

## **Disorderly Eating in Marie NDiaye's 'La Gourmandise' OR The Solitary Pleasure of a *Mère de famille***

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### **Abstract**

NDiaye's typically subtle and polysemic story 'La Gourmandise' (1996) can be interpreted as the cautionary tale of a housewife's short-lived frenzy that could have ended with a descent into madness brought on by the escalation of a destructive secret passion (binge eating). It also represents, writ large, everywoman's everyday battle with food. A third approach might see the protagonist, working-class drudge Antoinette who has little cultural capital, striking out for her own space, creativity and luxurious pleasure in a tragi-comic re-writing not only of Emma Bovary, but of Marie-Antoinette, legendary for promoting cake, or Virginia whose intellectual ambitions necessitate a room of her own. The text asks, with Antoinette, what is gluttony and why is it a deadly sin? 'La Gourmandise' moves craftily between the everyday human (woman), the animal and the sacred. An 'idiot boy', Edo, is the pendant to fleshy Antoinette, her grotesque shadow, and the threshold figure who acts to safeguard the moral community which in the end will keep her in her place, her crazy bid for freedom forgotten.

### **Keywords**

Marie NDiaye, 'La Gourmandise', gluttony, binge-eating, working-class women, animals

‘The desire to consume is a kind of lust.’ (Hyde 1983: 10)

The ascetic and the glutton: ‘The one eats nothing, the other everything; but both are adventures in revulsion, and both defy the capacity of food, despite its infinite variety, to slake our thirst for lack, or to appease our everlasting hunger for the end.’ (Ellmann 1993: 113)

Eating has always been one of the most significant human activities - important to sustain life but also significant in the sense that it is freighted with meaning. Micro-communities frequently bond over meals; larger communities often share eating practices and explicit or implicit rules about what is good to eat. Who or what is eaten and who prepares and serves the food? Women may provide the infrastructure while the *polis* rises above them – and hence they must be policed, or, better, police themselves. Eating regulation informs, and is informed by, the inclusivity or exclusivity of the community. Small wonder, then, that food features large in novels and films, often revealing (about) characters, and that meals are a common fictional device to reproduce everyday situations as well as special occasions. Nevertheless some authors are more particularly drawn than others to the description of our relationship with food – always ordered (as we learn from Lévi-Strauss and other anthropologists), but consequently always available for the thinking and lived experience of disorder. I argue that Marie NDiaye is one of these (see also Jordan 2017a, notably chapter 3 ‘Intimate Invasions: Feeding, Eating and Wounds’; Jordan this volume). I shall give just two examples before I move on to the main course which is the short story ‘La Gourmandise’ [‘Gluttony’],<sup>1</sup> a tale which oscillates between the animal and the divine as it explores the frailty of human flesh and spirit via one woman’s *manie* [mania] for illicit feasting. ‘La Gourmandise’ presents the trials and tribulations of working-class mother of four Antoinette, who has a short-lived extra-familial relationship with her extravagant purchases from the cake-shop and the delicatessen before being pulled back into appropriate domestic parsimony by the community’s disapproving gaze. Her neighbours erroneously assume that her sly straying takes the form of a sexual relationship with the ‘village idiot’ rather than binge eating, funded by money she secretly takes out of her husband’s bank account, even though her excess flesh tells the true story.

Short, but more than an *amuse-bouche*, ‘Le Jour du Président’ [‘The Day the President Came’] is a story from 1997, the year following NDiaye’s production of ‘La Gourmandise’, and could be seen as the opposite end of the eating spectrum. It is the painful tale of a day in the life of Olga, a lonely adolescent girl with ‘anorexia’ – ending with her

collapse during a reception for her mother's idol, Jacques Chirac, the President of the Republic.<sup>2</sup> It is perhaps NDiaye's most explicit 'eating disorder' text, set in Normandy (plausibly also the backdrop to 'La Gourmandise'), land of creamy milk products which fail to tempt the protagonist Olga, in this respect the antithesis of Antoinette. Olga is sent to Le Havre *école de comptabilité* by respectable working-class parents who count on her success; they economise on their own pleasures so that their only child can stay in a 'nice' boarding house, and acquire secretarial and accounting skills. The other boarders, her only 'friends' (but they really are no friends of hers), are two middle-class girls who dress scruffily and dye their short spikey hair red. Olga's conservative, pious mother, very impressed with the synthetic bourgeois décor of the boarding house 'suintant de prétention et d'hostilité' (1997: 32) ['oozing pretentiousness and hostility'], completely and disapprovingly misreads these bodily signs of class confidence. These wealthy Business Studies students tease Olga (transposing class to ethnicity) pretending to think she is Russian (1997: 30), and indeed she could be from another planet. Carefree and careless, they notice neither her pain nor her lack of appetite (for anything at all), but the reader must surely be moved by the agonising descriptions: 'Il me semblait que mon squelette était lourd, infiniment lourd à porter. L'extrême maigreur n'était pas douce et immatérielle mais pesante, et le poids insensé des os ne diminuait pas en même temps que la chair fondait' (Ndiaye 1997: 37) ['It seemed to me that my skeleton was heavy, infinitely heavy to bear. My extreme thinness was not gentle and immaterial but weighty, and the crazy weight of my bones did not decrease as my flesh melted']. Here, as reader, I have been drawn into naming; like other readers (e.g. Asibong 2013: 145, 201; Jordan 2017a: 65), I have diagnosed 'anorexia' which NDiaye does not mention. However, self-starvation has a longer history and a broader reach than this particular mental disorder – including the hunger strikes of the suffragettes or the mysticism of St Theresa. Political and religious fasting is often excluded from pathology because of the specificity of explicit motivation, but it can be returned to pathology by those investigating the complex vicissitudes of choices which may *screen* a desire to mortify the flesh.<sup>3</sup> Olga, however, does not *choose* to restrict her intake of foodstuffs because she wants to be thin – like Margaret Atwood's protagonist Marian in *The Edible Woman* (1969), also often diagnosed as an anorexic, she simply *cannot* eat. Their bodies are acting out a protest and a lament, which relates to the exclusion, or over-forceful inclusion, in a community which feels hostile to them. Olga has no place, and she slowly disappears. I shall leave this text with a question – should we categorise that literary corporeal response or leave it floating?<sup>4</sup> NDiaye

has a gift for the ‘both/and’ rather than the authorial cut of conclusion, and perhaps we readers should respect that undecidability across all the texts here mentioned.

My second hors d’oeuvre, though it more than deserves to be a main course, *La Cheffe, roman d’une cuisinière*, published twenty years after ‘La Gourmandise’, is a long novel devoted, as the title implies, to the obsessive sourcing, preparing, cooking, serving and eating of food by a relatively solitary female chef, touched with genius (Still 2019). It explores creativity via the *art* of *haute cuisine*. And yet even (Michelin) starry cooking somehow hovers anxiously around the animal. This haunting is not only because flesh is the consummate sacrifice on the altar of the (kitchen) gods, the food stuff *par excellence*, and not only in the Western tradition: it’s not a meal without meat. La Cheffe’s first employers say exactly that.<sup>5</sup> But also this allegedly essential ingredient casts a shadow of lingering doubt about the *nature* of (animal) food stuffs, their provenance and their preparation, raw or cooked. One critique of our disorderly eating today points to so many millions of beasts, especially chickens, factory-born and raised only to exist in misery before an early death; the perverse twin of the decline in number of species is the rise of Franken-chickens, the animal of the Anthropocene.<sup>6</sup> This is a technology of bestial cruelty to which animals, we think, do not descend (Still 2015: 119-20, 130). Factory farms: what might once have been a contradiction in terms now easily rolls off the tongue, familiar by repetition. Not only the industrial farm but also the abattoir is too well-hidden from view and from the other senses – the smell of the blood and faeces produced by slaughter is too well disguised, the sound of animal cries of shock and pain is muffled just as much as the vision of the beast bludgeoned, scalded or sliced up is lost or blurred (see Sorente 2013). We do not touch those bodies and they do not touch us, we are not touched. Rather we receive the sacrifice processed in packages or nuggets – like the communion host, a dry wafer in which only the very vivid imagination can taste bleeding flesh today. La Cheffe’s kitchen ethos is the opposite of this – for her, respect for the animal is an integral part of her cuisine – but where will this care for her raw material end?

La Cheffe’s career is book-ended by chickens. Her very first creation has as its centrepiece the sacrifice of a chicken, involving the selection of a splendid victim, the ceremonial preparation of the corpse and finally the incorporation of the transformed, transfigured flesh. It is a costly work of artifice (costing money, time and a life), a miracle received with anxious, uneasy rapture by her bosses who then become enthralled, her servants, her prisoners (2016: 120ff.). The unctuous flesh is cut from the magnificent chicken’s body, minced and mixed with other substances including five eggs then replaced on

the carcase in a simulacrum of the living bird. Finally the beautiful corn-coloured skin dresses the chicken once again to complete the illusion, and she surrounds the large bird with small vegetables (2016: 73-4). Despite her apparent extraordinary mastery of her art already in her first adolescent experience of cooking, la Cheffe, in a lifetime of discipline and dedication to her art, will always look back on this juvenilia with shame – it is a botched scribble, ugly in her eyes because it did not respect the integrity of the material – it was indeed a brutal violation of the flesh. ‘Comme la Cheffe haïrait le simulacre, plus tard.’ (2016: 74) [How la Cheffe would hate simulacra later on]. Her final meal, what for her is the summit of her career, is instead the entirely imaginary consumption of living chickens which peck at, though do not really eat, the vegetables in the garden where she is sitting with her only friend and sole witness, whom she summons to join her in this telepathic act of communion. The chickens are saved from slaughter – but, more extreme still, the vegetables and fruit too are left to grow untouched. Thus life left to *le vivant* other would ultimately lead to the death of the protagonist from starvation. The long novel ends with this thought hanging, and I shall do the same, resisting the temptation to name ethical orthorexia.

These three subtle works all present ‘lower-class’ female protagonists who wrestle with their place in the world via a passion (pleasure and/or suffering) for eating or cooking. I argue that these highly literary, albeit consumable, texts challenge the reader to reflect on their staging of particular women’s constructions of improper economies of food – both personal and exceptionally political. I shall organise the chapter into four sections relating to women (specifically here lower-class women) – first motherhood, then solitary pleasure, third, the sacred and animality/stupidity, and finally the relation to the community.

First, however, I need to tackle the thorny question whether ‘La Gourmandise’ is the representation of an eating disorder or ‘simply’ (perhaps, complicatedly) of disorderly over-eating. Who is to say how much is too much – at what point do little indulgences tip over a danger point? The argument in this volume is that there is a continuum of orderly and disorderly eating to the point of eating disorders (to the point of death), as there is with (mental) health and illness. Even the most ‘normal’ end of the spectrum is likely to have micro-elements of abnormality. And thus we have the ever thorny question of categorisation and the establishing of a nomenclature whether by the medical establishment or the popular media – and the positive or negative consequences of identification with a label. NDiaye’s (anti)-heroine could be seen as illustrating a phenomenon analysed by Maud Ellmann, who argues that what is seen today as addiction to (the wrong kind of) food is often associated with self-abuse ‘the antedated term for masturbation’ (1993: 56):

Victorian as they seem, the same strictures are levelled nowadays against ‘food-abusers’, and moral outrage is still masquerading as medical concern. The hospital has supplanted the confessional, while the psychobabble of ‘compulsive eating’ has replaced the moral rhetoric of ‘greed’. [...] The fat person is ‘out of control’: fat is the enemy within the body, like Communism in the body politic, which threatens to subvert the very notion of self-governance. [...] What exactly is the dreadful secret? Can it be so appalling that we *like to eat*? (1993: 57).

I would argue that the behaviour described in this tale is offered to the reader to chew over and digest as she will – moved to tears or laughter, loathing or even unspeakable longing – no doubt influenced by her own history and moment of consumption as well as by the text produced by NDiaye. Our (anti-)heroine is not threatened by hospitalisation, let alone death, because of her ‘bad’ behaviour - lucky for her that she is not in a male-authored nineteenth-century novel... Our talk of ‘binge-eating’ (or other kinds of binges) covers a wide spectrum from the occasional blow-out, which I could dignify with reference to Bakhtinian or Barthesian analysis of those dedicated days of disorder which inoculate society against revolution, to conditions which are ultimately lethal, whether one should relate such danger to the insane individual or to socio-political sanction. Antoinette’s disorderly relationship with food ends as a passing ‘fancy’ however great an obsession at the outset.

### **1. Motherhood – a duty to feed others**

NDiaye’s typically subtle and polysemic short story ‘La Gourmandise’ might be interpreted as the cautionary tale of a housewife’s short-lived frenzy that could have ended with a descent into madness brought on by the escalation of a destructive secret passion. From another perspective, it represents, writ large, everywoman’s everyday battle with the economy of food. All animals, including human animals, have to have a relation to food – that is part of the natural order of life. But women have had, and continue to have, a particular even peculiar relationship with food (both feeding others and eating themselves) that can easily slip into disorder. Female mammals have the special attribute of being able to *feed from* their bodies, as well as feeding their bodies as animals must do in order to survive. Women can potentially feed and nurture embryos and fetuses in the womb, and then breast feed in the early months or sometimes years of their child’s life – and also breastfeed other children – and these days even the embryo nurtured in the womb can genetically belong to someone else.<sup>7</sup> Another physical attribute characteristic of many females is the greater propensity to fleshiness than the male – fetishized in women’s breasts and complicated in

other parts of the body, admired or demonised. Beyond such a physical connection, is the massive socio-cultural expectation that women, and, in particular, mothers are responsible for the daily production of nourishment for husbands and children. Men who cook for others *unwaged* have traditionally been viewed as heroic and exceptional (Bordo 1993: 119-21).

The protagonist of ‘La Gourmandise’, Antoinette, is not untypical as a NDiaye heroine, or anti-heroine, in that the author does not make her heroic or loveable or even attractive. She is often mean and spiteful, selfish, and dishonest. She is a *mère de famille* [mother and housewife] but she engages in solitary pleasure at the expense of the family budget – it is as if she were taking not only time but food from the mouths of her children.

The image of the fat person as a selfish person is a sly, cruel trick of Late Capitalism. The fat person is not responsible for the fundamental inequities in distribution that make for hunger. This is the doing of capitalists who may be fat or thin. [...] Thin people are capitalism’s ideal consumers, for they can devour without seeming gluttonous; they have morality on their side. Fat people are ideal scapegoats; they take food out of the mouths of the starving poor, and they *mean* to do so – else they would summon the will power to keep their weight down and their appetites in check. (Schwartz 1990: 329)

Antoinette is such a scapegoat on the level of the domestic rather than national economy. And yet, I would argue that it is possible for a reader (though perhaps not all readers) to have some sympathy, even empathy, for this thirty-seven-year old mother of four who has little in her life which offers her transcendence or sublimation – and who briefly finds ecstasy in bingeing on luxury food. NDiaye has a gift for rendering quotidian feminine sinning visible without condemning her heroine to death as Emma Bovary and so many other fictional women had to die for their sins.

Antoinette’s home is an impoverished environment, literally and figuratively. Her kitchen is ‘minuscule’ (1996: 48), and the house, which was also that of her parents, is: ‘presque une bicoque, aux plafonds très bas et noircis, sans étage’ (1996: 48) [‘almost a hovel, with very low blackened ceilings, on one level’]. Her home is not quite *propre* – hardly her own property and not properly clean in spite of her efforts, cleanliness would be next to godliness. Her response to her children is ‘las’ [‘tired and fed up’] and mechanical; her family seem to her ‘si lent, si pesant’ (ibid) [‘so slow, so heavy’]. They exhaust her, weigh on her, weigh her down – make her heavy and close to the ground like her dark dump of a house – the physical descriptions in the story often connote a moral or at least social judgement. I note that NDiaye’s protagonists who cannot eat, like Olga, also suffer from

feeling ground down and heavy even as the weight falls off. This sensation then is not necessarily the result of literal excess mass, but in ‘La Gourmandise’ the corporeal and the mental or emotional align in powerful rhetorical collusion.

In the home Antoinette is, however, a lowly but proper cornerstone of the community, a mother who does not eat, let alone take pleasure in eating, with her family – because she is busy serving others, her husband and children.<sup>8</sup> Cooking is domestic labour; albeit delicious, the food she produces is not a treat for her but an output for others. She experiences solitude in the midst of company, her family – and desires solitude on her own. In her fascination with the play of taste (*goût*), what makes her salivate with anticipated pleasure, and disgust (*dégoût*) – both socio-moral and also physical (taking in and expelling) – she cannot help falsely accusing her husband of disgusting greed: ‘Il n’y a rien de plus dégoûtant qu’un homme gourmand!’ (1996: 48) [‘Nothing could be more disgusting than a greedy man’]. In fact for him food is fuel so he can work. He just shrugs his shoulders at her jibe as ‘disgusting greed’ is not loaded with passionate pathological meaning for him as it is for her.

Antoinette’s husband has the masculine body of the manual worker; his body is slim, muscular, and economic – the opposite of her body which has taken on the characteristics of the lard, jelly or fat wrapped around the charcuterie she loves. Her flesh expresses her unseemly passion while her husband’s hard body reveals his industrious indifference to food:

sa chair à elle tendait à ressembler aux mets qu’elle désirait si intensément en pensée, figés dans la gelée (œufs au jambon, pâtés en croûte) ou dans de la blanche et odorante graisse de porc (‘Comme j’aime les rillettes, la ballotine, et les andouillettes qu’on enveloppe de saindoux’), et sans véritablement déborder, sa chair était pale et molle maintenant, fragile, fuyante. (1996: 49)

[her flesh tended to resemble the dishes her brain desired so intensely, fixed in jelly (eggs wrapped in ham, pâtés in pastry) or in white and odorous pork fat (‘How I love rillettes [fatty shredded pork], stuffed chicken leg, and andouillettes [traditional coarse sausages] coated with lard’), and without exactly overflowing, her flesh was pale and soft now, fragile, shifting’].<sup>9</sup>

Antoinette’s husband and children forget food as soon as they have eaten while she can think of nothing else: she is feverish like an alcoholic (1996: 49) in her anxiety to get her family out of the house. In her constant fear of discovery, she imagines as she cleans the kitchen that it could all come to an end; she would then be considered disgusting (she repeats the word, tasting it) – nothing more disgusting than a penniless woman who is a glutton: ‘une mère de famille gourmande dont le corps s’est flapi et relâché, rien de plus dégoûtant que



d'être gourmande quand on ne travaille pas et de s'empiffrer avec l'argent d'un autre' (1996: 50) ['a greedy mother/housewife whose body is worn out and slack, nothing could be more disgusting than being a glutton when you don't work and you are stuffing yourself with someone else's money']. I note that she emphasizes her lack of financial resources

In the last two centuries, fat has shifted from a sign of affluence to a sign of poverty, growing fearsome in the transformation, as if the fat of the land were rising up against the class that feeds upon it. The fat woman, particularly if she is non-white and working-class, has come to embody everything the prosperous must disavow: imperialism, exploitation, surplus value, maternity, mortality, abjection and unloveliness. (Ellman 1993: 2-3)

During the Revolution, those on the side of the genuinely starving attack the shameless fat Marie-Antoinette in words and images, bringing her down to size as the Baker's wife. Today spectacular consumerism permits worship of the rich and famous for their miraculous power to savour the finest luxuries, and, at the same time, by their (oscillating between effortful and effortless depending on the narrative) self-discipline, remain trim and toned. Despite the lack of historical evidence, Marie-Antoinette has passed into legend for foolishly advocating cake as a solution for the poor ('qu'ils mangent de la brioche'), and yet is magically slim in the film of that name which references her presumed fancy with piles of gateaux (Coppola 2006). Models and other skinny celebrities describe their pleasure in gorging themselves with 'naughty but nice' food stuffs, and advertising, say for Galaxy chocolate, shows a beautiful woman in rich surroundings.<sup>10</sup> Antoinette's body gives away her lack of discipline. People think she has the appetite of a bird because she does not like to eat in company, but the judgement of that suspicious rural chorus would be: 'Elle est pourtant bien grasse.' (1996: 55) ['All the same she's pretty fat']. The word for fat here is *grasse* which carries precisely both senses of *fat* – it identifies Antoinette with what she craves: 'cette bombance de choses grasses et molles' (NDiaye 1996: 48) ['that feast of soft and fatty things']. Antoinette, with her eye attuned to girth, refers to the woman serving in the baker's as 'cette grosse bonne femme' (NDiaye 1996: 47); but *grosse* or big (particularly paired with *bonne*) is somehow not quite as disgusting as *grasse*. As the villagers suspect, there is indeed a lack of relation between Antoinette and a bird in terms of appetite – she is instead drawn, in *goût* and sometimes *dégoût*, to cows and pigs. Of course these commonplaces about bovine or porcine girth tell us very little about animal appetites – more about human typologies – who is to say if a real seagull is more or less greedy than a sow, depending on circumstances? The stories we tell about birds do nevertheless have an interesting relationship to motherhood both with

respect to the generally self-sacrificial effort to meet the demanding appetite of the baby bird, and specific examples such as Musset's ambiguously gendered and bleeding pelican.<sup>11</sup>

Antoinette dutifully makes all kind of delicious fattening treats for her family which she does not eat herself: 'Elle voulait voir grossir les enfants et le mari' (1996: 55) ['She wanted to see her children and husband put on weight'], but they are too active to put on weight which makes her bitter *and* ashamed of being bitter. In her solitary paradise it is different. She feels powerful and scandalous as if she has a fine secret lover (1996: 54) like Emma Bovary who looks in the mirror saying 'j'ai un amant'.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, in her light, pastoral refuge, food can seem good and pure, and she can love her family from a distance like a saint or an angel full of goodness. But she is grumpy again when it is time to go home.

## 2. Solitary Pleasure

As I have indicated, it is a classic fictional device to show meals, whether family meals or larger hospitality. Narratives focus less on solitary eating, and especially not the *pleasure* of solitary eating. It is possible to find examples of the opposite, of the sadness of eating alone, say, a lonely middle-aged bachelor forced to prepare food and eat on his own. Michel Houellebecq, for instance, implies nostalgia for the 1950s in the face of neo-liberal society where the nuclear family has disintegrated and women go out to work, so men must cater for themselves. Women can pick and choose today, his protagonist mournfully suggests (1994), rather than being tied to serve a man for life - as the serf was bound to the lord and master, we feminists might add.<sup>13</sup>

Virginia Woolf calls for a room of her own – but above all for intellectual pursuits, in order to create as a writer, or it could be an artist, a bourgeois bohemian woman. Antoinette, a working-class woman, with little cultural capital, claims that she too is a poet in her crafting and consuming of wonderful feasts – although she is not even a *Cheffe*, the figure of NDiaye herself (Jordan 2017b), merely a *bricoleuse* assembling her luxurious display from items purchased, not created by herself, to curate solitary pleasure without having to tend or attend to others. These hidden pleasures must be secret of course for both practical and psychological reasons: she puts on a prophylactic disguise, mac and rubber boots, over her night clothes to steal out to the cash dispenser early each morning 'Et cette sorte de nourriture, prise dans le secret, était abjecte, elle le sentait bien, mais elle lui semblait aussi innocente et dépourvue de signification, elle lui semblait même révéler ce qu'il y avait en elle, Antoinette, de plus innocent, de plus poétique' (1996: 48) ['And that kind of food, taken in secret, was abject, she was well aware, but it also seemed to her that it was innocent and

free of meaning, it even seemed to reveal what was most innocent, most poetic in Antoinette herself’]. NDiaye’s protagonist, working-class drudge Antoinette, with little cultural or other capital, is nevertheless shown striking out for her own space, creativity and luxurious pleasure in this tragi-comic re-writing of Marie-Antoinette, who can afford a very up-market simulacrum of a dairy, or Virginia with her intellectual ambitions that necessitate space and time of her own. Antoinette’s only reference to art or literature is in terms of her reflection on food – for her food is art. However, importantly, it must be relatively expensive food that you buy at the *traiteur* or the *boulangerie* or *patisserie*. She seems to be a good cook, and makes all kind of delicious delicacies for her family – but hardly touches her own food.

The excitement lies partly in the quality of the forbidden – having to steal money from her husband in an elaborate morning ritual to take her daily hundred francs – just enough for her fix of cream, sugar and charcuterie. This food is not part of the domestic routine – it is illicit extra-marital pleasure enjoyed without anyone knowing. ‘Sa bouche s’emplissait de salive un peu aigre. La force de son désir rendait ses jambes un peu tremblantes.’ (1996: 51) [‘Her mouth would fill with slightly bitter saliva. The strength of her desire would make her legs tremble slightly’]. Her husband had never seen her excited like that. She remembers that, even when she first knew him, as he held her she would fantasise about grilled meat dripping with butter, and when she drooled he would tease her as gagging for it “‘Oh! gourmande, sacrée petite gourmande”” (1996: 51) [‘Oh! greedy girl, you are a really greedy little girl.’]. He may have imagined she was eager for sex, but it is the cheese spilling out from a *croque-monsieur* which melts her heart. NDiaye’s example could hardly be more explicit.<sup>14</sup>

She could presumably eat her illegitimate treats in the house if her children are at school and husband at work; this might be a safer option, away from the prying eyes of the censorious community. However, the home is a place of self-sacrifice, even drudgery – she needs a more splendid location for her ritual of illicit pleasure – either glorious nature (à la Marie-Antoinette as shepherdess, Rousseau, lover of feminine dairy products and country picnics, divine or Romantic spectacle) or the church. We give or we are taken by others and that uses us up (*usure*), wears us thin – Antoinette wants to spread herself out and take up more, not less, mental and physical space. She wants a special place *à part*.

### 3. From the *Sacré* to *Bêtise*

The human is often understood along a spectrum going from the divine to the animal. Humans believe they are above animals, whose relationship to food is assumed to be

unmediated and therefore should be unproblematic. G  n   cites Brillat-Savarin: ‘Les animaux se repaissent; l’homme mange; l’homme d’esprit seul sait manger’ (NDiaye 1996: 19) [‘Animals feed; man eats; only the man of intellect knows how to eat’]. Such assertions about animals tell us less about animals than about human beings and their hubristic desire to occupy a special place in the great chain of being (see Still 2015). Despite the typically unsubstantiated claim that animals cannot appreciate food, just as they cannot enjoy art or wit, and hence cannot *fall* into bestiality or eating disorders, animal appetites are often represented as greed. Thus there is a divide even within our perception of ‘the animal’ between those (birds) who eat what they need in order to live and those (pigs) who live to eat. And we force-feed animals we intend to eat – with technological ferocity in industrial plants (Sorrente 2013). Human perception of animals (excluded from reason or conceptual language) is of course such that many societies regard it as acceptable to eat animal flesh and other animal products while unacceptable to eat human products. Humanity, split off from the animal, is nevertheless below the divine which is sometimes assumed to be above matters of the flesh. And yet, while Christians, for example, might imagine that angels do not eat, and that fasting is particularly holy, religions often incorporate sacrifice of food or food as sacrament. In ‘La Gourmandise’, the protagonist Antoinette is carefully located oscillating between the divine and the animal. In cold weather she takes refuge in the church; in warm weather she eats outside close to where heifers graze. NDiaye’s language is studded with references to angels, demons, monsters and animals. Antoinette is acutely aware and fascinated by the animal origin of some of her food, while also drawn to patisserie seen as more innocent.

The church, however, has fallen from its divine mission; it is a physical refuge from the rain, but certainly not a spiritual sanctuary with its sad mimicry of the language of advertising in order to bring more customers, and particularly younger ones, in to the fold: ‘*Le cat  , c’est bath*’ (1996: 57) [‘catechism’s cool’].<sup>15</sup> Bathos indeed. The cur   took little time over Antoinette’s marriage – wanting only to get back to his distant home – and likewise religion for her is no more than a formal social obligation. Resentful as she may be, she is not, however, on a mission to be a rebel however much her body or spirit revolts. As NDiaye wryly has Antoinette observe: she will probably put her children into catechism classes. The different meanings of *communion* – from the hospitable bringing together of a community to the awesome cannibalism of the mass – lapse in the face of an abject miming of all-encroaching capitalism. The text makes the reader ask, with Antoinette, what is, and what is

wrong with, gluttony? Why is it a deadly sin?<sup>16</sup> ‘La Gourmandise’ thus moves craftily between the everyday human (woman), the animal and the sacred.

Why is gluttony a sin? In general and in this text? In the general economy of sin, gluttony is sensual gratification which thus arouses disgust, feelings of dirtiness, as opposed to the purity of fasting or at least the minimal eating necessary to survive. Of course there are religious interdictions on all pleasures of the flesh, and social prohibitions, especially for women. Gluttony is peculiarly a sin which marks itself on the body – albeit unequally depending on genes (some are more inclined to put on weight). In spite of the naturalising language of religion, however, attitudes to (over)-eating are historically and socially contingent. Fleshliness has been prized by societies in the past as a mark of wealth or power, which, for women, could mean that their bodies show they are the possessions of men who took pride in providing for them, one element in their competitive conspicuous consumption. Now Westerners differentiate themselves with more slender forms of distinction. The well-off can demonstrate their well-being with their virtuously toned bodies;<sup>17</sup> they can afford gym subscriptions and even personal trainers now that the neo-Fordist working classes are less likely to develop muscles through real (men’s) jobs involving manual labour, and are more likely to be unemployed or employed in the lower echelons of the service sector. To be slim you have to work (with, or on, your body). Those with cultural and economic capital can buy clean organic food – delicious, but to be consumed in carefully calculated doses – just enough for a ‘good’ look.<sup>18</sup>

NDiaye is often deliberately unspecific about location and precise historical moment for her texts; in ‘La Gourmandise’ the two clues regarding chronology are the references to 100 francs and to a cash machine, used regularly by a road worker’s wife, suggesting that the setting is in the decade or so before the time of writing in 1996. Antoinette is not, however, set up as a member of the undeserving poor who unwisely stuff themselves on fast food. The critique of convenience food, particularly in France, would play into an anti-American and anti-Neo-Liberal discourse which may satisfy a certain socialism, but can easily fall into both nationalism and nostalgia for a past which was certainly not simply preferable if you take into account the situation of women and ethnic minorities.<sup>19</sup> The tertiarisation of the labour market was accompanied by a feminisation both with respect to a significant increase in jobs for women, and with respect to a growing demand for the emotional labour that women have long provided in the home and that is now frequently required in the work place – for better or worse.<sup>20</sup> Antoinette is not, however, the demonised, feckless, post-industrial working mother who fails to provide healthy nourishing meals for her family – she is a traditional

*mère de famille* as far as anyone knows. Yet her maternal care is a performance – her heart is not in it – and in that respect mirrors, as it would be mirrored by, the labour of the smiling MacDonald's worker. Typically NDiaye is not suggesting that traditional family structures, and traditional French food, are some kind of panacea against globalisation and postmodernity. Women's service at home or at work – and in other texts NDiaye shows women employed in a range of tertiary sector roles – remains service to be analysed as such.

It could be argued that gluttony is built on the pain of other animals: we do not need animals for protein – we can get that from pulses – beans and vegetables are rarely associated with gluttony. Rather it is animal flesh and animal fats which turn human beings into beasts (as animals cannot be *turned* for they are animals by our definition). Milk is the maternal gift *par excellence* and here cows' milk has been worked into cream. Sugar too is a luxury shadowed by a memory of pain – as Voltaire famously has his mutilated black slave remark in *Candide* 'C'est à ce prix que vous mangez du sucre en Europe' (1972: 320) [This is the price paid for the sugar you eat in Europe]. Taking things into oneself, or being taken in, expelling them or being expelled, enter into the play of taste and disgust in the story. Finding it hard to come to a final decision in the *charcuterie*, Antoinette purchases a slightly hairy pig's ear displayed 'comme le trophée d'une bataille triste qui avait eu lieu dans l'arrière-cour (et le triste prix de cette dépouille intime, cinq francs, l'emplissait d'une honte vague)' (1996: 51) ['like the trophy from a sad battle which had taken place in the farmyard (and the sad price of that intimate relic, five francs, filled her with vague shame)']. The pathetically, indeed shamefully, cheap pig's ear is not so much triumphant spoils from the field of a battle pitching man against beast (like the bull-fighter's mark of skill or even the wolf hunter's bloodied proof of kill), than the depressing remains of an intimate organ through which words could enter the body. Whereas the cakes she buys seem a more child-like ingenuous pleasure, as they are not the result of a 'lutte pathétique' ['pathetic struggle'] 'nulle douleur là-dedans, nul cri, nul mugissement' (1996: 51) ['no pain therein, no cry, no bellowing']. In the nursery story the maternal cow does not cry out as her milk is taken from her to be magically transformed by the *patissier*. But the pig's ear and trotter are less well disguised, and will be discarded in the cows' meadow; leaving food, let alone throwing food away, is of course the greatest luxury, denied to the poorest and thus, however environmentally undesirable, a desirable possibility for those used to a tight budget. 'To have it but not to eat it is a sign of class superiority, betokening an independence of necessity' (Ellmann 1993: 7). Although key fantasy objects, as these recognisable body parts hover at the frontier of cannibalism, she does not actually suck them up, chew or savour them. Antoinette's

grandmother, she notes, has a taste for all the animal – offal, lard, kidney, raw liver, foot, ear, *museau* (1996: 57). In fairy tales too benign grandmothers can be uncannily associated, if only by juxtaposition, with wolfish appetites. However, Antoinette makes a sacrifice of the unprocessed body parts which are laid, perversely, before the vegetarian beasts of the field.

The pig's ear forms a link with the most borderline figure in the story, a young man who is variously angel, infant, beast and monster. He is named Edo, and is an 'idiot'; he cannot really speak, indeed seems to have no language, although, in fact, if his interlocutor is very patient he can pronounce something or at least *dégurgiter* (1996: 56) in his attempt to vomit out words. He watches for Antoinette with his own grubby sandwich which he sucks like a child – letting pink meat (maybe raw sausage) fall to the ground. She thinks he can smell her food like a voracious savage or animal sniffing her out. He is her gluttonous alter ego; *she* is the one who has the cultural imaginary of food. The reader wonders with Antoinette: does he covet her flesh or her food? After all, Caliban wanted to *marry* (or rape) Miranda. His desire for her flesh makes us reflect on the ambiguity of *chair* (1996: 53). Might he judge her?

Or, elle savait qu'Edo, avec son sandwich répugnant, n'avait pas plus de point de vue que les jeunes vaches curieuses qui regardaient passer Antoinette à travers la haie. Sur le plan de l'opinion et du jugement, Edo n'existait pas. Pourquoi alors se figurait-elle qu'il méprisait la gourmandise? Il était sans doute lui-même gourmand avec obscénité, gourmand passionnément et de n'importe quoi. (1996: 53)

[And yet she knew that Edo, with his repulsive sandwich, had no more point of view than the curious young cows who used to watch Antoinette through the hedge. Edo did not exist on the level of opinion and judgement. So why did she imagine that he despised gluttony? Obviously he was himself obscenely gluttonous, passionately greedy and for anything at all].

He is like the animals whom she eats – but they watch her, and he watches her – this passage plays with reversals. She 'knows' that they view but have no point of view. She wonders if he judges her gluttony and then gives herself a Freudian kettle set of reassurances: Edo and beasts are not capable of judgement and Edo and beasts are themselves greedy for food as for sex – without human discernment and choice.

Edo is an 'idiot', and perhaps an avatar of the simple idiot boy, the opposite of the stupid bourgeois, full of words, in certain famous literary examples of *bêtise* found, for example, in Flaubert and Dostoevsky (Ronell 2002). Here this marginal figure in fact guards the community and its mores. He is atavistically reminiscent of a medieval gargoyle from an

age when the Church exercised power over sin. Edo links man, pig, and the greatest food taboo, cannibalism (Jordan 2018):

Elle revoyait la douce oreille de porc, ses yeux gênés fixaient alors l'oreille d'Edo, étonnamment grande et béante. Mon Dieu, comment supporter de manger cela ? [...] Antoinette promenait son regard des laides oreilles d'Edo (reposant sur le persil finement coupé, assaisonnées d'un seul trait de vinaigre de cidre) à ses cheveux clairs et rares comme une toison de bébé, attendant qu'il se fût délivré des pauvres mots qui l'empêchaient de reprendre souffle, ne voulant pas le blesser en le plantant là. (1996: 52)

[She would see the sweet pig's ear once again, her embarrassed eyes would then fasten upon Edo's astonishingly large and open ear. My God, how could you bear eating that? [...] Antoinette would let her gaze roam from Edo's ugly ears (resting on finely chopped parsley, seasoned with a splash of cider vinegar) to his pale thin hair like baby's tufts, waiting for him to be delivered of the poor words that prevented him from drawing breath, not wanting to wound him by dumping him there.]

This hybrid figure, edible Edo, merges eating and being eaten, animal and baby – and monster: 'Il était, à vrai dire, une sorte de monstre, il n'avait ni entendement ni pensée' (1996: 53) ['He was in truth a kind of monster, he had neither understanding nor the power of thought']. How could anyone imagine skinny Jesus was an angel, Antoinette asks herself – she is the angel – 'Autant dire, songeait-elle, qu'Edo était un ange, et un ange aussi bien le vélo d'Edo, ce vieux clou.' (1996: 56) ['You might as well say, she would think, that Edo was an angel, and that his old crock of a bike was an angel']. This claim is marked by a certain desperate level of denial. Eventually she loses her temper with him in church: 'Qui aurait pu l'aimer, cette créature obscure, plus abjecte qu'un pied de cochon?' (1996: 58) ['Who could have loved him, this obscure creature, more abject than a pig's trotter?'] – feeling he is coldly judging her – she hits him.<sup>21</sup> Perhaps he just wanted a human touch – even a blow is better than nothing for he is entirely alone. She gives him a slap instead of a caress for 'c'est une bête sans raison, sans pitié, rien de plus et rien de moins' (1996: 58) ['he's a beast without reason, without pity, nothing more and nothing less']. If he is an angel then perhaps 'un ange pervers et répugnant' ['a perverse and repulsive angel'].

#### **4. The Relation to the Community**

The 'idiot boy', Edo, is the pendant to fleshy Antoinette, her grotesque shadow, and the threshold figure who acts to safeguard the moral community which in the end will keep her in



her place, her crazy bid for freedom forgotten. He pursues her for some weeks, making obscene gestures (sucking his fingers) as she buys her treats, not eating (angelic purity?), seeming to be getting thinner, but sitting close to her while she eats, as she longs for his death. 'Il lui sembla qu'Edo s'était arrangé diaboliquement, bien qu'il n'eût ni esprit ni intelligence, pour lui donner l'impression qu'elle le mangeait, lui, et en éprouver une répugnance qui la détournerait de toute espèce de nourriture.' (1996: 62) ['It seemed to her that Edo had managed in a diabolical fashion, although he had neither wit nor intelligence, to give her the impression that she was eating him and feel such repugnance about it that it would turn her off any kind of food']. Edo is so close to the id, but then somehow fulfils the function of a superego. Eventually the village (and then her husband) presume they are having an affair, and they are particularly scandalised as Edo is so monstrous and supernaturally ugly. Thus he saves her from gluttony as she is forced to stay at home. She forgets the details of how she nearly lost her mind. NDiaye's disturbing account of the straying into disorderly eating puts some flesh on the bones of the theorisation of community and *le propre*. We could reflect on the *folie* or hubris of the protagonist spending money taken from her hard-working husband, a road worker (1996: 48), to spend mostly at the *charcuterie* but also at the *pâtisserie* – where wondrous delights are displayed to tempt the right consumer and tantalise the unworthy. The village community is censorious, not quite a panopticon but everyone sees everyone and so keeps all on the straight and narrow – Antoinette could only evade it for so long. What is required is the dull self-sacrifice of the housewife in the home, with luxury expensive food only as a special treat for others, only if you can afford it. 'It is through the constant frustration of desire that Late Capitalism can prompt ever higher levels of consumption' (Schwartz 1990: 328). Shop window displays transparently advertise 'eat me', and arouse the ache of longing. And yet doubly binding, blinding, bourgeois values require economy and order, and the mother is after all the reproduction of the means of production, in order to inculcate social values in her children, she must embody self-denial herself.

Across 'La Gourmandise', 'Le Jour du Président' and *La Cheffe* NDiaye stages solitary (working-class) women who learn to efface themselves through denying themselves food they previously enjoyed. In the first story Antoinette attempts to escape to a divine place of her own where she can look down on the ignorant community, and guzzle a disorderly mixture of salty and sweet, meat and cake, which offers her perfect happiness and plenitude, a special kind of pleasure. She feels like a benign floating shadow, detached from her humdrum self, as she carelessly takes in 'autant de gras, autant de sucre' (1996: 54) ['so

much fat, so much sugar’], but she is brought down to earth with a bump. Her neighbours hypothesize that she must perversely be buying all these expensive items as gifts to press on her hideous lover; it is beyond their imagining that she would be feasting alone. Their heightened surveillance then means both that she renounces her secret love-affair with food and that she dare not venture beyond the village. Olga, having achieved more than Antoinette (a move away from home and the possibility of advancement at least in her parents’ eyes), in a more extreme reaction to a world that does not really seem to pay attention, to have space or time for her, then cannot eat at all. La Cheffe too gives up eating having reached heights of creative gastronomy, and a successful career unimaginable to her youthful self or to obscure women such as Antoinette or Olga. Why do these three women all disappear, fade, through corporeal self-denial over which they are not really in control? In the case of la Cheffe, the radical decision not to end the life of anything living could be read as an ethical and aesthetic choice, but the endless voice of the (male) narrator, who mediates everything the reader knows about this extraordinary woman, translates this into a madness which has come upon her. Antoinette’s end could be interpreted according to community values as a sensible return from folly into normalcy, but she has no analytic self-awareness either of her former daily straying or of her present situation. In all three cases there is a sense that an external force has dictated withdrawal. Even a very modest amount of hubris has been punished, as we imagine Tantalus, thief of divine ambrosia and nectar, was tortured by the repeated withholding of the food he most wanted. Social (and patriarchal) order, which keeps insiders in their places and outsiders outside tells us not to be greedy, tells women to sacrifice themselves for others, but has a dysfunctional relationship with the drive of the market to encourage consumption in all forms – to treat ourselves ‘because we’re worth it’. The toxic water of contradiction in which we all swim may simply subdue Antoinettes, but may kill young women such as Olga and even brilliant women like la Cheffe.

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<sup>1</sup> This story came out in a publication to accompany an exhibition at the Centre Pompidou (Géné and NDiaye 1996). The translation of the title removes some of the ambiguity of 'Gourmandise' – but, in the context of the deadly sins, it has to be 'Gluttony'. Jean-Anthelme Brillat-Savarin argues, in his *Physiologie du goût* (1826), cited by Géné in the volume, that precisely *gourmandise* (the epicure's pleasure in food) is wrongly assimilated with *gloutonnerie* or indiscriminating greed. This sense of *gourmand* lurks, for example, in the *thé* or *café gourmand* today (an upmarket treat with small cakes or similar delights accompanying the hot beverage). Certainly Antoinette oscillates between seeing herself as a *gourmande* in a positive sense and fearing the hostile gaze of the community which judges the greedy woman, out of control.

<sup>2</sup> Amélie Nothomb, Marie NDiaye, Jean-Pierre Ostende, Eugène Nicole and Jean-Jacques Viton, were given the task: 'Dialoguez avec le lecteur, et parlez-nous du monde à travers votre subjectivité' (1997) [Dialogue with the reader, and tell us about the world via your subjectivity]. The story is one of a number of examples of complicated mother-daughter relationships in NDiaye; the devoted working-class mother wants the best for her daughter, but the latter, parachuted into a middle-class environment where she does not feel at home, is tormented by shame about the marks of her origins.

<sup>3</sup> See Ellman; while she is careful to point out the real differences between various forms of refusal to eat, she does discuss the 'jouissance of self-starvation', asking whether hunger strikers may ultimately find excuses to justify the 'ecstasy of disembodiment'. Conversely

female anorexics may be hunger strikers in disguise defying patriarchal values, although others would argue that they ‘collude in their oppression by relinquishing the perilous demands of freedom in favour of the cosy compensations of infantilism’ (1993: 2).

<sup>4</sup> Indeed *The Edible Woman* deals delicately with the aberrant literalising of the figural or emotional when Marian creates a woman out of cake and offers it to her fiancé so that he can devour it instead of hunting her down, she feels, in order to destroy her (Atwood 1969).

<sup>5</sup> ‘Les Clapeau s’étaient mis dans l’idée, curieusement, que la glorification par leurs soins de leur goût effréné pour la viande faisait oublier leur manie de la nourriture en général, et c’est ainsi que la viande faisait l’ordinaire chez les Clapeau et qu’ils allaient jusqu’à vouloir considérer cette habitude comme une nécessité thérapeutique, affirmant que la viande les préservait de maux qu’ils ne manquaient pas d’attraper quand certaines circonstances les privaient de porc ou de bœuf à chaque repas’ (2016: 49) [‘Oddly the Clapeaus had become convinced that their glorification of their frenzied taste for meat, by the care they lavished on it, disguised their mania for food in general, and thus meat was everyday in the Clapeau household. They would go so far as asserting that their meat habit was a therapeutic necessity, claiming that it kept them safe from illnesses that they would not have failed to fall prey to, had specific circumstances deprived them of pork or beef at every meal’]. The narrator glosses : ‘les plats que la Cheffe voyait préparer chaque jour devaient donc rester dans son souvenir composés de viandes exclusivement’ (2016: 50) [‘the dishes that la Cheffe would see being prepared on a daily basis thus inevitably remained in her memory as composed entirely of meat’].

<sup>6</sup> Bennett et al conclude: ‘The advent of the fast-growing broiler morphotype in the 1950s and its uptake across industrial farms worldwide, can be viewed as a near-synchronous global signal of change to the biosphere, currently maintained by humans and the technosphere. Modern broiler chickens are morphologically, genetically and isotopically distinct from domestic chickens prior to the mid-twentieth century. The global range of modern broilers and biomass dominance over all other bird species is a product of human intervention. As such, broiler chickens vividly symbolize the transformation of the biosphere to fit evolving human consumption patterns, and show clear potential to be a biostratigraphic marker species of the Anthropocene’ (2018). Thanks to Christopher King for recommending this article to me.

<sup>7</sup> Mothers’ liability for their children’s bodies starts with what they eat in pregnancy – nowadays not only are pregnant women obliged to deny themselves various food stuffs and alcohol (varying by country and time period) lest they ever forget the presence of their

precious guest within them, but also the emphasis is firmly on staying in shape not only for the sake of their own future silhouettes but so that their children do not grow up obese.

<sup>8</sup> In *Ladivine*, NDiaye describes a devoted black, working-class, single mother (Ladivine Sylla) who is disparagingly described as *la servante* by her daughter Malinka (e.g. 2013: 55) who reinvents herself as the pale-skinned Clarisse Rivière – and yet as part of this reinvention she herself becomes *la serveuse*, not only a wife and mother dedicated to the happiness of her family but also the embodiment of the perfect waitress. She sees her domestic environment as advancement in class and ethnic terms without verbalising her progress as this would entail confessing her origin. At the same time, as a woman, Clarisse continues to *serve* inside and outside the home. Her shame about her repudiation of her loving mother is frequently expressed in terms of her conscious or unconscious rejection of food, for example: ‘Son amour pour sa mère lui était une nourriture âcre, impossible à avaler’ (2013: 72) [‘Her love for her mother was bitter food for her, impossible to swallow’] and worse: ‘Son amour pour sa mère l’empoisonnait’ (2013: 73) [‘Her love for her mother was poisoning her’].

<sup>9</sup> The reader is not told that Antoinette is a white woman *française de souche* [French born and bred]; while most textual clues point in that direction, such as the paleness of her flesh, a counter-argument to that example would be that people of North African descent often have a range of skin tones. Readers of NDiaye are often keen to draw lessons about race or racism from her texts – and some of her work (such as NDiaye 2009) explicitly addresses these issues. In this instance, race is not foregrounded – but isolation and the possibility of social ostracism certainly are. If a reader were hunting for micro-textual signs that this representation of everywoman is not supposed to have what is sometimes seen as ‘a first-world problem’ (although eating disorders, never mind disorderly eating, are not unique to ‘the West’, contrary to our Western self-flattering abnegation in this respect) these might include the box of *semoule* under which Antoinette hides her ill-gotten gains during the painful hours between cash machine and purchase. *Semoule* can mean semolina which would be used to make simple and innocent children’s desserts – it can also mean couscous, the classic North African dish. In *Mon cœur à l’étroit* (2007) NDiaye uses *semoule* to refer to couscous grain – also as a simple innocent family pleasure – but for the kind of family regarded as ‘different’.

<sup>10</sup> Bordo analyses such ads involving ice-cream or chocolate as ‘private, *self*-feeding [...] represented as a *substitute* for human love’ (1993: 126) – in the American context, she argues that typically women will only be shown indulging in ‘bite-size’ treats, and only after they

have fulfilled their domestic obligations. She suggests that many women would (shamefully) need rather more than a small candy – which is certainly true for Antoinette.

<sup>11</sup> NDiaye often draws on bird imagery in her writing; the example of *Trois femmes puissantes* (2009) has been much discussed, but I would also draw attention to the significance of chickens notably in *La Cheffe* (see Still 2019), and even in ‘Le Jour du Président’ which opens as follows: ‘Ce lundi là, jour de la première visite du président au Havre, je m’éveillais le matin avec lenteur, avec pesanteur, alors même que je ne pesais plus guère, alors même que je n’étais plus depuis des semaines que légèreté et vide gargouillant – une légèreté osseuse, craquante, de poule maigre ou d’un de ces volatiles décharnés qui volaient bas sur le port en hiver’ (1997: 29) [‘That Monday, the day of the President’s first visit to Le Havre, I woke up in the morning slowly, heavily, even though I no longer weighed very much at all, even though for weeks I had been nothing more than lightness and gurgling emptiness – a bony, crackling lightness, like a scrawny chicken or one of those birds with no meat on them which used to fly low over the port in winter’]. Royle (2017) provokes thought on the way in which birds are ‘hidden’ in plain sight in linguistic tropes – dead and alive.

<sup>12</sup> While NDiaye does not specify the location of this story, it is a region of beeches, moss and fat cows, and thus could well be the Normandy readers would associate with Flaubert’s archetypal bad (selfish) housewife Emma Bovary. Another link to Flaubert in this story is the figure of the idiot boy. See Asibong and Campmas (2017) for some essays comparing NDiaye’s writing to Flaubert’s.

<sup>13</sup> My thanks to Isha Pearce and Jeremy Lane for introducing me to Houellebecq’s *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, and for our discussions about the sexual politics in his writing.

<sup>14</sup> The name of the classic French cheese and ham toastie brings together a familiar term for ‘eat’ and ‘monsieur’. While it could be what monsieur likes to eat, it could also be you ‘eating’ him. Interestingly, *croque-madame* adds a fried egg, another level of indulgence for the ladies as we deprive the mother hen of any chance of progeny.

<sup>15</sup> Another example of NDiaye’s amused observation of the decline of the Church in favour of Mammon is to be found in *En Famille* (NDiaye 1991). Once upon a time the church steeple provided a means of geographical (and perhaps moral or social) orientation in the village which is heavily cathected as *home* by the naïve protagonist unwilling to accept that autoimmune forces of exclusion are at play in the region, and that she will never be accepted. In the course of the novel the church is eclipsed in every way by a giant hypermarket, but the forces of capitalism do not bring greater inclusivity.

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<sup>16</sup> See J P G  n  's 'Le Calvaire de la gourmandise' (G  n   and Ndiaye 1996: 6-31) ['The Calvary of Gluttony']. He discusses religious examples including Eve eating the apple as gluttony (rather than curiosity); Christmas feasting, the wedding at Cana (particularly wine), bread and fishes, the last supper, edible Jesus in communion bread and wine; gluttony viewed by the Church as sin, often linked to lust while fasting is virtuous; monastic production of food and drink; temptation for greedy monks – linked to lust; and the French Revolution pitting the starving poor against greedy monks and aristocrats. His secular examples include Brillat-Savarin's definition of greed without sin; the first restaurants; the rehabilitation of *gourmandise* in that, for instance, Barthes sees admitting to greed as a 'sorte d'aveu aimable et gentiment complaisant qui ne sort jamais du bon ton' ['a kind of amiable and sweetly indulgent confession which is never in bad taste'] unlike confessing sexual perversion; the invention of the gourmet; post-war food shortages; American food in France; consumption as differentiating man from other animals 'A la diff  rence de l'animal qui se satisfait de l'indispensable, l'homme r  fl  chit    son menu quotidien et    ses ingr  dients.' (1996: 24) ['Unlike the animal, satisfied with the necessary, man reflects on his daily menu and its ingredients']; tradition in the sense of authentic *terroir* (food chauvinism); top chefs as artists or celebrities; hospitalisation and the problems of cholesterol etc; and hunger strikes.

<sup>17</sup> Ehrenreich (2018) notes the contemporary obsession with health and longevity through self-denial; instead of changing the world the middle-classes want to change their bodies. This easily leads to victim-blaming of those who die 'early', and blaming the working classes for their unhealthy (and inappropriately expensive) habits (smoking, drinking, fats, sugars in fast food, drugs). The attitude towards those who regularly give way to temptation is too frequently a mixture of pity and contempt even on the part of health professionals, rather than making any attempt at understanding the culture or the pressures of life particularly for stressed working-class mothers who may indulge in 'defiant self-nurturance', doing 'something for themselves' albeit something which is condemned by the wider community.

<sup>18</sup> Nietzsche's point that the powerful appropriate the language of virtue (for example nobility) to describe themselves remains pertinent.

<sup>19</sup> I would note that in *En Famille*, NDiaye's protagonist moves from working in a traditional rural *auberge* to working in an urban fast food joint – the former is certainly not more welcoming a location for its employees – particularly if they are visibly 'different' (NDiaye 1991).

<sup>20</sup> Tertiari  sation covers both the most highly-paid and the most secure careers and also the least well-paid and most insecure jobs (with the rate of pay not necessarily relating to the



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level of security). Equally, increasing demand for emotional labour has negative connotations (such as the imposition of the smile and the formula ‘have a nice day’ on exhausted, exploited employees) and more positive ones (such as a recognition of the need for emotional intelligence in institutions otherwise given over to the brutality of economic rationalism).

<sup>21</sup> NDiaye has already referred to abjection (1996: 48, cited earlier); this could be related to Kristeva’s work on the abject (1980).