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The Fridge: A Window Into the Soul?

Isabel Beshar
Medical Anthropology
University of Oxford
isabel.beshar@stcatz.ox.ac.uk

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In November 2014, a Google Search of the words “fridge” and “dating” loads a page with 3,600,900 hits. The top choice directs you to the “Check Their Fridge” website of dating guru, John Stonehill. Unsure about your future romantic partner, nervous about your next date, or eager to predict your relationship compatibility? The next time you are at their home, take a quick peek into the fridge. According to Stonehill, the contents inside – the leafy green vegetables, open salsa jars, take-away containers, and/or pop-open beers – may reveal the truth about the person you are dating.

“Check Their Fridge” is mostly here to stay: over the next 12 months, ABC News will develop a segment based on the premise of Stonehill’s website. And like its already-established future, Stonehill’s principles seem to have an entrenched history. In 1825, French epicure Anthelme Brillat-Savarin famously said, “Tell me what you eat and I will tell you who you are.” In the 1920s, nutritionist Victor Lindlahr developed Brillat’s ideas into a “Catabolic Diet” with the idea that “90% of diseases known to man are caused by cheap foodstuffs. You are what you eat.” During the 1960s, the slogan was adopted by champions of the organic food phenomenon and later, through the 1990s, by the Slow Food Movement. Between 2004 and 2007, the British TV Show “You Are What You Eat” used computer programming to ominously predict the candidate’s body appearance in 10, 15, and 20 years as usually obese. The moral judgment inherent in the saying is not lost; social scientist Julie Guthman critiques it for “disparag[ing] others and plac[ing] blame in many of the wrong places.” Be that as it may, food has increasingly come to represent the social, political, economic, moral, and religious identities for many people.

So, yes, food is important, but what is it about the fridge that is so special? Why not the pantry, breadbox, cereal drawer? And why the voyeurism? There is an intimacy involved in peering into a fridge, in a way similar to – or perhaps more so – sneaking into a friend’s clothes closet or rummaging through a colleague’s work desk.

In 2007, American photographer Mark Menjivar spent six months traveling around the United States, documenting the contents of 60 different fridges in 20 different communities. His photos are large (20x200 cm) and dramatic; seemingly unedited, they speak as



Figure 1: Mark Menjivar, *Refrigerators* “Bar Tender | San Antonio, TX | 1-person Household | Goes to sleep at 8 AM and wakes up at 4 pm daily 2007; Credits: Camera and Editing: Mark Menjivar <http://www.splendidtable.org/story/photographer-takes-voyeuristic-peek-inside-refrigerators>



Figure 2: Mark Menjivar, *Refrigerators* "Delicatessen Attendant | Daphne, AL | 4-person Household | Disowned by parents because of her interracial marriage 2007; Credits: Camera and Editing: Mark Menjivar <http://www.splendidtable.org/story/photographer-takes-voyeuristic-peek-inside-refrigerators>



Figure 3: Mark Menjivar, *Refrigerators* "Food Artist | Brooklyn, NY | 1-person Household | Runs small vegan bakery from her apartment 2007; Credits: Camera and Editing: Mark Menjivar <http://www.splendidtable.org/story/photographer-takes-voyeuristic-peek-inside-refrigerators>

direct, honest representations of American larders. Menjivar includes only a few identifiers – the occupation, location, and household identity of those he features. The fridges highlight a huge range of contents. Some feature only frozen meat and Russian vodka; others overflow with leafy greens, rugged eggplants, and ribbon-y carrots; still more are stocked with half-eaten take-out containers. Some are organized (color-coded Tupperware included); others are so dirty they forced Menjivar "to close the door three times during the shoot [due to the smell]." The fridge owners are similarly diverse – one is a Florida divorcé, another a nocturnal bartender, and then there is a former World War II Prisoner-Of-War, followed by a famous documentary filmmaker couple.

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Limited descriptors always demand a story, but the wide-open fridge door seems to do more. Centrally situated in any home, the fridge is opportunistic to outsider violation. Piquing curiosity, it begs the construction of narratives and the passage of judgment on the owner. It gives just enough information to build stories, but not enough to confirm or destroy such runaway imaginations.

And there is something about seeing living food preserved inside. Food grows and buds, it flowers and ripens, but it also decays and rots, peels and molds. At the most basic level, food has a life. And the fridge celebrates this – but it also arrests it. Fridge drawers and doors present food, but sub-freezing temperatures also halt food lifecycles. Delayed in decomposition, the foodstuff becomes a natural product in a seemingly artificial environment, preserved in a synthetic state.

As such, the fridge is caught in a moment in time. The pause button is hit, limbo is constructed, and existence becomes liminal.

A frozen frame, the fridge boundary straddles life-and-death, evoking power, meaning, and mystery. Anthropologist Jean Jackson argues that humans have long been obsessed with the intersection of these ambiguous continua, which “challenge and threaten the naturalness of culturally constructed categories.” Perhaps it is this aspect of the fridge that is so telling of the owner – and, according to Stonehill, their dating agenda.

Acknowledgement: Mark Menjivar gave his permission to use the photographs pictured herein. More images from his project can be viewed here: http://www.markmenjivar.com/projects/you_are_what_you_eat

Author biography

Isabel Beshar is pursuing her MPhil in Medical Anthropology at Oxford University. Her research interests include the presentation of diabetes and obesity in LMICs, refugee populations, and indigenous groups. She is also interested in the intersection of art and health, particularly in relation to bodies and body image.