

Ep07_BetweenAcrossThrough_McDonaldCheese

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[music]

00:04 Speaker 1: You are listening to Between, Across, and Through.

[music]

00:22 S1: Imagine you're walking along a trendy neighborhood and among the retail stores and specialty food shops you see a cheese shop tucked away, and you think, "Hey, I like cheese." You walk in, a little bell chimes, and a fragrance engulfs your senses. And among the aisles and aisles and aisles of cheeses and jams you see labels reading Normandy, La Mancha, Somerset, and suddenly you realize, "I have no idea what I want." And maybe as your gut clenches, you think, "I shouldn't have come in." Today, Professor Kevin Lewis O'Neil, Director for the Centre for Diaspora and Transnational Studies speaks to Professor Ken MacDonald, from the University of Toronto. They will discuss how that anxiety you feel is caused by a larger production of culture and identity. Please join us as we travel Between, Across and Through.

[music]

01:26 Kevin Lewis O'neil: Welcome I'm Professor Kevin Lewis O'Neil, and I'm joined by Professor Ken MacDonald. Ken, why did you decide to study cheese from a cultural perspective?

[chuckle]

01:35 Ken McDonald: All right, so this could be a long story. I used to... Well, I still work in Northern Pakistan, in the high mountains. And there was a year when my knees had been acting up, and I'd had a climbing accident, and I realized I was gonna have to come up with the second line of research to compliment what I was doing. And so I was sitting at home, in my office one day and I kicked back and I thought, "Hey, if you had to do another line of work what would it be?" And I thought, I could see myself working in a cheese shop.

[laughter]

02:06 KO: Working in a cheese shop, yes.

02:09 KM: Or owning a cheese shop and telling stories about cheese. Cheese as always been my favorite foods. So I sat back and I thought, "You know, I wonder what a cultural anthropology or cultural geography of cheese would look like." So yeah, I did what we academics do, did the literature search online, there was next to nothing. And I thought, this is fascinating because now I work on wine, there's tons of stuff on wine. And there was lots on bread, there was literature on certain food staples but there was next to nothing on cheese. And I thought to myself, "This is weird." Like, "Why is there nothing on cheese? It's such a staple in so many parts of the world." And one of the things that twiggged me off is I had been in Northern Pakistan, and I was sitting in this small hotel, in this small market town, and it's a big climbing scene, because the villages I work

in are around K2. So there was this Italian climber and his Swiss wife, and the Italian climber was from Lecco, I think, and his swiss wife was from some alp in Switzerland. [chuckle]

03:08 KO: Yeah.

03:08 KM: And we started talking about cheese, and the Italian guy go, "If you're interested in cheese, you gotta come visit me in Lecco. We'll go, we'll have some amazing cheese." And his swiss wife peeks up and says, "You Italians what do you know about cheese? You wanna have good cheese, you come to Switzerland." And they started getting into an argument about this and I thought, "You know what, you two have got problems bigger than cheese." But the argument about cheese was serious, and it was a twig that... This was... Here's an object, a cultural object that is very specifically something embroiled in the relations between people, place, nature and tradition. And I thought, "This is fascinating, what a fantastic thing to research."

03:51 KO: And so, what have you found in terms of cheese's contribution to the production of identity?

03:58 KM: Probably exactly that. That they're... To reproduce the idea of tradition you need some manifestation of it, some materialization of it, and one of those materializations is food. And when we think about food and tradition particularly in relation to the connection between identity and place, the one thing that... I mean, there's multiple things that we consume, but the one thing that we consume, that is undeniably or undeniably becomes part of us is food. We ingest it, it becomes part of our material substance. And there is something about cheese that connects the land to a way of life to institutions that govern the land to bodies of practical knowledge that you use to manage the land and nature. It sort of captures all of the aspects of living within a particular place. And it's an object that you can both point to, as expressive of that place and an identity of that place, and an object that you can actually sensorially experience that place, either through aroma or through taste, it provides a trigger to take you to a particular place.

05:19 KM: So, it's a classic kind of diasporic tale in a sense that it's an object that becomes more important when you're out of place than when you're in. When you're in place, it's one of those kind of taken for granted qualities of where you live, and who you are, but when you leave that place and no longer have steady access to something like a piece of something that seems as simple as a piece of cheese, it becomes an aspect of sensorial connection to that place. And a more important aspect in defining who you are, or your ability to consume it.

06:00 KO: And so then the cheese shop you mentioned earlier must be such a critically important part of this process in terms of place and communication and experience?

06:00 KM: Yeah, yeah, it's remarkable. It's remarkable in a lot of different ways. So one of the things that I'm interested in when I think about cheese is the formation of transnational cultural economies. So how is meaning and value produced around a cultural object? In other words, an object that is produced through a body of knowledge and skill that belongs in a particular place to a particular group of people. What happens to that object when it travels through space from a site of familiarity to a site of unfamiliarity and lands in a cheese shop in a place like Toronto where we've

got a diverse population? So people like me who grew up lower middle class, parents brought kraft cheddar Kraft cheese slices [laughter]

07:01 KO: No, Kraft is probably the kind of constant experience, at least the North American experience of over-the-counter cheese.

07:07 KM: Absolutely, which is, in many ways, weird because particularly Ontario, there's a strong history of cheese factories where for the better part of the early 20th century, we were exporting very good cheese to Britain, very good cheddar. And that's about all that was made. Anyway, so I think about the cheese shop now, and people like me will go in there and it is a mediated experience. In other words, there's a glass counter that separates you from the cheese, there's cheese on shelves, on racks, there's somebody in a white coat behind the counter that will cheese... Call themselves something like a cheese monger.

07:45 KO: Yeah. And this is entirely different than just racks of bags of cheese at the local supermarket.

07:50 KM: Yeah. Well, and it's entirely different than what you would encounter sometimes, depending on where you are in France. So you could go into an Intermarche and I just got back from Toulouse and Toulouse and buy all of the French cheeses they would find in The Cheese Shop in Toronto. You can go into a cheese... Especially a cheese shop in France, a fromagerie, and you would find more local cheeses of the region or fresh cheeses. So there are sort of upper scale cheese shops, but you can go into a regular grocery store and buy a good cheese. But if you go into a cheese shop in Toronto, certain magical things happen. One is that you realize you're in a transnational city because you get cheeses from Germany, from Italy, from France, from Britain, from Canada. If you go to France, you will get French cheese. If you go to Germany, you'll largely get German cheese except Germans will say, "Well, the French make the best cheese. So we'll bring in some brie or some..." Right? Go to Northern Italy, go to the Piemonte, all you will get is Italian cheese.

08:53 KM: So the remarkable thing about Toronto is you can get a diversity of cheeses, which means that if you are... Let's say you're an Italian immigrant and you immigrated from, I don't know, somewhere in the Piemonte in 1956 and you came to Canada, you can go into a cheese shop in Toronto and find some cheeses that you're familiar with. And you can say to the cheese monger, "Could you find me this?" I went into a cheese shop... This was years ago now, but part of what I do in this work is hanging out in cheese shops so you get to know people. But I went into this cheese shop, and the guy behind the counter says to me, "You gotta try this cheese. You'll hate it." "You're gonna give me a cheese I'll hate?" He says, "You gotta try it." So he pulls out this cheese, and it is a green mold cheese. It was like a blue cheese, except the mold was green instead of blue. And he gave it to me, and he was right. It was atrocious, it was bitter, it was salty, it was... Oh, my God. I had a repulsive reaction to it, and he laughed as he watched my face. I said, "Where did you get this?"

09:57 KM: And he tells me this tale of this cheese coming from this very particular part of Italy, and that there's a small population in Toronto from this community, and that they had asked if he could find this cheese for them. It's a statement of the way in which we learn taste. In other words,

all I can think of is that the only way you could enjoy a cheese like that is if you had been eating it from the moment you were born. And this became a defining feature of how your taste profile was formed. And that you may enjoy other cheeses, but this is the cheese you love.

10:34 KO: But when talking about taste you, in The Cheese Shop, we have this vision of... For example, yourself, a very knowledgeable, not just scholar, but consumer of cheese. I can imagine cheese shops being really anxiety provoking also in an incredibly anxious space if you don't know your taste or what tastes might look or feel like.

11:00 KM: Yeah. That's the flip side of the story that I just told is that we're used to purchasing food in environments in which you can read about the product and go into a grocery store or flip a box of cornflakes around and read what cornflakes are, some made-up history of cornflakes, or the nutritional status of cornflakes. But again, this cheese shop is a mediated experience. And hanging out there, you'll see people come in, usually people like me and a fellow or the woman behind the counter will say, "Can I help you?" And there will be this awkward silence of about maybe five seconds. And that's the moment... That was just about five seconds.

11:50 KO: Yes.

11:50 KM: So that's the moment at which somebody will say, "Got any old cheddar?" which is Canadian for cheese, right? It's like saying, "You got any cheese?"

11:58 KO: Right.

11:58 KM: So part of what's going on there is a recognition that you don't know what to ask for because you can't reach out and touch the object, and flip it around and read what it is. And that in admitting that you don't know what to ask for, there's an admission of a particular form of class ignorance. In other words, we associate class position with both the consumption of and the knowledge of particular kinds of products. So over time, cheese, particularly good cheese, has become kind of an objective class status. And there's a particular history to that, where if we think about cheese historically, cheese in place, cheese in its site of production. So let's say institute's cheese was nothing special to people. People understood how it was made, they made it themselves, they ate it themselves, it was a mechanism for storing protein over the winter over a couple of years, and you take the nutritional value of milk, and you just consolidate it and store it in the form of cheese.

13:08 KM: But at a particular moment in European history, there is only really one group that can command a diversity of cheese, and that's an aristocracy. If you're in France and you belong to the aristocracy you can literally, in the 18th century, command that a diversity of cheeses be brought to you and you can consume those cheeses or provide those cheeses to your guests. And if we look at cheddar in Britain, most of the cheddar produced in Britain before the dawn of modern transport was shipped to the French court, and it was consumed by either the English court or the French court. So there was this attachment of the consumption not necessarily of cheese, but of diversity by a nobility, but that conferred status on cheese. So cheese, then, becomes an object through which you can engage in class transcendence through consumption. So if you walk into a cheese shop and

somebody says, "What can he get you?" Kind of intuitively, if I admit an ignorance of this, I'm admitting a class position.

14:16 KO: It's an aristocratic question in a sense.

14:17 KM: Absolutely. Right. Yeah, it is in many ways. So your fallback is, "I'll just give them what I know." "You got any old cheddar?" This is probably... It's total speculation, but pretending that I came in here to buy cheddar. And then if you see a good cheesemonger, a good cheesemonger will know that cheese is this object that produces anxiety in some people. And if, for example, I am in the cheese shop, and they're offering a sample of cheese to me, and you should always taste your cheese before you buy it, that they will also offer a piece of cheese to someone right next to me who's waiting, waiting their turn. And they'll say, "Here, try a piece of this." And when they're finished with me, they might turn to that person and say, "So did you like that?" And the person would say, "Nah, nah, not so much." "Well, what didn't you like about it?" Or, "Yeah, that was great."

15:09 KM: And, "Oh, what did you like about it?" And in doing that, they reduce the level of anxiety. So the person doesn't have to identify what it is that they're looking for as a name of a cheese or as a type of a cheese, they can begin to focus on qualities. "Oh, well, it was really creamy," or, "It tasted like nuts," or, "I really liked the saltiness or the tanginess. It was amazing," or, "I liked that texture. It just melted in your mouth." They can begin to focus on qualities that we're all familiar with. Qualities don't require knowledge. It's not this kind of artifactual thing that you can point to. Qualities are something that you enjoy. And then the cheesemonger can say, "Oh, you should try this," or, "You should try this," and enhance sales in doing that.

15:53 KO: So it's this... Is that the process of just tasting where people gain the cultural capital to navigate a cheese shop more confidently?

16:00 KM: Yeah, partially. It's knowledge-building in a sense. So again, as part of the research that I do, I've taken these maitre-fromagier classes which are like working toward the similar status with cheese as a sommelier would have with wine. And what you acquire in those classes is exactly to have the ability to navigate your way through. So as a sommelier learns how to approach wine, a maitre-fromagier learns how to approach cheese. So you would describe the appearance of the cheese with the particular nomenclature, you would describe the texture of the cheese as you break it open, and describe the rind of the cheese. So you would break down these properties of the cheese in terms of appearance, texture, aroma, flavor. You've got these broad categories. And then within each of those categories, you have a register. You've got a vocabulary, prepared vocabulary. And part of what a course like that does is it disciplines your palate to that vocabulary. So a classic story that I recite is the first class I went to. And ironically, they start you off with bad cheese. So I'm thinking, "Why am I eating bad cheese?"

17:28 KO: What is bad cheese?

17:29 KM: I don't know.

17:30 KO: A Kraft single.

17:31 KM: Emmental from No Frills. [laughter]

17:32 KO: All right. Okay.

17:35 KM: And I think that's actually what they gave us, but... And so you're given a benchmark in essence. And I'm thinking, "Well, if everybody in this class is like me, we don't need a benchmark 'cause this is what we've been eating all our lives," or, "This is what we grew up with." Maybe we've kind of graduated out of that, but that's where they start. So on a plate, around comes a piece of some variety of Swiss cheese, a no-name variety of what we have historically called Swiss cheese, which as Swiss would say is nothing like Swiss cheese. And we begin to approach this cheese. So one of the things that you'll do is describe its appearance, and then it's texture.

18:15 KM: And to describe a texture, basically you're breaking a piece of cheese apart. And if you take a piece of Emmental from No Frills, it doesn't break. It bends. It's like a piece of rubber. So the instructors, "So how would we describe the texture of this cheese?" And within an instant, rubbery pops into my head. But I'm supposedly there to observe, so I bite my tongue and just wait. And a couple of seconds later, a woman across the table says, "Well, it's kind of rubbery." And the instructor stops and says, "Hmm, rubbery. Mm-mm. Rubbery, that's not really a word we would use to describe cheese. Can you think of another term that might describe this texture?" A few seconds of silence, and then some guy puts up his hand and says, "Elastic?" "Elastic. Yes, yes, that's a very good one." You think, "What is the difference between rubbery and elastic?" And yet, elastic is on the register and rubbery isn't. So you've got that distinction between terminology and a course that's structured to produce a standardization of a register so that no matter where you go, that same register will be applied.

19:37 KO: You've mentioned a few times how one approaches cheese. Can you talk to us a little bit about that language of approach?

19:44 KM: Sure, so again the parallel here is wine. So if you think about going to a wine tasting, engaging in a cheese tasting is the same thing. That there are a number of steps that you go through before you actually consume this piece of cheese. So if you and I are at home, or if you come to my house and I offer you some cheese, we sit down and we eat some cheese, we don't approach the cheese. But if you're in a formal tasting there are these ritualistic steps that you go through in a particular order. So it is the appearance, it is the texture, it is the aroma and then finally, it is the taste. So that notion of actually approaching the cheese, and going through these ritualistic steps of behavior. And I can remember being at a cheese tasting in Italy in the Piemonte, and there was, and this was a slow food event. So slow food is this movement that seeks to both stabilize, if not resurrect, the production of traditional products, rural products, and they've got a very strong focus on cheese.

20:57 KM: Anyway so we're in this tasting and it's with four producers were there who were very, very small scale made cheese in the hills in Northern Italy. And then there was a moderator and then a so-called expert. And the expert is running us through this tasting and at the end, articulating

the qualities of these cheeses. And then you could see this grizzled old guy at the end of the line, he's got a leather hat on, you can tell he's been up in the hills all his life. He's about 70, his face is leathered. And the expert looks at him and says, "But of course that's just my palate. And of course, we all have different palates. But this is your cheese. What would you think?" And the guy, the grizzled old guy, turns to the expert and he just looks at him, he says, "Sir, your words overwhelm me." [laughter] And it was like this very polite, "F you," to this expert. It was like, "What is this BS that you're spouting?"

22:00 KO: That's funny, and that... But the approach also implies a kind of intimacy that this older gentleman may not have recognized.

22:10 KM: Well or it in practice is a mode of taking an object that really is like what? Nothing more than coagulated milk with knowledge and practice applied to it, so that cheeses are differentiated and turning it into something more than that. Producing a meaning for it and generating forms of practice that give it or that stabilize a class position. That produce it as an object with both cultural value, but also with class value, so that if you go into a restaurant, good restaurant in Toronto and the cheese tray comes around and there'll be like little slivers of this, or little slivers of that, and the maitre-fromagier explaining what they are. Going to a good restaurant in France, they'll just bring a cheese plate. Right?

23:08 KM: There's no elaborate kind of performance around it, it's just part of a meal. So again, part of what's happening in that emergence of a cheese tasting is a way to generate value for this cultural object that it doesn't otherwise have. And part of it is looking back to a mythical European past of oriculture, this idea that the Europeans have eaten well, which is, of course nonsense. Europeans haven't always eaten well. We can point to all sorts of scourges and famines and diseases and malnutrition and... I mean, the aristocracy in Europe always ate well. But it wasn't until modernity, or the emergence of contemporary modern period of transportation, primarily the rail network in France, that you began to get frequent regular deliveries of cheese from all over the country into cities like Paris or Lyon, wherever. And then the education of a populous that had to learn what these cheeses were. So in Paris, there was Pierre Andrieu. And Pierre Andrieu in the early 1900s, 1910s, 1920s was running tasting salons for people in Paris so that they could taste the product of the country. They didn't already know this stuff. He was providing them with tastings of these, what now we think of as regional products, so that they could recognize them and go into a shop and ask for them by name.

24:47 KO: It seems like this regional flavor or this construction of identity and cultural capital, seems supremely dependent on transnationalism, on the potential for movement and connection across borders.

25:01 KM: Oh, absolutely, yeah. And if you think about cheese, and on the one hand it gets produced as national. So if you say cheddar you think, at least Canadians would think Canadian or Canada, and Brits might think somerset or something like that. If you say pecorino, people think Italy, if you say Camembert, people think France. So there are certain cheeses that become emblematic of the nation, that fit into the ideology of the nation. But they only take on, in many ways, that national importance when people step outside of the nation and look back upon it, right? So that's when that idea of particular cheeses, as important regionally or nationally, actually assume

or take on enhanced cultural value and national value, is from that external perspective. So yeah, they did and then it's very much a demonstration of the way in which a cultural object assumes a value largely through its transnational context.

25:39 KO: Because you cannot appreciate the distinction or the quality of an Italian cheese until you also have access to a cheese from France, for example.

25:39 KM: Yeah. So you've got some comparative basis. So and that's... That, in many ways, is the incredible delight of living in a city like Toronto when it comes to cheese, or more specifically New York. So in Canada we have these regulations.

25:39 KO: I feel like there was an undercutting of Toronto right there. We're very sensitive to that.

[laughter]

26:39 KM: Well, we have these ridiculous... Well, they're not ridiculous. There's historical grounds for quota restrictions in Canada, but we have, in terms of what's potentially available in terms of cheese in this country, we have a very limited selection. Whereas if you go to New York, you get a much wider range of what's available. You go to the Bedford Street Cheese Shop, or go to Murray's, or some of these iconic places in New York, you'll get a much better selection than you do in Toronto, which, historically, there's been a reason for regulations to protect the well-being of dairy farmers in this country, but they definitely have inhibited the production of what we would think of as good cheese, with exception of Quebec. Quebec is just doing amazing things with cheese.

27:27 KO: These kinds of regulations in terms of the distribution of cheese, or the sale of cheese in different countries, that must set up the capacity for cultural capital. So for example, does knowledge about cheese in, for example, Italy, have the same kind of cache as it does here in Toronto, or in New York, where you potentially could have a greater kind of access to different kinds of cheeses?

27:52 KM: Yeah, I don't think so. One of the things that happens again, in the production of a transnational cultural economy is that space for the creation of value is produced through that distinction between what people are familiar with and what people are unfamiliar with. So if you grew up in a particular region of Italy, you know the cheeses of that region, or you know a good part of the cheeses of the nation. In many ways, they're not that important to you. I can't think of people who are specific experts in cheese in France. People run cheese shops, people become well-known for their cheese shops, but it's not like you read the newspaper and there's a weekly column on this week's cheese, whereas that's all over North America now.

28:32 KO: No. No. I see.

28:33 KM: Now we've got magazines devoted to cheese. It's become, on the one hand, it's become part of the whole of foodie culture that has emerged and cheese has been kind of in-slotted into that and given a profile within it. But on the other hand, there is a way in which narrative becomes important for mediation. So within a restructured politics of production, distribution and

consumption in which people are focused on the local, or the locale, or...

29:08 KO: The traditional.

29:09 KM: The tradition, the environmental dimensions of production and distribution. People want a narrative around something like cheese, which is an expensive object. So narratives get produced and you need people to produce those narratives. So one of the things that happens in that space between familiarity and unfamiliarity, is the emergence of the connoisseur. And not simply the connoisseur, but the connoisseur expert who also becomes perhaps a media spokesperson, or an author of a book that will guide you into the world of cheese. So there is this way in which that space between familiarity and unfamiliarity, not only creates potential value for the cheese, it creates potential value for the mediator and also creates potential value for the consumer because the consumer can then take on the status of bearing that knowledge and, I don't know, having a party and sharing it with their friends, or starting a small business, putting on cheese tastings for corporate entities, or corporate Christmas parties. So there's all kinds of room for value in there, but the mediator and the connoisseur step up. One of the things that struck me when I started out on this research is the relative absence of ethnographic studies of connoisseurs and connoisseurship. I thought they play such an important role in the mediation and production of value, and yet anthropologically, we really haven't paid much attention to that, the role of the connoisseur in capitalism. It's remarkable.

30:44 KO: Well, this reminds me of mid to early 20th century etiquette manuals amid industrialization in North America, that you had this rising middle class with access to free time, and to new ways to consume, and absolutely anxious about how to host a dinner party. And I always teach this material as very foreign. Anything from where to put the fork, to when to introduce the dessert, etcetera. But it seems like this kind of anxiety, this class anxiety is alive and well, and people are really hungry to class up.

31:19 KM: Yeah, absolutely. And that's all... Well, all is a long word. [laughter] That is important in the history of food in general, that food has become one way in which class transcendence becomes possible. Well, there are, as you say, there are modes of eating and eating practices that are part and parcel of class distinction, but there are also types of food that are part and parcel of class distinction, and learning those foods and learning how to consume those foods, is markedly important in that exercise of class transcendence. It's striking in a way, because, I don't know, you go home and you open the cooler door in your fridge, and you haul out a block of cheese, and take out a knife and you cut off a hunk and you toss it down your throat. And then you'll have a party, and you lay it out on this lovely cheese board with cranberries sprinkled around.

[laughter]

32:15 KO: With...

32:16 KM: It's exactly the same object, right? But it's a completely different performance. So cheese is playing markedly different roles.

32:25 KO: And even within the context of the ritualistic performance at the dinner party, you've spotted two, at least pre-divergent narratives of the traditional, but also the foreign or the European, that both seem to have a certain kind of cultural capital in this context, but people in the know are supposed to shuttle between the two or prize them differently or similarly?

32:37 KM: Yeah, shuttle between the two, but one is more... One is much more "domestic" and it's in a privatized space, and the other is much more performative and demonstrative of our class position, right?

33:05 KO: Which one's which? So the two different kinds of cheeses that seem to be able to construct identity and gain, a lot of people have access to a higher kind of class status is either something incredibly local or terribly foreign.

33:20 KM: Right, right right, yeah. If we think about that distinction and especially in the context of the local, I think one of the things that happens with the fetishization of the local, especially in terms of the politics of production and distribution is that local gets confused with locale, that what is local does not necessarily mean it exists within a particular radius of a particular site, but it gets translated into this object comes from this locale and we can describe that locale as local because it's rural, because it's a small village, because there are only 30 farmers producing this cheese in that region, around that village. And they never mind the fact that the cheese might have to travel 5000 kilometers to get here, but it's that sort of equation of locale and local that I think aligns those two politics such that something can be simultaneously "local" and foreign, right? That, so it's like this double whammy of value creation, if you like. You can satisfy the kind of concern with the local and this is partially the riff that slow food plays on. You can satisfy the concern with the local and the traditional by understanding, not so much the relations of production, but the practices of production.

34:55 KM: So then this again, is the importance of a narrative. If you have a narrative that tells you that this cheese is being produced by, and I don't know, it's Juan Carlo and Juan Carlo and his family have been making this cheese for 150 years in this particular location, using the same breed of sheep, with the same equipment, with you've got...

35:17 KO: It's essentially the same sheep.

35:19 KM: Oh.

35:19 KO: Right, somehow that's really important.

35:20 KM: It's, well...

35:22 KO: Yeah, yeah.

35:22 KM: Strangely enough. [chuckle]

35:23 KO: Sure, I can believe it.

35:24 KM: As long as leave blackheads, we're good to go.

35:27 KO: Right.

35:28 KM: Anyway, so that story is what helps to localize that particular cheese, even though it's from the Pyrenees, right? So, it's distant but it's simultaneously local in a strange way that those two things become conflated, so that it retains that kind of exoticness of coming from a distant locale but you can point to its local-ness because you've got the narrative that tells you that this is a local product, but what that narrative doesn't tell you is about the relations of production. Maybe there are radically inequitable gender relations in this village in which, Juan Carlo doesn't get out of bed at 5:00 in the morning, his wife is made to get out of bed at 5:00 in the morning and go milk the sheep, and heaven forbid if the sheep aren't milked by 8 o'clock. This is part of the problematic of the fetishization of the local is that it doesn't actually pull back that kind of veil and look underneath to say, "Okay, what actually are the relations of production here?" It's like the narrative is sufficient to just quell an anxiety.

36:36 KO: Do you have a sense of how the introduction of European cheeses into the Canadian market will affect people's relationship to Canadian cheeses?

36:45 KM: Well, it's a big debate right now. In a lot of, not so much in Quebec, but in Ontario, cheese producers are anxious about the new free trade agreement, and part of the anxiety is that we're finally just producing, we're beginning to produce really good cheese. We're getting a foothold in the market. People are recognizing Ontario cheese as distinct from the stuff that you ate 30 years ago, and now the market is going to be perhaps not flooded, but new cheeses from Europe are going to be able to access this market and further marginalize Ontario cheese. So people may become particularly fascinated with these new European cheeses or they'll hold a cache that Ontario cheese doesn't have in the cache that Ontario cheese has, is that it's good but that it's also local but there is that anxiety around it. Quebec choose is different. It already has a solid market in Quebec. It's very, very good. It's been good for a long time, and people seem satisfied with what they're producing. So one of the dilemmas in Canada is that in the dairy licensing structure, if you want to export cheese inter-provincially, in other words, if you wanna ship cheese across provincial borders, you need a federal dairy license as well as provincial dairy license.

38:11 KM: So, in essence, you need two different licenses, which is an expensive proposition. So there are a lot of cheeses that are made in places like Quebec that you won't see outside of Quebec, at least legally, they make their way out in other forms. But you also talk to producers in Quebec who say, "Well, we're satisfied with what we're doing here, we're satisfied with what they make", so I don't think they feel the same threat as felt in Ontario.

38:39 KO: Will this have any impact on the cultural capital gain by someone who knows a lot about Canadian cheeses?

38:47 KM: I think so. One of the problems that Ontario and Quebec cheese have had is that there isn't really an effective social media presence, spokesperson, spokespeople, popular cultural

representation. If you drive around the city, occasionally, you'll see these billboards that say cheese and you think, "Okay, so that just means I'm supposed to eat cheese, it doesn't give me a history, it doesn't give me a story." So, you're beginning to see the emergence of stories about particular producers in Ontario, but they're not widely circulated that you'll see a story about Ruth Klassen, who runs some dairy in Stratford or outside of Stratford and has been making good cheese for a long time, but you largely pick it up in farmers markets. And yeah, that's been a fascinating story because she's used community support to expand. So when she needed an initial infusion of funds to expand her production, she basically sold shares that could be paid back in cheese. So I, for example, bought, I think it was \$750 worth of cheese that would be... Or fronted \$750 of them, got back excess of that in the form of cheese over a period of time. So she basically issued cheese dollars that you could use to go to the farmers market or wherever, in St. Warren's Market and buy your cheese.

40:24 KO: What?

40:25 KM: Yeah, so it was very, very innovative. But simultaneously it was...

40:29 KO: Wait, hold on. There's a shadow economy of cheese dollars. Just for my own sake, walk me through this. So you fronted \$750?

40:39 KM: Yeah, on the promise...

40:41 KO: And that bought you... In my mind, that buys you \$750 worth of cheese.

40:45 KM: And it bought me \$750 plus, only I can't remember what the exact proportion was.

40:49 KO: Is it appreciated?

40:49 KM: No, because that was the promise. What's the Popeye line? "A hamburger today for three hamburgers tomorrow."

[laughter]

41:00 KO: Okay, okay. I see.

41:01 KM: Like, "Front me the cash that we need right now and you'll get that plus \$500 bucks worth of cheese in return.

41:10 KO: Wow.

41:10 KM: But the return will all be in the form of cheese. So if you are somebody like me who consumes an absurd amount of cheese, it's nothing.

41:18 KO: Sure, sure.

41:19 KM: It's a deal. But yeah, that's an investment in my cheese future. It is like futures, right?

[laughter]

41:25 KO: Right.

41:25 KM: But it's also an indication of... And this is important, but it's an indication of somebody's... I mean, partially it's a faith in a community. Partially it's a faith in a community that will provide the capital without the financial services costs to go along with the provision of that capital that you would incur if you were to go to a bank. Part of it is a statement that, you go to a bank and banks are not all that keen in loaning money to what they might see as risky, and Ontario cheese really can... So that's markedly different than, for example, Italy where Italian banks take Parmigiano Reggiano. They'll take wheels of Parmigiano Reggiano as collateral on production loans, and they become responsible for aging and storing that cheese.

42:16 KO: The banks?

42:16 KM: So, they've got the banks. They've got banks who own warehouses of cheese and they'll hire people to make sure that the cheese is aging appropriately and that they're not losing value in the cheese. And the Italian government is seriously invested in making sure that the global price of Parmigiano does not fall below a particular level. It's like De Beers and diamonds, right? How do you keep the value of something up? You engage in price stabilization. And here's another good example, in the Villeneuve Hills, above the north shore of Lake Geneva, that really snake-like boundary, Napoleonic-era boundary between France and Switzerland. There are these old Napoleonic forts, that are largely just like bunker forts, but underneath the surface of these forts are these old armament vaults, which are reasonably long but they have constant temperature and constant humidity, which is good for munitions, but it's also good for aging cheese.

43:15 KM: So [43:18] of Comte have bought up these forts, and they're using them as sites for the aging and the maturation of Comte. And I went into one of these facilities with the guy who runs it once and he had bought robots. So there were what? Like, six armament vaults, and each of them is quite long. So he had a robot in each of these vaults. And the robot would... And cheese is stacked on wooden shelves and Comte in these big rounds. So the robot has sleeves, the sleeves slip up, pick up the cheese, bring it into the center of the aisle, brush it, flip it, put it back on the shelf, drop it, go up to the next shelf...

44:04 KO: These robots are like Zoombas that sweep our floors.

44:07 KM: Yeah. Exactly.

44:08 KO: They're just timing on the GPS.

44:10 KM: Then they move forward a meter, they do the same thing.

44:13 KO: Yes.

44:13 KM: They move forward... And each of these things, he said, cost about a million, so he's got...

44:17 KO: A robot?

44:17 KM: Yeah, he's got like, I don't know, \$6 million invested in these things. And I thought, "This is incredible." But then I stopped in that moment and I calculated the value of cheese that he had in that one facility at that one moment in time and what it would sell for in Canada which would be markedly more than what it sells for in France, but what it would sell... And it was like \$170 million in that one moment in time.

44:39 KO: My goodness.

44:40 KM: And you've got one facility making or maturing one kind of cheese in a country that makes hundreds and hundreds of different kinds of cheeses.

44:48 KO: And he probably bought the robots with cheese. No kidding. It's probably not...

44:53 KM: That was funny.

44:53 KO: But it could have been.

44:55 KM: If you give me a robot, I'll give you some Comte.

44:57 KO: Yeah, right.

44:57 KM: Who knows? It might have worked, it's France.

45:00 KO: It is France. Thank you so much.

[music]

45:04 S1: That was Professor Kevin Lewis O'Neil, in conversation with Professor Ken McDonald from the Department of Human Geography at the University of Toronto. On our next episode, we'll talk to professor Andrea Allen to discuss the embodiment of lesbian sexuality in Brazil. Please subscribe on Stitcher, Apple Podcasts, Spotify, or your favorite app, so you won't miss it. This monthly podcast was brought to you by the Centre for the Diaspora and Transnational Studies at the University of Toronto. I am Jane Romero. Thank you for listening and joining the conversation.

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