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.

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

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-embodying as a material and semiotic encounter.
That is, eating means embodying a food and its concomitant meanings, which can move away from questions of ‘whether to eat’ towards 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 interpolate eating as ethical encounters when embodying others. As Alexis Shotwell (2016, 108) explains, embodiment implicates us 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 irresolvable ethical entanglement. ‘To ideate such a practice, I consider three threads: (1) a relationality of eating, 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 ceding the privilege of being prey. (Much of meat-eating constitutes the privilege of being predator while relegating others to being prey. Not above them. Others, not above them. Not above them, but not below us either. The myth of expendability is based on the fact that the boundaries of the eaten (e.g., impala) dissolve 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’ (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.

‘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, 5) 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 decentralizes 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 not only whose 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 a relation of killing. But, killing should be full of care, if only to honor, respect, and reflect on the justification for having taken a life.

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 interchangability, which our past and present are not), I do think we ought to consider the vulnerability 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 relationships 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 (2018) 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 amongst 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 in and of others.

Eating shows that we are not only dependent on microbial life, but 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. Even microbes cover all surfaces and skins, all foods and foods-to-be, and all pathways by which these foods become edible or inedible. 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 microbes, remain inseparably linked to the foods we eat. Eating-as-embodiment highlights the already entangled and co-constitutive relations with microbes which 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, Bäumel et al. 2018). This entanglement of embodied life undercuts the question of 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 convivial relations that compose the individual.’ She complicates the Cartesian sense of individuality 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 interrelationships 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 Heldke’s provocations 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’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 but 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 like cancers and tsunamis have their own ‘life’ force. Heldke (2018, 258) reminds us that reconfiguring ecological boundaries to consider kin in different registers and continually tending to embodied difference.

Haraway’s ‘unfinished configurations’ come 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.’ 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 as inextricably one, give 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 unsustainable for all species, we must reexamine how to make-with—”to accrete a surface.” (Pasco-White, Jahnne, 2018).

References


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

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

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


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, Art Gallery of New South Wales’s 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 Bruggemeier 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