



# De-constructing Food

Thoughts on the *Feminist and  
Queer Perspectives on Food Workshop*

Sophie Gerber, Sophie Kühnlenz

Sophie Gerber, Sophie Kühnlenz

## De-constructing Food

Thoughts on the *Feminist and Queer Perspectives on Food Workshop*

### ABSTRACT

Over a year after the *Feminist and Queer Perspectives on Food* workshop (5 and 6 May 2022) at Technisches Museum Wien, the first *Journal on Gender and Sexuality in STEM Collections and Cultures* is published. The introduction reflects on food and eating as a situated, context-dependent and constantly changing practice and gives insights into the contributions of the issue. The common thread is deconstruction in the sense of questioning self-evident facts, as well as the diversity of constructive, formative and empowering moments in queer-feminist engagements with eating and nutrition practices and their communication.

### CV

Sophie Gerber is a historian of technology and has been working at Technisches Museum Wien since 2019, where she is in charge of the domestic technology and food, their expansion and documentation. She also works on strategies for diversity-oriented, gender-informed collecting, exhibiting, educating, and research in science and technology museums. 2014 PhD in the project "Objects of Energy Consumption" of Deutsches Museum and TU Munich. Her research interests include gender and queer studies, material culture, and intersections between the history of technology, consumption, and everyday life.

Sophie Kühnlenz is a public historian working at the intersections of museum and gender studies on gender-informed museum discourses. She is a research assistant and doctoral candidate at the Department of History, University of Erfurt, Germany. Among others, she was Scholar-in-Residence at the Technisches Museum Wien and Visiting Research Fellow at the Centre for Contemporary and Digital History (C·DH), University of Luxembourg. Her research interests include empirical historical culture and museum research as well as science and technology, gender and queer studies.

### KEYWORDS

Deconstruction, Food, Workshop, Museum, Queer(y)ing, Material Culture

Sophie Gerber, Sophie Kühnlenz, "De-constructing Food. Thoughts on the *Feminist and Queer Perspectives on Food Workshop*", *insightOut. Journal on Gender and Sexuality in STEM Collections and Cultures*, 1 (2023), 13-18, DOI: 10.60531/insightout.2023.1.2.

DOI: 10.60531/insightout.2023.1.2.

Published under license CC BY-NC-ND 3.0

# Gender is not self-evident either; rather, it is constructed. Like food, it is a socio-cultural phenomenon that is determined historically, culturally and discursively.

What is going on with the food on our plates? A few years ago, it became a trend in restaurants and kitchens to separate ingredients and re-arrange them in a new way. Ideally, the new interpretation would give rise to completely new flavours and change the way we perceive familiar dishes. It seems that deconstruction does not stop at our food and, paradoxically, it comprises a constructive and formative element.

More than a year after the *Feminist and Queer Perspectives on Food* workshop (5 and 6 May 2022) at the Technisches Museum Wien, the first *Journal on Gender and Sexuality in STEM Collections and Cultures* has now been published. Drafting its introductory remarks is an opportunity for us not only to summarise the contributions, but also to reflect on the insights gained from the presentations and discussions. The common theme running through the articles is “constructing and deconstructing”, in the sense of

questioning what is usually taken for granted.

But what is a deconstruction approach all about? In the humanities, the term was first coined by Jacques Derrida. In the search for complex and fluid, i.e. non-stable, levels of meanings in the area of food and nutrition, his approach is productive when it is a matter of taking a look at allegedly clearly defined and fixed practices, habits and identities in their “made state”. Food and nutrition therefore become visible and discussable as situated, context-dependent and variable practices. The articles in this issue look at how (collective) identities are constructed and negotiated; how inclusions and exclusions (where we eat and when, how, what, why and with whom) come about; and how food becomes a (discursively) contested field.

Gender is not self-evident either; rather, it is constructed. Like food, it is a socio-cultural phenomenon that is determined historically, culturally and discursively.

Gender is not self-evident either; rather, it is constructed. Like food, it is a socio-cultural phenomenon that is determined historically, culturally and discursively.



Fig. 1: Opening of the workshop in the ceremonial hall of the Technisches Museum Wien

sively.<sup>1</sup> Binary categories such as man/woman, raw food/cooked food or housework/wage labour are all-important, especially in Western thinking. The purpose of deconstruction is to question and explore this aspect. Hierarchies, which are part and parcel of such conceptual pairings, can be analysed and questioned as much as supposedly unambiguous gender attributions. If we also take deconstruction to mean paying attention to structures and constructs that are questioned or dismantled at the same time, then it is possible to build bridges to queer-theoretical approaches. “To *queer* facts means to shake their supposed naturalness”<sup>2</sup>: by definition, the word “queer” – a wilful adoption and positive reassignment of a pejorative term for non-heteronormative lifestyles and sexualities – refuses to be clearly defined. As a practice, queering aims to unsettle, question, and draw attention to vaguely emergent intermediate stages, hidden or subordinate meanings and, more generally, their open-endedness and fluidity.<sup>3</sup> Queer-feminist perspectives on food and nutrition – whether in a museum or other context – re-examine practices and constellations that seem self-evident, unambiguous, clearly defined and natural when it comes to growing, preparing, serving, consuming, utilising and rating foodstuffs. In each of their thematic fields, the various contributions explore this potential for deconstructing practices and (not least gendered) role attributions in the food sector that seem natural or ahistorical at first glance.

On the one hand, what we eat is something that has been made: food is farmed, grown, cultivated, processed and cooked, among other things. Cultu-

ral ideas influence what we eat just as much as the broad spectrum of technologies used, from an open fire to genetic engineering. **Naomi Hammett** uses the example of dairy cows as ‘milk machines’ to demonstrate to stunning effect how living creatures are turned into food, or “bio-facts”<sup>4</sup>, through agricultural technology and bioengineering. She discusses what sort of futures might be envisaged for “queer cows”, and how the boundaries between nature and culture are becoming blurred in modern dairy production, adopting a “multi-species” approach that highlights the precarious nature of supposedly unambiguous opposites.

And it’s not just what we eat that’s crucial, but also the growing and rearing of the food, and its processing and marketing, as **Sahar Tavakoli** illustrates in her contribution, which looks at nation-building through food. Regional foods and foods with designations of origin or indications of geographical provenance are just as much a part of the construct of socio-technological systems as nations are – and indeed the ideas associated with them. Tavakoli picks up the idea of “gastro-nationalism” on the one hand and, on the other, uses the concept of “socio-technological imaginaries” from the field of science and technology studies to examine a “performance” by Italian butcher Dario Cecchini. She considers the imaginary scenarios of a desirable (food) future that play out in his performance as “camp” (as defined by Susan Sontag) insofar as they mirror the past: “Where we wish to be is where we have already been.”

In her contribution, **Psyche Williams-Forson** highlights the fact that a close look at material cultures

<sup>1</sup> cf. “Gender”, in: Anna Babka, Gerald Posselt: *Gender und Dekonstruktion. Begriffe und kommentierte Grundlagentexte der Gender- und Queer-Theorie*. Vienna 2016, p. 56.

<sup>2</sup> Sophie Gerber: “Labelling Machines and Synthesizers: Collecting Queer Knowledge in Science and Technology Museums”, in: *Museum International* 72 (2020), Issue 3–4, pp. 116–127, here p. 127, Note 1.

<sup>3</sup> cf. Sophie Kühnlenz: “Eindeutig uneindeutig, beständig unbeständig. Museum queer-feministisch: Gedanken zum Weiterdenken”, in: Martina Griesser-Stermscheg, Christine Haupt-Stummer, Renate Höllwart et al (eds.): *Widersprüche. Kuratorisch handeln zwischen Theorie und Praxis* (= curating, ausstellungstheorie & praxis, Vol. 6). Berlin, Boston 2022, pp. 195–198.

<sup>4</sup> Nicole C. Karafyllis (ed.): *Biofakte. Versuch über den Menschen zwischen Artefakt und Lebewesen*. Paderborn 2003, particularly “Das Wesen der Biofakte”, pp. 11–27.

as a source (especially in everyday historical contexts) is certainly worthwhile and offers a previously often overlooked potential for the study of “race”, “class” and “gender”. An analysis of domestic work in “settler colonial house and plantation museums”, which barely touches on the (domestic and slave) work performed there, shows how focusing on ordinary everyday things enables intersectional and power-critical views of US history that have been shaped by “race”, “class” and “gender” asymmetries and the way they are communicated in museums. Williams-Forsen uses various household objects and cooking utensils from George Washington’s Mount Vernon Home Estate House Museum to show how the search for the “absent potential” of these objects can lead to an intersectionally more aware processing and mediation of a history shaped by violence and inequality.

Food and drink can serve as a means of constructing community. **Holly Porteous** demonstrates this using the example of a British museum that is also a library, archive and neighbourhood meeting point. Offering a cup of tea turns out to be an inclusive element for (new) visitors: not only does it make it easier for them to cross the threshold to the museum and strike up a conversation, but it also helps them to stave off loneliness. A porcelain tea set is used; in other words, a special level of respect is shown to the guests by using a specific material culture. In this way, the museum becomes an inclusive venue that creates a sense of community and cohesion through a feminist reinterpretation of the practice of hospitality.

**Philipp Hagemann** and **Alexander Wagner** see food and nutrition as decidedly political fields, and their contribution is devoted to the relationship between food, class and family-based care relationships. A *research laboratory for interventions against classism* – \*FLINK for short – is set up under the rubrics of gender, materiality, power, space, knowledge,

“race” and a reflection of one’s own sense of position in order to draw up and implement diversity- and classism-sensitive intervention formats. Personal life stories and emotions are a fundamental element of the intersectional exploration of not least media-mediated discourses, for example through food ads in Germany in the 1990s and 2000s. Their approach shows that one’s own experiences and sensitisation to specific classist forms of discrimination gives rise to situated knowledge that can be used as a resource for empowerment and to address discriminatory structures. To make the text as inclusive as possible to its readership, it is published in both English and German.

**Ana Daldon** uses a card game to test the waters, as it were, for the best way to exhibit the concept of fat. The fact that the results of the group work carried out in the workshop were so different also illustrates the constructed quality of exhibitions. This playful and creative approach also proves to be a queer method in that it dissolves the boundaries between museum experts, potential visitors, teachers and learners through a collective curatorial practice. Last but not least, queer and fat activism have similarities and parallels, also linguistically, through the re-appropriation of pejorative terms and experiences of discrimination and pathologising.

As much as deconstruction was the common thread running through the workshop, the outcome itself was constructive. For one thing, the presentations resulted in the publication of this first edition of *insightOut*.

**Working and exploring collectively, i.e. through exchanges, meant that the supposed gap between museum and university research receded into the background, as did the boundaries between scientific disciplines and between objectivity and emotionality.**



**Fig. 2: Joint reflection on the presentations and discussions**

The forthcoming Vienna Workshops on STEM Collections, Gender and Sexuality, 2023 under the heading *Diverse Infrastructures? Gender, Queer and the Foundations of Society*, are to build on these findings and continue the exchange.

