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Bits of Bytes and Bites of Bits: Instagram and the gendered performance of food production in the South African Indian community

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Abstract

Social media have created electronic media platforms like Instagram that enables snapshots of offline lives to be commemorated online. The very nature of social media platforms allows for the accepted limits of humanity to be extended and the boundaries of anthropocentrism to be breached. Smartphone technologies have allowed us to re-examine our limitations - surpassing parameters of geography, memory, and communication. This article engages a techno-feminist approach to analysing Instagram posts about food production and consumption in the South African Indian community. It explores the ways in which the conventionally gendered everyday production of food is portrayed online. With new technologies embodied in smartphones becoming increasingly accessible to middle-class Indian women, the engagement with these technologies has allowed them to confront, challenge and overcome gendered, racial, and class positionalities Using a posthumanist approach, the article explores the ways in which these women engage with and represent their online/offline lives on this platform. It contends that, akin to Haraway's cyborgs, Instagram content creators of South African Indian descent embody a multidimensional space that is free from humanist dualisms. In this way, performing food production for online consumption becomes an important marker of culture and belonging.

Keywords
food, posthumanism, South African Indian, Instagram, women

The 21st Century ushered in an era of unprecedented technological advancement, with human life becoming increasingly reliant on emerging technologies. Just as the Industrial Revolution saw the mechanisation of physical labour, the Digital Revolution brought with it the digitisation of human brainpower. From performing simple tasks such as playing music, to larger tasks solving complex algorithms, people are progressively more dependent on digital technologies going about their daily lives. The need for physical social interactions has also gradually been reduced, with technology facilitating human connection through screens. The small, middle-class Indian community in South Africa is one of many communities worldwide which have become increasingly reliant on social media technologies to mediate their social lives. This article applies posthumanism as an approach which theorises the interface between technology and human beings and explores how it can be applied to an understanding of the gendered concepts of food production and consumption on social media in the South African Indian community. Consequently, it is interested in the gendered impact of technology on social life[1] in post-Apartheid South Africa. With almost all aspects of

social life being digitised, the impact of digital technology on the basic act of food production and consumption is considered.

Notions of Indianness have always associated Indians with stereotypical, exoticised notions of food, Bollywood and a cultural mysticism that is embodied in dress, religion and other cultural markers. Instagram, a social media platform dedicated to visual posts, acts as a sort of digital diary on which users depict chosen aspects of their daily lives. The site has also facilitated the rise of the "content creator" – a person who creates content (of a visual nature) and attempts to gain a fan following of individuals who appreciate the same sort of content. Content creators use social media to perform culture, embody belonging and create spaces of belonging for their followers. One common trend is the performance of culinary prowess, amongst other skills, on Instagram as a curation of lifestyle content for women of South African Indian descent. Notable content creators in this realm are Naqiyah Mayet (@naqiyah_mayet), Faaiza Omar (@faaiza_omar), Kamini Pather (@kamini_pather). These women have curated Instagram pages that depict lifestyle, fashion and, most prominently, food content.

This article first offers a brief profile of the selected content creators, using a textual and visual analysis. Second the notion of cyborgs, as proposed by feminist theorist, Donna Haraway (1991) is considered in relation to social media, followed by a discussion of food in the South African Indian community. I conclude with a posthumanist analyisis of posts about food on the profiles.

Cooking content creators

Naqiyah Mayet is the first content creator that has been selected for the purpose of this article. On first sight, through the visual appeal of her page, it is apparent that her content is intentional, strategised and targeted to her specific follower demographic. With a follower count of 55,100 at the time of writing, she is one of the most prolific content creators from the South African Indian community which I focus on. On her Instagram profile, Mayet lists lifestyle, food, and fashion as her page focus. While lifestyle and fashion photos do appear often on her feed, it is food that dominates her curation of content. The second person selected is Faaiza Omar, also popularly known as "The Sylish Baker". Omar's feed is also dominated by images of baked goods and sweet treats. Her claim to fame is her baking prowess and, like Mayet, she also launched a cookbook. Similar to Mayet, albeit in a more informal style, Omar's page is curated to give her followers insight into her baking techniques and fashion and lifestyle recommendations. Unlike Mayet and Omar, Kamini Pather's profile, and her popularity stems from her participation (and subsequent victory) in the second season of Masterchef, South Africa. She is also the host of her own Netflix show, and a book author (as are Mayet and Omar). Like the other two content creators, Pather's Instagram feed is dominated by food alongside lifestyle and fashion. If food is considered the primary marker of culture, then in what ways do these women, and others, use food as a marker of South African Indian culture? Food is a basic need, but when brought into the public domain through social media platforms, food becomes a symbolic rendition of culture, aspiration, indulgence, and even anxieties of

belonging (Counihan & Van Esterik 2012; Mishra 1996). In extension to this, the nature of food production and the methods by which food manifests online are also gendered.

Posthuman cyborgs on social media

A posthumanist approach to exploring the implications of the performativity of South African Indian culture on platforms such as Instagram, I argue, allows for the rejection of binary notions of humanism and highlights a non-anthropocentric approach , which decentralises man as the centre, to analysing culture. A techno-feminist approach , which decentres man, and concurrently centres technology and nature, is helpful in understanding the role of technology in reshaping subjectivities. Posthumanism is a theoretical position that is borne from the fallacies of humanism and western Cartesian philosophy. The prefix "post" suggests that it connotates an extension of, ending of or "after" humanism. On the contrary, posthumanism is a theoretical position that rejects the West's theory of humanism which among others has foregrounded the anthropocentric, resulting in the belief that humans, men specifically, are central to all moral, philosophical and scientific knowledge (Van Dijck 2008). More recently, there has been a demand for theoretical work that extends a posthumanism perspective in cultural studies, a necessity catalysed by a "radical transformation within increasingly globalised late capitalism from an "analog" (humanist, literate, book or text-based) to a "digital" (posthumanist, code, data or information-based) social, cultural and economic system" (Herbrechter 2013, p. 4). This shift has opened avenues of research which have focused on the implications of the human/technology interface.

Social media platforms are digital technologies that have reshaped human interaction and communication habits. As digital technologies developed, so did notions of human/digital interfaces. At first, with digital communication lacking visual and aural capacities, it was believed that the "evanescent technology of electrons allowed cyberspace to become a realm of pure mind" (Bolter 2016, p. 5) where ascribed notions of gender and race were left behind in their human form. In this case, the digital realm was devoid of the human. However, as markers of identity exist in any piece of communication (Bolter 2016), the human element is not necessarily left behind. As digital technologies continue to advance and evolve, visual and auditory capacities have been added to the textual, making communication more immersive, and more human, than ever before.

Social networking sites such as Facebook and Instagram have been at the forefront of digital communication technologies, and the platforms evolve to continue to keep digital communication a vital part of users' everyday lives. Social networking sites are "embedded in the social lives and embodied practices of their users" (Bolter, 2016, p. 6). For most users, social media is a source of entertainment, education and information along with the ability to enhance communication with real-life contacts. As mobile technologies increasingly become an essential tool for everyday life, so too have social networking sites, through their mobile platforms, become an essential for their users. As Bolter (2016, p. 6) elaborates:

And users of mobile devices come to constitute a bridge between the vast hypertext of the Internet and the physical and social environment. They serve as both channels and sensors; they bring information from the Internet into the world and act on it and at the same time convert the world into digital information, either explicitly through texts and images or implicitly by allowing their phones and mobile devices to record their locations. Ubiquitous computing and ubiquitous media are conditions of media culture today that require the active participation of human users in order to operate. Posthumanist theorists make a convincing case that digital communication in the 2000s is not a refuge from the physical and social world, but fully implicated in it.

A posthumanist approach to investigating food posts as constructing identity inserts an implicit understanding that social media is no longer an extension of reality but rather, wholly encompassed in it.

I turn now to the notion of the 'cyborg', as formulated by Haraway (1991). Haraway (1991, p. 149) defines a cyborg as: "a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction." Followers of content creators interact with the cybernetic organism that appears on the screen in front of them. The creature that appears on the screen is a snippet of a real social being, fictionalised for the entertainment, education and information of the consumer – they are "chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism" (1991, p. 149). The distinctions between human and machine have been blurred, with human attributes being increasingly associated with machines and machine attributes being increasingly ascribed to humans. As Haraway (1991, p. 154) elaborates:

Late twentieth-century machines have made thoroughly ambiguous the difference between natural and artificial, mind and body, self-developing and externally designed, and many other distinctions that used to apply to organisms and machines. Our machines are disturbingly lively, and we ourselves frighteningly inert.

Digital technologies have become so ingrained into daily life that it likely surpasses human activity daily. Technology has become so immersive that it is hard to tell what is natural and what is artificial – photoshopped images and Instagram filters are just some examples of how digitisation has blurred this boundary.

Haraway takes a feminist stance, drawing attention to the fallacious humanist position in which man is positioned as central to all subjects of enquiry. As humanism foregrounds men, feminism critiques the exclusion and othering implicit in this centring by disrupting male, white, cis gender norms (Bolter, 2016).

Instagram content creators, as chimeras, are engaged in the process of cultural memory-making through their work. Van Dijck (2005; 2008; 2013) offers in-depth analyses of how digital programmes serve as "evocative frames" (Van Dijck 2008, p.

124) of memory that are mere representations of snippets of their daily lives that they would like to memorialise and that "triggers particular emotions or sensations" rather than "reinvoke(s) the experience as a whole" (Van Dijck 2008, pp. 124-125). Pictures of hearty meals, scrumptiously plated serve to immortalise meals created (in reality) to trigger an emotion or sensation (for the creator or the follower). Furthermore, by posting up pictures and videos of snippets of their daily lives, they are digitising signified practices of culture. I refer back to Bolter's point that identity markers are apparent in all types of communication – as with any image, images of food that have been produced and/or consumed, are embedded with signs of identity and culture. These signs are also interlaced with the digital, which I will elaborate on later.

Food and culture in the South African Indian community
It is apparent, from the abundance of food-related posts on the selected Instagram profiles, along with others, that food among South African Indians is a key instrument of communicating their culture, alongside their femininity. The globally recognised image of India and the Indian diaspora often relate to the exoticised, spices and food. Food is one of the symbols that South African Indians have used to invoke memories of home, as well as affirmations of belonging. For South African Indians, food is central to the sustenance of not just the body, but also identity and culture. The success of these sites (which garner tens of thousands of followers) demonstrates that food is "intrinsically linked to notions of home, culture and belonging, along with the challenges faced by Indians in South Africa" (Baderoon 2014, pp. 59). Food appears in almost all cultural productions of the community. It is a dominant theme and Ojwang argues that to understand South African Indians better, it is vital to "account for the centrality of food as material reality and symbol" (2011, p. 68). On social media, this material reality and symbol become intrinsically linked to the social world. Thus, food exists to invoke memory (of a long-lost "home"), but also as an affirmation of belonging to a social world – both digital and real.

The use of food, and the narration of this routine part of everyday life, is utilised to articulate the "powerful links with places left behind" (Ojwang 2011, pp. 70) and also offers "the grammar for rendering the experience of loss and longing". This theoretical longing is less a yearning for an imagined home left behind and more a yearning to belong (or to reminisce about belonging) to a cultural group in the grey landscape of post-Apartheid South Africa, which is defined quite starkly by a black/white binary. Adhikari (2005) considers belonging in the South African coloured community and the sentiment of not being White enough nor Black enough to belong in the post-Apartheid milieu. In the post-Apartheid media landscape, visibility for communities outside the black/white binary is limited. South African Indian women are becoming increasingly visible online, outside of the mainstream media landscape, which is dominated by the complexities of the black/white binary[2]. In this instance, women of South African Indian descent are overcoming the black/white binary through their use of technology to narrate their food stories and the narration of food becomes key in negotiating displacement and belonging. What better way to feel at 'home' than with a meal that invokes memories of belonging? Through the daily practices of basic food preparation,

and narrating stories of how they learnt to create specific food items, meals and ingredients, content creators conjure notions of cultural memory and pride. The nostalgia in these posts is palpable, a yearning for the connections to culture, to family and to home (whatever that may mean for the creator) is expressed through the reproduction of food like a mother or grandmother or aunt used to make it. Through the narration of these experiences, the rendering of memories of belonging, culture, and the nuanced ways in which both occur in the everyday turn into clearer affirmations of cultural pride.

Gendered notions of food production continue to exist in the South African Indian community. Like many other cultures, the women of the community are responsible for the sustenance of their families, to nourish their bodies and their culture – sometimes both simultaneously.

> The burden placed on women to reproduce the immigrant community socially through the preparation of "traditional" food is turned into a resource by the women who take control of kitchens. Such women personify what Brinda Mehta calls "a paradox of positionality" in that they display complete autonomy in the kitchen on one hand, while being enlisted to ensure cultural permanence as a means of safeguarding the interests of the group (Ojwang 2011, p. 70).

Here, women are given a 'voice' through their food, with which they can ensure that the 'group' is taken care of. In a culture that is predominantly based on patriarchal notions, one of the few spaces where women can assert their identities and truly belong, is around the axis of food.

In one post, Kamini Pather (@kamini_pather) shares a picture of her *spice* dabba[3], a beautiful shot of various spices she uses in everyday cooking. She asks her followers to share what spices they use daily. Spice is the ultimate exoticised symbol of all Eastern diasporas. The use of spice is specific to region, and the different ways of mixing and grinding the numerous blends of spices in varying proportions can reveal the country, and even the specific region within that country that the recipe is from. In the case of South African Indians, the regional specificity of where in India passenger and indentured[4] descendants hail from is revealed through the spices they use most often. The foodways are often clearly delineated, with certain spices only being used by Gujarati speaking Indians versus others only being used by Tamil speaking Indians, for example. Similarly, methods of cooking vary, with some braising spices in a curry before adding the meat and vegetables, and others adding the spice closer to the end of cooking, creating different flavour profiles and subtle changes in taste. This subtle difference extends to the wider differences within the community, divided by geographic location (where in India the descendants hail from as well as where in South Africa one has settled), religion, language, and sometimes even caste. This is not a divisive division, of course, many overlaps do exist, with some meals being specific to South Africa only – the bunny chow[5], for example. The careful selection of the spice *dabba*, the positioning of the spices, the framing of the shot and various other

factors that underlie the image on Pather's profile leads us into the next discussion of gendered food production and consumption on Instagram.

Bites of bits: Indian women and food on Instagram
I have mentioned that women are seen as the upholders of 'nationhood' through their food production in the South African Indian community. In her work on gender performativity Butler explores the "radical discontinuity between sexed bodies and culturally constructed genders" (1990 p. 9). She suggests that the biology of two sexes does not necessarily translate to two genders, and that gender is performed and constructed through culture. In building on Butler's (1990) notions on gender performativity, I consider that Instagram posts of food are performative: the digital shapes, affords and constrains (through the limits of digital technology) identity performance "according to discursive frameworks" (Bolter 2016, p. 7).Gender performativity as a framework is posthuman in itself, as it defies humanist notions of man's superiority, and suggests that gender (and other identity performances), "rather than being ordained by nature, are constructed and performed by individuals within discursive and cultural constraints" (Bolter 2016, p. 4). As Haraway (1991, p. 150) envisions a "utopian" imagining of a "world without gender", these women exploit and commodify their gendered role of cooking, in an attempt to demonstrate constrained agency. In this way, not only do they transgress boundaries, but they also create a sense of connection with their followers, many of whom may not be aligned to a genderless utopia. This occurs on Instagram through the creation of digital intimacy (Ibrahim, 2015. McDonnell, 2016.)– where content creators connect, intimately, with their food, followers, and their platforms. In doing this, content creators can also foster belonging, destabilise gender norms, and interface with the middle-class, male-dominated digital world.

At this point I complicate this notion of connectedness, in the context of real world limits.. The middle-class, aspirational lifestyle is only affordable to few, as is connectivity and access to digital technologies which allow their followers to interface with their content. A post-gender world is only possible if accessible to all, and though "technologies of different kinds, in varying social contexts, offer opportunities to challenge existing barriers to economic social, and political participation", Oxfam notes that, "they can also consolidate or worsen existing power imbalances" (Oxfam 1998, n.p.).The complexities of the digital divide, while offering women of middle class backgrounds the promise of a utopian equality, also highlight divisions of privilege.

Food, as conceptualised by content creators, is produced (and consumed) online in intimate ways. The very nature of social network sites is to accommodate self-presentation – which itself is an intimate act. Users who realise the promotional potential of this intimacy become content creators. Through narrating their personal interactions with food, these creators connect to their followers, and their followers to each other, through a shared algorithmic experience. I say algorithmic because no longer are we connecting to people in the social world through physicality, our "connectedness is to connectivity" (Van Dijck 2013, p. 202). Van Dijck elaborates:

Interface technologies translate relationships between people, ideas and things into algorithms in order to engineer and steer performance (2013, p.202).

To simplify, interface technologies refer to the technologies that allow social networking sites to track users' data from harnessing information about their activity, the things they like and follow. As friends would introduce mutual friends over dinner, Instagram now suggests mutual friends or interest groups that the algorithm has matched you with over a shared liking for dessert recipes. Algorithms are the new connections through which we connect.

Content creators are those who have embraced the algorithmic connections and realised the lucrative offline rewards that could be gained from successfully harnessing the algorithm. Of the four content creators I mentioned, three have published cookbooks. That South African Indian women have managed to gain large fan followings for their food posts is telling that food is intrinsically linked to manifestations of South African Indian culture, algorithmically and offline. Returning to Pather's spice *dabba*, a little intimate piece of her kitchen that she chooses to share with her thousands of followers. They 'like' the image and post replies to her question. This immediately gets the algorithms going – bits and bytes of data bounce off satellites – and just like that, an intimate item, which typically would only be seen by those who are personally close to Pather, has become memorialised for her fan following. Her followers can identify with the presence of the stainless-steel container, for most have one in their own homes. In doing this, she has affirmed that she is part of a shared culture, and that she continues to maintain her Indian heritage. Along with sharing images, narrations of intimate life experiences, such as Mayet's anecdotes about learning to cook with her mother or Omar's sweet tooth, all become algorithmic representations of intimacy, aimed at creating a sense of commonality, connection and, ultimately, lucrative 'likes'. Assuredly, these women have more to their daily lives than the frames of perfectly curated images that make up their profiles, yet it is food to which they turn to get a fan following – the algorithm speaks for the users, and symbiotically, the users speak to the algorithm – and food sells. These content creators make choices in how they customise their pages (and their overall brand), and implicitly portray conscious assemblages of their private life, thus shaping and performing their identity.

Like presenting the self on an open platform, producing and consuming food as a deeply intimate activity has gained popular meaning and currency. So much so that the term "food porn" has become synonymous with the act of posting pictures of food online. Ibrahim (2015, p. 2) defines the term:

The term 'food porn' is increasingly used to describe the act of styling and capturing food on mobile gadgets, eliciting an invitation to gaze and vicariously consume, and to tag images of food through digital platforms. The mundane and ordinary food is attributed a spectacle in this economy premising food as the message and the medium.

Food has become a symbol akin to sex, an essential part of human nature, fetishised and opened to the gaze. Food, "when dislodged from the kitchen and devoid of its nutritive or taste qualities enters a realm of the performative" (Ibrahim 2015, p. 4), and content creators need to interface with limitations of the technology at their disposal to ensure that the visual and auditory account for the lack of taste and smell. Thus, hyper-visual, extravagant, luscious images of food replace the physical connection.

Mayet and Omar both have carefully curated Instagram profiles, with all their food pictures styled perfectly before the shot is taken. McGee (2007, in Ibrahim 2014, p.4) describe the online effect that is created as a luxurious, high end and decadent aesthetic, and the food they create "takes the form of glossily lush photographs of voluptuous and sinfully rich desserts, or of fantasy recipes and lifestyle images that are 'so removed from real life that they cannot be used except as vicarious experience'". Both Mayet and Omar operate in a realm of wealth that is not afforded to most South African Indian women, their 'food porn' being available to their followers for their pleasure. Here, posthumanism's notions of pleasure and performativity apply. To their followers, pleasure is attained from the visual, and the aspiration to attain such perfection is maintained through the small frames of an Instagram post.

On Instagram, globally, food "is conjoined with the creation of self-identity, community, invitation to gaze, memory making, and as a form of social capital to transact and exchange" (Ibrahim 2015, p. 5). Not surprisingly, it is women that dominate in the online food space. Technology, a realm usually reserved for men, and its increasing accessibility, has meant that women are now taking space. Ibrahim's research shows that female content creators use their technological savvy to operate their smartphones, and styling, photographing and posting food and lifestyle content to reach their audiences mostly by themselves (2015, p. 3). Mayet has often commented on the smartphones she uses to capture her images and has even offered giveaways where aspirational followers could win the very same smartphones. This female dominated space has proven that "smartphone foodporn democratises imaging practices around food as a cultural artefact" (Ibrahim, 2015, p. 3). Where food photography was before relegated to specialised, trained (male) individual, it is now a space where anyone with access to a device may produce foodporn images. At the same time Ibrahim sees the normalization of food imagery as a social exchange possible in the use of accessible and pervasive technologies, (Ibrahim, 2015, p. 3). Bringing the technology into homes has served to allow for the lines between home and public, domestic and professional, human and posthuman to be blurred.

Situating the creative presentation of food as worthy of academic discussion can be considered one of "the ways in which Black women imagine feminisms and postcoloniality" (Gqola, 2001 p. 11). Creative media is "not traditionally subsumed under the terrain of theory-building" (Ggola, 2001: 11). South African Indian women use the creative presentation of the mundane (food) to "occupy subject positions in which they determine the structures, the meanings of their lives" (Maqagi 1990 p. 24). In this project – through adopting the digital and creatively embodying agency, these women are effectively rejecting humanist, Cartesian dualisms, which traditionally render them, and their work, invisible.

To conclude, I refer back to the spice *dabba*. We have entered a time where Instagram digital media has enabled snapshots of offline lives to be commemorated online. Pather can symbolically preserve and disseminate her *dabba* (and her culture) globally using Instagram. The *dabba* has said as much as any other identity marker (race, gender) and has enabled the limits of humanity to be extended by breaching the boundaries of anthropocentrism. With this small, framed snapshot, Pather has surpassed the parameters of geography, memory, and communication.

With new technologies embodied in smartphones becoming increasingly accessible to middle-class Indian women, the engagement with these technologies has allowed them to confront, challenge and overcome gendered, racial, and class positionalities with their food. Thus, as stated above, I employ a post humanist approach to explore the ways in which these women engage with and represent their online/offline lives on this platform. Based on this, I suggest that content creators of South African Indian descent embody a multidimensional space that is free from humanist dualisms. This posthuman space shares some digital and algorithmic patterns in common with Haraway's world of cyborgs. Gender, race binary and class are transcended through the performance of culture by creators who metamorphosise the preparation, cooking and consumption of food to the digital, thus rendering a human endeavour to the cyborg.

Notes
1. Adhikari (2005), Radhakrishnan (2005) and Vahed and Desai (2010) all consider the lack of visibility for communities outside of the black/white binary.
2. See Bolter (2016) and Hollinger (2009).
3. Usually a stainless-steel container, with various compartments or smaller bowls that hold different spices.
4. Indians arrived in South Africa in two waves. The first arrival of Indians were indentured labourers, brought to South Africa to work in the sugarcane fields. They were closely followed by passenger Indians, who arrived in search of lucrative business opportunities. Class differences between the two groups continue to exist to this day.
5. The bunny chow is a meal made of a hollowed-out half or quarter loaf of bread, filled with a spicy curry. Versions of curry vary, some meat-based and some with beans or lentils.

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