

Best Before:  
Recipes and Food in Contemporary Aboriginal Art

By

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in  
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Best Before: Recipes and Food in Contemporary Aboriginal Art  
Lisa Myers  
Master of Fine Arts, Criticism and Curatorial Practice  
OCAD University, 2011

## Abstract

This thesis consists of a curatorial essay and contemporary art exhibition entitled *Best Before* featuring artwork by KC Adams, Keesic Douglas, Cheryl L'Hirondelle, Peter Morin and Suzanne Morrissette. Through the investigation of a variety of topics including Aboriginal curating, culinary exhibitions, food studies, food history, and the associations between food, place, representation and identity, my research engaged texts pertinent to the complex issues raised when analyzing artworks addressing cultural agency and the encoding of food from Aboriginal perspectives. The curatorial essay continues these examinations by relating the acculturation of so-called Aboriginal cuisine with artworks that unmask the lived experiences of a continuing colonial legacy where food sources play a key role. In the exhibition, artists respond to recipes of their choice by referencing food in their artworks. Together these artworks complicate notions of cultural identity while signalling the links between colonization and the global food system.



## Acknowledgements

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I dedicate this thesis to all my culinary teachers, especially my Mom and Granny.

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## **Fresh from the Kitchen**

### **Scone**

3 cups flour

3 heaping teaspoons baking powder

½ teaspoon salt

2 cups water (more if needed)

Mix dry ingredients in a large bowl and create a well in the middle of dry ingredients, fill with water. Stir water while gradually mixing in flour from the sides of the well. Slowly incorporate all flour until you have a soft-dough. Bake at 350F for 30 to 40 minutes or cut dough into small, flattened pieces, poke holes in middle and fry in vegetable oil.

Lisa Myers

Family recipe devised from a breakfast conversation.

During a recent breakfast at the gas station/restaurant in Shawanaga, the reserve area

where my mother was born, my family's conversation revolved around food memories.

The soup and scone special roused a discussion of how Granny made the best scone

(pronounced "skawn," also known as bannock or fry bread). My sister explained that her

own scone always came out hard as a rock. Uncle Sonny piped up, "I know how to make

scone," and started listing off measurements: "three cups of flour, three heaping

teaspoons of baking powder, some salt, then you add some water, and don't mix it too

much." My sister responded by asking me to show her how to make it because she knows

that measurements will not help her make better scone, she needs to do it with someone

to get the feel of it. The conversation continued with stories of scone making, fried

bologna, hunt camp meals of partridge soup with dumplings, and the unresolved

controversy of whether a beaver tail cooked up like bacon or if it was just used to sharpen

knives.

This conversation confirmed food's capacity to connect people with places, history and a sense of cultural identity. From my experiences of cooking for families and individuals at a healing lodge for eight years, I came to understand that beyond personal likes and dislikes, food symbolizes visceral connections to the past, and stands in as a cultural affirmation that people need to reclaim as their own. These experiences gave me a particular perspective and interest in food-related artworks by Indigenous artists. Their use of food engages the politics of place in relation to colonial history, which acknowledges the presence and absence of traditional food memory in their lived experience. At the same time, as a chef/cook I noticed the gradual emergence and commercialization of a category called "Aboriginal cuisine".

This text begins by introducing the premise of the exhibition *Best Before* and continues with an explanation of the construction of Aboriginal cuisine as a relatively new food genre, one that obscures underlying Indigenous issues of land and identity. I then critically engage with a discussion of artworks, initially derived from the artists' response to a recipe of their choice. Through their work, these artists convey the politics of displacement from land and identity by speaking back to an anthropological lens that categorizes and presumes to verify the authenticity of pre-contact and post-contact realms. *Best Before* discourages romantic resonances around Indigenous people and unmask the lived experiences of a complex colonial legacy.

## **Across the Kitchen Table**

“Best Before” refers to the dates when perishable foods are safe to eat. Rather than suggest that food was better previous to any particular point in time this exhibition, *Best Before* refers to the way recipes can encapsulate the secrets of food preparation, relationships and memories, while also invoking the idea that someone made the best food *before*. Creating an entry point into a dialogue of the politics of food from an Aboriginal perspective, I asked artists to make artwork in response to a recipe of their choice. By constructing a kitchen theme in the gallery, the space of aesthetics opened to wider connotations as the works adopted, re-appropriated, reframed and re-envisioned food as a material to symbolize personal stories, memories and experiences, thus unraveling the powerful significance of food as a versatile medium and influence in art making.

*Best Before* features works by KC Adams, Keesic Douglas, Cheryl L’Hirondelle, Peter Morin and Suzanne Morrissette. These artists strategically reference or present foods in their artwork that function as personal markers of their histories, tradition, home, family and community, at the same time signalling and addressing the legacy of colonization and the global food system. I assemble these works together in one exhibition to complicate notions of cultural identity inevitably overdetermined by external and internalized perceptions.

Recipes are often passed on through families with the stories that either make the recipe worth savouring or contain the details that make the recipe work. In this way, recipes tell stories and of course change as they transfer from cook to cook. Similarly,

curator Candice Hopkins examines how Indigenous artists utilize many kinds of media as tools for storytelling. Since stories change over time, and are dependent on different storytellers, Hopkins writes that such change plays a key role in the dynamism of culture and “reveals a worldview: one in which truth is considered apart from fact, where originality coexists within the copy, where change is an inherent part of tradition.”<sup>1</sup> Hopkins provides this counter-argument to the problematic outlook that tradition means stasis. For the works in *Best Before*, each artist’s recipe contends with the implications of change as their artwork reveals the adoption and imposition of commodity foods.

Emphasizing the method of making recipes, rather than their ingredients, I accentuate potential narratives in the practices and approaches to food to question the need for “authentic” traditional ingredients used to verify or categorize Aboriginal food. Jimmie Durham, Cherokee artist and activist, contests the idea that materials embody traditions. Instead, he speaks to the idea of change and adaptability as he emphasizes that traditions “exist and are guarded by Indian communities. One of the most important of these is dynamism. Constant change – adaptability, the inclusion of new ways and new material – is a tradition that our artists have particularly celebrated and have used to move and strengthen our societies.”<sup>2</sup> Durham’s idea of dynamism emphasizes approaches towards materials rather than focusing on just the materials themselves.

Food customs and traditions inform cultural identity. Cultural theorist Stuart Hall describes cultural identity as the colonial subjects’ positioning in accordance with the

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<sup>1</sup> Candice Hopkins, “Making Things Our Own: The Indigenous Aesthetic in Digital Storytelling.” In *Place: Local Knowledge and New Media Practice*, ed. Danny Butt, Jon Bywater and Nova Paul (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholar Publishing, 2008), 93-102.

<sup>2</sup> Jimmie Durham, *Certain Lack of Coherence* (London, UK: Kala Press, 1993), 108.



past and conveys how identity hinges on a state of becoming:

Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they [colonial subjects] are subject to the continuous “play” of history, culture and power. Far from being grounded in mere “recovery” of the past, which is waiting to be found, and which when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past.<sup>3</sup>

Although Hall’s own subject position, as a diasporic Jamaican living in London, England differs from Aboriginal people in Canada, the idea that a reclaiming of the past provides the tools to engage with contemporary situations and identities extends to what Durham refers to as adaptability and cultural dynamism.

### **The Original Meal?**

In Canada, the term “Aboriginal cuisine” contributes to the construction of nationalism whereby indigenous foods, cookbooks and menus give a sense of pride about the country’s bounty, and inform cultural identity. For example, the décor and food served at The Tundra restaurant at Expo ‘67 in Montreal reflected lifestyles of Arctic areas of Canada. Wall murals created by two Inuit artists, Elijah Pudlat and Kumkuluk Saggiak, depicted both the old hunting days and contemporary Inuit life of the time. Although the offerings were not entirely familiar to the majority of Canadians from the south, foods had a certain “fresh from the land” appeal, such as Beaver Tail Broth, Kelalugak Beluga Casserole and Paillard of Buffalo.<sup>4</sup> As the first engagement of this kind, The Tundra represented an emergence of Aboriginal cuisine interwoven into an example of national

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<sup>3</sup> Stuart Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora.” In *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: a Reader*, ed. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1993), 394.

<sup>4</sup> Rhona Richman Kenneally, “The Cuisine of the Tundra: Towards a Canadian Food Culture,” *Food, Culture & Society*, Vol. II, no.3 (September 2008): 288-313.

Canadian cuisine at an international forum.<sup>5</sup>

Another major contribution to the development of this food category came from chefs who participated in the 1992 Culinary Olympics. The gold medal winning Native Canadian Haute Cuisine Team, comprised of five First Nations chefs from across Canada, went on to innovate food trends, influence a generation of young chefs, and establish careers in producing television shows and cookbooks. As part of the North American Indigenous Food Symposium (June 2009), held at Muskoday First Nation in Saskatchewan, David Wolfman prepared a feast with the youth from the community.<sup>6</sup> He served his Aboriginal fusion foods alongside fare such as bannock, moose stew and Labrador Tea, which were all brought to the feast by community members. Wolfman's cooking demonstrations and feast preparation at First Nations across Canada creates a potential dialogue between local Aboriginal cooks and celebrity chef cooking practices.

Aboriginal cuisine includes ingredients sourced or associated with the flora and fauna of specific regions, often fused with a nouvelle cuisine presentation, and classic French cooking techniques and menu structure.<sup>7</sup> The key indicator of Aboriginal cuisine seems to be the use of ingredients derived from an indigenous source that has strong

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<sup>5</sup> A recent exhibition called "We: 12 Manifestos for the City" (2011), at the Vancouver Art Gallery, examined various cultural producers that activate the city of Vancouver. The exhibition included a culinary feature displaying the title Aboriginal Cuisine in large letters, and smaller text discussed chef Inez Cook and his local restaurant – Salmon n' Bannock – in the context of food and culture. This demonstrates the use of the term Aboriginal Cuisine in the promotion and marketing of the City of Vancouver. See [http://projects.vanartgallery.bc.ca/publications/We\\_Vancouver/2011/02/09/salmon-%E2%80%98n%E2%80%99-bannock/](http://projects.vanartgallery.bc.ca/publications/We_Vancouver/2011/02/09/salmon-%E2%80%98n%E2%80%99-bannock/) (Accessed March 2, 2011).

<sup>6</sup> David Wolfman is a celebrity chef with a television show called *Cookin' with the Wolfman* on the Aboriginal People's Television Network and was a member of the 1992 Culinary Olympics Native Canadian Haute Cuisine Team.

<sup>7</sup> See Pricilla Parkhurst Ferguson and Sharon Zukin, "The Careers of Chefs." In *Eating Culture*, ed. Ron Scapp and Brian Seitz (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1998), 94. Nouvelle Cuisine is also known as Nouvelle American Cuisine. The chefs in this culinary genre focused on fresh organic foods and Native American foods in addition to the practices in European professional kitchens.

associations with the land, wild meat, or wild edible plants. Regardless of the cook, this cuisine and these ingredients generate romantic notions of traditional, pre-contact food sources that imply a sense of authenticity in regards to food and identity. In many ways, Aboriginal cuisine provides a symbolic reclaiming of a knowledge base of regions through food, and in so doing, Indigenous chefs can convey life experience and knowledge of ingredients with culinary skill and techniques.<sup>8</sup> At the same time, Aboriginal cuisine is the construction of a culinary category that reconstitutes, acculturates and commodifies cultural customs and knowledge. The use of the term “Aboriginal cuisine” tends to obscure food issues within Aboriginal communities, such as the political legacy of colonization, the displacement from the land and the resulting deleterious effects on health, and uneven power relations, which are all inextricably linked to everyday materials such as food.

The differential experiences among Indigenous people share a common displacement or dispossession from the place-based specificity of traditional food sources. As government policies such as the Indian Act (1876) dislocated Aboriginal people from traditional lands and sequestered them onto reserves and settlements or forced them into urban centres, grocery foods and rations became a part of daily life. From the late-nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century, commodity rations distributed by the Canadian government offered low nutritional value staples such as flour and bacon. Withholding rations as a means of social control dictated that Aboriginal

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<sup>8</sup> See Robert Gairns and Andrew George, *A Feast For All Seasons* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 1997). Andrew George was a member of the Native Haute Cuisine Team, wrote a book called *A Feast For All Seasons* wherein he presents recipes and menus connected to season and place. Throughout the book, he describes the relationships around food in the hunting, fishing, preparation, sharing and eating in the context of recipes and food styled images.

people would remain on reserves and participate in agricultural activities.<sup>9</sup> These uneven power relations and oppressive government policies compromised the accrual of land-based knowledge, and limited traditional food sources and practices, thus evoking an uprooted sense of place for Aboriginal people. Ironically, the recent acculturation and commodification of indigenous foods produces and serves to an *audience* of food connoisseurs.

The verifying ingredients that make meals or food a part of Aboriginal cuisine often include those that signify so-called pre-contact fare, such as wild rice, venison and bison. The anthropological parameters of pre-contact and post-contact culture looms as legitimating factors that “authenticate” this food genre. These measures of authenticity are specific to Aboriginal cuisine. For example, although the Food Network presents cooking styles that use fruits, vegetables and grains introduced from the Americas, the network does not acquire the name “The Post-Contact Food Network” or even a correlation with post-contact food ways.

Departing from a focus on such categories, the artworks in *Best Before* highlight ingredients, practices and narratives derived from the context of a chosen recipe. Each section below features the artist’s recipe, a discussion of their artwork, and contextualization within the politics and discourse of food in First Nations culture.

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<sup>9</sup> See James B. Waldrum, D. Ann Herring, and T. Kue Young, *Aboriginal Health in Canada: Historical, Cultural, and Epidemiological Perspective* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 155.

## A Different Kind of Sugar Coating: KC Adams

### Pancakes

#### Dry Ingredients

2 cups of flour  
2 tsp of baking powder  
1/4 cup of sugar  
Pinch of salt

#### Wet Ingredients

2 cups of milk  
2 eggs  
1/4 cup of oil  
1 tsp of vanilla (optional)<sup>10</sup>

KC Adams chose her Grandmother's pancake recipe to respond to for her artwork in *Best Before*. She reminisces: "This is a pancake recipe that my mother taught me when I was a child, and it was a recipe that was taught to her by her mother. They didn't write the recipe down, I had to come up with the numbers. The beauty of this recipe is you only need a cup and a small spoon to measure everything out. You just have to make sure the dry and wet ingredients are equal in volume."<sup>11</sup> Despite pancakes' most appropriate complement of real maple syrup, Adams' installation for *Best Before*, titled *The Gift that Keeps on Giving* (2011), considers some of the white processed ingredients in this recipe. Adams' use of white as a colour in her artwork speaks to a negotiation of a paradox that emerges from her mixed-race background and what she refers to as "having a 'white'

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<sup>10</sup> KC Adams offers these instructions for her recipe: If you want it to be more sinful, change the 1/4 cup sugar and oil to 1/2 cup each. Mix the dry ingredients together in a bowl, mix the wet ingredients in another bowl with a fork and pour into the dry bowl. Stir. Add milk to reach your preferred consistency (It is normal to have clumps in the batter). Don't over mix, the less stirring, the lighter the pancakes. Grease a pan on medium low heat and pour a small amount of batter in the pan, turn over when bubbles appear. It is common knowledge that the first pancake will be flat and heavy because of the pan, just ignore it. The next pancakes will be scrumptious.

<sup>11</sup> KC Adams, email correspondence with the author, March 14, 2011.

guilt but also aboriginal guilt because I don't know my own history.”<sup>12</sup> She reframes this duality to place her work in a context not prescribed by a specific cultural trajectory rooted in the past; rather, she asserts its position in the future. In much of her art practice, she employs the colour white in a process of re-functioning its signification.

Adams' use of white flour, sugar, lard, salt and milk as the main ingredients in her installation arises from her experience with the prevalence of diabetes in Aboriginal communities and in her own family. Rather than demonizing these foods, Adams cradles them in conical ceramic pots delicately balanced between river rocks on the gallery floor. She leaves her pots unfired, fragile, porous and permeable, susceptible to the saturation of milk, the rendered oils of lard and the flavour of sugar. As the pottery transforms and absorbs the food, it brings to mind the way food enters the body, with all of the attendant biological influences and implications, and changes in appearance and composition. This juxtaposition of refined ingredients and a pot design that comes from early Aboriginal pottery tenderly evokes ancestral bodies and a lament for the foods that once filled such vessels.<sup>13</sup> The white pottery suggests that the white food becomes the foundation of meals, as the cooking container appears to meld with the ingredients.

Currently, the detrimental influence of sugar is compounded because it comes under many more guises. Industrialized food, often referred to as processed food, contains additives that extend shelf life, such as trans-fatty acids, fibre-depleted

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<sup>12</sup> Interview conducted by Candice Hopkins with KC Adams, transcribed in the exhibition catalogue for *In-Between* (Calgary: Truck Gallery, 2008), 12-16.

<sup>13</sup> Examples of such containers exist in the holdings of the Royal Ontario Museum and date back from 600 to 1600 AD, made throughout southwestern and eastern Ontario by Wendat and Haudenosaunee people. Due to the low firing process of the clay, direct exposure to fire would have shattered the pots. To heat the food, hot rocks surrounded and were inserted into the vessel of food.

gelatinous starches and sugary syrups. Not only are these foods less expensive to buy, they release sugars into the body's bloodstream faster than unrefined foods with fibre intact. The more refined, processed, and sugar-laden the food, the more it contributes to the risk of developing type-2 diabetes.<sup>14</sup> Aware of the adverse health effects of processed food, Adams' work acknowledges its allure and places it eerily on the gallery floor, where viewers may walk among them like gravestones or burial plots.

The Aboriginal diabetes education initiatives in southern Ontario refer to sugar as one of the five white gifts.<sup>15</sup> Traded by European settlers, sugar and the other four gifts – flour, lard, salt, and milk – carry the connotation of colonial oppression. All these items are deemed to have displaced indigenous foods, and in so doing, contribute to diabetes in Aboriginal communities. Adams uses these “white gifts” in her installation to adapt and restore their bodily associations through the melding of clay with white food.

Considering food as art materials invites the symbolism derived from the history of its manufacturing. Sugar in particular embodies the story of colonization. According to research by anthropologist Sidney Mintz, besides being the product that can lay claim to being the “highest technical achievement in sugar processing,” white sugar has a complex history that involves the exploitation of lands and people by plantation owners from European nations.<sup>16</sup> Sugar plantations in the Caribbean encouraged the slave trade, which

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<sup>14</sup> See Gary Paul Nabhan, “Rooting Out the Cause of Disease: Why Diabetes is So Common Among Desert Dwellers.” In *Food and Culture: 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition*, ed. Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik (New York: Routledge, 2008), 372.

<sup>15</sup> Southern Ontario Aboriginal Diabetes Initiative provides in their diabetes educational tool kit a *Five White Gifts* hand-out that highlights the contribution of milk, salt, lard, flour and sugar as unhealthy food choices for Aboriginal people.

<sup>16</sup> Sidney Mintz, “Time, Sugar and Sweetness,” in *Food and Culture*, ed. Carole Counihan, and Penny Van Esterik (New York: Routledge 2008), 50-92.

began in the sixteenth century and peaked in the eighteenth century.<sup>17</sup> The cyclical nature of the influx of slave labour, primarily from Africa, and the outgoing commodities to Europe, specifically sugar, fed the expansion of capitalism and a resulting consumerism in Europe. This economic upturn fuelled colonization in the Americas, not to mention a global exchange in the form of imperialist ideologies, commodities and conquests.<sup>18</sup> Such history gives the idiom ‘sugar-coated’ a completely new significance. Adams’ employs these ubiquitous, highly refined and processed food items as material accomplices both imposed on and embraced by Aboriginal communities with ever-changing food conventions. This legacy of manipulating oppressed populations within the production chain of sugar relates to the history of withholding commodity food rations by the Canadian government as a means of control over Indigenous populations on reserves.

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<sup>17</sup> See Eric R. Wolf, *Europe and the People Without History* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1982), 196.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 314-316.



## **Making Reservations: Keesic Douglas**

### **Kam and Cheez Whiz Sandwich**

2 slices of white Wonderbread; the official supplier of the Vancouver 2010 Olympics.

1 - 3/4 inch thick slice of KAM; a Maple Leaf product formerly government issue for the Rama Reservation.

1/4 inch thick of Kraft Cheese Whiz that is basically one degree away from being plastic.

Place KAM and Cheez Whiz on Wonderbread and cut into 4 triangles like a medicine wheel.

2 tablespoons of Cherry Kool-Aid added to 8 ounces of preferably nonpoisoned tap water. Stir vigorously. Enjoy.

Keesic Douglas's sandwich preparation delves into memories of quick summer lunches at home on the reserve. To convey some of the elements at play in Douglas's larger practice of photography and video, I want to start by discussing his video *The Vanishing Trace* (2007). In this video, First Nations individuals share their experience of racism and illustrate these stories using iconic and stereotypical features such as feathers, bottles of alcohol, and tipis drawn over photographic portraits of themselves. One of the participants, Steve Teekens, a traditional drummer, describes an encounter that occurred after performing at a Toronto city hall event where a child asked him if he lived in a tipi and what kind of food he ate. This question exemplifies misperceptions of First Nations people based on a historically-oriented-imaginary-Indian verified by Hollywood movies and unsound history books. Indeed there are First Nations communities and people living off the land for food sources but none fulfill constructed romantic ideals. Douglas's 4

*Reservation Food Groups* (2011) dispels the stereotypical ideas of the Indian and what constitutes First Nation's cuisine. As an Ojibway from Mnjikaning First Nation, also known as Rama Reserve, Douglas represents life on the reserve as the backdrop for much of his video and photography. The politicized and contested space of the reserve in Canada marks a place of social control, restrictions and oppression. In many ways, commodity foods are inherently linked to these manipulative circumstances.

As part of a larger body of work that examines trade and the exploitation of the barter system set up by the Hudson's Bay Company, Douglas's food group photographs bring to mind the history of the fur trade as a catalyst of events that shifted lifestyles, territory and food sources. In the midst of a growing demand for beaver pelts in Europe, hunting for food was supplanted by hunting for furs, and during the eighteenth century the gradual spread of flour, lard and tea altered the roles and practices involved in large-scale group hunting and fishing throughout most regions of Canada.<sup>19</sup> To make a long story short, through numerous exploitations and shifts in land, food sources, and uneven socio-economic power relations, government policy created enclosures called reserves or reservations that became home to many First Nations people in Canada.

Douglas's photo series appropriates the model of a food guide and suggests the inadequate nutritional value of commodity food rations issued to First Nations on reserve throughout Canadian history. Since the 1940s, Health Canada has issued publications prescribing healthy diets that promote four food groups, originally called *Canada's Food Rules* and more recently *Canada's Food Guide*. In 2007, Health Canada supplied new

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<sup>19</sup> See Eric R. Wolf, *Europe and the People Without History* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 1982), 175.

food guides in four indigenous languages described on the website as Plains Cree, Woods Cree, Ojibwe and Inuktitut. The cover image depicts a circle with an outside ring divided into quarters, each containing pictures of both indigenous foods and grocery foods. The centre of the circle displays illustrations of food gathering, hunting and fishing, which acknowledges the various practices around indigenous foods and regions. All language versions have the same images, conveying a homogenized and idealized understanding of First Nations food and food gathering practices.

Douglas's *4 Reservation Food Groups* parodies a prescriptive dietary regime and exemplifies each group with a brand name food product. Mainly derived from the artist's childhood food memories – Cheese Whiz for dairy, Wonderbread for grains, Kool-Aid for fruit, and Kam for meat (Kam is the Canadian canned meat product version of Spam) – these photos portray an iconic tableau of the triumph of marketing. Brand names replace the actual food and supplant the name of an entire food group. The harshly lit and precariously stacked grid pattern recalls Andy Warhol's *Two Hundred Campbell's Soup Cans* (1962), though Douglas's grocery items sit on a scuffed table with the backdrop of a scarred wall. This bleak setting conjures the sense of narrow food choices for people who contend with a fixed income. Instead of recommended daily portions, Douglas's photographs display twelve of every brand, suggesting that this is the food afforded for each month of the year. An audio recording of his father's KAM story describes life on the reserve in the early 1950s and the way these food memories live on. This work implies issues of the socio-economic barriers towards food security and equal access to healthy foods. Such grocery items also convey a sense of placelessness and homogeneity

as mere consumer products, and offer a window into grocery store chains of the global food systems, where the ubiquitous availability of food removes a sense of season or region, time or place.

### **Bannock Connection: Peter Morin**

#### Cheese Bannock

2 cups flour  
¼ tsp salt  
3 tsp baking powder  
¼ cup grated cheese  
1 to 1½ cups water  
Vegetable oil

Mix dry ingredients in a large bowl.  
Add water and stir.  
Drop large tablespoons full into heated frying pan.  
Fry in oil at medium heat.  
Turn to brown both sides.<sup>20</sup>

Peter Morin's Auntie Diane's recipe for cheese bannock appears in his fundraising cookbook *Bannockology*.<sup>21</sup> His interest in making connections between people comes through in his bannock projects as he integrates activism, relational interactive events and performance in his art practice. Morin's work for *Best Before* incorporates a series of prints that depict salmon and symbolize a core food of his home community in Tahltan territory and the documentation of his largest bannock cook-off event.

Intentionally designed to draw media attention to a sit-in by Elders at the band

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<sup>20</sup> Diane Burrows, "Cheese Bannock" in *Bannockology*, ed. Peter Morin (Vancouver: Western Front, and Camosun College, 2009), 43.

<sup>21</sup> Bannock is a quick bread made with a mixture of basic ingredients like flour, baking powder, salt and water. Variations of the recipe for bannock include frying or baking, ingredient substitutions or additions such as sugar, oil, lard, milk, raisins, maple syrup, blueberries or eggs, just to mention a few.

offices in Telegraph Creek (1000 km north of Vancouver), Morin's performance, entitled *Team Diversity: World's Largest Bannock Attempt* (2005), took place at the Britannia Community Centre on the lower end of Commercial Drive in Vancouver and fed over 300 people. Morin juxtaposes prints of salmon with the video of the cook-off. He uses letter-sized postage envelopes as the surface to print salmon designs and arranges them across the gallery wall. The envelopes evoke the idea of sending something to or from home. The salmon face in one direction as they would in swimming upstream to their spawning waters. Morin projects a video of the bannock cook-off documentation within the arrangement of salmon prints, connecting the preparation and eating of bannock in an urban centre with the protection of traditional foods on Tahltan territory.

His call to defend the integrity of the land against environmental degradation sought to protect the habitat of salmon rivers and other food sources in this remote region.<sup>22</sup> Demanding a meeting with their Chief, the Tahltan Elders demonstrated for over eight months contesting controversial band council decisions made without community consultation or environmental assessments for the development of resource extraction ventures. Many people in Tahltan territory, located in the northern interior of British Columbia and the artists' home community, depend on food sources from the surrounding land and waters. Morin's bannock cook-off in Vancouver functioned to create a spectacle engaging people passing by on the street and thus draw media attention to the Elders' demonstration for protection of land and food sources, as he outlines in this performance "recipe":

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<sup>22</sup> Candice Hopkins, "Our Land Is Our Kitchen," in *Bannockology*, ed. Peter Morin (Vancouver: Western Front, and Camosun College, 2009), 4.

A good recipe to get publicity for a cause in your home community:  
a little dream of being in the Guinness Book of World Records  
a big dream of making the worlds largest bannock attempt  
a pinch of community fundraising to make the world's largest bannock  
a bigger pinch of grant writing  
a little bit of moccasin telegraph  
a plan to feed people

Combine all ingredients at a local food festival. The result is a lot of good bannock, a lot of good energy and laughter, donations to support the Elders, two television spots and three radio interviews.<sup>23</sup>

The displacement of Indigenous people from their land, due to government policy or resource extraction, like mining and forestry, has grave implications for food sources. The Tahltan Elders participating in the demonstration regard the land as an integral source of food in which salmon play a central role. Their position reveals a worldview about the relationship with land that appears distinct from one that regards it as merely a source of economic development.<sup>24</sup> In Morin's words, the Elders have "an in-depth traditional knowledge of the region."<sup>25</sup> Due to their connection to land, the food from Tahltan has strong ties to the ongoing knowledge of place. Food traditions and the meanings of food come from the cumulative experiences of food and food sources. This knowledge travels through time by being encoded in the symbolism passed on through various practices and stories, for example, in making an offering before gathering foods, hunting, trapping and fishing. Morin's work contributes to the transfer of food knowledge and reifies integral relationships with the land.

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<sup>23</sup> Peter Morin, email correspondence with the author March 15, 2011.

<sup>24</sup> See Candice Hopkins, "Our Land Is Our Kitchen," in *Bannockology*, ed. Peter Morin (Vancouver: Western Front and Camosun College, 2009), 4.

<sup>25</sup> Paraphrased from email correspondence with the artist Peter Morin, February 28, 2011.

The narratives, poems, recipes, essays and art in *Bannockology* articulate the social and experiential importance of food in carrying symbols and meaning over the expanse of time. Created as a fundraiser for youth programs, this book project articulates Morin's concern for community and social justice.<sup>26</sup> For many Indigenous people across North America, bannock embodies memories of family, food, and home, and contributes to a sense of identity and belonging. In her text in *Bannockology*, Nanette Jackson describes her childhood memories of watching bannock being made and how as an adult it evokes a sense of nostalgia and connection to her "homeland."<sup>27</sup> Recipes reveal and conceal, so divulging a secret ingredient or technique potentially changes the cook's power of making great food. *Bannockology* exposes the enigma of bannock and its mythology to whet the appetite for the novice cook, the homesick and the hungry.

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<sup>26</sup> Peter Morin created *Bannockology* as a fundraiser for youth programs through Watson Lake Library, Liard Valley Literary Society, and Surrounded by Cedar Child and Family Services.

<sup>27</sup> Nanette Jackson, "Bannock: Symbolism for Belonging." In *Bannockology*, ed. Peter Morin (Vancouver: Western Front, and Camosun College, 2009), 26.

### **Leave it to Your Imagination: Suzanne Morrisette**

In a work produced prior to *Best Before*, Suzanne Morrisette draws on an historical botanical study of Labrador Tea, or *Ledum groenlandicum*, Morrisette cleverly renders the illustration in glass beads on a piece of fabric, subverting the idea of an accurate depiction of the plant for scientific purposes. Not only does Morrisette replace the illustration with decorative materials, she replaces the Latin name, which reveals the nomenclature of botany, with the Cree name *Muskego Apoy*.<sup>28</sup> Through language, Morrisette reframes the scientific designation of a plant in relation to her understanding of the medicine tea. Her work for *Best Before* continues this examination of Labrador Tea through assembling her family's recollections of seasonal outings for picking tea. As a Métis woman, Morrisette sets out to articulate what picking medicine means to her and considers carefully the purposeful gathering that happens with her mixed-race family.

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<sup>28</sup> Labrador Tea also referred to as *muskeegobug aniibi* in Ojibwe and *muskeko-pukwa* in Cree.



*solve for spur to bum area, for some*

**notation:**  
 -let y axis equal distance (d) at nearest whole number (i.e. 1-76 and **not** 75.75).  
 -let x axis equal expression of minute (d) rendered in fraction of inches relative to width of paper (w) measured in centimeters.  
 -let each line equal a since person.  
 -let length (l) in inches relative to the size of the paper be expressed within squared brackets i.e. [37].  
 -let distance(d) in kilometers be expressed within rounded brackets i.e. (44).  
**NOTE:**  
 y axis is distorted at instances where x axis intersects to express minute (d) so that quantity of persons may be shown.

**formula:**  
distance (d) is translated into visual coordinates by:  

$$\frac{[y]}{[l]} = \frac{x}{(d)}$$
 y = y axis coordinate measured in centimeters (variable).  
 l = largest measure of y axis length measured in centimeters (constant).  
 z = actual distance measured in kilometers (variable).  
 d = longest measure of actual distance in kilometers (constant).  
horizontal line across width (w) of page {correlative to distance travelled by one person} translated into visually discernable coordinates (if the number is not whole) by:  

$$\frac{[y]}{[l]} = \frac{[u]}{[w]}$$
 [y] = decimal fraction of y measured in centimeters (variable).  
 [y] = y axis coordinate measured in centimeters (relative to [l]) (constant).  
 [u] = minute coordinate expression (relative to (d)) measured in centimeters (variable).  
 [w] = largest measure of x axis measured in centimeters (constant).  
**NOTE:**  
 the terms under which y is calibrated are ≠ to the terms under which x is formulated which enables a visual rendering of y.

**given:**  
 -let (d) reflect both the distance to a location from (0) so that the distance from that location to Falcon Beach is less than (145).  
**NOTE:**  
 Any resulting coordinates plot locations along a paper vector based on a distorted area – that presumes all places exist along a single vector – and **not** actual distances between places whose locations, in reality, exist in gridded cartographic space.  
 (d) from Winnipeg – Falcon = (145)  
 (d) from Winnipeg – Nutimik = (56.3)  
 (d) from Winnipeg – White = (65.6)  
 subsequently:  
 (d) from Nutimik to Falcon = (88.7)  
 (d) from White to Falcon = (79.4)  
 = 5  
 Nutimik – Falcon Beach = 4  
 White – Falcon Beach = 8  
**NOTE:** # of persons represents locationally specific data gathered over time such that it does not distinguish between different trips. As a result, any two lines parallel to one another may reflect the same person travelling during separate moments in time.

Figure 1: Suzanne Morrissette, *Recipe for Gathering Muskego Apoy* (2011).  
 Photo: Courtesy of the artist.

In a diptych that includes a pencil drawing and a print titled *solve for spur to bum area, for some* (2011), Morrisette maps the site and the events of tea picking by conveying the distance travelled to the site where she picks muskego apoy in proportional relation to the size of a piece of paper. Morrisette's recipe takes the form of a mathematical formula (Figure 1) that visually encodes various pieces of information into her drawings. Like processing fieldwork data, Morrisette performs a translation of and visually expresses the location of sites, the number of times these excursions took place, and what family members went to pick tea. Her methodology seemingly references ethnographic research as she phones family members to get all the details of time, place and participants and then translates this "experiential data into highly abstracted renderings of time and place."<sup>29</sup> Morrisette explains her approach to these drawings when she writes: "I abstract my relationship to place and to the gesture of picking medicine to complicate my relationship with spirituality and cultural knowledge in order to resist reductive expectation of contemporary Aboriginal art expression."<sup>30</sup> In doing this, Morrisette circumvents romantic stereotypes of the inherently spiritual "Indian" communing with nature.

In Morrisette's process of abstraction, she evades conclusions and sidesteps the romanticism and spectacle of what Comanche curator Paul Chaat Smith calls an "ideological prison" of the construction of Indian:

We have never been simply ignored, or simply romanticized, or been merely the targets of assimilation or genocide. It is rather all these things and many more, often at the same time in different places. The prison is a dreamcatcher, a vapor. It

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<sup>29</sup> Suzanne Morrisette, Artist Statement, March 4, 2011.

<sup>30</sup> Suzanne Morrisette, email correspondence with the author, March 4, 2011.

is both vicious and flattering, flexible, and never monolithic. It can't be refuted or denied, it just is. Most devastating of all, the ideological prison is capable of becoming an elixir that we Indian people ourselves find irresistible.<sup>31</sup>

In her reluctance to merely illustrate the site where Labrador Tea grows, or to present a notational recipe for tea, or even to just present tea in the exhibition, Morrisette engages in a method of turning from or confronting viewer expectations. Professor of Native American literature Gerald Vizenor uses the little "I" *indian* word as a term that encapsulates the simulated, imaginary Indian, one without a history that represents the absence of Native Americans.<sup>32</sup> Curator and art historian Richard William Hill argues that the many discourses around the construction of Indian and the mechanisms, such as Hollywood, that disseminate and reproduce such discourses, factor into Indigenous agency.<sup>33</sup> In Morrisette's case, the display of her personal practice of cultural knowledge has the potential to fulfill specific constructions of the romanticized Indian. Her offering of an abstract line drawing of abstruse calculations conveys a mathematical rationale to presenting a visual interpretation of the work involved in gathering Labrador Tea.

Departing from the mathematical abstraction of this work, in the second section of her diptych, Morrisette depicts the abundance of tea by using repetition on a large paper surface. Making a stylized design of a tea leaf, she carved the flat cut side of a potato to create a stamp. This rhythmic composition of leaf prints symbolically suggests the trace

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<sup>31</sup> Paul Chaat Smith, "Luna Remembers," *Everything You Know about Indians is Wrong* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 91.

<sup>32</sup> Gerald Vizenor, *Fugitive Poses: Native American Indian Scenes of Absence and Presence* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press 1998), 15.

<sup>33</sup> Richard William Hill, "Representation and Problems for Indigenous North American Agency," Conference paper in *Rethinking Nordic Colonialism Act 4: Finnish Sapmi*. (June 16-July 9, 2006.) (<http://www.rethinking-nordic-colonialism.org/files/grid/c4.htm>) (Accessed November 23, 2009.)

or imprint of memory. The use of food, the potato, a relatively low cost staple, as a tool rather than a nutritional source, speaks to distance between the potato print as medium and the medicinal tea as subject.

A responsibility comes with understanding medicines and the way to pick and consume them; Morrisette complicates the conventional perceptions of a recipe that resists a simplistic transfer of formulaic written ingredients and instructions. A notated medicine tea recipe lacks an integral person-to-person relationship. Morrisette's work emphasizes that access to this recipe or information comes from relationships with others that know about the plant and its location, and then from learning the practices, uses, preparations and ways of gathering medicine plants. In this way, Morrisette foregrounds empirical methods of aboriginal knowing (negotiated through the activity of picking tea), and its notational expression (evident in the creation of a mathematical formula). Her exploration demonstrates the sophistication and interconnectedness of experience, relationships and information central to even a seemingly simple task.

## Spam Equals Spam: Cheryl L'Hirondelle

Cheryl L'Hirondelle's collaborative online cookbook/artwork, the *NDNSPAM Cookbook: Celebrity Edition* (2011), embraces Spam as a catalyst for storytelling in the form of recipes.<sup>34</sup> This volume invites viewers to stand at the stove and enjoy recipes from thirteen celebrities and ten commissioned Spam art projects by Aboriginal artists.<sup>35</sup> Her written declaration provides the main premise of her project:

Also known as, indian steak, spam, klik, kam, bologne and/or any other processed meat has gained popularity and widespread consumption within Aboriginal communities since the early 30s. Though not part of our "traditional" diet, processed meat has been embraced due in part to its affordability and widespread distribution within our communities. As the champions of adaptability and warriors of survival, Indigenous Peoples all around the world know how to make things our own.<sup>36</sup>

L'Hirondelle re-claims and re-appropriates a common, budget-conscious food item (one that was a government issued ration of "commod" (commodity) foods sent to reservations) as a strategy for not only emphasizing the act of making the best use of what resources are present, but also employing the *NDNSPAM Cookbook* as an email listserv. This listserv offers communication for messages that can range from "political to

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<sup>34</sup> The NDNSPAM Cookbook was commissioned by *Tribe Inc.* centre for evolving aboriginal media, visual and performing arts, located in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan.

<sup>35</sup> My personal relationship with Spam arose during a road trip from central Ontario to Montana. My companion and I decided to take a random exit off the highway to find a motel for the night. It happened that we turned off in a town called Austin, Minnesota. Unknown to us at the time, the most intriguing part of this sleepy midwestern town, besides the biker bar and the friendly locals, was its title as "Spamtown USA," home to Hormel Foods Corporation, the manufacturer of the canned meat product, Spam. Coincidentally, we also arrived in time for the annual Spam Jam weekend celebration. I didn't stay for the jam but I gathered a few facts about Spam from locals who worked at the factory. First, I learned that Spam contains a lot of fat, as one guy leaned over to me with wide eyes and said "Don't eat it" and second, the name Spam stands for "Special Product Austin Minnesota." Originally produced to feed soldiers during World War II, Spam was an affordable food item with a long shelf life that has since gained global popularity.

<sup>36</sup> Cheryl L'Hirondelle, "About NDNSPAM," <http://lists.artinjun.ca/mailman/listinfo/ndnspam>. Accessed November 23, 2010.

ceremonial to humorous to musical.”<sup>37</sup> For years, L’Hirondelle collected all the junky chain emails she received from other Aboriginal people and observed the distribution of these emails.

L’Hirondelle embraces the unwanted spam email as a strategy to encourage communication. It demonstrates her tendency to invert meaning and find use in what most would discard. An absolution of sorts underlies her equation of unwanted spam email and the processed meat her mother cooked for her as a child. As she explains, “I felt somehow vindicated when I realised that I wasn’t the only person who ate that meat.”<sup>38</sup> Collecting and disseminating the recipes of Spam with an online cookbook further expresses this quest to come to terms with Spam as a shared food experience reflective of L’Hirondelle’s self identification as a “nomadic mixed-blood.”

L’Hirondelle’s strategy of inversion, which changes the meaning and essentially the use of an object or material, brings to mind Jimmie Durham’s description of the adaptation of materials and tools introduced by Europeans. He writes that every “object, every material brought in from Europe was taken and transformed with great energy. A rifle in the hands of a soldier was not the same as a rifle that had undergone Duchampian changes in the hands of a defender.”<sup>39</sup> In terms of L’Hirondelle’s online cookbook, her re-appropriation and reframing of Spam takes the kitsch aspects of the product into a realm purposed for an Indigenous audience. Merchandise such as crochet-topped tea towels and cups in the shape of the Spam can design all display the NDNSPAM logo.

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Cheryl L’Hirondelle, email correspondence with the author, March 8, 2011.

<sup>39</sup> Jimmie Durham, *A Certain Lack of Coherence* (London: Kala Press 1993), 108.

L'Hirondelle's logo design includes vibrant versions of the four sacred colours – yellow, red, blue and white. The design includes a white silhouette of a bison with a thought bubble full of stylized designs of four-legged animals in hot pink. The title *NDNSPAM* is two-tone, with hot pink for the letters NDN and bright lemon yellow for the word SPAM. The use of the bison in this design signifies what was once a major source of food from an expanse of land across North America.

L'Hirondelle's reference to the bison in the *NDNSPAM* logo speaks to an important reverence for the animal as a symbol of cultural knowledge and a source of nourishment important in the preparation of a portable dried food called pemmican made from dried meat, marrow fat, maple sugar and dried berries. Pemmican also raises an interesting point about the absence of roles and activities around food preparation. Dr. Danny Musqua, Elder in the Saulteaux nation and honorary degree recipient at the University of Saskatchewan, describes the year-round process of making pemmican. In the spring, berries were picked and dried, and then buffalo or moose were killed at a certain time in the late summer so that the meat was lean and it would dry efficiently in the wind. Firewood was cut and stacked in the winter in preparation for the early spring when maple sap was boiled to make maple sugar. All the ingredients were ground together with marrow fat to make pemmican, a portable high-energy food.<sup>40</sup> This narrative of pemmican preparation conveys the importance of time, season and place in relation to food preparation.

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<sup>40</sup> This description is paraphrased from a public presentation by Dr. Danny Musqua, during the North American Indigenous Food Symposium in June of 2009 at Muskoday First Nation, Saskatchewan. For the purposes of this paper, I briefly outline the process but must emphasize that a detailed description of the skill and breadth of knowledge required to make pemmican is much more extensive.

Through vivid descriptions of colour and texture, L'Hirondelle conveys her sensory exploration of foods from her childhood:

Our mama always said, "You'll shit if you're well fed" but that was just her way of saying don't waste food. "Quit your belly-aching and clean your plate up. Don't go to bed on an empty stomach. If it doesn't kill you it will make you stronger and as long as we got water we got soup."

Sliced and fried, soft edible pink. Soft but not like the sponge, not melt in your mouth like the hard of sponge toffee. Coral coloured but not precious or semi precious. Not rare, or on occasion it was everyday fare, it was common. Salmon pink but not salmon, not from the sea, not spawning upstream, not even chicken of the sea though it was canned and opened often. Edible and served as soup, steak, sandwich, sausage, gruel, we called it valium stew. Generous dollops of ketchup made palatable macaroni floating around bobbing canned peas in a familiar sea of stewed tomatoes. Plated turquoise melamine devoured harvest gold copper-toned kitchen fluorescent orange crochet and macramé amidst an urban whitewash where the buffalo no longer roam. Home sweet home.<sup>41</sup>

Although Spam, as a mass produced food product, reifies placelessness and homogeneity, L'Hirondelle refers to spam in the above "recipe" to describe her experience of watching and learning the techniques of spam cookery, thus imbuing this canned meat product derived from her childhood food memories with a meaningful context.

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<sup>41</sup> Cheryl L'Hirondelle, email correspondence with the author, April 8, 2011.



## Clearing the Table

At my recent family breakfast in Shawanaga, the conversation about food, and particularly scone, gave us a sense of belonging and, for the moment, connected us to our Grandparents, the reserve, hunting camps and to our First Nations heritage. At the same time, the need for that conversation acknowledged the disconnection with these same people, places and topics. Since none of my generation lived on the reserve, the subject of food seemed able to patch up our fragmented sense of place.

Recipes, cooking and eating contribute to making connections between people and places. Elspeth Probyn, gender and cultural studies scholar, resolves to make no definitive connections between identity and food. She claims, however, that eating “can be a mundane exposition of the visceral nature of our connectedness and distance from each other, from ourselves, and from our social environment: it throws into relief the heartfelt, the painful, playful or pleasurable articulation of identity.”<sup>42</sup> I expect that connections and disconnections to identity can be forged through food and recipes. However, this constant negotiation depends on a web of relations that inform culture and identity.

*Best Before* offers a feast of artworks that elucidate the underlying issues often obscured by the construction of Aboriginal cuisine. As the artists reminisce about pancakes, Cheez Whiz and Kam sandwiches, bannock, tea gathering, and the ways of cooking Spam, they engage in, and with, the meaning of food. This exhibition stimulates a breakfast conversation that we can all savour, so let’s dig in.

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<sup>42</sup> Elspeth Probyn, *Carnal Appetites: FoodSexIdentities* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 13.

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Appendix A:

Exhibition documentation of *Best Before*, Graduate Gallery OCAD University,  
April 27 – May 7, 2011.



Figure 2: *Best Before* at Graduate Gallery, OCAD University (2011). View of entrance. Photo: Keesic Douglas.



Figure 3: KC Adams, *The Gift That Keeps on Giving* (2011). Clay pots, river rocks, white flour, white sugar, salt, milk and lard. Photo: Keesic Douglas.



Figure 4: Suzanne Morrisette, *solve for spur to bum area, for some* (2011). Paper, pencil, pen, ink, metal screen, electric stove elements, camping stove, stock pot, and Labrador Tea. Photo: Keesic Douglas.



Figure 5: Peter Morin, *Salmon and Bannock* (2005/2010). Letter envelopes, hand-printed lino prints, and video documentation of *Team Diversity: World's Largest Bannock Attempt* (2005). Photo: Keesic Douglas.



Figure 6: Keesic Douglas, *4 Reservation Food Groups* (2010). Four chromagenic prints, Cheez Whiz, Kam, Wonderbread, Kool-Aid, water, audio file of Mark Douglas telling his Kam story. Photo: Keesic Douglas.



Figure 7: Keesic Douglas, *4 Reservation Food Groups* (2010). Detail of sandwich and Kool-Aid. Photo: Keesic Douglas.





Figure 8: Cheryl L'Hirondelle, *NDNSPAM Cookbook* (2011). Preview of *NDNSPAM Celebrity Edition Cookbook Website* (commissioned by Tribe Inc.), *NDNSPAM crocheted tea towel*, *NDNSPAM can*, *NDNSPAM iMac cozy*. Photo: Keesic Douglas.



Figure 9: Cheryl L'Hirondelle, *NDNSPAM Cookbook* (2011). Detail of *NDNSPAM crocheted tea towel* and *NDNSPAM can*. Photo: Keesic Douglas.



Figure 10: Cheryl L'Hirondelle, *NDNSPAM Cookbook* (2011). Detail of *NDNSPAM iMac cozy*. Photo: Keesic Douglas.