

M/C Journal, Vol. 13, No. 5 (2010) - 'pig'**Sugar Pigs: Children's Consumption of Confectionery**<http://journal.media-culture.org.au/index.php/mcjournal/article/view/294>*Toni Risson*

Sugar pigs are traditional confections shaped like sugar mice with little legs and no tail. One might, therefore, nibble the trotters of a sugar pig or suck delicately upon the nose of a sugar pig, but one must never eat one's sugary treats like a pig. As an imagined border between the private world inside the body and the public world outside, the mouth is an unstable limit of selfhood. Food can easily cause disgust as it passes through this hazardous terrain, and this disgust is produced less by the thought of incorporation than by socially constructed boundaries such as the division between human and animal. In order to guard against disgust and the moral judgement it incurs about the eater, the mouth is governed by myriad rules and, in the case of the juvenile mouth, subject to adult surveillance. This paper investigates children's consumption of confectionery in relation to the mouth as a liminal border space. Children are "sugar pigs" in as much as they disregard the conventions of civilised eating that govern the mouth, preferring instead to slubber, gnaw, lick, and chew like animals, to reveal the contents of their mouths and examine the contents of others, to put lollies in and out of their mouths with dirty hands, and to share single lollies. Children's lolly rituals resist civilised eating norms, but they hold important cultural meanings that parallel and subvert those of the adult world. Children's mouths are communal spaces and the rituals that take place in them are acts of friendship, intimacy, and power.

Eating norms instituted over thousands of years ensure that people do not eat like animals, and the pig, in particular, stands in opposition to civilised eating. In *On Good Manners for Boys* (1530), Erasmus of Rotterdam advises that a general guide to eating like a human being is to eat inconspicuously and self-consciously—to "lick a plate or dish to which some sugar or sweet substance has adhered is for cats, not people," he explains, and to "gnaw bones is for a dog"—and he compares ill-mannered eating with that of pigs, observing how some people "slubber up their meat like swine" (qtd. in Kass 145). Unrefined table manners and uncontrolled appetite continue to elicit such expressions of disgust as "dirty pig" and "greedy pig." Pigs grunt. Pigs snuffle among refuse. Pigs, as Bob Ashley et al. note, represent all that is uncivilised and exist only as a signifier of appetite (2).

The pig and civilisation, however, do not exist simply in opposition. Cookery writer Jane Grigson argues that European civilisation has been founded upon the pig (qtd. in Ashley et al. 2). Also, because the pig's body is pinkish, soft, and flabby like a human body and because pigs were usually housed near or even inside human dwellings, the pig confounds the human/animal binary: it is "a threshold animal" (Stallybrass and White qtd. in Ashley et al. 7). Furthermore, the steady evolution of eating practices suggests that humans would eat like animals if left in their natural state. Food rules are part of the "attempt to exclude piggishness" from human civilisation, which, according to Ashley et al., demonstrates "precisely the proximity of human and pig" (7). As physician Leon Kass observes, eating conventions "show us both how much we have taken instruction and how much we needed it" (139). Humans aspire to purity and perfection, but William Ian Miller explains that "fuelling no small part of those aspirations is disgust with what we are or with what we are likely to slide back into" (*Anatomy* xiv). Eating norms, therefore, do not emphasise the difference between human and the pig as much as they express the underlying anxiety that the human mouth and the act of eating are utterly animal.

'Lollies' is the Australian term for the confectionery that children mostly buy, and while the child with a lolly pouched in its cheek is such a familiar, even iconic, image that it

features on the covers of two recent books about confectionery (Richardson, Whittaker), licking, gnawing, and slubbering—Erasmus' wonderfully evocative and piggish word—aptly describe the consumption of lollies. Many lollies are large and hard, and eating them requires time, effort, concentration, and conspicuous mouth activity: the cheek bulges and speaking is difficult; a great deal of saliva is produced and the area around the mouth becomes smeared with coloured drool; and there is always the possibility of the lolly falling out. The smaller the child's mouth, or the larger the lolly, the more impossible it is to eat inconspicuously and self-consciously. Endless chewing is similarly animal-like, and "the bovine look" of teenagers featured in public complaints when chewing gum was mass-produced in the twentieth century (Hendrickson 7). Humans must not eat like animals, but overly-stuffed cheeks, sucking and slubbering mouths, licking tongues, gnawing teeth, and mindlessly ruminating jaws are unashamedly animal-like.

Other rules guard against disgust arising from the sight of half-chewed food. When food is in the process of becoming part of the body, it quickly acquires the quality of things with which disgust is more readily associated, things that are, according to Miller, moist rather than dry, viscid rather than free-flowing, pliable rather than hard, things that are "oozy, mucky, gooey, slimy, clammy, sticky, tacky, dank, squishy, or filmy" ("Darwin's Disgust" 338). Soft lollies with their vividly-coloured and glossy or sugar-encrusted surfaces look magical, but once they go into the mouth are "magically transformed into the disgusting" (Anatomy Miller 96). Food in the process of "becoming" must, therefore, never be seen again. The process of transformation takes place in the private interior of the body, but, if the mouth is open, half-transformed food is visible, and chewed food, according to Miller, "has the capacity to be even more disgusting than feces [sic]" (Anatomy 96).

Sometimes, the sight of half-consumed lollies inside children's mouths is deliberate because children poke out their tongues and look into each other's mouths to monitor the progress of lollies that change colour as they break down. Miller explains that the rules of disgust are suspended in sexual and non-sexual love: "Disgust marks the boundaries of the self; the relaxing of them marks privilege, intimacy, duty, and caring" (Anatomy xi). This principle applies to children's lolly rituals. If children forget to note the colour of a Clinker as they bite it, or if they want to note the progress of a Cloud or gobstopper, they open their mouths and even poke out their tongues so a friend can inspect the colour of the lolly, or their tongue. Such acts are marks of friendship. It is not something children do with everyone. The mouth is a threshold of self that children relax as a marker of privilege.

The clean/unclean binary exerts a powerful influence on food because, in addition to the way in which food is eaten, it determines the kind of food that is eaten. The mouth is a border between the self (the eater) and the other (the eaten), so what is eaten (the other) eventually becomes the eater (the self). Paradoxically, the reverse is also true; the eater becomes what is eaten—hence, "we are what we eat." Little wonder then that food is a site of anxiety, surveillance, and control. The pig eats anything, but children's consumption is strictly monitored.

The clean food imperative means that food must be uncontaminated by the world outside the body, and lollies violate the clean food category in this regard. Large, hard lollies can fall out of the mouth, or children may be obliged to violently expel them if they are danger of choking. The young protagonists in *Saturdee*, Norman Lindsay's bildungsroman set in country Victoria after WWI, arrange a secret tryst with some girls, and when their plan is discovered a horde of spectators assembles to watch the proceedings:

[Snowey Critchet] had provided himself with a bull's-eye; a comestible about the size of a cricket ball, which he stowed away in one cheek, as a monkey pouches an orange, where it distended his

face in a most obnoxious manner. He was prepared, it seemed, to spend the entire afternoon inspecting a scandal, while sucking his bull's-eye down to edible proportions. (147)

Amid a subsequent volley of taunts and cow dung, Snowey lands in the gutter, a reprisal that "was like to be Snowey's end through causing him to bolt his bull's-eye whole. It was too large to swallow but large enough to block up his gullet and choke him. Frenziedly he fought his way out of the gutter and ran off black in the face to eject his windpipe obstruction" (147-8). Choking episodes are further aspects of children's consumption that adults would deem dangerous as well as disgusting.

If a child picks up a lolly from the ground, an adult is likely to slap it away and spit out the word "Dirty!" The child's hands are potentially part of the contaminated outside world, hence, wash your hands before you eat, don't eat with your fingers, don't lick your fingers, don't put your fingers into your mouth, don't handle food if you aren't going to eat it, don't eat food that others have touched. Lolly-consumption breaches the clean/unclean divide when children put fingers into mouths to hook tacky lollies like Minties off the back teeth, remove lollies in order to observe their changing shape or colour, pull chewing gum from the mouth, or push bubble gum back in. The mouth is part of the clean world inside the body; adult disgust stems from concern about contamination through contact with the world outside the body, including the face and hands. The hands are also involved in playground rituals.

Children often remove lollies from their mouths, play with them, and put them back in. Such invented rituals include sharpening musk sticks by twisting them in the mouth before jabbing friends with them and returning them to the mouth. Teenagers also bite the heads off jelly babies and rearrange the bodies in multicoloured versions before eating them. These rituals expose half-consumed lollies, and allow lollies to be contaminated by the outside world, but they are markers of friendship and ways of belonging to particular groups as well as sources of entertainment.

The ultimate cause for disgust, apart from sharing with a pig perhaps, arises when children violate the boundary between one mouth and another by sharing a single lolly. "Can I have a lick o' your lollipop?" is an expression that belongs to a time when germs were yet to consume the public imagination, and it demonstrates that children have long been disposed to sharing confectionery in this way. Allowing someone to share an all-day sucker indicates friendship because it involves sacrifice as well as intimacy. How many times the friend licks it indicates how important a friend they are. Chewing gum and hard lollies such as bull's-eyes and all-day suckers are ideal for sharing because they last a long time. Snowey's choking episode is punishment both for having such a lolly while others did not, and for not sharing it.

When friends share a single lolly in Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief* it is a sign of their growing intimacy. Rudy and Liesel had only enough money for one lolly: "they unwrapped it and tried biting it in half, but the sugar was like glass. Far too tough, even for Rudy's animal-like choppers. Instead, they had to trade sucks on it until it was finished. Ten sucks for Rudy. Ten for Liesel. Back and forth" (168). Rudy asks Liesel to kiss him on many occasions, but she never does. She regrets this after he is killed, so here the shared lolly stands in lieu of intimacy rather than friendship.

Lollies are still shared in this way in Australian playgrounds, but often it is only hard lollies, and only with close friends. A hard lolly has a clearly defined boundary that can easily be washed, but even unwashed the only portion that is contaminated, and contaminable, is the visible surface of the lolly. This is not the case with a stick of chewing gum. In response to Tom Sawyer's enquiry as to whether or not she likes rats, Becky Thatcher replies,

"What I like, is chewing gum."

"O, I should say so! I wish I had some now."

"Do you? I've got some. I'll let you chew it a while, but you must give it back to me."

That was agreeable, so they chewed it turn about, and dangled their legs against the bench in excess of contentment." (58)

Unlike the clearly defined boundary of a gobstopper, the boundary of chewing gum continually shifts and folds in on itself. The entire confection is contaminated through contact with the mouth of the other.

The definition of clean food also includes that which is deemed appropriate for eating, and part of the appeal of lollies is their junk status. Some lollies are sugar versions of "good" foodstuffs: strawberries and cream, wildberries, milk bottles, pineapples, and bananas. Even more ironic, especially in light of the amount of junk food in many adult diets, others are sugar versions of junk food: fries, coke bottles, Pizzas, Hot Dogs, and Hamburgers, all of which are packaged like miniatures of actual products. Lollies, like their British equivalent, kets (which means rubbish), are absolutely distinct from the confectionery adults eat, and British sociologist Allison James shows that this is because they "stand in contrast to conventional adult sweets and adult eating generally" (298). Children use terms like junk and ket intentionally because there is a "power inherent in the conceptual gulf between the worlds of the adult and the child" (James, "Confections" 297). Parents place limits on children's consumption because lollies are seen to interfere with the consumption of good food, but, as James explains, for children, "it is meals which disrupt the eating of sweets" ("Confections" 296).

Some lollies metaphorically violate a different kind of food taboo by taking the form of "unclean" animals like rats, pythons, worms, cats, dinosaurs, blowflies, cane toads, and geckos. This highlights the arbitrary nature of food categories: snakes, lizards, and witchetty grubs do not feature on European menus, but indigenous Australians eat them. Neither do white Australians eat horses, frogs, cats, dogs, and insects, which are considered delicacies in other cultures, some even in other European cultures.

Eating human beings is widely-considered taboo, but children enjoy eating lollies shaped like parts of the human body. A fundraiser at a Queensland school fete in 2009 epitomised the contemporary fascination with consuming body parts. Traditionally, the Guess-The-Number fundraiser involves guessing the number of jelly beans in a glass jar, but in this instance the jar held teeth, lips, noses, eyeballs, ears, hearts, and feet. Similarly, when children eat Tongue Pops—tangy tongue-shaped lollies on a stick—the irony of having two tongues, of licking your own tongue, is not lost on children. Other lollies represent tiny people, and even babies.

In the ordinary world, children are small and powerless, but the magic of lollies enables them to be the man-eating giant, while Chicos and jelly babies represent the powerless child. Children welcome the opportunity to "bite someone else's head off" for a change. These lollies are anonymous people, but Freddo Frog and Caramello Koala have names as well as bodies and facial features, while others, like Cadbury's seven Magical Elves, even have personalities. One of these, Aquamarine, is depicted as a winking character dressed in blue, and described on the wrapper as "a talented musician who plays music to inspire the Elves to enjoy themselves and work harder, but is a bit of a farty pants." Advertisements also commonly personify lollies by giving them faces, voices, and limbs, so that even something as un-humanlike as a red ball, in the case of the Jaffa, is represented as a cheeky character in the act of running away. And children happily eat them all. Cannibalism rates highly in the world of children's confectionery (James 298).

If lollies are “metaphoric rubbish,” as James explains, they can also be understood as metaphorically breaking food taboos (299).

Not only do children’s rituals create a sense of friendship, belonging, even intimacy, but engaging in them is also an act of power because children know that these practices disgust adults. Lollies give children permission to transgress the rules of civilised eating and this carnivalesque subversion is part of the pleasure of eating lollies. James suggests that confectionery is neither raw nor cooked, but belongs to a third food category that helps to define “the disorderly and inverted world of children” (“Confections” 301). In James’ analysis, children and adults inhabit separate worlds, and she views children’s sweets as part of the “alternative system of meanings through which [children] can establish their own integrity” (“Confections” 301, 305). In the sense that they exist outside of officialdom, children have inherited the carnivalesque tradition of the festive life, which Bakhtin theorises as “a second world” organised on the basis of laughter (6, 8). In this topsy-turvy, carnivalesque realm, with its emphasis on the grotesque body, laughter, fun, exuberance, comic rituals, and other non-official values, children escape adult rule. Lollies may be rubbish in the adult world, but, like the carnival fool, they are “king” in the child’s second and festive life, where bodies bulge, feasting is a public and often grotesque event, and children are masters of their own destiny. Eating lollies, then, represents a “metaphoric chewing up of adult order” and a means of the child assuming control over at least one of its orifices (James 305-6). In this sense, the pig is not a symbol of the uncivilised but the un-adult.

Children are pigs with sugar—slubbing around hard lollies, licking other children’s lollies, metaphorically cannibalising jelly babies—and if they disgust adults it is because they challenge the eating norms that guard against the ever-present reminder that eating is an animal act. Eating practices “civilize the human animal” (Kass 131), but eating is inherently an untidy experience, and any semblance of order, as anthropologist Mary Douglas explains, is only created by exaggerating difference (qtd. in Ashley et al. 3). The pig is commonly understood to be the antithesis of civilisation and, therefore, the means by which we understand ourselves as civilised beings. The child with a lolly, however, is evidence that the line between human and animal is a tenuous divide.

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