At the Center of the Center of the New York Bagel

This is an illusion of roundness, a flattened sphere, the rotund world squashed, as if, beneath a loafer. At its middle, either a gaping zero, or the zero squashed—a flattened sphere within a flattened sphere, an eye swollen shut, having once seen the beautiful constellations in a stockpot of boiling water—as if something umbilical had been excised: our tether, perhaps, to every conflicting narrative in this state.

This is Homer and Aristotle finally compromising on the shape of the Earth, which has something to do with New York City.

We eat our bagels because they are not necessarily anything, except flattened spheres. They are not necessarily sweet, or savory. They are not trapped by the doughnut’s severe identity, by our expectations of grease and confectioner’s sugar. Here, we further the narrative by choice—Garlic? Cinnamon-raisin?

Today, this is who we are: circular, without origin or end; flat, so we can’t roll easily away from our centers.

This is the bagel as a bumping-and-grinding of astronomical theory to theory... Who would say the bagel is ponderous? Who would say it is incantatory?

According to the American Academy for Jewish Research, the scriptures the Midrash and the Talmud and the Targum do “not think of a globe of the spherical earth, around which the sun revolves in 24 hours, but of a flat disk of the earth, above which the sun completes its semicircle in an average of 12...” and one of the old great secrets of the Torah is that “The Earth is usually described as a disk encircled by water.”

In the bagel is Zero, and its origin story—its rebellion against the other numbers, its refusal to behave like a 2 or an 11. Like Zero, the bagel commands a strange reverence, belief, or lack thereof. Aristotle liked to say that he did not believe in Zero, and he would swagger as he would tell people this in one outdoor arena or another, the rainwater, susceptible to the cold and to Celsius’s measurement of it, becoming ice in his beard.

Here, the Zero—believe it or not—is geocentric. Just look at that manhole cover on Broadway, and that man popping from it, poking his head through the firmament, the hard hat reflecting our sun and neon advertisement, a fat bagel sandwich in his clean hand.

Into this nothing, we shove everything; everything being blistered onion, garlic, caraway, poppy seed, sesame seed, and salt.

Into this narrative of Everything comes dissent, belief, and lack thereof; as if the pre-Socratic philosophers jockeying with Columbus about the parameters of the planet: according to SeriousB (B for bagel), on the “Serious Eats” blog: No, no, never caraway! It ruins it. Overwhelms the other flavors with its nastiness, and is a pain to chew too. Buffy agrees, as does BaglFreek, though HungryCristal Just plain loves caraway and for some superlative reason refers to the Everything Bagel as the Hypertension Special, as if, in this flattened sphere, overly decorated, is some commentary on our quickly beating hearts, according to HungryCristal.
The drive to define the bagel is manic and stressful and allows the pressure to build in our blood until, like the bath responsible for the bagel, it boils at a point of temperature that’s been referred to as the Opposite of Zero.

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Here, we suspend the bagel in the sort of water that so opposes its shape, it cooks it, makes it ready for our mouths. In this is some treatise on the homogeneity in all repulsion—the perfect relationship of round and flat, of Zero and the agent that boils it.

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New Yorkers like to say that it’s our water that makes our bagels taste so different, so good. Manhattan’s early settlers siphoned their water from shallow, privately owned wells. According to NYC Environmental Protection, “In 1677 the first public well was dug in front of the old fort at Bowling Green. In 1776, when the population reached approximately 22,000, a reservoir was constructed on the east side of Broadway between Pearl and White Streets. Water pumped from wells sunk near the Collect Pond, east of the reservoir, and from the pond itself, was distributed through hollow logs laid in the principal streets. In 1800 the Manhattan Company (now The Chase Manhattan Bank, N.A.) sank a well at Reade and Centre Streets, pumped water into a reservoir on Chambers Street and distributed it through wooden mains to a portion of the community. In 1830 a tank for fire protection was constructed by the City at 13th Street and Broadway...”

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Here, the bagel is born in a fluid between Pearl and White (to say nothing of the cosmologically seminal), tries its damnedest to be immaculate, pure as hunger or crystal, to Collect its debated flavorings like burrows or boroughs, to cloak us from the rats who Chase other rats in the hollow logs, the wooden mains, themselves trying their damnedest, under our feet to eat and couple and propagate their species as, birthed from the water that decorates their back-fur, the bagel presses from the Chamber, defying fire by boiling, by wetness, emerges sleek and saturated, the testimony of its journey written silent in the gaping surprised zero at its Centre.

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What else can we do but open our mouths in the sort of way that confuses hunger for communion?

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Today, the homeless man on the corner of Pearl and White, doubly all-inclusive, shouts about having had sex this morning with an Everything Bagel.

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The three water collection systems, says NYC Environmental Protection, were designed and built with various interconnections to increase flexibility by permitting exchange of water from one to another. Here, the embryonic bagel stretches its dough—the yeast, the little bit of sugar, little bit of salt, high gluten flour, and the room-temperature water—flexes its paste toward its fellows, considers the stack of ingredients that will soon top it, or embed themselves within it, and soon, if we are patient, we can bite in the name of connection and exchange and flexibility, and take these things inside ourselves via the sort of breakfast we mistakenly dub as simple.

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Here, we eat while walking. Escape is essential. Here, escape is both a slave to, and a salve for, pain. The hole in the bagel’s center, it is believed, was created so that many bagels could be threaded onto a length of string and carried for great distances as sustenance to the persecuted cultures that had to flee the wrath of those who wished to destroy them.

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Here, Zero accommodates the string, and feeds us. All it takes is a boiling point.

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Bagel comes through Yiddish from the Old German, meaning first “to bend or bow,” then “a stirrup or ring.” Here, the bagel is so weighed-down, we confuse, if only linguistically, its collapsing for genuflection. Which the weight of the narrative, which the sesame seeds?

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Here, we allow such a confusion to become a ring—the very thing that entraps us, becomes the symbol for a sacred union.

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In the 1970s, a New York Bloomingdale’s began selling shellacked bagel jewelry, igniting what briefly became known in the city as the Poppy Seed Anniversary.

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Says Milton Berle, “We used to buy day-old bagels. They were so hard we had to hammer the butter on. Then my
uncle came up with a brilliant idea. He went to Israel and made a fortune selling Cheerios as bagel seeds. If you believe either of the previous, there’s some border property along the Golan Heights I’d like to sell you.”

It’s easy to associate said confusion with the Jews and the Old Germans, harder to determine why the bagel, in seventeenth-century Krakow, was the most popular gift given to women in childbirth.

Amniotic, umbilical, the bagel passes from one vessel into another…

Every minute, enough Niagara River water pours over the Falls to make 640 million cups of coffee. This helps to wash down the 3 billion bagels eaten last year in the U.S. alone.

New York City’s water supply, in its long and storied history, has been contaminated by rodents, sewage, industrial waste, petroleum, Diet Mountain Dew bottles, Cheeto bags, Cheerio boxes, Genesee beer cans, rat shit, cat shit, dog shit, my shit and yours, rotting fish, steaks, pork chops, cellophane, guns, fertilizer, pesticides, glue, human bodies, and an “underground oil leak bigger than the Exxon Valdez spill,” all coupling into a sludge that environmental scientists have dubbed “black mayonnaise,” that includes, like our bagels that supposedly depend on this water for their goodness, “just about everything… seemingly just about everything.”

The homeless man on Pearl and White screams Fuck the pretzel! and we hope he’s not really going to do it.

“It’s never going to be pristine,” says Walter Mugdan, EPA official, and says John Lipscomb of the Riverkeeper clean-water advocacy group, “It’s a byproduct of our society,” and says environmental writer Verena Dobnik, “On the Queens side, the cries of seagulls fill the air as they swoop over a junkyard that sells scrap metal to China… and nature survives—just barely.”

Knead the dough for ten minutes until it is smooth and elastic. Let rise in a warm place for one hour, until the dough has doubled in size. If the dough rises too quickly, move it to a cold area (this process is called retardation). Punch the dough down...

Here, if we plunge into water either toxic or boiling, we can briefly leave this earth.

Maria Balinska says, “The hole itself has intimations of eternity in the way it goes from being a finite space in the middle

According to bagel expert Maria Balinska: In the Middle Ages, “Christians insisted that any kind of bread, given its connection with the person of Jesus Christ, should be denied Jews. The Christian mob began attacking any Jew with the temerity to continue to buy or bake bread. However, the local ruler was a wise man and, having been petitioned by the local Jewish community, announced that it had been ruled that it was only what was baked could be properly called bread. The Jews promptly took the hint and departed to seek out a way to prepare wheat without baking. What they decided on was boiling and what resulted was the first batch of bagels ever made.” As the Jews further became scapegoats for any sort of calamity (including the Black Plague of 1348–49, during which Jews were hunted and murdered as a sort of sacrifice to the disease), they loaded their boiled bread rings onto rope and sticks and lit out for what they only believed would be greener pastures.

Here, the greener pasture is also an illusion of roundness, the rotund world squashed. Here, the belief in the greener pasture is us trying so hard to be Aristotle, to not to believe in Zero.

In the 1970s, New Yorkers, deciding en masse to make sandwiches of their bagels, demanded a new recipe, a softer consistency, in order to “domesticate” what were often then colloquially known as “cement doughnuts” or “Brooklyn jawbreakers.” According to New York Times writer Mimi Sherman, “We became too lazy to chew,” much less flee the city with only a string of bagels to sustain us.

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Maria Balinska says, “The hole itself has intimations of eternity in the way it goes from being a finite space in the middle
of the dough to an infinite space once you have finished eating the bagel! Heady stuff.”

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Materialists! You lack all sense. Your brain is maimed. Do you think the bagel’s more important than its essence? Are you running from the spiritual idea? Its presence Is indeed the central core and cause of every entity Even of crude brass So rude and crass Just out of curiosity Cut the brass in pieces and then with care Slice the smallest silver thin as hair Then slowly further subdivide it like one divides the year To months and days, hours, minutes, seconds. Isn’t it quite clear That now you’re at the bagel hole, the rounded zero. Do you grasp the thesis? Think! Now you have a mere o. Its profundity assess and cogitate!

—from The Bagel Hole and Two Brass Buttons by Yiddish poet Eliezer Shtaynbarg (1880–1932)

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According to Encyclopedia Americana’s Cosmology, “The Hebrews saw the earth as an almost flat surface consisting of a solid and a liquid part, and the sky as the realm of light in which heavenly bodies move.”

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In 2008, astronaut Gregory Chamitoff, on his Space Shuttle mission to the International Space Station, became the first person to take the bagel into outer space. He also shunned the caraway, and packed 18 sesame seed bagels for the three-day trip. He did not load them onto rope or stick. Biting into his first, in zero-gravity, ever-rising, he did not consider how the sun, reflecting from the surface of the Space Station, allows the structure, to us back here on terra firma, a brightness 16 times greater than that of Venus. He did not consider the weightlessness of a single bubble of trapped air making for countless surfaces as the stockpots of the Earth began to come to their boil.

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In Manhattan, “95% of the total water supply is delivered to the consumer by gravity. Only about 5% of the water is regularly pumped to maintain the desired pressure.”

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This is the bagel as everything in need of a tether.

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This is the prayer that one day, all pressure can be determined by desire.

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...cool on a wire rack.

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According to the Food and Drug Administration, “there is no legal standard of identity for bagels in the United States. Bakers are thus free to call any bread torus a bagel, even those that deviate wildly from the original formulation.”

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According to John Mitewich, in his article “Taking Things to a Hole New Level,” the greatest mystery in the universe is “how people can eat un-toasted bagels.”

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Maria Balinska may wonder if baker and boiler can ever be the same thing again.
In complex dynamics, a mathematical set of points whose boundary is a distinctive and easily recognizable shape, like a circle, is called the Mandelbrot Set.

If the toasting of the bagel is a shunning of its origins, the cutting of the cord, what other sorts of persecution can we forget via the addition of a second form of heat? How much temperature is required before we can double back on ourselves like a ring, until we can return to Zero?

According to Camille Flammarion’s *L’atmosphère: météorologie populaire*, the above engraving, by an unknown artist, portrays a “cosmic machinery [that] bears a strong resemblance to traditional pictorial representations of the ‘wheel in the middle of a wheel’ described in the visions of the Hebrew prophet Ezekiel. One of the most significant features of the landscape is the tree, which some people have interpreted as the Kabbalistic Tree of Life.” The caption beneath the engraving in Flammarion’s book reads: A missionary of the Middle Ages tells that he had found the point where the sky and the Earth touch . . .

We bow and bow and run away. This means we’re not yet broken. This means we’re touching something.

We look around and around for a filling meal, with people.

At the funeral home, spread on the table, apricot rugelach, chocolate-chip mandelbrot cookies, pyramids of bagels, lox flushed with shock, three different kinds of cream cheese and white plastic knives with which to spread it. If we are to spread it, we must first halve our bagels, but, like Zero, they don’t behave. Like Zero halved, a halved bagel remains a bagel. We rebuild it with cream cheese and say nothing of brick or mortar or haroset, of building a harder purity from the sewage. All it takes is redefinition, as we turn from the dead to the food, tell ourselves, shhh and I’m sorry, and speak of cycles and full circles and clear boundaries, the flatness of the face in death, the flatness of the lid that seals us in, and we chew, and through mouthfuls of bagels and everything on them, we say it again: shhh and I’m so, so sorry and a better place, and it’ll all be okay, I promise, and we chew in circles and circles and the minced onion is cooked so soft it hardly makes a sound against our teeth and this is good and this is ample and this is sufficient and this is the sound of us not crying.