

Gastropolitical Encounters and the Political Life of Sensation (postprint)

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Food as a political object has been pivotal in defining the political and socioeconomic positioning of political leaders across many different countries. Instrumentalised as a diplomatic tool to enhance and maintain economic and international relations, food as gifts and acts of commensality are routinely built into the pursuit and maintenance of local and foreign policy, which point both to the materiality and sensoriality of gastrodiploacy. This is however, a realm of analysis that is fairly incipient in sensory scholarship. I make conceptual connections between food, senses and political life by proposing the notion of political gustemology, and by developing conceptual parameters in explicating the political life of sensation. In directing attention to sensory aspects of gastropolitical encounters, the paper departs from extant works on gastrodiploacy and provides a newer framework and insight to apprehend the embodied and sensory features of political episodes in everyday life.

Keywords: political gustemology, senses, gastropolitics, political life of sensation, gastrodiploacy

Introduction

Food has been deployed as a medium by different nations to display wealth, cement alliances, reinforce power relations, and to build up and solidify a sense of national identity (Holtzman, 2006; Lusa and Jakešević, 2017). Food then is a political object (Chan, 2010; Farquhar, 2002; Lien, 2004) that is pivotal in defining the political and socioeconomic positioning of political leaders across many different countries, instrumentalised as a diplomatic tool to enhance and maintain economic and international relations (Ojong and Ndlovu, 2013; Reynolds, 2012; Tellström, 2004; Zhang, 2015). The relationship between food, trade, and diplomacy has been in circulation over a long period of time (Goody, 1982; Mintz, 1985); as Hillary Clinton once

proclaimed: 'Food is the oldest form of diplomacy' (Mehta, 2016). There have been many variants of such gustatory political behaviour, ranging from 'barbeque diplomacy' (in the US), 'kimchi diplomacy' (in South Korea), to 'gado-gado diplomacy' (in Indonesia), and 'durian diplomacy' (in Thailand; see Chongkittavorn, 2018). On 11 September 2018, Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping took a break from their meetings at the Eastern Economic Forum held in Vladivostok, Russia, and whipped up pancakes ('blini') together. They later ate the blini with caviar and washed it down with vodka shots (Collman, 2018). This has been perceived as a 'reciprocal gesture' given that the two Presidents had made Chinese dumplings ('baozi') together in Tianjin, China just three months earlier (Birtles, 2018).¹ Political observers note that 'the cosy display was meant to send a message to the west'; 'if the United States pushes too far', these two leaders would 'move closer to each other' (Collman, 2018) in opposing trade protectionism and unilateralism (Birtles, 2018). These varied examples of food as gifts and acts of commensality built into the pursuit and maintenance of local and foreign policy point to the materiality and sensoriality of gastrodiploamacy - a domain that is fairly incipient with regard to sensory investigation.

While scholarly attention on food and the senses has been on the rise in the last few decades (Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy, 2010; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1999; Rhys-Taylor, 2017; Sutton, 2010), an area of inquiry pertaining to the political life of sensation remains inchoate, having only recently gained traction in analyses of everyday political life (Borch, 2015; Howes and Classen, 2014; Kunreuther, 2018; Panagia, 2009; Rotter, 2011, 2019). Developing from current expositions, this article focuses on how foodways in the field of politics play out in everyday encounters. It engages with the sensuous features - both as sense perception and as

metaphor - of food consumption by politicians that come to bear on international as well as local politics. By analysing 'gastropolitical moments' (Trapido, 2011, 55) of sensory cross-cultural encounters that form the backdrop for a diverse range of political motivations, I argue that they reflect upon a range of embodied political behaviour including cooperation, contestation, and other political strategies to influence voting and other forms of behaviour.

I demonstrate that sensory experiences and metaphors surrounding the consumption of food in the political arena of social life intertwine with and signify complex statecraft processes of power, cultural representation, political subjectivities and contestation. Political subjectivities acquire a measure of sensory materiality, as such experiences and metaphors are useful avenues toward articulating political positions and motivations, either through manifest or latent messages. I address the following core research problematic: *What are the sensory motifs of gastropolitical episodes that may be identified, and what do they reflect upon in terms of political behaviour?* Gastropolitical encounters form the nexus between the political and the sensible. Where the former points to manifold statecraft and political behaviour, the latter refers to the capacity for sense perception including the deployment of sensory metaphors. Focusing on moments of eating and food behaviour is then an important initiative in bridging three subjects of inquiry that are typically kept apart, or approached mainly through the lens of food diplomacy or the politics of food debates.

I establish conceptual connections between food, senses and political life by drawing upon examples of gastropolitical moments which comprise charged meanings (Hastorf, 2017; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1999) that may be unveiled through a closer inspection of the sensible.

They reveal different power dynamics of cohesion and tension between varying sets of political actors. As Howes and Classen argue: 'The senses are directly put to political ends through acts of marking, excluding, punishing or exalting particular individuals and groups' (2014, p.66). The senses aid in exemplifying political relationships and connections, directing us to particular aspects of political form and practice (cf. Cooper, 2011). This article therefore serves as a critical instigation of combining analytical approaches from sociology, anthropology, diplomacy, and food and foodways (cf. Morgan, 2012) in appraising the importance of culinary-political encounters both within and between nations. It adopts a sensory reading and discussion of gastropolitical exchanges, geared towards developing a political life of sensation (Howes and Classen, 2014; Panagia, 2009) that builds a theoretical and empirical connection between the political and the sensible (Laplantine, 2015). Such a sensory perspective (Strati, 2007) explores the socio-political metaphors of taste (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1999) and other accompanying sense experience. These are addressed through my proposed notion of 'political gustemology' which I explicate below, to illustrate the deployment of sensory knowledge and power in both actual sensorial exchanges and metaphorical takes on the sensory.

I present 3 gastropolitical encounters in unpacking what is political about food and sense experiences - (i) A U.S. ambassador in Singapore tasting local fare (the heritage gift of the other); (ii) the non-tasting of Dalit food (the rejected gift); and (iii) contesting tastes (Singapore General Elections 2015)(the contested gift). Conjunctionally, this synchronic series of three cases (cf. Ray, 2018) represent political behaviour and its accompanying aims of establishing ties with political partners, exhibiting discrimination through non-consumption, and responding to ones' political opponent. They are selected to illustrate different sets of global/local political

actors and their varied axial political relations.² Undergirding these examples is a denominator motif of *sensorial othering* that I pursue below. My sensory engagement across these 3 cases also reflect upon multiple political socialities that are collaborative and/or opposing writ large, interpreted anew through the political life of sensation. Commensality can bring people together, but different acts of food practices and consumption behaviour can also be the media through which demarcations along the lines of ethnic, gender, and class identities are articulated (Abbots, 2011; Bell and Valentine, 1997; Kong and Sinha, 2015; Ray, 2018). In other words, political action and boundary erection are manifested through gastro-sensorial materialities. Such materialities inculcate the sensorial potency of political strategies and form an important cog in the machinery of politics.

Conceptual Parameters

The term 'gastropolitics' was first proposed by Appadurai (1981) where he makes references to the semiotic codes of food in everyday socialities. More recently, DeSoucey (2016, p.17) connects this term to symbolic politics in relation to group identities and cultural meanings, and differentiates it from the wider literature that has routinely dealt with the 'politics of food'. Such politics involve food security and food aid issues, the power of food corporations, and the deployment of genetically modified organisms in producing monocrops, among others. I bring together Appadurai and DeSoucey's use of the term gastropolitics to refer to how food and sensory references in the domain of political life relate to constructions of group identity, and political and sociocultural differentiation. The idea of symbolic politics illustrates how particular

foods and their accompanying sensory inflections become embroiled in cultural and political contentions (cf. DeSoucey, 2016). I am therefore interested to discuss the 'politics of food' literally in the realm of politics and everyday life, thereby moving beyond the 'politics of food' as DeSoucey has clarified.

My analytical parameters of the political life of sensation include notions of *political gustemology* and of the gift, as well as the connections between the sensible and the political. I develop Sutton's (2010, p.215) idea of 'gustemology' comprising an 'understanding of a wide spectrum of cultural issues around taste and other sensory aspects of food' and propose the term *political gustemology* for analysis. The range of issues that gustemology as an approach considers involves connections between the personal and the political, place-making, sociality and social values, as well as expressions of agency, as discussed by Sutton. Extending from Sutton's approach, *political gustemology* is an admixture of sense perception and metaphor, and affective forces that may be analysed from political behaviour. Utilising the notion of political gustemology coheres with Sutton's (2010, p.220) argument that more work needs to be undertaken so as to 'make the sensory aspects of food central to an understanding of lives and experiences'. I interpret the affective forces (Highmore, 2010) that are generated from gastropolitical encounters, running a possible gamut of affect and emotions (Wilk, 1997) from surprise, disdain, fear, scorn and contempt, to pleasure, fondness and enjoyment. These forces are also entangled with sensation and perception comprising the gustatory, olfactory, haptic and visual. As modalities of experience, they reflect upon the materiality and embodied aspects of political-gustatory exchanges.

A word on the political life of sensation is necessary here. Linke (2006) calls for closer analysis in studying the state in its embodied forms. Beyond comprehending its institutional, discursive or imagined modes, querying the 'sensual life of the state' (Linke 2006, p.206), including political life, engenders new analytical possibilities. In tandem with Linke, I argue that political leaders and their gastronomic encounters form those 'sensually concrete spaces of power' (2006, p.206) where state machinations and embodied subjects intertwine. Concurrently, 'political fields' such as gastropolitical exchanges are 'fundamentally bodied productions' (2006, p.210). Similar views on studying the sensorial life of the state have it that 'the political only really acquires meaning through the sensible in action' (Laplantine, 2015, p.84). In challenging the assumed binary of the political versus the sensible (where the former connotes reason and the rational, and the latter is connected to the emotional and the affective), Laplantine (2015, p.84) posits an 'epistemology of continuity' that conjoins domains such as the political, aesthetics, and history, which are usually treated separately. This paper aligns with these theoretical directions in exemplifying the political life of sensation that transcends the divide of reason versus affect.

To explicate further on the political life of sensation and political gustemology, I return to Appadurai's (1981) discussion and questions on the semiotic functions of food: 'What do particular actions involving food (and particular foods) "say"? To whom? With what immediate social consequences? To what structural end?' (Appadurai, 1981, p.495). Furthermore, he notes that any outcome of such semiotic functions is triadically contingent upon the food item itself, the social actors, as well as the social context and audience of the transaction. Taking the lead from Appadurai, I examine the sensory semiotic functions of food offered by and to political

leaders in order to address these questions given the powerful associations (Fischler, 1988) that food items and ways of consuming possess. Such associations include the experience of tasting the local and thereby imbibing heritage (Chan, 2010), connecting to the masses for political ends, and the maintenance of political ties vis-à-vis gastro-encounters as a means of enacting soft power. My discussion considers both the immediate sense of taste and smell in gastro-encounters, as well as the metaphorical notions of these senses vis-à-vis political statecraft. Both immediate and figurative sense registers are resources that avail embodied insights into an array of political practices and power dynamics.

A final conceptual strand has to do with the premise that gastropolitical encounters may be interpreted as transactional moments of food as an item of gift exchange. Food constitutes one of the earliest and most frequent gift, typically involved in commodity trading (Mauss, ([1954] 2002). Anthropology as a discipline has pursued a long-standing interest in gifts, stemming from the core principle that 'gift exchange is seen to create and maintain social relations between persons and groups' (Venkatesan, 2011, p.55). I apply some general themes from Mauss' discussion on the gift to frame my analyses of political gustemology and sensory experiences. Food acts as a medium and gift for public and cultural diplomacy (Rockower, 2012), both within and between nations. If gift exchange materialises continuing relationships where 'social networks are built between individuals through food gifts that branch out into larger social alliances' (Hastorf, 2017, p.27), then the sensory aspects of such food gift-giving – where gifts are revelatory (Strathern, 1999) – further offers an embodied dimension to the building up of political alliances. However, gifts are also 'poisonous' (Mauss, [1954]2002) where reciprocity is expected without being articulated. Even if a reciprocal return or cycle of giving

may not be guaranteed or immediate, there still is a hope of return and where the significance of such gifts or at least the memory of it, is mediated through sensory experiences. While Mauss ([1954]2002) has deliberated upon both the obligation to accept and reciprocate gifts as part of the economy of gift giving and exchange, insufficient attention is devoted to the possibility of refusal or rejection (Young, 1985). My discussion of food as a gift in political scenarios both inflects and expands upon what Mauss has tabled in terms of the moral economy of gift-giving, with an additional take on the idea of the rejected gift to be explained below.

Gastropolitical Encounter I - From *Bak Kut Teh* to Durian

Former U.S. Ambassador to Singapore, Kirk Wagar, was previously featured in a 2014 video posted by the U.S. Embassy in Singapore where he and his wife were trying *bak kut teh* (pork rib soup). This encounter was Wagar's 'first taste of gastronomic diplomacy'.³ Singaporean food blogger Leslie Tay guided them on how to order the pork rib soup as well as its accompanying dishes comprising dough fritters, braised pig trotters, salted vegetables and braised peanuts. The video captures an excited Wagar who, upon taking his first bite of the pork rib, described the taste as 'tremendous'. The report notes that 'Mr Wagar was also taught how to eat rice with chopsticks and was educated on the history of Singapore hawker food'.⁴ Netizens responded by suggesting that the ambassador try other local dishes including nasi lemak,⁵ roti prata,⁶ and the king of fruits, the durian.⁷ Wagar's *bak kut teh* experience went so well that he later proclaimed on Twitter that he was open to trying the durian, a fruit well-known for its very

strong and pungent smell: 'And I might finally try durian. I will probably regret that.'⁸ About a year later, Wagar did attempt the durian, which was after two years since he first moved to Singapore. Together with his wife, both went along once more with Leslie Tay to taste the fruit. Where his wife commented that the durian 'attacks your nose and palate at different times' and that 'it's very very complex flavours...like at the beginning I just don't really wanna...but the end presents a different flavour', Wagar had this to say about the durian: 'This does not look good. This kinda looks like intestines'. Muttering a quick prayer, Wagar took his first taste of durian; it was clear that he did not appreciate the taste of the fruit, calling it 'strong' while grimacing.

This example on Wagar and his wife eating local dishes that form part of the culinary culture and heritage of Singapore stands as an instance of food constituting as a type of heritage (Chan, 2010; Giovine and Brulotte, 2016; Kong and Sinha, 2015) that is introduced and gifted to dignitaries, albeit in an informal setting. Inviting a foreign, ambassadorial couple to taste local fare and to educate them about the history of Singapore's hawker food illustrates how such a gastronomic episode reflects upon food and its accompanying sensory affective forces play into national identity and culinary diplomatic processes; further bolstered by the responses of netizens with their recommendations of popular local dishes. Moreover, the affective outcome of eating durian bears testimony to a reluctant response to local/regional food culture given the lack of sensory familiarity in ingesting an unknown fruit. Yet notions of being Singaporean, or to have a taste of Singapore, usually requires the foreign other to experience the taste of durian that forms one of the litmus tests. Such affective responses then constitute a part of the relationship between the political and the sensorial. The links between

food, senses, and emotional connection are vivified, where gastrodiploacy seeks to cultivate an understanding of foreign cultures vis-à-vis enticing audiences to experience through their taste buds (Rockower, 2012). Similarly, gastrodiploacy means that food can function, in a non-threatening way to both connect with a foreign audience and to gain favour (Wilson, 2011). Near the end of the video on durian-eating, Tay remarks that Wagar's wife seems to be 'getting it' as she appears to settle into the taste of durian compared to Wagar. When food is employed as a medium for engagement, a more 'oblique emotional connection to culture' is in place (Rockower, 2012, p.236) given that our experience of food through our senses, especially smell and taste, brings with it particular emotive and visceral qualities (Wilson, 2011). The connection involves the staging of sensory interactions in order to engage public diplomacy implicitly through soft power. These forms of cultural connections would 'ultimately shape long-term public diplomacy perceptions in a manner different than targeted strategic communications' (Rockower, 2012, p.236). The various types of gastrodiploacy raised at the outset of the paper would likewise constitute instances of how such emotional connections may be activated in political encounters.

Furthermore, the present example also reflects upon a process of tasting an unknown other (Molz, 2004). Built into this process are tastes of heritage, tradition and national identity (Blakely and Moles, 2019; Holtzman, 2006) as encapsulated in the various sense experience and discourses surrounding such food items. Richly laced with affective intensities of pleasure (in eating pork ribs) and a sense of adventure and risk (durian), this example demonstrates how political gustemology, in perceiving and eating the other transpires. To borrow Highmore's words - 'flavours and feelings are knotted together in complex and contradictory ways; pleasure

and pain, politeness and cunning animate the production and consumption of sensual culture' (2010, p.133). Eating the other is both a sensory and bodily challenge which may turn out positive and/or negative. Such embodied challenges – constructed or otherwise – are also reminiscent of how the foreign Other is perceived and metaphorically consumed or 'civilised' in colonial encounters (Collingham, 2001; Konishi, 2013). Both streams of consuming the Other are packed with sensory and affective density – in this example, gastronomic relish is conjoined with attempts to comprehend the Other through food. Such political comprehension is discerned from Wagar's Twitter post, where he stated: 'Singapore is passionate about its Durian. Your Durian broker is one of your most important relationships!'.⁹

Gastropolitical Encounter II - The Rejected *Pulao*

In this example, I appraise the notion of the rejected gift in the context of Indian politics, foodways, and the caste system. I show how sensory boundaries of untouchability and caste politics informed various political reactions to the rejection of the food gift. The appraisal expands upon Maussian approaches as well as those of other scholars who sustain debates surrounding the significance of the gift in transactional, social relations. In May 2017, Karnataka President of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), B.S. Yeddyurappa, became mired in a political controversy when he allegedly rejected the food – *pulao*¹⁰ – that was prepared in a Dalit household and instead ordered *idly*¹¹ and *vada*¹² from a hotel. Yeddyurappa and other BJP leaders were visiting the house of a Dalit family in the Tumakuru district where breakfast was arranged for them.¹³ The refusal to consume food prepared by the Dalit family was deemed

tantamount to practicing untouchability and caste discrimination given a seemingly conscious choice to not come into (gastronomic and sensory) contact with the Dalits who are considered 'unclean'¹⁴ (see Boroora, 2017). Sensorial othering against members of a lower caste is perceived to have transpired. A police complaint was filed by a man from Mandya, Karnataka, and for which it was also filed with the Home Minister G. Parameshwara.

The incident also prompted political leaders from the Janata Dal (Secular)¹⁵ party and the Congress to launch their criticism of Yeddyurappa for not eating the food cooked at the Dalit house. Even if gift givers – in this case, the Dalit family – might not be expecting direct reciprocity from such recipients as state leaders or other public figures (Ssorin-Chaikov, 2006) like Yeddyurappa, there is still an unspoken contract for the intended recipient to either receive the gift or to subsequently reciprocate (Mauss, [1954]2002). Yeddyurappa's act of declining the *pulao* and instead opting for hotel food, was therefore conceived as an act of untouchability. The enactment of gift-giving between partners of unequal standing further reveals hierarchical relations (Venkatesan, 2011). Rules and practices surrounding food and the caste system in India are closely interlinked, where ritual and sensory boundaries of purity and impurity govern caste behaviour and the (non)acceptance of foods from another caste (Ghose, 2003; Staples, 2014). Declining *pulao* prepared by the Dalit household reflects upon the rejection of a food gift that in effect further deepens the cleavage in caste relations, even if the intended political goal of the visit, as Yeddyurappa maintains, is to support a socially equitable society. Spence (2016, p.5) opines: 'There is, after all, no surer way of showing that a politician is different than by eating the wrong kind of food, or else by ordering something inappropriate.' Where Dalits are

the lowest caste of the untouchables in the Hindu caste hierarchy, Yeddyurappa's rejection was therefore construed as discriminatory.

A BJP spokesperson claims: 'The complaint is politically motivated and lodged by those who have been shaken by the Dalit outreach program. Their frustration is palpable.'¹⁶ The BJP has been reaching out to the rural poor, such as Dalit groups in order to gear up for a series of assembly elections that would lead to the Lok Sabha polls scheduled for 2019. '[V]isits to villages for night stays and having dinners at Dalit homes' have been undertaken by various BJP leaders, where their campaign 'comes against the backdrop of opposition parties targeting the Narendra Modi government over its alleged anti-Dalit policies'.¹⁷ In response to the BJP's outreach campaign, the President of another political party, the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), Mayawati says:

"First Congress leaders dined at the homes of Dalits and announced it to the world. Now, the BJP is walking in its footsteps. While people think that they are eating food cooked by Dalits, the reality is that it is prepared by upper castes in their own homes," she has said after Adityanath's Pratapgarh visit.¹⁸

Interpreting the complaint as a scheme to thwart the BJP's outreach efforts demonstrates how the rejected gift becomes semiotically manipulated as political weaponry by other parties in stirring up caste politics, sensory transgression, and discrimination. This example coheres with Spence's (2016, p.5) observation on politicians' food choices: 'Politicians need to be extremely careful about what they eat, or at least what they are seen to consume in public. If they are not, the gastronomic choices they make can all too easily end up alienating those whom they are trying to connect with, or convince.' Yeddyurappa's behaviour has therefore been manipulated by his political opponents to decry the BJP's outreach agenda, where they employed the

encounter of the rejected gift to dent his party's political program.

Gastropolitical Encounter III - Oyster Omelette Politics

The final example here likewise elucidates upon the senses as a political metaphor harnessed between opposing sets of political actors (though in different measure), which reflects upon the taste of political discontent. In August 2015, Singapore held its 17th General Elections (GE) to elect the new parliament. The 2015 GE was dubbed as 'Food Elections' given that opposing party members launched into a gastropolitical interlocution which transpired on Facebook and Instagram. A newspaper report queries: 'Is the 2015 General Election shaping up to be a war fought in the hawker centres?'.¹⁹ The report states:

Barely a week after Ms Sylvia Lim of the Workers' Party (WP) posted a snap of herself enjoying an oyster omelette at Fengshan Market and Food Centre on Instagram, it seems as if People's Action Party's (PAP) Charles Chong has aimed a light dig back at the opposition party's chairman. The current Joo Chiat MP, who will be contesting in Punggol East at the upcoming election after his constituency was subsumed under Marine Parade GRC, posted a photo of himself on Facebook saying that the omelette in WP-held Aljunied tastes better.²⁰

We are told through the report that Chong could have made a 'perfect riposte' in highlighting the PAP's intention to win back the Aljunied ward from the opposition Workers' Party, if not for Chong having made a language faux pas about mixing up the dialect name of the dish he was having. In his Facebook post, Chong put up a photograph of him eating *orh neng* (oyster omelette without starch) in Aljunied (thereby serving as a hint that the PAP was eyeing Aljunied in the elections, which 'tasted better' there as Chong remarked on his Facebook post) but having mistakenly called it *orh luak* (oyster omelette made with sticky starch) instead.

Lim's Instagram post on the 'heavenly' taste of Fengshan', underscored with the hashtag '#reasonstowin' then drew a response from another PAP politician, Deputy Prime Minister Teo Chee Hean, who 'questioned WP's motives for eyeing Fengshan amid questions over their handling of the Aljunied-Hougang-Punggol East Town Council's finances.'²¹ Teo was quoted as stating:

Now we see the chairman of the town council saying that Fengshan SMC looks quite delicious. What's going to happen? You're going to swallow up Fengshan? For what purpose? To serve the residents of Fengshan? Or is Fengshan delicious because you want to add it to the pot? And help the town council with the deficit?²²

Politicians from different parties employ the semiotics of taste and distaste to metaphorically spar against each other in a period of elections. As a metaphor used in such political rivalry, the affective force of taste here is that of (1) political efficacy ('tasting better') and (2) alleged greed ('swallow up Fengshan') as opposed to other extant taste associations imbricated with status and discernment (Highmore, 2010). Taste and eating are therefore metonymically mobilised as a medium of political gustemology where such online political sparring exhibit contestation and accusations - the very stuff of politics that we are familiar with. Taste is harnessed to inflect political posturing of shame and hit-back here, resembling affective intensities in the usual contexts of political rivalry. As compared to the earlier example on rejecting *pulao* in the context of the Dalit household, the taste of omelette here stands as a contested gift where both opposing and ruling party members aim at winning votes for these two sites as desired wards. Electoral wards that are intangible and contested by politicians become materialised through food and its accompanying taste sensation as a contested tangible gift. The political scramble for such a gift in the context of hawker centres also indicates how politics and

everyday sites of consumption translate into further mileage for these politicians to reach out to the masses. In further abstraction, taste 'is an orchestration of the sensible, a way of ordering and demeaning, of giving value and taking it away' (Highmore, 2010, p.126). Senses, conjugating with affective forces, are therefore provocative conduits that reflect upon embodied political exchanges and contestation.

The above episode in effect created further avenues for food and sensory experiences across the elections period. Where candidates from the ruling PAP held their various press conferences in coffeeshops that dot residential areas in Singapore as well as having served food to residents as part of their political campaigns, other candidates have taken to social media platforms to talk about their favourite foods. Such contestation over food and taste metaphors demonstrates how food and its accompanying sensory qualities may serve in an incendiary manner toward fleshing out, in embodied and sensorial terms, political opponents' engagement with each other as a form of political performance or 'gastro-warfare' (Spence, 2016, p.8).

Toward the Political Life of Sensation

The episodes of political commensality analysed above are in essence, political transactions where the host offers gastronomic and sensory opportunities to partake local fare as culture, and where the guest takes up (or not) the invitation in ingesting the goodwill and/or political maneuver. What is transacted is cross-cultural culinary experience as a gift, combined with a latent political intention for solidifying future nation-to-nation and other political ties. The larger constellation of meanings that thread across the three encounters reveal political

exchanges that are calibrated, staged, and deliberate both for the consumption of the invitees and the masses. Two related themes of analysis formed the basis of this paper. I first featured the political role that food plays in gastropolitics, conveying the semiotic value that social actors place on particular food items in the realm of political behaviour and diplomatic contexts. Second, I explicated the semiotic functions of sensory metaphors in relation to tastes of the other, rejected taste, and taste as political weaponry. Through both themes, political associations are produced vis-a-vis sensory and gastronomic references and thereby demonstrate how '[p]olitical fields and national spaces have a visual, tactile, sensuous, and emotional dimension' (Linke, 2006, p.205). These dimensions are systematically fleshed out through the lens of political gustemology comprising sensory and affective experiences and their semiotic encoding meted out by political actors across all three encounters.

What fundamentally undergirds the three examples is my analytical presentation that relates to the idea of *sensible knowledge* derived from political gustemology. Such knowledge has to do with 'what is perceived through the senses, judged through the senses, and produced and reproduced through the senses' (Strati, 2007, p.62), exercised by social actors and their varying political linkages which I have discussed. Furthermore, sensible knowledge as a 'form of knowing' contributes toward accounting for how social actors experience the social world – in this paper, political worlds – in personal, sensory and corporeal terms (Strati, 2007) and which fills a void in works on food diplomacy. My conceptual use of political gustemology therefore draws attention to human social actors, their cultural perspectives underlying these interactional-political moments and which connects all three cases of gastropolitical encounters. These encounters conjunctionally demonstrate how food and its accompanying

sensations serve as a code that is symbolic of social relations (Goody, 1982). These moments are summatively concrete experiences of particular political actors involved in gustatory processes of (sensory) exchange.

My analyses of the political life of sensation may be further expanded with reference to what Kim (2016) terms as 'sensory power'. Based on how humans and things interact through sensory-emotional capacities, sensory power is produced through artifacts and their sensorial amplitude. While Kim argues that artifacts such as surveillance cameras and noise metres act as 'conduits of sensory power' employed by the government against protestors, I make a case for *food as a conduit of sensory power* deployed by different political actors enacting particular statecraft behaviour. Kim notes: 'The senses exist only in the spaces constructed through interactions between humans and things, and power operates on the senses by flowing through material things. The sensory power facilitated by things is vital in political contexts' (2016, p.412). As political partners or opponents articulate their sensibilities around food encounters, they produce, in the process sensory power to experience a taste of the other, to wage counter-positions against each other, or to bridge relations mediated by food and the senses as allied conduits. Sensory power in political relations therefore prompt the material dimension and memory of gastropolitics and different forms of political engagement and negotiation. By directing attention to sensory aspects of gastropolitical episodes, the paper provides a different framework to apprehend the embodied features of political situations.

Concluding Remarks

Food and its accompanying sensory experiences are able to send powerful political messages depending on those who consume, what they consume (or not), and under what circumstances gastro-encounters take place. Political behaviours are expressed through the material and sensorial practices of commensality. While sensory experiences of eating may be at first instance prosaic, these varied experiences serve as potent ingredients through which politics is problematised vis-à-vis semiotically nuanced and variegated ways beyond current theoretical frameworks that have deliberated on soft power or gastrodiploacy (Morgan, 2012; Reynolds, 2012; Rockower, 2012; Spence, 2016). The three gastropolitical episodes demonstrate how foodways, sensory experience and political behaviour intersect and are foregrounded analytically in order to reflect upon the political life of sensation. The trope of sensorial othering is an important conceptual exercise in articulating how political relations ranging from the collaborative to the oppositional are managed, performed, and sustained over time.

My contribution in proposing the political life of sensation and examined through political gustemology is two-fold. First, the notion of political gustemology enlarges extant debates on food diplomacy (Lien, 2004; Morgan, 2012; Spence, 2016) by drawing attention to food as gifts (accepted, rejected, and contested) in political exchanges including the accompanying affective forces and sensory power that elucidate upon different configurations of political craftsmanship. Existing works in this respect are nascent and warrant further study. My discussion thereby provides a different perspective to think about and analyse political life between actors who carry out such acts of cooperation, contestation and negotiation mediated

through embodied encounters of eating with, and eating (or not eating) the other. In doing so, I focus on interactional and immediate exchanges between different political actors which pertinently departs from extant studies on food diplomacy that tend to deliberate more on nation-states as actors and broader social structures of political behaviour. Second, I suggest how scholarship on food studies, sensory research and politics (Carolan, 2011; Counihan, 2018) may be fruitfully interlaced through an amalgamation of conceptual discussions propounded herein. The political life of sensation developed in this paper illuminates the importance of studying the senses as political, and politics as sensorial (Borch, 2015; Howes and Classen, 2014; Panagia, 2009). In both paradigms of inquiry, the broader argument has to do with explicating how food and senses abound with political functions. Beyond gastropolitics, the arguments here may also be extended to other forms of sensory and embodied political exchanges to include drinking, dancing, and also the wearing of traditional clothing.²³ Overall, sensoria reframes political life beyond the disembodied-discursive paradigm to pertinently consider affective links between the sensible and the political, thereby approaching polities as 'sensed communities' (Howes and Classen, 2014). This approach departs from Bourdieu's (1984) work on normative taste communities and class-consumption orientations where social actors statically capitalise on taste, as opposed to my endeavour here which highlights the dynamic negotiations pertaining to taste politics. If politics is assumed to be a form of rational persuasion (Highmore, 2010), political gustemology instigates a rethinking of such a disembodied position. The analytical purchase of political gustemology is this – to highlight enactments of sensory power and to analyse sensible knowledge in gastropolitical exchanges that thereby spotlight much needed focus on political relations and their manifold forms of

sensory embodiments. By foregrounding sensory analyses, I also seek a re-framing of politics and political sociology in transcending the core focus of state-society relations (Nash, 2001) to highlight and map embodied practices onto different political configurations in these domains of scholarly inquiry.

My focus on the sensual life of the state and politics provides new vistas to think about different 'political fields' (Linke, 2006), of which I suggest that gastropolitics forms a neglected and crucial domain. Where political power 'operates through the senses' given that 'contours of state apparatus are...moored to the sensual fabric of everyday experience' (Linke, 2006, p.218), problematising gastronomic experiences across a range of political-social encounters between global and local statespersons avail embodied approaches toward studying power and diplomacy. While Durham (1998) contends that sensual realism stems from a heterogeneous range of social practices, and that it is fragmentary, such incoherence is, according to Linke (2006, p.219), 'matched to the operations of state power' given that this form of power is not fixed. The three cases illustrate political exchanges taking place between the political and the sensible and demonstrate the 'embodied and affective dimensions of political subjectivity' (Kunreuther, 2018, p.24) which in tandem articulate collaborative or opposing political behaviour. In order to explain how the political and the sensorial aspects of social life are co-constitutive rather than polarised, this paper has suggested sensory ways of unravelling the links between affective and political modes of exchange and behaviour situated in the context of food as gifts and through the lens of political gustemology. Studying sensory politics and gastrodplomacy is one way among others, of articulating polyphonic political perspectives.

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Notes

¹ This gesture may potentially be analysed in terms of navigating public gendered display of cooking, usually consigned within the realm of women's domestic work (Allen and Sachs, 2007; Kemmer, 2000). What Xi and Putin have done resonates with 'self-oriented' culinary display as opposed to 'other-oriented responsibility' of cooking for others' well-being that women largely undertake (see Szabo, 2014).

² These three cases were selected on the basis of how different types of 'gifts' and sensory relations are played out, and contingent upon the responses that are generated through social and mass media. Therefore, I am analysing both the representation of and reactions to these three encounters which are mediated, and for which interviews are not feasible. Bearing in mind issues of authenticity and representation in media discourse (Page, 2012; Umair, 2016), social media is also a space for which the sensory can be discerned and analysed (in the first and third example) while traditional media (second example) provides useful press statements and coverage for analysis.

³ From <http://www.asiaone.com/news/soshiok/us-ambassador-may-try-durian-after-eating-bak-kut-teh-first-time?amp>.

⁴ From <http://www.asiaone.com/news/soshiok/us-ambassador-may-try-durian-after-eating-bak-kut-teh-first-time?amp>.

⁵ Aromatic rice infused with coconut milk and pandan leaves, served with sambal (a spicy chili paste), peanuts, anchovies, fried egg and chicken wings.

⁶ A South Indian flatbread served with curry.

⁷ <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/see-us-ambassador-kirk-wagar-try-bak-kut-teh-for-the-first-time>

⁸ <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/see-us-ambassador-kirk-wagar-try-bak-kut-teh-for-the-first-time>

⁹ @AmbWagar, 28 August 2015.

¹⁰ Rice cooked in a seasoned broth.

¹¹ Savoury rice cake.

¹² Savoury fried snacks including fritters, doughnuts and dumplings.

¹³ <https://www.thenewsminute.com/article/yeddyurappa-visits-dalit-house-eats-hotel-food-faces-untouchability-charge-62375>.

¹⁴ <https://www.thenewsminute.com/article/yeddyurappa-visits-dalit-house-eats-hotel-food-faces-untouchability-charge-62375>.

¹⁵ The JD(S) is recognised as a state party in the states of Kerala and Karnataka.

¹⁶ <http://epaperbeta.timesofindia.com/Article.aspx?eid=31806&articlexml=BSY-eats-hotel-idlis-at-dalits-home-lands-21052017007007>

¹⁷ <http://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2018/apr/29/bsp-plans-counter-to-thwart-bjps-dalit-backward-outreach-programme-1807899.html>

¹⁸ <http://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2018/apr/29/bsp-plans-counter-to-thwart-bjps-dalit-backward-outreach-programme-1807899.html>

¹⁹ 'Orh luak dragged into politics' in *The New Paper*, 19 August 2015.

²⁰ 'Orh luak dragged into politics' in *The New Paper*, 19 August 2015.

²¹ 'Orh luak dragged into politics' in *The New Paper*, 19 August 2015.

²² 'Orh luak dragged into politics' in *The New Paper*, 19 August 2015.

²³ Here, I am relating to political exchanges such as David Cameron treating Xi Jinping to beer and fish and chips in a traditional English pub in 2015, Teresa May's awkward attempt to dance on her 2018 visit to South Africa and Kenya, or political leaders donning silk outfits at an APEC meeting held in Beijing in 2014.

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