Cultural Indigestion in Multicultural Australia: Fear of “Foreign” Foods in Australian Media

Abstract: In Australian public discourse food multiculturalism has been celebrated as a sign of the country’s openness to migrant cultures. Yet, as we show in this article, this apparent celebration of Australia’s ethnically diverse foodscape has emerged alongside a virulent culinary xenophobia at the level of public discourse. In particular, we identify how fears about Asian immigration are often expressed in a distaste for foreign food in the Australian media and official discourse. First, we demonstrate how an advertising campaign jointly funded by government and Australian industry deployed a xenophobic fear of contamination to encourage consumers to avoid food imports and buy Australian foods instead. We then look at how newspaper and television coverage of food poisoning in restaurants and food courts suggests a link between ethnicity and contamination. This analysis of a range of public attitudes to “foreign” foodstuffs highlights that the mainstream enjoyment of ethnic cuisines is not a panacea for long-standing xenophobic discourses.

Keywords: Australia, public discourse, culinary xenophobia, food multiculturalism, Asian food.

Twenty-first-century middle Australia has embraced a variety of ethnic cuisines and imported foodstuffs as some of the undeniable benefits of cultural diversity and globalization. Each phase of migration has contributed to the expanding horizons of the nation’s taste buds, creating an appetite for cuisines not just from Europe, but also from Asia, Africa, and the Americas. There has been a “culinary turn” in popular culture in Australia, and food—and in particular “ethnic” food—has become central to the lifestyles around which Australian consumers construct their identities. Indeed, food has become an Australian national obsession in recent years, something reflected in all areas of the media. Yet despite the celebration of culinary diversity in popular culture, and the embrace of an array of fad ingredients from the Himalayas to the Andes, media portrayals of “foreign” or “ethnic” foods continue to invoke an element of cultural “indigestion” when it comes to culinary diversity. In this article we argue that—despite the celebration of “ethnic” food in many areas of the Australian media—in other areas, “culinary xenophobia” persists, much as racism persists despite the putative success of Australia’s program of multiculturalism.

We begin by briefly outlining the Australian experience of “food multiculturalism,” a celebrated aspect of the post-WWII immigration program. We show how this putative positive of Australian multiculturalism has recently been critiqued by Australian scholars as a shallow and self-serving aspect of white, middle-class Australians. This is apparent when we see that Australian “food multiculturalism” has emerged alongside persistent fears about “Asian” immigration in particular, fears that have often been expressed in a distaste for foreign food. We then look at three aspects of “culinary xenophobia” in the Australian media. First, we show how an advertising campaign jointly funded by government and Australian industry deployed a xenophobic fear of contamination to encourage consumers to avoid food imports and buy Australian foods instead. We then look at how newspaper and television coverage of food poisoning in restaurants and food courts suggests a link between ethnicity and contamination. Although food poisoning is of course not limited to ethnic food—including in the examples we discuss—we show here that the ways in which incidents are reported invoke an established association between “foreign” cuisines and food poisoning outbreaks. Finally, we discuss how in popular television “current affairs” programs food imports have been problematized. This was done in a way that stoked long-standing Australian fears of Asian inundation. The consumption of Asian food imports is likened in these reports to the threat of an “Asian invasion.” This analysis of a range of Australian media reveals that attitudes to “foreign” foodstuffs have not changed as much as the mainstream enthusiasm for “ethnic” food might suggest.

Food Multiculturalism in Australia

It is a truism that the Australian foodscape was bland and insipid prior to the transformative wave of post-WWII
migration. The comedian Barry Humphreys (1992: 102) encapsulates this view of a featureless culinary landscape in his memoir of a childhood in middle-class Melbourne, where a family visit to an Italian restaurant proved revelatory: “The Spaghetti à la Bolognese was a total novelty for me, as were the strange twig-like fragments in the sauce that suggested that someone had shaken a dead bush over the plate. It was my first experience of herbs.” While this view of Australia’s culinary history has recently been challenged as overly simplistic, it is true to say that the large-scale migration that transformed Australia’s predominantly Anglo-Celtic and white European ethnic profile has been reflected in a breathtaking diversification of dining options.1 In Australia, as in other multicultural societies, “food multiculturalism” is commonly touted as an indication of intercultural acceptance, and among middle-class diners an eclectic palate has been found to be a marker of cultural capital (Warde et al. 1999). Multiculturalism as a government ideology began in Australia in 1973 with the election of a progressive Labor government that spelled the end of the long-standing “White Australia Policy” that had defined the nation’s immigration policy throughout the twentieth century. Although Australia had experienced non-European immigration as early as the nineteenth century, the end of the White Australia Policy led to a visible and rapid change in Australia’s racial profile, beginning with the acceptance of refugees from countries such as Vietnam and Lebanon in the 1970s. The advent of formalized immigration from Asia and the Middle East was also accompanied, especially under the 1990s prime ministership of Paul Keating, by a reorientation toward Asia in Australian foreign affairs.

If at the level of government Australia had thrown its lot in with the Asian region in which it now realizes it was located, at the level of popular discourse there was a strain of disquiet at the “Asianization” of the country. This was encapsulated by historian Geoffrey Blainey’s criticism of Asian immigration in his 1984 book, All for Australia. In Blainey’s account of the resentment of a white Sydney resident of her new ethnic neighbors, a distaste for their food practices is evident. The woman complains that her Lebanese neighbors cook on the balconies, filling the sky with “greasy smoke and the smell of goat’s meat,” and protests of her Vietnamese neighbors: “At one stage, they were even drying noodles on the clotheslines in the backyard” (Blainey 1984: 132). A popular political backlash against “Asian” immigration was later led by the independent parliamentarian Pauline Hanson. Hanson (1996)—whose origins as a fish-and-chip shop owner were shorthand for her Anglo credentials—complained in her maiden speech to the national parliament that Australia was “in danger of being swamped by Asians.” David Walker (2002: 323–24) has traced a century of anxiety over the “Asianization” of Australia from the 1880s through to the late twentieth century. Worries about Asian immigration have been joined in the last decade or so by an obsession with Muslim migration, particularly since the terror attacks in the United States. Jeff Sparrow (2014) recently revisited Hanson’s maiden speech, arguing that concerns about Asian others have been almost entirely displaced by the fear of Muslims in contemporary Australia. However, our analysis of recent Australian media representations of cultural indigestion shows that a fear of Asian “inundation” persists in the form of culinary xenophobia.

The diversification of Australia’s foodscape that came along with extra-European migration from the 1970s onward has been a celebrated aspect of Australian multiculturalism. In public discourse, food multiculturalism was touted as a sign of Australia’s openness to new cultures, as local and federal government bodies and the tourism industry “promulgate[d] the idea that by eating ethnic food we can learn about ourselves, the Other and their culture” (Flowers and Swan 2012: 1). Moreover, attendance at food festivals and visits to ethnic restaurants were regarded as an ideal way to learn about other cultures and promote social harmony. “Food,” as one scholar puts it, “has long been the banal, acceptable face of multiculturalism” (Gunew 1993: 13). “Ethnic” eating is also a long-standing feature of the Australian mediascape, seen, for instance, in the number of cooking or food-related television shows devoted to teaching viewers about foreign cuisines. Perhaps the most well-known of these series is Food Safari, which screens on the television channel SBS, or Special Broadcasting Service. Itself a product of 1970s multiculturalism, SBS started out life as a state-funded service broadcasting in community languages and has become a privately and publicly funded broadcaster with a significant mainstream audience of white high-income earners, in addition to its ethnically diverse viewers. Using language that invokes discovery and adventure, Food Safari features a different ethnicity or cuisine each week and taps into the appetites of so-called “food adventurers,” usually urban, middle-class diners who seek out new tastes in an ethnically diverse foodscape. Other popular “ethnic” food shows offered by this channel are Shane Delia’s Spice Journey of Turkey and Luke Nguyen’s “gastro-tour” of Vietnam, which evince also how food multiculturalism is successfully packaged for middle-class consumption in contemporary Australia.

While food multiculturalism is celebrated as part of Australia’s ethnic diversity, in the last decade or so, Australian sociologists and food studies scholars (Hage 1997; Probyn
2000; Gunew 1993; Duruz 2010) have begun to question the putative positives of cross-cultural consumption, asking to what extent—if at all—“experiences of ‘otherness’ through food... contribute to positive relationships across difference” (Wise 2012: 85). Elspeth Probyn (2000: 2) argues: “Eating... metaphors are often used to cover over other nasty bits: the hearty enthusiasm for ‘foreign’ food that is supposed to hide the taste of racism.” In another context, Laura Lindenfeld (2007: 335) has contended that “[r]epresentations of ethnic foodways provide an especially comfortable way to contain ‘otherness’.” Thus it has been asserted that “culinary acceptance... is not necessarily a signifier of acceptance or understanding” (Gabaccia 2010: 23) and that it is in fact possible to have a “multiculturalism without migrants” (Hage 1997) in which “ethnic” food is consumed by the white middle class in restaurants, without any concomitant benefits for intercultural understanding. Ghassan Hage in particular criticizes this “cosmo-multiculturalism” as limited, promoting instead the idea of a more authentic “home-building multiculturalism” that takes place in private homes. Informing Hage’s critique of food multiculturalism is his broader argument that multiculturalism in Australia is a white national fantasy, which “allows some white Australians to manage ‘cultural diversity’ through sanctioning the Other” (Hamada 2011: 90) and fears about it. The Other, for Hage, is primarily deployed as an object for a white project of status and cultural enhancement.

In exploring a number of mainstream media representations of “ethnic” or “foreign” food from print and television, we build on these critiques of food multiculturalism by showing how “culinary xenophobia,” and in particular fears of Asian inundation, persist in areas of the media despite the popularity of culinary diversity in food media. Australian food historian Barbara Santich (1996: 232) has labeled the distrust and dislike of foreign food as “culinary xenophobia,” making the point that these types of attitudes paralyze the development of cuisines, as was arguably the case of Australian cuisine up until the middle of the twentieth century. This is strikingly borne out in the Barry Humphreys anecdote above.

**Ingesting the Other: The “Australian Made, Australian Grown” Campaign**

The xenophobic attitudes toward food identified by Santich do not just relate to the body politic or national imaginary. As Michael Goodman and Colin Sage (2014: 1) observe, “there are few things more essentially transgressive and boundary-crossing than food,” and, as such, ingesting a foreign or different cuisine can also represent a threat to one’s own bodily integrity. Indeed, the omnivore’s dilemma, first proposed by Paul Rozin (1976), describes what is at stake when we are presented with novelty in our diet. In biological terms, omnivores have the significant advantage of flexibility in their diets, but there is the real risk of poisoning or of an imbalanced diet. Michael Pollan has popularized the omnivore’s dilemma as a way of understanding the nutritional problems in the industrial world. He argues that, as traditional diets have broken down, people in developed countries—in thrall to an industrialized food chain—have made increasingly toxic food choices with resulting health and social problems (Pollan 2006). But the omnivore’s dilemma has a cultural dimension as well. We contend that the residual biological anxiety that confronts us as omnivores before a novel cuisine is fortified by existing prejudices about cultural difference. Our food choices involve ingesting otherness quite literally. Indeed, the difficulty in accepting a new ethnic community or migrant group has been theorized as a kind of cultural “indigestion,” expressed in concerns about contaminants in “ethnic” food (Edwards et al. 2000). And if a certain cosmopolitan sophistication can be conveyed by the enjoyment of a variety of nonnative cuisines, then, equally, xenophobic intolerance can find expression in fearful attitudes to “foreign” foods. In a recent article on what she has coined “digestive politics,” Melissa Caldwell looks at cultural indigestion in attitudes toward foreign food in the Russia. A critique of capitalism, and worries about the loss of autochthonous Russian culture and customs, find expression, according to Caldwell (2014: 113–17), in fears about foreign food and a recent bout of food poisoning. In this context, traditional Russian food is not just perceived as more “authentic” but also as restorative and the ideal antidote to the food poisoning believed to be a result of foreign ice cream.

Public discourse about imported food draws on a range of concerns about cultural contact in a globalized and multicultural context. In late 2011 the Australian food industry and government-funded “Australian Made, Australian Grown” campaign placed advertisements in major publications warning consumers about the dangers represented by imported food products. Suspect items included *Queso de Valdeon* cheese from Spain, said to contain high *E. coli* levels, and basmati rice from India that contained a “large number of live and dead insects.” These and other food imports were presented in the advertisement as a threat to both Australian bodies *and* the Australian body politic. The advertisement informed consumers that 95 percent of imported food was not even tested by the quarantine service. Moreover, billions of dollars were spent on imported produce each year that
could be going to “our farmers and their local communities.” In the midst of the global economic downturn and in the lead-up to the food frenzy that is Christmas, Australian consumers were exhorted—in jingoistic terms—to reject foreign food in favor of “genuine Aussie grown produce.” This campaign shows that, when it comes to food and intercultural contact, the perceived threats to cultural, bodily, and economic integrity are various, especially in times of fiscal crisis. Concerns around food reflect broader worries about globalization, the economy, and cultural alterity. If we ingest these potentially dangerous foreign foods, and absorb them into our bodies—and the body politic—the consequences are unknown and potentially devastating. The “Australian Made, Australian Grown” campaign, like other popular discourses in the Australian media, taps into the plethora of anxieties that surround the nation in a globalized economy and a multicultural society. Many of the foods featured in the advertisement connote particular cultures—basmati rice from India, soy sauce from the Philippines, peanut oil from China; these are not just imported foods, they are “foreign” and, predominantly, Asian foods. Read together with the colloquially Australian language of the advertisement, these images of “dangerous” foods arouse concerns not just for physical self-preservation, but also for the preservation of Australian identity itself.

As a material substance, food has immediate biological implications. Unlike other physical expressions of cultural specificity such as clothing or bodily rituals, food is literally transformed and becomes part of the substance of the body. Thus, the saying “you are what you eat” has several layers of meaning from the symbolic to the material (Lien 2004). As Roland Barthes suggested, food—far from being merely a carriert of nutrients, calories, and minerals—is also a semiotic system; its attendant rules and narratives, and the choices available, make of food and eating a means of communication. Food is inextricably linked to both individual and collective identity. Anthropologists of the 1960s and 1970s established the notion of cuisine as a language of sorts. Claude Lévi-Strauss looked to food practices to explore how societies made sense of the world. Lévi-Strauss (1966) is most widely remembered for his argument in the “Culinary Triangle,” that there is a universal structure underlying food and cooking practices, in particular that cooking is structured by the culinary triangle raw/cooked/rotten. Barthes and Mary Douglas also applied structuralist analyses to food subjects, showing how seemingly taken-for-granted, everyday food substances and practices are weighted with significance. According to Barthes (1979: 166), the meal is much more than the sum of its parts, for it is made up of “a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations, and behaviour.” Douglas also stressed the role of food as signifier, classifier, and identity builder. For Douglas (1997), when “deciphering a meal” we must remember that food categories encode, and therefore structure, social events. This approach led Douglas to the conclusion that the meals people eat together express shared social identity and relationships.

Food and the Body Politic: Racializing Food Poisoning

Food and food practices, as these early theorists have shown, are an important form of discrimination between social groups. Thus, food is often co-opted as a “meaningful signifier of national identity” (Wilson 2006: 43). The globalization of foodways can therefore represent a significant challenge to national identity. The pressures and paradoxes of globalization, with the migration of peoples and products across borders, are felt especially keenly in an island nation such as Australia that has, until relatively recently, upheld a mythology—and policy—of Anglo-Celtic monoculturalism and an attendant obsession with border control. Even though Australian society has been repeatedly enriched by its various waves of immigration, there is continued anxiety about further immigration. The popular paranoia about seaborne immigration reflects the idea of the nation-state as a nation-body in popular discourse, with unauthorized arrivals from the north threatening the integrity of the body politic. As David Marr (2011) has argued, the fear of an invasion by the “Asian hordes” to the north has defined Australian politics, and if the fears about “boat people” have moved with the times and come to rest more in the twenty-first century on “Muslim” migrants, the imagery has been strikingly constant. The persistent political worry about an unannounced arrival of a foreign element at the nation’s back door seems to express a kind of penetration anxiety. The particularly overt tendency in Australia to view the island nation as a metaphorical body—and what Suvendrini Perera (2009: 8) has called its “self-image as an island fortress and outpost of western civilization”—means that food is an especially useful site for an exploration of the public tensions relating to multiculturalism and intercultural relations. In exploring the discursive links between the nation and the body politic in Australia, Zoe Anderson (2009: 112) has argued that the “geographical certainty of continent-as-nation” means that collective understandings in Australia about what constitutes a healthy nation are based as much on the threat of disease as they are on the threat of the foreign. This visceral nexus between the body and the nation in the Australian
imagination comes equally to the fore in the question of “foreign” food.

It has been noted that multicultural tensions are evident in media reportage of food poisoning outbreaks; there is a strong tendency to link such incidents to the perceived ethnicity of certain foods (Edwards et al. 2000: 304). Consequently, while “ethnic” cuisines are associated in some areas of the media with cultural sophistication, in others they are viewed as potentially threatening. In reportage about food poisoning (not just in sensationalist tabloid newspapers but also in the quality press), the link between food poisoning and “ethnic” foods is repeatedly suggested. The 2005 reportage of a notorious outbreak of food poisoning at the Alasya restaurant in culturally diverse inner-city Melbourne is a case in point (Shtargot 2005). The aspirational The Age newspaper does not just provide the facts of the outbreak, but nurtures a generalized fear of “ethnic” cuisines and the “ethnic” other with its accompanying photo. The image of the entry to this Turkish eatery features an Indian woman in a sari walking past the restaurant’s distinctive shopfront (see Figure 1). This photo, taken in Brunswick, a part of Melbourne renowned for its multiculturalism, including a significant Muslim population, suggests a link between cultural diversity and “ethnic” cuisines in general and the threat of food poisoning. Due to this visual cue, the facts and figures of this uncharacteristically widespread outbreak (more than four hundred suspected cases) are therefore quickly connected in the reader’s mind with “ethnic” food. The positive association of cultural diversity with vibrancy (the woman’s colorful sari) and pleasure (the exciting array of cuisines) has, the juxtaposition suggests, a dark side: the threat of contamination. The very real concern over one’s physical safety—the restaurant is an iconic Turkish eatery with a high customer turnover—melds here with residual anxieties about the consequences of the absorption of ethnic Others into the Australian body politic.

More recently, the tabloid Herald Sun newspaper embarked upon an energetic scare campaign around food poisoning in Melbourne’s eateries, more often than not finding indirect ways of linking this problem with “ethnic” food in the minds of a readership that is arguably susceptible to racial
stereotypes. An article written about a latex glove found in a stir fry in Darwin in the north of Australia connects this incident with ethnicity by labeling the stir fry “Asian” (Statham 2011), while the original NT News piece deemed the meal a “Chinese dinner” (Byrne 2011). Here, as elsewhere, an individual case of food poisoning is reported such that it becomes a story about ethnicity. Although the Herald Sun is careful to avoid overt racial stereotyping in its food poisoning campaign, long-standing public perceptions about the safety of “ethnic” foods are subtly referenced. In 2012 the paper ran an article decrying the lack of information available to the public about food sellers who routinely fail inspections or who have been issued infringement notices. The article includes enough images typically associated with “ethnic” cuisines to convey the impression that the problem is one typical of “ethnic” food. The warning about “threats lurking in food courts” conjures associations of the various—if somewhat bland—permutations of “ethnic” cuisines that are common in shopping center food courts in Australia (Chinese, Indian, Japanese, Middle-Eastern, perhaps Italian). A reference to “filthy food vendors” in a context saturated with images of “ethnic” eateries—such as the Sushiman outlet in suburban Box Hill, an area with a significant Chinese population—skirts overt racism but taps into age-old associations of ethnic difference and uncleanliness and confirms the existing prejudices of a readership suspicious of cultural diversity. Moreover, the newspaper is not above allowing its subjects to express the overt prejudice it is careful to avoid. In an article about the Sushiman incident, the newspaper cites victim “Margaret” as saying, “I used to enjoy going to Japanese restaurants...but I will probably never eat Japanese food again” (Hudson 2012). In this way, the connection between a particular ethnic cuisine and food poisoning is confirmed.

Racialized reporting on food issues also pervades the so-called “current affairs” programs that air on Australia’s commercial television channels immediately after the nightly news bulletins. These programs in fact have a greater entertainment than news value and tend to run formulaic reports often aimed at stoking resentment toward certain aspects of the community, such as the unemployed or nonwhite ethnicities. One example is Channel 7’s program Today Tonight, which aired a number of news items on food poisoning, with a particular focus on sushi (see Figure 2). In 2011 the show reported on the high levels of E. coli and other potentially life-threatening bacteria found in sushi, which, according to the report, can be the result of poor hygiene, dirty equipment, or the ingredients themselves (Wellings 2011). The report was introduced by images of sushi overlaid with oversized images of bacteria and featured a foreboding soundtrack. The facts

FIGURE 2.:  *The tabloid Australian current affairs program, Today Tonight, regularly covers “ethnic” food scares.*

*courtesy of Seven Network © 2013.*
and figures were equally frightening: four out of five sushi shops that Today Tonight had tested exceeded minimum bacteria standards and as many as 120 people die a year from food poisoning in Australia, the show claimed. As in the Herald Sun newspaper articles mentioned above, there is a conflation of different ethnicities in this report; one of the shop owners interviewed is of East Asian appearance, but not recognizably Japanese, and the shop he owns is called “Chop-Chop,” visual cues that would only lead the viewer to generalize about the perceived dangers of Asian food. It is also telling that another Today Tonight report purporting to discuss the risks of food poisoning in general consistently shows iconic images of Asian cuisine, such as chopsticks and sushi (Brady 2012). Therefore, while the report is supposedly not about “ethnic cuisine” in particular, but food poisoning in general, the shots of easily recognizable Asian cuisine make the gruesome pictures of vermin, droppings, and whole chickens floating in stagnant liquid all about the risks and threats of “ethnic” food. Equally suggestive to the viewer is that while the interviews with consumers also emphasize the dangers of Asian food: “Eating sushi can be like playing Russian roulette with food” (Brady 2012). The understandable biological fear about contracting food poisoning is repeatedly exploited by Today Tonight and other tabloid media to reinforce a generic unease that has long characterized white Australia’s attitude to Asia.

The Asian “Invasion”: Threatening Food Imports

Of course, as Australian journalist and author David Marr (2011) reminds us, instilling fear and panic in readers is the raison d’être of tabloid journalism: “There is a cynical old saying that the purpose of tabloid journalism is to maintain a perpetual state of false alarm.” That the panic over Asian invasion is the “gift that keeps on giving” for tabloid media is exemplified by the reporting on food import issues on Today Tonight. In early 2012 the program reported a “fruit and veggie invasion,” the background graphics to the anchor’s introduction featuring a map of Australia and the words “dumped on” and “dumping deluge,” while the anchor spoke of Australian farmers “battling a foreign invasion” and of “overseas competition flooding the Australian market illegally” (Fajzullin 2012). The government’s “tough laws,” the anchor suggested, were being flouted by an overseas menace. The language and imagery here is disturbingly reminiscent of Australia’s relentless “boat people” debates in recent decades—something governments of left and right have also addressed with “tough laws”—thus supplanting the anxiety about foreign invaders to the country onto food imports. The program suggests that foreign food represents a potential crisis for the nation’s very existence, with imports threatening “to wipe farmers and manufacturers off the face of the continent” (Fajzullin 2012). In this instance, Today Tonight chooses to emphasize Chinese imports, referring to its requests for information under freedom of information laws about China’s role in dumping (a trade term that is incidentally never explained to the audience). The claim that seven possible instances of dumping were detected is voiced as the translucent image of a Chinese flag flutters on-screen, revealing a clichéd image of a Chinese streetscape behind, with Chinese men on bicycles. Facing this tide of imports, the report says, Australia is a “soft target,” language that had recently been used to describe Australia’s situation regarding “boat people.” The worry that “the continent’s” borders are not being adequately policed characterizes both issues.

Perceptions of threat can be heightened when there is competition between cultural groups for economic or other resources (Stephan et al. 2000: 243). In the above media report we can detect white Australian anxiety over the economic rise of China, especially given the dependence of the Australian economy on China as Australia’s largest trading partner. This paradox pervades reportage on Chinese food imports. As the Global Financial Crisis strengthened the Australian dollar relative to other currencies, local producers and exporters faced a situation in which their product became even more expensive relative to imports. The response to this economic threat—as we saw in the “Australian Made, Australian Grown” campaign—was to appeal to nationalistic sentiment and to exploit the dark side of the omnivore’s dilemma, suggesting that danger is lurking everywhere in foreign food. Growers, industry groups, politicians, academics, and unions provide commentary for Today Tonight, which is crafted into frightening and xenophobic reports that stir up archaic white Australian fears. Often, Today Tonight uses the almost subliminal method of rotating headlines like “hidden dangers,” “foreign flood,” and “dumping deluge.” The story on fruit and vegetable imports cites a consumer law academic who is happy to supply Today Tonight with its trademark blunt, inflammatory language: “Dumping can be very damaging to the Australian economy because it destroys local jobs, destroys local industries, and what that means then is prices will go up” (Fajzullin 2012).

The threats raised here range from the serious to the more trivial. Today Tonight and its ilk have a paradoxical obsession
with promoting cheap food while supporting Australian industries that really need consumers to pay more, not less, for food in order to support higher employment and quality standards. This paradox means that Today Tonight’s reportage on food issues is often confused and contradictory, but where there is an intercultural element, it invariably invokes “us” versus “them” rhetoric and imagery. For example, a story aired just prior to Christmas 2011, ostensibly about seafood pricing, takes its cue from the Australian seafood industry’s campaign against imports (Everaardt 2011). Images of Asian fishermen are interspersed with shots of dead fish, crawling with flies, floating in stagnant water, overlaid by a dread-inducing soundtrack. A grim-looking spokeswoman from the industry lobby group Ausbuy declares: “we are eating this inferior product,” suggesting that dead and rotting fish are plucked from Asian waterways for export to Australia (Everaardt 2011).

The perceived threat from Asia in this story, however, does not simply arise from what is implied to be an inferior product. The story also suggests an existential threat in the context of food scarcity and the growing global population. Worse than ingesting an inferior imported product, it seems, is having no imported product at all: “Our seafood imports are likely to dry up, our supply under threat from an ever growing Asian market” (Everaardt 2011). The frightening prospect of food scarcity is ascribed here to China and its “hordes.” File footage of crowded Chinese streets, the fluttering Chinese flag, even the Imperial Palace in Beijing—the seat of Chinese imperial power for five hundred years—conjures the omnipresent spectacles of contamination, scarcity, and engulfment by an intercultural element, it invariably invokes “us” versus “them” rhetoric and imagery. For example, a story aired just prior to Christmas 2011, ostensibly about seafood pricing, takes its cue from the Australian seafood industry’s campaign against imports (Everaardt 2011). Images of Asian fishermen are interspersed with shots of dead fish, crawling with flies, floating in stagnant water, overlaid by a dread-inducing soundtrack. A grim-looking spokeswoman from the industry lobby group Ausbuy declares: “we are eating this inferior product,” suggesting that dead and rotting fish are plucked from Asian waterways for export to Australia (Everaardt 2011).

The soundtrack lightens as the report concludes at the dinner table of a white Australian family headed by “mum” Sarah Wilson, who laments the increasing cost of seafood. A photogenic blond girl at the dinner table declares that she loves fish and the reporter reassures us (contradicting the earlier industry-led message about import quality) that with increasing consumer demand, Asia will increase its seafood farming and prices will come down again. “Great news for all,” the reporter intones. Having frightened viewers with spectacles of contamination, scarcity, and engulfment by a monolithic Asian other, Today Tonight calms viewers with this domestic scene of a white Australian family. It is thus apparent that the “all” of the previous quote refers not to the ethnically diverse body of Australian consumers, but to an imagined “typical” white family of modest means. This archetypal family—surely intended as a reflection of the audience of Today Tonight itself—is unlikely to be the type to participate enthusiastically in Australian food multiculturalism as food adventurers in the Food Safari mold. For them, ethnic food represents the many changes to Australian society wrought by the policies of multiculturalism. On screen at least, though, Today Tonight is able to contain the threats posed by ethnic diversity and preserve a reassuring image of white, wholesome family eating. To borrow from Hage, this is a kind of “home-building” monoculturalism, in which Australia is reimagined as untouched by non-European immigration.

The Future of Food Multiculturalism

The coexistence in the Australian media and public discourse of such polarized treatments of “ethnic” food corroborates the polemic critique of food multiculturalism by Australian food studies scholars and sociologists in recent years. For many, one of the best things about Australian postwar immigration is that the dreary prewar foodscape of white Australia was transformed. Australians now enjoy a diverse range of cuisines in various local iterations that are no longer confined to the “pizza joint” or the “local Chinese” with its predictable offerings of beef and black bean sauce, lemon chicken, and the like. If politicians have been quick to see Australia’s appetite for “ethnic” food as a sign of intercultural acceptance, a number of scholars—most notably Hage and Probyn—have criticized this link forthrightly, arguing, for instance, that an appreciation of “ethnic food” is often deployed to cover up a “taste for racism” (Probyn 2000). Our analysis of three extreme examples of culinary xenophobia in the Australian media speaks volumes to this critique and encourages scholars to continue debating the merits or otherwise of Australian food multiculturalism. From a government and industry
an advertising campaign to newspaper and television coverage of food poisoning and food imports, we have identified a persistent fear mongering about potential contamination via “foreign” foods. At evidence too in these examples from mainstream media are long-standing Australian fears about Asian inundation.

As we conclude our discussion about the persistent culinary xenophobia in Australia’s mainstream media, and the way it is invoked to make Australians feel—in the most visceral way—that the national body is at risk, it is important to consider the future of food multiculturalism as a subject of academic debate. What we have shown in this article is that a mainstream enjoyment of ethnic cuisines is not a panacea for long-standing xenophobic discourses of the kind that are expressed in the formats we analyze here. If, as we believe, cultural texts help to constitute culture, these media are unfortunately helping to shape the intercultural encounter in Australia. It therefore remains to be seen whether and how food multiculturalism can produce what a leading Australian food studies scholar calls “hopeful intercultural encounters” (Wise 2010).

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NOTES

1. Such as by doctoral student Andrew Junor, whose work questions the assumption that Australian cuisine in the first half of the twentieth century was “Backward, British and Bland.” See Junor 2014.
4. In his address to the Lowy Institute in 2011, Abbott warned against Australia becoming a “soft touch” (Abbott 2011).

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