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Theory Culture Society 1999 16: 215

DOI: 10.1177/02632769922050485

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Beyond Food/Sex

Eating and an Ethics of Existence

Elsbeth Probyn

Appetite is nothing but the very essence of man. (Spinoza, *The Ethics*, in Balibar, 1998: 82)

What's Eating Us?

IT SEEMS like a strange time to be arguing that the primacy of sex may be passing. After all, the world has watched in horror and mostly disbelief as Bill's concept of sexuality was disclosed. In fact, my horror was caused less by the Monicagate ensemble than by the idea that this article would be totally out of sync with the times. But as commentators (perhaps especially outside the US) constantly complained about being bored with sex, and as the sex–non-sex definitions were aired, it became legitimate to wonder whether this scandal constituted the last gasp of the reign of sex. (It also led me to wonder if oral sex wasn't sex, was it eating?) Possible epistemological ruptures aside, in this article, and under the rubric of the question that Foucault (1997: 303) takes from Kant (*'Was ist die Aufklärung?'* [*'What is Enlightenment?'*]), I want to ask *'What's eating us now?'* As you will recall, this is to question *'who we are in the present'*; to engage with passion in *'stalking the elusive singularity of the present'* (Rabinow, 1997: xviii). In my own small quest to figure the present, I try to follow the line of sex as it intersects with that of food. My argument takes from research that I have been conducting in Australia on the role that food now occupies in re-articulating national identity. More generally, I am interested in thinking about a new ethics of existence, one which is theoretically indebted to Foucault and his work on the dietetic regimen, or as Deleuze puts it, the alimentary-sexual regime (1986: 102). Along with others, I want to try to push at our ways of thinking sexuality in order to get beyond the impasse that threatens studies of sexuality. Simply put, I will argue that thinking sex through food is compelling for the ways that it focuses our attention on the

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- *Theory, Culture & Society* 1999 (SAGE, London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi), Vol. 16(2): 215–228
[0263-2764(199904)16:2;215–228;008262]

interrelation of various corporeal dimensions: that constituting oneself as an ethical subject involves conjugating the forces of sex along with those of food, exercise, sleeping, writing and thinking.

Like a rhizomatic line that always turns into something else, the vector of food soon leads into other areas, and along the way I have been struck by the ways in which the boundaries between food and sex are currently being blurred. As others have argued, food has a propensity for hazing the frontiers of categories. For instance, Georg Simmel argues that food encapsulates the paradox of absolute individuality and complete universality: 'Of everything that people have in common, the most common is that they must eat and drink. It is precisely this which is, oddly enough, the most egoistic, and the most unconditionally and most immediately linked to each individual' (1994: 346). Food here is both what we all share and forms the absolute limit to any commonality. Simmel writes that 'what the individual eats, no one else can eat under any circumstance' (1994: 346). By this rather strange statement, Simmel gestures to what we might call the brute physicality of food: as the morsel is going into my mouth, pricking up my tongue and taste buds, and then sliding down on its route to digestion and finally defecation, you cannot be anything more than a witness. In the face of this fundamental alienation of one from the other, it is only 'the shared meal [that] lifts an event of physiological primitivity and inescapable commonality into the sphere of social interaction' (Simmel, 1994: 346).

As that which both viscerally segregates us and radically brings us together, without doubt food is a hugely powerful system of values, regulations and beliefs; in short a system of representation that hides its nature in appeals to immediacy, and non-mediation. One of the difficulties that faces any investigation of food is its enormity, and the ways in which it spills into every aspect of life. As it lends itself to easy metaphor, the chances are that any sociological specificity will be lost. Mary Douglas quite rightly warned against the propensity to privilege an overly cultural or symbolic reading of food, stating that 'Food is not only a metaphor or vehicle of communication; a meal is a physical event' (in Symons, 1994: 339). In a similar fashion, Arjun Appadurai argues that 'Food may generally possess a special semiotic force because of certain universal properties. . . . But this special force must always remain tacit until it is animated by particular cultural concepts and mobilized by particular social contexts' (1981: 509). Appadurai qualifies the rush to celebrate food's innate universal qualities by arguing that 'the cultural notion that food has an inherently homogenizing capacity . . . is itself converted from a metonymic hazard into a metaphoric convenience in the contexts where sharing, equality, solidarity, and communality are, within limits, perceived as desirable results' (1981: 507).

The problems that arise from either 'a metonymic hazard' or a 'metaphoric convenience' are especially troubling if one wants to use food to think through different relations of sociality. To name but a few, food is imbricated in nation-building, the reproduction of the family, constitutes a major site of the division of labour, and is central in the production of

geo-political inequalities. But if food statements commonly contain a metonymic connection ('you are what you eat'), the peculiarities of what and how you are eating and the connections to who or what you are soon get lost. As Appadurai reminds us, food seems to possess inherent tropic qualities. Simply put, food moves about all the time. It constantly shifts registers: from the sacred to the everyday, from metaphor to materiality, it is the most common and elusive of matters. This is, of course, not 'natural' to food, and as Roland Barthes has argued 'food has a constant tendency to transform itself into situation' (1979: 171). For as he states, food is always 'bound to values of power', revealing the fact that 'a representation of contemporary existence is implied in the consciousness we have of the function of food' (1971: 171).

I will now turn to several sites that highlight the scrambling of sex, gender and food. I use these somewhat idiosyncratic examples to sketch out the possibilities that food may offer in rethinking the limits of sex deployed as the sole or privileged object within the theorization of identity. I should be clear that this is not a polemic against those theories (queer and feminist) that have centred on sex, and which I have myself used. Rather, it is my wish to *extend* the reach of sexuality by looking first at the way that sex now spills on to food, and, second, at accounts of food that compel us to think in terms of another ethics of living. While I realize the enormity of the term, here I take Foucault's fairly simple if demanding line on ethics in order to concentrate on modes of living already in existence, 'to learn from and strengthen these, not to discover or "invent" others' (Rabinow, 1997: xxvii). If 'ethics' cannot be reified as an object, but rather it is always a mode of relating to oneself and to others, then the task of thinking ethics will necessarily be a doubled one. On the one hand, it enjoins us to seek out the singularities marking our present, and on the other hand to engage with them as they mark us. The promise of thinking food/sex is that it requires attention to what Foucault calls 'attitude': 'a way of thinking and feeling; a way too of acting and behaving that at one and the same time marks a relation of belonging and presents itself as task' (in Rabinow, 1997: xxxi). The question I put to myself, then, is in what ways might food and sex come to constitute the outlines of another way of thinking and feeling, one that is fuelled by what the novelist Antoine Laurent calls 'sympathy': 'Sympathy for where she is, for who she's with, and for what's feasible at any time or place. For the ingredients themselves, the people she's cooking for, all play a part' (1989: 24). In this sense, sympathy highlights an ethical practice, not a passive acceptance of life. In what follows, I will first sketch out certain overdetermined ways of constituting food/sex, and then focus on the ethical possibilities that food and sex offer when practised with care, restraint and good timing.

Food Chic

To start, come with me to Sydney in order to experience the sights and smells. It is a hazy summer evening in the fashionable enclave of Potts Point, and around the corner from the flesh spots of King's Cross things were

getting hot and sticky at the Paramount restaurant. The buzz spilled on to the pavement as a veritable who's who of Australian power-queers sipped a concoction called 'passion pops'. In terms of the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras, 'Eat our Words', a queer fiction and food fest, was the hottest ticket and sold out in minutes. The event had gay and lesbian writers squashed in like mere membranes of a *mille-feuille*, digestive fodder in between the sumptuous courses. The real star of the night was Christine Manfield who, along with her partner Margie Harris, owns the Paramount. The mistress of ceremonies introduced her as 'the dominatrix of the kitchen', 'sex on a plate', and described one of Manfield's famous dishes, 'Creaming Cock' which compels the eater to go down on large *tuile* cones with apple-ginger custard and Tokay caramel. In turn, Manfield said grace, telling us 'to eat the words that you are given and if you want to go down, go ahead'. The *pièce de resistance* was not a cigar but Manfield's signature dish, the 'slice of pride', a beautiful pink and white ice cream triangle which in true commensal fashion we were to share.

Let me turn now from the restaurant to television. In one of the weirder series, two large women regale with tales of derring-do among the landed gentry of Scotland, ham it up with the members of a girls' school lacrosse team, flirt with boy scouts, and play at being Annie Oakley on the moors as they shoot small birds. In between titbits about cooking testicles in Benghazi (in cream of course), or musings about their 'kitchenalia fetish', one of the ladies plunges her beringed fingers complete with long red nails into a bowl of raw mince and egg, the other passes scathing remarks about vegetarians, microwave ovens and supermarket bought chicken, the conversation is peppered with remarks about 'real faggots' (meatballs), instructions to wrap your meatloaf in bacon so it looks like a Union Jack, and we learn that 'pan Asian' is really Australian. This is all lubricated with asides about 'slap-up meals', 'toothsome meat', and odd refrains of songs: 'The playing fields of Eton have made us frightfully brave' croons the one, as the other declines Latin verbs.

The programme is the phenomenally successful BBC cooking show *Two Fat Ladies*, starring the decidedly upper-class Clarissa Dickson Wright who apparently owes her girth to a destroyed thyroid brought about by an excess of gin, and the worldly and at times rather 'pukka' Jennifer Paterson; she of the long red nails to be found at the end of an episode clutching cigarette and gin and tonic. Talking to others, it wasn't surprising to find that many found this show decidedly queer. Certainly, Jennifer's arch comments belie a Cowardesque inclination (her immediate advice to the young female producer was 'to find yourself a nice poof'). And the easy banter of the two ladies is evidence of a female homosociality, which may also be a mellowed version of the edgy homoerotism rampant in private girls' schools. If the Ladies were good on their first series, in the second they get down and have a great time with each other. Perhaps being centrefolds in the British gay mag, *Attitude* (November, 1997) has given them the cue to show off that they are as queer as a bent sixpence in a rich fruit loaf (lavished with cream no

doubt). While the interviewer, Nick Taylor had them pegged ('Eccentric, shameless and unmarried? They're clearly lesbians'), they will only admit to being vegetarian-phobic, and very *fond* of men. But as they drool over the young boys from King's College Cambridge, remarking on the fact that the white ruffles around the singers' necks make them look like deliciously edible little lamb chops, it is their pronounced taste for all forms of flesh that tantalizes.

In their latest cookbook, *Two Fat Ladies Full Throttle*, we're told that 'the whole of the USA seemed to have developed Fatladymania' (Paterson and Dickson Wright, 1998: 7). Given the fact that Clarissa 'holds the home of the hamburger responsible for everything that's wrong with the modern world – including fast food, political correctness and plastic surgery', they may be deluding themselves about their status in the States. However, certainly in Britain they move with the powerful, and dine with the Blairs. In short, they inhabit the world where, as a recent columnist writes, 'Chefs are the new rock 'n' roll stars, cookbooks are the new pornography'. Wendy Harmer concludes that 'When the difference between a boring Saturday night alone and an evening of mind-blowing erotic adventure is a backlit picture of a chargrilled eggplant . . . you've got it made' (1998: 29). In the boudoir, the kitchen, or more likely in a trendy restaurant, it seems that food has become more exciting than sex. As a case in point, the *Sydney Morning Herald* recently instructed that we should 'Forget sex sells – these days food sells. Replace the motor show dolly birds with a plate of stuffed squid draped over the car bonnet and see what happens' (9 February 1998). The article focuses on the new smart restaurant in Sydney, 'MC Garage' which offers 'extravagant petrol heads a sportscar as a side with their octopus . . . snapper and mussel stew with saffron, tomato and rouille'. Apparently, replacing girlies with sexy and expensive food has resulted in a doubling of the sales of MGs which start at \$45,000. Food also seems to sell queer mags. The Australian gay glossy *Blue* recently published a display of the popular Manfield doing 'rude food'. According to a breathless newspaper report, this featured an s/m scene with two models in meringue, raspberry sauce, nipple rings, and 'plenty of black leather'. In actual fact, the scenes were pretty tame with a rather sweet looking Manfield in black lurex and spikes. While one can only agree with Manfield's motto that 'Life's too short for bad food, bad sex or no sex at all' (in Karpinski, 1998: 88), her recipes and food are, in fact, a lot sexier than the photos.

This is hardly surprising given that the food pages of newspapers have replaced the personals as the site of titillation and innuendo. For example, one newspaper recently outed vegetables with the headline of 'Look What's Crawled Out of the Crisper: Glam Veg' (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 November 1997). Citing k.d. lang, the article describes vegetarians as 'sort of, well, glamorous. Emerging chrysalis-like from their earth-brown shirts, the new vegetarians match sauvignon blanc with their asparagus . . . and get terribly upset if the chef hasn't double-peeled their broad beans' (Dupleix, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1 November 1997). As vegetables oust

lesbian chic, food writers have become political philosophers, telling us why eating seasonal food will save the world. Food writer, Jill Dupleix, turns sexologist, and alongside a scrumptious recipe for oysters, comforts us with a thought that could have been lifted from any number of sexual manuals. She comments that in matters of sex, 'Just remember . . . that your mood is even more important than your food. If you are feeling warm, relaxed, happy and loved, then cheese on toast and a nice cup of tea are going to work just as well' (1994: 100). Following the cue of the Californian doyenne of food as philosophy, Alice Waters, restaurateurs and critics alike now are on a crusade: 'For me food is a totally painless way of awakening people and sharpening their senses' (Waters, 1982: xi).

So what *is* this food fetishism all about? Could it be simply that food is now replacing sex as the ground of identities, be they gendered, national, postcolonial, collective or individual? If this is so, what happens to the purchase of all those theories – feminist, gay, lesbian, queer, psychoanalytic, etc. – that have privileged sex in one way or another as either constituting the very truth of ourselves; or those that have invested in endlessly deconstructing that supposed truth? While it is tempting to categorically proclaim that sex is dead, long live the cook as queen, this is not only hasty but would, I think, miss the insights that the current popular cultural food scene provides. While there are numerous analytic lines that flow from food, here I want to consider whether in the celebration of food as sex and sex as food we can see some of the limitations of dominant theoretical uses of sex. For instance, certain examples of food porn forcefully reveal the limits of thinking in terms of transgression, be it about food or sex.

Bluntly put, the conflation of food/sex may be simply convenient (the use of easy metaphors), or sloppy (the type of inversion that makes meat equal masculinity). Either way, these appropriations of food miss their mark. For surely sexuality, like food, is only of interest insofar as it allows us to see new connections between individuals, collectivities: to ask what sex and food allow and disallow. Whether it be food or sex, or a doubled reconfiguration of both, what matters is how they enable precise connections to be thought and enacted. In Deleuze and Guattari's words, 'What regulates the obligatory, necessary, or permitted interminglings of bodies is above all an alimentary regime and a sexual regime' (1991: 90). In turn, I also want to question what types of ethical bodies the intermingling of sex and food might produce.

This is at the heart of Foucault's argument in the second volume of *The History of Sexuality*, where he is interested not in sex per se but rather in the conception of corporeal ethics that the Greeks practised. As a way of defining 'the uses of pleasure . . . in terms of a certain way of caring for one's body', diet, or the notion of the regimen was central (Foucault, 1986: 97). Foucault argues that regimen was dietetic not therapeutic, thus signalling an important difference between a Greek conception of ethics and sex, and how the ensuing history of Western thought and practice would deal with sex. Thus, 'diet', what, how, when and where one eats 'characterised the

way in which one managed one's existence . . . a mode of problematisation of behavior. . . . Regimen was a whole art of living' (1986: 98). If one were interested in generalizations of history, one could say that sex became the object of what Foucault describes as the Christian motif of 'knowing oneself', whereas food and diet continued as the way in which one cared for oneself.

The Moral of the Flesh

Of course, things are not quite so clear cut. The long tradition within anthropology reminds us that food has also functioned as a privileged way by which we know and categorize the other. For instance, the preoccupation with cannibalism within anthropology reveals much about the colonial imagination as well as the constitution of the discipline (Hulme, 1998).¹ 'Eating the other' is both a metaphor for imperial violence, and the point where knowing the self and caring for the self merge, where food and sex intersect (Derrida, 1991; hooks, 1993). Either way we are faced with the elemental fact of the flesh. In a bare manner, flesh confuses the limits of what we are and what we eat, what or who we want; flesh encapsulates the quandary of whether the body in question is edible, fuckable, or both. As Derrida so famously states, it is 'a question no longer of knowing if it is 'good' to eat the other or if the other is 'good' to eat. . . . One eats him regardless and lets himself be eaten by him' (1991: 114).² Breast or thigh, dark or white meat, or a sweaty sexy entanglement of limbs? Angela Carter's early feminist critique of the function of sex in Sade mines the possibilities as well as the limits of flesh. As she writes, 'The word "fleisch", in German, provokes me to an involuntary shudder. In the English language, we make a fine distinction between flesh, which is usually alive and typically, human; and meat, which is dead, inert, animal and intended for consumption' (1979: 137). Her musings set off others: in French, '*la chair*' evokes the delicious intermingling of species as well as the variety of human form. '*La chair*' equally refers to animal, human and vegetable flesh, but also always brings to mind the image of a woman '*bien en chair*', rounded, voluptuous, or again in the superbly evocative French adjective, '*plantureuse*' – copious, lavish, buxom, fertile, of an ample *poitrine*. In French one dives into the expansiveness of flesh, describing penetration as '*entrer dans les chairs*', and firm young flesh is seemingly of necessity exemplified in the dictionary as '*aimer la chair fraîche*', for indeed how could anyone not *aimer entrer dans les chairs fraîches*, not wish to enter into young firm flesh.

Carter uses the semiotic slides between body/flesh/meat to give a compelling critique of Sade, and by extension of certain modern understandings of sexuality. She draws out the ways that a mechanics of transgression based solely in the inversion of body and meat is at the core of Sade's work. Against either celebration or simple condemnation, Carter shows how his mania for sexual transgression as inversion was fundamentally uninteresting. Her argument constitutes an early warning against an overvalorization of sex as transgressive when she proposes that Sade

provides a model of sex that in the end is devoid of complication. For all his physical exertion, sex is rigidly compartmentalized and serves to confine the leakages between categories. 'Sade is a great puritan and will disinfect of sensuality anything he can lay his hands on; therefore he writes about sexual relations in terms of butchery and meat' (1979: 138).

In Carter's argument, sexual pleasure through transgression maintains a sovereign position for the transgressor and serves only to reinforce the inward-looking, isolated and alienated subject. It is the very principle of containment, with sex as 'nothing but a private and individual shock of the nerves'. As such, 'sexual pleasure is not experienced *as* experience; it does not modify the subject' (1979: 144). When sex is a cerebral, knowing act of transgression, 'where desire is a function of the act rather than the act a function of desire, desire loses its troubling otherness' (1979: 145). It becomes a way of reterritorializing the subject rather than sending it into lines of flight. In other words, this model of transgression fundamentally reterritorializes the body in sex. Instead of being the fusion of bodies that confuses their limits, sex as meat becomes the principle to reintegrate.

In a wonderful line, Carter writes that the bed is 'as public as the dinner table and governed by the same rules of formal confrontation' (1979: 146). Carter's reading of Sade clarifies for me why I find much of the current food-porn boring. Call me the Sheila Jeffreys of food-sex, but representations of sex combined with food are not per se transgressive (although of course that would not be the complaint that anti-porn campaigners would use). In a recent example of transgression as inversion, Linda Jaivin's bestselling novel and soon to be film, *Eat Me*, uses food to disguise the ways sex is rendered as the very principle of normalization. In the opening story, one of the heroines, Ava, is in the supermarket stuffing different kinds of fruit up her cunt. To be more precise, figs, strawberries, grapes, and a kiwi fruit before the store detective stops her and is ordered to eat her out. He then fucks her with a banana. She then fucks him with a Lebanese cucumber. The store closes, and as they leave it turns out that this is a regular routine: 'See you next week, honey pot?' asked Adam. 'Usual time, usual place?' 'You bet, sweet pea', answers Ava (1995: 1-7).

What emerges from Jaivin's novel is the sense that sex on its own is no longer terribly interesting. And to be fair, she is not alone in this regard. Indeed the issue of 'sex on its own' is implicitly raised by 'the ampersand problem' of sexual politics, a problem that queer was supposed to fix by its expansive inclusiveness, but may have instead aggravated. While Jaivin's account is fundamentally about heterosex, she seeks to queer it by hyphenating sex and food. But surely the queerness of sex is not to be found in merely adding on another bit; does it not lie in the way in which it compels other combinations, sends lines out to seemingly distant realms and brings other worlds into dizzying proximity. When queer becomes content merely to *be* sex, is it possible that it may actually hinder our capacities to make connections? Posed as the answer, we need to question whether sex can really explain everything.

The Repressive Hypothesis of Meat

Within certain cultures of eating it seems that sex can explain everything. When it comes to *not* eating meat, it also seems that the repressive hypothesis is well and truly alive. If we no longer say ‘no’ to sex, in some articulations of eating, ‘no’ is the way to go. Carole Adams is the guru of such thought, and takes a radical feminist anti-porn line into the realm of eating, equating s/m and butchery in a sort of weird return to Sade. In her book, *The Sexual Politics of Meat*, women and animals are the ‘voiceless’ victims of patriarchy. She reiterates endlessly that ‘Eating animals acts as a mirror and representation of patriarchal values’ (1990: 187). In fact it doesn’t seem to matter whether it is animal or woman that is the object of consumption because ‘Meat eating is the re-inscription of male power at every meal’ (1990: 187). This yields a direct equation of the terms meat and men, which then can be inverted at will: ‘The killed and slaughtered animal yields . . . imagery of ferociousness, territorial imperative, armed hunting, aggressive behavior, the vitality and virility of meat eating’ (1990: 189).

Strangely enough Adams’ unreconstructed rad-fem analysis of sexual politics is similarly structured to the wannabe ‘bad girl’ Jaivin’s orgy of heterosex dished with fruit and veg. To use Carter’s phrase, in neither does the combination of food and sex fulfil the capacity of the flesh for the ‘fusion to confuse’. In Jaivin’s story, it is clear that she ‘knows’ what sex is, and the addition of vegetables and fruit merely serves to enforce this knowingness. And in a congruent fashion, Adams wants to police the troubling fusion of flesh eating flesh. In her rage against meat-eaters and, worse, those ‘bad’ vegetarians who eat fish, we hear not ethics but the maintenance of strict predetermined boundaries.³

In these scenarios, the importation of food into sex tends to close down the troubling possibilities of sex – as well as those of food. I would suggest that these examples show up some of the limits of sex, or at least the limited possibilities of an ampersand model of sex, whereby addition doesn’t alter the other term. As Foucault argued throughout his work, the point was to lose oneself, to have oneself rearranged through sex or thought or writing. We are however increasingly faced with the question of whether sex can rearrange us when it is transformed into an object, the measure of inclusion and exclusion.

It is perhaps inevitable that human practices will take on the force of stratification, and then require other actions to free them up. In Deleuze and Guattari’s argument, lines of flight will always be reterritorialized, and then require a change in attitude in order to open them up again. An example of both the stultifying weight of concepts as well as the positivity of freeing them can be heard in Maria Angel and Zoë Sofia’s wonderful reading of Peter Greenaway’s film, *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover*. You will recall that Greenaway fuses food and sex, using the figure of the cannibal to carry his contempt for the lower middle-class rich. Angel and Sofia concentrate on the excess of his representation in order to elaborate a

feminist rethinking of the ethics of eating and sex. Arguing against the limitations of the phallus, they instead plunder the surplus generated around anal and oral eroticisms which produce ‘an extraordinary mobility and confusion of organs and spaces and the things that go in and out of them’ (1996: 479). This produces the politics of food and sex as complex, ambiguous, not to say downright messy.

Following these considerations, I want to now turn to ways of putting the doubledness of sex and food to work: to use their enfolding as both analytic vectors and as sites of ethical becoming. From the various food-sex sites I have touched upon, it seems to me that those that work, those that send off new lines and beg new connections, are the ones motivated by what makes cooking, eating and sex all potent. For instance, the ‘Eat Our Words’ event (which I described earlier) produced unexpected connections. Following one speaker, and in the smoke break outside between courses, I listened as a group of young gay men struggled to think about the violence that their mothers had experienced in the confines of the suburban homes and kitchens of their youth. The women present reacted to these thoughts with encouragement and some restraint: none of us pointed out that the boys were stumbling on well-trodden feminist ground. In small ways, the connection of food and sex made possible other vectors, considerations of conduct not usually associated with ‘queer pride’. In a spontaneous way, it provoked reflection on questions that are all too often separated out from those of sexuality per se. Of course, one cannot lay too much hope or weight on what was, after all, an event for the affluent. However placed within a network that includes charity dinners in aid of people living with AIDS, and the poor, and volunteer organizations that coordinate individuals who cook for home-ridden HIV sufferers, it is important to remember that this practical caring for strangers, friends and lovers coexists with the wilder manifestations of queer life. Here it does not make sense to say that food is more important than sex, or vice versa.

In fact, it brings home the practical, embedded and corporeal nature of thinking ethics, or an ethno-poetics of food and sex. My wager is that through food we may begin to formulate an ethics of living that works against the logics of categorization that now dominate much of the politics of identity. To return to my question of ‘what’s eating us’, I want to be clear that food cannot simply supersede sex. Rather it is a way of retraining the ethical and political impulse that propelled much of queer theorization: the wish to make connections between our sexualities and our lives; the imperative not to be subsumed within sex. Thus for me food offers a way of returning to questions about pleasure within restraint, sympathy understood as a means of respecting the situatedness of identity. It also returns our attention to the forces that regulate our everyday lives: in short to a very practical figuring of an everyday ethics of living.

One of my favourite mistresses of the ‘alimentary-sexual’ as a guide for life is Alice B. Toklas. Beyond her *renom* for a piquant version of brownies, *Alice B. Toklas’ Cookbook* embodies a sort of caring, translated as practical

advice. In her eminently sensible way, Toklas tells us that ‘the only way to learn to cook is to cook’ (1995: 37). Along with being very good, her recipes are suggestive of a certain conduct; we glimpse through them the intermingling of bodies, nations, memories, war and love. As she roams over decades and constantly eddies around the love of Gertrude Stein, her book is completely informed by, and instructive of the role of restraint. Her golden rule is ‘Respect for the inherent quality and flavour of each ingredient’ (1995: 4). In culinary terms, as in others, this comes from considering seriously the qualities of each element before they are combined: ‘This restraint, *le juste milieu* . . . the golden mean, is what makes . . . not only good cooks but good critics of food’ (1995: 5). Of course, one can object that she and Stein were the products of a certain time and class, when good cooks had maids, and good critics like Stein had independent means, not to mention the company of the adoring Toklas. Nevertheless, her desire to train the palate reverberates with the wider themes I have been discussing. To extend Deleuze and Guattari’s point, this is to recognize that while alimentary and sexual regimes regulate the ‘interminglings of bodies in a society’, how we practice *le juste milieu*, alimentary or sexual, is what allows for more ethical arrangements of bodies.

Thinking of the limits and possibilities provoked by this, in conclusion I want to draw on another representation of the sexual alimentary that flays food and sex into their composite dimensions, and then recombines them in suggestive ways. As many will remember, Dorothy Allison’s wonderful short story ‘A Lesbian Appetite’ opens with an homage to biscuits, buttermilk, beans, pork fat, bacon and greens. With a scrumptious list of meals, she remembers her girlfriends by what they ate together. Later she will describe both the girls and the meals, but first she writes of the ‘one lover who didn’t want to eat at all. We didn’t last long. The sex was good, but I couldn’t think what to do with her when the sex was finished. We drank spring water together and fought a lot’ (1988: 151–2).

Reflecting on this experience, Allison refuses to conflate sex and food. Rather, she uses food to trace out one direction, which then intersects with the tracing provided by sex. Yet another line is clearly and distinctly drawn as she tells of her childhood worry and shame that they were not getting enough vitamin D. A teacher instructs her that ‘the children of the poor have a lack of brain tissue simply because they don’t get the necessary vitamins at the right age’ (1988: 156). The child is horrified by the image ‘of my cousins, big-headed, watery-eyed, and stupid’: ‘We will drink milk, steal it if we must’ (1988: 156). Like salt on an eggplant, with these images Allison draws out the meaning of food within poverty, and gives us a profound understanding of the connections between food, family, pride, shame and love.

In Allison’s story, women are hungry for other women, for real Southern barbecue, coleslaw and hush puppies, for sex, for chocolate, for remembering (1988: 163). While ‘A Lesbian Appetite’ strikes me as a great deal more erotic than some of the current food-porn, it is also a deeply pedagogic tale of the ethics, the modes of living that food and sex can forge.

Her text strangely echoes or embodies Foucault's argument. If, as he argued, 'homosexuality . . . is an historic occasion to re-open affective and relational virtualities' (1984: 207), in Allison's tale affective and relational possibilities are embodied in the slow caress given to each detail, each ingredient, the sense of timing and movement so essential to eating, cooking, loving and being. Lest one think that this is only possible in an avowedly lesbian text, this exploration of timing and touch is also what makes the *Two Fat Ladies* so suggestive: food here is something to be felt, touched ('get those hands in there'), enquired after (who has grown it and can we go play with it on the hoof), cared for and ultimately eaten with appreciation. In short, food is the opportunity to explore the tangible links between what we eat, who we think we are, how and with whom we have sex, and what we are becoming. In short, what we have here are descriptions of the lines that can be wound between food, sex, bodies: an ethics of connection and disconnection between the various assemblages we inhabit.

To end, let me be clear that if I have argued that certain representations of food and sex belie the limits of sex as the sole optic through which to elaborate an ethics of existence, it should also be clear that I am not advocating the wholesale replacement of sex by food. On the contrary, what I have tried to suggest is that thinking *through* food to sex may make us 'infinitely more susceptible to pleasure'. Pleasure and ethics, sex and food are all about breaking up the strict moralities which constrain us. Just as 'food' must break open into production, preparation, exploitation, consumption, reading, writing, play and work, so too should sex fall apart. In articulating an alternative ethics of social connection between all those aspects that have been too summarily subsumed by sex, we need to proceed with respect for the inherent qualities of each element. Guided by the question of what is eating us, and the exigency of reflecting on our manners of living, this may also remind us of the necessity of enacting *le juste milieu*, a care for the self and for others guided by pleasure and restraint, in theory and in practice. It is an alimentary matter of common sense that delicacy and restraint make for good cooking; they are equally essential for an alternative ethics of existence.

Notes

The arguments presented here are further developed in my forthcoming book, *Visceral Citizens: Essays on Eating, Sex and Ethics*. My thanks for research assistance to Gill Dempsey, Michelle Imison and Megan Jones, and to the ARC for funding the project.

1. For a fascinating discussion of the range of uses of the cannibal, see the anthology, *Cannibalism and the Colonial World*, (Barker et al., 1998).
2. Elsewhere I take up Derrida's argument more fully in the context of the concept of citizenship, and Balibar's (1991) compelling analysis of equality (Probyn, forthcoming).

3. Of course, Adams is hardly representative of the more developed arguments on 'ethical eating'. As David Bell and Gill Valentine put it, 'Being a citizen of the world also means, for some people, eating only your share, and eating only what is ethical.' The push to 'green cuisine' is 'an important countercultural response to being in the world' (1997: 188). In Lisa Heldke's argument, this entails thinking of our relations with food as 'participatory', that 'acting in the world is a communal, relational activity – that we are in correspondence with, and are also responsive and responsible to, others in the world' (1992: 310). However, the confusion over sex and food reappears in Wendall Barry's summation that, 'Like industrial sex, industrial eating has become a degraded, poor, and paltry thing.' It follows for him that the contemporary eater is 'passive and uncritical – in short, a victim' (1992: 375).

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