

DON'T PLAY WITH YOUR FOOD

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Is there a person alive who hasn't been told at some time, "Don't play with your food"? If eating is a human universal and if play is a human universal, then playing with food very likely is a human universal. I have not scoured the ethnographic literature for evidence of this claim, though the scarcity of references to playing with food in the work of anthropologists and other ethnographers could mean no more than the fact that playing with food is one of those everyday, mundane experiences that ethnographers fail to record and report. Playing with food hits the triviality barrier (Sutton-Smith, "Psychology of Childlore" 1-8).

Perhaps its very triviality recommends food play to our attention. The topic, of course, lies at the intersection of two very powerful human practices—eating and playing—so it would be surprising, indeed, if this inquiry did not arrive at some nontrivial observations. My aim in this essay is to begin mapping the territory called "playing with food," both for folklorists and for the interdisciplinary field called "play studies." I focus here on children's playing with food, but the discussion necessarily leads me to considering the continuities between children's and adults' play with food. Folklorists of children's cultures long ago had to deal with the question, "when does childhood end?" For good reasons we became comfortable with defining children's folklore as including the folklore of adolescence, and since that folklore continues through college age, folklorists of children find themselves slipping into the study of the folklore of young adults.

Playing with food has received some unsystematic attention, and a goal of this essay is to draw more attention to the phenomenon and to link some previously unconnected ideas. Toward those ends, I shall first review briefly the theoretical perspectives that underlie this inquiry and then offer the beginnings of a mapping of children's food play. I close the essay with a discussion of the diverse meanings and functions of playing with food, favoring Sutton-Smith's model of play as a form of "adaptive variability" (*Ambiguity of Play*). First, though, we need some theory.

The Eating Body, the Playing Body

Over the past two decades, at least, culture critics have found it very productive to begin with the human body as a complex, polysemic "text" for understanding how we inscribe social and cultural concerns onto the body. As Mary Douglas puts it, we are always studying "the two bodies," the "body" that is the society and the "body" that a human possesses. The human body works as a very apt model of the society. The body is a bounded system, with clear zones "outside" and "inside" its boundaries. Since the body is a system, change in one part of the system affects every other part. Moreover, there are things that pass across these boundaries. Air, food, drink, mother's milk, and other non-food materials—usually labeled "dirt"—cross the boundary from outside to inside, and a number of materials (urine, feces, milk, semen, menstrual blood, non-menstrual blood, saliva, tears, sweat, snot, flatulence, and some minor excreta) cross the boundary from inside to outside. Gaps in the boundaries, the "holes" in our bodies where things cross over in one direction or another, are liminal zones, hence dangerous. Cultures "police" these zones, creating elaborate rules surrounding what materials can flow where and how those materials and movements must be done so as to minimize the danger. Thus, societies have taboos (or, at least, approved preferences) regarding food, drink, and other materials passing into the body, just as they have taboos and other rules or practices handling the danger of the excreta.

We tend to create metaphors around the body, we tend to make metaphors about the society (the "social body"), and—most important—we tend to carry these metaphors from one realm to the other. Many of our everyday metaphors and commonsense understandings are based in our experiences of and with our bodies (Lakoff and Johnson). When we think about our bodies and talk about our bodies we often are thinking and talking about our society, and the metaphors we use in the one realm (e.g., binary oppositions such as CLEAN/DIRTY, GOOD/BAD, MORAL/IMMORAL, SAFE/DANGEROUS) often bleed into the other. This way of thinking about the "two bodies" that are always with us makes food a powerful, universal symbol.

The child's body works as an especially powerful, condensed symbol of the society for adults because we project so many of our own fears and anxieties on children. Put differently, children's bodies become in our public discourse the site for a great many ideological struggles, including such diverse issues as abortion, animal rights, violence, drugs, and "values." Children's bodies become another site of struggle when children resist the power of adults. The struggle begins early and over precisely the danger zones mentioned above—that is, over adults' attempts to control the child's body by socializing its eating, urinating, and defecating. Later, of course, the struggle over the child's body moves on to limiting movements, clothing style, hair, body ornamentation, smoking, ingesting drugs, sexual activities, and the like. I shall have more to say about the struggle over food, below, but for now let us recognize simply that the child's body carries a great deal of symbolic weight in adult discourse.

As our collective strategy for bringing order and meaning to our lives, culture handles dangerous materials like food in two related ways—through ritual and through play. The ritual strategies aim to tame and domesticate the dangerous material, sometimes through avoidance altogether and sometimes through ritual treatment and transformation of the dangerous material (Babcock-Abrahams 167–81). Our food taboo against eating dogs and the centrality of the bread in the Christian Eucharist exemplify the two strategies.

But playing with a dangerous substance is just as common a human strategy for taming a substance's power, and from a sociobiological point of view play certainly precedes ritual. From the sociobiological perspective, playing with food can be dangerous. As in all play, valuable calories are being expended and defensive attention is distracted during the play with food, but ethnologists are discovering, nonetheless, that a wide range of animals play with their food, and sometimes in extremely cruel ways (DeLong NP). Human play with food may require abundance, for it is a luxury to take the chance of "wasting" food during play.

Play certainly precedes ritual in the case of children, and the clash between the moods of ritual and of play are no more salient than in the adult's injunction to the child, "Don't play with your food!" Gregory Bateson would have been able to do so much with

that injunction; it touches on so many issues that interested him, from the nature of play to the role of the double-bind in communication. Later I want to "Gregory" that injunction (as his daughter, Mary Catherine Bateson, calls the process of engaging in the thought experiment of wondering how her father would think about some puzzle). In what follows I take a Batesonian approach to play. The essence of play lies in the paradox of its special, framing metamessage: "This is play." That metamessage governs the meanings of the various communications (messages) exchanged within the play frame. But, says Bateson, we face "two peculiarities of play: (a) that the messages or signals exchanged in play are in a certain sense untrue or not meant; and (b) that that which is denoted by these signals is nonexistent" (Bateson 183). As Bateson says, using an animal playfight as his example, "the playful nip denotes the bite, but it does not denote what would be denoted by the bite" (Bateson 180). Several decades' worth of play research (plus Erving Goffman's *Frame Analysis*) have helped us refine the Batesonian approach to play, keeping the fundamental notion of frame (and message and metamessage), but also paying more attention to power (and especially to its inequalities in a frame) than did Bateson. Goffman sees all social reality as a confidence game, so with Goffman any romantic notion about the voluntariness of and the experience of equality in the play frame must be suspect forever.

The injunction, "Don't play with your food!", immediately sets up a power struggle over the definition of the human activity immediately preceding the injunction. The adult is trying to bring order—one might even say ritual order—to the dangerous activity of eating, while the child is doing, well, doing what? The injunction is not technically a double-bind communication, but there is plenty of ambiguity here. What constitutes "playing" with your food? For the child, the operational definition becomes clear; playing with your food is what you are doing just before the adult says, "Don't play with your food!" But the adults are also pushing their food around on their plates, and they manipulated and transformed the food in preparing it for the table. What is so dangerous and wrong about playing with your food?

Playing with Food: A Map of the Territory

Based on my own experience, my lengthy ethnographic work with a troop of Boy Scouts, some collecting of food play accounts from my students and colleagues, some scholarly attention to children's foodplay, and mass mediated accounts of playing with food, I shall survey here some of the various ways children, adolescents, and young adults play with food. Later, I attempt to answer the more difficult "Why?" question. I confess at the outset that I had planned on creating a tidy "typology" of types of foodplay for this descriptive section, but the list got messier and messier, which might be an important point about the ways play with food invades all sorts of categories of play.

Let us begin with the individual. The play can begin in our imaginations, as John Caughey and others have taught us. We can dream about food, we can daydream about food, we can anticipate food in our mind's eye, and if we are hungry enough we can experience hallucinations about food; from a Batesonian perspective these dreams and fantasies have a family resemblance to play. These sorts of imaginings might not quite count as play, but (keeping in mind Bateson's family resemblance point) it is only a short step to imaging food as part of imaginative play, as in a child's tea party where the table and china are there but the tea and cookies must be imagined (well, the hot tea, anyway, but other fluids can be substituted for real tea and the cookies can be real). Eating is a common activity in the imaginative play of children, alone or in groups.

The food in imaginary play can be more material than imaginary, as children typically convert some materials in their play space into other objects (Bronner 251-71). Children play with food through the proxy materials of clay, mud, blocks (converted into cakes), and more. Our older grandson at age three loved to play that a string of colorful plastic Mardi Gras beads coiled and piled were a birthday cake, which we would sing over and then pretend to "cut" into servings. Slowly, commercial culture created for kids catches up with such children's folk play, marketing manufactured plastic play food, cooking utensils, and ranges to add adult-desirable "realism" to the play with food. We thought we had found the perfect present for our grandson when we bought him a plastic

birthday cake with a plastic knife to "cut" the cake into the four quarters held together by Velcro, but somehow that toy cake never held the fascination and pleasure of the pile of Mardi Gras beads that had become, in his imagination, a birthday cake.

The "Easy Bake" oven appeared in the 1950s and revolutionized one sort of children's imaginary play with food; now the child (a girl, of course) could actually bake small cakes and cupcakes in this oven heated by a common electric light bulb. The Easy Bake oven has been a toy hit for 40 years, even though it represents the typical adult, commercial impulse to move children's imaginary play from the truly imaginary to the "real." Plastic food replaces the wooden block that could be a hamburger in the imagination, real cupcakes from the Easy Bake oven replace the imaginary cakes served with imaginary tea. Still, the children manage to survive this attempt by adults to control and channel the imagination, and the resilient child is perfectly comfortable moving from one level of the imaginary/real to the other, often converting the "real" thing into a new imaginary one, as when the plastic porkchop becomes a handgun.

So imaginary play with food is the first large category of foodplay. But children also play with "real" food. Our first experiences with manipulating food occurs very early, as it has been observed that children can play with the breast's nipple. Certainly the introduction of solid food into the infant's diet presents the occasion for playing with the food—that is, for using the food for purposes other than its instrumental purpose of nutrition. Children play with feces, food, and dirt (even if it comes in the sanitized version of Play-Doh), and a Freudian viewpoint added to Bateson would see these as variations on the single play with feces and the issue of mastery (Freud, 168–75). Playing with food, moving it from order to disorder and back to order, is part of a larger set of developmental themes in children's lives. Eventually, the acquisition of language leads to children's speech play with the names of food, such as "bug juice" for the Kool-Aid served at camps and schools (Opie and Opie 162–67).

Individual children sometimes play with food by altering it to resemble something else. Biting a piece of bread into the shape of a toy gun or chewing eye holes and holes for the nose and mouth in a piece of bologna to wear it as a mask transform the food into

something else, and then the transformed object gets consumed. Children learn from peers the different ways to eat an Oreo cookie, which might include biting the circle into the form of a square. Mashed potatoes and gravy on the plate become erupting volcanoes, and eating a cup of ice cream can be turned into the excavation of a construction site. Bronner highlights this fundamental customary behavior by children, the manipulation of objects and their imaginative transformation into something else. Ethnographers do report some of this play with food objects, as in Smith's example of the child who carries a banana around as her "baby" and the creation of mud "bananas." The use of foodstuffs (usually "raw" as opposed to "cooked") is an important sort of children's play with food, but note that in many cases this is not "real" eating, that is, there is no danger here surrounding food's passing from the outside to the inside; nor is there much danger of "wasting" the food. The stakes get higher the closer we get to eating.

By the way, adults have found a clever way of trying to socialize even this sort of play with food. As in other areas of children's folklore, the adults have appropriated the folklore and commodified it, turning it into a product to be sold back to the kids. Adults have created children's cookbooks with instructions for transforming familiar food into something else, including "gross" something else (Porter; Elffers), and adults have marketed kits for children to bake cakes with gummy worms and other "gross" things in them.

Children's play with food can be very social. Food makes a wonderful prop in the "improvisational performance" we see in children's imaginative play (Sawyer). Reifel's look at play in a school cafeteria and Holmes's study of play during a kindergarten snacktime show how the framed setting of a meal or snack can induce several sorts of play, including some play with the food itself. Sharing food is an important gesture in the ecology of the child's friendship group, but so is refusing to share.

Humans sometimes play with food with their pets. I reported several sorts of food play with pets in my essay ("Banana Cannon" 312-23) arguing that the "folk dyad" can consist of a human and a non-human animal, and children quite often include pets in their imaginary and real play with food.

Children and adolescents also practice dirty, forbidden, "dark" play with food. Sutton-Smith and Kelly-Byrne, Gary Alan Fine, and others alert us to the range of play that we might call dark, dirty, forbidden. Playing with "disgust" is an important form of children's forbidden play with food. Folklorists are quite accustomed to understanding the role of disgust ("that's gross") in children's folklore. Sometimes other children are the audience for the disgusting performance, and one paradox of this play is that the child is both disgusted and delighted by the performance. Consider the food=pus equation in some children's play with food. Pubescents and early adolescents play by filling the mouth with mashed potatoes and pushing with both hands on the cheeks so that the potatoes extrude from the pursed lips like a pimple (a "zit" in teen parlance) being popped. At the Boy Scout camp I have studied for many years, a variant of the P, B & J (peanut butter and jelly) sandwich is the P, B & P (peanut butter and pus, that is, mayonnaise) sandwich. Sociobiological and functionalist explanations of disgust do not quite explain disgust as a human response to some foods; as Jones points out, disgust also has aesthetic and moral dimensions, a point to which we shall return below.

Stealing food can be a form of play. When prompted, college students will offer stories about ways to steal a roommate's food without the roommate's knowledge, such as drawing a spoon across the peanut butter or ice cream in precisely the pattern one found the surface. The famous game of "banana time" recounted by Donald Roy, after all, involved the stylized "stealing" of one worker's banana by another, a much more public and stylized version of the play of stealing another's food. Children and adolescents are capable of the same sort of stylized stealing of food as part of a game or practical joke.

Practical jokes involving food can be played within the play frame, or the play frame of the practical joke can be used to "mask" real aggression (Sutton-Smith and Kelly-Byrne). Jorgensen's essay on children's pranks and teases mentions a few practical jokes involving food, but anyone who has spent time watching children and, especially, adolescents taking meals together can provide more examples. Unscrewing the top of a salt or sugar shaker, replacing salt with sugar, and more elaborate practical jokes assault people

by violating their taken-for-granted frame for the proper food in its proper place. The meanings of this play, again, depend entirely on the frame. If the participants have a high-context relationship that includes "permission to joke," then the prank reinforces the metamessage about the relationship between the participants. How one takes a practical joke is a test of group membership. The practical joking can escalate, sometimes into a full foodfight.

Large foodfights in public places are a form of forbidden play. School cafeterias, camp dining halls, and college residence halls can be the sites for foodfights. Of course, like any framed playfighting, foodfights can break frame and turn nasty. Contrary to the gospel according to the Three Stooges, foodfights may be more common in private, dyadic relationships than in larger groups of near strangers. These more private, intimate foodfights do not count as forbidden play because the metamessage of the play frame confirms a close, trusting relationship.

The dyadic foodfight can slip into erotic play. The spontaneous foodfight that gathers momentum in the cafe kitchen scene in the film, *Fried Green Tomatoes* is intensely erotic, and there are a few other instances of erotic foodfights in film. Actually, erotic play with food can begin solo. Ever since Philip Roth's character, Portnoy, had that beef liver on the end of his penis in the afternoon and at the end of his fork for dinner, it was been acceptable to talk about solitary erotic play with food. Boys learn to masturbate with a variety of food items; there is nothing as fertile as the imagination of a horny adolescent boy in search of a slippery substance. Boys masturbate with meat, with banana peels, and with melons. Food products double as a penis for the masturbation by girls and, in some circumstance, by boys. Carrots and cucumbers present themselves as suitable tools, but bananas have qualities that make them more suitably symbolic penises than actual dildoes. Sausages draw our attention, and folk speech recognizes the metaphoric equivalencies, through such euphemisms as "stuff the sausage" and "hide the salami." Dyads might have their own erotic play with food, extending the repertoire from carrots and liver to chocolate syrup, whipped cream, honey, pudding, ice cream, and so on. There is a theme here making a metaphorical equivalence between sex and dessert, and the polysemic uses of the term "hunger" cross the realms of food, sex, and commodity consumption.

Sugar and chocolate, especially, have traditional associations with love, romance, and sex (Mechling and Mechling 19–32).

The examples so far have been of “dirty” or “forbidden” play with food. What of “dark play” with food, play that puts the players in danger? Young children probably do not engage in dark play, but teenagers can and do seek the thrill of dark play with food. Mushroom hunting carries danger, as does a diabetic’s eating chocolate cake. Eating disorders are perhaps the best known examples of dangerous play with food. Many would not want to call these pathologies “play,” but I see no reason to pull back from that attribution. Eating disorders are not solitary play in one sense; some practices (such as the bulimic’s self-induced vomiting) might be very private, but there is always an “audience” for the result, which is “thinness” (Bordo; Hesse-Biber).

I cannot claim to have created, here an exhaustive list of play with food. I have meant merely to suggest the range of sorts of play, and I count on the reader and future researchers to provide more examples prompted by my list. Far more important to the enterprise of using children’s folklore and customary behavior to understand their lives is the interpretive move. We see that children and adolescents play with food in a number of ways. Now we must ask, “why?”

Don't Play with your Food!

As I promised, I now want to return to the injunction with which this essay began and “Gregory” that command. I shall draw from Bateson’s work, but also from Sutton-Smith’s recent work on the “rhetorics of play”—namely, rhetorics of play as progress, as fate, as power, as identity, as the imaginary, as about the self, and as frivolous. Sutton-Smith seeks to uncover and warn us about the ideological package we are accepting when we use each rhetoric to talk about play, and he provides a way of thinking about play that I find promising in thinking about foodplay (*Ambiguity of Play*).

Why do children play with food, and why do parents in our society admonish children, “Don’t play with your food”? Let’s begin with the children’s play.

The sociobiological, functionalist explanation of foodplay

doesn't seem to have much to recommend it. It is difficult to imagine a satisfactory sociobiological explanation for playing with food, yet many mammals do it. Indeed, why would taking risks (like waste) with food have any evolutionary advantage? In much of the play with food, some food is lost to consumption altogether. Animal play theorists used to focus on flexibility, on the ability of play to create a repertoire of responses to the environment, in this explanation of the functions of play. Perhaps children's playing with food is anticipatory socialization for the adult activities of preparing food for consumption. But that seems like a very risky use of food for training the child. As Sutton-Smith observes, Fagen and other leading theorists on play are now giving more power to "the role of aesthetic factors in evolution" (*Ambiguity of Play* 34). Searching for developmental or evolutionary functions of food play, therefore, must conclude that we are in the presence of expressive, rather than instrumental behavior.

If children's foodplay is expressive behavior, then we need to understand the "pleasures" involved in playing with food. The play theories employing a rhetoric of "the self in play," explains Sutton-Smith, favor "the psychology of the individual player," purposely ignoring the social aspects of play (*Ambiguity of Play* 173). Of course, as Sutton-Smith notes, this perspective is, itself, a product of social and historical forces, such as the individualism, secularization, commodification, and psychologization of our modern period. This approach would have us focus on the experience of playing with food, on how the play delivers "fun," perhaps the experience of "flow" coined and studied by Csikszentmihalyi and his colleagues. The problem is that children (and teenagers, for that matter) are notoriously poor at being able to describe why something is "fun." It would take very ingenious questioning for the folklorist to discover, for example, why it is "fun" to mix the rice and peas on your plate, or bite off the bottom of a sugar cone and suck the melting ice cream from the bottom of the cone. "Fun" often derives from the juxtaposition of "sense" and "nonsense," so that taking the "commonsensical" way of eating food and disrupting the ordinary into some form of nonsense complicates the meaning of the act of eating. The nonsense might actually reinforce the legitimacy of the common sense, just as cheating paradoxically strengthens belief in the legitimacy of the game frame,

but even that function does not lessen the impact of the transgressive "frivolity" (another rhetoric of play examined by Sutton-Smith) of the play.

Some of the child's pleasure in expressive food play derives from its social nature. Folklorists and others who study the foodways of high context communities usually view play with food as a form of discourse about identity. We see food as a powerful symbolic element in a performance of its identity. The very fact that the participants establish and maintain a frame communicates to them something about their relationship. There is an implied intimacy in eating together, an act even more intimate than conversing (we can "make nice" with strangers or with people we dislike, but eat with them?). Maybe this intimacy and implied trust are products of the danger of the activity, that is, the danger of having food and drink cross our body boundaries. In any case, a group's using a shared meal as a signal of identity builds on this frame of trust and intimacy. Foodways are among the last things to disappear as ethnic groups become assimilated, so powerful is food as an ethnic marker. Family gatherings and celebrations, festivals, holidays, and other stylized performances of identity almost require the appropriate food. Children understand this use of eating from a very early age.

Children also learn how the consumption of food can be part of the performance of identity. Certainly children learn the role of food in family, ethnic, and other group identities, but I mean here the use of food to mark the distinction between child and adult. Children take some pride and pleasure in performing their identities as children distinct from adults. Some foods are childish, approved as such by adults. This happens on the folk level at the family table, but it is also evident in the commercial culture of commodities. Children constitute a market, and a stroll through the grocery store will enlighten even the most unobservant adult to what degree children are a market segment for distinct foods. These are the foods advertised on children's television—consume these programs, consume these advertised toys, consume these foods, consume these foods to get these toys.

We see, then, that the child can find multiple pleasures in playing with food. The drives impelling the foodplay are part psychological and part cultural in some combination we still can't quite

sort out. We know that children will play with food under just about any circumstance, just as we know that the adult caretakers will often issue the injunction: "Don't play with your food!" Why do those adults do that?

Adults send mixed messages about whether they want children to take food "seriously." On the one hand, most adult caretakers usually take seriously their responsibility for the child's health, which includes making sure the child eats "healthy" food. But adults tend to go beyond the pure biological necessity of eating and tend in our culture to turn food into a fetish; that is to say, adults place a symbolic value on food far beyond its real value to the health of the child. Like toys (Sutton-Smith, *Toys as Culture*), food is a "gift" that bears many messages, including "I love you." Parents of all social classes use food as rewards and punishments, just as some parents use the giving and withholding of love as reward and punishment. Adult caretakers attempt to socialize the child by bringing seemingly arbitrary order to the act of eating. The rules of eating must seem to the child to emerge very slowly and unsystematically. Sit here when you eat; sit up straight when you eat; want to see "restaurant behavior"; use your fork, not your fingers; don't blow bubbles in your milk; chew with your mouth closed; I know you're hungry but it's not dinnertime yet (we eat according to the clock, not the sensation of hunger); we eat dessert after we've eaten the meal; eat that outside; don't play with your food.

Children understand quickly the fetish value of food, so they understand quickly the value of food as a resource for taking power in a social situation. Parents can give and withhold food treats, but you can't make a child eat. To "take food seriously," as so much communication from the adults seems to suggest, is to make food the center of a power struggle between child and adult, with consequences ranging from the minor to extreme eating disorders.

With each other as the audience for the performance of disgusting eating, children are playing with power. They are playing with the power of the eating, they are playing with the power to disgust another person, and they are playing with the power of dark or dangerous play. When adults are the intended audience for the child's performance of disgusting behavior with food, the child most likely intends to shock the sensibilities (nice word) of

the adults, one of the few ways children can have any power over adults. Disgusting play with food, in these cases, serves as a move in what Sutton-Smith calls the "antithetical" nature of children's play, whereby the child resists, undermines, subverts, and otherwise works against the adult versions of reality, propriety, and order.

I said that adults send mixed messages. If the first is to take food "seriously," the second is that it is good to play with your food. Adults "play" with food all the time with and in the presence of children. Cooking and other ways of manipulating food can resemble play. Adults commonly link play and "creativity" in their talking with children about an assortment of activities, and some of these activities include preparing and serving food. Apparently the play is to end with the presentation of the food, and the task of getting the food from the plate to the mouth should be purely instrumental. And then a child watches an adult eat a lobster. Mixed messages.

Play with Your Food!

Sutton-Smith declines to offer a definition of play. Although he finds defects in each of the seven rhetorics he examines, he assures us that each also tells some truths about play, that the best we might hope for is that a "melange of metaphors" might point toward "the possibility of a truth yet to be discovered" (*Ambiguity of Play* 218). He favors an understanding of play variability as analogous to the notion of "adaptive variability" to be found in evolutionary theory and in recent developments in cognitive science (*Ambiguity of Play* 229–30), and I think Bateson would approve of working on a consilience between understanding biological systems (like the brain) and social systems like play.

It was reading Stephen Jay Gould's *Full House*, by Sutton-Smith's account, that led him to see a parallel between the three basic principles of evolutionary variability—quirkiness, redundancy, and flexibility—and the basic qualities of play (*Ambiguity of Play* 222–23). Evolution, as any reader of Gould's essays and books knows by now, does not necessarily progress. Some adaptations work out splendidly; some create monsters or lead to extinction. There is no way of knowing in advance what traits will

be needed for survival and reproduction. Thus, natural selection creates the circumstances favoring variability as the best hedge against future exigencies.

From Gould's principles of evolutionary variability and from recent research in brain science, Sutton-Smith reasons that play—as quirky, redundant, and flexible as it is—may provide a relatively safe model for the challenges we humans face every day, from our needs for food and shelter to our complex needs for sociality. In short, play “may be an invention meant to model such natural selection processes” (*Ambiguity of Play* 229). The higher developed play in humans (as opposed to the lower order play of animals) thus “engenders variable contingencies” (uncertainties and risks) for the purpose exercising selective control over them in fictive and factual terms. “Play” is a mastery process, (as Erikson said) “creatively derived from the exigencies of the evolutionary predicament” (*Ambiguity of Play* 229). Of course, Sutton-Smith recognizes that this evolutionary explanation for the origins and our continuing embrace of play provides only the substrata for the other qualities of play that make it so interesting and human—its “metacommunicative and perhaps even its structural dialectics” (*Ambiguity of Play* 230). So much of play's adaptive variability is accidental; but in many cases it is a lovely accident.

Where does this leave us with thinking about play with food? I see at least two ways in which playing with food might provide the materials of adaptive variability that keep it energized. First, play with food keeps all options open. Humans are born remarkably “world open” (Berger and Luckmann), capable of a range of behavior far more variable than any society settles into. Culture narrows our options, socializing us into eating certain foods, avoiding others, and using these differences as symbolic categories. Play with food, as I see it, resists this narrowing by culture. American children don't eat real worms; they eat gummy worms. But they could eat real worms, or beetles, or ants. Play with food deconstructs it, destroys its cultural shaping, returns it to something primordial, only to be shaped again by the player.

Second, I believe that my examples of play with food demonstrate that the evolution of culture has demanded that we have an aesthetic dimension to our manipulating and consuming food. As Sutton-Smith notes, this seems to be the direction of theories about

animal play, and it makes good sense to understand our childish playing with food as productive experimentation with what is pleasing to our eyes, noses, touch, and taste. Play with food is usually "about" aesthetics. Playing with food exercises those aesthetic relationships with food. Even the simplest food can be "beautiful" or "nice" by folk aesthetic standards.

Like Sutton-Smith, I am reluctant to declare that there is one core meaning to human play with food. Our play with food is very contextual. I think it also may provide some very functional "adaptive variability," and I have suggested two ways that playing with food helps maintain the quirkiness, redundancy, and flexibility we need for dealing with this most important and most powerful material. Ultimately, I favor the "melange of metaphors" approach to understanding food play; it describes fairly the polysemy of play. Aesthetic playing with food is a quintessentially human activity, and I hope this essay has convinced more than a few adult readers that children's playing with food is (as Martha Stewart says) "a good thing."

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