GSWS 333-4: Ruth Wynn Woodward Advanced Seminar: “Food-Writing: Queering the Culinary”

Professor: Dr. Lucas Crawford  
Email: lcrawfo@sfu.ca

Office: AQ 5095  
Office hours: TBA

Lecture: Thursdays 13:30-17:20; SEC 1013

Course Description:
The act of consuming food has been analyzed from a number of (variously) fascinating approaches – medical, psychological, geographical, economical, activist, governmental, legal, and so on. As with categories such as “transgender,” we tend to treat medical/economic approaches as those that carry the most weight. Over the last seventy-five years, however, a new specifically literary genre of food analysis has gradually emerged: food-writing. This new genre, powered by Food Network programming and fine-dining pocketbooks alike, seems to newly announce “food” as an object that requires its own form of discourse – even though food in literature is far from new. (You might recall Eve’s apple, Plato’s teachings on diet, Maya Angelou’s anti-ode to “health-food diner[s],” etc.) Therefore, our first line of questioning will be: what is this new form? What is the difference between “food-writing” and merely “writing about food”? What historical forces and developments made this “emergence” possible at this time, and in this way? For instance, why and to what effect has “food-writing” consisted almost entirely of two genres – memoir and reportage? (What about food poetry, food fiction, food lyrics, or food performance?) How might food-writing’s genres reproduce a limited sense of gender?

Our second line of questioning involves the bodies that appear in food-writing. Given that eating is unavoidably a carnal act – after all, eating assimilates “other” matter into your “self,” using your body to do so – we must ask: what is the body of food-writing? What is lost/created in the translation from eating-body to body-of-text? Given that food-reading is not food-eating, what kind of desirous/desirable texts are these? What visceral act does the reader of food-writing commit? How does food-writing limit what might be meant by the word appetite?

The approaches above will help us queer the increasingly tight literary conventions of food-writing, its desires, and its bodies. Our third line of questioning generates this “queering” in a more literal fashion. That is, we will analyze the gendered and sexual stakes of food-writing, food TV, kitchen culture, and food activism. For our purposes, considerations of social class, race, immigration, and ability will be important factors in this “queering.” Moreover, we will ask: what role has food and consumption played in the history of feminism and queer theory? Why have GSWS fields elevated sexual pleasure to the status of revolution while leaving food pleasure off the menu? What are our food feelings, and what effect, if any, do they have? Can we create a more capacious theory of bodily pleasure that doesn’t divide our senses and palates with such sharpness?

Educational Goals:
• capacity to understand, synthesize, apply, critique, and otherwise intervene in debates about food
• developed curiosity about consumption, queer theory, literature, and popular writing
• improved critical skills with regard to history, literature, politics, and the embodied lives thereof
• increased confidence as a viewer, creator, critic, and witness of culture
• ability to form highly unique, rigorous, imaginative, and relevant arguments

Prerequisite: 30 units including 3 units in GSWS.
Course Texts and Courseware:
1. Custom courseware (available at SFU bookstore, Burnaby campus).

Course Evaluation and Assignments:
- Participation 20%
- Mid-Term 20%
- Seminar Presentation 20%
- Writing Assignment 20%
- Final Exam 20%

NOTE: This course is a seminar. Students will vigorously debate ideas they have gleaned from our fun but heavy reading load. The level of discussion will not be intentionally opaque, but students’ previous engagement with the histories and debates of GSWS fields is important. A student without the proper pre-requisites, or without a genuine interest in the topic, will be very challenged. A challenge can be a wonderful thing indeed. My advice, however, is to regard this seminar as you would any other senior seminar, such as those in Chemistry, Russian Language, or Music Performance. (If you wanted to take a senior-level credit in playing jazz trombone, but do not like jazz and have never played the trombone, what would you do to succeed in such a course? Think creatively and be in touch with Dr. Crawford with any questions.)