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## Food and Societal (Dis)Order in Marie Darrieussecq's Works

Sandra Daroczi

### Abstract

This article analyses the way Marie Darrieussecq explores oppositions intrinsic to food, both as a lens that reflects the absurdities of various societal orders and as an instrument to contest, respond to, and subvert these orders. First I focus on fictional works (*Truismes* (1996) and *Il faut beaucoup aimer les hommes* (2013)), and on the othering processes they depict. In its relationship to the animal/human distinction and to colonial and postcolonial discourses, food in these works is shown to be both welcoming and divisive. Then I study non-fictional texts (Darrieussecq's autobiographically inspired *Le Bébé* (2002) and her biography of Paula Modersohn Becker, *Être ici est une splendeur* (2016)) in which food is linked to discourses of mothering and to the upholding of the patriarchal order. Finally I draw on recipes published by Darrieussecq to show how reading as we eat can contribute to the development of new types of readerly hospitalities.

**Keywords:** animality, hospitality, postcolonial, Other, motherhood, breastfeeding, patriarchy, reading.

Considering the ubiquitous character of food in our lives, it is rare that we use it as a lens for analysing other social phenomena. We most definitely talk about food: as Barker *et al.* demonstrate in a study of references to food in British women's magazines, 'public appetite for discussion about food was unprecedented during the 1990s' (2014: 132), while Ferrier notes that we currently associate discussions about food with a new type of public moral consciousness (2014: 1). However, we do not necessarily use food to talk about non-food related societal issues, nor do we see food as an answer to these issues. Instead, we tend to take it for granted, ignoring the multiple oppositions involved: survival and danger, inside and outside, body and mind, individual and community.<sup>1</sup> These oppositions carry tremendous potential for creativity and subversion, as they force us to navigate an uncertain, in-between space. Societal order aims to regulate this space and diminish its reach. Therefore, social norms prescribe what can and cannot be eaten, where we should procure our food, how we should cook it and eat it, and with whom we should share it. Going against these norms can cause cracks that significantly disturb the established order, and even provoke its restructuring by enlarging this in-between space.

This article analyses the way Marie Darrieussecq uses food in her works both as a lens that reflects the absurdities of various societal orders and as an instrument to contest, respond to, and subvert these very orders. It is through a variety of disorderly modes of consumption that Darrieussecq's characters are able to tackle these oppressive orders. The article adopts a wide-ranging understanding of food that includes discussions of foodstuff, food production, cooking, eating, and rites of hospitality. The latter are directly linked to meeting the Other; as Julia Kristeva points out: 'la rencontre commence souvent par une fête de la bouche: du pain, du sel et du vin [qui fusionnent dans] le rite de l'hospitalité' (1988: 22) ['meeting the other often begins by a feast of the mouth: bread, salt, and wine [merge] in the rite of hospitality']. For Kristeva, this sharing of food goes hand in hand with the sharing of stories: 'Mais ce coin de table plaisamment dévorant est parcouru des chemins de la mémoire: on se souvient, on projette, on récite, on chante' (Ibid.: 22) ['But this table corner of pleasant devouring is crossed by the paths of memory: the companions remember, plan ahead, recite, sing']. This 'miracle de la chair et de la pensée' (Ibid.: 22) ['miracle of flesh and thought'] allows for a communion beyond differences. Storytelling becomes essential for Darrieussecq's female narrators and characters, as it allows them to make sense of and assert their changing identities. I focus first on two fictional works — *Truismes* (1996) and *Il faut beaucoup aimer les hommes* (2013) — and on the othering processes they depict. Food contributes to the

marginalisation of the narrator of *Truismes* (a young woman transforming into a sow) and underlines the elitism and absurdity of the ruling political class. In *Il faut*, these othering processes are significantly influenced by the intersection of food with colonial and postcolonial discourses. The article's second part studies two of Darrieussecq's non-fictional texts — the autobiographically inspired *Le Bébé* (2002) and the biography of Paula Modersohn Becker, *Être ici est une splendeur* (2016). In these texts, food is directly related to discourses of mothering and to the upholding of the patriarchal order. However, it is also through food that light is shed on the contradictions facing new mothers and that women can assert their independence and creativity. The third and final part of the article will return to the above-mentioned in-between space, suggesting that one's engagement with food can act as a model for the engagement with texts: reading as one eats can be beneficial for welcoming the Other and for not letting go of the creative, rebellious self.

### **Food and othering**

In a 2012 interview with Shirley Jordan, Darrieussecq highlights the link between food, sex, and women's bodies, especially when looking at the protagonists of *Clèves* (2011) and *Truismes*: 'La nourriture et le sexe [...] sont des brèches, c'est-à-dire des voies par lesquelles son corps peut être envahi, menacé, dissocié, déchiré, séparé en morceaux. Des voies par lesquelles le désir passe et met son grand désordre (Jordan and Darrieussecq 2012: 139) ['Food and sex are gaps, they are routes through which one's body can be invaded, threatened, broken up, pulled apart, separated into pieces. Routes through which desire passes and leaves behind its great disorder']. Both sex and food are highly regulated by social norms, because of the subversive and creative potential they carry in these 'brèches' ['gaps']. The chaos and disorder they leave behind can be the source of new beginnings. However, this potential is not always immediately obvious or easily reached. The protagonists need to pass through a series of exclusions and marginalisations within which food acquires a double function — both as an element that contributes to this exclusion, and an element that helps to overcome it. Food, as pointed out by Dearbhla McGrath, both reinforces and threatens 'societal demarcations concerning concepts of gender and humanity' (2018: 152).

An example of food reinforcing social demarcations appears in *Truismes*,<sup>2</sup> when the protagonist describes the type of food she prefers as she transforms into a sow, food that is unexpected to the reader and places the narrator outside the realm of the human. The

human/animal divide is not just put into question by the type of food consumed, but also by its provenance, its unclean and raw state, and the lack of table manners when eating it. The food she finds in the park includes: ‘beaucoup de racines [...], qui sentaient bon la réglisse, l’hamamélis et la gentiane, et dans la gorge c’était doux comme un dessert, ça faisait baver en longs fils sucrés’ (Darrieussecq 1996: 69) [‘lots of roots [...], smelling nicely of liquorice, witch hazel, gentian, and they slipped down my throat like a sweet dessert, festooning me with long strands of sugary drool’ (Darrieussecq 1997: 58)]. While the sensation described is reminiscent of eating a dessert, it is produced by plants not normally associated with human consumption. There is little indication that these roots have been cleaned or washed; the protagonist is treading the line between the clean and the dirty, a line that is also a marker of normative food consumption. Moreover, none of these ingredients is cooked; they have not been transformed by fire, an action regarded as a sign of civilisation, marking man’s separation from and conquering of nature. While fruits and vegetables are regularly eaten raw (and normally washed), the plants enumerated by the narrator are not habitually consumed uncooked. Given contemporary innovations, we could argue that such ingredients are no longer unusual; however, the narrator eats them directly from the earth or sometimes from bouquets received from her clients. And while she is nauseated by the idea of pork, a later episode shows her musing inquisitively on whether a baby she spots with its mother in a car park might taste good (Darrieussecq 1996: 84). Such potential cannibalism marks the ultimate boundary of the human and the acceptable in alimentary terms.

The human/animal divide is further complicated when the narrator eats in the company of other humans. At a New Year’s Eve party organised by the fascist government the heroine, now transformed into a sow, displays more human(e) behaviour than the rest of the guests. The banquet is a pronounced example of disorderly eating, demonstrating that simply sharing food with others is not a guarantee of hospitality. Part of the guests’ animality is mirrored by the excess and unfamiliarity of the food consumed: ‘des bouts de cerf rôti, des tranches de giraffe, des pots entiers de caviar, des gateaux au sirop d’érable, des fruits d’Afrique, et des truffes surtout’ (Darrieussecq 1996: 105) [‘hunks of roast venison, slices of giraffe, whole jars of caviar, maple sugar candies, exotic African fruits, and truffles, especially truffles’ (Darrieussecq 1997: 93)] which cast the humans as a pack of famished animals. Both the quantity and the type of food consumed, thrown around, and subsequently wasted, highlight the unruliness of the fascist government and its disconnection from social realities. The night descends into further excess and atrocity, involving rape and even murder.

Despite the elegance of the surroundings, the guests' eating habits and brutal behaviour challenge the sense of division between 'civilised' human and 'uncivilised' animal. Cooking does not guarantee humanity, any more than elegant surroundings imply manners and civility. The ability to transgress boundaries with impunity renders the new power structure completely alien to the 'human'.

If *Truismes* allows us to think about food, disorder, and the human/animal divide, *Il faut* explores food, disorder, and cultural belonging, within a complicated mixed-race relationship. The New Year's Eve party in *Truismes* finds an echo in the Christmas party depicted in *Il faut*. *Il faut* tells the story of a mixed-race couple working in the Hollywood cinema industry. Solange, the novel's protagonist is a French actress who, while in Hollywood, falls in love with Kouhouesso, a Canadian actor and director originally from Cameroon. Kouhouesso is working on an adaptation of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, to be filmed in Africa. Jessie, the organiser of the Christmas party, has agreed to play the helmsman in the adaptation. The party embodies a perversion of traditional hospitality rites, even when its individual elements try to replicate hospitable encounters. As Solange and Kouhouesso arrive at the party, they see

Jessie, torse nu, barbe blanche et boxer rouge, [qui] recevait en offrant de petits bols pleins d'une neige où étaient plantés d'adorables nains bûcherons. Les nains étaient en chocolat et la poudreuse se prenait par le nez. Il fallait un peu de temps pour décoder la tenue d'Alma [...]. 'Elle est déguisée en renne', expliqua Jessie d'un ton d'évidence. Il faisait mine de la chevaucher. (Darrieussecq 2013: 147–48)

[A shirtless Jessie, wearing a white beard and red boxer shorts, [who] was offering little bowls full of snow adorned with dwarf lumberjacks, upon arrival. The dwarves were made of chocolate and the snow was meant to be snorted. It took a bit of time to decipher Alma's outfit [...]. 'She's dressed as a reindeer', Jessie explained with an obvious tone. He pretended to ride her].

The symbols of Christmas celebrations are re-appropriated, marking the eccentricities of the cinema industry, just as the choice and quantity of food marked the extravagance of the political ruling class in *Truismes*. The offering of chocolate dwarves and 'snow' on arrival imitates the hospitality rite but does not nourish; instead the 'poudreuse' marks the need to escape reality via the use of drugs (namely, cocaine), while the 'nains en chocolat' are reminiscent of childhood tastes, suggesting a desire to flee adult responsibilities (at least

during the Christmas party). The characters effect a double escape from reality: firstly, through their filmmaking work and secondly, through their consumption of drugs and alcohol. Traditionally, celebrations such as Christmas are an opportunity to share food and create common memories. However, in *Il faut*, the festive meal is perverted and transformed from a social adhesive into a mechanism for forgetting. In addition, Solange is puzzled by the fact that people deliberately take on animal characteristics (an echo of the banquet in *Truismes*). Yet again, the sharing of food and festivities does not mean hospitality, but rather chaos and inhumanity.

Depictions of food are further complicated by the postcolonial lens in *Il faut*. Instead of inclusion and integration, food can further perpetuate dichotomies and highlight postcolonial binarism. Solange and Kouhouesso are unable to carve out a societal space for their inter-racial relationship, an inability mirrored by their failure to reach a common ground concerning their choice of food:

Ils prirent un taxi, dînèrent au *Terminus Nord*. Elle aurait aimé lui faire visiter la Goutte d'Or, mais il n'avait aucune envie des quartiers africains, aucun goût pour cet exotisme, ni *ndolé*, ni poulet-arachide: il voulait du foie gras et de la confiture des figes, des huîtres, des bulots, une sole grillée et pouilly-fuissé. (Darriussecq 2013: 170)

[They took a taxi and had dinner at *Terminus Nord*. She would have liked to take him to the *Goutte d'Or*, but he was not in the mood for African neighbourhoods, nor did he care for this exoticism, neither *ndolé*, nor peanut chicken: he wanted *foie gras* and fig jam, oysters, whelks, a grilled sole and *pouilly-fuissé*.]<sup>3</sup>.

The contrast between Solange's and Kouhouesso's wishes raises questions about the extent to which this is a shared meal. Even though they eat together, Solange quickly realises that 'elle n'avait plus son attention' (Darriussecq 2013: 171) ['she no longer had his attention']. The categorical refusal of diasporic food leaves no possibility for compromise or a middle-way. The use of 'exotisme' ['exoticism'] is replete with questions: is Kouhouesso equating diasporic food with exoticism or is he commenting on Solange's desire for him to eat African food? If the former, the reader can be struck by Kouhouesso's distancing from his African background (particularly given that the dinner conversation revolves around the question of race and origins). If the latter, the reader can grasp Solange's tendency to simplify issues by assuming that Kouhouesso would feel 'at home' in the *Goutte d'Or*. However, by referring to

this tendency as ‘exotisme’, Kouhouesso stifles any possibility for discussion that could help Solange unpack her preconceptions and discern the intricacies of postcolonial identifications. Solange’s naivety is met by Kouhouesso’s negative response and his refusal to engage in an open conversation about the issues raised, which leads to a reinforcement of self/Other dichotomies reflected in a meal that is common, but not shared. This lack of meaningful sharing proleptically points towards the eventual break-up of the couple.

Food can thus be divisive and unwelcoming. This non-integrative character of food is even more prominent when the protagonists are in Cameroon filming their adaptation of Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. The two production teams — the Franco-American one, also known as the ‘white’ team, and the local one — have two different sets of supplies: ‘cinquante kilos de riz, un sac de sel, et un grand sac d’ignames – deux jours de vivres pour l’équipe locale – plus vingt packs d’eau minérale pour l’équipe dite blanche’ (Darriussecq 2013: 211) [‘Fifty kilos of rice, a bag of salt, and a big bag of yams – two days’ worth of food for the local team – plus twenty packs of mineral water for the so-called white team’]. Supplies for the ‘white’ team need to be sealed, protected from any form of contamination, reinforcing the clean/dirty dichotomy. We should note that ‘whiteness’ here is far from a clear-cut category and concerns nationality, not only race; it is relativized in this African context so that African-American Jessie, ‘une des rares superstars noires de Hollywood’ (Darriussecq 2013: 86) [‘one of only a handful of black superstars in Hollywood’], is unproblematically classified as ‘white’ and in need of special protection. The ‘white’ team’s supplies are not allowed to come into contact with the outside or with the Other; they are a direct transposition of the implantation of colonial power into the colonised land (the brand of bottled water mentioned later in the text – Évian – becoming a metonym for France). While medical advice recommends drinking bottled water when abroad to avoid the risk of dysentery, the ‘white’ team chooses to have imported water, rather than local brands. This insistence on the clean/dirty separation reaches its zenith when the team needs to re-enact a storm scene. Since Jessie ‘ne tournerait les scènes d’averse que sous Évian’ (Darriussecq 2013: 229) [‘would only film the rain scene under showers of Évian’], the rain machine needs to be ‘chargée d’Évian jusqu’à la gueule’ (Ibid.: 230) [‘filled with Évian up to bursting point’]. To avoid any possible contamination with the Other, the production company is paying for imported bottled water to fall into the river. This absurdity is legitimised using both medical and legal discourses: the insurance company and Jessie’s lawyer insist upon their need to protect him from any potential infections. The Other is seen as a carrier of



danger and disease. The fear is further perpetuated by Solange herself in an encounter that takes place soon after the filming of the rain scene. Here the team meet a group of girls from a nomadic Pygmy tribe, the ‘baka’, that inhabit the rainforests of Cameroon. When the girls ask Solange for water she hands them the Évian and a few of them drink from the bottle, carefully screwing the top back on when they have finished (Darrieussecq 2013: 232). Contemplating the Évian a little later Solange cannot bring herself to drink from the bottle; in spite of her raging thirst she sees only the perils that the water now represents: ‘Solange avait très, très chaud, et mal à la tête; il faut boire de l’eau disait Patricien. Mais le reste d’Évian, dans la bouteille, lui semblait concentrer tous les virus du monde’ (Darrieussecq 2013: 233) [‘Solange was feeling very, very hot and she had a headache; Patricien told her she needed to drink some water. But the water left in the Évian bottle seemed to concentrate all the world’s viruses’]. The water she had available already contained the Other, and as such could no longer come into contact with the self. This (post)colonial relation is further complicated if we take into account MacClancy’s observation that ‘[f]ood is power. Those who regulate its production, distribution, and consumption can control others’ (1992: 2-3). In *Il faut*, the distribution of the supplies is carried out by the local team. Patricien is the one who drives both Solange and the bottled water for the ‘white’ team. Despite his direct access to the sealed, non-contaminated supplies, he does not hold power over them. The colonial past is stronger than the postcolonial present, precluding Patricien from acting against the ‘white’ team’s desire for separation and clean boundaries.

Despite her refusal to incorporate the Other (by drinking from the same bottle as the baka girls), Solange attempts to pierce through postcolonial dichotomies. Food and hospitality rites are tools she uses to assist her in the endeavour. She is willing to share food with the locals, partly overcoming the divisive character of food analysed above. On her first night in Cameroon, there is a reversal of traditional hospitality rites: while she is the guest, she is also the one buying everyone food: ‘tous les poissons, elle avait acheté le panier. [...] On trouva des papayes, elle acheta toutes les papayes’ (Darrieussecq 2013: 217) [‘she bought the basket, with all the fish in it. They found papayas, she bought all the papayas’]. By providing the food, Solange is becoming a host in a place she is completely unfamiliar with. This change in location is also reflected in table manners, as she needs to improvise a plate using a plastic bag, while searching for a fork becomes more of an adventure than initially estimated. This feeling of being out-of-place is further exacerbated by Solange’s constant need to disinfect her hands with antiseptic gel reinforcing the above-mentioned clean/dirty division present throughout most of the trip.

The repetition of the adjective ‘tous/toutes’ [‘all’] highlights Solange’s impact upon the village — she had the financial means to buy *all* the food, that would feed *all* the people. This is still a reflection of her status as former coloniser, since the village she arrives in is shown to be unable to provide for her needs (be they food, cutlery, or means to clean her hands). She needs to use her money to compensate for this lack. Her inner monologue, towards the end of dinner, reflects her naivety and lack of knowledge about her new surroundings: ‘Elle devenait lentement et sûrement la patronne, avec une aisance qui la troublait, la réconfortait, personne n’allait la manger puisqu’elle nourrissait le village’ (Darrieussecq 2013: 217) [‘She was slowly and surely becoming the boss, with an ease that both troubled and comforted her; no one was going to eat her since she was feeding the whole village’]. Her reference to possible cannibalism suggests how little she knows about her host country. Furthermore, this remark can transform her gesture from a desire to share with the Other into a need to protect the self. The sharing of food was not necessarily an attempt to bring down barriers, but rather a way of ensuring the protection of the Western Other. Solange does not realise that with or without her, the village would probably have eaten the same thing; all she did was buy all the food from the villagers only to give it back to them. She was nonetheless helping construct a small community around this shared meal (as will be shown later, sharing a meal can positively contribute to breaking down self/Other dichotomies). Throughout this episode, she is both guest and host, disturbing traditional hospitality rites.

These rites are further altered when it comes to sharing stories: as a guest, Solange is the one who tries to reduce her otherness, and by extrapolation the danger she might represent, by telling Siphindile, the innkeeper, about her love story with Kouhouesso, shortly before the meal analysed above: ‘l’ennui était tel [...], l’ennui et l’angoisse, qu’elle lui raconta tout, Kouhouesso, son absence, son silence massif, à quoi Siphindile répondit que les fesses de la marmite ne craignent pas le feu’ (Darrieussecq 2013: 216) [‘boredom was so heavy, boredom and anguish, that she told her everything, Kouhouesso, his absence, his deep silence. To all this Siphindile replied that the bottom of the pot should not fear the fire’]. Siphindile is not an altogether satisfactory recipient of Solange’s story, as her answers are mostly truisms, proverbs that could apply to almost any situation: ‘Le brouillard du matin n’arrête pas le pèlerin, en somme. À cœur vaillant rien d’impossible. Elle le voulait? Il suffisait d’y mettre les moyens’ (Darrieussecq 2013: 216) [‘In short, the morning fog does not hinder the traveller. Nothing is impossible to a brave heart. She wanted him? She just had to

put the work in’]. While Solange does share her story, its reception is not meaningful, leaving the guest/host dynamic largely unchanged from what it was at the beginning. The stories do not help to reduce the Other’s otherness. This lack of meaningful listening and reception contrasts with Siphindile’s job as an innkeeper: traditionally, innkeepers are repositories of worldly knowledge and useful advice for travellers. Siphindile and Solange are unable to relate to each other, despite the sharing of food and stories, essential for a positive experience of hospitality. The inability is reminiscent of the former colonial relationship between France and Cameroon.

The remnants of colonial hierarchy underlying the narrative are diminished as Solange spends time with the local production team. This change is reflected in the meal shared by about fifty of them when they cook a whole pangolin caught by one of the team members (Darrieussecq 2013: 245–48). This time, Solange no longer pays for the food; Patricien buys it for his wife’s birthday, which they all celebrate in his hometown of Kribi. The pangolin is new to Solange: ‘Solange connaissait les taupes, même très grosses, du jardin de sa mère; mais ça elle n’avait jamais vu’ (Darrieussecq 2013: 245) [‘Solange was familiar with moles, even with the very large ones from her mother’s garden, but she had never seen anything like this before’]. The animal embodies the exotic and the unknown: its shells are hard to crack, and it is reputed to have magical powers. Moreover, unlike most animals, the pangolin can walk in a human-like upright position, using its tail and hind legs. The pangolin itself appears not quite human, not quite animal; it is as mixed and composite as the group of people that feast on it. Despite its otherness, the pangolin is rendered fit for human consumption through the process of cooking; human intervention diminishes the danger represented by this previously unseen animal. It even becomes familiar: ‘un goût un peu comme le canard, confit à la sauce arachide’ (Darrieussecq 2013: 246) [‘a taste a bit like duck, confit with peanut sauce’]. The familiarity of the taste and the conviviality of the meal reflect Solange’s growing familiarity with her surroundings and even friendship with her companions:<sup>4</sup> ‘Elle s’africanisait avec une maladresse qu’ils lui pardonnaient’ (Darrieussecq 2013: 248) [‘She was Africanising, with a clumsiness that they forgave her’]. She is no longer imposing her presence on the others (as in the previous episode, when it was not easy for the villagers to fulfil her needs), but rather sharing the experience. The idea that she was ‘Africanising’ suggests an openness towards the Other that was not shown in the initial encounter with Siphindile and the villagers. A mutual understanding — of the kind that was missing from Solange’s dinner with Kouhouesso at *Terminus Nord* — seems to be emerging here as the

others forgive Solange's clumsiness. The initial need to protect the self from the Other has disappeared, allowing for a breaking down of boundaries via the feast.

This opening towards the Other (partly by means of food and drink) has a positive effect on the self: 'Elle buvait du *matango* jaune et mousseux, mangeait du *tapé-tapé*; et ce caillou qu'elle avait dans la gorge, ce stupide nœud dans le ventre qui datait des jours d'attente à Los Angeles, se dissolvait un peu' (Darrieussecq 2013: 247) ['She was drinking yellow, frothy *matango* and eating *tapé-tapé*; and this lump she had in her throat, this stupid knot in her stomach that went back to her days of waiting in Los Angeles was slowly coming undone']. The fact that she uses the words *matango* and *tapé-tapé* instead of palm wine and fried plantain suggests a coming to terms with the new environment. There is no longer a need to explain or translate the Other (here represented by the traditional drink and side dish); the Other can now be incorporated in its original form. Naming food is a powerful tool for asserting group membership and for rendering food less dangerous and more accessible. In the same paragraph, a further word is typeset in italics and thus marked as foreign (to contemporary French): to *matango* and *tapé-tapé* is added *cantou*. The latter is of Gascon origin and can refer to a corner or angle, a large fireplace or a piece of bread. Gascony is Solange's birthplace, and the juxtaposition of these three terms in the same paragraph foregrounds the fact that identities are formed through the amalgamation of experiences over time. Identities are mutable and complex, and Solange's identity now carries French and African elements. These African elements are represented by the *matango* and the *tapé-tapé* to which Solange attributes significant powers. They help her in starting to overcome the ache caused by waiting for Kouhouesso. They aid in releasing the pressure of the 'lump in the throat' and the 'knot in the stomach' caused by her dependence on him. Therefore, these elements are not transitory, they effect a change that can impact Solange's self-definition.

As shown in this article's first section, then, food and its corollaries (cooking, eating, drinking, sharing with others) can reveal processes of othering, marginalisation, and exclusion. Nonetheless, food can also be a means by which such processes are overcome, especially when hospitality rites are upheld and when ingestion of the Other as foodstuff is accompanied by an openness towards the Other as person.

## Food and patriarchal (dis)orders

In Darrieussecq's non-fictional works we find differently complex depictions of food concerning motherhood and the patriarchal order. *Le Bébé* asks us to consider orderly and disorderly eating at their point of origin: the start of life and the mother's body. The text describes the baby's first nine months, alongside the mother-narrator's interrogations concerning parenting. Food occupies a significant place in the mother-baby dyad, marking both the union of the self to the Other (via breastfeeding) and their separation (via weaning). Breastfeeding is a particular type of hospitality, since it does not only involve the sharing of food, but the sharing of one's own body. In this instance of sharing, food is powerfully connected to ideas of duty and love, and the progression from milk to solids is fraught with social discourses that construct the places the mother and the baby should occupy within familial and societal frameworks. In *Le Bébé*, soon after the baby is (prematurely) born, the narrator tells of her struggles to feed him, due to his weakness and his period in an incubator. However, medical professionals link her inability to breastfeed to her desire to continue her creative preoccupations: 'Plus tard, la même [sage-femme], me trouvant en train d'écrire: "ça va empêcher la montée de lait"' (Darrieussecq 2005: 64) ['Later on, the same one [midwife] seeing me write remarked: "that's going to stop the milk flow"']. Breastfeeding regulates the life of both mother and baby. While the latter cannot engage in any other activities, the mother has to match this and dedicate herself fully to the baby, eschewing her previous occupation(s). The baby's physical hunger is matched by an 'emotional and social hunger' (Waxman 2008: 372) that prevents the mother from being anything else than a mother. These multiple dimensions of hunger act almost as an anaesthetic, encouraging the mother to numb (and even forget) her pre-mothering interests and desires.

Feeding the baby has regulatory effects even outside the actual moments of breastfeeding. In order to ensure the production of milk, the mother receives varied and contradictory advice about what she should eat, drink, and do, for example: 'mangez du fenouil. Buvez de la bière sans alcool. Prenez de la levure, du pastis, du lait. Portez un soutien-gorge d'allaitement. N'en portez pas' (Darrieussecq 2005: 65) ['You need to eat fennel. Drink non-alcoholic beer. Have some yeast, *pastis*, and milk. Wear a breastfeeding bra. Don't wear one']. Breastfeeding is largely regulated by external forces rather than by the needs of the mother and of the baby. The mother's body is seen as the place where other types of food and drink are miraculously transformed into life-giving breastmilk. Food, in its double articulation (as foodstuff consumed by the mother and milk given to the baby), controls the

mother and contributes to the reinforcement of societal orders and discourses about motherhood, legitimised by the medical establishment: ‘Plus tard, entre autres montées<sup>5</sup> de mots, je suis tombée sur les directives de l’OMS, qui préconisent de ne pas séparer la mère et l’enfant, de le mettre au sein tout de suite, et de ne jamais utiliser de tire-lait’ (Darrieussecq 2005: 65) [‘Later on, between other word flows, I came across the directives of the WHO which advocate not to separate the mother from the baby, to breastfeed him as soon as possible, and to never use a breast pump’]. However, this immediate *post-partum* union is impossible for the narrator; as the baby spends his first weeks in the incubator, the mother has to use a breast pump if her ‘life-giving milk’ is to reach her son. Societal (and even medical) discourses allow little flexibility, even when medical reasons prevent the mother from breastfeeding.

These same ‘orderly eating’ discourses regulate weaning, which physically marks the separation between the mother and her baby; they are no longer one but two distinct and separate entities. Nonetheless, weaning does not instantly presume the stopping of breastfeeding. Solids and mother’s milk coexist for a time, complicating the mother-baby separation. If this coexistence lasts for too long, orderly eating transforms into disorderly eating, or at least into a socially constructed notion of disorderly eating. The narrator gives the example of her Norwegian friend ‘qui donne encore le sein à son fils de quatre ans. Le père est parti depuis longtemps. C’est un cérémonial à deux, matin et soir, dans un fauteuil réservé à cet usage, sous les néons d’une salle de bains où ils s’enferment’ (Darrieussecq 2005: 75) [‘who still breastfeeds her four-year-old son. The father left a long time ago. It is a ceremony for the two of them, morning and evening, in an armchair reserved for this particular purpose, under the neon lights of the bathroom wherein they lock themselves’]. Kelly Oliver notes, after Kristeva, that ‘the child must separate from its mother’s body in order to be an autonomous being. It cannot remain dependent on her’ (1992: 81). The act of breastfeeding the four-year-old boy precludes such separation, preventing him from fully entering the symbolic order dominated by the law of the father. The disorderly aspect of this ‘cérémonial à deux’ [‘ceremony for two’] is reflected in the fact that it can only occur in private, away from public scrutiny for it goes against accepted societal norms of eating and feeding. Such norms vary according to time and place, with the narrator’s experiences being mostly anchored in the French context. The example of the Norwegian friend highlights these socio-historical distinctions, as ‘en Scandinavie, l’hygiène publique veut qu’on allaite tard’ (Darrieussecq 2005: 75) [‘Scandinavian public health promotes a longer period of breastfeeding’].

When the baby changes diet, the mother acquires both a lack and an excess: she is no longer indispensable to the baby (lack of purpose), and yet she could still be producing food for him/her (excess of milk). If the mother decides to overcome this lack and to make use of the excess (like the Norwegian friend), she is going against societal order. Society forces the mother to repress this contradiction between lack and excess, which determines Oliver to follow in Kristeva's footsteps and to call for new discourses of maternity:<sup>6</sup> 'We can create a new discourse in which mother's milk is a symbol for a social bond based on *love of an other as oneself*' (1992: 82, emphasis mine). The new discourse Oliver calls for does not render the mother invisible, nor does it put her fully in the service of the baby. This discourse recognises the individuality of both the mother and the baby and emphasises the need for building a social bond based on love rather than interdictions and prescriptions, a need highlighted by Darrieussecq's discussion of breastfeeding.

The link between the baby, the food (s)he eats, and the world (s)he needs to integrate remains present even after weaning. Changes in diet help the baby understand the functioning of the world: 'La fin de l'allaitement inaugure sans doute la série des choses qui se terminent, contre lesquelles je ne peux rien. [...] Le biberon est continu, le petit pot est discontinu: entre chaque bouchée, il réclame; on enfourne les cuillères dans une bouche en cris' (Darrieussecq 2005: 111) ['The end of breastfeeding certainly marks the start of a whole host of things that end, against which there is nothing I can do. The bottle is continuous, whereas the little jar is not: between mouthfuls he asks for more; we shove spoons into a crying mouth']. Time and the Other are directly connected to food: the continuous nature of the flow of milk (during breastfeeding or via the bottle) puts the baby centre stage. There is neither space nor time for anything to intervene, or to disturb this continuous flow. However, the transition to solid food interrupts this flow. Time passes between spoonfuls, marking separation, discontinuity, and finitude. The baby needs to learn patience and to start grasping the fact that (s)he will not always be the centre of attention. The baby's frustration is mirrored in the image of the 'bouche en cris' ['crying mouth']. No matter how quickly the parents try to deliver the spoonfuls, the flow of milk cannot be recreated. Therefore, the baby is forced to come to terms with this interruption; an interruption that helps him/her understand the concept of time and creates the space where eventually the Other will emerge. This type of feeding can appear disorderly to the baby: a different type of food delivered by means (s)he is not used to. However, it is this very 'disorder' that guarantees the baby's 'orderly' development and entry into the social.

The social order is clearly depicted in *Être ici*, Darrieussecq's biography of Paula Modersohn Becker, with a focus on patriarchal ideas and traditional views of femininity that preclude the development of women's creativity. Paula is caught in a web of opposing tensions, having to negotiate between being a wife and a painter, between holding on to the freedom of childhood and entering the realm of constricting adult responsibilities, and between living in France and Germany. This constant in-between-ness is mirrored by Paula's alimentary choices and by her relation to cooking. Before she can marry Otto Modersohn, her parents insist on the condition that Paula take cooking lessons: 'Il ne sera pas dit que Fräulein Becker s'installe en ménage sans savoir nourrir son mari' (Darrieussecq 2016: 54) ['It will not be said of *Fräulein* Becker that she settled into her new married life and household without knowing how to feed her husband']. Since this is the only condition Paula's parents have before the marriage,<sup>7</sup> knowing how to cook becomes almost synonymous with a happy marriage. The focus is not necessarily on Paula, as much as it is on society, since the parents seem to be primarily concerned with what others would say. Nonetheless, Paula 'ne supportera pas au-delà de huit semaines ce *siècle culinaire*, malgré les musées avec sa cousine Maidli' (Darrieussecq 2016: 54, emphasis in the original) ['is unable to bear this *culinary century* for longer than eight weeks, despite the museum visits with her cousin Maidli']. Paula's aversion towards the activity is not necessarily fuelled by cooking *per se*, as much as by the fact that cooking prevents her from painting. To be able to attend these cooking classes, Paula had to 'laisse[r] ses pinceaux' (Ibid.: 54) ['put down her brushes'], which creates an opposition between cooking (what she is supposed to do) and painting (what she wants to do). This will later develop into an opposition between marriage and painting. Cooking is metonymically linked to an unhappy marriage, as evidenced by Paula's words in her expense notebook:

La première année de mon mariage, j'ai beaucoup pleuré, et des sanglots comme ceux de l'enfance. [...] L'expérience m'a enseigné que le mariage ne rend pas plus heureuse [...] J'écris ceci dans mon carnet de dépenses, le dimanche de Pâques 1902, assise dans ma cuisine à préparer un rôti de veau. (Darrieussecq 2016: 72)

[I cried a lot in the first year of my marriage, sobbing like a child. The experience taught me that marriage does not make women happier. I am writing all of this in my expense notebook, on Easter Sunday of 1902, sitting in my kitchen trying to prepare roast veal].



Marriage is synonymous with the routine represented by the expense notebook, while the complexity of the Easter meal is reminiscent of social conventions that usually require religious celebrations to be marked with complicated dishes reflecting culinary prowess. Even though cooking can be a creative process, there is no evidence of this in Paula's account. The juxtaposition of crying, cooking, and marriage further heightens the disappointment felt by Paula at not being able to dedicate herself entirely to painting.

When she can paint at her leisure, her cooking and eating habits change too, undoing the rigid schemas that dictate the time and place of eating as well as the composition of meals and expressing freedom through 'disorderly' eating:

Paula dort à son atelier quand Otto n'est pas là. Elle y dîne d'œufs à la coque et de compote. Elle aime ces dîners qui n'en sont pas, 'rien qui puisse tenir au ventre d'Otto', sans table à mettre ni cuisine à faire, sauf pour la bonne. Elle lui commande de la *Bier-kaltschale*: un entremets sucré à la bière, à la crème et à la cannelle. Ou encore 'du riz au lait avec des pommes cuites en quartiers et des raisins secs'. Ou simplement des poires et du pain et du fromage. (Darrieussecq 2016: 83)

[Paula sleeps in her studio when Otto is not at home. She has boiled eggs and compote for dinner. She loves these meals that are not really a proper dinner, meals that would not satisfy Otto's appetite. She has no table to lay and no cooking to do, only the maid has a few cooking tasks. She asks her for *Bier-kaltschale*: a sweet *entremets* made from beer, cream, and cinnamon. Or for 'rice pudding with cooked apples cut into quarters and topped with raisins'. Or simply for pears with some bread and cheese].

As highlighted by Darrieussecq, this type of food can seem childish (due to its high sugar content) and even regressive (due to its simplicity and minimal cooking required).<sup>8</sup> Most importantly, it is food that allows Paula the time to paint. If in *Truismes*, raw, unprepared food is used to mark the animal/human division that the text asks us to question, in *Être ici* similar food (uncooked or requiring very little preparation) mirrors a desire for independence. Paula's rebellion against the patriarchal order manifests itself in the stereotypically feminine sphere of cooking. She is contesting the system from within by engaging in a 'subversive form of consumption' (MacClancy 1992: 92); however, she can only do this when 'Otto is not at home', which diminishes the reach of her rebellion. The reference to Otto's appetite further highlights the relation between the sexes: satisfying men's hunger requires time and effort, which prevents women from developing their own interests. Paula rarely mentions meat,

which can also be associated with a stereotypically masculine appetite, as it is ‘heartier’ and more filling. As shown by the above-mentioned Easter meal, meat also tends to require more cooking time. The Berlin cooking classes were useful in knowing what to avoid (complicated dishes meant for the entire family), rather than what to cook. By refusing to apply the knowledge of the ‘culinary century’ to her own daily routine, Paula is asserting herself as a woman, and even more significantly, as a woman painter (while also reducing the labour of her maid). ‘Disorderly’ eating thus becomes a way to promote much needed progressive societal re-ordering.

Similar minimal cooking is employed during Paula’s stay in Paris, a stay that is almost entirely dedicated to improving her artistic skill. She usually enjoys a breakfast of fresh bread and hot chocolate, followed by lunch at Duval’s, and dinner at home with a preference for pancakes and hot chocolate (Darrieussecq 2016: 79–80). The latter seems to be Paula’s drink of choice, encapsulating comfort, sweetness, and childhood, marking her refusal to engage fully with the socially accepted image of adulthood (more readily associated with coffee or tea). It is significant that she has dinner at home, due to harassment on the streets of Paris, especially at night. This further highlights the precarious position occupied by women at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a position that repeatedly pushed them back to a household that many were trying to escape. The unfamiliarity of Paris is further reflected in the food available, which brings up constant comparisons with Germany: ‘La cuisine de Bertha lui manque, surtout les harengs à la crème. Elle fait durer la saucisse fumée que sa mère lui envoie de Brême’ (Darrieussecq 2016: 79); ‘[e]t pas moyen de trouver des patates: à la place, du pain, toujours du pain’ (Ibid.: 93) [‘She misses Bertha’s cooking, especially her herrings with sour cream. She makes the smoked sausage that her mother sends her from Bremen last’; ‘and there is no way of finding potatoes; instead there’s bread, always bread’]. Longing for traditional dishes and for the feelings of familiarity, intimacy, and security that they carry within them enhances the sacrifice made by Paula to further her artistic career. The repetition ‘du pain, toujours du pain’ [‘bread, always bread’] suggests the frustration and disappointment caused by the need to choose between homeland and career. Not being able to satisfy her appetite while in Paris is suggestive of the split between Paula as a painter and Paula as a wife. Her several returns to Germany indicate that the choice between these two selves was not an easy one, determining Paula to be constantly in-between. Paula’s ‘disorderly’ eating becomes symptomatic of her need for independence and of the impossibility to fit in fully in Paris.

This in-between state is encapsulated in Paula's pregnant self-portrait, a portrait in which she was not actually pregnant, just imagined herself to be.<sup>9</sup> Some specialists attribute the painter's swollen belly, which she frames with her hands and offers to the viewer, to her diet: '[t]rop de chou et de patates. L'autoportrait d'une femme ballonnée: encore un peu de potage?' (Darrieussecq 2016: 121) ['too much cabbage and potatoes. The self-portrait of a bloated woman: would you care for more soup?']. For Darrieussecq, this could be the work of Paula's imagination: '[m]ais elle peut très bien s'*imaginer* enceinte. [...] L'autoportrait comme autofiction' (Ibid.: 121-22, emphasis in the original) ['she could very well be *imagining herself* pregnant. The self-portrait as autofiction']. This painting occupies an in-between space, being an oscillation between reality and an imagined future. The mentioning of her diet brings the painting closer to reality (the self-portrait as autobiography), while the reference to Paula's imagination pushes it into the field of (auto)fiction. Using food as an explanation for the painter's swollen belly becomes a way of providing 'reality effects' (Cruikshank 2013: 302), helping the viewer or the reader connect to the work of art. However, as will be shown below, food itself occupies an ambiguous place between reality and fiction.

### **Food as an in-between space**

On two occasions, Darrieussecq herself wrote recipes: four 'real' (or 'orderly') ones drawing on her Basque heritage published in the 'Elle à table' section of *Elle* magazine, and a 'fictional' (or 'disorderly') recipe for *Huit* magazine.<sup>10</sup> In the latter, Darrieussecq lets disorder creep into recipe writing, a type of 'orderly' writing commonly associated with clear instructions and precise measurements. However, it is by looking at the 'orderly' and 'disorderly' recipes in conjunction that the ramifications of cooking can be grasped.

The fictional recipe advises readers on how to cook a giant squid and is accompanied by a photo of a 50m-long squid ('from head to tentacles'), allegedly washed up on a Californian beach and surrounded by curious onlookers. This altered, collage-like photo<sup>11</sup> emphasizes the fictional, almost surreal character of the recipe. However, with the exception of the giant squid, the other ingredients are easily available, and used in the 'real' recipes published in *Elle*. One of the main differences between the two sets of recipes is the manner of presenting the ingredients: in *Elle*, precise measurements are available in the list of ingredients, whereas for cooking the giant squid one needs 'plusieurs tomates bien mûres, pas

mal de vin blanc, beaucoup de piment d'Espelette, plein de gousses d'ail' ['several ripe tomatoes, a fair amount of white wine, a lot of Espelette pepper, many garlic cloves']. While the exact measurements might be 'conventionally appropriate' (Hollander 1999: 204), the loose quantities given for the squid recipe are not uncommon when it comes to cooking. They can be a representation of what Lisa Heldke designates as 'bodily knowledge', since 'the knowing involved in making a cake is "contained" not simply "in my head" but in my hands, my wrists, my eyes and nose as well' (1992: 218). Cooking relies on 'embodied experiences' (Ibid.: 219), thus going beyond mind/body dichotomies. This is implied by Darrieussecq herself, in her addition to the first 'orderly' recipe: 'La recette de ma mère... Elle la fait "sans y penser"' ['My mother's recipe... she makes it "without thinking about it"']. Cooking becomes a liminal experience, fuelled by knowledge deeply lodged in both mind and body. In Darrieussecq's recipes, Espelette pepper (originating from the Basque country)<sup>12</sup> is needed for cooking both the giant squid and two of the dishes in *Elle*. Therefore, at a gustative level the 'real' and the 'fictional' recipes are connected to each other, as they would generate comparable responses from our taste buds. Even though we cannot physically try the giant squid recipe, it is possible to obtain a reaction akin to our tasting the dish. This reaction is produced by means of remembering and imagination. The known ingredients, such as the Espelette pepper, trigger our gustative memory (in a similar manner to how the pangolin reminded Solange of duck), whereas the fictional ones put the imagination in motion. Therefore, food occupies a space between the tangible and the imagined, between reality and fiction, compelling us to eat using our memories, bodies, and creative powers.

Eating and cooking are therefore both liminal experiences, stimulated by rationality, bodily knowledge, and creativity. It is at this point that I would like to draw a parallel between food and reading. The act of eating inherently involves the transgression of boundaries: 'the body transgresses here [in the act of eating] its own limits: it swallows, devours, rends the world apart, is enriched and grows at the world's expense' (Bakhtin 1984: 281). This ingestion is by no means safe, eating being always caught up between survival and danger through poisoning. Similarly, there is no guarantee of the outcome of reading, a process often described as 'nourishing' or 'nurturing' that can yield (self-)knowledge, (self-)doubt, frustration, pleasure, etc. Nevertheless, a meaningful reading should allow for this opening and transgression of boundaries, in a similar manner to how eating allows the outside (or the Other) in. Many readers already describe their reading as if it were eating (Nell 1988: 16), devouring books that supply them with food for thought. Therefore, trying to read as we

eat should not be an insurmountable step. Nonetheless, an important caveat needs to be raised: just as eating a limited diet can have adverse effects on one's health, one should not read only safe or known materials, as that will lead to 'knowledge obesity and regurgitation; [i]t is the combined pleasure and exercise of a mind fed on a very mixed diet of things, not least of familiar and unfamiliar "foods"' (Orr 2003: 57) that allows for development, and for the furthering of thought. Moreover, it is not only the mind that should be involved in reading. As shown above, bodily knowledge contributes significantly to food preparation; therefore, reading with the body as well as with the mind can enrich our encounters with the text. This would allow reading to leave marks on both the mind and the body, engaging readers in a transformative experience that would make the self more fluid and flexible. We can draw a parallel between the effect the *matango* and *tapé-tapé* had on Solange and the impact reading can have on us, leaving permanent traces and thus influencing our development and self-identification. Reading as we eat would entail allowing texts to contribute to our growth, despite the possible dangers they carry. This openness towards the text can pave the way towards new types of readerly hospitalities, manifested through mutual and meaningful sharing (between reader and text) and 'a readiness to have one's purposes reshaped by the work to which one is responding' (Attridge 2004: 80).

Food can contribute to the pleasures of reading, by triggering our sensorial and gustative memory. It also helps us relate to the narrative by providing us with 'reality effects' that diminish the otherness of the text. Nonetheless, food is more than just an add-on that eases the reader's entry into the text. This article has explored how, in Darrieussecq's writings, food is an instrument that both mirrors societal orders and exclusions and helps disturb and overcome them. Reading food compels the reader to stay in-between: between nature and culture, body and mind, reality and fiction, order and disorder, self and Other. Prometheus brought fire to Earth (fire to cook our food and thus assert our humanity) as an act of rebellion against the order of the gods. Our food is thus infused with a spirit of revolt that allows us to find creative answers to oppressive orders. As shown throughout this article, Darrieussecq's works provide numerous examples of both individual and communal responses to oppressive orders, responses that involve new or different modes of consumption. These disorderly modes of consumption bring about adaptation, rebellion, and sometimes change. Such change can also be implemented in the way we read, contributing to the (re)shaping of our readerly hospitalities.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Even if we share a meal, the eating is in the end individual. For more on this tension, see Skubal (2002: 3-4).

<sup>2</sup> *Truismes* has been much studied since its publication, but only recently through tracing the heroine's disorderly eating: see Rodgers 2012, Stojanovic 2018, and McGrath 2018. Adding to this growing corpus, the present article analyses the way the narrator's disorderly eating marks the human/animal divide and contributes to her marginalisation and social exclusion.

<sup>3</sup> The Goutte d'Or neighbourhood is known for its North-African and sub-Saharan communities, while *Terminus Nord* is a 1920s Art Nouveau and Art Déco brasserie.

<sup>4</sup> Here, companion should be linked to its Latin roots, i.e. one who breaks bread with another.

<sup>5</sup> The mother's subtle subversion of the established order is seen in her use of the word *montée*. The narrator uses it to refer both to the flow of milk ('*montée de lait*') and to the flow of words ('*montées de mots*'), suggesting that she continues her writing endeavours despite medical advice to the contrary.

<sup>6</sup> Kristeva calls for an ethics of the maternal, or a *herethics*, that would be based on love, rather than prohibition or the Law. This same *herethics* would allow us to come to terms with the other within, which in turn would positively affect our relation to the Other.

<sup>7</sup> Paula's parents have conditions for Paula, but none for Otto, her future husband.

<sup>8</sup> During the *Beyond Words French Literature Festival 2018* organised by the London *Institut Français*, Darrieussecq mentioned that she took all references to food from Paula's diaries and correspondence. Darrieussecq used terms such 'regressive food', 'kids' food', 'comfort food' to refer to these meals.

<sup>9</sup> *Self-portrait on the sixth wedding anniversary* (1906), Paula-Modersohn Becker Museum, Bremen.

<sup>10</sup> Marie Darrieussecq's recipes, alongside corresponding images, are available at: <http://www.elle.fr/Elle-a-Table/Menus-de-stars/Stars/Marie-Darrieussecq>. *Huit* magazine is an annual black and white magazine. Darrieussecq's recipe is available at: [https://issuu.com/astronefpalace/docs/huit\\_2015\\_pour\\_revue\\_en\\_ligne](https://issuu.com/astronefpalace/docs/huit_2015_pour_revue_en_ligne). My deepest thanks to Marie Darrieussecq for pointing me in the direction of these materials and sending me a copy of each.

<sup>11</sup> The reference on the same page makes it clear that this is a 'fake picture'. However, when the photo first appeared it was widely shared on social media as a 'real' photo. For more on this, see Lee (2014) available at: <https://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2014/01/140110-giant-squid-picture-hoax-ocean-animal-science/>.

<sup>12</sup> Geographically in France and Spain, and yet culturally and linguistically distinct, the Basque country is a recurrent image in Darrieussecq's creative universe, allowing for both spatial anchorage and (self-)exploration.

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