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## Bear(ing) Down: Encountering Posthuman Critical Media Studies through the (Re)tracing of Object and Embodiment

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### Abstract

*This paper explores the how of posthuman theory by a collaborative and conversational visual reading of FX's *The Bear*. In both the shared and individual encounters with the show, we consider how objects produce relational affects across characters, objects, time, and space. We insist that unique shows like *The Bear*, expand beyond a "use" orientation of objects, instead producing objects as central to the narrative. Some objects become, in one way, another character as the action does not occur separate from the objects. We argue that while that is often the case, this is not often made visible. *The Bear*, while still being a character-driven show, emphasizes the agency of the objects. Objects get long takes, close-ups, and meaningful space in dialog, making the show a meaningful text for temporary withdrawal from human-centered ways of seeing and knowing.*

**Keywords:** Agency; Objects; Posthuman; Television; FX's *The Bear*

### Introduction

Human relationality and mutuality are complex—nested and knotted within shifting conditions and kaleidoscopic circumstances. As these relationships (d)evolve, they become imbued with the agency to alter ongoing unfoldings surrounding each encounter. Put differently, and toying with Sara Ahmed's (2010) thinking, as people make relationships within the more-than-human world, the more-than-human world in turn, makes relational people. Finding ourselves within this paradoxical logic brings into focus static/inert objects and materials that play a central role in how people connect to one another. In this sense, ontologically, objects and materials are more than passive and benign, they abound with a sense of vibrancy—thus animating how human relationships (pro/di)gress (Bennett, 2009; Snaza, 2019). According to Jane Bennett (2009), "[i]f matter itself is lively, then not only is the difference between subjects and objects minimized, but the status of the shared materiality of all things is elevated. All bodies become more than mere objects, as the thing-powers of resistance and protean agency are brought into sharper relief (13). Extending the trajectory of what constitutes as a body collapses logistics upholding the binary of human and non-human through a redistribution of agency. Here we take a cue from Karen Barad (2007) who wrote, "[c]rucially, agency is a matter of intra-acting; it is an enactment, not something that someone or something has. Agency is doing/being in its intra-activity" (235). In this sense, agency becomes the capacity to (re)act *through* two (or more) bodies encountering each other. Going further, when these encounters are framed as trans-corporeal (Alaimo, 2018), agential bodies become "intertwined with

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the dynamic, material world, which crosses through them, transforms them, *and* is transformed by them” (435, our use of emphasis).

Sara Ahmed (2018b) discusses the politics of attention, emphasizing that how we attend to encounters impacts how we can know and be in the world. Nathan Snaza (2021) writes that “a particular social order—we can call this Enlightenment, or imperial Western modernity—dulls us to particular aspects of our world, and to considering how that world has come into existence, even as it shapes us in other way” (21). Of interest to our work, is engaging in techniques that allow for expansive ways of sharpening that which is easily backgrounded. Concurrently, alongside being guided to consider the politics of attention, we also practice attending to the politics of human relationships as depicted in popular culture, revealing themselves through material entanglements. Further, we wonder how different ways of looking allow for alternative readings to emerge toward ruptures in assumptions of bounded liberal subjects and colonial ways of looking and knowing.

We know that despite commitments to looking in new ways that this takes ongoing practice. Guided by Judith Butler’s 2004 position that “[t]here is a certain departure from the human that takes place in order to start the process of remaking the human” (3-4), we use thing-power (Bennett, 2009) to (re)read the first season of the popular television series, *The Bear*. While Jane Bennett (2009) discusses the agency of objects, putting into question taken-for-granted cause-and-effect relationships, Stacy Alaimo (2012) positions bodies as being unable to be disentangled from “the flows of substances and the agencies of environment” (476). Avery Gordon (2008) reminds readers to account for in-between spaces of materiality, those imprinted with a “seething presence” (8). That is, a (re)orientation of our attention as readers and consumers of media that accounts for spaces, bodies, and relationships that cannot be touched, yet nonetheless continue to touch those on screen (Varga & Helmsing, 2022). Again, socialized in Western epistemologies and colonial ways, it takes ongoing practice to think and see differently (hooks, 1992) in order to become and relate differently. Posthuman and more-than-human theories provide a place to start unlearning habits of only noticing the humans in any given scene-fictional encounter or otherwise. Following Alaimo (2018; 2012), Barad, (2007), Bennett (2009), and Gordon (2008), if objects have (ephemeral) agency and are affective<sup>3</sup> (Ahmed, 2004; 2008; 2010), we must (re)imagine relationships that produce consequences and entanglements.

We turn to prestige television because despite it being deeply implicated in market forces of entertainment, it departs from mainstream television in that viewers take interest, and perhaps find pleasure, in complex and challenging narratives. Prestige television is a shared visual, sonic, and narrative encounter that, when intentionally read through theory, allows for creative frames for viewing and thinking to emerge. In the case of *The Bear*, food becomes central to the action of the narrative in a way that allows the viewer to recognize the leakiness of the humans (Manning, 2020). The reason prestige television holds the attention of all kinds of people is because it is a space to (re)imagine what matters, while also resonating with what always-already does (Bignell & Woods, 2022; Levine, 2008). *The Bear* did this—and continues to do this—for millions of people.

In the summer of 2022, FX’s first season of *The Bear* premiered on Hulu. The show’s protagonist, Carmen (Carry), returns home to manage his deceased elder brother’s sandwich shop after traveling the world working as a fine dining chef. Home in this sense is also the site of (childhood) trauma.

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<sup>3</sup> Along with Ahmed’s work, our understanding of affect is informed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s (1987) notion, via Baruch Spinoza (1677/2005), that, as a register of myriad sensibilities and “shuttling intensities” (Seigworth & Gregg, 2010, 2), affect seeks to understand the “ability to affect and be affected” (xvi).



The protagonist returns to find a family that is worse off than when he left, reeling from the loss of his older brother Michael. While the show is about Carmy, the restaurant, and multiple forms of loss, these things are entangled with the day-to-day of cooking, eating, and keeping a business running. Unlike many television shows, the less central characters are also developed and provide relevant texture to the arc of the story. The show is anxiety-producing, complicated, difficult, and on occasion, heart-warming. It is “good television” in that the characters are relatable; they each have traits/flaws that draw viewers into their individual/collective stories, and the narrative resonates with the experiences common in human life. *The Bear* resonates as prestige television because it is unexpected, unpredictable, and challengingly sensory—food, and all its presence/absence is central to the story.

One does not watch *The Bear* to escape the difficulties of everyday life—rather one watches to *feel* and *sense* both the best and worst of being alive in contemporary times. As television further entrenches its dominance as a cultural text, different ways of reading visual texts are required to theorize the place of television in critical media studies (Cord, 2022; Gripsrud, 2010). For as Erin Manning (2020) reminds us, “[t]o do this work, modes of knowing differently must be valued” (53). Thus, we see this posthuman viewing of *The Bear* as a mode of knowing that is not bound by neoliberal subject positions that seek singularity through static repetition. A posthuman viewing is concerned with difference through simultaneity and modes of not just knowing, but *becoming* situated with/through the material world.

Television is in a renaissance. Since *The Sopranos*, the 1999 HBO television show featuring a mob family’s complex lives, a genre of television has emerged that is meant to be difficult, upsetting, and challenging to the assumptions of viewers (Bignell & Woods, 2022). Engaging with media through a materialist lens holds the potential for deeper understandings of the multiplicitous ways in which matter animates how humans connect with/to each other. By (re)tracing workings and materials composed of metal in the popular show *The Mandalorian*, Bretton Varga and Erin Adams (2022) identified “the direct and indirect role that metal plays in shaping everyday social, intellectual, and technological performatives” (176). Importantly, Varga and Adams (2022) noted that the relationships between the show’s characters and metal traverses the contours of merely identifying a material discursive bond. That is, bringing to light how such relationships “will provoke new ways of thinking about identity, responsibility, justice, and perhaps more significantly, co-existence across more than human world” (Varga & Adams, 2022, 177) holds implications for how people might come to understand their own entangled alliance with/to technological devices (e.g., phones, televisions, computers). An alliance that is underpinned by deeply problematic and extractive policies/practices relating to how devices used to consume media are produced.

Adjacently, Paulo Saporito (2020) conducted a posthuman (re)reading of three Italian films by Michelangelo Antonini *L'avventura* (1960), *La Notte* (1961), and *L'eclisse* (1962) to explore the relationships between female protagonists, material conditions on screen, and the role the camera plays in how each scene is constructed. Framing this analysis through Barad’s (2007) agential realism, Saporito (2020) keyed in on the intra-activeness of how the female body becomes materially (re)produced through relationships that are not represented on screen (e.g., director, camera). While this suggested absence conjures Gordon’s (2008) notion of haunting and the significance of how “understanding it is essential to grasping the nature of our society and for changing it” (27), it underscores the thing-power (Bennett, 2009) inscribed upon objects used during the performance and production of media. Expounding upon the agency of camera, Saporito (2020) writes, “[t]he camera fully embodies its tactile-eye and aims to register haptic stimuli, beside the visual and aural

ones, both acknowledging the agency of matter in its reconfigurations and claiming its agential space in the enacted material entanglement” (290). In essence, Saporito’s (2020) work advocates for an interrogation *and* indexing of relationships underpinning—or we would argue haunting—on-screen liaisons between bodies both human and non-human.

While it is common to discuss television by focusing solely on the characters, we tread down a similar path of these articles by investing in the agency of objects (Barad, 2007; Bennett, 2009; 2010) and the affective implications of what they produce (Ahmed, 2004; 2008a; 2010). This re-read, re-watch, and re-trace of *The Bear* provides different ways of understanding how objects and affects entangle with the agency of the characters across time(s) and space(s). We see this posthuman approach as a resistive act of troubling how media is traditionally consumed. Ultimately, this work seeks to complicate the assemblage that is visual storytelling through an attunement of human and non-human relationality.

### **Tracings of Thing-Power**

By modelling a collaborative practice of “reading” a visual text, we imagine this paper as a pedagogical offering, accounting for the different paths toward visual texts. Visual culture frames and facilitates ways of seeing and imaging. In a media-rich environment, the stories that we encounter help us make a temporary sense of the world and can frame the politics and social interactions that come to make up a life. Donna Haraway (2016) writes, “It matters what thoughts think thoughts. It matters what knowledges know knowledge. It matters what relations relate relations. It matters what worlds world worlds. It matters what stories tell stories” (35).

### **Thing-Power**

Why advocate the vitality of matter? Because our hunch is that the image of dead or thoroughly instrumentalized matter feeds human hubris and our earth-destroying fantasies of conquest and consumption. It does so by preventing us from detecting (e.g., seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, feeling) a fuller range of the nonhuman powers circulating around and within human bodies.

In the introduction of *Vibrant Matter*, Bennett (2009) references other thinkers and writers who have learned this “attentiveness to things and their affects” (xiv), concluding that “[w]ithout proficiency in this countercultural perceiving, the world appears as if it consists only of active human subjects who confront passive objects and their law-governed mechanisms” (xiv). The lack of proficiency at this kind of perception, as she describes, is a failure of the imagination and a block to reframing the social and political in ways that may come to matter in significant ways. Removing or reducing this block shift necessarily facilitates different kinds of relationality but requires ongoing practice. The argument for its value and use is insufficient for developing a “countercultural perceiving” (Bennett, 2009, xiv). Attunement, attentiveness to “non-human forces” is difficult because accounting for the more-than-human remains counter with the most dominant frameworks disciplined and surveilled in the broader society. Critical media studies account for the effects and impacts of media on power relations. Combining critical media studies with vital materialism attends to the potential of reading and re-reading media to differently imagine and know the media artifact, but also the world that media represents. We argue that media, in this case a television show, can become a space to practice looking and therefore an opportunity to become better attuned to the role that the non-human plays



in producing the actions/inactions that make up a life. We think *The Bear* is particularly suited for developing a practice of reading visual texts that engages the agency of objects and their vitality.

According to Bennett, “thing-power” is when a thing “issues a call” that may or may not be understood or heard. The hearing or understanding is not required for a thing to call. Bennett (2009) writes that a limit to the term is that it “lends itself to an atomistic rather than a congregational understanding of agency” (20). Things have the capacity and ability “to make things happen, to produce effects” (Bennett, 2009, 5), alone and in *confederations*. In our discussion, we want to engage the “collaboration, cooperation, or interactive interference of many bodies and forces” (Bennett, 2009, 21). By differently paying attention to objects that figure prominently in not just the action of the show, but specifically the way relationships manifest, we also want to think about them in relation to other objects, humans, and non-humans, working together to produce action and stasis, sometimes both at the same time. Knives cut, their absence or loss disallows further cutting, and stops the humans from cooking in the kitchen. Knives represent status and skill, or the lack thereof. The outcome of a dish could depend on the knife used by the hand to cut. Fire burns skin causing it to bubble, while simultaneously cooks (and overcooks the meat) in a kitchen, where people of different races, genders, neighbourhoods, ages, and histories are brought together around a shared goal. Fire, along with human willingness to transgress the law, facilitates lucrative insurance fraud, allowing a failing business to continue. The failing business continues, allowing patrons to receive beef sandwiches that melt in their mouths and give them a feeling of gastric satisfaction. The business can continue, thereby extending food, family, community, and geographic entanglements and relations, while also becoming central to new relationalities and the possible encountering of future intensities.

We next present fragments of our shared discourse about how we each re-read *The Bear*—specifically the emergent connectivity between humans and more-than-humans featured in the show. While each author presents a “reading” of *The Bear*, this section is sutured together by the theories that underpin this work. That is, material framings meant to position more-than-human objects as vibrant and agential.

### **Proliferation: Describe how objects animate the emergence of relationships**

“*Something* throws itself together in a moment as an event and a sensation; a something both animated and inhabitable” (Stewart, 2007, 1, original use of emphasis).

**Asilia:** I want to start with Carmy’s fancy knife and the *Noma* book to think more about Tina and Marcus’ becomings. The book is introduced in the second episode and features colour photos and descriptions of Carmy’s culinary creations. The book represents the old Carmy. The Carmy before his brother died and before he returned home to hold together the pieces left behind by his brother. Marcus and Tina both work in the kitchen. Tina is a middle-aged working class Latina woman and Marcus is a working-class Black man. Marcus is curious about Carmy’s past kitchen experience, while Tina is outwardly mocking and dismissive. She does not want the restaurant to change and resents Carmy’s attempts to “elevate” the establishment in ways that reflect his skill and experience. Both Marcus and Tina’s backgrounds are alluded to at different points, but only in vague terms. The details that are revealed frame them in terms of narratives familiar to the viewer—working class, Black/Brown, people living in an urban metropolis, stuck in dead-end jobs. This is ordinary and familiar.

Despite the lack of exposition, it is clear that their kitchen training is limited to a lower tier, fast-casual eatery serving other working-class people. Tina initially has a flexible role in the kitchen, doing prep and other jobs as needed, but Marcus exclusively bakes the bread used for the famous beef sandwiches. Both initially seem to understand their jobs at the restaurant as just that—a job. They work for a paycheck and have a laugh with their coworkers, but they do not expect that their time at *The Beef* will expand their economic or personal possibilities. This changes when Tina encounters Carmy's knife and Marcus encounters Carmy's *Noma* book, thereby shifting both of their trajectories in ways that unfold over Seasons One and Two. "Each transition is accompanied by a variation of capacity: a change in which powers to affect and be affected are addressable by a next event and how readily addressable they are—or to what degree they are present—as futurities" (Massumi, 2002, 15). The assemblage of forces—knife/book, worker in dead-end job, kitchen, Carmy, *The Beef of Chicagoland*<sup>4</sup>, and beef—combine to facilitate a future that neither had been able to previously imagine. Both Tina and Marcus will "[b]e changed by the encounter" (Massumi, 2002, 15) with the objects that they previously likely would not have otherwise seen or touched had Carmy not returned from his time away to run the restaurant after his brother's tragic demise.

To further explore Tina and Marcus' trajectory we can start literally on the ground. *The Bear* is unusual in that the camera often captures that which is commonly obscured in television shows—dripping grease, stained countertops, and the floor of a kitchen tasked with serving food in a working-class Chicago neighbourhood. The viewer sees the spills, onion peels, and other items that you would find on the kitchen floor of a busy dysfunctional restaurant. In episode 1, "System," the viewer is introduced to Carmy's knife less than ten minutes into the episode. The introduction happens before the viewer meets characters that become central. As viewers, we learn that his knife is of a superior quality to those that are most available in the kitchen of *The Beef*. We learn that the knife is from Carmy's time in fine dining. Carmy says to no one in particular, "Where is my knife?" over and over again (Storer, 2022a, 10:40). Then: "Chefs we gotta sharpen our knives when we get a second. All these knives are dull" (Storer, 2022a, 11:16). The camera pans to the ticking clock on the wall. The knife is associated with the constant threat of passing time. The knife is a threat and a potential. The dull knife slows times while the sharp knife quickens. Time is also a threat and a potential in a restaurant. More time means more delicious foods—as emphasized with the slow cooking meat that the old timers worry takes too long until they tasted it when it was done. But also, time passing means that things might not be done in time, which has a lot of unwanted implications in a struggling restaurant. If time is not used appropriately, the restaurant might fail leaving precarious people without stable employment. Time is of great importance to the trajectory of their lives. And a dull knife slows time.

In this episode and many others, Carmy focuses on the details because in his view, all the small details add up to become the kind of restaurant he hopes to run, serving the kind of food that goes far beyond what *The Beef* is used to serving. The details are an accumulation of his hopes entangled with sharp knives, clean countertops, cut (not torn) tape, and beef cooked and cut to perfection. Humans' ability to use these objects in ways that serve the broader goal of keeping the restaurant open are also essential to the confederation. Later in episode 1, at 15:36 Carmy looks down, the camera follows his gaze to find his knife lying on the floor partially visible lying under the sink. Time slows again, the camera lingers on the knife. Carmy picks up the knife and the screen flashes to him

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<sup>4</sup> *The Beef* is the name of the restaurant in season 1, but ultimately—through countless relational encounters—becomes *The Bear* in season 2.



in the morgue, then flashes again to the seasoned, juicy cut of meat. Some dead bodies are eaten, others lie in the cold morgue.

There are many ways to read the knife and its ongoing (e/a)ffects and impacts, but here we will focus on Tina. The knife, the very same one that Carmy loses and then finds carelessly discarded on the floor (possibly by Tina in a move toward disorder and confusion) becomes one of the things that allows for Tina to develop a set of skills that transition her from line cook to chef, shifting her sense of herself from low wage worker to skilled chef. This change in status impacts her life in ways that are never detailed or explained, because viewers familiar with precarity, labour, and late-stage capitalism can easily recognize how the expansion of possibilities might impact someone like Tina. The character development is not only a result of the knife, but also *not only* the outcome of Carmy and Tina's will and efforts, as might be a more common reading.

In the season opener, viewers' attention is drawn to everyday items that produce a range of effects over the course of both season 1 and 2. For example, the show begins with Carmy entering a work atmosphere that has been largely established. The staff already know each other and have ways of working in the kitchen that is familiar and comfortable. Carmy wants to change the restaurant, so it more closely reflects what he believes matters about running a restaurant. To do this, he must socialize them into a new way of doing things. They resist this socialization, management, and surveillance to varying degrees. They ignore him, argue with him, mock him, neglect to do aspects of their job, and in some cases, outright sabotage him. Tina is the most overtly resistant to Carmy's management. She talks badly about Carmy to the other employees, ignores his directions, and does tasks in the way that she prefers, even when this derails the productivity of the kitchen. Tina calls Carmy "Jeff" instead of "Chef," refusing to comply with the restaurant norm of addressing colleagues. This annoys Carmy, but he chooses his battles and avoids pulling rank on small matters. He wants to change the restaurant but does not want to change the community that has developed among the workers.

In contrast to Tina, Marcus' resistance to change is minimal. He complies without argument, even as sometimes he shows his annoyance. Marcus is immediately interested in Carmy's background as a celebrated chef. Carmy does not directly discuss his experience in fine dining, often shrugging it off or changing the subject when it comes up. The *Noma* book, thick with beautifully shot pictures, becomes a stand-in for what Carmy avoids discussing—his past, his brother, and the knotted trauma of both. Marcus does not know any of this context and engages the book in its most obvious use—a guide and inspiration for baking.

At 26:22 in episode 1, Marcus asks Carmy to check the bread he has just baked. He previously baked a batch, but Carmy told him it was too crumbly and told him to do a steam bath. During this interaction, the *Noma* book is behind him on the shelf foreshadowing season 2 and Marcus' evolution as a baker. The book had been placed there after it had fallen to the ground in the previous scene. In subsequent episodes, Marcus is inspired by the book, printing out colour photos and placing the photos around his workstation. He shows Carmy what he has done with the book, the photos communicating Marcus' appreciation of Carmy's experience and his desire to learn. The book brings the two together, momentarily flattening the divide between boss and worker. These moments with Carmy and the book allow Marcus to visualize something (maybe, a different future, a pastry, a skillset) that he could not have had an image of prior to encountering the book *and* Carmy. Carmy, flesh and blood in front of him, brings the images of the book to life. This "to life" becomes *both* literal and figurative, as Marcus later learns to make some of the desserts featured in the book.

In the following season, Carmy sends Marcus to Copenhagen to study at the very same restaurant featured in the book that he picked up and displayed on the kitchen shelf so many months prior.

**Bretton:** I think *The Bear* uses materials in many ways to resist the reproduction of uncritical assumptions about how relationships within the more-than-human world are developed and are always-already haunting. In episode 2, “Hands” (Storer, 2022b), relational texture emerges between two characters that have different racial identities, backgrounds, perspectives, and dispositions through the stickiness of objects. Here, I am thinking about Sara Ahmed’s (2004) positioning of material connectedness within the “histories of contact between bodies, objects, and signs” (90). Tracing the contours of this thought, objects stick to other objects thus im(br/pl)icating the trajectory of human connectedness.

This holds true for how Richie who is an unmotivated white, male, vulgar, and antagonistic character intra-acts with Sydney, a determined, Black, female, thoughtful, and generous character. Richie is Sydney’s foil. Richie’s history working at the show’s restaurant, The Beef, is extensive and Sydney is the newcomer. Immediately, Richie is hostile to Sydney upon her arrival, but an encounter *through* three different objects (that become linked) begins to thaw Richie’s surly disposition (even if momentarily). During a visit from the Health Inspector, a pack of cigarettes are found left on the stove. Carmy believes they belong to Ritchie<sup>5</sup>, who he angrily tasks with going to the hardware store to buy caulking to fix a problematic hole in the wall that was discovered by the Health Department (contributing to the grade of C, along with the cigarettes). However, Ritchie has a suspended license triggering Carmy to assign Sydney to the role of driving Ritchie. Once at the hardware store, Ritchie’s contumacy influences the product he selects for the repair job—which of course is wrong. Several moments later, the two are back in the car and Ritchie begins questioning Sydney on why she would want to work for Carmy. To which, she affectively replies, “You know the restaurant could be good. Like, I know you know that. Like, it doesn’t have to be a place where the food is shitty, or everybody acts shitty and feels shitty” (Storer, 2022b, 19:36). Weaving itself into the fabric of this scene is another object, a cell phone, which further animates intensities and happenings layered within the unfolding relationship between Richie and Sydney. After answering an incoming call, viewers hear Richie talking lovingly to his five-year-old daughter, as he begins to console her on her fear of starting a new school. For the first time, Richie’s character becomes humanized and, after he hangs up, Richie admits that he “fucked up with those cigarettes...and I got the wrong caulk, I think” (Storer, 2022b, 22:23). Sydney simply holds up a plastic bag and replies, “You did. But I didn’t” (Storer, 2022b, 22:36). The two characters share a laugh and the scene closes.

A vital materialist reading of this scene—and relationship—embraces Bennett’s (2010) use of the material term *entelechy*, which “attempt[s] to name a force or an agency that is naturalistic but never fully spatialized, actualized, or calculable” (63). From this perspective, each of these three objects: cigarettes, caulk, and cell phone traverse the literary category/register of MacGuffin—which flattens objects embedded within fictional narratives as merely being propulsive actants. Instead, objects become *vibrantly* (re)positioned with thing-power (Bennett, 2009) and agency (Barad, 2007) thus drawing our attention to the “necessarily intimate relationship between entelechy and the regular, observable operations of matter” (Bennett, 2010, 55).

Crucially, each of the objects transcend their usual/intended purpose and contribute to the making—and later in episode 7 “Review” in which Sydney stabs Richie—and unmaking of the material self which, as Alaimo (2012) reminds us, “cannot be disentangled from networks that are

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<sup>5</sup> In the final scene of this episode, Carmen realizes that the cigarettes were indeed his and not Ritchie’s.





simultaneously economic, political, cultural, scientific, and substantial” (476). Concomitantly, following the pattern of the non-humans throughout the duration of the scene works to spatialize where—and ultimately how—the relationship between Richie and Sydney progresses. While the three highlighted objects apply pressure to how the characters begin to relate to each other, the portion of the scene that perhaps could be defined as being the most intimate, occurs within the most intimate space that viewers see, the front seats of a car. Going further, spatiality plays a role throughout the season as many relational and affective encounters proliferate within perhaps the *restaurant’s* most intimate space, the walk-in refrigerator. Perhaps material intimacy, and all its nuances, begets relational intimacy—time and time again.

Through a posthuman reading of *The Bear*, arrangements of time—and thus matter—flow in multiple directions at once, gesturing towards a pastpresentfuture (Varga, 2024) conceptualization of both registers. As we learn throughout the show, Carmy, his sister (Sugar), uncle (Jimmy), and most of the characters that worked at The Beef before Carmy’s arrival are haunted by the death of Michael, who battled substance abuse and eventually took his own life. The undercurrents of this trauma are palpable in the show—individual recollections of Michael, comments about Michael, and questions about how Michael ran The Beef all tug at the viewer’s attention. Carmy’s hauntings however reveal themselves *through* the food itself and works to position his character at the nexus of two distinct culinary worlds: a Michelin Star<sup>6</sup> winning fine dining restaurant and his brother’s floundering establishment “long known as a family joint, the purveyor of sloppy but tasty Italian beef sandwiches” (Storer, 2022c, 3:18).

In many ways, food for Carmy is pharmakonian—that is, both trauma/joy and love/hate simultaneously. His success in the fine-dining world did not come without scars, whether it be relentless strain to perform, missing familial activities, or being told by his boss, “You have a short man's complex. You can barely reach over this fucking table, right? Is this why you have the tattoos and your cool little scars, and you go out and you take your smoke breaks? It’s fun, isn't it? But here’s the thing. You’re terrible at this. You’re no good at it. Go faster, motherfucker. Keep going faster. Why are you so slow? Why are you so fucking slow? Why? You think you’re so tough...you are not tough. You are bullshit. You are talentless...you should be dead” (Storer, 2022b, 2:06). This example locates how “[g]hostly matters are part of social life” (Gordon, 2008, 23) and the paradoxical nature of ghosts/hauntings. That is, the material-discursive entanglements that are braided within how people come to relate to each other and the more-than-human world (Alaimo, 2012; 2018). Matter in this way is always-already haunted and produces myriad affects for people *within* material-discursive relationality.

## Significance and Concluding Thoughts

*The Bear* is a show that features humans who intra-act across class, race, and gender differences. Read on this level, the show is familiar, but less common in prestige television. Shows that involve the workplace are often the only realistic settings for such diversity. Shows like *Abbott Elementary*, *The Office*, and *The Jury* are all examples of very differently socially and culturally positioned kinds of people coming together to produce comedic situations. These comedic situations are often the result of misunderstandings, cultural differences, or personality clashes. This is true in *The Bear* to a lesser

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<sup>6</sup> Michelin Stars are given to restaurants around the world that demonstrate cooking excellence. The recognition—which can also be removed if the same quality of dining is that earned the award is not being met—takes into account “the quality of the ingredients, the harmony of flavours, the mastery of techniques, the personality of the chef as expressed through their cuisine and, just as importantly, consistency both across the entire menu and over time” (Michelin guide, 2022, para 1).

degree.<sup>7</sup> There are funny moments in the show but funny is not the most immediate tone and the source of humour is not the cultural, class, or racial differences that make up the staff of the restaurant.

In the case of *The Bear*, the differences among the people are not the main source of conflict, rather it is how those differences manifest in/across/through entanglements with things. Sydney's Blackness, her gender, or middle-class upbringing is not source material for plot. It is more her enthusiasm for Carmy's vision for the restaurant, her eagerness to wear the crisp blue apron without any eye rolling or snorting, her unconcealed reverence for the kitchen, and how she uses French words that she learned in cooking school that rub her coworkers the wrong way and create distance between her and them. These things create Sydney's character—without them we would not know her. As we have argued, the show is about fire, meat, knives, pastries, bread, anxiety, fear, Post-Traumatic Stress, death, and debt. The show could be described as character-driven with the relationships between the humans being central to the narrative, but *The Bear* is also equally or even to a greater degree about food and all the things that must be skilfully and thoughtfully combined to conceptualize, procure, make, and serve (good/great) food.

The things in the show must speak to and through the characters, their intra-actions, and their challenges because each episode is only approximately 25 minutes. In some ways, the things must also become characters in their own right. This means that the show must rely on the objects to also develop stories within the overarching story. These constellations of things come together at crucial moments to facilitate encounters that produce (a/e)ffects. Carmy does not have enough meat to serve and must barter his vintage denim. Things for things to make things needed to connect to other things. Once the meat is procured the action shifts away from the action of the humans (even as they remain essential) to focus on the food. The meat is lovingly slow-cooked, tended to, and monitored, then deftly cut with sharp knives. The meat is then placed gently by hands between two slices of bread and then tasted with moans and groans of appreciation. In these scenes, the food—in whatever state it is in at the time—is central, the hands belonging to the human become background to seared and juicy cuts of meat that will be exchanged for money.

All character-driven shows are about more than the humans involved, but *The Bear* emphasizes the more-than-human by tight close-ups of the objects that are also central to the storyline in that without them the action could not occur. Plastic containers, blue labels, olive oil, salt, herbs, flour, mixers, pans, clean surfaces, clocks, walk-in refrigerator, electricity, stoves, and hands to combine, cut, sprinkle, drizzle, sear, and boil. The food could not be cooked, tasted, and eaten with relish without the human and non-human assemblages.

In sum, *The Bear* is more than a (dark) comedy about a motley crew of characters searching for something. A posthumanist orientation of the show as a visual text can be capacious in helping viewers begin “to recognize that phenomena are caught in a multitude of interlocking systems and forces and to consider anew the location and nature of capacities for agency” (Coole & Frost, 2010, 9). Put simply, it is *through* the vibrancy and intra-connectedness of the objects existing throughout the various spaces depicted in the show that *become* animating forces entangling the characters in the material ecologies of their work environment, their affective affiliations with/to food, and perhaps most significantly, their relationships to each other (past/present). While Ahmed (2023) reminds us that “[w]e tell stories. We carry them. We are them” (116), posthumanism indexes the different ways that the static and inert are imbued with both thing-power (Bennett, 2009) and, consequently,

<sup>7</sup> At the prestigious 2024 Emmy Awards, *The Bear* won the category “Best Comedy Series.”



*narrative power*. As a revision of Ahmed's (2023) thought, perhaps *The Bear* is revealing in the sense that *objects* tell stories. *They* carry them. *They* are them.

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