The Role and Influence of Food on Migratory Patterns and Othering Behaviours

Sara Wong, Simon Fraser University

Abstract

This paper was originally written for James Horncastle's Humanities 360 course, *Great Themes in the Humanistic Tradition: Mass Migration & Refugees*. The assignment asked students to write on a topic of their choice, so long as it related to themes discussed in the course, such as population movements in the ancient world. The paper uses APA citation style.

Using food as the common link, the relationship between migration and attitudes towards "the Other" is examined across space and time. Often, everyday practices are key to understanding the human condition. This paper illuminates how deeply embedded Western exceptionalism is in multicultural exchanges. From Europe to the Middle East to North America, food is integral to shaping worldviews.

Food is more than sustenance. It is a cornerstone of culture, though the connotation is not always positive. Food can typify social inequities, such as elitism in ancient Greece, Orientalism in late 1900s Western Europe, and gentrification in contemporary Metro Vancouver. Examining these three periods, it becomes clear that attitudes of cultural superiority play a pivotal role in the construction of foodscapes, particularly when it comes to what is categorized as "healthy" and "unhealthy." Consequently, interactions with food have a direct impact on population movement.

First and foremost, Homer's *Iliad* is a heroic tale about military excellence and divine fate during the Trojan War. Yet it also serves as a commentary on the social fabric of the Achaeans and Trojans. Studying food-related rituals is crucial in this regard. Like scholar Michele M. Sordi (1989) points out, "eating in a Homeric epic is serious business, and its physical and spiritual ramifications are clear to all the characters" (p. 81). Success in combat is only part of the initiation process for a warrior to attain kleos (glory). How one conducts oneself off the battlefield is equally important. When a grieving Achilles isolates himself, this is viewed as disgraceful — partly because of his continued withdrawal from the war, but also because he refuses to eat. However, when Achilles decides to redeem himself, it is recognized with a feast. For, as Odysseus says, "the one who takes his fill of food and wine / before he grapples enemies full force, dawn to dusk / the heart in his chest keeps pounding fresh with courage" (Homer, c. 762 BCE/1990, p. 494). A hero's diet therefore shapes how they are perceived. While analyzing

eating scenes in the Achaean camp, Sordi notes the emphasis on specific actions or attitudes indicates cultural standards of "right" and "wrong" consumption (p. 82–83). The existence of "proper" gastronomic traditions highlights the essential relationship between food and honour in the ancient Greek world. Despite survival challenges during the war — from the dangerous journey across the Aegean Sea to a plague inflicted by the gods (Homer, p. 77) — the Achaeans are devoted to following tradition, signifying how ingrained the pursuit of kleos is. Maintaining food norms is a way for the Achaeans to define their identity, and it shapes perspectives on "the Other" as well. In the elite society of ancient Greece, complete dedication to earning kleos is expected, so those who do not follow this status quo are categorized as inferior. This can be seen in how *The Iliad* portrays the Trojans, specifically Hector. For example:

> But Hector shook his head, his helmet flashing / 'Don't offer me mellow wine, mother, not now / you'd sap my limbs, I'd lose my nerve for war…promise to sacrifice twelve heifers in [Athena's] shrine / yearlings never broken, if only she'll pity Troy, the Trojan wives and all our helpless children / if only she'll hold Diomedes back from the holy city / that wild spearman, that invincible headlong terror!' (p. 204)

Hector virtuously avoids temptation, values others' wellbeing, and observes the war pragmatically. But from the Achaean point of view, these are weaknesses. The Trojan hero's declination of wine contrasts Odysseus' statement that the fermented drink will fortify a warrior during battle, suggesting Hector is flawed. His selflessness deviates from the personally-motivated behaviour seen among the Achaeans, and admitting Diomedes is a stronger, fearful opponent further emasculates Hector. By characterizing Hector as subordinate, the Greek superiority complex becomes more pronounced. This is reinforced when the Achaeans win the war. As a result, food systems are significantly changed. When Achilles and Priam share a meal in book 24, the Achaean and Trojan foodscapes are re-defined "not as fixed opposites but as vehicles for preserving a culture that seeks to assimilate the individual and collective values associated with each type of eating" (Sordi, p. 90). Achilles and Priam's meeting recognizes the end of the war, and ultimately promotes Greek as the dominant culture. Although this is useful for the Magna Graecia (i.e. colonization), the surviving Achaean heroes do not benefit much post-war. In other words, migration was beneficial for ancient Greek society, but not for every individual. As Strabo succinctly observes, "Agamemnon and his fleet ravaged Mysia in the belief that it was Troy-land, and came back home in disgrace" (para. 17). Using various eating scenes in *The Odyssey*, Homer also showcases the paradox of population movement. At a welcome feast for Odysseus' son Telemachus and Nestor's son Pisistratus, Menelaus laments:

> While I roamed those lands, amassing a fortune / a stranger killed my brother, blind to the danger, duped blind / thanks to the cunning of his cursed, murderous queen! / So I rule all this wealth with no great joy. (c. 700 BCE/1996, p. 127)

Meanwhile, Odysseus remains stuck trying to get home. Through his misadventures, Homer revisits how connections to food can project othering behaviours. Book 9 especially illustrates the harm a cultural superiority complex causes when Odysseus recounts his interaction with the Cyclops Polyphemus. The Cyclops is depicted as a monster in arguably more vivid detail than

any other character. While murdering Odysseus' men and "ripping them limb from limb to fix his meal" (p. 220) is not to be condoned, it is important to remember the Achaean crew instigated Polyphemus' wrath by stealing the Cyclops' sheep and cheeses without permission (p. 218). Though food and drink are part of guest rights in ancient Greek culture, visitors usually wait for the host to welcome them. The fact that Odysseus and his crew do not hesitate to take from Polyphemus displays a gross sense of entitlement, which explains why the Cyclops is characterized so harshly. That being said, Homer tempers the demonization by describing a tender relationship between the Cyclops and his herd of sheep (p. 225). Humanizing Polyphemus demonstrates that even though "the Other" was of concern, they were treated with some dignity. Overall, food-related sections in the Homeric epics reflect a more tolerant culture and an ease of mobility as a result.

Compared to what is seen in ancient Greece, othering in Western Europe during the 20th century is more racially-charged. Whereas rivals like the Achaeans and Trojans respected one another, this later period features a pejorative narrative casting the Western world as civilized and the East as barbaric. The drastic change is in part due to Orientalism, a concept defined by scholar Edward Said (1994) where the minimization of Middle Eastern (a.k.a. Oriental) cultures is used by the West to justify imperialism and other colonial actions (p. 34-40). Orientalism subsequently fuels the doctrine of Western exceptionalism, mirroring attitudes of cultural superiority in ancient Greece. One of the ways it does so is through perspectives on food. Dursteler (2014), recognizing that "for classical writers, the consumption of meat, domesticated or wild, over bread and wine, was directly connected to a savage, uncivilized state" (p. 208), points to Polyphemus' demise via drunkenness (Homer, p. 222–223) as an example of how the Greeks expressed their supremacy. Orientalists convey the West's dominance in a similar fashion. French geographer Nicholas de Nicolay "sets up a dichotomy not only between good and bad food, but also between civilization and barbarity" (Dursteler, p. 206) when he judges Turkish cuisine as crudely simplistic (p. 206–207). Parallels notwithstanding, Orientalists persecute "the Other" more severely than the ancient Greeks did. While Polyphemus is portrayed as barbaric and needing to be disciplined, he was the only Cyclops treated in this manner. Odysseus clearly distinguishes between individual and collective. On the other hand, Orientalism reduces complex, interconnected group identities to "us versus them." Geography and migration patterns offer reasons as to why this is the case. In *The Odyssey*, Odysseus' crew encounters the Cicones, Lotus-eaters, and Cyclops in less than two weeks (Homer, p. 213–215), suggesting close proximity between ancient Greek civilizations and consistent travel. Given these circumstances, a shared food culture prospers, as indicated by the fact that Polyphemus stores foods familiar to the Achaeans, like cheese. This is relevant because, as Dursteler states about foodways, "those who eat similar foods are trustworthy and safe, while those whose foods differ are viewed with suspicion" (p. 205). Evidently, the ancient Greeks had a more flexible attitude towards "the Other." Meanwhile, Orientalists had biases formed by greater geographical distance and less population movement. Reviewing how former British Prime Minister, Arthur James Balfour, presents Egypt, illuminates the detriment of imperiousness: "authority here means for

'us' to deny autonomy to 'it'—the Oriental country—since we know it and it exists, in a sense, *as* we know it. British knowledge of Egypt *is* Egypt for Balfour" (p. 32). This encompasses the anthropological concept of armchair anthropology, where a culture is explored from a distance and subsequently the researcher draws conclusions perpetuating ethnocentrism (Medeiros & Cowall, 2017, para. 15). Because of this sedentary research method, when ethnography *is* done it is more susceptible to romanticism. Looking at accounts about Ottoman (Turkish) food, Dursteler observes that Croatian Bartholomeus Georgewitz "described Ottoman bread as 'not bad' and 'like ours'" (p. 222). Also of interest: "'they sprinkle a certain seed called (Suffram) on top, then they bake it. This gives it a great sweetness to whoever eats it. And this is not done in any place of our people, except in Spain'" (p. 222–223). The Georgewitz passages Dursteler features accentuate the relationship between Orientalism and exoticism. Traditional food practices are stylized to fit the binary of West versus East, or "familiar" versus "strange." If what is depicted is not reminiscent of Western European culture, Orientalists deem it not worth exploring further. Hence, "knowledge of the Orient, because generated out of strength, in a sense *creates* the Orient, the Oriental, and his world…inviting the West to control, contain, and otherwise govern (through superior knowledge and accommodating power) the Other" (Said, p. 40–48). Unfortunately, these facets of Orientalism persist, and not just in Western Europe.

Given colonial connections, it is unsurprising that systemic racism is embedded in North American foodscapes. Turning to Metro Vancouver, this can be seen with the increase in gentrification. The process of gentrification displaces a community's long-term residents (who often identify as lower class and belonging to a racial minority) in order to expand wealthy, urban centres (Wharton, 2008, p. 0), therefore limiting marginalized groups' accessibility to food networks. In anthropologist Parin Dossa's book, *Afghanistan Remembers: Gendered Narrations of Violence and Culinary Practices*, the disinvestment in ethnic communities resulting from Western exceptionalism is highlighted on multiple occasions. Canada prides itself on being multicultural, yet does little to support refugees or newcomers. Dossa hints at this while reporting on interactions between an Afghan store owner and his customers:

> A customer walked in and asked Ali if he knew of any job vacancies. Ali pulled out a card from his shirt pocket, and said, 'Here take this. This person left me his card only yesterday. He is looking for someone to work with him.' I asked Ali if he typically helps his customers in this way. He replied, 'All the time, whenever they ask me.' Ali is multilingual, and knows Dari, Pashtun, English, French, and Urdu. He verbally translates letters for Afghan customers from English to Dari or Pashtun. He also assists customers in writing resumes. (2014, p. 114)

This exchange demonstrates food hubs function as more than a place to pick up groceries. They foster community and cultural connections, which occurs less frequently in other public spheres. Discussing a primary school's sandwich program, one of Dossa's research participants said their children, who do not eat pork, were simply given cucumber and tomato instead. In order for the children to not feel excluded — and get a more nutritious meal — the parent had to meet with the school several times (p. 117). The accommodation of dietary restrictions being subjected to

such a bureaucratic process shows how extensive the othering effects of Western exceptionalism are. At food banks, ignorance of various food needs is even more toxic. From fieldwork, Dossa discerns that the products distributed are low in nutritional value and close to expiration, making the experience of visiting a food bank dehumanizing (p. 130). Furthermore, Dossa finds those allocating the items contribute to the issue:

> When I inquired as to what they would do with so much old bread, one of the providers said, 'They have a freezer.' A second provider noted that 'they have cars,' in response to my question on how they would carry two bags. She added, 'Nothing is enough for them. I know one man. He comes here to collect the food and then he goes to a second food bank.' (p. 131)

The "us versus them" mentality present in the above narrative is reminiscent of Orientalism, emphasizing that racism compounds in everyday interactions. The examples from Dossa's work exhibit how marginalized ethnic foodscapes are ostracized or relegated to the periphery of Western European-dominated society. In essence, gentrification. While Dossa's study concerns the Afghan community, more research stresses that other minority groups, such as the Chinese and Filipinx, face similar struggles. Vancouver's Chinatown has historically been a refuge for those deemed "racially inferior, culturally immoral, and socially objectionable" (Li & Li, 2013, p. 31) by Eurocentrists. Chinese-Canadians across Metro Vancouver would travel to this area to work, shop, and eat (p. 23), creating a niche foodscape. However, over time Chinatown has attracted the attention of developers wanting to "revitalize" the neighbourhood, bringing with it increasing rent costs and higher-end stores (Mamont, 2019). Consequently, many of its residents have moved elsewhere. Thriving Chinese communities can now be found in cities like Richmond, Burnaby, and Coquitlam — all of which include food centres. As impressive as Chinese-Canadians' resilience and adeptness towards mobility is, it signals the perpetuation of colonialism. Cultural food centres embody the tension between West (characterized as "normal" and "progressive") and East ("unusual" or "stagnant"). They prevail because and in spite of gentrifying forces. The controversy surrounding the City of Vancouver's Joyce-Collingwood Station Precinct Plan (2016) illustrates this tension unfolding in present day. Joyce-Collingwood is known for its multiculturalism and community engagement (p. 53), but the city's proposal, which states "site-by-site rezoning applications by private developers will be a key driver of Plan implementation" (p. 61), endangers the neighbourhood's vitality. Although the plan is good for green transportation (p. 35–41) and additional housing opportunities (p. 19–23), residents have pointed out it will displace small, local businesses that service the Filipinx community, particularly with the 5163-5187 Joyce St. rezoning application (Shape Your City, 2020). This exemplifies how urban planning tends to be designed to only benefit select groups. Without reconsideration, the Joyce-Collingwood plan will further limit access to diverse cultural spaces and, subsequently, the mobility of ethnic minorities.

Exploring group dynamics in ancient Greece, 20th century Western Europe, and contemporary Metro Vancouver, a dichotomizing pattern emerges. Using food as the subject for this study, it confirms that a Western cultural superiority complex — intensified by elitism,

Orientalism, and gentrification — underscores what constitutes growth and decline in society. Food then, as a keeper of tradition, part of identity formation, and source of comfort and conflict, affects population movement.

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