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Eating a Meal with the Other: The Ethical Challenges of Travel Food Shows

The Travel Channel show *No Reservations*, starring the popular chef and writer Anthony Bourdain, takes us around the world to explore the cultures and cuisines of exotic locales. Through tours of everywhere from Vietnam to Paris to the rural South, viewers are captivated by the fantasy of travel and new experiences. The travel show is an increasingly common format, as indicated by the viability of an entire basic cable channel devoted to travel. Such programming is compelling to watch and often inspires its viewers to be good consumers on many fronts—they desire the food, the locale, the culture, the adventure, to be theirs, and if they want it they just have to pay for it. But as these shows move from the glitz and glamour of New York or Miami Beach into underdeveloped countries like Malaysia, Argentina, or Ghana, ethical dilemmas begin to arise. The unequal power dynamic between the white American television crew and the individuals who are being interviewed is often troubling, and the question of whether or not we actually want these communities to be swamped by American tourists eager to experience "authentic" cultures and cuisines is left unanswered. Using Anthony Bourdain's show *No Reservations* as my primary text, I examine the question of whether it is possible to have an ethical travel food show, given these concerns among many others. I argue that Bourdain's postmodern, self-reflexive hosting style complicates what could otherwise be seen as a colonialist intrusion into third-world countries for the sake of a marketable program that appeals to US viewers. Yet it is important that we continue to ask what is gained by the production of such shows, and if those benefits outweigh the negative impact that they may have on their subjects.

The show *No Reservations* premiered in 2005 on the Travel Channel, and is now in its fifth season. The show's host, Anthony Bourdain, is an extremely popular American chef and author of both fiction and nonfiction books about food and professional cooking. In his most popular book, *Kitchen Confidential*, Bourdain developed his acerbic writing style, describing the restaurant industry in graphic and somewhat profane language; he is known for his testosterone-driven adventures in drinking, drugs, and sexual exploits—all in the kitchen. *No Reservations* starts with Bourdain announcing "I write, I travel, I eat . . . and I'm hungry for more" before trekking off to places like Uzbekistan, New Zealand, Puerto Rico, India and Namibia. On occasion the show will stay in the U.S. to focus on the cuisine of a city like South Carolina, Cleveland, or New York, but in general, the focus is on international travel.

It is important to investigate travel shows like this one because of the ideologies that they propagate about what it means to travel, as well as how one ought to conceive of and interact with native populations. As Jaworski et. al argue in their exploration of British tourism programs:

We assume that the presentation of tourism and tourist destinations . . . is an apt representation and reinforcement of viewers' expectations, beliefs and practices. In other words, we consider the discourse of [travel shows] as an instrument through which dominant ideologies of tourism are (re-)produced. (Jaworski, Ylanne-McEwan and Thurlow 137)

In many ways, the proliferation of travel shows on television has contributed to a sense that tourism is a part of our everyday leisure practices and activities (McCabe), and yet this routinization of tourism can cause travelers to look even harder for difference when they leave the safe confines of their own home. In this way, shows like *No Reservations* contribute to a sense of banality when confronted with images of "the Other" while also encouraging travelers to seek out even more extreme experiences of difference when they try to recreate such an experience in their own lives, often intruding upon the lives of indigenous populations and severely impacting their destinations. Because of these dual impacts, it is important to consider the ethical dimensions of travel shows. While travel shows and the tourism industry that they promote are deeply entrenched in growth industries designed to sustain their own economic futures, the larger notion of travel is inherently connected to a multitude of ethical dilemmas that must be considered, such as "the reciprocity (or lack of it) in 'host'-'guest' relations, the (un)fair distribution of benefits and revenues, issues like sex-tourism, 'staged authenticity' and travel to countries with repressive regimes" (Smith and Duffy 5).

This is not to say that all touristic encounters such as these are steeped in inequality or the potential for exploitation. Indeed, in many host-guest relationships, the hosts see the exchange in an entirely positive light, as it gives them the opportunity to showcase their own culture or cooking talents, to narrate their experiences and life stories, to learn about another culture and meet new people, and more broadly to simply socialize and enjoy themselves. Opening one's home and sharing a meal with strangers reflects an admirable sense of altruism and hospitality that should not be downplayed. Further, travelling to a foreign country and dining with local families can be an important site for cross-cultural exchange for both parties, breaking down barriers between Americans and individuals from other countries over the course of the meal. Despite these possibilities, this investigation of the show *No Reservations* is still important to consider due to the fact that this is no simple encounter between travelers and native populations—the intrusion of the camera and the urgent expectations for creating a marketable television show add a power dynamic that cannot be ignored. In the filming of the show, native informants might find it difficult to deny Bourdain's requests, and there is a certain level of performativity to the exchange that might not otherwise be present without the camera crew. Each meal is part of a carefully constructed and orchestrated performance that is visible to thousands of audience members. It is these power dynamics that make such programs important to investigate.

Bourdain's Indigenous Tourism

Over the course of an average show, Bourdain narrates a selected history of the location, visits a local market, and is given a culinary tour of the city through the assistance of one or two natives. The tour usually includes a home-cooked meal with a family, a sampling of street food, and an education in the regionally produced alcohol, rarely venturing into upscale venues. This type of tourism is known as "indigenous tourism," since Bourdain is travelling to a remote location that is not easily accessible to the average tourist and contacting indigenous peoples and their culture (M.K. Smith). While this type of tourism is growing in popularity, it is Bourdain's encounters with host families and locals, as well as his narration of the country's culture that may be seen as problematic.

Patai offers an important foundation for examining these problems in her essay, "U.S. Academics and Third World Women: Is Ethical Research Possible?" Patai's ethical dilemma of researching third-world women can offer a critical framework for analyzing travel shows like *No Reservations*, which offer an everyday media representation of a very similar act. In her essay, Patai worries that white, middle-class academic researchers who choose poor, nonwhite individuals as their research subjects are participating in a system troubled by steep inequalities that cannot be overcome. Patai argues:

In addition to the characteristics of race and class, the existential or psychological dilemmas of the split between subject and object . . . imply that objectification, the utilization of others for one's own purposes . . . and the possibility of exploitation, are built into almost all research projects with living human beings. (Patai 139)

These problematic constraints are similarly present in the case of the travel food show, where the individuals from the country being profiled are necessarily objectified and possibly exploited for the creation of an appealing program. The format of a travel show is such that a crew of American technicians descends on a foreign locale, where they develop contacts with local informants who can act as tour guides for the short period of the filming. The individuals who serve in these roles have little to no say in how they are represented, and are simply used for their cultural knowledge. As Smith finds is often the case in indigenous tourism, "the local populations are usually immobile both physically and financially, at least in touristic terms; therefore their role will never be more than that of serving tourists" (M.K. Smith 172).

These problems with travel shows are particularly marked in the case of travel food shows like *No Reservations*, which consistently operate under the assumption that other cultures are exotic and exciting because their food is so different. Long defines culinary tourism as "the intentional, exploratory participation in the foodways of an Other, participation including the consumption . . . of a food item, cuisine, meal system, or eating style considered

as belonging to a culinary system not one's own" (Long 181). Long and others suggest that when we engage with ethnic cuisine, it is done so in a way that exoticizes the creators of foreign food while asserting and maintaining our own dominance (Barbas; Ward). While there is nothing inherently wrong with eating ethnic food, it must be noted that a simple interest in sampling ethnic food rarely carries the potential for any power structures to be disrupted, or for the subjects of fascination to demonstrate agency or resistance. An episode of *No Reservations* that most vividly illustrates the ethical dilemmas of "eating the Other" is the episode focusing on Laos.

Bourdain's trip to Laos clearly reveals the tension inherent in traveling to a faraway place for the purpose of a travel food show. The narrative of this particular episode is that Bourdain wants to showcase the beauty of the country and shed light on its complicated entangling with the U.S. military. Yet a recurring theme throughout the show is that Laos is shrouded in mystery; as Bourdain states, "It's very romantic, very beautiful, very enchanted place that no one knows about. I understand everyone who came here who became captivated by this place. You look at these mountains with the mist in the morning and it's magical, there's no place like it." This sort of language is decidedly Orientalist (Said), framing this Southeast Asian country as one that is mystical and exotic and feminine—an alluring trap for Westerners because they just cannot fathom its hidden depths. With this framework of Orientalism exists the idea that such cultures are inherently inferior to the West; to be sure, Bourdain cannot help but draw comparisons to the U.S. in his comments. He marvels at the fact that there are "No KFCs, no McDonalds, no Burger Kings" and that it remains "uniquely untouched" by Western influences—two facts that are posited as advantages for travelers, but that inadvertently reinscribe the authority and dominance of the U.S.

The most problematic moments from Bourdain's trip to Laos come when he starts eating meals in private homes. In his narrative he explains the history of Laos becoming involved in World War II, which resulted in over 250 million bombs being dropped on the country, a third of which failed to explode. Over 30 years later, farmers and other innocent Laotian civilians still stumble upon these explosives, and the results are disastrous. Bourdain meets up with a man who lost an arm and a leg to a land mine, and is invited to share a meal with his family. It is clear that the family is living "close to the poverty line," as Bourdain describes, and yet the man's wife prepares a bountiful meal for him: "Eating meat or fish is not an everyday feature of the meal in this village, but we are honored guests. She does her very best with a whole fish and vegetables gathered from their garden." While we might assume that the show pays the family for the meals—despite the fact that there is no evidence of this fact—it is still disconcerting and uncomfortable to watch these poor individuals feed Bourdain, an extremely successful American celebrity chef, with food that they have gathered themselves and would not have eaten if he were not there.

These concerns about the way that we deal with individuals from other cultures—specifically with regard to the sharing of food—are echoed by Patai in her discussion of feminist research methods. She describes an important moment in her early research when she is interviewing a woman in Brazil named Teresa. The experience sticks out in her memory because of the way that Teresa invites her into her dwelling and offers her a bottle of soda and a piece of cake, despite repeated refusals by Patai. This generosity is contrasted with the fact that "the refrigerator was bare when she opened it, and she herself looked worn out and undernourished" (Patai 141). Patai wonders why Teresa had participated in the interview at all, and further worries that putting Teresa's narrative in the public sphere is a form of exploitation. While Bourdain may be compensating the individuals for the meal that they provide, it is clear that this act of sharing food with the legitimized, authoritative outsider is troubling on many levels. What, exactly, are the participants getting out of their encounter with Bourdain? While Patai worries about the fact that her role as a researcher stands in the way of "fair exchange" between the participant and herself—as she is surely getting more out of it than they are—there is an even sharper contrast between Bourdain's Laotian interviewees and himself. It would be impossible for the Laotians to see themselves on the American television program or to reap the benefits of exposure in any way, and so they are left with simply the notion that they are contributing to a greater body of knowledge for the American public. It is certainly possible that both the Laotian family and Patai's informant Teresa shared the meal out of a sincere generosity and desire to share that they would gladly offer in any situation, but we cannot ignore the identities of those who asked of these individuals. In light of these issues, it is quite possible that the participants opened their home to Bourdain because it was requested by an American television crew, and they were in no position to deny such a request.

One way that Bourdain repeatedly attempts to shrink this power differential throughout the show is through invoking language of brotherhood through food. He often claims food culture as a common ground between himself and his interview subjects, despite the real inequalities that divide them. "Where food, people and culture intersect, that's where you really see both the things that are different about us and what we share," he states in the episode on China. Yet this romantic notion of shared passions and friendship merely disguises the problem. Patai notes that feminist researchers often invoke "sisterhood" as a way of alleviating power differentials between the interviewer and the interviewee. Female researchers will try to befriend their subjects because they are both women and can understand each other on that level as equals. However, as Patai argues, "the problem with this honorable intent is its disingenuousness" (Patai 144). In Patai's own research she interviewed 60 women, and although she promised many of them that she would keep in touch, she found it overwhelming to actually maintain any meaningful ties. The idea that the participants benefit from things like "the opportunity to tell their stories, the

entry into history, the recuperation of their own memories . . . do not challenge the inequalities on which the entire process rests" (149). In the same way, Bourdain's claims that we all have something in common when we love food does nothing to change the dire poverty within which his subjects live. We do not know if he makes them any promises of friendship or further communication, but after five seasons and 71 locales, it's impossible that he could forge a lasting bond with all of the participants, and unfair that he should choose between them. Even if he genuinely assumes the position of a friend and fellow foodie, this can only be at best an act, and at worst a form of manipulation.

Another way that Bourdain attempts to justify putting himself in this admittedly uncomfortable position is through an activist claim that he is doing the show because he wants to expose the political realities of American intervention in Southeast Asia. In response to a question from one of his hosts as to why he would visit a place that was so devastated by American troops, Bourdain replies, "Every American should see the results of war. It's not a movie. I think it's the least I can do is to see the world with open eyes." This goal of education and enlightenment can be applauded, but it cannot be forgotten that this is a travel show, and that an important aspect of such shows is to effectively advertise for the locale that is being presented. Thus, despite a message of devastation and loss, there is always an overriding sensibility that this place is beautiful and magical, and that Bourdain is thrilled to be able to travel there himself. Travel shows are inextricably entwined with the tourism industry—a fact of which Bourdain is keenly aware. In their study of travel shows, Hanefors and Mossberg discover that "when anyone from the destination's population actually appears, he or she is involved in the tourism industry, and if not, seems to act as a sort of silent marker, as if to lend authenticity" (Hanefors and Mossberg 243). It cannot be said that these Laotians are part of the tourism industry, and so they must represent authenticity—and in sharing their homes, their food, and their stories, this much seems clear. This quality is of critical importance in food programming, as we have seen in analyses of food films as well. In her exploration of the film *Tortilla Soup*, Lindenfield states:

U.S. food films tend to construct a touristic experience of cultures outside of white middle-class America, a posture that television adopts as well. These texts invite the tourist gaze to experience ethnic "others" and their food cultures, fulfilling a questionable ethnographic function for white audiences. (Lindenfeld 304)

No matter how much Bourdain wants to explain the sociopolitical history of the location and the food culture that he is explicating, his white audience is still on

the side of the tourist gaze, consuming the image for the sake of experiencing "the Other" and perhaps making travel plans to do so in person someday.

Self-Reflexive Television and Possible Futures

We have seen that the show *No Reservations* unabashedly exoticizes and Orientalizes its subjects, bringing an American host into the private spaces of poor non-White locals to share a meal that is beyond their means, all for the sake of a show to promote the travel potential of the country. These critiques are significant and should not be overlooked, but there are many ways in which Bourdain is an atypical host, and departs from the normal conventions of travel shows. The first is that Bourdain is very self-reflexive in the language he uses to guide the show's narrative. He frequently mentions the fact that he is trying to make good television, that there is a camera crew present, that his producers are offering their input, and that he feels uncomfortable with the power that he wields. This dynamic is particularly visible during a scene at a lao lao whiskey brewery, as the Laotians include the entire crew in their sharing of the alcoholic beverage. Bourdain explains, "Our hosts just don't make the distinction between the on-camera guest, meaning me, and the camera crew, who are not usually supposed to end up in the shot. They get offered the same lau lau as I do. To refuse this generosity would be an insult." Further, Bourdain is also completely explicit about the fact that his interviewees are clearly not getting anything out of the process, and so he is surprised that they are willing to participate at all. When the Laotians graciously offer him their food, he states, "This is something I've seen a fair amount of over time making this show—acts of kindness and generosity from strangers who have no reason at all to be nice to me. It frankly kicks the hell out of me." He acknowledges that these individuals have nothing to gain from being on the show, and yet they still open their homes to him and share their food happily.

Bourdain also voices his discomfort with the fact that travel shows often compel American tourists to visit the places that he has exposed. After watching the daily parade of Buddhist monks through the town, he notes the presence of a few clicking cameras as an ominous foreboding for the future. He tells one of the locals:

If you're from this neighborhood and lived here your whole life this is very much a community thing. We're here because it's beautiful and because we're fascinated by traditional Lao culture. I'm afraid that sometimes because we take pleasure in showing people with these cameras how beautiful it is we help them destroy it. I hope we don't.

In explicitly reminding his viewers that an onslaught of foreigners into this community ritual will indelibly change the experience, he is able to distance himself from the outward goal of travel shows. At the end of the show, he openly states, "That's the problem with making travel television. When we

succeed, we inspire others to travel to the places we care about. And in a sense, we help kill what we love." Such reflection is rarely permitted on travel shows, but as self-deprecation and bluntness are markers of Bourdain's intrigue, we see that his celebrity eclipses the self-serving function of such programs. This does not entirely excuse Bourdain's behavior, however. Patai finds herself in a similar situation when she researches, as "feminists imagine that merely engaging in the discourse of feminism protects them from the possibility of exploiting other women, while their routine research practices are and continue to be embedded in a situation of material inequality" (Patai 139). Yet it can still cause viewers to think about the potential effects of their nascent travel plans to follow in Bourdain's footsteps.

It is heartening to see that Bourdain and the producers of *No Reservations* are clearly aware of at least some of these ethical dilemmas, as Bourdain explicitly attempts to destabilize his position of power and expose the difficulties that he believes are present in the making of the show. Indeed, for anyone with the desire to travel to a foreign country and interact with indigenous populations, these questions of exploitation and power dynamics must be raised, perhaps without an easy answer. One possibility for hope is in the idea that there is a growing movement for sustainable gastronomic tourism, wherein travelling as Bourdain does can be done on a larger scale and still have the positive values of conservation, equity, community control, and mutual respect for the local host communities and the traveler (Scarpato). While tourism can be problematic, it can also be a viable means for gaining social and economic control, and improving the health of the community, if done so in a thoughtful manner. Further, as mentioned earlier, individual encounters between tourists and native populations are not always marked by the unequal power dynamic represented within the show, so there may be potential for positive relationship-building at an individual level. It is not hard to imagine a conversation within the bounds of travel food shows that addresses these scenarios and possibilities, and Bourdain seems uniquely poised to do so. Although the problems that travel show hosts face are complicated and weighty, Bourdain has already shown that he is willing to step outside of the box and actually consider some of these issues, so we can only hope that each of these issues continues to be brought to the surface and openly discussed in a way that encourages improved discourse and change.

University of Southern California

Lori Kido Lopez

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