PART FOUR

Subverting Categories

Critical-Creative Re-interpretations of Food

The five essays in Part 4 turn to material and "messy" sources of inspiration, providing means of moving across expressive and disciplinary frameworks. Here, the topic of Canadian food cultures is examined from positions of critical and imaginative exchange, individual transformation, and challenges to societal norms. Whether in the contexts of popular culture, personal life experience, literature, or visual and performance art, food is experienced, shaped, examined, and consumed in ways that highlight and destabilize conceptual and physical boundaries, offering alternative ways of thinking about and relating to the world. In a piece of creative non-fiction that brings queer theory and object studies into conversation, Jes Battis opens this section by exploring the relationship between food and sexuality with "a queer twist." Through personal anecdote and analysis of popular television series, Battis poses an urgent and provocative question: what makes a meal queer? Moving from the queering of food to an examination of a "taste for the abject," artist Sandee Moore meditates on why food is a constant within her practice. Through public acts of consumption and food sharing, Moore highlights social bonds and power relations, demonstrating how uncomfortable encounters destabilize her audience's expectations and sense of intimacy. Turning to the intersections of literature and art, Heidi Tiedemann Darroch brings writer Alice Munro and painter Mary Pratt into conversation through paradoxical and sometimes mutually inspired depictions of gendered experience and violence via the domestic kitchen. Alexia Moyer then reveals how online communities have transformed her reading of Canadian literature through her cooking blog *Tableaux*. Theorizing her project as "an exercise in literary tourism," Moyer shares her favourite literary recipes. Closing the section is a conversation between Mi'kmaw artist Ursula Johnson and curators David Diviney and Melinda Spooner on the topic of Johnson's interrelated and award-winning multimedia performance artworks that provide a community-based examination of the natural and cultural ecologies and the foodways of Nova Scotia's Cape Breton Highlands National Park.

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Breaking Bread

Queer Foodways and the Non-human

Jes Battis

Introduction: Cruising Food

A recent episode of the culinary program *Chopped* was ecstatic to focus on aphrodisiacs.[1] *Chopped* first aired in 2007, emerging from the "lifestyle" reality show boom of the early 2000s that also brought us *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* (2003–07). Unlike *Iron Chef America* (2005–), which pits celebrity chefs against one another, *Chopped* focuses on unknown contestants who compete for prize money. The contestants come to the show with personal narratives, and the host, Ted Allen, plays the same neutral figure as he did on *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, with nary a raised eyebrow. In this episode, the menu included the usual suspects, like chocolate and oysters, as well as avocado, which I'd never thought of as a particularly sexy food. The contestants struggled to cook with ingredients that emerged from a mystery basket (not the easiest strategy for assembling a romantic meal). There is something decadent about *Chopped* as a show. It transforms cheap ingredients – often high in sodium or sugar – into aggrandizing works of art. This is an act of high camp, though the contestants are deadly earnest about it.

Before watching as the contestants try to combine chocolate with asparagus, we hear about their histories, their relationships, and – most importantly – why they need the prize money. Often, there is a recent marriage or death involved. This particular episode was playing with a number of well-worn Mediterranean stereotypes. The Spanish contestant gave provocative names to each of her dishes, while the chef from Sardinia was understood to value family above all else. The Jamaican chef, eliminated early, was accused of being "too spicy." By the halfway mark, it was clear that the white American chef, with his creepy fetish for Thailand, would be the winner. Inspired by the erotic undertones of the episode, the judges started

to go off the rails. Amanda Freitag leaned across the table to proposition Aarón Sanchez, who looked decidedly uncomfortable. In spite of near-constant citations regarding the sexiness of the food, it was clear that nothing about this scene could actually be sexy.

I often watch *Chopped* with my mother, and that night was no exception. When they got to the oyster round, she said: "Your grandfather gave me a raw oyster once, and it came right back up." As a critique of the episode, it was incisive, as well as unsettling. The thought of my grandfather feeding people oysters was weird in itself, but her summary was what called the entire episode into question. What could be sexy about something that looks and feels the way that an oyster does? What could be sexy about the alimentary process in general? I thought about the Jamaican contestant, who had seemed queer to me. Perhaps it was his focus on brunch, or the fact that he didn't have a visible family. It made me wonder how the episode might have been different had all the contestants been queer. Would the menu have been the same? What does queer food look like, and does it share the same definition as pornography – that is, do we know it when we see it? The word "queer" supposes an orientation, but that's a relatively recent development. Sara Ahmed has argued that queerness might be no position after all, or a kind of productive vertigo. "It is not always obvious which places are the ones where we can feel at home."[2] If we unmoor sexuality from an experience that's either orientative or situational, what are we left with? I'm reminded of a Frank Zappa song, "Call Any Vegetable," in which we're asked to "think of a vegetable / lonely at home … Vegetables dream / of responding to you." I imagine the scene of a lonely avocado, watching *Chopped* with desperation. What kind of orientation would that be?

Food Studies and Object Studies: New Recipes for Subjectivity

I want to focus on the relationship between food and sexuality, with a queer twist. In addition to thinking about queer genres of food and the ways in which certain foods can signal sexuality, I also want to think about food as "vibrant matter," to use ecologist Jane Bennett's phrase, which might have a queer life of its own. In her book, Bennett describes the various relations between animate and (supposedly) inanimate matter, in order to challenge easy notions of what it means to have "agency" as a thing in the world. She asks whether a cascading power failure, a landfill, or molten steel might have a life of its own, especially at the contact point be-

tween human and object. Her work is part of the "materialist turn" within critical theory, inspired by Bruno Latour's theorization of "networks" among objects, as well as the idea of the "assemblage" (an organism composed of different parts/relations) popularized by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. The goal of much of this work has been to decentre the human within the world's larger narrative, as well as to extend some of the benefits of personhood to animals and objects.

Sara Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology* debates the relationship between orientation and objects, but I'd like to expand this field to discuss the queerness of objects themselves: particularly, food objects. Could it be ecologically productive to think of food as something with agency, something that exists in a dynamic partnership with humans? Can the non-human have an orientation, a sexuality, and if so, how might this broaden the scope of queer studies? Through a mixture of cultural analysis and creative non-fiction, I'd like to spend some time blurring the boundaries of alimentary scholarship, parting sexuality from rigidly human properties. As I hope to argue, sexuality can resonate through meals just as clearly as it might through erotic encounters. The "love is love" tag privileges monogamous queer relationships, but what happens when our orientations drift towards the non-human? I'll touch upon queer meals, object studies, and Canadian popular culture in order to address these questions. My point is to query the value of implicating edibles in the study of queerness and, in particular, things that have a biological effect on us, which become us, as we become them.

It's one thing to say that meals can be queer in the sense of encoding a certain sensibility, a covert symbolism. It's different to say that food itself can have a queer orientation, like a sentient being with memories and agency. When I began writing this piece and would talk briefly about it with friends, they were all over the queer symbolism angle. "Cucumbers! Fruity drinks!" But the part about food *as queer* tended to provoke a raised eyebrow. Critical fields like object-oriented ontology suggest that vegetative life can form productive networks, even act upon human life, but can non-human life participate in sexuality? The more I was dissuaded from arguing this, the more I fell in love with the idea of a closeted avocado, a "vegetable … lonely at home." Human beings certainly don't have a patent on sexuality. While it's true that we sex both plants and animals, this is a poor translation of how they experience the biological processes that we place under the umbrella of sexuality and reproduction.

My point is that the notion of queer orientation, which was more or less required to secure a framework of rights for queer people, is also a translation. Rock

anthems like Lady Gaga's "Born This Way" suggest that sexuality is a recipe, encoded from birth and superimposed on the extraordinary chaos of desire. If we want this definition to remain livable, we need to extend it to the non-human; or we need to replace it with non-human patterns of sexuality, which offer fascinating, vegetative, non-prescriptive ways of being queer. We also need to query the life of the non-human, the desire of that which seems radically different from us, though sometimes familiar in its bonds, its alliances. Extending sexuality to things can be a way to look beyond the Anthropocene, to imagine the order of a world whose imperatives do not focus on us, the logical queers.

Food studies and object studies remain in a peripheral relationship with each other. In his edited volume on object studies, *Inhuman Nature*, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen thanks the "cheese [and] cherries … [that] fueled some of [the book's] thinking."[3] But the chapters that follow engage with noble objects, like ships and trees, even matter itself, rather than taking up questions of food. While we often think of eating as a relational act, it can also be solitary. Perhaps this boundary crossing is what makes it difficult to integrate food into critical theories such as object-oriented ontology. In a recent issue of *New Literary History*, Bennett notes the crisis within object studies between autonomy and community. We can point to symbiotic relationships between non-human life, or highlight the ways in which the human body works in co-operation with different organisms. But this doesn't necessarily work for what ecologist Timothy Morton calls hyper objects: "things that are massively distributed in time and space relative to humans."[4] Storms and glaciers may have agency, but they aren't team players. They don't belong to a system, nor do they require interlocutors. Bennett offers the following solution: "Perhaps there is no need to choose between objects or their relations … One would then understand 'objects' to be those swirls of matter, energy, and incipience that hold themselves together long enough to vie with the strivings of other objects, including the indeterminate momentum of the throbbing whole."[5] How might this erotic physics structure a conversation about non-human queerness? Bennett's language suggests that every object is an aphrodisiac, but to other objects, rather than to humans. It's starting to sound more like a queer orientation that goes on when we aren't looking, something as peculiar and necessary as gravitational waves. "Think of a vegetable, lonely at home." What do things want, without us?

Edible Orientations Part One: Wine

Television offers a variety of sex and food acts: to be consumed, critiqued, and, sometimes, feared. Whether we respond with desire or ambivalence, the popularity of reality food programs like *Chopped* and *Diners, Drive-Ins, and Dives* (meant to showcase family-owned restaurants in the United States and Canada), suggests that we devour food programming as if it were a form of visual erotica. Two Canadian comedies, *Schitt's Creek* and *The Kids in the Hall*, provide a queer fusion of food and sex that I'd like to explore. My treatment of *Schitt's Creek* focuses on wine as a queer orientation, and I then turn to coffee as a community-building substance in *Kids in the Hall*. Both programs address Canadian identity through scripted comedy, improvisation, and storytelling rooted in Canadian geography. *Schitt's Creek* explores what it means to have "taste" in a small Canadian town, while *Kids in the Hall* uses sketch comedy to deconstruct the urban gay rights movement in the 1990s.

In *Schitt's Creek*, the character David navigates sexuality through his deployment of taste. This implies not only Pierre Bourdieu's notion of taste that "classifies the classifier"[6] but also taste as one of the five senses. The show focuses on a wealthy family exiled to a small town that they once "bought" as a joke. It is David, in fact, who owns the town of Schitt's Creek, making his helplessness there all the more ironic. In the pilot episode, the Rose family visits a diner that serves as the town's gossip mill and community centre. David is particularly offended by the over-sized menus, which fold out accordion-style, unlike the chic prix-fixe menus to which he has become accustomed. They resemble the menus of a New York diner that calls itself a "New York diner," a kitchen masquerading as culture. David's frustration with the menu extends to the entire town as a surface that offends him. More than any other character on the show, he responds viscerally to the smells and textures of the aptly named town, which threaten to invade him at every turn.

Though coded as queer, David remains ambiguous. He has achieved a level of metrosexuality and critical shade that would qualify him as a success story on *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*. He definitely has a queer eye, but his own desires remain private, until he drunkenly sleeps with his female friend Stevie. It's clear in previous episodes that Stevie has also coded David as queer. She repeatedly describes his clothes as "funky," and more than anything, it's his difference that she seems to value – the mystery of his taste, so unlike the town's usual fare. After they sleep together, Stevie delicately tries to broach the subject. They're at a liquor store,

and she seizes upon wine as a suitable metaphor: "I *only* drink red wine," she says to him, "and until last night, I thought that *you* only drank red wine."[7] What's significant about David's response is how it refuses metaphor, while still using wine as a cipher for sexuality: "I do drink red wine. I also drink white wine. And I've been known occasionally to sample a rosé. And three summers back I tried a chardonnay that used to be a merlot … I like the wine, not the label."[8] His monologue allows the audience to visualize sexuality through taste and colour, as a kind of mutable vintage, rather than a fixed orientation. This also recalls a famously deleted scene from the 1960 epic *Spartacus*, in which Laurence Olivier playfully tells Tony Curtis: "I prefer both oysters and snails."[9]

What's interesting here is not simply how food and wine become substitutes for sexuality, but how they become inseparable from sexuality, creating new orientations and anti-labels: rosé, snail. They are what Morton describes, in his work on ecology, as "strange strangers": matter both familiar and alien to us.[10] This might refer to the intestinal flora that make digestion possible, or the plant-based tannins that we absorb when we consume red wine, blending organisms. In *Schitt's Creek*, David's parents describe him as "pansexual," and Stevie, at first, views him as bisexual. David classifies himself simply as a wine drinker, a hater of labels. The very idea of "a chardonnay that used to be a merlot" suggests a liquid transition, from one taste to another. And what could a "rosé" be? I watched this episode with my roommate, and she wondered if David might be talking about intersexuality. Was his response politically inclusive, or simply a clever twist of gustatory language? I'd like to suggest that David's description is not figurative. Wine is an expression of his sexuality, and taste is a more accurate way to describe what he desires. Not orientation, but viniculture. In a later episode, he goes in search of a chocolate torte whose richness – and scarcity – perfectly defines how he feels about his mother.[11] Stevie fails to understand the significance of this torte, which precipitates their breakup. For David, food and wine are not metaphors, but life modes.

Wine was always a marker of queerness for me. I was supposed to like beer (and hockey), and I'll admit that I do appreciate a stout; however, like David from *Schitt's Creek*, my preference has always been wine. Red wine is to be savoured. White wine should be consumed to excess while slowly collapsing into a friend's couch. Before we'd come of age, my group of friends engaged in the tradition of ordering mixed drinks at a restaurant chain that was known to serve minors. Mostly we choked down Long Island Iced Teas, and when truly desperate, we raided liquor cabinets and watered down bottles of Malibu. When drinking was forbidden, it

didn't matter what you actually drank, so long as there was alcohol in it. I could make a killer B-52, and my hockey-playing buds drank it without complaint. But after runs to the liquor store became possible, I found that my drinking choices were under scrutiny. Beer, not wine, was the correct response. Wine was for girls. At first, my trick was to buy insufficient beer, then shrug ruefully and drink the rest of the wine. Gradually, I found myself taking a vinicultural stand for the queerness that I felt. I defiantly brought red wine to backyard barbecues and after-game parties. I hung out with the girls in the kitchen, laughing easily, comparing notes on significant topics, like how many times we'd seen *Titanic*.

I grew up in the Fraser Valley, a rural and predominantly religious community in British Columbia that has become more culturally diverse in the last decade. Farms, corn stands, and berry picking were a part of my formative years. Another part was the hockey fundraiser: a "steak night" at a local pub, designed to generate funds for minor hockey. Chip in $15 and you help the team out, while scoring yourself a perfectly mediocre cut of meat, sandwiched between two dry pucks of garlic bread. One night, I found myself at a pub called Major League 2 (the first Major League had been such a success, they'd built a sequel in a nearby neighbourhood). A beer was included in the price of the steak, and I'd resigned myself to order a Corona, whose lime made it the fruitiest choice possible. As I was trying to summon up enthusiasm for this, a friend tapped me on the shoulder and pointed to the menu. "They've got a house red," he said. I can't describe the love I felt for him in that moment. When our drink order arrived, my cheap cabernet gleamed like a carbuncle among the drafts. Nobody said a word. I enjoyed a sense of belonging that can only come from a small town, dregs and all. A small place can make you bigger, even if it sometimes cuts you down. Nobody at the table would join me in a discussion of queer theory. Everyone at the table would defend me from harm at the slightest provocation. They considered me an equal, though slightly offside at times.

Edible Orientations Part Two: Coffee and Cheesecake

What *Schitt's Creek* does with wine, *The Kids in the Hall* does with coffee. This Canadian sketch comedy series features a recurring sketch called "Steps," in which a group of gay men hang out on the steps of a Church Street café in Toronto's gay village. *Kids in the Hall* was a transgressive program when it aired in the late 1980s, particularly because many of its sketches featured the male performers in drag.

Scott Thompson, part of the sketch troupe, was openly gay from the beginning of the show's run, even addressing his sexuality in multiple episodes. In Season 1, Episode 6 (1989), Thompson played a character called Running Faggot in a sketch of the same name. The brilliance of the sketch lies in its subversion of a horrific image – a gay man running from homophobic violence – and transformation of Thompson's character into a superhero who "runs" between locals, solving problems. In Season 3, Episode 2 (1991), Thompson plays a character who is repeatedly called "Fag" by a boy on a bike. The epithet is uttered cheerfully, as if the boy is saying "Good morning!" Thompson's character keeps changing outfits, cycling between Orientalist slippers and a lumberjack T-shirt, but the boy's cry of "Fag!" continues to haunt him. Finally, he dresses up as a bear and mauls the kid, knocking him off his bicycle, only to remove his bear head and say laconically: "Fag." This was a rare moment in which a queer actor was able to respond to hate speech on-air, while calling into question the very meaning of "Fag," since it seemed to apply in every situation.

As early as 1993, the characters on "Steps" were debating the necessity of gay marriage, while drinking coffee and cruising the boys who walked by – a practice combining sex, politics, and consumption.[12] The setting of this sketch was designed to mimic Timothy's café on Church Street in Toronto's gay village. For years, one of the cruisiest cafés in the village was Second Cup, a Canadian chain transformed, by virtue of its location, into what Gordon Brent Ingram calls "[an] explicit space of queer living."[13] In the early 1990s, there were no other shows that featured a group of queer characters, let alone a community of urban gay men like the one featured in "Steps." While it's true that the sketch trades in stereotypes, it also paves the way for more dramatic LGBT programming such as *Queer as Folk* and *The L Word*. Caffeine is the element that links this sketch to my previous discussion of wine. The characters gather on the steps of a café, installed as firmly middle-class citizens of Toronto, willing to overpay for espresso. Their queer money is, in fact, what keeps the café running, and coffee becomes symbolic of their politically charged discussion. The branded to-go cups turn their innocent gathering into a salon of sorts, designed to reflect on their urban status, while also physically claiming a space within downtown Toronto.

As the political spokesperson of the group, Smitty (who shares his name with a Canadian family restaurant chain) is most often worked up and over-caffeinated. Dressed in neutral khakis and a sweater vest, he's visually removed from the field of cruising that Butchy navigates so well. Yet in Season 5, Episode 17 (1993), both

Smitty and Butchy end up calling the same phone-sex line, proving that the former's politics don't make him any less sexual. In Season 4, Episode 16 (1992), Smitty scolds everyone for cruising: "Rome is burning, and all we do is cruise." Riley waves him away, responding: "I'd switch to decaf, Smitty." Here, coffee is political fuel, driving Smitty to decry their lack of engagement, though he can't quite look away from men passing by. It serves as a stimulant to discussion, as well as the source of their purpose-built community on the steps of the café. Electrified, sweaty, and talkative, the characters consume endless cups of coffee, which they can afford by virtue of having disposable income. The sketch comes to signal the rise of the Canadian queer middle class, who were becoming all the more visible in the 1990s as they engaged in politics of reconstruction near the close of the AIDS era. In Season 5, Episode 18 (1993), Smitty criticizes pharmaceutical industries for delaying a proper cure: "Because there's so much money in looking for a cure, they can't afford to find one." He does this while holding his coffee cup and raising an eyebrow at the camera, drawing further attention to the space shared by consumption and capital.

Cafés are unique queer spaces, especially in small towns that lack any kind of queer community organized around a bar. In the 1990s in Chilliwack, I spent a lot of time at a café called Afterthoughts, which today strikes me as the name of a thoroughly ambivalent gay bar (one step below Rumors). As a closeted high-school student, I would do my homework at the café, while unconsciously cruising the baristas. In spite of the success of shows like *Friends*, café culture was slow to catch on in the Fraser Valley, and Starbucks remained only semi-popular. Chilliwack was (and still is) a farming town, known for its overlapping Christian communities. Only a few hours from Vancouver, it felt like a different world. It was rare to see a teenager with a disposable coffee cup, and there was something Proustian about sipping expensive coffee while eating cheesecake from a glass plate. A part of me knew what I was doing. Afterthoughts was no bar, but it was the queerest place in Chilliwack, and I spent a lot of time there. After I came out, female friends would point out cute patrons, or gently encourage me to flirt with one of the baristas – anyone who looked like Duckie from *Sixteen Candles* was, in their mind, a potential boyfriend.

As a kid, I loved watching *The Golden Girls*, which transformed cheesecake into a symbol of both community and excess. The show, which ran from 1985–92, focused on the lives of four older women living in Miami, and had a large queer audience. I didn't see the episode featuring Blanche's gay brother, and Sophia's

speech about love and tolerance, until I was an adult.[14] What impressed me most was its depiction of park cruising in 1988, addressed with a surprising lack of judgment. I remember the ways in which *The Golden Girls* celebrated the bodies of older women. They were always drinking, dancing, and eating food that was bad for you – especially cheesecake. Since I'm lactose-intolerant and have a number of food sensitivities, cheesecake is especially bad for me. Eating it is a queer act of rebellion against my own body. Part of what makes it good is that it's so very bad.

The Golden Girls were always eating cheesecake at the kitchen table, digging in with their forks while they talked about fears, loves, disappointments. It wasn't until I grew older that I began to suspect this particular dessert was coded as feminine. When the first posh café opened in Chilliwack, in the early nineties, they had a tremendous variety of cheesecakes. My female friends would often split a piece, or simply gaze at the perfect specimens under glass. My male friends never made cooing noises at the glazed cherries. Dessert wasn't part of their vocabulary, and cheesecake was the queen of desserts, which they wanted no part of.

When I think about coming out, I immediately smell coffee and taste cheesecake: both the sweet pleasure, and the inevitable damage. The shame in the bathroom later, as my body rebelled, would prepare me for the equally complex mechanics of shame that drove my sexuality. The danger of eating cheesecake in a town where boys ate burgers. Eating burgers at a backyard barbecue meant that you were an all-Canadian boy, en route to a hockey game somewhere. Eating cheesecake meant that your friend's car was nicknamed Madonna, that you drove around with a boom box in the backseat, burning out your *Little Mermaid* soundtrack, searching for a place to get your ear pierced on a Saturday night.

Eating In: Gay Neighbourhoods and the Politics of Food

Gay neighbourhoods have often organized themselves around bars and pubs, which serve as dual safe spaces and community centres. Buddy's, a gay bar in Edmonton that closed in 2015, served Christmas dinner to patrons who'd been kicked out of their homes for being gay. Since Edmonton doesn't have a discernible gay village, it was the task of bars like Buddy's and The Roost to create a sense of community across disparate neighbourhoods.[15] For decades in Vancouver's Davie Street Village, the two poles of queer nightlife were The Odyssey and Denny's. The Odyssey, formerly located on Davie and Howe streets, was a gay bar that opened in 1990

and closed in 2010 (reopening in 2015 as an entirely separate establishment in Vancouver's downtown business district). In its heyday, The Odyssey was a queer local that included dancing, drag shows, and male strippers (along with a healthy drug culture in the unisex bathrooms). The patio was the cruising epicentre, and also the place to go if you wanted cheap triples (when Joan-E was bartending). The bar was located along a high-traffic corridor and surrounded by 99-cent pizza places, which would fill up at closing time.

Although the intersection of Davie and Howe was slightly removed from the gay village proper, there was still the sense that it actually began with The Odyssey, that this ramshackle building marked the border between straight and gay Vancouver. For me, what symbolized being on Davie Street more than anything else was lining up at The Odyssey's back door. The bar had two entrances, and those in the know lined up at the rear, in a small lot where the owner's pink Cadillac had been parked forever. The line was long, but moved quickly, and you'd have the chance to catch up with friends and check out people's outfits. "Pre-cruising," as my then-boyfriend described it. The building itself resembled a crumbling villa, with the promise of old-world glamour and decadence (in addition to men dancing in raised showers, which offered a Canadian taste of Nero's flamboyant Rome). A night dancing at The Odyssey would always be followed by a semi-coherent meal at one of the surrounding late-night eateries: either pizza, twice-baked fries at Fritz, or Denny's.

Denny's on Davie is routinely described as "Gay Denny's," as if its Grand Slam Breakfast has some kind of queer quality. A cursory survey of Yelp reveals that Denny's restaurants all over Canada, when they happen to be in proximity to gay bars, are often called "Gay Denny's." In the Denny's on Davie, I'd often meet drag queens mingling with seniors late at night. I like to think that we transformed the restaurant into what J. Halberstam describes as "a queer time and place,"[16] subject to its own non-canonical laws. The restaurant itself had the veneer of a family place, but it was rare to see tourists there, and on weekends it became an unofficial after-hours club. You would slide unsteadily into a giant booth, already beginning to nod off but driven by the prospect of sugar and starch. The menus, like those featured at the diner on *Schitt's Creek*, were camp texts on their own: giant, full-colour images of skillet meals, and entrees with names like "Grand Slam," took on a sly subversion after you'd been dancing beneath a go-go boy for the last three hours. The wholesome baseball theme took on an ironic dimension when placed in the context of gay slang, like "pitcher" and "catcher," and the glossy pictures were reminiscent of gossip magazines like *Tiger Beat*.

Davie Street, located in Vancouver's wealthy West End, is replete with bars and restaurants. The street thrums with activity all night long, after more respectable neighbourhoods have gone to bed. You'll often encounter tourists who don't realize that they've wandered into the village, or suburban commuters who are looking for a spicy locale. Gentrification began in the 1980s, and was not a peaceful process.[17] In between the posh lounges and restaurants, however, you can make out food cultures of the past. There is Priscilla's, a Greek/Italian restaurant that has been open since the late-1970s, used to be a community space for drag culture and working-class queer folk. There are also coffee houses like Melriches, which I've been going to since I first arrived in Vancouver (2001). Part meeting place, part café, part lounge, the decor consists of scarred tables and community art, with the condiments stored on an antique chest of drawers.

On Davie Street, "eating in" is also a turn towards the safety of community. It means admitting that you don't want to leave the warm confines of a queer space where virtually anything goes. It also means having enough capital to pay for take-out, or to patronize an ultra-chic lounge (usually the former). Eating in comes to symbolize a particular urban identity, rooted in queer geography. When I wander around Davie Street, it sometimes feels like an extension of my apartment. Everything is familiar, everything is heavy with memories and the scent of meals past. But I also recognize that the gay village has never been wholly inclusive. While it serves as a centre of drag culture, it is not particularly encouraging of trans and non-binary people. Its population is largely gay, cisgender male, and white. As a particular nexus of sexuality and capital, Davie Street sometimes feels like a realm of gay bars and restaurants, with community activities under the surface. In reality, is a palimpsest: multiple neighbourhoods ghosting across each other, remembering the shifting borders that define the West End. Online culture has, perhaps, erased the materiality of the queer local: the bounce of the floorboards, the smell of the bathrooms, and the greasy food afterwards.

Bear Necessities: Devouring Queer Life

As I've grown older, I've found myself slipping more and more into the role of a bear. This term used to refer to gay men with body hair, those who carried extra pounds. In a culture obsessed with fit youth, the bear position was a forgiving one, a hirsute alternative that many of us fit into whether we wanted to or not. The cul-

ture of Instagram has mainstreamed the role of "bear" into a heavily muscled, younger man, locked in an endless bicep flex. What's lost in translation is the gut – the part that denotes appetite, comfort, and a wry shrug to genetics and body type. This version of the bear is incomplete: it streamlines the body while erasing its hungers, aches, and necessary curves. As a term, "bear" is decidedly visual, and has become a staple of online hookup apps, which depend upon the image to sell a specific persona. The bears that we see online are mediated by filters and camera angles, designed to distill an essence that borrows from pornography (poses), cultural cues (facial hair), and merchandising (bearish T-shirts, socks, dog tags, all of which you'll find at queer bookstores/emporia like Vancouver's Little Sister's). Food and drink are, in a way, the forces that invigorate bear identity, even as those forces are so often absent in online hookup culture.

There are a variety of hookup apps to choose from (especially when living in an urban centre), but Grindr and Scruff remain two of the most popular platforms. Grindr has been called out for its racism and lack of bodily inclusivity, with users able to filter out various body types and ethnic groups. Scruff is often billed as the more inclusive app, though it tends to put muscular bears at the forefront, privileging gym-toned bodies rather than bearish ones. Both platforms reduce the bear position to a strictly visual one, ignoring the impact of culture that might also fashion a bearish body: eating, drinking, reading, watching *RuPaul's Drag Race* on the couch (where the only six-pack is the one that you've just taken out of the fridge). As a counter-argument to gym culture, the bearish body type has often been a refusal of rigid social norms around what a queer body should look like. Part of the attraction of meeting someone on a bear site (such as Bear411, now fallen into disuse) was a kind of relief in knowing that your date would probably not spend the night talking about his gym routine. Apps like Scruff have streamlined "bearishness" into a sexual type, while ignoring the complex reasons why one might identify as a bear in the first place.

One antidote to the commodification of bear-identity lies in the survival of bear bars – gay pubs that cater to a particularly bearish aesthetic. These locales don't use an online filtering system or employ a rigid visual hierarchy. The patrons represent a number of different body types, and in effect, they are imagining the bear role into existence as a flexible category. An example of this occurs every night at PumpJack, Davie Street's bear and leather bar. While it does have a dance floor in the back, the centre of the PumpJack is the bar itself, where everyone shares pitchers by the open windows. Their laughter spills onto the street as they drink, share stories,

and prepare for whatever the night holds. The bar also supplies nuts: for me, this has always been what makes it an ursine space, what separates it from the Vodka-fuelled dancing of other locations. At any point, you can hold out your hands – like a kid in the bulk section of a grocery store – and receive a cascade of salted peanuts and cashews. They absorb the alcohol, but they also signal that this is a place where snacking is encouraged. Fortified by salt, you then move on to business.

Bear culture is about more than food, of course: it emerges from a whole spectrum of body types that don't fit into the hookup ideal. But at its core, bearishness involves both fat-positive and sex-positive attitudes towards life. It acknowledges that a queer body might be implicated in various kinds of productive excess, that it might not fit within the visual frames that we apply to mainstream sexuality. This can be a fraught space, because larger bodies are often connected to narratives of shame: narratives that they refuse on a daily basis. Part of being a bear is saying a resounding *fuck you* to norms that are designed to make you feel unattractive, unhealthy. To be a bear is to know who you are, and how extraordinarily powerful that self-knowledge makes you. It allows you to find beauty in taste and texture, to admit that food, drink, and physical variation should be a cause for joy, rather than remorse. Some wariness comes with the package. When a guy says, "I like your belly," I'm skeptical, as if he's just complimented one of my degrees. What can't be faked is the pleasure of two imperfect bodies in colloquy, a hand on your stomach, tracing familiar contours. Your favourite table to eat at.

Queer Meals: A Personal History

What is a queer meal? Does it require fellowship, or can it admit solitude? I can think of various queer meals that I've had in my life, both shared with others and by myself. Some of them were queer in the literal sense, because everyone at the table (or on the steps, or the street corner) happened to be queer. Others deserved the name because of their singularity, their unrepentant strangeness or nearness to camp.

When I first moved to the prairies, I accepted a dinner invitation from a guy with whom I'd shared a few dates. We were excellent together on paper: both nerds, both introverts, both relatively unconcerned with appearances. The dinner party was at his friend's house, and when I arrived, I was struck by the odd group of people loosely gathered around the coffee table. Two couples, one in their early

twenties, the other in their late fifties, shared spaghetti and garlic bread. Multiple generations were crammed into the living room, and none of them knew how to talk to each other. The older couple made bawdy jokes, often erupting into glorious laughter. They called each other bitch, and fanned themselves when someone mentioned a male celebrity. The twenty-somethings were primly embarrassed by this old-school faggotry, though they bore it with half-smiles of resignation. *Oh those queens*. The guy and I were both in our thirties, the middle queers, who remembered dial-up Internet but had not seen Bette Midler performing in bathhouses. I chewed my garlic bread in what I hoped was a thoughtful manner. As a new professor, I was feeling a class gap that warred with my small-town upbringing. The wine that I'd brought seemed hopelessly nouveau riche, a nervous gesture that made it look like I was trying to outclass the (delicious) spaghetti sauce. You couldn't ask for queerer messmates, yet I can't say that any of us connected that night on the level of community.

At eighteen, on Valentine's Day, I went out for dinner with a guy I'd met online. We'd chatted through ICQ, and made the – in retrospect – awful decision to meet on one of the most depressing days of the year. When we arrived at a local restaurant, we saw that there was a set Valentine's Day meal "for lovers." Since it was too late to back out, we awkwardly took a seat, trying not to stare too skeptically at the pink menu. It was Chilliwack in the nineties, and I fully expected the server to make a joke about two boys sharing a romantic meal together. I had prepared all kinds of excuses – *it's ironic, we're brothers, we just love lasagna* – but the server lit our candle without comment. We ate baked pasta surrounded by straight couples, and as I shovelled dangerous amounts of cheese into my mouth, I felt a rush of fear and excitement and something I couldn't quite name (later indigestion). It was stupid to plan a first date on Valentine's Day, but we were too young to realize that, too eager and open and exquisitely fragile. Years later, at the multi-generational spaghetti dinner, I recalled the sweetness of that marinara. The wry smile of the server as she lit our candle. Though I'd been on dates before, that ill-advised meal was one of the first times I was able to see myself as publically queer. We'd slipped unnoticed into a time-honoured straight ritual, half-expecting to be scoffed at or shown the door, when, ultimately, we dined by the same light.

Twenty years later, I remember meeting two friends at Club Q in Regina, where we ordered takeout. The delivery person was slightly baffled by the address, but offered no complaint as we met him at the door. The club wouldn't officially open for a few hours yet, but my friends were involved in its operation, so we could hang

out early. The dance floor was dark, and the bartender was drinking a coffee while watching reruns of *Saved by the Bell*. We divvied up the naan and chana masala, washing it down with the finest red that we could find in the bar fridge. My friends were both community activists, who remembered Regina's first pride parade in 1990: everyone had worn masks to avoid being outed, fired, excommunicated. In those days, and before, the gay scene had revolved around clandestine house parties. It reminded me of the eighteenth-century molly houses, which, as Alan Bray observed, "must have seemed like a ghetto, at times claustrophobic and oppressive, at others warm and reassuring. It was a place to take off the mask."[18] Unlike that awkward spaghetti dinner, this was a moment when we also took off the mask, and shared stories with ease and humour. I was older and more comfortable with a sexuality that I sometimes described as "murky," like a bottle of wine that has turned (or is not yet complete). There was dancing later, but what I remember was the stained napkins, the laughter, the indigestion as an acceptable sacrifice.

Raw Food: A Spectrum of Desire

In *Vibrant Matter*, Bennett describes the ways in which we share relationships with food. Calling food "vagabond matter" for its ability to shift our own biological properties, she notes that "in the eating encounter, all bodies are shown to be but temporary congealments of a materiality that is a process of becoming."[19] We are transformed by what we eat, and vice versa. Cheesecake can make me feel something that no other food can, even as its operations on my body are violent. Food leaves its mark on us, and as we devour it, our bodies shift ever so slightly. Does food have rights? Would that matter? Bennett observes that the vitality of food is often "obscured by our conceptual habit of dividing the world into inorganic matter and organic life."[20] Thinking about the ways in which we coexist with food might galvanize us to treat non-human life in an ethical way. It might force us to think about sustainable modes of farming, which help not only people but also vegetable itself produce the needs of the landscape. Respecting things that don't think – at least not in the ways that we think – can only lead to a more expansive definition of the human. Admitting that we can be attracted to books, houses, and storms can only broaden our anthropocentric notions of sexuality to include alternative orientations. When we say, "love is love," there is no human caveat. Loving

things, and perhaps feeling them love us back, can be as richly informative as any human relationship.

When we uncouple sexuality and allow it to spread among non-human life, it becomes a more inclusive force. As a bear, I can't help but acknowledge that my body type is connected to my sex life, and my body is implicated with food, wine, and other illicit substances. With this expansive framework in mind, an edible object need not simply *represent* queerness (as the symbolic cheesecake); instead, it might *embody* queerness, as a force of desire that so often remains untranslatable, insatiable. The late-night pizza, the beer quaffed to calm a nervous tremor, the unexpected handful of peanuts in a packed bar, the "moment on the lips" that brings with it a delicious lifetime: all of these edibles share in our experience of sexuality. They remind us that who we are, and what we desire, is a flux of random glances, tastes, and precious objects that go beyond a narrow definition of life. This includes the smell of your ex's breath, the stain on the tablecloth, and the blissful decay of a broken-down sweater. Objects have lives of their own, and they influence our desires in ways that we can't separate from our own intentions. They promise an orientation, to paraphrase Sara Ahmed, where what we love is so often close to hand.

Vancouver Pride and Queer Advertising

The pride parade always divides Vancouver into East and West. East Vancouver has traditionally been a space for diverse communities, although this now includes hipster enclaves. Vancouver's West End has tended to privilege those with disposable income. My East Van friends, particularly those living on Commercial Drive, find the whole spectacle to be vulgar, commercial, and discriminatory in its lack of trans and non-binary inclusion. The event is overwhelmingly cis, white, and middle class. But for residents of the city's West End, the parade is a community institution and raucous social gathering, including a week's worth of events. During Vancouver Pride Week in 2016, we wondered if Black Lives Matter would interrupt the parade, as they had so effectively in Toronto. Instead, the prime minister of Canada marched (for the first time in Canadian history), looking both sassy and vaguely imperial in white pants as he waved to the crowd.

I was preoccupied with thoughts of queer food, and how food and drink became associated with pride as affect/event. The most recognizable example was Absolut

vodka in its rainbow bottle, encouraging queers of every stripe to get drunk on clear, tasteless liquid. Vodka is what you order when you want to pretend that you're drinking water. A friend remarked that the 2016 bottle was less gay than its 2015 predecessor. The earlier bottle displayed a rainbow flag, but the new bottle was covered in geometric shapes. "It's vague," he said. "Just colours." I compared it with the 2015 bottle, which we still had in our freezer, and had to agree. This slick new design was abstract, rather than political. It made me think how strange it was to impute queerness to this commodified bottle, and yet, how welcome the flag had been when it was clearly visible last year. Pride flags of every size and taxonomy were on sale at the street party, including the bear flag, which I already have on a pair of socks. It was impossible not to think that we were drinking queer vodka, touching queer fabric, in the midst of these unsettling corporate relations.

Two food examples stuck in my mind for their mixture of community outreach and bald capitalist desire. The first was a poster in the window of Denny's on Davie Street, which I've already described as an unlikely queer community centre. This poster depicted a stack of rainbow-coloured pancakes, along with the phrase: "Denny's has pride." I thought about the idea of a corporation having pride, and then remembered that corporations also possessed many of the same rights as humans. But it was the pancakes themselves that held my attention, oozing rainbow syrup like "pink blood," the title of historian Douglas Janoff's book on homophobic violence in Canada.[21] There was something macabre about the image, but it was also undeniably sexual, like the repartee of the late-night queens who unwound there after a long performance. Pancakes are not an especially queer dish, but they do have a desultory side when you eat them at night, while coming down. Something you eat the morning after, or the long night before. Something you can make when you can't make sense of any other recipe.

The second example was more surprising because of the way that it implicated "traditional" family values. While passing the A&W on Alberni Street – perhaps Vancouver's wealthiest shopping corridor – I saw a poster depicting the chain restaurant's "burger family," with a twist. In this version, there were three cartoon married couples: straight, gay, and lesbian. They were still the same iconic 1950s caricatures, but that somehow made it more transgressive to see two balding husbands with Eugene Levy eyebrows, cheek to cheek. Below them was a rainbow burger decal, similar to Denny's rainbow pancakes. I noticed that the poster didn't include queer kids, but then remembered that the kids in the original advertisement were

supposed to be siblings. I couldn't help but smile as I imagined how this conversation must have gone down at the A&W corporate office. Had a well-meaning PR person dared to mouth the word "incest"? Had they brainstormed a way to queer the kids, only to abandon it for fear of category confusion? What pleased me most about the rainbow burger was how much meaning it held for me, a small-town kid raised on backyard barbecues. You were supposed to eat burgers to avoid suspicion, but here it was a suspicious burger. At the same time, I knew how sketchy it was for a fast-food company, already profiting on marginalized communities, to extend its profit to queers. Food participates in relays of sociability and capital flow, absorbing and conveying meaning. A&W was saying: *put down that pumpkin scone, have a Cheese n' Egger*. But I was also fascinated by the extent to which they were willing to debase their family values in order to court men like me, who bore a startling physical resemblance to those cartoon dads.

Conclusion: Who We Are/What We Eat

I've argued throughout this piece that food has always been involved in queer identity – mine included – and that thinking about the peculiar life of food may expand our concept of orientation in productive ways. Rather than fetishizing food as an erotic object, my goal has been to examine the ways in which we share our bodies with edible material, and how queering that material reminds us of how open we are as organisms. In "Cyborgs to Companion Species," biologist Donna Haraway notes that "organic beings [such as] rice, bees, tulips, and intestinal flora … [all] make human life what it is."[22] My aim has been to expand this permeability to include queer orientations, which may not take the kind of traditional objects that we'd expect. If sexual attraction is a murky honey of memories, physical features, smells, and tastes, then food becomes a necessary element within that process. This is the only way I can describe how eating Turkish Delight makes me feel, or how the smell of decayed book-binding glue and dust in a used bookstore can drive me over the edge. It smells of home, which orientation also signals: a sphere of belonging.

Too often, food and consumption are left out of the attraction when discussing queer desire. They are elided in favour of the immaterial, the staged image on the hookup app, with nothing but pixelated shadow in the background. An exception to this, surprisingly, is the OkCupid app, which asks users to list five things that

they couldn't do without. Most people end up including a food or drink in that list, and sometimes that gustatory pleasure spills into their broader profile. To properly think of ourselves as desiring subjects, we must also think through what we crave, what we put in our bodies, what eventually transforms and quickens us. My initial question about the lonely avocado is tongue-in-cheek, but also partially serious. When we imagine food as part of our circulating desires, we have to acknowledge its value in making us human. Plus, there is the sobering thought that we are also food: we've fed animals in the past, just as they've fed us. The hunting metaphors that we use to describe sex and romance are not innocent: as we pursue things across the field of desire, we can't help but recall our own place in the shifting food chain.

When I initially sat down to write this, I thought about my first queer meal. Does one have to be gay to participate in a queer meal? I thought about the breakfast that I threw up before coming out for the first time, to a friend who understood what it was like to be judged by what she did with her own body. I thought of the mushroom caps that made me sick on my first date, and the schnitzel cooling on my plate when I realized that I was a third wheel. I thought of the buttered challah that I ate in front of my first boyfriend's parents, after reciting the Kiddush – a prayer that my goyish, teenage mind had memorized for love. I thought of the pancakes with dulce de leche that I'd learned to spin with the tips of my fingers. An exercise in not getting burnt that eventually failed. But the meal that I keep coming back to is the slice of pizza that I wolfed down at 2 a.m. standing in front of Luv Affair, a club on Richards Street in Vancouver that no longer exists. Not even a gay club, but somehow ours for that night. I danced to "Personal Jesus" with two friends, and we laughed about being stereotypes. We weren't incomplete. Just sweaty, hungry, and flammable. Tomato sauce stained a shirt immortalized in a photo from those days – a shirt that I have no hope of fitting into now. I remember thinking, as cheese seared the roof of my mouth, that I would grow older, that I would no longer have this effortless twenty-year-old body. Thankfully.

Notes

1 *Chopped*, Season 27, episode 7, "Love Bites." 2016.

2 Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 10.

3 Cohen, ed., *Inhuman Nature*, x.

4 Morton, Hyperobjects, 1.

5 Bennett, "Systems and Things," 227.
6 Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 6.
7 *Schitt's Creek*, Season 1, episode 10, "Honeymoon." Directed by Jennifer Ciccoritti. 2015.
8 Ibid.
9 *Spartacus*, directed by Stanley Kubrick. Hollywood, CA: Bryna Productions, 1960.
10 Morton, *The Ecological Thought*, 15.
11 *Schitt's Creek*, Season 1, episode 12, "Surprise Party," directed by Paul Fox. 2015.
12 *The Kids in the* Hall, Season 4, episode 16, directed by John Blanchard. 1993.
13 Ingram, *Queers in Space*, 23.
14 *The Golden Girls*, Season 4, episode 9, "Scared Straight," directed by Terry Hughes. 1988.
15 The Roost also had a late-night hot dog vendor, with a considerable lineup after hours.
16 Halberstam, *A Queer Time and Place*, 1.
17 Up until the late 1980s, Davie Street was one of the centres of Vancouver's sex trade, and served as a gathering space for queer and trans sex workers, as well as IV-drug users. The Vancouver Police Department gradually pushed these marginalized groups out of the West End, forcing them to concentrate in the embattled Downtown Eastside neighbourhood. This purge was what made Davie Street a destination for gay men with disposable income, but the gentrification process also pushed rents up steadily, making it an inaccessible space for many.
18 Bray, *Homosexuality in Renaissance England*, 84.
19 Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 49.
20 Ibid., 50.
21 Janoff, *Pink Blood*, 1.
22 Haraway, "Cyborgs," 302.

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