

Gravy (For My Mash Potatoes): On the Cultural Reproduction of Food and Sex

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This paper addresses the metaphorical and mnemotechnical connections between food and romantic and sexual desire through a selective survey of cultural and literary productions. As the history of American popular music (Dee Dee Sharp's "Gravy (For My Mash Potatoes)", Willie Dixon's/Howlin' Wolf's "Back Door Man," the Archies' and Wilson Pickett's "Sugar, Sugar", etc.) reveals, the metaphorical connection between food and romantic and sexual love is often deployed in the name of prevailing notions of heteronormative and patriarchal desire, reinforcing a model of romance and desire premised on a consumptive enjoyment of the other. A critical assessment of how desire is represented in terms of food unpacks the ramifications of both our food and sexual economies and raises questions about how we square these necessary dimensions of a flourishing human life with our ethical and moral concerns. Drawing on the work of the feminist theorist Carol Adams, the political theorist Chad Lavin, and on the nature writings of Henry David Thoreau, this essay seeks to move beyond critique to investigate how a critical ethos of eating not only has important consequences for refashioning the predominant political-economy of food but is also suggestive for a different understanding of both our broadly political and our most intimate personal relationships with one another. In accord with the interdisciplinary focus of this conference, this paper draws on the fields of cultural studies, political theory, American literature, political economy, and food studies, to offer a partial list.