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CRIP APPETITES: AMERICAN GASTRODYSTOPIAS IN THE GRAPHIC SERIES CHEW¹

Dystopian or postapocalyptic science fiction enables an examination of current anxieties in futuristic settings.² It brings known or perceived threats or anxieties to their (il)logical conclusions, and transforms them into a cautionary tale and a reflection of the zeitgeist. The process of defamiliarization of the present into the futuristic strange, Darko Suvin's "cognitive estrangement,"³ may be achieved through fantastic visions of technological advancement or tragic devolution, as well as through making the mundane unfamiliar and toxic. This can be, and often is, achieved through the making strange of food and food practices, which become Suvin's *novum*,⁴ be it in the form of scarcity, over-abundance, or technologies involved in procuring and consuming it. As both common and highly ritualized, food and eating opens up infinite possibilities for communicating meanings and values,⁵ and is also a mediator between living bodies and technologies that support these bodies. Laurel Foster points to "the metaphorical meaning of food as part of the political and cultural comment made by science fiction regarding both futuristic messages and reflections on contemporary society."⁶ In the futuristic context of science fiction and the poetics of cognitive estrangement, defamiliarized food and eating are also easily made uncanny and express anxieties about sustainability of human life.

¹ This article is a result of a research project entitled "Crip Appetites: Teoria crip i krytyczne badania nad jedzeniem w amerykańskim komiksie" carried out at ASC UW and funded by State Fund for Rehabilitation of Disabled People (PFRON). Project no. BEA/000044/BF/D.

² D. Suvin, *On the Poetics of the Science Fiction Genre*, "College English" 1972, no. 34 (3), pp. 372–382; A. Roberts, *Science Fiction*, Routledge, London 2000; F. Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*, Verso, New York 2005.

³ Ibidem, s. 372.

⁴ D. Suvin, *On the Poetics...*, op. cit., p. 373.

⁵ R. Barthes, *Toward a Psychology of Contemporary Food Consumption* [in:] C. Counihan, P. Van Esterik (eds.), *Food and Culture: A Reader*, Routledge, New York 1997.

⁶ L. Forster, *Futuristic Foodways: The Metaphorical Meaning of Food in Science Fiction Film* [in:] A. Bower (ed.), *Reel Food: Essays on Food and Film*, Routledge, New York 2014, pp. 252–253.

Most importantly, food and eating in science fiction bring back the question of whether the future holds enough food to support human existence, and how will the food of the future affect the future bodies and subjects eating it. Thus debilitating malnutrition, either from over or undereating, is one of the food anxieties expressed in science fiction. This anxiety is based in ableist notions of the future that assume *a priori* that any debilitating effect is automatically a negative one.⁷ Yet, the dramatic cry of *Soylent Green*'s Thorn that "Soylent Green is people" in an apocalyptic vision of 2022 New York reflects the ultimate in food anxieties and taboos: humans eating other humans. Either as a myth and a white Western cultural narrative working in tandem with racism and colonialism,⁸ metaphor for alimentary or sexual over-consumption,⁹ or a satirical description of frugality or social engineering,¹⁰ the fear of unwittingly or purposefully consuming another affects not just the eating body, but also the eating subject. An example of a text that deals with cannibalism in politically interesting ways is *Chew*, an American graphic series by John Layman and Rob Guillory. The series focuses on Tony Chu, a detective-cannibal, or "cibopath," who eats murder victims to solve crimes in a post-pandemic gastrodystopia where eating chicken is prohibited and humans have food related superpowers. A satire on excessive consumption in late capitalism, the series aggregates and upends narratives of masculinity, ability, and subject formation by weaving them together with strange and grotesque food practices that include the normalization of cannibalism.

Regardless if sacrificial, involuntary, or motivated by hunger, cannibalism is a transgression that has numerous consequences for the subject who ingests another human, as it violates the assumption that humans reside at the top of the food chain. This reign is maintained by a narrative of humans as separate from other animals because humans have language and culture, including, for example, the culinary arts. Despite the fact that many instances of cannibalism are part of rituals or other intricate practices, it is seen as an expression of savagery. Thus it poses a threat to the delicate yet firmly maintained border between human and non-human animals. Gananath Obeyesekere observes that with colonialism "the impossibility of finding monsters in the actual world" led to the projection of savagism onto colonized people, where the "term 'cannibal' ... became a sign of savagism."¹¹ The delineation of the borders between human and non-human animals, as well as the civilized and the savage thus allows the human species to abuse and mistreat other species – and, as

⁷ A. Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 2013, pp. 5–20.

⁸ W. Arens, *Mit ludożercy. Antropologia i antropofagia*, transl. W. Pessel, Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, Warszawa 2010; G. Obeyesekere, *Cannibal Talk: The Man-Eating Myth and Human Sacrifice in the South Seas*, University of California Press, Berkeley 2005; K. Tompkins, *Racial Indigestion: Eating Bodies in the 19th Century*, New York University Press, New York 2012.

⁹ E. Probyn, *Carnal Appetites: FoodSexIdentities*, Routledge, London 2000.

¹⁰ J. Swift, *A Modest Proposal*, The Project Gutenberg EBook, 1729, <http://www.gutenberg.org/1/0/8/1080/>.

¹¹ G. Obeyesekere, *Cannibal Talk...*, op. cit., pp. 11–14.

history shows, also other humans – in service of its survival.¹² Once human flesh is reduced to edible objects, with the possible exception of sacrificial cannibalism, the already suspect reign of humans over the world, and some humans over some other humans, is seriously threatened. Given the destructive tendencies of humanity as an invasive species, this threat is not necessarily a bad thing. Yet, it seems that the various representations and narratives about cannibalism¹³ express a cultural fear of radically challenging the racist, heterosexist, ableist, and classist status quo enabled by the man-eating myth.

At the same time, current critical theory offers new ways of conceptualizing and criticizing the conventional divisions into human/non-human or edible/non-edible, while popular culture is gradually becoming more open to positive albeit satirical or camp spins on cannibalism. Shows such as Netflix's *Santa Clarita Diet* (2019), the CW's *iZombie* (2015–2019, based on a comic series), NBC's *Hannibal* (2013–2015), or *Chew* analyzed in this text, challenge conventional notions of likability and cannibalism, and in consequence, open up new ways of understanding the cultural narratives of cannibalism and its impact on the human subject.

The aim of this essay is to examine the ways in which cannibalism may be used to comment on consumption and identity, and more specifically on consumption and masculinity. Through an analysis of the consumption – all ambiguity intended – of the three FDA agents at the center of the plot: Tony Chu, John Colby, and Mason Savoy, and the comic's villain, the Vampire a.k.a the Collector, I show how food and food practices, including but not limited to cannibalism, feature in futuristic yet nostalgic constructions of masculinities and subjectivity more generally.¹⁴ I propose a serious exploration of food and eating anxieties of late capitalism as expressed in the imagined gastrodystopia of *Chew*. Viewed as a reflection on the interweaving of fears associated with the disabling impact of globalization, climate crisis, exploitation of (human) resources, as well as discourses of crises of masculinity and collapse of social bonds in neoliberalism, Layman and Guillory's graphic series present a new way of conceptualizing gender, consumption, waste, and community through characters that both conform to and subvert conventional gender types featured in comics and the eating practices implicitly or explicitly associated with them.

¹² R. Adams, *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory*, Continuum, New York 2010.

¹³ W. Arens, *Mit ludożercy...*, op. cit.; G. Obeyesekere, *Cannibal Talk...*, op. cit., pp. 1–5; M. Douglas, *Deciphering a Meal* [in:] C. Counihan, P. Van Esterik (eds.), *Food and Culture...*, op. cit.

¹⁴ In the scholarship on graphic novels and comics much is said about the difficulty of defining the limits of the form and approaches to reading graphic texts critically. I am indebted to Jerzy Szyłak's, *Jak czytać komiksy i właściwie po co?*, "Jednak Książki. Gdańskie Czasopismo Humanistyczne" 2017, no. 8, pp. 149–168, as well as S. McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, Kitchen Sink Press, New York 1993; and for disability in comic, J. Dolmage, D. Jacobs, *Mutable Articulations: Disability Rhetorics and the Comics Medium* [in:] C. Foss, J. Gray, Z. Whalen (eds.), *Disability in Comic Books and Graphic Narratives*, Palgrave, New York 2016, pp. 14–28, and other essays in that volume.

As consumption practices are, among others, highly gendered, food and eating have different meanings depending on gender and its performance.¹⁵ Given the conventional association of food production and culture with the domestic, it is vital to address and theorize the ways in which masculinity is informed by a food and eating analysis. What is more, based on critical eating studies' call for food studies to prioritize the eating subject rather than the objects consumed to avoid fetishization and reification of food objects,¹⁶ new materialist approaches to embodiment and subject,¹⁷ as well as critiques of clean eating,¹⁸ and other body-disciplining discourses generated by disability and fat studies scholars, I argue for a new understanding of the intersection between gender performance and consumption that accounts for waste not as an abject consequence of nourishment, but as a potentially productive category in community formation.¹⁹ As cannibalism in *Chew* is presented as a practice that contributes to solving crimes and eventually saving the world from annihilation, it poses a challenge to conventional understandings of the boundary-making functions of edibility.²⁰

Eating as Thinking

An analysis that does justice to the cognitive estrangement of *Chew* requires a rethinking of the ways in which eating and being are conceptualized in the contemporary world. After all, the world of this gastrodystopia features not just cannibal law enforcement officials, but other people with food-related powers of various strengths and applications. What is more, the series is successful in normalizing cannibalism as a valid practice for solving crimes. Put simply, in *Chew* gnawing is knowing, as it embraces a twisted version of ritualistic cannibalism, which conveys the powers of the eaten to the eater, thus providing knowledge to the latter and a quasi-immortality to the former. It also illustrates just how much decisions about consumption and ingestion affect the eating subject.

¹⁵ C. Counihan, S. Kaplan, *Gender and Food: Identity and Power*, Routledge, London 2000; S. Koch, *Gender and Food: A Critical Look at the Food System*, Rowman and Littlefield, London 2019.

¹⁶ K. Tompkins, *Racial Indigestion...*, op. cit.

¹⁷ R. Braidotti, *Transpositions: On Nomadic Ethics*, Polity, Cambridge 2016; S. Alaimo, *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 2010.

¹⁸ K. Hall, *Toward a Queer Crip Feminist Politics of Food*, "philoSOPHIA" 2014, no. 4(2), pp. 177–196.

¹⁹ I cannot do justice to the literature on waste created within Discard Studies, but the concepts in this paper are inspired by approaches presented in S. Moore, *Garbage Matters: Concepts in New Geographies of Waste*, "Progress in Human Geography" 2012, no. 36(6), pp. 780–799; J. Scanlan, *On Garbage*, Reaktion Books, London 2005; S. Strasser, *Waste and Want: A Social History of Trash*, Owl Books, New York 2000, and for a take on disability and waste: B. Hughes, *The Abject and the Vulnerable: The Twain Shall Meet. Reflections on Disability in the Moral Economy*, "The Sociological Review" 2019, no. 67(4), pp. 829–846.

²⁰ M. Douglas, *Deciphering...*, op. cit.

In *FoodSexIdentities*, Elspeth Probyn discusses the ways in which food and eating, embodiment, and sexualities produce subjects and relationships of subjects and objects with one another, and posits the cannibal as the ultimate omnivore and consumer *par excellence*.²¹ Food and food practices, which are simultaneously conventional and highly ritualized, convey meanings and attitudes and are used as modes of communication. Invoked, states Probyn, in relation to both authenticity and artifice, food and food practices are part of identity formation and representation that increase in importance in a world obsessed with consumption of goods and exploitation of people. She points to the collapse of the boundaries between various types of appetites: “If oral sex isn’t sex, is it eating? Conversely, when is eating sex?,”²² which allows her to deconstruct the disciplinary discourses prohibiting various forms of consumption while privileging and normalizing others.

This blurring of boundaries between subject and object offered by a reinterpretation of food and eating affect also Western notions of subjectivity and embodiment. Raymond D. Boisvert and Lisa Heldke in *Philosophy on the Table* argue for taking food and eating as metaphor for epistemology, thus accounting for a different type of subjectivity, which they claim, has been ignored in classical philosophy.²³ By re-privileging food and by extension the experiences of the eating bodies, philosophical investigation may account for the philosophical Other, i.e. that which escapes classification, what oozes, and smells, that, what in Kristeva’s terms, is abject.²⁴ Eating, unlike any other behavior, reveals human vulnerability.²⁵ Any consumption requires a decision that something is safe to ingest, but a failure to eat may also have adverse effects. The need to eat makes humans inherently dependent on other humans and other matter. This proximity and trust that what is eaten is not poison requires experience and knowledge. Boisvert and Heldke argue that ingestion ensures the most intimate relationship between the person and the object, a relationship impossible if sight rather than taste is prioritized as the dominant sense of knowing.²⁶ Thus they argue for tasting-as-knowing as a metaphor for epistemology, which is made literal in the world of *Chew* where consuming a corpse enables Tony Chu to reconstruct all that happened to that victim.

The privileging of embodied experiences as valid sources of knowledge is also a perspective embraced in disability studies and crip theory, which re-center authority over experience to subjects whose bodies are actually experiencing phenomena rather than the distanced eye of the expert.²⁷ From a different vantage point and mobilized

²¹ E. Probyn, *Carnal Appetites...*, op. cit., p. 32.

²² Ibidem, s. 59.

²³ R. Boisvert, L. Heldke, *Philosophy on the Table*, Reaktion Books, London 2016, pp. 117–128.

²⁴ J. Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, transl. L. Roudiez, Columbia University Press, New York 1982.

²⁵ R. Boisvert, L. Heldke, *Philosophy...*, op. cit., p. 107.

²⁶ Ibidem, pp. 106–108.

²⁷ G. Kleege, *Blind Range: Letters to Helen Keller*, Gallaudet University Press, Washington, D.C. 2006.

by different, though non-exclusionary, ideologies, both critical eating and disability studies accounts of experience and what may constitute knowing challenge the hierarchy of senses that overprivileges sight and hearing over other, more direct ways of encountering the world. As a result, both critical eating studies and disability studies argue against knowledge that is based in the principle of objectivity founded on the premise that distance from the object described ensures a more reliable account than an intimacy with the object or experience. Again, *Chew* makes this notion a reality, where “cibopaths” like Tony Chu are able to experience the past of humans and non-humans they consume.

Similarly to Heldke and Boisvert, Stacy Alaimo also discusses intimacy which may lead to the collapse of the boundaries between human and non-human in *Bodily Natures and Exposed: Environmental Politics and Pleasures in Posthuman Times*. She challenges the notion of an impermeable Western human subject and argues for “performing exposure as an ethical and political act.”²⁸ The vulnerability involved in the ingestion, as pointed by Boisvert and Heldke, poses a threat to the body envisioned as a finite entity. As I argue in *‘Success to Crime,’ or Sam Spade’s Consumption Habits in Dashiell Hammett’s “The Maltese Falcon”’: Consumption and Control*, this is especially threatening to the white male subjectivity whose status is ensured by discipline of the body that maintains a pretense of complete autarchy. It would be glib to state that this is the source of so many unnamed masculine food anxieties, but in fact the relationships between corporeality, identity, and gender are very much at stake when analyzing men’s eating and food practices, with the fear of being consumed by another – literally or figuratively – positing the utmost threat. The narratives of cannibalism therefore may be seen as another means of maintaining the status of some masculinities over other masculinities and genders, making the hegemonic model of masculinity transparent by otherizing in equal measure the consuming and the consumed.²⁹

An embrace of epistemologies based on immediate experience that postulates the subject as permeable and interconnected with the matter around enables a challenge to the binaries that organize notions of subjectivity. When discussing the abject, Julia Kristeva points to feces as a byproduct of ingestion, which were part of the subject, but once evacuated, became the abject other.³⁰ The not-me of waste is used to delineate what is no longer the subject. Thus the status of waste, bodily waste, as well as other waste, including the waste of mass production, or the waste that is a human corpse, must be immediately eliminated, as it is the putrid reminder of that what has been expelled. The waste disposal system is designed to give an illusion that

²⁸ S. Alaimo, *Exposed: Environmental Politics and Pleasures in Posthuman Times*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 2016, p. 5.

²⁹ M. Usiekiewicz, *‘Success to Crime,’ or Sam Spade’s Consumption Habits in Dashiell Hammett’s “The Maltese Falcon”’: Consumption and Control* [in:] P. Hamera, A.K. Kuropatnicki, A. Piskorz (eds.), *Food and Drink in Contexts*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe UP, Kraków 2019, pp. 125–128.

³⁰ J. Kristeva, *Powers of Horror...*, op. cit., p. 53.

waste disappears, which has severe climate and economic consequences. But as it decomposes in landfills, sewer systems, rivers, or is offered at yard sales, it is still matter that remains in the world. It does not vanish, but it is made to be invisible to some.

This politics of refusing to see waste is somewhat akin to the notion of “ethics of purity,” identified by Kim Q. Hall in the clean eating discourse of the alternative food movement.³¹ Though in no way dismissive of the movement’s criticism and outright challenge to the industrial food production that is harming the environment, non-human animals, and people in various nefarious ways, Hall points how language of purity conveys exclusionary, alimentary racist, and even eugenic sentiment peddled as solutions to the perceived nutrition and food crisis. Instead, Hall suggests a “queer crip feminist conception of food and food justice that not only attends to the relationships that structure and are brought about by the production, distribution, and consumption of food but also critically engages the conceptions of community, relationship, bodies, and identity that are assumed, made possible by, or foreclosed by food discourse.”³² Thus, rather than a metaphysics of purity, Hall introduces a “metaphysics of compost,” which revalue what is conventionally considered unproductive. As “there are no pure bodies, no bodies with impermeable borders”³³ there is no way to maintain a fiction of the autarchic human subject, rather, “a metaphysics of compost has the potential for thinking of food as a network of relationships, not all of which can be repaired through ‘good’ choices and not all of which can be known or assumed in advance.”³⁴ Similarly to crip and queer temporalities, Hall’s approach defies linear temporality to better reflect the ways lives are being lived and sustained.

Hall’s notions about the revaluation of disablement due to malnutrition and the lack of “good” choices chimes well with the food logic of *Chew*, where Tony Chu is routinely asked to consume putrid food and decomposing flesh to solve murder cases on the basis of what he learns through this consumption. To a degree Hall’s political and theoretical stance is reflected in the fantastical landscape of the graphic series. If science fiction is a reflection of the zeitgeist, than *Chew*, with its multitude of alimentarily gifted characters, who can make food noxious or delicious, deadly or erotic, captures these minoritarian narratives of food and consumption. This gastrodystopia, entertaining as it is as a satire, makes a point that the current consumption patterns, including discourses that advertise restraint, mindfulness, objectivity of food research, and temperance, continue to be exclusionary, sexist, ableist, and invested in maintaining the status quo.

³¹ K. Hall, *Toward a Queer Crip...*, op. cit.

³² *Ibidem*, p. 178.

³³ *Ibidem*, p. 179.

³⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 190.

Chewing the World

The world of *Chew* is filled with characters struggling or embracing their food-related conditions and superpowers, including an ability to make guns out of chocolate, a talent to create real food porn with pictures of food that inspire instant sexual arousal, or a force to pass gas equal to a 14 kiloton bomb. In this context of alimentarily-gifted people, and in a clear and self-conscious nod to noir plots and tropes, the graphic series focuses on two FDA Special Crimes Division agents, Tony Chu and John Colby. The series initially reads like a play on a noir or procedural where each man performs a different version of masculinity. Gradually, as the plot develops so do the generic interferences from horror and science fiction, as well as, argues Parasecoli, the Japanese *gurume manga*.³⁵ Chu and Colby inhabit a post-avian flu-pandemic world of simultaneous food scarcity and overabundance, where readily available biomedical augmentation turns humans into cyborgs or at least provides them with interesting prosthetics. It is also a world obsessed with consumption where due to the regulations introduced after the pandemic the sale and eating of chicken is prohibited. It is also a world in which aliens threaten to obliterate any poultry-eating planet. As a result, the FDA is the most important US law enforcement agency, and NASA is the most powerful and wealthy one. In its depiction of the world, *Chew* ridicules overconsumption and excess. It pokes fun at dining clubs for food snobs, evil food manufacturers, as well as over-funded NASA scientists whose exorbitant budgets lead them to fall into complete debauchery. It also creates a space where cannibalism, if done for the right reason, such as solving crimes, is somewhat justified or encouraged, despite the fact that consumption and consumerism are not.

Chew makes text what has been the subtext of many futuristic representations of the logical consequences of overconsumption. At the same time it seems to creatively reimagine the idea that once sources of food are gone humans become oblivious cannibals at the mercy of big corporations producing nondescript food rations forced upon the unknown masses. Yet these anxieties about the content of food are satirically upended in the comic series, as the mysterious ingredient designed to replace chicken is not people, but a plant from space harvested in lieu of the chicken prohibited after the pandemic.³⁶

In a world where individuals may weaponize the most mundane of foodstuffs at will or eat others to gain their knowledge or power, it is not the ingredients that are unsafe, but the people using them. With restaurateurs being able to serve patrons dinosaur meat or actual killer roosters working as staff at the USDA – the other food agency where the all-female team of agents is partnered up with animals – concerns

³⁵ F. Parasecoli, *Gluttonous Crimes: Chew, Comic Cooks, and the Ingestion of Masculinity*, “Women’s Studies International Forum” 2014, no. 44(1), p. 243.

³⁶ It later turns out that the avian flu which killed 23 million Americans and 116 million globally was manufactured to prevent extraterrestrial species of highly evolved chicken-humans from annihilating the world.

over contents or provenance of food become irrelevant. If people are able to imbue coffee with evil thoughts or become invincible when high on psychoactive frogs, the divide into human and non-human animal is called into question, too. Though it has to be said that the divide is rearticulated when Pollo, the USDA killer rooster, is cooked and served by Colby to Chu to encourage the latter to become as angry as the deadly Pollo. The logic is reversed, again, when Chu's mentor, Mason Savoy, orchestrates a plot in consequence of which Chu eats Savoy.

Thus food anxieties represented in *Chew* surpass the conventional concerns of the postindustrial era, and are much more invested in the effect food has on those who consume it. *Chew* represents the kind of analysis that embraces the new materialist approach to the relations between subjects and matter, as well as Probyn's take on food and eating as means of subject formation. Rather than addressing the fear of factory farming, *Chew* expresses a meta-anxiety over the effect of consumption on the body and the subject in terms of health, identity, and ethics. It shows the political dimension of the food industry and food culture and makes evident the arbitrariness of food fetishes and fads. It also challenges the ways in which food regiments and austerity are presented as a saving grace for the overeating and yet malnourished humanity. Though some would argue that it is the bad processed food that is killing people, *Chew* seems to echo Hall's claim that it is not the food, but the ableist, sexist, and racist culture that contributes to the poor health of the eating subjects.³⁷

Chewing Men

In the first pages of the first volume of *Chew* a horizontal black panel taking up a quarter of the page features a grotesque drawing of a middle aged weary Asian man wearing a thin black tie loose around the collar of a grey shirt, and what seems like suspenders. Next to him is a description: "Meet Tony Chu. Tony Chu is almost always hungry, and almost never eats. This is why."³⁸ The four subsequent panels explain that Chu is a "cibopath," which means that upon ingesting anything he gets to sense its entire history. The only edible item that does not trigger either a serene vision of an orchard when eating an apple or, more likely, brutal scenes from the slaughterhouse when eating a burger are red beets. His condition is a source of shame to him and a reason he is ridiculed by his FDA colleagues and superiors. He is also disliked by his family, despite the fact that both his sister, Antonella, and his daughter, Olive, also have food powers of exceptional strength and usefulness. Nonetheless, Chu seems the only one hating himself for it and resenting the things he is made to eat, especially fragments of dead bodies and other evidence from food crime scenes.

³⁷ K. Hall, *Toward a Queer Crip...*, op. cit., s. 180.

³⁸ J. Layman, R. Guillory, *Volume One: Taster's Choice* [in:] *Chew*, Image Comics, Berkeley 2013, chap. 1.

Fabio Parasecoli notes that “Forced to explore aspects of ingestions usually condemned as abject and impure, the detective unwillingly embodies forms of ‘queer masculinity’ that have the potential to subvert normative gender categories and disrupt hegemonic constructions of heterosexuality.”³⁹ But it takes Chu the entire length of the series and consumption of the entire body of Mason Savoy, his mentor, to embrace his cannibalism. Parasecoli points to how food choices are used in performance of masculinity. He argues that Chu’s beet-and-corpse diet renders him queer, as he does not conform to the standards of conventional masculine consumption. By refusing to eat meat, Chu is moving away from the hegemonic masculinity of his omnivorous partner Colby or the other cibopath in the FDA and Chu’s mentor, Savoy. But I would argue that there is more to Chu’s gender performance than just the queerness of refusing to eat meat or anything but beets, such as his race and stereotypes about Asian masculinity or his respect for rules and regulations so unlike the model for the individualist American male. Meat eating though conventionally gendered male⁴⁰ is just one of the ways in which hegemonic masculinity is performed via food. After all, there have been models of hegemonic white masculinity that were based on austerity and denial peddled as means of ensuring corporeal health and Christian moral purity, such as the 19th century movements founded by Sylvester Graham or John Harvey Kellogg.⁴¹ It is not Chu who is queer because of his diet, after all, he is a serial heterosexual monogamist, but it is his food practices. It is more productive, thus, to think of Chu’s food and eating as a version of “queer alimentarity.”⁴²

Kyla Wazana Tompkins, who devised the term, notes that “eating functions as a metalanguage for genital pleasure and sexual desire. But eating is often a site of erotic pleasure itself, what I call, as a means of signaling the alignment between oral pleasure and other forms of nonnormative desire, *queer alimentarity*.”⁴³ Though Chu neither desires the foods nor experiences pleasure while eating them, he is nevertheless drawn to consuming them to get at the truth. His dedication to punishing criminals and seeking justice transforms his revulsion at eating corpses into a compulsion. Though he has to be coerced into doing it, Chu gradually manifests less obstinacy when presented with a decomposing body part crucial to solve a murder. In fact, the first time Tony resorts to cannibalism to solve a case is on his own accord. He realizes that a cook in a chicken den he and Colby are surveilling is a murder-cannibal guilty of dismembering and consuming 13 women. To get the names of all the victims, Tony bites into the cook who seconds earlier killed himself to take his secret with him.

³⁹ F. Parasecoli, *Gluttonous Crimes...*, op. cit., pp. 236–237.

⁴⁰ J. Sobal, *Men, Meat, and Masculinity: Models of Masculinity*, “Food and Foodways: Explorations in the History and Culture of Human Nourishment” 2005, no. 13 (1–2), p. 135.

⁴¹ A.E. Farrell, *Fat Shame: Stigma and the Fat Body in American Culture*, New York University Press, New York 2011, p. 3; B.S. Turner, *The Government of the Body: Medical Regimens and the Rationalization of Diet*, “The British Journal of Sociology” 1982, no. 33, pp. 254–269.

⁴² K. Tompkins, *Racial Indigestion...*, op. cit., p. 5.

⁴³ Ibidem.

Fueled by his need to return peace to the families of the victims, Chu continues to eat the dead cook until he is pulled away by police. With every “chomp” Chu gets closer to the truth. As such, both Chu and the cook show that despite Probyn’s assurances that a cannibal may be a figure of both excess and restraint,⁴⁴ there are moments when excess wins over. As the ultimate consumer, argues Probyn, a cannibal could eat anything at any time, but chooses not to do so.⁴⁵

Chu desires knowledge and gets it via ingestion of the abject, therefore embodying tasting-as-knowing formulated by Heldke and Boisvert. The two other turning points in Chu’s eating-as-knowing are when first he eats his sister’s toe she left for him in anticipation of being killed by the Collector, and later when he consumes the entire body of Mason Savoy to learn what he knew about the flu pandemic and absorb the skills to prevent the end of the world. With each bite of Savoy, Chu becomes a stronger cibopath and learns to switch his power on and off therefore ridding himself of his inability to eat anything but beets. It is only once he accepts his cibopathy that he is able to control it.

In a twisted version of a superhero origin story, Chu must eat his mentor to unleash his own power. This is foreshadowed in a scene when Chu kills the Collector, but refuses to eat him. He refuses the sacrificial consumption that would immortalize the food powers collected by the Collector, and thus refuses to be part of this particular relay of skills. He refuses to perform ritualistic cannibalism and in that remains the figure of restraint. When it comes to eating Savoy, who makes arrangements for Chu to find his hanging corpse with an instruction to eat him, the mentor and his mission to avenge the death of his wife live on in Chu. This narrative of transformation recalls also the familiar beats of a coming out story, where self-loathing turns into self-acceptance in a community of loving and accepting people. In time, Chu’s cannibalism is normalized, and it does offer Chu different ways of relating to his masculinity, humanity, other people, and the world. Placing Tony Chu among other characters with various degrees of disabling/enhancing food-related abilities or tastes helps to depict a world of interconnectedness rather than radical individualism so common in stories written using tropes from noir, science fiction, or super hero narratives that center the individual – usually one who is white, heterosexual, and male – over the community.

First deeming Chu’s masculinity as “wobbly,” Parasecoli claims that “The only saving grace for Chu is his superpower, a gift he has not earned or honed. In order to prove himself, he has to taste blood, a rotting severed finger, and even a dead dog.”⁴⁶ I would argue, however, that it is not the toughness of cannibalism that enables Chu a reassertion of his masculinity, but self-acceptance.⁴⁷ As a cannibal, Tony Chu em-

⁴⁴ E. Probyn, *Carnal Appetites...*, op. cit., p. 81.

⁴⁵ Ibidem.

⁴⁶ F. Parasecoli, *Gluttonous Crimes...*, op. cit., s. 138.

⁴⁷ John Burdick offers an account of the ways in which consuming bizarre foods is turned into a performance of masculinity, *‘That sounds repulsive. I can’t wait to try it’: Andrew Zimmern’s Bizarre*

phasizes the discriminatory aspect of Probyn's figure of restraint. In *Manliness and Civilization* Gail Bederman points to restraint as an element of white hegemonic masculinity constructed against the savagery of the racial other.⁴⁸ It is not Chu's embrace of brutality and savagery, but his restraint that affords him the transformation into his most powerful self. What is more, his ritualistic eating of corpses also evokes Hall's notions of the metaphysics of compost. The corpse of the cook, and more importantly, Antonella's toe, or Savoy's body – all are waste but for Tony Chu who turns them into meaning. His later power to absorb the talents of others is a take on the ritualistic aspect of cannibalism: consumption as honoring the dead.⁴⁹

In no way does this challenge the notion that hegemonic masculinity is afforded to the ultimate consumer and that consumption is possession, but the difference with Chu is the way the consumed subject is treated. Inspired by hook's take on US commodification of difference via the consumption of decontextualized Otherness, Probyn observes that "whites are cannibals hungry for difference."⁵⁰ Chu is a reversal of the white cannibal, he is the non-white figure of restraint, the most civilized among the cibopaths and thus, within the logic of the comic, the most masculine and the one alive at the end. Once Chu is able to control his consumption instead of refusing it, he asserts his masculinity.

The two other male cibopaths featured in the comic: Mason Savoy, Chu's FDA mentor, and the Vampire, or Collector, are figures of excess and lack of control, as both are presented as having broad appetites, and both do not live to see the end of the series. Mason is depicted as a gourmand, a comics version of the gentleman sleuth with elevated speech patterns and body that reflects his strength and enjoyment of food. The Collector is depicted in a more sinister fashion – fangs included – but, similarly to Savoy, as an erudite and gourmand. His agenda is to eat other alimentary gifted people to possess their powers. His consumption is not about honoring those he eats, but a mere compulsion to destroy and possess. He embodies white hegemonic masculinity at its consumerist peak, and thus represents the excess of cannibalism and by implication of masculinity. Similarly, it is not Savoy's appetite that makes him a figure of cannibalistic excess, but rather his over-the-top persona that makes it difficult for Chu to form an alliance with him. Notably, there are only a few times when Chu himself becomes the figure of excess, most importantly when he eats the cook at the start of the story and when he eats Poyo, the killer rooster, to ensure that he will have enough rage to kill the Collector and avenge the death of his sister, Antonella.

Foods, Disgust and the Sensory Racial Erotics of Eating, "The Americanist" 2014, no. 29, pp. 77–92.

⁴⁸ G. Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880–1917*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1996.

⁴⁹ For a review of types of cannibalism, see for example L.R. Goldman (ed.), *The Anthropology of Cannibalism*, Greenwood Publishing, Westport, CT 1999, as well as Arens's *Mit ludozercy and Cannibal Talks* by Obeyesekere.

⁵⁰ E. Probyn, *Carnal Appetites...*, op. cit., p. 82.

Parasecoli concludes that “The comic book exposes masculinities as constituted by the tension between subjection to power and resistance/agency, as a result of ‘identity work’ in the form of self-regulation and self-discipline aimed at receiving validation from dominant power structures and ideologies, and as an effect of exclusionary processes that define men in opposition to various ‘abjected others’ (Butler, 1997; Fausto-Sterling, 2000; Garlick, 2003).”⁵¹ As much as the claim is true, my reading points to the fact that it is no longer the validation of the dominant power structures that govern masculinity in *Chew*, or at least not in the case of Tony Chu. As pointed earlier, consumption makes the eater vulnerable as it includes the opening of the body to a foreign object, thus masculinities must either enforce self-discipline or the discipline of others. This is also true for Chu, who early on is incapacitated by anything he eats bar beets. Thus it would seem that masculinities invested in impenetrability are the ones that suffer from consumption the most. They have to maintain the delicate boundaries of self and other, human and non-human animal, masculine and not masculine by enforcing arbitrary criteria and definitions, as well as by subjugating the sexual, racial, or disabled Other. After his transformation, Chu no longer needs to be afraid of ingestion and therefore starts to embody a new version of empowered masculinity.

The graphic series works to undermine the taut able-bodied white hypermasculinity as hegemonic masculinity, and Tony Chu’s is not the only masculinity that offers that challenge. Chu’s partner, John Colby is depicted as a conventional masculine hero with voracious appetite for food and sex, little respect for rules, and a willingness to take action. He seems the hypermasculine “hard body” who rejects empathy and concern for others.⁵² Yet, in a fashion typical for *Chew*, this initial pose is quickly rewritten as Colby is reconfigured into a poor-man’s version of a robocop, a disability that he embraces. Moreover, though initially a model of hegemonic, and by implication, heterosexual masculinity, Colby quickly becomes a much more complex figure of excess. In her examination of the depiction of quadriplegic athletes in *Murderball* Cynthia Barounis shows how masculinity redefines disability, but fails to do the reverse. The athletes are presented as hypermasculine and hypersexual: violent and indomitable during the games and irresistible to their able-bodied and conventionally attractive partners. Barounis thus shows that the hypermasculinization of the men removes the perceived stigma of disability, and therefore reinforces both the sexism and ableism present in society.⁵³ It would appear that Colby’s hi-tech prosthetics are supposed to reinforce his already hyper masculinity, signaled for example by his eating of chicken in defiance of the law he is supposed to uphold, yet his choices make possible a different reading as Colby is the true queer figure of excess. Colby is

⁵¹ F. Parasecoli, *Gluttonous Crimes...*, op. cit., p. 144.

⁵² S. Jeffords, *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinities of the Reagan Era*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, NJ 1993.

⁵³ C. Barounis, *Crippling Heterosexuality, Queering Able-Bodiedness: “Murderball”, “Brokeback Mountain” and the Contested Masculine Body* [in:] L. Davis (ed.), *The Disability Studies Reader*, Routledge, New York 2013, p. 385.

disabled and queer, but instead of aiming to suppress or overcompensate these potentially stigmatizing identities, he leans into them losing none of his status.

Colby represents the self-assured comfortable masculinity associated with young men in positions of power, including rogue representatives of law enforcement populating popular culture. Once he becomes a robocop version of the same, he continues as himself only technologically enhanced: he is the eater to Chu's fasting, but his appetite does not stop at food. Colby accepts Chu's power, but finds the ingestion repulsive. At the same time, to save his partner he seduces their FDA boss, Applebee, who he later marries and even falls in love with. In fact the two men's sex life expands the moment Applebee is turned into a half-human half-robotic centaur thanks to USDA technology. Colby also seduces the elderly chief of the USDA to help Chu, and at one point lives with both in a triangular sexual arrangement broken only by Colby's nuptials. In a twist on traditional gender roles and on the sexuality of cyborgs, Colby uses his pansexuality rather than his strength and masculinity to aid Chu. Finally, Colby is the person with the social skills to reunite the people needed to save the planet and sacrifices himself in order to stop the end of the world. Though he does not force Chu to eat him, the plot to save the planet involves Chu spreading a virus that kills all those who had consumed chicken. Colby forces Chu to do that even though he just had chicken for breakfast. This plot twist once again shows that the food landscape of *Chew* emphasizes that the danger is not in the food object, but in food politics and systemic rather than individual choices.

Digestif

In a feat of satirical excellence, *Chew* makes text what has been the subtext of so many cultural representations of consumerism, masculinity, and disability. By moving back and forth from food as metaphor to food as material, the comic series illustrates the ways in which consumption practices are part of both construction and representation of masculinity, and offer ways of queering and upending conventional gender tropes. Food and eating practices may reinforce existing models of masculinity and undermine them, but as vehicles of meaning they connect the abstract with the embodied in philosophically useful ways.

In the case of the eating and non-eating men of *Chew*, appetite and restraint are key slide bars regulating masculine performance. Both voracious appetite and reticence about eating inform the ways in which masculinities of Chu, Colby, Mason, and the Collector play against one another. Thanks to the logic offered by a metaphysics of compost cannibalism and the abjection it is associated with are normalized and neutralized. Neither symbols of savagery, nor racist consumption, ritualistic cannibalism is recast as a way of returning value to that which is discarded and considered non-human and abject in late capitalism. As a result, instead of gastrodystopic visions of food scarcity generated from positions of white able-bodied privileged power, in the wake of a climate catastrophe, there is an opening to think outside of the binaries

disciplining bodies and matters, and producing new theoretical and material solutions to the impending doom.

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