

Multiplied Trajectories: A Traveller's Dinner

By Molly Beth Seremet

Parts of the following article have appeared in electronic publication elsewhere. See Seremet, Molly. 'Source Texts for Embarking on a Journey'. Activate 1.2 (2011).

Abstract

This practice-as-research document melds performative writing about ethnic identity and cultural heritage with theories surrounding sense memory, cosmopolitanism and performance. Are ethnicity and heritage determined solely by one's family tree, or can they be flexible constructs? What stands to be learned from exploring one's own culture through the lens of another? This piece is a personal journey through the landscape of individual memory and cultural identity. This exploration draws on Kwame Anthony Appiah's notion of cosmopolitanism, paired with Peggy Phelan's work on performativity, and is fed by Nadia Seremetakis' work on sensorial cultural engagement. Structured around the preparation of a meal, the work attempts to engage with ethnic identity and ambiguity on an intimate, experiential level and seeks to ingest the theoretical terrain of performing belonging.

*Mansaf is the national dish of Jordan
I am not Jordanian
Mansaf is eaten in accordance with rituals of hospitality
I am in fact not Middle Eastern at all
Mansaf is eaten with the right hand
I am left-handed
Mansaf is about community
I don't belong to the community that Mansaf is made for
Mansaf is an easily decipherable symbol for Jordanians
I am engaged in a process of translation*

This document is the trace that remains from a walk on London's Edgware Road, and the subsequent leftovers from the dinner party that followed.

This journey emerged from a search for origins, and although it was completed in April and May 2011, it continues its wandering trajectory as an underscore to this text. The journey that already happened has now culminated in an unexpected engagement with an audience – you. This search resumes here on this page, in time and tandem with you.

I have undertaken this small-scale journey because of a visceral association I feel between feelings of ethnic heritage and day-to-day performed elements of culture; these can include religion, language, tradition and, finally (and to me most interestingly), food. For a disposable commodity, food has tremendous significance and, in my memory at least, holds so much permanence. In this way, I have elected to imagine a space in which I possess an Arabic identity, because it feels like an identity I can perform and, perhaps in the enacting, learn something. Or possibly remember something. In an attempt to fit in on Edgware Road, I seek the sort of opening that Peggy Phelan gets at when intimating that ‘the process of self-identity is a leap into the narrative that employs seeing as a way of knowing. Mimetic correspondence has a psychic appeal because one seeks a self-image within the representational frame’ (5). By supposing a connection to a national identity, and making an attempt to insert myself into it through a sensory and culinary intervention, I believe that it may be possible to both blend in and reveal something within something. Conversely, there is an undercurrent in me that sees this earnest attempt to mesh with an ‘other’ identity (whilst acknowledging the potential for resistance to my mimetic presence) as a strategy to atone for the dispassion I feel for my ‘real’ identity, stemming from my inability to communicate within it.

My genealogy can be traced back to Eastern European roots, but large gaps in my family’s collective history have rendered my relations untraceable after a few scant generations. While I am ostensibly Polish and Hungarian, I speak no Polish or Hungarian, and nor do my parents, or even my grandparents (the first born Americans of my lineage). I make pierogies from my great-grandmother’s instructions, learned from watching my father, but I cannot read her handwritten recipe for this dish. I zero in on this felt language barrier because, as a writer and theatre-maker, language holds primacy for me. Without the ability to communicate, to not

just make myself heard, but understood, I struggle to see myself as a full member of a community, even though that community may be where my family is rooted. Without the ability to make myself heard, how can I participate? However, this emphasis on spoken language is deceptive; although I feel that my self-imposed silence restricts me from accessing my Eastern European heritage, perhaps it can invite a new kind of listening, a quiet conviviality that invites an embodied communication.

We will take a walk on London's Edgware Road and at the culmination of our journey I invite you to partake in an authentic Jordanian meal in my own home. As you are now aware, I am not of Middle Eastern descent, nor am I an expert on the landscape and character of London, as I am an American. My authority as tour-guide is spurious at best. The most important qualification I have for this job is ethnic ambiguity. I am a person who physically blends in. I tend to look like I 'belong' to a lot of places and ethnic backgrounds that I cannot rightly claim as my own. I am regularly assumed to be Latina, Arabic, Italian, often depending on my geographical location. My appearance seems to perform a multiplicity of possible identities, read by others in the context of my environment. As Peggy Phelan suggests, this performance occurs because 'self identity needs to be continually reproduced and reassured because it fails to secure belief. It fails because it cannot rely on a verifiably continuous history. One's own origin is both real and imagined' (4). Being mistaken for ethnicities that I am not puts me continually in a state of flux, reevaluating and reimagining what I am, looking for context. In a sense, my ability to blend in everywhere causes me to feel like I fit nowhere. This sensation of being adrift is heightened by the inevitable breakdown of communication I create by being able to speak fluently in English only. My outward appearance (black hair, dark eyes, olive-toned skin) opens doors that my mouth cannot usher me through. My inability to articulate the possibilities that call to me renders the performance of my own identity mute.

To begin a convivial exchange, I need new language. And perhaps a new destination. Even though I cannot speak my great-grandmother's mother tongue, I feel close to her, because we loved each other in a familial way. Scanning her recipe, I do not just observe her looped writing. I also see her hands and imagine her in

the act of writing: blue pen grasped in short fingers, so like mine, the halting spill of one letter into the next, the amber ring. I am tempted to travel somewhere that reminds me of her, to make a more tangible connection to this part of my heritage. If corporal communication is to be relied upon on this journey, I need to travel somewhere where I am not tethered by sentimentality. Instead, I search for somewhere in which my roots have no origin, but rather a place where I can transplant myself to explore my own narrative in a different representational frame. A place where my journey seeks not to reconstruct my past but instead makes an attempt an invention. In this way, Kwame Anthony Appiah's conception of cosmopolitanism appeals:

Conversations across boundaries of identity – whether national, religious, or something else – begin with the sort of imaginative engagement you get when you read a novel or watch a movie or attend to a work of art that speaks from someplace other than your own.
(xx)

We are going to Edgware Road at the imagined urging of a friend I have drifted apart from. A Palestinian with a Jordanian passport. In my mind, this journey is a conversation started by him: stories he told of the fruit trees in the courtyard of his parents' home, coffee breaks with his Nana, driving lessons on roads with no speed limits. These mundane memories capture me, because they are so similar to my own experiences, although I grew up in the U.S. The geography changes, but the flavor of the memory stays constant. I am taking you on a journey to Edgware Road because I am caught up in a fantasy of Arabic culture – not a fetishisation, but a sense that many things across cultural divides are very nearly the same. In this way, although I would argue that I am adopting Appiah's cosmopolitan strategies in this journey, I also must admit that I am drawn to the least exotic kinds of imaginings. I am equally mute in the cultures of my belonging and of my imagining and yet I feel drawn to open up to these encounters, because I want desperately to be part of somewhere. I am characterised by both an overwhelming desire to start a conversation, and a sense of always having the wrong words on the tip of my tongue.

Language is no touchstone for our journey. To this end, traversing Edgware Road opens up a hope chest of scents, tastes and sounds, and even though they are unfamiliar, they somehow make me remember things for which I am hungry. I can translate them in relation to my own history. These experiences open a channel that my rudimentary language skills had barred. In an echo of Nadia Seremetakis, I perceive that:

it is a mutation of meaning of memory that refracts the mutual insertion of the perceiver and perceived in historical experience and possibly their mutual alienation from public culture, official memory and formal economies. This *performance* is not '*performative*' – the instantiation of a pre-existing code. It is a *poesis*, the making of something out of that which was previously experientially and culturally unmarked or even null and void (7).

In this way, I wonder if a walk on Edgware Road will connect me with my roots as much as a trip to Hungary might, because what matters is not the physical geography I travel, but that *I am the traveller*. The external location of the journey is not as crucial as the commitment to let the journey affect me, and to be open to what it makes me remember. In this way, my journey grows out of cosmopolitan imagining, but becomes a constantly morphing performance, allowing me to be in the present of Edgware Road, and also to reach back to my past. If there is a future in all this, *poesis* is the key.

By undertaking this journey, I commit to conversing on a bodily level. Harkening back to the example of my grandmother's pierogies, perhaps reading the words of the recipe is not as important as immersing oneself in the physical process of mashing, rolling and folding. Outside of a few culinary delights, I was not raised immersed in the culture that claims me. Therefore, I already am engaged in a process of performing my own cultural heritage using the signs and symbols I glean to enact my identity. And, to carry through the notion of cosmopolitan performance, perhaps a dedication to 'eating' culture is a step in the right direction, an approach to letting a culture exert its influence on me. Although

I was born into the American melting pot narrative, I still feel incomplete, in need of a wider variety of ingredients, a different language. On Edgware Road, I hope to find poesis through digestion. I hope that you will join me.

In any case, welcome.

Fajr

(Dawn Prayer, London 3:13AM, Brooklyn 4:34AM)

Not Me: *That's not mayonnaise.*

Me: *I'm sorry?*

Not Me: *You know what that is? It's not mayonnaise.*

Me: *Oh thanks. I thought it would be a substitute for jameed. Do you think so?*

Not Me: *Ah, jameed. Yes, you do know what this is. Yes, kacek is close. Kacek should work. What are you cooking?*

There is going to be a dinner party. The main course is mansaf, a traditional Jordanian dish of Bedouin origins. The history of the recipe is rich, passed down from family member to family member. Not my family however – I am the only known link in my family chain to mansaf. The recipe is simple, more time-consuming than complex. I will need a special dried goat yogurt, good quality Egyptian-style rice, and a wide array of spices for the lamb. I also require six or seven people to feed.

I am interested in the interstice that exists between who I 'am' and where I came from, divorced at this moment from personal historical fact, and instead arising from a feeling of belonging. Phelan's discourse on performativity feels apt here, stressing that 'identity emerges in the failure of the body to express fully and the failure of the signifier to convey meaning exactly' (13). This feeling of belonging is predicated on my own willingness to learn the rules of the road, and to make informed choices in relation to the codes and constructs set before me. I do not expect to find my roots on Edgware Road, or to be able to triangulate my trajectory back to the Middle East and become someone new. For Appiah, 'such exposure to the range of human customs and beliefs hardly [leaves] the traveler untethered from his own' (6). I simply seek a moment where Edgware Road feels familiar, where an intangible glimpse of a home I recognize as my own emerges. I do not fit here, and *here*

does not rise up to meet me. But, in this break, perhaps I can reside, if only fleetingly. As I am ambiguous, can I experience a place to which I might belong?

In looking for belonging where no ties exist, it could be construed that your humble guide is engaged in a process of appropriation. My intentions here are different, more focused on personal identity through a cosmopolitan cultural engagement. I am choosing to focus on looking for familiarity instead of searching for exotic souvenirs. To borrow again from Appiah's strategies for cosmopolitanism, 'a cosmopolitan openness to the world is perfectly consistent with picking and choosing among the options you find in your search' (5). It strikes me that a contrapuntal relationship exists here between Appiah and Phelan. Although both theorists suggest that identity is constructed through interaction with others, they diverge on the tone of interaction that causes this poesis to occur. For Appiah, this identity emerges from a conscious process of choice, selecting elements with individual resonance to incorporate. In Phelan's estimation, however, this identity-making is what happens in the moments of disconnect, emerging in the gaps between. While not without responsibility, Phelan's conception of performativity is less about choice than about influence. My investigation wanders this gap, and forces me to remain open to what finds me.

I begin by going shopping.

Shorwq

(Sunrise Prayer, London 5:38AM, Brooklyn 5:58AM)

Me: *Do you sell saffron threads?*

Not Me: *Do you want Spanish or Iranian?*

Me: *Iranian.*

Not me: *Yes, we have saffron.*

As an American shopper on London's Arabic Edgware Road, I was not aware that I wanted Iranian saffron, until it asserted itself as different from the Spanish variety. I felt two identities, Latina and Arabic, tug at my 'authentically' Eastern European directness, causing me to ask the Lebanese shopkeeper for the product grown in closer proximity to his native land. I was rewarded with a tiny tin of the Middle Eastern varietal. And a smile.

When travelling abroad, I feel like a tourist. When travelling in ethnic neighborhoods at home, or wherever home currently is, I sometimes feel more like an imposter. As a traveller in an unfamiliar place, I perceive a pressure to behave appropriately, so as to fit in without taking over, to comply with the rules without assuming knowledge of how the game is played. Sara Ahmed pinpoints this when describing how 'processes of homing and migration take shape through the imbrications of affective and bodily experience in broader social processes and institutions where unequal differences of race, class, gender, sexuality, among other relevant categories, are generated' (5). If I choose to disregard the conventions that exist, I ostracise myself, seeming to assert that I am exempt from (or even more problematically, above) the implied rules. Having an engaged experience in a place for me is conditional on making an earnest attempt to understand the demands that place will put on me while I am within its borders. I am not here to collect souvenirs, but rather to be a part of the landscape. To be as unnoticed as possible.

I dress carefully in the morning prior to my trip to Edgware Road. I do not want to announce myself as a tourist, nor do I want to look as though I could be expected to speak Arabic. I become very aware of my face, with sunglasses covering my eyes; in this way, I am the photographic negative of the women in their veils, with only their eyes on public view. My scarf hugs my neck, while theirs conceals the rose of their cheeks, the tilt of their lips. In shops, I hear the 'salaams' and raise them a 'shukran' on making my purchases, but leave it at that. I do not fit here, but I make the effort.

There is a dance that happens at every shop. First, a vaguely familiar woman crosses the threshold with one purpose: to buy food without making an ass of herself. She negotiates the narrow aisles, in a two-step of sense-making, eyeing the spices curiously. She cannot identify the spices by written name: *قربزك* looks nothing like the 'coriander' for which she searches. She relies on smell. She holds each spiced packet to her nose, knowing not the names of individual seasonings, but rather relating each discrete odor to a tangible taste. Or place. The first packet is heavy in her hand and conjures an image of fire, not a tame indoor job, but an outdoor bonfire. She does not know that it is sumac, but can tell

you a story about a stickful of burnt marshmallows and a pair of ruined tennis shoes that the heavy tang is associated with. Our dancer buys the sumac. She navigates this interior catalogue, trusting it to help her buy the correct ingredients for bharat. In the end, she finds she lacks only cassia bark. She has no frame of reference for cassia; it is a completely unknown step combination. She stands in stillness surveying the spice shelf, now needing to find something she has no language to describe.

At this point, the dance becomes a duet. She wants the shopkeeper to tell her what cassia smells like, to describe it before she can smell it herself, and he complies. After a solo interlude, he has his answer, and tells her definitively, 'Oranges. Cassia smells like oranges'. She knows before she even inhales that she will notice citrus as a result of her partner's certainty. She almost wants to end the dance here, to linger in the pleasurable hesitation of uncertainty. But now she is too curious, and she follows her partner's lead. One deep inhale later, she smells oranges and sees the interior of a spacious church.

To her, cassia smells of the incense-infused Catholic masses of her youth and a heady dose of citrus. In this smell, her past has found a meeting-place with a possible future other. Now the dance is again a duet, but one contained under the skin of a single body. She sees two of herself bound up in the perfume, not in opposition to one another, but existing in a common frame, the current temporality. She stands in the store and now knows that it is impossible to forget what cassia smells like.

Asr

(Afternoon Prayer, London 4:59PM, Brooklyn 4:44PM)

*His Palestinian nanna gave him a spoonful of tahini
when he was ill.*

My Polish nan prescribed honey.

We both drained our spoons while perched on the counter.

We learned the same thing, just differently

I have now gathered the spices to make bharat, the traditional herb medley which will season my mansaf. The only time I have ever been invited to a mansaf dinner was in America. My Jordanian host had received his spices in the mail from his mother, packed carefully

into a cardboard box. The individual packets were not labeled, yet he knew what every peculiar scent was. I found it curious that these spices, readily available in the United States, were somehow better when imported from one's native home. It made me very aware of my host's status as a re-rooted person. Home is not then a singular locus, but a catchment zone, simultaneously encompassing a multiplicity of places. As Sara Ahmed explains:

We also seek to escape the immediacy of location of a discrete entity, and to blur the distinction between here and there. Where or what is 'there?' Is it necessarily *not* 'here?' How long is 'there' a significant site of connection? And for whom? How far away is there? (4).

Here and there have collided in the form of a postage-bearing parcel. The 'there' of a home in Jordan now sits in a lived-in suburban United States kitchen, to allow a recreation of one country's dinner on another country's dinner table.

Although as individuals we have the privilege and in some cases the necessity of being extremely transient, we are aided and abetted by the availability of these cultural connections to our homes (however multiplied that construct is). My mother sent me Jif peanut butter this year, and his mother mailed him cardamom pods and sage for tea. The desire is identical, though the flavors diverge. The further I am from my geographical home, the more I crave the taste of my roots. I mean crave in the most literal sense of the word. I desire ways of carrying my cultural identity within my body, through the songs I know, the perfumes I wear, and the foods I eat: 'homeland is identified as the poet's "flesh and bone" (an individual and collective body)' (Ankori 59). By eating the peanut butter in London that my loved ones are eating back home, we are one across the distance. I digest my culture to reinforce it as part of myself, both expressing my own heritage externally and reinforcing it for myself through consumption.

What happens though when the culture I am preparing to 'eat' is one to which I am an outsider? In an ethical sense, because I am borrowing a traditional dinner from another culture, do I have a responsibility to give something back? I did not travel to Jordan

to obtain my recipe for this meal, a Jordanian symbol of hospitality. What can I offer as a token of gratitude? By creating this traditional meal in my adopted London home, I hope to create a place *for* Jordan. I am not aiming to appropriate a culture that is not mine, but rather to invite it onto a shared plateau to examine it side-by-side with my identity, a hodge-podge of Eastern European cultural roots, an American birthplace and a London postcode. For Kwame Anthony Appiah:

There are two strands that intertwine in the notion of cosmopolitanism. One is the idea that we have obligations to others, obligations that stretch beyond those to whom we are related by the ties of kith and kin, or even the more formal ties of a shared citizenship. The other is that we take seriously the value not just of human life but of particular human lives, which means taking an interest in the practices and beliefs that lend them significance. (xv)

Belonging, then, is not just an inherited trait, but a behavior that can be cultivated, through conscientious inquiry and engagement with others. I am not trying to appropriate Jordanian culture and serve it on my dinner table, but, rather, I am looking to use this meal to locate an entry into a small understanding of the space between here and there. Simultaneously, I cannot help but remember that the man who introduced me to mansaf and the rituals of hospitality associated with its enjoyment was not Jordanian by birth; he was born in Palestine, and his family took refuge in Jordan when he was an adolescent. A ritual designed to showcase a host's generosity takes on new significance to me when I remember that the first time I partook of this meal was at the invitation of someone who had taken refuge inside the culture.

I will now begin the process of cooking the lamb for the mansaf and getting the feast underway.

Maghrib

(Sunset Prayer, London 8:19PM, Brooklyn 7:49PM)

Me: Shoo shukran salaam dood helmi layl zip hellwa

Me in translation: *What thanks hello worm my dream
night penis beautiful*

Note: *This is all the Arabic that I speak from memory.*

Both the lamb and I have spent the past 24 hours marinating, ruminating, and drawing influence from the ether surrounding us. The lamb has taken in the salty, acidic character of the kacek (which is not mayonnaise) it soaks in. It has turned grayish, reflecting its total saturation. I have also been stewing, spending hours on YouTube watching footage surrounding the death (murder?) of Osama bin Laden, carried out upon the orders of Barack Hussein Obama, the only world leader for whom I have actively campaigned. I feel like my skin must have turned lamb-grey as I scrolled through the videos, watching the joy pervade my not-quite-hometown of New York City. I am plunged back almost ten years, when I also spent time with video documentation of celebrations surrounding human extermination: that time, I watched the festivities in pockets of the Middle East celebrating the demise of 3000 Americans.

In this moment, I begin to hate the cosmopolitan way of thinking that allows me to exist in London, New York City, and my imagined version of the Middle East simultaneously. In a sick sort of way, I am jealous of the Americans who dance in the streets today, because I am envious that to them, this death (like those that came before it) is that simple. As Appiah postulates, 'each person you know about and can affect is someone to whom you have responsibilities: to say this is just to affirm the very idea of morality' (xiii). How, then, is any further death a cause to celebrate, particularly a death brought about by a politics that I had supported through my vote in the previous election? How can I digest this painful powerlessness in the face an interminable string of 'eye for an eye for eyes'? There is an almost intolerable opposition between my status as a passport-holding American and the personal trajectory I follow as one who is drawn to imagining a place within other cultures. To me, it is much easier to live as an American outside of America, so as to not have to confront these feelings on a daily basis.

In planning this dinner party, it seems that I have invited a host of guests to sit at my table, but all of them take up only one seat: mine. I want answers from myself and for myself, but, again,

I am stymied by an insufficient knowledge of a language with which to interrogate myself. Through my performance of the rituals of this dinner, I have been attempting to model behaviors of cosmopolitan thinking that feel absent in the current actions and political climate of my home country. This dinner-for-one draws me back to Peggy Phelan's thoughts on performativity, echoing the notion that 'identity is perceptible only through a relation to an other – which is to say, it is a form of both resisting and claiming the other, declaring the boundary where the self diverges from and merges with the other' (13). Inviting myself to a Jordanian dinner made by my own hands feels like a small way of resisting my country's intervention in the politics of another (or multiple others). As Nadia Seremetakis intimates, 'there is a corporate communication between body and things, the person and the world, which points to the perceptual construction of truth as the involuntary disclosure of meaning through the senses' (6). In a small way, I feel as though my creation of this dinner is the most profound statement of my identity I can make; I am in agreement with Kwame Anthony Appiah on the point that responsibilities and morals are cosmopolitan questions, and ones that encourage frequent and constant reflection.

Being engaged in preparations for my mansaf dinner has brought me face to face with a reality I would rather not own up to; I am not unhappy that Bin Laden is dead, but I also cannot deny that my home country's hand in his death troubles me. Instead of taking up the celebratory cry, I instead feel myself straining to hear the voice of someone calling for solidarity. Conviviality: not as individual citizens of any given soil, but as humans, occupying shared human territory; as people who could all crowd around my table, if I could get out the way, to partake in a shared meal. That is the discourse lacking in this moment of grief mismatched with festivity. My dinner now tastes acrid. Seremetakis says that 'commensality can be defined as the exchange of sensory memories and emotions, and of substances and objects incarnating remembrance and feeling' (37). While I have been engaged in setting a dinner table, my home nation seems to be taking a different tack with cultural conversation. I was trying to extend an invitation, while my country of birth issued an ultimatum. Death cannot redeem a prior set of deaths, but it can assert a world order, a faith in governments and world powers.

As I place my seasoned mansaf in the oven, I am overcome by a special sadness. I sense a sadness in myself that this is the condition of the world that I live in, that I will likely soon bring children into: a world where cosmopolitan curiosity and liquid identity meets the resistance of closed-mindedness and xenophobic fear. This sadness also mingles with feelings of loss. I miss my Jordanian friend, and realize that my solitary parroting of mansaf's traditions feels hollow. I feel at this point like I am co-opting, as though I am stealing this recipe to avoid visiting a Muslim nation, looking to stuff my face with culture to feed my feelings of guilt surrounding my lack of intellectual knowledge. Guilt also gnaws at me out of embarrassment for my roots: my heritage as an American and my inability to correspond with where I'm from. I see my great-grandmother's hands again and wish I could just hold on to them for while. I sense a bitter taste in my mouth that I suspect no coriander, clove and cassia combination will blunt. This dinner is now an offering, a sacrifice, a way of atoning for something I did not do, but for which I feel powerfully responsible.

Isha

(Evening Prayer, London 10:36PM, Brooklyn 9:15PM)

Not Me: *Where you from? Me, I'm Iraqi. Where you from?*

Me: *The U.S. I live here now though.*

Not Me: *Me, I'm Iraqi.*

Works Cited

- Ahmed, Sara et al. 'Introduction: Uprootings/Regroundings: Questions of Home and Migration'. *Uprootings/ Regroundings: Questions of Home and Migration*. Oxford: Berg, 2003: 1-22.
- Appiah, Kwame Anthony. *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2006.
- Ankori, Gannit. "'De-Orientalism': Displaced Bodies/Embodied Displacements in Contemporary Palestinian Art'. *Uprootings/Regroundings: Questions of Home and Migration*. Oxford: Berg, 2003: 59-90.

Phelan, Peggy. *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*. London: Routledge, 1993.

Seremetakis, Nadia, ed. *The Senses Still: Perception and Memory in Material Culture in Modernity*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1994.