## Becoming and unbecoming Asian in Sydney

### 1. Prelude:

Two bowls of miso soup with *renge* (蓮華), a ceramic spoon typically used for drinking ramen soup and often associated with Chinese cuisine in Japan, sit on the counter in front of Emi and her companion in a Japanese restaurant in Sydney. In Japan, *miso-shiru* is customarily served at the end of the meal and drunk straight from the bowl (chopsticks may be used for eating seaweed or other soup ingredients), but there it was, served part way through, with spoons. "他のテーブルとの間違えじゃありませんか？まだコース料理の２つ目です (Wouldn't they be for another table? We are still on the second course)." This casual interrogation was met with a reply from the owner standing behind the counter: "白人さんは最初にスープを飲むから、白人さんのお客さんがいる時は最初に出します (White people eat soup at the beginning of the meal, so we serve miso soup first if we have a White customer)."

Pointing to the ceramic spoon in the bowl in front of Emi's 'German' companion, he adds proudly, "この蓮華もおつけしているんですよ (We even provide [them] with a *renge* spoon)." Emi looks around at the other customers in the restaurant. As far as she can tell, no one else has been served the miso soup first, nor have they been provided with spoons. And as far as she can tell, too, the other customers are Asian, though not necessarily Japanese. What should we make of this moment, as Emi's Asianness is denied her in exchange for an invitation to be White, like her companion, being served miso soup earlier in the meal, and with a spoon? Why are the other Asian customers – a number of whom are of Chinese background – not given spoons, especially since these utensils are associated with Chinese cuisine (at least from a Japanese point of view)? And how do we best understand the pride and politeness with which the owner explains his decision and his use of the term "白人さん" – White person?

The questions raised by this incident introduce some of the issues we want to take up in this paper. We are not so much interested here in a predetermined notion of Asian languages and cultures spreading across the world (Korean dramas going global, for example, or Japanese sushi becoming a worldwide fast food), nor in cosmopolitan spaces in Asian cities (Seoul as cosmopolitan bricolage; Shanghai as the new Paris), nor in the ways that languages such as English have become Asian (Asian Englishes; English as the Asian lingua franca), all of which could be considered important ways of looking at global Asia. Rather, our focus is on the making and unmaking of Asianness, on becoming and being undone as Asian in relation to non-Asians. Our interest therefore is in the relationality of being Asian, on how identifications with Asia may be projected, taken on, or rejected in the give and take of daily life. Our "global" focus, as with this opening prelude, will be on various contexts in Sydney, where being Asian has a long and often difficult history – White Australia policy was to a large extent anti-Asian, as Fitzgerald (2007) makes clear) – but also a contemporary salience as the demographic makeup swings towards Asia.

### 2. Becoming Asian

In developing our thinking about this, we return to Ibrahim's (1999) study of how a group of immigrant African youths "become Black" as they engage with possible forms of language and identity in their school in Canada. They may already be differentiated along lines of language, culture, ethnicity, nationality, or religion, but faced by the racialized world of North America, a framework in which they are already defined as Black, the members of the group start to identify with certain linguistic and cultural forms such as Black English and Black popular culture (in this case basketball and hip-hop). Their identification as Black (one that was not necessarily salient in their upbringing) then becomes a resource for particular ways of walking and talking, and particular forms of engagement with language and culture. Inspired by the issues Ibrahim's work raises, we are interested therefore in who is viewing and being viewed as Asian. Put differently, this is a question of who the *listening subject* is (Inoue, 2006); that is, of who is deciding what counts as Asian or not (Lo & Reyes, 2009).

We can consider the processes of becoming Asian along similar lines. Being Asian is not necessarily something one associates with on a daily basis; other national or local identities may come first (Japanese-Australian, from Tokyo, a female academic). We may consider Emi's loss of Japanese identity in the prelude as a temporary exclusion from a broader Asian identity, but Japanese people, as Ang (2004) suggests, have always had a rather ambivalent relationship to Asia because of their brutal imperialist history, their rapid post-war reaffiliation with western capitalism, their disdain for less developed Asian nations, and their insistence on being unique. As with the African youths, there may be many other modes of identification, and Asian may or may not be one of them. Asian is also an identity that is as much ascribed as it is looked for: In a racialized world, and with the inability of many to distinguish among different Asian identities, "Asian" is a general racial – and racist – categorisation. A US president has only to identify the "China virus" to make it dangerous to be "Asian" on city streets in America and elsewhere. As has been noted, this racist invocation was a return to the rhetoric of the "yellow peril" (Jack-Davies, 2020), acknowledging that to be Asian is to be a potential focus of racial vilification. So being Asian may be a broad identification of cultural solidarity, but it may equally be an othering by non-Asians: One becomes Asian in relation to others, and to discourses and practices around race and difference.

There are other things going on in the encounter described in the prelude. The restaurant owner uses the term '白人' (hakujin: White person/ people) with the honorific 'さん' (san). An alternative would have been the common 外人 (gaijin: literally "outside person," a common term for foreigners, and often taken to mean Westerners). 白人さん on the one hand defines everyone else in the room as non-White, and in this case as Asian. On the other hand it is also a term of deference, an ideological construct of the post-war period in Japan that maintains the supremacy of things western, and of White/Caucasian people. The owner is changing the normal ways of serving Japanese food to accommodate a non-Japanese person, but not just any non-Japanese person--not an Asian, but a White European. The same treatment given to Emi as to her companion canalso be seen as a sign that she is being considered an honorary White person (even if it is merely a matter of the practicality of serving their meal together with the same utensils and in the same order). Our interest, then, is in the ways people may become Asian as they choose this identity, ascribe it to others, or are themselves described as Asian.

A second interest in this paper is that when we look at these processes of identification, it is important to take in much more than common identity markers such as language, cultural practices, or physical features. As we have argued elsewhere (Pennycook & Otsuji, in press), identity is better understood not so much as the property of an individual or as interactively achieved, but as part of a larger assemblage of people, places, and things. The restaurant, soup bowls, miso soup, ceramic spoons, the counter, the menu, and the other customers all play a role here alongside other factors such as the owner's use of Japanese, or English spoken between the German and Japanese friends. We shall explore this further through a brief discussion of assemblages and resemiotization in the next section before turning to other examples in our data where the push and pull of being Asian is evident.

**3. Matsutake and assemblages**

In her anthropological inquest of *matsutake*, Tsing (2015) explores the *entanglements* of these pungent mushrooms that grow on a particular pine tree and are highly coveted in Japan. When the 1986 Chernobyl disaster contaminated European supplies of matsutake and prices in Japan soared, jobless Indochinese refugees in California rushed to the Pacific Northwest forests in search of the new "white gold." They were joined in the forests of Oregon by other mushroomers – disabled White veterans, Asian refugees, Native Americans, undocumented Latinos – in search of this new trade. We need to understand how these factors operate together, how "humans, pines, and fungi make living arrangements simultaneously for themselves and for others: multispecies worlds" (Tsing, 2015, p. 22). This is a question of assemblages, of understanding the ways that pine trees, mushrooms, and forest spaces cleared by humans cooperate with each other: "Assemblages don't just gather lifeways; they make them. Thinking through assemblage urges us to ask: How do gatherings sometimes become 'happenings,' that is, greater than the sum of their parts?" (2015, p.23).

We have been working with the idea of assemblages in our own studies of shops and markets in Sydney and Tokyo, in an effort to understand the ways in which people, places, and things come together in dynamic ways (Pennycook & Otsuji, 2017), how fish, phone cards, labour migration, economic conditions, and so forth are brought together, or how a sign for an English language school in the Philippines is entangled with power lines, gendered labour mobility, class, and regional access to language varieties, education policies, and more (Pennycook, 2020). As Bennett (2010) has noted, this focus on a new form of materialism – where objects are deemed to play an important role alongside humans – does not replace the older materialist focus on socioeconomic inequality, but rather operates alongside it. For Tsing (2015, p.24), assemblages "drag political economy inside them, and not just for humans;" they are "sites for watching how political economy works" not through a predefined operation of capital, but by the juxtaposition of people, things, and life trajectories.

This line of thinking, as Kroskrity (2021) has noted, enables close ethnographic understandings of how different elements – different languages and communities, political economy, places, and objects – that are often not considered together may operate in *language ideological assemblages.* Following these lines of thinking, we focus in this paper on assemblages and entanglements in moments of becoming Asian, when bowls of miso soup, ceramic spoons, the counter of the restaurant, the menu, people (the owner, hakujin-san, and other customers both Japanese and non-Japanese Asians), Japanese and Western culinary practices, and more generally geographical location, migration patterns of Australia,

and history all come together to produce cultural identifications. By talking of "semiotic assemblages" (Pennycook and Otsuji 2017), we suggest that meaning does not simply lie in human semiotization processes alone, but may also be part of a broader assemblage whereby human-non-human encounters afford a variety of engagements for new meanings, a process of resemiotization.

This understanding of what we elsewhere have termed *distributed identity* (Pennycook and Otsuji in press) within a critical metrolinguistics of diversity draws on an understanding of assemblages to show how agency, cognition, language, and identity can all be understood as distributed beyond any supposed human centre. Identities, therefore, are not merely discursively produced (as poststructuralist accounts traditionally insisted), but are better understood in terms of sociomaterial assemblages that bring language, people, places, and things together. The owner's focus on the hakujin-san and miso soup positioned the rest of the customers as fellow Asians, or we might say as generic Asians. It is to this idea that we turn in the next section, though first, drawing on data from the long-standing metrolingualism project (Pennycook and Otsuji, 2015), we will discuss the ways an elderly Chinese couple growing vegetables in a market garden positioned themselves and their vegetables.

## 4. From "foreign vegetables" to "the worst, like, general Asian ever"

Market gardens around Sydney have a significant history, politics, and economy (Boileau, 2017). Chinese immigrants to Australia started working as market gardeners in the middle of the 19th century, many having arrived to pursue the Victorian gold rush but leaving the goldfields as a result both of declining opportunities and racial disputes. Standing now at these market gardens near Botany Bay in Sydney – squeezed between Sydney Airport and suburban housing – one feels in a different place and time. The old wooden workers' cottages, brick chimneys rising above rusting corrugated iron roofs, and broken fly screens on the doors suggest old farms in the Australian outback; the Cantonese radio program flowing through an open window, the Chinese New Year sign above the door – 安平入出 (from right to left, *chat yap peng on* in Cantonese; safety to those who leave or enter) – the blackened rice pots and woks in the dark kitchens, the conical straw hats of the elderly workers pushing wheelbarrows and digging the rows of vegetables by hand, all suggest rural China.

The excerpt below is from an interview with an elderly couple working in one of these market gardens. They moved to Australia from Baitu (白土镇) in Guangdong, and grow a variety of Chinese vegetables including *ku gua* (bitter melon), *een choy* (Chinese spinach), *bok choy* (Chinese cabbage), *dong gua* (winter melon), *choy sum* (Chinese flowering cabbage), *Shanghai bok choi* (Shanghai cabbage), *gai lan* (Chinese broccoli), and spring onions. While the presence of a large Chinese population in Sydney has meant there is a constant demand for Chinese vegetables, this has also put a downward pressure on the price, and this couple struggles to make a living. The situation took the couple in another direction; as the wife puts it, "就鬼佬菜而家多…多 (We're growing more Western vegetables now)."

Excerpt 1
FF (female farmer), MF (male farmer), R (researcher)
Spoken Cantonese

1. FF: 而家做農民, 以前啲菜又係差唔多嗰個單價, 嗰啲芥蘭而家又係!
(The price of vegetables is nearly the same as before, the price of the *gai lan* is the same.)
2. R: 係呀! 一直都一樣呀, 都幾呀年囉喎!?
(Really? The same as before, it's been some twenty years already!)
3. FF: [ 係上海白升咗啲
(Except for shanghai bok choy, which has gone up a bit.)
4. MF: [ 廿呀幾年囉
(Some 20 years already.)
5. R: 以前係種乜嘢菜呀? 即係會唔會多啲…多啲其他…黎巴嫩呀…
(What kind of vegetables did you grow before? Are you growing more…other types…like Lebanese…?)
6. FF: [ 而家多…而家好賣
(We grow more now…it sells better now.)

7. MF: [ 而家多…Parsley 呀

(We grow more now…like parsley.)

8. R: 係呀…我都中意食

(Yeah, I like it too.)
即係而家同以前有乜嘢唔同呀…種嘅菜?
(So what's the difference between now and before... the sort of vegetables you grow?)
9. MF: 唐人菜就差唔多
(Chinese vegetables are similar.)

10. R: 唐人菜差唔多呀

(Chinese vegetables are similar to before.)
11. MF: 就 鬼佬菜而家多…多…
(We're growing more Western vegetables now.)
12. R: 鬼佬菜? 邊啲係鬼佬菜?
(Western vegetables? what are Western vegetables?)
13. MF: [Parsley…
14. FF: [Parsley…
15. MF: Dill, thyme, mint…
16. R: Dill, thyme, mint…
17. MF: 即是嗰啲香…香…香菜
(Those…her-…her-...herbs.)

Of interest here for an understanding of global Asia(s) is the relation between these Cantonese farmers transplanted to a market garden near Sydney Airport, the vegetables they grow, and the ways they distinguish between Chinese and foreign vegetables. Despite the long history of Chinese involvement in market gardens, for this couple, resident in Australia for a little over 20 years, there remains an important contrast between Chinese (唐人菜 ) and Western vegetables (鬼佬菜) (lines 9 and 11). Here, "Western vegetables" (鬼佬菜) is used to refer to the herbs this couple grows for the non-Chinese market (parsley, dill, mint, thyme), locating their worldview as if still in the soil of Guangdong, or at least from a Cantonese-oriented view of Australia. It is worth noting that from an Indigenous Australian point of view, these are of course all foreign vegetables. Botany Bay is the site of the first encounter on the east coast of Australia between the Aboriginal owners of the land, the Gweagal and Kameygal people of the Dharawal nation, and the European invaders. As Pascoe (2018) has documented, Indigenous Australians – contrary to settler colonial narratives about 'hunter-gatherers' – clearly tended the land[1]. Indeed, the different vegetables here (if we include what has been called "bush tucker" in settler colonial terms, such as Warrigal Greens and Gulalung, or finger limes) could be seen as part of the three pillars of contemporary Australia: The Indigenous, the European, and the multicultural (Pearson, 2017).

The term "gwai lou coi" (鬼佬菜) uses the common Cantonese word for foreigner "gwai lou" (鬼佬). The literal translation of the term is "ghost person," referring to white skinned foreigners, sometimes also translated as "foreign devil." Both "gwai lou" and the similar Japanese term "gaijin" (外人) ("outside person," "foreigner"[2]) refer almost exclusively to White people, and are commonly a point of dispute between Westerners and Cantonese or Japanese speakers as to whether the use of the term is derogatory. The use of this term resonates with the "hakujin-san" (白人さん ) anecdote at the beginning of the paper, though in that case the whiteness is explicit while suggesting more deferential overtones (and the honorific 'san'). While the prologue's Japanese restaurant owner or the elderly couple could be taken as "outside people" themselves from a White settler colonial view of Australia, through their eyes, hakujin-san, non-Chinese Australians, and their vegetables, remain forever the outsiders, or "the other," regardless of their location.

Several points are apparent here: To understand the identity moves of these market gardeners, it is important to see these as distributed across the surrounding assemblage of people, language, objects, and place. To repeat Tsing's (2015) point, assemblages give us insights into local economic and material relations.. That is to say, the working conditions, the price of vegetables, the possibility of vegetables being grown and sold, are very much part of this picture. The terms for these vegetables – the "foreign vegetables" parsley, dill, and thyme – are entangled in a broader history of migration, discrimination, and economic relations. To understand global Asia in this instance we need to appreciate the ways this couple's

[1] We are aware that this is part of a more complex debate about nomenclature, historical sources and archaeological and First nation-settler politics (see Sutton and Walshe, 2021).

[2] Although "outside people" could include non-Caucasians such as non-Japanese Asians or Africans, the latter are normally referred to as gaikoku jin (outside the country people).

identifications are assembled in relation to the colonial past and present, to rurality and urbanity, migration policy, and the history of Australia among many other elements. Their precarious life as market gardeners and as Asians is defined not only by their migration from southern China but also by the price of vegetables and their relation to non-Chinese vegetables.

At the other end of this spectrum, when asked about his Chinese background at another metrolingual data collection session (Pennycook and Otsuji, 2015), Ben, the co-owner of a coffee shop in one of Sydney's Japanese precincts, explained as he put the coffee on our table, "I don't even know! I am the worst, like, general Asian ever! [laughter]." This "general Asian" category with which Ben labels himself needs to be understood in relation to several other options: It stands in distinction to the common "Aussie" label (which was often used among our participants to indicate White Australians), but also to the possibility of naming himself as a more specifically located person of Chinese background. As he continues, "It's terrible! I can't even speak Chinese," we are reminded here of Ang's (2001) dilemma of "not speaking Chinese," that is of being recognizably Chinese/Asian but of not performing acts of that identity that in others' eyes (other Chinese, other Asians, Aussies) might solidify these identity claims.

Ben's fluid and mobile history featuring a Chinese family in Papua New Guinea migrating to Australia and marrying into another Chinese-Australian family spurs the occasional pull towards the fixity of Chinese-ness, of speaking Chinese. "So I'm half Chinese," he says. "Actually, officially, I'm seven-eighths Chinese and one-eighth Irish! So … I'm half, though. Like, I'm Chinese on the outside, but I can't even speak Chinese. I can understand a little bit, but … I'm pretty useless." While he may be classified as "Aussie," he also feels that pull of ethnic identification suggesting that perhaps he ought to speak Chinese, and by not doing so he becomes nothing but a "general Asian." Here, then, unlike the vegetable growers (who speak little else but Cantonese, and identify themselves in relation to "foreign vegetables"), this coffee-shop co-owner sees himself in terms of a category of Asianness which, if not differentiated internally (by speaking Chinese, for example), becomes a "general Asian" grouping.

There are very different types of global Asianness going on in the two examples discussed in this section. In the first, the Asian category is one we have ascribed to the two market gardeners as a way of discussing their Cantonese perspective: There is no evidence that they would subscribe in any obvious way to being Asian, though it might be a label attached to them by others. Of importance here is the way they viewed their own position in relation to the wider Australian community and its vegetables. The coffee shop co-owner, by contrast, labelled himself as Asian, a classification that seems double- or multi-voiced (Blackledge and Creese, 2014). In part his self-identification appears to be viewed from his "Aussie" locus of enunciation (he views himself from an Anglo-Australian perspective as an undifferentiated Asian), but it also seems to be viewed from his own Chinese/Asian perspective (he is aware of the pressure from within and without the community to be capable of using a so-called heritage language). The presence of certain linguistic performative acts (the market gardeners' rural variety of Cantonese or Ben's broad 'Aussie' English) or the absence of others (English for the market gardeners and Chinese for Ben) have, as Lee (2019) reminds us, implications for the reinvention

and dis-invention of ethnolinguistic identification. Ethnolinguistic identification is also, however, part of their migration histories, the economy, vegetables, embodied identifications, the Cantonese radio program coming through the windows, coffee, everyday practices and the indeterminant and inter-determinant perceptions of self and other.This is a multi-layered push and pull of identifications.

## 5. "We have our community of Asian friends, they can eat my food and I can eat theirs."

A study of Vietnamese students in Sydney (Nguyen & Pennycook, 2018) found that alongside the common difficulties faced by international students – struggles with academic English, adjustments to a different education system, difficulties working out supervisor expectations – their adaptation to life more broadly involved various ways in which they became Asian in Sydney. A background problem to this, widely documented in the literature on international students, is being labeled a priori as of Asian or Confucian-heritage background (Kettle, 2017; Ryan and Louie, 2007), a set of assumptions that defines them as "needy, problematic and passive" (Heng, 2018, p. 6). This was compounded by racial vilification within the wider community. As one student explained, when he studied in a smaller provincial city, he was subjected to racial abuse: "There were Australian guys who drove past us, shouting at us with f-words. My Vietnamese friends also told me they witnessed Australian guys throwing empty beer bottles at them. These are the things that make me feel I don't belong to this land." Moving to Sydney, however, was an improvement: "There are more Asian people, so I feel better" (undergraduate engineering student, translated from the Vietnamese).

This became a common theme in the interviews: While the Vietnamese students were subject to racist comments and stereotypes as Asians (there was no particular indication that they were singled out as Vietnamese), they also found the Asianness of Sydney comforting. Central to this process was food. As a PhD student in Education claimed, "I have no problems adapting to life here. Sydney is diverse in cultures, so I don't feel isolated or discriminated against. There are so many Asian people, so many Vietnamese people, so many Chinese people … I don't feel out of place. There are Asian foods … I eat as I do in Vietnam." This focus on Asian foods was clearly both a way in which these students started to think about themselves as Asian, and a means for them to find a niche in a city that could also be alienating: "Adapting to life here is nothing to worry about," another PhD student in Engineering said. "There are so many Asian people, Vietnamese people, Indonesian people ... We don't feel completely left out. There are Vietnamese foods of all types … they have everything here, even fish sauce. There are also many Asian foods, Asian restaurants. Easy to eat; there's nothing to worry about. Just relaxing and comfortable!"

Another PhD student in Education contrasted her experience in Belgium where she had studied for an MA and where "I had to eat Western food even though I didn't want to, because you don't have much choice there; I didn't have any Asian friends, so I had to make friends with them," with her experience in Sydney. "Here I don't have the need to integrate with them … We have our community of Asian friends, they can eat my food and I can eat theirs." Again, this student was explicit that this was about Asian commonality and the affordances produced by shared food practices. As with Ibrahim's (1999) students "becoming Black" in Canada, we here see students "becoming Asian" in Sydney, where an imposed Asian identity, a generic and racial categorisation, can also become a set of shared commonalities assembled around food. This is made possible by various shared or related

eating practices, as well as shared cultural and physical characteristics: As Lee (2019) points out, it is possible for a young woman from Hong Kong to "pass" as Korean whereas this is not a possibility for an African American (however well he may sing Korean songs).

Assemblages of Asian foods and access to items such as fish sauce (and the importance of items such as fish sauce in these narratives should not be underestimated) provided a means to assume a collective identity. And yet, as Ang (2004) reminds us, this commonality of Asian food must be understood in terms of the ways the West "is always-already a symbolic player in the contemporary construction of Asian identity" (p.152). Asian food – connected perhaps by rice – can be bought in Asian food stores, yet it is as internally diverse as the people it serves. Being and eating Asian always occurs in relation to an other. For these students, therefore, there was also a multi-layered push and pull of Asian identity in their lives in Sydney: As international students, they were always partly on the outside: "I'm not lonely, not excluded, not isolated though we are not entirely in this Australian society" (PhD student, Education). They were perceived both in their student roles and within the wider society as Asian, with racial and cultural implications. And yet, the diversity of people and goods within the city made it possible for them to embrace this Asian identity and share it with their fellow Asians.

## 6. **Conclusions: Assembling Asianness**

In this paper, we have focused on moments of global Asianness by looking at the ways people of Asian background become Asian in Sydney. Of interest here have been the ways in which being Asian is both an inscription into a racialized identity – like "European" or "African," these identities suffer both from a lack of internal distinction and a racialised characterisation – and a space in which a certain commonality can be found. "Being Asian," Ang (2014, p.148) insists, "is neither a self-evident identity nor one that is seized upon outside particular social and political contexts." Europeans may only become so when outside their region of the world: White tea planters in India would refer to themselves as "European" (Pennycook, 2012). The development of White Australia and the "white dominions" is closely connected to the colonial governance of India (Maclean, 2020). Similarly, "It is mostly outside Asia and, more specifically, inside the west that being Asian becomes a self-conscious identity option, even a necessary identity for people from the diverse countries of the region" (Ang, 2004, p. 148-9).

We have also drawn attention to the importance of assemblages among people, objects, and language in particular places at particular times, and how these produce and re-semiotize cultural inferences and identifications. Drawing on various distributive frameworks (distributed cognition, agency, language, and identity) as well as semiotic assemblages – which we see as mutually co-constitutive – this chapter makes a case for understanding practices in the moment of becoming (or undoing) "Asianness," wherein the interaction between people, things, and places becomes the key. The objects and their roles in the opening prelude's Japanese restaurant, the vegetables, or the fish sauce, are part of the ways in which "things make people happen" (Kell, 2015, p. 442): "Objects, in and of themselves, have consequences."

This is to take more seriously the idea that material objects might themselves be understood as active alongside humans and other living creatures, making a space for things and

alternative agencies, and suggesting that meanings are not reducible to the symbolic values that humans invest in them (Bennett, 2010). Our goal here is to move beyond methodological individualism – whereby language, cognition, agency, and identity are all seen as invested in the individual – beyond forms of cultural identification – whereby people are assumed to follow certain cultural scripts – and beyond interactional identification – whereby identities are assumed to be the products solely of human interaction. Instead we have focused on the entanglements of history and place, the renge spoons and the miso soup, which are at least as important as the intentionality of the doer (the owner).

Another point we make in this paper is that indexicalities are always rewritten as part of a broader assemblage in which they are distributed and relayed among humans and non-humans. Rather than conceiving cultural identification and indexical signs (miso soup indicates Japan) as exclusively controlled by human intentionality, we include material and non-discursive factors, thus breaking down the barriers between inside and outside, between humans and their surrounds, between language and context. These are forms of distributed identity (Pennycook and Otsuji, in press). For Tsing (2015, p. 24) "the polyphonic assemblage is the gathering of these rhythms, as they result from world-making projects, human and not human," so *miso-shiru*, the discursively laden history around "hakujin-san," the "seven-eighths Chinese and one-eighth Irish" produce ethnic and cultural identification through human and non-human engagement.
Global Asianness, therefore, is only partly about a new and resurgent Asia replacing Europe as the axis of the world; it is also about a longer history of people, places, and things, about spoons, vegetables, and fish sauce, and the affordances they bring for being Asian. Such affordances, however, occur within longer histories of orientalism, colonialism and White ascendancy that have come in part to define the territories on which Asian or non-Asian identities are affirmed. In the examples discussed in this paper, therefore, we see a multivocal and multilayered push and pull between predefined notions of otherness and possibilities of affiliation that might not otherwise have existed. The rise of Asia is in part what makes it possible to get different kinds of Vietnamese fish sauce in Sydney, but the role of fish sauce in making one comfortably Asian cannot be easily separated from that longer history.

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