

# **Introduction to Disorderly Eating in Contemporary Women's Writing**

Shirley Jordan and Judith Still

## **Abstract**

The Introduction presents the rationale for the special issue, and engages with key scholarship in the field. It makes the case for considering eating disorders in the wider context of 'disorderly eating', both as a sociological phenomenon and a recurrent literary concern, granted the importance of *ordering* and regulating food consumption for community cohesion. It is particularly concerned to ask what is, and what is not, specific about the contemporary late-capitalist period, which has seen such an explosion of eating disorders, in the context of ever more disorderly eating. We ask what we can learn from the elaboration of the disorderly preparing, serving, sharing and eating of food specifically in contemporary women's writing in French, Spanish, English, Italian and German. The Introduction adopts a cross-cultural perspective to suggest both some commonalities and some contextual specificities to the lived and represented experience of eating and disorder across sexes, classes, generations and ethnicities.

## **Keywords**

Disorderly eating, eating disorders, contemporary women's writing, postcolonialism, class

'Manger est toujours bien plus que manger' (Giard 1994: 279)

['Eating is always much more than eating']

## **Disorderly Eating**

We have to eat to live, and eating disorders remind us of that in a dramatic fashion when they threaten life itself. However, eating and feeding go a long way beyond the need to survive. All communities order food – albeit in very different ways. They order what can and cannot be eaten, at what time of day or year, where, in what sequence, in what way, how much, by whom and with whom (Delamont 1995: 19-41). Transgression of these regimes carries a price although, like other kinds of transgression, it may also bring pleasure, if only the pleasure of protest. The imposition of both explicit and unspoken kinds of regulation on food helps any community affirm itself and maintain its borders at a given historical moment.<sup>1</sup> This sense of order and disorder created around food extends to issues of structure and

context. Anthropologists have explored the rigorous and distinctive structuring of meals across cultures and class lines (e.g. Douglas and Nicod 1974; Giard 1994) and noted women's role in maintaining this. Levi Strauss's binaries of the raw and the cooked (Levi Strauss 1964) also address the ordering and classification of what we see as 'ingredients' (including animals). The pleasures of order are in permanent tension with the dangers and temptations of its opposite and with transgressions both disagreeable and agreeable.

This special issue will focus on *disorderly eating* in contemporary women's writing across a range of language areas. It has been composed at a historical moment when there is an explosion of *eating disorders* (EDs) – those extreme forms of disorderly eating where an individual's control or lack of control, of their eating reaches a point that it is deemed pathological and indeed the individual could suffer extreme health consequences, even death. One of our goals in this volume is to contextualise EDs within a broader panorama of eating 'against the grain', against social prohibitions or exhortations, whether this be by explicitly refusing norms or by taking these norms to their logical conclusion thereby reducing them to a lethal absurdity. We shall continually return to the question: if already Hippocrates was worried about the phenomenon of 'loss of appetite', what is, and what is not, specific about the present moment?<sup>2</sup>

Our reach is therefore broader and more diverse than that of studies delimited to clinically recognized pathologies. Our focus too is distinctive in that it is specifically on contemporary women's writing. Our argument is that women are particularly *interested* in the politics of eating and feeding, and we ask how articulations of food and disorder are used imaginatively in their works to throw up a range of provocations. Women's closeness to food relates to the policing of women's bodies as well as to the – still – core role of women in domestic labour. It is sometimes argued that most narrative accounts of EDs are more or less autobiographical (and by women who, it is said, account for about 90% of EDs).<sup>3</sup> In this volume, however, contributors take a broader range of works, both autobiographical and fictional, and consider disorderly consumption not only by women but also by men and boys (Bartel, Lee-Six), which of course, as in these examples, often *concerns* women as mothers, daughters, partners (carers and cooks).<sup>4</sup>

This special issue is, in addition, culturally comparative, contributing to the very necessary attempt to tease out the specificity of lived experience of eating and disorder as it is conditioned by different contexts (inflected not only by race but also class). Food and eating are signifiers which are central to the creation of a sense of cultural belonging - or conversely to the rejection of enforced kinds of belonging - while food within a 'trans-', or fusional

space calls into question the relationship between countries and cultures, disrupting and challenging national culinary traditions. Such traditions are carried by diasporic groups, modified by intergenerational transmission, and diffused and adapted by host groups. Thus each of the essays collected here traces the meanings that hover and coalesce around eating in a distinctive context originating in Spanish, Italian-American, German, French or Francophone cultures. The editors of a recent transnational study of EDs in contemporary women's writing emphasise what is common in, for example, the writing of anorexia, arguing that 'there are more similarities than differences in the ways in which anorexia is inscribed' (Bagley et al. 2018:10), and there is indeed generic value to many of the ideas elaborated in this volume. Nevertheless it is important to work out, where possible, the tension between what is specific and what shared, albeit in a modest way given the volume's size, and without reaching into issues such as EDs in developing countries and West/East comparisons (Nasser, Katzman and Gordan 2001). We should note at this point that both editors of the current volume are French specialists. We are thus writing with knowledge of a literary and cultural context which has seen an especially remarkable concentration of works on EDs in recent decades (the importance of addressing a specifically French context is addressed in Cairns forthcoming: 6-8).

While disorderly eating can bring pleasure, including a conscious or unconscious challenge (if only in magnification), to the imposed social norms, when it spirals into the complex set of phenomena that make up EDs these can blight individual lives, destroy families, and represent a major challenge to public health systems at the start of the twenty-first century. Pathologies such as anorexia nervosa, bulimia and binge ED are key instances of the body in crisis, yet, in spite of a raft of factors – the alarming statistics, the undeniably powerful experience of these disorders, the fact that they are now widely reported in the public domain and the evidence they give of severe, widespread malaise in response to a range of social factors – they have been slow to find a recognisable/recognised voice in literature.<sup>5</sup> This is now changing as an increasing number of writers, often also sufferers, are rising to the socio-political and personal challenge of bringing the experience to explicit articulation. At the same time, in a virtuous circle, scholarship on such writing is growing, in part thanks to the current interest in the medical humanities.

Unsurprisingly most of this literature is produced by younger women writers, although there are some exceptions: it is notable for example that veteran life-writer Annie Ernaux, now in her late seventies, recently wrote for the very first time about a period of her late teens and early twenties that was marked by an ED (Ernaux 2016; Cruickshank, this

volume). Other writings are even more clinically precise about the mechanisms of self-harm through food deprivation. The novel *Dürre Jahre* (1998) [The Lean Years] by Austrian writer Helen Flöss traces the effects on body and mind of a young girl's self-starving; Italian writer Alessandra Arachi gives a graphic account of food expulsion in *Non più briciole* (2015) [No More Crumbs]; the protagonists of Ulrike Draesner's *Mitgift* (2002) [Dowry] and Geneviève Brisac's *Petite* (1994) [*Petite*] afford an uncomfortably close perspective on privation, fasting, extreme exercise, and so on. Certain writings straddle the diary and the survival guide: Marta Aleksandra Balinska's *Retour à la vie: quinze ans d'anorexie* (2003) [*Return to Life: Fifteen Years of Anorexia*], Camille de Peretti's *Thornytorinx* (2006) [*Thornytorinx*], Mélanie Courtelle's *Journal d'une faim de vivre: témoignage* (2011) [*Diary of a Hunger to Live: A Testimony*], Nicole Desportes's *Voyage jusqu'au bout de la vie; comment j'ai vaincu l'anorexie* (2016) [*A Journey to the End of Life: How I Beat Anorexia*] and American writer Kelsey Osgood's *How to Disappear Completely: On Modern Anorexia* (2013) are instances of personal testimonies which offer detailed, embodied descriptions of disturbed interactions with food including binge eating and vomiting. Each seeks to account for the pathology, to overcome its unspeakable dimension and to conjure shame. Each expresses the sufferer's desire for transparency and weightlessness – to be diaphanous as 'une bulle de savon' [a soap bubble] (de Peretti 2006: 161) or light like a feather – as well as her loss of a sense of self, her deteriorating body, her avoidance behaviour around food, and the catalogue of routines, rituals, phobias and control mechanisms that structure her days. A skeletal form may be adopted, reducing the text down to its bare bones. Thus Janine Teisson's *L'enfant plume* (2012) [*The Feather Child*], the poetic testimony of a mother, struggles to find a form that will lend the experience its full impact and offers the reader spare fragments redolent with unspoken emotion. Meanwhile, Marie Le Bars's *Appelez-moi plume* (2014) [*Call Me Feather*] brings together a chorus of voices around an anorexic girl. Designed for patients, therapists and families, the book takes the form of an *abécédaire* [ABC], running from 'Aménorrhée' [Amenorrhea] to 'Vie' [Life], and is compiled as a collaborative venture, in part because, she says, words are 'les premières victimes de cette maladie' [the first victims of this illness], and '[I]es patients ne savent plus parler' [patients no longer know how to speak] (49). Haitian-American Roxane Gay's *Hunger: A Memoir of (My) Body* (2017) is rather different in telling a 'fat-girl' story, as she phrases it, in her account of her journey to and from what is labelled as 'super morbid obesity'.

Writers of testimony and fiction have, then, begun to thread their way down the difficult path of drawing EDs into literature, and scholars are increasingly following (e.g.

Cairns 2007, 2015 and forthcoming; Robson 2016; Bagley, Calamita and Robson 2017; Bartel 2020). Such writings create in-depth relationships with fictional or real sufferers, offering detailed phenomenological and experiential accounts of their disorders and raising fascinating issues in terms of interpretation and reception. Collectively, they are set to provide the general reader, the sufferer and the medical establishment with opportunities to enhance their understanding of the grave and all too often unspoken psychiatric disorders which are tellingly dubbed by Émilie Durand a ‘folie ordinaire’ (2006) [‘ordinary madness’]. At the same time, many contemporary women writers blur the distinction between EDs and disorderly eating. Best-selling mainstream authors such as Amélie Nothomb and Marie Darrieussecq have each produced creative, metaphorical explorations of women whose responses to food become disorderly. Nothomb’s female protagonists habitually evoke the contentiously skeletal images of women in the fashion world, clinging to their androgynous childhood physique and expressing revulsion at the onset of womanhood (Damlé 2013). The protagonist of Darrieussecq’s novel *Truismes* (1996) [*Pig Tales*] whose metamorphosing body famously serves as a magnet for multiple interpretations and debates as it shifts to-and-fro between woman and pig, presents with aberrant attitudes, desires and practices with regard to food so that one possible analysis involves casting her as a symbolic sufferer of bulimia and anorexia (McGrath in Bagley et al 2018: 145-66).

### **Looking at Women, Reading the Body and Writing**

Many sociological analyses of disorderly eating, and indeed EDs, focus on ‘the pressure to conform to socially imposed standards of physical beauty propagated by mainstream media through the relentless images of (air-brushed) slender female bodies that represent idealised femininity’ (Bagley et al 2018: 2). This is presented as a contemporary phenomenon, significantly different from earlier periods, although some scholars acknowledge the history of female self-starvation whether this has been named saintly, devilish, hysterical or consumptive – now anorexia nervosa (a term first coined in 1873) or bulimia (coined in 1979). Susannah Wilson, for example, examines early cases of ‘hysterical anorexia’ in the nineteenth century (2014; 2017). We argue that we must remember the long traditions of verbal and visual ideals of femininity, for example in a context where most girls attended church and gazed on statues and other images of pious virtue – and in which clothing, hair styles and so on were prescribed – although some women escaped thanks to their class or status. Let us not forget the cruelty of corsets or foot binding – cramming women’s bodies into smaller space. Today young women have greater choice and a greater range of models;

while we deplore the predominance of a certain fashionable look, we should also consider the significant increase in the number of visible female professionals over the last half century or so. Yet *qualitatively* there has been a shift towards the visual and verbal sexualisation of the body even as women demonstrate that they have minds too. In addition, very importantly, there has been a *quantitative* leap: in the age of small screens and a range of social networking platforms, as well as old media, the opportunity to look and be looked at (such as the relentless posting of anxiogenic selfies begging for ‘likes’) has grown exponentially. Once upon a time in the West (and still the case in some countries more dominated by religion today), pornography, soft or hard, was hidden from (most) women’s eyes – even supposedly secular societies initially took a cue from religion with regard to the control of women’s bodies (after all men still wanted to know that their sons were legitimately theirs). Now young women apparently have more choices, but with each opening of a door, professional or personal, comes a new set of demands and pressures – and even as they are now told that their minds matter, the gaze on their bodies, including their own gaze, has rarely been more ferocious. Best-selling author Jacqueline Wilson (1998) gives a powerful account of teenage girls’ experiences of over-eating, fat-shaming, bulimia and anorexia – addressed to a pre-teen and teen audience particularly susceptible to the desire to be a model, to attract a boyfriend, or just to be ‘like everybody else’.

Bagley et al follow a strong line of current thinking in claiming that: ‘Pathological starvation and bingeing are an idiomatic and paradoxical language employed by women – and more recently by men – to communicate their deepest feelings, express their identity and protest about their socio-cultural roles’ (2018:1). They add later that medical professionals tell us about this singular woman with an ED that ‘she will lie a great deal and try to keep her ED a secret; paradoxically those with anorexia are often good at feeding others’ (Bagley et al 2018: 16). As literary critics we often want to read texts which are, strictly speaking, outside language – and are lured even into presenting material practices and phenomena as codes which could then be de-coded. However, to take an example close to home here, which should warn of the dangers of reading bodily signs, we readers need only study the critiques of that master-interpreter Freud in his analysis of cases – one of the closest to home being ‘Dora’ (see Bernheimer and Kahane 1985). It is interesting that philosophers resist the idea of animal language beyond the simplest kind of communication on the grounds that animals are trapped in the physical, and yet not only human minds but also human bodies and behaviours are seen as unconsciously as well as consciously expressing highly complex yet *legible* messages of protest and the desire for autonomy. They ‘lie’ – but do their bodies lie or tell the

truth? Women with EDs are also represented as those who *fail* to read, see, interpret or judge since anorexics and bulimics are defined as those who see their body erroneously – as fat when it is skeletal. But perhaps this self-misreading is simply a parody of social judgement.

Reading bodies and practices and then naming disorders (Foucault 1976) tends to produce fixed identities with narratives attached. We theorists may reject this, seeing a complexity of multiple origins, trajectories, *stories*. However, when caring for a child who is self-harming the temptation is to seek professional help from those who themselves turn to diagnostic manuals, with all their social prejudices and economic influences (big Pharma should never be underestimated) – resulting in a *name*. And of course people name themselves too. This name can help and harm; it can link individuals to communities (insider/outsider) – with potential hierarchies – who is more skinny, more hard core, more damaged? – sharing strategies to cope, strategies to escape detection by outsiders, ways of not consuming, or replacing calories by other rewards including verbal ones. Cairns (forthcoming) argues, and is not alone in doing so, that a major therapeutic response to EDs should be encouraging sufferers to *write*. She points, for instance, to a major writing-induced cognitive breakthrough in Valérie Rodrigue's *La peau à l'envers. Le roman vrai d'une boulimique* (1989) [*The Inside of the Skin. The True Novel of a Bulimic*]. However, reading and writing explicit accounts of the lived experience of bulimia, details of food intake, BMIs and so on can also prove 'triggering', provoking complex reading responses depending on the context of the production and consumption of the text.

One perverse flipside of reading the anorexic's body language is to read literature as anorexic by definition; as Isabelle Meuret puts it: 'la tentation est grande de lire l'anorexie [...] comme une pathologie propre à l'écriture, dont les signes calligraphiques figurent les stigmates de l'émaciation [...] anorexie et écriture se nourrissent mutuellement' (2006: 13) ['it is a great temptation to read anorexia [...] as a pathology proper to writing, whose calligraphic signs figure the stigmata of emaciation [...] anorexia and writing nourish each other reciprocally']. Meuret is fascinated by (literary) anorexia as a seductive way of walking the tightrope of approaching death while staying alive, bearing witness to the vertigo of nothingness. Her approach may seem cavalier to one who has spent any time with those, particularly those who are not famous, not great writers, who have done irreversible damage to their bodies while still very young. Alcoholism, drug addiction, and other paler forms of self- or other-abuse have in their turn proved to have a poetic resonance for writers and critics – albeit obesity and fake tans not so much thus far. One of the most disturbingly striking elements for us about Meuret's introduction to anorexia is the number of times anorexia is the

generalised subject of a sentence, e.g. ‘Pour Bernard Vialettes, l’anorexie est une “déraison philosophique” car elle fournit un “refuge” devant les “angoisses communes à l’Humanité”.’ (2006: 19) [‘For Bernard Vialettes, anorexia is “philosophical unreason” for it provides a “refuge” in the face of “anxieties common to Humanity”’]; ‘L’anorexie est donc une pathologie de la communication, du temps et aussi de l’espace.’ (2006: 23) [‘Anorexia is thus a pathology of communication, in time and also in space.’]; ‘Anorexie et écriture sont deux expériences de la limite qui se confondent en un même projet de naissance à soi.’ (2006: 24) [‘Anorexia and writing are two experiences of the limit which are combined in one project of self-birth.’] We would like to argue for a broader approach to the macro and micro socio-politics of eating and not-eating – which also has to be integrated with the politics of feeding, not-feeding, not allowing to feed.

### **Politics of Food (i) the Larger Picture**

Because we need food to live, access to food (and clean water) has always been political on both the macro and the micro level. On the macro level, you could consider the history of colonialism whether in the New World or in Africa where colonists typically displace indigenous peoples from the territories they consider most important – often the most fertile agricultural land. In the Southern Americas, for example, colonists found ideal grazing for Spanish longhorns, and the Spanish seeded cattle from Texas to the boot of Chile (Rifkin 1994: 45ff). In the nineteenth century vast herds of buffalo were exterminated partly to make space for more cattle as fatty (‘marbled’) beef became ever more popular in the Americas and back in Europe – and, the historical record indicates, that the resulting genocide of indigenous peoples for whom buffalo had been a staple foodstuff was not contingent but entirely deliberate and intentional. Surviving natives were suitably reduced to dependency. A different example would be Algeria,<sup>6</sup> and other cases include Ireland and Scotland where the British weaponised famine. As Amartya Sen points out, famine is: ‘not the lack of food but the inability to purchase it [...] People starve because they *have* no food, not because there *is* no food’ (cited in Ellmann 1993: 5). Subaltern groups sometimes turn this strategy back on their oppressors. A complicated case is that of Irish Hunger Strikers in the Maze who could be seen as establishing their own archaic tradition: ‘By hungering, the protestors transform their bodies into the “quotations” of their forebears and reinscribe the cause of Irish nationalism in the spectacle of starving flesh’ (Ellmann 1993: 14). A different example would be that of slaves who deliberately starved to death – in that case there is no media spectacle of suffering as there is no audience to which the emaciated body is speaking (Margaret Thatcher



or the press as conduit to public opinion in the case of the Long Kesh strikers). Slave suicides in general can be read as escape and as thwarting the master – in the case of the long death of refusing food (for which punishment was cruel) there is a particular rejection of nourishment from the master.

A rather different approach to the broader politics of disorderly eating is of course to approach it from the perspective of capitalism rather than colonialism (the two rarely far apart). Capitalism entails a great deal of apparent choice – how many kinds of crisps, what a selection even of plain yoghurts! When chemical additives, added sugar, salt, fat, never mind GM horrors, start to worry the consumer with plenty of disposable income then the market will provide organic food at a premium. When factory farming with its cheap products is revealed to the chattering classes as cruel to animals, the environment and workers, and spreading disease to boot, then the market provides meat or eggs branded ‘cruelty-free’ – the sense of these labels often approaching non-sense, but nevertheless maybe a little less cruel. And then the supermarket will provide a vegan range. Food wrapped in lots of single-use plastic can be wrapped in a little less. Diversification for profit is both abominable – and, let’s face it, great for busy shoppers (still, so often, women on the dual shift) who can find what they need under one roof when they do not have the time or the money to go to the farmer’s market and the artisan bakery. Globalisation has brought a really extensive variety of exotic food products to our shops, and the flows of migration have also meant an incredible range of restaurants compared to half a century ago. We should not deny the pleasure and the opportunities, even while we analyse the pain and the traps.

This is a line of analysis that helps to explain a particular historical surge in EDs. If, in certain locations, it could be argued that peak consumption has been reached, then the market diversification of products can take particularly perverse forms to maintain demand. Why did the US government lower the BMI threshold casting large numbers of citizens into ‘overweight’ and some into ‘obesity’ overnight (Orbach 2017: 23)? Orthorexia, obesity and dieting *all* involve additional expenditure beyond whatever the necessary is historically considered to be. Schwartz is clear that not only has big business profited hugely from ‘luxury’ foods (accessible to the masses or kept at a distance), food fads, and particularly dieting, but also that apparently pleasing self-improvement mirrors the ethos of capitalism:

Buying into the culture of slimming is perilous. It means buying into the worst of capitalism and the worst of ourselves: meanness, paranoia, deception [...] Capitalism reduces what is real to what is apparent; dieting reduces what we are to our

appearances. Capitalism emboldens us to believe that insofar as we deprive ourselves, we can master others. (1990: 331-2)

Susan Bordo analyses advertising (1993) in this context; while advertising targeted at women to keep them focused on body image, consumer products and a well-kept home is not new, it has of course expanded hugely at the same time as women's economic and thus social power has increased – with concomitant backlash. Margaret Atwood's self-starving Marian already, in the late 60s, works for a market research company, and mentions variously the 'canned rice pudding survey', 'the coast-to-coast instant pudding-sauce survey', 'the laxative survey in Quebec'. W.J. Keith, who sees *The Edible Woman* as a great comic novel, emphasizes here as elsewhere the ridiculous elements (1989: 31) such as the women market surveyors sprayed with blood-red instant tomato juice in a storm. While the book is indeed brilliantly witty, it is also important to note the seriousness of the sometimes cruel humour – the growing power of advertising and synthetic food combined with a heroine who cannot stomach anything. Women are labour, fodder for the marketing machine, out in all weathers selling the idea of the products – women are also targets. Marian's initial horror of meat (expanding into a rejection of all food) stems from a bloody description by her excited boyfriend of his slaughtering a rabbit; her growing identification with a hunted animal is reminiscent of the later comic fable by Marie Darrieussecq, *Truismes*, where the woman metamorphosing into a pig is likewise haunted by blood and feels sick at the thought of consuming flesh (Daroczi this volume). Primal horrors are, however, intertwined with dissection of the most modern forms of *persuasion*: Darrieussecq's protagonist gazes longingly at advertisements featuring skinny models while her plump body is exploited in publicity for a neo-fascist party.

### **Politics of Food (ii) the Personal**

Starving kills people, while simply a reduction in food (especially in protein) can be a tool to make them passive and compliant – a trick used in many an institution. In Darrieussecq's short story 'Connaissance des singes' (2006: 37-54) ['Monkey knowledge'] the narrator's mother explains that she does not feed her emaciated and lethargic chimpanzee companion Marcel:

Il ne mange pas [...] De l'eau seulement. Une petite poignée de millet pour lui occuper les dents, et une banane tous les deux ou trois jours. Ça suffit largement. [...] Plus il a faim, plus il parle. Il a commencé par dire ça, *j'ai faim*, et puis il est passé à autre chose. Et moi, j'aime qu'on me parle. J'ai besoin de compagnie, figure-toi, ce ne

sont pas tes deux visites par an qui vont remplir ma vie. Mais je n'ai jamais voulu l'assoiffer. Ça me semble trop cruel. (2006: 45)

[He doesn't eat [...] Just water. A small handful of millet for his teeth, and a banana every two or three days. That's plenty. [...] The hungrier he is, the more he talks. He began by saying that, *I'm hungry*, and then he moved on to other things. And I like someone to talk to me. I need company, you see, your two visits per year won't fill up my life. But I've never wanted to deprive him of water. That would be too cruel.]

The monkey servant (or, should we say, slave since he is not allowed to leave the house) has internalised his mistress's rules to the point that initially he refuses the food offered by her daughter (the narrator) with the words: 'Quand je mange, je deviens lourd et stupide' (2006: 49) ['When I eat, I become heavy and stupid']. This fable certainly provokes thoughts of slavery and servitude in the domestic situation – as well as relating to our treatment of domestic animals.

Over-feeding too can be a way of encouraging docility. In the short story above, the daughter ultimately betrays her mother by persuading Marcel to repeat tales of her mother's love-affairs so that she can recycle them in a novel. In a second betrayal, she combines using food to liberate the ape with effectively weaponizing food to deprive her mother of the companion of her old-age (now compliant to the daughter's wishes even if these seem much more desirable to the reader) – as the narrator herself is, she feels, abandoned and betrayed by her own successful writer daughter.

The domestic context is of particular interest to a number of the authors examined in this volume – unsurprisingly granted women's particular historical and continuing role in that sphere. The family is a key location both of the acting out and transmission of social and cultural regulation, and also a psychodrama in which mother, child and father are the chief actors from the outset:

It is through the act of eating that the ego establishes its own domain, distinguishing its inside from its outside. But it is also in this act that the frontiers of subjectivity are most precarious. Food, like language, is originally vested in the other, and traces of that otherness remain in every mouthful that one speaks – or chews. From the beginning one eats for the other, from the other, with the other: and for this reason eating comes to represent the prototype of all transactions with the other, and food the prototype of every object of exchange. (Ellmann 1993: 53)

Family dynamics, especially phrased as mother-daughter, but also parent-child in all its variations including symbolic parents and children, are of particular interest with respect to

EDs. While some medical professionals focus on nurturing positive family bonds in order to support patients' recovery, there is a long-standing and often negative focus on mother-daughter relations.

In their Introduction, Bagley et al cite a number of works which argue that anorexia and bulimia should not be seen exclusively in terms of a desire to be slim, but also 'with a refusal of (adult) gendered identity', and 'the ambivalent struggle for autonomy from the mother' (2018: 8). Indeed they assert that: 'It is usually the case that the foundation of EDs is an unhappy mother-child relationship, in which the mother shows lack of love or is over-protective' (2018: 9). Since over-protective could gloss 'too loving', it seems that it would be possible to blame the mother for 'too little' or 'too much' love in almost any case. Mothers stand accused of a failure to *nurture* with moderation, and yet can also be guilty for their *nature* – passing on the wrong genes (or even not passing on the right ones in some children's complaints). Luce Giard thus asserts that girls' and women's disorders are due to 'une relation surinvestie à la mère' (1994: 273) ['an overinvestment in the relationship with the mother'], and that girls and women self-starve 'pour ne pas se changer en femme à l'image de la mère' (1994: 272) ['so as not to change into a woman like their mother'], or gorge 'pour se soustraire [...] à la loi, au regard antérieur de la mère' (1994: 272) ['to escape [...] from the law of the mother, from her former gaze']. A brilliantly funny and yet also heart-breaking account of a mother-daughter struggle over weight is to be found in Atwood's *Lady Oracle*. It is tempting to quote at suitably enormous length, but we shall restrict ourselves to a merely hefty quote from a point when Joan, the first-person narrator, is thirteen:

I was sitting in the kitchenette, eating half of an orange layer cake, for which I would later be scolded. But I'd already eaten one piece and I knew the number of words for that one piece would be as great as for half a cake, so I ate on, speedily, trying to get it all down before being discovered.

By this time I was eating steadily, doggedly, stubbornly, anything I could get. The war between myself and my mother was on in earnest; the disputed territory was my body. I didn't quite know this though I sensed it in a hazy way; but I reacted to the diet booklets she left on my pillow, to the bribes of dresses she would give me if I would reduce to fit them – formal gowns with layers of tulle and wired busts, perky little frocks, skirts with slim waists and frothy crinolines – to her cutting remarks about my size, to her pleas about my health (I would die of a heart attack, I would get high blood pressure), to the specialists she sent me to and the pills they prescribed, to all of these things, with another Mars bar or a double helping of french fries. I swelled

visibly, relentlessly, before her very eyes, I rose like dough, my body advanced inch by inch towards her across the dining-room table, in this at least I was undefeated. I was five feet four and still growing, and I weighed a hundred and eighty-two pounds. ((1976: 71)

Mother-blaming is common and can be glossed to fit the historical moment; the episode above takes place in 1955 Toronto. Joan's aspirational mother names her after the *slim* Joan Crawford, and wants a daughter who is strong rather than weepy, but also absolutely obedient, and who fits the feminine bourgeois image of the day as seen from the constraining yet frilly outfits evoked. Other real or fictional 'suffocating' mothers may be too religious and deny their daughters' sexuality, while mothers who go out to work, mothers who fail to prepare nutritious 'home-made' meals and rely on 'convenience', ready meals or fast food are equally liable to be held responsible for their children's bodies. It starts with what you can or cannot eat in pregnancy,<sup>7</sup> and then the 'choice' to breast-feed or rely on powdered baby milk, to purée your own baby food or buy little jars... Siobhán McIlvanney is unusual in foregrounding (via recent autofictions by Teisson, Véronique Poivre d'Arvor and Marie Dupont) the – harrowing – maternal perspective, including the horror of being unable to nurture your child who is visibly suffering (in Bagley et al 2018: 23-44). Joan's hideously respectable mother, cruel in her coldness, is reminiscent of many frozen mothers of contemporary women's fiction. But even these demonised women (perhaps rightly demonised from a filial perspective) are victims too, and sometimes take refuge in their own disorderly consumption – alcohol in the case of the mother in *Lady Oracle*, as Joan wins the battle to be obese and weepy.

Patriarchy too is, or should be, in the firing line. Granted the long history and geography of patriarchy, however, it is more challenging to fit this into a narrative of a 'recent epidemic' unless in terms of 'backlash' to feminism and women's increasing importance in the workplace. The occasional ED narrative brings the father explicitly into the equation: Michela Marzano's autobiographical *Volevo essere una farfalla* (2011) [I Wanted to Be a Butterfly] has an unusual father-daughter focus and sheds light on anorexia through the former's incomprehension. Some analyses of EDs highlight literally or metaphorically absent fathers (a feature in *Lady Oracle*) or positive paternal figures against the controlling, and yet herself disordered, mother (Cairns forthcoming). Yet it has long been the case not only that fathers and husbands attempt to control their daughters and wives – their value contingent on modesty or an appropriate look to demonstrate *his* wealth (trophy wives are not a new thing) – but also that, where resources are scarce, women are usually last in line for

meat. And mothers are socialised to sacrifice (even enjoy sacrificing) their desires for others; Bordo cites Bud Poloquin's 1988 'An Ode to Mothers' where 'Moms' are approvingly defined as "those folks who, upon seeing there are only four pieces of pie for five people, promptly announce they never did care for the stuff" (Bordo 1993: 118), as well as numerous earlier examples.

Whether women are pushed to eat or discouraged from eating, rejecting those explicit or implicit pressures through starving or bingeing is one of the obvious weapons in an armoury for those who may have (had) few other options. The idea of options brings us back to the question of whom particular pathologies are associated with or 'belong' to: how is disorderly eating distributed – and by whom – not only across gender and generation but across the borders of class and ethnicity? We might set out here with Giard's 1994 description of bulimia and anorexia. This constitutes a remarkable document, perhaps especially when read over twenty years later when these diseases are so mediatised that one might almost believe they were brand new (1994: 271-276). What strikes us in her account is first and foremost the context: it is part of a study of 'l'invention du quotidien' ['the invention of the everyday'], ethnographic in method and emphasis, and devoted to enumerating and describing commonly understood practices of cooking, feeding and eating as so many 'arts de faire' ['practical arts']. What are the things, Giard asks of her informants, that the body does around, and with food? What are the habits, constraints and ruses through which it responds to particular circumstances? Giard writes not as if she were introducing something unknown, but instead assumes her reader will have some awareness of what she is describing: there is a taken-for-grantedness about the exercise. It is fascinating that there is no preamble to explain why this material on anorexia and bulimia is discussed in a book about the everyday. We note that Giard's informants, all women (for we are speaking here of the routine, domestic production and consumption of food) are also described, as is typical in ethnography, as 'des gens ordinaires' (1994: 226) ['ordinary people']. For Giard this means not working class but belonging to 'la petite et [...] la moyenne bourgeoisie' (1994: 226-7) ['lower-middle and [...] middle classes']. Cautious about these informants' ability to give usefully elaborate accounts of themselves, she and her co-researcher abandoned the idea of interviewing 'des femmes de milieu très modeste' (1994: 228) ['women from very modest social milieus']. We thus learn nothing about working class women and alimentary excesses, which is consistent with the enduring problem of assuming that anorexia and bulimia are middle-class diseases. The lack of analysis does not, of course, signify absence of the phenomena. Ernaux (2016) narrates her own ED as the experience of a working-class girl, who is made uncomfortably conscious of

her lower class status, in the late 1950s; she is able to name and describe her ED only as the now bourgeois and much older writer. What Giard's research does pick up, however, is material indicating that disorder in eating is not confined to women: in the verbatim transcription of an extended interview with forty-four year old Irène and her husband Jean entitled “‘Au fond, la cuisine, ça m’inquiète”” (1994: 314-350) [“‘Basically, cooking worries me””] is an account of the eating habits of Irène's son Pierre. When tiny, Pierre was repelled by eating and ‘maigre comme un coucou’ [‘thin as a rake’]; later ‘ça a été exactement l'inverse, il est devenu énorme, et il s'est mis à bouffer comme un chancre. Il avait la peur de manquer qui était absolument pathétique [...] il avait toujours ses mains sur les plats’ (1994: 321) [‘it was the precise opposite, he became enormous, and he started to stuff himself like a pig. He had a fear of going without that was absolutely pathetic [...] he couldn't keep his hands off at mealtimes’]. These sparse references to working-class and male experience of EDs are telling.

If the pressures that engender EDs are notoriously difficult to pinpoint, causality may become still more complex where issues of cultural integration and postcolonial stigmatization are part of the picture, and there are as yet relatively few explorations of EDs as experienced specifically by other than white women. *Nervous Conditions* by Zimbabwean author Tsitsi Dangarembga, tells the story of a Shona family in post-colonial Rhodesia during the 1960s, and, in particular, the tale of the young girl Tambu who eventually is selected to go to a convent school thus escaping the oppressions of family life. Her equally clever (and seemingly more advantaged) cousin and best friend Nyasha, Babamukuru's daughter, meanwhile develops an ED. This (anorexia or bulimia) is indeed considered more a white girl's disease by the doctor whom her parents finally consult. This puzzlement combines racism against black Rhodesians with a vision of the refusal to eat as a hysterical *luxury*, a disease of relative privilege if not wealth, of education, refinement, sensibility or sensitivity – an excess of humanity. The view of anorexia as a white, middle-class feminine disorder still predominates today – no doubt in part because of the greater *visibility* and *audibility* of the white middle-classes and thus of those problems which they choose to surface such as autism, dyslexia and other phenomena which may involve initial diagnosis within the family.<sup>8</sup> Animals (and the lower orders) after all simply eat. Apart from the major issue of aligning subaltern races or classes with animality, this is (a) simply not true as animals do refuse to eat out of misery, resistance or grief – emotional self-starvation is not a purely human phenomenon, and (b) a failure to acknowledge that not eating can be a political action, a response to oppression on the micro or macro level or both.

In *Nervous Conditions* there is an unsurprising gendered dynamic: women prepare food, and eat and sleep in the kitchen in Tambu's house. Babamukuru is not only the patriarch in his own family, at his own table, but generously provides food for his whole extended family. Important economic dynamics are at play; as the older brother of the family he was selected to transcend class – and race to some extent – by training as a teacher in England. For the rest of his life, it seems, he will be respected and thanked profusely for his gifts, but also *expected* to support his siblings' impoverished families. For his only daughter then refusing food is luxury, and an effective rebellion against her father.

Recent literature by women of North-African origin offers several instances of self-starving heroines whose pathologies present the reader with particularly pronounced interpretative problems (Meuret 2009; Bordo 2009; Hron 2005). In a study of French-Maghrebi writer Fawzia Zouari's anorexic protagonist Amira in *Ce Pays dont je meurs* (2000) [*This Country of Which I Am Dying*], Anna Kemp reads Amira's starved body against the grain, resisting theory which sees the individual's physical disorder as expressive of the collective malaise of cultural 'others' and which 'limits them to speaking from a place of suffering' (2016: 50). Kemp shows how Zouari invites us to unpick such deceptively smooth interpretations, and how she harnesses the causal indeterminacy of anorexia to raise debates about gender, integration and identity that are more searching and troubling than those inscribed in, for example, the now familiar coming-of-age stories found in Beur fiction of the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>9</sup> Growing up in a working-class family of Algerian immigrants, and the only member of that family to be born in France, Amira struggles against the confining stereotypes of class, race and gender. Indeed her illness itself is caught up in this debilitating mass of pre-formed conceptions, for it is, according to her family, '[u]n mal français' [a French sickness] (Zouari 2000: 77). Amira's thwarted desire for the anonymity and invisibility that French Republican ideology in theory promises her, results in a will to progressive disappearance which places her 'beyond easy recuperation by the politics of voice and visibility' (Kemp 2016: 57). Critically, Amira's diminishing body and crisis of self-harm take the reader beyond the habitual terms of the politics of pain that we expect to find inscribed in narratives of cultural otherness written by cultural others. The easy – and politically ineffectual – appeal to the reader's empathy in such literary accounts is short-circuited in this case by Amira's 'accusatory withdrawal from the reader's gaze' (Kemp 2016: 62) and therefore, as Kemp suggests, it is usefully called into question as a general proposition. For Kemp, Amira's pathology thus serves as a way of highlighting the habitual



pathologisation of immigrant writing and disturbing the unproblematised pleasures that identification with its protagonists can provide for readers.

### **Measuring Food**

Slimming is one way of working on the body that is particularly pervasive today, but there is of course a long history of ‘techniques of the self’. Foucault (1984) points out the tradition of exercise of the self from classical times, and body practices including those promoted by Saint Francis de Loyola in the Counter-Reformation (spiritual exercises, imitation of Christ, mortification of the flesh) are hardly new. Sensible, and yet confusingly contradictory, advice (better to eat little and often, or to eat proper healthy meals with your family rather than snacking alone), and rules of taste, politeness, and hospitality are all part of the network of regulations affecting the way in which we eat and drink which may seem far distant from extreme practices which mortify the flesh. In the shape of orthorexia, for example, with its particular catalogue of good and bad substances, adherents may claim that it has no link to the fetishisation of an ideally slim (adolescent) body shape, and that clean eating would simply promote health for the individual and the planet. Yet, its sometimes questionable division of edible products into virtuous foods and bad foods may arouse desire for that which is naughty and (but or therefore) nice. Watching what you eat involves incessant (self-)questioning: what may I eat? How much? When? How often? Many Catch 22s dog this inner dialogue – for the invoking of a rule typically involves the imagining of its infraction. ‘Dieting strategies have followed the stages of capitalism so closely that one could be the model for the other’ (Schwartz 1990: 327), and dieters ultimately consume more. Arguably the most common form of disorderly eating today is the counterpoint of obesity, the restricted diet with its science or dark arts: quantification, obsessive measuring and recording – counting calories, syns, carbs, fats, points... Inputs are the most common focus but outputs matter too – expenditure of calories in exercise regimes from gentle to punishing, counting reps or minutes or heart rate or...<sup>10</sup> Worse still is bingeing followed by purging – that extreme version of ‘normal’ eating and the gradual expulsion of calories through evacuation.

These practices (as they hurtle towards lack of ‘rational’ control) require control of body and mind – self-policing – sometimes supported by micro- and macro-levels of policing by others. This can start in the family with healthy eating, but also a suspicion of sexual curves. In Marie NDiaye’s ‘Le Jour du Président’ [‘The Day the President Came’], the self-starving protagonist Olga finds her mother’s rules and strictures echoing in her head: ‘Ne fais jamais confiance, disait ma mère, aux filles dont la poitrine est trop développée’ (NDiaye

1997: 42) [‘Never trust, my mother used to say, girls whose bust is too developed’]. How much is too developed? the reader might ask. But a respectable woman would just know, and be able to measure up in a flash. Of course, mothers are easy to blame with their overarching responsibility for care, but peer group pressure – sometimes named ‘support’ – is equally influential, more influential over time. Shared values, (specialist) vocabulary and rituals which may be opaque to outsiders are a powerful bond.

But the ultimate end is not necessarily in counting, it can be in stopping eating altogether. In NDiaye’s ‘Le Jour du Président’, the middle-class girls with their credit cards are free to spend as they wish, and are comfortable in rebelling in ways positively expected of students – indeed their parents pay extra rent so that they can be as untidy as they like, and pin up rock idols on the precious wall-paper. The working-class Olga, who lives alongside them, is acutely aware that her parents are counting on her, and counting their expenditure to pay her way, so that she can learn accountancy – having always, they believe, been good at numbers. She cannot believe that she was ever good at anything, and, rejecting numbers as well as forgetting words, does not measure food intake like a typical slimmer – rather she wishes she could eat. Her daily prayer begs for daily bread: ‘Mon Dieu (Il faut dire: Dieu Tout puissant par respect, affirmait ma mère), faites que je puisse boire du lait et manger une tartine, ce matin.’ (NDiaye 1997: 39) [‘Oh God (You must respectfully say: Oh all-powerful God, my mother used to assert), let me be able to drink some milk and eat some bread and butter this morning.’]

### **Postcolonialism and Food ‘Out of Place’**

Ideas of alimentary order and disorder give rise to the category of ‘left-over’, the now extraneous, the out-of-place for which a place must be found. Arguably, geographical displacement automatically entails a degree of disrupted or disorderly eating. As migrants assimilate to an alien culture, their food systems are dislocated and habitual foodstuffs, where these are available, wrenched from localised significance and associated rituals, both everyday and special. Such ideas have been harnessed in recent literature and critical studies that think about food, belonging and power relations in postcolonial context (Durmelat 2015; Canepari and Pessini 2012; Cruickshank, forthcoming). How do people originating in former colonies re-order food and eating systems that displacement has rendered ‘disorderly’ and ‘out of place’? And how are European alimentary orders marked by the residues of culinary traditions that are legacies of colonialism? More broadly, what alimentary dis- and re-

orderings are produced in response to the increasingly hyper-mobile global order and the unsettled diasporic identities that it produces (Loichot 2013; Calamita this volume)?

Taking the French case and glancing at France's occupation of Indochina we might look back at Marguerite Duras's account of how her (poor White) family sometimes refused to eat the indigenous foodstuffs prepared for them by their 'boy', 'des saloperies, des échassiers, des petits caïmans' (Duras 1984: 13) ['disgusting stuff, storks, little caimans'], out of place on a French table however hungry the family; or we might cite the accounts of inheriting, disrupting or transforming culinary cultures that constitute important dimensions of diasporic experience. Valérie Loichot notes a progression across generations in this regard. When the migrant father figure in Haitian-born novelist Edwige Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1994) calls for plain white rice on his death bed, his daughter sees the choice as a sign of defeat, the blandness of the rice 'epitomiz[ing] the cultural death of migrants leaving their culinary complexity behind as they assimilate into the new culture' (Loichot 63). If first-generation migrants might swallow whole what is offered by the host culture in a desire to be not only assimilated, but also, obscurely, 'ingested and erased' (Loichot 69), the second-generation may actively promote creolisation of food systems and culinary practices.

Detailed attentiveness to recipes, food preparation and eating events which are frequent in much women's writing – either in normative terms (such as Ernaux's account of family meals from the 1940s to the 2000s which structure the narrative of her life in *Les Années* [*The Years*]), or as illustrations of disorder (such as the overturning of organization, combination and measure in the listing of foods lined up for a binge (NDiaye 1996: 47; Brisac 1994: 71), or other explicit literary representations of the unregulated ways in which those with EDs combine, ingest and expel food) – take on new significance in accounts of migration. Elizabeth Collins (2017) has noted that postcolonial accounts often explore women's use of recipes or cookery books as a means of negotiating and highlighting the terms of their cultural displacements. The heroine of Linda Lê's *Les trois parques* [*The Three Fates*] tries but is unable to reproduce the recipes handed down to her by her Vietnamese grandmother, recipes handwritten in Vietnamese. She struggles with a language she can scarcely read. The results of her efforts are inedible and are ultimately thrown away, but not before we are treated to an intoxicating account of tasks, aromas, emotions, words, repressed memories and a quite violent attempt to re-claim belonging through food. At once engaging with and expunging her Vietnamese past she binges and purges, cooks only this food which harms rather than nourishes, and installs a high-powered extractor fan to eliminate the odours. Ultimately it seems that the recipe book has become a mere cultural artefact, a relic

that cannot be adapted to the present. It is hidden away by the heroine among her other cookery books where she is often unable to find it again.

Kim Thúy too explores women's use of recipe books from Vietnam in a French-speaking space. In *Mãn*, the heroine co-authors a best-selling book of Vietnamese recipes with a Quebecois friend. These are recipes that she has crafted for her restaurant's multi-cultural clientele, each one of them 'portée par une histoire' (2013: 75) ['conveyed within a history']. Here the recreation of recipes is collective, collaborative and polyphonic, representing the joyful possibilities of fusion and adaptation. The heroine's book *La Palanche* (the name of the rod carried over the shoulders which contains a basket on either side for carrying food) becomes a best seller and internet followings give accounts of the intense sensation and affect aroused by its contents, including by those whose relationship with Vietnam was that of coloniser. Here food emerges as emissary of reconciliation and producer of a new, energetically fusional alimentary order. If restaurants are prime fictional settings for the pitting of one order against another and for possible fusion, so are the grocery stores which crop up in diasporic literature in numerous settings (see Cho 2007).

Examples relating to West Africa, another region with a colonial legacy and diaspora, include Cameroonian author Calixthe Beyala's delicious *Comment cuisiner son mari à l'africaine* [*How to Cook one's Husband African Style*]. Her title alludes to the legend of cannibalism as part of the African culinary repertoire (Janes 2015; Loichot 2013), and gives a wry take on the supposed connections between women's cooking and their conquering of men. This culinary novel, which disrupts formal norms as well as alimentary expectations since it fuses African *conte*, ancestral recipe and first-person confessional narrative (Gray 2013), focuses on the experience of Mlle Aïssatou, a woman of African origin living in Paris who wishes to seduce her neighbour Bolobolo and who follows her mother's advice to bewitch him with food. Like Lê's protagonist in *Les trois parques*, Mlle Aïssatou is distanced from her roots and she returns to her ancestral heritage for purely pragmatic reasons. Each chapter ends with a typically African recipe (smoked antelope with pistachios; bush turtle with green bananas; boa in banana leaves; crocodile). There is distinct humour here (snake meat is 'out of place' in Paris and tricky to procure) and also a transcultural tension. The upshot is the heroine's re-connection with and appropriation of the recipes as a bridge between ancestral practices and prescriptions and her current life as a cosmopolitan Parisian. Each of the above examples of cooking in postcolonial context reminds us that the order expressed via food, because it is naturalized in the extreme and deeply rooted, is a prime site

of lost power and empowerment, profoundly enmeshed with the body and perpetually subject to negotiation.

### **From Alimentary Misrule to Eating Flesh and Blood**

Substances that are strictly speaking not foodstuff are especially ‘out of place’ on plates and in mouths, and our imagination toys with their haunting potentiality at the outer limit of our alimentary structure. One thinks of the disorder known as *pica*, the craving for and consumption of non-foodstuffs (often – but not always – in pregnancy) which can provide comfort or, in some cases, such as the schoolmates in Colette’s *Claudine à l’école* (1900) [*Claudine at School*], who graze on a range of school supplies such as rubbers, pencil stubs, charcoal, chalk and blotting paper, a form of rebellion (Mahuzier 2001). The excitement of transgression is part of the pleasure derived by children from the carnivalesque disorder of their sweet-eating culture which overturns the rules of the adult world by inviting them to suck on jelly snakes or babies, and munch flying saucers. Conversely alimentary misrule can be terrifying, as testified by the child-eating ogres or other monsters that are a staple of children’s and indeed adult literature (Keeling and Pollard 2008). And it can be both pleasurable and terrifying as you switch from voracious wolf to innocent lamb and back again (Cixous 2003).

Another version of alimentary misrule is to be found in Jim Crace’s *The Devil’s Larder*, a collection of micro-texts about terrible, bitter foodstuffs such as canned babies’ fingers.<sup>11</sup> Here Crace explores food’s malevolent potential, our darker attractions to its taboos and our unrelenting fascination with the ways in which it passes through and constructs our bodies. A similarly unruly gastronomic imagination is present in NDiaye, whose writings for adults interface with the *conte* (a little boy is eaten whole by a snake; a little girl perhaps cooked in a terrine and fed to her grandmother). Anthropophagy, the most disorderly of eating, is a taboo that replays symbolically throughout our lives in a range of cultural forms and contexts, either fictional or dreadfully real (one thinks of Issei Sagawa who killed and ate parts of Dutch woman Renée Hartevelt in Paris in 1981; of Armin Meiwes who recruited a consenting victim via a small ad. in 2001; of performance artist Zhu Yu who ate a foetus in the context of a Chinese television entertainment show in 2003, and other sorry examples). Myth and classical literature frequently ask us to contend with cannibalism: thus Ovid invites us to imagine sisters Procne and Philomena feeding his own son to Tereus in punishment for raping Philomena; thus Dante’s Count Ugolino is driven to eat the flesh of his own children. Contemporary women’s writing is not short of examples either: Sylvia Plath’s ‘Daddy’

explores parental love and primitive childhood terror by having the father bite into his daughter's heart and drink her blood (1965: 54-6); the heroine of Atwood's *The Edible Woman* eventually resorts to making a cake in her own image for her predatory fiancé to consume (and the author claims she was inspired by the sight of marzipan pigs to write about symbolic cannibalism); the heroine of Darrieussecq's *Truismes* lives in fear of being eaten as she morphs back and forth between pig and woman; while Maryse Condé's *Histoire de la femme cannibale* (2003) [*Story of the Cannibal Woman*] oscillates between the symbolic dimension and the fascinating possibility of literal cannibalism. Cannibalism is of course harnessed in psychoanalysis to account for the problem of locating the boundaries between self and other and the perverse or paradoxical effects of identification:

The 'I' [...] is composed of the remains of all the other selves it has devoured. Freud argues that the ego comes into existence by identifying with another being and that this process of identification originates in cannibalism. He writes: 'The first [pregenital sexual organisation] ... is the oral, or, as it might be called, cannibalistic,' whose aim is to 'incorporate the object' into one's own body. This fantasy of cannibalism provides 'the prototype of ... identification,' which later plays 'such an important psychological part' (*SE*, vol. 7, 198). For this reason, identification is 'ambivalent from the very first,' since eating can preserve the object only at the cost of its destruction. (Ellmann 1993: 40)

Thus assimilation is figured as annihilation – even though in a 'normal' healthy relationship the infant also learns that the object willingly gives (of) itself, lets itself be eaten – and survives. Derrida argues that eating is always already haunted by sacrifice: 'J'irai jusqu'à soutenir que, plus ou moins raffiné, subtil, sublime, un certain cannibalisme reste indépassable.' (2001: 113) ['I would go as far as maintaining that we still cannot eradicate a kind of cannibalism, more or less refined, subtle or sublime']. Ideas of sacrifice and appropriation are played out not only in thoughts of taboo flesh, but in thoughts of blood. Vampirism as disorderly eating also lingers horribly on the periphery of our alimentary consciousness, not least as a trope for colonial relations (Khair and Höglund 2013) or capitalism. Does the current enthusiasm for vampire culture (not to mention the fascination for flesh-eating zombies) signify more than a glamorous erotic trend? Beyond the obvious sexual interest provided by up-dated blood-sucking icons, the draw of impossible love stories and the excitement of slaying, perhaps such tales are fitting for young people about to navigate a world beset by increasingly aggressive cultures of competition, consumption and predation. For Sirgent, the young are attracted less by the vampire's eternal youth than by the

fact that s/he is free from the constraints that weigh upon others and, notably, ‘imperméable à l’humiliation’ (Sirgent 2010: 173) [‘humiliation-proof’]; for Piatti-Farnell, the post-9/11 vampire reflects the ‘growing politics of anxiety, conflict, longing, and contested identities’ (Piatti-Farnell 2014: 2) of which youngsters today are deeply aware.

The current special issue offers original studies of a whole range of disorderly eating. Ruth Cruickshank focuses on clinical categories of EDs in relation to the description of what is named, with great difficulty, bulimia in Ernaux’s *Mémoire de fille*. Francesca Calamita explores bi-cultural identity as played out via food and eating in Italian-American culture with particular reference to Louise DeSalvo’s *Vertigo* (1996). Heike Bartel focuses, unusually, on men’s relationship to food and on the phenomenon of male EDs as depicted in German women’s writing. Abigail Lee Six analyses one of the most hauntingly terrifying acts of disorderly eating, vampirism, in Gema del Prado Marugán’s ‘Comer con los ojos’ [Eating with the Eyes] (2016); this is all the more horrifying as it is presented as contagious predation, something transmitted from one young boy to another. Sandra Daroczi presents an extended analysis of a range of works, two fictional and two non-fictional (autobiographical and biographical) by Darrieussecq. These essays draw variously on literary analysis, clinical study, feminist thought and ideas from cultural and social anthropology. Two articles turn to NDiaye, an author whose writing offers one of the most important and complex contemporary examples of the reach of thinking with food alluded to at start of this Introduction. Experience of EDs is clearly present in certain NDiaye texts, but, more broadly, attention is drawn to unusual behaviour around food and eating as betokening disorder in interpersonal relations or in individual psyches; food is used to try to access hard to articulate anxieties and its power in this regard lies in the fundamental fact of its entry into and absorption by the body as foreign substance, threatening contamination. This special issue offers an in-depth analysis of the little-known short story ‘La Gourmandise’ (Still), and a broad assessment of disorder, eating and disgust in NDiaye which focuses predominantly on the meanings of meat (Jordan).

If there is one message that should emerge from this special issue it is that there is a spectrum of ambiguity from ‘healthy’ to ‘unhealthy’ in body and mind – as sane merges into mad, so orderly gradually fragments into disorderly eating – and indeed an excessively orderly approach may well have extremely disorderly causes and effects. Without in any way minimising the seriousness and danger of today’s EDs, we argue that it is helpful to take a longer and broader perspective without rushing to the name of a pathology and all that

follows from identifying with a diagnosis. The perspective of writers today – both those who ‘confess’ an ED and those who do not, but who return almost obsessively to the vicissitudes of eating and feeding and to the particularity of women’s relationship with these – can help us complicate what should not be too quickly simplified.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Anderson, Arnold E. (ed.) (1990) *Males with Eating Disorders* (New York and London: Brunner-Routledge)
- Arachi, Alessandra (2015) *Non più briciole* (Milan: Feltrinelli)
- Atwood, Margaret (1969) *The Edible Woman* (Toronto: McLelland and Stewart).
- Atwood, Margaret (1976) *Lady Oracle* (Toronto: McLelland and Stewart).
- Bagley, Petra M., Francesca Calamita and Kathryn Robson (eds.) (2018) *Eating Disorders in Contemporary Women’s Writing* (Berg: Peter Lang).
- Balinska, Aleksandra (2003) *Retour à la vie: quinze ans d’anorexie* (Paris: Éditions Odile Jacob).
- Bartel, Heike (2020) ‘Opening up the Discourse of Male Eating Disorders: Personal Experience in English and German Narratives’, in Lasse Raaby Gammelgaard (ed.), *Madness and Literature: What Fiction Can Do For the Understanding of Mental Illness* (Exeter: Exeter University Press).
- Barthes, Roland (1957) *Mythologies* (Paris: Seuil).
- Bernheimer, Charles and Claire Kahane (eds.) (1985) *In Dora’s Case: Freud, Hysteria, Feminism* (London: Virago).
- Beyala, Calixthe (2000) *Comment cuisiner son mari à l’africaine* (Paris: Albin Michel).
- Bordo, Susan (1993) *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press).
- Brisac, Geneviève (1994) *Petite* (Paris: Seuil).
- Cairns, Lucille (forthcoming) *Eating Disorders in Contemporary French Women’s Writing* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press).
- Cairns, Lucille (2015) ‘Bodily Dis-ease in Contemporary French Women’s Writing : Two Case Studies’, *French Studies* 69:4, 494-508.
- Camus, Albert (1957) *L’Exil et le royaume* (Paris: Gallimard).
- Canepari, Michela, and Alba Pessini, eds. (2012) *Food in Postcolonial and Migrant Literatures / La Nourriture dans les littératures postcoloniales et migrantes* (Oxford: Peter Lang).



- Cho, Lily 'The Turn to Diaspora' (2007), *Topia* 17, 8-20.
- Cixous, Hélène (2003) *L'Amour du loup et autres remords* (Paris: Galilée).
- Collins, Elizabeth M., 'Cooks and Books: Relational Dynamics of Identity and Cuisine in Contemporary Francophone Vietnamese Literature', unpublished conference paper delivered at the Study Day *Transdiasporic Literature: Vietnam and Beyond*, University of London in Paris, 18 December 2017.
- Condé, Maryse (2003) *Histoire de la femme cannibale* (Paris: Folio).
- Courtelle, Mélanie (2011) *Journal d'une faim de vivre: témoignage* (Paris: Beaurepaire).
- Crace, Jim (2001) *The Devil's Larder* (London: Viking).
- Cruikshank, Ruth (2019) *Leftovers: Eating, Drinking and Re-thinking Post-war French Fiction* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press).
- Damlé, Amaleena, 'The Becoming of Anorexia and Text in Amélie Nothomb's *Robert des noms propres* and Delphine de Vigan's *Jours sans faim*' (2013) in Gill Rye and Amaleena Damlé (eds.) *Women's Writing in Twenty-First-Century France: Life as Literature* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press), 113-126.
- Dangarembga, Tsitsi (1988) *Nervous Conditions* (London: The Women's Press)
- Darrieussecq, Marie (1996) *Truismes* (Paris: POL)
- Darrieussecq, Marie (2006) *Zoo* (Paris: POL)
- Delamont, Sarah (1995) 'The Golden Oranges: Food, Appetites and Identities', in *Appetites and Identities: an Introduction to the Social Anthropology of Western Europe* (London and New York: Routledge), 19-41.
- Derrida, Jacques and Elisabeth Roudinesco (2001) 'Violences contre les animaux' in *De quoi demain... Dialogue* (Paris: Fayard and Galilée) 105-27.
- Desportes, Nicole (2016) *Voyage jusqu'au bout de la vie; comment j'ai vaincu l'anorexie* (Paris: Odile Jacob).
- Douglas, Mary and Michael Nicod (1974) 'Taking the Biscuit: the Structure of British Meals', *New Society* 19, December, 744-6.
- Draesner, Ulrike (2002) *Mitgift* (Munich: Luchterhand)
- Durand, Émilie (2006) *Ma folie ordinaire. Allers et retours à l'hôpital Sainte-Anne* (Paris: Empêcheurs de Penser en Rond).
- Duras, Marguerite (1984) *L'Amant* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit).
- Durmelat, Sylvie, ed. (2015) *Food and the French Empire*, *French Cultural Studies* 26, 2.
- Ellmann, Maud (1993) *The Hunger Artists: Starving, Writing and Imprisonment* (Harvard University Press; London: Virago).

- Ernaux, Annie (2016) *Mémoire de fille* (Paris: Gallimard)
- Feminist Studies* 40.2 'Food and Ecology' (2014)
- Flöss, Helen (1998) *Dürre Jahre* (Innsbruck: Haymon).
- Foucault, Michel (1976) *Histoire de la sexualité I La volonté de savoir* (Paris: Gallimard).
- Foucault, Michel (1984) *Histoire de la sexualité II Le souci de soi* (Paris: Gallimard).
- Gay, Roxane (2017) *Hunger: A Memoir of (My) Body* (New York: Harper Collins).
- Giard, Luce 'Faire-la-cuisine' (1994) in *L'Invention du quotidien*, eds. Michel de Certeau, Luce Giard and Pierre Mayol (Paris : Gallimard Coll. Folio / Essais) pp. 213-350.
- Gray, Margaret E. (2013) 'The Cook, Her Narrative, Its Recipes and the Textual Body in Calixthe Beyala's *Comment cuisiner son mari à l'africaine*, in *Experiment and Experience : Women's Writing in France 2000-2010*, eds. Gill Rye with Amaleena Damlé (Oxford : Peter Lang), 143-158.
- Groulez, Marianne (2006) 'Ecrire l'anorexie: évolution de la maladie, renouvellement du discours', *Etudes* 10, 330-7.
- Hron, Madelaine (2005) 'Pathological Victims: The Discourse of Disease/Dis-Ease in Beur Texts', *French Literary Studies* 16, 159-74.
- Huysmans, J.-K. (1977) *À Rebours* (Paris: Gallimard).
- Janes, Lauren (2015), 'Writing about Cannibal Diets and Consuming Black Africans in France during the First Half of the Twentieth Century', in Sylvie Durmelat, *Food and the French Empire*, *French Cultural Studies* 26, 2, 176-186.
- Jones, Katie (2007) 'Literature as Consumption and Expulsion: Amélie Nothomb's "esthétique du vomissement"', in Baldwin T., Weller S., and Fowler J. (eds), *The Flesh in the Text* (Oxford: Peter Lang), pp. 175-9
- Kemp, Anna (2016) "'Le passeport de la douleur ou rien": Fawzia Zouari's *Ce pays dont je meurs* and the politics of pain', *Contemporary French Civilization* 41, 49-67.
- Khair, Tabish and Johan Höglund (2013) *Transnational and Postcolonial Vampires: Dark Blood* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan).
- Kim, Thúy, *Mãn* (2013)
- Keeling, Kara K. and Scott T. Pollard (2008) *Critical Approaches to Food in Children's Literature* (London: Routledge).
- Keith, W.J. (1989) *Introducing Margaret Atwood's 'The Edible Woman'* (Toronto: ECW Press).
- Lê, Linda (1997) *Les trois parques* (Paris: Christian Bourgois).
- Le Bars, Marie (2014) *Appelez-moi plume* (Paris: Fabert).

- Levi Strauss, Claude (1964) *Mythologiques I: Le Cru et le cuit* (Paris: Plon).
- Loichot, Valérie (2013) *The Tropics Bite Back. Culinary Coups in Caribbean Literature* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press).
- Mahuzier, Brigitte (2001) ‘Colette’s “Écriture gourmande”’, in Lawrence R. Schehr and Allen S. Weiss eds. *French Food: on the Table, on the Page and in French Culture* (New York and London: Routledge), 99-113.
- Marzano, Michela (2011) *Volevo essere una farfalla* (Milan: Mondadori).
- McIlvanney, Siobhán (2018) “‘Impuissance’ and ‘Culpabilité’: Reducing the Weight of Maternal Influence in Contemporary French Women’s Narratives of Anorexia”, in Petra Bagley et al (eds.) *Eating Disorders in Contemporary Women’s Writing* (Berg: Peter Lang), 23-44.
- Messem, Alexandra (2014) *Spectacles of Suffering: Self-Harm in New Woman Writing 1880-1900* (Portsmouth PhD thesis).
- Meuret, Isabelle (2006) *L’anorexie créatrice* (Paris: Klincksieck).
- Nasser, Mervat, Melanie A. Katzman and Richard A. Gordon (eds.) *Eating Disorders and Cultures in Transition* (2001) (London and New York : Brunner-Routledge)
- NDiaye, Marie (1996) ‘La Gourmandise’, in J P Géné and Marie NDiaye, *La Gourmandise (3 Les Péchés capitaux)* (Paris: Éditions du Centre Pompidou), 46-63.
- NDiaye, Marie (1997) ‘Le Jour du Président’ in Amélie Nothomb, Marie Ndiaye, Jean-Pierre Ostende, Eugène Nicole, Jean-Jacques Viton, *La double entente du je* (Bordeaux: L’été du livre en Gironde), 29-46.
- Orbach, Susie (2017) *Le Poids un enjeu féministe* tr. Florence Paban (Paris: Marabout) inc Avant-propos ‘Le poids, toujours un enjeu féministe’ 9-32.
- Osgood, Kelsey (2013) *How to Disappear Completely: On Modern Anorexia* (New York: The Overlook Press)
- Peretti Camille de (2006) *Thornytorinx* (Paris: Pocket)
- Piatti-Farnell, Lorna (2014) *The Vampire in Contemporary Popular Literature* (London and New York: Routledge).
- Plath, Sylvia (1965) *Ariel* (London: Faber and Faber).
- Rifkin, Jeremy (1994) *Beyond Beef: The Rise and Fall of Cattle Culture* (London: Harper Collins, [1992 or 3?])
- Robson, Kathryn (2016) ‘Voicing Abjection: Narratives of Anorexia in Contemporary French Women’s (Life-)Writing’, *L’Esprit Créateur* 56.2, 108-120.
- Rodrigue, Valérie (1989) *La peau à l’envers. Le roman vrai d’une boulimique* (Paris: Robert Laffont).

- Schwartz, Hillel (1990) *Never Satisfied: A Cultural History of Diets, Fantasies and Fat* (New York: Doubleday [1986]).
- Sirgent, Jacques (2010) *Le Vampire en France des origines à nos jours* (Aurillac: Éditions Juste Pour Lire).
- Still, Judith (2010) *Derrida and Hospitality* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press).
- Teisson, Janine (2012) *L'enfant plume* (Paris: J'ai Lu).
- Thúy, Kim (2013) *Mãn* (Paris: Liana Levi).
- Wilson, Jacqueline (1998) *Girls Under Pressure* (New York: Random House).
- Wilson, Susannah (2014), 'The Iconography of Anorexia Nervosa in the Long Nineteenth Century', in Kate Scarth, Francesca Scott and Ji Won Chung (eds.) *Picturing Women's Health* (London: Pickering and Chatto), 77-104.
- Wilson, Susannah (2017) 'Emaciation as a Subversive Strategy in the Goncourts' *Renée Mauperin* and an Early Case of Hysterical Anorexia', in *Medicine and Maladies*, ed. Sophie Leroy (Rodopi/Brill), 154-170.
- Zouari, Fawzia (2000) *Ce pays dont je meurs* (Paris: Ramsay).

---

<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that these borders shift over time whether that be the food industry variously persuading its target market that either butter or processed vegetable oil is better for you, or the issue of national identity. Barthes (1957) shows how steak and chips summed up Frenchness in the 1950s; in the current period pork products play a particular role in policing borders as right-wing politicians ostentatiously consume charcuterie when campaigning for election, and insist that pork must be on the menu in French schools – these days less about vegetarian- or Jew-baiting (though those are no doubt pleasing by-products for the Front National, even ‘de-toxified’ as Rassemblement National) than Islamophobia.

<sup>2</sup> Susie Orbach, who first published *Fat is a Feminist Issue* in 1978, writes in her 2017 Introduction to the French translation that over the subsequent forty-year period the problem ‘a explosé d’année en année’ [‘exploded from year to year’], increasing exponentially in importance (9).

<sup>3</sup> All figures relating to EDs are contested including the relative proportion of men and women living with EDs. Categories expand and contract - according to recent research cited by Cairns (forthcoming), the figures for the current prevalence of EDs range from 0.3% of population to 4% of the population for anorexia alone, and 10% of girls and young women

---

have some form of diagnosable ED. Cruickshank in this volume argues that the majority of EDs should be placed in the (catch-all) category of unspecified EDs, a category which itself has shifted over time in various iterations of diagnostic manuals.

<sup>4</sup> While male EDs have long been studied and debated in psychiatry and medicine (Anderson 1990), they have been slower to find an acknowledged place in recent literature than the large and expanding phenomenon of women's EDs. A notable (un-diagnosed) literary case is to be found in the morbid development of *pica* and anorexia in des Esseintes, hero of J.-K. Huysman's decadent novel *À rebours* (1884). Male *disorderly eating* more generally – including grotesque appetite, self-starving, vampirism and so forth – has a long history in literature.

<sup>5</sup> Arguably they have been well hidden in plain sight in earlier periods; see, for example, Alexandra Messer (2014), chapter 2 'Getting Beyond the Fleshly Veil: Self-Starvation in the New Woman Novel'.

<sup>6</sup> In Camus's 'L'Hôte' (1957) the French protagonist Daru 'chooses' a life stripped bare. He is aware that he is rich compared to the starving Arabs around him – famine victims. But is the famine a natural disaster caused by the inhospitality of the land, which the generous paternal French State does its best to alleviate via distribution of grain, as Camus urges in his political writings? Or is the famine political in cause and effect? The French redistributed fertile land to themselves as colonisers and displaced more indigenous populations to areas of Algeria which cannot sustain them – these populations can then be supported or not by handouts from the French state. In times of famine, theft of food is close to murder and the Arab's crime of killing someone who withheld food seems less distasteful to us than it is presented in the text. It could even be argued that the original food thief is the French (Still 2010: 176-7).

<sup>7</sup> Mothers used to be encouraged to 'eat for two' though of course to deny themselves a range of products (depending on cultural context) lest they ever forget the presence of their precious guest; nowadays the emphasis is firmly on staying in shape not only for the sake of your own future silhouette but so that your child does not grow up obese.

<sup>8</sup> Problems which appear to be over-represented in the working-classes tend to be those which are easy to condemn (lack of self-discipline), or which arouse fear of disorderly conduct that could damage respectable people or their property.

<sup>9</sup> 'Beur' is a colloquial term designating European-born people whose parents or grandparents are immigrants from North Africa, more specifically the Maghreb.

---

<sup>10</sup> Ellmann picks up Schwartz's interesting analysis of the complex case of film star and anti-war activist Jane Fonda's extreme workout videos, self-improvement concealing self-destruction – linking her low-calorie diet and her push for 'the burn' to the American experience in Vietnam (Schwartz 1990: 334-6 and Ellmann 1993: 9-10).

<sup>11</sup> The title is from the 'lost' book of the Bible, 'Visitations', which asserts: 'There are no bitter fruits in Heaven, nor is there honey in the Devil's larder'.