

An Academic Diptych

THIS YEAR REPRESENTS A peculiar personal anniversary. I have now been doing food studies for as long as I previously did sexuality studies, before my “culinary turn.” While I have gradually slid from the sex to the food side of the academic table, I still teach both subjects. I also remain active on the editorial board of *Sexualities*, a leading journal in the sociology of sexuality, even as I participate in the editorial collective for *Gastronomica*. Thus, as I was gazing at Jess Stephens’s mesmerizing photographic diptychs in this issue, I also was contemplating the academic diptych of my own career, on the one side “sex,” on the other “food”—what connects them? This question formed for me a way of looking at this issue. Just like the flies caught lighting upon the dates in the cover image from Stephens, questions of bodily politics buzz from food to sex studies. Drawing on these articles as food for thought, I found three terms that seemed ripe for comparative reflection: *authenticities*, *temporalities*, and *borders*.

Sex and food find a connection in the concept of authenticity. Food and sex both are visceral ways of grounding culturally prescribed “truths” about self and society in the body. As Gaozi tells Mencius, “food and sex are natural” (食色性也 *shi se xing ye*), but for Mencius, this commonsensical observation is only half the story. The Confucian conception of nature, like Aristotle’s, is both descriptive and normative (Bloom 1997; Hall 2020). In short, desires for sex and food are simultaneously formed in the body and informed through the cultivation of a moral instinct. Similarly, for us moderns, “authenticity” is a term that contains within it this simultaneously socialized and naturalized conception of a prescriptive path—a “way” (*dao* 道) of eating—that still must be cultivated through social pedagogy (e.g., food writing and nutrition studies). Sex is analogously thought to be “natural,” though the standards of “nature” we apply to it are different.

As both culture and nature, food and sex also are ways of marking social time on multiple scales, from the daily meals and hugs to feasts celebrating a lifelong marriage. Food, through the vehicle of palatal memory, is a particularly powerful way of establishing shared social temporalities, confirming private and public connections through palatal nostalgia. Sex, in contrast, is often a way of forgetting as much as remembering, and sexual memories are notoriously mutable. Both can be ways of grounding stories about our pasts, presents, and futures. But are these stories told through the body always reliable?

Finally, eating and sex can both be a way of staking out boundaries against others, while simultaneously creating especially inviting ways of violating them. While

sexual border crossing is more often perilous, gastronomy both celebrates distinctive social identities and suggests new recipes for redefining them. Culinary boundaries and borderlands are concepts in many of the pieces in this issue. Therefore, in outlining themes that unite this issue of *Gastronomica*, I try to generate some formative questions from my perspective on sexuality studies, which I pose as one way of reading these contributions to food studies. I start first with the theme of authenticity, then memories and temporalities, and finally return to the questions of boundaries and boundary crossing.

Authenticities: An Italian Dao of Eating

The topic of authenticity is at the center of this issue of *Gastronomica*, with a path-breaking special section devoted to the concept of authenticity in food studies, all based on Italian case studies. Since this special section comes with its own thorough introduction by Lauren Crossland-Marr and Elizabeth L. Krause, I will not introduce the individual articles here. However, as a bifocaled food-and-sex scholar, I can't help but be struck by the question of whether or how sexuality scholars would talk about "authentic sex," and what form this conversation might take. My own reply would be to point to the discourse of "naturalness" in ethnographic sex research. Good sex is often described as "natural" in interview-based studies (Fahs and Plante 2017; Farrer, Tsuchiya, and Bagrowicz 2008). This idea of "naturalness" is conceptually very close to "authenticity" in implying a corporal *telos*, grounded in "natural" needs that we still must discover and cultivate socially. Another explicit take on authenticity comes up in studies of commercial sex, in which clients seek "real" emotional connections with sex workers, even while knowing such connections are contrived or even faked (Bernstein 2007). Authenticity in sex is thus opposite of contrivance and commodification—but exists in their shadow. In authenticity discourses about food, this grounding of palatal taste in nature is tied to embodiment but also more broadly to peoples and lands—in the worst instances, a crude culinary version of Blut und Boden (blood and soil), in others as flexible ties among peoples, places, and practices. As with sex, there is a similarly naïve hope that such "real" connections can survive the processes of commodification, marketing, and regulation. The articles in this section explore how tastes are bound to people and places, while not ignoring the social exclusion created in market mechanisms and regulatory standards, many of which are institutionalized by European Union authorities.

Not surprisingly, as we also see in the articles in this issue, norms of culinary authenticity are viewed with suspicion by many ordinary eaters. Is it because they seem to be imposed by bureaucrats and elitist foodie authorities? Some examples in this special section seem to point in this direction. How would people react if standards for "authentic sex" were regulated by the European Union or the columnists of *The New Yorker*? Indeed, research in sexuality shows that in addition to "naturalness," another standard for good sex is the ability to choose our own sexual scripts (Fahs and Plante 2017). Probably, the same is true for food. "Good eating"—like good sex—most likely entails our choosing our own scripts for authenticity. In this issue, we learn about several scripts for authenticity, mostly from Italy. This is a pluralistic and ethnographic approach to authenticity that brings much pleasure in reading, even for those who remain skeptical of the promise of "true" food.

Temporalities: Culinary Ghosts of Past, Present, and Future

Linked perhaps to the peculiar physiology of smell and taste, gustatory experiences are recalled so vividly (or at least imagined so) that they enable us to re-encounter a personal and collective past as though it is still present—the famous “Proust effect” (Hamilton 2011). Individual and shared food histories are constructed through this acutely felt culinary nostalgia (Swislocki 2008). Sex, however, in contrast to taste, reminds us of the untrustworthy nature of sensory memories. Men and women show wide discrepancies in their recollections of sexual experiences, even basics such as the numbers of sexual partners (Brown and Sinclair 1999). Sexual memory points to the equally human arts of forgetting and dissembling, something food scholars might consider more thoroughly. Indeed, the essays in this issue point to both slippages and creativity in imagining food pasts, presents, and futures. Memories are extremely fecund, but they may be faulty. And even imagined futures are deeply laden with selective readings of the recent past.

Several of the essays in this issue of *Gastronomica* deal with temporalities expressed through food memories, food nostalgia, and routinized food practices. First, we learn how personal food memories help us construct the present while simultaneously reimagining a collective past. Victor Valle, in his article in this issue, takes his own kernel of childhood palatal memories and enlarges it into an ambitious exploration of the culinary meanings of chiles that draws on poetics as well as neuroscience. Far more than an exercise in childhood nostalgia, Valle’s essay presents the hope of a postcolonial politics of food memories based on both personal and collective memories associated with the pungent chiles native to the Southwest United States.

One of the most intriguing explorations of culinary storytelling in this issue involves a case of failed or disappointed food memory. The author and photographer (and our reviews editor) Janita Van Dyk returns to Italy aiming to photograph the foods and places she had associated with the slow food movement only to find that her memories have failed her. On her return, the foods she previously photographed are now ugly and the places disappointing. There is no Proustian madeleine moment of recognition for her. For Van Dyk, food memory proves faulty and evasive. She can only recapture the essential conviviality of slow food by refocusing her gaze on candid portraits of her fellow diners and friends. In this essay, then, the reputed reliability of gustatory memory is questioned, and the presence of slow food is shown to be less on the plate and the tongue than in the momentary expressions of co-presence on the faces of the people she shares it with.

Food pasts also become ways to talk about the future of food. We see this vividly in Alex Ketchum’s essay on the retrofuturist visions of food robots and food computers in mid-twentieth-century America. As Ketchum points out, even in a future in which culinary work is made effortless by automation, men could only imagine women staying at home in order to push all the digitized buttons. Evidently, the unquestioned routines of women conjuring meals for men makes a gastronomic future dominated by robots and computers palatable to the assumed male reader or viewer of these ads. In short, the future imagined through food may just be another jaded version of the gendered past, until someone unexpectedly stops pushing buttons for those in power.

Taken together, these articles show that food is a particularly pliable medium for imagining our pasts, presents, and futures, but it is not as reliable as we sometimes

think. Ultimately food memory is, as Van Dyk writes, a political act, as is the imagination of our food futures. And, good meals, like good sex, may be as much an art of forgetting as remembering.

Borderlands: Border Crossings and Imagined Frontiers

Another shared symbolic function of sex and food is the politics of boundary-making and boundary-crossing. Sexual boundary crossings are often fraught with danger, whether concerning the boundaries of heteronormativity, homogamy, or propriety. Eating seems far more promiscuous. While religious folks may refuse the food of the “other” and urban elites grouse about culinary appropriation, gastronomic practice has long been an orgy of cross-fertilization, allowing for a bodily politics of contamination and hybridization. With sex, in contrast, people proceed cautiously across sacred social boundaries, often at mortal peril. The comparison is not meant to imply equivalence, but I do believe thinking about these similar but different uses of food and sex helps sharpen our attention on what is at stake in the corporal politics surrounding both.

Foodways can both solidify and blur social boundaries. In this issue of *Gastronomica*, the primary emphasis is on the ways in which foods allow us to cross borders, to inhabit and reimagine borderlands, and to use border crossings to reimagine the identity of the center. Blake Allmendinger’s paper reads the border-crossing career of Julia Child against another essay by Bernard DeVoto that defends a romanticized idea of the “frontier” in American history. For Allmendinger, the significance of Child’s writing lies in the politics of opening up the American domestic sphere to experiments with cosmopolitan foodways at a time when the Cold War politics of the country were increasingly xenophobic. According to Allmendinger, Child defined the kitchen as “a liminal space of transformation and possibility; as a contact zone in which different cultures converged.” Of course, America had long placed French cooking at the center of its metropolitan culinary tables, so Child’s work might not be quite as radical as Allmendinger applies. Still, Child clearly did impact the American kitchen in ways that went further and deeper than the fancy French banquets served to elites in large cities since the nineteenth century (Freedman 2016). Readers of Child’s cookbooks and those inspired by her learned first that there were acceptable ways for Americans to be “European” and then later to be “global.”

Culinary histories of borderlands may also help rewrite the broader social histories of places, show connections that were later erased, and even expand the “border” to include most of the territory. Taking us on a far-ranging culinary tour of the border zones of the United States and Mexico, Patrick Charbonneau and Jeffrey M. Pilcher use the sweet fudge-like panochita de leche to show us how food histories can be reimagined through a particularly popular food item. Panochita is a confection of boiled sugar and milk invented in colonial Mexico. It became a popular sweet in nineteenth-century Mexican cities and towns. The authors trace its cross-border lineage and show it sometimes merged with similar categories of sweets, especially fudge, in the United States. It was subsequently used by cookbook authors to represent both Mexicanness in Mexico and localized authenticity in the American West before gradually becoming a nostalgic and rare item sold in only a few places. Studying this sweet allows the authors to reexamine a postcolonial Mexican American history of shared culinary borderlands and cross-border influences. As

a coda to this historical article, Charbonneau and Pileher join with Kelsey Kilgore in the Culinaria kitchen at the University of Toronto to recreate panochita in a series of surprisingly arduous experiments, showing how the embodiment of a dish involves more than a sense of taste, but also muscular kitchen labor.

Sex rarely pops up explicitly in *Gastronomica*, but it did here. In passing, the authors note what Spanish speakers will already know, that more than a century ago the term “panochita” turned into a slang term for female genitals, and remains so today. The longevity of this slang perhaps points to the resonance of food–sex metaphors. A cautionary tale about googling for images of “panochita” also points to the moral boundary work we reflexively engage in about sex. There are no “not safe for work” warnings on food porn. True, food also can be the locus of fierce moral boundary maintenance. Hindu extremists have killed Indian Muslims for allegedly slaughtering cows. Secular examples also can be found. Some Americans protest the eating of rabbits, dogs, or horses, regarding them as exclusively pets. But such examples are scarce in comparison to the number of people policed and even murdered for infractions of sexual boundaries. The battles over the hijab in Iran or abortion in the United States show the fierceness of these sexual border wars. Food, in contrast, seems to form an arena of body politics in which boundary crossing is not only tolerated but even celebrated. Both the connections and disjunctures in these two most common foci of corporal politics are striking, and could be a site for longer investigations.

Food Writing and Sex Writing

Turning the question around, what did food studies teach me, then, about studies of sex? If you read the pages of *Gastronomica*, you might be forgiven for thinking that no one ever had a bad meal. Food scholars gush over the joys of their fieldwork. If you read the pages of *Sexualities*, in contrast, you might suspect no one ever has good sex. Problems abound in the bedroom. Clearly, food studies can be critical, and *Gastronomica* is perhaps the best example of this type of writing. Sexuality studies, however, could possibly learn something from food studies about celebrating the textures, tastes, and terroir of the erotic. This is tricky, but that doesn’t obviate the point that academic sex writing is often oblique, technical, and dry. Food writing is both more direct, vivid, and embodied. Good writing mobilizes people, and above all, good writing is read. Visceral prose can more directly pierce the established conceptual and societal boundaries we all seek to question in our research. This is one great merit I see in *Gastronomica* as a collective enterprise devoted to both scholarly rigor and writerly style. I am now happy to be sitting more often on this side of the table.

And finally, *Gastronomica* is a collective of members who rotate into and out of editorial duties. This year, Helen Zoe Veit, José Johnston, and Simone Cinotto leave us, and we thank them for their devotion and good companionship over the years. Their seats at the editorial table are now taken by Alyshia Gálvez, Irina D. Mihalache, and Rafia Zafar. We look forward to their fresh voices in our continued conversations to make the journal even better, more inclusive, and more accessible to readers and contributors.

—James Farrer, for the *Gastronomica* Editorial Collective, Tokyo, November 2022

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