

Five
Tenders:
An
Incomplete
Theory
of Social
Digestion

This is a call to arms against disembodied social relations, against claims of alignment, against fantasies of ethical and harmonious coexistence. The world is unfriendly to many, to most. It is from a position of privilege (one which I do not take for granted) that we can even begin to think about how to make kin. Still, I'd like to offer *tender* as a lens for refocusing kinship. *Tender* extends its meanings generously from softness and vulnerability, to activities of care or nurture, to bids for proposals and business offers, to being easy to chew and chunks of processed meat.¹ This text is my response to the proposal tendered by the editors of this publication to rethink the boundaries, substances, and architectures of kinship. This text is also a direct and visceral response to the vagueness of alignment-based, kin-claiming practices which manifest in and reproduce through popular discourse. These seemingly friendly practices do not offer a grounds for body-based, labor-aware, relational processes. They can at times tend toward a social economy of self-indulgent self-reproduction and -perpetuation. The claiming and broadcasting of alignment bears the risk that relating remains in an economy of representation, where abstraction and reduction are consistently used to instrumentalize persons (human and nonhuman) and their relations into value or capital. In such a system, bonds we make too easily, and too often through representation alone, circulate in a virtual economy of producers who make kin a process of production or who make kin a value. Attending to a bodily dimension of relating to others is a way to recompose ourselves—and our guts—in relation to what and who are around us.²

1 “tender, adj. (and adv.) and n.3,” *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, accessed September 19, 2019. www.oed.com/view/Entry/199047. See also “tender, n.1,” “tender, n.2,” “tender, v.1,” and “tender, v.2,” *OED Online*, Oxford University Press.

2 In introducing her recent publication co-edited with Donna Haraway, *Making Kin Not Population*, Adele E. Clarke writes about a notion of kinship that is urgently non-biological: “Kinfolk are parts of one another to the extent that what happens to one is *felt* by the other, such that we live each other’s lives and die each other’s deaths. *Biological* connection is not required.” Adele E. Clarke, “Introducing *Making Kin Not Population*,” *Making Kin Not Population*, eds. Adele E. Clarke and Donna Haraway (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2018), 3.

This text is an attempt to point towards such a mode of making kin that *feels* belonging right in the gut, indigestion notwithstanding. It moves beyond just living each other’s lives and dying each other’s deaths to acknowledging the possibility that we are responsible for each other’s deaths and that those deaths might be responsible for other lives. Our own self-sustainment and self-reproduction is necessarily tied to the consumption and possible prevention of that of another.

3 Michelle Murphy writes about the very real and violent biopolitical effects of metabolizing chemicals and endocrine disruption: “What it means to be human is to materially develop in the uneven distribution of chemical exuberances of a century of industrial capitalism. As such, the very premise of the discrete body is unravelling. Microbiome research, for example, shows how bodies are not singular organisms, but instead always collectivities.” Michelle Murphy, “Against Population, Towards Alterlife,” *Making Kin Not Population*, eds. Adele E. Clarke and Donna Haraway (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2018), 115.

4 Here, I find Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing’s explanation of the term *assemblage* to be useful: “Ecologists turn to assemblages to get around the sometimes fixed and bounded connotations of ecological ‘community.’ The question of how the varied species in a species assemblage influence each other—if at all—is never settled: some thwart (or eat) each other; others work together to make life possible; still others just happen to find themselves in the same place. Assemblages are open-ended gatherings. They allow us to ask about communal effects without assuming them.” Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), 22–23.

Donna Haraway also embraces *compost* as a way to think about how humans inhabit the world: “I am a compostist, not a posthumanist: we are all compost, not posthuman.” Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 32, 101–102.

5 Or, the global economic and ecological networks that the Matsutake mushroom, the protagonist of Tsing’s book, is part of.

6 On the potentiality in joining together as and with other bodies, Haraway writes about symplexis, a process of *making with* other companion species, which is necessary in a time when bounded *individualism* is “unthinkable,” considering the urgencies of inhabiting, recuperating, and the future flourishing of the earth. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 30–31, 57.

7 Tsing writes about the notion of “salvage accumulation” which is “taking advantage of value produced without capitalist control.” It is “the process through which lead firms amass capital without controlling the conditions under which commodities are produced. Salvage is not an ornament on ordinary capitalist processes; it is a feature of how capitalism works.” Tsing, *Mushroom at the End of the World*, 63.

This includes, for instance, the reproduction of labor power that is not (yet) fully controlled by capitalists, or energies or resources that are unintentional byproducts.

So much in our bodies is becoming externalized—through safely cached biomedical data and records; through X, Y, or Z DNA tests; through donated, extracted, saved-for-later sperm and eggs frozen in storage; through newborn umbilical cords snipped off, packed up, and sent to cord blood banks; through our shit itself being deposited in not-for-profit stool and fecal microbiota centers. Simultaneously, our bodies are also being externally mediated in alarming ways—through invasive abortion regulations; through the corralling of people at the border; through the dismembering, dismantling, and disenfranchisement of indigenous, or migrant, or otherwise “othered” communities; through the very legislation of gender and identity. Next to this, interacting on an interpersonal level has increasingly become a disembodied, virtual experience, thanks to social media; networked communications; the on-demand, gig-based economy; and data-driven, platform-mediated networks. While the boundary between a self and the outside,³ between our bodies and others, blurs, we can reassess how it is that we compose ourselves and, consequently, our kin.

Renegotiating the terms of how we relate allows us to embrace the blurriness of our selves and our body matter, to set it into focus, and to redefine what might be alternate configurations of selves, family trees, political bodies, microecosystems, macro-ecologies, and live and ripe compost piles.⁴ From virtual bonds in the digital space of the Internet, to negotiated trade agreements among nation-states, to the high-speed communication networks of mushrooms and their local ecosystems,⁵ relating occurs not just as form but also as process. It is belonging as/through conversation. Yet beyond this initial level of exchange—beyond the communicating and sharing of knowledge—there are processes of production and consumption at work, an exchange of value (and values). Making kin might be viewed as the joining together of singularities into larger bodies, like covalent bonds that share energy.⁶ These energies are produced and consumed. And, in turn, produce new energies again.⁷ Still, such a process is one that requires negotiation, conciliation, and sometimes contestation.

Might we consider a more violent theory of kinship, a mode of understanding relating as a process that moves beyond mere practices of pronunciation, beyond just saying “I agree” or “I disagree” or “I know you” or “I recognize you” or even “I love you,” but one that acknowledges—and even embraces—the very fact that we are consuming beings and systems? Perhaps making kin can be conceived of as a process of consuming: we ingest, we digest, and we metabolize each other. This is a kinship that doesn’t say anything at all. Its mouth is too full.

The etymology of *consume* comes from the Latin *con*, meaning “together, together with, in combination or union, altogether, completely” and *sūmere*, which means “to take” or “take up.”⁸ Consuming is already a communal process. We break bread, together. If we take consuming at face value, we must consume *together*, with others. Hunting and gathering was done in groups. Some civilizations were built on agriculture and a newfound ease of producing what was consumed, together. Consumption is essential to our life processes. To live, we consume.⁹ Not only humans but all creatures, plants, and microorganisms produce and consume energies, participating in processes of transformation.¹⁰ Consuming does not have to be unidirectional, as in parasitism. Symbiotic relationships offer illuminating models of mutually beneficial consumption.¹¹ Beyond this, inhabiting and cohabiting with ecosystems both local and global are also processes of exchange and, in time, of consumption. Consumption is what keeps us inextricably bound to each other, other beings, and our environments. On a more intimate level, consuming and eating can be seen as activities parallel to devouring that or whom we desire.¹²

What could be more entangling than utter and complete consumption?¹³ Perhaps being with and being together in their most visceral (and vampiric) states occur through taking a part of the outside, transforming it into a bite-sized morsel, and making it an integrated part of one’s own body, flesh, and microbiome, just as our own bodies and microbiota are already out and about, commingling in the world. In some way, aren’t we all live tenders, potentially consumable, and always on offer? Digestion is a process of making tender things tender(er). Processing meat (ourselves and what’s around us) might in some way make things easier to swallow (and chew). We can find our most tender filets and offer them up for consumption, with the hope that those who ingest us can also digest us. Yet, this is a consumption that is more than a quick taste or snacking around.¹⁴ It’s more than merely naming kin as kin. This is not just about relating humans to humans, the filial, familiar, or familial. It’s also about how we relate to what is around us, other creatures and critters, organic and artificial bodies, or internal and external ecosystems. Yet, we might for the moment focus on the human aspect, the consuming of one another, gut-to-gut.

8 consume, v.1.” *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, accessed June 26, 2019, www.oed.com/view/Entry/39973.
 “com-, prefix” *OED online*, Oxford University press, accessed June 26, 2019, www.oed.com/view/Entry/36719.
 “supsimus, n.” *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, accessed June 26, 2019, www.oed.com/view/Entry/194033.
 9 Even in the spiritual afterlife, consuming can be important. In Taiwanese folk practices, for instance, food such as fruits, cooked meat, sweets, and crackers are offered to the spirits of ancestors and to gods.
 10 “Critters interpenetrate one another, loop around and through one another, eat each another, get indigestion, and partially digest and partially assimilate one another, and thereby establish sympoietic arrangements that are otherwise known as cells, organisms, and ecological assemblages.” Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 58.
 11 For instance, the Hawaiian bobtail squid hosts in its stomach the marine bacterium *Vibrio fischeri*, whose “bioluminescence emits a diffuse light at wavelengths matching moonlight and starlight above, thereby camouflaging the squid from predators beneath” when the squids feed in the upper ocean layers at night. Jennifer J. Wernegreen, “First Impressions in a Glowing Host-Microbe Partnership,” *Cell Host Microbe* 14, no. 2 (August 2013): 121-123.

12 In their interview with Jacques Derrida, “On the Limits of Digestion,” Daniel Birnbaum and Anders Olsson discussed a fragment from the work of German romantic philosopher Novalis, who wrote: “All enjoyment, all taking in and assimilation, is eating, or rather: eating is nothing other than appropriation. All spiritual pleasure can be expressed through eating. In friendship, one really eats of the friend, or feeds on him.” Novalis, *Philosophical Writings*, ed. and trans. Margaret Mahony Stoljar (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press,

1997), 102-103, qtd. Daniel Birnbaum and Anders Olsson, “An Interview with Jacques Derrida on the Limits of Digestion,” *e-flux journal* #2 (2009). Eating and assimilating are also subjects of a seminar series that Derrida gave from 1990-1991 called *The Rhetoric of Cannibalism*, at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, as recounted by David Krell. David Farrell Krell, “All You Can’t Eat: Derrida’s Course,” *Rhetorique du Cannibalisme*,” *Research in Phenomenology* 36 (2006): 130-180.

13 In the 1920s, Brazilian modernists adopted as their name the *Anthropophagous Movement*, referring to the custom of Tupi Indians of eating their enemies. Suelly Rolnik describes this “anthropophagic cultural micropolitics” as “a continuous process of singulization, resulting from the composition of particles of numberless devoured Others and the diagram of their respective marks on the body’s memory: a poetic response—with sarcastic humor—to the need to confront the presence of the colonizing cultures (which rendered pathetic the local intelligentsia’s bedazzled mimetization of it).” Suelly Rolnik, “The Politics of Anthropophagy in the Transnational Drift,” *Where to Sit at the Dinner Table*, ed. Pedro Neves Marques (Berlin: Archive Books, 2014), 541.
 See also Oswald de Andrade, “Cannibalist Manifesto,” trans. Leslie Barry, *Latin American Literary Review* 19, no. 38 (1991): 38-47.
 14 We need to work on our digestion. See: the growing attention to the gut microbiome; the proliferation of probiotics, prebiotics, and enzymes; and the increasing interest in fermentation. We want and need and are being sold stuff that’s predigested.

The separation of spheres of production and consumption continues to collapse. All spaces can be colonized by work and become spaces of production: one’s home, one’s vehicle, one’s lifestyle choices, one’s social media presence, etc. What is created when we turn everything into something to eat?¹⁵ Looked at another way, how are we instrumentalized and how do we instrumentalize ourselves? Eating each other and what is around us has the potential to resist accumulation, beyond biopower and through the biopolitical.¹⁶ Ingesting and digesting can thus be thought of as a field of microbiopolitics that—although minor—we can actively (and passively) participate in on a daily basis. We can begin to think of this field as a transformative—and possibly delicious—space, a social stomach. It is a space that extends beyond our selves as individual subjects, that dismembers our bodies from singularities into multiplicities, and that disorganizes us from contained microbiomes into the great messy swirl of biota around us.

15 Even eating itself and our dietary choices have become something to consume and broadcast.
 16 I turn to Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt’s distinction between biopower and the biopolitical: “The perspective of resistance makes clear the difference between these two powers: ... the former could be defined (rather crudely) as the power over life and the latter as the power of life to resist and determine an alternative production of subjectivity.” Hardt and Negri continue by describing what this biopolitical power might include: “Our reading not only identifies biopolitics with the localized productive powers of life—that is, the production of affects and languages through social cooperation and the interaction of bodies and desires, the invention of new forms of the relation to the self and others, and so forth—but also affirms biopolitics as the creation of new subjectivities that are presented at once as resistance and de-subjectification.” Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, “Biopolitics as Event,” *Biopolitics*, eds. Timothy Campbell and Adam Sitze (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 238-239.
 This notion of new subjectivities rings true with the project of the Anthropophagous Movement.

We are not closed systems, self-contained, exceptional, or immune.¹⁷ We do not control our own distribution. This includes our energies, as well as our personal data, which are maybe just fuel of another sort.¹⁸ But perhaps we can counter the ongoing abstraction, measurement, and regulation by states, institutions, and corporations of everything micro and macro that can be parceled out into discrete units of identification, information, or otherwise. Making kin through consuming enacts an embodied and elaborative practice. In doing so, it has the potential to make us part of the very many labor processes that are abstracted from what we consume.¹⁹ Making kin and naming kin are also ways to understand ourselves and our own belief systems. Yet, through digesting kin we can resist the urge to reduce, abstract, know, or understand. Instead, we need to eat things up! Devour each other! Cut a little piece off of ourselves (preferably the tender part below the ribs, next to the backbone), grind it! Mash it! Mix it! And shape it into small chunks that we can offer to each other.²⁰ Eating something moves it from the realm of the legible to the site of the digestible.

17 Roberto Esposito writes about biopolitics in terms of the paradigm of immunity and community. He looks at the Latin etymological root of the word community and its origin in *munus*, or gift, specifically of an obligatory nature. He writes, “the *munus* that the *communitas* shares isn’t a property or a possession [*appartenenza*]. It isn’t having, but on the contrary, is a debt, a pledge, a gift that is to be given, and that therefore will establish a lack. The subjects of community are united by an ‘obligation’...” Roberto Esposito, *Communitas: The Origin and Destiny of Community*, trans. Timothy Campbell (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010), 6. See also Esposito, *Immunitas: The Protection and Negation of Life*, trans. Zakiya Hanafi (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2011).

According to Esposito, immunity and community are inextricable. Immunity, or the preservation and protection of the individual, necessarily negates the community and the common; one who is immune is exempt from communal obligation. In this sense, community is formed based on reciprocal giving that cannot belong to the self, but, rather, to the community.

18 Just as populations and their labor are converted into value, data gathering systems and surveillance technologies that make a study out of people instrumentalize and monetize their habits, choices, distractions, and dalliances. See Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* (New York: Public Affairs, 2019).

19 Hannah Arendt writes about consumption as a form of laboring and as part of the reproduction of labor: “This cycle needs to be sustained through consumption, and the activity which provides the means of consumption is laboring. Whatever labor produces is meant to be fed into the human life process almost immediately, and this consumption, regenerating the life process, produces—or rather, reproduces—new ‘labor power,’ needed for the further sustenance of the body.” Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958), 88.

20 In his lecture “Artists, what is your value?” Jan Verwoert talks about the artists Lygia Clark, Alina Szapocznikow, and Maria Bartusová, in whose work we might consider bodies not just as properties or assets but as strange communal resources, as part of a communal life where artists can re-enter metabolism into the act of gift-giving and receiving. Jan Verwoert, “Artists what is your value? On Seduction, Value, and Metabolism,” Lecture, Institute of Contemporary Art, London, February 25, 2015.

21 What is the medium through which we consume? In an economy based on representation, one possible answer is attention: it is what is consumed and the way we are consumed. Through our non-metabolic consumption of media, most of what we consume is not actually absorbed into the body. It’s almost like a bad case of food poisoning or stomach flu: content just passes right through us.

22 Giorgio Agamben writes about inoperativity and feasts: “Presents, gifts, and toys are objects with use and exchange value that are rendered inoperative, wrested from their economy. In every carnivalesque feast, such as the Roman saturnalia, existing social relations are suspended or inverted... In this

way the feast reveals itself to be first and foremost a deactivation of existing values and powers.” Giorgio Agamben, “Hunger of an Ox,” *Mudrities*, trans. David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), 111.

23 In her writings on the Anthropophagic Movement, Rolnik describes how the notion of “anthropophagic subjectivity” resonates with the Ideas of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, for whom “subjectivity is not given; it is the object of an endless production that totally overflows the individual.” For Rolnik, “The Politics of Anthropophagy,” “images of subjectivity are in principle ephemeral, and their formation presupposes by necessity collective and impersonal agency.” Rolnik, 543.

24 As Deleuze and Guattari note in their reference to Edmond Perrier’s work on animal colonies and tachygenesis, “the brain of a vertebrate may come to occupy the position of the mouth of an amnelid, in the ‘fight between the mouth and the brain.’” Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 522. See also Edmond Perrier, *Les colonies animales et la formation des organismes* (Paris: G. Masson, 1881).

25 In his early writings, Karl Marx writes about the deprivatization of the senses: “The supersession of private property is therefore the complete emancipation of all human senses and attributes; but it is this emancipation precisely because these senses and attributes have become *human*, subjectively as well as objectively.” Karl Marx, *Early Writings*, trans. Rodney Livingstone and Gregor Benton (London: Penguin Books, 1992), 352.

What if Aesop’s Belly suddenly opened itself up, turned inside out, and enfolded the hands, the mouth, the teeth, and all the members of the body into itself? What if our intestines inverted themselves? What might such an overturned digestive system do? In offering ourselves up and consuming each other, we might begin to understand the outside world as part of us and ourselves as part of it.²³ Everything eats everything. What gets spit or shat out? Understanding *my* stomach as *your* gut, or *your* gut as *my* shit, or *their* shit as part of *our* scrambled ecosystem allows us to reimagine how we relate to one another.²⁴ Parts of ourselves and even our ingestion become shared, up for grabs, and out of our own control. Consuming each other thus becomes a process of deprivatizing and making public our faculties.²⁵

26 In "Eating the Other," bell hooks writes about the violent and imperialist appropriation, commodification, and consumption of the culture of the Other. This kind of consumption essentializes, "when the 'primitive' is recouped *via* a focus on diversity and pluralism which suggests the Other can provide life-sustaining alternatives." The risk and fear here is that "the Other will be eaten, consumed, and forgotten" bell hooks, "Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance," *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 21-39.

27 The anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro proposes to think through Amerindian cannibalism, perspectivism, and multinaturalism as ways to decolonize thought and transform philosophy. In particular he distinguishes between "divine Araweté cannibalism" and "Tupinambá human cannibalism," the latter of which manifests "as a process for the transmutation of perspectives whereby the 'I' is determined as other through the act of incorporating this other, who in turn becomes an 'I' ... but only ever *in* the other—literally, that is, *through* the other ... What was eaten was the enemy's relation to those who consumed him; in other words, *his condition as enemy*." Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, *Cannibal Metaphysics*, trans. Peter Skaffish (Minneapolis: Univocal, 2014), 142.

This shared digestion attempts to defy a paradigm of consumption that is conflated with possessing.²⁶ If in consuming we destroy and digest what it is that we encounter, it means that we no longer *have* it. Instead, it has become a part of us.²⁷ And after, what we don't incorporate—leftover crumbs, what's excreted, wasted, or discarded—can be offered up once more, tendered to a public stomach. The social space of shared digestion is one that invites collective desire, collective consumption, collective metabolism, collective embodiment, and collective excrement.²⁸ Through such a digestive and metabolic process, we eat, drink, and pass through each other, incompletely and chaotically. We knowingly relinquish parts of ourselves (arms, legs, guts, and all) to the social compost heap.²⁹ By consuming socially and collectively, we can tend—together—to what it is we are digesting—ourselves, each other, and our social relations, including the good *and* the bad. For, this is a process that bears risks and requires responsibility. It demands that we actively acknowledge the potential hazards, hangovers, and possible indigestion ahead.³⁰ Eating can be a messy affair.³¹

It is violent, perhaps, to open oneself, to ingest—and be ingested by—everything in its entirety. But this is a consumption that's worth the violence. We're building sociality, ecology, and kin. One tender at a time.

31 In *Rabelais and His World*, Mikhail Bakhtin writes about collectively experienced carnivalesque feasts and other popular festive forms. In Rabelais's description of the "feast of cattle slaughter," we find that "the limits between animal flesh and the consuming human flesh are dimmed, very nearly erased. The bodies are interwoven and begin to be fused in one grotesque image of a devoured and devouring world. One dense bodily atmosphere is created, the atmosphere of the great belly," Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 221.

28 David Graeber explicates the importation of the term "consumption" from the field of political economy into cultural analysis. In particular, he notes a paradigm shift from the idea of desire as erotic to the idea of desire in terms of eating food, which first occurred in popular discourse in medieval and early modern Europe. Significantly, Graeber notes that popular culture embraced impulses of appetite and desire collectively and communally in feasts, parades, Carnival, and festivals. Later, the "privatization of desire" was just one component in the development of capitalism. See David Graeber, "Consumption," *Current Anthropology* 52, no. 4 (August 2011): 489-511.

29 Viveiros de Castro writes about the irreducibility of mythic subjects into fixed identities: "I have in mind the detotalized, 'disorganized' bodies that roam about Amerindian myths: the detachable penises and personified anuses, the rolling heads and characters cut into pieces, the eyes transposed from anteaters to jaguars and *vice versa*, etc." Viveiros de Castro, *Cannibal Metaphysics*, 67.

30 In "The Body as an Accumulation Strategy," David Harvey conceptualizes the body by connecting different discourses on the body, which he frames as the individual and the self. He cites Marilyn Strathern's book *The Gender of the Gift*, in which she offers an analysis of Melanesian social practices on the island of Gawa as opposed to what she describes as traditionally Western views of the body as belonging to oneself. In the Melanesian perspective, "eating does not necessarily imply nurture; it is not an intrinsically beneficiary act, as it is taken to be in the Western commodity view that regards the self as thereby perpetuating its own existence. Rather, eating exposes the Melanesian person to the hazards of the relationships of which he/she is composed ... Consumption is not a simple matter of self-replacement, then, but the recognition and monitoring of relationships." Marilyn Strathern, *The Gender of the Gift* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 302, qtd. David Harvey, *Spaces of Hope* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), 99-100.