



## In and of and with and through: Or, how to make kin through eating

Maya Hey

In *messmates*, Jahnne Pasco-White (2019) reflects on a more mindful way of looking internally and framing our relationships with ‘those populous bacterial companions *in* and *of* the body.’ Though we may not see them easily, these companions make up various surfaces and linings of our bodies and enable an entangled life together. What we may think of as being a set of invisible relations, Pasco-White highlights visually through layering, composing and transforming materials as part of her artistic process. Her work demonstrates that engaging with countless messmates—and to do so generatively—depends on accepting Donna Haraway’s (2003, 32) assertion that ‘[c]o-constitutive companion species and co-evolution are the rule, not the exception.’

Pasco-White (2019) reminds us that making kin ‘is an unfolding process of becoming with’ others. It is a process characterized by frequent and multitudinous encounters that reiterate our co-constituted status of being. I take the notion of co-constitution in a literal sense by thinking about eating as a way to make kin between and across species. I extend Pasco-White’s focus on having ‘always *shared* [the] body with countless messmates’ and apply her themes of interconnectedness and embodied kinship to the question of eating.

Eating is just as much a figurative form of embodiment as it is a literal, material one. What we eat partly defines us, and these identifications live on beyond Jean-Anthelme Brillat-Savarin’s (1994 [1825]) aphorism: ‘Tell me what you eat, and I will tell you what you are.’ Consider, for example, how the practices of eating meat (or abstaining from select or all kinds of animal flesh) influence notions of class and gender, whilst eating ‘ethnic’ foods can essentialize race, or eating superfoods rely on reductionist, and extractive logics that signify economic and social mobility. Each exemplifies how eating ideologies shape aspects of identity that are tied to power, social positioning and personhood. These eating encounters can be internally enunciated (e.g., *we eat this*) or externally enforced (e.g., *they eat that*). Since we are obligate eaters who must eat, the foods we embody inadvertently affect power relations in social and political manners, making the embodiment of certain foods an inherently ethical quandary.

Thus, eating-as-embodiment recognizes food’s ability to broker relations. As Elspeth Probyn (2000, 12) argues, ‘eating [...] is a powerful mode of mediation—it joins us with others.’ For Probyn and other scholars, this mediation provides a framework for understanding food-embodiment as a material and semiotic encounter.



That is, eating means embodying a food and its concomitant meanings, which can move away from questions of ‘who or what to eat’ towards more complex questions of ‘how’: how do we practice eating in a way that considers the ethical stakes of embodiment? To foreground eating as an ethical concern provides an opportunity to reconcile the consequences of having embodied (i.e. having eaten) with the responsibilities of living/dying together with other species. When thought of as an active form of embodiment, eating can help us practice relationality across species with whom we share space and, sometimes literally, break bread.

Eating is an ethical encounter. I examine encounters *in and of* the body, *with* other messmates, *through* eating, and I do so with the hope of unpacking what it means to make kin with the species we eat. These prepositional phrases—*in* and *of* and *with* and *through*—position us in relation to other messmates and help us to interrogate eating as ethical encounters when embodying others. As Alexis Shotwell (2016, 108) explains, embodiment implicates us in that ‘we rely on others intimately[...]. To address the relations necessitated by our embodiment, we must reach toward a nonindividualized ethical practice that can address the problem of unresolvable ethical entanglement.’ To ideate such a practice, I consider three configurations of eating as a relational act: that eating is neither linear nor cyclical, eating necessarily entails killing well, and, since we cannot opt out of eating, it requires us to maintain co-constitutive relations with others.

### 1. Eating is not linear.

Linear models of eating inform the hierarchies of an imaginary “food chain” or “food pyramid,” which grants certain species the privilege of being predator while relegating others to being prey. (Much of meat-eating rhetoric relies on this line of reasoning.) Not only does this model perpetuate anthropocentric or human-centered thinking, it also fails to account for all of the other relationships that bring a food into being.

Food is never a standalone object; it is tethered to peoples, places, and things that materialize it and give it meaning. Lisa Heldke (2018) argues that linear models of eating reinforce the vertical ordering of food-objects such that the boundaries of the eaten (e.g., impala) dissolve to become and *give rise* to the eater (e.g., lion). The impala *becomes* the lion, the apple becomes me, and the ‘eaten’ becomes the ‘eater,’ constituting the latter in both matter and meaning. This orients eater and eaten so that their relationship exists only as a hierarchy, effectively

disregarding its other constitutive relations because whatever was previous *became* whomever consumed. Unlike a linear model, a relational model of eating embraces the (messy) connections *in and through* food practices. Sunlight doesn’t just become plant to become fodder for the meat that is consumed; sunlight, plant, meat, and human body are with each other, being together, in a shared ecology. Their interconnections, and co-operations highlight our shared responsibility for what Anna Tsing et.al. (2017) call the imperative of ‘living together on a damaged planet.’

In this non-linear and interdependent arrangement, eating makes visible our terms of engagement on micro- and macro-scales. By moving away from ideas of ‘becoming’ and towards ‘being with,’ Heldke (2012) proposes the notion of consider food as ‘loci of relations.’ In so doing, food serves more than a perfunctory role of delivering nutrients or informing identity; it can point to the possibility of re-imagining relationality across messmates.<sup>1</sup>

‘Being with’ repositions the human eater as neither top nor center of an eating ecology, and instead acknowledges that our relations are multidirectional, in constant flux, and never guaranteed. Or, as Haraway (2003, 9) notes, ‘the shape of my kin networks looks more like a trellis or an esplanade than a tree. [...] I know that multidirectional gene flow—multidirectional flows of bodies and values—is and has always been the name of the game of life on earth.’ It is this trellised and multi-flow exchange that decenters the human from the pedestal (and pitfalls) of exceptionalism. We make kin by reformulating and reorienting our ontological standing as being amongst others, not above them.

### 2. Eating well means killing well.

Eating makes apparent these more-than-human relations and the ethical calculus of weighing self-nourishment against the expense of taking an other’s life. Ingesting and partially digesting others implicates the eater to eat responsibly, which *requires killing responsibly* too. As Haraway (2008, 295) explains, ‘Because eating and killing cannot be hygienically separated does not mean that just any way of eating and killing is fine, merely a matter of taste and culture. Multispecies human and nonhuman ways of living and dying are at stake in practices of eating.’ Or, as Val Plumwood (2008) reminds us, we must not forget that we nourish others through death, and we are neither immune nor exceptions to this fact of animal existence. Both Haraway and Plumwood highlight the fact that multispecies thriving requires we

prioritize the care ethics of how a life is taken. Although it may be easy to imagine care in eating practices, it may be difficult to imagine it in acts of killing. But, killing should be full of care, if only to honor, respect, and reflect on the justification for having taken a life.<sup>2</sup>

Admittedly, these ethics become increasingly obscured in the current food system where much of the ‘processing’ of plant fibers and animal flesh are kept hidden behind the veil of convenience and protocol. Many of these processes are cold and detached—effectively stripped of all relationality—in order to remain objective in moments of execution. While I do not mean to suggest that we return to bucolic, pre-industrial modes of self-sufficiency where we killed by our own hands (for, as Anna Tsing [2015] argues, the problem with scalability is that it depends on interchangeability, which our past and present are *not*), I do think we ought to consider the viscosity and weight of death that happens on our watch. How exactly are we killing—by our knives, teeth, chemicals—and how can we practice killing from a situated, grounded place? Killing cannot and will never become an unaffected practice. But if the justification we use to kill others is because they are separate from us and *made to be* an other for our consumption, then we must radically reconsider of what our biological and metaphysical selves consist because our very beings are made possible because of more-than-human lives. (I expand on this in the next section.) Our human bodies are nested and shared with other forms of life, making us sometimes dependent on microbial life, other times threatened by them. There are no clear answers, except that our relationship is contingent and emergent. While our interests may never align, our actions involve other species which, in turn, can affect our own kin and kind.

The unexamined ethics of killing can perpetuate what Peter Singer (2009) cautions to be an ethos of expendability. While Singer’s critique is specific to animals, it can be applied to all forms of human and more-than-human entities that are consumed, disposed, discarded, or forgotten. The myth of expendability is based on the ontological separation of subject and object and the misguided notion that humans are exceptional to others. We can make kin by embracing our imbricated status as *already* more-than-human, which suggests that we reconsider how we position ourselves amidst other more-than-humans. This shifts the attention away from consuming and expending regardless of outcome, but to *regard with* concern for a collective, future thriving.

### 3. Eating keeps us co-constitutive with and response-able to others.

Consider microbial life. Microbes compose and decompose our bodies and our foods in ways that are often invisible to us, serving as a productively problematic heuristic for other relations we may not easily see or sense. Yet microbes cover all surfaces and skins, all foods and foods-to-be, and all pathways by which these foods become edible or inedible. Even if microbes were cleaned off or cooked out of existence, food is still a product of microbial relations in soil systems as well as in regulatory systems that enable/prevent the production and distribution of safe/contaminated foods. Thus, from farm to kitchen to table to mouths, microbes remain inextricably linked to the foods we eat. Eating-as-embodiment highlights the already entangled and co-constitutive relations with microbes who transform our foods and our bodies.

To be sure, microbes are not the only messmates that highlight these relations, but are arguably the most ubiquitous; they represent one of many invisible forms on whom we are dependent. Physiologically, the latest estimates on the composition of a human body indicate that the number of microbial cells and human cells are at a ratio of about 1:1, making us just as microbial as we are human (Sender et.al. 2016, Bäuml et.al. 2018). This complicates the line between self and non-self and whether such a line is even warranted, especially when our intestines are lined and replenished with microbial passers-by who produce compounds that help modulate our appetite, immune function, and mental health. The fact that we are made up of—and dependent on—microbial life challenges what it means to be human. Arguing for a radical overhaul of ontological fixedness of the human self, Heldke (2018, 253) contends that ‘Eating relationships transgress borders [...], locating networks of constitutive relationships inside of the individual.’ She complicates the Cartesian sense of individualism by taking into account the microbiome, or one’s unique profile of microorganisms that live inside and on the body. Contrary to having clear contours of inside/outside relations, one’s microbiome exemplifies how our outermost relations with microorganisms in our gut are located at our innermost core. But Heldke (2018, 249) also cautions that this ontological reshuffling must take into account *all relations*, including the neutral and potentially damaging versions of co-constitution: ‘our relationships with these less-than-benign organisms [must not] be discounted, explained away, or passed over in silence. The individual is the sum not only of its





beneficial relationships, but of all the relationships in which it is enmeshed.' We cannot afford to conveniently disregard the anomalous and the exceptional, but to embrace it as the starting point for how to go about ethical relationality across *all* scales of difference.

If we are to take seriously a new conceptualization of the human body as enmeshed and co-constitutive instead of autonomous and self-contained, and if we are trying to do so in the name of dismantling human exceptionalism, then we must also be wary of making the parasitic and the pathogenic as exceptions to the rule of embodied kinship. They, too, form and inform our narratives of more-than-human thriving. Here, I call upon Haraway's provocation of 'staying with the trouble' to revise our collective imaginaries. Haraway calls for inheriting the difficult stories and work through them, so that new ones can be imagined and worlded into existence. Haraway (2016, 1 and 190 emphasis added) implores that what is at stake is 'to become capable, with each other in all of our bumptious kinds, of response [...] as a practice of learning to live and die well with each other in a thick present.' She brings to the fore issues of recuperation and reconciliation to emphasize that becoming 'response-able' is always ongoing, 'entwined in myriad *unfinished configurations* of places, times, matters, meanings.' For Haraway, to be responsible means reconsidering ecological boundaries to consider kin in different registers and continually tending to embodied difference.

Haraway's 'unfinished configurations' echo her earlier writings (2003, 9) in which she declares that '[c]ompanion species rest on contingent foundations.' Our relations are predicated not predictable, aspirational not absolute. We must therefore do the work of tending to difference, response-ably, through each eating encounter, which includes the sobering possibility that we, too, can be eaten. Tangible examples such as sharks and coronaviruses come to mind, but even intangible examples like cancers and tsunamis have their own 'life' force. Heldke (2018, 258) reminds us that reconfiguring our sense of self as co-constitutive comes with conditions: 'It requires us to grasp the reality that *living things eat each other. Persistently. Regularly. Of necessity.*' Again, eating is and has never been linear. Perhaps we ought to own up to this fact before our self-interests consume us.

As nested and co-constituted organisms, we must look to all relations, not just the 'friendly' or seemingly symbiotic ones, because feeding oneself means taking on the responsibility of feeding many. (This is certainly the case for our gut microbiome.) Eating helps us to maintain

these relations as tethered, based on attuning to needs outside of oneself. We can make kin by engaging with co-constitution as a necessary baseline, not a reality that one can opt out of. Eating keeps us co-constitutive in, with, and through each other.

### **Rethinking Relationality**

Pasco-White brings attention to the overlapping, nested, and co-constitutive orientations with embodied kin. Her work challenges us to rethink relationality across messmates, tending to the materiality of both body and art. A conversation with the artist reveals that her process foregrounds this material reality, preferring natural dyes over harmful chemicals and pigments. In painting, as with eating, bodies are exposed to the harshness of synthetics, toxins, and residues, epitomizing the salient reality of 'the interconnectedness of all living things' (Pasco-White and Hey 2020). Pasco-White describes melding together a practice that utilizes organic and inorganic materials, using 'avocado skin, beetroots, carrot, turmeric, onions, boiling fabric in pots on the stove and using these dye baths as paint often as a way to do things at home with [my child] or while she is sleeping.'<sup>3</sup> Being mindful of one's proximity to a child, praxis adapts to minimize exposure and prevent the embodiment of risk and harm. Exposure affects bodies in ways that are not always uniform or outwardly apparent, which makes consuming anything—be that food or chemical—an exercise in testing the integrity of our physical beings. It seems that forethought guides Pasco-White as she blurs the boundaries of food/dye and considers how these things enter our bodies and pass through them: 'I think about [...] the interweaving of the internal and external always shifting, making, moving, onwards and outwards, the traces that all these moments and material processes leave.' As things become embodied or excreted, internalized or externalized, they leave behind marks of intimacy as remnants, what Pasco-White calls 'bodily memories.' These memories not only inform a future set of actions, they also point to a continuous present, like moving along on a Möbius strip. This tension across temporalities, of considering past-present-and-future as inextricably one, gives texture and dimension to our everyday encounters: 'Past and present moments are brought together creating a disparity between tenses, leaving space between each encounter creating a non-linear work' (Pasco-White, 2017). It is in these everyday encounters that we must pay attention to



relationality and practice response-ability in the form of embodied kinship. As Haraway (2016, 1) implores:

We—all of us on Terra—live in disturbing times, mixed-up times, troubling and turbid times. The task is to become capable, with each other in all of our bumptious kinds, of response [...]. The task is to make kin in lines of inventive connection as a practice of learning to live and die well with each other in a thick present.

Processes of eating, like processes of art, can be attentive modes of making kin with messmates.

We make kin with the species we eat because of—not in spite of—our eating. Eating implicates our bodies with other species and our shared environment in ways that call forth response-ability and the decentralization of human power. Making kin through eating means attuning to the relations that make our-selves both physiologically and ideologically. It also means practicing our humanity in ways that see ethics as being entangled and layered, instead of bifurcated or exclusive; but it would be prudent to do so without assuming mutual benefit. Eating is not just to serve our-selves; or, if we do subscribe to this belief, then we must also be ready to ‘serve’ others in their eating as well.

Eating can cultivate a different kind of relationality, which may help us better understand response-ability to other species and, in particular, how ‘to make-with—become-with, compose-with—the earth-bound’ (Haraway, 2015, 161). Given the dire call to address climate change, acidification of water systems, toxic wastelands, and diets sustainable for all species, we must reexamine how we eat (with) messmates. We can no longer afford the time or resources to defer and deflect the onus of relational eating. At the same time, eating is but one way of mediating encounters *in and of* the body, *with* other messmates. There are countless others.

#### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Eating is not cyclical either. Or, if we are to adopt a cyclical orientation of humans eating and being eaten, then we must also be willing to expand our ideas of what is “eating” us and acknowledge that phenomena like ‘natural disasters’ and ‘outbreaks’ may be part of this cycle as well. However, adopting this view disregards the social and structural barriers that make certain humans more vulnerable and precarious than others in the face of “becoming eaten.”

<sup>2</sup> These thoughts on care are informed by the ideas of Vinciane Despret (2004, 131), who writes: “To ‘de-passion’ knowledge does not give us a more objective world, it just gives us a world ‘without us’; and therefore, without ‘them’ – lines are traced so fast. And as long as this world appears as a world ‘we don’t care for’, it also becomes an impoverished world, a world of minds without bodies, of bodies without minds, bodies without hearts, expectations, interests, a world of enthusiastic automata observing strange and

mute creatures; in other words, a poorly articulated (and poorly articulating) world.” See also the work of Temple Grandin and her “cow’s eye view” to sensory-based, humane slaughter.

<sup>3</sup> One may consider inorganic materials to be inert and therefore not-alive. However, I side with scholars such as Heather Davis (2015) as well as Oron Catts and Ionat Zurr (2006) who argue that our categorization of liveliness is limited to and inextricably linked with ideas of sentience, especially when we consider the insidious and relentless consequences of things like plastics, radioactive isotopes, or viruses that could be called ‘semi-living’ or ‘undead.’

#### References

Baumel, Sonja, and H.L.P. Tytgat, B. Nemeč, R. Schmidt, L.W. Chia, H. Smidt. 2018. ‘Fifty Percent Human: How art brings us in touch with our microbial cohabitants.’ *Microbial Biotechnology*, 11(4): 571-574.

Brillat-Savarin, Jean-Anthleme. 1994. *The Physiology of Taste*. Translated by Anne Drayton. 1970. Reprint, New York: Penguin Books.  
Catts, Oron and I. Zurr. 2006. ‘The Tissue Culture and Art Project: The Semi-Living as Agents of Irony.’ In S. Broadhurst and J. Machon (eds.) *Performance and Technology*. London: Palgrave Macmillan. 153-68.

Davis, Heather. 2015. ‘Life & Death in the Anthropocene: a short history of plastic.’ In H. Davis and E. Turpin (eds.) *Art in the Anthropocene: Encounters Among Aesthetics, politics, Environments and Epistemologies*. London: Open Humanities Press. 347-58.

Despret, Vinciane. 2004. ‘The Body We Care For: Figures of Anthro-po-zoo-genesis.’ *Body & Society* 10(2-3): 111-134.

Haraway, Donna. 2003. *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

— — —. 2008. *When Species Meet*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

— — —. 2015. Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin. *Environmental Humanities*, 6: 159-165.

— — —. 2016. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Heldke, Lisa. 2012. ‘An Alternative Ontology of Food: Beyond Metaphysics.’ *Radical Philosophy Review* 15 (1): 67-88.

— — —. 2018. ‘It’s Chomping All the Way Down: Toward an Ontology of the Human Individual.’ *The Monist*, 101(3): 247-260.

Overend, Alissa. 2018. ‘The Problem with Singular Food Truths.’ *Healthy Hypothesis* (blog), August 21.

Pasco-White, Jahnne. 2018. ‘To accrete a surface.’ *Unlikely: Journal for Creative Arts*, Is. 3.

— — —. 2019. messmates, artist statement. [reprinted in this volume]

Pasco-White, Jahnne and Hey, Maya. Email correspondence. 2020.

Plumwood, Val. 2008. ‘Tasteless: Towards a Food-Based Approach to Death.’ *Environmental Values*, 17(3): 323-330.

Probyn, Elspeth. 2000. *Carnal Appetites: FoodSexIdentities*. London: Routledge.

Sender, Ron, and S. Fuchs, R. Milo. 2016. ‘Revised estimates for the number of human and bacteria cells in the body’, *PLoS Biology* 14 (8): e1002533.

Shotwell, Alexis. 2016. *Against Purity: Living Ethically in Compromised Times*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Singer, Peter. 2009. *Animal Liberation: The Definitive Classic of the Animal Movement*. Toronto: HarperCollins Canada.

Tsing, Anna Lowenhaupt. 2015. *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Tsing, Anna Lowenhaupt, Heather Anne Swanson and Elaine Gan, and Nils Bubandt (eds.). 2017. *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet: Ghosts and Monsters of the Anthropocene*. Indianapolis: University of Minnesota Press.







**Jahnne Pasco-White: Kin**

Published by Art Ink and Unlikely  
Publishing, in Melbourne, Australia  
artink.com.au  
unlikely.net.au

Unlikely Publishing is supported by The Centre of Visual Art  
(CoVA) at The University of Melbourne



All images © 2020 Jahnne Pasco-White  
Text © 2020 N.A.J. Taylor and the authors where stated  
This edition © 2020 Art Ink

Editor: N.A.J. Taylor  
Design: Hayman Design  
Copyeditor: J.M.L. Taylor

Jahnne Pasco-White is represented by STATION, Australia

Jahnne Pasco-White acknowledges the following organisations for sponsoring the project at various junctures: Australian Council for the Arts, Marten Bequest for Painting, Gertrude Contemporary, Art Gallery of New South Wales' Mora Dyring Memorial Studio Fellowship, Bendigo Art Gallery's Arthur Guy Memorial Painting Prize, Yarra City Council, Moreland City Council, Regional Arts Victoria, Monash University and the Australian Federal Government's Department of Education, Skills and Employment. Several individuals, identified by the tremendously supportive staff at my gallery STATION, acquired works that enabled printing the book in hardcopy. Jahnne is especially grateful to her partner Nico for his unwavering commitment to her practice and to this book, and their daughter, Oslo, whose entry into their lives gave rise to this body of work in the first place. The project's ultimate shape and form benefited from being intimately nurtured by family, peers and friends, as well as intellectually nourished by the dozen authors who dedicated time and energy to write such thoughtful chapters.

N.A.J. Taylor is greatly indebted to each of the contributors to this volume—and the peer reviewers—for meeting every editorial demand made of them during an extraordinarily difficult 18-month period, both individually and collectively. One of the joys of editing this book has been to document the grace and grit of his partner Jahnne as an artist, whilst observing these same qualities being developed in her mothering of Oslo. His own mother, Jan, deserves special praise for her editorial assistance. He would also like to acknowledge Simon Hayman and Samantha Lynch at Hayman Design and the team at Art Ink, as well as Norie Neumark and Jan Hendrik Brüggemeier at *Unlikely: Journal for Creative Arts*, for agreeing to co-publish this volume.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form without prior written permission from the publishers and copyright holders.

Distribution: Art Ink, Australia  
First Edition of 750  
ISBN: 978-0-6450166-0-4  
Printed by Gunn & Taylor, Australia  
Paper: Ecostar+ 100% Recycled Uncoated, 120gsm, 250gsm  
Stephen Clay, 120gsm, 250 gsm

