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Cuisine of economy, cuisine of excess: materializing value in culinary practice

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Certain culinary practices are often interpreted as evidence of 'economizing' (a frugal use of available resources) or of 'excess' (a celebratory expenditure of resources for symbolic purposes). This article uses these categories as a way to interrogate analytical assumptions about materialism more generally. Drawing on ethnographic research from both rural Tanzania, and the contemporary suburban United States, it argues that various qualities of discernment, taste, and preference are not determined by the material affordances of foods, but rather that these judgements can be materialized in social and cultural practice.

Consider the meatball. This seems a very simple thing to do – who cannot conjure up an image and experience to fit the term? In the contemporary United States, its canonical version comes with pasta and tomato sauce (or macaroni and red gravy) – spaghetti and meatballs, a perfect set (Lady *and* the Tramp). And as even most American eaters of this most quintessentially Italian-American dish know, there's really no antecedent for the dish in Italy. Meatballs (*polpette*) are a dish, or an accompaniment prepared in a variety of ways across Italy's many culinary regions, though none of them involve spaghetti and a marinara sauce. At the same time, as simple as at is to imagine a meatball, even to grant the Italian-American dish a kind of iconic status, it instantly becomes clear that this presentation is merely a token of a type. Swedish meatballs in a cream-enriched sauce, nearly identical *Konigsberger Klopse* from Prussia, Russian *tefteli* (often of chicken, occasionally sauced), *boules de picolat* from Catalonia – not to mention stewed Lion's Head, popularized in Shanghai, or Tagalog *bola-bola*: the global varieties seem inexhaustible.

Efforts to account for the ubiquity of the meatball (even when the meatball doesn't actually contain *meat*, like the *kofte*, balls of spiced and ground lentils, that are putatively the antecedent of both Asian and European meatballs), with its characteristic virtues and sociological variation, are often described in terms of the utilitarian features of their preparation and consumption. A meatball, that is, is the paradigmatic food of

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economizing. When there are scraps remaining on the carcass, or leftovers from the roast, or odds and ends that didn't make it into any of the week's repasts, any and all can be ground or pounded into the base for the meatball. Adding to the efforts at frugality, the base must be extended – stretched with a cheaper filler. Rice is plumped and burst before adding to pork or poultry, stale bread is softened (perhaps in the last bit of milk or wine for the week) and smooshed before adding to the protein, making it more filling, feeding more at the table, and using up all remnants of edible things in a single dish – indeed, a single bite. Meatballs, then, seem like the quintessence of an economizing cuisine.[1]

But let's get back to our iconic spaghetti and meatballs. As many have noted (e.g. Cinotto 2013), Italian immigrants to the northeast of the United States found beef much more widely available in their new circumstances than their former ones. And as so many had come from Southern Italy (Naples, Sicily, Calabria, etc.), marinara sauce was favoured as the accompaniment. Hearty, simple, homely, cheap food made to be shared with gusto. At the same time, there is a paradox in this practice, because by the 1930s, when spaghetti and meatballs became part of the standardized pantheon of Italian-American dishes (veal parmigiana, cheesecake, and manicotti) offered today in every strip-mall Olive Garden, they had thoroughly inverted the qualities of Italian *polpette*. Now the characteristic forms of scrimping and saving could be entirely recast as *abbondanza* (abundance and plenty) with meatballs made entirely of beef, and as big as baseballs, served up not only for cousins and in-laws, but as commodified forms of 'dining' in Italian restaurants (Cinotto 2013). Indeed, it is as though the ethos of economizing parsimony provides the grounding against which the demonstration of excess and abundance becomes more extravagantly evident (a point I will return to below).

What this micro-history suggests is that the meatball (and undoubtedly related dishes) is an exemplar of culinary practice – a practice not of economizing but, as I will show, of evaluation. The materials from which meatballs are made have certain potentials that can be elaborated into very different kinds of meals – either frugality *or* abundance in the self-same dish. My argument throughout this article is that cuisine materializes distinct values that derive from a given set of potentials; but these materialized values are always realized in keeping with a wider order of values (social and cultural tastes) that shape the motivations and reception of any culinary offering.

Materialism and its limits

So much of culinary practice, as I've suggested, is understood, in both the popular imagination and more academic analyses, to derive from the necessities of dire circumstance and resource limitation (e.g. Albala 2012; James 2004). 'Peasant' cuisines; immigrant 'foodways' recalled from 'the old country'; '*cucina povera*' (the 'poor kitchen'); the frugal methods of impoverished, perhaps even enslaved, communities giving rise to a repertoire of techniques and dishes that are essentially an expression of limitation and the necessity of improvisation, the demand that nourishment be derived by optimizing every last scrap of bone and peel, core, and sinew from the comestible in question – each of these can be offered as an illustration of this utilitarian demand. In almost thirty years of teaching, my undergraduate students have produced careful, often brilliant, research asserting that Greek-American, Pennsylvania Dutch, Soul Food, and Appalachian cuisine are all defined by the compulsion to use every bit of food available, to feed as many people as possible on a few simple ingredients, to

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maximize the minimal. Yet I don't think anyone would mistake any one of these cuisines for the other.

At the same time, this demand for thrift need not be a demand at all; it can readily be refashioned as an 'ethos', a principle of the kitchen and gastronomy that celebrates such techniques even when no resource limits are imposed. Thus, as I've shown elsewhere (Weiss 2016), snout-to-tail cuisine can equally be extolled as part of a regional (or simply 'traditional') heritage when adopted by fine dining establishments – actual constraint is not a requirement for a commitment to saving every bit of viscera and offal, seeds and stems. Indeed, the uses of these items are routinely converted into signs of culinary value and esteem ('those are the best parts!') for revealing one's discerning palette, or demonstrating skilled kitchen techniques.

This duality (the practice of economizing as the foundation of extravagance) points to a more fundamental problem in anthropological observation and theorization: how can we characterize the place of *material form* in sociocultural practice and (even more broadly) human experience? Is there some way in which the material world (its apparent self-evidence, its 'reality', its ontological givenness) exercises a determinant force in historical matters like cuisine? Indeed, culinary concerns are an especially apt domain for examining such questions because, as I always say to my aforementioned students in 'The Anthropology of Food', the human relationship with food is not only an indispensable biological constraint, without which we cannot long survive, but also constituted by a nearly infinite variety of elements and substances, methods of preparation and combination, to say nothing of social forms of eating with (or *refusing* to eat with) others. Indeed, we can even eat and enjoy those things that undermine our health and well-being, from nutmeg (in sufficient quantity), to fugu (the potentially neurotoxic blowfish served as sushi), to most American soft drinks. Food is at once obligatory and desirable, prescribed and preferential. How can we address this paradox?

At a certain level, this problem of determination recalls Sahlins's critique of materialism from the 1970s. In particular, his position in 'Colors and cultures' (Sahlins 1976) goes directly to the point that physiologically determined structures of perception, like those manifest in purportedly universal categories of colour, are nonetheless only *available* as possible perceptions. Whether and how they will be perceived (let alone elaborated into complex forms like 'contrasts', 'primary colours', etc.) can never be strictly determined by, or reduced to, these physiological capacities. Thus, Sahlins argues that colour categories demonstrate 'the presence in culture of universal structures that are nevertheless not universally present' (1976: 4). In more recent scholarship, this dimension of materiality (its rich potentiality for elaboration, which is not simply reducible to the limitations or constraints of material form) is often discussed in terms of 'affordances' (although the term itself is introduced by Gibson in 1977, at more or less the time that Sahlins was describing the limits of material reason), an understanding first, and continuously, endorsed in anthropology in the work of Ingold (e.g. 1992; 2000). A chair must elevate a body even while one reclines within it; a coat hanger, or a ceiling fan, lacks these capacities, and so their material characteristics lack the affordances necessary to engage with them – that is, to take them up as objects of our motivated action (Gibson 1977) – in this way. But a stoop, a milk crate, a car hood, or a hammock, though none is designed as a chair, may all be taken up in the intentional act of sitting and so be perceived and engaged with as a chair. These are the affordances available in certain material forms, which may or may not be taken up in our practice, though the capacity for such uses must permit a 'fit' of material

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form and purposive action. By the same token, a Morris chair can serve as a bed in a reclining position, a storage space for a box of tax returns, an object of fetishized desire as an investment by a collector, or a pile of kindling if one is desperate enough for heat. Thus, sleeping, storing, investing, and burning might also be considered affordances of (certain types of) chairs; and none, few, or all of these might be found in the stoop or milk crate. In this way, affordances are capacities available in material form that, in many respects, remain quite indeterminate of the human activity that, nonetheless, requires these material conditions for specific actions. Materiality is not only a requisite *for* but also, perhaps, a manifestation *of* the actions intended to make use of it. In this sense, an affordance is not only a material potential, it is also a potential that can be *materialized* through our purposive action.

The notion of affordances, and its incorporation into anthropological and other analytical perspectives, has become associated (sometimes in tension, and sometimes in alignment) with Peircean semiotics. In particular, Peirce writes about the *potential* of certain signs, specifically qualisigns (Peirce 1932), whose capacity for signification lies in what he called an 'indefinite possibility' – a possibility which may then be grounded, or 'embodied', in a material form. Qualisigns can be taken up in processes of signification precisely because their sensory qualities are capacities, potentials, and possibilities that, once embodied in objects, events, or conventional signs (e.g. 'redness' in a Stop sign) which convey them, can permit a host of associations and configurations. Materialization is, thus, a necessary element in the signification of qualisigns, or qualia (Chumley & Harkness 2013; Keane 2003: 415).

In contrast to this perspective, Ingold has insisted that a focus on affordances is at odds with semiotics. Affordances, he holds, are unmediated and perceived unreflexively: '[W]e perceive things directly, as they come forward into presence and impinge on our activity, not indirectly through the signs they leave in their wake. Interpretation comes later' (Ingold 2018: 41). Ingold's work, of course, has been enormously influential in contemporary anthropology, especially as the field turns its attention to environmental concerns and a recognition of the devastating implications of anthropogenic climate change. The perspective I am developing here, though, does not see affordances either as 'intrinsic properties of objects in themselves, regardless of whether any living being is there to realize them', as in a so-called 'realist' view, or as only 'realized in the activity of a creature for which, or for whom, they are of consequence', as in the 'relational' view, according to the contrasting theories of affordance that Ingold describes (2018: 40). Rather, as I will demonstrate here, affordances are available for *transformation*. They are specifically forms of potential that permit the perceptible to be incorporated into wider 'projects' (cf. Keane 2018). The affordance of a material potential such as edibility, oiliness, or heaviness is never an unmediated quality of direct perception that may or may not be suited to a 'creature's' activities. Rather, the processes through which social actors are engaged in the world allow them to grasp the affordances of the world as open to possibilities; possibilities available to perception precisely because human engagement with the world (our projects) is always already informing our being-in-the-world.[2] Meaning does not merely come 'after the fact' of perception, for our perceptions are saturated with meanings.

If we see materiality as the embodiment of potential affordances, then it's possible to grasp how *innovation* emerges simultaneously within the terms of the conventional, standardized, and taken-for-granted aspects of activity – the affordances of everyday life; how *different* potentials might be incorporated into novel practices that nonetheless

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make use of the same material forms; and how the *foreclosure* of certain possibilities (the introduction of practices that de-emphasize, even inadvertently, the presence of specific qualities) under changing regimes and dispensations can all be seen as ways of tracking and assessing the force of historical transformations and the modes of consciousness they entail. Any number of works of social history attend to precisely these kinds of innovations, appropriations, and foreclosures (e.g. Burke 1996; Miller 1994; Schama 1988). To use the example already described, the self-same meatball can express economizing limit *and/or* excessive celebration in the very same material form, or the material form can change (from vegan *kofte* to beefy Italian-American icon) and nonetheless continue to embody the same sensory qualities.

What I would add to this discussion of affordances is a dimension of social practice that I think isn't quite captured simply by a focus on the array of possibilities available in a given form. My point, and it is especially relevant to discussions of food (but it is by no means a narrow concern), is that the way in which specific affordances, qualities, or attributes become codified and standardized in recognizable categories (again, what makes a *polpette* both a meatball and an expression of parsimonious hardship) depends upon preferences, judgements, and (we might say) tastes. Without these evaluative motivations, different affordances are merely possible descriptors for the world of things: 'that one's blue', 'that one's heavy', 'that one's bold', 'that one's shiny'. But what human orientations to their world depend upon beyond this process of sorting and reference is a way of making judgements stick. There are, for example, a nearly infinite array of ways of *not* using meat to prepare a dish that does not cost much, that uses readily available products, that maximizes the use of minimal resources, and is toothsome. But what makes any particular dish so delightful to some and so inadequate to others?

In order to see how these judgements are, as I've said, made to stick, it's vital to see that taste, judgements, discernment, are *evaluative*; and as values they are realized in the course of specific human engagements with the world. Transformations of affordances, realizations of material potential, are expressions of the values that orient the structuring and productivity of these sociocultural orders. This is a capacious process that many works in the anthropology of food, especially those concerned with its materiality, have noted. Paxson (2012), for example, draws attention to cheese as what she calls 'an unfinished commodity'. Artisanal cheese, as she ably demonstrates, is a 'lively' form that engages a recursive process of near-perpetual transformation, one that incorporates craft and labour, capital and landscape, ruminant livestock and micro-organisms. Each of these is a material condition whose potential is realized through its engagement and transformative relationships with the process as a totality. Similarly, West (2019; 2020) suggests the ways that debates about 'values' are critical to concerns for heritage and craft among the many artisanal cheesemakers with whom he works.[3] He reveals how the very materiality of cheese (the flavourful process of fermentation that is the 'managed decay' of milk) iconically embodies the tension between tradition and innovation, decline and renaissance, that is pervasive in the cheesemaking world. Further, Mol's (2021) recent work on the 'philosophical anthropology' of eating draws attention to the pluralist dimensions of the many putatively material forms considered 'food'. She aims to show (among other nuanced claims) how any reduction of eating to a 'natural' process concerned with (for example) nutrition, or health, or environmental impact is a form of hierarchization. These hierarchies untenably privilege 'the human' who elevates certain modes of doing (e.g. thinking, political action), in contrast to '*this*

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or *that* human' (Mol 2021: 102, original emphasis) who is eating – which is to say, living in *contact*, often absorption, with the world upon which our human capacities (being, knowing, doing, relating) depend. Her larger point, which resonates with my own, is that the particular qualities of any specific food, dish, or mode of eating (the sourness of a heritage apple, the rush of caffeinated coffee, the satiety of a snack of cheese and crackers) bring into the plurality of human experiences a plurality of materializations. In this way, eating is a generative process, incomplete, unrestrained by given conditions, and full of potential.

The present article is meant to make a contribution to these discussions in the anthropology of food, to demonstrate (as these works also do) the wider relevance of these dimensions of food and eating for anthropology as a whole. Most specifically, I use the received contrast of 'economizing' and 'excess' as a way to show how material characteristics of foodstuff are not simply 'there' in the substance itself, but come into being and experience through the complex, historically shifting ways in which people encounter food, one another, and themselves in acts of eating. An affordance, in this view, is a potential, but one that is only realized as a value, a characterization at once materialized and meaningful, that emerges in historically situated social practice. To explore such processes, I draw on ethnographic evidence about food preferences and practices from places that would certainly be characterized by extremely different social, historical, and economic circumstances: first, my work with banana and coffee farmers in Northwest Tanzania (from the late 1980s), and then my work with affluent farmers' market customers in central North Carolina in the 2010s.

Meat in pieces

While I've written extensively elsewhere about culinary matters in Northwest Tanzania (e.g. Weiss 1996; 2003), here I'll stick to a discussion of meat, or (more specifically) animal protein. The Bahaya farmers who live today in the Kagera region of Tanzania raise bananas (*ebitoke* – what we would more readily recognize as plantain) – as their staple food, and one they expect to be served at nearly every meal; as well as Robusta and (to a lesser extent) Arabica coffee (*amwani*) as a commodity product that, from the 1940s through the late 1980s, at least, provided most of the cash income for residents of these villages. The staple pot of boiled *ebitoke* is generally complemented at each meal with a condiment: a vegetable, or legume, cooked up in a pot (often, not always, the same one in which the *ebitoke* are cooked), usually creating a savoury gravy to be served along with the starchy dish. As part of this condiment (in Kiswahili and Ouhaya, *mchuzi*), there is occasionally some meat.

Bahaya villages are spread out over the volcanic rifts adjacent to and above Lake Victoria, and there is often fish for purchase, even in communities that are quite far from the lake. The market in fish allows for many increments of purchase, from the entire catch of one crew's expedition, to a single piece of fish (usually *sangala*, the invasive Nile perch) smoked or fried, so the range of people making some money in the fish trade is quite vast. Smoked fillets of fish can be shredded and stirred into a thick *mchuzi* of tomato and onions and ever-present beans to be served, usually to a family, or within a household, alongside a pot of the evening's *ebitoke*. But much more frequently, in the 1980s at least, you could find households with a pot of boiling oil being tended by young people in front of their family home, frying up fish to be sold by the individual fillet for about 10¢ a piece. Sometimes this piece would be wrapped and taken home for the household meal. But my friends and neighbours also told me that fried fish was exactly

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the sort of thing a person wanted to eat after a heavy session of drinking. So it was quite common to find fish being fried in the vicinity of the houses where home-brewed *olubisi* (banana beer) or *enkonyagi* (the much higher-proof spirit distilled from it) was being sold, and individuals would buy a piece of fish and consume it right on the spot.

Fish was probably the most pervasive, accessible, and affordable animal protein available in Kagera in those days. Another option included chicken, invariably slaughtered just before being stewed for an evening meal – which meant chicken was rather rarely eaten, as it required a sizeable group of people to eat all of it in a single sitting. Some older men still held that women were prohibited from eating chicken; the point was essentially moot because there weren't that many chickens around for eating. Indeed, a whole chicken cost about $3, far more that most families could afford, even for a special occasion. Many of the kids in my neighbourhood who were not yet teenagers told me they had never eaten chicken, but looked forward to it someday.

I bring up these two examples (fish and chicken, one widely consumed the other far less so) primarily because they demonstrate an important feature of the larger problem of the relationship between economizing/frugality, material form, and signification, and that is the issue of increment. When we consider the affordances of an object (perhaps especially a foodstuff) from the perspective of its potential frugality, we are asking about how this material good or substance can be rendered in increments. The ethnographic evidence here suggests quite different incremental affordances, quite literally different ways to slice up reality. As a *substance*, either 'fish' or 'chicken' can be stretched nearly infinitely: smoked or stewed, the meat from either animal can be shared among a theoretically limitless crowd of eaters, even if the portions become infinitesimally small (or perhaps just a flavouring that can hardly be eaten as 'meat', e.g. as fish or chicken broth). Of course, both animals have to be considered as whole animals when thinking about them as 'meat' – a fish or a chicken (spoiler alert!) has to be killed before being consumed. But here's where the problem of affordance and parsimony becomes more complicated. A fish in Kagera can be sliced into fillets, perhaps into quite small ones, and parcelled out (and notably *sold*) to a group of separate consumers. Alternatively, the entire thing can be smoked and then used to flavour a stew; or the entire fish can be stewed to feed a household. A fish, then, lends itself to consumption by a series of individuals; a set of different households sharing pieces of prepared fish; or a single household eating an entire fish. In Kagera, this is simply never possible for a chicken. Of course, it is *possible* to cut a chicken into small pieces, cook them up in some way (smoking and frying come to mind, just like a Nile perch), and sell them to individual customers for immediate consumption, or perhaps adding to the family stew pot. But no one would ever think of doing this in Buhaya. In fact, one of the reasons I know this is because I did just this once when I was gifted a chicken. I had the bird cut up into pieces and then fried it in oil so that it could be widely shared with people in our household, as well as beyond it. Aside from the fact that the cooks of the house had a hard time figuring out how to fry a chicken, the eaters I welcomed commented on the difficulty of eating chicken this way; it was a novelty, but not something anyone found especially tasty.[4]

A chicken *can* be cut into individual pieces and widely distributed, but these material possibilities (these affordances) are foreclosed by the fact that chicken *is* only served up when an entire bird is slaughtered and prepared for a collective group – perhaps a very large group, each member of which will enjoy only a small bit of chicken. Why is a fish subject to such different incremental units, or portions, while a chicken is never

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portioned out for diverse individuals or groups to consume? Let me point out first of all that the reasons cannot be the material differences of fish and chicken alone. As forms of 'meat', each is highly perishable, but each *could* also be transformed through the proper technique (probably smoking) into a foodstuff that could be portioned out, shared, or saved for multiple family meals – which is routinely the case for fish. Chicken, however, is a *prestige* food; it is always associated in Haya communities not just with the means to purchase it (indeed, people who raise hens for eggs are probably the mostly likely to consume a culled bird), but also with the restrictions on the group that eats it. As I noted above, some men still feel chicken should be prohibited to women and children. It comes with a history of restriction built into its consumption – a restriction that is reinforced by the fact that chicken is consumed by a delimited group, typically a household, and not divided up for sharing in ever smaller portions. This technique assures that chicken retains its prestige, while fish, to the contrary, is thought of as food of some degree of hardship.[5]

Note, as well, that while chicken is 'expensive' and fish is 'cheap', it's fish that is much more widely associated with commerce. Indeed, the ways that fish is transformed into various incremental portions generates precisely the potential to transform a single fish into opportunities for multiple sales – so much so, in fact, that someone might actually earn more money from an entire 'cheap' fish, perhaps through the aggregate sale of fried fish slices, than from a whole (undoubtedly living) 'expensive' chicken. The 'economizing' character of fish, then, is in some measure the *product* of the ways that it is transformed into increments for multiple monetary transactions, and sold to consumers as a 'cheap' food (perhaps even a very cheap, if somewhat small, meal). A chicken, by contrast, remains whole, sold only once as a unit, and cannot, in sociocultural terms, be readily converted into incremental portions. This is part of what allows chicken to retain its status as a food (in terms I'm spelling out here) of 'excess' – for even when it is converted into a soup and a very small bit of flesh dispersed among a large crowd, chicken is a delightful treat. Dishes, then, suggest 'economizing' or 'excess', not because of fundamentally different material affordances in the meat, but because these qualities are *materialized* in the transformation (production, preparation, and consumption) in accordance with their relative (social and culinary) *value*.

Increment, substance, preference

I've dwelt on these sociomaterial characteristics of fish and chicken in Kagera because they reveal the complexities of the nexus between economy (economizing or excess), materiality, and affordance. The ways that increments are established, as demonstrated in these examples, prove to be crucial to the problem of 'prodigality', as resources are both saved and squandered by means of the production of variable increments of consumption (in the case of food) or expenditure (in the case of other commodities). These increments, though, are not reducible to the material form of the object, or even of the substance ('meat') that is portioned; but, once it is established, the increment shapes the affordances of the social form of the good that circulates. In this case, a fillet of fried fish is not a whole, living chicken and these two forms generate very different sociocultural affordances – and materialize quite different modes of sociality and taste – for the final process of consumption. Let me elaborate on this process in order to look at its further implications, specifically in order to try to understand how increments, economizing, and excess are entangled in particular foods – but also in social practice more generally.

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Beef is generally available across Kagera, as well, and it's eaten with some frequency (perhaps a few times a month in my limited 1989 survey) in most households. As with so many pastoral communities across Eastern, Central, and Southern Africa, the control of cattle has long been closely associated with the control of social relations (Comaroff & Comaroff 1990; Evans-Pritchard 1940; Ferguson 1985; Hutchinson 1996; Lienhardt 1961). To this day, most Bahaya do *not* have access to cattle; but because cattle are no longer exclusively associated with bridewealth, or royal patronage and tribute, as once was the case, beef is available because cattle can be readily converted into meat in most of the region.

Most rural Haya live within a few miles of a butcher's shop, typically a small kiosk run by a butcher, or butchers (*wachinjaji*), who purchase, slaughter, and sell beef to their customers. In the small town centre near the village where I lived in the 1980s, beef was sold twice a week, and on holidays (Christmas, Easter, and – in a few places – Eid al-Fitr). I also saw entire bulls consumed, but only on the very rare occasion of a wedding party that had a large number of guests. Customers who want to buy beef would go to the butchery and ask for a set amount, often a half kilo for a household. A kilo of beef sold for about 200/= in 1989, or $1, not a luxurious purchase, but not an everyday provision, either. What I found especially interesting about beef was the way it was priced. There were really no distinguishable 'cuts' of the animal offered, although certainly different kinds of flesh were proffered, but all of it was priced identically, 200/= per kilo. Beef that had bone fragments, offal like tripe and liver, pieces cut from a shoulder, leg, or diaphragm – all were identical from the point of view of price. So it was quite literally impossible to 'economize' by buying 'lesser cuts' of beef, or parcels of meat that might be stretched, or cooked in such a way as to permit them to be saved, or shared more or less generously. In Buhaya, beef for domestic consumption – and in rural areas, it was all for domestic consumption – was sold at the same price and prepared in the same way: stewed. Sometimes with beans, sometimes with tomatoes, or onions, or greens, but always stewed. There were no methods for roasting beef,[6] no slowly braised shanks or briskets, no succulent bits for a quick sautée. All beef was stewed – or, in the vernacular, 'boiled' (*okutagata* in Oluhaya, or *kuchamka* in Kiswahili).

Now this may seem like an impoverished culinary practice, one single technique for cooking all parts of an animal, in effect treating 'beef' rather like a uniform substance of indistinguishable components. But this was not actually the case at all. Haya men and women readily distinguish between different parts of livestock, both beef and goat, and have preferences for certain pieces, and make aesthetic and other claims about these components. For example, whenever I would purchase beef, the butcher made a small joke out of giving me 'steak', which in this case simply meant a single piece of flesh without bones or other viscera in it. Sometimes this was cut from a shoulder, sometimes from the belly, nothing ever from the loin (which is too close to the spinal column to easily be trimmed out bonelessly with a machete, as was the prevailing method for cutting meat); but so long it was a single, homogeneous mass, it was 'steak' – which the butcher presumed I preferred since the very category of 'steak' was available only via the English loanword 'steak'! At the same time, many people expressed a preference for the meat adjacent to the viscera – from the diaphragm, or what we might think of as 'brisket', because it had a lot of visible fat in it, and this would make the meat 'sweeter'. Similarly, many preferred meat from the ribs, including meat with large bone fragments in it, because the bone itself might have 'soft' marrow in it, and the meat near the bone once stewed become especially 'juicy' in the view of many I spoke with. For

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similar reasons, most Haya beef customers made sure they got some tripe – or 'stomach' (*eibunda* in Oluhaya; *tumbo* in Kiswahili) – with their order. This was especially prized by most people I spoke with because this offal was held to be especially 'soft', and the transformation of 'tough', 'bitter' flesh into 'soft', 'sweet' meat was held by many to be the entire point and pleasure of cooking and eating beef.

Children and older people were said to be especially fond of such 'soft' meat. Moreover, other varieties of offal were often prized for very specific reasons. Liver, for example, as a dark red organ, was thought to 'increase blood' – a general potency of all flesh consumption, and a health benefit amplified by eating dark offal. The heart was equally prized for the same reasons. The larger point here is that a host of aesthetic and health benefits attended to the various pieces of the bovine form available at the butcher's – Haya expressed an elaborate, and in some ways standardized, set of judgements and preferences; and yet this did not imply a difference in price or cost. Beef was, in effect, a modest extravagance, but could also be a mode of economizing that satisfied a range of different tastes and inclinations.[7] Again, these were material possibilities of beef, but they could in no way be determined by either the economic characteristics (which were, in any case, identical for all parts of the animal) or the material properties of this flesh. Economizing and excess are clearly not motivated by the constraints imposed or facilitated by the material character of the resources; rather they seem imposed upon them as techniques of preparation, distribution, sociality, and ultimately consumption.

I should also point out Haya people certainly did have notions of foods that were preferred, or prestigious, and foods that were consumed under duress. Everyone knew that cassava was planted as a failsafe against drought (as it was across much of East and Central Africa: Nweke, Spencer & Lynam 2002), and was only eaten for a meal as a food of hardship: *kwa shida*. Similarly, certain foods, notably specific kinds of plantain, were reserved for honoured guests, characteristically one's in-laws, as evidence of a household's generosity and self-sufficiency. But there was no sense either of 'making do' or 'luxury' in cuisine. Every home had access to some kind of prestige food, and each prepared for the worst with alternatives to bananas should they become less available. No one, though, purposefully thought of stretching a portion of this staple by thinning it into a gruel, or soup, or of adding water to a pot of boiling beans to feed an expanding crowd; quite the contrary, a meal was always thought of as a way to suggest a limitless amount of available food. Even to note that a portion was excessive (let alone complaining that it might be miserly) was to invite ruination through the mere suggestion that there might be some *limit* to the amount of food available (Weiss 1996: 92). In my experience, this could never be done.

These preferences for different kinds of meat, its distinct preparations, and its characteristic modes of consumption in Kagera of the 1980s confirm my claim that the affordances of meat are less material dimensions of animal flesh than they are potentialities available for its transformation into food that bears desirable tastes. What is more, this process of transformation is motivated by what can be called the 'projects' of the Haya men and women engaged with food in these ways. These projects can be seen as expressions of, and motivated by, a specific set of values that inform wider Haya practice and relations. The incremental form of fish slices, their commodification, their association with individual consumers and their contingent states of sobriety; the contrast with 'prized' chicken, always meant for a crowd, almost infinitely divisible into portions through sharing and rendering as soup; beef priced

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and portioned to serve a household where all can share in the 'treat' it creates – each of these practices is an expression of Haya commitments to the notion that the household is an indivisible whole. This value of totalization is typically expressed in food production and provisioning (processes I discuss in great detail in Weiss 1996). In effect, households attempt to establish and demonstrate their viability as social forms by assuring internal sufficiency, abundance in the food they provide ('feeding' is an act of both hierarchy and magnanimity), and this is contrasted with external activities of individuation and commodification where the cost of every meal (like every slice of fish) must be calculated. Thus, the tastes I've described here *materialize* the values of household viability within the historical transformation of the region, as commodity forms, price, and market transactions. In this way, the affordances of 'animal flesh' are transformed through the social and cultural projects that materialize distinctive food judgements and preferences.

The excesses of local food

It might seem that the hierarchies of class and the dictates of a contemporary cultural commitment to 'ethical consumption' such as one can expect to find among the customers at American farmers' markets would generate a materialization of values and tastes quite different from those just described for rural Northwest Tanzania. And in many respects, this is true. At the same time, it is not clear how these tastes are organized, how they change, and how the particular character of these hierarchies and values are expressed in food. In my work in the Piedmont of North Carolina looking at pasture-raised pork production and consumption (Weiss 2016), I examine the making and marketing of such meat as a lens through which to consider the sociocultural implications of contemporary food movements, and the broader project to create what many would call an 'alternative food system'. I describe, in particular, how commitments to a specific concern – namely 'authenticity' (hence, 'Real Pigs') – organize and express an array of social and material forms and practices: from an interest in 'heritage' rooted in places among itinerant North Carolina consumers, to the tasty qualities of pork and fat that express the vitality of the 'healthy' animals from which they come, as well as the putatively 'natural' and 'local' agricultural practices that produce them. In short, political aspirations and culinary connoisseurship are conjoined in a commitment to local, vital, heritage pork.

At the same time, a taste for such pork is, as I have demonstrated, also dependent on inculcating a capacity for discernment (Grasseni 2004; Weiss 2011). Consumers, in the view of many advocates (farmers, butchers, and the like), must, it is often said, be taught to appreciate the quality of, say, extra fatty bacon, bright pink pork chops, or well-aged prosciutto. What such discernment makes clear is not only the work that goes into generating such sensibilities as *terroir*, the understanding that place can be expressed in taste, but also the claim that not all pork is created equal. And this is expressed not only in the substantial price differential between farmers' market and grocery store pork, but also by the way that specific cuts of the pig are especially esteemed in this market sector. In many ways, these cuts are taken to be icons of the alternative system itself: animal flesh that might be bypassed in a grocery store becomes privileged under the snout-to-tail ethos. It is this differentiation *within* the pig that touches upon the themes of materiality and its affordances and its connection to economizing and extravagance in cuisine (and beyond). As I've noted above, the ethos of those committed to an alternative food system – commitments exemplified by many chefs in this region and

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others where such movements as Slow Food are celebrated – urges diners to see the value in adopting an economizing perspective to their cuisine and consumption. We can now praise the virtues of using every scrap of the beast – or, as is said, 'respecting the life' of the animal that gave its all for our enjoyment (Weiss 2016: 176) – both as a recognition of the 'old ways' of frugal cooking *and* as an opportunity to develop exquisite kitchen technique and consummate discernment. It should go without saying that all of this generally comes with a hefty price tag.

One of the main, purportedly material qualities of meat that is held to be a source of both difference in price-point and distinction in taste (usually offered up as a parallel set of differences in discerning consumers) is the contrast between 'toughness' and 'tenderness'. Put simply, 'tough' cuts of meat come from muscles of an animal that are used for weight bearing, and consequently become overworked and durable. A pork butt or a chuck roast from a cow are both quintessentially tough cuts of meat (and they are both cuts from the shoulder of the beast). Tough cuts are cheaper, and they require very different cooking techniques in order to make them toothsome; tender cuts are easy to cook quickly to yield readily portioned and melting meat. Characteristically, the 'cheap', tougher cuts of meat are held to lend themselves to an economizing cuisine. A whole pork butt, for example, can be a six- to eight-pound piece of meat, usually fatty, full of connective tissue, bone, and a tangle of different muscles. To render this cut edible it must usually be cooked at a rather low heat – either by smoking (barbecuing, as we say in North Carolina), simmering, or braising – for several hours. This causes the sinew and collagen to render down, the juices from the meat to be released (which usually contributes to, and thereby extends, the finished dish), and the meat to break apart into tenderized shreds. Toughness is thus transformed into tenderness by the careful cook.

Again, this kind of cooking is typically associated with an economizing cuisine – and, indeed many of the chefs with whom I worked in the region described it in just such terms. One chef, who runs a very successful farm-to-fork restaurant in Carrboro, told me that his grandmother would be surprised to see him offering so much pork shoulder in a 'fancy' restaurant because braised or barbecued pork was so strongly associated with the food she ate during the Depression: humble, simple, and meant to be eaten as part of a family meal over many days. But this account confirms that 'economizing' is not simply a feature of the materiality of the meat itself. A tough cut may be cheaper, but preparing it in a way that makes it available as a meal that can be consumed over time depends upon cooking techniques and wider forms of cuisine that demand an array of skills;[8] as well as a recognition of 'toughness' as a quality that lends itself to transformation. Moreover, the fact that this chef of an upscale restaurant *does* serve slowly braised pork shoulder, and that such cuts of meat are mainstays of farmers' market sales across the region, also shows the closely connected relationship between 'economizing' and 'extravagance'. Indeed, economizing can readily be converted into a form and a sign of *discernment*, as the form, taste, and ethos of transforming tough cuts into tenderized meals (recuperating dishes like pork shank, beef ribs, chuck roast, and pork belly) has become a staple feature of affluent consumption in farm-to-fork dining (Weiss 2011). The desirability of these cuts is, further, something that contemporary consumers often require instruction in how to prepare, a form of insider knowledge that further enhances the discerning characteristics of these meats, and these tastes. Here, 'economizing' – which may be quite pricey – serves as a basis for presenting the virtues of a regional heritage of 'homely' meals served by careful and calculating cooks offering up the product of their skills for hardworking, hungry eaters. The tough cuts in

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a farm-to-fork context thus become both Peirceian icons (embodiments) and indexes (points of reference) of the virtuous character of homespun contexts, symbolic forms for which today's customer is willing to pay a significant price, thereby also allowing them to indulge in the fatty, rich, unctuous meat of what is usually a festive occasion. Such economizing potential thereby generates a performance of excess. Moreover, this North Carolina example not only confirms that economizing serves as a kind of iconic-indexical foundation for extravagance, it further reveals how the affordances of the material world (here, a cow or a pig) are available for transformation in accordance with the wider projects and values of the community that perceives these potentials. Thus, the 'fatty' cuts, the 'tough' hams and shoulders, and the 'hearty' and 'homely' tastes they generate are all ramified into a wider range of practices and relations aimed at cultivating the *values* of 'artisanship', 'authenticity', and 'discernment' in an alternative food system.

Conclusion

The comparison that I've offered here between the culinary preferences of rural farmers in Tanzanian villages and the alternative food scene of affluent consumers and chefs in contemporary North Carolina (and beyond) is one that has often be described in evolutionary (if perhaps historical) terms. Indeed, the relationship that I'm describing between economizing and excess has typically been addressed as a point of contrast in this evolution. Mennell (1987), for example, holds that the 'Civilizing Process' depends principally on a transition from quantity to quality, on a restraint of the appetite such that restricting one's intake of a sheer volume of food in accordance with an ever greater refinement of taste became a way of distinguishing between those with greater and lesser social power. 'When the possibilities of quantitative consumption for the expression of social superiority had been exhausted', he writes, 'the qualitative possibilities were inexhaustible' (Mennell 1987: 389). Thus, discernment in taste of the kind that I've described here comes to supplant an interest in the mere volume of food consumed. (Apparently, says, Mennell, because once everyone is food secure, human physiology provides a fixed outer limit on how much food we can eat.)

Conversely, Mintz (1986) holds that the transition to a 'modern' (decidedly *not* civilized) diet has been marked by an economizing homogeneity ushered in by the strictures of capitalist labour. Most specifically, what the mass production of Caribbean sugar made possible, Mintz tells us, was the transformation of the British working-class diet from one built around time-consuming meals of grains and legumes complemented, if meagrely, by meat, to one in which time-saving sugar permitted all manner of food (a hot pot of tea, most specifically) to be transformed into a calorie delivery device for hard-working labourers, and the undernourished wives and daughters doing the work of domestic provisioning. Sugar, for Mintz, virtually created and materialized poverty, and thus promoted new modes of parsimonious consumption premised on time-saving, calorie provisioning, and comestible rationing.

What should be clear, by contrast, is that the Bahaya communities and the contemporary Americans I have discussed do not live in distinct historical eras; rather each inhabits a 'modern' world, albeit within quite different social, economic, historical, and cultural contexts. Moreover, I have demonstrated that some form of discernment underwrites *all* of the culinary practices characteristic of these actors. In Kagera, avid eaters have very specific ideas about the pleasures and health benefits of all manner of produce and meat, none of which is reducible to quantitative dependencies. And

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discernment itself is very much a prized currency, a core value in contemporary American food activists and foodies. Here 'quality' is not simply a matter of price, fetishized commodity forms, or sumptuary restriction; rather it's a matter of cultivated, learned tastes. This is a process that shapes producers' actions (who must, after all, 'educate' their customers to develop a desire, for example, for pork shanks and flat iron steaks); chefs marketing their ethical commitments to food reform as well as culinary technique; and consumers eager to both innovate and indulge in the nostalgic reveries of 'real food'.

In no simple sense are the possibilities of economizing parsimony and excessive indulgence limited by the material affordances of the meats in questions. In all of the cases I have described, some process of judgement (a project) that extends beyond the obligation to 'make do' is required to determine how any kind of comestible product will be processed and consumed. The increment of the food – from pieces of fish fried for individual consumers, to a whole-hog barbecue for a family reunion (indispensable across Eastern North Carolina) – can be used to express a range of values, but these are often contradictory or polyvalent. As I've noted, a cheap piece of fried fish may make a tidy income to supplement a farmer's household – even as it satiates someone who's spent a bit too much time and money in an afternoon of binge drinking. A whole hog, on the other hand, may be a somewhat pricey capital outlay for a butchered and 'dressed' (i.e. eviscerated) pig costing over $500; a greasy caloric indulgence and the quintessence of a festival food; but also a cheap way to feed a crowd on a per capita basis, loaded with tough cuts of hog tenderized by smoking and stretched out with the requisite sides. (Take the mac and cheese, trust me.)

In her compelling examination of food in Cuba, Garth (2020) shows how 'food insecurity' is an inadequate analytical category to capture the challenges of people who seek not simply *enough* to eat (which is never an issue) but a 'decent meal' (see also Garth 2019). A compelling illustration of this struggle is found in her discussion of Alonzo's efforts to make a 'real' *ensalada fría* (Garth 2019: 431-3). This dish, a macaroni salad laden with mayonnaise, cheese, pineapple (perhaps olives), and pork, is *de rigueur* at Cuban birthday parties. This festive, rich, and extravagant dish is best made with a pig's head, both because this makes it a 'real Cuban dish', and because the meat from the head can be extended over many meals. But with no pig's heads available, Alonzo offers up a meatless version of the *ensalada,* deciding that a small piece of ham (cheaper than a whole pig's head, but not 'economical' because it cannot be extended for other meals) '*no valen la pena*', isn't worth the trouble. Here, again, economizing and excess are bound *together*, if in a distinct configuration in a historically specific repast: a starchy, commodified pasta, mixed with fatty mayonnaise and pork, seasoned with sweet, 'local' pineapple – a hearty dish for a ravenous crowd, as well as a festive food that should be made the proper way to express its 'authenticity' and 'dignity'. It makes little sense to 'explain' such meals in terms of 'either' their econometric constraints or their extravagance.

Cuban *ensalada fría*, like the examples I've offered, demonstrates that we should be paying ethnographic attention precisely to this (and of course many other) configuration of these possibilities – how *do* the cheap and the indulgent serve as affordances of one another? Excess can be performed as economizing (waygyu beef, foie gras, and a carefully fermented brioche in a slider rather than beef Wellington) and economizing made to serve excess (substitute salmon roe for caviar on your canapé). Economizing and excess, clearly, are not the *only* relevant dimensions of any cuisine.

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The qualities of nutritious or unhealthy, innovative or traditional, ascetic restraint or carnivalesque indulgence are frequently culinary categories. Drawing attention as I have here to this taken-for-granted contrast only illustrates a pattern that can surely be applied more broadly to other aspects of cuisine (to say nothing of forms of cultural production similarly subject to such reductive categorical contrasts). In our embrace of 'materiality' in the human sciences, we have too readily brought prevalent *ideological* assumptions about 'matter' to the fore – as though thrift, restraint, and limit 'really' concerned the material, while decadence, opulence, and voracity were denials of it. If, instead, we see *materialization* as an inevitable dimension of social interaction, evaluation (or taste), and discernment, we can avoid the ready-to-hand bifurcations and evolutionistic assumptions (quantity vs quality, necessity vs choice, parsimony vs extravagance – in sum, economizing vs excess) that continue to haunt our understanding of social and cultural practices, culinary and otherwise.

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NOTES

[1] I should note that I do not mean to equate 'economizing' with 'economy'. Indeed, I consider the work I'm presenting here as evidence of the way that an economy is, among other things, an organization and realization of specific values, a process that can be extravagant, luxurious, generous, or parsimonious. 'Economizing' in the utilitarian sense I'm using it throughout this article refers both to a tendency towards frugality and to the theoretical assumption that such a tendency motivates the material form of sociocultural practices like eating a meal.

[2] Indeed, Ingold himself proposes such a process, suggesting we can bring perception and 'imagination' 'together, in a single creative movement' (2018: 43). But he poses such a process as a *synthesis* of fundamentally different sub-processes. I am suggesting that there is no perception without imagination and no imagination unmoored from perception.

[3] See also Sutton's (2014) work on Greek everyday life and forms of cooking innovation amid tradition.

[4] White's (2011) essay on the differences between 'chickens of Whiteness' and 'chickens of Zuluness' similarly points to the ways that portioning and serving different chickens (not a relevant distinction in Kagera of the 1980s) demonstrate very distinct modes of sociality and social distinction. The Zulu case, like this Haya example, marks a point of significant contrast with Striffler's (2005) work, where chicken is shown to be the very icon of industrial food production precisely because it is so readily transformed into myriad bits and pieces for distributed consumption.

[5] Some etymologies suggest that the term '-*haya*' refers to 'fisher people', which was a derogatory term among the more powerful Ganda and Ankole kingdoms to whom the Bahaya are historically related.

[6] Roasted beef is a popular treat across urban Tanzania, where it is served as *nayama choma*, but it was never prepared this way in Haya villages.

[7] Boiling up meat to point of softness produced a great deal of flavourful 'soup' and easily partible meat for very wide sharing – thus the common order of half a kilo, regardless of the household.

[8] The classic 'meat-and-three' of the Southern diner is a great exemplar of the 'main dish' supplemented by voluminous quantities of vegetables, which are also cooked as slow-braised accompaniments to meat prepared in the same way, perhaps even in the same pot.

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Cuisiner à l'économie, cuisiner à l'excès : matérialisation de la valeur dans la pratique culinaire

Résumé

Les pratiques culinaires sont souvent interprétées comme manifestant une recherche « d'économie » (par l'utilisation frugale des ressources disponibles) ou « d'excès » (par la dépense festive de ressources à des fins symboliques). Le présent article utilise ces catégories pour interroger plus généralement les hypothèses analytiques relatives au matérialisme. À partir d'une recherche ethnographique menée en Tanzanie rurale et dans une banlieue contemporaine des États-Unis, il avance que divers aspects du discernement, du goût et des préférences ne sont pas déterminés par les disponibilités (*affordances*) matérielles des aliments, mais que ce sont plutôt ces jugements qui peuvent être matérialisés dans la pratique sociale et culturelle.

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