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A recent return to Kuala Lumpur after many years of absence reacquainted me with the sights, sounds, smells and tastes of the city. The weather was remarkably clear, despite its tropical humidity, and the city was free from the haze that usually veils it during certain months of the year (a result, so the explanation goes, of the slash-and-burn practices of farmers in neighbouring Indonesia). The naked visibility of the Light Rail Transit (LRT) system winding its way along and across familiar highways and unfamiliar buildings, was accompanied by the sounds of traffic, much
busier now, yet less noisy than before, as scooters give way to tidy Protons—Malaysia's national car. But more striking to me than anything visible or heard was my reacquaintance with the smells and tastes of KL.

For many who are Malaysian-born and who reside elsewhere, cravings for the smells and tastes of nasi lemak, asam laksa and roti canai (a rice, noodle soup and bread dish respectively) are moderately satisfied by cafeterias and restaurants in, for example, New York, London or Melbourne. Concessions are duly made for the fact that the rempah (a seasoning paste) may not be as good as it is back in KL but, for most, 'it's not bad'. Khoo makes such an observation in her article and completes the loop between the pleasure and ethics of eating with the never-ending process of adaptation and substitution: the sensual pleasure of eating rests in the Deleuzian process of Becoming and the ethics of eating can be found in a similar process. Why not consider and substitute our food ingredients, she asks, and, therefore, satisfy both the sensual and ethical aspects in our ever-becoming quest for the Deleuzian post-human subject?

I agree. But her thoughts on food set my mind thinking about a further aspect of eating in Malaysia. In KL, smells and tastes are immediate, sensual; but food and eating transcend the material and its derived pleasures. The experience of animated conversations on roadside tables at 3 a.m., the banter over where to find the best char siu and siu yoke (both forms of pork) rice, the silent sociality of eating banana leaf rice (rice with Indian condiments) mess hall-style in a sweltering corner of Brickfields and the sensory pleasures associated with food and eating expand into the social. Pleasure is not only derived from what we eat, but also with whom, where, how and why. And thus, pleasure is experienced both in heterogeneous ways and at different levels of intensity: a family dinner at an expensive Chinese restaurant in one of KL's swanky hotels celebrating a relative's birthday contains a set of pleasures that is particular to the situation; a lunch-time meal in a crowded coffee shop, with minimal conversation and maximum discomfort (think: heat and noise) is pleasurable in its silent focus on quick and tasty nourishment. I was so reminded and struck by this social aspect of eating that I would venture this preliminary statement: that in KL, eating is a total social fact,¹ in the sense that Marcel Mauss had originally proposed as 'total social phenomena', where 'each phenomenon contains
all the threads of which the social fabric is composed. In these total social phenomena, as we propose to call them, all kinds of institutions find simultaneous expression: religious, legal, moral and economic. In addition, the phenomena have their aesthetic aspect and they reveal morphological types.\textsuperscript{2}

The phenomenon of eating, then, contains indications of its larger context and a detailed analysis of eating—not just the ‘what’ but with whom, why, where and how—provides an understanding of the social, cultural, political, economic, religious and, yes, ethical aspects of life in Malaysia. In the 19th century, Jean-Anthelme Brillat-Savarin wrote, ‘tell me what you eat, and I will tell you what you are’. Our postmodern time compels us to consider much more than that.

\textbf{Notes}

1. I would like to thank Bob Swinburn for introducing this concept to me, through his application of Mauss to his own work on wine.