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## **I want to be good food for others: care, food-chains and being prey**

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### **Bio**

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## **I want to be good food for others: care, food-chains and being prey**

### **Abstract**

This article involves thinking with toxics and food chains, and complex systems, and where do all the chemicals and heavy metals go? What are the distributed effects? How might we hack legacies of toxic inheritance? What alternative rituals, practices and values are needed? It uses the theoretical tools of feminist environmental humanities to explore the question: what does it mean to be good food for others? Through engagement with different artworks—Karin Bolender's art project *R. A. W. Assmilk Soap*, Miriam Simun's *the Lady Cheese Shop*, Natalie Jeremijenko's *Cross(x)Species Adventure Club* and Jae Rhim Lee's *Infinity Burial Project*—alongside and through feminist environmental humanities, this article explores the ways in which artists complicate death/food relations and nourishment through their express acknowledgement of chemically burdened bodies. In grappling for ways to respond in permanently polluted worlds, the analytic device of viewing humans as “being prey,” via Val Plumwood, alongside feminist ethics of care, is used to imagine what Maria Puig de la Bellacasa refers to as “more caring affective ecologies.” Speculating on becoming prey and wanting to be good food for others—whether this is for a crocodile, fish, mushrooms or microbes in the soil—cuts into contemporary theories of toxicity and care.

Keywords: care; prey; toxic embodiment; feminist environmental humanities, art

### ***Interlude one***

*It started with skin rashes, mainly around my mouth. I was given a diagnosis of perioral dermatitis and prescribed various creams. Insomnia followed, accompanied by brain fog. I found hair accumulating more rapidly in my hairbrush, down the shower drain, strands caught between my fingers after running them through my hair. Alongside, fatigue, irritability, and increasing anxiety. Then an instance, standing in a living room with a ringing in my ears, tightness across my chest, breath now shallow. The sense of my throat closing, closing inwards. Heart racing, a strong desire to run, and yet a sense I can't move. Thinking: might I die? I made it to the closest emergency clinic where the physician told me I was having a panic attack.*

*Subsequently, after visiting various medical specialists and running multiple tests, in 2015 I received blood test results that indicated I had mercury circulating through my body above the stated high exposure range, a possible catalyst for the symptoms experienced. Hair mineral analysis also confirmed these results—predominantly a measure of methylmercury (organic mercury) exposure. A possible explanation for the symptoms I was having?*

### **Becoming toxic**

Taking my implications in, and complicities with, food chains and toxics as a starting point, this article uses the theoretical tools of feminist environmental humanities to explore the question: what does it mean to be good food for others? It enquires into the ethics and obligations involved in consuming and being consumed, but rather than focusing specifically on toxic molecules (such as mercury) and their impacts (such as my panic attack) as the key site of harm, this article animates toxicity as a means of focusing on multispecies relations and concomitant infrastructures of power produced within enduringly toxic worlds (Liboiron et al. 2018). In personally grappling with toxics, asking what does it mean to be good food is also a means of asking “what to do?” In searching for practices that move beyond critique, I turn to artists who are experimenting with speculative acts of care centred around eating with multispecies others, including prospects of being eaten—of becoming prey. These creative practices of multispecies performance art begin to address the question: what does it mean to be good food for others?

Multispecies performance art “examines the enmeshment of human existence and responsibility with other species and the more-than-human world” (Tiainen 2017, 359). Various artists are working in the space of performative food art events to critique existing practices and open up questions of how things might be otherwise (see Kirksey 2014), including ones engaged specifically with questions of pollution. For example, Mel Chin’s *Revival Field* (1990-) in Minnesota carefully selects plant species that accumulate toxics from the soil to remediate the landscape. And, *Free Range Grain* (2003-4) by Critical Art Ensemble, Beatriz da Costa and Shyh-Shiun employed tools from molecular biology to check if everyday food was genetically modified (for example, to withstand toxic weed killers, like glyphosate) when not necessarily labelled as such. However, of interest to my argument are *multispecies* performance pieces by the three artists Karin Bolender, Natalie Jermijenko and Jae Rhim Lee. Each specifically engage with interspecies eating, putting humans in the food chain. And simultaneously address toxics in the food web, differently articulately ways of

being prey with other animals. The art performances in this article are chosen not for their capacity to generate controversy, nor power to turn the *slow violence* (Nixon 2011) of pollution into a spectacle, but on the politics of care and ethical relations they foster. In polluted ecologies, they seek and demonstrate practices that can “challenge modes of politics that rest on dominant evidentiary representations of harm, and explore less celebrated modes of activism to collectively argue for multiple concepts of toxic politics [...]” (Liboiron et al. 2018, 333).

I begin with Karin Bolender’s art project *R. A. W. Assmilk Soap* and draw on Val Plumwood’s (1995) analytic of “being prey”—of conceiving of oneself in the mouth of a crocodile, rather than having a reptile served up on your plate. This analytic is firmly embedded in legacies of feminist environmental humanities (see Hamilton and Neimanis 2018), that critique the human/nature dualisms—what Plumwood (1993, 42) refers to as the “mutually reinforcing dualisms” of oppression in the Global North. Dualisms, such as male/female, mind/body and civilized/primitive. In this paper, I connect this directly to a sense of mastery over the food chain that “being prey” critiques. I also build on feminist toxic embodiment scholarship that highlights the porousness of multispecies bodies and uneven exchange of pollutants, to bring the idea of “being prey” to literatures of bioaccumulation and toxicity.

To thicken engagement in ethics and obligations of toxicity and being good food, I also draw on the work of Maria Puig de la Bellacasa (2017) to integrate a feminist ethics of care, arguing for speculative and situated practices of care. In which care is positioned as “a vital affective state, an ethical obligation and a practical labor” (2011, 90). In her work on care, Puig de la Bellacasa encourages us to engage “with our own complicities in a creative way” (2018, 274). She argues that this “can be more productive than a defensive stance” (274). Reflections on care are yoked with Miriam Simun’s *the Lady Cheese Shop*, Natalie Jeremijenko’s *Cross(x)Species Adventure Club* and finally Jae Rhim Lee’s *Infinity Burial Project*. I use both artworks as a way to speculate on practices of being prey, during eating and after death, and the specific obligations of being good food. This is not to moralise, but to promote “collective ventures of ethical doing contingently embedded in the situated relationalities that are the driving force of being” (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2009, 312). By turning to artworks, in addition to bridging human-non-human divides and integrating a

feminist ethics of care, this article also contributes to emerging feminist research on interspecies performance art and toxics.

At this point it is useful to distinguish between toxins and toxicants when we talk about toxicity and harm. Toxins, although harmful, are formed within organs or living cells. Whereas toxicants are synthetic, with scales, intensity and life-spans beyond toxins. This is important, for as Liboiron (2017, n.p.) states, “when we accidentally call toxicants ‘toxins,’ we are also accidentally naturalizing and depoliticizing industrially-produced chemicals and their politics.” In a reworking of Douglas’s (1984, 36) distinction of harm as entailing “two conditions: a set of ordered relations and a contravention of that order,” Liboiron et al. (2018, 335) usefully define toxic harm, as “more than just the contravention of an established order within a system, toxic harm can be understood as the contravention of order at one scale and the reproduction of order at another.” They provide the example of how “chronic low levels of arsenic in water interrupt the reproduction of fish, but maintain the ability of mining companies to store mining tailings in open air mounds.” Following Liboiron et al. (2018, 336) “toxicity is a way to focus on how forms of life and their constituent relations, from the scale of cells to cultures, are enabled, constrained, and extinguished within broader power systems.” In this way, toxicity is not a fixed state, nor category, but situated and reproductive of forms of life. This article investigates how this toxic reproduction is examined through performance art pieces that refuse simple solutions and hold onto tensions and ambivalences through feminist ethics of care.

### **Interlude two**

*Was the accumulation of mercury from the fish I’ve eaten? The air I was breathing? What levels was I born with? What did I inherit from my mother’s milk? What about that fluorescent bulb I broke four years ago? My amalgam fillings? Cosmetics? The hepatitis B vaccines I had in 2014?*

### **Multispecies entanglements**

In the summer of 2002 the artist-researcher Karin Bolender, and a pregnant American Spotted Ass named Aliass, set out on a seven-week journey from Mississippi to Virginia. Together they travelled, companions walking with each other, and in various ways caring for each other. In describing her original intentions of this multispecies performance art project Bolender (2018, 134) writes, “I initially set out with Aliass to make ‘untold stories’—or

rather, to deliberately inhabit the meshes of always-unfolding events, exchanges, and becomings that comprise the flow of lives in every environment.” The environments they walked through morphed between urban streets to small rural roads. And as they walked, they both treaded through polluted ecosystems, forming messy entanglements with what they breathed, ate and where they slept (Bolender 2018).

After walking together for seven weeks Aliass gave birth to an ass, Passenger. Before the birth, Bolender reflected on the milk that Aliass would produce for Passenger and the “residues—both physical and metaphorical—of all the asphalt miles we travelled, the lonesome, thistle-grown hayfields, the border crossings, churchyards, borrowed pastures, and dark nights in strangers’ woods—hold it all like memory is supposed to” (Brodie 2013, n.p.) As a means of articulating the different connections between bodies (maternal and multispecies), ecologies, and ways of knowing, Bolender created *R. A. W. Assmilk Soap*. A substance to clean with, but also to think with. It was created from ass milk and the environments that grew the ass up. The bar of soap became a means of holding together “the invisible traces of bodies and antibodies immersed and entangled in specific times and places” (Bolender 2014, 73-4). She has mixed her own breast milk into certain batches of the soap, too. Bolender offers this entangled journeying with ass, encapsulated in the soap and its making, as a means of opening “imaginative space for holistic wisdoms of the animal body, known and unknown, and to remind us that our bodies are always bound to the places and others we find ourselves among” (Bolender 2014, 74).

If people, from anyplace in the world, tested themselves for industrial chemicals the results would *all* come back positive, revealing only different mixes and different unevenly distributed impacts (EDAction 2016; Liboiron et al. 2018). Acknowledging the ways in which we are toxically bound to place highlights the dilemma that emerged for me when I encountered the medical figures demonstrating my own mercury exposure: To be healthy we can try to avoid exposure by avoiding certain things and places, but as a long-term strategy it now appears impossible and misguided. For, “management via separation, containment, clean up and immunization—the hallmarks of 20th-century pollution control—are premised on a politics of material purity that is no longer available or was never viable to begin with” (Liboiron et al. 2018, 332). Rather than conceptions of chemical connections to places, this ethics of avoidance reinforces Western/Global North notions of bounded, individual, contained bodies. And avoidance enacts further privileging of particular bodies (humans and

more-than) through what the sociologist Norah MacKendrick refers to as “precautionary consumption” (2010). This discourse encourages individuals to purchase “green” products, thereby individualising risk, rather than emphasising the need for producer accountability and other forms of collective responsibility. Such responsibility might “address the wider social, political, military and other power structures that engender toxicity to begin with” (Liboiron et al. 2018, 332). But in practice it’s complicated. I try to purchase organic foods to avoid pesticides. I’ve removed six amalgam mercury fillings from my mouth to avoid the leaching of further mercury into me. I want to be good food. Yes, these acts are conceptualised as acts of consumption and avoidance that still focus on *how* my body, figured as an individualized body, can avoid toxics; they do much less to question *why* the toxics are there and what engenders them. But in detoxing my own body, can I also practice a kind of pre-emptive or future care for the bodies in which my own body will end up—as food?

Artists, such as Bolender, are helping to refigure shifts from an anthropocentric worldview to multispecies becomings, in which humans are positioned within webs of relations, rather than chains of hierarchy and mastery. In making visible connections with toxics, R. A. W. Assmilk Soap also traces gender, sex, industrialisation, colonialism that work to reproduce and/or quench life. These sudsy reckonings emerge in the rubbing up together of humans and other animals in multispecies cohabiting. One could say, an ass bears the genetic traits of transition from prey to domestication. Being prey, in this specific instance, is in the allure of being lathered together and recognising the lures that led to this. Bolender writes, reflecting on the pelt of her first American Spotted Ass Aliass:

I owe a lot to her spots: without their spectacular lure—and the words and stories they both conjure and elude—I might never have come to inhabit the hopeful frictions of living with a so-called American Spotted Ass in all the quiet dusty spaces, nameless encounters, and untold stories we make together. (2018, 152).

For it was Aliass’s spotted coat, that was made through various breeding and commercial practices engrained in different legacies of industrialisation and colonisation in America that first attracted Bolender to Aliass. A spotted coat, desired and wanted amongst breeders, in this way preyed upon. Consumed, not in the sense of being eaten but being traded. Although this conception of prey under capitalism, as trade and consumption of species as commodities, is part of my argument, this is not the main thrust of prey I wish to interrogate. I want to move towards thinking about our bodies as literal food for others as

well. It is not only the non-human animal who is preyed upon, but the human animal too. Which is where the feminist eco-philosopher Val Plumwood's (1996; 2008; 2012) multispecies concept of being prey—of humans as both eater and eaten—through her near-death story of becoming prey for a crocodile is useful to think with. For conceptualising humans as prey starts to cut through a positioning of humans outside of webs of multispecies becomings—I will pick up on this further in the next section. If we move towards concepts of humans as prey, how is Bolender consumed by Aliass? What ethics does the Ass enact that changes Bolender? Bolender's work introduces multispecies entanglements and ideas of prey, particularly through her mixing of her own breast milk with that of ass milk to make soap. However, a deeper engagement with breast milk and bioaccumulation through feminist scholar's work helps to interrogate notions of being prey further.

### **Interlude three**

*In wanting to be healthier, I also want environments around me to be less toxic. And I actively avoid environments that I perceive as toxic: the chemical smell of someone's perfume or the spray of DEET laden insect repellent sends me walking in the other direction. I no longer eat large fish. But I also wonder what mixes am I stirring up as I ingest prescribed tablets to help flush the mercury out of me? Thinking of the burden of my own individual body and consumption patterns on these very environments and chemical relations put me into a vexed state regarding different theories of toxicity and competing notions of ethics they mobilise. I know I deserve my own care – but what if caring for myself interferes with caring for others in my environments?*

### **Leaking, lactating bodies**

In contrast to notions of “precautionary consumption” (MacKendrick 2010) and containment, the refrain of the porosity of bodies—which Bolender's practice highlights—is central to feminist environmental humanities and discourses on toxic embodiment (see Alaimo 2010; Neimanis 2017; and Hamilton and Neimanis 2018). Leaky maternal bodies, are particularly useful in this regard. Alexandra Joensson's public art performance “200ml of Human Breast Milk” in which she electronically expresses human breast milk and then serves breast milk tea, highlights the porosity of bodies, particularly maternal ones and the care and labour involved in expressing milk. Simms (2009, 266) reminds us, “milk redefines the boundaries of the lactating body, and thinking it through leads to a trans-subjective, non-dualistic psychology.” A psychology beyond the human/nature dualisms of enlightenment. Although

Joensson doesn't expressly raise concerns about toxics in her performance, the offering of breast milk tea raises questions around the commodification of female mammals that can produce milk, including humans. Questions that relate to how the milk is produced, what is being consumed by the locator that then goes into the milk, and what influence the environment has? Bolender (2018) reminds us in her discussion of R.A.W. Assmilk Soap that you are advised not to move a mother and offspring, whether ass or human, around the time of birth as mothers' milk contains antibodies to kill pathogens in the local environment.

In contrast to Joensson, the artist Miriam Simun explicitly raises concerns around toxics in breast milk through her performance *The Lady Cheese Shop* in which she showcases how to produce cheese from human milk. It is now well documented that toxics accumulate in breast milk attracted by the fats (Williams 2005)—fats which are paradoxically intended to nourish. Simun (2014, 138) writes, “milk is a tricky substance—entangled with bodies and environments where it originates. Steering clear of chemical toxins, and deadly microbial agents, requires a real commitment to understanding exactly where this food substance comes from.” Her art performance positions human breast milk as a commodity with three different varieties of cheese from three different women available. She describes these cheeses as locally made and ethically sourced. As part of the demonstration of producing cheese, Simun mixes the human milk with goat milk. The reason for mixing it with goat milk, describes the artist is to help it curdle, due to the casein in goat's milk which is absent in human milk but vital for making cheese. These mixtures invite us to think about “entangled histories” and “health, welfare and diet” (Simun 2014, 139) of both goat and humans.

In a video complementing the exhibition Simun adopts the clean marketing aesthetic of an artisanal food maker, heightening the emphasis on the commodification of the labour of female bodies. The video also draws out contrasts with the messiness of leaking, lactating bodies through video footage of milk being pumped by suction cups into a storage unit, rather than into the mouth of a baby. Simun's artwork raises questions around the entangled relations with the commodification of other mammals, such as goats. It speaks to Puig de la Bellacasa's (2012, 197) notion that care is a “practical labor,” and in the case of breast feeding, a labour that can often go unacknowledged or is exploited. For example, the continued exploitation and commodification of the reproductive labour of women, particularly women of colour, in human milk purchasing initiatives such as Medolac Laboratories abandoned proposal (see Harrison 2019).

In addition to commodification of human milk, the human cheese opens up conversation on the types of toxics one might consume with a bite of fatty human cheese. Human cheese emphasises the flow and accretion of toxics in mammary glands and milk, and highlights the implausibility of conceiving of bodies as contained, impermeable and separate from environmental matters. However, Simun's framing of the Lady Cheese Shop in both artist statements accompanying videos and more scholarly pieces (2014), still focuses on a discourse of avoidance and tracing toxics to their original source. But, as Neimanis (2017, 33) points out, polluted mothers' milk "foreground[s] the need to think about bodies differently—as not at all those discrete, zipped up skins of Enlightenment individualism."

In her influential *New York Times* magazine article on chemicals and breastfeeding, Williams (2005, n.p)—breast-feeding at the time of writing—asks "ultimately, though, the question for me as a mother is not at what threshold of exposure will my baby be harmed, but why are we manufacturing common products made with these toxins at all?" While these questions are important, I shift to examine another question: what if the individual is always more than themselves—in their role as food and sustenance for others? How can care for oneself also acknowledge the need for care to what comes after your own body—in space, and time?

#### **Interlude four**

*Thinking with narratives of food-chains, I reflected on mercury's modes of accumulation up the chain. From deposits of mercury into the sea from coal-fired plant emissions, turned into methylmercury by bacteria and then accumulated up the chain. But is it really a neat chain, from, sardine, snapper, tuna can, mother, breast-milk, to child, say? How are legacies of fossil fuelled industrial expansion, colonisation and latent intergenerational impacts on humans and other animals intertwined?*

#### **Being prey in permanently polluted food webs**

Nested alongside concepts of Enlightenment individualism are narratives of human mastery over nature that have informed conceptions of bioaccumulation of toxics, particularly in the so-called "food-chain" (Simms 2009). Hapke's (1996, 431) claim that "during the transfer from one link in the chain to another some heavy metals may be accumulated up to the final link, man" is representational of this kind of final-link exceptionalism thinking that feminist

scholarship critiques. For example, Simms (2009, 266) uses the image of the food-chain, but with the lactating woman and her child at the top of it, to put “an intimate and personal question to women: can we still believe in an ethics that stops at the boundary of our skins?” The point is to question the sovereignty of man at the top of the chain, which is done through this image of “eating one’s mother,” an act of consumption that evolutionary biologists refer to as matrotropy. Simms (2009) calls for us “to consider relationships that go beyond the human,” (277) stating “what is true for mackerel and smelt is also true for us: we are part of the food chain” (274). Yet, the multispecies ethical dimension of her argument still requires further fleshing out. While I concur with her that “we are part of the larger ecosystem, and a placental, ecological, feminist ethics must address this more than human relationship,” (277) her theorisation of breastmilk and toxics is still mainly couched in human terms.

In contrast, Plumwood’s (1996; 2008; 2012) multispecies concept of humans as both eater and eaten, as prey, can expand discussions of care, toxics, and multispecies relating and offers a point of departure. She describes how being death-rolled by a crocodile altered her food/death perspective, encouraging a wider philosophical re-imagining of Human Exceptionalism for her. Being prey, in the jaws of a crocodile, revises Western/Global North notions of human exceptionalism and bounded individualism. Plumwood (2008) argues, “human exceptionalism positions us as the eaters of others who are never themselves eaten... and has profoundly shaped dominant practices of self, commodity, materiality and death—especially death” (324-5). But Plumwood does not imagine what it might mean for her crocodile if it were to eat a body with heavy metal poisoning. It is this analytic device of “being-prey” that I wish to mobilise, both metaphorically and physically, bringing this to talk of toxics and wanting to be good food.

In describing her experience of being prey, Plumwood (1996) details her account of the “narrative self” and the ways in which beliefs of self as individuated and outside of food chains start to collapse when in a death roll. In this way, she questions our human capacities to refute the animals that we are and the stories we tell of our mastery over nature. Plumwood attributes this near-death event as contributing to her philosophical re-imagining of alternative modes of ecological living through a radical interrogation of the “mutually reinforcing dualisms” that configure oppression. She elaborates that:

In particular, the dualisms of male/female, mental/manual (mind/body), civilized/primitive, human/nature correspond directly to and naturalise gender, class, race and nature oppressions respectively. (1993, 43).

For, in re-inserting the human amidst other animals, in food webs, as prey, it starts to collapse nature/culture binaries. And, as argues Plumwood, a collapsing of one category destabilises others due to their conceptual links. For example, ways in which the categories of women, animals, the body and nature are all positioned as inferior, in the background and inextricably connected as a way of organising the world—male as subject desiring female as object, interconnected with the backgrounding of nature as something that can be objectified and commodified. These mutually reinforcing dualisms are treacherous and involved in the environmental crisis (Plumwood 1993). To unfurl arguments about being prey, eating toxics and matters of care further, I will move to Natalie Jeremijenko's *Cross(x)Species Adventure Club* to discuss how what we eat is shared by what our prey eats in permanently polluted food webs. Finally, I travel to Jae Rhim Lee's *Infinity Burial Project* and her mushroom burial suit to explore conceptions of humans being literal food for others after death.

### **Interlude five**

*I want to be good food. A direct cause and effect relationship between evidence of mercury in my body and the symptoms I experienced cannot be made. There are multiple other factors—such as stress, and changes in diet and environment—that could have contributed... And yet, various studies have demonstrated that mercury exposure can cause or contribute to many of the symptoms I experienced. There is evidence to suggest a link between mercury exposure from amalgam fillings and chronic conditions such as anxiety and fatigue (Kern et al. 2014). Hair loss, skin rashes and issues with memory are also linked to mercury exposure. The World Health Organisation states, “exposure to mercury—even small amounts—may cause serious health problem” and considers it “as one of the top ten chemicals or groups of chemicals of major public health concern” (WHO, 2017).*

### **Cross species dining**

In addition to thinking with breast-milk, eating one's mother, being prey and biomagnified toxins, to shift perspectives away from dualisms and towards multispecies conjunctions—What if, rather than hierarchical chains that stop at man, we consciously ate with other species? Edible conjunctions of technoscience and naturecultures are situated and produced

in the milieu of gender, class, race, and colonialism, amongst other powers that redistribute both flourishing and oppression unevenly. The artist-scientist Natalie Jeremijenko's *Cross(x)Species Adventure Club* project offers alternative, speculative, entwined practices of more-than-human eating with toxics.

In 2011, I worked with Natalie Jeremijenko to prepare and serve interspecies treats for her *Cross(x)Species Adventure Club* at two events: a performance at *Curating Cities* (2011) in Sydney and *Drought and Flooding Rains* (2011) dinner event at *Arc One Gallery* in Melbourne. The club is a cross-species supper club that creates culinary experiments to augment food practices, remediate ecological systems and restage human/more-than-human relations. She has held these events around the world including at the Neuberger Museum of Art in New York, often working with local chefs, such as Mihir Desai (New York) and Pierre Roelofs (Melbourne). Within these dining events Jeremijenko rethinks shared food relations through shifting institutional structures and frameworks. She states "in the tradition of institutional critique I am developing an alternative institution ... as a way of working on or redesigning/reimagining our shared urban environments (2013). For example, at a *Cross(x)Species* event rather than humans eating fish, both fish and humans were fed with food fish sticks, or "lures" as Jeremijenko refers to them (Twilley 2010). These lures contain chelating agents, removing PCBS and heavy metals from bodies, and ultimately making these chemicals less bioavailable to other species when excreted. Through these shared eating events, humans and fish are positioned within shared webs of exposure, mitigation and responsibility. By explicitly inviting us to eat food prepared for both fish and humans, it opens up questions of shared impacts of what we eat.

Jeremijenko's *Cross(x)Species Adventure Club* makes visible food webs, relations of eating that are not only hierarchical chains in which bioaccumulation of toxins occur up the chain, but also acknowledges complex sideways relations. In being prey, it is also to acknowledge who we eat with, not only who eats us, and that what we eat is shared by what our prey eats. Which speaks to how bioaccumulation of toxics travels, not necessarily in linear food chains, but across intricately connected webs. In other words, what we eat is shared by what our prey eats, with bioaccumulation occurring across these webs. The significance of eating with others is also suggested by the story Alaimo (2012) shares of the case of Hardy Jones, a founder of the marine conservation organisation BlueVoice.Org. Jones committed his life to conservation efforts to protect dolphins and whales, however, due to

sharing a similar diet of fish to the dolphins he attempted to protect, he developed chronic mercury poisoning. Jones states, “I was diagnosed with a disease that intertwined my life with dolphins in a way I could never have imagined” (488). In this anecdote, humans and dolphins, are bound by their shared exposure to mercury through a shared diet.

Simms (2009, 276) states that “the insidiousness of chemical technologies is that they operate on the substructure of visible and temporal experiences: they cannot be directly experienced and they appear in the food chain long after their makers have died.” Although both Bolender and Jeremijenko’s artwork work to visualise some of indirect impacts of toxics and articulate the types of relations mobilised by toxicity and eating—whether consumption is via the maternal body, or as prey, or with other animals—they do not make claims of certainty of reduced risk. In states of uncertainty, which toxics produce, there can be a desire to make full account of the harm. A desire to know exact sources and empirically document the impacts, through blood test results and hair mineral analysis, for example. As Liboiron et al. (2018, 34) highlight, the notion that “more, better, clearer, affective, localized, and/or embodied representations will lead to more, better, clearer, effective, local and embodied action” is a myth. I don’t deny the importance of finding connections and mitigating impacts, particularly when impacts are not evenly distributed. Yet, as Neimanis (2017, 37) points out “how, for example, do we calculate the risks of toxic breast milk, when these flows cannot be dissociated from cultural questions, and other kinds of flows? From an amphibimixic perspective, and in a water world of queer time and space, we can never track the trickle, definitively, back to its source.” Rather than concentrating on evidence and modes of certainty, the artworks discussed move the emphasis to the natureculture frameworks, both material and semiotic, that enact different reproductive orders. This includes changing the structures of who and what gets served together in a dining event.

Here it is useful to engage with Puig de la Bellacasa’s (2011; 2017) conceptualisation of matters of care to thinking understandings of eating with others that eat toxics or conversely being eaten along with the toxics harbours in the act of being consumed. As previously mentioned, Puig de la Bellacasa (2011, 90) describes care as “an affective state, a material vital doing, and an ethico-political obligation.” Care, when considered as an affective state speaks to the way caring manifests itself physically, as something that is felt. For example, the ways in which we observe, analyse and represent matters have an affective charge, such as the lures used by Jeremijenko. Puig de la Bellacasa (2011, 89) argues that

care arises from “a strong sense of attachment and commitment.” Matters of care are important as a means of tending to the attachments and commitments that are a necessary part of relating (Puig de la Bellacasa 2010).

### **Interlude six**

*I want to be good food.*

### **Mushrooming matters of care with toxics**

What do we want for our bodies when we die? To be buried, cremated, or something greener? An increasing number of people in the Global North are wanting to be cremated, many consider it to be a more ecological alternative to traditional burial practices. (NFDA 2017). However, studies have demonstrated that crematories disperse harmful levels of environmental toxicities, such as mercury, into the atmosphere (Mari and Domingo, 2010). As a counter to toxic burial practices, the artist Jae Rhim Lee has created a mushroom death-suit through her *Infinity Burial Project*, a project that seeks to transform burial practices. The suit—originally an artwork, but now available as a commercial product via the organisation Coeio—is embedded with mushroom spores that transform and digest a human, remediating toxicities and metabolising the body into vital nutrients to nourish more-than-human life ([www.coeio.com](http://www.coeio.com)). How do bodies want to be metabolised? What wants do the organisms, that decompose bodies, have? In transforming burial practices and re-imagining ourselves as edible what types of questions are raised about the heavy metals and toxicants that leach from a human body after death? (Rhodes 2014).

Jae Rhim Lee’s Mushroom Burial Suit challenges nature/culture and human/non-human binaries, binaries informed by transcendental frameworks for identity and kin. In a transcendental heaven-oriented model of identity, a disembodied spirit goes to heaven and the unthinking body that remains becomes shrouded in rituals that attempt to keep it separated from other living organisms. Like Rhim Lee, Plumwood (2008) calls for alternative burial practices and imaginaries of death as a counter to narratives of death in which the human body is enclosed, packaged, cemented, or cremated, and thus not explicitly acknowledging human death as part of ecological nourishment for other species and organisms. Plumwood (2004, n.p.) summarises, “the story passes on to the other life forms you nurture with your death, nurturing those who have nurtured you, in a chain of mutual life-giving.”

Olson, also emphasises that, recently “a more positive attitude toward the idea of the nutritive human corpse has begun to gain traction” (Olson 2015, 338). He specifically discusses the mushroom burial suit, alongside highlighting this nutritive shift in death studies and practices “amongst [other] artists, scientists, technologists, funeral service providers, and funeral consumers in the US and Canada (as well as in the UK, Europe, Scandinavia, and Australia)” (338). However, it is not purely towards this nutritive turn, nor the collapsing of human exceptionalism that is the focus of this paper. Rather I take up Plumwood’s (2012, 93) emphasis on being prey which opens out a different mode of relating, and her argument that “transcendental solutions to the problem of identity and continuity depend on denying our *kinship* to other life forms and our shared end as food for others.” What does it mean to make kin and be good food, with more-than-humans, with our decomposing bodies? Specifically, what do we want when we become food with bodies that harbour toxics?

Puig de la Bellacasa’s (2010, 89) notion of care as strong “attachment and commitment” resonates also with the work of multispecies anthropologist Anna Tsing (2011), who discusses “mushroom lovers” and emphasises how practices of “noticing” (6), such as searching for mushrooms, are “a way of teaching ... open yet focused attention” and a means of creating “passionate immersion in the lives of the nonhumans” (19). Care is situated in, and arises from, material practices that generate affective attachments. Lee, in her communication of the mushroom burial suit describes cultivating mushrooms to feed off her toenails, hair, skin cells and other pieces she sheds from her body, caring for them as they learn to consume her.

In addressing the way care is entangled in practices, Puig de la Bellacasa (2010) highlights that care is not about prioritising self-care, but acknowledging an interdependency of human and non-human actors and that “we are in relations of mutual care” (164). Care, as a form of “material vital doing” (Puig de la Bellacasa 2011, 90), builds on notions of care that arise from feminist scholarship, particularly evident in Tronto and Fisher’s (1990) oft-quoted definition of care: “Everything that we do to maintain, continue and repair ‘our world’ so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, ourselves, and our environment, all that we seek to interweave in a complex, life sustaining web” (40). Here, perhaps, we arrive finally at an example of care where care for an intoxicated self (by mercury poisoning, for example) can also be care for others.

Chemical toxics challenge what it means to nurture and care during the metabolism / decomposition of a body. The example of the Mushroom Burial Suit, is used as it complicates death/food relations and tastiness through its express acknowledgement of chemically burdened bodies. The burial suit, laced through with mushroom spores, supports other life forms as the human body decays, with the mushrooms, yet also is premised on remediation of toxics. Positioning oneself in the food-chain, by becoming nutrients for other organisms, such as mushrooms, asks for a re-orientation of eating as making-with in toxic metabolic flows. Engaging with questions of responsibility that create vectors across different times and scales, including past-oriented questions of who and what is accountable for the accumulated toxics in a body, and future oriented questions of what responsibilities one has for the metabolic relations one's body enacts, after death. Where is the emphasis on collective and individual responsibilities?

Thinking of responsibility gives rise to conversations on damage and empathy. Chen (2012, 205) writes "although the body's interior could be described as becoming 'damaged' by toxics, if we were willing to perform the radical act of releasing the definition of 'organism' from its biological pinnings, we might from a more holistic perspective and approach toxicity with a lens of mutualism." It is through these empathetic forms of eating, of attention and care to how bodies, specifically human bodies, are part of metabolic relations, that different understandings of relationality can emerge that move beyond damage centred narratives. The Infinity Burial Project engages with toxic substances, such as mercury, and the foodiness of humans, or mushroom tasting of human flesh, to construct positions and problems of being good food, such as those enacted by and with mercury for me. It reframes relations as never simply solely harmful or benign.

## **Conclusion**

This article works through various tensions that learning and caring with toxics is teaching me. It does so by thinking carefully alongside various other feminist environmental humanities scholars who think with food chains, predator-prey relations and toxics. It also considers how multispecies performance artworks can mobilise notions of being good food for others and learning how to care in toxic worlds. Rather than focusing specifically on toxic molecules (such as mercury) and their impacts as the key site of harm, this article animates toxicity as a means of focusing on relations and infrastructures of power produced within these relations. In grappling for ways to respond in permanently polluted worlds, the analytic

device of viewing humans as “being prey,” via Val Plumwood, alongside feminist ethics of care, is used to imagine what Maria Puig de la Bellacasa (2017, 219) refers to as “more caring affective ecologies.” Speculating on becoming prey and wanting to be good food for others—whether this is for a crocodile, fish, mushrooms or microbes in the soil—cuts into contemporary theories of toxicity and care.

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