

# Lesbian Mess(ages): Decoding Shawna Dempsey's Cake Squish at the Festival Du Voyeur

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## ABSTRACT

Shawna Dempsey and Lorri Millan's performance piece "Mary Medusa" is explored as an example of how artistic lesbian mess(ages) can be decoded by viewers. Focusing upon anthropological, feminist, and queer theory, I examine how both "Mary Medusa" and its decodings implicate women, sex, power, and food.

## RÉSUMÉ

La pièce "Mary Medua" de Shawna Dempsey et de Lori Millan est explorée afin de montrer comment les messages artistiques lesbiens peuvent être décodés par les spectatrices en se concentrant sur la théorie anthropologique, féministe et homosexuelle/lesbienne, j'examine comment tous les deux "Mary Medusa" et ses décodages réunissent les femmes, le sexe, le pouvoir et la nourriture.

*But what of our appetite? What if we no longer control, or, worse yet, lose control ourselves? What if we "lose it" and turn our heads and each of our snaky locks against status quo economics, sexual politics and morality? Well, it could get messy...*

(Dempsey and Millan 1993)

The Festival Du Voyeur<sup>1</sup> was Winnipeg, Manitoba's festival of les-bi-gay/queer visual arts, held January 22 to March 6, 1993. (I henceforth use "queer," the term chosen by the incorporated group of artists who originated the Queer Culture Canada festival.) Intrigued by the event's name and aims, and welcomed by the organisers, I entered this inquiry/investigation as a "token female heterosexual anthropological voyeur" (Greenhill 1993).<sup>2</sup> With considerable pleasure, I watched collaboration between individuals and galleries produce a Festival showcasing local, national, and international queer artists and artworks. Among them was Winnipeggers Shawna Dempsey and Lorri Millan's "Mary Medusa." An excerpt performed on January 22 on the local six o'clock television news in an entertainment clip announcing the Festival's opening engendered controversy - and my discussion here.

The segment began with host Jay Mirus seated in the studio:

JM: And some of the arts community is gearing up for what they're billing as the Festival Du Voyeur, it's a celebration of queer culture. What this is all about, um, well Robert Taylor, right here, Robert, tell me what it's about?

RT: Well it's a festival of gay and lesbian artists and performance artists, Jay, and it's running from January 22 until March 6 at venues across - all over the city of Winnipeg, mostly concentrated in the downtown area. So there's a wide variety of exhibitions, musicians, performance art, and theatre pieces going on.

JM: What is queer culture?

RT: Queer culture is artistic expression by gay and lesbian performers, artists, and anything in between the two opposites. So it's, it's a wide ranging look at the gay and lesbian community.

JM: And you brought us a performer right now. Can you tell me a little about her?

RT: Sure, this is a piece by Shawna Dempsey and Lorri Millan and it will be playing at the Prairie Theatre Exchange during the Festival and it's called "Mary Medusa" and it's a look at, at woman and power.

JM: Well here she is.

(The camera moves right to show the head and shoulders of Shawna Dempsey, wearing her "Mary Medusa" wig, composed of articulated plastic toy

snakes. As she removes her jacket, she begins.)

SD:

A woman out of control  
is a frightening thing.  
She may bite you  
and choke you  
and turn you to stone  
and then - snip.

(The camera moves down as Dempsey removes her skirt, showing black pantyhose. Her shirt covers her crotch.)

I need my control tops to keep it all together  
I need control bottoms too but I can't find them  
anywhere.

Perhaps a quest is in order.

Perhaps someone should alert the RCMP.

A woman out of control  
is a frightening thing.

Stalking the streets of River Heights by night  
in search of victims on whom to practice self-  
defence.

"Officer,

he was Wen-Doed to death,  
LEAVING an estrogen scent trail to every woman's  
door."

"No sir,

I was pouring my husband a bath"  
as the tub runs over.

A woman out of control  
is a frightening thing.

In her pursuit of sex and food for  
what else is there?

SCREAMING "once a week is plenty, thank you."

But bring on the chocolate cake

I want chocolate cake now.

Appetite huge

inappropriate appetite but she doesn't give a  
care<sup>3</sup> and why should she?

A woman out of control  
is a frightening thing.

(The camera pulls back as Dempsey positions  
herself over a cake on the floor. Leaning back,  
knees bent, her hands behind her feet, she squeezes  
it three times between her thighs, then turns her  
face away.)

JM: OK, once again, it kicks off tonight?

RT: Kicks off tonight with the gala opening,  
Rudolf Schwartzkogler at the Plug-In Gallery, 8 to

9 p.m., and Pierre Molinier at Floating Gallery from  
10 on, so come on out.

JM: Very good. Thanks for coming.

RT: Thank you.

JM: And Tom, that's it for Lombard, and can I  
get you some chocolate cake.

Tom: No but you can start answering those  
phones buddy. Um, we'll see you at 10 o'clock. Oh  
my. Well, ahead tonight, the dollar....

I focus on observations of how sexualities  
were encoded in this performance, and how this  
"text" was decoded by various viewers or "readers."  
Central to all readings is Dempsey's squishing a  
chocolate cake between her thighs - a literal and  
figurative mess. This act ends a text emphasising  
women's power and potential violence against men,  
spoken by Dempsey wearing a wig of articulated  
snake toys. I explore the valences of this cultural  
and social mess(age), and its relationships to queer,  
feminist, and anthropological theorising. I draw  
particularly upon concepts of feminist and queer  
coding, and develop the notion of "decoding," via  
comparison, denial, and indexing, to explore the  
cake's multivalent constructions and  
deconstructions. Joan N. Radner and Susan S.  
Lanser discuss coding as a way in which women  
may, with relative safety, produce "feminist talk in  
sexist company" (1993a). Coding protects a text's  
presenter because the audience can interpret her  
meaning in various ways, benign and otherwise.  
"Acts of coding," then, are "covert expressions of  
disturbing or subversive ideas" which:

are a common phenomenon in the lives of  
women, who have so often been  
dominated, silenced, and marginalized by  
men. The..."texts" of women's folklore -  
the texts of their oral performances, of  
their material creations, and of the  
routines of their daily lives - may  
communicate a variety of messages to  
different segments of their audiences...The  
essential ambiguity of coded acts protects  
women from potentially dangerous  
responses from those who might find their  
statements disturbing.

(Radner and Lanser 1993, vii-viii)

The risks and dangers that prompt the coding associated with feminist statements are equally present in queer culture. "Coming out" as queer is almost necessarily coded (Adams 1993; Radner and Lanser 1993a; Stekert 1993). When a discovery of queer identity may endanger one's life, self-expression becomes problematic. Yet identification of self and others is absolutely necessary for creating and maintaining community. Thus, though feminist coding is usually implicit - "not only the message but the very fact of coding is concealed" - Radner and Lanser suggest that much queer coding is complicit - "based either on collectively determined signals, consciously employed by members of a group, or...on esoteric knowledge" (1993a).

Lesbian culture has both implicit and complicit coding. Referring to "the lesbian double entendre," filmmaker Sara Diamond concurs: "Really, I prefer to code in ways that are slippery: where one thing seems to be happening, but the other reading is standing on the surface, just begging to be taken" (1993, 169). Complicit coding can be playful as well as protective, since "in the realm of sexuality it is not only the codes but the identities themselves that may be unknown or unacknowledged, shifting or blurred" (Radner and Lanser, 1997a).

Coding - "strategies for the covert expression of anti-patriarchal messages" (Radner and Lanser 1993a) - is not only protective. It is also a discursive practice; fundamentally creative, symbolic, and expressive. Coding, then, is slippery, shifting, blurred, indeed *messy, dirty, or polluting* in terms integral to the theorising of anthropologist Mary Douglas: "As we know it, dirt is essentially disorder. There is no such thing as absolute dirt; it exists in the eye of the beholder....Dirt offends against order" (1966, 2). She continues, "Reflection on dirt involves reflection on the relation of order to disorder, being to non-being, form to formlessness, life to death" (1996, 5).

Douglas's work implicates women's positions in white supremacist capitalist patriarchy (hooks 1992). Women are socially constructed as locations of mess and pollution, with bodies producing copious amounts of substances from menstrual blood to tears. However, women are also

those most intimately associated with the (re)production of cleanliness via domestic labour. Feminist theorist Rosalind Coward's (1985) compelling analyses of women, food, sex, and power provide more specific and elaborated indications of how these elements are interrelated in women's lives and experiences.

As foreshadowed by the anchor's comment, viewer response came immediately in phone calls to the television station. Several employees said this was a frequent occurrence. The piece aired on a Friday night, when Winnipeg Bureau News Director Pat Onysko had left for the weekend. Callers were asked to ring on Monday, and Onysko says that twenty to thirty people did. When Jay Mirus, the camera operator who was the segment's substitute producer and host, come back to work, he was fired for "irresponsible and unacceptable" broadcasting (Duguay 1993).<sup>4</sup>

Onysko says the station received about a hundred calls in total, divided almost equally between those who were "disgusted," "overtly homophobic," and "in support" (fieldnotes 1993). Newspaper accounts included "Man in the soup over cake" (Duguay 1993) and "Dempsey's just desserts: Performance artist has her cake & squishes it too" (King 1993). Letters to the station focused on Mirus's firing. A petition with over 50 signatures went to the Canadian Radio-television Telecommunications Commission (CRTC - the federal licensing and monitoring agency). And, among Festival participants especially, people talked and told stories about the performance, and the firing.

The focus was the cake squish:

LM: You could say that we're exhorting women to kill men. It definitely exhorts women to lose it, to take power, and free themselves, and lose control. I mean, "a woman out of control is a frightening thing." But I don't think anybody heard that. I don't think anybody was really listening to it. I didn't hear anybody refer to the text at all.

(interview 1993)

According to Dempsey and Millan, the station

manager:

SD: kept saying to Rob, "I can't believe you did that!"

LM: ....When Rob was specific, he said "What was the problem." [The station manager] said "I can't believe you have to ask! The cake! The cake! It was the cake! It's five to six; it was the cake!" I mean he was completely inarticulate. So obviously he didn't know what the heck was bugging him about it.

SD: And the focus of his distress seemed to be not the content of the text, or the fact that I took off my skirt, or the fact that he had a gay guest on TV, but it was that I squished this cake between my pantyhosed legs. I think it's because the image doesn't leave room for men, because it's a woman expressing sexual power without a male object of desire and without a self-consciousness that would imply or give room to the male gaze.

(interview 1993)

Perhaps the best indications of how the performance was read as coded commentary can be found in the decoding reactions. As Radner and Lanser show, discovering the presence of coding can be a decoding (1993, 1-4). Decoding, like coding, can be a discursive practice involving creativity and symbolic expression, as is evident when various supporters of the Festival (re)interpreted events in reaction to detractors' decodings. They produced counter decodings or "warring constructions" (Radner 1993) which were themselves decoded in a cycle of interpretations that approached the brink of forgetting their object entirely.

The first decoding strategy, used by defenders of Dempsey and Millan, and of Mirus, was *comparison*, distinguishing "Mary Medusa" from rock videos, movies, and so. Artist Carol Hutchinson wrote to the station's General Manager, "It seems OK to show Jack Nicholson vomiting cherry pits all over people, but a bit of cake squeezed between the legs of a local performer is too much? If it were Lily Tomlin doing the

squeezing, your station's attitude might be different" (1993).

Usually, comparisons addressed programming on the same station. Most often, supporters compared the "Mary Medusa" segment with a clip from "A Current Affair," shown at the same time of day, featuring videotaped footage of a man actually shooting his wife in the head. Characterising the latter in terms of the obscenity that it was, comparison tellingly re-framed the content.

A few comparisons were playful. Jay Mirus joked "They'd better take off Julia Child; that's kind of pornographic. The way she stuffs that turkey, that turns me on" (interview 1993). However, most were direct, straightforward, straight-faced analogies. Robert Taylor commented that Dempsey was fully clothed in the performance, yet in a weekly fashion program women's breasts were often exposed (personal communication). Similarly, both Dempsey and Taylor speculated about possible effects of squishing cake on other parts of the body, to indicate the arbitrariness, yet symbolic weight, of arguments.

Only one supporter took the comparisons outside the context of television. Alison Gillmor compared the performance to that of feminist artist Jana Sterbak, whose "meat dress" installation at the National Gallery of Canada was controversial:

It's like the meat dress controversy in Ottawa. A lot of people said they were upset by it because it was a waste of food. And I think that was the way they rationalised it for themselves. But I mean restaurants throw that kind of food out the back door every day. There was something else about the meat dress that bothered people, and the only way they could justify their reaction was by saying well "I don't like to see food wasted."

(interview 1993)

A second reading popular with Dempsey and Millan supporters was *denial* - disavowing outright any problematic content, via distraction, indirection, and trivialisation. Gallery owner Lisa Mark wrote, "Shawna Dempsey's piece included

NO SEX, NO NUDITY, and NO VIOLENCE" (Mark 1993). This triad was invoked by many, and Millan added "No degradation. No animals" (quoted in King 1993) referring to the infamous Butler decision.

While the "no violence" - except perhaps to the cake - and "no nudity" suggestions remained uncontroversial, the assertion of "no sex" was not. One lesbian commented:

So many times I've said to people, "I don't see why it even seems to be sexual." And then everyone laughs like crazy, and then I feel really foolish. So I think the sophisticated answer is "it's sexual," but don't really know why....For me, it's something that's really playful; it's a version of the pie in the face, right, that's "ha ha ha," you're supposed to just think that's the funniest thing, which I've always thought was the stupidest thing, but maybe it's 'cause I like sweets so much that I don't imagine why you would waste a pie on your hair. So I always feel obliged to laugh but I never understand why. So here it's a take off on it, except it's not her face that's getting it, it's her genitals and inner thighs that are getting it. So it's that take-off, I thought, that's just very funny. It's unexpected. It's really a beautiful kind of image really, and just makes you want to eat her up. So maybe that's why it's really sexual, but I never sort of thought of it that way. (interview 1993)

Gillmor contradicts: "Of course there was sex" (interview 1993) - and I personally agree. Publicist Robert Taylor said that Dempsey's "symbol of the suburban woman's sexual aggressiveness is eating a black forest cake" (interview 1993). Dempsey herself called it "a woman expressing sexual power without a male object of desire and without a self-consciousness that would imply or give room to the male gaze" (interview 1993).

The public reactions of those who disapproved of Dempsey's and Millan's piece centred on *indexing*, employing terms like

"obscenity" and "pornography." Though this third mode is clearly a decoding, it does not specify what is problematic about the performance. Millan commented "it seemed to have the same effect as a disturbing dream, that they were unwilling to examine" (interview 1993). For example, the CRTC petition stated that the segment featured:

Shauna (sic) Dempsey dressed in a "wig of snakes" reciting poetry....With little more than 15 seconds passing from her start the woman dropped her pants revealing herself in not much more than somewhat darkened pantyhose. Much to our shock the feature continued unabated with no attempt to conceal the very obscene picture portrayed. From obscene to pornographic, Shauna (sic) dropped down to the cake, followed closely by the camera, squeezing it continually between her legs, in a highly sexual confrontation...I as a concerned citizen will not sit back and shut up when obscenities are blatantly proclaimed over prime time in our own living rooms...Please see to it that our airways stay free from degenerate attitudes. (Lawson 1993)

Those who liked Dempsey's performance were no more specific than its detractors about what it meant, or why they liked it, but instead called it "funny," "great," and so on. Supporters' public decodings of station management and viewer responses focused upon indexical terms like "homophobia," "misogyny," and "censorship." Queer Culture Canada president Noam Gonick wrote to the General Manager that "the only heads that should have rolled as a result of last Friday were those of the homophobes and misogynists who were not prepared to see a woman performance artist express herself, and her desires, to the fullest" (1993).

Dempsey characterised her work as a threat:

It's people being threatened by sex - people's horror of sexuality. And the great

thing about the Festival Du Voyeur, and a great thing about gay culture, is that we say sex is great, sex is good, and everybody should have lots of sex. It's not necessarily for procreation.

(quoted in King 1993)

It may be tempting to see these warring indexes as mere name-calling. I initially saw them as successful decodings; they matched my understanding of the Dempsey and Millan piece's transgressive nature. Similarly, I initially saw the anti-station reactions as simplistically literalist, even "rationalist." And I was not alone in this. One newspaper writer commented:

The Queer Culture crowd has been handed a case that confirms all their self-righteous rhetoric about knee-jerk fear of sexuality, non-mainstream or otherwise...A woman squishing a piece of cake between her panty-hosed thighs would not seem to be as disturbing as a woman being shot in the head at close range (which [the station] also aired). Rational minds were not at work here. (Walker 1993)

But a more postmodern, discursively focused analysis indicates the fruitlessness (cakelessness?) of such judgements. Stating that their piece "deal(s) with mythological themes" (quoted in King 1993), Dempsey and Millan suggest "In 'Mary Medusa,' we wanted to examine women in power, how women are allowed to have power, and what the source of our inherent power is. So we look at whiteness, race, privilege with respect to social proximity to men - like marriage, sex, and economic power" (interview 1993). The primary metaphor in this piece for expressing both sexuality and feminist dissent/rebellion is food. Rosalind Coward suggests that for women:

Food, kissing, verbal foreplay - these are some of the great delights of female erotic life. But all the evidence suggests that these pursuits can quickly become problematic. When oral pleasures are indulged, there's often a whole train of

guilty and anxious consequences to deal with.

The mouth probably inhabits this complicated place in women's sensual life for two reasons. First, it is through the mouth, in speaking, that a person asserts her presence in the world. And second, because the mouth is so crucially connected with eating and nurturing, oral pleasures bring women into direct confrontation with ideologies about women's appetites, and women's domestic place. (1985, 118)

Coward discusses the mouth and women's prodigious oral appetites, and their linkage with women's power and sexuality. Dempsey and Millan mess up this association by juxtaposing food - the chocolate cake - with a location more conventionally associated with women's sexuality, particularly in heterosexist interpretations: the space between her thighs. This action, which in Douglas' sense creates dirt and pollution from matter out of place, does so particularly because it implies another messy juxtaposition - associated with lesbian sexuality - of the mouth with the vulva, clitoris, and vagina.

Indeed, the most striking image for most readers of "Mary Medusa" is the cake squish. Dempsey and Millan told me:

SD: The first time I crushed a cake between my legs was in '86. There was a festival in Toronto called the Ultra Eros Festival. There was a slumber party in a gallery one night, and there was maybe fourteen women who were just sitting around talking, and I told this story about how my husband would reward me with food for losing weight. And at the end I crushed this cake between my thighs in my little baby doll pyjamas. And a woman, Dale, cried, and she said "I know exactly what you mean." We became friends as a result of that cake-crushing. She'd been through eating disorders for most of her life. So I sort of filed it away as an act that had resonance. So we performed at the [Winnipeg] Art Gallery, and they were totally rowdy.

LM: Rowdy, yeah. Rock and roll concert. Oh

yeah.

SD: 350 people, most of them women, and they went nuts on the cake crushing. And I guess there's a sense of - not any more in Winnipeg - but there used to be a sense of surprise when I crushed the cake. Now they hoot and holler before we - they know what's coming. "Oh, here comes the cake."

LM: ...They love it, and they come up on stage and eat the cake, at the crushed rubble of cake on stage. At least one woman a show will come up and eat some of it. (interview 1993)

The cake squish, of course, has the multiple meanings of coded performance. The literal/metaphorical enactment, via the cake, of lesbian oral sexuality happens when audience members eat the cake which has formerly resided between Dempsey's thighs. Food and sex are conflated. In "Mary Medusa," food becomes a signifying expression of appetite and desire, and appetite and desire for food becomes appropriate to, and conflated with, sexual appetite. These symbolic linkages reflect pervasive connections in Euro North American language and society. Dempsey and Millan consciously use food in this ambivalent and metaphorical fashion:

SD: That whole women and food thing is really complex. I think, I mean it makes people uncomfortable when women take big bites, or when women...

LM: Express an appetite.

SD: Have third helpings

LM: Third helpings, yeah, that really -

SD: Express an appetite in any way, be it food or sexual.

LM: I wonder if it's like vagina dentata kind of stuff going on, too. I mean it's like, there it is, the big thighs coming down on that cake. It's just "Oh my god." That could be what it is.

SD: Yeah, maybe. I don't know.

(interview 1993)

Coward suggests "oral pleasures are only really permissible when tied to the servicing of others in the production of a meal. Women are controlled and punished if they indulge themselves" (1985, 105). Hence, "Mary Medusa" repeatedly

asserts that "a woman out of control is a frightening thing," because the control of women's appetites for both food and sex are intrinsically linked with their defined place as domestic labourers in a heterosexist society.

Feminists have linked conventional society's obsession with women's bodies and with controlling their urges and appetites - for sex as well as food - (Coward 1985, 101-6) with eating disorders like anorexia nervosa and bulimia (Wolf 1991).<sup>5</sup> The playful inversion of these obsessions in the conclusion of "Mary Medusa" is encoded in the sexualized appetite for cake:

SD: I've gone through hard times with eating disorders. There's been something very sexual about my relationship with food, and denial...In those times when I've been out of control with respect to food, I have not had any sexual desire, but I've been very passionate about food, with food. I've been obsessed with food.

(interview 1993)

That the cake be chocolate is particularly appropriate when popular folk medicine asserts that it contains the chemical substance produced in the human brain by sexual activity. Millan commented, "We actually had to do the show a couple of times with white cake, and it just didn't have the same kick as with chocolate cake. Mind you, chocolate is so highly sexualized in our culture" (interview 1993). In addition, conventional racist associations of white and whiteness with purity, and black with abjection, overdetermine the chocolate cake.

Appetite, as Dempsey and Millan use the term in the opening quotation, incorporates a variety of possibilities. Coward suggests that:

For women the pursuit of oral pleasure runs up against prohibitions and controls, against social prescriptions about feeding and food, against cultural prescriptions about women's appetite and women's duty to give out. The mouth for women is a site of drama, a drama between the desire to pursue active needs and against the prohibitions levelled against women's behaviour. When women attempt to lay

claim to the pleasures of the mouth, they are often constricted by anxiety about transgressing the appropriate expression of female desire. (1985, 122)

The anxiety of a portion of Dempsey and Millan's viewers concerned a complication of the simple expression of appetite - itself, as Coward so eloquently argues, transgressive. Appetites may comprise the "acceptable" and "reasonable" - the right amount of food, heterosex in the missionary position between husband and wife - and/or the "unacceptable" and "unreasonable" - too much or the wrong kind of food, "deviant" sexual activities or sexualities. These two appetites are conflated - and thus compromised - in "Mary Medusa."

As Dempsey and Millan warned in my prologue, things definitely got messy. But here, mess - the cake, as well as the indexes, denials, and comparisons of its meanings - is deployed consciously. At the conclusion of their performance, Dempsey and Millan provide a

striking, memorable, humorous image which conflates and compromises not only the presentation of (un)acceptables and (un)reasonables, but also (re)presents a new expressive format for rejecting conventional ways of thinking around those binary oppositions. In her sexual, physical, inter-thigh encounter with a chocolate cake, Dempsey risks the kind of inappropriateness - the wastage of food - that conflates with heterosexist ideas of lesbianism - the wastage of women, who do not direct their desires toward "consumption" by men.

Like Dempsey and Millan, filmmaker Sara Diamond links sexuality and feminism via the codedness of lesbian culture. "Must lesbian culture always name itself? Must it be for a counterculture, and about it? Why can't feminine desires be messy, nomadic, and anxious?" (1993, 175). In a pluralist, postmodern society, "queeries" are more evocative than answers, as Dempsey and Millan's conflation of food, power, sex, and women in "Mary Medusa" shows.

## ENDNOTES

1. A version of this paper was originally presented at the American Folklore Society (Greenhill 1993a). Help from the following people was indispensable: Noam Gonick, President of Queer Culture Canada; Wayne Baerwaldt and Thea Demetrakopolous at Plug In; and participants and observers I interviewed: Don Belton, Di Brandt, Karen Busby, Shawna Dempsey, Alison Gillmor, Bob McKaskell, Lorri Millan, Jay Mirus, Pat Onysko, and Robert Taylor. Jo Radner and Susan Prentice critiqued drafts, and SSHRCC funded the research.

2. As self-described in the Festival Du Voyeur catalogue. My "coming out" as heterosexual risks invoking privilege, or implying homophobia, but not doing so risks avoiding the significance of my subject/speaker position.

3. Substituted for "she doesn't give a fuck," at station employees' insistence.

4. Mirus was offered his job back after negotiations between his union and the general manager for wrongful dismissal, but he resigned and moved to Toronto to become a videographer for MuchMusic.

5. Other theorists who use food as social indicator include Bourdieu (1984, 195-207) and Douglas (1966, 41-57).

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