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Platform: Journal of Theatre and Performing Arts is published twice annually. Contributions are particularly welcome from postgraduate researchers, postdoctoral researchers, and early-career academics in theatre and performing arts. We welcome the submission of academic papers, performance responses, photo essays, book reviews, interviews, and new dramatic writing. *Platform* also welcomes practice-based research papers.

Papers should not exceed 4500 words (including notes and references). Practice-based papers should normally include images in JPEG format (300ppi). Reviews should be around 1000 words. Photo essays should not exceed 2000 words and 10 pictures. All contributions should be formatted according to the MLA style guidelines (see Gibaldi's *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*) and should include a 200-word abstract of the article submitted as well as the article itself. Authors should also send a 50-word bio with their submission. Submissions should be sent electronically as email attachments to platform-submissions@rhul.ac.uk.

Peer Review Policy

All articles are subject to peer review. All articles are anonymously refereed by two or more independent peer reviewers, in addition to review by the editorial board.

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Editorial

Food and gastronomy saturate contemporary cultural spheres: from social media's 'food porn', reality television and culinary pop-ups to concept-restaurants and the internationalisation of local cuisines. Arguably, menus have recently become a privileged medium for cultural transfer and appropriation, but food has long been both the signifier and transmitter of emotion, identity, ideology, belonging, and wealth.

The title for this edition was trickier to pin down than others. The call for papers initially defined its subject area as 'Theatre and the Kitchen'. We received a variety of responses, the majority of which were concerned with the event, meaning, setting, and performance of meals. Eventually, the social and cultural trope of mutual dining and its relations to art, theatre, and performance emerged as the overarching interest of this issue. Rather than reflecting on the long (and fascinating) history of the representation and staging of food-making and consumption in theatre, this edition of *Platform* examines the social, symbolic, aesthetic and political workings of meals, suppers, and dinners as performance events.

As manifested in the four articles, the creative piece, and the performance review, performing and feasting intersect in a myriad of ways. Perhaps due to the tendency of feasts to cut across the social, the symbolic, and the material-corporal, an underlying theme of the texts collected here is the negotiation of practice, theory, and research. At the heart of each of them there is a meal (or meals) that serves as its intellectual, artistic, and scholarly pivot. The table, if you will, around which ideas, insights and propositions are assembled.

The first article in this issue traces the genealogy of one of the main Western icons of social eating, the banquet. Athena Stourna provides an expansive historical overview of the banquet, from Greek antiquity to contemporary European banquet performances by Daniel Spoerri, Emmanuel Giraud, and the French women's group Les Platonnes. The breadth of Stourna's chronology demonstrates the enduring appeal and deep embeddedness in Western culture of the performative, entertaining, and often spectacularly arranged

consumption of food and drink.

In nearly complete opposite direction from the banquet's antiquity and its public conviviality, Ana-Christina Acosta Gaspar de Alba explores the theme of intimacy in long-distance dinners in 'TableTalk: Staging Intimacy Across Distance Through Shared Meals'. Reflecting on a play in development by the author and collaborator Danielle Laurin, this article explores how the idea of commensality, of eating together, might serve to communicate a sense of the enduring intimacy of a long-distance relationship to theatre audiences, who, like the long-distance lovers in the play, are separated into two locations.

The meal in Carmen C. Wong's 'The Past Perfect Kitchen: Materiality and Memory Spaces in *Unmade, Untitled*' is performed by the participants of a performance event taking place in a Singapore residential flat. Wong's practice-informed investigation draws timely connections between inedible food stand-ins and immigration, longing, and belonging. Morphing from its status as a marker of intimacy, in this article, the feast becomes a precarious and unstable site of memory and identity.

In Emilia Halton-Hernandez's 'Babette's Relational Art: Dualistic Worship in Isak Dinesen's *Babette's Feast*' the feast serves as the connecting joint, or rather point of contention, between the corporeal-material and the spiritual-ethical. In her theorisation of the binary of 'sacred things' versus 'sacred words' in the nineteenth-century short story, Halton-Hernandez offers a refreshing application of the theory of relational art to literary analysis while shedding light on the performative qualities of feast-making and feasting.

The creative piece, by performance artist Emma Miriam Berentsen, presents impressions from Berentsen's performance practice and invites the reader to contemplate a slightly twisted, powerfully emotional question—what would you eat as your last meal before you die? Vivian Appler reviews the performance *Oh My Sweet Land* (New York, 2017) by writer-director Amir Nizar Zuabi, which mediates memories from ongoing realities of war and forced migration through food-making.

In the book review section, we are happy to include a review

of *Theatre in the Dark* (2017), co-edited by one of *Platform's* former editors, Adam Alston, along with Martin Welton. In addition, this issue of *Platform* features a review of *The Disney Musical on Stage and Screen* (2017) edited by George Rodosthenous, and *The Sixth Sense of the Avant-Garde: Dance, Kinaesthesia and the Arts in Revolutionary Russia* (2017) by Irina Sirotkina and Roger Smith.

We wish to thank the Department of Drama, Theatre and Dance at Royal Holloway, University of London for enabling this publication and for supporting it enthusiastically and attentively. Further thanks are due to *Platform's* editorial board for their motivation and hard work. We would also like to thank Bloomsbury Methuen Drama for the book review copies. Finally, we whole-heartedly wish to thank the authors of the articles in this issue, whose diverse and enlightening responses to the theme of this edition have turned *Platform* 12.1 into what we hope will be an original and enlightening contribution to an emerging interest in humanities research.

Julia Peetz and Raz Weiner, Editors

Notes on Contributors

Ana-Christina Acosta Gaspar de Alba is a PhD student in Comparative Studies at Florida Atlantic University. Among her creative interests, the exploration of physical and emotional distance ranks high. She received her BA in English and Latino Studies from Indiana University and her MFA in Creative Writing from Virginia Tech.

Vivian Appler is an assistant professor at the College of Charleston. Her research interests include science and performance, activist theatre, and practice-as-research. She has published with *The Journal of American Drama and Theatre*, *Comparative Drama*, and *Theatre History Studies* and she is developing a monograph on feminism, performance, and science.

Emma Miriam Berentsen is London-based performance artist. Her work is based on autobiographical material and its transformation into diverse forms of theatre, performances and installations. She works on the edge of non-fiction and fiction and the boundaries of the medium of theatre. She presented work at festivals and venues such as Venice Biennale (IT), Over 't IJ Festival, Amsterdam (NL), GIFT Festival, Gateshead (UK), ACT Festival, Bilbao (SP) and others. Website: <https://emmaberentsen.nl/about-2/>

Emilia Halton-Hernandez is a CHASE-AHRC funded PhD student in the School of English at the University of Sussex. Her research is on the work of author, painter and psychoanalyst Marion Milner. More broadly she is interested in life writing, visual studies, Romanticism and British object relations psychoanalysis.

Lisa Moravec is a fully-funded research student at Royal Holloway and a freelance writer. Her research explores aesthetic, ethical, and biopolitical issues. She is developing the notion of dressage whilst examining performance art, its documentation and leftovers with a focus on horses and humans from 1968. She tutors at Royal Holloway and at Kingston School of Art, and regularly writes art criticism for

Studio International and *Die Springerin*.

Laura Robinson is Lecturer in Dance at the University of East London. Her PhD research focused on the construction of spectacle in male Street dance crew performances on U.K. television. Publications include chapters in 'Bodies of Sound' (2013) and 'The Oxford Handbook of Dance and the Popular Screen' (2014).

Athena Stourna is the author of the monograph *La Cuisine à la scène: boire et manger au théâtre du XXe siècle* (2011). She trained as Scenographer (Rose Bruford College), and holds a Maîtrise, D.E.A. and Doctorat in Theatre Studies (Université de Paris III). She is the artistic director of the multinational Okypus Theatre Company, and a member of the Food project, an international group that experiments with food, space and technology. Athena is currently Visiting Fellow at the Center for Hellenic Studies at Princeton University.

Carmen C. Wong makes participatory performances and researches how belonging is performed by food and its eaters. Her dialogical method of working employs embodied practices, and utilizes food as plastic, sensory and affective material. Her current participatory gastro-performance on embodied listening and gestures, and asks: Can we eat our way home?

Jessica Worden is an artist and writer. Her research focuses on performances of breathlessness, written scores and writing-as-performance. Recent publications include 'Slow veins' in *Syncope in Performing and Visual Arts* (2016) and commissioned writing for *EROS, Salt* and]performancespace[. She performs and exhibits work in the UK and abroad.

Banquet Performance Now and Then: Commensal Experiments and Eating as *Mise en Scène*¹

By Athena Stourna

Abstract

Allan Kaprow, in his first attempts to conceptualise Performance in the late 1950s, insisted upon characterising his happenings as “social occasions” rather than theatrical or artistic events. This was a time when art would embrace life, after many centuries of mutual separation. Indeed, this was a long cultural process, which finally led to the creation of independent art forms, as we perceive them today, like painting, theatre, music, and gastronomy, as opposed to the fused forms where all the arts would blend together on the occasion of social or religious events. By going back to the social sphere and back to the public space, art would serve again as a social instrument by including and, more importantly, by incorporating all those who, until then, had been excluded from it. Spectators would, from now on, become participants and, due to the accessibility of the event, this aesthetic experience would cease to be addressed only to experts of an exclusive taste. Within this frame, Kaprow dissociated “artlike art” from what he defined as “lifelike art” (Kaprow, 1983, 100). This kind of art embraces life, ceremony and ritual, and provides a communal experience where boundaries between artists and visitors/spectators/participants are broken.

This article examines several theatrical and performative elements of the historical banquet, from Greek antiquity up to the 19th century, and how they have been rediscovered, reused and sometimes even distorted in contemporary European banquet performances. Beginning with the work of Daniel Spoerri, in the early 1960s, I will question how sympotic practices have been incorporated in performance art from these earlier experiments. Spoerri used eating as a participatory performative element and food as a perishable form of art during his long artistic career. I will then look at more recent banquet-performances, focusing on the work of Emmanuel Giraud, who revisits historical banquets in his performance experiments,

1 This article was written during a Visiting Fellowship at the Seeger Center for Hellenic Studies at Princeton University.

where he explores the potentials of table sociability. Likewise, the group Les Platonnes turns to the Greek *symposion* and attempts a feminist re-reading of Plato's *Banquet* in a performance titled *La Banquette* (2015).

The above-mentioned artists experiment with 'commensality', the idea of eating at the same table or *mensa* (Fischler 529), as an 'ingredient' of their performances, thus emphasising the spectators' active participation in their events. The act of inviting spectators to the table, of sharing food and drink with them, provides a different kind of communal experience: participants become table guests and thus shape the overall performance. Eating becomes an artistic act and food an organic, ephemeral work of art. An element of performance art *par excellence*, spectators' participation as both viewers and artistic agents, is also a component of the banquet from the Greek *symposion* to Grimod de La Reynière's staged feasts in the late 18th and early 19th century. A historical overview of the Banquet will thus provide examples of how theatrical and performative elements have characterised this social event in past centuries.

In particular, I will focus on the theatrical nature of the banquet, by exploring its *mise en scène*. I deliberately use the French term as opposed to 'theatre direction' or 'staging'. Recently reclaimed by Patrice Pavis (2013), the concept of the *mise en scène* encompasses the multidisciplinary nature of both theatre direction and performance creation; it refers to a form of total art in itself. In this sense, I wish to underline a conscious, artistically driven act of putting all the different (and sometimes disparate) elements of the banquet together: performance acts, the choice of foodstuffs and food design, table decorations, the topography of the symptotic space, rituals, and the banqueters' eating and performing. Every single component works in autonomy and, at the same time, in synergy with the others, thus bringing to the fore a synesthetic performativity of the symptotic event. Here, I make use of the concept of 'performativity' as it has been formulated by Richard Schechner. For Schechner, performativity refers to

a pervasive mood or feeling – belonging not so much to the visual–aural realm (as performances do) but to the senses of smell, taste, and touch. ‘I smell something funny going on’ or ‘that’s to my taste’ or ‘I was touched by what happened’ are ways of apprehending the performative. (*Performance Studies* 169)

‘(S)cenography’ (a neologism that I owe to my former professor, the late Daniel Lemahieu) is another theatrical term that will be discussed, as it captures the material aspect of the banquet. This neologism combines ‘scenography’ and the Latin word *cena*—the Roman banquet. It is, in sum, what Stephen di Benedetto terms ‘scenography of the senses’: ‘a sensual engagement experienced through a body’s response to and within the theatrical event’ (72).

Drawing on performance theory, I will stress how commensality and the sociability of the table offer the possibility of active audience participation. These elements, together with the banqueters’ performative involvement, have constituted the basic components of the banquet in history. It should, therefore, be productive to explore how these components are being rediscovered and reproduced in contemporary banquet performances.



Fig. 1. ‘Daniel Spoerri (standing on the left) during *Le déjeuner sous l’herbe*, 1983’. Photographer: David Boeno. 12 February 2018.

Short History of the Banquet

Historically, gastronomy and the consumption of food and drink have intertwined with discourse, performance, and art in the context of public and private shared meals.² These kinds of social events emphasised entertainment, sociability, conversing, spectacle and the pleasure of the senses. Throughout history, such meals were referred to by different names. The widely used term ‘banquet’ was in use from the Renaissance onwards and encompassed various meanings, depending on the historical epoch in which it was being used. Deriving from the French word ‘banc’ and the Italian ‘banquetto’—a diminutive of ‘banco’—‘it implies the use of “bench” or “board” as a surface upon which to display, or from which to serve food’ (Meads 8). It is interesting to note that this surface served as a kind of stage, thus setting off the activation of the theatrical mechanism of play and display.

In ancient Greece, variety shows developed alongside tragedy and comedy during the *symposion*, a component of the Greek banquet, which consisted of two parts: the meal proper, δειπνον (*deipnon*), where people ate, and the συμπόσιον (*symposion*), which means ‘drink together’, where people drank (Stourna 19). A third component sometimes concluded the banquet: it was called the κῶμος (*komos*). This was an orgiastic Bacchic revel of the symposiasts. These components were seen as separate, each being a ritual with a sacred quality. In the dining room, the ἀνδρῶν (*andrōn*, which literally means ‘the space reserved for men’), the banqueters would lie on couches shared by two men. During the *symposia*, performances were held in the centre of the space. These performances were not only confined to professional performers. The symposiasts would indulge themselves in impromptu amateur performances, like reciting poetry and playing music.

While the Greek *symposion* held spiritual and religious

² Since antiquity there has been a distinction between public and private banquetting. For example, in ancient Greece, the *Syssition* was a public banquet (Schmitt Pantel), whereas the *symposion* was private (Murray).

significance, the Romans were more engaged in the pleasures of extravagance and ostentation. In Rome the feast was called *convivium* or *cena*³ and contained a spectacular dimension. Dinner did not involve any theatrical act, but there was music and dance. Yet, the Roman feast was of a theatrical nature in the sense that it deliberately made use of the idea of astonishment. In other words, the whole table ceremony was dramatised and special dishes were invented to accompany this dramatisation. Here are two notable examples: the host served unknown meat (such as stork and bear paws) or presented symbolic dishes. For instance, ‘Trojan pork’, consisted of a pig’s head adorned with a Phrygian cap, thus evoking the Trojan horse filled with warriors, since the pork’s head was stuffed with birds.⁴ A successful *cena* consisted of the pleasure of sharing and culinary pleasure. To achieve this goal, everything had to be well regulated: satisfaction was to be neither excessive, leading to disgust, nor insufficient, thus annoying the diners. For this reason, the ceremony associated with the *cena* was a complex and delicate art: its failure could mean a rupture in the social standing of the host (see Dupont 59-85).

In medieval times, feasting included performative acts which operated as an interactive action between banqueters and performers. These acts were a very precise and calculated way of conveying messages of political and economic superiority, and of social cohesion. Occasionally they functioned as a celebration of the launch of a political programme. The *Banquet du Faisan* (*The Feast of the Pheasant*), which took place in Lille in 1454, fulfilled the latter function. Most of the elements of that banquet—including the choice of ingredients, recipes, food design, and the performances of the *entremets* – were designed to promote a crusade planned by the banquet’s host, Duke Philip the Good, against the Ottomans, who

3 Both Roman words are linked to sharing and conviviality, the latter, according to one interpretation, referring to the Greek word *koinon* (*koinon*) which means ‘common’.

4 Horace’s *Satires* and Petronius’ *Satyricon* both contain information on the proceedings of the *cena*. The particular examples of the dishes stated here derive from the above literary texts – a fact that leads us to believe that they are fictional and not commonly consumed in the *cena*.

had taken Constantinople the year before. A number of performances that took place within that banquet relate explicitly to the crusade's aim. One notable performing act included an enormous pie which contained twenty-eight musicians performing a musical composition (from the inside of the pie). At the end of the performance every banqueter would take an oath to participate in the crusade. This banquet provides an example of how food, performance and politics become a unified artistic event (see Normore).

During the Renaissance, the banquet became a 'total' festive event: all the elements (music, dance, and food) came together to produce a coherent spectacle with a single theme. An example of such lavish and extravagant banquets is the so-called 'sugar banquet' given by the Venetian state in 1574 to honour the future King of France, Henry III: all the elements—napkins, cutlery, and tableware—were made of sugar. The strong visual theme (one might say 'scenographic') of this banquet was accompanied by efforts to activate the other senses (touch, smell, and taste). Thus, all the senses worked together in order to transform a mere visual appreciation into a total, synesthetic experience.

The plethora of food and spectacle—the main characteristic of the banquet in the 15th century—gave way to refinement and rarity in the 16th century. During the 17th century, the banquet reached its zenith as an art form; remarkable examples are the ones given by Louis XIV in Versailles, one of them being an event called 'Les plaisirs de l'île enchantée'. This was a three-day feast, which included several theatrical and operatic performances and was preceded or followed by a majestic meal. Towards the end of the 17th century, during the so-called *repas en ambigu*, the dining room turned into a kind of gastronomic theatre: a 'dramatic' combination of sweet and savoury foods were displayed in a room, but not necessarily consumed. The meal became a feast for the eyes, since visual pleasure was now seen to be more important (Kirschenblatt-Gimblett, 'Making Sense', 73-74).

Between the late 18th and early 19th century, the French

gastronome and theatre critic Grimod de La Reynière created some of the most memorable examples of staged banquets. In his first legendary mock-funerary banquet which took place in February 1783, Grimod employed a dramatic situation, and explored food and eating as spectacle (see Shrem). Funeral invitations were sent out to the twenty-two table guests and another three hundred spectators were invited to watch the banquet from above, in a voyeuristic kind of participation, which greatly shocked some of the guests:

On arrival, guests were disarmed and stripped of their decorations before being led into a darkened room, examined by an advocate, and then allowed into a black-draped dining room lit by 365 candles with a catafalque as centrepiece and a balustrade for invited observers around the periphery. Grimod introduced two of the known courses, of pork and foods cooked with oil (Levi 101).

Grimod's lavish, eccentric and highly spectacular meals marked the end of a long period of theatricalised banquets. From the 20th century onwards, the banquet has been characterised more by the social nature of conviviality than by the artistic, eccentric and ludic elements of the historical banquet.⁵ It is interesting to consider why the banquet gradually lost its magnificence and celebratory and gastronomic excess and gave way to less distinctive forms, like the banquets given by heads of state or the presidential inauguration banquets, among others.⁶

According to Kirshenblatt-Gimblett the banquet was replaced by new forms of festivity and sociability after the French Revolution ('Making Sense' 75). This was due to the emergence of the restaurants in the 19th century, opened by the chefs who used to work in aristocratic households and had been left unemployed after

5 See, for example, the French Belle époque banquets, as they are presented by Roger Shattuck in his book *The Banquet Years: The Origins of the Avant-Garde in France, 1885 to World War I* (1968).

6 For examples of modern Banquets and their similarities and differences with historical court banquets, see Freedman 99-108.

the upheaval of the Revolution. The restaurant came to be considered as the new 'temple' of sociability, and provided a new, more intimate kind of space. As a result, the focus of the diner became the plate and its contents, rather than the visual pleasure and spectacular paraphernalia of the traditional banquet. Joshua Abrams underlines this shift of focus from the visual/scenographic to the gustatory and draws a parallel between contemporaneous evolutions in both cuisine and the theatre:

While such a shift may seem at first glance the inverse of the historical shifts in theatrical scenography, it might be usefully considered to run parallel to the development in emphasis from the stock settings of eighteenth-century theatres through the early-nineteenth-century 'archaeological' theatrical design (under Josef Schreyvogel and Charles Kean, for instance) to the ultimate 'realism' of the box set and naturalistic settings, which sought to allow focus to remain on the plot and theatrical content of the play itself. (Abrams 7-8)

The emergence of the historical avant-garde in the early 20th century was a response to the restrictions on creativity that were felt to exist in the arts whilst realism and naturalism were dominant paradigms. The avant-garde also provided new fertile ground for the return of the theatricalised banquet, which would now become mainly an artistic event, rather than a social one. Food would provide the ideal medium for provocation, dramatic effervescence, and spectacle. For example, the Cubists turned to the art of gastronomy as early as the 1910s, when Guillaume Apollinaire invented the term *gastro-astronomisme* and spoke about the first culinary experiments of Cubist cuisine (see Berghaus 8-9). *Gastro-astronomisme* demands, according to Cecilia Novero, 'a "dramatic" look at cooking and eating' and 'presupposes that food be—intentionally—used as drama so as to consciously have an impact on the viewer/diner's emotional and sensual perception of the world' (9). While Cubist cuisine provided an original and provocative dimension to both cuisine and the arts,

the Italian Futurist movement is where art, food, and performance were more thoroughly blended together and acquired a consciously evoked social, political, artistic, and aesthetic dimension. The Futurist banquets reached their apogee in the early 1930s (Berghaus 3-17). Marinetti separated food from nutrition in his (and Fillia's) *Cucina Futurista* (1932). The Futurists believed that food, liberated from the constraints of providing nutrition, could become an artistic medium. Thus, the process of preparing food and consuming it acquired a theatrical and performative aspect, since food applied to all the senses. Both the Futurist banquets and Futurist cuisine were provocative and controversial, a reaction against Italian bourgeois cultural and culinary tradition.

A few decades later, in the United States, Allan Kaprow found food and drink to be ideal materials to experiment with in his happenings. In 1964 he created *Eat* in the Bronx, within which he offered wine, apples, bananas, toasts with jam, and potatoes in a semi-Eucharistic ritual. In his first attempts to conceptualise performance in the late 1950s, Kaprow had already insisted upon characterising his happenings as 'social occasions' rather than theatrical or artistic events. This was a time when art would embrace society and life (including everyday life), after many centuries of separation, from Kant and Schiller's ideas about artistic autonomy to the gap between art and life in late 19th century aestheticism. By going back to the social sphere and to public space, art would serve again as a social instrument by including and, more importantly, by incorporating all those who, until then, had been excluded from it. Spectators would from now on become participants and, due to the accessibility of the event,⁷ this aesthetic experience would cease to be addressed only to experts with specifically cultivated, exclusive tastes. Within this frame, Kaprow dissociated 'artlike art' from what he defined as 'lifelike art' (100). The latter embraces life, ceremony, and ritual, and

7 Happenings and performances may happen in public spaces—a street, a garage or a church: spaces with easy and free access that are more welcoming than those specifically reserved for artistic events.

it provides a communal experience where boundaries between artists and visitors/spectators/participants are broken. The banquet provided the elements that could create a new type of commensality, which could reinforce the new yearnings of live, visual and performance art. According to Nadia Seremetakis:

[C]ommensality can be defined as the exchange of sensory memories and emotions, and of substances and objects incarnating remembrance and feeling. ... Here each sense witnesses and records the commensal history of the others. In this type of exchange, history, knowledge, feeling and the senses become embedded in the material culture and its components: specific artefacts, places and performances (37).

Seremetakis stresses the idea of exchange between past and present, memory and the present emotion, identity and alterity as ingredients of the shared table. This sense of commensality can also be found in both the historical banquet and in current banquet-performances. Through the use of food and its sharing between performers and banqueters/spectators, a new sense of communion is created, one that is enhanced by the intimate, direct communication that the banquet has diachronically offered, as opposed to the frontal communication in conventional theatre and the museum/art gallery. Seremetakis highlights the materiality of food among other artefacts. This new-found interest was also underlined by Kaprow, back in 1958. When writing about Jackson Pollock's legacy, Kaprow stated that:

Pollock ... left us at a point where we must become preoccupied with and even dazzled by the space and objects of our everyday life, either our bodies, clothes, rooms, or, if need be, the vastness of Forty-second Street. ... Objects of every sort are materials for the new art: paint, chairs, food, electric and neon lights, smoke, water, old socks, a dog, movies, a thousand other things that will be discovered by the present generation of artists. (Kaprow 7-9)

Here, food, together with other quotidian, banal objects, becomes the ideal artistic medium that both represents and symbolises the use of everyday life as source of inspiration and final artistic destination.

The Banquet Revival in the Performance Art of Daniel Spoerri, Emmanuel Giraud, and Les Platonnes

The revival of the banquet as artistic event brings out the spectacular quality of the actions and images related to food. The *mise en scène* highlights the elements of surprise, deception, and dramatization, and these banquets revolve around a theme or story and develop through time. The (s)cenographic arrangement of the contemporary banquet performances studied here call for an association between the table and the stage and the table as stage. Similarly, the topography of the 'symptotic' type of space, as formulated by David Wiles,⁸ plays a significant part in the artistic concept. The spaces where banquet performances take place may reflect both the idea of inclusiveness and the idea of exclusiveness, as testified by the use of both indoor and outdoor spaces that are either accessible to all, or reserved for a limited number of participants. Banquet performances may take place in museums, galleries, restaurants, gardens, highways or in private spaces. Likewise, the table becomes a new type of stage, where food and drink are displayed before being consumed, and a space that unites all the spectators/banqueters surrounding it, almost like a small-scale gastronomic theatre in-the-round. At the same time, food design is particularly emphasised, since recipes may be conceived especially for the event. Hence, the choice of ingredients, the taste, and image become dramatic and symbolic.

Daniel Spoerri, member of the group Nouveaux Réalistes and inventor of Eat-art, apart from using food in his work, has, since the 1960s, organised numerous banquets, the so-called 'dinner-

8 Wiles (2003) argues that the evolution of the Banquet's spatial arrangement through the ages shows the different requirements related to each historic epoch, as regards the place occupied by politics, table talking and discourse, social relationships, the performing arts and, of course, the art of gastronomy.

actions'. One of them that I will briefly present is *Déjeuner sous l'herbe* (*Luncheon under the grass*),⁹ whose title is a reverse reading to Manet's famous painting *Déjeuner sur l'herbe* (1863). In the outdoor area of a château, Spoerri set a long table for a hundred guests, while a forty meter-long trench was being dug. In the middle of this feast, Spoerri ordered the diners to bury the tables with the food leftovers inside the trench. In 2010 and 2016, in a type of archaeological excavation, the banquet's leftovers were revealed once again, in a gesture to remind



Fig. 2. 'The tables are installed inside the trench. Daniel Spoerri, in the foreground, is directing the operations'. Daniel Spoerri, *Le déjeuner sous l'herbe*, 1983. Photographer: David Boeno. 12 February 2018.

spectators of the ephemeral nature of both food and performance. Eating, an act mostly associated with survival and the continuation of life gave way to burial—the last act of performing death. Decades

⁹ This dinner took place near Versailles in 1983, see <http://www.dejeunersousl-herbe.org/>

later, a symbolic resurrection of the meal would take place. The banquet's decaying (s)cenography would acquire the characteristics of an archaeological find, a relic of a performance that lasted a lot longer than usual. Indeed, this performance might be thought of as having continued under the ground for decades after the meal was over. Spoerri thus played with the notion of time, which can be both devouring and disgorging.



Fig. 3. 'The excavations of part of the banquet in 2016.' Daniel Spoerri, *Le déjeuner sous l'herbe*, 1983/2016. Photographer: Anne Fourès. 12 February 2018.

The French artist Emmanuel Giraud creates food performances, in which he acts both as chef and master of ceremonies. In an effort to revive the memory of famous banquets of the past, he resuscitates these banquets while altering them in gustatory and in symbolic terms. According to Allen Weiss, 'Emmanuel Giraud's performances are places where solipsism, narcissism, and the fantasies of a greedy person join commensality, seduction, and the mythology

of a well-chosen group of table guests' (11, my own translation from the French).



Fig. 4. Emmanuel Giraud, *Devenir gris*, 2009. Photographers: © Luc Jennepin / Emmanuel Giraud. Courtesy of the artist.

In 2009¹⁰ Giraud performs *Devenir gris* (*Becoming grey*), in a gallery in Montpellier. This was a deformation of Grimod de la Reynière's funerary banquet, mentioned above. Giraud's sympotic space is bare and contains the most characteristic props in Grimod's original (s)cenography: black candles, a coffin and a catafalque. Likewise, the gastronomic creations that echo Grimod's menu¹¹ are cooked on the basis of ingredients in black—an unusual colour for food and one that caused mistrust among the evening's banqueters:

10 In that same year, Giraud returned to a historical form of the banquet and created his own version of a Roman *cena*, *Le Festin de Trimalchion*, at the Villa Medici in Rome.

11 A fictional account of this menu can be found in Huysmans' novel *A Rebours* (*Against Nature*) (1884).

black egg, raddles of rare rabbit in cocoa juice, and Guinea fowl in tombstone, among other morbid delicacies. This dark, highly aestheticised scenography of vision and taste is dramatically eloquent: the banquet's menu and recipes, just like the props¹², tell a story of mystery and death and approach this topic with black humour.



Fig. 5. Emmanuel Giraud, *Devenir gris*, 2009. Photographers: © Luc Jennepin / Emmanuel Giraud. Courtesy of the artist.

Another recent example of the distorted reproduction of a historical banquet comes from the French women's group Les Platonnes. A feminist reworking of Plato's *Banquet*,¹³ this 'phalloghagic' *symposion* aims at going against 'the very masculine philosophical concept on love, in which women have been trapped since antiquity' (*La Banquette des Platonnes*). Hence, the names of the Platonic *Banquet's* participants are changed into female ones.¹⁴ Socrates becomes SocratA, Alcibiades becomes AlcibiadA and Phaedrus becomes PhaedrA. The character of PhaedrA is also the banquet's centrepiece: her head is placed in the middle of the table,

12 For example, the banqueters' were frightfully curious when first seeing the coffin: would it contain the food they were going to consume?

13 The title itself —*La Banquette*—refers to this feminist appropriation.

14 This work openly alludes to Judy Chicago's installation *The Dinner party* (1979) where seventy important women of the past are symbolically invited in a triangular table.

and her philosophical discourse is ‘ingested’ by the other female symposiasts. Precarious food (rotten fruit, candies, and marshmallows) and wine are offered only to female spectators. Male spectators cannot enjoy this oral experience, since their mouths are stuffed with sanitary towels. As Nariné Karslyan, who is part of Les Platonnes, told me, the aim was to achieve a state where the men can, for once, remain silent and listen to the philosophical discourses pronounced.¹⁵ The participants in this banquet performance thus communicate a clear political message against the diachronic male supremacy, during which women’s mouths were shut for centuries. Women were not allowed to express their own version of important philosophical issues. Similarly, they could not easily indulge themselves with the sensual pleasures (love, wine, and food) that had been normally reserved for men.¹⁶



Fig. 6. *La Banquette des Platonnes*, 2016. Photographer: Hubert Karaly.

¹⁵ Personal communication, 8 February 2018.

¹⁶ Indeed, in the Greek symposia, women were not allowed to attend, with the exception of professionals, like the *heterae* and female performers.

Banquets, Art, and Society Today

Our highly self-conscious society calls for a more intentional implication from both performers and spectators, who not only do or even re-do, but are self-conscious about it (Carlson ix). Performance is interactive, inclusive, physical and direct, and for this reason, food's material aspect, its relationship to the mouth and body, as well as its importance to the community make of it a powerful medium for creating a collective conscience between artists and participants. Food is also a visually and dramatically eloquent scenographic element, which can also be perceived by all the senses, in a synesthetic way.

In banquet performances, apart from the use of food as a perishable, ephemeral and consumable prop, the arrangement of the table, which prevails in the sympotic space, introduces a new kind of (s)cenography, a *locus* where artists and participants become part of the same performative experience through the notion of commensality. Furthermore, the table creates an embodied experience of the material elements of performance, sociability, and physical intimacy between performers and participants through the shared feeling of conviviality. All these ingredients are 'kneaded' by the performance's *mise en scène*, the art of staging and orchestrating the disparate elements coming from the theatre, everyday life, and cultural performance.

During the 1960s and 1970s performance artists consciously turned to the search of a more communal experience in their events through the activation of both commensality and conviviality. Turning to the aesthetics of the historical and the avant-garde banquet, these two notions could be resuscitated in performative practices with well-defined aesthetic, social and political resonances. As regards the evolution and flourishing of banquet performances after the turn of the century and up until the present day, it is essential to point out that the ground for this proliferation was already laid a decade earlier. In his essay 'Relational Aesthetics', Nicolas Bourriaud defined a renewed need for conviviality, which was experienced by the artistic creation in the 1990s: 'there has been an upsurge of convivial, user-friendly artistic projects, festive, collective and participatory, exploring

the varied potential in the relationship to the other' (61).

This conviviality was different from the one that was sought by the historical avant-garde, whose artistically tumultuous context emphasised the provocation of the public and of art itself. As a result, during the historical avant-garde, the table had turned into a battlefield, thus provoking a rupture in conviviality. Conviviality was also different during the 1960s and 1970s—a time when the need to define art was still evident. Within this frame, the table became a space where artists and viewers/spectators/participants would meet in search of a shared social and political identity.

In the 1990s, the issue, Bourriaud argued, was 'to experience art's capacities of resistance within the overall social arena' (31). Indeed, conviviality had become a consumable product in the 1990s—a period of apolitical art and social solitude. The need for the formation of communal experiences in the arts, just like the ones that had been created back in the 1960s, gave way to a need for reactions against a society, which seemed to have become an anonymous, all devouring arena. Conviviality could be 'bought' when entering the museum, the gallery or the theatre and then thrown away at the exit. This was probably one of the reasons that banquet performances and eating in the theatre particularly flourished in the following years. However, as opposed to the 1960s, society during the 1990s and early 2000s seemed to have become more politically apathetic, and art served as a consumable product of experiencing temporary sociality and indulgence. Food and the shared table were employed as political symbols in an apolitical society, in theatre productions like Eva Diamantstein's *Nachtmahl (Meal)*, in Germany¹⁷ and Michael Marmarinos' *O Ethnikos Hymnos (National Anthem)* in Greece.¹⁸

Today, direct and physical commensality, as well as the

17 Spielart Theatre Festival, Munich, 2001. In this production, during a shared meal between actors and spectators, the table becomes a stage. The play explores questions of national identity in Germany, drawing from the period of the Nazi era.

18 Theseion Theatre, Athens, 2001. Here, again, spectators and actors sit at the same table and eat and drink together. The devised play is concerned with Greece's search for a new national identity, during a period of rapid and constant change, from the civil war period (1946-1949) up until the turn of the century.

materiality of food, still provide fruitful inspiration in both theatre and performance art. This can be testified in the work of artists like Spatula&Barcode¹⁹ in the United States, who place the performance of hospitality at the centre of their artistic endeavours, or the immersive dining theatre produced by Gingerline²⁰ in the UK. Sharing a meal between dancers and spectators is also a basic component in the choreographic piece *Beytna* by Omar Rajeh and his group Maqamat Dance Theatre,²¹ based in Beirut, which was presented in Paris in March 2018. The organic quality of food and the physicality of the dancers' bodies—an interesting and unorthodox combination since eating is traditionally dissociated from dancing—add a commensal fluidity to the performative banquet.

In contrast to the physical banquet performances of the contemporary moment, the advent of new technologies creates a new, digital form of conviviality. For example, the Brazillian-French research group *Corpos Informáticos* establishes new kinds of conviviality between digitalised banqueters. In their work *Hungry@Corpos*,²² invited guests or random chat network users who happen to be online share a virtual online banquet. Here, a fragmented kind of long-distance communion is produced.

This interesting kind of 'glocal' virtual conviviality plays with the notions of presence and absence: bodies, the images of food and its consumption are, at the same time, present (through the screen) and absent (since they are not physically in the same place). In this fractured reality, the sharing of a common meal, the taste of food and drink, the sense of smell or the gaze between the banqueters are being lost. This 'muting' or even 'mutation' of the senses caused by the digitalised banquet, leads to the loss of *mise en scène* and (s)cenography's traditional capacities to create a total, whole, shared,

19 <http://spatulaandbarcode.wordpress.com/>

20 www.gingerline.co.uk/

21 <https://www.maqamat.org/>

22 These experiments with telepresence had started as early as 1997.

For images of the online banquet *Hungry@Corpos*, visit: <https://anthology.rhizome.org/telepresence>

commensal experience. Online participants bring their own micro-(s)cenographies of the table and food items to the shared screen. They also shape the overall *mise en scène*, since their participation might have an effect on the evolution of the virtual banquet's unfolding. For instance, in one of *Hungry@Corpos* online banquets, one virtual banqueter began licking a chutney-covered carrot. At that point, the webcast was terminated, probably due to the fact that the chat network's moderator considered the content to be offensive.²³ In this case, the moderator became an anonymous "big brother" kind of *symposiarch*²⁴ and played the part of the person who sets the rules of the banquet, just like in ancient Greek *symposia*.

Banquet performances still provide what Marcel Mauss calls 'total social facts' as he posits that feasts concurrently embody and show all aspects of society: juridical, aesthetic, political, religious, moral, among many others (100). As a result, the table becomes a stage, where different and complex such phenomena are knit together through the banqueters' active participation, synesthetic (s)cenography and a commensal *mise en scène*. To conclude, the theatrical and performative elements of sympotic practices continue to evolve in curious and unexpected ways as society, culture, the arts, and technology continue to intersect, collide, converse and merge. Performance makers maintain a vital interest in the banquet and its historical evolutions and continue to offer new perspectives.

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24 The presiding officer of the *symposion*.

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***TableTalk*: Staging Intimacy Across Distance Through Shared Meals**

by Ana-Christina Acosta Gaspar de Alba

Abstract

This article explores how commensality, or the shared meal, can be used to structure a series of scenes between two characters in different locations, using *TableTalk*, a play in development by Danielle Laurin and myself, as an example of the potential for long-distance commensality in theatre. The play focuses on a long-distance relationship and I argue that, by setting the play around a series of shared meals, believable intimacy can be achieved across distance. To begin, I offer a framework for understanding commensality in general, commensality in theatre, and finally commensality across distance. I next provide analysis of how commensality is used in our conceptualisation of *TableTalk* specifically, looking at the experience of each location and performer separately before discussing how the two performers interact with one another and achieve a believable remote dining experience. Finally, I suggest how the experimentation with multi-location shared meals done so far in *TableTalk* may provide grounding for future theatrical experimentation.

There is something inherently social about sharing a meal. A silent meal is considered to be strained; generally, new acquaintances and close-knit families alike converse over a meal, interact and share more than just broken bread. Shared meals make for good playwriting too; they are a natural setting for meaningful dialogue with built-in action. What happens however when a meal is shared across distance - say, across national borders and connected solely through a web-based portal?

In *TableTalk*, a multi-location one-act play in development, my creative partner Danielle Laurin and I explore this concept by having two characters who are in a long-distance relationship regularly eat dinner together via Skype. This is dramatized by having each performer in a separate performance location (A and B) with a separate audience. Like their characters in the narrative, the performers experience the unique challenges of a long-distance relationship by acting against a partner who is virtually rather than

physically present. Likewise, each audience group encounters one performer who is physically present and one who is virtually present.

In a workshop on December 2, 2016 held in Blacksburg, Virginia, the distance between performance spaces was limited to different rooms in the same building, but *TableTalk* has the potential to be staged across limitless distance, even across national borders. Future performers may not even have met in person, rehearsing and performing exclusively long-distance. It is the universality of sharing a meal that would allow the performers to create and maintain a believable intimacy between their characters, regardless of physical distance.

More than the specifics of the play, the development of *TableTalk* serves as a testing ground for the potential of long-distance commensality in theatre. I argue that the commensal model provides fertile ground for writing multi-location theatre that feels coherent and authentic for audiences.

Sharing More Than Just Food

To understand the potential of multi-location shared meals in theatre-making, it is important to first recognize the value of shared meals in identity formation. The act of eating together, termed commensality by sociologists, is a global social practice and useful for analysis of communities, cultures, and customs (Julier 3). Who is invited to a shared meal, who prepares said meal, and who steers the conversation during the mealtime are all factors that serve to establish and/or enforce individual and group identities that continue outside of mealtime. Much can therefore be inferred from observing a commensal meal.

As a conceptual model, commensality has three dimensions: interaction, symbolic, and normative. Sociologist Claudia Giacoman describes them as such:

First, mealtime has an interactional dimension, as members of a group gather together with their peers at a designated place and time, and these members

interact and develop shared, reciprocal actions. Second, this practice holds a symbolic dimension, as it is charged with meaning for those participating in it, benchmarking their feelings of belonging to a group. Third, eating together has a normative dimension, as it entails the staging of norms carried out by diners and the control over those norms (463).

When staging a commensal meal, all three dimensions but especially the symbolic must be taken into consideration. The interaction dimension in particular poses a challenge for long-distance commensality, however the notion of “meeting” at a designated place and time and interacting can still be played out, albeit virtually rather than physically. Additionally, the symbolic and normative dimensions can still occur relatively similarly to how they would in a traditional shared meal.

In the framework of theatre, the recurring traits of commensality can provide context both for understanding specific characters and for understanding their relationship to each other. A gathering of people eating together provides an immediately recognizable scene for audiences, needing no setup or explanation. As detailed in Dorothy Chansky and Folino White’s seminal *Food and Theatre on the World Stage*, ‘the close embrace between food and theatre...is evident across centuries and continents not only in dramatic texts, theatrical devices, and theatre architecture, but also as an audience requirement’ (2). More attention can then be given to establishing characters through the dialogue facilitated by mealtimes, their physicality while eating, and/or by their placement around a dinner table. Routines of commensality reveal the structure of social life outside of mealtimes (Sobel and Nelson 188) and can be used to effectively set up structure in theatre. If a play includes more than one shared meal, which patterns continue and which are broken can be suggestive of developments in the relationships between characters.

Beyond the social element of a shared meal, the meal itself can also be informative to an observant audience. The effect of a

family partaking in a grandiose meal is very different from that of a family sharing a pizza. The truism ‘you are what you eat’ makes for an effective theatrical tool - audiences deduce certain things about the character who chooses the tofu burger over the filet mignon. This is in line with Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital, in which taste is inherently linked to class position and works at a subconscious level (170). That is, audiences can make connections between the food consumed and the consumer without conscious effort. Lorie Brau and David Jortner’s analysis of the role of food in Betsuyaku Minoru’s Japanese plays comes to mind as an example, where they argue that ‘food symbolises a particular vision [of Japan which]...celebrates certain cultural self-images and suppresses others...[reinforcing] the audience’s received ideas about their culinary culture’ (80). Perhaps this is why food has been used centrally in theatre since in early in its history.

Cooking And Dining On Stage

The relationship between food and theatre can be traced as far back as classical Greek plays and has remained steadfast ever since, despite Bertolt Brecht’s critique of culinary theatre as ‘mere indulgence or self-medication’ (Chansky and Folino White 1). As early as the nineteenth century, performers have taken on the challenge of preparing and eating actual food onstage in an effort to add realism to theatre and have successfully added moral, social, political, religious, and cultural dimensions to their work through use of food (2, 4). While there are obvious challenges presented by the inclusion of real food in productions, the immersive payoff of not just the visual and auditory but also aromatic markers for theatergoers can be substantial.

One of the benefits of including real food in a production, and particularly freshly cooked foods, is the added sensory pull on the audience into the world of the play. The live preparation of food and the subsequent preparation of the dining space is innately relatable (Hemming 15). If an audience is small enough, they will be able to smell the meal and experience it almost as if they too are at the dinner

table. In the case of works such as the collaborative *Chef's Theater: A Musical Feast* (2004), which features songs from Lynn Ahrens and Stephen Flaherty, Andrew Lippa, and Marcy Heisler and Zina Goldrich, and Gary William Friedman's *The Last Supper* (2003), the audience even gets to consume the meal that is prepared (Chansky and Folino White 7). This added interaction narrows the divide between audience and art.

Of course, that is also the challenge. Cooking and eating onstage requires attention to detail and impeccable timing, not to mention performers who are competent enough in the kitchen to avoid overcooking a meal or giving the entire cast food poisoning. When it comes to eating onstage, theatre critic Sarah Hemming warns that 'actors have to manage food, lines and expression simultaneously, and audiences are all experts at eating—miming won't convince them.' Despite the challenges, the innumerable ways food can be prepared and consumed makes it a valuable tool in any playwright's arsenal.

Factoring In Distance

Most commensal meals, in life and in art, are shared in the same physical location. Yet with increasing frequency the demands of school, work, and other life factors prevent commensal partners or groups from sharing the same physical space. The solution to this is remote dining. Commensality across distance, or remote dining, is contingent on the use of live video-based technologies to connect two or more individuals who eat their meals in separate locations while sharing in mealtime conversation. (Shaid Ferdous et al. 4) By doing this, they manage to maintain a multisensory social connection despite distance and to share in the experience of eating together. Returning to Giacomani's three commensal dimensions, the long-distance shared meal is most reliant on the symbolic dimension of belonging to a collective experience, extending the interactive dimension beyond the physical and playing out the normative in as close to a traditional shared meal experience as is possible.

Remote dining changes the shared meal in several ways.

First, more planning is required. This is exemplified in a study of connectivity via video conferencing, where ‘participants first communicated with remote users via phone, email or text message *prior* to video conferencing...to inform the other person that they were available and wanted to video conference...This even occurred when both parties had a good understanding of each other’s schedules and availability or they had preset times for calling’ (Judge and Neustaedter 656). Whereas people in the same location can spontaneously decide to share a meal, remote dining requires forethought and careful coordination. Second, there is a greater awareness of shared space as what is visible via video feed is limited and often fixed. A book on the uses of Skype aptly describes this idea as a ‘theatre of composition’ where ‘people quite consciously compose or construct space in order to appear a certain way to others’ (Longhurst 51). This can be extended to the way meals are presented, and whether or not the food itself is prominently framed in view of remote diners. Finally, there is the difference of the food not actually being the same across locations, as one diner may eat a simple ham and cheese sandwich while the other eats a rich stew, fundamentally changing their perceptions of the meal.

While remote dining is not a perfect substitute for a meal shared in the same location, it is a valid form of commensality. Honest communication can still occur over a dining experience shared across distance and therefore identities can still be built. Designating specific expectations and norms (i.e. pre-agreed food and beverage coordination and preparation) shows an effort to make the meal as ‘shared’ as is possible across distance, and to make the meal feel emotionally if not physically connected. In the context of theatre, a remote dining setting provides a unique opportunity for engaging multiple audiences in an experience that is shared yet variable depending upon location.

Multi-Location Shared Meals In *TableTalk*

In *TableTalk*, the initial impression of audiences is completely

contingent upon which location they are attending, as the two sets are completely different. In Location A, the audience sees a performer, Emory, cooking in a small kitchen and dining area. An open laptop sits on a table, the screen projected behind the set. To contrast, Location B is dressed as a bedroom with an open laptop on a desk. The performer in Location B, Joey, is lying on the bed, reading. The only similarity to Location A is the screen projected behind the set. These screens are the gateway for audiences between remote locations, open only when video conferencing is activated by both performers. Both laptops maintain their placement throughout the production, limiting what the Location A audience sees of Location B and vice versa.

Because Emory is cooking in her first scene onstage, the Location A audience (henceforth Audience A) is immersed in the shared meal aspect of the play earlier than the Location B audience (henceforth Audience B). They observe the meal making before the two locations are connected. Audience B meanwhile sees no signs of a meal until video conferencing is initiated and they first see Emory, perhaps noticing she is cooking. The true confirmation of commensality, however, is in the dialogue:

EMORY. Hey! Are you ready?

JOEY. No. But it's still kind of early here and ramen doesn't exactly take a lot of preparation. (3)

In these two lines, the characters indicate that they have previously arranged to share a meal, framing commensality as the impetus for the video call. This trope will carry into every subsequent video call scene, as food is present in both locations for every scene that follows. Because the food changes, the passing of time is implied and shows that shared meals are a key part of maintaining the long-distance relationship between the two characters.

Food in Location A: Emory. Location A is more overtly meal-oriented

than location B, in part because the set is a kitchen and dining area, but also because Emory is preparing meals in some scenes and eating in others. The kitchen includes a stove over an oven, a countertop, and storage space under the countertop. Pots, trays, plates, utensils, and drinkware are all included in the prop list for Location A, along with a detailed array of ingredients and meals. Audiences will quickly deduce that Emory is a character who enjoys cooking and takes great care in the preparation of her food, implying she is mature and detail-oriented. The types of foods she eats—cauliflower crust vegetable pizza, squash spaghetti, kale chips—further suggest that she is very aware of what she consumes.

Food is also used by Emory to express particular emotions. In one scene a kale chip is used as a prop in the expression of her frustration, as follows:

JOEY. Now, you still need to help me pick out a pair of pants, unless you want me to be the laughing stock of the office holiday party.

EMORY. (aggressively bites a kale chip) Wouldn't want that.

JOEY. (pauses by the dresser) Okay, what's wrong?

EMORY. Nothing's wrong.

JOEY. That kale chip says differently.

EMORY. (eats the rest of the chip) What's it say now? (12)

Joey, clearly used to sharing a meal with Emory, is able to read the nonverbal signal Emory is giving her by aggressively eating a kale chip. In another scene, as Emory and Joey have a fight, Emory signals her anger by dropping her fork and getting up from the dinner table. These examples stand in contrast to emotionally calmer moments, in which Emory savors in preparing or eating her meal.

Audience A is able to experience this with the added depth

of the smells of freshly cooked food. There is the potential for the aromas of Emory's meals to fill Location A in a way that only that audience can experience. Audience A also has the benefit of a direct line of sight into Emory's kitchen, while the placement of the laptop in Location A only allows Audience B a limited view of the kitchen in the background of their screen. The effect of this, I imagine, is that Audience A experiences the meals of *TableTalk* as more traditionally commensal than their counterparts in Audience B. The latter are limited by a lack of sensory touchstones, that is, the immediacy of a kitchen/dining area setting or the aromatic triggers of fresh cooked food. Yet, via the visual and auditory connection to Location A, they are still able to partake in the commensal experience to some extent.

Food in Location B: Joey. At first glance Location B is not set up for dining. In fact, there is no food present in Location B for the duration of Joey's initial scenes and the only meal props ever used in Location B are a bowl of ramen with a spoon and a beer bottle. The bowl of ramen, mentioned in some of the first lines of character dialogue and physically added to the set in Scene 3, remains present throughout the rest of the play. Joey's consistency in meal choice suggests to audiences that she is less concerned with what she eats, hinting at her more laidback personality. The kind of repeated meal she chooses—hassle-free and ready in minutes—reinforces this assumption.

Because food is not a central presence for Joey the way it is for Emory, she spends much less time interacting with her meals. The bowl of ramen is placed on her desk or, in Joey's final scene, balanced in her lap while she sits on her bed. This contrasts with Emory's traditional dining setting and further emphasizes that the eating portion of the shared meal is not the priority for Joey. Instead, her focus is more on the social aspects, as she observes Emory cooking or eating more often than she herself eats, not even tasting her ramen onstage until Scene 6.

One thing the shared meal setting does provide for Joey is an opportunity for meaningful conversation. The scene referenced

earlier, where Emory expresses her anger in a fight by stepping away from the table, is brought on by Joey confessing that she has quit her job—a serious admission. In an effort to calm Emory down, Joey first asks her to sit back down at the table and then tries to reengage her in their meal:

JOEY. Look, Can we please just go back to eating our dinner, and you can tell me about the test you're studying for?

EMORY. Joey...

JOEY. Please? You can keep yelling at me later.

EMORY. (pause) You're insufferable.

JOEY. Yep. (takes a bite of ramen, makes a face) I think my ramen froze. (21)

Even though Joey is not as immersed in the dining experience as Emory is, she is still aware of the commensal nature of their interaction and is able to engage it to her advantage.

Like Joey, Audience B is not immediately absorbed in the food aspect of the commensal experience. Joey's ramen is not a focal point for Audience B, however, because they are seeing Emory and by extension her meals on a large screen, they are able to get closer look at what she is eating than Audience A. This second-hand immersion into Emory's dining adds to the shared element of the play overall, and keeps Audience B involved in food aspect of the play. I would hazard that the effect of this is that they are more aware of the remote dining nature of *TableTalk* than their Audience A counterparts, given they are experiencing commensality more acutely at a distance.

Acknowledgement of Shared Meal. For the commensality of *TableTalk* to be effective in structuring the play and building the characters' individual and shared identities, overt acknowledgement of the shared meals is key. As previously stated, the first exchange between

Emory and Joey is in reference to their plans to share a meal. In the continuation of that scene, a pattern of teasing about what each party is eating is developed, as Emory disapproves of Joey's ramen and Joey expresses her aversion to Joey's healthier meal choices:

JOEY. I love that crap!

EMORY. You're impossible. (checks watch, places pizza tray in oven, then fully faces computer) Just a few minutes and my pizza is ready.

JOEY. Your weird cauliflower crust pizza?

EMORY. There's nothing weird about my pizza!

JOEY. Mhmm. (3-4)

This is a pattern that will be repeated in subsequent scenes as a mutual acknowledgement from the characters of their shared meal and as a marker of their familiarity with one another's dining habits. This gives not only the play but also their meals a format to follow.

Time passes quickly in between scenes of the play, adding to the importance of a consistent commensal structure. Because the significance of shared meals comes from repetition, as 'each meal carries something of the meaning of the other meals...[and] is a structured social event which structures others in its own image,' it is important to note that Emory and Joey are implied to share many meals not shown in the play, including some while in the same physical location (Douglas 69). Towards the end of the play, with the characters soon to be inhabiting the same physical space, reference is made to their different food preferences and how they will navigate the discrepancy:

EMORY. Are you sure you're ready for three whole months of me?

JOEY. Are you kidding? Three months won't be enough.

EMORY. I'm just saying, you've probably

gotten used to your bachelorette lifestyle—underwear on the floor, the cap off the toothpaste..

JOEY. Ramen. (takes a bite of ramen for emphasis)

EMORY. Exactly. Your stomach may not be able to handle real food anymore.

JOEY. We'll figure it out. (26)

Though the exchange is short and light, the implication is that Joey will acquiesce to Emory as the primary meal-preparer, despite regularly expressing reservation or disgust in response to Emory's meal choices. It is possible, though unconfirmed in the text, that Emory may also change what she cooks to better suit Joey's taste. Their willingness to find commonality in their meal choice shows their commitment to continuing to regularly share meals and, by extension, maintain the bond that commensality affords.

Commensal Intimacy. Like all character-driven art, *TableTalk's* effectiveness hinges on the chemistry between its characters. Audiences of *TableTalk* will quickly register that Emory and Joey are in a long-distance relationship, in part because of their use of shared meals. It is clear early on that their shared meals serve at least in part as a date, and given that 'in many traditional cultures, eating together, for a pair, is a highly sensitive, even suggestive, situation,' this can then serve as evidence to audiences that the two characters are dating without need for verbal confirmation (Fishler 533). Once their status as dating is established, success is measured by whether or not the audiences find the relationship to be believable and relatable.

Given the limitations of remote dining, how the characters navigate their limited shared space determines if they are able to achieve a convincing intimacy. A study of how video conferencing is used found that, not surprisingly, 'adults without children primarily used video conferencing for *conversation*. Here the webcam was used

solely to watch the other person, their gestures, and body language' (Judge and Neustaedter 656). Conversation is certainly the focus of *TableTalk*'s video conferencing, and observation of each other's movements is prevalent. Joey in particular generally stays in one placement for the duration of their video calls, and becomes agitated when Emory goes in and out of camera shot:

JOEY. —could you please sit back down?

EMORY. (stops pacing) What?

JOEY. You're making me dizzy. (EMORY drops back into her chair, glaring)
Thank you. (20)

Joey prefers being able to observe her partner, while Emory is more comfortable with movement. The only time Joey moves around more is when she is holding potential outfits to wear for Emory to see, consistent with Judge and Neustaedter's finding that video conferencing was at times used to show objects pertinent to the conversation (656). It is also crucial that both characters are comfortable with the technology, making intimacy easier to achieve given the performers are also part of the audience. This is a complexity shared with other multi-location pieces, including Paul Sermon's *Second Life*, which allows for a unique connection between performers and audience (Sermon 174). Because the audience and performer in Location A have the same view of the performer in Location B, they are similarly implicated in the narrative. Discussing the use of projection above the actors in *The Waves*, an adaptation of Virginia Woolf's book of the same name, Jefferies and Papadaki claim that 'the use of technical means...created a platform for an intimate momentum between the audience and the stage' as the production used sound and live video images to explore the themes of time and death (196). This is similar to what was experienced by those present at the staged reading of *TableTalk*, who reported feeling drawn in by the live video feed to the performer in the other location.

Another factor towards creating long-distance intimacy

is that audience must believe that remote dining is a new norm for Emory and Joey and still being navigated after having been accustomed to interacting in the same physical space. Joey expresses her frustration after their plans for a visit fall through:

JOEY. I want to see you. (EMORY steps back and gestures sarcastically to herself with her hands.) You know what I mean.

EMORY. What's it going to take? A striptease in my kitchen?

JOEY. That'd be nice. (EMORY flicks JOEY off. She laughs.) You really can't spare a weekend? (5-6)

This points to the adjustment required for those used to being physically together, and specifically dining together, to then being long-distance and again allows for added relatability for the audience, who must also adjust to this new norm.

Though video conferencing affords a multi-sensory experience, it also presents unique challenges. For example, at first it can be disorienting and it will always fail to fully provide the connection of being in the same physical place (see Longhurst 120). Even after more time has passed and Emory and Joey have grown accustomed to long distance, each shared scene includes planning for the next time they will be in the same place. Yet there is also a sense that they are grateful for the experience they do have, such as in their final scene together:

EMORY. I'd better go. Wouldn't want to miss my flight tomorrow.

JOEY. Just...one more minute.

EMORY. What is it?

JOEY. I just want to look at you.

EMORY. Don't be a sap. You get to hold me in just a few hours.

JOEY. Can't wait. I love you, Em.

EMORY. Love you too. I'll see you soon.

JOEY. See you tomorrow. (27-28)

Commensality of any kind, be it the traditional sharing of a meal at the same dining table or the remote dining exemplified in *TableTalk*, is dependent on the willingness of participants to truly share the experience. Successful social interaction leading to true intimacy is dependent upon participants' ability to adapt [their] circumstances to fit the material and social constraints of their daily lives' (Julier 84). Hopefully it is apparent in *TableTalk* that Emory and Joey are willing to do whatever it takes to make their long-distance relationship work.

Limitations And Future Research

Because *TableTalk* is still largely in development and therefore theoretical, it has not yet been previewed for full audiences. Our workshop took the form of a staged reading with minimal props and sets, and was only observed by Danielle and myself, an assisting sound engineer, and a few advisors. However, the feedback we received from our advisors and from the performers themselves, as well as Danielle's and my own impressions, suggest that commensality can work as a grounding for multi-location theatre-making.

Given this initial positive response to basing a play around a series of long-distance shared meals, there are several factors I would like to consider in further developing *TableTalk*. Depending on staging location, the first consideration would be whether or not to change the meals to suit the locations where the play is being staged, as currently both locations feature food that I would consider to be particular to young Americans. If we are able to stage a transnational version of this play, it might be worth considering changing some of our food choices. The second consideration would be the practicality of having Emory cooking with working kitchen appliances, so as to maximize the sensory experience for Audience A. This would only be worth considering if the use of real food in the production proved as

effective as research suggests.

The next step for Danielle and I is to fully stage *TableTalk* in separate locations (likely Boca Raton, Florida, U.S.A. and Montreal, Quebec, Canada). The success of several factors would need to be measured, including: what the play looks like with complete props and sets (including real food), the intimacy achieved between performers who are never in the same physical location, and the similarities and differences of experience for Audience A and Audience B. We would strive to keep our audience sizes relatively small, and would invite both audiences, separately and then together, to discuss their impressions of the production. This would all be used to inform further use of the commensal structuring in multi-location productions.

Conclusion

TableTalk was written without any formal consideration or grounding in the concept of commensality, and inspiration to include food in the piece came from a series of interviews, conducted by Danielle and myself, of individuals who had experienced long-distance relationships with family, friends, and romantic partners. In these interviews the idea of sharing a meal was brought up several times, and led to us structuring *TableTalk* around a series of shared meals. I believe this was the right decision, as remote dining proved to be a rich field for artistic exploration.

The commensal nature of *TableTalk* grounds audiences in a familiar experience that makes the multi-location aspect of the play more accessible. Audiences in both locations come to know Emory, Joey, and their relationship with each other through what and where they eat and what they talk about and while dining together (albeit virtually). The distance between the two locations is bridged by the metaphorical dinner table in order to achieve the intimacy so crucial for effective theatre-making.

Though the specific circumstances of *TableTalk*'s shared meals may not be directly relatable to all audiences, increasingly more people are engaged in long-distance relationships of some kind and

all of these people have experience with commensality. It is my hope that this discussion of *TableTalk* serves not solely as a case study of multi-location shared meals, but as a testimony of the potential to incorporate remote dining in theatre so that future playwrights may be inspired to try it themselves, to see what they can create out of a deceptively simple concept: the shared meal.

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The Past Perfect Kitchen: Materiality and Memory Spaces in *Unmade, Untitled*

by Carmen C. Wong

Abstract

Written from a place of elsewhere, of not yet, perhaps never, arriving, my practice-as-research performance *Unmade, Untitled* focuses on the loss of 'sense of place', a symptom of modern mobility, and migration. The piece uses non-food materials (incorporating non-edible symbolic materials, specifically joss-paper and red packets) as an intervention in the semiology and affects of everyday food-making choreographies and its relation to identity. The following question is addressed: how might un-belonging be performed? The resulting gastronomic ritual of unmaking is performed with and through various surrogates, which connote displacement and the re-embodiment of past belongings.

1. Lost Geographies: Personal and National Displacements

Imagine the dot of a languid exclamation mark being swallowed by the curvature above. That is usually how I might describe on a map, the tiny island of Singapore—a country I grew loyalties for without birthright. Singaporeans, and those studying it, refer to this 'little red dot' with a particular admiration and fondness, in the way one would regard something so small, yet so tenacious. Defending against the fragility of this dot has been at the forefront of the pragmatic policies administered by a government that continues to be in power, with little opposition, since its founding. The result is an 'air-conditioned nation'—this term was coined by the journalist and scholar Cherian George to describe the custodial ways in which the country has been able to achieve a high level of economic progress 'at the cost of individual autonomy, and at the risk of unsustainability' (15, 18-19).

Living in Singapore, even without bearing its nationality, has stitched on me an affective nostalgia associated closely with particular secret languages, and cultural codes, or historical events and their corresponding political amnesia. My departure and sporadic returns to this now-estranged home never fail to challenge my body and my memory. I perch precariously, scanning for recognisable fragments

of places I grew up in: homes, schools, hang-outs, eateries, places of worship. Didn't this use to be a shop I bought art supplies from? Wasn't there a church not far from it? Where is that sliver of sea I used to be able to spy from my parents' flat?

If we believe, as the human geographer Yi Fu Tuan posits, that '[p]lace is a pause in movement', then my movements in geographic space might have rendered it impossible for Singapore—the place, or my memory of it—to ever become 'a center of felt value' (*Space and Place*, 138). But mine aren't the only movements to have occurred. Singapore's clipped pace towards modernity and urban development has changed both the physical, social, and even geographic landscape. George crisply observes that you can get 'lost at home... because what was there then is here no longer' (190), because landscapes and maps of memory become virtually unrecognisable due to the constant remodelling of towns, and the reclamation and redevelopment of land—a self-erasure of geographic shapes, material history, and cultural memory.

In writing about women's intercultural performance Julie Holledge and Joanne Tompkins discuss geo-political interpretations of 'home', and how memory space is constructed within feminist, post-colonial narratives by female diaspora playwrights (97). Here, memory space—a concept first articulated by Gaston Bachelard—is the imaginary and symbolic space between 'home' and 'homeless' feelings experienced by the displaced. In this article, I explore how this double displacement (where the displacement of the person is intensified by the physical and macro changes within remembered spaces) is played out in *Unmade, Untitled*, a practice-led performance I created and performed once, somewhat furtively, in Singapore in February 2016. The performance is an interrogation of the processes of unmaking—particularly of how one might take the concept of belonging apart (both in the sense of belonging while away, and also deconstructing the notion of ever having belonged). This doubling of displacement is countered by the use of surrogates: of materials and their symbols, and of bodies and their voices.

My personal narrative is re-voiced by a pair of participants (who I call 'surrogate speakers'), while the other participants are guided into incorporating symbolic paper materials (joss paper and red packets, described below) with food materials within a familiar kitchen ritual of shared food preparation. As such, the piece is seen as a joint performance with audience-participants who engage with what Astrid Breel has defined as a 'co-execution' of an invented ritual of unbelonging (370). I enlist the concept of 'surrogacy' to gesture towards a quality of imprecise substitution, and to echo Joseph Roach's use of 'surrogation' in his exploration of how colonial cultures in the circum-Atlantic world employ memory, counter-memory (substitution), and performance to collectively reproduce new social and cultural memory (2). The article will focus on two main registers of surrogacy within this performance: an invented gastronomic ritual that uses symbolic but un-eatable materials in food-preparation to unmake food-making, and the locus of the body's voice in retelling a poetic, auto-ethnographic narrative detailing places of past belongings. These techniques firstly provide an embodied representation to address the concept of double displacement, and, secondly, engage the ruptures around authenticity and unbelonging.

2. Techniques of Surrogation

A residential kitchen as a performance venue stood in for the light-filled kitchen of my childhood, which had been on the seventh floor of a government-subsidized high-rise. This kitchen was also the starting point of my narrative in the performance. Hosted in the home of an expatriate family living temporarily in Singapore, the kitchen emphasized impermanence: a transient place where an outsider's home houses a performance by a once-insider no longer at home in her own home.

There is a discomfiting moment as the twenty or so unshod participants take their places in two groups, on the floor, occupying the home of strangers (who themselves might be viewed as strangers to the country). The two performance facilitators who guide each group

demonstrate how to begin working with the materials placed in the middle of each circle, with the simple, repetitive actions of communal food preparation. As I moved slowly and silently in the background, boiling a pot of water and frying diced onions, participants were tasked with handling one of two symbolic paper materials as though they were ingredients: red packets in one work circle and joss paper in the other (Figures 1 and 2). Traditionally, the former are given out as tokens of good luck and prosperity during celebratory or auspicious occasions (red being a color of good luck), such as weddings and birthdays, and the latter gold- or silver-printed papers folded into ingot shapes, are burnt in special bins for ancestral and deity worship, to send currency and provision in the afterlife.

Participants in one of the circles rather enthusiastically



Fig. 1 and 2: Left, red packets or 红包; on right, joss paper or 金纸, Singapore, image courtesy of the artist.

ripped open the sealed red packets that contained a jumble of dried beans in lieu of money, which they began to sort by type (Figure 3). The red packets were shredded by hand by participants, following customary practices (perhaps a way to ensure every penny is extracted before disposal) but this is where the tradition ends. The torn red bits were placed in water and the macerated mush was then mixed with a paste made from cooked red beans and fried onions. Members in this group hand-shaped the mixture into meatballs, which I fried and topped unceremoniously on cooked spaghetti. The group working with joss paper was tasked with twisting the icing tops off the gem cookies, and mashing only the white ones. I later combined this white



Fig. 3 and 4: Left, a group working on opening red packets; on right, a group crafting and filling tubes of joss paper, Singapore, image courtesy of Sam Chow.

icing dust with dried shredded cabbage, and orange peel to create a filling which participants spooned into rolled tubes, tucking the ends neatly to contain this (Figure 4). Once this task was completed, I took the filled, prepared rolls and placed these on a gas-flamed barbecue grill outside where they were reduced, fragrantly, to ash. This was sprinkled on the meatballs as garnish to the dish.

Cultural/material practices and rituals surrounding red packets and joss paper are adapted and incorporated through food-making gestures within an invented ritual that is devised, as Eric Hobsbawm notes, ‘by borrowing from the well-supplied warehouses of official ritual’ (6). Participants, complicit in an invented ritual that they do not recognize, are nevertheless able to tap into their embodied knowledge of culturally Chinese rituals surrounding gifting and processing red packets (opening, extracting, tearing) and burning joss paper (folding, burning), even if these ultimately become intercepted by the languages of cooking. Those familiar with the original uses of joss paper and red packets might detect that these materials are only mis-used insofar as they do not overtly perform their original function; the manner in which they are performed with remains true to their form if not outright function: the sealed red packets were torn open, the new forms of currency extracted, and the packets shredded in particular ways that conform to the usual ritual, and the joss paper likewise, was burnt. The conformity of use signified a knowledge of these rituals, yet their undoing and unmaking by including them in the vocabulary of food, albeit non-eatable, might be seen as unusually

novel, both strange and estranging. The surrogation in material and ritual as such begins to displace the transmission of ritual performances with joss paper and red packets. The resulting plate of enmeshed symbols—what might be seen as an ‘effigy’, to further borrow from Roach’s constructions of material surrogacies around memory and performance (36)—bear an unspoken critique and a material rejection of the cultural symbols of wealth and currency that these materials once embodied.

This method of manipulating food material and symbols in *Unmade, Untitled* has a lineage in the counter-gastronomic turn-of-the-century avant-garde arts, which dabbled with the ‘dietetic (and aesthetic)’ (Novero, xxxiv), and is nestled within a plethora of artistic practices that work critically and experimentally with ‘speculative gastronomy’ through the use of symbolic ingredients (Denfeld et al. 21). When the Futurists released their scrapbook of culinary formulas (or ‘recipes’) in the 1930’s, Cecilia Novero notes that they ‘radically juxtapose[d] ancient customs with future bodies and high technological worlds’ and ‘(l)ight and steel [...] two staple ingredients of most Futurist recipes, [were] symbolically and rhetorically evoked in certain instances through organic materials, and concocted through actual metallic or artificial materials in others (11, 14).’ While the inclusion of ball bearings and electricity in recipes reflected a clear rupture from tradition for the futurist palette, the incorporation of joss paper and red packets demonstrated a complicated (and simultaneous) corroboration *and* disruption in the enmeshed relationships between remembrance, place and identity, when viewed through the lens of food and symbolic dietetics. The nutritive quality of food, its affects, and meanings are contested when the prepared and cooked materials (both food and non-food that symbolize currency) transforms the lot into anti-food for remembrance instead of for eating. The unmaking of food thus becomes a surrogate ritual meal signifying unbelonging.

Surrogation happens most clearly in the roles and performing bodies of what I term surrogate speakers, volunteers recruited by facilitators early in the proceedings to recite a short, contextualizing

narrative to the group. The volunteers listen to a pre-recorded text via an in-ear audio feed and say verbatim what they hear (Figures 5 and 6). Like Janelle Reinelt, I am cautious of employing ‘verbatim theatre’ to the surrogate speaking used in *Unmade, Untitled*, as I would like to avoid the ‘narrow orthodoxy’ she identifies (13), and largely because the performance aims to turn this very technique on its head and reveal the limits of authenticity and memory in personal or autobiographical narratives, rather than preserving or documenting them unaltered and unquestioned. The transfer of voice from the originary narrative body (mine) to the surrogate speaker contributes a rhetorical matter-of-factness, and a third person displacement and distancing. It further instigates the instabilities of memory and autobiography and highlights, to cite Roberta Mock’s investigative and reflective reperformance of Dee Heddon’s autobiographical narrative, ‘the relationships between intertextualities and embodiment, and the “authenticity” of located memory as coherent story’ (17).

My own role as author and artist is at once present—my silent body performing-cooking is in the same space—but disembodied, or rather, self-selectively dis-voiced. My narrative, as embodied by a surrogate speaker performed in Singapore (the site of the narrative, even if in a different kitchen), like Mock’s re-performance, by-passes ‘the tendency to accept the separation of authorial voice from the voice produced by a specific performing body, as well as narrative time and place from the here and now of performance’ (Mock 17). Truth in memory and authenticity in *Unmade, Untitled* is yet another element that has found a surrogate through various displacements. It is now voiced by a different body speaking these words of past belongings without having experienced them, and without the benefit of rehearsing the affective quality of the words in the story.

From post-performance feedback, Paul, one of the surrogate speakers within the performance might well concur with Mock’s experience, in his reflections on his embodied performance, which required a complex and occasionally conflicting balance between being a performer connecting with his audience, and ‘channel’



Fig. 5 and 6: Surrogate Speakers, Singapore, image courtesy of Sam Chow.

conveying and transmitting an authored, ‘source’ narrative:

It quickly became evident how important it was ... that I use my voice effectively to convey not just the words but the meaning of what others weren’t hearing for themselves from me (“the source”). I felt aware of being constrained by my newly assigned role in this performance, which was making me feel removed to a certain degree, no longer able to simply experience what was unfolding around the room. I was using gesture, eye contact, as well as my speaking voice, to affirm connection with those around me ... On further reflection my role was more of a channel than an interpreter (Surrogate Speaker, Paul, in email exchange with author).

Embodying, as the surrogate speakers do, a narrative of being in a state of unbelonging, opens the possibility of reading the body as an archive of knowledge on how to be both in and out of place(s): in Paul’s experience, ‘feel(ing) removed ... no longer able to simply experience what was unfolding’ and yet simultaneously feeling the importance of ‘affirm(ing) connection’ with those around.

3. Belonging, Translated

In writing about the poignant meeting of the homely (*heimlich*) with the uncanny (*unheimlich*), Svetlana Boym notes that ‘[r]eflective nostalgics see everywhere the imperfect mirror images of home, and try to cohabit with doubles and ghosts’ (251). This reflective nostalgia is picked up on in George’s observation that ‘[e]ven if they stay put,

the country moves around them, and Singaporeans find themselves eventually in a new place, clinging only to ghosts' (193) amid the relentless changes the little island has endured in the name of progress. Much of what *Unmade, Untitled* tries to do with its inversions and inventions of rituals for belonging to homes consists of establishing an intimacy with ghosts from the past, by setting out a meal for them. The performative ritual of unbelonging becomes a call for responses from the uncertain belongings of those at home, those never at home, or those for whom home is always only remembered.

The intentional use of strange, imperfect surrogates for memory, places, materials, bodies and their meanings was a way to acknowledge and counter these instabilities of belonging to a place, and to enable a re-embodiment, an inhabitation of the failure of belonging, or of the failure or ghosts of memory. The failure of memory and belongingness is less fraught with consequence within this invented ritual, where the de- and re-construction of familiar objects in semi-familiar actions and performance frameworks. This ritual helps the spectators to pursue an uneasy navigation of an artist's psycho-geographic memory space of the home performed inside a stranger's home kitchen. The participation in tactile hand-work provides an opportunity for the participant's sensory awareness to call upon the active and constant making and un-making of his/her own memories and material experiences as they relate to home. Translation-by-doing here could also be seen as a constructive act of destruction. As the cultural anthropologist William Reddy argues, translation happens 'not just between languages and between individuals, but among sensory modalities, procedural habits, and linguistic structures ... toward a conception of the individual as a site where messages arrive in many different languages or codes, and where some of the messages are successfully translated into other codes, while others are not' (80). In post performance feedback, one participant admitted to an initial reluctance to participate, reflexively perceiving her refusal as a 'childish way to deal with initial uncertainty when coming to new environments'. And yet, this resistance was

still a meaningful translative process where ‘destruction, rather than contributive creation ... performed some sort of selective process ... to get a sense of orientation within the staged place and find the anchor points’ (participant Markéta, in Facebook message exchange with author).

The estranging quality of including non-food materials into communal food-making proceedings further helped to configure a metaphor for dysfunctional memory (being required to forget in order to belong, yet not remembering to forget) in the context of Singapore. Paul Rae’s demonstrative analysis of how this city/state performs self-care astutely points out how this is dependent on a populace participating in what Paul Connerton might call ‘prescriptive forgetting’ (61): forgetting that is in the interest of all citizens. Lulled by the tropical heat and humidity the bodies of Singaporeans become ‘all the more significant as repositories and representations of memory’ (Rae, ‘No Sweat’ 163). Despite the prescribed and possibly constructive forgettings at play, the muscles in my body slip into imprecise remembrance, unable to remember to forget, requiring other bodies better at forgetting to embody my past belonging to places, many of which no longer exist.

As such, requesting other bodies (truer repositories of present memories living in Singapore) to perform my narrative of displacement and migrancy allowed for a disruption and translation of the experience of authenticity. This, in turn, opens up the possibility to reflect on post-belongings within the performance: belongings which are able to intersect fluidly with numerous social, spatial, material, affective and political dimensions (Lähdesmäki et al. 236). The performance space of *Unmade, Untitled* becomes a general repository of all the potentialities of unbelongings, and prior, hybridized belongings, experienced more fluidly than we think. Surrogate speaker Paul reflects that the performance brought to mind ‘questions of identity, culture, tradition and the sense of place, of the meaning of home—especially for those whose lives are shaped by currents of globalized sense of community and identity ... I think

this piece led me to consider the ephemeral and context-determined nature of my own identity and the identity of others with whom I am connected' (in email exchange with author). His transient, 'globalized sense' of belonging and identity evoked by the imagined rituals and remembered narratives of *Unmade, Untitled* can be located in Arjun Appadurai's notion of complex, interwoven reconstructions of imagined lives and 'imagined worlds'—a term Appadurai has refashioned from Benedict Anderson's 'imagined communities' to connote the 'multiple worlds that are constituted by the historically situated imaginations of persons and groups spread around the globe' (33).

My disembodiment from my home, conveyed through my dis-voicement, and in the co-creation of anti-food is the inevitable and dissonant result of an attempt to re-member (put together) and inhabit the multiple shifting worlds of my body, its memory, my country and its habitual forgetfulness, all of which have been transformed and reimagined by the pushes and pulls of modernity and mobility. As such, the performance plays out the out-of-place-ness experienced by members of diaspora, where:

[t]he experience of leaving home in migration is ... always about the failure of memory to fully make sense of the place inhabiting a migrant body, a body which feels out of place, which feels uncomfortable in this place. The process of returning home is likewise about the failures of memory, of not being inhabited in the same way, by that which appears as familiar (Ahmed, 343).

In fact, it could well be that the handful of migrants in the performance (rather than Singaporeans who can decode many of the symbols and lingua franca used within the performance, and in general feel the strongest level of belonging) that might engage most affectively with Ahmed's notion of 'uncommon estrangement' where people in diaspora come together in the 'potential to remake one's relation to that which appears as unfamiliar, in order to reinhabit spaces and

places' (344).

If Rae is correct in his assessment that '(n)othing—and no-one—is entirely at home in the city/state' of Singapore ('Performing Singapore', 190), perhaps one can only aspire to touch on the mythic impossibility of home through the back door of unbelonging, where the choosing, discarding, ordering of symbolic meanings of home point to a more homely, self-ordered elsewhere, from the repositories of our bodies and memories. The tearing, sorting, mashing, soaking, filling, rolling, smelling, and listening amidst the cooking haze in the kitchen afforded an intense, embodied sensory experience for the audience in this performance of culinary realism that unmade food into inedible relics for a ritualized performance of unbelonging.

Between listening to a story unmade of memory, and inhaling the sticky smells of fried bean-paste-paper mixed with ash, one might begin to feel the remnant steam from boiled pasta water. This mixes with the thick humidity from being so close to the equator, which causes the newspaper you are sitting on to leave its inky imprint on your ankles. A familiar strain of a nostalgic folksong barely being hummed is echoed in the raindrops splattering the terracotta tiles just outside the kitchen. If we pause long enough to attend to what our hands, eyes, noses, and ears are gathering, we might be urged to conjure a remembrance of what it was like to once belong. And in this sensory, felt, memory space of belonging elsewhere, elsewhen, we might recall Tuan's observation: '[w]herever we are, our senses immediately bind us to it. Think and we are out of our senses, detached and elsewhere ... Thinking makes us an exile' ('Home as Elsewhere').

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Babette's Relational Art: Dualistic Worship in Isak Dinesen's *Babette's Feast*

by Emilia Halton-Hernandez

Abstract

In this paper I would like to explore the number of dualisms that exist throughout Isak Dinesen's short story, *Babette's Feast* (1958). It seems to me that Dinesen seeks to deal with these opposing forces in a way not previously thought about by other critics. H. Wayne Schow has understood Dinesen to be 'the poet of wholeness and coherence' (Stambaugh 112), but I argue that this statement underestimates Dinesen's more sophisticated understanding of the necessary conflicts and oppositions existent in human life and relations. *Babette's feast* is reparative not by virtue of reconciling these dualisms, but by inculcating a new way of approaching and relating to the inevitable fault lines that exist between the word/thing, aesthetic/ascetic, body/mind, self/other dichotomies. Finally, I will show how *Babette* can be thought of as a proto 'Relational artist' in her creation of the 'real French dinner' (Dinesen 42) which I will explain with regards to the aims and practices of the Relational Art movement of the 1990s.

Dualistic Thinking in *Babette's Feast*

Dinesen's *Babette's Feast*, a short story included in the author's collection *Anecdotes of Destiny* (1958), is set in the village of Berlevaag in northern Norway and tells the story of the lives of two sisters Martine and Philippa. Their father, the Dean, is the leader of a small Lutheran sect and his daughters are expected to abstain from marriage in order to lead the sect after his death. As young women, Martine attracts the attention of Lorens Loewenhielm, a young lieutenant who becomes infatuated with her but is never brave enough to reveal his feelings. Philippa catches the eye of a visiting opera singer from France, Achille Papin, but she breaks off their meetings. Both sisters remain unmarried and lead the life that is expected of them after the death of their father. Fifteen years later, the sisters receive a visit from a Catholic Parisian woman called Babette, who was forced to flee her country after the Paris Uprising of 1832. She brings with her a letter from Papin who asks if the sisters will take her in as a maid as she now has nowhere to live and has lost her family. The

sisters agree, and Babette becomes a live-in cook and maid. Thanks to Babette's playing the French lottery by mail, she wins a ten-thousand franc prize and offers to pay for the sisters hundredth birthday celebration of their father. Babette invites the Lutheran congregation as well as a now middle-aged Loewenhielm to a sumptuous feast, an experience which is powerfully transformative for all the characters involved. At the core of this tale about the simple lives and lost loves of a puritanical sect and its visitors in nineteenth century Norway, is the deep division between the worship of the word and the thing. This polarity is one that affects all characters within the story, who to different degrees and at differing times adhere to one side or the other. I will first consider the divisions inherent in puritanical thinking, and then move onto an analysis of the different character's negotiation of these binaries, both in their religious adherences and in their personal predilections and outlooks on life.

I would like to use the psychoanalyst Ronald Britton's paper 'Fundamentalism and Idolatry' to think more deeply about the dualisms at play in the story. Scholars Elaine Martin and Laurie Brands Gagne have analysed the ways in which the text stages a conflict between self and other, and body and soul, respectively. Whilst these dualisms are certainly present within the text and my paper will address them, I find Britton's notion of 'thing-worship' (the worship of the concrete body of the mother and the maternal realm of the primary object) and 'word-worship' (worship of the word/law of the father, the realm of the secondary object) provides a more fundamental way of understanding the intrinsic divisions within the text, of which the binaries of self/other and body/soul are encompassed. In psychoanalytic terms, the line of cleavage is one between a parental object experienced as the 'source of solace and comfort [the mother] and the parental object perceived as the source of knowledge' the father (Britton 162).

Britton uses the terms 'thing-worship' and 'word-worship' to understand the way in which some religious thinking sees a conflict arising between sacramental theology and its ritualistic relationship

to the symbolic, and the textual, anti-materialism of fundamentalism. In its most polarised form, God and spiritual goodness is believed to be either found through contemplation of the divine material world and its objects and icons, or found in sole reflection on the Holy Scriptures and texts which are believed to come from the literal authority of a divine being. In this latter view, sensualist images and representations of God are viewed as blasphemous and their iconoclastic destruction is understood as doing God's will.

Britton's study focuses on the example of a series of tracts called 'The Fundamentals', published in 1909 in the USA. Their religious zealotry depended upon the belief that every word in the Bible is the literal Word of God, which therefore guarantees its infallibility and ultimate authority (Britton 163). Importantly, they considered Modernism and Roman Catholicism as anathema to their aims and belief, regarding the sacramental bread and wine as signifying the blood and body of Christ as idolatrous (Britton 163). The Dean's puritanical sect bears many similarities of faith and worship to those described in Britton's case study of word-worship. The Dean and his world view is the paternal word of law, one for whom 'the earth and all that is held to them was but a kind of illusion' (Dinesen 23). This condemnation of the idolised material object (sacrament) and the notion that only the word or the idea contains the truth is essential to the sect's puritanical thinking. We are told that 'its members renounced the pleasures of this world', living ascetically and sparingly, with the two sisters Martine and Philippa 'never possess[ing] any article of fashion; they had dressed demurely in grey or black all their lives' (Dinesen 23). Britton states that crucial to worship of words is the notion that the 'words of the text are treated as powerful, sacred and inviolable beyond their function of conveying, inexactly, like all words, a meaning' (Britton 168). The congregation's main form of reverence is in the form of gathering 'together to read and interpret the Word' (Dinensen 24). The importance attributed to the word is similarly felt when Martine and Philippa assume that Babette is engaging in her own kind of word worship, despite

these words being 'popish': '[t]hey would find her in the kitchen, her elbows on the table and her temples on her hands, lost in the study of a heavy black book which they secretly suspected to be a popish prayer-book' (Dinesen 38). And yet, Babette most importantly comes to be suspected for her dangerous thing-worship by the sisters and the congregation. Anne L Bower describes the sumptuous feast that Babette cooks up as sacramental, writing that the experience she creates is 'worthy of St Barbara, that brings atonement (at one meant) to its participants, just as the Catholic mass does' (Bower 212).

In this sense, the transubstantiation of the Eucharistic offering into the real body and blood of Christ in the Catholic Church is an example of substance or the material possessing spiritual power considered by Lutherans/puritans/word-worshippers as idolatrous. Britton writes that '[i]n idolatry the thing itself though a material object is treated as possessing psychic or spiritual power' (Britton 168), and it seems that Babette is initially feared of as engaging in this kind of veneration. Martine's disturbing dream features 'Babette poisoning the old Brothers and Sisters, Philippa and herself...The ladies could not tell what fires had been burning or what cauldrons bubbling there from before daybreak' (Dinesen 46-48). With Babette suspected to be scheming a 'witches' Sabbath' (Dinesen 46), her creations are clearly felt to have dangerous, powerful effects that possess the spiritual devilish power to excite sensual desires. Sensual experience and desire linked to materiality is felt to be the enemy of Godliness and is therefore vehemently opposed and feared by doctrines founded upon the exaltation of the word.

This split between sensual 'thing-worship' and non-sensual 'word-worship' is, in my opinion, the fundamental fault line in the story and something which all of the characters struggle. But more than just representing the struggle between puritanism and sacramental Catholicism in the story, Britton's terms to describe these dualisms help us to see how the more philosophical conflict between idealism/subjectivism versus realism/objective materialism are also at play in the story. Britton adds that a similar mutually

hostile tendency exists in philosophy between idealism and realism, and in psychology between behaviourism and subjectivism (162). The struggle between these binaries are encapsulated in the characters of Lorens Loewenheim and Achille Papin.

Both characters seem to swing between devoting themselves to an illusory ideal, and then with the inevitable disappointments of these quixotic beliefs they turn to the worship of material goods, status and worldly ambitions. Loewenheim falls prey to revering the ideal illusory world of subjective imagination that is involved in Britton's definition of word worship. Upon seeing Martine he felt 'at this one moment there rose before his eyes a sudden, mighty vision of a higher and purer life...with a gentle, golden-haired angel to guide and reward him' (Dinesen 26). Young Lorens sees Martine as an ideal, angelic almost platonian form whom he cannot properly relate to because he feels himself almost intolerably earthly fleshy and material: '[h]e followed her slim figure with adoring eyes, but he loathed and despised the figure which he himself cut in her nearness' (Dinesen 26). Importantly, the family madness which he fears he has inherited involves the power of omnipotent second-sightedness, the ability to see beyond the earthly and the material into the realm of the spiritual thanks to the legend that one of his ancestors was a Huldre, a female mountain spirit of Norway (Dinesen 27). Loewenheim worries that he may be suffering from this visionary condition, (that is, hyper subjectivism), and the narrator writes that 'panic fell upon him. Was it the family madness which made him still carry with him the dream-like picture of a maiden so fair that she made the air around her shine with purity and holiness? He did not want to be a dreamer; he wanted to be like his brother-officers' (Dinesen 27). This state of panic clearly betrays the General's own fear of glorifying a hypersubjective ideal, an illusion of love and femininity that is not rooted in reality and cannot provide the foundations for a real relationship. As the young Lorens bids farewell to Martine, he cries 'in this world there are things that are impossible!' (Dinesen 27). At the core of Loewenheim's statement here is surely a defeatist recognition

about his own predilection to worship the impossible and unreal in the world around him. The young Lorens begins in word-worship, but as he continues into adulthood he drives himself to the other side of the same coin— the thing-worship of social status, material wealth and ambition, endeavors which are all felt to provide a false sense of spiritual sustenance and power. These material enticements replace the lost illusory certainties of an earlier, younger stage, and so his desires become geared to the accumulation and possession of worldly things.

The French musician Achille Papin is also caught up in his own struggle between idealistic and realistic approaches to viewing the world. Though perhaps entertaining some romantic illusions about Philippa, Papin's worship of an ideal is more in her artistry and in his ability to cultivate a virtuoso that will be adored by the audiences of France. As he hears Philippa's voice, the narrator writes, '[I]ike Loewenheim he had a vision' (Dinesen 29), suggesting the beginning a fantasy of fame and artistic acclaim. In his new-found prodigy, he wonders: 'I have been wrong in believing that I was growing old. My greatest triumphs are before me! The world will once more believe in miracles when she and I sing together!' (Dinesen 30). His belief in these illusions even allow him to entertain the notion that bodily decay can be stayed. Corporeal decay and the natural loss of powers with age will not happen to him - his material conditions are allayed by a worshipping of the miracle of their combined talents. When Philippa decides to put an end to her lessons, Papin like Loewenheim when comparing himself to the ideal Martine, seems to experience a reality-checking fall to earth from the heavens: 'I have been wrong. My day is over. Never again shall I be the divine Papin' (Dinesen 30). The sense that idealism and realism are irreconcilable and unable to coexist is here clearly shown. And like Loewenheim, Papin resorts to taking the other side of the path into thing-worship when we later hear of his estimation of his life in his letter to the sisters: 'I feel that you may have chosen the better part in life. What is fame? What is glory? The grave awaits us all!'

(Dinesen 34). Loewenheilm has also experienced his turn to thing-worship as an ultimately unfulfilling approach to life. Loewenheilm reasons that he 'had obtained everything that he had striven for in life and was admired and envied by everyone' but '[o]nly he himself knew of a queer fact, which jarred with his prosperous existence: that he was not perfectly happy' (Dinesen 51). This mature existential crisis coupled with the unhappiness of the disappointed idealisms of his early youth illustrates exactly the problems with taking either route of word or thing-worship. The congregation also seems to have reached an impasse in their adoration of the illusory and ideal. Their conception of the world as an illusion, with 'the true reality' as 'the New Jerusalem toward which they were longing' does not seem to provide real spiritual sustenance to the congregation, as shown by the breakdown in their relations (Dinesen 23). We are told early on in the story that since the death of the Dean, the congregation 'were even becoming somewhat querulous and quarrelsome, so that sad little schisms would arise in the congregation' (Dinesen 23). Whilst Martine and Philippa are perhaps presented as the most calmly contented of the characters with their lot, it is subtly suggested that their abstinence has led to a shrinkage in their depth of experience of life and their denial of sensual pleasures has come at some cost to the development of their personalities. Martine avoids discussing her dalliance with Young Lorens with her sister, and on the topic of Papin, 'they lacked the words with which to discuss him' (Dinesen 32).

As shown, the conflict between this kind of dualistic thinking and living is encountered in the text in a multiplicity of ways that we can be understood as all belonging to either a kind of word-worship or thing-worship. We see this theologically in the divide between Puritanism and Catholicism, philosophically in the divide between idealism and realism in the ambitions of Loewenhiem and Papin, and in the divide between asceticism/abstinence and aestheticism/sensualism as encapsulated in the characters of the Sisters and Babette. Elaine Martin has also interestingly observed how the mind/body

dualism in the story is most powerfully observed in the character of Babette herself: 'Physically exiled to the provincial, unimaginative, and endlessly repetitive world of split cod and ale-and-bread-soup, Babette's mind nonetheless continues to inhabit the kitchen and the Café Anglais in Paris' (Martin 36). Through the 'popish' book the sisters suspect Babette to be reading, it is by what is in fact most likely a 'cookbook, [that] Babette, trancelike, removes herself to Paris' (Martin 36).

A Breakdown of Divisions?

Martin goes on to argue that via Babette's artistic feast, the dualisms of body/mind and self/other existent in the story are finally broken down and the transformative properties of the food and wine enable the group to achieve community through consumption (Martin 36). Deane Curtin's 'food-centered philosophy of human being' as outlined by Martin also provides a particularly fruitful way for thinking about how Babette's feast breaks down the dualistic thinking that the characters are defined by (27). Curtin understands food to be an important site for complicating the self/other duality that has characterised Western thinking for so long. In Martin's words, '[s]ince food is ingested and becomes part of the self, it obliges us to reconceptualise not only the other but also identify of a self that is so permeable, it can physically incorporate the other' (27). Brands Gagne's article also looks at how Babette's artistic abilities are integrative and unifying. She writes that it is Babette's ability as an artist to connect us to our souls, which is 'the point of unity of mind and body' that is the artist's ultimate gift, enabling the blurring of the corporeal and the spiritual (231). She adds that 'Babette's Feast calls us to the task of recovering the soul and participating, thereby, in the work of reconciliation' (Brands Gagne 231).

In Britton's terms, it is through feeding and nourishing the group with her sensual gift that Babette provides a more maternal 'source of solace and comfort' that is usually split into 'thing-worship' (Britton 162). According to Britton, '[t]he true symbol

(as understood in the German and English Romantic movement and now in psychoanalysis) is the meeting place of meaning and matter, or of spirit and substance. It is the place where something is simultaneously what it is in its substance and is also what it signifies' (Britton 165). All great art is ultimately a symbol, and it is possible to understand Babette's ability to better integrate these two split forces that ultimately revives those around her as that which marks her as a true artist of body and soul.

The Problem with Worship

Identifying the separate elements Babette unifies and integrates through her feast as Martin and Brands Gagne have done allows us to better make sense of the feelings of revitalization and reconciliation that the feast-goers undergo. There seems to be something almost akin to a Hegelian dialectic that Babette achieves. However, Babette does not simply erase the conflict between 'word-worship' and 'thing-worship' as both writers would seem to be suggesting. The ultimate irreconcilability of the word and the thing or body and mind is unavoidable. Britton writes that these dualistic forces 'are bound together in mutual hostility and always co-exist' (Britton 164). And it is not just that these opposing forces come about simply thanks to a dualistic way of thinking (despite Curtin's hopeful claims that it is a problem special to Western thought) - they are inherently a part of the complex experience of the world with which we as human beings must encounter and negotiate. James Ogier has importantly observed how the feelings of transformation through unity that the feast provides is in fact figured as an impermanent state within the story. He writes that:

Just as one might expect from a Dionysian revel, the effects of the *altid* are short-lived. The party breaks up under a brilliant star-filled sky, expressing the hope that it may never snow again. It does, of course, almost immediately... The appearance of snow also underscores the brevity of the group's... epiphany and leads to doubts

about the long-term effect of Babette's efforts on the group (Ogier 184).

We cannot know for sure about the long-term restorative effects that the feast will have on the group, and Ogier's observation does suggest that the kind of dualistic thinking that troubles the characters is in many ways unavoidable and will resurge. Indeed, Loewenheim and Martine are never able to consummate their feelings for one another in any real sense. He says to her after the meal: 'I shall be with you every day that is left to me. Every evening I shall sit down, if not in the flesh, which means nothing, in spirit, which is all, to dine with you, just like tonight. For tonight I have learned, dear sister, that in this world anything is possible' (Dinesen 62). It seems that he has once again taken side with the veneration of the illusory and the ideal.

However, although word and thing are always going to be separated in some way, it is the tendency to dogmatically choose one or the other as a reaction to ambiguity, or as a rejection of the discomfort of the irreconcilable that seems to be where the key problem lies. I would argue then that the main issue dualistic thinking addressed in the story is not that these binaries exist *per se*, as they are unavoidable, but that the problem lies with how the conflict is intensified by the act of 'worship'. The characters seem to feel a constricting sense of having to devote themselves to one side or another. For example, the elder Loewenheim right up until the feast feels compelled to choose between one kind of reverence or another, incapable of feeling satisfied by either. Upon arriving to Berlevaag after many years absence, the General suddenly wishes he had the power of second-sight (Dinesen 53). We learn that 'he would find himself worrying about his immortal soul', that looking into the mirror and seeing his decorated figure he exclaims "Vanity, vanity, all is vanity!" The strange meeting at Fossum had compelled him to make out the balance-sheet of his life' (Dinesen 52).

With the gift of Babette's feast, the guests do not have to choose to absolutely devote themselves to either the thing or the word. Instead, the collective experience that Babette provides

them with enables the guests to cherish both the spiritual and the material in their taking in of her food and drink. We are told that the congregation ‘realized, when man has not only altogether forgotten but has firmly renounced all ideas of food and drink that he eats and drinks in the right spirit’ (Dinesen 58). The feast enables the guests to give up the dogma of word worship and take in that which they had previously forbidden themselves: ‘[t]he vain illusions of this earth had dissolved before their eyes like smoke, and they had seen the universe as it really is’ (Dinesen 62). In Loewenheim’s speech we see how the feast enables him to feel that he has not been deprived of one way of thinking or feeling, despite his earlier choices: ‘[g]race, brothers, makes no conditions and singles out none of us in particular; grace takes us all to its bosom and proclaims general amnesty. See! that which we have chosen is given us, and that which we have refused is, also and at the same time, granted us. Ay, that which we have rejected is poured upon us abundantly’ (Dinesen 60). This sense of being opened up to a fuller and more whole experiencing of the world is felt to be a blessing. Crucially, this taking in of the other that had been previously rejected allows the guests to open their hearts to one another more freely. Old grudges and mistreatments are forgiven, and the words “Bless you, bless you, bless you,” like an echo of the harmony of the spheres rang on all sides’ (Dinesen 63). In this sense, Babette erodes the closed and limited ways of thinking that are necessarily involved with veneration of any kind and allows them to relate to one another and themselves in such a way that both resembles and then produces the intersubjective give and take of a loving relationship. In a famous line from the story, Colonel Galliffet says of Babette’s culinary artistry: ‘this woman is now turning a dinner at the Café Anglais into a kind of love affair—into a love affair of the noble and romantic category in which one no longer distinguishes between bodily and spiritual appetite or satiety!’ (Dinesen 58). A love affair is precisely dependent on a mutual relationality, a give and take of self and other.

In sum, worshipping inculcates a state of non-mutual relations

in which the object of desire is reified and set upon a pedestal. To worship, venerate or show devotion is a one-way street of desiring and feeling. And as we have seen, this way of relating to the world profoundly affects the relationships the characters have with one another. Characters come to worship one another - Loewenheim and Papin worship the Sisters, and the Congregation worship the memory of the Dean, but these relationships become unsatisfying because they are not based upon intersubjective modes of relating. Essentially what Loewenheim and congregation feels is a kind of freedom to relate and feel, to not have to choose between one restrictive way of being. For Loewenheim, he feels a freedom to not have to choose between thing and word worship as expressed in his speech on Grace. For the congregation, the ability to enjoy what was previously feared and othered, material and sensual pleasure, is experienced as a liberation. Not having to choose between one form of dogmatic worshipping and being able to tolerate the dualisms that invariably exist in life is both enabled by the intersubjective experience of collective consumption, and in turn enables a more intersubjective and successful form of relating to one another.

Babette's Relational Art

Thanks to Babette's ability to transform the relational modes in the group through her culinary artistry, I think it is useful then to think of her as an artist that is engaged with a 'relational aesthetics'. Relational Art or Relational Aesthetics is a term coined by art critic Nicolas Bourriaud in his 1998 book *Esthétique relationnelle* to describe the work by a select group of artists in the 1990s. Bourriaud defines relational art as 'an art taking as its theoretical horizon the realm of human interactions and its social context, rather than the assertion of an independent and private symbolic space' (Bourriaud 14). Crucially for the relational artist, art is considered a state of encounter, 'consisting of convivial, socializing, interactive, non-object, artist-audience collaborations' (Perreault). By thinking along these lines, we can understand the transformative effects of Babette's feast

as lying not simply in the food she makes, the artistic product, but in the communal, relational experience she enables and develops through this artistic production. In relational art, the artist can be more accurately viewed as the ‘catalyst’ for the artistic experience rather than being at the centre of it (Nechvatal 73). The artist Rikrit Tiravanija’s work which sets up communal dining experiences within gallery spaces seems to be most akin to that of Babette’s, and a brief analysis of his work will be helpful in understanding how both artists are doing similar things.

In his landmark 1992 work entitled *Untitled (Free/Still)*, Tiravanija converted a gallery into a kitchen where he served rice and Thai curry to the public free of charge¹. In the words of Tiravanija:

I am interested in making a condition or situation where...people have to come and stand next to each other and look at something...and deal with each other. I think it is quite important in the work, for me, that people participate in it or take action in it or are it. (Art Radar)

These aims very much parallel the collective and relational qualities of Babette’s feast. It is the guests whose bodies and countenances in relation to one another bear the final artistic mark in the story. Again paraphrasing the Colonel’s evaluation of the dining experience at the *Café Anglais*, it is the love affair that is produced between self and other that is the ultimate artistic achievement of Babette’s—not the technical brilliance found in the aesthetic object, the food or drink. Bourriaud explains this collective creation of meaning with regards to relational art as: ‘the audience is envisaged as a community. Rather than the artwork being an encounter between a viewer and an object, relational art produces intersubjective

1 It should be noted that this work was first displayed at 303 Gallery in New York City, a commercial and privately-owned gallery. This might seem antipathetical to Bourriaud’s statement that relational does not take place in private spaces. It does however perhaps bring the social contexts within which Tiravanija and Babette work closer together—they are both providing a free experience for a group of people within the domain of the private that is not their own—the former in a privately owned gallery and the latter in a privately owned house.

encounters, meaning is elaborated collectively, rather than in the space of individual consumption' (Bourriaud 17). This perhaps goes some way to explaining why the guests at Babette's feast cannot remember anything about the meal itself. We are told that Martine and Philippa 'realised that none of their guests had said a single word about the food. Indeed, try as they might, they could not themselves remember any of the dishes which had been served' (Dinesen 64). The guests are so caught up in the feeling that has been produced amongst and within them that the food itself comes to bear little meaning. Tiravanija captures this experience when commenting on the effects on his own work: '[a] lot of it is also about experiential relationship so you are actually not really looking at something but you're within it, you're part of it. The distance between the artist and the art and the audience gets a bit blurred' (Stokes). The divisions between art and life, artist and audience are broken down and obfuscated in much the same way as Babette's feast breaks down the aforementioned forms of dualistic thinking and forms of worship. Incorporating the communal consumption of food and drink seems to make culinary art the art form par excellence for achieving these relational outcomes. The inherent participatory quality of eating and imbibing amongst others moves people in such a way that other types of interactive and communal activities cannot do to the same extent.

Conclusion

One guest at Tiravanija's exhibition interviewed at the end of the dining experience remarked that 'there is something wonderful about mixing the contemplative, almost religious activity of looking at art and also having the possibility of sitting in the art gallery with the art, eat something lovely, and speak to either your companions or new friends that you meet' (Stokes). This sentiment of wonder at the mixing of the spiritual, culinary and interpersonal could have easily been expressed by one of the guests at Babette's meal.

Babette's feast opens up a space for new modes of relating dependent upon the act of eating and consuming collectively. Helped by the fact

that the ingestion of food itself breaks down dualisms between mind and body, self and other, we see the feast opens up space for relational modes that are not based on the restrictive worship of either word or thing, or the adoption of dogmatically dualistic thinking, but instead allows for the intersubjective creation of meaning and relating.

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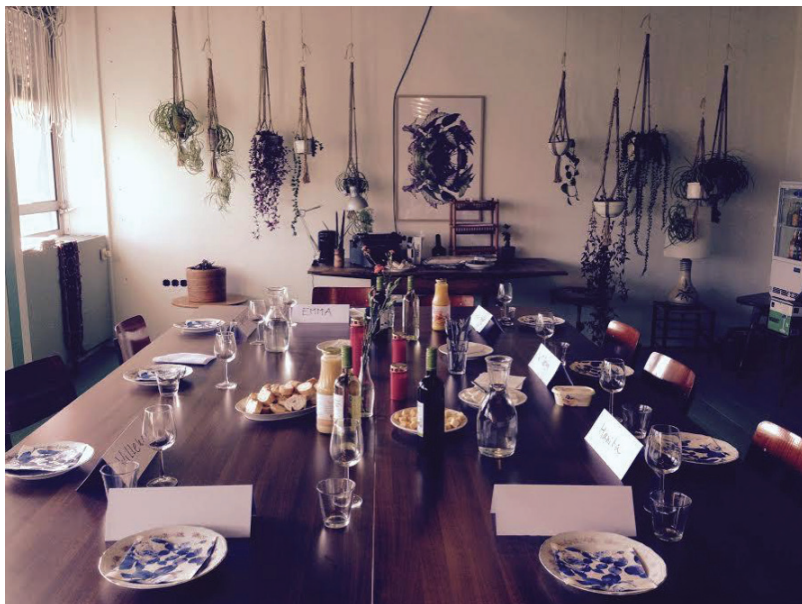
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If this was your Last Supper, what would you serve?

By Emma Miriam Berentsen¹



London, United Kingdom (Autumn 2017)

Introduction

The text you are about to read is not a coherent or chronologically written academic text. It is to be read as a performance. A performance on paper or a journey of a performance on paper. In my phone I have a note written on 21 May 2015 at 21:22:

‘Emma, let’s develop a series of events around art/
death and food. LAST SUPPER NIGHT (S)
CONCEPT—(inspired by the last sleepover dinner

¹ I recently started building a *Last Supper* website where I want to archive *Last Supper* wishes, recipes and memories attached to the choices of food. If you like to contribute please contact me or keep an eye out on the website. The website www.lastsupperarchive.com will be launched in 2019 and people will be invited to upload stories, recipes, and pictures. For more info about me and my work please visit my personal website: www.emmaberentsen.nl

If this was your Last Supper, what would you serve?

we just had and because my mum will die tomorrow and also include the last meal idea of people on death row) Every night is set-up in the same way, however they are all different as the speaker of the night is someone else. It should be an interesting speaker, who deals with death in their work/life. [...] Work out the concept and organise some of these last suppers!!!!'

As I developed the concept for my *Last Supper* project further, I got in touch with *Denkstof*, an organisation based in my hometown who had previously shown interest in my ideas. *Denkstof* is a Dutch organisation that facilitates conversations on various topics for diverse audiences, and, following further discussion, we decided to make the *Last Supper* an inclusive event where everyone's last supper dishes were on the table, rather than that of just one person. The question: 'What would you want to serve if it was your *Last Supper*?' became a prominent question in the dinners that I have organised so far. The text you are about to read is a journey through my research. It is an archive of the last 2 years working on my *Last Supper* project, set up as a menu. A menu you can read from A to Z, or from Z to A or any way you like to eat your way through the text.

Arnhem, the Netherlands (Spring 2016)

Wine

The table was decorated with a white table cloth, porcelain plates, wine glasses, graveyard candles and filled with French bread, grapes and wine. It was during one of the *Last Supper* events I held in Arnhem, the Netherlands, that one participant arrived accompanied by her husband and three-year-old son. Whilst the participants were instructed to take a moment to look out of the window and let their thoughts wander in silence, her husband asked me if it was okay if he and his son prepared something for his wife. I said yes. On a large wooden plate they

The screenshot shows a Facebook event page. On the left is a navigation menu with options: Events, Calendar, Birthdays, Discover, Past, and a 'Last Supper by Emma Berentsen' highlight. Below the menu is a '+ Create Event' button. The main content area features a photo of a woman sitting at an outdoor table with a red water bottle. Below the photo, the event title 'Last Supper by Emma Berentsen' is displayed with the date 'JAN 11' and the location 'Public · Hosted by PopUpkerk Arnhem'. A 'Going' button is visible, along with the event date and time: 'Wednesday, January 11 at 7 PM - 10 PM UTC+01 about 10 months ago'. The location is 'Coehoornpark' in Arnhem, Netherlands. At the bottom, it says 'Invited by Matthias Voor de Poorte'.

The screenshot shows the Glasshouse Art/Lab website. The header includes the logo and navigation links: ABOUT, VISIT, AGENDA, RENTALS, and JOIN. The main content area features a section titled 'Date: 2/18/2017' under the heading 'In Residency>>'. The text reads: 'Glasshouse's Winter Residency 2017 Welcomes Artist Emma Berentsen & Chef Marente van der Valk To Present'. Below this is the title 'Last Supper: Dinner Installation' and the date 'Saturday, February 18, 6-9p'. A paragraph describes the installation: 'Last Supper' is a dinner-installation in which the Dutch artist-chef duo collaborate to create an immersive dinner setting of a supper, a lament. Audience is invited to explore, taste, listen, and add to the installation. This culminates the two week residency of artist-chef duo Berentsen & Marente at Glasshouse as part of the art-house's 'Edible Bodies' season. (\$10/suggested). At the bottom, it notes: 'The following performance is part of 'Edible Bodies' program at Glasshouse. Curated by Lital Dotan'.

Last Supper Dates 2016 - 2017

- 27-28 May 2016 - Last Supper (in collaboration with *Denkstof*), Arnhem
- 16th of July 2016 - Last Supper, Chisenhale Art Place, London
- 24th of August 2016 - Last Supper, New Cross, London
- 11th of January 2017 - Last Supper, PopUpkerk Arnhem, Arnhem
- 12th of February 2017 - Last Supper workshop (in collaboration with Marente van der Valk), Glasshouse, New York
- 18th of February 2017 - Last Supper participatory installation (in collaboration with Marente van der Valk), Glasshouse project, Brooklyn, New York
- 29-30 September 2017 - Customized Last Supper, MAAS, Rotterdam

If this was your Last Supper, what would you serve?

carefully placed biscuits. They left the plate in the middle of the table. Next to the woman's plate they left a folded handwritten note. The husband whispered in my ear, explaining that this was a fantasy biscuit landscape in which he and his son had created a story for his wife. Then they left. Later that night, once it was the woman's turn to share her dish, she told us that she had asked her husband and son to prepare the *Last Supper's* task for her. She did not want to do it herself. She explained that if she ever was to have her *Last Supper*, she would want to be nourished by the people she loved. She told all of us how scared she was, and cried. She said that dying was her biggest fear. The story that was written on the note by her husband and son was a story about a girl getting lost in a fictional landscape. A land where girls get lost but are never scared. We all tried one of the biscuits. They tasted just like the dry, sugary biscuits we would bake at home as children. We all ate them in silence and afterwards we started to whisper about everyone's fear of dying. I imagine that everyone at that moment was too scared to make loud noises as it was almost as if the fragile childhood memories we had attached to these biscuits would break and crumble away if we were to talk too loudly.

Starter

Last Supper is a performative dinner that offers the opportunity to talk about the role of death and mortality in our lives. A maximum of 12 participants are invited each night to bring a dish they would want to share as their *Last Supper* and to join in a collective conversation. Much like the recent phenomena of the Death-Café movement founded in 2010 by late Jon Underwood, *Last Supper* intends to facilitate conversation around death and our own mortality. Each participant's contribution serves as a starting point for exchange. The *Last Supper* was conceptualised following the chosen death of my mother in 2015. My mother lived in the Netherlands at that time and in the Netherlands the

law states that: ‘euthanasia and assisted suicide are legal only if the criteria laid down in the Dutch Termination of Life on Request and Assisted Suicide (Review Procedures) Act are fully observed. Only then is the physician concerned immune from criminal prosecution. Requests for euthanasia often come from patients experiencing unbearable suffering with no prospect of improvement. Their request must be made earnestly and with full conviction. They see euthanasia as the only escape from the situation. However, patients have no absolute right to euthanasia and doctors no absolute duty to perform it (Government of the Netherlands).

The night before my mother died, my sister and I prepared her final meal: homemade lasagne, a big green salad, and organic apple cider—just how she liked it. We had dinner in our living room, sitting all around my mum’s bed, one of those hospital beds that the hospital had lent us. It was not important how the dish looked, or if it was the perfect taste, what was important were the memories we all had around eating lasagna as a family, and all being together for one last night.

There is a long trajectory of tradition and ritual interrelating food and death, with last suppers being a common trope for those with a scheduled death as a way of saying goodbye to their next of kin. Despite that my mother was unable to enjoy the food in the way she once had, the occasion provided a space to celebrate her life in the knowledge that it would be over the following day. Consequently, the *Last Supper* dinners have proved to be engaging and open performative experiences in which a group of strangers come together and find common ground to discuss and reflect on life and death. Through this project, I hope to lighten this dark, unspeakable subject. I have found that *Last Supper* has not only contributed to the current discourse on death, but has provided a reflective space for people to talk about this inevitable, painful yet cathartic life phenomenon.

London, United Kingdom (Summer 2016)

Wine

Olivia Lamont, a producer and friend whom I met through a previous work, helped me produce *Last Supper* nights in London. She was intrigued by the project from the start, and helped me organise and develop a PR pack. When Olivia attended a performance she spoke of her own background and thoughts:

‘I don’t have much experience of people passing away very young. I see it as something very natural. In my mind it is very natural thing of people that they reach a certain age and then they die. [...] If I had to serve something as my last supper, what would I serve? - MEAT! Yes, definitely meat’.

Breaking the silence of the evening, the other participants burst into laughter as Olivia continued:

‘Yes, a big steak—I really would love to eat a steak before I die.’

(Transcribed from video footage from the Last Supper held the 24th of August 2016)

Appetizer

Food and Performance

During the *Last Supper* performative dinners the participants’ stories are the performance. All the participants are asked to listen carefully to the story of why a certain dish is being brought, what memories are attached to it, and how it is made. Through the unfolding of these personal (hi)stories the memories attached to a certain dish melt into the actual food we eat. While everyone is invited to taste the dish in silence, the senses of the participants are stimulated. We smell, taste and touch the memories of the strangers we share this night with.

The *Last Supper* dinners are set up in such a way that it does not become a big feast or dinner-party, but a space to listen, reflect, taste and sense both the stories and the flavours of the food.

'While food in everyday life is very much about doing and behaving, the reciprocity of table and stage has a long history. One of the ways that food is made to perform is through the dissociation of food from eating and eating from nutrition, and the disarticulation of the various sensory experiences associated with food' (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 85).

Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett points out that the dissociation of food from the sole purpose of nurturing our bodies is a common strategy to perform food. Reflecting upon the way food serves as a medium that transfers stories during my *Last Supper* performative dinners, I see a division between what happens 'above' and 'under' the table.

'Above' the table we share our stories, unfolding personal narratives, the connections between the foods we eat and the memories it provokes. Simultaneously, 'under' the table we digest and turn this material into the parts of our bodies. The unconscious corporeality of this process outlines the physicality of our bodies and their existence as disposable matter. To some extent, the performative nature of the *Last Supper* dinners might dissociate food from nutrition, however the action of eating inevitably reinforces the association of food to nutrition and nutrition to death.

This 'above' and 'under' the table dissociation also resonates with the setup process of the performances, on-stage and off-stage. The kitchen, where the food is being prepared, is not in the performance. All the mess of food-preparation has happened before, somewhere off-stage. On-stage we only encounter the final product. What would happen if the performance took place in a kitchen? If we all came together to not only share the

If this was your Last Supper, what would you serve?

final product but also the making of it? In its current format, the off-stage element is present in the participants' preparation of the food, making their *Last Supper* dishes in their own kitchens. The participants are like actors who are preparing at home, in solitary individuality, and then come to the theatre to perform on-stage, to play a role in a scene. Whilst I want to create a community through my *Last Supper* dinners, I am also aware that it preserves some deeply rooted emotions of loneliness and isolation attributed to the coping with death. However, I hope that through the sharing of these dishes during an event where you are surrounded with people who give attention and thought to both the food as the story behind it will enable the participants to embrace all these emotions in regards to death and our own mortality. For the development of the *Last Supper* project it would be interesting to see if the performance could possibly also take place in the kitchen of the participant. To bring the off-stage and on-stage element together. I am constantly experimenting with ways how to embed the idea of talking about death with performative concepts and experiences so it is definitely worth thinking about different approaches in regards to people's last supper wishes.

Arnhem, the Netherlands (Winter 2017)

Wine

My late boyfriend's step sister, Caro, had asked me some weeks before a *Last Supper* night in a pop-up-church if it was okay to film the evening for a video work she was creating. I confirmed this would be fine as long as she had permission from the attendees. On the night she came an hour early to set up her camera and to ask me some questions. When the participants started to arrive she asked everyone individually if they were happy to be filmed, and we began without any issues. I welcomed everyone and

explained the setup of the night. The moment I asked everyone to close their eyes and to imagine this really was their last night alive on earth, Caro tip-toed towards me and asked if, rather than filming, she might be able to participate in the evening. Of course I was happy for her involvement, however this meant the performance wasn't documented on film as had been planned.

Caro joined the conversation but did not have a specific wish for her last supper dish. Impressed by the evening, she later contacted me saying that she felt much more part of the conversation sitting with the rest of the participants and not behind her camera.

The first time I met Caro was at the funeral of my late boyfriend back in 2010. Where, if I remember correctly, we had drinks in a bar at the beach after the funeral service was over. I can't remember myself having food that day, nor did Caro.

Main Course

Death, Dying and Food

When I was a child my dad would often say to me: *'Als je niet eet, ga je dood'* (*If you don't eat, you will die*). He, obviously, had a point there. You can of course think: well, if you eat too much you will die, too. In my performances I often think about this paradox of food and nutrition. On one hand, food keeps us alive, gives us energy, it is the petrol we humans need to keep going. On the other hand, food can make us very ill and has the potential to kill us.

As babies we are nourished by our carers. We grow up and learn how to cook and feed ourselves, until the moment we are too old or ill and need someone or something else to nourish us. Either way, both our life and death revolves around food. We give meaning to food, we share food recipes, we attach memories to food and those meanings and stories are valuable in life, art and

the process of dying and coping with death.

In a lot of cultures there are existing traditions in regards to the mourning period where people celebrate the life of the deceased with a certain meal after the person has died. Often this is either related to the funeral itself or throughout the period of mourning where the mourners are given food by family, friends and neighbours. Although very interesting and fascinating in itself my fascination with food and death and the development of my *Last Supper* dinners is mainly dealing with the time before we die. It questions how we, the living, would imagine our last meal or last period alive to be.

Even though I borrow elements such as the number of guests and the sharing of bread and wine, from the most famous last supper depiction within Christian tradition, Jesus's last supper, in my personal research into this theme I have been very fascinated by the way American death-row inmates are given the opportunity to choose their last meal. Interestingly, Jesus and the death-row inmates both share/shared the knowledge of their upcoming and unchosen death, yet paradoxically Jesus ate his last meal with company, and could therefore share his experience, whereas death row inmates remain in solitude. As part of the research I did during a residency in February 2017 at the Glasshouse Project² in New York, I have been looking into the works of both Julie Green and Henry Hargreaves, both of whom have researched and re-constructed the last supper wishes of death row inmates. Julie green depicts these meals by painting them onto dinner plates in blue paint, publishing them on her website under states, dates and description.

In the *Last Supper* performative dinners I have been organising and creating I have been implementing elements from the two models of *Last Supper* I have discussed; the model of sharing and community (as Jesus's last supper is depicted), and the model of

² <http://www.glasshouseproject.org>

loneliness and solitude (as with death row inmates and the art of Julie Green).

Rotterdam, the Netherlands (Autumn 2017)

Dessert Wine

As part of a customized *Last Supper* installation for the premiere of a dance performance called *Happily Ever After* I interviewed the cast and crew about their last supper thoughts. One of the dancers told me that he would love the opportunity to go back to his mother's hometown in Thailand and have his last supper there, sitting with family on the floor in a circle around the food. The dancer started to smile as he added: 'and there are so many people that they don't fit all together around the food, so they have to sit shoulder to shoulder, almost like a bunch of ravioli together in a package'.

(Transcribed from audio recording for the customized Last Supper, recorded on the 25th of September 2017, Rotterdam)

Dessert

Last Supper Recipe

Create your own *Last Supper*

You will need

Limited time to live (preferably know the date you will die or at least close to the date)

People you would want to have next to you (or if you want to be alone you are allowed)

A kitchen to prepare the last supper (or if you don't need a kitchen think about where you will prepare the food)

If this was your Last Supper, what would you serve?

A dinner table (or car or garden or campsite or any other place you wish)

Plates (or how you wish to eat)

Glasses (or how you wish to drink)

Cutlery (or how you wish to put food in your mouth)

Candles (in any colour you like)

Napkins (in any colour you like)

Any other props you like (in any colour you like)

Method

Ask yourself the following questions:

What dish brings up a happy memory?

Do you remember the smell of this food?

Do you remember how the taste was the first time you tried this food?

If you were to have a Last Supper what would you want to eat or serve?

Does this food has a special memory attached to it?

Would you like to have people surrounding you at your Last Supper?

Who would be there?

Where would your Last Supper be?

How would it look like?

What season would it be?

What colours or accessories would you like to add?

And then – before you start preparing, being honest to yourself, would you really want to have a Last Supper?

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Performance Response

Oh My Sweet Land: A Love Story From Syria

Written and Directed by: Amir Nizar Zuabi. The Play Company.
14 October 2017.

by Vivian Appler



Fig. 1: Nadine Malouf performing *Oh My Sweet Land*.
Photographer: Pavel Antonov.

We step out of the subway station in Park Slope, check the address emailed the previous day, and walk about a block to the Brooklyn brownstone to ensure we're in the right place. We're early, so we stroll past the restaurants on the outskirts of the residential neighborhood and select a place to eat afterwards – we know we'll be hungry for food and conversation after the show. This complicated prelude to performance is due to the special demands of the U.S. premiere of *Oh My Sweet Land: A Love Story from Syria*, written and directed by Amir Nizar Zuabi and performed by Nadine Malouf. The Play Company solicited the temporary donation of private kitchens for the production of this one-woman show in which the preparation of the traditional Syrian dish *kubeh*, a small, savory fried meat pastry, anchors the action of the play. The performance begins with an emailed address and a trek to a stranger's home. The search initiates a viscerally empathetic relationship with the protagonist, together

embarking upon an impossible quest for a disappearing country. I take my seat in the front row (there are only two). Malouf is toasting pine nuts and making easy eye-contact with the dozen-or-so audience members whose journeys have just begun.

The play's production history is itself a travelogue of migration and politics. *Oh My Sweet Land* was originally conceived by award-winning actor Corinne Jaber, who is of Syrian-German descent. Jaber and Zuabi collaboratively developed the play for its 2013 Swiss premiere, at which point 90,000 people had already been killed in Syria's civil war. In 2017, over 480,000 Syrian people have died in a war that has escalated to engage many more international and extremist factions, all to the detriment of the country's citizens. Minor dramatic adjustments to geographic situation make all the difference in the play's potential to engage American audiences with the current, global refugee crisis. In the play's transit from Europe to the United States, the protagonist, now played by Malouf, remembers growing up in Denver, Colorado, not München, and her present is in New York, where we are all gathered bear witness to Syria's still-unfolding history.

In *Oh My Sweet Land*, cooking and narration mingle to create surprising, often deeply disturbing, confluences of current events, foodstuff, and kitchen technology. 'Wheat. Meat. Heat. Syria.' Over the course of the play, Malouf prepares *kubeh* in a parallel storytelling device that makes Zuabi's analogical association of consumable flesh to human being unmistakable. The tale compels her to cross the Atlantic, the Mediterranean, and finally the Syrian border as she searches for Ashraf, her Syrian lover and friend who, in turn, is also always searching for his friends and family that are either internally displaced in Syria or living in refugee settlements in Syria's border cities.

Design elements weave elegantly into the action of the play. A row of clear plastic bottles filled with variegated hues of cooking oil line the rear edge of the kitchen counter to create a liquid glow alternately suggestive of the play's many settings: a home kitchen, an

airport, an interrogation cell. A kitchen radio is an embedded sound source, but real theatre magic transpires when the story's rhythm and music emerge from Malouf's cooking. A powerful example of this occurs when she hires a cab to transport her between the Lebanese cities Akkar and Zahlé. The motor of the food processor that she uses to blend the 'skin' of the *kubeh* becomes the taxi's engine as she begins her circuitous path eastward, into Syria. This tale evokes the memory of another car trip taken as a child with her father, a Syrian immigrant established in Denver. The mechanical body of the food processor, while performing its function to blend bulgur and meat, doubles to traverse space and time and become vehicles that transport Malouf and the audience to the Syrian and Syrian-American men whom she loves.

The preparation of *kubeh* matches Malouf's emotional journey. Mistakes are built into the performance: she burns the onions as she gets lost in reminiscing about meeting Ashraf and the beginning of their affair, only to chop a second onion with greater intensity as she discovers the extent of his involvement with helping his friends escape. Ashraf inevitably disappears into Syria, and when Malouf begins her search for him in a refugee settlement in Akkar, she begins to chop meat in earnest. She performs snapshots of displaced Syrians that she meets as she looks for him -- women who have lost husbands and brothers, who have themselves survived injuries from bomb attacks. Her chopping intensifies, and when pauses to gather her work and ask, 'How fast do we become numb to pain?' one wonders if it's lamb flesh or Syria that she holds in her hands.

No one escapes Zuabi's neoliberal critique in this intimate setting. The New York audience cannot help but slip into the shoes of those represented in the play, while simultaneously realising our American complicity in the refugee crisis. Malouf, towards the end of the play, stands in the devastated Syrian city of Taffas. She gazes over the audience and sees not people, but 'long rows of charred watermelons,' that are, 'bleeding on the burned soil.' We, in Park Slope, see not watermelons, but versions of ourselves blended with

the wasted lives of hundreds of thousands of Syrian people. By the end of the play, the *kubeh* smells delicious, but eating is the last thing on anyone's mind; Malouf has finished her dish with a desperate flourish of lemon juice and presents it as an accompaniment to the final dramatic image of rows of children who perished in a sarin gas attack. The urgency of staging this play in the United States in the wake of Donald Trump's islamophobic travel bans is lost on no one seated in the small kitchen. The question remains as to how this play, and its message, might spread beyond an intimate group of empathetic audience participants to effect global humanitarian change at this, 'the end of the world.' Will we continue to consume the crimes against humanity that persist in Syria via the news and social media even as we stuff ourselves with its comfort foods? Or, will we risk everything to act for peace because we now know that we are also the crops rotting in Syria's burnt earth? In the words of Reem, Ashraf's young daughter, 'What happens to all will happen to us.'

Note: *The Play Company* is planning on touring *Oh My Sweet Land* to other US cities in the Spring and Summer of 2019, but the dates are still to be decided.

Book Reviews

The Disney Musical on Stage and Screen: Critical Approaches from 'Snow White' to 'Frozen' by George Rodosthenous, ed.

London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2017, 257 pp. (paperback)

By Laura Robinson

In a faraway land, long ago, there lived an editor with the task of building upon the huge breadth of cultural studies literature written on the global corporate brand of Disney. Carving a niche in this saturated market by compiling the first critical treatment of the Disney mega-musical; a genre that crosses the animated screen, the Broadway stage, and the live-action remake, George Rodosthenous's anthology expands on scholarly work that situates Disney as popular entertainment and globalized commercial product. Guiding the reader chronologically from *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) to *Frozen* (2013), whilst also stopping off at lesser known junctures, including the live-action remakes of *Cinderella* (1957, 1965, 1997) and the musical stage production of *Newsies* (2012), the book caters for both Disney fans and critics. It provides musical theatre students and scholars further insight into the production techniques of the Disney machine, as well as critiquing the socio-political impact of these globally recognised and historically situated animated, screened and staged cultural products.

Rodosthenous sets out three main frameworks in his introduction for reading Disney films in stage and film incarnations: 'firstly a political tool for enhancing our understanding of race, sexuality and gender, secondly an educational tool for younger audiences and thirdly as a place for artistic innovation' (2). Somewhat confusingly for the reader, the book does not directly follow these methodologies as structure, with the genealogical format of the musicals themselves dictating the chapter format. Instead, the book is separated into three main sections: *Disney Musicals: On Film*, *Disney Adaptions: On Stage and Beyond*, and *Disney Musicals: Gender and*

Race. Natural overlaps occur across chapters, with weighting firmly placed on studies of identity politics within the Disney Musical. Nonetheless, the structure enables the study of the Disney musical through the lenses of film theory, musicology and semiotics, and is particularly effective in the following areas: the close analysis of the relationship between the Disney musical score and the animation/live action, the detailed insight into the production techniques and the capitalist commercial practices of the Walt Disney Company and its associated business units, as well as the critical gravitas of its analysis of race, hetero-normativity, masculinity and femininity.

In terms of the relationship between the musical score and the animation, Elizabeth Randell Upton explores the 'pursuit of cinematic realism' (18) in her chapter on *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), and includes a close musicological study of the songs participation in the Disney artist's strive for stylised human characters. Likewise, Raymond Knapp's analysis of *Sleeping Beauty* (1959) reveals how 'the balletic and leitmotivic dimension of Tchaikovsky's music to styles and tropes then prevalent in musical theatre' (32), provided consistency and cohesion to the spiky animation style and its dislocated depictions of the sublime and the earthly in its characterisation. In a live-action contemporary context, Paul Laird's analysis of *Enchanted* (2007) in Chapter Four illuminates how the postmodern and self-reflexivity commentary of film's narrative is replicated in the musical score, including the pastiche of musical styles, and the creation of 'parallel dramatic situations with earlier Disney features' (66).

Further highlights include the detailed research within studies around Disney's production techniques in its staged, televised, and outreach activities linked to the Disney musical. Olaf Jubin's chapter on the film and European and U.S. staged versions of *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1996) explores the issues with the 'Disneyfication' (104) of Victor Hugo's romantic and political 1831 novel, whilst Barbara Wallace Grossman's study of the staged musical *The Lion King* (1997) reveals the artistic risks undertaken through

Julie Taymor's vision and direction. It is Stacy E. Wolf's chapter on Disney's outreach musical theatre projects, Disney Jnr and Disney Kids, that stands out in both its acknowledgement of the problematic and for-profit operation of Disney's musical theatre ventures with schools, whilst also exploring their 'uniquely progressive – artistically, pedagogically and socioeconomically – potential' (136).

The anthology excels in its theoretical engagement in the third section of the book, 'Disney Musical: Gender and Race', as well as in the other numerous chapters that tackle Disney's global influence in identity construction. With a focus on gender, Dominic Symon's study tackles representations of conservative gender roles within the 'post-millennial, post-feminist utopia' (171) of Disney's television musical *High School Musical* (2006). Tim Stephenson's analysis of *Mary Poppins* (1964) in Chapter Three and Sarah Whitfield's study of *Frozen* (2013) in Chapter Thirteen, on the other hand both consider the feminist potentiality of these films and their borrowing of genre tropes established within musical theatre. The multi-authored study of the musical theatre version of *The Jungle Book* (2013) is a particular highlight in its dense reading of structures of power and Orientalist discourses embedded in its production of pleasure and entertainment. Similarly, Sam Baltimore's study of Queer Orientalism in *Aladdin* reveals how director Howard Ashman's interpretation was a gesture of solidarity, but still recirculated the exoticization and eroticisation of Asian and Black performers. Geoffrey Block's earlier chapter on four of Disney's made-for-television musicals also explores how Disney responds to target markets in its reflection a revised vision of America, embarking on historical comparisons that reveal processes of integration, colour-blind casting, and a 'revisionist interpretation' (94) of Broadway television adaptations from the 1950s.

The anthology falters in its reliance on identity politics to cover its critical treatment of Disney. In the Introduction, Rodosthenous raises interesting ideas of Disney's role in childhood nostalgia, memory, and the viewers' affective relationship with the screen. These ideas warrant further exploration through the lenses

of affect theory, fan theory, and cultural memory studies but are not given space within the strict structure of the book. A further oversight is the consideration of the role of dance within these musical theatre productions. Aaron C. Thomas's study of the musical theatre production *Newsies* (2012) provides an interesting account of boyhood and masculinity within the musical, and also situates this construction through vivid descriptions of the virtuosic choreography. This movement/music focus, however, is lacking in other chapters.

As a whole, the anthology promotes the cultural richness and scholarly significance of musical theatre entertainment, whilst beginning to situate these ideas within the corporate stronghold that Disney has in its global domination of screen and staged entertainment. In the wake of recent profitable live-action musical theatre remakes, including *Beauty and the Beast* (2017), the press and social media hype surrounding the future live-action remake of *The Lion King*, due 2018, and Disney's buying of 21st Century Fox's entertainment assets for £39.1 billion, this anthology could go further in places to realise the link between the family-friendly Disney magic created on stage and screen and the global reach and influence of the techno-capitalist machine of the Disney corporation. Dreams really do come true in the Disney mega-musical, but at what cost?

The Sixth Sense of the Avant-Garde: Dance, Kinaesthesia and the Arts in Revolutionary Russia, by Irina Sirotkina and Roger Smith, London: Bloomsburg, 2017, pp. 217. (hardcopy)

By Lisa Moravec

In focusing on the sixth sense (kinaesthesia), the Russian and English authors of this book originally contribute to the existing body of literature on the early twentieth-century Russian avant-garde. They make a clear claim for the dominance of body-based, hence situated knowledge and embed it within a broad spectrum of renowned Russian Formalist and Futurist artistic practices—including, amongst

others, Wassily Kandinsky, Vladimir Mayakovsky, Viktor Shklovsky, Konstantin Stanislavski, Vsevolod Meyerhold—and compare it to the postmodern American dance practices of Isadora Duncan, Merce Cunningham, and Yvonne Rainer. In doing so they shift the existing narrative of Russian avant-garde art away from the visual domain and to notions of tactility and kinaesthesia, setting it up in a global context. Although the authors shed compelling light on a selection of well-known Russian artists and elegantly move the reader through related psycho-physical theories, their points and references, which are key to develop a scholarly understanding of kinaesthesia, could have been explored in more detail. Instead, they cover a vast amount of material. As their intention and argument is clearly stated and demonstrated throughout the seven chapters, the book nonetheless remains accessible when the authors quickly move through the practices of myriad artists.

The introduction and the first chapter both examine the notion of kinaesthesia by drawing on a number of philosophical accounts, commencing with Aristotle and guiding the reader from the science-based debate of the seventeenth-century all the way to phenomenology and into poststructuralism—ranging from Derrida and Husserl back to Nietzsche and Pavlov. It is here that the authors argue that the artists of the avant-garde all danced and studied movement in various ways, without primarily considering movement as their own main practice. At the core of the book lies Kurt Goldstein's and Nikolai Bernshtein's critique of the behaviourist Pavlov, who argued that education of movement skill does not come about through repetition but instead depends on the intent of executing the movement task (158). The manner in which the authors expand on the notion of kinaesthesia—not limited to avant-garde dance—is effective but also confusing at times. Their argument becomes most transparent when examining Meyerhold's actor training and dance techniques, since the body of the actor or dancer is the medium of such body-based art practices. When establishing a link between tactility and kinaesthesia, Sirotkina and Smith skilfully flesh out that

kinaesthesia gives “unmediated contact with the world, while the other senses offer a mediated relationship” (4). The first, according to them, comes about through direct relationships between subjects and objects, with dance being “the most powerful metaphor” and becoming “the reality, of unmediated being alive as part of a world” (5).

Although the authors voice a supremacy of dance movements within the arts, they give it little attention throughout the book. The following chapters ‘Expression in Dance’ and ‘Speaking Movement’ focus on the distinction between the American expressionist dance of Isadora Duncan and Merce Cunningham in comparison to the Russian dance tradition, and continue with broadening the spectrum of movement-based dance through a discussion of more or less danceless bodily gestures. This approach unfolds differences that operate between scripted, improvised dance, and poetry. This line of investigation then leads to examining the contemporary state of what accepted knowledge is and how its understanding has changed over time.

Dedicated to language and poetry, the fourth chapter draws attention to the authors’ concern with the troublesome distinction that still operates between embodied, hence practiced and lived, and what is considered intellectual knowledge, such as theory. The authors write themselves into the art of kinaesthesia by thinking with and through their own and others’ bodies, simultaneously demonstrating their understanding of the science of psycho-physiology and biomechanics. The book, therefore explores how and what kind of comprehension different body-based artistic “techniques” (Russian *priem*) have contributed to the movement of the Russian avant-garde of the twentieth-century.

Keeping the notion of technique rather loosely-defined allows the authors then to move into another original direction: they discuss how yoga and esoteric practices influenced the work of these Russian artists. This further broadens the amount of material the book brings together and expands their analysis of kinaesthesia in movement-

based practices. On the one hand, this demonstrates the authors' deep knowledge of various practices and how they are all connected, but on the other, this framework results in a fragmentary narrative of the avant-garde at the turn of the twentieth-century. For example, the only reference they provide to Russian classical dance is in the passage discussing the ballet *Struggle of the Magician*, performed in Moscow by Jeanne Salzman's female students, in order to illustrate the drilling characteristics of ballet training. While classical dance is not their focus, a comparison with modern and postmodern dance might have strengthened their argument concerning what kind of influence free American (expressionist) dance had on the Russian dance tradition, and consequently on the avant-garde.

Concluding the last chapter 'Art as Bodily Knowledge' with Shlosky's call for the deconstruction of techniques (158) gives way to the book's boldly underlying claim: namely that its approach towards dance and poetry is "new" (165). On a whole, *The Sixth Sense of the Avant-garde* contributes a new methodological approach to how to look at art that came about in Russia at the turn of the twentieth-century that goes beyond object-based and conceptual art. The book's focus on the immaterial movement sense—that bridges the gap between dance, gesture, and writing—is however not "new". For a methodological comparison see for instance Carrie Noland's latest book *Agency and Embodiment: Performing Gestures, Producing Culture* (2009). The English's version *The Sixth Sense of the Avant-Garde* (Russian, 2014) brings dance and performance studies, the history of art and literature, as well as the history of science together within the field of visual culture. Half a historical and half a visual studies analysis, this book contributes to heated debates concerning performance within the field of visual culture and demonstrates why embodied knowledge continues to matter.

***Theatre in the Dark: Shadow, Gloom and Blackout in Contemporary Theatre* edited by Adam Alston and Martin Welton**

London: Bloomsbury, 2017, pp. 283 (hardback).

By Jessica Worden

Adam Alston and Martin Welton's *Theatre in the Dark: Shadow, Gloom and Blackout in Contemporary Theatre* is the first book to address increasing experimentation with darkness and obscured vision in twenty-first century theatre practice alongside the aesthetic, cultural, and historical implications of low light. The editors intend to "rescue the plural pleasures and intrigue of shadow, gloom and blackout from the nominalised determinism of 'the dark' and to open up rather than foreclose a field of research" (4). The scope is therefore broad, including considerations of the relationships between differing understandings, perceptions and materialities of darkness (9). The plurality of critical approaches employed by contributors (many of whom use first-hand observations to communicate experiences resistant to visual documentation alongside conventional critical analysis) embed the immateriality of darkness within the experiential realm and makes space for sensory-focussed critical examinations of contemporary theatre.

Materiality is the starting point for *Part One: Dark Aesthetics*, beginning with a historiography of the use of artificial light in Western theatre by Scott Paler which emphasises the relationship of darkness to the material conditions of live performance. By articulating the workings of aesthetics in relation to performance, authors Adam Alston and Liam Jarvis identify ways in which the immateriality of darkness interacts with and transforms relationships to materiality. In his analysis of how dining in the dark commercial enterprise *Dans le Noir?* fails to transform social relations and perpetuates commodification, Alston identifies how darkness, despite its immateriality, can be used to reframe perceptions of the material world and the relationships that come into being through it. Jarvis' chapter "Creating in the Dark: Conceptualizing Different Darknesses

in *Contemporary Theatre Practice*” focusses on the performativity of engineered darkness - a focus that foregrounds further discourse on the materiality of darkness through haptic and other sensorial readings.

The sensory turn is most apparent in *Part Two* due to experience-focussed dialogues with theatre and performance makers. It opens with the notable conflation of different modes of sensory perception proposed by Lynne Kendrick, who proposes how the act of listening reconfigures our ability to make meaning in the dark. These ideas are discussed further in “Darkness, Perceptual Ambiguity and the Abyss”—an interview with performance maker Tom Espiner (*Sound & Fury* theatre company) and performance scholar George Home-Cook on considerations made by performance-makers who use total darkness and sensory deprivation to achieve ambiguous emotional experiences, such as loneliness, loss, collectivity, and anticipation. The inclusion of interviews with practitioners at this juncture reiterates the performative potential of darkness in contemporary theatre practices (88). Challenging perceptions of visual impairment, Amelia Cavallo and Maria Oshodi describe how the performing arts company *Extant* (comprising of blind and visually impaired performers) employs total darkness and diverse interactive, haptic, and aural techniques to transform the sensory landscape.

In “Missing Rooms and Unknown Clouds: Darkness and Illumination in the Work of Lundahl & Seidl”, Jo Machon proposes (part in dialogue with artists Christer Lundahl and Martina Seidl) how haptic approaches to sensing generate a holistic model. The discourse shifts beyond what can or cannot be seen to encompass all sensory perception. Experimentation in sensory modes stretches the definition of what theatre can consist of as well as how darkness augments these processes by directing perception beyond the visual and dislocating the audience from the site of performance. Although Espiner and Home-Cook describe how darkness perpetuates collective experiences of loneliness, darkness to them facilitates and condenses multi-sensorial techniques (particularly in the work described by

Cavallo and Oshodi). And furthermore, they draw attention to how these can be experienced collectively and generate non-hierarchical ways of sensing and making meaning in live performance.

Part Three: Shadow, Night and Gloom focuses on collective meanings and experiences produced by shadow and low-light in theatre. Matthew Isaac Cohen challenges Platonic thought on the transience of shadow through Heraclitus, and argues that shadow play “allows special access to a plastic reality of continual change” in cross-cultural shadow puppet theatre, including traditional Indonesian *wayang kulit* and contemporary uses of screens and shadow in Western theatre (216). Communal transcendence through darkness in performance event *Mycenae Polytopon*, as discussed by Marina Kotzamani, reallocates ocular hierarchies of meaning-making to the sensory collective. The democratising effect of darkness dislocates meaning-making from mimesis and repositions the role of the audience in perceiving and sensing. Welton concludes the section by questioning how gloom and faceless performers produce opportunities for considering the ethics of “theatrical encounters” and counteract rising alienation in visual culture (247-248). Welton contrasts these “befuddled” modes of seeing to contemporary hypervisibility, a proliferation of visual representation in contemporary and social media, to propose how these thresholds of peering might facilitate encounters between the self and the other despite the perceived facelessness of performers in these darkened productions.

Contemporary theatre faces difficulties in producing documentation of darkened productions and this reproduces darkness in the archive through the inability of productions to visually represent their work in a conventionally coherent way. The book does not focus on how darkened theatre resists visual reproduction but several authors document performances through first-hand multi-sensorial written descriptions. Although challenges to documentation are not addressed at length, it is demonstrated by how the authors resolve the lack of ocular representation for experiences that—in a literal, photographic sense—cannot be seen. However, for many readers, the

works discussed here will never be experienced. Although some social implications of darkness and blackout in contemporary theatre are addressed, and most clearly in terms of disability, what is missing is how, due to socio-economic conditions, these performances may not be democratically accessible – especially by those lacking an expendable income. In this sense, the collection overlooks how the financial strain of facilitating black-out performance might generate conditions that impair access to the work and consequently reproduce exclusion through darkness. While it is understandable that access was excluded, a more rigorous analysis of the relationship of darkness to representation and the archive would have been welcome. It feels lacking in comparison to the detail and texture afforded to other aspects of darkness.

However, several authors show innovative thinking about perception and the senses – particularly Machon who builds her argument around sensorial experiences as a source of knowledge. Similarly, Kendrick proposes listening beyond the readily understood to discover how we might engage with an experience that doesn't readily lend itself to representation. For researchers and students, it is this approach that offers significant innovation: a comprehensive overview of different relationships to darkness and gloom that at the same time establishes diverse ways of thinking and writing about theatre's resistance to visual representation. The sensory turn that Alston and Welton foreground in the introduction establishes critical approaches to practices that may otherwise be difficult to disseminate through conventional critical modes and proposes different ways of sensing, and making sense of, theatre experiences that withstand conventional ways of 'seeing' a performance.