

PARAMETERS OF SPOONING: IN THE SITE OF POSSIBILITY

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ABSTRACT

Parameters of Spooning: In the Site of Possibility explores the intersections of craft, identity, and self-discovery through the creation of spoons. Stemming from an abundance of curiosity, my research took the form of learning new skills as a way to access the self. The process of learning, both of materiality and of self, centred around the question: what does it mean to queer an object? The work I produced during my MFA explores these skills and applies them to the form of the spoon, continually pushing this form further and further into ‘uselessness.’ These spoons—in ceramic, wood, metal, bronze, and woven natural materials—investigate failure as a queer possibility for transformation and growth. Through the queering of the spoon, I reimagine their purpose and transcend traditional notions of functionality, failure, and a possibility for trans and queer futurity. This paper is written to accompany my MFA thesis exhibition, which will be on display from April 15th to April 19th 2024, in the Special Projects Gallery at York University.

DEDICATION

To everyone who was patient with me while I was learning and growing:

I owe you a spoon.

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INTRODUCTION

I have always considered myself to be a person consisting of many pieces, like that of a puzzle. Some sit cardboard side up, and others have fallen below the table. Some fell out of the box and went missing entirely, lost to the shag carpeting, or to the vacuum, or fell down into the vents. I feel that the pieces are missing. I know it even as I am making the puzzle, even before it's come out of the box. I move through my life finding these pieces, my queer identity being a rather large section, after many years of practicing heterosexuality really well—so well that even I believed it. As I began my first queer relationship, and began to live as a queer person, I felt the full effects of my step away from “being ‘in line.’”¹



Fig. 1, drawing of fine cordage.

As Sara Ahmed describes in *Queer Phenomenology*, “we are orientated when we are in line. We are ‘in-line’ when we face the direction that is already faced by others.”² Being released from following this line, from “becoming straight,”³ created a space for me where I felt I could finally breathe. I could finally be myself in this space of non-direction, to a new dynamic, one where I didn’t have to be feminine, petite, or feel like I was acting. I think I always knew that as I ventured down this road, I would never come back.

I began to think critically about my gender in the spring of 2021, while working on a farm in rural BC, and being constantly mistaken for a man. For a whole month, the neighbours would drive by and see me out working in the field, with a long mullet haircut, Carhartt work pants, and a baggy hoodie. When I first heard that they were curious who the new farm boy was, I loved it. I felt so secure, and like I held so much power. I was working in a town where being gay was tolerated by some, but you were never sure who, and femininity felt like weakness. And no one

¹ Ahmed, *Queer Phenomonology*, 15.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., 16.

knew who I was. I spent a lot of the summer imaging myself as a man, attempting to pass, and I felt the pieces falling into place. “Performativity,” states Judith Butler, “is not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual.”⁴ It is through this, that “gender proves to be a performative,” and “is always a doing.”⁵ I didn’t feel like either; both sides felt like a costume, clothes to try on and then shed at the end of the day. Much of my life is a series of outfits, worn and then shed, over and over, depending which version of myself I want that day.

I spent a lot of time thinking about performance, specifically my own gender performance within my life. Hil Malatino describes this process as a practice of trans-ing, and involves gender not as identity, but as an entrance into a space.⁶ Trans-ing allows one to focus on how gender is a practice of assembly and reassembly, and is a process without a predetermined outcome.⁷ It was within this expansiveness that I sought something to feel grounded. I felt like I had opened a door to a huge space of possibility, and it was overwhelming.

When my season came to an end and I returned to my urban life in downtown Toronto, I found I had changed, and something had opened up inside me that did not go away. My feelings towards my identity and gender swirled around in my mind, and my confusion built as I tried to name this feeling. Around the same time, I attended my first spoon whittling gathering, a weekend outside the city where folks come together to learn and hone their spoon whittling skills. This led to my first experience with wood carving, and spoons more specifically. Spoons felt commonplace, ubiquitous, and comforting, a form I knew and could easily wrap my mind around. I spent hours working the green

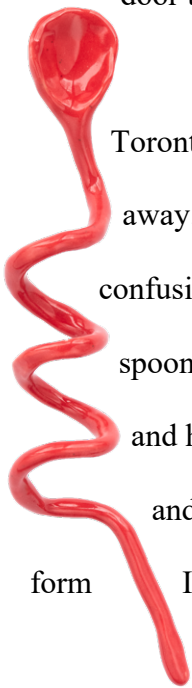


Fig. 2, *Squiggle Spoon (for Siobhán)*, 2024.

⁴ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, xv.

⁵ Ibid., 33.

⁶ Malatino, *Side Affects*, 32.

⁷ Ibid.

wood—wood that is still alive and has not gone through the usual drying process—into something that I could use, something that felt simultaneously easy and hard. I would carve in silence, imagining its final form and shape, as I would imagine for myself too. It was unstoppable, after so many years of amazing denial that not even I recognized. As I made more spoons, I felt like this was the beginning of cracking open, of uncontrollable self-discovery and self-hood. As I carved, I would ponder the question, “Where do we turn to heal?”⁸

I am now a few years separated from my initial encounter with spoons, and still continually questioning my identity and gender, and what it means to explore this relationship creatively through a physical medium. To me, spoons feel uninscribed by gender; they are sites that can continually be changed, just as they’ve continued to evolve through history. As I consider spoons more and more, they transform into vessels that are not either or, beginning as these uninscribed vessels with great potential for transformation. It is a vessel that receives and holds, and it is not permanent, temporarily holding and giving. This vessel sometimes wears a costume, sometimes becomes a chameleon for other purposes or to hold different meanings. They can go under the radar or become ornate.



Fig. 3, carved spoons on my desk.

During my time in the MFA program, I have made hundreds of spoons, amounting to hundreds of hours of work. Each spoon is different, and slowly they moved away from their

⁸ Malatino, *Side Affects*, 101.

intended use. The form of the spoon became queer, no longer fully functioning as it was originally intended, creating a new thing altogether. In this way, my “queering” of spoons can be seen as what Sara Ahmed calls “queer use,” which looks at how things can be used in ways outside of their original intended purpose, or by people from whom these objects were never intended.⁹ My spoons are symbolism for queer life, for transformation, and for a potential queer future. Which begs the question, if a genderqueer spoon existed, what would it look like?

⁹ Ahmed, *Complaint!*, 137.

LEARNING BY HAND

Spoons crawl across the floor, beings in movement, snaking around corners and crawling up walls. Some create identifiable shapes, large S's and swirls, some knotted and twisted in on themselves. A large spoon hangs from the ceiling, its pieces connected with woven grasses, resembling that of a prehistoric animal displayed in a museum. Hundreds of spoons are contained in this space, in all different shapes, sizes, colours and forms. Some are woven with willow and with grass, some carved from wood, others made with fire in clay, metal, and glass. Some have broken and been mended. These shapes feel infinite, undefinable, vessels that have lost their purpose and destination, no longer able to perform their function. So, what does that make them? They sit, inviting the question, what does it mean to queer an object?



Fig. 4, *A Snake in the Grass!*, 2024.

Sometimes, I like to trace the spirals at the bottoms of the baskets I make and attempt to think in terms of those lines. I start from the centre, the tightest place, and I slowly move outwards, along the slowly spiraling branches. I could choose to follow each one individually, along the length of the basket until I reach an edge, but I would not get as far. Instead, I prefer to look at it in terms of a whole. Each cane supports the other, helping to make it function as an entire basket, to carry and support weight. But all together. I started with one very big block of wood, one I felt at times might pull me apart entirely. I have worked from that and attempted to pull it apart into segments, and through that process I found individual strands that sent me in

other spaces. I found more and more, developed and honed myself and my craft, and explored my practice alongside who I am as a person, where I am heading. I then take these skills I have learned, and apply them back into the spoon as form, creating woven, bronze, metal, ceramic,

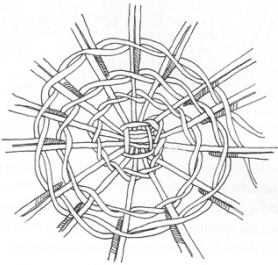


Fig. 5, drawing of spiraling willow weaving.

and wood objects that resemble spoons, but feel distant. I am creating a really beautiful basket, one that might not hold anything important, or be able to hold anything at all. It might be weak in some areas, or have a few gaps or areas that need fixing, but it's mine. I built it. And I learned.

These spirals replicate, duplicate, and show up in a lot of the work I do, be it in baskets, in learning, or in the spiraling of my research, happening concurrently with feelings of spiraling out the deeper I go. These spirals continue to grow, and they splinter off into these areas I never expect. They find their way into communities, and into spaces of further curiosity. I find I am weaving together myself, creating a way to be in the world through making. This feltness, as described by Stephanie Springgay, is “a practice of intimacy,” and what she believes to be the future of radical pedagogy. This intimacy is “a necessary source of disruption,” and one that I feel is prevalent in my work.¹⁰



Fig. 6, in-progress pine needle basket.

Anthea Black and Nicole Burisch discuss how craft is “a meaningful shorthand, a sign, a symbol, a representational system that flows across multiple sites of knowledge and cultural production.”¹¹ Craft holds many meanings, but consists mainly of making, and has a perceived authenticity through its use of natural materials, handmade quality, and made “with love.”¹²

¹⁰ Springgay, *Feltness*, 7.

¹¹ Black and Burisch, *Politics of the Handmade*, 1.

¹² Langlands, *Craeft*, 9.

Craft also “conveys and challenges emotive, cultural, political [and] economic values.”¹³ I find it difficult to distinguish where I fall in the crafting landscape, finding my place to be somewhere in-between many others. Not quite wildcrafting, foraging and harvesting plants in nature, or bushcraft, the use of practical skills and knowledge to survive in the outdoors, or potentially landcraft, crafting practical items utilizing natural materials and the land. As of late, I have settled on craftsmanship, “as the state of being engaged: how we interact materially, with each other and our immediate surroundings.”¹⁴

In his book *Shop Class As Soul Craft*, Matthew Crawford describes how mentally enriching craft and manual work can be, and states that the “straightforwardly useful can also be intellectually absorbing.”¹⁵ He also discusses how manual labour is a “systematic encounter with the material world,” and that knowledge of craft is knowledge of nature gained from firsthand experience.¹⁶ This knowledge of the nature of things connects the craftsman to the world around them, and allows them a greater capacity to think, knowing how the things around them operate. By going down this road, my world has opened up, and I have a much greater appreciation and understanding of how things operate in my world. I look at a basket and can understand how many hours, days even, went into it, and at what time of year the materials had to be harvested, for how long they had to soak in water, and for how long it took for them to grow to that height and width.

There is a certain dance and balance to carving that mimics my life. I fell into spoons at a time where I was questioning a lot about who I am, and now it serves as a symbol to think through my identity. Sometimes the simplest objects have the most surprising outcomes, as they

¹³ Black and Burisch, *Politics of the Handmade*, 1.

¹⁴ Langlands, *Craeft*, 11.

¹⁵ Crawford, *Shop Class as Soulcraft*, 21.

¹⁶ Ibid.

have to be thought through carefully and analyzed at every step; you have to adapt your initial plans to accommodate, slowing down or speeding up, sometimes settling for a simpler design and doing something more ornate on the next. Eating spoons are one of the most difficult spoons to carve, as they force you to consider the ability to hold and deliver food to the mouth adequately, as well as the smoothness of the grain and the fit within one's mouth. Carving a spoon takes a lot of thought, attention to detail, and skill, especially to carve a wooden spoon that is functionally sound.

I began learning first with spoons, with carving, and then it slowly progressed to other things. My knives needed sharpening, so I learned about metal. Then my tools needed covers so I would stop cutting my hands, so I learned about bark and leather sheaths.

I slowly turned from learning just what I had to, to learning for a love of it. I would encounter materials and wonder what I could do with them. Sweetgrass and pine needle baskets, banana peel cordage, bark knife sheaths, hide tanning. The more time I spent learning, alone or with others, in silence, laughing, or chatting, I learned more about myself. Through the frustration of being truly bad at something, things not going the way you planned, through making mistakes and failing.

Starting to carve felt easy, linear, but as I got into it, it created more and more questions, sending me on a spiral. I felt as I honed my skills, new avenues would open up and create more questions—how can I stop cutting my hands with my tools? How do I create leather tool covers? Where can I store my tools? How can I make a large basket? The more I learned about myself,

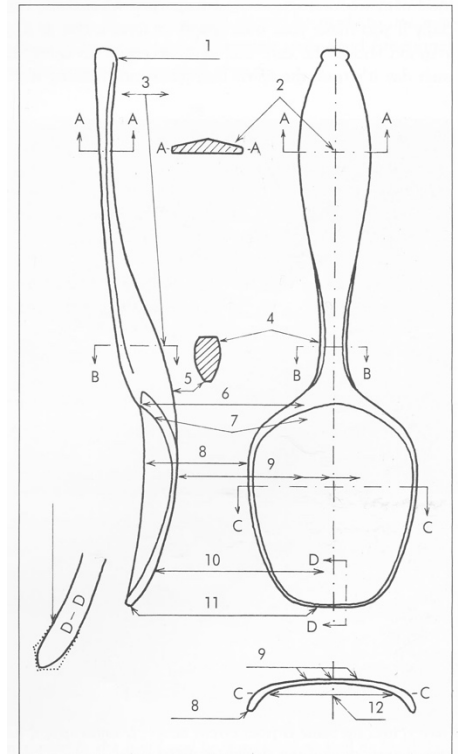


Fig. 7, schematics of a spoon.

the more I would question. I felt like I needed to do physical things, or I would fly away. I learn through my hands; I need to touch things, feel them, smell them to understand the world around me in a more robust way.



Fig. 8, *In Search Of*, 2023.

My spoons began evolving as my thoughts did. They started in simple bass wood, replicating the basics over and over again, splitting and breaking less and less as I progressed. I then started to carve wavy spoons from wood, trying to make something smooth and seemingly soft from a solid, stationary form. Then I came into some clay, and I began with ceramic spoons. They got increasingly bigger and longer, their bowls stretching wider and getting less and less functional. They started curving up walls and folding around corners. They inched across the floor, and transformed into an object that both was and was not a spoon. I started dreaming about this middle space where they could exist, as spoon but also as other, where their existence could be just enough. “Queer has been used variously to denote the unsettling of norms,” states Springgay and Truman in *Stonewalks*, “making the strange and the monstrous as practicing of queering.”¹⁷ For me, queer acts as strange, and therefor disrupts what we have come to know as the norm.

¹⁷ Springgay and Truman, “Stone Walks,” 858.

SPOONING

I first heard of Spoon Moot, a spoon carving gathering around a central question, in 2021, and it was the first time it had ever crossed my mind. Before that, I didn't consider myself an artist at all, but just a photographer, not someone who worked with, or could work with, my hands. I looked at my world and found images, documented them, and added them to other images, added words, and laid them out into books. I did not even consider myself particularly handy.

On a warm Saturday in October, I took a day trip up to Mount Wolfe Farm in Caledon, Ontario, for the first Moot since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. I attended the beginner's lesson, where I met Jim, the organizer and teacher of the workshop. We covered knife and axing basics, as well as some basic safety protocols when dealing with knives and live wood. In the demonstration, Jim sliced his hand, causing blood to soak into the soft, fresh bass wood of his spoon block, the chopping block, and onto the ground. Later in the day, I sliced my own hand, and my blood soaked into the wood, causing me to change my design to slice away the deep red colour. I made a large bowl with a short handle. It was ugly, but I made peace with it as my first attempt at whittling.

I returned the next year, the day having turned into a full weekend affair. I met more people and began developing friendships that I would come to revisit and strengthen. Over home cooked meals, we sat around the fire laughing, chatting, and talking about carving. I got to see two different pole lathes and try my hand at making a candle stick holder, talk about blacksmithing and glassblowing,

and troubleshoot issues I was having with my basic carving. I felt like a child again, surrounded by all these



Fig. 9, *Blood Sweat and (some) Tears*, 2021.

individuals who were miles ahead of where I was, creating beautiful things that I could hold and see. There is always more to learn.

This past fall, I attended my third Moot, and co-taught the beginner's carving with Jim. This gathering served as a marker of how much I learned, and the rapid nature of my obsessions and how closely I follow them. I returned knowing most of the people who came, contributed my own tips I had learned, and understood the talk about tools. This year felt different. I found I now had a style, a distinction between my spoons and others, and that everyone knew which were mine without me having to say so.

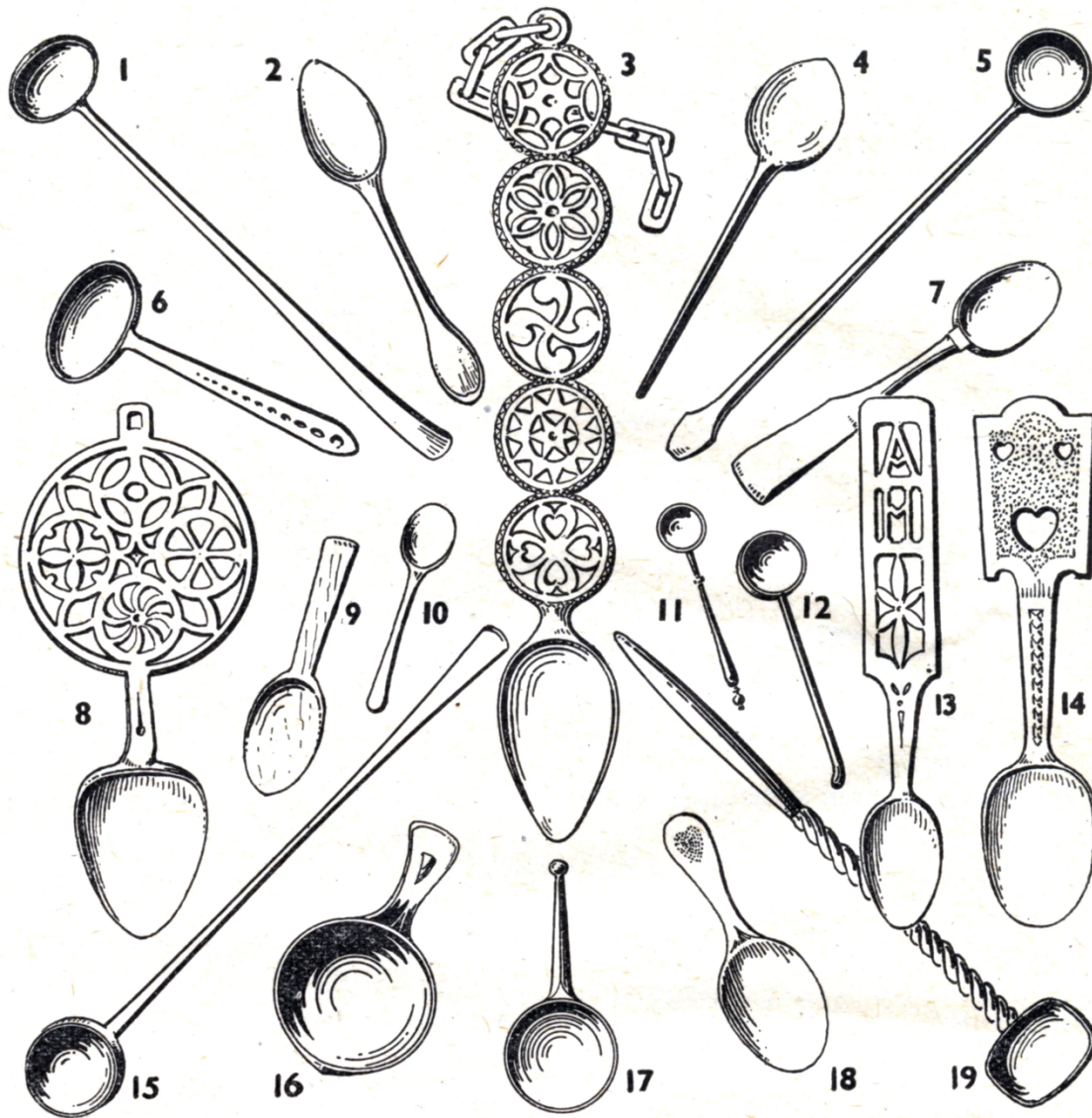
Spoons are estimated to be the oldest of the three eating utensils, first used in the Paleolithic era nearly 500,000 years ago, and made from seashells and bone.¹⁸ As I have been working on this body of work, spoons have been finding their way to me in my everyday life, coming up in daily conversation, on social media, and in books. Spoons have evolved and changed in uses, adornment, and type over many thousands of years, having first been made to mimic the cupped hand as a way to consume warm liquids.¹⁹ "The first cultural device was probably a recipient," states Ursula K. LeGuin in her book *Dancing at the Edge of the World*.²⁰ The spoon serves as carrier and receiver, deliverer to the mouth, from that of the bowl or other container. In the same way that LeGuin talks about a novel being a holder of words which have meanings, as well as a medicine bundle holding things in relation to one another, spoons can be seen as carriers that can take the shape of a container, a holder to a queer future for myself, as a way to be in the world, to both contain and receive.²¹ When I imagine containers, things that hold other things, I imagine an infinite number of possibilities.

¹⁸ "Facts and History of Eating Utensils."

¹⁹ Fulton, "From Chopsticks to Sporks."

²⁰ Le Guin, *Dancing at the Edge of the World*, 166.

²¹ Ibid., 169.



OLD WOODEN SPOONS AND LADLES.

1. Long punch ladle, 18 ins. to 21 ins. long with oblong oval bowl. (Also smaller sizes from 12 ins. to 16 ins.). 2. Beech spoon, about 11 ins. 3. Love spoon, fretted and carved, with wood chain. Length 18 ins. Date probably about 1800. 4. Porridge-stirring spoon, beech or sycamore; length 10 ins. to 11 ins. 5. Long round-bowled punch ladle, about 20 ins. 6. 8-in. spoon with incised handle and oblong-oval bowl. 7. Lime or beech spoon, 9 ins. to 10 ins.; 18th century type. 8. Love spoon, about 8 ins., sycamore. 9, 10. Old porridge spoons, lime, 9 ins. and 8 ins. 11, 12. Small cordial ladles, 7 ins. and 7½ ins. 13, 14. Welsh love spoons; these, in various woods, are of many types and sizes. 15. Long punch ladle, with delicately worked handle, sycamore, 21 ins. long. 16. Peach-shaped ladle with short curved handle. 17. Early small spoon (maple) about 5 ins. long. 18. Boxwood spoon, about 6 ins. 19. Punch ladle, squared-oval bowl, turned handle, partly spiral-curved, length 20 ins.

Note.—These spoons and ladles have necessarily had to be drawn to varying scales.

Fig. 10, drawing of old wooden spoons and ladles.

In early history, spoons often served as a romantic symbol, taking on many roles, from ornate early Egyptian ritual spoons, to coronation spoons of British royalty, to apostle spoon sets that later became christening gifts for children.²² Spoons have seeped into the everyday, adopting and formfitting our thoughts and feelings, serving as a blank form to congratulate, to grieve, to mark an important part of history, or just to eat. The first spoon did not look much different to what we know today, only differing in bowl and stem shape and design, and the materials used. Spoons have existed in every age and culture in a wide variety of shapes. They are a daily occurrence, often hiding in plain sight. Objects have a “tendency to disappear from view,” states Sara Ahmed, when these objects are conventional and have a specific use.²³

Spoons have also come to be used as a metaphor of intimacy, for both cuddling and as a sexual position. Spooning first came to involve a *love-spoon*, an intricately carved wooden spoon gifted to a woman by her suitor in 17th century Wales, then around the 1800s this practice gave way to spooning, the act of flirtation between love interests. Spooning now refers to the cuddling position, mimicking the way two spoons cradle each other in a drawer, the person on the outside as the “big spoon” and the individual on the inside as the “little spoon.”²⁴ I realize that for years since my coming out, this form of cuddling is much more prevalent with my partners; it draws an interesting parallel between queer community and modes of intimacy, and my making of queer spoons one of a kind and unable to fit together.

Spoons can also be used to measure energy. Created by Christine Miserandino, Spoon Theory relates to disability studies, in that you have a limited number of “spoons” (energy) each

²² Defenbacher, *Knife, Fork, Spoon*, Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1951, 36.

²³ Ahmed, *Queer Phenomonology*, 168.

²⁴ Davies, *Encyclopaedia of Wales*, 523.

day, and that each activity requires you to “spend” spoons. Most people without chronic disabilities have a much larger spoon supply, while others who suffer from chronic conditions have few. This theory has been adopted to Autism and ADHD Spoon Theory, encompassing executive functioning, physical activity, social engagement, focus, sensory, and language spoons.²⁵ One of my advisors, Allyson Mitchell, made me aware of this, and I realized that I have been using this for years without knowing: I’ve been giving away all of my spoons to the physical spoons I’ve been working on, leaving few spoons for social functions.

Spoons are also referenced in Indigenous cultures, specifically *a dish with one spoon*, developed by Indigenous peoples of northeastern North American and the Great Lakes region. Created hundreds of years ago, this concept was used to describe how “land can be shared to the mutual benefit of all its inhabitants,” and influenced the Iroquois Confederacy, the Great League of Peace.²⁶ *Dish with one spoon* is often referenced by Indigenous peoples in treaties, made to avoid violent conflict. In this sense, the “dish” represents the peacefully shared land in the land treaty, and the “spoon” represents the different groups living on this land in harmony and peaceful cooperation.²⁷ This place I am learning from, with, and on is protected by a treaty, made to protect the people and land from which I live. I feel as though I am working in tandem with the environment around me, trying to give back as I create, through community, gifting, and giving thanks to the materials I use.

Fig. 11, broken ceramics and kiln furniture.

²⁵ Neff, “Neurodivergent Spoon Theory.”

²⁶ Glover, “A Dish with One Spoon.”

²⁷ Ibid.



Spoons offered me a gateway into the world of craft, an easily understandable object and form to think through other crafts and explore alternate skills. I began attending skill sharing workshops and gatherings, and one-on-one tutorials. I learned about blacksmithing, hide tanning, natural dying, wood turning, basket weaving, chicken slaughtering, wild foraging, flower growing, ceramic making, and lumber milling, to name a few. During this time, I largely considered myself an outsider, entering rural spaces as a visitor from an urban environment, here to learn something new. However, over time, I began to build a community around me each time I entered these spaces, becoming more or less a local. Now, if I am looking for something, I will mention it to a friend, and though this message getting passed from one person to another, I will get what I seek, as if by magic. I feel like I am a part of a network, functioning within something greater than just myself, one that wants me to succeed, even if they personally do not know me.



Fig. 12, dandelion stems from Candace.

This community, for me, is the cornerstone to learning, and has helped me get to the place I am today. In many instances, I feel this sense of community is a large part of the reason I learned as well as I did. Michael Crawford describes this sentiment well, that “when the maker’s...activity is immediately situated within the community of use, it can be enlivened by this kind of direct perception.”²⁸ He argues that when work takes place within a community, the work is often enhanced, and the work of the craftsman improves. I would argue that it is this very social aspect, discussing issues and troubleshooting while working, and feeling as though one has a community to fall back on, allows you to take bigger

²⁸ Crawford, *Shop Class as Soulcraft*, 187.

risks, if you know there will be people to catch you and help when you are stuck. Crawford agrees that even while conversing about nothing at all, knowledge is gained, and that “practical activities in company with others [are] a sort of conversation indeed. In this conversation lies the potential of work to bring some measure of coherence to our lives.”²⁹ Craft, states Crawford, can be “understood as a way of life: a community of those who desire to know.”³⁰

My love for craft, for learning, and for community continually draws me back to these

Fig. 13, Annie’s spoons at Spoon Moot.



spaces. I feel so seen in ways I struggle to in the city. I have experienced so much generosity, kindness, and curiosity in these spaces, sharing what makes you passionate with others. I often look to my carving and craft friends for inspiration and fill my notebooks with images of their spoons taken at gatherings, as well as screenshots of their creations from online. So much of carving happens with people, whether online or in person. For example, my friend Sammy Tangir makes spoons from bent, scraggly pieces of wood, the wood people normally get rid of, whereas my friend Annie

Sanassian makes spoons that embellish the cracks or flaws of the wood. I cannot help but draw parallels between the work of my friends and tie them to the other things I come across in my daily life. I draw inspiration from my friends and community, through “horizontal forms of knowledge worked out in daily experimental practice.”³¹



Fig. 14, spoon from Sammy, gifted to me on my birthday.

²⁹ Crawford, *Shop Class as Soulcraft*, 197.

³⁰ Ibid., 199.

³¹ Levine, *Art and Tradition in a Time of Uprisings*, 206.

WHO AM I? WHERE AM I?

My practice begins in photography, working primarily with film. I capture everything around me, obsessively documenting myself and my experiences with the world. I then started bookmaking and experimenting with various display methods, alluding to interdisciplinary modes. My work looked to images as its base, building up with documents, notes, letters, books, and other materials. I always started from a barrage of materials, a cascade of paperwork saved over the course of many months or many years. I would amass them and see what I could find out by looking at them all together, what insights I could glean from combining an image with a piece of texts, and the new meanings that could be made from viewing everything at once.



Fig. 15, spoon inspiration in my notebook.

Each project or book I created felt like a stepping stone to where I am now, gradually building up from photography, into the realm of collage and multimedia, and then into physical objects. Although the modes have shifted, the subject matter has remained relatively the same: I encounter a sticky spot in my life, and I work through it with my art practice. In a larger sense,

my work is a self-examination, but each through a different lens: examining my ADHD diagnosis, family connections, my relationship to medications, and my connection to my heritage and my mother's first language. I have always sought to answer a question, gathering materials and "evidence" in the form of images and thoughts to hopefully answer the question, and investigating the topic in a non-linear way. Identity is always a doing, never simply a passive being.³²

I have always found the world to be an extremely overwhelming and hard to process place. Every small task feels large, my brain scrambling written and verbal information, handing it to me in pieces and chunks all demanding to be heard at once. So, I make lists as a way to cope. I have made hundreds of lists just in the last few years alone, so they tend to pile up. These lists range from high and low priority tasks, birthdays, and snippets of online articles, to casual conversations, milestone events, and TV shows to watch. Looking for one particular piece of information is like wandering the open, cavernous space of a gym changing room full of lockers, with only one small key.

My practice looks at everything all at once, mimicking my mind. I like to think around things, follow them around the room and see where they settle. I like to take them with me on my swims in the lake, to work and to bed with me. They swirl around me and roam the halls of the locker-room in my mind. Nothing can fully separate itself from the other, information and thoughts sticking to each other, blurring the lines between the life I live and what I create. I have always been leaning towards tactility, always been building on it, and craft feels like a natural progression. There is almost no life and craft separation because the life and the art happened together.

³² Bey, "On Nonbinary Gender," 232.

Throughout my craft process, I have found my images shifting to those of instructional photographs, featuring mostly hands performing activities, separate from their owners. I shoot



Fig. 16, *Forcing Smoke Through*, 2024.

these images on film, in the order the activities transpired, and find I reflect back on them often, printing them small and adding them to a wall in my studio where my other images dwell. I use this space to see the order and motions of the activity, and how they interact with each other. In her book *Instructional Photography*, Carman Winant describes these images as “a likeness,” and claims that they can inform the viewer in subtle ways, even well beyond their stated function.³³ When isolated from the larger body of work, these images begin to take on new meanings, and become much more figurative,

taking on a life of their own. It’s here I find myself relating back to aspects of my previous practice, mixing all my images together to try and glean new information that only the greater whole can.

In March of 2020, COVID-19 forced me back to the place I grew up and made me relate to creativity in a new way. I returned to the spaces I frequented often as a child, and hiked for hours each day, creating maps of the places I went. As I walked, I began to recognize the plants around me. As I learned about my surroundings, I started to try and engage with them creatively, learning about the use of pine needles in baskets, or the use of grass as cordage, fish skin as leather, and mushrooms as food. Looking back, this has been something that has always been there, but I lived in a dense city seemingly far removed from nature. I now

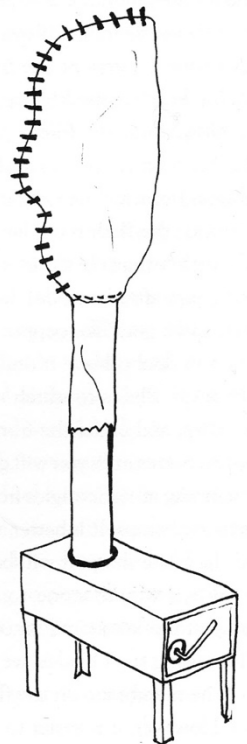


Fig. 17, drawing of a smoking hide.

³³ Winant, *Instructional Photography*, 18.

know I just wasn't looking very hard. Robin Wall Kimmerer describes this developing relationship of love through learning about the land like discovering a lost part of myself.³⁴

Growing up on the west coast, I found nature to be all encompassing, and it dictated much of my childhood. The cold, dark rainy winter nights populated my dreams, rain thrumming on the roof right above my bedroom. In the mornings, I could hear the crows and flying squirrels chasing each other on our roof, the woodpeckers in the trees ringing out in the early hours, and ravens calling out to one another. Waterfalls, low hanging fog, eagles, and salty breezes populate my memories as a child and instilled a deep reverence for the earth and nature as a whole. I find now, as an adult, I do certain activities to recall those memories: swimming in Lake Ontario year-round, running outside, and listening to rain to fall asleep.

I frequently question my relationship to land and to nature, often many times a day. I am a settler, and I am white. I was born in Vancouver, but my maternal ancestors are Dutch immigrants, and my paternal are long ago Scottish settlers. I continue to educate myself on how to be better, and do better, by the people who stewarded this land for millennia before I got here. Robin Wall Kimmerer asks the question, "If people do not feel 'Indigenous,' can they nevertheless enter into the deep reciprocity that renews the world? Is this something that can be learned? Where are the teachers?"³⁵ I spend a lot of time thinking about where I learn things, and from who, and how I can give back in a reparative way. It's a delicate dance, between affordability, who is teaching, and how far I need to travel, but I try to do the best I can.

³⁴ Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, 285.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 213.

Nature to me feels so generative, and so flexible. It can be used for anything—it's adaptive, it's ever changing. Materials find me coincidentally: the black pine tree outside my studio dropping needles on my head on a break from class, tall grasses waving to me from the side of the bike lane in an abandoned lot, cattails swaying from the side of the road. I see materials and I wonder what they are, and how they got there, then what I could potentially do with them. The environment around me feels queer in that way, popping into my eye in a strange moment, dropping hints and making itself known. The environment around me feels like a queer inspiration to me, a non-binary force.

I am a very compulsive, obsessive, directed person, and this extends to everything in my life. I find something curious and I cannot stop thinking about it, and I carry it around for a long time. I am not sure why I am pulled to the things I am, but there is usually a sense of fear and danger to the intrigue. They are something I find hard to learn, or something close to me that feels foreign, that I feel pulled towards trying. These feelings and thoughts are compulsive, never-ending, and all consuming.

This learning, most specifically of spoons, slowly overtook my life. I would find wood chips in all my drawers and in the washing machine, as well as leaves in my shoes and in the bottom of all my bags. I would have dreams of the perfect spoon—of my perfect spoon—being a wall full of all kinds of spoons for very specific uses: Victorian folding spoons for travelling, christening spoons for special occasions, long and delicate spoons for stirring very tall liquids, a

Fig. 18, cattail pollen collected on my studio floor.

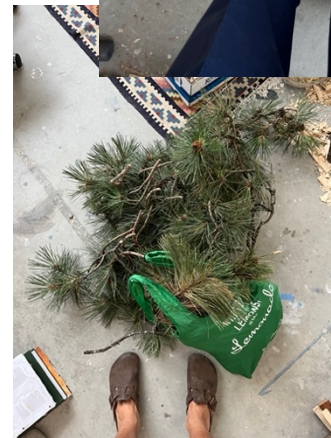


Fig. 19, bag of pine needles (again on my studio floor).

soft and flexible spoon, and a spoon to wrap around your hand with a bowl perfectly tailored to fit inside your mouth. Each spoon fit an aspect of my life and fit perfectly on this metaphorical spoon rack in my imagination, fitting to each of the aspects of my personality. I would enter the kitchen of my mind each morning and pack up my energy spoons for the day, and each would be labelled and correspond with an aspect of my personality. On any given day, I gather my masculine and feminine spoons in one hand, and they fit perfectly into one another despite being so drastically different. They are two sides of the same coin—my coin—and they blend together. I tuck them into my back pocket and head off.

I spend so much time wondering what queer really means, and why identity and perception really matter. Why do I care so much? What creation and freedom does it allow for? I don't think I will ever fully figure it out, but entering into my imaginary kitchen and pulling spoons off the racks, experimenting with combinations each day, helps me get closer to an answer. Not really an answer greater than myself, mainly just for me, in my body, with my gender.



Fig. 20, a handful from the floor of my studio, containing dried reed, wood chips, clay, leaves, and cordage.

MY GREATEST SKILL IS MY ABILITY TO PERFORM

In the sweltering heat of a July afternoon in 2023, I arrived at *Biblioterre*, a land-based cooperative in Wakefield, Quebec. *The Garden of Gender Euphoria*, a gathering made specifically for non-binary, trans, and gender-creative folks, was hosted by Anya Solovey and Névé, and consisted of a weekend of learning and queer joy. We spent the time camping, swimming naked in the pond, singing sacred harp, and sharing skills. This gathering was unlike any that I had been to thus far, and to my knowledge, the only such gathering of its kind that I have been able to find. Meals were a collective effort, and served when people were hungry. The workshops were loosely scheduled around when people wanted to do them, and attendance was optional. Anyone could walk away and take a break at any time.



Fig. 22, a successful fire.



Fig. 21, “log cabin” fire building at The Garden of Gender Euphoria.



Fig. 23, feather sticks catching.

At this gathering, I taught pine needle basket making. Everyone was outside, seated in a circle in the shade on a large rug, scattered with pillows and blankets. Time at this retreat felt long and slow, divided not by scheduled blocks but by hunger and attention, by who wanted to do what and when. We took each step one by one and waited for everyone to catch up before

moving on. We worked for hours, weaving and working, building our baskets. A basket maker and friend describes this as “Basket Time,” where everything else falls away and you are in your zone of creation. In Basket Time, real time doesn’t exist, and passes in strange ways. The sky turns from light, to dark, and back to light again, and time slips away without feeling hunger or tiredness. I frequent this state often, spending large stretches of time in this place.

At most of the skill shares I attend, I rarely encounter other visibly queer individuals, and opt to blend in with those around me. Whenever I enter these spaces, I feel myself shedding the city, attempting to adapt to a more rural appearance. I shift my conversation topics, my politics, and my queer identity as much as I can. I attempt to hide in plain sight.

In order to enter into a community, to be accepted, you need to shed what differentiates you, “to read the space and the bodies around you to gauge their potential hostility.”³⁶ This allows you entrance to learn. Only after testing the waters, probing lightly, can you establish who to trust. I know plenty of people who do it, “the practice of learning when and how to camouflage oneself.”³⁷ Specifically queers, who hide that part of their life to befriend neighbours, to be accepted into a community that they have no way around. I am not sure whether it’s good or bad. I feel disingenuous, and like a chameleon. “Passing,” describes Hil Malatino, “is a fragile art.”³⁸



Fig. 24, *Breaking (and mending)*, 2023.

³⁶ Malatino, *Trans Care*, 28.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid., 27.



Fig. 25, *The Spoon-to-Mouth Ratio Test*, 2022.

The performance I put on every day is never ending. I go to work, or to a doctor's office, or to the grocery store across the street from my home, and in every space, in every scenario, I am read differently, and I have to decide how much I should read into it or care. Sometimes it's easier to perform to make other people happy, or to avoid hurting others. Sometimes I stand up for myself and perform as someone stronger than who I am. Each performance is trying on a different costume and seeing how it feels. Sometimes I hate it, and sometimes it feels nice. Sometimes I try and grow into that mask, to fill that shape that feels like it's missing. I think that's why I continue learning and continue to make spoons. I want to make all these different kinds, to fit these daily feelings.

Fig. 26, fine bronze dust.

I often struggled with and got stuck in my conflicting thoughts about authenticity. The process of thinking through a craft helped bring solidity to my thoughts. I would be misgendered and then wonder what really made it as bad as I thought it was. Ivan Coyote talks about the idea of razors in their book *Tomboy Survival Guide*. Everyone has a razor blade with the potential to shave away parts of yourself if you give them the power to do so. Those closest to you have bigger blades, with the opportunity to do more damage.³⁹ In this sense, the people closest to me have the power to chip away at my gender identity to fit the mold they want to put me in, until eventually I no longer recognize myself, and instead pretend that this reshaping and reconfiguring is normal. When queer people are misgendered, we are essentially being told that we don't exist, which functions as "an attack on beingness."⁴⁰ I begin to perform my gender the way they expect me to, instead of presenting myself in my authentic way.

³⁹ Coyote, *Tomboy Survival Guide*, 211.

⁴⁰ Malatino, *Trans Care*, 14.

Donna Haraway in her book *Staying With the Trouble* defines trouble as “to make cloudy” or “to disturb.”⁴¹ Throughout this process of making, I have been disturbing my feelings and thoughts, and bringing emotions to the forefront of my consciousness. In staying with the trouble, one must learn to be truly present, and in this way, I feel these feelings and I stay with them.



Fig. 27, ceramic spoons drying on a bat.

⁴¹ Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 1.

CIRCLE THINKING

My relationship to learning has been fraught in the past. I was diagnosed with ADHD at ten years old, after almost failing the fourth and fifth grades. I grew up believing there was something wrong with me, never believing I would make it through high school, let alone any form of higher education, and definitely not into a master's program. I had to work at overcoming my fear around academia, the panic that would wash over me sitting down at a test, the anxiety that a quiet library would create. Listening to everyone around me work on their computers, the clicking of keys and the ticking of clocks would cause me a certain level of dread that I could never quite place. I find it hard to concentrate in most places and writing this caused me so much anxiety and fear. I developed elaborate ways of tricking myself into learning, along with complex reward systems to get myself to accomplish what I needed. With craft, and learning with my hands, I never had to do that. The fear was not present, and I was so at ease that when problems occurred, I did not feel that same panic, so I could work through it and continue working.

Along with my ADHD diagnosis, I have both long and short term memory issues, making school that much harder. My mind holds onto information in a confusing way, ideas and thoughts passing quickly and swirling all together, then losing the connection entirely when recalled. This led me to create memory tricks and songs to remember information. Now as an adult, I realize I do that same thing, but with muscle memory and smell. When my mind cannot pull up that memory and make the connection, my muscles and senses will remember. If I smell fresh willow, my mind pulls the memory of weaving together a basket, of how to soak and work

with sticks to make them pliable, and how and when best to harvest it. I smell fresh wood and know the feeling of it in my hands. I know how to carve a spoon, but struggle to explain without demonstrating. These manual skills, smells, touch, and taste bypass the broken connections in my mind, much like a memory trick or song, and help me to forge that connection.

Along with these muscle memory cues, I build community and social networks that help with learning. As someone researching within the institution, I attempt to research

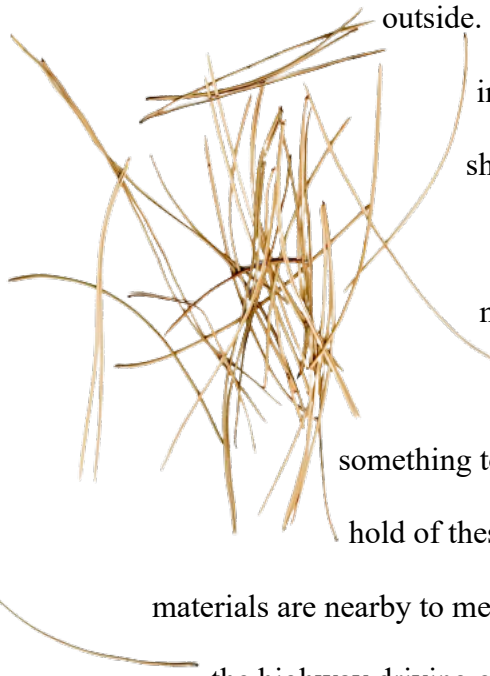


Fig. 28, *Completion Test*, 2023.

in a collective, bringing together information I gained individually, in conversation, and through doing. When I attend gatherings, consult friends and enter into community, we are all learning together. The same can be said about how I research and learn within the university: consulting my peers and my cohort members, faculty, and committee members. Through conversation and building a network, I receive support and the learning feels collective. The knowledge I acquire, and process largely comes from outside the traditional classroom, swapped and passed along in hallways, out on a walk, in online research or over a weekend camping and learning. Even within the walls of the university, knowledge seems to flow in non-linear ways. I learn from what I am surrounded with: the people, nature, and material abundance. They are all my teachers.

While the university and skill sharing spaces are often positioned as sitting at two opposing ends of education, they often mirror one another. I have taught and been taught in both spaces, and oftentimes I bring what I have learned outside, in, and then back out again. I research traditional skill building and community within the walls of the institution and take what I learn

Fig. 29, dried pine needles.



outside. As I build upon that, learn more, and take it back once again, the information becomes transformed somehow, from conversation to skill sharing to university and back to community.

Learning opens a new space for me, a world that holds so much more than the life I am currently living. A separate thing typically leads me in, such as needing to sharpen my spoon tools, or needing

something to hold the materials that are ever expanding across my floor. I catch hold of these little clues, and pursue them, taking each bit by bit. Usually, the

materials are nearby to me, like the black pine tree outside my studio, or the willow bushes by the highway driving onto campus, the tall grasses in the empty lot by my house. These

materials call out to me, and I try to figure out what I can do with them. Could I adapt them to my project? Can we work together to create something to hold my tools? Maybe this puzzling leads me to a dead end, and that is alright. I find a friend, or a gathering, or a workshop that can bring me past the place I cannot find a way around. The conversations made while working create new deer trails off the central path of this craft, leading to places to explore later, or perhaps a new way to get to where I need to be. I continue down my path, and I lose track of where this destination even was. I finish my basket, to hold my tools, and I immediately start on a new one. When I am working, everything else falls away. I feel like I am finally able to breathe, with my hands and mind busy puzzling out this brand-new way to use my hands to create. I build connections between previous ways my hands have moved to create, and the crafts build paths between one another. Nothing is learned in isolation.

As I continued to think about my gender, about myself, I would hit certain walls, feel uncertain about myself, feel frustrated about the never-ending nature of it all, anxious and

confused. In my carving, I hit the same walls. My knives would break, or become dull, and I would have to learn how to repair and sharpen them. My spoons would snap in the same places, and I would look to my friends and the internet for help. These things happened simultaneously, concurrently, side by side. This learning is never finished, and I continually feel overwhelmed by how much there is to know and that I am just scraping the surface. I found I would think myself into circles, dead ends, and cul-de-sacs. I would find solace in thinking through learning and through obsession, losing myself in a space of curiosity and frustration. I began to use craft and land-based skills as a means to bridge gaps, to explore my self-identity, and as “a vehicle through which we can think, through which we can contemplate, and through which we can *be*.”⁴²



Fig. 30, *Cordage: Nature's Rope!*, 2023.

⁴² Alex Langlands, *Cræft : An Inquiry into the Origins and True Meaning of Traditional Crafts*, New York, W.W. Norton & Company, 2019, 343.

FAILURE AS A GOAL

When I work on these new skills, things break. They split, crack, shatter, and fall to pieces. The newer I am to the skill, the more breaks it seems to produce. This failure at first brings frustration, and feelings of wanting to hide these imperfections away, discard them and move on. But there is something inherently wrong about this to me, to simply discard and move

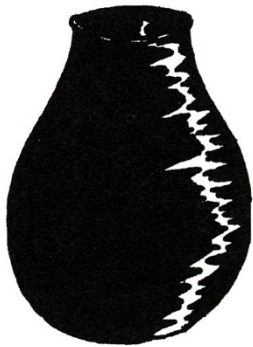


Fig. 31, drawing of earthenware pottery.

on. When a spoon splits, you can pack the split with glue or pitch, and wind string tightly around the break to strengthen it at its weakest point.

When I was first learning with clay, so much would break inside the kiln. Spoons would break into four or five pieces, and entire spoons would explode into shattered pieces. I would unload the kiln with bloody hands, glass shards littering the floor, and I would feel the need to hide these failures. I attempted to imagine a new destination for these

broken objects, a way I could use materials around me to create a new life. I combined wood scraps, weaving and fabric, and joined them to these broken pieces. This making do, the pulling together of scraps and broken detritus, feels right. This binding is about self-repair. It admits that there has been a repair but does not show it fully. These jagged edges have been filed, but still remain recognizable of a breaking point.

When things in my life break off, feel broken beyond repair, I assess them anyways and see what I can do. I bind them to other areas, wind string around them to strengthen at the breaking point. Sometimes they are too broken, and then I will file the end, so it doesn't cut anyone else. Sometimes an object is destined to be broken, and then continue to be used in its new form. Throughout this process, I have realized I have no interest in creating perfect objects, despite that being the initial destination of craft. I am a flawed person creating beautiful and flawed objects,

that function perfectly for what I need them to: maybe eating, but maybe not. Sometimes their function is to just exist and be beautiful. This repair is part of the journey of the object, one that now sits in-between worlds, being part wood, part metal, part ceramic. Sitting at the edge of where worlds meet in the site of possibility, I am always looking for that space when things collide to create new beauty.

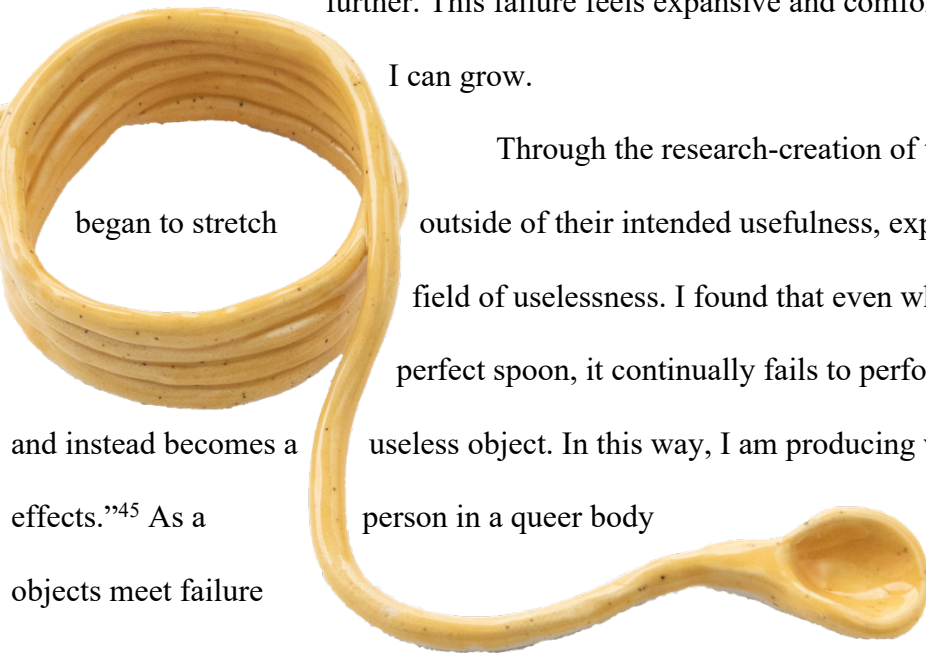
I now find this imperfection so comforting, as failure is more often than not a better bet than success.⁴³ Jack Halberstam talks about failure in his book *The Queer Art of Failure*, and how feminine success is always measured by male standards. In that way, failure can be extended to gender failure, often removing the pressure to “measure up” to the ideals of the patriarchy, as being unsuccessful at womanhood can offer “unexpected pleasures.”⁴⁴ By starting with failure to fit myself into either category, I open myself up to further failure within my art, and I can explore



Fig. 32, documentation of drying and breaking clay.

further. This failure feels expansive and comfortable, like a place where I can grow.

Through the research-creation of this body of work, objects began to stretch outside of their intended usefulness, expanding into an unknown field of uselessness. I found that even when I try to make the perfect spoon, it continually fails to perform its intended function, and instead becomes a useless object. In this way, I am producing what Ahmed calls “queer effects.”⁴⁵ As a person in a queer body striving towards use, my objects meet failure and roadblocks, and



⁴³ Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 4.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ahmed, *Queer Phenomonology*, 174.

Fig. 33, *Emergency Rope Spoon*, 2024.

become something else. Ultimately, these objects become queered, and “might even become wonky” in the process.⁴⁶

These objects, according to Ahmed, are “becoming queer,” as the objects depart from their normal function into something other.⁴⁷ These objects take on a strangeness and leave their impressions on the user.⁴⁸ Queer then, “becomes a matter of how things appear, how they gather, how they perform, to create the edges of space and worlds.”⁴⁹ By disrupting what an object can do, it makes the object point toward something else.⁵⁰

She argues that to queer these objects “might be about making what is in the background, what is behind us, more available as ‘things’ to do ‘things’ with.” When we start to acknowledge these background objects, they come to life, “which already makes things rather queer.”⁵¹ As I began to consider spoons as something more than their form,

interesting things began to happen. As I created these spoons,

their usefulness slipped further and further away, causing them to distance themselves from their initial origins and “usefulness.” The idea of a spoon became more and more queer, in that the concept of a functional spoon became a distant thought, its functionality slipping away.⁵² It is through this failure that an object can still let a person do something despite its failure to perform its intended purpose, causing the object to be attributed with “properties, qualities, and values.”⁵³



A wooden spoon should fit the hand and be functional as well as beautiful.

Fig. 34, how a spoon should be.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 163.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 167.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 46.

⁵¹ Ibid., 168.

⁵² Ibid., 171.

⁵³ Ibid., 49.

An object is itself when it can perform its function, and *points* it toward something.⁵⁴ What happens when an object of use is transformed into something else? Where does it now point?

Each time I make a spoon, I learn something new. I push them into the area of not quite, but just enough, and wishing I could reside there too. Perhaps, through this repair, through the failure and reimagining of the destination, these objects become queer, changing directions and pointing towards a new space entirely, a space of trans and non-binary joy and freedom. The

spoons curve, they dance, they take on a life of their own and they transform, pointing towards a new queer futurity, where we “face the objects that retreat, and become strange in the face of their retreat, with a sense of hope.”⁵⁵

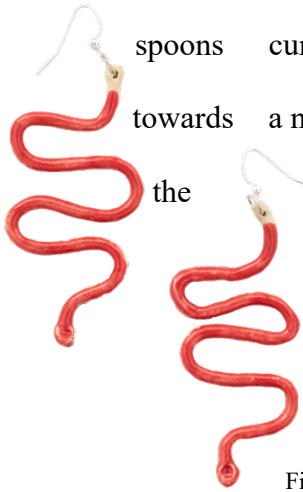


Fig. 35, *Tapeworm Earrings*, 2024.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 46.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 178.

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Fig. 36, tea stirring spoon.

APPENDIX A: EXHIBITION DOCUMENTATION IMAGES

Parameters of Spooning: In the Site of Possibility
Special Projects Gallery, York University Campus
Images by Heather Rattray, 2024

