

## Review: Transactions in Taste

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Manpreet K. Janeja, 2010, [Transactions in Taste. The Collaborative Lives of Everyday Bengali Food](#) (London: Routledge). 185 pp.

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The reader uninitiated or uninterested in Bruno Latour's Actor Network Theory (ANT) will find this book difficult. Lately, as I have been digging deeper into the philosophical assumptions of ANT through the work of a cohort of philosophers around Graham Harman (2009), Janeja's book turned out to be a good empirical test of the uses of speculative realism, which assumes that there are all kinds of relationships between things without the mediation of human perception or cognition. And I came away from this exercise with mixed feelings.

Rarely have I read a book that came with the heavy artillery of "Advance Praise" from such luminaries in Anthropology such as James L. Watson, Willem van Schendel, Michael Herzfeld, Abhijit Dasgupta, and Marilyn Strathern. I can see why. Once one gets past section titles such as "The House, Everyday Kitchen, Utensils, and Implements: Place- and Thing-Actants/Patients" (2010: 43), there are exquisite ethnographic details and promising conceptual gambits. Even Latour's propensity to string together sentence-fragments, works for Janeja, when she begins by evoking the full sensorial range of "Bengal. Deltaic abundance. Football. Fish. Communism. *Adda*. Rivers. Strikes and *hartals*. Partition. Cricket... Rice. Taslima Nasreen... Poverty. Ray, Tagore, and Teresa. Famine. Tea (*cha*)" (2010: 1). Then there are gorgeously evocative sections connecting the Muslim call for prayer (*aazan*), to the cymbals and bells, perfumed flowers and incense offerings of the Hindu *sandhya aarati puja*, yoked together by the secular aromas of sizzling *begunis* (fried eggplants in a gram batter), *singaras* (Bengali samosas), *puchka* (tamarind-water dipped, spicy potato-filled, bite-sized, flour balloons), *jhal mudi* (salty, spicy puffed rice mix), and *chowmein* (a Bengali-Chinese iteration). She notes sharply, that the "cooks, that is the *rannar lok* and the *bhuas*, and the street food vendors, residing in slums, are *significant absences* or invisible veiled *presences* that are crucial to the *collaboration of presences and absences* that is constitutive of, and constituted by, the foodscape in middle- and upper-class neighbourhoods in the city" (2010: 42). All the italics are in the original. That is another thing about this book, there are lots of italicization, long-strings of transliterated Bengali words, followed by parenthetical translations, and bold texts, that are not designed to facilitate smooth reading.

The book highlights the possibilities of durable academic writing that is critical of everyday common sense, especially national and religious propaganda, and journalistic hatchet jobs about the structuring of identity around loud claims of religion, language and nation. Food insinuates itself sometimes even between hostile communities. Assertions of innate differences are always fragile, contentious claims, laced with acrimony, especially against those who might pass and crossover. Janeja conveys that brittle fragility of middle-class Bengali middleness successfully. In covering both Hindu and Muslim practices in Kolkata and Dhaka *Transactions in Taste* is path-breaking. It is the only book written on Bengali food that accounts for practices and constructions of taste, across

a border crossed by millions legally and illegally, but invisible to the tools of the cultural sciences. There is no other comparable work in spite of all the talk about transnationalism. Chitrita Banerji's (2006) exquisite memoir of love, life, cooking and eating in Dhaka and Kolkata is the only other work I can recall, but that is a different genre of writing.

Arguments about human-plant-machine assemblages also work when Janeja elaborates on the emergence of the refrigerator as a significant actant or passage point in the transactions of the everyday kitchen. By collapsing the divide between *aamish* (non-vegetarian)-*niraamish* (vegetarian), *raw-pakka-kachcha*, and fresh-stale, the refrigerator forces the transgression of conventional boundaries of purity and impurity in a Hindu Brahmanic family in Kolkata. In Dhaka, the "refrigerator, in holding the bloody goat's meat, and other foods, *together in the same place*, then violates" the boundaries between "*tahir* (pure) and *rijs, najis* (impure), *halal* (lawful) and *haram* (unlawful) forms delineated in the Qur'an and Hadiths that regulate what can be eaten, how, and from whom it can be received" (2010: 80). Here the refrigerator becomes an actant, something that Latour beautifully illustrated in the case of door hinges (Latour 1992). In Janeja's case the refrigerator engages with Hindu and Muslim conventions of purity, and modifies them unfaithfully. Such surprising analogies between Kolkata and Dhaka also open windows into the stifled science of the space between nations, which leads me back to my previous point. The basic tools of cultural history, demographics, and even anthropology have been so nationalized that they have repressed the centrality of connections between neighboring regions in South Asia, say in Punjab and Bengal, which happen to be contained in separate nations. New histories of oceans (that have generated exquisite fictions by Amitav Ghosh e.g., 2008, 2005) and the renewed visibility of transnational circulation of people, things, signs, and ideas, are finally reinvigorating discussions of cultural domains that exceed the nation-state, an artifact naturalized as much by the propaganda of republics as the mechanics of data collection. Janeja's project rattles national and religious cages, in the name of language and food.

Speaking of data collection, one must acknowledge another methodological master-stroke by Janeja. In my book [The Migrant's Table](#) (2004) I was unable to settle the question decisively: what is normal, typical, Bengali food and how may we access that? Janeja makes that inquiry the centerpiece of her quest. The answer of course is both obvious in practice to Bengalis and an insurmountable problem for the analyst. One could invest immense amount of time and expertise in an exhaustive survey of a scientifically randomized and representative sample by class, gender, sub-region, city, country, caste, religion, etc., and come up with a dish, a meal, or a daily, weekly, monthly, even yearly pattern of everyday Bengali diet. Yet, that would be a static slice and it is doubtful how much of the feeling of the "everyday-average" such a survey might be able to convey, even if the positivist assumption of transparency of questionnaires were to be accurate. Instead, Janeja answers the question by looking at the discourse and practice of middle-class Bengalis in producing their local, contingent, normality, a recurring aspirational mimesis of the imagined every-day, tautly invoked by the repeated injunction to servants to cook *rojkar moton*, "like every day."

In the end, I think, *Transactions in Taste* is a good dissertation that has faltered in its transformation into a good book. To go back to the beginning, I wonder if a book really needs sentences (and there are many like that) such as the following?

Moreover, the practical temporal dispositions that [Pierre Bourdieu] addresses – in his treatment of the rhythms of different production processes such as agricultural practices, and time as a resource manipulated strategically by transactors engaged in gift exchange (Bourdieu 1977, 1990) – in effect result in a ‘strictly repetitive and static’ (Weiss 1996: 221) notion of temporality subsumed in a general ‘logic of practice’ that ‘obscures temporality’ (Munn 1992: 108). Munn (1986), Gell (1986), and Weiss (1996) go beyond Bourdieu in that the temporal relations that food mediates in their works are dynamic, and this dynamism is firmly entrenched in the simultaneity of past-present-future relations (Janeja 2010: 5).

I have excluded two additional footnotes in the above sentences, which reference six more quotations and citations. *Transactions in Taste* highlights some of the problems of theoretically informed academic writing. It is sometimes cluttered, often tattered, full of caginess and nervous qualifications meant to cover-over professorial criticism of not having read enough, here married to a Bengali bhadralok’s assertion of having read and thought about everything. Precisely because Janeja’s book is promising, it is unfortunate that she goes about it with a theoretical sledgehammer that makes parts of her book difficult to bear. The problem is sometimes as simple as page-layouts that are often badly executed, muddled with words, concepts and styles that will surely go out of fashion soon. In the end, I take *Transactions in Taste* as a seductive *dawat* to engage with Latour, while the rest of us will probably feel marginalized at the meal.

**References:**

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