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## **Rewriting a national cultural food icon: a gastrobiography of Vegemite**

### Abstract:

In the current publishing environment, where there is an unprecedented level of reader interest in food-related texts, a wide range of subject matter is providing a rich source of opportunities for writers. In this context, the individual food product (either biological or processed) is one such area of professional and creative opportunity. Suggesting that the 'gastrobiography' is a form of writing that can serve the particular interests of writers as well as their readers and publishers, this article defines the term and its applications in food writing. It then presents a gastrobiography of Vegemite, utilising the form to consider the yeast spread's history, ongoing role in Australian life, and how this has been conceptualised and written about. Also investigated is Vegemite's place in the personal politics of eating and politics more broadly. In the process, the gastrobiographical form is revealed as one that can present Vegemite as a site of contradiction and paradox that can reveal much about the world in which it is produced and sold.

### Biographical note:

Donna Lee Brien is Associate Professor of Creative Industries at CQUniversity, Australia (Central Queensland University). Founding Editor of *dotlit: The Online Journal of Creative Writing* (2000-2004) and Assistant Editor of *Imago: New Writing* (1999-2003), Donna is currently an Associate Editor of *New Writing: International Journal for the Practice and Theory of Creative Writing* (UK) and the Immediate Past President of the Australian Association of Writing Programs. Widely published in the areas of writing pedagogy and praxis, practice-led research, creative nonfiction and collaborative practice in the arts, Donna has been writing biographies and about the biographical form in academic and more popular publications since the 1980s.

### Keywords:

Gastrobiography – biography – Vegemite

In doing the biography of a thing, one would ask questions similar to those one asks about people: 'What sociologically, are the biographical possibilities inherent in its 'status' and in the period and culture, and how are these possibilities realized? Where does the thing come from and who made it? What has been its career so far, and what do people consider to be an ideal career for such things? What are the recognized 'ages' or periods in the thing's 'life,' and what are the cultural markers for them? (Kopytoff 1986: 66-7).

Leon Edel, renowned biographer and important theorist of the genre of biography, identified the central task facing the author of biography a quarter of a century ago in his statement that 'every life takes its own form and a biographer must find the ideal and unique literary form that will express it' (qtd. in Novarr 1986: 165). In an increasingly competitive publishing environment, every writer today must also find the unique and ideal literary form that will also capture the interest of readers and publishers. At a time where there is an unprecedented level of reader interest in food-related texts, food-related subject matter is providing a rich source of opportunities for writers. In this context, studies of individual food products (either biological or processed), rendered in biographical form, provide one such area of professional and creative opportunity.

Setting out by defining the term 'gastrobiography' and its applications in food writing, the following defines the term 'gastrobiography' and its applications in food writing. It then uses the gastrobiographical form to consider the yeast spread Vegemite's history, ongoing role in Australian life, and how this has been conceptualised and written about. Also investigated is Vegemite's symbolic place in the personal politics of eating and politics more broadly. This is especially apparent in the context of the resurgence of patriotism in Australia of the past decade and discussions of Australian nationalism and national identity. In the process, Vegemite is revealed as a site of contradiction and paradox that, in common with all biographical subjects, reveals much about the world in which it is located.

### Defining gastrobiography

The sub-genre descriptor 'gastrobiography' has been recently employed in two main ways. The first of these is to describe the biographical studies of individuals, when this biography works from a culinary food-oriented basis. In this, the form operates similarly to food or culinary memoir, but where a memoir tends to be written by the subject him- or herself, a biography is usually defined as the study of one subject by another. Gastrobiography has been utilised in this way in describing South African food critic Anna Trapido's study of Nelson Mandela through the food he has eaten, *Hunger for freedom: The story of food in the life of Nelson Mandela* (2008). Of her rationale for conceptualising her biography in this way—which the author went further to describe as 'gastro-political biography'—Trapido has written:

We all reveal our most elementary social, economic and emotional truths in the ways that we cook, eat and serve food. So why not ask those who changed the world what they were eating while they did it? (qtd. in Bramen 2009).

*Hunger for freedom* explores Mandela's desire (the metaphorical and literal 'hunger' of the title) for South African liberation, through stories from various periods of his life—from his childhood, life as a political campaigner and activist, the time he spent as a political prisoner and, finally, his role as world statesman—stories which detail both the food he consumed at these times and the people these meals connected him with. This Mandela biography, thus, also details the stories of a series of previously unknown cooks and other people who were part of the struggle against apartheid by cooking and otherwise providing nourishment for political activists in South Africa.

Another example of this type of gastrobiography is the documentary, *The burger and the king: The life and cuisine of Elvis Presley* (1996), which was based on David Adler's *The life and cuisine of Elvis Presley* (1993). Adler's book can be classified as a hybrid work of life writing: part Presley biography, part cookbook with over 70 recipes, and part creative nonfiction, as the author documents his own quest to not only discover but to also eat Presley's favourite dishes. The filmed study, on the other hand, although also including some recipes, focuses much more biographically on where Presley's life intersected with the food he ate, and the insights this culinary information provides. The result is a compilation of surprisingly compelling and often quite poignant biographical information and reflection. The infamous incident where Presley took his private jet from Memphis to Denver to buy extravagantly priced peanut butter and bacon sandwiches for his guests is, for instance, revealing of both an ingenuous desire to please others as well as a revelling in excess which has been noted as characteristic of Presley's life overall<sup>1</sup>.

The second way the term gastrobiography has been utilised is to describe socio-culturally inflected studies of individual foods. The term is utilised this way in food scholar Betty Fussell's preface to the second edition of Maguelonne Toussaint-Samat's expansive social history of cuisine and eating, *A History of Food* (2009). Fussell describes this work, which was first published in France in 1997, as 'a unique embodiment of the gastrobiography of humankind'. This is a gastrobiography, therefore, due to the detailed study of individual foods undertaken. Toussaint-Samat, moreover, details the unique history of humans' relationship with particular foods, a relationship that Fussell expressed in terms of our self consciousness about our eating habits: 'While all organisms hunger, only man thinks about it' (Fussell 2009: xiii). It is this thinking about not only foods themselves, but also their integral and formative place in our human lives, which is, in this author's opinion, at the heart of the gastrobiography as a literary descriptor.

This second sense of the meaning of gastrobiography—as the 'life stories' of individual foods—has at least part of its origins in the relatively recent interest in studying material culture. This has moved, over the past four decades, from commodity-oriented and symbolic analyses through more ethnographic and life history-based approaches. In 1986, Arjun Appadurai proposed that objects possessed their own 'biographies' which need to be researched and expressed and Igor Kopytoff asserted that such a methodology can reveal not only information about the objects under consideration themselves, but also about ourselves as we examine our responses to these life stories.

Biographies of things can make salient what might otherwise remain obscure ... Our cultural responses to such biographical details reveal a tangled mass of aesthetic, historical, and even political judgments, and of convictions and values that shape our attitudes to objects (Kopytoff 1986: 67).

In this way, studies such as Janet Hoskins' *Biographical objects: How things tell the stories of people's lives* (1998) and a special issue of *World archaeology* on the subject of 'The cultural biography of objects' (Gosden & Marshall 1999) set the scene for utilising such an approach in food studies. This has, indeed, provided, for instance, the framing idiom for Ian Cook, Philip Crang and Mark Thorpe's study of consumer choice through a study of individual products' 'biographies and geographies' (1998), which they define as the

recognition that foods have lives before and after they appear on the supermarket shelves ... [and] a concern with the many different places, people and social institutions foods travel through as they move from 'farm to fork' (1998: 162).

Of course, landmark studies of individual products—of which Sidney Mintz's *Sweetness and Power* (1985) tracing the history of sugar consumption as well as its production, is a leading example—contributed to this development of focus.

The gastrobiographical label is also an indication of two contemporary trends in mainstream publishing in English: the expansiveness of the descriptor 'biography' itself (see, for instance, Donaldson 2006) and the often-noted popularity of food writing, the latter of which includes detailed studies of individual foods and food products (see, for example, Hughes 2010). The first of these trends, the use of the term biography as an overarching descriptor of a number of types of non-fiction writing was very prevalent in the later 1990s and first years of the new millennium, with biographies of non-human subjects attracting significant sales in Western markets. Framing largely historical studies of cities, countries and other locations as biographies was particularly prevalent, with John Birmingham's study of Sydney, *Leviathan*, subtitled *The unauthorised biography of Sydney* (1999), and similar subtitling attaching to Eric Rolls's *Australia: A biography* (2000) and Peter Ackroyd's *London: The biography* (2000). Some of these projects (including those by Rolls and Ackroyd) are monumental in scope and could be classified as Annales School style histories with more in common with Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie's epic *Montaillou* (1978) than most mainstream biographies, while others were clearly cynically trading on life writing's popularity in the hope of boosting sales. This was sometimes embraced by writers with a self conscious irony as in a product history of the Barbie doll, which was marketed as a biography of the iconic toy, and dedicated by its author to Barbie's doll 'boyfriend', Ken (Lord 1994).

The use of the label 'biography' for studies of foods was thus instituted at a moment when reader interest in both biography and food writing was marked. A notable example, Mark Kurlansky's surprise bestseller, *Cod: The biography of a fish that changed the world* (1997), spawned a series of biographical genre-stretching copycats, although Kurlansky himself utilised the more critically acceptable term 'history' to describe his later studies of salt and New York oysters—*Salt: A world history* (2002) and *The big oyster: History on the half shell* (2006). Carolyn Wyman's

studies of processed food products were thus published as *Spam: A biography* (1999) tagged *The amazing true story of America's 'miracle meat'* and *Jell-O: A biography*, subtitled *The history and mystery of America's most famous dessert* (2001). The former was marketed using life story descriptors:

Born in 1937, SPAM has led a long and successful (shelf) life ... *SPAM: A Biography* presents the completely true story of this one-of-a-kind, all-American, all-pork product (Wyman 1999: cover)<sup>2</sup>.

A comprehensive series of educational studies of products were similarly pitched to middle school teachers and librarians as biographies, including *The biography of bananas* (Eagen 2005) and others in this series including chocolate (Morganelli 2005), coffee (Morganelli 2006), corn (2007), potatoes (Rodger 2007), rice (Zronik 2005), spices (Rodger 2005), sugar (Eagen 2005), tea (Gleason 2007), tomatoes (Morganelli 2007), vanilla (Karner 2006) and wheat (Lackey 2007)<sup>3</sup>. Interestingly, and indicative of this titling trend having perhaps run its course, Lizzie Collingham's popular scholarly study of the international influences on, and the global adoption of, Indian cuisine, was first published in London in 2005 as *Curry: A biography*. When republished the next year in New York, however, the book did not carry the biography label, being titled instead as *Curry: A tale of cooks and conquerors*.

### **A gastrobiography of Vegemite**

Unlike other Australian processed food products and food brands of the 1920s, most of which have long passed into obscurity, the yeast spread Vegemite ranks in a 2010 listing of the thirty-nine most purchased branded products (not all of which are food and drinks) in Australian supermarkets and convenience stores, lagging behind Coca-cola, Tip-Top bread, Cadbury chocolates and Arnott's biscuits, but ahead of Campbell's soup, McCain's frozen pizza and Extra chewing gum (Dale 2010: 166). Although Vegemite spread on hot buttered toast or as a simple sandwich filling appears completely uncomplicated, the product occupies a site of considerable interest in Australian cultural life.

Vegemite, indeed, has a significant history as an object of study and is, moreover, the subject of mass media and popular interest, regularly featuring in news stories and fan websites. Material examples, including filled and unfilled jars and other packaging are collected by museums and are regularly included in exhibitions. A groundbreaking moment in the serious scholarly engagement with Vegemite as a cultural object is its inclusion in John Fiske, Bob Hodge and Graeme Turner's *Myths of Oz: Reading Australian popular culture* (1987), an approach that was extended and developed in White's study 'A brief cultural history of Vegemite' (1994). This focus has given rise to a number of articles exploring Vegemite's role as marker of national identity (Ivory 1998; Renne 1993; Rozin & Siegal 2003; Richardson 2003), work that often references, and reflects on, Vegemite's inclusion in popular studies of Australian iconic brands and products (Cozzolino 1980, Luck 1992). Vegemite is also included in studies from various disciplinary perspectives include food history (Symons 1984), tourism (Murphy 1998) and brand marketing (Khamis 2004), although many of the above studies could be classified in a number of these categories.

Vegemite is also a site of considerable paradox as it is, for instance, both an often mobilised national symbol, yet wholly owned by foreign multinational food giant, Kraft. Held up as an example of a traditional Australian staple, the product has changed significantly throughout its history. Its savoury flavour is as close to the relatively recently Japanese-identified taste *umami* as Anglo-Australian cuisine gets, yet it is not liked by Japanese consumers. A childhood staple and adult comfort food, this high-salt commercial foodstuff continues, moreover, to be a popular choice at a time when Australian consumers are showing an unprecedented interest in multicultural cuisines, in ethically produced, sustainable gourmet produce, and in more healthy food choices. A gastrobiographical approach can assist in unpacking these revealing contradictions.

### ***Birth and early years: first faltering steps***

Vegemite's history as a consumer product is well documented, although the apocryphal and actual are difficult to separate in these accounts. Developed in the early 1920s in Melbourne, under the direction of Fred Walker of Fred Walker and Company, canners of meat for export and manufacturers of Bonox branded beef stock, its recipe was based on Marmite yeast extract, which was then imported into Australia from the UK (Farrer 1979: 357-58)<sup>4</sup>. The contents were, like Marmite, largely based on brewer's yeast residue, which was sourced for Vegemite from the local Carlton & United Breweries, and flavoured with onions, celery, spices and salt (Creswell & Trenoweth 2006: 353). After a well-advertised competition to name the spread, Vegemite was launched in 1923 with promises that it performed in a role that could be substituted for both Marmite and Bonox: 'delicious on sandwiches and toast. Improves the flavour of soups, stews and gravies' (ctd. in Richardson 2003: 60).

In 1926, Walker met US-based food producer J. L. Kraft and the two companies merged in Australia as the Kraft Walker Cheese Company. Vegemite was not an immediate success and in 1928 was renamed 'Parwill: the all-Australian product' in an attempt to boost sales by attracting customers from its rival Marmite, its advertising punning on the idea of 'Ma-might but Pa-will' (White 1994: 16). Still unsuccessful, the original name was reinstated, but Marmite continued to significantly outsell the local product in both Australia and New Zealand throughout the Depression years (White 1994: 16).

### ***Coming of age: rising popularity***

When Walker died in 1935, the rights to Vegemite were sold to Kraft, and in 1950 Fred Walker and Company was absorbed completely into Kraft (Kraft Foods 2009)<sup>5</sup> and a new, much more aggressive approach was taken to marketing the product. A successful campaign in 1935 and 1936, whereby a free jar of Vegemite was offered with every sale of a Kraft-Walker product (White 1994: 16), helped establish the product in Australian households and, ever since, Vegemite has been kept in the public eye by international advertising giant J. Walter Thompson and its affiliates<sup>6</sup>.

In 1939, just before the beginning of World War II, the British Medical Association endorsed Vegemite as a source of Vitamin B. The product was advertised in the *Australian Medical Journal*, encouraging doctors to recommend it to patients. Once Australia joined the war, Vegemite, packaged in tins, was included in troop rations as a nutritional supplement as well as a reminder of home. So much so that, from 1942, civilian consumer sales were rationed, except for invalids and babies. Advertisements made a positive of this lack, asking civilians to forego their Vegemite as a humane and patriotic contribution to the war effort:

Vegemite fights with the men up north! If you are one of those who don't need Vegemite medicinally, then thousands of invalids are asking you to deny yourself of it for the time being (Blake 1992: 22).

This rhetoric firmly established the nutritional integrity and health benefits of the spread, as well as laying the foundations for a nationalist frame around the product, and sales of Vegemite in Australia finally approached, and then overtook, those of Marmite.

In the 1940s, Vegemite packaging was redesigned to appeal to both mothers and their children: the jars could be thriftily reused as drinking glasses, and featured Disney characters on the labels. The baby boom following the Second World War created a growing market for Vegemite (Kiple & Ornelas 2000: 1348), and advertisements in high circulation magazine, *The Australian Women's Weekly* featuring a 'Sister MacDonald' with 'years of infant welfare experience' insisting that 'Vegemite is most essential' (Blake 1992: 28). In the late 1940s, cinema advertisements underscored this message. In *Sister knows best* (c1948), for instance, Vegemite is recommended by a nurse in a baby health centre and, moreover, is underscored as an economical and tasty choice for the whole family. Composed in 1949, the 'Happy little Vegemites' jingle was recorded in 1954, and aired extensively on radio, stressing the spread's health benefits for children:

We are happy little Vegemites as bright as bright can be,  
We all enjoy our Vegemite for breakfast, lunch and tea,  
Our mummy says we're growing stronger every single week,  
Because we love our Vegemite,  
We all adore our Vegemite,  
It puts a rose in every cheek! (NFSA 2008)

The jingle was then revived and became the basis for a 1956 television advertisement, featuring eight children marching to the jingle (Rood 2008a). The song disappeared from the Australian airwaves in the 1960s, but was reintroduced in a partly colourised version in the late 1980s, with the children's cheeks coloured red to underscore the health benefits implicit in the closing line. It was re-recorded for a new campaign in 2007 (Canning 2007). Susie Khamis finds that this reuse of the jingle in successive advertising campaigns, lends a 'comforting permanence' (2004: 129) to the commercials that translates back across to the product itself.

*Adulthood: marker of Australian identity*

In an interview during the 2007 federal election campaign, then Australian Prime Minister John Howard revealed that he always made his own breakfast, as he liked to eat it on his own. Many election analysts believed that this interview cast Mr. Howard in a more human and contemporary light, although the detail about preferring to dine alone—'I'm very much a loner at breakfast' (qtd. in Fordham 2007)—worried some commentators. Weeks later, Labor Party prime ministerial contender Kevin Rudd countered with the claim that he not only also made his own morning meal but that he was, moreover, a 'simple Vegemite-on-toast man' (qtd. in Crabb 2007). While other factors undoubtedly affected the election outcome, and Mr. Rudd's political fortunes have since waned, the ongoing role in Australian life that the interest in his breakfast Vegemite toast indicates, and how this has been described and conceptualised over the past decades, is worthy of consideration.

In marketing terms, Vegemite is regularly characterised as one of the 'world's greatest brands' (Interbrand 1992) and a 'superbrand' (Superbrands 2004). In addition, Paul Rozin and Michael Siegal propose that Vegemite may be the best predictor of national identity of any food in the world, as only Australians like it (2003: 63-7). Indeed, it has been noted that this very 'specific appeal to Australian's palate has added to its status as a badge of national identity' (Powerhouse Museum 1991). So powerful are the identify politics around Vegemite that Kraft has tactically claimed only a custodianship of the brand:

We don't own Vegemite. The people of Australia own Vegemite. We're just the custodians and we want to make sure Vegemite is available for everyone (Hargreaves 2010).

Drawing on this identification, Vegemite is often utilised symbolically. It can stand in for the whole of Australian cuisine and taste as, for example, in Bock and Uncles's discussion of international market segmentation:

a quick tour of world cuisine serves to remind us that we are not born with all of our tastes, whether we are talking about Americans and root beer, Chinese and the fat of the snow toad (a dessert), Australians and Vegemite, or Danes and ammonia-flavored liquorice (2002: 217).

In one of nationalist balladeer John Williamson's songs, 'Home Among the Gum Trees' (date), Vegemite stands in for a substantial part of Australian cuisine:

You can see me in the kitchen  
Cooking up a roast  
Or Vegemite on toast.

It plays a similar role in *The Simpsons* episode, 'Bart vs. Australia' (1995), which features cans of Fosters beer in a number of scenes, but the only food represented is Vegemite (Oakley & Weinstein 1995). When a single consumer product or food needs to symbolise all others, Vegemite is often chosen. It was, for instance, in April 1984, the first product in Australia to be electronically scanned at a supermarket checkout (Kraft 2009).

Vegemite can also stand in for being Australian more generally. This is the case in the chorus of another of Williamson's songs, *True Blue* (date) (which has become an anthem of down-to-earth 'traditional' Australian-ness). As such it is featured, for instance, at high profile events, such as the various 2000 Sydney Olympic Games ceremonies and funerals of nationally-known figures such as Steve Irwin. The lyrics have, indeed, since been reworded in recognition of Vegemite's foreign ownership:

True Blue, is it me and you?  
Is it Mum and Dad, is it a cockatoo?  
Is it standing by your mate  
When he's in a fight?  
Or just Vegemite [changed to 'Or will she be right?']  
True Blue, I'm asking you.

Effie Detsimas's *Bread, olives and Vegemite broth* (c1996) and Deborah Jane Phillips's *From Vegemite sandwiches to moose on rye: The adventures of a suburban Aussie housewife in Alaska* (2006) are tales of cross-cultural acclimation, with 'being Australian' clearly signalled through these references. Vegemite is used in this way in the titles of a number of books and other cultural products as a shorthand metaphor for a range of Australian qualities. An example is *The Vegemite tales*, a play written by Australian playwright Melanie Tait that has only been staged in the UK. Although described there as an Australian stage version of popular US television series *Friends*, the storyline and themes revolve as much around the issues and problems caused by being Australians living in a foreign city as being a group of twenty-somethings residing together. First staged in a small fringe theatre in west London in 2001, the show was then produced each year until, in 2006, it made its West End debut, underlining its Australian credentials by casting Blair McDonough from *Neighbours* in a key role. It had a second West End season in 2007, by which time an estimated 60,000 people had seen the play, although it has been noted that many of these are from London's Australian, New Zealand and South African expatriate communities.

As 'true blue' Australians all supposedly love the product, Vegemite can be used to identify who does not fit into this classification. Kay Richardson, writing in high-art food periodical *Gastronomica*, suggests that Vegemite is embraced by immigrants to Australia who consciously acquire a taste for the spread and, in the process, 'redefine their sense of identity, tasting Vegemite and learning to love it' (2003: 62). In 2008, artist Sarah-Jane Cook made this explicit in her photographic project, which set out to document people's facial expressions as they bit into a slice of Vegemite on toast, 'exploring the response of Australians *from all backgrounds* eating a stereotypical Australian food' [my italics]. Framed as a 'study of culture and identity', Cook reportedly stated:

There is that saying, 'as Australian as Vegemite'. This project is about what it means to be Australian and trying to break down stereotypes about what it means to be Australian (qtd in Brady 2008).

Kosher Vegemite is an example of how fluid national gastronomic identity can be. Vegemite has been certified kosher since the 1980s, made in the Kraft factory after meat processing machines were cleaned. In June 2004, changes in the manufacturing

process voided the kosher certification. This situation was stated to affect some half of the 100,000 Australians who choose kosher foods when these were available, and Melbourne's *Herald-Sun* reported shopping panic:

Hundreds of families have been scouring supermarkets for the last kosher jars of the famous spread. One mum bought 75 jars in one shop. ... All five members of the Caulfield North [Chaskiel] household had it for breakfast, lunch, and even dinner. Dad Mark Chaskiel said the family have run out of kosher Vegemite after panic-buying 35 jars. 'I was brought up on Vegemite', Mr Chaskiel said. 'I can sacrifice lobster and prawns for kosher but I can't give up Vegemite. It's an Australian birthright (Rout 2004)<sup>7</sup>.

In response, a number of groups began lobbying Kraft including Certification group, Kosher Australia (Rout 2004) and the Victorian State Opposition spokesman for multicultural affairs, Murray Thompson, who organised a petition. As a result, Kraft Foods revised its production arrangements and, as a result, Vegemite was reaccredited as kosher.

The revulsion Vegemite generates in those unfamiliar with the product is indicative of Vegemite's power as a marker of identity. For Hopkins and Freeman, Vegemite is so unpalatably exotic that it features in their book titled *Extreme Cuisine: The weird & wonderful foods that people eat*, wherein it is described as 'canned stool sample', its taste described as that of 'anchovies, fermented to bring out the taste of salt' (2004: 247). In *Hungry Planet: What the world eats*, Vegemite is similarly described as 'roach bait' (Menzel & D'Aluisio 2007: 34). Although it has features of the *umami* taste popular in Japanese food (variously described as that of meat, mushrooms and cheese) (Chandrashekar et. al. 2006), Japanese consumers reportedly found it inedible in a marketing trial (White 1994: 17). Many unsuspecting visitors to Australia or those with Australian friends and colleagues overseas are, it seems, duped into trying Vegemite, believing it to be a chocolate spread. Tales of the experience of these first tastings appear in many tourist blogs and webpage posts, assisting in identifying the extreme foreignness of Australia as a destination (Murphy 1998). Perhaps the ultimate expression of Vegemite as alien is in US singer Amanda Palmer's song, 'Vegemite—The Black Death', in which an ultimatum is issued to a fictional lover to choose between her and Vegemite.

You tell me that you love me ...  
 So, how can you love  
 Vegemite? It tastes like sadness.  
 It tastes like batteries. It tastes like acid.  
 I cannot hold a man so close who spreads this cancer on his toast.  
 It is the Vegemite, my darling, or it's me (Palmer 2010).

Being foreign and liking Vegemite has even more meaning. Rudy, for instance, found that US Mormon missionaries who made extended stays in foreign countries 'find many foods that were initially considered entirely unknown, unpalatable, and inedible early in the mission to eventually be edible and even enjoyable later in the mission' (2003: 146). Rudy describes how returned missionaries have demanded that Vegemite be imported into Utah, and explores this phenomenon in terms of the transformations

in personal intercultural relationships that can occur alongside shifts in accepting, and then growing to like and even crave, previously unacceptable foreign foods (2003: 146). In this way, Nagy sees Urban Qatar's 'supermarket shelves ... stocked to satisfy the range of tastes, everything from tortillas and poppadoms to vegemite and peanut butter' (Nagy 2006: 119) as not only indicative of, but also a means of fostering, social and cultural diversity in that city.

Vegemite can also operate as a site that focuses tensions around issues of national and cultural identity. In January 2010, Kraft announced that Vegemite had been certified halal and the company would be including this information on its labelling. Kraft spokesman Simon Talbot restated the familiar nationalist rhetoric, albeit clumsily: 'Islamic communities are proud Australians and they want to be able to eat our national icon as well' (qtd. in Hargreaves 2010). Muslim community leaders apparently 'congratulated Kraft for introducing the labels' (Hargreaves 2010) and past-president of the Islamic Council of Victoria claimed the certification was a sign Muslims were 'becoming more Aussie' (Yasser Soliman qtd. in Hargreaves 2010). However, this announcement also provoked a racist response, with the halal labelling identified as a sign of the 'Islamisation' of western countries: 'We're already seeing sharia law courts operating in Britain ... Where does it end?' and the company accused of 'bending over backwards to please minority groups' (Bill Muehlenberg qtd. in Hargreaves 2010). The issue was a predictably popular topic of some talk-back radio shows following the announcement, and more than a dozen groups and many more associated pages were created on social networking site, Facebook, to register criticism of the labelling (Facebook 2010). Talbot reported that the head office was apparently receiving 'regular' phone calls expressing 'some fairly strong views ... that we at Kraft don't agree with. We don't engage in racist or bigoted commentary' (Talbot qtd. in Hargreaves 2010) and did not back down.

Vegemite is so powerful a symbol of national identity that it has not only featured in the nationally-focused situations outlined above, it has also been central in a number of international political incidents. These incidents reveal a continued investment in a patriotic Australian nationalism, with Vegemite as a central symbol. In October 2006, newspapers and bloggers in Australia picked up a story first published in Brisbane's *Courier Mail* (Healey 2006), that Vegemite had been banned in the United States, and that Australians entering the country were not only being searched, but also having their Vegemite confiscated (Reuters 2006). The *Herald-Sun* ran a feverish article titled 'Vegemite ban: Back off, Bush!' that blaming President George W. Bush for the ban and urging readers to send protest emails to the White House. By the time the story was revealed to be false, it had been widely circulated<sup>8</sup>. The various US agencies involved—the Food and Drug Administration and United States Customs and Border Protection—apparently received so many enquiries from travelling Australians that they found it necessary to clarify that although it was technically illegal in the US to add folate to food products other than bread or cereal, there were no plans to investigate whether Vegemite contained folate, to subject it to an import ban, or withdraw it from US supermarket shelves (AAP 2006a & b). In another case, three months before the commencement of the Beijing Olympic Games in 2008, it was reported that Chinese authorities had issued a directive that all food supplies for

teams must be sourced from within China and, therefore, a ‘Vegemite ban’ was in place (Murdoch 2008). The Australian Olympic Committee immediately set about working on reversing the edict, arguing that Vegemite was a necessary dietary supplement for the athletes (Murdoch 2008). The Australian Olympic team nutritionist, instead, argued for Vegemite’s symbolic power, asserting that such products were crucial for the athletes’ peace of mind ‘because they help our athletes feel at home’ (Louise Burke qtd. in Murdoch 2008). Vegemite was eventually allowed to be imported into China in association with the Olympic Games.

### ***Midlife crises: trials and tribulations***

Kraft proudly claims Vegemite is not only a rich dietary source of protein and minerals, but also ‘one of the world’s richest sources of B group vitamins’ (Kraft 2009) and contains no added sugar. However, the product contains a considerable proportion of salt, with one 5g serve currently providing some 8 per cent of the recommended daily allowance of sodium for adults. This concentration was higher until the 1980s but, following the introduction of more detailed food labelling laws, Kraft’s marketing arm reportedly ordered a drastic reduction of the salt in the product, with some reports claiming that the result was half the 1971 level (Blair 2006). Some of the first serious public questioning of Kraft’s nutritional claims came in 2006, when nutritionists drew attention to the salt content:

Everyone talks about Vegemite being so good for kids because it’s rich in B vitamins ... But you are also getting a massive dose of sodium when you eat it—169mg in a 5g teaspoon ... Sodium causes problems such as high blood pressure and hardening of the arteries. With a Vegemite sandwich, which is often made with white bread, you are getting sugar from the bread, which causes obesity and diabetes. You’ve probably got butter on it, so lots of saturated fat there, and a few B vitamins from the Vegemite. Does that make a nutritious meal? No (Peter Dingle qtd. in Lampathakis 2006).

Although responses abounded in the press and on discussion lists, few agreed. Most did not, however, argue with Professor Dingle’s figures or their implications, but replied with impassioned arguments about the level of B group vitamins and its long-lived place in their diets. In 2008, a number of regional childcare centres introduced dietary guidelines banning Vegemite due to its salt content<sup>9</sup>. Respected nutritionist Rosemary Stanton mused that ‘I suppose they’re trying to get mothers to put better quality stuff in the kids’ lunchboxes’ (qtd. in Cregan 2008) but, again, most of the public responses were passionate defences of the spread’s long-lived place in Australian children’s diets, even to the point of describing the childcare centres’ attempt to control its use as ‘lunchbox Nazis’ (Cregan 2008).

In January 2009, this issue seeped into national politics, when it was widely reported in the Australian media that the Federal Government’s Preventive Health Taskforce, set up in 2008 to recommend ways to tackle preventable health problems such as obesity, was going to regulate the fat, sugar and salt content of food. In response, the Australian Food and Grocery Council (representing 80 per cent of the processed food, drink and grocery products sector), led its opposition to any such regulation of its products by claiming that Vegemite would be ‘among the casualties’ if food content

were regulated—as ‘Vegemite without salt is not Vegemite’ (Geoffrey Annison qtd. in Ryan 2009). In response, then Deputy Prime Minister, Julia Gillard, stepped in to personally reassure the public that Vegemite would not be affected by the taskforce’s work. This guarantee was not due to any nutritional reasoning (some, for instance, arguing that although the proportion of salt appeared high, only small amounts of the product were eaten in any one meal), but due to Vegemite’s iconic stature in her own, as well as Australian life more broadly:

I am a very happy Vegemite eater and there is no way in the world that Vegemite would be banned in this country ... Vegemite is part of being Australian, part of our history, part of our future and I’ll be continuing to wake up in the morning and having it on my toast (qtd. in Anon 2009).

Also commenting on this issue, the Federal Opposition health spokesman, Peter Dutton, similarly did not engage with the level of salt or its possible effects, arguing, instead, against any regulation of foods. Dutton stated that Australian families ‘don’t need to be served up a menu from the Rudd government about what they need to eat and drink three meals a day’ (qtd. in Gray 2009).

Neither Gillard nor Dutton, nor, indeed, anyone from Kraft, engaged with the idea that a lower salt version of Vegemite could be developed. Instead, in 2009, a higher salt and higher fat version of Vegemite was launched<sup>10</sup>. A mix of Vegemite can cream cheese spread, and with a serving size of more than double that of Vegemite (13g as opposed to 5g), the new product has more than four times the kilojoules per serve, significantly higher fat and carbohydrate levels, and 186mg (as opposed to Vegemite’s 174mg) sodium. Despite this, and while there was considerable negative comment regarding its name and taste, there was virtually no discussion of its nutritional value. In July 2009, Kraft restaged the competition for the original naming of Vegemite with a national competition for this new product. Three million jars with the label ‘Name Me’ were sold during the competition’s period, and Kraft reportedly received more than 48,000 entries (Canning 2009a). This was, presumably, also in line with Simon Talbot’s (as Kraft’s Corporate Affairs Manager), avowal that Kraft’s social media strategy was ‘about ... listening, and understanding buyer personas’ (Scott 2009). On 26 September 2009, during the Australian Football League grand final match, Kraft announced the winning new name, ‘iSnack 2.0’, as ‘next generation Vegemite’ (Canning 2009a). Public reaction to the name was virtually immediate and overwhelmingly negative after the announcement, with a Facebook poll that day attracting over 19,000 responses, 97% of whom disliked the name. So unenthusiastic was the public response to the product itself that there was conjecture that this was a brand loyalty-building exercise for the original Vegemite, and that the new product would disappear from the shelves after a few months, no matter what its name. Kraft, however, denied this, with Talbot stating that the company had expected debate about the new name, but had been caught off guard by what he identified as the ‘ferocity’ of the reaction (qtd. in Canning 2009a). Just two days after the iSnack 2.0 name was unveiled, Kraft executives would not confirm it would be retained (Canning 2009a) and, the very next day, the company announced that the controversial name would be replaced with another chosen by a national vote (Canning 2009b). A week later, Kraft announced the results of the poll as ‘Vegemite Cheesybite’, with 36 per cent of votes

from more than 30,000 respondents, although jars labelled iSnack 2.0 remained on sale for a number of weeks as Kraft made the shift to the Cheesybite branded packaging (Canning 2009c)<sup>11</sup>.

### ***Older age: celebrating birthdays and other anniversaries***

Vegemite has been the subject of a stream of marketing campaigns since its inception, with commemorative events and special packaging used to mark and celebrate the anniversaries of its initial invention and launch. In this way, Vegemite's 60th birthday was marked with a permanent plaque at the site of Walker's original factory in Melbourne (City of Port Phillip 2001: 43). In 1990, Kraft held a nationwide campaign to collect Vegemite containers and packaging, and then donated a series of these to Sydney's Powerhouse Museum, which then held an exhibition of these in 1991 (Powerhouse Museum 2010). The product's 70th birthday was commemorated with two openly nostalgic books, *The Vegemite Cookbook* (Blake 1992) and *The Big Vegemite Party Book* (Pittaway 1992) (see also, Brien forthcoming 2010). In 2003, Kraft promoted the 80th birthday of Vegemite with the so-called 'Spread the Smile' campaign, which sought to exploit the significant public interest in family and oral history by recording childhood reminiscences about Vegemite.

Following this campaign, commemorative activities multiplied, not only celebrating Vegemite's birthday (the original invention/launch date), but also instituting a practice of marking the anniversaries of other major dates in the product's life. These always attracted media interest. News headlines, for instance, announced that Kraft was trying to locate the children who featured in the 'Happy little Vegemites' television campaign, in readiness for celebration of the advertisement's 50th anniversary in 2004. In October 2006, these once child actors joined a number of past and current Kraft employees to celebrate the supposed production of the one-billionth jar of Vegemite (Rood 2008a & 2008b). In 2007, the then iconic marching band image was resituated into a contemporary setting—presumably to mobilise both the original messages (nutritious wholesomeness in an Australian domestic context) as well as its heritage appeal.

### **Concluding remarks**

Like many other biographers, I conclude this biographical study with the disclaimer that, despite my efforts above and those of the other researchers cited in this paper, much of Vegemite's life story remains as yet unrecovered and untold. Instead of any final and definitive account, this brief study of a single and relatively humble food product has attempted to provide some answers to the questions that Igor Kopytoff suggested should be asked of a non-human subject in writing its biography. This gastrobiography has thus discussed: 'Where does the thing come from and who made it?' and 'What has been its career so far?' (Kopytoff 1986: 66). It has also allocated life story related labels for what Kopytoff terms the 'recognized "ages" or periods in the thing's "life,"' (66) and attempted to locate and define a series of what Kopytoff

termed the ‘cultural markers’ for these periods (1986: 67) in terms of both Australian and some international indicators. In his discussion of the biographies of things, however, Kopytoff also asked the biographer to consider the end of the life of a product and ‘What happens to it when it reaches the end of its usefulness?’ (Kopytoff 1986: 67). The above clearly shows that, although now in its 89th year of production, this has not been necessary in the case of Vegemite. This is because Vegemite as food product, identity marker and symbol of Australia, while certainly the subject of retrospective museological and critical interest, still has much to offer contemporary consumers, whether they are ingesting the spread on their morning toast, or readers and writers who are studying it as a vital and alive cultural object.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> The ‘Fool’s Gold Loaf’ was an invention of a five-star Denver restaurant, the Colorado Mine Company. Comprising a pound of bacon and whole jars of peanut butter and grape jelly on a loaf of toasted bread, it was, in the mid-1970s, priced at almost US\$50 (Adler 1993). The combination of bacon and peanut butter was not without precursor—early editions of Rombauer’s classic *The Joy of Cooking* (1931) included recipes for Peanut Butter and Bacon Canapés and a Peanut Butter and Bacon Sandwich.

<sup>2</sup> The latter was marketed with a claim that has more in common with a social history approach: ‘Jell-O is not just a food product, it is part of America’s history and culture’ (Wyman 2001: cover).

<sup>3</sup> Eagen, Rachel (2005) *The Biography of Sugar (How Did That Get Here?)*; Eagen, Rachel (2005) *The Biography of Bananas (How Did That Get Here?)*; Gleason, Carrie (2007) *The Biography of Tea (How Did That Get Here?)*; Karner, Julie (2006) *The Biography of Vanilla (How Did That Get Here?)*; Lackey, Jennifer (2007) *The Biography of Wheat (How Did That Get Here?)*; Morganelli, Adrianna (2006) *The Biography of Coffee (How Did That Get Here?)*; Morganelli, Adrianna (2005) *The Biography of Chocolate (How Did That Get Here?)*; Morganelli, Adrianna (2007) *The Biography of Tomatoes (How Did That Get Here?)*; Neilsen, L Michelle (2007) *The Biography of Corn (How Did That Get Here?)*; Rodger, Ellen (2005) *The Biography of Spices (How Did That Get Here?)*; Rodger, Ellen (2007) *The Biography of Potatoes (How Did That Get Here?)*; Zronik, John Paul (2005) *The Biography of Rice (How Did That Get Here?)*; all Crabtree Publishing Company, New York.

<sup>4</sup> Developed in 1902 in the UK, Marmite is made from beer brewing waste. In 1944, the first Marmite to be produced in Australia was made in Sanitarium’s Cooranbong factory, some 116 kilometres north of Sydney. Since the 1970s, all the Marmite sold in the South Pacific region has been manufactured in Sanitarium’s Christchurch factory in New Zealand.

<sup>5</sup> After decades of mergers and acquisitions, the Philip Morris Company (now known as Altria Group) acquired Kraft in 1988, eventually merging it with another food subsidiary, General Foods, which it had acquired in 1985. In 2000, Philip Morris also acquired Nabisco and merged it with Kraft. In 2001, Altria sold 280 million Kraft shares, retaining an 88.1% stake in the company (Funding Universe). On 31 January 2007, Kraft announced that remaining Kraft shares would be shared among Altria shareholders, making Kraft an independent publicly held company, which is listed on the New York stock exchange. It has three manufacturing sites: Suttontown in South Australia, Strathmerton in Victoria and Port Melbourne in urban Melbourne, where Vegemite is manufactured.

<sup>6</sup> Rebranded in 2005 as JWT, the company's global remit is to 'create stories our customers want to spend time with' (JWT 2009).

<sup>7</sup> At this time, it was noted that although (Sanitarium's) Marmite was certified kosher, this was not seen as a solution to the problem.

<sup>8</sup> The story appears to have begun with a traveller's report that was inflamed by an (inaccurate) statement from a Kraft spokesperson to the effect that products containing folate were illegal in the US.

<sup>9</sup> The program 'Good for Kids—Good for Life' operated across 300 preschools and day care centres in the Hunter-New England region, with the goal of combating obesity.

<sup>10</sup> This was not the first time that Kraft has mixed Vegemite and cheese, with a short-lived product release of Vegemite Singles in Australia in the 1990s. This consisted of Kraft Singles (individually wrapped single slices of processed cheese) with Vegemite added. While Vegemite and cheese sandwiches, comprising a slice of processed cheese added to a Vegemite sandwich, were at that time very popular, Vegemite Singles were not.

<sup>11</sup> Other names polled were 'Vegemite Smooth' (23 per cent), 'Vegemate' (20 per cent), 'Snackmate' (8 per cent), 'Vegemild' (7 per cent) and 'Creamymate' (6 per cent) (Kraft 2009).

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