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## **‘Lesbian Appetites’: Food, Sexuality and Community in feminist autobiography**

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Food and its emotional and political significance pervade autobiographical writing by lesbians. Audre Lorde’s evocation of a sexual awakening while pounding Caribbean spices or Dorothy Allison’s utopian dream of a feast uniting all her past lovers are all eloquent examples. In these texts, the writers do not only recount various ‘food memories’, but make explicit links between food, sexuality and lesbian community. Charting their own food histories, they depict the ways in which food is crucial to the emergence of a complex sense of identity, as a conceptual link to childhood, belonging, or ancestral roots. On the other hand, the autobiographers offer a critical feminist viewpoint on individual and social food histories as well as the families that shaped them, the relationships they engage in, and the political movements they take part in.

Any feminist discussion of food needs to reflect on the gendered patterns of production, preparation and consumption of food. Feminist critics have argued that food practices express a gendered hierarchy, with the status of a ‘good woman’ and the well-being of her family dependant on her cooking, thriftiness and self-sacrifice (Delphy and Leonard, 1992). As late as 1979, Pierre Bourdieu claimed that men and women ate differently: men greedily, in gulping mouthfuls, women daintily, taking smaller bites and chewing carefully. Moreover, women actually seemed to prefer the cultural capital of moral superiority to an equal share of the food: women ‘don’t have a taste for men’s food [red meat and ‘hearty’ dishes] ... they are satisfied with a small portion ... stinting themselves ... they derive a sort of authority from what they do not see as deprivation.’ (Bourdieu, 1979; quoted in Probyn, 2000: 28-9) To this depiction

of men as eaters and women as feeders, both Caroline Bynum (1987) and Carol Adams (1990) add that women themselves are what is eaten—they are metaphorically represented as food. This representation can be linked to race: for example, bell hooks (1992) reads the huge chocolate breasts displayed in a cake shop's window as an expression of the deep-rooted image of the black 'mammy' feeding a white child, while her white friends find the display harmless and amusing (61-2).

Since being a 'big eater' is in itself seen as masculine, the image of the good woman as selfless feeder of others is complemented by the persistent stereotype of the fat, greedy and aggressive lesbian. A striking example is German writer Günter Grass's (1979) *The Flounder*, where three wannabe lesbians embark on a Father's day barbeque, eating huge steaks with their teeth 'not nibblingly concealed but brazenly bared' (215), like *Real Men*, and then proceed to gang-rape another woman with a strap-on rubber penis. However, lesbian autobiographers writing about food purposely disrupt these gendered stereotypes by portraying themselves as both 'eaters' and 'feeders' and laying open the power relationships expressed in who feeds whom, and who decides what is eaten. Food and food imagery thus play an ambiguous role: food can signify 'home' and belonging; it can evoke sensuality, sexuality and community. On the other hand the discourse of 'bad food' marks the eater as lower class, and endless conflicts revolve around the eating or not-eating of food. The writers therefore need to address the historical and social context of their individual food histories. For example, the mother's social aspirations are expressed through the championing of the orange (Winterson) or the disdain for the water melon (Lorde), while Anna Livia contrasts the poverty of lentil-consuming UK lesbian feminists with the affluence of Californians who enjoy organic artichokes and the food of Allison's childhood

signifies both class stigma and class pride: in the interlinking of individual and social histories within autobiographical writing (Probyn, 1993) food can be a crucial element.

In the following, I will trace these connections between food and sexuality, identity and community through four exemplary texts that are situated somewhere between ‘fact’ and fiction<sup>1</sup>. The ambiguous symbol of the orange in Jeanette Winterson’s *Oranges are Not the Only Fruit* (1985) is linked, via Christina Rossetti’s ‘Goblin Market’, to romantic poetry and erotic love between women. Audre Lorde, in her ‘biomythography’ *Zami* (1982), uses fruit and vegetables of African and Caribbean origin to relate the narrator’s ancestral roots to her own lesbian existence. Dorothy Allison’s short story ‘A Lesbian Appetite’ (1988) explores the ways in which food encapsulates social, personal and sexual histories, while Anna Livia’s autobiographical essay ‘Tongues or Fingers’ (1995) charts the narrator’s development from the all-encompassing sensuality of a South African childhood to sensory deprivation in the London radical-feminist movement and from there to a re-awakening of the senses in Southern California. The first part of this article, ‘Fruit’, focuses on connections between food and lesbian sexuality. The second, ‘Greens’ explores the tensions between different food histories; the third, ‘Meat’, addresses the use of food to create boundaries around communities and between self and Other.

### **Fruit—food and sexuality**

The connection between food and sex can be a cliché, commodified by scores of ‘gastroporn’ books and TV shows featuring ‘naked chefs’ like Jamie Oliver or ‘domestic goddesses’ like Nigella Lawson (Probyn, 2000). This connection has been

seen as universally applying to all humans, related to the primary eroticism of sucking at the mother's breast (Lupton, 1996: 18). The use of fruit imagery to signify sexuality is widespread—the suggestive shapes and textures of fruit lend themselves very easily to this. On the other hand, there is a persistent association of fruit and the 'fruity' with queer sexuality.<sup>2</sup> Another obvious connection is that between fruit and woman-as-prey, passive and ready to be plucked; the journalist who described a young Martina Navratilova as 'a juicy ripe plum' was clearly playing on both these connotations (see Hallett 1999: 131).

In *Carnal Appetites* (2000) Elspeth Probyn argues for a theory of food that connects eating with sexuality but avoids the easy metaphors or simplistic gendered associations (e.g. meat equals masculinity). Using food to replace sex as the linchpin of identity confounds both those 'who have privileged sex ... as either constituting the very truth of ourselves; or those that have invested in endlessly deconstructing that supposed truth.' Instead, 'sexuality, like food, is only of interest so far as it allows us to see new connections between individuals and collectivities' (67/8). This approach draws on a Deleuzian view of the body not as a stable entity, but 'a multitude of surfaces that tingle and move' (70), where boundaries between body and food, eater and what is eaten are blurred. Following on from this, Probyn offers a reading of both food and sex that is informed by queer theory: aiming to avoid the creation of stable identities (bodily or sexual), Probyn presents both eating and sex as multi-sensual experiences that call these identities into question.

In exploring the autobiographical writings themselves, this perspective on food and sex needs to be reconciled with the authors' assertion of a specifically lesbian

sexuality linked to fruit imagery. While Anna Livia briefly recounts a happy rainy afternoon spent with a friend comparing dried apricots to ex-lovers' genitals (48), fruit symbolism pervades the whole text of Jeanette Winterson's *Oranges are not the Only Fruit* (1985). Oranges are proclaimed to be 'the only fruit' (29) by the forbidding adoptive mother who offers oranges but no support in response to young Jeanette's expressions of need, anger or bewilderment (Kley, 2003). The mother's statement is set within the context of a 1960s mill town where food expresses class status (for example, 'sandwich inspections' target poor school children whose lunches are made from leftovers (33)). Imported fruit, seen by some as 'muck from Spain' (76), can also encapsulate social aspirations with their Mediterranean promise: 'Spanish Navels, Juicy Jaffas, Ripe Seviles' (134). This status-based attitude to fruit is then reinforced by the mother giving away the church's hoard of tinned pineapples (both foreign and cheap) to the local Black evangelical church because 'she thought that's what they ate'. Moreover, there may be links between the orange and the virgin birth so desired by the mother who has to accept adoption as second best: orange trees can reproduce through parthenogenesis, and the orange branch—associated with Palestine—symbolizes the Virgin Mary in Renaissance art (McPhee, 1966). Thus, oranges (or tinned pineapples) come to stand for the mother's monomaniacal, anti-modern world view she attempts to impose on her daughter (Kley, 2003: 258).

On the other hand, oranges are associated with desire and the 'fruits of the flesh' (7) despised by the mother. Jeanette tears open an orange from which emerges the 'orange demon that beguiles', a subversive alter ego encouraging her to have a 'difficult, different time' (106-111). Later, a text vignette describing a paradise garden with an orange tree at its heart ends with an allusion to the Fall of Adam and Eve

which illustrates Jeanette's need to leave behind the security of her mother's firm beliefs: 'to eat of the fruit means to leave the garden because the fruit speaks of other things, other longings' (120). Winterson's (invented) attribution of 'Oranges are Not the Only Fruit' to Nell Gwynn, who had been one of the girls who sold 'oranges at sixpence a piece and themselves for little more' (McPhee, 1966: 86) also points in this direction, leaving room for speculation what these other possible fruits might be.<sup>3</sup> On a more simple level, oranges are also a source of sensual enjoyment. They can be sucked and champed by toothless Elsie, or eaten 'like oysters, dropped far back into the throat'. The mother's totalising claim that 'oranges are the only fruit' is countered by a riff on the various subversive uses of fruit: 'fruit salad, fruit pie, fruit for fools, fruited punch. Demon fruit, passion fruit, rotten fruit, fruit on Sunday' (29). Rebellious old Elsie Norris introduces Jeanette to the forbidden fruit of same-sex eroticism by sharing an orange and reading her Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market* (1862) which famously mingles sisterly love with sexual desire in its bittersweet and addictive goblin fruit:

Did you miss me?  
Come and kiss me.  
Never mind my bruises,  
Hug me, kiss me, suck my juices  
Squeezed from goblin fruits for you,  
Goblin pulp and goblin dew.  
Eat me, drink me, love me,  
Laura, make much of me,  
For your sake I have braved the glen  
And had to do with goblin merchant men. (1862: 94-5)

Fruit, both seductive and dangerous, have become interchangeable with the female body; and Rossetti's device is taken up in more graphic ways by lesbian authors. While Jeanette's ritual of 'breaking an orange' with other women has been read as symbolically 'giving herself' (Carter, 1998), Ali Smith (1995) offers an erotically charged description of opening up a Satsuma: 'I'd try to take the peel off in one piece,

working slowly round the edges, easing the fruit out of the skin, then my thumb going in, splitting and spreading the pieces ...' (31) If fruit can symbolise the female body, the peeling, opening and eating of fruit offers endless metaphors for the celebration of a lesbian sexuality of 'tongues or fingers'.

In Audre Lorde's *Zami* (1982), fruit express the yearning for a lost homeland: Caribbean immigrants in New York treasure fruit that is sent by relatives back home or bought from the Caribbean street market 'under the bridge' (3). The forbidden fruit is the watermelon, associated with poor Blacks from the Southern US from whom the Caribbean families want to distance themselves: Audre's parents look down on the man who sells watermelons from his 'rickety wooden pickup truck with the southern road-dust still on her slatted sides' (58); in retrospect, the narrator reads her mother's disgust of watermelons also as a sign of her mother's fear of a voluptuous female sexuality. However, the fruit that form a recurring 'leitmotif' in *Zami* are the avocado or 'Goddess pear' and the banana. They are depicted on the mother's mortar—brought from the Caribbean—intricately carved with 'rounded plums and oval indeterminate fruit, some long and fluted like a banana, others ovular and end-swollen like a ripe alligator pear' (62). In retrospect, the mortar becomes an image for a Black women's tradition of sensuality both phallic and masculine and roundedly feminine that the mother passes on to her daughter in spite of her Catholic beliefs necessitating the tabooing of sexual expression.<sup>4</sup>

The fruit on the mortar are later echoed by the fruit used for lovemaking between the protagonist and her lover: '*ripe red finger bananas ... with which I parted your lips gently*' (218) and mashed avocado that forms '*a mantle of goddess pear that I slowly*

*licked from your skin.*' (220, her italics) Here, the narrator expresses a desire for phallic masculinity, but she does this in a slightly ironic vein, since the softness of the banana is incompatible with stereotypical phallic hardness. Moreover, contrary to conventions of representing the masculine as 'eater' and the feminine as 'food', Lorde represents both Audre's and her lover's body as food, writing of 'finger bananas', a 'mantle' of mashed avocado and 'grape-purple' genitals (220). I would speculate that for Lorde, brought up a strict Catholic—the impact of this upbringing can only be glimpsed from the throwaway comment "'Cross my heart." We Catholic girls never hoped to die.' (35)—the 'mantle of goddess pear' is also a subversive re-appropriation of the image of the Virgin Mary, who is likened to an African mother goddess. By carefully locating the fruit in childhood memories of cooking with her mother as well as in an historical Afro-Caribbean context, Lorde offers a different slant on the well-worn imagery of the phallic banana and licking food off the lover's skin. Fruit connects the narrator's lesbian sexual identity to her Caribbean and African ancestry: the 'Goddess pear' forms a connection to the matriarchal cultures of a mythical, pre-colonial West Africa that Lorde claims as her matrilineal heritage. Making this connection between sex, 'exotic' fruit and the places of origin forms part of Lorde's strategic project to counter the discourses that link lesbianism to Western, un-African decadence (Carlston, 1993; Chinosole, 1990). Lorde also echoes Caribbean literary tradition where fruit—unlike the 'cruel cane' associated with slavery—come to stand for the sensuality of ordinary Black people (Smilowitz, 1990).

By situating metaphorical fruits and sexual practices in an historical context and connecting them to the celebration of lesbian sexuality, both Winterson and Lorde invest the 'universal' symbolism of food and sex with personal and social

significance. On the other hand, the fruit imagery used by Winterson, Lorde, Rossetti and Smith can be read, through Probyn's queer theory of eating and sexuality, as dissolving boundaries between food and sex, bodies and fruit, masculine and feminine, eroticism and religion.<sup>5</sup> Since Winterson and Lorde develop multiple and at times contradicting layers of possible meanings for the orange or the avocado, the identities and sexualities linked to these fruits remain ambiguous. While insisting on a uniquely lesbian sexual imagery, they avoid the positing of the simplistic 'truth' of sexual identity Probyn had described as counterproductive for lesbian theorising of food and sexuality.

### **'Greens'—food and identity**

Dorothy Allison begins her autobiographical essay 'A Lesbian Appetite' with an evocation of the foods that evoke to her own childhood in Greenville, Carolina and the historical 'roots' of immigrants to the USA:

Greens. Mustard greens, collards, turnip greens and poke—can't find them anywhere in the shops up North. ... Red beans and rice, chicken necks and dumplings ... refried beans on warm tortillas, duck with scallions [spring onions] and pancakes, lamb cooked with olive oil and lemon slices, ... potato pancakes with applesauce, polenta with spaghetti sauce floating on top—food is more than sustenance; it is history. (185)

Allison's essay picks up on the strong links between food and identity (see for example Antoniou, 2004), with different foodstuffs clearly linked to regional and ethnic backgrounds. Most prominently, the narrator's recurrent yearning for greens (she describes scouring New York's all-night delis, ending up with tinned spinach and bacon which she eats with tears in her eyes) is closely linked to her childhood in the South, and her alienation in the 'diaspora' in New York. For US-Americans, greens are strongly identified with Deep South heritage. As part of the 'soul food' tradition, originating in slave cooking based on cheaply grown produce (as with mustard

greens) or by-products of higher status food (as with turnip greens), greens are both nostalgically linked with 'home cooking' and an unsettling reminder of the history of slavery (Hughes, 1997). Zafar (1999) draws the parallel between the importance of greens for Black Americans and the bitter herbs that traditionally remind Jews of the slavery endured in Egypt (462). Since the tradition of 'soul food' has been shared by poor Black and white Southerners alike, Allison does not explicitly address the issue of slavery, but instead links the yearning for greens to her own 'poor white trash' heritage, with its delicious but deadly cooking exemplified by the pork fat, sugar and salt used to flavour the bitter greens.

Similar to Lorde who uses the Caribbean banana and the African goddess pear to link her own ancestral roots to her sexual identity, Allison links both food and sexual cravings to her own childhood. She claims that 'my sexual identity is intimately constructed by my class and regional background' (1994: 23); and the food preferences she describes further contextualize this sexual identity. However, 'A Lesbian Appetite' also addresses collisions between different food histories which are only hinted at in *Zami*. Allison expresses the dynamics within the narrator's lesbian relationships through the food and drink shared between the couple, ranging from Southern grits with butter and cheese to Italian-American eggplant with garlic, from chocolate soda to bitter yellow piss. They are an expression of the narrator's own identity as a Southerner in the diaspora, and her lovers' various regional, sexual or political identities: vegetarian feminism, the Jewish roots of New York intellectuals, unreconstructed butches' love of barbecued pork and lesbian celebration of all of a woman's bodily fluids. The individual food histories recounted in 'A Lesbian Appetite' are varied, making specific connections between food, location, class and

sexuality. They include the narrator's poor childhood paradoxically characterised by rich food, her health-conscious ex-partner's move from sensuous fried aubergines to raw vegetables and macrobiotic cooking and the damaged Southern belle's repudiation of and wistful yearning for the food of her childhood. Even though many of these food histories are incompatible, it remains imperative that both food and memories be shared: one relationship remains short-lived since the lover 'didn't want to eat at all ... we drank spring water and fought a lot.' (186) In Allison's text, women connect to each other by joyfully or painfully sharing food, stories and memories. However, the generous impulse of 'let me feed you what you really need' (202) can lead to a presumption what the other woman 'really needs', and therefore an exercise in power.

This introduction of power within the feeding relationship means that food can divide women as well as unite them. The narrator of 'A Lesbian Appetite' acutely perceives a class-based hierarchy of foodstuffs, where some foods express sophistication or moral superiority. For example, one ex-lover praises New York deli foods as the best in the world, and the whole wheat bread that sticks in the narrator's throat becomes 'a symbol for purity of intent' (192). The narrator's own yearning for the food of her childhood marks her out as 'white trash', resonating with Deborah Lupton's (1996) description of the discourse of 'bad food: 'Bad food is associated with illness and disease. It is also associated with ... abundance, hedonism and release, with childishness and childhood ... Bad food is polluting and fattening, it is linked with the masculine and working class.' (155) Allison sees the discourse of 'bad food' as closely connected to a discourse of 'bad sex'. Both in 'A Lesbian Appetite' and several of the essays in *Skin* (1994) the narrator takes issue with strident feminist

disapproval of her upfront sexuality and self-identification as a masochist that is again strongly linked to her childhood and a personal history of sexual abuse. Describing the pressure to adapt to sexual and food practices extolled by her lesbian-feminist friends, she refuses 'to be ashamed of my childhood or who I became through surviving it.' (54) In 'A Lesbian Appetite', feminist health-consciousness is also seen as a kind of class oppression, a devaluation of the narrator's family: 'Poor white trash I am for sure. I eat shit food and I am not worthy. Five of my cousins bled to death before thirty-five, their stomachs finally surrendering to sugar and whisky and fat and salt ... But my dreams will always be flooded with salt and grease'. (1988: 187) Choosing the healthy food recommended by friends and lovers might prolong the narrator's life, but it would also betray the dreams and yearnings shaped by her childhood. For Allison, food, like sex, is constructed by individual background and history, yet paradoxically at the same time deeply embedded in the very core of the self.

At first glance this reading of Allison's story seems to run counter to Probyn's (2000) reading of it as a transgressive Deleuzian text that calls stable identities and universal connections between food and sex into question, where 'rhizomatically, eating opens in several directions, which then intersects with lines that set off in sex.' (76) Extending my exploration of Lorde's and Winterson's use of fruit imagery to claim and at the same time deconstruct lesbian sexual identities, I would like to argue that Allison uses the multiple meanings of food to complicate lesbian identity. 'A Lesbian Appetite' outlines how food, identity and sexuality can be connected *and* comically at odds with each other: at times, sexual desire propels the narrator to adapt to her lovers' food tastes, or the craving for barbecued pork drives her away from her strictly

vegetarian girlfriend. Although Allison depicts sexual expression and food cravings as strongly linked to her own childhood, both evolve and change as she connects with other women. Similar to Audre Lorde who claims that ‘every woman I have ever loved has left her print upon me’ (1982: 233), the foodstuffs encapsulating the background and politics of different lovers are ‘incorporated’ by the narrator into her own narrative of identity.

### **Meat—food and community**

The need to eat ‘viscerally segregates us and radically brings us together’, driven by the—until very recently—universal experience of food scarcity. The egoism of eating and depriving others of resources is tempered through the social altruism of sharing food, and thereby creating community (Probyn, 2000: 63). However, this can also be achieved by not-eating, that is, by religious or social food taboos (e. g. of pork), which is a means of distancing one’s own community from others, a means of exclusion that can be expressed in a visceral disgust of taboo foods: Margaret Visser (1989) claims that ‘food always symbolically underpins societal categories ... it is not necessary to be aware of a structural violation; one reacts simply and directly with avoidance and abhorrence.’ (121) Food is especially potent in this way because it is taken inside the body, while bodily boundaries are heavily invested with meanings: they represent selfhood and individuality, but also the larger community and the ‘body politic’. Thus, breaching these boundaries by eating is always fraught with anxiety; and food represents what ‘we’ are, and what ‘we’ are not (see for example Dowler, 2003, Lupton 1996, Caplan 1994).

One of the ways in which many radical-feminist communities have defined themselves is by refusing to eat meat, partly as a reaction to the popular association of meat eating with masculinity and power over nature (Fiddes, 1992). In Carol Adams' often-quoted feminist polemic *The Sexual Politics of Meat*, man's use of animals is related to his use of women. Both are 'meat' or prey, hunted and devoured by men. 'Meat-eating is the re-inscription of male power at every meal.' (Adams, 1990: 187) Thus, women *should not* have 'a taste for men's food': this would mean identifying with the oppressor and colluding with the exploitation of animals and women. Elspeth Probyn argues that, in pursuing this line of argument, Adams wants to expunge the sexual associations of meat eating: she 'wants to police this troubling fusion of flesh eating flesh ... in her rage against meat-eaters ... we hear not ethics but the maintenance of strict and determined boundaries.' (2000: 73) However, Anna Willetts, in her study of vegetarianism in South-East London, found that it was a 'fluid and permeable category embracing a whole range of food practices' (1997: 117). Describing oneself as a vegetarian could accommodate occasional 'lapses', especially when eating out, while some of the meat eaters were just as concerned about factory farming or attempting to reduce the amount of meat they ate.

Allison uses the gendered associations of meat eating in order to engage in a debate about the acceptability of a female masculinity which is portrayed as strongly working class, reading the repudiation of meat as a repudiation of butch identities and sensual pleasures. In a move that Willetts describes as typical for troubled meat-eaters, she depicts vegetarian feminists as hypocritical and controlling. The popular idea that eating meat creates aggression and non-meat eaters are peaceful comes in for special ridicule in one episode where a vegetarian girlfriend bullies the narrator into cutting

mountains of vegetables into 'bite-sized' pieces, and then leaves with a macrobiotic cook. The narrator retaliates by taking off with a working-class butch in search of a barbecue (196). In this episode, struggles over power, class and gendered identities are expressed in fights about food. However, Allison also blurs the association between meat-eating and masculinity by describing butches combining barbecued meat with childlike chocolate soda, or making the essential Mother Earth task, making bread, seem very masculine ('Lee ... punching down a great mound of dough for the oatmeal wheat bread' (202)).

In a similar polemic against pleasure-averse feminist politics, Anna Livia's 'Tongues or Fingers' deplores the puritanism of the Eighties radical feminist movement in London where 'food had shrunk to bowls of raw chick peas with lentils; clothes were uniformly navy blue' (Livia, 1995: 49)—although the narrator acknowledges that her experience might have been at the extreme end of the radical movement, since some friends stubbornly continued to eat salmon and wear pink. Having relocated to pleasure-seeking southern California, the narrator makes fun of middle-class vegetarian lesbians and their consumption of expensive organic artichokes. Instead, the narrator is inspired by a memory from a London curry house, of 'chicken, baked in a sauce of ... was it yoghurt? cottage cheese? ... turmeric? garam masala? cumin?' and praises the sensuality and provocative spirit of a girlfriend 'whose ambition it is to taste every animal that is not endangered' (51): a minimum standard of ecological conscience is still required.

Anthropologist writers on food (e.g. Claude Levi-Strauss, Mary Douglas) have analysed the uses of food as a language inscribing personal relationships, gender

relations or social class positions (Caplan, 1994). This means that the possibilities of expressing allegiance to or resistance against class, ethnic, gender or familial positions by preparing and eating or not-eating food are endless. In the specifically lesbian political contexts described by Allison and Livia, emotionally charged foodstuffs become easily recognisable ‘shorthand’ for sexual identities or political standpoints. In their recollections, the highly publicised ‘lesbian sex wars’ are accompanied by generational ‘food wars’ waged between the worthy vegetarian, chickpea- or tofu-consuming radical-feminists and the young, daring, taboo-breaking, meat-eating sex radicals. As comedian Lea di Laria has put it: ‘there’s only one thing you have to eat to be a lesbian, and it’s not hummus’ (1993, quoted in Ainley 1995: 45). Food metaphors easily lend themselves to describing contested sexual identities: Emma Healey, in *Lesbian Sex Wars* (1996) accuses radical feminists worried about ‘male-identified’ sexual practices of ‘sexual veganism’. They then ‘faced a group who wanted to eat red meat. But a quick fuck and raw steak could never be part of the lesbian feminist equation.’ (89)

Thus, food preferences, raw steak or granola—the worthy wholegrain US-American breakfast cereal comparable to Weetabix in the UK <sup>6</sup>—come to stand for a lesbian identity that includes political, sexual and fashion components. The Toronto website planetout.com encapsulated this very nicely with ‘Whether you’re a tie-dye-wearing granola lesbian or a leather-clad, meat-eating party animal, there is a place for you in Toronto’s very diverse yet co-operative and welcoming [gay] community.’ The reason an opposition of red meat and granola can be used as immediately comprehensible ‘shorthand’ is that it draws on a well-established concept of the ‘granola lesbian’ that is linked to seeing grains as embodiment of the earth and thus

the nation, the 'good' and the 'moral' (see Visser, 1989), or, for lesbian feminists, Mother Earth. Creating binary oppositions between drab, political granola lesbians and meat-eating, hard-drinking young dykes, Allison, Livia and Healey recast both food and sex wars as a generational struggle within the lesbian community, drawing on a well documented use of food as a battleground for conflicts between mothers and daughters (see for example Chernin 1984). Allison and Livia, identifying with the 'pro-sex', adventurous lesbians of the late eighties and nineties, denounce the asceticism of the generation of lesbian feminists before them, and link the repudiation of meat with the repudiation of female masculinity. In addition to this divisive use of food imagery, Allison depicts the overcoming of boundaries between masculine meat eaters and feminist vegetarians—for example, the narrator and a fellow Southern lesbian can agree on fried crawfish with hot sauce as a compromise between red meat and vegetarian food for a celebration of their shared origins. Clearly, the positing of simplistic binaries can be a disadvantage of using food as 'shorthand' for politicised sexual identities, and Allison uses this device together with more complex representations of food, identity and sexuality. Yet the fact remains that, in both Allison's and Livia's text, the importance of acute political and environmental concerns behind feminist asceticism and vegetarianism is not raised at all.

Having focused on the divisive aspects of the gendered politics of meat, I would like to end this discussion with the possibility of an inclusive concept of meat eating where the eater is, in a way 'consumed' as well. In Probyn's words, "“eating the other” ... is also the point ... where food and sex interact. In a bare manner, it confuses who we are and what we eat, what or who we want.” (70)<sup>7</sup> Surprisingly, it is Audre Lorde who envisions a lesbian community united by the eating of meat. At the end of

*Zami*, the narrator describes her friend Geri's party, where she meets her first new lover after a very painful break-up. The party forms a quasi-utopian space where black lesbians of all shapes, sizes and sexual identities can meet and mingle. At the centre of a table laden with food is 'a huge platter of succulent and thinly sliced roast beef ... each slice of rare meat ... lovingly laid out and individually folded in a vulval pattern, with a tiny dab of mayonnaise at the crucial apex' (p. 212) In this taboo-breaking scene that echoes the celebration of female bodies in the performance art of the seventies, the women both metaphorically and actually 'eat flesh': the gendered associations of meat-eating are overlaid with a sensuous celebration of lesbian sexuality.

### **Potluck: Conclusion**

Allison ends her story with a utopian dream of a feast that allows all the varied women (and a few men) that represent strands of her life and facets of her identity to come together, barbecuing butches and wholemeal bread-baking ecofeminists joining her mother salting greens and her aunts baking biscuits, and thus representing the whole story of the narrator's life in the form of a potluck. The lesbian ritual of potluck (see Zimmerman, 2000), sometimes leads to debates on what foodstuffs are acceptable. However, it offers a utopian possibility: a community that is accepting of women's different regional, ethnic and social backgrounds, reflected in the food they bring to share. Potluck also symbolises the autobiographers' method of bringing together highly varied food histories and memories to be shared and consumed. Food is crucial to the autobiographical writings discussed, encapsulating—both as 'shorthand' for ethnic roots and political beliefs and as complexly layered patterns of memories and emotions—concepts of sexuality, identity and community. The

autobiographers challenge preconceptions of women as feeders and men as eaters by presenting themselves as both, and by outlining the complexities of eating/feeding relationships between lesbians.<sup>8</sup> Because of a critical engagement with issues of food and gender, the food described in the autobiographies is never just a sign of belonging to—or challenging—a clearly defined community, but part of a very complex and at times contradictory narrative of identity.

However, all four authors relate their use of food imagery to the utopian tradition of dreaming of abundance, rivers flowing with milk and honey, or the sharing of food by peaceful communities (see for example Bartkowski 1989)—although Winterson can also be very scathing about the pseudo-utopianism of hypocritical do-gooders sharing unwanted food. The realities of poverty, troubled histories and divided communities are clearly outlined in the autobiographical texts I have explored. Yet it is the pervasive power of this utopian aspect of food that helps create a diverse lesbian community not at odds with the construction of a complex personal identity. Food is seen as integral to lesbian existence, intimately connected to and involved in the shaping of sexual identities, personal histories and lesbian communities.

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<sup>1</sup> There has been an ongoing debate within autobiography studies about the status as autobiography as 'fact' or 'fiction'; most would agree that it is situated in between, although the marketability of many autobiographies rest on the assumption that they are 'fact'. To mark the complex interplay of different selves within autobiographical writing, I am distinguishing between the author of an autobiography ('Lorde') the protagonist in the text ('Audre') and the 'narrator' in the text, who looks at her past from a position of hindsight.

<sup>2</sup> The Oxford English Dictionary lists 'fruit' an American slang term for somebody or something ripe for plucking: a dupe ready to be fleeced, a promiscuous woman or prostitute (similar to the German use of *Früchtchen* 'little fruit' for a sluttish woman or a naughty girl); or a gay man. It is unclear whether the word is used because of his alleged promiscuity or vulnerability to blackmail, but the term seems to suggest that unrestrained female and gay male sexuality are two sides of the same coin.

<sup>3</sup> Hilary Hinds (1992) recalls that when the television drama based on *Oranges* was first screened, one tabloid journalist fantasised about a version with a cast of Page Three models where 'melons are not the only fruit' (166).

<sup>4</sup> See also my article (2001) on autobiographies by three daughters of immigrants, which briefly outlines the relationship between Caribbean/African ancestry and lesbian identity in Audre Lorde's use of fruit imagery.

<sup>5</sup> This blurring of boundaries has been disturbing even to lesbian feminists: Anna Livia (1990) remembers that for the group of radical feminists she belonged to in the eighties, there was 'a certain discomfort occasioned by the avocado scene in *Zami*' (50).

<sup>6</sup> For US-American readers, 'granola' is still redolent of the Puritanism of the Kellogg brothers. The maverick sexologist John Money (1985) popularised the view that they saw the consumption of cereals as a means of curbing sexual desire, alongside cauterisation of the offending organs.

<sup>7</sup> Probyn refers here to bell hooks chapter 'Eating the Other' in *black looks* (1992) but puts a positive slant on this term originally referring to colonialist oppression.

<sup>8</sup> According to Christina Jarvis (2000), Allison complicates the classic situation of a mother selflessly feeding her daughters through 'various reinscriptions of this eating/feeding scenario, sexualised through the relationships of the lesbian lovers.' ( 778)