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Making the Self in a Material World

Food and Moralities of Consumption

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Food is increasingly central to consumer culture. From fine dining restaurants to farmers' markets, stainless steel kitchenware to celebrity chef cookbooks, a stylish array of culinary commodities are on offer for fashioning our identities. Yet this occurs at a time when commodity consumption more generally is under greater question as a site of self-making, and anti-consumerist sentiment is rising. In this article I examine how people negotiate moralities of consumption in their identity formation by focusing on those for whom food is central to their sense of self: 'foodies'. I define foodies as amateur enthusiasts who strive to form a moral self not only through the consumption of material cultures of food—which is my focus here—but also their production.¹ In this article I draw on theories of consumption, identity and material culture, and ethnographic research conducted with foodies in Melbourne, Australia. I argue that many foodies are anxious about the morality of making a self through consumption, and explore how they negotiate this in a number of ways: first, through the selection of which material goods are deemed proper for self-formation and, second, through what levels of consumption are

considered appropriate. I focus on fine dining and shopping—two consumption practices that are central to foodie lifestyles—and argue that different moral registers operate within each practice.

—CONSUMPTION AND MORALITY

Consumption is a syncretic concept that has two senses, one of ‘purchase’ and the other of ‘using-up’.² Daniel Miller argues that the latter sense has led consumption to be viewed negatively throughout history as an ‘intrinsic evil’. A higher moral value has historically been placed on production, which ‘creates the world’, than consumption, ‘whereby we use it up’.³ This morality is epitomised by the work ethic and abstention from consumption on the part of puritan Protestants, which Max Weber explored in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*.⁴ Miller highlights how this suspicion of consumption and the moral stance against it continues today and has dominated academic work on the topic. It is embodied in the theory of consumption as materialistic, which suggests that people in capitalist societies are bound up in the excessive accumulation of material goods—either for their own sake or for purposes of distinction—and that these goods, while never satisfying the consumer, are more important to them than their relationships with other people. Miller argues that this perspective is inherently middle-class—voiced by affluent academics anxious about their own levels of consumption—as it advocates an ‘ascetic repudiation of the need for goods *per se*’, the ‘liberation’ of people from things.⁵ Moreover, writings from this perspective, which tend to be speculative, ignore the many empirical studies of consumption which have found that most people are not that materialistic.

This critique by Daniel Miller warns against viewing material consumption as intrinsically bad, yet as Toby Miller reminds us, it should not be seen as intrinsically good either.⁶ He highlights how cultural studies has often viewed consumption in a less critical manner, particularly that undertaken by minorities, such as the ‘resistant’ consumption of working-class subcultures. Cultural studies is renowned within other disciplines in the social sciences for its postmodern model of the consumer as the playful identity-maker.⁷ This more positive and at times celebratory approach to consumption has led to criticisms not only from other academic disciplines, but also from left-wing journalists, who have accused cultural

studies of being aligned with right-wing economics, suggesting that it has become 'the handservant of capital'.⁸

An effective way to escape polarised views of consumption as purely positive or negative is to employ the method of ethnography which, as Don Slater argues, allows scholars to approach consumption as 'a realm of everyday practice that has to be understood in its own terms, rather than from a moral high ground'.⁹ I take such an ethnographic approach in this article. Given the purely theoretical nature of most work on consumption, it is of vital importance to conduct further empirical research into the complex nature of people's lived experience of consumption. When dealing with actual consumers and their everyday experiences, the interpretation of consumption in late modernity becomes a lot less black and white; it may be murky, messy, contradictory or ambivalent. It may involve pleasure and anxiety, spending and thrift, inclusion and exclusion. It is almost always complex, and not easily reducible to categories such as materialism or consumerism.

Here, I explore the 'moral cosmologies' that shape people's practices of consumption.¹⁰ The ways people use moral frameworks in their consumption is a crucial issue which demands scholarly attention. As Richard Wilk argues, 'we need to know more about who makes moral arguments, how these arguments are deployed, what kinds of effects they have on others, and how inequality is justified and rationalized by both rich and poor in many different social contexts'.¹¹ In particular, I am interested in the relationship between these moralities of consumption and processes of self-identity formation. Much of the scholarly work on consumption has focused on questions of identity and self-formation, and argued that consumption is a key realm—or even 'the' realm—through which we create and communicate our sense of self.¹² Morality is central to this process, for consumption 'is a space in which people formulate and perform fundamental questions concerning their most substantial values and ends, their sense of who they are and who they should be'.¹³

The importance of examining people's moral cosmologies becomes even more significant in the current context of growing anti-consumerism, where the morality of making a self through consumption has been called into question not only within academia, but also within society more broadly.¹⁴ Today, excessive consumption is not only condemned by social commentators, but also 'popularly understood by the

western public as socially undesirable'.¹⁵ Most research to date has focused on the clearly contestatory voices of anti-consumerist movements and practices, including fair trade, boycotts, green consumers and downshiffters.¹⁶ In contrast, I am interested here in exploring how such anxieties about consumption and the self are expressed in the moral cosmologies of more 'ordinary' consumers who are not necessarily tied to such political standpoints. I explore this by focusing on the moral values of a lifestyle group and cultural identity centred on the material culture of food.

—MAKING SELVES THROUGH FOOD: FOODIES AND MORALITIES OF MATERIAL CULTURE

Food has increasingly become a focus for scholars of consumption and material culture.¹⁷ Within the dedicated field of food studies, a significant stream of research has examined the relationship between the food people eat and their identity. Most research has focused on categories of social identity, such as ethnicity, race, gender and national identity.¹⁸ In comparison, I am interested in the relationship between food consumption and self-identity. I focus on a particular type of self, the 'foodie' self.¹⁹

Unlike most scholars who write on food, I am not a foodie myself; the production and consumption of material cultures of food does not play a central role in my own self-identity formation. This provides a critical analytical distance from my subject, which refuses the romanticisation, celebration and even fetishisation of food (and its practitioners) which characterises some work in food studies. In order to understand how foodies see the world, I conducted ethnographic fieldwork in Melbourne, Australia, between 2007 and 2009. In a city of four million people, Melbourne's foodie community is large and dispersed. They belong to a 'social world' which is 'diffuse and amorphous in character', an 'internally recognizable constellation of actors, organizations, events, and practices'.²⁰ I used a number of methods to access this dispersed community and recruit informants: I was introduced to members by a key contact in the foodie community; I left flyers in bookshops dedicated to food; and the city's chief food critic, John Lethlean, published a story on my research in the *Epicure* food supplement in *The Age* broadsheet, Melbourne's leading news publication targeted to foodies.²¹ My fieldwork took me into the homes of foodies; in particular, into their kitchens, where

they cooked, and to their dining tables, where we ate. It took me to restaurants and cafes with foodies, to explore their public consumption and judgements of cuisine; to farmers' markets and food and wine festivals, where Melbourne's large foodie community comes together; and online, to their food blogs and social media, which increasingly connect this community. In addition to participant observation, the research included in-depth interviews with twenty foodies (ten women and ten men). These were semi-structured and conversational, allowing foodies to focus on their particular interests and practices, and lasted for between one and three hours. My questions revolved around meals, cooking, shopping, dining out and media. They formed the basis of a qualitative open-ended questionnaire which was completed by a further thirty foodies (twenty-three women and seven men).

My informants included women and men whose ages ranged from the early twenties to the late sixties. They came from a range of ethnic backgrounds, including Anglo-Australian, Asian and European, and a significant number were first-generation migrants. Among the younger generation, Anglo-Australians were the minority. The informants were, in general, middle class, mostly members of the 'new middle class' or 'knowledge class'. As a group, they were highly educated. The large majority had tertiary qualifications and a substantial minority were undertaking or had completed postgraduate qualifications. They worked in a range of white-collar occupations in government, business and academia. The majority earned incomes above the national average, with a substantial minority earning double. They were predominantly urban, with the large majority living in gentrified inner-city suburbs. In the interest of anonymity, I have replaced their names with pseudonyms. This ethnographic research was conducted in the culturally specific context of Melbourne and therefore necessarily has local dimensions, but it nevertheless shares many similarities with urban food cultures in other post-industrial multicultural Western societies, most notably the United Kingdom and the United States. The foodie is not an identity unique to Australia, but rather an increasingly global one found across many countries and cultures. It is a product of globalisation and transnational flows of food, tastes, media, capital and people.

To date the foodie has been understood, both in popular culture and academia, as a fashionable status-seeking consumer. The term 'foodie' was coined in 1982 in the British style magazine *Harpers & Queen*, where it referred to a 'cuisine poseur'

who used sophisticated culinary consumption as a means of social distinction.²² Two years later, *Harpers & Queen* published *The Official Foodie Handbook*, which constructed the group as consumers who use food as a status symbol in class distinction. The cover declared: 'Food is the opium of the stylish classes'.²³ Sociologists Josée Johnston and Shyon Baumann put forward a similar perspective in *Foodies: Democracy and Distinction in the Gourmet Foodscape*, where their analysis of media and foodie discourse argues that foodies are bound up in the pursuit of social distinction through the consumption of 'authentic' and 'exotic' foods.²⁴

In contrast to these earlier understandings of the foodie, my fieldwork found that foodies' self-formation through food could not be reduced to an instrumental quest for social distinction and fashionability. Rather, as I argue in detail elsewhere, it involves a more substantial process of the formation of selves through the negotiation of moralities of consumption and production in leisure.²⁵ The moral anxieties which many people feel towards consumption today, particularly members of the educated middle class, were common among the foodies in my ethnography. Many possessed a distrust of consumption—particularly excessive consumption—as morally suspect. Indeed, their attitude towards consumption shares many similarities with that of the middle-class Protestants described by Weber, to whom this ideology may be traced. So how do they negotiate these anxieties in the formation of their identities?

The problematic status held by consumption in general within their moral cosmology is negotiated by choices over what categories of material things are deemed appropriate for making selves. Many foodies believe that the consumption of food, in which their self-formation is invested, is of a higher moral value than the consumption of other material goods, such as clothes. Some foodies, particularly the baby-boomer generation, found the consumption of clothing superficial. This distinction between clothing and food in self-formation has a symbolic dimension. For where clothing sits on the surface of the self, food goes deep into the self and shapes it from the inside out. There is a rich body of scholarly work that shows why clothing is anything but superficial.²⁶ Yet its consumption, like all material things, is invested in moral regimes, and is more central to making some selves than others.

The foodies in my ethnography did not reflexively think of themselves as 'consumers'—like people who shape their selves through stylish clothes—because

they believe food is a necessity not a luxury, a need not a want. Their perspective is similar to the ‘worldly asceticism’ of Protestants, which only ‘approved the rational and utilitarian uses of wealth which were willed by God for the needs of the individual’—that is, spending on ‘necessary and practical things’—whereas spending on fashionable clothes was considered ‘the idolatry of the flesh’.²⁷ Some foodies went to great lengths to distance themselves from ‘that type’ of consumption, which was invested in ‘fashion’ and ‘style’ and the associated endless replacement of goods. For example, when their favoured weekly food supplement in the city’s broadsheet was moved to the ‘Style’ section alongside fashion, several of my informants reacted vehemently. They included John and Elena, an Anglo-Australian couple in their fifties who worked in property development and community relations respectively. They immediately cancelled their subscription to the newspaper in protest. As John described:

We were deeply offended, because it’s just the wrong attitude to food, like food is *not* a fashion item ... It’s meeting a basic need first and foremost, and you’ve got to never lose sight of that, and when you start turning it into fashion, you lose touch with the bedrock purpose of it. I resent that.

This sentiment was echoed by other foodies. For example Jeff, who worked as a nurse in a hospital emergency department, said ‘I guess it’s not food as a fashion accessory for me ... I guess if you’re interested in the food, that just detracts from it’. Ruth, a policy advisor in the public service, was also incensed: ‘Suddenly in *Epicure* there was all this advertising and style, they included the ‘Style’ section in it ... It was about clothes, fashion, that sort of stuff—*way* not what we want in our *Epicure*’. She responded by writing an email complaining to the editor, saying ‘this is *not* appropriate; this is *not* what we value about *Epicure*’. She was not alone in this endeavour. Pippa, a mid-career academic, responded similarly:

I wrote the most scorching email about opening up my *Epicure* and finding fishnet stockings! I went right off ... I was outraged! It’s such an insult to the industry, you know, and to the reader, just assuming that you’d be into fishnet stockings because of your food interest.

Pippa stresses that food and fashion are used to shape different kinds of people, different sorts of selves. The overwhelmingly negative response by their audience led the newspaper to remove the food supplement from the style section, thus

restoring the distance—within the Melbourne foodie community—between food and fashion.

Like many people with high levels of education, most foodies see themselves as culturalists rather than materialists, people whose self-making is bound up in the acquisition of cultural experiences and knowledge, rather than the accumulation of material things.²⁸ What is unique about food is that it offers culturalists an opportunity to partake in the pleasures of material culture, but without the evidence—or guilt—of accumulation. For food consumption differs from most other forms of material consumption in significant ways, and these differences are central to the foodie's preference for food and its use in their self-formation. The key difference lies in the longer lifecycle of most other forms of material culture—such as a house, a car, jeans or shoes—which are not 'used up' instantly. These material things generally have a much longer 'social life' after the 'commodity phase' in which they are acquired.²⁹ Unlike clothes or shoes, food *must* be endlessly replaced, yet it doesn't accumulate: the goods are completely used up in the process of consumption. While it may accumulate on the body, there are moral dimensions to this too: over-consumption and obesity are associated with the lower classes, not with middle-class discipline and refinement.³⁰ Food, then, is a material thing with a culturalist status, and this is one of the reasons for its popularity as a site of self-making today, particularly among the educated middle class. It allows them to retain a sense of moral propriety, a sense of themselves as culturalists, and a sense that they are not 'real' materialist consumers.

The moral discourse of foodies, then, suggests that food consumption is a natural activity based on biological needs, which is morally superior to forms of consumption based on culturally constructed needs and desires. However, eating is not simply a natural act, and the desires of foodies are culturally constructed. Wilk argues that in eating, 'we must all face the boundary between nature and culture, and recognize that we have both basic needs and aesthetic pleasures in the same activity'.³¹ While foodies recognise and relish the aesthetic pleasures of eating, it is the satisfaction of biological needs which they use as its moral justification. This emphasis on biology diminishes the role of the self, for, as Wilk argues, 'our own agency is called into question by the natural compulsion of need, which leads us to constantly search for the dividing line between necessity and luxury, the needs-

driven, and the wants-driven'.³² To explore this dividing line in the moral cosmology of foodies further, I will focus on two practices of consumption that are central to the foodie lifestyle.

—MORAL CONSUMPTION AND FOOD PRACTICES: FINE DINING AND SHOPPING

Recent research on consumption has highlighted the merits of examining it in the context of social practices. As Alan Warde argues, consumption is not a practice in itself, but 'a moment in almost every practice'; it is 'partitioned through its boundedness within practices'.³³ This suggests that rather than trying to understand consumption as an abstract whole, we need to examine how people consume within certain practices, and how modes of consumption differ between practices. I do so here by exploring how different moral regimes govern the consumption foodies undertake in the practices of fine dining and shopping.

Where the ascribed moral value of food consumption becomes problematic in the foodie's cosmology is that while food itself may be a necessity, foodies possess a particular taste for luxury (and fashionable) foods. This is epitomised by the expensive *haute cuisine* many consume in the practice of fine dining. For example, Amelia, who was in her twenties and worked in communications, said, 'I love eating out at all sorts of places, but the fancy places always impress me.' Sarah, a veterinarian, described how she too was impressed by the cuisine in such restaurants, saying 'you can have something that is so stand out there that you wouldn't get just anywhere—like the pasta is cooked to absolute perfection, or the meat is cooked to perfection'. *Haute cuisine* has long been an object of 'conspicuous consumption', used in the display of wealth and in status competitions. According to Thorstein Veblen, this is the most wasteful and morally suspect form of consumption.³⁴ The consumption of luxury restaurants can thus cause anxiety for some foodies, as they are concerned about being viewed as materialistic conspicuous consumers by spending large amounts of money. In order to reconcile this anxiety with their taste for such restaurants, many foodies implement a type of asceticism which restricts the frequency of their consumption, and thus the overall level of consumption.

Most of my informants did not dine in expensive restaurants weekly or fortnightly, but around once every few months. John and Elena said 'we don't spend

that kind of money', in reference to just throwing money at restaurants. They are careful about when they dine out and how much they spend on it. Like many foodies in my study, they limited their expensive fine dining by concentrating on cooking quality meals at home. Raymond, a real estate agent, also focused more on cooking and saved fine dining for special occasions, when 'a couple of times a year' he and his wife would 'spend \$300 to \$400 at a top flight restaurant in the city'. Another informant, George, was in his thirties and worked in the public service. He preferred to focus more on cooking *haute cuisine* meals at home, following recipes from cookbooks by professional chefs, rather than consuming them in restaurants. Indeed, most of my informants placed more significance on cooking than dining out in their self-formation. They were much more interested in talking about what they had cooked than what they had eaten in restaurants; it was only those who were serious restaurant buffs for whom dining out also played a central role. This is tied to the higher moral value placed on food production over its consumption. For most, morality is based on what you do and make as a foodie, not what you consume in designated consumer spaces such as the restaurant, which needs to be restricted.³⁵

In contrast to the ascetic taste of Protestants, which favoured 'sober utility as against any artistic tendencies',³⁶ foodies possess a taste for luxury, but this taste is tempered—even disciplined—by asceticism in terms of frequency. The key difference between the asceticism of foodies and that of Weber's Protestants, however, is the fundamentally opposite relation to pleasure in whose name this asceticism is deployed. For Protestants, this asceticism—manifest in the abstention from consumption, particularly of luxury goods—was deployed in order to *deny* pleasure. As Weber describes it, 'this asceticism turned with all its force against one thing: the spontaneous enjoyment of life and all it had to offer'.³⁷ Pleasure, and leisure, was to come in heaven, as a reward for the work done on earth.³⁸ In contrast, foodies deploy their mode of lite-asceticism—the restriction of consumption of luxury foods—not only to allay anxieties about consumerism, but also as a strategy to *maximise* pleasure. In this sense, it constitutes a form of what Kate Soper calls 'alternative hedonism', whereby changes in consumption in response to consumerism lead to new or increased pleasures. These pleasures can only be secured through restricting consumption, and therefore are 'conditional on "alternative hedonist" commitments to self-policing'.³⁹ This is illustrated by the case

of Surat, one of the most serious restaurant buffs in my research group. He had migrated to Australia from Thailand as a teenager. Now in his early thirties, he was undertaking a doctoral degree in computer engineering and working part-time in an information technology call-centre. He described how he limited his consumption of fine dining restaurants to maximise the satisfaction he gained from it:

Even French and Japanese [his favourite cuisines], sometimes when you have them up to a certain point you can over-do it. You don't appreciate them as much. One of my eating buddies is doing a PhD in economics. He describes it as 'diminishing utility'. It's like some food, if you have too much, you don't appreciate its value anymore.

Here, Surat employs an economic discourse of consumer satisfaction to describe his approach to dining out, representing himself as a *homo economicus* involved in a rational calculation of value, cost and saving. He went on to demonstrate this theory with an example of how he had gone on a foodie holiday a few years earlier with his then girlfriend, and had planned a range of restaurants to eat in for lunch and dinner over the four day trip. He said: 'After a few meals, I don't appreciate them as much. I think towards the end it was more like a waste of money. You don't feel its value as much as in the beginning'. This theory of diminishing utility, while not explicitly named, was implicit in many foodies' responses. For example, Sarah, another restaurant buff, limited her visits to *haute cuisine* restaurants to a couple of times a year. As she described:

I would never want to be in a position where I could just say, 'Oh, let's go to Rockpool, just for Friday night dinner', you know? I like the fact that—'Wow', it's such a big event and I'm so excited to be going ... I feel like that makes it so much more special than someone who can just go and it's no big deal at all.

Thus even serious restaurant buffs, such as Surat and Sarah, restricted this practice and limited their consumption, as they saved themselves for these experiences in order to fully appreciate such luxury consumption. There is a sense in which foodies have to earn their pleasure in restaurants. As Weber observes, 'even the wealthy shall not eat without working';⁴⁰ you have to earn your food, particularly morally suspect luxury food. Most foodies earn it through cooking—being productive—most of the time. Through these various strategies, fine dining takes on the status of the

treat. As Daniel Miller has observed, the notion of the treat brackets off excessive expenditure within clear boundaries, marking it as the opposite of everyday consumption, and thus tames such 'transgressive' purchases and resolves moral anxieties.⁴¹ For many foodies, their morality of consumption in fine dining involves restricting the overall level of consumption and appreciating it more.

There were only a few foodies in my research group who did not restrict their consumption of *haute cuisine* restaurants, and they expressed a sense of guilt and shame over their level of consumption. For example Maria (a housewife) and Katarina (an accountant), who dined out regularly, both said they spent 'too much' money on restaurants. There was a sense that such excessive spending was wrong, and that they *should* be restricting it. Katarina was the most frequent fine diner in my research. But she talked about the number of restaurants she had visited in a negative way, as something bad, rather than something of which she was proud. She expressed the opinion that this level of spending wasn't right, and kept referring to it as 'scary'—not just scary that she had spent so much, because she could afford it financially, but perhaps scary that she had become a conspicuous consumer. The fear appeared to be not only that others may perceive her this way, but also that she herself did not see this—conspicuously consuming—as a moral way of forming the self. Such foodies avoided adding up how much money they had spent on restaurants. As Maria put it, 'I don't know that I am ready to know just how much I spend', while Katarina said 'I don't even want to put a dollar value to it, and I'm not going to.' They did not want others to think of them as consumerist, or to face this vision of themselves. Thus even among those foodies who did not restrict their fine dining, there was a similar moral judgement of excessive spending as wrong.

In contrast to dining out, the foodie's conception of moral consumption in the practice of shopping generally involves 'spending more'. Rather than restricting consumption, most foodies emphasised that they were willing or prepared to spend more money in order to acquire 'good quality' food for the home. For example Nick, a postgraduate student, said, 'I'm willing to pay more for fresh, good quality ingredients'. Sian, a retired former teacher, said that quality was 'very important' when it came to shopping, while Tess, who worked in public relations, declared that 'price is not important. Quality is everything!' Foodie shopping is governed by what I term a 'morality of quality', because it is quality which is of the highest importance

in their ideas about what constitutes 'good shopping'. This stands in contrast to the morality of thrift which often governs the food shopping of more ordinary consumers, in which 'saving money', rather than spending money, is central to ideas about the 'right' way to shop.⁴² The moral value that foodies attach to quality stems from both their emulation of the values of professional chefs—who always emphasise the importance of 'quality ingredients'—as well as their middle-class taste.

Foodies have a complex set of criteria through which they judge the quality of food in their shopping. Central to their judgements are sensory properties such as flavour, smell and appearance, yet these judgements are influenced and sometimes short-circuited by other factors such as the mode of production and distribution, through which additional values are placed on properties such as fresh, local, seasonal, traditional, small-scale and artisanal—properties associated with what Rachel Laudan calls 'culinary luddism'.⁴³ It is some, or all, of these various properties that are invoked when foodies refer to 'good quality'. As Laudan points out, while culinary luddites see this as a return to traditional food values, the idea that food should be fresh, natural and local is actually a latter-day creed. For our ancestors, natural food often tasted bad, was unreliable and usually indigestible:

Eating fresh, natural food was regarded with suspicion verging on horror, something to which only the uncivilized, the poor, and the starving resorted ... Local foods were the lot of the poor who could neither escape the tyranny of local climate and biology nor the monotonous, often precarious, diet it afforded.⁴⁴

It is somewhat easier to identify what foodies consider to be bad quality food than what they consider good quality. These are the foods which are the result of industrialised and globalised systems of mass production and distribution and are sold in supermarkets; that is, the products of 'culinary modernism'.⁴⁵ This includes the fresh produce sold in supermarkets, but it is epitomised by highly processed foods and pre-prepared convenience meals. As Celina, a business manager in her thirties, put it:

I never buy things like frozen meals or even frozen vegetables or fish fillets, or partly prepared ingredients like a pizza base or already marinated meats ... I am continuously appalled by what people consider to

be an adequate meal—something that has been processed, frozen, packaged and sitting in a freezer in a supermarket for who knows how long and then microwaved.

These lowbrow processed foods are associated with the consumption practices of the lower classes. Moral consumption, for foodies, involves purchasing ‘good quality’ food from alternative shopping spaces—such as greengrocers, butchers, bakers, delicatessens, ethnic grocers, specialty shops, markets and farmers’ markets—rather than supermarkets. The foodie’s morality of quality, then, cannot be separated from matters of class. These issues of class taste are implicit in the moral discourse voiced by many foodies about what people should buy and eat. For example Beth, a marketing consultant, said emphatically:

How can there be people who say they can’t afford to eat right? There is an oversupply of great food, but people buy processed food, and become addicted to that. There are affordable alternatives, it is so accessible ... And it’s very affordable. I mean, it’s *very* affordable.

Additionally, Leah, an accountant by trade, said ‘people should buy local food, and learn to make things themselves. Not buy the cheapest, imported canned food, or takeaways.’ As Bourdieu argues, such perspectives transform the taste of necessity of the poor into a ‘taste of freedom’, reducing it to a ‘pathological and morbid preference’ for such foods, ‘a sort of congenital coarseness, the pretext for a class racism which associates the populace with everything heavy, thick and fat’.⁴⁶ In this neoliberal discourse, the ‘choice’ to ‘eat wrong’ symbolises the irresponsibility of the lower class, their lack of personal responsibility as good self-governing citizens. As Toby Miller has observed, in neoliberal society ‘ethico-aesthetic exercises are necessary to develop the responsible individual ... “Good taste” becomes a sign of, and a means toward, better citizenship.’⁴⁷ He argues that the consumption of industrialised processed foods by the poor cannot be reduced to matters of taste; it is also, fundamentally, a question of economic resources: ‘Despite clear correlations between youth obesity and local prices of fresh fruit and vegetables—nothing to do with consumer choice—the high moralism so prevalent in the US media has led to a doctrine of personal responsibility, militating against both collective identification and action.’⁴⁸ Likewise, despite the claims about the affordability and accessibility of ‘great food’ by the high-income earning foodie quoted earlier, research has shown

that many Australians on low incomes and welfare payments are suffering 'food stress'. The cost of fresh foods has risen at a higher rate than processed foods in recent years and the consumption of the latter by those on lower incomes is not necessarily a result of issues of taste or nutritional knowledge, but importantly of price: they simply cannot afford to 'eat right'.⁴⁹ Unlike foodies, not everyone is prepared to, or can afford to, spend more money for 'good quality' food.

How, then, does this morality of quality that governs foodies' shopping—a willingness or preparedness to 'spend more' for good quality food—connect with the moral asceticism they displayed towards excessive expenditure and its connotations of consumerism in relation to fine dining? Why do they find it morally legitimate to spend more on food in shopping, but not in restaurants? The difference is that while fine dining restaurants are considered by foodies to be luxury consumption—which is particularly morally suspect and in need of restriction—buying good quality food for the home is not. They can legitimate spending more in their shopping because the food they consume here is not considered superfluous like that in fine dining restaurants, but is a necessity required for life maintenance. While they recognise that the taste for and practice of fine dining is elite, and not affordable for everyone, most do not consider purchasing costly quality foods from alternative suppliers for the home to be elite; it's just 'right' (Beth). Spending more on food for the home is also legitimated by its close connection to the productive activity of cooking, and the higher moral value it holds in their self formation. Nevertheless, while they are willing to spend more on quality ingredients, some foodies still construct their overall levels of spending as somewhat thrifty, by knowing where to buy 'good quality food for a fair price' (Celina) and 'buying produce that is in season' (Sian), they suggest that they 'don't actually spend heaps on food' (Pippa). This qualification is used, once again, to allay their anxieties about appearing to be materialistic conspicuous consumers, and to defend their shopping choices in the face of suggestions of consumerism or elitism: to construct what they feel to be a moral self through their consumption of material goods.

—CONCLUSION

Questions of morality are central to consumption, both to scholarly understandings of it, and to how people negotiate it in their practices of self-making. The

consumption of material things remains an important part of the formation of selves today, even for those who may question the overall morality of the process. This article has explored such questions in relation to the foodie, a self-identity which has become increasingly common in late modern consumer culture. In examining how foodies make moral judgments of their own consumption, and that of others, I have shown that in their moral cosmology, food is of a higher value for self-making than other forms of material culture, such as clothing, which is often perceived as superficial. Food holds a particular appeal for self-making for those who are anxious about consumerism and tend to prefer cultural experiences over material goods, as it offers a way of consuming without accumulating. This is one of the reasons for its popularity today, especially among the educated middle class.

Anxieties over consumerism and materialism are negotiated not only through the categories of material things consumed, but also through levels of consumption. For foodies, the consumption of food within different social practices is governed by seemingly contradictory moral regimes in terms of what level is deemed appropriate. Foodie consumption in fine dining restaurants often involves strategies of moral asceticism which aim to restrict overall consumption and ultimately to spend less money, whereas their shopping is governed by a 'morality of quality' which involves a willingness to spend more money. This is because while both constitute forms of luxury consumption, only fine dining is regarded as such by foodies; in contrast, they consider buying expensive 'quality' food for the home to not only be 'right', but a necessity. This raises the need for further research on the spatial dimensions of moralities of consumption, to examine whether different moral regimes operate in public spaces as compared to private spaces.

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—NOTES

¹ For my broader theory of the foodie, see Isabelle de Solier, *Food and the Self: Consumption, Production and Material Culture*, Bloomsbury, London, 2013.

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⁶ Toby Miller, *Cultural Citizenship: Cosmopolitanism, Consumerism, and Television in a Neoliberal Age*, Temple University Press, Philadelphia, 2007.

⁷ See Colin Campbell, 'The Craft Consumer: Culture, Craft and Consumption in a Postmodern Society', *Journal of Consumer Culture*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2005, pp. 23–42.

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⁹ Don Slater and Daniel Miller, 'Moments and Movements in the Study of Consumer Culture: A Discussion between Daniel Miller and Don Slater', *Journal of Consumer Culture*, vol. 7, no. 1, 2007, p. 8.

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¹¹ Richard Wilk, 'Consuming Morality', *Journal of Consumer Culture*, vol. 1, no. 2, 2001, p. 250.

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- ²⁶ See for example, Sophie Woodward, *Why Women Wear What They Wear*, Berg, Oxford, 2007.
- ²⁷ Weber, p. 115.
- ²⁸ However, as I argue elsewhere, the main reason foodies acquire knowledge is as a form of productive leisure, which is less about display for others associated with cultural capital, and more about the care of the self and the moralities of production in self-making. See de Solier, *Food and the Self*.
- ²⁹ See Arjun Appadurai, 'Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value', in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Arjun Appadurai, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1986, pp. 3–63.
- ³⁰ See Samantha Kwan, 'Individual versus Corporate Responsibility: Market Choice, the Food Industry, and the Pervasiveness of Moral Models of Fatness', *Food, Culture and Society*, vol. 12, no. 4, 2009, pp. 477–95.
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- ³² Wilk, 'Morals and Metaphors', p. 23.
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³⁴ Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institutions*, The Modern Library, New York, 1934 [1899]; see also Amy B. Trubek, *Haute Cuisine: How the French Invented the Culinary Profession*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 2000; Alan Warde and Lydia Martens, *Eating Out: Social Differentiation, Consumption and Pleasure*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2000.

³⁵ I discuss this at greater length in de Solier, *Food and the Self*.

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³⁷ Weber, p. 111.

³⁸ Weber, p. 104.

³⁹ Kate Soper, 'Alternative Hedonism, Cultural Theory and the Role of Aesthetic Revisioning', *Cultural Studies*, vol. 22, no. 5, 2008, p. 572.

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⁴⁴ On culinary modernism, see Laudan, p. 38.

⁴⁵ Laudan.

⁴⁶ Bourdieu, p. 178.

⁴⁷ T. Miller, p. 11.

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⁴⁹ Cate Burns, Gary Sacks and Lisa Gold, 'Longitudinal Study of Consumer Price Index (CPI) Trends in Core and Non-Core Foods in Australia', *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health*, vol. 32, no. 5, 2008, pp. 450–3.