

Urban foodscapes in Woodstock, Cape Town and ‘Glocalised’ supermarkets

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Desiree Lewis

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Introduction

Much of my work on food tries to draw on memories, anecdotes and personal observation of the relationship between people and food in worlds I know. Recently I’ve been thinking more and more about food-buying acts in a small family-run supermarket I often use. I’m struggling to explore food-buying as an act involving the body, the body’s relations to foodstuffs, the body’s movement in physical space and the forms of affect, sensory experience and cognition linked to this. I’m keen to pay careful attention to the agencies of human bodies and social subjects. This is particularly important in view of the flood of research on how globalised food commodity culture erodes human agency and “local” tastes. Responding to this, I draw on the following understanding of glocalisation as a form of “hybridity [that is] ... a pervasive but evasive cultural condition. Hybridity is construed as a space of oblique signification where power relations dialogically reinscribe[d] ... the concept of “glocalization”; [it] is proposed as a more inclusive and heuristic alternative to “globalization” (Kraidy, 2009:16).

Critical inter-disciplinary work on supermarkets often reads these as sites that consistently undermine peoples’ empowering and conscious engagements with food: while consumers seem to have economic and cultural autonomy, this agency is ultimately regulated by their status as dupes of the neoliberal capitalist market. (See, for example, Humphrey, 1998).

Following recent work on supermarkets by scholars such as Psyche Williams-Forsson and Carole

Counihan (2012), I've begun to think about how food-buying in some of these can mediate people's relationships to their environments and other human beings in very productive and enriching ways. In particular, I've been speculating about how some supermarket food-buying echoes long obliterated rituals and traditions in which human beings devoted time, emotional energy and a kind of instinctual knowledge to following their bodily and human needs for sociality through food sourcing.

The subtitle of this conference, "Making a mess", very aptly characterises this work. Being "intersectional" analytically and methodologically is crucial to thinking about how certain socially marked bodies and specific subjectivities navigate available spaces and socio-economic contexts for purchasing food. Importantly, this is done in the face of a corporate food world that is not only exploitative, but also very coercive. Supermarkets as we know can bully customers horribly. Through managing bodies spatially, through advertising, through sound, through being bombarded with marketing and advertising messages, customers are steered through routes of symbolic meanings and economic rationality routes that are often not of their own making.

Food-buying at Balmoral: a generic anomaly

Balmoral Supermarket in Woodstock Cape Town is a third-generation family-owned supermarket that originated as a small corner vegetable and grocery store in a suburb very close to the city centre. Begun by Vallie and Ayesah Adam in 1954, the store grew even when apartheid's Group Areas Act outlawed property ownership and residence of black South Africans in areas such as these. Currently, the supermarket has expanded to occupy the entire block. It provides fruit and vegetables for several restaurants and ship chandlers, has an online shopping facility and is always busy. Despite its location very close to a range of supermarkets in the area, it is frequented by a diverse range of people and is clearly thriving.

Balmoral is far from the "alternative" often celebrated by food justice scholars and activists; it is

not a co-operative, farmers' market or outlet for the sale of community garden products; it is an emphatically commercial venture whose owners make profits and exploit their workers in selling food at competitive prices.



An early view of the corner on which the first Balmoral store was built, the Adams' who started the store, and their son in the 1980s.

In contrast to the uniform clientele that most supermarket chains or many grocery stores attract, a very diverse group use Balmoral supermarket. These include low-income residents, immigrants from various African countries and of course, also the new group of middle-class and professional people who now inhabit the rapidly gentrifying suburb Woodstock.

One ethical and methodological challenge I have faced is how to produce knowledge and sensitively “read” the ways that these very diverse individuals navigate the supermarket spatially and imaginatively. The conventional route availed to me as a “responsible researcher” is to pursue ethical accountability with reference to my university’s formal ethical requirements. Globally, these ethical requirements in universities have become increasingly rigorous. But the rigour, I suspect, tells us more about the neo-liberal university’s need to protect itself legally. The rights and dignity of research participants - including their rights as agential knowledge-makers and analysts of popular culture – tend to be displaced by the preoccupation with researchers acquiring legal consent from various “stakeholders”. So, for example, for a research project on supermarkets, supermarket managers or even CEO’s would need to give permission that the research can be done and that the relevant supermarket name may be used. Vulnerable and less powerful groups would need to sign consent forms, yet need not necessarily be acknowledged as knowledge-makers with situational, changing and often critical views.¹

Overall, requirements for ethical accountability in the neo-liberal university prioritise risk management and echo standards of accountability in the corporate sector: the security of the powerful institution (university) as a powerhouse for producing “reliable” knowledge as a

¹ For example, in a case where a researcher gathers data by interviewing customers, these could tell the researcher what they think she wants to hear, give the researcher a very brief and truncated response because of other priorities or blatantly “fool” with the researcher for one or other reason. The data gathered, however is rarely subjected to discursive or situational analysis.

commodity - under circumstances where its liability risk is low at the same time that its pre-eminence as a producer of authoritative knowledge is high.

The research I wish to do focuses on inter-personal engagement, individuals' navigation of space, as well as individuals' feelings, and the textures and what can be seen, smelt and tasted. I therefore want to use images of people and space. But the ethical dilemmas attached to this are considerable.

My compromise has been to focus on the following: digital media texts in the public domain, conversations, anecdotes, photographs that do not include recognisable faces, observation based on shopping at the supermarket and efforts to read the feel of the space and how people inhabit it. These methods do not absolve me from "using" participants, or avoid the pitfalls noted above; but it does, I hope, lead to research that captures more texture, depth and "thick description" than the more standard qualitative approaches do.

"Good food": the relationality of bodies, subjectivity and food

Amidst the array of peddlers of "good food" in a rapidly gentrifying Woodstock, Balmoral's definition has given "good" the inflection of "authenticity" in emphasising that its food is locally produced and sourced fresh from farmers in the area. Yet its advertised claims are not entirely or always true. While it does prioritise the produce of local farmers, cooks and bakers, it imports many products. Most of these are groceries, but fruit, for example, oranges from Spain are also sold. Moreover, fruit and vegetables are not always those that have been freshly stored and not frozen. Balmoral has been able to market foodstuffs effectively that have no sell-by date, with buyers seeming to rely on "trust", and often selecting vegetables (especially produce like mushrooms or asparagus) through their senses of smell, sight and touch.

My observation that Balmoral customers' value what is local, legible, familiar and authentic is based on my efforts to read their intuitive sense of visceral body desires and needs, namely a sense of connectedness to an environment and food sources that are legible, that hold out the promise of the body's belonging within circuits of matter, cycles of seasonal change and the proximity of a known environment.

One customer person I spoke to said "I like that when you go to Balmoral you see the trucks from the Phillippi market And the guys carry the stuff straight to the shop with all the leaves and sand and everything. ... Sometimes I buy the veg and it does go off. But it's not like Shopright where you don't know how long it's been in the warehouse freezers and when it was put into those plastic packets. So when I put the Balmoral stuff in my fridge I know ..."

Much more than literal reassurance seems to be implied by the concluding claim to knowledge. This shopper invests positive meaning in being able to insert herself in a circuit through which food items travel. In today's corporate food system, the circuits of food sold in most commercial supermarkets is unfathomable, overwhelming or impenetrable. Certainly, it is not "known". Her agency derives from her belief that she can know, and can find a place for herself within an imaginable foodway.

Human connectedness: bodies, other bodies and glocal worlds

Another pattern I'm grappling with is how food buyers at this supermarket relate to its halal and Muslim-associated foods. The popularising of certain halal and Muslim-associated foods, beverages and spices has begun to feature significantly in South Africa's many funded nation-building ventures, and in Cape Town in particular. One example is the now annual Muslim food fair, the "Spice Mecca Ramadhan for All" expo. As Gabeba Baderoon reminds us, Muslim food and cooking (defined offensively as Malay food and cooking) has long featured in the domestication of slavery and slave era cultural appropriation ... "disembodied versions of 'Cape Malay'disarticulated from the people who made them...are used to craft a national cuisine"

(2014). The national cuisine, however, is based on existing forms of cultural and social dominance.

Thus, the promotion of “things Muslim”, especially food, in recent rainbow nation-building may suggest yet another appropriative move, the incorporation of some unthreatening but exotic ingredient into “being South African”.

But this reading of Muslim and eastern foods sold at Balmoral ignores the extent to which customers, both Muslim and not, derive collective pleasure from participating in food buying that is uniquely linked to a sense of religious affiliation. In other words, is definitely not “disarticulated from the people who make them”, as Baderoon puts it.

One customer I spoke to had this to say:

“The fast is something I look forward to a lot. I don’t fast. Second I’m not Muslim. But I feel very connected to my friends who fast. And even the people I don’t know at Balmoral. What I like best is to buy boeber and me and my daughter eat dates and have boeber most evenings during the fast. And plus we always get koe’sisters and food from the neighbours.”

For certain customers, foodstuffs such as a wide variety of dates, boeber, rose water and Turkish delight routinely feature among the “special” foods that are anticipated during Ramadhan and before Eid. Interestingly, and maybe especially for non-Muslim customers, this is *not* accompanied by the anxious food buying spree and cooking frenzy associated with Christmas. For many, pleasurable “Muslim foods” allow them to participate vicariously in the convivial and socially ritualistic aspects of food-abnegation, and also food-sharing and food eating to mark collectively acknowledged moments. It should be noted that “conviviality” is a frequently used term to describe the effects of eating that stimulates communality. A sense of fusing different value and cultural systems, and of various participants becoming part of these “glocal” systems seems to me to be a vital part of new “glocal” communities. On one hand, a globalised work of big food and mainstream supermarket shopping overtly privileges dominant foods and food-buying rituals; on the other, many food buyers are attracted to other more

localised trends (including those rooted in food consumption for religious rituals) that hold out the promise of less frenetic and more “meaningful” human relationships.

Spatial movement and food-buying freedoms

A third, and probably the most complex theme in my analysis has to do with how shoppers navigate space, their visceral experiences in moving through space.

Unlike spatial arrangements in many supermarket chains, Balmoral’s geography mirrors the spatial arrangement of open markets, where customers have a birds-eye view of the entire selling and buying space, as well as the foodstuffs on offer. In other words, they are not regulated into following numbered aisles in ways that undermine their power to choose freely, and that turns them into “captive bodies”. Instead, they have freedom of movement, a freedom that increases the power to choose and acquire an overall agency-endowing perspective of the food items on sale. This has implications for customers’ buying power: irrespective of the fact that they are purchasing foodstuffs, they have the leeway to move much more freely among the products on sale, experiencing the licence to make choices among the various fruits, groceries and vegetables on sale.

In speculating about this quality, one feature of conventional supermarkets that strikes me is that the customer is spatially positioned as a disempowered, choice-less recipient of foodstuffs according to a logic determined by up on high. This is of course very different from the open market, where individuals, despite their dependence on sold foodstuffs, have the relative autonomy to move among items, to choose, to compare, to speculate to demonstrate physical agency. Literally, of course, customers do have this nominal freedom in conventional supermarkets. At the same time, the spatial arrangement and categorisation of items in aisles militates strongly against this. Like the other physical environments of neo-liberal democracy, then, supermarkets function as Foucauldian spaces of surveillance and self-regulation.

The freedom to make choices about things and commodities is linked to the probably even more significant freedom that subjects have to engage with one another. In contrast to the list-clutching self-absorption of the individualised bodies guided along numbered shopping aisles (and inhibited in their ability to engage with one another), spatial arrangements encourage far greater degrees of human interaction - human interaction between staff and buyers, and among buyers. Interestingly, there is much more unregulated talk in Balmoral than in other supermarkets I have shopped in.

Concluding Remarks

I'm curious about how generic anomalies like Balmoral thrive in urban contexts around the world. In Sweden, Germany, for example, I've gone to small groceries, many established by immigrants, that seem to offer food-buying pleasures for customers who experience other food outlets as deeply alienating. An obvious reason is that the former provides non-mainstream foods that customers want and prefer. But a neglected reason seems to me to involve the sensory, intuitive and bodily freedoms that food buyers often yearn for.

Many have explored agencies among food producers and consumers who explicitly challenge the status quo (i.e. assume the idea of the sovereign and autonomous human subject, whose cognition directs the body). I'm primarily interested in how some everyday food buyers, often without explicitly politicising or rationalising their choices, are intuitively guided in their gustatory choices via the knowledge of the body. This agency is significantly at odds with assumptions made by the dominant food system. It also transcends Cartesian and anthropocentric beliefs, namely that human desires are shaped primarily by the mind and cognition, or by a distinctively human subjectivity that can be separated from the dynamic force that matter, other life forms and the environment exert on it. These ideas about the human subjectivity are not novel in many non-western and precolonial indigenous knowledges. Many assume that persons are whole, fulfilled or fully human only in and through synergetic relationships to other life forms, to plants and things, and to environments. This claim might

suggest a hopelessly esoteric view of human needs and desires in the very quotidian context of food-buying. In studies of human relationships to food, however, it can expand on the somewhat brittle, deterministic and limited views of human freedoms that many traditions of radical thought - including radical thought about human relationships to food - bequeath.

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