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# ‘Imitation crab’ and the material culture of commodity production

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Addressing the material culture of commodity production, this paper focuses on different and shifting meanings that are developed within and incorporated into the production of consumer goods. Analysis of the geographical production of individual consumer goods provides insight into the ways that social interactions ascribe meanings to things without erasing the material nature of those things. A case study of the Euro-American ‘imitation crab’ industry is used to examine how producers de- and re-contextualize commodities both materially and symbolically throughout production processes. By distancing imitation crab from both its physical origin as a fish and its social origin as a Japanese food product, firms are able to present this inexpensive and mass-produced commodity as a substitute for an expensive food. Instead of taking commodity forms for granted, this paper takes as its central method the analysis of these forms and their material-symbolic transformations. Cultural economic analysis of material production highlights key moments in the social geography of things, and the importance of these things in both daily life and social relations over time and space.

Just what is that crab-like stuff in a California roll? And what’s in the ‘seafood salad’ at the grocery deli counter? Is it real, where did it come from, and why does it exist? At once real and imitation, these foods are called ‘surimi seafood’. Surimi is a fish paste, first developed in Japan several hundred years ago, made by mixing fish protein with starches. Although surimi is a flexible food that can be used in a variety of ways, in this paper I examine the imitation crab, or ‘krab’, form of surimi. A somewhat curious food item, imitation crab is a mass-produced, low-cost source of fish protein designed to imitate high-cost, luxury goods, including not only crab but also lobster, shrimp and scallops. To make these imitations, manufacturers start with surimi paste, form it into different shapes, add flavours, and dye it various shades of pink to imitate real shellfish. The imitation form of surimi was first developed by several Japanese seafood firms in the early 1970s. Then in the late 1970s, Japanese firms introduced imitation products to Western markets, where consumption increased rapidly throughout the 1980s in the United States and the 1990s in Europe. In the marketplace, however, there is little sense of what these imitation products really are, from where they come, or that surimi was

originally a Japanese product. Instead, imitation crab is sold either as a substitute for the 'real thing' or, more generically, as 'seafood' in a seafood salad. This situation contrasts with surimi products in Japan, which range from the inexpensive to the expensive, and which include an array of stand-alone products that do not copy anything else. This paper explains how this surimi seafood came to be.<sup>1</sup>

Addressing the material culture of commodity production, the paper highlights specific interrelationships between cultural and economic practices. It contributes to current debates on cultural economies and material culture by emphasizing that production itself is an important arena for creating and enacting both meaning and materiality of consumer goods. The next section more fully develops an argument for material cultures of commodity production by exploring existing approaches to cultural economies for what they can and cannot contribute to analysis of the geographical production of individual things. While highlighting different dimensions of cultural economic relations, recent literature on material culture of consumption, the culture industries, and business culture has not been able to address the dynamics of production and the interlinkages between material and symbolic dimensions of commodities. Analysis of the geographical production of individual consumer goods provides insight into the ways that social interactions ascribe meanings to things without erasing the material nature of those things. Instead of taking commodity forms for granted, these forms and their material-symbolic transformations are the central focus of the analysis.

Subsequent sections explain surimi as a unique food item by examining cultural economic processes that allow firms to present this inexpensive and mass-produced commodity as an alternative to – and imitation of – expensive foods. Because surimi is a generic paste that is used differently in different markets, it is an interesting case for exploring the complexity of processes that give commodities their specific forms. To explain the history and geography of surimi seafood, analysis centres on how surimi is shaped, transformed and given new meanings as it enters new circuits of production, trade and consumption. The focus is on ways in which different and shifting meanings are developed within and incorporated into the production of imitation crab as producers de- and re-contextualize surimi both materially and symbolically. Emphasis on the production process itself is not meant to imply that consumption is unimportant; but in this project I analyse this material-symbolic interplay before surimi products reach consumers. To explain the existence of surimi seafood requires examination of the cultural economy of production and the material cultures through which this commodity is created.

## **Meaning and materiality in commodity production**

Although it seems obvious that production itself is not just about economic goals of capital accumulation but is also about cultural processes of signification and social interaction, in practice most analyses tend to treat production as primarily economic. As Peter Jackson recently argued, although there is growing interest in understanding the imbrication of the cultural and the economic, there is also 'a tendency to equate culture with consumption, and the economic with production', which prioritizes consumption

as the moment at which the economic and the cultural come together.<sup>2</sup> For example, Martyn Lee justifies his book on the cultural politics of consumption by claiming that ‘consumption is *the* social activity which, above all others, unites economy and culture,’ thus suggesting that the economic and the cultural are linked yet remain distinct domains.<sup>3</sup> In contrast, John Tomlinson proposes that the economic and cultural are dimensions of social life, not ‘discrete spheres of activity: people don’t turn from “doing the economic” to “doing the cultural” in the way that we might imagine them ending work for the day and turning to leisure activities.’<sup>4</sup> Reflecting debates within anthropology about the continued salience of the idea ‘culture’, at issue here is not ‘peoples and cultures’ that are associated with a specific place, but instead practices by which people make the world meaningful, construct identities and embody difference.<sup>5</sup> As Ulf Hannerz puts it, ‘culture goes on everywhere in social life, organized as a flow of meanings, by way of meaningful forms, between people.’<sup>6</sup> This then challenges the idea that it is only in consumption, and among consumers, that we can find ‘the cultural’, and makes it possible to explore the ways that production, too, involves complex processes of signification.

Further, it should also be obvious that production is about the material. Yet the significance of the particular materiality of particular commodities, and how this interconnects with symbolic dimensions of objects, is often ignored or downplayed both in economic analyses of profits, innovation and competitiveness and in cultural analyses of significance, interaction and identity. This tendency has not been overcome by the recent attention given to cultural–economic relations, even in analyses of producers and commodities. In their book on Nike and consumer culture, for example, Robert Goldman and Stephen Papsen focus on the ways the company has produced the swoosh as a meaningful sign while explicitly saying that the commodity itself (the shoe) is largely absent.<sup>7</sup> And in their cultural studies analysis of the Sony Walkman, Paul du Gay *et al.* do give attention to production, but primarily in terms of business cultures and identities, not material production.<sup>8</sup> These insightful analyses of individual commodities and brands depict the multiple ways in which commodities are involved in cultural processes, yet the significance of material production remains somewhat obscure. A brief examination of several bodies of literature will illustrate and further develop both these points, on the role of production and importance of materiality, while drawing on the expanded views of culture discussed above.

The wealth of literature over the past two decades on material culture exemplifies some of these splits while also offering opportunities for new directions.<sup>9</sup> Led by scholars such as Mary Douglas and Daniel Miller, the concern of this body of work has been to examine ‘the specificity of material domains and the way form itself is employed to become the fabric of cultural worlds’.<sup>10</sup> In focusing on the role of consumer goods in sociocultural systems, a central aim has been to move out of the realm of abstract economic theorizing, in which consumption is just a function of production that exists to reproduce workers and realize profits for owners. In material culture studies, consumers are active agents, and consumers’ choices, purchases and uses of goods are cultural forms that reflect and create individual and group identities, play key roles in social interaction, and themselves give meaning to the goods that are being consumed.

Particularly relevant for this paper, this re-theorization of consumer goods challenges ideas about global 'homogenization' and convergence on a 'global culture,' pointing out instead that cultural difference can proliferate depending on the 'logic by which goods are received (acquired, understood and employed) in different societies'.<sup>11</sup> This change in focus then encourages analysis not just of how global processes affect people and cultures, but also of how commodities themselves are transformed as they are transported to new places and incorporated into new cultural practices.<sup>12</sup> Material culture perspectives are thus useful for highlighting the social nature of individual commodities, and for avoiding a tendency either to reduce material culture to social relations, or to read meanings off the mode of production. But to highlight consumers and the role of material things in everyday lives is also to lose sight of the cultural economy of production.<sup>13</sup> Although material goods and spaces are present, what becomes most important is how social actors, in interaction, each shifting meanings onto these goods and spaces.

Other bodies of literature, with more explicit economic focus, give more emphasis to the cultural economy of production, yet still give little attention to the actual things being produced, or the significance of materiality. One set of literature focuses on the ways cultural and economic practices have become more alike in the postmodern era, particularly as economic activities are increasingly oriented around producing cultural materials.<sup>14</sup> Drawing in particular on Jean Baudrillard's contention that we live in a 'hyperreal' world in which signs (signifiers) are no longer tied to their referents (to reality),<sup>15</sup> the majority of this work focuses on economies of information, images and signs. Mike Featherstone defines this as the 'aestheticization of everyday life', which refers to the 'flow of signs and images which saturate the fabric of everyday life in contemporary society'.<sup>16</sup> Scott Lash and John Urry, similarly referring to 'aesthetic reflexivity', argue that economic objects are no longer material, but instead are about their sign-value.<sup>17</sup> Ironically, by focusing primarily on the contemporary 'proliferation of signs', this approach to cultural economy eliminates the material content of economic goods. This actually reduces the meaning of culture to just the 'cultural sphere' and culture industries, that is, the world of media, entertainment and the arts, and cultural economy is simply those economic sectors that produce information and images: television, movies, music, art, fashion, tourism and so on.<sup>18</sup> Because it relies on problematically narrow conceptions of both materiality and culture, this cultural economy is of limited usefulness for understanding material-symbolic production.

A very different approach to the cultural economy of production focuses less on the relationship between production and consumption or the relationship between commodities and signs, and more on the ways that cultural relationships affect the internal workings of all kinds of industries. From this starting point, different researchers have emphasized, *inter alia*, the role of learning, knowledge and trust in economic activity and economic geographies, the ways that cultural relationships shape business networks, changing identities of workers in different kinds of businesses, and the ways that gendered practices are a part of economic activity.<sup>19</sup> Although this groups together a lot of very different work, what these varied perspectives share is a sense that the workplace is a cultural site where meanings, norms and conventions are constructed,

embodied and enacted. This returns us to the idea that the cultural is about the construction of meaning, and challenges problematic notions that treat the cultural and the economic as separate spheres that join only within certain activities (i.e. consumption) or certain sectors (i.e. the culture industries). But where this focus on business networks and cultural economic relations addresses economic agents themselves, as enculturated, knowledgeable people, the goal within this paper is different. The aim here is to move back into an emphasis on what it is that is produced and consumed – the things of economic and cultural life – while still retaining this idea that economic sites and activities are also cultural sites and activities.

Thus, drawing on material culture approaches, this paper focuses on signification, that is, how objects become meaningful. But where material culture approaches emphasize signification within consumption, this paper instead highlights production itself as a site for cultural practice, as is emphasized within research on the cultures of business. Yet rather than looking at social relationships within firms, this perspective is used to look at commodities themselves. Against cultural economy perspectives that treat aestheticization as replacing materiality, the analysis does not take individual commodities for granted; instead analysis of the commodity form, its transformations and so forth is the central method. Returning the focus to the material objects themselves can bring attention to the ways that production is simultaneously about material form and sign-value.<sup>20</sup> This requires seeing objects not just as inert things; in Raymond Williams's words, 'we have to break from the common procedure of isolating the object and then discovering its components. On the contrary we have to discover the nature of a practice and then its conditions.'<sup>21</sup> From this starting point, a move back into production does not mark a return to a simple productionism in which economic activity determines culture and the cultural context of commodities. But neither does it mean refusing materiality in favour of the proliferation of signs. The cultural content of commodities is neither simply a fetish and false consciousness nor the independent play of consumer meaning and identity. Instead, cultural signification is a constitutive moment of production itself.

To carry out analysis of the production of surimi seafoods as being simultaneously material and symbolic, I use the spatial metaphors of *distancing* and *entanglement*.<sup>22</sup> Geographers have argued that these spatial metaphors highlight how consumer goods are drawn into complex geographies of 'networks, distances, diversions, routes, and inhabitations'. Spatial metaphors facilitate analysis of the interrelation between sites of production and consumption; the commodity chains that link these various sites; and the geographical knowledges about objects as they circulate through these increasingly global chains.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, Arjun Appadurai writes about the relationship between 'spatial, cognitive, or institutional . . . distancing' and the generation of various knowledges of commodities and commodity flows.<sup>24</sup> Here I use the metaphor of *distancing* to focus attention on practices through which connections are made across space and time. It is through analysis of these very spatialized practices that it is possible to understand both the material and symbolic content of individual commodities.

These spatial metaphors are particularly useful for engaging the 'social geography' of surimi. The idea of the social life of things was first articulated by Appadurai,<sup>25</sup> although

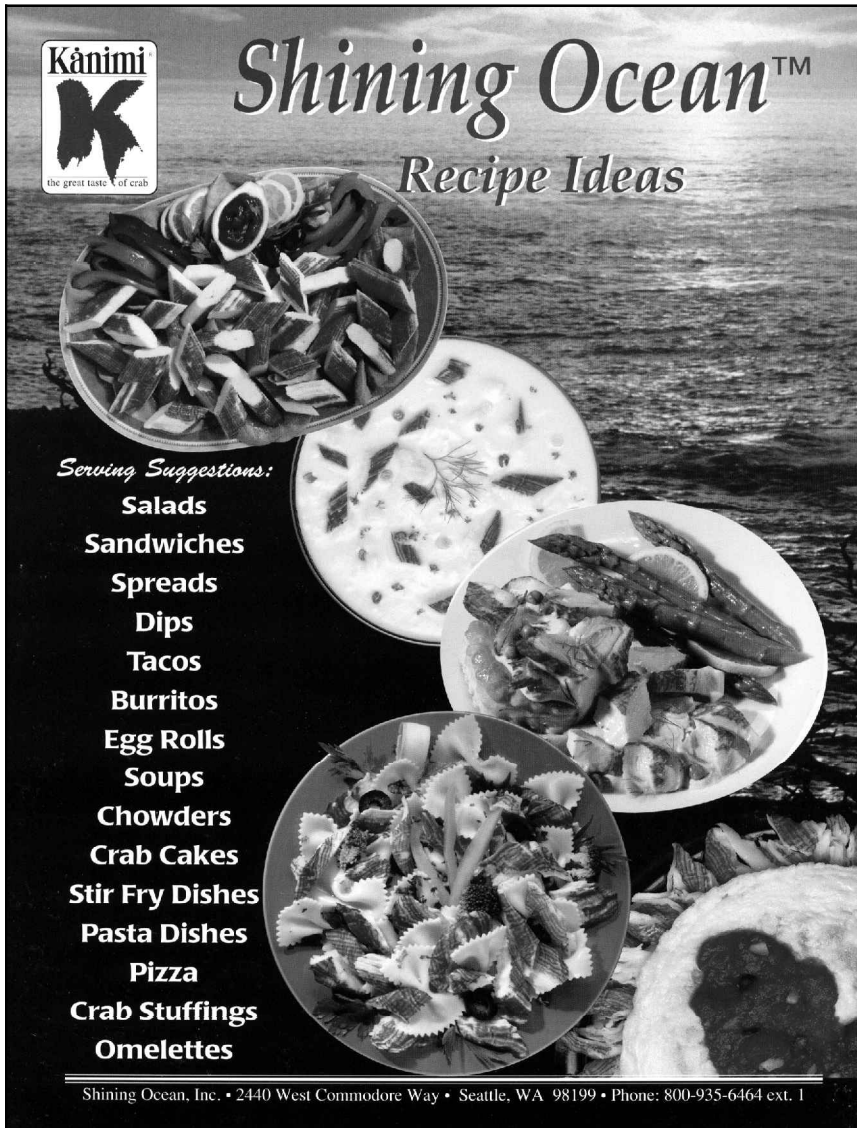
I am using this concept in a somewhat different way from his original suggestion. Whereas Appadurai focuses on identifying the cultural-economic conditions under which specific objects move into and out of the commodity form, I focus on the cultural-economic practices that give a specific commodity its material and symbolic forms. Following Appadurai, this paper analyses both the cultural biography of surimi seafoods and their social history. The cultural biography refers to the transformation of materials and meanings as an object circulates through various sites of production and consumption,<sup>26</sup> while the social history addresses the cultural-economic processes that shape classes of objects, rather than individual items, on a longer time scale.<sup>27</sup> Using the metaphors of distance and entanglement, I follow the two trajectories suggested by this framework of cultural biography and social history. The first trajectory traces the transformation of fish into imitation products, focusing mainly on the connections between the production process and how these imitations are marketed at the wholesale level. The second trajectory uses the history of surimi to trace the transformation of Japanese surimi products into the dominant US and European form of imitation products. Imitation products were introduced to the West by Japanese firms, and yet they were never recognized within the marketplace as a Japanese product. I argue that it is through a double-distancing within the surimi seafood biography and history that surimi can be positioned as it is. Once surimi is distanced from the actual fish *and* from Japan, to be entangled with more familiar seafood items, firms can sell surimi seafoods as precisely what they are not – or rather, sell them as something more than what they are.

## **Cultural biography: producing surimi seafoods**

For the purposes of this paper, I enter into the surimi production chain where imitation products are marketed at the wholesale level, and work back into the production process from there. Very few surimi seafoods firms have marketing campaigns aimed directly at the consumer. Instead, they promote their products to brokers, retailers and restaurants through trade shows and advertisements in industry magazines. Because the general public will very rarely see these ads and fliers, these promotional materials are not about telling consumers what they should think about these foods, but are rather about setting up a context in which these products can be sold and positioned within the larger seafood market. I first discuss some of the ways these ads represent and construct the meaning of surimi seafoods, and I then show how this is not simply a symbolic move, removed from production, but is tied up with the production process itself and the materiality of the product.

As a group, these advertisements present images of surimi seafoods in various dishes and offer recipes and menu ideas to position these imitations as enticing and delicious 'speciality' food products. According to these ads, surimi seafoods can be used to make dishes into something special. For example, a flier from Shining Ocean (Figure 1) offers images of and serving suggestions for their Kanami brand surimi seafood. The images show plates bursting with seafood salads, stews, soups and omelettes, and on the back of the flier, Shining Ocean offers recipes for these dishes. Similarly, under the headline 'Endless possibilities', Trident Seafoods presents a menu with ideas for using their

'Maritime Medley' line of surimi seafood for breakfast, lunch, appetizers and dinner. These advertisements present surimi seafood as 'a simple yet elegant addition to hot and cold menu items', as the Alaska Seafood Marketing Institute says in its promotional literature. These ads give surimi significance not simply as a low-cost, flexible food but as something that is elegant and enticing.

A black and white promotional flier for Shining Ocean's Kanimi brand imitation crab. The background is a photograph of a beach with waves crashing onto the shore. In the top left corner is the Kanimi logo, which features a stylized 'K' and the text 'the great taste of crab'. The main title 'Shining Ocean™' is written in a large, elegant serif font, with 'Recipe Ideas' in a smaller, italicized serif font below it. The flier displays five circular images of various dishes: a salad with crab, a bowl of soup, a plate of crab with asparagus, a bowl of pasta with crab, and a crab cake. To the left of these images is a list of serving suggestions. At the bottom, contact information for Shining Ocean, Inc. is provided.

**Kanimi**  
the great taste of crab

# Shining Ocean™

## Recipe Ideas

*Serving Suggestions:*

- Salads
- Sandwiches
- Spreads
- Dips
- Tacos
- Burritos
- Egg Rolls
- Soups
- Chowders
- Crab Cakes
- Stir Fry Dishes
- Pasta Dishes
- Pizza
- Crab Stuffings
- Omelettes

Shining Ocean, Inc. • 2440 West Commodore Way • Seattle, WA 98199 • Phone: 800-935-6464 ext. 1

FIGURE 1 'Shining Ocean Recipe Ideas'. Serving suggestions for their Kanimi brand imitation crab, the recipes for which are on the back of the flier. These images and recipes present imitation products as enticing and delicious. (Used by permission of Shining Ocean, Inc.)



At the same time as these companies position surimi seafood as a speciality item, ads also present imitations as being the equivalent of the seafood they are trying to copy, placing surimi seafood in a recognizable realm. Firms position their product as being as good as – or even better than – the ‘real thing’. In a product flier from Peter Pan Seafoods, imitation crab is placed along side real snow crab legs. In their description of the *imitation* crab, they claim that ‘crab fans long for legs that taste like these . . . [They] deliver all the same good eating as real crab, but with real economy.’ Similarly, Trident Seafoods claims that their Sea Legs brand surimi seafoods have a ‘unique crab “flavor burst”’ and that ‘Sea Legs products are pure luxury at an extraordinary value with the look, taste, and performance of fancy crab meat at a fraction of the cost’. These claims to equivalency are precisely what construct the legitimacy of surimi seafood as a product. This is particularly true as companies have developed a variety of shapes, forms and flavours for their imitation products. While imitation crab, in the form of sticks, chunks, flakes, shred, etc., is the dominant form of surimi seafood, companies are able to develop new products on the basis of making them equivalent to other types of seafood. Products such as imitation lobster, blue crab or scallops could not exist without this imitation status. By selling an imitation product that ‘contains real lobster meat’ (i.e. a small amount of lobster is one ingredient) and has a ‘genuine lobster taste’, as Trident Seafoods claims in one product flier, companies can transform slightly different recipes into completely different seafood items and thereby make new speciality items.

By creating an array of imitation products, companies have *entangled* surimi with other, more familiar foods and the meanings we give them. One important dimension of this are the class associations of the seafoods that surimi is designed to imitate. As several of the above quotes indicate, in their attempts to imbue surimi with the status of seafood such as lobster, firms use words such as ‘luxury’ and ‘elegant’ to describe imitation products. Surimi is then even constructed as something to fantasize about, as in ads for the Fanticrab line of surimi (Figure 2). In this ad, Neptune, the god of the sea, is composed entirely of surimi products, from his crown to his tail. A recent publication of this ad in *Seafood international*, a seafood industry magazine, is a visual representation of the ways that surimi products become entangled with class associations of seafood.<sup>28</sup> On the page facing the ad is a picture of a shrimp platter, captioned as offering ‘a touch of class’, positioned on the page so that it is directly adjacent to the imitation shrimp that constitutes Neptune’s hair. The imitation shrimp visually flows into the real shrimp, entangling the ‘fantasy of surimi’ with constructions of class that are available even if you cannot afford the real thing. Here, not only is surimi supposed to be enticing in its own right, but its existence is premised upon associations with other foods.

While these advertisements play an important role in positioning surimi seafood as a speciality product that can claim to be the equivalent of seafood such as crab or lobster, firms do not construct these associations only in the advertisements, but throughout the production process itself. The images in these ads are not entirely arbitrary, but instead are about entanglement based upon distancing that happens during production. To be able to sell imitation crab in these ways, it has to be distanced from its association with a specific fish type, so that people do not know its physical and geographical origins.

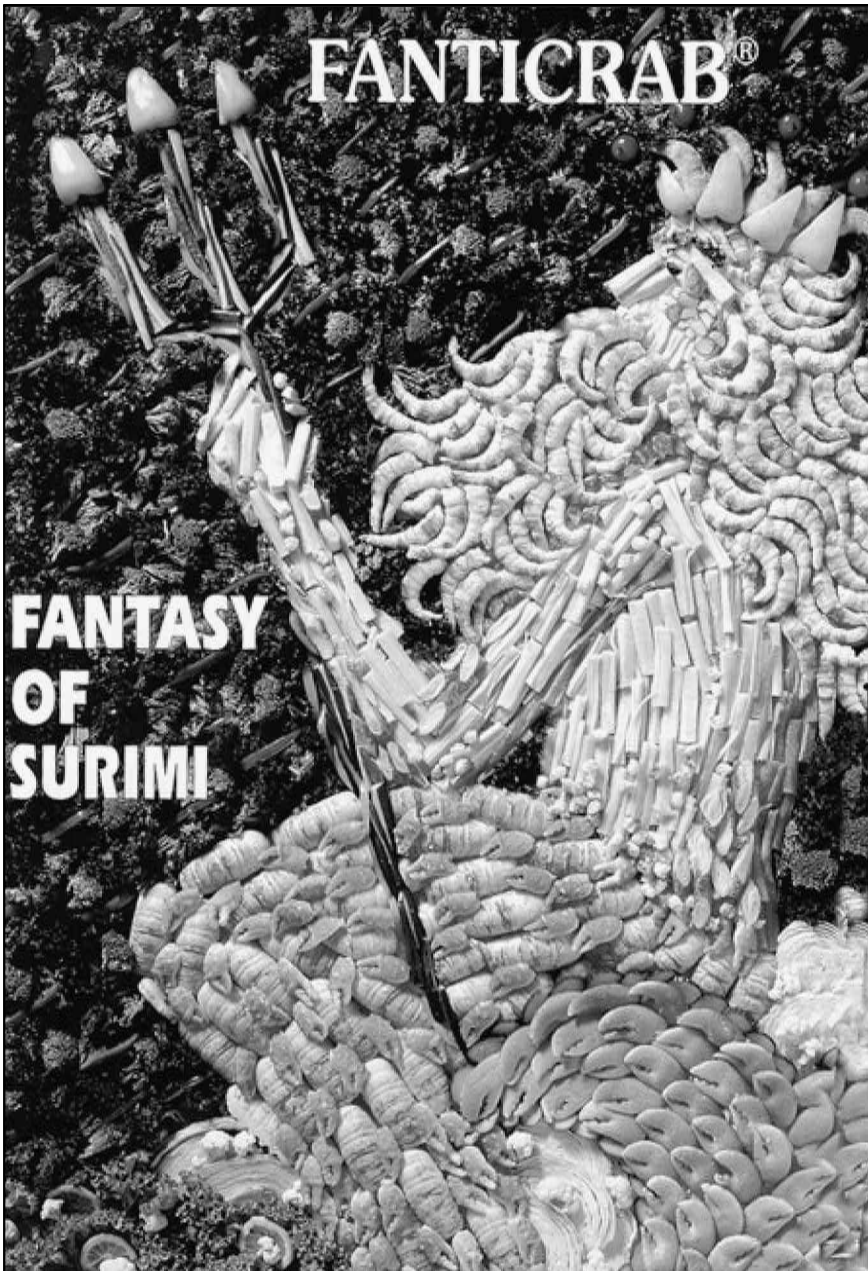


FIGURE 2 'Fanticrab: fantasy of Surimi'. In this collage, Neptune, the king of the sea, is composed entirely of imitation seafood: his hair is imitation shrimp, his face, body and arms are imitation crab, and his tail is imitation lobster tail and claws (the background is vegetables). In a companion ad, the company uses surimi products to depict a bare-breasted mermaid. (Used by permission of S.I.T. International.)

The majority of surimi seafoods are made from a fish called Alaska pollock, from the North Pacific Ocean. This fishery is actually the largest fishery in the world,<sup>29</sup> although pollock does not command a large market when sold as 'pollock'. Instead, pollock is transformed into a paste that can be worked, both economically and culturally, to develop a different commodity – surimi seafood. It is in this physical transformation that surimi is produced as an item with specific sociocultural connotations. After being caught, pollock is stripped of its properties as a fish. Through heading, gutting and de-boning, multiple washings, straining and even centrifuging, the fish is processed to remove anything except the fish protein (Figure 3). It is then mixed with salt, sugars and starches

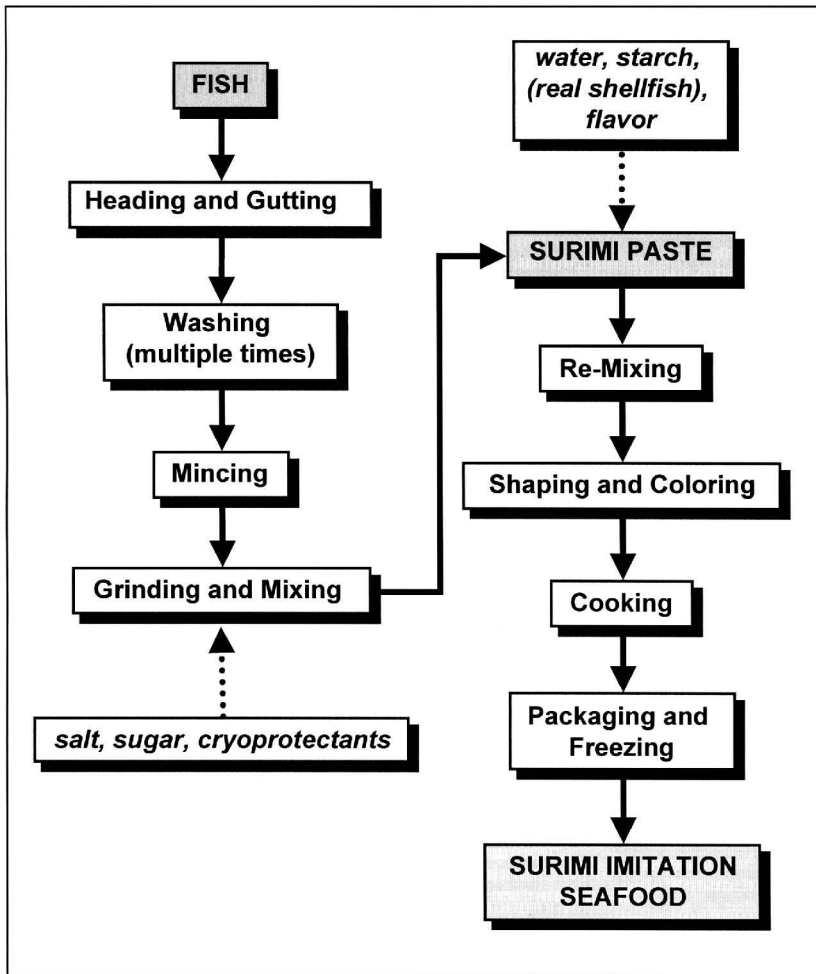


FIGURE 3 Surimi seafood processing flow chart. Shows the basic steps processors use to transform fish into surimi paste and then into imitation seafood; individual processors' methods may be different from this.

to become a generic paste, which is a commodity in its own right, sold in the global marketplace. Seafood firms then remix this generic surimi paste, adding varying amounts of water, more starches, sometimes a small amount of real shellfish, and artificial flavours (a chemical 'eau de crab'). The flavoured paste is then extruded or moulded into different shapes, the edges are painted or dyed pink, and it is cooked, packaged and frozen.

What is critical here is that even in its physical form, what is being created is not simply a fish paste or fish cake. In the extrusion and painting process, the fish paste becomes *representational* as processors give it the form of imitation crab, lobster, shrimp, or scallops. Surimi seafood is thus a social construction of seafood, and the ads follow from and extend this representational context. The meanings developed in ads, then, cannot be separated out as cultural signifiers that are added subsequent to production, but the food and the ads are entangled as part of the distancing of surimi seafood from a real fish. Critically, once the production process is over and surimi seafood is marketed, it is no longer about taking a generic fish paste and selling it as crab: it is taking something that looks like crab, and tastes something like crab, and selling it as crab. Regardless of how firms advertise their product or how an individual consumer uses the product once they buy it, surimi seafoods are no longer pollock – they are no longer 'fish'. Instead they are 'seafood', or perhaps even 'shellfish'. Thus, the cultural–economic act of production is simultaneously about transforming both the material form and the meaning of surimi as a commodity.

## **Social history: new markets for surimi products**

To make sense of this first trajectory – the transformation of fish into imitation products – it is also important to understand the social history of surimi, in which it is transformed from a Japanese product into a Western one. Although primarily made from the same fish – Alaska pollock – surimi products in Japan and in the West have rather different characteristics. As Sidney Mintz argues, 'when unfamiliar substances are taken up by new users, they enter into pre-existing social and psychological contexts and acquire – or are given – contextual meanings by those who use them. How that happens is by no means obvious.'<sup>30</sup> Thus, as surimi products became available in Western markets, firms actively redefined meanings, cultural constructs and product forms in another process of distancing. This distancing took on particularly national tones, in that US firms and fisheries development agencies were redefining surimi to be explicitly 'American'. US firms did not simply ignore the Japanese origins of surimi; rather they 'orientalized'<sup>31</sup> Japanese products and production systems by representing them as 'other'. Through what Derek Gregory calls 'dispossession through othering',<sup>32</sup> the American-ness and familiarity of surimi seafoods came from actively casting Japanese products and production strategies as different and odd. The development of surimi production in the US, and later Europe, is very much about constructing and enacting specific types of meanings about surimi and surimi seafoods that are about much more than seafood itself; these meanings are non-innocent ways of constructing the 'familiar' and the 'strange', an 'us' and a 'them'.<sup>33</sup> Thus, while distancing is a move of separation, it is also a move

of connection, in which meaning and significance are derived precisely by creating that distance.

In Japan, surimi is a well-known product with a long history. Secondary sources report that surimi was developed in Japan almost a thousand years ago: the first surviving mention of Japanese surimi products was in 1115. However, surimi was not available in large quantities and year round until after the Second World War, when new technologies, especially for refrigeration and freezing, enabled fishing fleets to initiate the North Pacific pollock fishery, generating large quantities of fish for surimi production.<sup>34</sup> Japanese seafood firms make hundreds of varieties of surimi products, including those that are broiled, steamed, fried, roasted, and boiled, with various different flavourings, shapes, and uses.<sup>35</sup> The most common of these are *kamaboko*, a fish cake that is steamed on a wooden board, and *chikuwa*, in which the surimi paste is shaped around a skewer then roasted to create a hollow tube. There is even a product (*datemake*) that is made with eggs and sugar, and can be used as a dessert. These surimi products have significance in a variety of sociocultural settings. For example, kamaboko is a traditional New Year's food. Also, specially wrapped boxes of surimi products are often used as gifts, placing surimi within Japanese practices of gift-giving and wrapping.<sup>36</sup> The surimi industry is also important to regional identities: surimi production is one of the historical industries of the coastal town of Odawara, about 80 km south-west of Tokyo. Tourist pamphlets from the town claim kamaboko as a 'traditional delicacy of Odawara', and you can buy this local speciality as a souvenir in the many kamaboko shops in the downtown area. As a speciality in their own right, surimi products are positioned very differently compared with the US and Europe. The status of individual surimi products comes from the quality of production, the types of fish used and the reputation of the manufacturer.

Several Japanese firms simultaneously developed the imitation crab form in the 1970s, when they made 'sticks' that could be used as snack foods or in sushi-making. While imitation crab was introduced in part to stop the decline in market share of surimi products,<sup>37</sup> imitation products are a relatively small part of the overall surimi products market in Japan, at less than 10% of the total.<sup>38</sup> The first of these Japanese firms to introduce their products to the United States was Sugiyo, a seafood firm that in 1976 paired up with a US seafood company to sell a line of imitation crab – Sea Legs – in the US.<sup>39</sup> As this brand name indicates, firms such as Sugiyo tried to take advantage of the popularity at the time of king crab legs by offering imitation crab as an alternative to this expensive, and increasingly rare, seafood item. So from the beginning, imitation products were entangled with foods that were known and desirable in the US.

After the introduction of surimi products, the US developed its own surimi processing industry, and it was at this point in particular that US fish firms and fisheries development agencies worked actively to distance surimi from its Japanese origins by positioning surimi as a new American product. During the late 1970s to mid 1980s, US interests focused on taking over fisheries production in the North Pacific from the Japanese fish firms, and agencies promoted surimi production as a way of 'Americanizing' these fisheries.<sup>40</sup> The Alaska Fisheries Development Foundation provided funding and support for development of the first US surimi processing facility, and produced a report on their project, entitled 'Surimi: it's American now'. In an effort to Americanize not only the

fisheries but the product as well, the cover of this report depicted surimi – as imitation products – taking its place in a Norman Rockwell-esque traditional American family (Figure 4).

Firms themselves also worked to position surimi as an American product rather than a Japanese one. Although several firms had been selling Japanese kamaboko and chikuwa

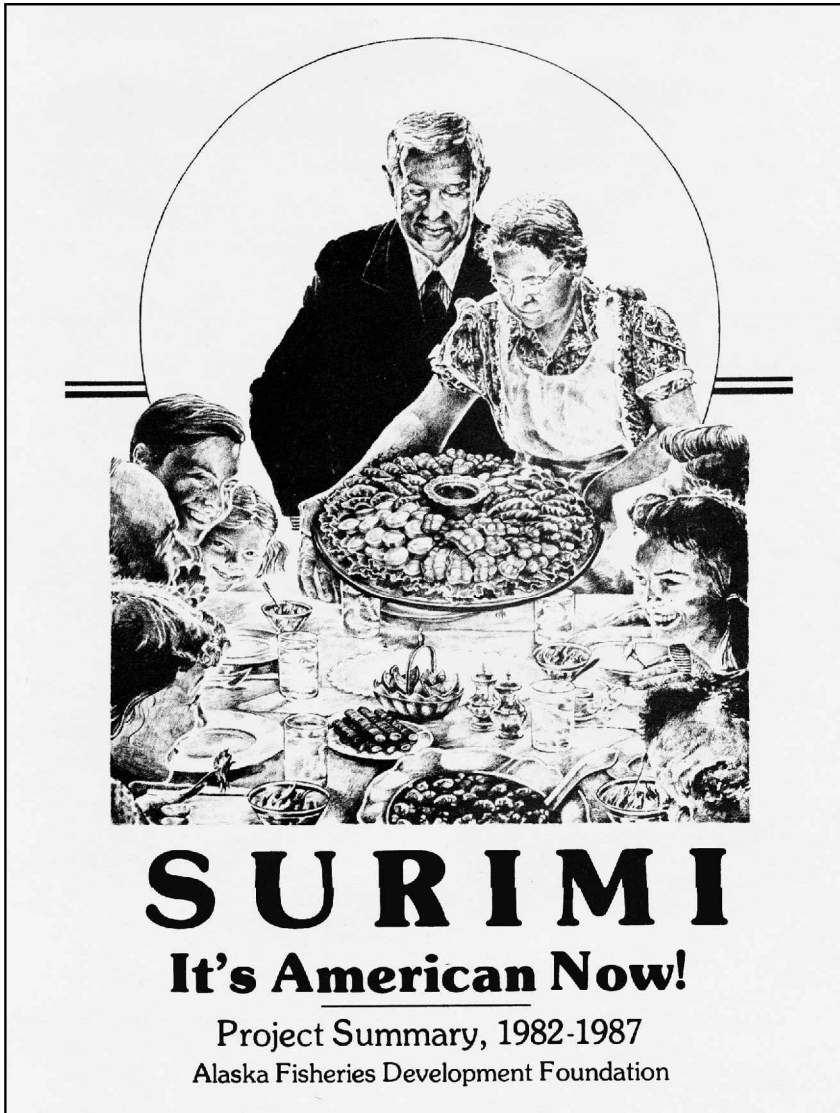


FIGURE 4 'Surimi – It's American Now!' Cover of a report by the Alaska Fisheries Development Foundation, published in 1987. The image depicts imitation seafoods taking their place within the stereotypical American family. (Used by permission of Alaska Fisheries Development Foundation.)

products in Asian markets in the US for decades, they had not been selling these products to the wider public.<sup>41</sup> One firm reported that in their market surveys, American consumers said that kamaboko looked like little rubber balls or a bar of soap, and that their dogs would not eat it.<sup>42</sup> Switching to the imitation crab product form allowed these firms to sell surimi to consumers in the US without marketing it as an 'ethnic' product. To further distance surimi products from Japan, firms selling imitation crab took on American-sounding names – even when the company was Japanese-owned. For example, surimi and surimi seafoods producers UniSea, Peter Pan, Westward and Trans-Ocean Products are all US subsidiaries of Japanese firms.

Deploying a variety of orientalisms that cast Japanese products and production as 'other', producers and surimi boosters in the US were also keen to distance surimi seafoods from Japan out of a sense of superiority about American ways of doing things, including technologies, processing techniques and food cultures. As a representative of the Alaska Fisheries Development Foundation boasted:

Think of it. Ten years ago surimi products were rubbery little slices of colored fish cake found only in Little Tokyo . . . The art of surimi making was perceived to be an oriental mystery – but it's not anymore. Thanks to the efforts of [named American researchers] new technologies are being introduced which will advance the surimi-making process into the 21st century.<sup>43</sup>

Despite the fact that it is in Japan that surimi products are the most varied, this representative went on to say,

I had my own doubts about the surimi industry, and they centred around a single fear: I worried that the US industry – the non-Japanese industry that is – would be satisfied copying existing processing technologies and accepting existing quality standards and grades.<sup>44</sup>

Two American researchers, involved in research and development of processing techniques, similarly argued that,

surimi manufacture as it exists today [the late 1980s] was tailored for specific products in a different culture: simply put, it is industrial scale-up of traditional methods based on cultural ideas. As such, it is not likely the most efficient . . . scheme for processing fish muscle.<sup>45</sup>

The goal of the American industry, then, was neither to imitate nor simply compete with Japanese firms, but to better them. Although in these quotes the superiority and innovativeness of the US industry is basically presumed, it is also constructed discursively by treating Japanese foods, technologies, standards and cultural practices as inefficient, weird and backward-looking.

In Europe, surimi products first became available in the 1980s, when Japanese and South Korean firms introduced imitation products to Western European markets. By the late 1990s, consumption in Europe as a whole was increasing at around 20% a year, with the highest consumption in France and Spain.<sup>46</sup> Unlike in the US, in Europe most surimi seafoods are imported, primarily from Thailand, South Korea and, most recently, China, rather than locally produced. There are, however, several companies, primarily in France, that are now producing their own surimi products for sale in France and other European Union countries, using surimi paste imported mainly from the US and Argentina.<sup>47</sup> Both importers and European producers of surimi seafood have, like their American

counterparts, distanced surimi from its Japanese origins by presenting it as familiar and local. First, many of the importers are local seafood firms, which then repackage surimi seafoods under their own, familiar brand names and in different product forms; examples include Sco Fro's 'Sea Spray' brand 'seasticks' and Freshway Foods' 'Seafood Sticks and Dip', in which imitation crab sticks are packaged with dipping sauces. Producers claim that breaded surimi 'crab claws' are particularly popular in southern Europe.<sup>48</sup> In addition to producing imitation products, the European manufacturers have also developed new products that are considered neither 'Japanese' nor 'American'. French firms such as Cuisimer and Fleury Michon are currently developing products in which surimi is formed into a *pâté*, such as one made from imitation crab and salmon, or packaged with French-style herbs and sauces. Again, by entangling surimi with familiar foods – from shellfish to *pâtés* – these European firms have distanced surimi from any association with Japan, and have done so not just through marketing strategies but through the very products they are producing and marketing.

This social history of how surimi was first introduced into Western markets helps to explain how we get from the array of Japanese products to the single category of imitation products. The imitation form was developed in Japan as a snack food and then introduced into the West. The legitimacy of surimi seafoods did not come from associating them with Japan and selling surimi as an 'ethnic food'. Rather, legitimacy came from distancing surimi seafood from Japan by entangling it both materially and symbolically with foods familiar to and sought after by Western consumers. Surimi seafood was first introduced as an analogue just for king crab legs; but by continuing to distance surimi from Japan, producers have been able to develop a whole range of imitation products in additional forms such as lobster, scallops and shrimp. And although surimi seafoods were not cast as ethnic or exotic, firms carried out this distancing and entanglement precisely by relying on and producing ideas about exoticness and familiarity. Further, this meaning construction was wrapped up with constructing nationality and representing national identity, i.e. American-ness or Japanese-ness. Although surimi seafood does not have an explicit national origin, ideas about nationality and otherness run through the social history of these products. Imitation product forms are about remaking surimi in a different mould.

## **Conclusions**

Once surimi seafood is distanced from both the fish and Japan, firms are free to position this mass-produced, inexpensive item as a familiar yet luxury seafood that is available to all consumers. Their ability to do so is based on the specific history through which surimi became a Western product, and on the specific production process through which fish-in-the-water is transformed into representation-of-shellfish. The emergence and dominance of imitation products in the West is not determined solely by economic rationalities nor solely by culturally specific ideas about food, familiarity and the exotic. Rather, the trajectories that I have traced here highlight the ways that cultural and economic production are simultaneous and entwined. In the process of making and selling imitation crab, lobster and scallops, seafood firms are not just creating new



products to compete in the marketplace, but are creating new cultural forms that are entangled with associations of speciality foods. Similarly, Japanese firms first introduced imitation crab legs to the West as a way of developing new markets for their products. The success of these products, however, came not simply from providing an economic good, but from positioning them in certain ways rather than in others – in particular by making them familiar in contrast to an exotic other. It is through these various processes of material-symbolic production that surimi in the West becomes a very different product from what it is in Japan. Explaining how surimi seafoods came to be requires examining how their material and symbolic production are entwined.

Analysis of geographies of distance and entanglement highlights some of the ways that production is about both meaning and materiality, and the ways that cultural processes of meaning construction are not limited to consumption, but are integral throughout production and trade as well. Material production remains important, and should not be relegated to an innocent materiality or an economically removed production. The intent here is not to return to the idea that cultural processes are subordinate to, or determined by, economic processes. Nor is the intent to suggest that research on other facets of production and consumption are not also important; for example, business culture, labour relations and consumption are all central to cultural economic relations. But to ignore material production is to miss key moments in the social geography of things, and the importance of these things for both daily life and social relations stretched over time and space. The story of surimi shows that in its material production, surimi seafood is a contradictory mix of cheap luxury, real imitation and familiar exotic. Although the meanings of these imitations are certainly not fixed, neither do they float freely, divorced from their materiality or their social history. The material existence of *these* products, as opposed to other products, is intimately connected with cultural constructions of taken-for-granted notions of class, nationality and what counts as a normal food. In its material production, surimi seafood links the deli counter with the North Pacific Ocean, Japan, and the history of relations between the United States and Japan and the relations that construct the 'West' and the 'Orient'.<sup>49</sup>

Commodity production thus entails myriad decontextualizations, which involve distancing through practices such as material transformation, monetary exchange and removal of cultural connotations. Decontextualization is simultaneously a material and symbolic recontextualization, which involves entanglement in new contexts, forms and places. Each act of de- or re-contextualization is about creating particular types of both distance and connection. The stories of things and how they come to be tells us much about the material-symbolic geographies of these distances and connections.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> A note on terminology: the term 'surimi seafoods' refers to imitation products. This is common practice within the industry, as producers often try to avoid using the term 'imitation'. 'Surimi products' refers to the larger category of surimi-based foods, including not only imitation products but also the range of Japanese products, fish balls and other items available in different markets.
- <sup>2</sup> P. Jackson, 'Commodity cultures: the traffic in things', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* **24** (1999), p. 95. See also P. Jackson and N. Thrift, 'Geographies of consumption', in D. Miller, ed., *Acknowledging consumption: a review of new studies* (London, Routledge, 1995), pp. 228–9.
- <sup>3</sup> M.J. Lee, *Consumer culture reborn: the cultural politics of consumption* (London, Routledge, 1993), p. xiii. Other studies that treat consumption as the meeting point of the economic and the cultural include D. Howes, ed., *Cross-cultural consumption: global markets, local realities* (London, Routledge, 1996), B. Fine and E. Leopold, *The world of consumption* (London, Routledge, 1993), and R.D. Sack, *Place, modernity, and the consumer's world: a relational framework for geographical analysis* (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992).
- <sup>4</sup> J. Tomlinson, *Globalization and culture* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1999), p. 18.
- <sup>5</sup> e.g. A. Appadurai, *Modernity at large: cultural dimensions of globalization* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1996); 'Writing for culture', special issue of *Current anthropology* **40** (1999); A. Gupta and J. Ferguson, 'Culture, power, place: ethnography at the end of an era' and 'Beyond "culture": space, identity, and the politics of difference', in Gupta and Ferguson, eds, *Culture, power, place: explorations in critical anthropology* (Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 1997), pp. 1–29, 33–51; see also P. Crang, 'Introduction: cultural turns and the (re)constitution of economic geography', in R. Lee and J. Wills, eds, *Geographies of economies* (London, Arnold, 1997).
- <sup>6</sup> U. Hannerz, 'Scenarios for peripheral cultures', in A.D. King, ed., *Culture, globalization and the world-system: contemporary conditions for the representation of identity* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1997), pp. 111–12.
- <sup>7</sup> R. Goldman and S. Papson, *Nike culture: the sign of the swoosh* (London, Sage, 1998). Whereas their section entitled 'The absence of the commodity' (pp. 79–81) is about Nike ads in which there is no indication of the product or company except the swoosh, there is very little of the commodity itself anywhere in their book either. Although quite insightful in their analysis of Nike's advertising, they seem to accept Nike's advertising position: the product is the sign, not the material commodity. See below for more on 'sign economies'.
- <sup>8</sup> P. du Gay, S. Hall, L. Janes, H. Mackay and K. Negus, *Doing cultural studies: the story of the Sony Walkman* (London, Sage, 1997). See below for more on business culture as cultural economic practice.
- <sup>9</sup> Early work includes A. Appadurai, 'Introduction: commodities and the politics of value', in A. Appadurai, ed., *The social life of things: commodities in cultural perspective* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 3–63; P. Bourdieu, *Distinction: a social critique of the judgement of taste*, trans. R. Nice (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1984); M. Douglas and B. Isherwood, *The world of goods*, 2nd edn (London, Routledge, 1996); and D. Miller, *Material culture and mass consumption* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1987). For discussion of this literature and more recent research, see M. Featherstone, *Consumer culture and postmodernism* (London, Sage, 1991); J. Friedman, 'Introduction', in J. Friedman, ed., *Consumption and identity* (Switzerland, Harwood Academic, 1994) pp. 1–22; P. Jackson, 'Rematerializing social and cultural geography', *Social and cultural geography* **1** (2000), pp.

- 9–14; C. Lury, *Consumer culture* (New Brunswick, NJ, Rutgers University Press, 1996), pp. 10–51; Miller, *Acknowledging consumption*, especially the chapter by Jackson and Thrift on geographical approaches; and D. Miller *et al.*, *Shopping, place, and identity* (London, Routledge, 1998), pp. 1–7.
- <sup>10</sup> D. Miller, 'Why some things matter', in Miller, ed., *Material cultures: why some things matter* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 6.
- <sup>11</sup> D. Howes, 'Introduction: commodities and cultural borders', in Howes, *Cross-cultural consumption*, p. 2. See also Appadurai, *Modernity at large*, pp. 27–47; M. Featherstone, *Undoing culture: globalization, postmodernism, and identity* (London, Sage, 1995), pp. 6–14, 86–92; Hannerz, 'Peripheral cultures', pp. 107–28; J.J. Tobin, 'Introduction: domesticating the West', in J.J. Tobin, ed., *Re-made in Japan: everyday life and consumer taste in a changing society* (New Haven, CT, Cornell University Press, 1992), pp. 1–41.
- <sup>12</sup> In this regard there has been a distinction, often implicit, between goods that originate in 'the West' and those that are incorporated into 'the West'. Whereas fears about homogenization are often cast as Westernization, goods from around the world in the US and Europe are treated instead as 'exotic' and their popularity construed as 'consuming the other' (see Howes, *Cross-cultural consumption*). But not all commodities retain their 'foreignness', and it is important to understand the cultural and economic practices that create this transformation; hence, this paper focuses on changes in surimi as it was transformed from an 'exotic' Japanese product into a familiar American one.
- <sup>13</sup> Daniel Miller quite explicitly references consumption, rather than production, as the proper locus for material culture analysis, and states that 'the key moment in which people construct themselves or are constructed by others is increasingly though relations with cultural forms in the arena of consumption'. See Miller, 'Why some things matter', p. 11.
- <sup>14</sup> Phil Crang, in identifying different approaches to culture and economy, calls this 'the cultural materialization of the economic'. See Crang, 'Cultural turns', pp. 13–14.
- <sup>15</sup> J. Baudrillard, *Simulations*, trans. P. Foss, P. Patton and P. Beitchman (New York, Semiotext(e), 1983).
- <sup>16</sup> Featherstone, 'Consumer culture', pp. 66–67.
- <sup>17</sup> S. Lash and J. Urry, *Economies of signs and space* (London, Sage, 1994), p. 5.
- <sup>18</sup> e.g. Featherstone, 'Undoing culture'; 'Culture, economy, policy: trends and developments', special issue of *Geoforum* **31** (2000); D. Held *et al.*, *Global transformations: politics, economics and culture* (Stanford, CA, Stanford University Press, 1999), pp. 327–75; Lash and Urry, 'Signs'; A.J. Scott, *The cultural economy of cities: essays on the geography of image-producing industries* (Thousand Oaks, CA, Sage, 2000).
- <sup>19</sup> J.R. Bryson *et al.*, eds, *Knowledge, space, economy* (London, Routledge, 2000); M. Storper, *The regional world: territorial development in a global economy* (New York, Guilford Press, 1997); H.W.-C. Yeung, *Transnational corporations and business networks: Hong Kong firms in the ASEAN region* (London, Routledge, 1998); P. du Gay, *Consumption and identity at work* (London, Sage, 1996); S. Halford and M. Savage, 'Rethinking restructuring: embodiment, agency and identity in organizational change', in Lee and Wills, *Geographies of economies*, pp. 108–17; and L. McDowell, 'A tale of two cities? Embedded organizations and embodied workers in the City of London', in Lee and Wills, *Geographies of economies*, pp. 118–29.
- <sup>20</sup> As Ian Cook argues in his analysis of tropical fruits as part of the global food economy, 'there is a symbiotic relationship between the "material" production of a fruit or vegetable and the "symbolic" production of its meanings(s)'. See I. Cook, 'New fruits and vanity: symbolic production in the global food economy', in Alessandro Bonanno *et al.*, eds, *From Columbus to ConAgra: the globalization of agriculture and food* (Lawrence, University Press of Kansas,

- 1994), p. 232.
- <sup>21</sup> R. Williams, *Problems in materialism and culture* (London, Verso, 1980), p. 47.
- <sup>22</sup> Recent geographical approaches have offered these spatial metaphors as an alternative to the more common visual metaphors, such as *unveiling*, that prioritize commodities as fetishes, in which sociocultural meanings simply hide the social relations embodied within a commodity. Whereas visual metaphors emphasize the surfaces of commodities, spatial metaphors emphasize connections and relations. See Jackson, 'Commodity cultures', 98–9; P. Jackson, 'Commercial cultures: transcending the cultural and the economic', *Progress in human geography* **26** (2002), pp. 3–18; P. Crang, 'Displacement, consumption, and identity', *Environment and planning A* **28** (1996), pp. 47–67; I. Cook and P. Crang, 'The world on a plate: culinary culture, displacement and geographical knowledges', *Journal of material culture* **1** (1996), pp. 131–53.
- <sup>23</sup> Crang, 'Displacement', p. 48; Cook and Crang, 'Culinary culture', p. 138. See also Jackson and Thrift, 'Consumption', pp. 204–37.
- <sup>24</sup> Appadurai, 'Politics of value', pp. 48–54.
- <sup>25</sup> Appadurai, *Social life of things*.
- <sup>26</sup> See also I. Kopytoff, 'The cultural biography of things: commoditization as process', in Appadurai, *Social life of things*, pp. 64–91, in which he coins the phrase 'cultural biography of things'.
- <sup>27</sup> In an approach complementary to that for which I argue here, Paul Robbins draws on Appadurai to trace the cultural signification of meat as it travels along commodity chains in India (see P. Robbins, 'Meat matters: cultural politics along the commodity chain in India', *Ecumene* **6** (1999), pp. 399–423). His take on cultural economies and the social life of things, however, separates production from exchange, and argues that it is in the expanding nodes of exchange – rather than production – that meanings proliferate.
- <sup>28</sup> *Seafood international* (Oct. 1999), pp. 20–1.
- <sup>29</sup> Food and Agriculture Organization, *FAO yearbook of fishery statistics* (Rome, FAO, annual).
- <sup>30</sup> S. Mintz, *Sweetness and power: the place of sugar in modern history* (New York, Viking, 1985), p. 6.
- <sup>31</sup> E.W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York, Vintage, 1979).
- <sup>32</sup> D. Gregory, *Geographical imaginations* (Cambridge, MA, Blackwell, 1994), p. 169.
- <sup>33</sup> See Said, *Orientalism*, p. 43.
- <sup>34</sup> The history of Japanese surimi production is from M. Okada, 'The history of surimi and surimi based products in Japan', in R.E. Martin and R.L. Collette, eds, *Engineered seafood including surimi* (Park Ridge, NJ, Noyes Data Corporation, 1990), pp. 30–41; M. Okada, 'History of surimi technology in Japan', in T.C. Lanier and C.M. Lee, eds, *Surimi technology* (New York, Marcel Dekker, 1992), pp. 3–21; and M. Raizin and L. Regier, 'Economic aspects of the Japanese kamaboko industry', *Marine fisheries review* **48** (1986), pp. 60–4.
- <sup>35</sup> For product descriptions, see J.W. Park, 'Surimi seafood: products, market, and manufacturing', in Park, ed., *Surimi and surimi seafood* (New York, Dekker, 2000), pp. 201–35 and Y. Kammuri and T. Fujita, 'Surimi-based products and fabrication processes', in Martin and Collette, *Engineered seafood*, pp. 248–57.
- <sup>36</sup> For a discussion of the role of presentation in Japanese society, see J. Hendry, *Wrapping culture: politeness, presentation and power in Japan and other societies* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1993).
- <sup>37</sup> Although I have no independent data to confirm this, several analysts have suggested that this overall decline is due to changes in food consumption patterns in Japan, as seafood is increasingly replaced by beef, chicken and dairy products. See e.g. T. Asakawa, *Japanese market information: surimi and surimi products* (Tokyo, Commercial Section, US Embassy, Japan, 1999), p. 1, and J.T. Sproul, 'Trends in Japan–USA seafood trade, with an emphasis on Alaska

- pollock surimi, and the effects on Japanese household consumption of surimi-based foods', *Memoirs of the Faculty of Fisheries, Hokkaido University* **40** (1994), p. 123.
- <sup>38</sup> From 1987 to 1996, total surimi production averaged 860 000 tonnes per year; average production of imitation products was 60 000 tonnes, or 7% of the total. Calculated from Asakawa, *Japanese market*, p. 45.
- <sup>39</sup> D. Best, 'A tale of two companies', *Prepared foods* **159** (1990), pp. 178–81. The Sea Legs brand that Sugiyo introduced is the same as that now owned by Trident, the ads for which were discussed above. In 1989 the Berelson Company (Sugiyo's US partner) was bought by Nichirei foods, another Japanese firm. Trident Seafoods, an American firm, then bought the Sea Legs line in 1999.
- <sup>40</sup> B. Mansfield, 'Thinking through scale: the role of state governance in globalizing North Pacific fisheries', *Environment and planning A* **33** (2001), pp. 1807–27, with Erratum **34** (2002), no. 1.
- <sup>41</sup> T. Kishimoto, 'Marketing and merchandizing of surimi-based products', in Martin and Collette, *Engineered seafood*, pp. 359–61.
- <sup>42</sup> R. Chambers, 'The importance of marketing quality products', in Martin and Collette, *Engineered seafood*, pp. 355–58.
- <sup>43</sup> C. Mitchell, 'Keynote address: three years ago to the day we made an important discovery', in Martin and Collette, *Engineered seafood*, pp. 4–5.
- <sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>45</sup> D. Green and T. Lanier, 'Fish as the "soybean of the sea"', in Martin and Collette, *Engineered seafood*, p. 43.
- <sup>46</sup> L. de Franssu, *The world surimi industry prospects for Europe* (Rome, Globefish Research Programme, 1992), pp. 30–31; 'Europe, only here does surimi flourish today!', *Produits de la mer* **55** (June–July 1999), p. 21; P. Clément, 'Le marché mondial du surimi' (The world surimi market), *Produits de la pêche et de l'aquaculture* **7/8** (1999), p. 21.
- <sup>47</sup> European import statistics from the Fisheries Directorate of the European Commission, unpublished data provided by Artur Payer at the European Commission. Supplementary information on imports from China from E. Hempel, 'Surimi: the world is now its market', *Seafood international* (Dec. 2001), pp. 30–33. Information on French production from A. Renard, 'Surimi: progression continue en France (Surimi: progress continues in France)', *Produits de la mer* **55** (June–July 1999), pp. 93–8.
- <sup>48</sup> Hempel, 'Surimi', p. 33.
- <sup>49</sup> In this context, the metaphor of distance is also useful for rethinking the character of 'globalization' of commodities such as surimi seafoods. Rather than emphasizing globalization as movement toward an integrated world, whether characterized as homogeneous or heterogeneous, 'distance' suggests that globalization is composed of complex and contingent geographies that are simultaneously about connection and separation. Distance serves to remind us that globalization of commodity production and consumption draws places together in various ways, while maintaining and creating distinctiveness and difference.