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Food for Thought: Food, Embodiment, and Knowledge

Blurred, Broken, and Bewildered: What Performing with Food does with the Lines Around Performance and Food Studies

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Intromucktion

[1] Discipline, authority, rigor, expertise. When it comes to food and food scholarship, how do we perform success? Does food present the same requirements for knowledge-making as the other modes of existence that we investigate? Or does it open up a space in which to challenge those requirements, make rifts in the academic fabric, and present tantalizing threads on which to gleefully tug?

[2] A post-industrial history of specialization, standards, and control mechanisms seems to point to framing devices and crisp delimiters as the benchmarks of success, not only in food, but across practices of all sorts, both academic and not. However, when clear-cut frameworks are placed on complex systems, they may not increase clarity, but instead obscure the value of disorder. As John Law has written, “simple clear descriptions don’t work if what they are describing is not itself very coherent” (2004, 2). And incoherency is often what food-and-human systems are made of: messy truths, emergent and unpredictable outcomes, and rafts of blurry boundaries between self and other, eater and eaten, actant and audience.

[3] As a transverse method of investigation that engages with the dynamics of food and food systems, performance offers a useful response to the tension between ‘messy’ research subjects and ‘successful’ outcomes. Elsewhere I have named food systems as “lively, complex, and intersubjective” (Szanto 2015b), meaning that they perform in time and space, interacting with and transforming both themselves and those who aim to

study them. In this way, performance parallels food: they are both hybrids of matter, meaning, and movement, and both are milieus in which scriptedness and improvisation are continually present. What is more, performance can be used as a mode of both research and reporting (i.e., observation and analysis) (Taylor 2003). Critically, it also provides scholars with the means to act *with and within* food systems, rather than *on or upon* them, avoiding the problematic delineations that conventional disciplinary practices would impose. As Eve Sedgwick proposes, performance brings subject and object *beside* one another, offering “some useful resistance to the ease with which *beneath* and *beyond* turn from spatial descriptors into implicit narratives of, respectively, origin and telos” (2003, 8).

[4] In what follows, I present a reflexive analysis of two food performances in which I participated, and the implications that they present for transdisciplinary practice in art, pedagogy, and gastronomic scholarship. Leaning comfortably on Rebecca Schneider’s discomfiting call for keeping things “on the slip” (2006) and Jack Halberstam’s appealing appeal to twist failure into another kind of value (2011), I demonstrate this work and my own self as a ticklish hybrid of things. As an academic actor and author, I become an agential activist and artist, while also remaining open to critique as none of these. And, as ongoing unfoldings of “research-creation” (Chapman & Sawchuck 2012; Manning & Massumi 2015; SSHRC 2010; Szanto 2015a), the two examples reveal moments in which knowledges meld and clear lines of definition (of which we humans are so fond) usefully blur, break, and become ever-so-slightly bewildered.

Perfumblance

[5] Over the course of several decades, food studies and performance studies have begun to demonstrate affinities for each other (Anderson et al. 2016; Banes & Lepecki 2007; Gough 1999). Certainly the use of food matter and food-related themes have presented themselves as valuable elements in performance art, theatre, and installational design works (Finley 2000; Howells & Hayman 2014; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1999). In many examples, food is shown as itself performing, not as prop or set piece, but as a sensory body that actively (and unpredictably) participates in what transpires (Iball 1999; Tingley 2014).

[6] In tandem with these varieties of food performances, the *performativity* of food systems and the liveliness of their “confederacies” (Bennett 2009) have also arisen as an important area of exploration. Paralleling the performative turns in a variety of other fields, food scholars too have begun to address the ways in which the material-discursive entanglements of edibility participate in ecological effects and outcomes (Lien & Law 2011; Mansfield 2003; Callon 1986). Such work acknowledges that food and

food systems are both transformed by and irreducible to the foodish (and other) agencies that they comprise.

[7] More recently, food and performance have become mingled within research-creation and endogenous or participative research practices (Paxson 2013; Cadieux et al. 2016; Szanto et al. 2016). These types of work bring attention to the critical role of both material engagement and embodiment—itself a type of material practice—in the production of knowledge. Importantly, they also offer opportunities to decentralize the agency of human actors while concomitantly (and paradoxically) recognizing the centrality of the human agent in *producing accounts* of how performances unfurl. For the artist-academic, this represents a slippery space to occupy and inhabit, demanding continual reflection on the “mentally manual” practices of food (Heldke 1992) and the emotional-intellectual beings that are food scholars (Szanto 2016). It also raises invaluable questions about the ecosophical articulations among the truths, representations, and *re-representations* of the lived experience of food (Boisvert & Heldke 2016; Doonan 2016; Conquergood 2002).

[8] Another stream of investigation that is relevant to food deals with the revaluing of failure and the intentional disempowerment of ‘authority’ figures. These follow performance threads that have destabilized ‘actors’ as central and refigured ‘audience members’ as agential (Fischer-Lichte 2008; Jones & Heathfield 2012; Schechner 2003). Themes such as food security, cultural authenticity, sustainable nutrition, and numerous others addressed by food scholars are embedded with the legitimizing value of such individuals as policy makers, historians, doctors, and academics. Yet when too much authority becomes anchored to these ‘experts’, what opportunities remain for the rest of us to critique and destabilize the Truths they promulgate? Two different perspectives on failure and non-authority may help refigure these notions as productive of value, rather than undermining it.

[9] First, when viewed ecologically, failure and collapse are more easily understood as productive, contributing to the health of a dynamic system, provided that a more flexible view of *scale* is taken (Homer-Dixon 2007). For example, within a narrow scaling of space and time, a forest fire is seen as widely destructive to living things. At a broader scale, however, that same ‘destruction’ frees up resources that had come to be centralized in large, dominant species, making them newly available for the creation of other structures by a wider range of opportunistic creatures. Such renewal allows the system to increase its resiliency—through greater diversity *and* redundancy—when future impacts come along (Gunderson & Holling 2001).

[10] Second, in a humanistic and institutional sense, the 'failure' of an individual or concept is beneficial in that it enables additional realities to be scaffolded on to what had previously been thought of as true (Latour 2004). Jack Halberstam's (2011) queer-theory perspective on failure elegantly demonstrates that 'success' metrics have historically been tied to dominant, masculinist-framed hegemonies. Failure, on the other hand, can help us celebrate the "wondrous anarchy" of things and destabilize "the supposedly clean boundaries" (3) that are often established as givens. Moreover, failure opens avenues towards academic transformation, which for food and performance seems timely: "As the big disciplines begin to crumble like banks that have invested in bad securities, we might ask more broadly, Do we really want to shore up the ragged boundaries or our shared interest and intellectual commitments, or might we rather take this opportunity to rethink the project of learning and thinking altogether?" (7).

Two Werrks

[11] In July 2015 and February 2016, I participated in two performances with food and other lively bodies. The first took place in Washington, DC, within the context of the banished? productions group show for Capital Fringe 2015, *I Thought the Earth Remembered Me*. "The Gastronome in You" focused on the human-microbial entanglements within bread and fermentation, and the endurance of human existence through yeast cells and memory. The trajectory of this performance comprised ten days of intimate, one-on-one interactions that activated sensing and knowing through tactile, gustatory, and affective channels.

[12] The second work, "Where OÙ Firma?", was a one-time, pop-up performance staged in a private residence in Singapore. Both scripted and improvised, it involved a series of gestural, material, and verbal responses to the belonging-and-origin question, *Where are you from?*, an interrogation that often confronts migrants and new arrivals. This piece followed a student showcase I had helped organize the previous day, itself the culmination of a two-day sensory storytelling workshop at Lasalle College of the Arts. Several of the workshop participants attended the pop-up event.

[13] As part of a longer exploration of endogeneity and identity, I had conceived both performances as occasions in which to deal with materiality and embodiment in the making and representation of food knowledge. Importantly, however, they were also a means to destabilize my own sense of internal delimiters. I aimed to occupy an unsure, slippery zone of practice that called to account my own messiness and 'failures' as an authority in food and performance. Staying present to my simultaneous nature as artist, academic, learner, and showman (among other things), I intended to attend to my

non-expert status as all of them. That is, by being *not very good* in just one role, I became *really quite good* at being blurry. In this sense, a number of outcomes emerged, which are discussed below.

[14] At this point in my writing, a conundrum arises: How should I usefully describe the performances that happened, in a way that acknowledges my aim with this text? Write a synopsis, provide the scores, show digital documentation? All of these tend to gel what happened into a kind of realness, a firmish form of unbroken lines on pages and screens. What about the blurring and bewildering? Nonetheless, this is what we do in food and performance studies. So, with that as caveat—

The Gastronomer in You (I Thought the Earth Remembered Me)



The Gastronomer in You (v2)

performance score

I Thought the Earth Remembered Me (banished? productions at the ARTillery)
Capitol Fringe 2015 | July 9–19, 2015 | Washington, DC

in an area that is both open and closed
two low stools are arranged on a drapery piece of cotton muslin
it rises up around the stools to form a nest-like space
about five feet in diameter

a bowl of water sits nearby
a hinge jar of bread pieces sits nearby
a hinge jar of yeast starter sits nearby, with a pastry brush

I indicate to the other person to sit
I sit on the other stool and look at the other

BREAD:

I take the hinge jar with bread, hold it in my lap
I open it and smell the bread
I pass it to the other and say: *smell this*
I tear off two small pieces of bread and put down the jar
I hand one piece of bread to the other, and keep one myself
I say: *Take a piece of this bread and see if it tells you anything. You can listen to it, feel it, even taste it if you want.*
(If the other declines, I acquiesce.) I taste mine.
I say: *It's a bread that I made with a sourdough starter that I got from my friend Gigi. We've been using it for over 20 years now.*

GIGI I:

I say, matter-of-factly: *I first knew Gigi when we were studying about food together in Italy. We traveled together a bit, did some research projects together. Ate lots of nice food. He went on travelling, and set up a bunch of farmers' markets—in Italy, but also a few in Lebanon, even here in the U.S., in South Carolina.*
I reclose the bread jar, and then look away.

FERMENTATION:

I say: *The dough for this bread rose because of fermentation. Yeasts eat sugars, produce carbon dioxide, acids, alcohol, other by-products. It's a very simple but amazing process, and it used to be how we preserved a great deal of our food. Now, much less so. We still use it for things like wine and beer, cheese, pickles... but not as much.*
I look again at the bread jar, touch the top, pause.

I say: *But beyond the practical aspect of fermentation, what's really extraordinary about it is the way it entangles lives together. It makes these necessary connections between different kinds of living things.*
I rub my hands together, rub my hands over my arms, gesture at the other.

I say: *Like, right now, on me, on you, in us—there are trillions of yeast and bacterial cells. More that we have human cells. But without them, we're not human. Because we don't digest, our metabolisms don't function, we just don't live. So, like the bread, we're made of fermentation, too. We're fermentation vessels. And those cells need us to live as well—we're necessary to them. We are where they live, we are what they eat. They live, grow, reproduce, and die with and within us. Constantly coming and going. They're coming and going between us right now as we sit here.*

GIGI II:

I laugh at myself a bit. I say: *When we were in school together, Gigi invented this thing he called a bullshitometer. An imaginary device that measured the level of food blah-blah-blah in the room. Like when someone started talking about the passion of wine making or the mystery of olive oil. (Or maybe kept going on about fermentation.)*

I make a bullshitometer with my arms.

I say: *He'd put his arms together like this, and make this gesture.*

I make the noise. I stop. I say: *And when the needle rose, we knew that bullshit was present. It was a tool we used maybe a little too often.*

MICROBIOME:

I reach for the brush and hinge jar with the starter. I open the lid.

With my right hand, I dip the pastry brush in the water and then in the starter.

As I paint my left hand with the starter, I say: *You know, when you're making bread—kneading the dough—there's this crust that develops on your hand. The flour and water, yeast and salt, forming a layer. And the tendency is to try to wash it away, scrub it off. But it's pointless, really. It just keeps coming back.*

I look at my painted hand and turn it over, showing the dry side. I turn it over again, and look at the play of light on the wet starter.

I look at the other and offer my right hand. If a hand is offered back to me, I take it and press it between both of my hands. (I no hand is offered, I say: *May I have your hand?*)

I think about the yeast making contact between us.

I look at the other and say: *When Gigi died two years ago, his mother gave pieces of his sourdough starter to all of his friends and family. And we took it with us to the places we were. And in it, we took Gigi, a part of him, quite literally. Because he's in there, some of what made him human.*

I pull my hands away from the other's, turning it over, running my fingers one last time across the palm.

I say: *And now he's in you, too, and on you. And you're in it. And on me.*

I look at the other and wait a few seconds.

I say: *So if you want to leave a trace of that combined being on the cloth for the next person who is here, go ahead. Or you can rinse your hand, or just leave it where it is, as a reminder that you, too, are always coming and going.*

I put the bread jar to one side and stand up from my stool, lifting it to one side as well. If the other stays sitting for a minute, I remain crouched, at the exit of the space.

When the other gets up and leaves, I say: *Thank you.*

Video link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qTYplmkTbLI>

Where OÙ Firma?



Where OÙ Firma?

performance score

gestures

I sit, fidgeting
I look at my watch
I sigh
I do a crossword puzzle
I examine my fingernails
I look at my watch again
I get up and walk around
I breathe
...
I take a slice of bread and with
 a spoon put some honey on it
I eat the bread fast.
I do it again

I slice and lay marge and
 cream cheese on a plate
I sneak a bit
I mash it with a fork
I mince an onion
I scrape anchovies
I mash them in
I sprinkle cayenne
I dump paprika
I mash, scoop, fold, mash
I fold, scrape, play, mash
I pile it up

I peel and grate apple and
 put it in a bowl
I chop walnuts finely
I sprinkle on some cinnamon
I sprinkle in the nuts and stir
I add some wine
I take a swig
I stir and fold and pat

words

I'm from Montreal
my mother's womb
Vienna, Scotland, England, New York
Uranus
Why do you want to know?
I'm from here.
<eye roll>
Goyang
Lots of places
Where are YOU from?
Just down the street
The University of Gastronomic Sciences
my food
Israel?
Singapore
Canada
well...
Mesopotamia, and you?
my stomach, my guts
what do you want to know?
<silence>
all over
Southern California
Manchester, New Hampshire
no where you've been
Toronto and Londonderry
<head shake, smirk>
Mexico City
lots of places
lots of places
lots of places

Video link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BHipQXVM5pI>

Dis(con)cussion

[15] In conducting this work, as in every other performance, outcomes were produced for all the participants, both during and following the formal timeframe of the projects. These implications continue to evolve, as they adhere to and intersubjectively transform with the outcomes of other research-creation work. What follows is a snapshot of extractions from both pieces, as I currently understand them.

Embodied and Material Knowledge

[16] My close friend and colleague Gigi Frassanito died in 2013 of stomach cancer, a particularly cruel experience for a man who cared so intensely about what he put in his body. At his memorial celebration, Gigi's mother gave pieces of his twenty-year-old *pasta madre* (sourdough starter) to all of his friends and family. In "The Gastronome in You", this yeast culture played a central role—becoming the bread that participants smelled, touched, and ingested, as well as forming a material-temporal and microbial-humanistic bridge when I painted my palm with it and then clasped the hand of the person across from me with both of mine.

[17] Gigi's death rocked me emotionally more than any previous loss in my life, including friends and family who were ostensibly more proximate. Because I couldn't figure out why this was the case, it also rocked me intellectually—it just didn't make sense, but there it was. In time, I rationalized this intensity through assumptions about the deep connectivity that food activates: having shared a year's worth of extremely close commensality, we were perhaps bonded differently. But this was only an intellectual supposition, a possible means to figure my way through mourning.

[18] Until I experienced the process of developing "Gastronome" and then performing it more than 150 times, my rational-cognitive justification of my emotional-affective state remained just that. However, over time—kneeling within a small muslin enclosure, facing the eyes and body of another person, telling my story of fermentation and humanness, brushing flour-yeast paste onto an already crusty hand, and then absorbing the responses from all of these actants—the emotional and affective were able to bind with the intellectual, more complexly anchoring their now-unified selves into my mental-manual corpus.

[19] Embodied knowledge such as this does not bear up to 'scientific' explanation—it is a knowing that is simply *known*, and then re-performed in subsequent space-time moments. Lisa Heldke has named such compound knowledges variably, as "theoretically practical" and "stupid knowing", which also incorporate both emotionality and sensuality (1992; 2006). Unlike the cool detachment of the mind-body duality, embodied knowledge is a hot, hybrid performance, in which expressing feelings

is a form of intellectual representation, and yeast cells can be understood as human memory enacted in real time.

[20] Moreover, the success of “Gastronome” did not lie in whether I got the script ‘right’ or whether the person in front of me apprehended my message about life and loss and food. No one enactment of the three-and-a-half minute ‘show’ existed independently of the others, nor were they isolated from Gigi’s history of bread-making, my displacement to Washington, DC, the Fringe-goers’ upbringings, or any other moment in our shared existence. Instead, each one “always [took] place in a context of other performances... [which] means that the success of any performance is uncertain” (Law & Singleton 2000, 774). Although *I Though the Earth Remembered Me* garnered lots of lovely reviews in the local press, its success was not defined by critics and audiences, but by its articulation into a larger trajectory of embodiment.

A View From Many Bodies

[21] In reporting on performance, whether through text, images, or other documentation, a tension arises between the singular gaze-and-translation that produces that report and the reality that the performance was always a multiple-perspective and multi-channel experience. The sense of authority that can emerge from individual accounts of socio-cultural experience has already problematized other types of reporting, such as ethnography and textual-visual depictions of interrelational art (Clifford 1983; Clifford & Marcus 1986; Conquergood 1985, 2002; Manning 2008; Turner 1982). Multiple questions therefore arise about how to produce a multi-view portrayal of the many *whats* that happen during a given performance.

[22] The construct for “Where OÙ Firma?” included the advance recording and assemblage of a series of voices that asked, in multiple languages, “Where are you from?” Provided to me by friends and colleagues in the form of audio files, I arranged them into an audio track, saved to an iPad, which could easily be played and played with during the performance. Beyond this element, I drafted a performance score, purchased some food ingredients, borrowed various kitchen implements, and staged it in the living space of a Singapore-based colleague. In attendance were art students from a previous workshop, friends and friends of friends, and a few other people less known to me. While I verbalized and enacted various responses to the recorded questions, my collaborator, Carmen Wong, improvised with the iPad, allowing one or many voices sequentially to interrogate me and my origins.

[23] At a certain moment in the performance, I grew concerned that Carmen was playing the voices too quickly, and that the track would run out before the piece was concluded. This led to a feeling of irritation and annoyance with both her and the

technological limitation I had myself constructed. My verbalizations grew more angry and terse; I stopped answering altogether; I halted my food-making gestures and took the iPad away from Carmen, switching it off. (She later went back to it and turned it on, restarting the voices.)

[24] Now, as I type up this account, I recall also what I have left out: my twitchy body, lying on a couch, performing the final minutes of Yom Kippur fasting as other people streamed into the space; the Singapore-dampness of my pants and shirt, drying and tickling my skin under the waft of heat-exchange air conditioning; the uncertainty I seemed to provoke in Debbie, one of the art students present, when I slid from my stage-ish location to where she sat watching and then asked where she was from. But even these additions elide the many other things that happened during this performance—those views from the other bodies that were there.

[25] A set of related notions about the problematic singularity of authority—Donna Haraway's "partial perspective" (1988), Eve Sedgwick's *beside-ness* (2003), Annemarie Mol's "body multiple" (2002), and Stephen Tyler's "post-modern ethnography" (2010)—all illuminate what is at stake here. None of us is capable of producing accuracy, precision, or success when reporting on *what happens*. Performance practices rattle Truth, and replace it as an objective with truths that are many. These may often not cleanly align, as well as downright contradict each other.

[26] By manipulating food into dishes, articulating words and sounds aloud, and moving my face and body, I produced multiple sensory affordances by which my witnesses could interpret the truths of "Where?" The food matter, and the gestures themselves, performed in their own ways. These may have initially confused those present through the discordances they seemed to present, yet at the same time, they invited an internal production of meaning that would have been unique to each individual. The witnesses' interpretive performance with the presentational performances around them elicited a kind of *diffractive knowledge* (Barad 2009), induced performatively rather than transmitted representationally. Importantly, to leave open a space for others to sense their own agency (i.e., to construct meaning from the performance), it was necessary that my authority (as actor/writer/teacher) not dominate. Perhaps this occurred—through Carmen's improvisational iPad manipulations, through my apparent non-acting at the outset and end of the piece, through the rough staging of the work in a private home. Or perhaps this always occurs, because audiences already witness performance as an untrue truth.

The Multi-Stable Me

[27] Erika Fischer-Lichte's interpretation of *perceptual multistability* expresses that, in performance, audience members witness both actor and character at once, and the body and its embodiments as a bimodal oscillation (2008). Yet just as audience members are themselves performers, so is the actor a witness to his own performance, particularly in the reflection that occurs through written analysis. The multiple nature of myself both "having a body" and "being a body" (72) remains present even now, calling into question what kinds of bodies I have and what kind of bodies I am. Was I and am I an artistic body? an academic body? an activist body? Are these even divisible? And does such uncertainty make me less reliable as a vector of aesthetic and knowledge transmission, or more?

[28] In both performance and food scholarship, various voices have examined the relationships between doing and un-doing. Performance has been named as a "disappearance" (Blau 1982; Phelan 1993) but also a leaving of remains (Schneider 2011; Taylor 2003). In parallel, food has been framed as both a production and a consumption, the concomitant synthesis of nutrients and decomposition of matter (Clapp 2012; Lorimer 2016; Tsing 2012). That these arguments both support and contradict each other points to the presence of non-dualistic discursive frameworks, and therefore the need to accept and engage with foodish non-ontologies. As a performer with food, I both disappear and solidify myself; as a performer with me, food leaves its traces and transubstantiates into other bodies.

Contraclusion

[29] "To live is to fail, to bungle, to disappoint, and ultimately to die," writes Jack Halberstam (2011, 186–87), expounding on the frameworks that construct our social and academic metrics. To live is also to remember some things and forget others, to embrace all that is both finite and absurd within our ongoing moments as humans. When we perform with food, then, we bring the systemic failures and successes of edible stuff, growing stuff, and politico-economic stuff into the framing as well. And by letting food matter perform alongside us, it rearranges who and what is in charge, and where depictive voices are situated, if indeed they are present.

[30] "The Gastronomer in You" and "Where Où Firma?" both rearranged patterns and conventions of authorial voice, of performance outcomes, and of the very perception of what "individual self" can mean. Through death, decomposition, and reproduction, the embodied knowledge and food ethos that my friend Gigi held in life were transmuted into a new kind of knowing and sensing that was held by many. The bread starter in "Gastronomer" found its way into my hands—and thence onto the

hands of others—allowing memory to perform, and turning emotionality back into life. At the same time, as one channel through which these transformations took place, I too was transformed, from artist-academic to actor-agent to a whole that was neither fully one nor the other, but more generative because of that.

[31] In “Where?”, the unclear connections between several dishes of food and the words and movements in the same room became invitations for others to think about what places and re-places them in their worlds, and what *origin* means for humanness. Diffractive representation set up interferences against accuracy, allowing a performance to re-perform and de-individuate the bodies that were present, as well as certain standards of success and productivity in art and academic work.

[32] The mutual becoming of food and performance—their multi-stability—thus appears to create a space in which lines blur and boundaries break. Is this also bewildering? Perhaps only in the sense that the domesticated controls of disciplines might be replaced with a more wild patterning of the world, one that is less corralled and controlled by individual agents, and more part of a continuum of what happens. The expert authority, the truthiness of knowledge, and the relative value of success might thereby lose their necessity, to be replaced with an attention to slipping and failing, including what they engender at the larger scales of complex systems.

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