

Life's a Peach: The Convergence of Sexuality and Class in Luca Guadagnino's *Call Me by Your Name*

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Call Me by Your Name (2017) became famous for its “peach scene,” though the orchard around the Perlmans’ villa where this fruit thrives could not have grown on its own. Distinctions of class and a parasitism by the most affluent of their workers cultivate the paradise where director Luca Guadagnino sets the blossoming romance between Elio and Oliver. Apricots are a clear metaphor for desire here, yet their prolificacy is only possible through the invisibility and silent intervention of other food items, from peas to latkes to water. Critics have pointed out the beauty of the Italian setting and its use as a temporary escape from heteronormative surveillance, as well as the way domestic workers flow in and out of scenes almost wordlessly. What these critics have missed is the connection these occurrences have in explaining how the working class have built (but do not benefit from) this heaven on Earth, where the young male lovers may permit their bodies to act without restraint. While queer and class theories inform this discussion, my primary vehicle for interpretation will be food, both for its prominent place in the movie and for the ways it parallels the class structure at the villa. I find the film quietly reflects on the levels of economic privilege and exploitation needed to experience the paradise it depicts, with the usurpation of food in many scenes helping to remind the audience of the inability of this space to be wholly subversive.

Two young men pause their summertime bike ride through the Italian countryside to speak to an old woman sitting outside a farmhouse splitting peas. Dressed in Memphis-Group-inspired shorts and a Talking Heads band shirt, the younger of these fellows asks the woman if she could fetch them glasses of water. While she’s inside, he reaches into the bowl where the woman has been sorting her split peas and grabs a fistful. His companion slaps his hand, smiling, unable to admonish the younger man for munching on his new-found harvest. After receiving their water, the men peddle off, leaving the woman to go on pea-splitting, oblivious to both the produce stolen from her as well as her role in sustaining a homosexual romance.

The scene above is representational of the large part food plays in facilitating the sensual, exploratory world of *Call Me by Your Name*. Besides earning an Academy Award nomination for Best Picture and launching Timothée Chalamet’s career, the 2017 film adaptation of André Acimen’s novel has been ground-breaking in its mainstream reception of a queer relationship. While almost every

reviewer has had something to say about the infamous “peach scene” (which itself was toned down from the source material) and similar symbols of lust and love in the film, few have focused on how food overall—its production, presentation, or consumption—functions in *Call Me by Your Name*. Fewer still have chosen to interact with the working-class characters who not only dot, but paint the lush backdrop of Elio and Oliver’s interactions and who provide for the main characters’ romance through food production. With these two lenses missing, we have been unable to understand this piece of cinema for what it suggests: for these men to have come together romantically, there needed to be a space, such as the Perlmans’ villa, where they could escape normative messaging around sexuality without stressing about the fiscal demands required for a fulfillment of the necessities—in this case, eating. According to this interpretation, love must transcend the body to exist; for that to happen, you need someone underneath to serve you. I propose food as a mechanism by which we can assess this movie’s romantic leanings as well as its reliance on class divisions to kickstart any meaningful realization of queerness. With this understanding in mind, we can begin to gather a better sense of *Call Me by Your Name*’s class-consciousness

and reckoning with economic forces that, on the surface, suggest entering a capitalistic elite to even clandestinely undermine heterosexism; however, these views ultimately bow under examination to show the inability of any space built on such a hierarchy to funnel out oppression.

Cartoonist Olivia de Recat lampooned the popular excitement around *Call Me by Your Name* through a 2018 series for *The New Yorker* entitled “Timothée Chalamet Made Me Do It.” In it, obsession over the film, and Chalamet in particular, manifests as a collection of indulgent admissions, such as this one from twenty-two-year-old “Fiona” of Portland, Oregon, whose face is broken out in a rash: “I started eating peaches again, even though I’m allergic to them.” This unashamed love coupled with the resulting mythology around Guadagnino’s production are reflected in most published critical reviews. Writing for *The New Yorker* as well, Anthony Lane hailed *Call Me by Your Name* as “an erotic triumph,” suggesting that “a gratifying cameo by a peach . . . merits an Academy Award for Best Supporting Fruit.” Besides being “far and away the best movie of the year,” *Call Me by Your Name* was, for Christy Lemire on Roger Ebert’s legacy site, a “sensitive adaptation”: “A feeling of melancholy tinges everything, from the choice of a particular shirt to the taste of a perfectly ripe peach.” A messy soft-boiled egg excited Manohla Dargis in *The New York Times*: “Mr. Guadagnino almost can’t help making everything look intoxicating.” No written discussion of the film seems to escape a discussion of its food, first among them *the peach*, which serves as a masturbatory tool while Chalamet’s character, Elio, waits in a barn loft for Oliver, played by Armie Hammer. That Elio discovers the fruit’s erotic potential undoubtedly fueled much of the movie’s public interest: today’s texters code the same reference in the peach emoji (Murray), though, as food studies critic John Varriano notes, wide-spread sexual interpretations of produce have existed for much longer, pointing to painted and poetic examples from the Italian Renaissance—some of which feature a peach in an explicitly homoerotic light. This popular discussion indicates that while not forming the basis of the movie, food cannot be removed from the emotional and critical connections which audiences form with *Call Me by Your Name*.

The film’s mythology manifests through other cinematic choices as well, including the story itself. Oliver is a graduate student who has come from America for the summer of 1983 to work under Professor Samuel Perlman, an expert in classical culture. The opportunity introduces Oliver to Elio, the professor’s son, a seventeen-year-old who makes a hobby of notating and re-interpreting Bach pieces and who can switch with ease between English, French, and Italian depending on the situation. Guided by the languid gazes of the professor and his wife Annella, the two young men swim, study, and simmer beneath the fruit trees of this expansive rural villa. As Anthony Lane writes, the film is “‘Somewhere in Northern Italy,’ and ‘Such vagueness is deliberate: the point of a paradise is that it *could* exist anywhere.’” In fits and starts, Elio and Oliver form a bond that starts as a distant intellectual respect for one another before becoming, by the film’s midpoint, a romantic one. Director Luca Guadagnino is faithful to author Acimen’s pacing of the novel by resisting expediting the tract of this relationship, instead allocating generous amounts of time to shots of fields, forests, and low-hanging apricots.

These apricots are seminal to the start of Elio and Oliver’s rapport. We are introduced to their grove as forming “Annella’s trees,” delineating a claim of ownership to them as well as to the cherries, pomegranates, and peaches, despite us never seeing Professor Perlman’s wife pick a single fruit—though, by some miracle, apricot juice abounds. A few scenes later, when Annella brings some of this juice to

the professor's study, she offers a glass to Oliver, who laps it down without pausing for a breath. Seeing this, the professor proposes a trajectory of the word "apricot" into English from Arabic that Oliver counters, situating the word's origins in the Latin *praecocem* meaning "precocious" and "premature." This last addition is directed at Elio, who has been watching Oliver behind a book while sharing smirks with his mother. They both know the father is testing his assistant's etymological skills, so when Professor Perlman declares Oliver has passed with "flying colors," Elio can't help but interject: "He does this every year" (*Call Me by Your Name*). As Anna Harvey of *Screen Queens* observes, Elio has become "intrigued by this newcomer's confidence," a growth that prompts the young Perlman to elicit Oliver's attention in this scene. It also attests to Roland Barthes's belief, stated in "Towards a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption," that "food has a constant tendency to transform itself into situation" (29); beyond giving sustenance, food is a symbol of the social predilections of its user/s, a truth that strengthens as the item's necessity as sustenance wanes. The philological sparring Elio witnesses resonates for him precisely because a physical attraction towards Oliver has already begun to form, characterized by this discussion of the sources of the succulent apricot.

In his negative review for *The New Yorker*, Richard Brody points to this scene as an example of how Guadagnino supplants intimacy and emotional development for having Elio and Oliver "post their intellectual bona fides on the screen like diplomas." Through this analysis, Brody fails to appreciate the extent to which these interactions with food express the development of the boys' relationship where words cannot be spoken. In his analysis of contemporary food advertisements, Barthes notes that advertising "eroticizes food and thereby transforms our consciousness of it, bringing it into a new sphere of situations by means of a pseudocausal relationship" (27). This relationship, which starts out as formally-structured, removed, and (in advertising's reliance on "[m]otivation studies" and other psychologies of the consumer) intellectual, dips into a more personal connection "connoting a sublimated sexuality" through the eventual association by the individual of specific foods with erotic images (Barthes 27). Barthes's description of French marketing schemes also proves insightful into Elio and Oliver's budding bond. This interpretation contends the notion that an eroticization of food requires the intervention of corporation images: as Varriano points out, we symbol-seeking animals need no incentive to link our world to our sex, particularly when these links help to code social transgressions.

To that end, many of Elio and Oliver's interactions with each other involve food or drink such that these items enwrap themselves into, and become, the conversation. At one point, Oliver, for example, uses a request for water after playing volleyball as an excuse to knead Elio's shoulder. Elio does not respond well to this touching because he mistakes it for teasing from a heterosexual man—with others around, Oliver cannot correct this misunderstanding. The presence of girlfriends for both characters complicates being explicit about any homosexual feelings. However, at breakfast one morning when Elio declares to Oliver and his father that he and his girlfriend Marzia "almost had sex last night," Oliver uses the opportunity to opine that "it's better to have tried and failed," glancing up from Elio to Prof. Perlman then back down at his soft-boiled egg (*Call Me by Your Name*). This egg's destruction starts the scene, with shots of the cracking of its shell, the spilling of the yolk, and the spooning out of its contents. It's a delicate but messy process, necessitating Oliver's focus as well as the audience, and sets up this discussion among the men of a sexual duty to pursue despite the possibility—or likelihood—of failure.

Food becoming its own language in *Call Me by Your Name* follows Pierre Bourdieu's observation from "Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste" that "[t]he sign-bearing, sign-wearing body is also a producer of signs which are physically marked by the relationship to the body" (35). So close to the body that it becomes the body, food must serve here where words cannot. Apricots, water, and eggs have joined the ranks of, if not usurped, the typical signalling method of speech to account for social muzzling—thankfully for Elio and Oliver, little gets lost in translation. This fact suggests the erection of "a new regime of discourses", founded to account for the fact that "[t]here is not one but many silences" (Foucault 27)—ironic for a film whose title promotes declaration. The extinction of words is necessary to conceal what is happening symbolically to the people around Elio and Oliver, who, if they did catch onto the code, could only ever become aware of a sublimation from strangers to lovers.

Since Oliver and Elio often must meet each other at mealtime (with Elio's parents, if not more people, present), meals play a role in both obfuscating and deepening this relationship. On Oliver's first night at the villa, a bell peels through the darkness: the Perlmans' maid/cook, Mafalda, is calling the house to dinner. Despite Elio's pressings, Oliver is too tired to attend and asks Elio to make an excuse for his missing the meal. Skipping dinner becomes a habit of Oliver's, a crass Americanism that Elio criticizes later on to his folks. His parents have none of it, disappointing Elio. He cannot share why Oliver's absence bothers him (if he knows why yet himself); this denial separates child from parents, though they are dining together. The elder Perlmans, it must be noted, are quite progressive for their time: they have gay friends, after all. Still, queer topics remain unpalatable at the dinner table, so it must be left to simmer, cloche-covered. When Mafalda comes by to remove Oliver's plate from the table, Elio scoots over to occupy the empty place, a way of "inhabit[ing] the body for which the space was reserved" (Harvey). This movement allows us to begin to understand, at the same time as Elio, how much he desires Oliver's company, particularly when he is surrounded by others of the household through the ritual of mealtime.

Mealtime, like everything at the villa, is cultivated and polished to a degree almost impossible for anyone outside the bourgeoisie to realize; human help curates the machinations of the Perlman mansion, for which they receive little in-world or on-screen recognition. Manohla Dargis sees the villa's "miles of bookshelves, its velvet sofas, scattered Oriental rugs and tastefully arranged antiques" as a sign of how Guadagnino makes "even a busy breakfast table and the fruit on a tree . . . seem art directed." In the film's universe, these aesthetic decisions are instead aided by a pair of domestic workers: Mafalda and the handyman Anchise. Both are involved in the production and service of food. Besides being the Perlmans' cook, Mafalda seems to be in constant expectation of the family's need for food: at one point, a milkshake she has prepared for Annella is waved away while she intervenes to show Oliver how to properly crack open a soft-boiled egg on his first morning there. Anchise, on the other hand, is more involved in the collection of food, such as picking the fruit from the orchard. A large fish he caught serves as amusement for Elio, who makes faces at what will likely be part of dinner that evening. Elio can take breaks such as this from his music transcription (done with a Walkman, no cheap product in 1983) because he did not have to involve himself in the fish's retrieval; because he did not have to blend the apricot juice he drinks; because the villa greets those with enough socioeconomic privilege to enter it with the sustenance for their academic, leisure, and sexual pursuits.

The Perlmans and their guests are never wanting for food, nor do they ever lack someone to serve them, a fact that they take as natural and therefore unnecessary to examine. Whether at home or at a café, they are always able to secure service. Annella makes appearances in the kitchen on the pretense of some female bonding with Mafalda; we learn later that Annella had inherited the property, and it is possible she and the maid have had a long relationship as employer and employed. However, when you only step into the kitchen to remove a tart from the oven so it's ready for a guest who just arrived, or, in a particularly weird sequence, look square in the eyes of your hired help while sticking your finger into another tart to have a taste, it doesn't suggest a strong bond. Nor does it suggest much awareness of the social stratification that might make Mafalda's presence at the villa a generational venture.

Oliver is not exempt from this lack of class consciousness; while his financial bearings are technically unknown despite his ability to travel abroad to further his doctoral candidacy, we cannot overlook how easily he adapts to having someone crack his eggs for him, or how he can bear to wave away a hot meal almost nightly. If you aren't having to make breakfast, you can stomach skipping dinner. When it comes to collecting to food, we see a Perlman—Elio—attempt this only thrice: once, when he steals the peas from the country woman; twice, when he gains Oliver's attention by shoving Oliver out of the way to pick a peach; the last time, when he picks another peach, which he inverts and converts through onanism, refusing even Oliver the chance to eat what remains. Each instance indicates a commodity comfort through its view of food as cost-free and arousing entity that stands on the shoulders of lower-class labor.

These initial observations of food in the film has led me to conclude that *Call Me by Your Name* imagines the fulfillment of same-sex desire only as an effect of capitalism that not only can the workers of the world never expect to realize, but the bourgeoisie might experience this luxury while still being unable to disclose it. Homosexuality can manifest only in the spaces as allocated for swimming pools, orchards, and private displays of antique sculpture; moreover, such manifestations must remain hidden, both to the property's owners and to the property's up-keepers. Besides being problematic, this world-view is pessimistic, albeit lining up with the film's sad ending. Contesting this original conclusion are certain elements of the story—subtle, clever, the largest of which happens at lunch—that allude to social change as a remedy for the social ill (heterosexism) which ultimately brings down Oliver and Elio. This is all to say that *Call Me by Your Name* is not, as I first thought, ignorant to the class distinctions described up to this point.

On the contrary, the film is aware of the political-social context, and while we see posters in town advertising the Communist and Socialist Parties, as well as Annella and the professor laughing at a televised satire of the newly-minted Socialist prime minister, the most thorough in-film examination of contemporary politics interacts with food. Over lunch one day following the national elections, friends of the Perlmans bicker about the incoming prime minister and the new "historic compromise" with leftist political parties. In part due to their friends' bombastic style, but surely as well from the topic at hand, Prof. and Ms. Perlman look uncomfortable throughout the scene, hardly touching their food. Per usual, Mafalda comes in and out of the scene, replenishing what food has been eaten and taking empty dishes away. However, because the Perlmans wish, through their glances, for some distraction, their maid comes more in focus for us—as does Anchise, who is off sitting alone in the grass, chuckling to himself

and shaking his head. The camera highlights the workers for their roles in facilitating the villa's orchestrated, daily outdoor lunches, making sure food and its production remain in the middle of this political conversation—although Oliver and Elio are only there as observers, sitting beside each other but silent.

Having said this, it may become easy to overestimate the political winds of change rippling through Italy; we cannot forget how singular the villa is even within the immediate vicinity and how, despite its origins and structure, it has permitted something unusual to flourish. The scene from the opening paragraph of this essay encompasses more than I first described; while Oliver and Elio are waiting outside for the elderly woman to return with water for them, Oliver points out the portrait hanging above the front door of her house: “Il Duce.” “Popolo italiano!” Elio replies, impersonating Mussolini. The two regard the portrait a second longer, leading Elio to resign: “That’s Italy” (*Call Me by Your Name*). His linkage of the country with its fascist past—and, as this encounter shows, the persistent penchant for fascism among the Italian working class—stands in contrast to what historian Charles F. Delzell in 1988 called “[Italian] citizens’ tolerance of regional and economic differences, . . . their ability to cope with the inefficiencies of democratic government, . . . their pragmatic acceptance of human foibles—and, most of all, . . . their appreciation of the rich texture of everyday life” (135). Rather, it is a sign that the political theories that endangered Jewish and queer Italians during World War II are still extant, in opposition to the atmosphere of liberality which the Perlmans sponsor (an anomaly their non-Jewish domestic workers appear to accept). Elio introduces to us, then, right at the start of his and Oliver’s sexual involvement (the beginning of the end), an awareness that whatever rapport the two of them will develop cannot sustain itself outside the walls of his parents’ mansion—even if there is always someone who will fetch something for them to drink. What these two men share will only be watered if it remains in the shade.

More than once will Elio have to wrestle with this fate. Elio and Oliver decide to travel around Italy together before Oliver must head back across the Atlantic. One night during this vacation, after the two have become drunk, Oliver finds a male-female couple dancing to the Psychedelic Furs’ “Love My Way,” a song that Elio had seen Oliver dancing to with his local girlfriend earlier in the film. Oliver dances with the woman here; Elio watches for as long as he can before throwing up the night’s reverie. Vomiting, argues Jude Agho, along with other modes of scatology, can be employed by artists “not as ends in themselves, but as means to an end; that of criticizing the prevalence of corruption, oppression and dehumanisation in society” (196). Speaking of the work of the Nigerian Biyi Bandele-Thomas, Agho comments on how portrayals of vomiting show that the writer “wants the reader to see his own feeling of shame, rage and disappointment at the way things have become in post-independence Nigeria” (205). We can link this interpretation with the violent ejection Elio emits in witnessing something as unappetizing as his man dancing with a woman to this song. When food has defined so much of their involvement with each other, we suddenly see a rejection of what can be considered Elio and Oliver’s last supper, and the prediction of Oliver’s eventual betrayal for hetero-conformity readable through Elio’s self-purge.

In the film’s final act, we see the villa in winter, blanketed in snow: a beautiful traditional veneer for this time of year, albeit with an acknowledgement of how the cold prevents the arbor from bearing fruit. Phoning in from America, Oliver reveals to the Perlmans that he is engaged; this knowledge hurts Elio to hear as much it hurts Oliver to convey. Still, despite Elio’s belief that his parents “know about”

his relationship with Oliver, neither seems willing to fight the matter, which can be attested as much to the legal and social abhorrence to homosexuality as much to the boys' religion.

Elio and Oliver's acceptance of their separate fates and resignation to social dictates develops as does Elio's exploration of his Judaism. Inspired by Oliver, Elio begins wearing a Star of David necklace in opposition to his parents' stance that they are "Jews of discretion," bringing Elio closer to a moral quandary, since his faith is opposed to gayness. In a food context, Judaism's consideration of pork as unclean may have been a result of considerations of holiness (Douglas) or, more likely, cost and care of swine in biblical Israel (Harris), though neither explanation supplants Judaism's mandate on reverence. Thus, even if "religions gain strength when they help people make decisions which are in accord with preexisting useful practices" and "God does not usually waste time prohibiting the impossible or condemning the unthinkable" (Harris 65), Orthodox Jews still "insisted that God's purpose in Leviticus could never be fully comprehended; nevertheless the dietary laws had to be as a sign of submission to divine will" (61); the effort against futility wracks its head on homosexuality. Elio and Oliver need no reference to Leviticus 18:22—the religious expectation of compliance on that matter is in conversation with the dietary dictates elsewhere. The reminder of this for Elio is that, upon the conclusion of the credits roll, he is called to the table for latkes—another meal, another form of silence, even at the villa. An ocean apart, Elio and Oliver can eat this traditional marker of Hanukah yet no longer consume each other; to that, they must consign if they are to be in conversation with the law, the land, and their faith.

For a brief summer, though, they were able to evade these concepts for a discovery of the flesh. The reality that they were never going to permanently transcend society's fury at their relationship speaks to what Michel Foucault wrote, that, for the heterosexists who would look to find some sign to condemn homosexuality, Elio and Oliver's romance would be "a secret that always gave itself away" (43). Their reliance on food to communicate to each other speaks as much to the subliminal nature of what they were doing as to the need to be a member of the bourgeoisie to say it. While this sexual search contested the two's gender scripts and social cues, it is not accurate to say they failed if the pleasure of the peach shall linger with them and the viewer: "Pleasure and power," wrote Foucault, "do not cancel or turn back against one another; they seek out, overlap, and reinforce one another" (48). Indeed, the lasting message of *Call Me by Your Name* is not to resign to louder, more normative messaging, but to better understand the link between what we govern and what governs us.

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