

THE FLAVOURS OF THE INDIGENOUS:  
BRANDING NATIVE FOOD PRODUCTS IN CONTEMPORARY AUSTRALIA

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ABSTRACT

*This essay investigates the recent incorporation of Australian 'native' ingredients into a range of food products. Examples of the packaging of products containing such ingredients are analysed to provide an overview of 'native' food packaging, demonstrating the semiotic diversity of ideas of 'indigeneity' in this context. The essay then explores how these multiple inflections relate to wider discourses of racialised difference in contemporary Australia, focusing on how discussions of 'natural' phenomena reflect confusion over who can be said to 'properly' belong to a place – a question that involves such urgent concerns for postcolonial societies as the (il)legitimacy of settler claims to land ownership. Much analysis of contemporary racisms positions them as articulating cultural rather than biological differences. Understandings of difference nonetheless continue to be inscribed with reference to particular bodies. 'Native' foods are a potent site for investigating such processes: food is often presented as a key site of cross-cultural exchange and interaction, but despite this cultural inflection, 'native' foodstuffs are often marketed as 'natural'. This constitutes a crucial difference between native foodstuffs and the extensive range of products branded through references to 'exotic' ethnicities. Exploring the entanglement of multiple narratives used to position native food products, this essay reveals how the realm of ecology, conceived of as 'natural' and therefore exterior to politics, is used as a forum for very political questions of 'belonging'.*

INTRODUCTION

The past three decades have seen the emergence and popularisation of food ingredients sourced from flora and fauna billed as 'native'<sup>1</sup> to the Australian continent (Ripe 1996: 216–23). An increasing range of products, restaurant dishes and home-cooked meals feature ingredients such as lemon myrtle, mountain pepper and bush tomatoes (for some indication of the extent of native food

production and the products involved, see Foster *et al* 2005; Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation 2008: 5–7). Many of these foods have been, and continue to be, eaten by Aboriginal peoples (Bruneteau 1996; Dyson 2006), but as this article discusses, this is not their only association. How is the idea of the native framed in the commodification of these foods? Why might indigeneity be a desirable aspect of a product's branding? This essay investigates these concerns using examples of the packaging of commercial native food products.

Native Australian plants and animals were recognised as valuable food items by the first British settlers – mentioned by Arthur Phillip in his first dispatch as governor of the new colony, they continued to feature in cookbooks throughout the colonial era (Bannerman 2006: 19). The focus of economic agricultural ventures in the colony was, however, on the 'improvement' of Australia through the acclimatisation of European crops and herds (Gascoigne and Curthoys 2002). There has been isolated and intermittent commercial interest in Australian flora and fauna throughout the two hundred years of British occupation,<sup>2</sup> most notably of macadamia nuts (Stephenson 2005), but it was only in the 1980s that commercial exploitation of a wider range of flora and fauna began (Ripe 1996: 216–23). Many Australians today have become familiar with the idea of eating native Australian plants and animals through the popular television series *Bush Tucker Man* (filmed in the late 1980s and 1990s), starring retired Army Major Les Hiddins, which introduced such foods within the firmly survivalist ethos that had dominated discussions of native food resources for much of the twentieth century (Instone 2006; Bannerman 2006: 21–23). Though the beginnings of the present wave of commercialisation of native foods were concurrent with *Bush Tucker Man*, they represent a break from this framing. Instead of survival, the emphasis of contemporary native food eating is on the gastronomic characteristics and 'gourmet' quality of such ingredients (Hayes 2006), as well as on their environmental and health benefits (see for instance the discussion of kangaroo in Ripe 1996: 211–15). This newly invigorated attention to the culinary delights of local Indigenous foods is not confined to Australia. Similar interest is also evident in other former British colonies such as Canada, the United States of America and Aotearoa New Zealand.<sup>3</sup> My focus is on how these foods are presented in the Australian context, but readers familiar with other postcolonial cuisines will find some resonance between those and the examples I discuss here.

This interest has not escaped academic attention. To date, studies have considered sites in which these foods are discursively framed (Probyn 2000) – such as cookbooks (Bannerman 2006) and television series (Instone 2006) – but there

has been no sustained examination of their presentation as branded commodities.<sup>4</sup> There has also been a tendency to discuss native foods as discrete entities, rather than examining how the coherency of this concept is created. The recent interest in Australian native foods covers a wide range of ingredients available in a wide range of products, from breakfast cereals to preserved rosella (native hibiscus) flowers to witjuti grub infused liquor. Many of these ingredients have not been made commercially available prior to this current wave of interest. What strategies are used to differentiate a group of products as native in an era understood to be post-racist and post-colonial? In such a setting, how does the native – previously reviled as ‘primitive’ – become a source of value and even an effective branding strategy? And what kind of relationships to place and people are native food products imagined to have? Such questions call for a critical investigation of the specific construction and deployment of indigeneity within the commodity culture of native foods, and the manner in which the material relationships between plants, animals, peoples and places are used to authenticate notions of difference within this culture.

The category ‘Australian native food’ is by no means as stable as it first seems. In *Spectres of Marx*, Jacques Derrida suggests the useful term ‘ontopology’ to name the ways of thinking that assert an indisputable relationship between being and place. The term neatly encapsulates what might be termed a discourse of origins, ‘an axiomatics linking indissociably the ontological value of present-being [on] to its situation, to the stable and presentable determination of a locality, the topos of territory, native soil, city, body in general.’ (Derrida 1994 [1993]: 82). Cultural geographer Noel Castree draws on Derrida’s suggestion to point out that naming the socio-spatial locations from which commodities appear to come is difficult without essentialising places, cultures and localities (Castree 2001: 1520). It is this kind of relationship that is being named when one uses a term such as ‘Australian native’. Discussions surrounding Australian native foods are, I argue, ontopological: they commonly assert that Indigenous foods have a special relationship to Australia’s natural environment, which is presented as their real origin. While this may seem self-evident, in the complex situation of the postcolonial negotiation of national boundaries and belongings, the project of taxonomic classification is a fraught one. Though science and its observations of the natural world are often understood as objective and neutral, the scientific labelling of ‘native’ types is a deeply political practice (Helmreich 2005). This is not however to discredit entirely the notion of place-bounded identities: my reservation with Derrida’s argument is his avocation of a global cosmopolitanism as an ethical alternative to nationalist essentialism. Delimiting the debate to a struggle between these two poles renders invisible the subaltern struggles of people excluded from both national and global rep-

resentation (Spivak 1995), as well as the possibility of connections to place that exceed these frameworks. The critique of ontopology is thus inadequate as an approach to the negotiation of relationships to place within Indigenous epistemologies (for discussion of tensions and cohesion between local knowledges and cosmopolitanism, see Butt *et al* 2008). Despite these concerns, Derrida's intervention remains an effective way of addressing the reification of place identities and the positioning of the native in the marketing narratives that this essay critiques.

Much analysis of contemporary racism positions it as operating through the articulation of cultural rather than biological differences – what Etienne Balibar terms 'racism without race' (Balibar 1991: 23). Part of my argument here is that biological notions of race do, in fact, persist in contemporary discourses of indigeneity. Native foods are a site in which debates over belonging become entangled with discussions of the natural world. Depictions of flora and fauna serve as a forum for the articulation of contemporary fears about national boundaries and racialised identities. Jean and John Comaroff (2001) usefully investigate what they term the 'ecology of nationhood' in South Africa. They examine fears about 'foreign' species threatening native eco-systems, arguing that the 'fynbos [*plant*] has come to stand for a 'traditional' heritage of national, natural rootedness' that is threatened by 'alien' invaders (Comaroff and Comaroff 2001: 244; compare Lattas 1997). This enables 'a new, postracist form of racism' (Comaroff and Comaroff 2001: 257) which, unlike Balibar's version (1991), maintains a basis in biological difference. Anxieties over citizenship and national belonging infiltrate the discourses of ecological protectionism and are projected onto the floral kingdom (Cerwonka 2004; Peretti 1998). There, such questions can be resolved through references to scientific discourses understood as objective, rather than being debated as critically and thoroughly political issues. These diversions are particularly charged in light of contemporary efforts to afford proper recognition and recompense to Indigenous peoples for the devastation caused by the colonial process. In these postcolonial settings, the line between 'exotic' and native is indeed a 'difference that matters' (Helmreich 2005; Morton and Smith 1999).<sup>5</sup> Native food packaging is another site in which this difference is constructed, and its exploration points further to the implications of understandings of natural phenomena for political life.

These difficulties of discussing the native are compounded in the context of commodity cultures. The ontological assertion of a connection to place, Derrida (1994 [1993]) suggests, is a statement regarding ontological value. In the case of native food products, it is also a statement of economic value. Work in

cultural geography has critiqued the ways in which 'geographical knowledges' about food are constructed and the role that these play in creating an ethically charged understanding of the agro-economic system (Cook and Crang 1996). Michael Pollan terms these tales 'supermarket narratives' (Pollan 2001: 11; see also Hollander 2003), a phrase that neatly encapsulates the manner in which images and texts on product packets depict idealised representations of the source of food ingredients. Statements and images that cast food products as originating from a particular place are a means of differentiating commodities – a fetishisation of production that elides the complex trans-local relations involved in the manufacture and distribution of goods (Appadurai 1996: 41–42). In the Australian context, such geographical knowledges are used to brand and differentiate Australian native food products. Following Derrida and Appadurai, I am concerned with the ways in which ontological assertions of the origins of native food ingredients work to authenticate products as 'genuinely' Australian while eliding the complexities involved in such territorialisation.

Some supermarket narratives locate the origin of products not within places but in peoples and cultures. In her book *Strange Encounters*, feminist philosopher Sara Ahmed suggests the term 'stranger fetishism' to name the mechanisms by which the native comes to be a means of value creation within commodity culture. Products are differentiated through the claim that they originate from the native stranger, thus attaining the status of 'authentic' cultural artefacts (Ahmed 2000: 5, 114–15). Such differentiation works to create value, providing a means of capitalising on what Rey Chow terms 'the surplus value of the oppressed' that results from the positive valuation of hitherto marginalised cultures (Chow 1993: 30). Aboriginal cultures are depicted in native food marketing as an instance of such valuation, but there are important limitations to the recognition afforded by branding that demands an authentic – i.e. suitably 'other' – Aboriginal culinary tradition.

Such cultural branding is also caught up in processes of the naturalisation of racialised difference similar to those identified by Comaroff and Comaroff (2001). Caren Kaplan, in her critique of how The Body Shop and other corporations represent the world's human population, argues that such contemporary portrayals are 'trans/national': they articulate 'the world' as a globalised entity but retain notions of nation and culture as 'distinct, innate markers of difference'. This is particularly evident, she suggests, in the depiction of 'traditional', non-metropolitan industries as native (Kaplan 1995: 49). A similar argument is made by Sarah Franklin, Celia Lury and Jackie Stacey in their analysis of the 'renaturalisation of kind and type' that characterises contemporary images of the globe (Franklin *et al* 2000). This is a renaturalisation that, as they explain,

works as a postracist form of racism. As a response to their considerations of 'global nature', I offer an examination of the local and national nature of native foods. In doing so, I draw on Kaplan's recognition of the ongoing role that nation and culture play as markers of naturalised difference.

The notion of nativeness and the accompanying versions of national, local and cultural identities in the marketing of Australian native foods are not simply contorted depictions of underlying entities and localities but actively participate in the creation and maintenance of the differences that establish these identities as discrete and separate places. In other words, the local and the native are produced as different. This argument extends Ahmed's (2000) analysis in a crucial way, by examining how the 'other' from which the commodity originates need not be human. While the figure of the native human remains an important part of the marketing of native foods, places and natural environments can also serve as the stranger from which products are claimed to originate – in ways that parallel, intersect, and perhaps even inform, understandings of human difference.

What then is the valuable difference of native foods? While my research has revealed a surprisingly wide variety of strategies that are used to differentiate native food commodities, there are some major motifs and themes that emerge in the marketing of native foods, in particular nature, Indigenous culture, place and nationhood. In July and August of 2006, I visited ten retail locations in Melbourne, chosen as a representative cross-section of the various contexts in which native foods are made available to urban consumers. The examples discussed here were all sourced during this investigation, except one that was found in Hobart later in the same year. Although I examine kangaroo marketing elsewhere (Craw 2008), for clarity I have chosen to focus solely on plant-based foods in this essay. Together, they give an indication of the most prevalent strategies used to market native food products in Australia today. This is not an exhaustive overview, and its categories are not mutually exclusive – both factors that should be taken as further evidence of the malleability of native foods and the range of discourses that they attract. My argument is not aimed at installing a new discourse of types, but rather seeks to critique the contemporary production of difference.

#### NATURALLY NATIVE

The most ubiquitous theme in the marketing of native foods is 'nature'. This follows a broad trend in contemporary commodity culture, where portraying foodstuffs as connected to nature is a common branding strategy (Hansen

2002; Pollan 2006). Such branding repeats and expands upon well-worn clichés, primarily nature's presentation as an unspoilt realm external to human society. While this attitude has been heavily critiqued (Grosz 2005; Rose 2003; Park 2000), it remains a potent and compelling narrative for the presentation of food's origins. Native food marketing is one site, amongst many, in which this binary conception of nature as pure and separate from culture has been taken up for the purposes of product branding (Goss 1999: 60–63).

Natural food branding asserts a connection between the often heavily processed product in the packaging and the environment that is purported to have produced it. The Australian Native Bush Pasta range, produced by Casalare Specialty Pasta, relies heavily on such a strategy. The range includes various dried pasta shapes, each flavoured with a different Australian native herb – I purchased Rivermint Gnocchi. The product is identified prominently as 'Bush Pasta', with an organic certification symbol and a large illustration of a plant on the packaging. The different aspects featured in the packaging – plant, biome, and farming methods – work to reinforce the natural origins of the product. As Michael Pollan discusses in relation to the branding of organic foods (Pollan 2006: 134–40), such supermarket narratives purport to show the agronomic production of ingredients transparently, but often do so in ways that involve evocative, idealising depictions. In the case of Bush Pasta, it is easy to assume that the plant depicted on the packet is the herb that is used to flavour the pasta, but this is a standard image of lemon myrtle rather than rivermint. Similarly, the 'bush' designation smooths over the wide variety of habitats in which the ingredients in the various varieties of pasta grow – from the Central Desert to Queensland rainforest.

More crucially, the wheat that makes up the bulk of the product is also not depicted. Native food products such as Bush Pasta incorporate these native, natural ingredients as flavourings in products derived largely from other culinary traditions and often made from mostly introduced ingredients. What is 'bush' about Bush Pasta is its tiny native component – in the case of Rivermint Gnocchi, for instance, the 'uniquely exciting flavours of local native plants' constitute only 0.4 percent of the ingredients – and the bush here is the source of natural ingredients, not cultural inspiration. Where, moreover, exactly is the 'bush' from which these plants are sourced? While the packaging describes the native plant flavourings as 'local', it is more insistent on describing them as 'Australian-grown'. The native is not simply local, but national, a specific territorialisation of the native.

Conspicuously absent from native food marketing is the idea of untamed nature as potentially threatening. While romanticisations of nature as free of the ills of modern society may dominate at the moment (Short 1991: 6), the ambivalence of historical attitudes towards nature is retained in some marketing discourses (Wilk 2006: 309–10). Narratives of nature as dangerous – and dangerously exciting – appear in branding: for instance, images of the jungle as ferocious and chaotic are used to sell products such as men’s cologne (Slater 2004: 172). Such invocations of nature as thrillingly terrifying are rare in native food marketing. The closest approach to the scarier side of nature that I found during my fieldwork was Vic Cherkoff’s ‘Wildfire Spice’ mix. The ‘wild’ appellation is suggestive both of heat – the ‘bit of zing’ promised by the label – and an uncontrolled fire, though this latter allusion was not reinforced by text or imagery. The tendency of marketing to position native foods as pure, safe and scientifically known can be viewed in light of the wider discourses about native food products, which emphasise the fearsome, or at least unknown, qualities of native ingredients. Native spices are often described in terms of their potent flavours and the need to overcome consumer unfamiliarity. For instance, Stephen Downes, author of *Advanced Australian Fare: How Australian Cooking Became the World’s Best*, devotes only a tiny sidenote to native foods labels, in which he labels mountain pepper as ‘incredibly strong – even caustic’ in taste (Downes 2002: 273) – a less enthusiastic way of saying it has a ‘bit of zing’. The positive conception of nature in native food marketing, then, should not be understood as a simple idealisation. Rather, such a conception plays against the more longstanding denigration of Australian nature as an empty, unproductive wilderness (Moran 2002; Robin 2007), and in doing so works to produce the ‘surplus value of the oppressed’.

#### NARRATIVES OF THE NATION

Like the South African fauna analysed by Comaroff and Comaroff (2001), Australian native foods are also co-opted as national symbols. Australian legislation requires packaging to state the country from which the ingredients have been sourced and indicate where the product has been processed (Food Standards Australia New Zealand 1987/2007). The majority of native food producers go well beyond the requirements of the code in their identification of their products as Australian-grown and -made, building on the scant suggestiveness of Country of Origin labelling to include emphatic connections to national identity. One of the few items commonly available in supermarkets (rather than specialist shops and markets) at the time of my survey was the Dick Smith Australian native foods line, which includes a range of canned soups and a breakfast cereal. The highly nationalistic packaging of these prod-



ucts is the company's standard branding strategy, with its common features of a prominently placed Australian flag and Dick Smith's Akruba-clad<sup>6</sup> head. In the case of the native food line, these national references are reinforced by the packaging's text: Bush Foods Breakfast, the cereal, features an injunction to 'discover the flavours of Australia' on the front and back of the box. A side panel emphasises that the product is made 'with Australian cereal grains, authentic Australian rainforest fruit flavours, [*and*] Aussie wattle seeds', the products of 'the great Australian bush'. Dick Smith's 'Australia' is a particularly virulent form of the nationalism that is common in the marketing of native Australian foods. While such zealous patriotism is uncommon, it reflects a more widespread trend within native food packaging, which works to homogenise both native foods and the continent from which they are sourced. Native foods are presented as native to Australia as a whole, a presentation that obscures the complex relationship that each species has to particular environments. While this is a process of identification, it also works to differentiate Australia as a discrete and distinct entity.

Such homogenisation supports a particular conception of national unity. In the Dick Smith example, added to the insistence on the national origins of the ingredients is the suggestion that those who consume the product are also Australian. The blurb from 'Dick' reports that the cereal has been made because he wants 'to share [*bush foods*] with all Australians'. Through the use of inclusive pronouns – these foods are 'from our rainforests', 'showcas[ing] the abundance of our country' – the citizen-consumer is interpellated as part of a national community with territorial rights to the Australian continent. Andrew Lattas perceptively describes the way in which Indigenous flora and fauna are presented within the context of (post)colonial settler culture. On his account, the colonial attack on the environment is presented as the primordial crime of the nation, 'a stain which defines the nation's personality' (Lattas 1997: 227). In an all-too familiar trope, settler culture is positioned as culturally deficient and superficially materialistic, alienated from nature and thus from themselves (Lattas 1997: 232). Lattas clarifies the way in which, having produced a gap between settler culture and the environment it inhabits and exploits, discourses of unitary nationalism can be presented as offering the means of overcoming this 'lack'. Such a mechanism can be seen in Bush Foods Breakfast's promise of a connection to a nationalised nature.

The backdrop to this rampant nationalism is the nature of the 'genuine Australian' ingredients. Behind the logo and text, the main image of the Bush Foods Breakfast box is a breakfast spread, surrounded by ingredients in their raw stage and set against a landscape of green hills and fields. What is not depicted

is just as significant: like Bush Pasta, the cereal consists mostly of ‘exotic’ species, none of which are represented in their unprocessed form. The species identified as ‘Australian’ make up a scant proportion of the product: the cereal includes 2 percent mangoes, 2 percent macadamias, 1.5 percent honey and a smattering of ‘Australian bushfood seasonings’. While the packet invites you to ‘discover the flavours of Australia’, the cereal’s substance is introduced staples – wheat, corn, oats, rice. Indigenous ingredients add spice rather than providing sustenance, a point that I return to below.

The inclusion of mangoes as a ‘bush food’ is particularly startling, and demonstrates the extent to which neither the ‘Australianness’ nor the naturalness which this packaging invokes are static nor self-evident. The mangoes are described on a side panel as ‘Queensland mangoes’. Coming after a paragraph describing ‘[t]he great Australian bush [as] full of surprises and new discoveries’, this implies that – like the macadamias and wattle seeds – the mangoes are also ‘truly’ ‘Aussie’. Such an implication conceals the complex, transnational interactions that continue to impact on Australian ecologies, and particularly significantly, the ongoing role that human efforts have in both maintaining and changing natural environments, including the substantial land management practices of Indigenous Australians before the arrival of British settler-invaders (see Rose 1996: 9–10). Mangoes have a recent history in Australia, having been introduced in the late 1800s.<sup>7</sup> They are hardly ‘new discoveries’ from ‘the great Australian bush’. Rather than a category error – a mislabelling of mangoes as ‘Australian’ when they are ‘actually’ ‘exotic’ – this distortion arises from the imposition of static notions of nature and ‘nation’ onto ecologies which, seen from other perspectives, exist in states of flux (see, for instance, Marianne Lien’s (2005) discussion of belonging and the transnational biomigration of Atlantic salmon in Tasmania).

Such an imposition is not politically neutral. Australia in this conception is a combination of geo-ecological features – rainforests and their produce – with cultural signifiers of the nation. Ecology and geopolitics are conflated in a manner that works to naturalise a particular conception of the Australian nation – one in which the bush and its fruits are available to ‘all Australians’ without the interference of messy factors such as native title disputes or environmental degradation. The packaging promises that ‘Bush Foods Breakfast brings the flavour of the Australian bush into your morning’. Inserting narratives of ‘nation’ and nature into the everyday practices of consumers in this way, Bush Foods Breakfast offers them a way of understanding not just the ‘Australian’ ‘bush’ but also their own relationship to place: eat this, the packaging implies, and you are making yourself part of this chain of life-forms connected to the

land. And 'Dick' enthusiastically encourages such a reading – taking it even further to assert that the flavours of the cereal come 'from our [*sic*] rainforests', turning inhabitation into a declaration of ownership. Eating the cereal becomes a way of appropriating for oneself the indigeneity of its ingredients – a way of enacting and simultaneously legitimating one's occupation of land (see Instone 2001, who suggests a similar mechanism at work in bush tucker consumption more generally). This reading is further supported by the strong cultural connections made between food and identity, evident in the common aphorism that 'you are what you eat' (see Probyn 2000). Through such nationalising supermarket narratives, the difference of the native becomes consumable as identity.

#### TOWARDS THE LOCAL

Place is an important part of the marketing of native foods. The appellation of a 'local' origin to a product in Australia is not subject to governmental regulation. The presentation of foodstuffs as 'local', then, is a strategic branding choice. This is slightly different from the European situation, where geographical indicators (such as 'Champagne') are part of a regulatory framework that acknowledges the 'local' as politically and economically invested (Parrott *et al* 2002). In both situations, however, the 'local' is associated with a turn from a heavily industrialised food culture to one more focused on artisanal production (Pollan 2006; Parrott *et al* 2002). The recent upsurge in interest in eating locally often pictures the local as the site of eating practices that are both ethical and pleasurable (Parkins and Craig 2006; see also Ripe 1996:183–90 on regional eating in Australia). The local suggests a single origin, and often a shortened supply chain between producer and consumer, both features that are desirable as guarantees of quality and safety (Kuznesof *et al* 1997). Local branding is, then, another instance of the ontological valuation of a product's imagined origin.

While the 'local' implies specificity, it is a loose concept, encompassing anything from particular farms to vast regions such as the Central Desert. Native food marketing can be particularly insistent on state identities as a means of localising a product. One company, Red Kelly's Gourmet Foods, trades on Tasmania's image as a discrete entity separate from the Australian mainland (this is a prominent part of the Brand Tasmania strategy, for details see Brand Tasmania Council 2007), stressing the Tasmanian character of products such as its Whole Grain Mustard with Native Tasmanian Lemon Myrtle. The mustard's packaging features a map of Tasmania, as well as multiple occurrences of the place-name, accompanied with the assertion that they are 'A Proud Tasmanian

Company'. Only the company's address admits that they are in Australia. This branding works in two ways, with the product serving as souvenir or exotica for purchasers from elsewhere, while also appealing to a vein of Tasmanian chauvinism. Red Kelly's links products to place as a way of differentiating their offerings.

Red Kelly's insistence on Tasmanianness is not, however, verification of the provenance of the enclosed foodstuffs. While other Red Kelly's products contain mountain pepper, which is indigenous to the region, the 'Native Tasmanian' ingredient in this particular mustard, lemon myrtle, has a distribution centred on southern Queensland rainforest areas (Hess-Buschmann 2004; Australian National Botanic Gardens 2003). Its appellation here as a 'native Tasmanian' plant – as it is described even in the ingredient list – seems rather bold. The resolutely local identity acknowledges the transient human migrant – the company's name derives from that of the infamous bushranger Ned Kelly's father, an Irishman shipped to Tasmania as a convict who left for Victoria after his release (Jones 1995) – but the smaller-scaled, more recent *intranational* migration of lemon myrtle plants is unremarked. Like the mango in Bush Foods Breakfast, they are caught up in ideas of the natural history of the nation. The indigeneity of ingredients is an authenticating source of difference only so long as they are seen to stay in place. Once again, native foods are the 'natural' – the word is mentioned three times on the packaging – component of a foodstuff that draws on migrant and settler cultures.

#### INDIGENOUS ALLUSIONS

There are significant issues surrounding the involvement of Aboriginal people in the native foods industry. While extensive numbers of Aboriginal people are involved in the collection of raw produce in central Australia, the industry as a whole is focused on non-Aboriginal horticultural enterprises, particularly in southern Australia (Davies *et al* 2008: 60). The industry rests on Aboriginal traditional knowledge, but this information is unprotected by Australian intellectual property law (Morse 2005: 13), and emergent Aboriginal enterprises are hampered by resource and skill issues (Davies *et al* 2008: 61). The Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation's *Native Foods R&D Priorities and Strategies 2007–2012* report, which sets the agenda for government-funded research, advocates the recognition of Indigenous contributions to the industry. However, the plan's emphasis is on mainstreaming and internationalising the industry (Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation 2008: 2; see discussion of this point in relation to two earlier R&D plans in Morse 2005: 14–15), and the association of native foods with Aboriginal culture

is listed as one of the weaknesses faced by the industry, preventing their billing 'as new tastes for Australian cuisine' (Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation 2008:10).

This sidelining of Aboriginal concerns is reflected in the marketing of native food products, many of which – such as the examples I have already discussed – are marketed without any acknowledgement of Indigenous cultures or peoples. Moreover, references to Indigenous culture are not necessarily a guarantee of Aboriginal involvement. Like the 'Aboriginal-style' home wares popular in the 1950s (Factor 2000), native food marketing often features design elements that draw on Aboriginal art forms. For instance, the design of Australis Native tea boxes incorporates a drawing of a kangaroo and a dot and line design. While both are suggestive of specific Aboriginal painting practices, there is no attribution of the pictures to a particular artist or group. Without such acknowledgement, the artworks become signifiers of a generalised 'Aboriginal style' art, affirming a similarly homogenised cultural identity.

Moreover, when Indigenous cultures are mentioned in native food marketing it is often in ways that place Aboriginal people in prehistoric time. Invocations of the past are a common branding strategy, alluding to a source of authenticity that contemporary society is perceived to lack (Lowenthal 1985; Urry 1995: 218–19). In Australia, it is often Aboriginal peoples who are positioned as the guardians of a now desirable 'primitive' way of life (Attwood 1996:xxvii-xxviii). This positioning pervades much of the explicit reference to Aboriginal cultures in native food marketing. For example, text on the Australis Native box claims that 'Australis Native reflects the spiritual dreamtime of an ancient continent – Australia. Australia's rich native plants have been gathered by Aborigines for thousands of years'. The possibility – and actuality of Aboriginal involvement, and more crucially, interest and investment, in present-day gathering and production of these plants is silently sidestepped here. Instead, the Australis Native packaging repeats a series of timeworn ideas about Indigenous cultures – 'ancient', 'spiritual' – all too familiar to critics of colonialism. Even innocuously numerical phrases such as 'thousands of years' can play into colonialist narratives. While at first glance this seems – like the kangaroo design – just recognition of the strength and value of Aboriginal culture, such invocations of Aboriginal inhabitation also have the effect of shoring up the idea of Aboriginal culture as a timeless and static monolith (McNiven and Russell 2005: 205–8). The homogenised and antiquated Aboriginal culture depicted in much native food marketing supports the notion of indigeneity as a discrete and innate marker of difference.

Two exceptions to such depictions are worth mentioning. Robins Bushfoods and Reedy Creek Nursery have both been instrumental in establishing umbrella organizations, Indigenous Australian Foods Ltd and the Outback Pride Project, respectively, to support Indigenous communities in establishing native food cultivation enterprises. These organizations link these enterprises to the wider Australian and international markets. For instance, Robins produce the Outback Spirit brand of sauces, jams and spices, available in the major Australian supermarket chain Coles and distributed internationally through the German spice company Hela; and the Outback Pride cultivators supply ingredients to Indigenous celebrity chef Mark Olive's Outback Café, a Lifestyle Channel programme with a range of tie-in merchandise such as spices.<sup>8</sup> In contrast to Australis Native's homogenised depictions of Aboriginal culture, marketing material from these projects presents specific present-day Indigenous communities and explicitly connects recognition of Indigenous culture to financial remuneration.

While these companies are greatly aiding the development of Aboriginal native food enterprises, their offerings to date do not challenge the general consumption culture of native food products. Lisa Heldke's *Exotic Appetites* (2003) examines the appeal of 'food adventuring' – searching out exotic, ethnic cuisines – for privileged white subjects. While much of her analysis of the appropriation and 'cultural food colonialism' that occurs in such practices is applicable to native food products, it is centred on the exoticisation of *cultures* and *cuisines*. In contrast, Indigenous Australian culture appears in native food marketing as the origin of *natural ingredients*. Instead of a fully-fledged Aboriginal cuisine, native ingredients are inserted into a 'modern Australian' cuisine that draws on techniques from migrant cultures. The products that I have discussed are good examples: mustard, tea, cereal, pasta. The image of Aboriginal cuisine presented by the range of available products excludes what for some groups constituted staples, for instance, foods such as yams, as well as the labour-intensive processes required to prepare many native foods.<sup>9</sup> Instead, the Aboriginal diet is portrayed as fish and meat flavoured with spices, an image that, inaccuracy aside, conveniently aligns Indigenous eating with the kind of meals that might be created in customers' home kitchens. At the same time, the available range of products elides indigenous eating practices based on activities that might be understood as closer to contemporary western agricultural practice – particularly the gardening of tubers and grinding seeds into flour to make a bread (wattleseed, for instance, has been used as a staple, not a spice, see Cheriakoff 1997 [1989]:43). There are some notable exceptions to this: for instance, Vic Cheriakoff offers pieces of paperbark that can be used to cook fish and meat in an Indigenous fashion. By and large, however,

Indigenous culinary techniques are, like Indigenous agriculture more generally (Rose 1996; Muecke 2004:51–2), elided by the contemporary interest in native foods. While the exoticised others are still considered to have culture, the primitivised, Indigenous other is ripe for appropriation as nature.

## CONCLUSION

The understandings of place, nation and nature that are mobilised in the marketing of native food products have been critiqued by several decades of academic work, but they remain, as this article has demonstrated, prominent in the marketplace. The success of these strategies is difficult to judge, especially as there is no formal data available on sales (Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation 2008: 5; Morse 2005:78). The increasing presence of native food products on supermarket shelves – two years after my initial survey, these products continue to be stocked and some ranges, such as Dick Smith and Outback Spirit have added to their offerings – gives some indication that the translation of the surplus value of the native into the differentiation of products has been successful. There is much room to extend this investigation, which is in many ways preliminary. A critical assessment of the consumer perception of these branding practices could fruitfully examine the link between everyday consumption practices and the understandings of nature, nation, and indigeneity that I have discussed. Do consumers also hold the attitudes to place and Aboriginal peoples that this essay argues are pervasive in the marketing of native food products? Or are the ways in which consumers think about – and with – what they eat developing new relationships, perhaps even ones which challenge these colonial legacies?

Such investigations might also further address the most prevalent aspect of the differentiation of native food products – their inscription as natural. As the examples I have discussed demonstrate, an association with Indigenous culture is not necessary for the establishment of nativeness. The marketing of native foods reflects and reinforces the notion that indigeneity is a category that exists outside of the cultural. Thus, the difference of the ‘indigene’ is renaturalised and ceases to appear as a politically charged and historically situated category. Neutralised in this way, the native becomes accessible as a marker of a difference that is both palatable and profitable.

NB: This paper draws on my doctoral research. I am grateful to my supervisors, Denise Cuthbert and Stephen Pritchard, for their advice and support, and to the anonymous reviewers of an earlier draft of this article for their perceptive comments.

NOTES

- 1 Australian native foods are also known as ‘bush tucker’ or ‘bushfoods’. My use of the term ‘native foods’ follows that of industry and governmental bodies (see, for instance, Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation 2008). For the purposes of legibility, this will be the sole occurrence of this word – and cognates such as indigenous – in quotation marks. Their non-appearance after this point should be understood purely as a service to the reader rather than an uncritical acceptance of this term.
- 2 Often this has taken the form of novelty shipments of Australian meat products overseas. For instance, kangaroo was available in London in the Victorian era (Lever 1992: 45) and again at the opening of the Safeways International supermarket in Washington DC in 1964 (Lonegren 1995: 220). Witjuti grub soup was served to customers in California in the mid-1970s (Hickson 1975).
- 3 For instance, the RAFT (Renewing America’s Food Traditions) project, taking place under the auspices of the American Slow Food organization, undertakes to catalogue and work towards the preservation of America’s edible native species (see Slow Food USA n.d.). For discussion of some of the New Zealand framing of Indigenous foods, see *Craw* (2006).
- 4 Soukoulis (1990) makes some general remarks but predates most of the products available today.
- 5 The phrase ‘differences that matter’ is drawn from the title of Sara Ahmed’s 1998 book, *Differences That Matter: Feminist Theory and Postmodernism*.
- 6 Named after an Australian hat company, an Akubra is a distinctive style of hat with a wide brim, which has become an Australian icon, associated particularly with rural farming and the outback.
- 7 The popular commercial cultivar, ‘Kensington Pride’, was probably introduced by participants in the horse trade between Queensland and India. The presence of mangoes in Australia is thus part of a complex system of interactions involving inter-species relationships (horses and mangoes) that are manipulated as part of economic and militarised colonial processes (horses were provided to India for military use) (Morton 1987).



- 8 Details of these projects and their products can be found on their websites: Outback Café <http://www.theoutbackcafe.com/>; Outback Pride <http://www.outbackpride.com.au/>; Robins Bushfoods / Outback Spirit <http://www.robins.net.au/>
- 9 An overview of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander food practices can be found in Dyson 2006; see also Cherikoff 1997 [1989].

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