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Fast Food Frontiers: I've Got a Feeling We're Not in Kansas Anymore

My friend in Denver was biking to work the other day, shortly before noon, and he noticed a line of cars so long that it spilled out of a Taco Bell drive-through and blocked traffic. He marveled at the line, recalling that the “second-best tacos in the United States” are sold at a local mom-and-pop taco stand just six blocks away for about the same price. There’s no drive-through, but the service there is fast, and the food is “a million times better than any Taco Bell.” He wondered why all these folks weren’t down at the local store, supporting that local mom-and-pop operation against the (inter-)nationalized chain.

His story made me wonder about fast food in general. Considering that so much of the cultural identity of fast food has to do not simply with the preparation but also with the corporate sprawl that dominates so many of our U.S. places, consumers seem to readily accept the sterile experience of fast-food chain restaurants even though an alternative with more personal attention, better quality food, even the same price — that local taco stand — is just down the road. But can the mom-and-pop operations properly be considered fast food? Is the question so easily divided between national chain and local store, particularly when that chain store is in fact a locally owned franchise? Perhaps the question isn’t about the outlet as much as it is about the food. What is fast food anyway? Does it have a

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popular definition? Does it have *any* definition? Perhaps more compelling: Where is fast food going? Where do we see the fast food frontiers?

The purpose of this article is to explore more carefully and to expand our definition of fast food. First I problematize the current notion of fast food and redefine it by suggesting that fast food is not a personal choice or lifestyle, but a societal condition. Second, I look into the international fast food scene beyond Taco Bell or McDonald's restaurants. These international examples from Thailand, Indonesia, Vietnam, Japan, Paris, and back to New York City co-exist side-by-side with the standardized assemblyline fast food associated with global chains. From these examples, I suggest that we should shift our way of thinking about fast food and seek some new models for an expanded understanding of fast food's frontiers.

Thawing Fast Food

"Fast food" is often discussed from a single perspective that presumes that it is easily recognized as burgers, fries, soda, and similar items which are already prepared or quickly prepared for customers. The discussion then readily shifts to the purveyors of these products: multinational Western companies, such as McDonald's. For the scholars who utilize this perspective, such as George Ritzer (1993), every aspect of fast food is conveniently explained by reference to rationalization in modern society; companies selling fast food reflect the modern tendency of organizations to operate under rules that institutionalize predictability, calculability, efficiency, and control and that result in a homogenized experience.

Although this conception of fast food is useful, it is overly simplistic, and in a sense almost frozen. It fails to take into account the rapidly changing contemporary reality of the fast food scene. A discussion that assumes analysis of McDonald's as a conclusion, rather than as a starting point — one of many possible starting points — does not serve to develop a broader understanding of this eating practice of fast food and its social impact. Even if an analysis of fast food were to focus exclusively on the United States, this discussion ignores a reality in which the practice of fast food is expanding in ways sometimes contrary to McDonald's as a model: small, local shops also provide fast food, perhaps those same burgers and fries; individuals even create their own fast foods.

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Fast food in other countries bears only a superficial comparison to the presumptive approach. For example, in Japan, people purchase *ekiben*, small lunchboxes available at railroad stations. These lunchboxes contain various foods all of which are part of traditional Japanese cuisine. The contents of *ekiben* vary seasonally and regionally, resulting in thousands of variations of this fast food.¹ While *ekiben* are fast and convenient like the food at a McDonald's, they cannot be explained only through a rationalization model of modern society, such as Ritzer's McDonaldization thesis. In Ritzer's rationalization model, a rich and individualized experience at fast food restaurants is almost impossible. The ultimate goal of rationalization is total control over natural (seasonal) and social (regional) environments, thereby ridding the process of chance: wherever you go, you have the exact same burger and the same eating experience. However, the logic of *ekiben* is based not simply on convenience, but also on creating regional pride, not system-wide uniformity.

An understanding of fast food must reflect the reality of a postmodern world in which eating practices are multiple and complex. One must acknowledge, at the outset, that there are no fixed reference points against which the many practices can be analyzed. Accordingly, a "global versus local" approach to fast food is not and, undoubtedly, never was adequate to explain these practices. Fast food arising from local or traditional practices coexists with its globalizing counterpart. The *ekiben* and the McDonald's — the two eating practices — each occupy a space — physical, organizational, social — in the world. By arguing that there are multiple fast-food eating practices and spaces, I do not argue that all are equally recognized or powerful around the globe. Clearly, McDonald's has had the corporate power to dominate space in a way that *ekiben* does not. And certainly one's ability to move between various experiences of fast food is shaped by where one lives (rural vs. cosmopolitan areas) and by one's socio-economic status.

But my main point is that these eating spaces are not insulated; rather they are contiguous: sitting side-by-side, parallel, overlapping, and even intersecting. One experiences each space not in isolation but in relation to the many other eating spaces. Eat the sushi on Monday and the burger on Tuesday. On Wednesday, grab some fast food from an eatery selling crepes. Each food and eatery resides in a space that brings its own context (e.g.,

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cultural and social practices) but each also has a meaning given to it. Without these multiple spaces, which implicitly deny any fixed reference point, “fast food” has little broader meaning or existence as a distinguishable concept for analysis.

Yet the context and the meaning of the spaces are in flux and destabilized as one proceeds through the contiguous spaces. Between and around the existing spaces new contiguities arise with the generation of new spaces. The continuous (re-)generation of experience, eating practices, and, in turn, new context and meaning undermine the single perspective on fast food (e.g., Ritzer) alluded to earlier. The multiplicity of spaces and the instability of contexts and meanings are, like the world in which we form our identities, constantly in a state of becoming, constantly pushing the frontier, constantly uprooting the seeming comfort of the spaces that become familiar like home.

Swept from her own home by the storm, Dorothy is transported to the Land of Oz, which holds all sorts of fantastical creatures and monsters and magical sights. Dorothy says to Toto, “I’ve got a feeling we’re not in Kansas any more.” Her simple perspective on the world accurately portrays this uprooted social landscape that most contemporary people experience. At the end of the film, having made her way back to her simple and plain farm in Kansas, a jubilant Dorothy exclaims, “There’s no place like home!” However, unlike the movie, in our modern reality, Dorothy wouldn’t be able to return. The simple home space we perceive no longer exists, because we cannot avoid sliding through the spaces of the world, coexisting with the dangerous and safe, the monstrous and magical.

Walking down the street today, we encounter a movable feast of possible fast foods from local and national providers: tacos and burgers, coffee shops and bakeries, or falafel stands and sandwiches. A seemingly simple world of food has exploded beyond our imaginations. But what is that explosion and where does it carry us in this globalized world?

From Fat to Fast: Changing Popular Conceptions of Fast Food

The concept of fast food is being revised almost daily despite the routine academic critique that focuses on assemblyline burgers, fries, tacos, and other foods sold at McDonald’s or Taco Bell. Throughout popular

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media — in magazines, on television, on webpages — the public has been changing the content of fast food and effectively subverting the academic discussion. This revision is (re-)discovering “new” fast foods in old places. The grocery store sells fresh fruit, a prepackaged organic soup, or a handful of simple ingredients that can be assembled in various recipes in just few minutes.

The common image of fast food generally involves a customer walking up to a counter or using a drive-through, reading the menu, placing and paying for an order, and in a matter of minutes receiving that order. The person usually takes the order out of the building or sits down and quickly consumes the purchase on premises. By this definition, the customer rarely lingers over the purchase — it is a speedy process. But is “speedy” the defining characteristic? What about my favorite gas station foods, such as pulled barbeque pork at Shell, tandoori at BP, or chicken-on-a-stick at Mobil? They are fast and — I’ve got to admit — delicious. Are these fast foods because they’re purchased (and perhaps eaten) quickly?

Defining fast food itself becomes an interesting social practice that can be observed. Answers.com defines fast food by the type of food: “Fast foods are convenience foods that can be prepared and served very quickly Fast foods include salty french fries, beefburgers, fried chicken, and pizzas with a thick cheese covering.”² This definition resembles one on upto11.net: “Fast food is usually *finger food* that can be eaten quickly and without cutlery. Fast food often consists of fish and chips, sandwiches, pitas, hamburgers, breaded chicken, French fries, chicken nuggets, pizza or ice cream”³ These definitions, with an emphasis on “finger food”/ “fast food” criteria, would cover my friend’s favorite local taco stand.

A different website, eHow.com, offers a complementary but competing understanding. “Expand your definition of fast food: sub sandwiches or wraps with lean meat (no cheese, no mayo), burritos (no cheese, no sour cream), Greek kebabs or pitas, and Japanese *bento* boxes (ask for low-sodium soy sauce) are tasty, convenient alternatives to the usual burgers and fries.”⁴ The website goes even further: “stock up on ‘fast food’ while grocery shopping: cottage cheese, yogurt, minicarrots (peeled and washed), and fresh fruit.” Now fast food sounds more like “convenience food,” which is designed to save consumers time in the kitchen by requiring minimal preparation, typically just heating. Some of these are packaged for a long

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shelf life with little loss of flavor and nutrients. For eHow.com, foods such as canned soup, TV dinners, macaroni and cheese, an oven-baked whole chicken, and pre-washed salad packages are all fast food.

The (re-)definition of fast food even comes from some of America's best-known chefs such as Jacques Pépin, with his 2004 PBS-TV series and companion cookbook, both entitled *Jacques Pépin: Fast Food My Way*.⁵ For Pépin, fast food is very simple cuisine. In one of the interviews, Pépin contrasts his fast food to conventional fast food:

Conventionally, fast food is associated with processed food. My food is usually easy and fast to prepare, but it is not processed food; I use fresh and, occasionally, canned ingredients but certainly never processed food full of all kinds of chemicals. I try to use organic ingredients whenever possible. A simple tomato salad with fresh basil and red onion, for example, is a fast-food recipe as I define the term.

Another Pépin example of fast food is a black bean soup: "emulsifying a can of black beans in a food processor with garlic, olive oil and Tabasco sauce and then finishing it with a garnish of sour cream, cilantro and some sliced banana or crushed tortillas." Pépin says that this black bean soup is a great, *very fast*, cold soup. He even recommends that we stock our pantries with cans: "canned white beans, anchovies, tomatoes or peaches can be put to good use in creating countless recipes."

The recommendations from eHow.com and Pépin seem to represent the current fad. Popular health experts such as the Mayo Clinic and the National Institutes of Health emphasize that "fast food" is no problem if consumers choose nutritious, healthy fast food.⁶ Were those lines at Taco Bell about healthy choices when inexpensive, fast, and good tacos were just blocks away? From this perspective, the Taco Bell consumers are lazy and ignorant, and they need the experts' advice: choose grilled over fried, exercise, don't use so much salad dressing. In this current rhetoric of "healthy fast food," then, the key to answering my initial question (why do people readily accept the sterile experience of fast-food chain restaurants while an alternative with more personal attention and better quality, and perhaps even more nutrition, yet the same price is just down the road?) is to make a wise "personal" choice.⁷

McDonaldization: fast food as a general process of rationalization in modern society

George Ritzer (1993) pointed to a much bigger picture around the fast-food phenomenon, a picture that goes beyond an individual choice. For Ritzer, what happens in fast-food chains (in terms of speed and convenience) is a part of what happens in modern society in general: a relentless process of rationalization. Borrowing Max Weber's concept of a rationalization process, Ritzer coined the term "McDonaldization," where predictability, calculability, efficiency, and control are the rules of any modern social organizations. And the fast-food industry has become both a model of and a metaphor for this general process. Ritzer's understanding of fast food challenges the idea of an individual's "ignorant" choice of unhealthy fast food. With structural and relentless standardization, people become passive consumers: millions buy fast food daily without considering where this food came from or how it was made. Eric Schlosser, in his book *Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal* (2001), describes a ubiquitous U.S. fast-food scene — the "rush of cold air...the backlit color photographs above the counter" (Schlosser, 2001:4) — which has become ordinary. "The whole experience of buying fast food has become so routine, so thoroughly unexceptional and mundane, that it is now taken for granted" (2001:4).

That standardized experience has spilled over to social relations: employer-mandated, scripted interactions at the fast-food counter convey the illusion of quality service to the customer, while allowing employees to maintain social distance and impersonality (Leidner 1993). Comparably, Chen and Wang (2002) argue that both workers and customers are socialized in now-standard consumption behavior: the moment we step into a McDonald's outlet, customers are welcomed by "standards": standardized service, even standardized smiles and greetings from the crew. From floorplan to recipe, fast-food outlets are thoroughly calculated and standardized to conform to motion studies of workers in food preparation. In return, customers follow the exact standardized script: queue up to order, take the food to the table, and clean up before leaving.

For these authors, to understand fast food, we must account for the general process of standardization and socialization which constructs not

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only fast food norms of what a proper and pleasant meal experience should be, but also the mechanisms to measure and sustain those norms. The formal rationality that promotes efficiency, continuity of operation, speed, precision, and calculation of result does not allow for any other form of fast food such as the local or mom-and-pop outlets. For Max Weber, this process is so effective and convenient for all of us that it will eventually dominate the entire culture and become the only remaining and valid norm for all organization in modern society. This frame for understanding fast food suggests that the controlling (or the standardization process) mechanisms reduce the diversity of local cuisine and eventually kill all local fast-food eateries.

Arguments about homogenization or the McDonaldization of culture, including eating practices, appeal to people who have experienced the tremendous changes in eating habits over the last three decades. The McDonaldization thesis highlights the growing sameness of cultural practices around the world, how cultural practices have been submerged by consumerism, and how practices follow the circulation of capital, channeled through multinational corporations. The picture of sameness has been eloquently drawn by Schlosser. “Over the last three decades,” Schlosser writes, “fast food has infiltrated every nook and cranny of American society. An industry that began with a handful of modest hot dog and hamburger stands in southern California has spread to every corner of the nation, selling a broad range of foods wherever paying customers may be found” (Schlosser, 2001: 2-3).

All U.S. malls and main streets, Schlosser continues, feature the same eateries, coffee shops, shoe stores, car repair places, optical chains, department and specialty stores, and hotels. “From the maternity ward at a Columbia/HCA hospital to an embalming room owned by Service Corporation International — the world’s largest provider of death-care services, based in Houston, Texas, which since 1968 has grown to include 3,823 funeral homes, 523 cemeteries, and 198 crematoriums, and which today handles the final remains of one out of every nine Americans — a person can now go from the cradle to the grave without spending a nickel at an independently owned business” (Schlosser, 2001: 6).

Spicing up the conception of “fast food”: the international scene

Although speaking specifically about the United States, Schlosser’s depiction seems to be increasingly common around the world. A new form of capitalism that is supranational in scope and organization but relentlessly U.S. in style and power is turning the world, to use Benjamin Barber’s formulation, into a “global theme park, one McWorld tied together by communications, information, entertainment, and commerce. Caught between Babel and Disneyland, the planet is falling precipitously apart and coming reluctantly together at the very same moment” (Barber, 1996: 6). This disheartening and bleak picture surely is what most of us experience when it seems that the monstrosity of the world is about to overwhelm us. Barber’s argument is not just of a new world “coming together” but one of convergence without a difference. He does not think that, in the long run, the warring tribes (“Jihad”) can hold out against McWorld (Barber, 1996: 9).

As strong as the arguments about homogenization and McDonaldization are, the realities of postmodern culture and eating practices are far more subtle and complex. In fact, the fast-food chains that Schlosser and Barber paint are not the only — or even the primary — sources of fast food in most of the world. Rather, alternatives such as an individual mom-and-pop store or a street-cart are the eateries that often provide the fast food. The diversity of these fast-food outlets complicates and challenges the simple version of fast food associated with international companies.

For instance, Giselle Yasmeen (2000) provides a different picture of fast food, giving a brief overview of the erosion of traditional eating habits and the growth of new practices of food preparation and consumption in Thailand. Yasmeen describes how urbanization, the spread of capitalist practices, and the growing proportion of men and, in particular, women in the paid labor force prompted a shift from family-based food production and consumption into the commodification of food through new forms of retailing and new spaces and practices of eating. Practices of “public eating” and the spread of “prepared foods” substitute for the traditional practices of private eating and in-house food preparation. The result is the emergence and growth of a “fast foodshop sector where food is available anywhere,

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anytime – an important attribute in a city [Bangkok] where traffic is gridlocked during rush hours” (Yasmeen, 2000: 367).

Women can be seen stopping at a food shop in the evenings on their way home from work to pick up dinner for the family, main courses are placed in small plastic bags with rice being prepared easily at home in a rice cooker... For typically middle-class Bangkokians — particularly women who tend to be impeccably dressed — frequenting cool, comfortable establishments is the most desirable option. Their male cohorts [...] enjoy ‘slumming’ in stalls and outdoor restaurants where they can sit at long tables, eat spicy dishes and drink vast quantities of whiskey. Working-class men, such as tuk-tuk drivers, do the same but are limited to less expensive venues. Since ‘proper’ Thai women do not drink alcohol in public, they engage in a slightly different pattern. Their habit is to go out with a group of friends, women or mixed-company, to a *suan ahaan* or a restaurant in a shopping centre. The urban masses are, for the most part, of humble economic means and purchase food on the streets and *soi* [sidestreets] from vendors both mobile and stationary, and small food-shops specialising in noodles, curried dishes or other fare. (Yasmeen, 2000: 367-8)

Yasmeen draws a picture of a myriad “small ubiquitous fast food-shops” spread throughout Bangkok, and which can be seen throughout the country’s cities. Stationary carts, bicyclists with roaming mini-kitchens, and individuals with baskets fill the alleys, empty lots, and streets. These vendors serve everything one might want: golden crepes, coconut hotcakes, hot-and-sour soup with noodles, or, more complex to prepare, a dish like stewed pork-leg served over rice with pickled vegetables.⁸ Even along the waterways, vendors in boats sell noodle dishes.

It is a picture visible not just in Thailand’s capital but, according to Yasmeen, in most large cities of Southeast Asia. Indonesia has a wide variety of street foods similarly sold from carts, baskets, and small stalls: *bakso*, served in a bowl with noodles, tofu, eggs, and some fried meat; a simple fried tofu; or *gudeg*, made from jackfruit and using traditional Javanese cooking. Another food, *soto*, is a soup-like dish of broth and vegetables, and includes meat such as beef or chicken; *soto* varies regionally and ethnically across the country.⁹ In the streets of Vietnam, one can buy a wide range of foods, such as *pho*, a beef noodle soup; *bate gan*, a pastry filled

with minced pork; or simply fresh fruits. Some vendors have not only the baskets of ready-made foods and pastries, but also mini-kitchens with soup stock, noodles, meats, and vegetables, plus all the typical herbs and spices, all of which they carry around in a search for customers.¹⁰

These images of fast food on the busy streets of Thailand, Indonesia, and Vietnam take a different appearance in the train stations of Japan — one in line with the traditional food practices of the Japanese. Paul Noguchi, in an article suggestively titled “Savor Slowly: ‘Ekiben’ — the Fast Food of High-Speed Japan” (1994), examines the emergence and growth of a specific type of Japanese fast food mentioned above: railroad station box-lunches. These lunches consist of small boxes containing a variety of food items, all part of traditional Japanese cuisine, sold in railroad stations and trains all over the country. One of these boxes, called *makunouchi*, contains, for example, “every single item of cooked food considered necessary or representative of Japanese taste: small pieces of fish and beef, baked or fried, seasoned with soy sauce; omelettes; well-cooked seaweed and vegetables; cucumber or radish pickles; and a sliced piece of an apple or an orange,” all complemented with white rice (Noguchi, 1994: 318).

While *ekiben* come in countless styles and ingredients, they are mostly in the style of the basic *bento*, lunchbox, which is sold at convenience stores, supermarkets, and kiosks. The basic *bento* looks like a shallow box divided into sections with different kinds of food along with a portion of rice. *Ekiben* is a kind of *bento* sub-genre. The *ekiben* tradition originated in the late 1800s as the rail network spread throughout Japan. Local stations competed to offer *bentos* to the passengers and to show off their local delicacies. Passengers looked forward to the different flavors as a major part of the adventure of travel. Originally, they were sold by peddlers to passengers who called out to them from the train windows. Later, speed became the focus of the train schedules, and it became impossible to stop long enough to buy the local *ekiben*, but the station continues. Express trains and *shinkansen* bullet trains serve them on their snack trolleys. Some say that *bento* has been served as the fuel that drives Japan and a solution to the problem of dining on the run.¹¹

Still today, the contents of *ekiben* vary according to the geographical location where the boxes are prepared and to the changing availability of food throughout the year. For instance, *ika-meshi*, squid (*ika*) stuffed with

rice and then simmered in a sweet and salty broth, is sold at the Hokkaido station. *Shamoji kaki-meshi*, stewed oysters on rice served in a rice-paddle-shaped container, is available at the Hiroshima station. The myriad combinations remain a culinary adventure: *Shumai Bento*, steamed dumplings and stewed bamboo shoots at the Yokohama station; *Masu-no-zushi*, pressed shushi topped with trout and wrapped in bamboo leaves at the Toyama station; *Kani-meshi*, crab on rice flavored with crab juice at the Fukui station; *Gyu-tan meshi*, slices of grilled beef tongue and pickles on rice at the Sendai station; *Hamaguri don*, stewed hamaguri clams on rice at the Chiba station; *Yukidaruma bento*, egg and minced meat over koshihikari rice at the Niigata station. *Hippari-dako meshi*, steamed octopus in a container shaped like an octopus pot at the Nishi Akashi station.

Noguchi contrasts *ekiben* with the U.S. version of fast food. Like fast food everywhere, Noguchi notes, *ekiben* affords “accessibility, quick service, relief from having to cook at home, reliability, and low cost” (Noguchi, 1994: 317). But while U.S. fast food is a “gastronomic atrocity of empty calories, provided in antiseptic settings by depersonalized service” which result in a uniform eating experience, *ekiben* are “tasty as well as nutritious” (Noguchi, 1994: 317). Furthermore, the regional variations of the box-lunches “invite the enjoyment of local topography and culinary art via travel by train, offering the opportunity to enjoin the sensory appreciation of eye and palate with place” (Noguchi, 1994: 318). The consumption of these box-lunches is widespread. During the late 1970s, Japanese men and women consumed about two million boxes a week. By the mid-1980s, the number had grown to twelve million boxes daily, sold in 1,600 different varieties; and by the early 1990s, 2,200 varieties in 360 stations (Noguchi, 1994: 319).

Clearly, the picture that unfolds from the train stations in Japan differs from the one that emerges in the lanes and sidewalks of Thailand, Indonesia, and Vietnam. But as ideas of fast food, the street fast food and train station fast food involve a very similar form. These styles incorporate and maintain variety, diversity, and a strong connection to traditional, local practices. The multiplicity and diversity of fast food in these examples contrasts with the regularity and homogeneity of the pervasive fast-food chain restaurants in the United States. Variations in food preparation from small shop to small shop or from rail station to rail station in the Asian cities — Bangkok,

Ho Chi Minh City, or Jakarta — stand out in their varieties in sizes, looks, furnishings, service and offerings.

The settings are not the antiseptic and depersonalized establishments in the main streets and malls of U.S. cities, nor the total estrangement from region and from seasonal rhythm. Virtually nothing resembles the rationalization of multi-corporation globalized fast food. The comparative eating experiences in the different places are almost diametrically opposed. A grassroots element continues to pervade the new practices of eating in the large Southeast Asian cities, an element absent from the U.S.-based fast-food industry.

This difference in actual experience does not mean that local and multinational corporations have no influence whatsoever. Large, but not necessarily U.S., multinational corporations dominate both the production and the wholesale distribution of food. Yasmeen mentions the dominance of a Thai-based multinational corporation, Charoen Popchand, in the production and supply of meat. The corporation's reach stretches to many neighboring countries including China. Moreover, small retailers increasingly use ingredients prepared by large conglomerates, a practice that helps the retailers gain time and money.

These examples of fast food in Asia reveal a very different view of "fast food." It is in some ways congruent with the image of fast food that Schlosser and Barber painted. Yet in many ways it is different, perhaps even completely at odds with their images of McDonaldisation and homogenization. The picture of fast food in Southeast Asia is not simply that of "tradition" fighting for its survival in the face of the imperialism of multinational capitalism. They are certainly not the forces of jihad waging a war against McWorld; nor are they an expression of "ethnic revivals" witnessed today around the world, although they are inevitably a little of those, too. Rather, the picture is of a different form of fast food generated by both local and global corporations — a form that follows a different line of development, one connected to local practices and traditions, yet which is equally tied to late twentieth-century capitalism. The practices express a different line in the development of capitalism, one that generates a practical reality that has little in common with the one that emerges in the United States; yet a reality that equally follows from a logic of capital and that, in Japan, exists side by side with, not in opposition to, the U.S. practices of fast food. And

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indeed, instead of negating one another, the two pictures and the two realities exist side by side.

For what we have in view is the co-existence and co-presence of multiple social spaces, each entailing very different cultural and social practices — and evincing very different experiences — of eating fast food. Indeed, U.S.-style fast food, from McDonald's to Starbucks, is by no means absent from the landscape of Asian cities in general. Yasmeeen, for instance, reports on the spread of U.S.-style fast-food eateries in the malls and office centers in and around Bangkok — places patronized mostly by middle-class, female office workers. But these eateries have *not* eclipsed the multiplicity of small food-shops where the practices of eating out among Bangkokians take place. They have surfaced alongside the native forms of fast food, bringing in new foods, new tastes, and new ways of eating, as well as the tendencies to homogenization, uniformity, and depersonalization of U.S.-style fast food.

The diversity and contiguity of eating practices is definitely not exclusive to East Asian cities. All of these, though again with unique manifestations, can be seen side-by-side when we take a walk through the streets of Paris or New York City. McDonald's is there, but so is the French counterpart, the small, ubiquitous food-shops such as one encounters in Bangkok. As one strolls through the Parisian boulevards, little stalls selling crepes or all kinds of sandwiches in baguettes pop up here and there. Fast foods are everywhere, from the small patisserie to the chocolate and candy bars. Restaurants that resemble temples of food follow one another. Traditional foods, in the boulangeries and patisseries, in the bistros, and in the food markets, are as alive as they have ever been. And new combinations emerge: French mall-like food-courts have a cosmopolitan aspect that brings together a unique mix of cuisines and customers. One can take a break from a visit to the Louvre museum to have lunch in the underground mall. There, one will find a mix of fast-food stores quite unlike the ones in the United States, Bangkok, or Tokyo: coming together are the pizza and Mexican food, Spanish tapas, Moroccan couscous, or French pâtés. And as one sits in the crowded dining space, one virtually shares one's food with people from around the world: Germans, Italians, Spanish, Greek, Japanese, Chinese, Argentineans, Senegalese, Nepalese, and even a few French. Yes, indeed, it is a different experience of fast food.

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This Parisian fast food scene bears a resemblance to many cosmopolitan cities such as New York City or Tokyo. On a recent trip to New York City, I noticed these so-called international scenes here in the U.S.¹² New York's financial district is often a chaotic market of vendors, workers, and tourists, all from around the world. There are the storefronts with, for example, a McDonald's and a Starbucks on nearly every block. Numerous international restaurants (Cuban, Asian and south Asian, Greek, etc.) and delis with international fare that must meet the mealtime deadlines of this busy district are squeezed into a few small blocks.

And even in late December's cold, there are carts available offering a wide variety of foods. Some carts arrive at 3 a.m. to set up breakfast fare, including coffee, tea, donuts, danish, bagels, and similar foods. They are gone by 10 or 11 a.m. But in the interim, the main shift (so to speak) has arrived and is selling breakfast foods for the later arriving workers and preparing for the lunchtime crowd.

In the space of one small Broadway block, more than a dozen vendors are lining the sidewalks, displaying LED signs flashing "open" or umbrellas announcing specific hotdog brands. The fare is largely identical across the carts, as are the menu-like pictures displayed, suggesting a single supplier, even if not a single owner. Middle-Eastern or Mediterranean dishes are common: falafel sandwiches or platters; gyros with lamb, chicken, or beef; grape leaves; chicken with rice or kebobs with various meats, or more descriptively on some carts, "chicken on a stick." A few vendors prominently inform customers that they sell halal (food permissible under Islamic law) meats. Mixed in amongst the offerings at carts are the seemingly "usual" fast foods: hamburgers, Philly cheesesteaks, or hot dogs and sausage.

On the other side of the Broadway block is a lone cart selling Mexican foods, such as nachos, quesadillas, or burritos, and posting a sign for "veggie lovers." Another cart sells prepackaged lunches: sandwiches, parmagananas, eggplant, or baked ziti. Several carts also specifically sell fresh fruits, smoothies, or power fruit-drinks with special additives: bee pollen, protein, B-vitamin complex, or ginseng. You can even decide in advance what you want from the cart's website.

Despite the lunchtime rush of workers and tourists, some carts have short or no lines; others have twenty-person lines waiting for service. There

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clearly are favored vendors who know their customers by face, if not by name. One cart displays newspaper articles about new companionship between falafel competitors after the terrorist attack on September 11, 2001. The owner of one cart, who has been on the block for seventeen years, displays an article identifying it as one of the twenty-best food carts in the city; there's a long line of customers chatting together or on cell-phones, or reading a report for an after-lunch meeting.

Anthony Bourdain, a well-known TV chef, talks about the best restaurants in New York City in his recent book, *The Nasty Bits*. He started with pastrami sandwich at Katz's Deli, pizza at Di Fara, and sushi at Yasuda. But for Bourdain, "the ultimate New York dining experience, however, may not be in a restaurant at all" (2006: 80). Rather, it is at home in his apartment: "I'll eat directly out of that classic New York vessel, the white cardboard [Chinese] takeout container, and watch a rented movie from nearby Kim's Video" (Ibid.). Even a bad hot dog with a warm, watery beer can be delicious if you are at Shea Stadium and the Mets are winning.

Each of these eating places and practices — from the *soi* of Bangkok to New York's Wall Street — reflects a space, physical, organizational, and social. The spaces all contribute to our understanding of fast food. In some ways they also undermine the effort to capture what fast food is. How we understand their similarities and differences, their overlapping and separate practices, when experiencing the realm of fast food eating practices is the key to unlocking the future of what fast food is.

Resetting the table through contiguity

Perhaps the notion of *contiguity* offers an apt metaphor for conceptualizing fast food. Contiguity is about spaces of discontinuity and heterogeneity, bringing together meanings from sometimes incommensurable social experiences, from unsettling or ambiguous social spaces. The existence of each space "sets up unsettling juxtapositions of incommensurate objects which challenge the way we think, especially the way our thinking is ordered" (Hetherington, 1997: 42). As we see from the variations of fast foods — the fatty vs. the healthy, the corporate sterility vs. the street cart — each effort to define what fast food is omits something. Yet, each effort also exists side-by-side in a condition of simultaneity.

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Michel Foucault articulates these spaces where multiple and yet contradictory dimensions co-exist. To quote Foucault:

We are in the epoch of simultaneity: we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed. We are at the moment. . . when our experience of the world is less that of a long life developing through time than that of a network that connects point and intersects with its own skein. (Foucault, 1986: 22)

The features of Foucault's epoch —"simultaneity" and "juxtaposition," the "near and the far," the "side by side," and the "dispersed" — all apply to the nature of the experience of contemporary eating practices of fast food. The multiple, unstable, non-linear realities of eating practices of fast food emerge from their contiguity to postmodern realities.

According to Foucault, then, spaces are not fixed; just as the context and meaning of one eating space can be in flux, these spaces always have multiple meanings for multiple agents. In this sense, eating practices can be taken as sites in which new ways of experimenting with ordering a society are tried out. They are thus arenas in which the new emerges. And they also are a means by which we create an "otherness," which does not exist in itself but rather as a relation between, a contrast against, different spaces.

Contiguity should not be confused with hybridization: the combination of cuisines. Contiguity is the co-existence of multiple cuisines, while hybridization involves a process of merging foods from different places to generate a new cuisine. The combination of European and Asian spices in California cuisine, the preparation of sushi with non-Asian ingredients, or the preparation of sandwiches on French croissants, are examples of hybridization. In hybridization, one experiences a combination of tastes, a mixing of flavors, definitely an expansion of gastronomical experience, which extends boundaries but hardly reshapes their markings. In contiguity, one experiences fragmentation, contradictions, and contestations in their meanings, which challenges the notion of fast food itself. In this globalized world, eating (and social and physical) landscapes have become more indeterminate in their meanings.

Ultimately, my own set of examples above — McDonald's and minicarrots, *ekiben* and Middle Eastern — has to be modulated. For, as I have already alluded to, we should not assume that any of the spaces that I have described or mentioned has any more of a permanently fixed eating

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practice than it does a context or meaning. Juxtaposition of multiple eating practices challenges the meanings of those features to which they refer in the surrounding society. The direction that I take here in looking at the future of fast food stresses the properties of contiguity and juxtaposition as discussed above.

Fast Food Frontiers: I've got a feeling we're not in Kansas anymore

A particular type of “fast food” has no fixed meaning or importance in itself — its meaning derives from its position, timing, and frequency in a succession of eating practices. While for one person fast food can be experienced as a simple parenthesis — an escape from healthy eating or an occasional “treat”—to another it can represent a sign of weakness. (Guilty pleasures!) In the context of a regimented diet, fast food can become an act of subversion, a vehicle of resistance or rebellion. The meaning of a home-cooked family meal to a person accustomed to eating alone is different from its meaning to someone who is used to eating out with her family and still different from the meaning to someone who eats at home with her family every evening. Any change in the sequencing, rhythm, or frequency of the practice would inevitably destabilize its accepted meaning. For instance, for many people in underdeveloped countries, McDonald's becomes, among other things, a symbol of insertion into the world, in which case the experience of eating at McDonald's generates a sense of “being modern.” McDonald's helps to shape an identity as “modern individuals” — identity that clashes with a multiplicity of other identities that constantly contest and subvert it.

I suggest that, in modern societies, the differences between fast-food and traditional- (or local-) food eating practices no longer signify a simple division. The wide range and quality of stylistic modes and the broad array of choices afforded to us nowadays display an openness and fragmentation unprecedented in the history of global food conventions. The differences no longer separate self from other, or center from margins. An identity formation for fast food is a function, in part, of multiple subject positions that

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cohere in contradiction and, in part, of continuous mirroring effects afforded by context.

At the same time as this relevance is rising, however, there is reason to be concerned that the practical and theoretical understanding of eating practices in fast food is being muddled and misconstrued either by the baggage of tradition, by older definitions that no longer fit the changing contexts of the contemporary moment, or by faddish buzzwords that substitute an apparently current relevance for deeper understanding. Thus it becomes urgent to open the topic to creative redefinition and expansion in new directions and to resist any attempt to narrow or confine its scope.

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Endnotes

¹ The website EKEBEN ROOM, <http://www.nre.co.jp/english/ekiben/index.htm>, (last visited June 5, 2008) contains a clickable map showing what kinds of lunchboxes are available in each railroad station in eastern Japan. For example, when we click on the Nagaoka station, we can see several different kinds of seasonally available lunchboxes, including squid, two different kinds of crab, and two different kinds of fish.

² <http://www.answers.com/topic/fast-food?cat=entertainment> (last visited July 14, 2008).

³ http://www.upto11.net/generic_wiki.php?q=fast_food (last visited July 14, 2008).

⁴ http://www.ehow.com/how_108891_buy-healthy-fast.html (last visited July 14, 2008).

⁵ Gordon Ramsay, a famous TV chef, urges preparation of fast food at home in his new cookbook *Fast Food: Recipes from "The F Word"* (2007): "Throw away the takeaway menus, ready meals and convenience foods!" He claims that these days everyone wants fast food but at the same time they want to eat well. So, his cookbook offers all kinds of fast food recipes, from five-minute snacks to ten-minute main courses. Ramsay claims that his cookbook is "for the way we live today."

⁶ Despite an emphasis on "healthy," some people would still reject the concept of "fast food" simply because it embodies a lifestyle deemed unhealthy. The Slow Food movement, which is both an organization and a philosophy, promotes

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ideals and principles which run counter to the frequently heard U.S. attitudes toward both food and life. Slow Food emphasizes literally “slowing down” at every step of the process of growing, cooking, and eating food. This slowing down begins with products from organic farms utilizing sustainable farming systems. The products are then sold locally at farmers’ markets for preparation of fresh, home-cooked meals. The Slow lifestyle discourages highly processed foods or foods whose origin is not local or regional. Standardization and homogeneity are to be shunned, while diversity, regionality, and authenticity are to be embraced. In short, the Slow Food philosophy has the goal of a healthier state of being for mind, body, Earth. To quote Carlo Petrini in *The Case for Taste* (2001: xii), “here at the table lies the template for the preservation of human rights and the environment.”

⁷ The recent mega-hit documentary, “Super Size Me” (2004), walks through a similar line of argument: “If you determine to change your lazy lifestyle, you can also be healthy.” While it might not be the filmmaker’s intention, the film certainly leaves room for such interpretation.

⁸ Kasma Loha-unchit, *Thai Fast Food: Crowded Sidewalks and Waterways*, <http://www.thaifoodandtravel.com/features/streetf.html> (last visited June 9, 2008); Michael Babcock, *Eating Out in Thailand*, <http://www.thaifoodandtravel.com/features/eatout.html> (last visited June 9, 2008).

⁹ “Indonesia Street Food,” <http://www.my-indonesia.info/page.php?ic=1127&id=3244> (last visited June 9, 2008).

¹⁰ Sheridan Rogers, “Vietnamese Street Food,” <http://www.travellady.com/Issues/Issue80/800-vietnamese.htm> (last visited June 9, 2008).

¹¹ See website Ekiben Room, <http://www.nre.co.jp/english/ekiben/index.htm> (last visited June 5, 2008). Anthony Bourdain (2006:14) also makes a similar argument: “But is fast food inherently evil? Is the convenient nature of the beast bad, in and of itself? Decidedly no: fast food — which traditionally solves very real problems of working families, families with kids, business people on the go, the casually hungry — *can* be good food. If you walk down a street in Saigon, or visit an open-air market in Mexico, you’ll see that a quick, easy meal, often enjoyed standing up, does not have to be part of the hideous, generic sprawl of soul-destroying sameness that stretches from strip malls in San Diego, across the U.S.A. . . .”

¹² Author’s field notes, December 2007.

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