

## Queering Kitchens: Dismantling Violence and Reimagining Livable Spaces

By Asher Warg

**ABSTRACT.** This paper addresses the ways in which the kitchen has historically existed as a site of violence and worked to actively exclude marginalized people. Working with Judith Butler's definition of queer and José Muñoz's concept of queer futurity, the concept of queering the kitchen is discussed as a method for creating accessible, equitable, and inclusive kitchens.

A pristine, well-dressed white woman opens the door of her state of the art General Electric oven, revealing a beautiful homemade apple pie. Her kitchen is sleek, efficient and the table is loaded with a delicious looking meal that is sure to please her hard-working husband when he gets home. This cultural imagery of an ideal, perfect 1950s housewife, hard at work in the kitchen seems to be a nice image of "simpler times" of long ago; however, the American kitchen functions as a multifunctional space and it often stands as a historical site of violence. The pristine counters of this kitchen hold dirty truths of slaughter, consumption with crossed lines of consent, and exclusivity at the expense of certain bodies. At the same time, the kitchen is often the center of an American household and provides nutrition, social connection, and education. With the kitchen existing as such a fundamental part of the American home, how can we queer the notions of what this type of kitchen is and what it looks like to make the kitchen a less violent site? In this paper I will first trace the kitchen as a violent site and unpack the varied ways in which it houses violence. I will then begin a conversation on reimagining the kitchen as a more holistic community space.

To begin to address a reimagining of a kitchen, we must first look at how the kitchen exists as a site of violence. Kitchens exist fundamentally as spaces to prepare food for consumption. The kitchen and the culture surrounding it is one that demands that consumption of bodies lower on the food chain. Using this notion, I argue that the consumption of bodies lower on the food chain occurring in the kitchen goes beyond the food, rather bleeding into consumption of human bodies and their capabilities. In exploring the kitchen as a site of violence, I examine (1) how the kitchen is heteronormative, (2), how the kitchen is a site of consumption of bodies, and (3) how the kitchen is designed only for able bodied individuals. Upon examining the kitchen as violent and exclusionary, I then begin to reimagine the kitchen as queer space that mediates the gaps that currently situates it as a site of violence.

Heteronormativity is an ideology that normalizes and privileges the idea of intimacy and romance as existing between only men and women. This notion is normalized through gender based roles that police the construction of masculinity and femininity. The construction of both masculinity and femininity within heteronormativity are very much tied to food and the ways in which that food is sold to people in gendered ways. Masculinity is affirmed via the ways that men are sold quick, easy, protein based meals. In *Men's Health*, one of the best-selling men's fitness magazines, men are given the "quintessential macho meal" that is simply listed as "a man, a can, a plan" (Parasecoli, 1997, p. 195). This recipe tells us quite a bit about how men consume food and how they exist in kitchens. The recipe is one that has limited ingredients and requires limited to no time in the kitchen for preparation. The recipe's main ingredients are sausage and beer, two foods that are deemed masculine. This tells us that men exist in kitchens as passerbys rather than residents. This makes it clear that men negotiate their space in the kitchen as temporary and on their own terms of what they desire for consumption.

In opposition, femininity is defined as an identity tied strongly to the kitchen. Labor in the kitchen is sold to women as an act of “love and emotional warmth” (Parkin, 2006, p. 43). Food is tied to romance and the women’s capability of earning the love of a man and maintaining it, suggesting that she is in somewhat in control of the emotional state of the man via her labor. In constructing femininity in this way, women are sold additional work with a pinch of an implied consequence if they fail to meet these standards. The nuances of the constructions of gender go as far as to bleed into the physical construction of kitchens. The modern day, domestic kitchen as we know it is tied to efforts to “redomesticate women following World War II,” and their movement into the workplace (Randl, 2014, p. 58). As women began to take on careers outside the home, the traditional gender role system was threatened. To continue to push the labor of homemaking onto women, the post-World War II kitchen was modified to “ease some of the most onerous kitchen tasks,” thus saving the working woman time (Randl, 2014, p. 73). The shift of women into the labor force never challenged notions of who was to maintain the home, rather it propagated the notion that women are innately designed to perform labor in the kitchen as an act of love. Furthermore, to suggest that the creation of food is an act of love holds a gendered assumption about women’s desires to serve food, bleeding into assumptions that “serving particular foods would earn them love from their families” and that this quest for love is their motivation (Parkin, 2006, p. 39).

When talking about consumption, the thought is often of the physical devouring of food. Consumption can extend beyond that into the taking of time and self-worth. Remembering that kitchens are sites of gendered assumptions, we know that kitchens are spaces categorized as feminine space, most commonly depicting women in them with all productive feminine work occurring inside them. This gendered assumption about where women spend their time in a home creates a culture that operates to keep them contained in the kitchen. Bodies are limited by time and the maintenance of the domestic kitchen is no small feat. The domestic kitchen and the expectation to provide three nutritious meals a day means that often women are expected to spend a great deal of their time cooking, cleaning, and serving meals. This alleged required labor pushed onto women has remained heavily gendered despite the integration of women into the workforce in the 1960s, creating the idea of the “Second Shift” (Hochschild, 2003). In creating the second shift, a woman must first be understood as the bearer of children and a caregiver to both her husband and their children. This notion of innate purpose is used to justify the caretaker role by ignoring the “transformation to mother” making this switch “socially invisible” (Holmes, 2006, p. 3). Without the role of the caregiver, which has been assigned to the woman, being valued and seen as active, the woman’s time spent occupying said role is not given value. The work done by women in maintaining kitchens and preparing food is not paid labor and adds an extra shift of work onto the day’s labor. This second shift is integrated in the societal model of what it means to be a proper woman. As any social model of identity, there are extreme repercussions for those who create discourse within these identities. Society polices the identity of individuals through the creation of shame. In this example, I will be discussing “ubiquitous shame,” a type of shame that exists as a “shame-*status* that attaches to the very fact of existing as a girl or woman” (Mann, 2018, p. 403). This shame is created for women who do not properly exist as women, which in the eyes of society, invalidates their identity as women.

This issue of consumption of bodies extends beyond just gender based violence, bleeding heavily into issues of stratification of consumption of racialized women's bodies. The white kitchen has a haunting history of exploiting Black women and Indigenous women. In the years following the Emancipation Proclamation, black women - despite their alleged freedom from slavery - struggled to find work and the resources needed to survive. Many were forced back into slave labor and working for white families as a means of survival. This tradition of slave labor work extended all the way into the 1950s. In looking at how this type of exploitation occurred, I looked to narratives of domestic servants to hear about personal experience. In looking at the experiences of Ethel Phillips, a domestic servant for the Clark Family of Dearborn, Michigan, Kellie Carter Jackson speaks about

how social norms of racism allowed for rampant disrespect and exploitation of her grandmother (2017). Jackson explains how her grandmother was able to find part-time work as a domestic servant for a white family, the Clark's, who verbally stated that Ethel was a "member of the family" (Jackson, 2017, p. 164). Despite this supposed status of family that Ethel was verbally given, the Clark's engaged in highly racist activity that fundamentally dehumanized her. Along with household labor and an incredibly low pay, Ethel and her life were kept highly separate from the Clark's - solidifying that she was not a true member of the family. In an interview with the Clark family's oldest daughter, Diane, she was unable to provide the correct answer to Ethel's last name. This intentional separation and lack of desire to know Ethel as a person illustrates the social stratification that was upheld by white families in relation to their Black employees.

Thus far, I have discussed the ways in which gender constructs and maintains the kitchen; however, the kitchen also works to exclude and diminish bodies on the basis of ability. The domestic kitchen is, and always has been, designed for the able bodied person. The space and tools used are not created with any physical limitations kept in mind. In looking at how people of different abilities negotiate space, there is evidence to suggest that "tasks involved in meal preparation and consumption...influence dietary intake" (Sharkey et al., 2012, p. 675). This means that the limitations of kitchen utensils is creating a gap of nutritional availability for people who have disabilities. This creates an obvious power dynamic that creates questions around who is worthy of access to nutrition, something that is a human need? In negotiating humanity, we see how cooking and nutrition is a "requirement of competent citizenship" (Hall, 2014, p. 183). The notion of citizenship is highly political and is used to give validity to people. There is a sense of animalization placed upon those without citizen status when they inhabit a space. Furthermore, the physical space of a kitchen is designed for certain abilities. In the 1920s, Using this line of thought, I have made connections in the question of the humanity of disabled bodies to capitalism to discuss how bodies that cannot be used for exploitative labor are not valued. In a society that demands a "Second Shift" from women, there is a requirement of performance of labor to be seen as useful and beneficial to society. Without the contribution of this so-called proper performance of labor, disabled bodies are not seen as important and therefore, not offered access.

### **Reimagining and Queering Kitchens**

This established knowledge of the kitchen as a site of violence allows us to create a frame of what needs to be improved about the construction and continuation of the kitchen. To inform this framing, I look to Judith Butler for a clear understanding of queering. There is limited conversation in academic circles about the ways in which a physical reimagining of a kitchen would appear. This reimagining would require a deconstruction of the current systems of oppression that subvert queers, women, and people with disabilities. I argue that we cannot imagine this kitchen without first constructing a "visionary fiction" of what a world without homophobia, misogyny, and ableism would look like (Imarisha, 2015). Our understanding of what this kitchen will look like is expansive in its possibilities and our path to creating this kitchen can be forged in a multitude of ways. Furthermore, with the intent of queering the kitchen, I look to José Muñoz to provide a guide to queerness. Muñoz reminds us that "queer is not here yet" and rather that it is something we must strive for and long for (Muñoz, 2009, p. 1). This futurity aims to motivate us to continue to push for changes.

To personally begin to reimagine the kitchen, I look at the ways in which we eat. Eating can be done in ways that rearrange the notions of what it means to value time and bodies. I believe that through the process of eating "we [should] hope to produce ourselves as thoughtful and even ethical beings, connected to each other" and therefore placing value in each other (Probyn, 1999, p. 422). When this value of time and body is made, we are able to better value the time and bodies of all kinds of people. The process of cooking and eating should be a social one where people bring all kinds of skills to the kitchen. The work of cutting up vegetables should be just as valued as the

person who washes the dishes. This cooking and cleaning divide should be split between people on the basis of what they can physically accomplish. We've been able to see this notion of ability carried out in kitchens of the past. The Black Panther Party of the 1960s used kitchens as spaces for both men and women to work together and organize for social change. To combat gender roles in the Party, the kitchens were occupied by men to show that their quest to combat systems of oppression meant combatting all systems, including sexist violence. While this notion does not encompass all the systems of oppression at work in the kitchen, it does begin the process of addressing a major system of violence at work in the kitchen. The ways in which we eat also need to be reimagined. I look at kitchens as places of social connection to break down social barriers that subvert. By this I mean, that kitchens should be reimagined as spaces of community gathering. Ideally, these spaces would exist without the divisiveness of the class system. I think a method of creating this space without class interference would be to think of kitchens as outside of the domestic sphere. Imagine a soup kitchen but instead of serving just low income persons, it would serve food to the entire community. This would allow the community to allocate roles in the kitchen among all persons, regardless of wealth. This would allow the beginnings of a breakdown of the ways in which class impacts the violence in the kitchen. Using this imagination, we can see that there is still space for us to continue to try to create reform, thus imagining a queering of the kitchen.

I also find it important to focus on ensuring that our understanding of reimagining a kitchen should not be perfect and strict in structure but rather be trashy and political. I draw this notion of trashiness from Nicole Seymour's concept of "trashy environmentalism," suggesting instead that we should be trashy eaters (2018, p. 192). This notion of being a trashy eater is to invoke a sense of consciousness around eating and an acknowledgement that eating cannot and will not ever be perfect and ethical in nature. There is a responsibility to be as ethical as we can be as individuals who are engaging in consumption under capitalism. There is value in looking at the way we eat as a whole to think of solutions- from grocery stores, to buffet restaurants, to class and portion size, we need to be thinking of manageable solutions for all people. If we are to eat with the intent of countering the politics of excess that has come to be associated with American eating, we will be actively working to ensure that our consumption is not endless and with intent to cause harm. Acknowledging that we need to eat for our health but that we do not need to go about this in excessive ways will allow us to be conscious of the food we prepare and consume, thus having us be aware of how to use the food to its fullest potential and limit waste. This kind of trashy eating will allow us to engage with ethical eating in more meaningful ways.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, a queer kitchen is a journey, not a destination. We must push for the queering of the kitchen in order to build a space that is so fundamental to the American home to better serve us and our communities. Our needs as people of varied lived experiences are too vast for the current restrictive confines of the American kitchen. As queer folks- and I mean this in reference to those outside of hegemonic norms- food is a substantial part of our lives and as it nourishes our bodies, it should strive to have it nourish our hearts, minds, and communities as well.

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