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Commodification Processes and Alternatives

Spring 2017

Midterm Self Evaluation #2: A Recipe for Relation

A story must be judged according to whether it *makes sense*. And 'making sense' must be here understood in its most direct meaning: to make sense is *to enliven the senses.* A story that makes sense is one that stirs the senses from their slumber, one that opens the eyes and the ears to their real surroundings, **tuning the tongue to the actual tastes in the air** and sending chills of recognition along the surface of the skin. To *make sense* is to release the body from the constraints imposed by outworn ways of speaking, and hence to renew and rejuvenate one's felt awareness of the world. It is to make the senses wake up to where they are.

-David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous*

In the above quote, by the philosopher and author David Abram, the words put in bold were done so by me to draw your attention to them. The quote, as a whole, relates directly to the work that Kirsten and I are undertaking this quarter in our ILC, *Animism in the Anthropocene.* Although we are not working directly with food, as many of the students in the SOS program are doing, our work is about deeply engaging with the senses to bring about a more embodied understanding of the world.

So, what does animism taste like? Although this subject, animism, and the relationships inherent to this method of approaching the world have been the primary focus of my own personal philosophical inquiry for the last few years, I have never thought about what animism would taste like. I imagine that it must taste different depending on where you are when you taste it, since the relationship between body and place is so important to an animistic understanding. Roll the word over your tongue, say it slowly and sensuously, *animism.* How does it taste? What thoughts does this bring to mind? Spell it out slowly, a-n-i-m-i-s-m. It’s a smoky, bloody word. It tastes of moss and huckleberry, nettle and flesh. You can taste the oxygen as it enters your body and the carbon as it leaves, and in that process, the process of inhaling and exhaling, you can taste the plants and animals who you are sharing breath with. You can taste the wind as it blows across your face. You can taste the humidity as it carries tiny water droplets through the air.

What would a recipe for animism look like? First, the surface on which it was transcribed would be different from what are used to. It wouldn’t be written in the pages of a magazine or cookbook, it wouldn’t be written on a notecard stored in a box of other notecards. It would be etched into tree bark maybe, or painted on the the walls of a cave. Perhaps it would be painted onto an animal hide or carved into a piece of bone, or maybe it couldn’t be written down at all. Maybe it would have to be passed on from generation to generation orally, in the form of a story or a song. Maybe it would be shared in the form of medicine made from the burnt and ground roots of some plant, ingested in the cold of winter, to heal a congested chest.

It doesn’t matter so much what exactly it would taste like, because as I mentioned, the recipe would very greatly from place to place. Instead what is important is that the taste of animism would set first your tongue, then your esophagus, stomach, intestines both small and large, then the rest of your body into resonance with the vibrations of place. When you passed this nourishment from your body, as we all must do, it would not exit your body as waste, but rather provide sustenance for the soil and the plants that grow there.

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In *The Lives of Animals* by J.M. Coetzee, the author uses the characters Elizabeth Costello and Patrick Costello as vehicles to discuss the commodification of animals in the modern food system. On page 58 of the book, Patrick Costello questions his mother about her philosophy in relation to animals.

“Do you really believe, Mother, that poetry classes are going to close down the slaughterhouses?

“No.”

“Then why do it? You said that you were tired of clever talk about animals, proving by syllogism that they do or do not have souls. But isn’t poetry just another kind of clever talk: admiring the muscles of the big cats in verse? Wasn’t your point about talk that it changes nothing?”

Later in the same conversation, Elizabeth says, “John, I don’t know what I want to do. I just don’t want to sit silent.”

So, let us no longer be silent with our recipes. Lets imbue our recipes with the stories that go into their creation. Not only the stories of where the recipes come from, not just the stories of our families and their relationship with food, but also the stories of the ingredients. What is the story of the vegetables or fruits you cook with? Were they grown in clean soil, were they purchased from a store, grown in your own garden, or harvested from the wild? Were they treated with poisonous pesticides or are they clean? Were they part of the system of monocrops that are currently depleting the once fertile soils of the Earth? What about the animals we consume? Did they ever get the chance to actually live, or were they genetically modified, pent up for their whole lives, the only emotion known to them terror? Or were they instead part of a wild ecosystem where they knew the freedom of space and the taste of the fresh foods the Earth provided for them?

Rather than talking about our food as if it is a commodity put here only for human consumption, let us talk clever about our foods. Let us wax poetic about the animals we eat and the way the interplay of sun and moon invites the plants from the soil. Understanding the story of the foods we eat provides us with a definitive alternative to the commodification of our food systems. Let us again say grace at each table; not in honor of any god on high, but instead in honor of the Earth under foot and the biodiversity that the planet brings to each of our tables. Bless the animals. Bless the plants. Bless the Earth.

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Abram, D. (2003). *The spell of the sensuous: perception and language in a more-than- human world*. New York: Vintage.

Coetzee, J. M., Gutmann, A., Garber, M. B., Singer, P., Doniger, W., & Smuts, B. B. (2016). *The lives of animals*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.