

Lisa Heldke

Exotic appetites: Ruminations of a food adventurer

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Lisa Heldke's *Exotic Appetites* is a unique attempt to tease out the connections between Westerners' enjoyment of so-called ethnic cuisine and the legacies of European colonialism.

There is immense pleasure to be found in the enjoyment of unfamiliar cuisine. Yet dominant groups are fond of using the landscapes, music, art, bodies, and artifacts of marginalized groups as entertaining retreats from the self-perceived blandness of their own—usually European—traditions. When cultures are commodified as resources for pleasure, they become what bell hooks calls, “alternative playgrounds” where privileged groups affirm their access to, and power over others (hooks, 22). Cuisine is an important part of this playground. Food production, preparation, and consumption are profoundly cultural, political and sometimes religious activities. So, why have scholars working on race, ethnicity and colonialism overlooked cuisine?

Lisa Heldke's *Exotic Appetites* is a unique attempt to tease out the connections between Westerners' enjoyment of so-called ethnic cuisine and the legacies of European colonialism. Her book is a wonderfully rich self-reflective effort to make visible the desires, attitudes, politics, and epistemic presuppositions that food adventurers—like herself—animate as they actively seek out exotic, authentic, and sometimes bizarre or risky eating experiences. Heldke positions herself as a food-savvy feminist standpoint theorist/anthropologist. She does her fieldwork in restaurants and kitchens. Recipes, restaurant reviews, cookbooks, menus, and conversations with dining companions are her artifacts. What she discovers is a cluster of philosophical problems rooted in the surprisingly colonial discourse of food adventurers, food critics, and cookbook writers. Once the connections between colonial and culinary discourse become visible, the question naturally arises: How ought we to engage or resist the culinary legacies of colonialism?

To address this Heldke develops an account of food adventuring. Ideally food adventuring is both an attitude and a practice; it is open to everyone regardless of race, ethnicity, or class. But most food adventurers occupy privileged subject positions. Like the white person who doesn't see race as part of her identity, the food adventurer thinks her culture's cuisine is bland, neutral, or simply unexciting. To counter this she routinely seeks out experiences that disrupt her ordinary American fare. Since one of Heldke's tasks is to address privilege, she focuses on white foodies for whom eating is a form of gastronomic orientalism. At first glance, food adventuring appears philosophically unnoteworthy: so what if I like to explore different cuisines! But her point is much deeper: Eating Chinese food, writing a restaurant review, or cooking Thai are not problematic activities in-and-of-themselves. They become problematic only when neocolonial attitudes carry cultural outsiders through these activities, and this is more the rule than the exception. These attitudes are not mere cognitive states; they shape our interactions with others. Colonial attitudes include the food adventurer's obsessive interest in and appetite for the novel, obscure and exotic; the arrogance of treating dominated cultures as useful resources to serve your

own interests; or the intense desire for authentic cultural eating experiences (7). Food adventuring, then is a disposition of spirit that adventurers embody when they eat out, shop at an Asian grocery, or skim the pages of a Thai cookbook; and, it fosters harmful relations to that culture. When a cuisine is thought to have value only insofar as it can be consumed for its novelty, then its value is relative to *my* interest alone. Food adventurers who valorize cultural novelty not only alienate themselves from their own culture's foodways, but also engage with that culture's foodways disrespectfully.

So, if cultural food colonialism exists, and if this attitude fosters interactions that are harmful--because they reinscribe the colonizer-colonized mentality--then how might food adventurers disrupt this dynamic? How might we engage in anti-colonialist eating practices? This sounds trivial, something like, how can food adventurers learn to dine with better politics? But Heldke is inviting us to think critically about eating--something we ordinarily think of as apolitical. Her inquiry into the possibilities of anti-colonial eating practices is a gastronomic parallel to Sandra Harding's exploration of "traitorous identities," that is, subjects who are members of dominant groups that resist the usual assumptions of their groups. She's not just asking us to change our attitudes; she wants us to change who we are, and how we structure our eating experiences.

Food adventurers are easy to identify, but the question of how to eat without backsliding into food colonialism is more difficult. Heldke offers suggestions for resistance and raise a few worries related to this question. For instance, how might food adventurers begin to animate resistant forms of eating in a neocolonial eating environment? Or, how might they discuss food in ways that don't reinscribe Us/Them binaries? Heldke recommends "self-reflective eating" as one response to cultural food colonialism. By "placing the colonial eating relationship square in the center of the dining table" and recognizing how colonialism and racism transform [our] actions as eaters," she thinks adventurers can examine the politics behind their desires (182). Just as many of us have learned to shop for clothes in ways that attend to the fact that the garment industry is almost exclusively fueled by sweatshop labor, so food adventurers can be attentive to the ways colonialism structures our experiences with ethnic cuisine. We can imagine the anti-colonial food adventurer cultivating a working understanding of the culture, politics and history behind Vietnamese cuisine which accounts for the sudden growth of these restaurants in the U.S. in the early 1980s. Anti-colonial cookbooks on the subject might make connections between French colonialism, American military action, and the influx of refugees to the U.S. after the fall of Saigon. The question here, however, is whether bringing this understanding to the dinner table counts as resistance.

Although Heldke acknowledges the variety of food adventurers, she initially frames newly revealed culinary puzzles along a "white eaters/ethnic cuisine" binary. She does this for good reasons: the binary mirrors colonial relationships. Later she tosses out the binary and—following Dion-Buffalo and Mohawk—suggests that resistant adventurers step out of the subject/object framework and "cultivate anti-colonial eating practices by acting in solidarity with nonsubjects" (184). Standing in solidarity with non-subjects opens up possibilities for resistance by suggesting new ways for food adventurers to interact with former colonial subjects.

I'm very sympathetic to Heldke's idea of food colonialism. Her tireless and persistent efforts to make culinary politics and epistemology visible are philosophically groundbreaking. They add

more than a whimsical philosophical footnote to the diner's guides of the world. They have broader implications for the ways we understand and engage with colonialism and its legacies. No doubt, non-western ethnic cuisine will continue to be commodified in ways that enhance the dominant palate. Cookbook writers and food critics will continue to wax poetically (nostalgically?) about exotic cuisine from faraway places. But perhaps we will do so with an awareness of how our desires inform our politics and somewhere down the line, as bell hooks says, we may "know better how desire disrupts, subverts, and makes resistance possible" (hooks, 39).

Alison Bailey is an associate professor of Philosophy and a member of the Women's Studies Program at Illinois State University. Her philosophical interests are largely motivated by issues of social justice. She is the author of *Posterity and Strategic Policy: A Moral Assessment of U.S. Strategic Weapons Options* (1989) and coeditor, with Paula Smithka, of *Community, Diversity and Difference: Implications for Peace* (2002). Her research on gender and race privilege has appeared in *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy*, *The Journal of Social Philosophy*, *Whiteness: Feminist Philosophical Narratives*, and *Feminist Ethics Revisited*. She is an enthusiastic practitioner of Iyengar yoga.