Elspeth Probyn

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CARNAL APPETITES

'Probyn always surprises her reader, as she moves from analyzing eating as a social concern to eating as a new way of looking at power. This is an original and important book, one that more than lives up to what we have come to expect from Probyn.'

Lawrence Grossberg, University of North Carolina

'Probyn's writing has never been more engaging, nor her ideas more original—*Carnal Appetites* marks an exciting transformation in the way we think through, and with, bodies that eat.'

David Bell, Staffordshire University

What's eating us? Investigating the current explosion of interest in food and eating, Elspeth Probyn's book uncovers some of the deep and dark themes underlying our craving for the culinary. Popular representations of eating depict food as the last area of authenticity, of what is *really* real, testifying to a desire for something visceral. If sexuality has been the privileged arena for our understandings of truth and identity, the question of who we are and want to be is now being debated in the pages of gourmet magazines and in sexy food programmes.

Is eating better than sex? The answer is that it depends on what you e While the book revels in the gloriously sexy intersections of the sexual and the alimentary, it also explores issues that trouble society, issues that are still not quite digestible: appetite, desire, greed, and pleasure. Going beyond a celebration of identity, either in terms of food or of sex, Probyn offers a different model of identity, and details the ways in which we digest ourselves now. We are 'mouth machines' that ingest and spit out bits of the local and the global, the familiar and the strange. Across a number of sites—funk food, McDonald's, vegetarianism and

'ethical eating', food-sex, cannibalism, anorexia, bulimia, and fat politics—the book constantly jostles debates about identity. Neither celebratory nor nihilistic, what emerges is the deep affect of eating.

Elspeth Probyn is Associate Professor in the Department of Gender Studies at the University of Sydney. She is the author of *Outside Belongings* (Routledge, 1996) and *Sexing the Self: Gendered Positions in Cultural Studies* (Routledge, 1993), and co-editor, with Elizabeth Grosz, of *Sexy Bodies: the Strange Carnalities of Feminism* (Routledge, 1995).

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FoodSexIdentities

Elspeth Probyn

London and New York

First published 2000
by Routledge
11 New Fetter Lane, London EC4P 4EE

This edition published in the Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2005.

"To purchase your own copy of this or any of Taylor & Francis or Routledge's collection of thousands of eBooks please go to www.eBookstore.tandf.co.uk."

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
29 West 35th Street, New York, NY 10001

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group
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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
Probyn, Elspeth, 1958–
Carnal Appetites: FoodSexIdentities/
Elspeth Probyn. Includes bibliographical references and index.
1. Eating (philosophy) 2. Identity (philosophical concept)
I. Title.
BD450 .P635 2000
641'.01'3–dc21 00–029114

ISBN 0-203-36116-4 Master e-book ISBN

ISBN 0-203-37372-3 (Adobe eReader Format)
ISBN 0-415-22304-0 (hbk)
ISBN 0-415-22305-9 (pbk)

CONTENTS

Acknowledgements vi

Introduction: gut feelings 1

1 Bodies that eat 11

2 Feeding McWorld, eating ideologies 35

3 Eating sex 61

4 Cannibal hunger, restraint in excess 81

5 Eating in black and white: the making of Mod Oz 103

6 Eating disgust, feeding shame 127

Postscript: eating—the new sensuality? 147

Notes 151

References 157

Index 167

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many people have sustained me in the writing of this book. My thanks go first to the research assistants who worked with me over the years: Michelle Imison, Gill Dempsey, Megan Jones, and Natalya Lusty. They are all talented researchers in their own right, and their insights and challenges have been invaluable. Natalya bore the brunt of the final stages, and I thank her for her ideas, style, and patience. Gretchen Poiner was central to the early stages, and conducted interviews in her inimitable fashion. Suzanne Fraser also helped with interviews. To those interviewed who gave of their ideas and insights, my deep appreciation. Several of my students have been incredibly supportive, especially Robyn Durack and Adam Eldridge (even if he hates food). Thanks also to my undergraduate students, who endured more about food than may have been good for them. In addition, my colleagues at the University of Sydney, and especially in the Department of Gender Studies, have been supportive. Pat Davies stands out for her exemplary alimentary style, and Nikki Whipps came up with wonderful food examples.

I am grateful to the Australian Research Council, and the Social Sciences and Humanities Council of Canada for research funding. I have benefited from invitations to present work-in-progress at several universities: including the Universities of Oslo, North Carolina, Lancaster, Concordia, Adelaide, Griffith and Western Sydney, and I thank those who invited me. I was fortunate to spend my research leave at Goldsmiths College, London, and warm thanks to Les Back, Vikki Bell, and Paul Gilroy. Nikolas Rose deserves special thanks for his kindness and intellectual support.

Rebecca Barden at Routledge has been great, and an editor who is a smart foodie is a wonderful thing to have. I am extremely lucky to have a circle of friends who can think and eat at the same time, and with whom I've shared great meals and conversations. Those who have directly influenced this book include Anna Munster (who came up with

the idea of a cookbook for rhizomes), Line Grenier, Val Morrison, Anna Gibbs, Chantal Nadeau, Zoe Sofoulis, Jeannie Martin, and Meaghan Morris. Rosemary Pringle lived closely with much of the writing of the book, and I thank her deeply for her comments, ideas, her patience, appetite and love. Wendy Brady had to contend with the final furlong: her generosity and help is lovingly acknowledged. As ever, my love to my family; if for reasons of geography we rarely eat together, we have stayed together (proving the *sagesse* of my mother's dictum).

INTRODUCTION
Gut feelings

Things to do with clichés

At the end of a previous book I mentioned the ways in which, at certain times, connections between cultures, individuals and modes of living seem to register most forcefully at the level of the guts—something I unscientifically called '*les tripes* as research protocol'. As is often the case, since then I have turned my experience, and, more pointedly, my stomach and taste buds, into a research project. The genesis of this project was not, however, greed, but curiosity, a trait that may at times be fickle, but which is absolutely necessary to any cultural analysis. My curiosity was first and foremost about how my adopted country, Australia, treated questions of national, historical, collective and individual identity in terms of eating and food. I was later to find that the food craze was certainly not limited to Australia, and that foodism now seems to spill into every nook and cranny. Love, sex, relationships, family, economics, comfort, obsession, pleasure, control, desire, shame, disgust, fear, hatred, work, leisure, sickness, death, birth—the list could go on and on. All of these disparate aspects of life are at different times touched by food, given meaning through eating. Intensely social, boringly mundane, simple or complicated, at times eating seemingly connects to the very core of our selves, at others it is just a drudge activity necessary to keep body and soul together.

Any cursory investigation soon reveals that the language of eating and food pervades our cultures like clichés that coat the tongue. There are fascinating regional and subcultural twists on food clichés: in Australia, 'she'll be apples' is a sunny example, along the lines of 'it'll fine up'. Before I moved here, my sister-in-law equipped me with an essential expression that I've yet to hear anyone use: 'don't come the raw prawn with me mate!'. More humdrum, yet still colourful, is the

gesture spawned from some TV show or film, the Valleygirl pantomime of the middle finger down the mouth: ‘gag me with a spoon’. While one could argue that such gestures reveal how far the supposedly intimate practices of anorexia and bulimia have penetrated our culture, I’m not sure of the reach of such analytic scavenging. The more usual clichés that one has to contend with are those that blend the often misphrased aphorisms of the French *bon vivant,* Jean-Anthelme Brillat-Savarin (1825/1970) (‘Tell me what you eat: I will tell you what you are’), with the home-spun admonitions of women’s magazines (‘the way to a man’s heart is through his stomach’). More up to date are the truisms about the pleasures of eating together slowly *en famille* or in the company of friends. As with all truisms, those about commensality have some basis in truth, or at least can decorate our aspirations. At a general level, it is clear that such images attest to a low-level yet widespread concern about intimate relations. But what is interesting about clichéd food statements is the ways in which they are normally sugar coated; they slide down the throat, encouraging other similar statements. In this way, eating examples and metaphors are often used to cover over the nasty bits: the hearty enthusiasm for ‘foreign food’ that is supposed to hide the taste of racism. Or, in a different register, the repetition *ad nauseam* of ‘comfort food’ at times serves to camouflage widespread loneliness or disappointment in life. Beyond the cooing of food editors, perhaps we should think about ‘power food’, ‘control food’ and ‘nasty food’ as offering more interesting social insights. There is after all something rather wonderful about the adamant admission of ‘I hate that’, ‘that’s disgusting’. It’s hard to say which is more sociologically interesting: the sincerity of a white middle-class man as he cooks an intricate and ‘authentic’ Thai meal, or the alimentary racism that seemingly naturally asserts what’s edible and what’s not.

Gut ethics

At a simple level, I am intrigued by the forceful nature of present proclamations about eating. At a time when seemingly nothing is sacred, or even worth getting heated up about, we are constantly bombarded with instructions about what and how to eat. The usual ingredients of scholarly controversy may not incite the public— questions about whether ‘fusion food’ has gone too far, or whether global feeding is killing off local cuisine. However, beyond academic storms in a teacup, there are profound concerns that the present food fetishism raises for the gastronome and ordinary eater alike. The aim of this book is simple but

immodest. Through the optic of food and eating, I want to investigate how as individuals we inhabit the present: how we eat into cultures, eat into identities, indeed eat into ourselves. At the same time I am interested in the question of what's bothering us, what's eating us now? Of course that is an impossibly large question. I would like to be able to say that I have narrowed the ambit by solely focusing on matters of food. However, this is not a sociological study of food *per se*. There are obvious areas that I have not addressed, for instance the worries about genetically modified foods, or wider environmental concerns. It is, however, the more diffuse nature of what's eating us that compels me: questions of appetite, of excess, of fear, shame and disgust. In eating, we grapple with concerns about the animate and the inanimate, about authenticity and sincerity, about changing familial patterns, about the local rendered global, about whether sexual and alimentary predilections tell us anything about ourselves, about colonial legacies of the past for those of us who live in stolen lands, about whether we are eating or being eaten. Alongside these concerns, it is seemingly impossible to avoid the television programmes and the food pages of newspapers or glossy magazines that promise a return to the real things of life through eating. In the face of this explosion of popular discourses on eating and food, I am drawn by another question that is relatively straightforward even as it exceeds my grasp: what is all this foodism about? One of the fascinating aspects of the new food faddism is the way that it combines a yearning for authenticity with a recognition of its impossibility. It is clear that eating has become for some, in some parts of the world, a matter of intensity. Of course, eating has always permeated our everyday lives and thoughts—from the worry about what to put on the table, to the obsession amongst the well fed about what goes in and comes out of our mouths and bodies. But now it seems that eating brings together a cacophony of feelings, hopes, pleasures and worries, as it orchestrates experiences that are at once intensely individual and social.

In more elaborated terms, I seek to use the materiality of eating, sex and bodies in order to draw out alternative ways of thinking about an ethics of existence, ways of living informed by both the rawness of a visceral engagement with the world, and a sense of restraint in the face of the excess. It is in this sense that eating allows us to rethink the ethics of bodies. Eating, of course, is intimately involved with bodies, and in fact can question what we think we know of the body. While there has been much work done at an abstract level in terms of embodiment, the realm of the alimentary brings these considerations down to earth and

extends them. An idea from Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus* has guided me in tracing out the connections between bodies that, in eating, open up and connect in different ways. Speaking of the ways in which bodies are produced, they argue that 'What regulates the obligatory, necessary, or permitted interminglings of bodies is above all an alimentary regime and a sexual regime' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988: 90). As I argue across different sites, in eating we find ourselves in various assemblages, produced and producing ourselves anew. The interminglings of the cultural, the culinary and the corporeal suggest to me other ways of thinking about ethical behaviours and practices. If the term 'ethics' immediately denotes either a vast philosophical project, or, when paired with food, a generalised green politics, here I am interested in smaller scenarios. As Nikolas Rose argues, in Foucault's later writings ethics was 'a general designation' for investigations into forms of 'concern' for the self. In this sense, ethics is contrasted with morality: 'moral systems [that] are, by and large, systems of injunction and interdiction—thou shalt do this or thou shalt not do that' (Rose, 1996:135). While certainly there are forms of eating that fall into this strict codification, I am more interested in the rather nebulous ways in which eating can inform practices and ways of thinking that coincide with Foucault's notion of ethics as a 'domain of practical advice as to how one should concern oneself with oneself, make oneself the subject of solicitude and attention, conduct oneself in the world of one's everyday existence' (*Ibid.,* 1996:135). In addition to the practical advice (given, for instance, by the food media, diet and cook books), I am particularly concerned to map out the different sites of intensity and problematisation that frame modes of conduct. Some of the thematics thrown up by eating include greed, generosity, hunger and a reversal of orders when it is no longer clear what is eating whom. While the food media would like us to believe that eating now inaugurates an era of straightforward pleasures—eating simply and well with friends—other astute food writers realise that food and eating may be as tricky as sex used to be. In a self-reflective fashion, Nigella Lawson writes about the ways in which 'We eat, we talk, but really all we talk about is what we eat' (Lawson, 1999:153). Lawson and countless others promote the realm of the kitchen as the place where time finds its own: she describes 'a very simple orange and almond cake made by boiling oranges till they're sodden and then lazily mixing them, any old how, with ground almonds, eggs, and sugar'. This experience, she says, demonstrates 'our growing equation of competence in the kitchen with ability to be part of life' (*Ibid.,* 1999:154). The pleasures of the kitchen, and of timing, are

contrasted with what she calls the 'denatured eating' of expensive restaurants. In this scenario, the home cook gets her hands dirty while she watches the exploits of sexy television chefs. Beyond the now tattered dream of liberation in the bedroom, and freed from the obligations of cooking, the kitchen is now sold to women as the new sphere of sensual liberation.

The joys of home cooking, the appeal of hunky chefs, the focus on touch and timing—certainly, all of these are instances of a new vaunting of sensual pleasure. Attracted by such descriptions, I nonetheless come to these pleasures at an oblique angle: what are we to make of them? Certainly, for the affluent, the time to make a cake is probably one of the scarcest commodities. But what of the idea that baking equates with the 'ability to be part of life'? In Lawson's description we have a rarefaction of one part of life into a guiding precept of how to live. Here eating becomes the end point. But what if alimentary representations and practices were an *apéritif,* stimulating the appetite for questions about how to combine various parts of life? While it may be a bit of a stretch to bring together recipes and philosophical problems, rereading Foucault's arguments in the second volume of *The History of Sexuality* made me wonder where we might find present-day examples of the principle and practices of combination that he finds in the world of the Ancient Greeks. The long history of imbricating practical and ethical injunctions through eating can be seen in any number of different orders of texts. It is then not surprising that across ages we find dictates to practise through eating *'le juste milieu':* from Platonic dialogues, to contemporary texts such as Alice B.Toklas's cookbook, and the erotic pedagogy of Dorothy Allison's 'A Lesbian Appetite', the emphasis is on combining eros and eating in 'the right measure'. These writers all focus on the intricate ways in which eating, loving, writing and thinking can and must be brought together. As such, they echo Foucault's description of the alimentary regimen as the principle that brings together diverse practices, such as exercise, eating, sleeping, sexual activity. Through the advice of practical texts, individuals constituted themselves as healthy and moral subjects. For the Greeks, and perhaps now for us, dietary regimens provided guidance in terms of how to relate to particular situations and circumstances, and this both in regard to oneself and to others. It is clear that these were not abstract notions, but were indeed practices to be governed by the sense of 'the right measure'.

For the Ancient Greeks the problematisation of pleasure was most clearly seen in the fact that 'diet itself…was a fundamental category

through which human behaviour could be conceptualized. It characterized the way in which one managed one's existence' (Foucault, 1986:98). Pre-dating the therapeutic model that has so dominated ethical thinking and care of the self, ethical behaviour was an ongoing process produced through the exact conjugation of 'exercises, foods, drinks, sleep and sexual relations'. An 'alimentary regimen as a mode of problematisation of behaviour…was a whole art of living' (*Ibid.,* 1986:98). In this way, eating and the concern for the body was, for the Greeks, of much more interest than sex, or rather sex was not seen as a separate domain. Indeed, as Paul Veyne argues, The Greek valorization of pleasure rather than sex meant that the Greeks encountered no other object than that of pleasure; the sex of the partner remained indifferent' (Veyne, 1997:228). *The Use of Pleasure* takes us into the intricacies of the development of the regimen, in part so that we can 'dwell on that quite recent and banal notion of "sexuality": to stand detached from it, bracketing its familiarity' (Foucault, 1986:3).

The problem of pleasure

In our own times, we have ample reason to stand back from sexuality. Faced with the continuing spectre of HIV, or in less tragic terms the sheer banality of sexual representation, the domain of eating is, I think, reintroducing concepts of pleasure into the realm of the popular. At the very least, in the attention to food and eating, we are witnessing an experimentation with forms of pleasure that are not first and foremost sexual. Concomitantly, representations of sexuality are often paired with food as a way of exploring different modes of sensuality. As Foucault argued, after the endless discussion of sexual desire, pleasure is for us a 'virgin territory' (in Deleuze, 1994). It could even be said that we live with a scarcity of pleasure, rendering our explorations of the senses both exhilarating and problematic. Certainly pleasure now comes in an explosion of tastes. For instance, slip into a local restaurant and you may encounter 'sheer, slinky ravioli with garlic chives…a bravura show of deep, long flavours', 'on tissue-thin discs of cucumber with tiny *nori* omelettes supporting delicate tuna tartare crowned with ethereal flying fish roe rubbed with *wasabi*' (Durack and Dupleix, 1999:94). Viewers are now accustomed to seeing Nigel Slater in 'real food' orgasm sucking his chocolate-covered fingers, or the 'soft porn' musical codes that accompany Delia Smith's patient instruction. From the food-porn novels such as Linda Jaivin's *Eat Me* (1995), or John Lancaster's exquisite deathly food philosophy in *The Debt to Pleasure* (1996), to

the high-cholesterol decadence of *The Two Fat Ladies,* the current *fin de siècle* craze for food seems to oddly echo Foucault's description of 'the question of foods—considered in terms of their peculiar qualities, and of the circumstances in which they were consumed (whether the seasons of the year or the particular state of the organism)—was a great deal more important than sexual activity' (*Ibid.,* 1986:114).

If much of cultural theory over the last decade has revolved around sex as that which secures identity, it seems to me that the sensual nature of eating now constitutes a privileged optic through which to consider how identities and the relations between sex, gender and power are being renegotiated. In eating, pleasure offers itself to be problematised. As it brings our senses to life, it also forefronts the viscerality of life. My contention is that the question of how to live today can be best seen at a 'gut' level. In a situation where politics (be they queer, feminist, left-or right-wing) are increasingly structured by *ressentiment* and a hierarchy of injury (Brown, 1995), the question of food and eating provides another perspective: one that Jack Goody sums up as both the simplicity and complexity of the fact that eating is 'a way of placing oneself in relation to others' (Goody, 1982). Along with Goody and others, I also argue that food and its relation to bodies is fundamentally about power: 'linked to the mode of production of material goods, the analysis of cooking has to be related to the distribution of power and authority in the economic sphere' (*Ibid.,* 1982:37). This power is obviously exercised at the macro level of economics and class (and indeed the clearest exposition of 'glocal' economics can be seen in agriculture), but it is also palpable at individual levels. My argument thus seeks to draw out the tangibility of power, its textures and flavour. As I've written elsewhere, we need to consider what power tastes like: where it is sucked, what types of bodies it produces (Probyn, 1997). These bodies may be aesthetic and controlled (as in anorexia), excessive and disgusting (the sight of other bodies eating), hungry and restrained (cannibals), or shamed and rendered abject (as in colonial regimes of power). Eating is therefore decidedly not merely metaphorical, a refusal I share with Mary Douglas and Arjun Appadaurai. The intricacies of power, mouths and bodies fascinate: small scenarios such as that revealed in a wonderful ethnographic study of the power wielded amongst elderly widows in a small Australian country town as they position themselves in terms of who makes the best scones (Walker-Birckhead, 1985). A concern with what might be called the micro-politics of food-lines can also be clearly heard in the interviews conducted for this book. Here, individuals from a range of social

backgrounds connect what they eat with quite spontaneous reflection on who and where they are, echoing Douglas's assertion that eating is 'the medium through which a system of relationships…is expressed… both a social matter and part of the provision for the care of the body' (1982: 86).

Recipes for rhizomes

Concretely, the sites that I study bring into focus a number of issues. In the spirit of 'what's eating us?', food and eating continually branch into areas that may at first seem unconnected, yet in their rhizomatic logic are deeply intertwined. The frame of eating juxtaposes the near and the far, the individual and the social, the natural and the cultural. In Chapter 1, inspired by some very inventive food enthusiasts, I consider what happens when we think about 'bodies that eat'. Moving away from much of the literature that sees in eating a confirmation of identity, I propose that in eating we lose ourselves in a wild morphing of the animate and the inanimate; what Foucault calls 'that obscure desire…to become other than oneself (Foucault, 1985:104). As I have intimated, much of the mainstream debate on eating signals a nostalgic return to authenticity. While there is nothing wrong *per se* with authenticity and nostalgia, at the present time, appeals to 'the real' operate as a way of covering over many of the massive changes in terms of families, gender and sexual orders, local and global economies. To laud a return to the real in terms of eating misses the mark. Against arguments that see in eating a confirmation of a predetermined identity, the point is to focus on the different forms of alimentary assemblages. It is here that we see glimpses of the types of intermingling of bodies that suggest other ways of inhabiting the world. In Chapter 2 I continue this mapping, this time dwelling on the confrontation staged between the global feeder, McDonald's, and the activists in the *McLibel* trial. Rather than condemning McDonald's, I carefully examine their rhetoric of familial citizenship and glocalised caring. While of course many of McDonald's practices are unpalatable, they also seem to have corporatised the logic of rhizomes, whereby eating and caring are rendered inextricably linked. Chapter 3 examines the current hazing of food and sex. Beyond a simple celebration of gastroporn, I seek to follow through on the ways that sex and eating intersect. This is to privilege the pleasures of restraint, the touch and feel of each element, and the sense of timing so necessary to both sex and food. Through eating, and in stretching the senses, we may refine the ethical and political impulse that initially propelled queer uses

of sexuality. In Chapter 4 I follow through on the most obvious link between food and sex: the literal eating of the other that cannibalism represents. I am primarily interested in two facets of cannibalism that dovetail. On the one hand, we have recently witnessed within business circles a concern about the cannibalisation of markets. This is centrally to do with worries about the finitude of consumer appetites within a context of the excess of commodity culture. On the other hand, the long racist history behind the circulation of the figure of the cannibal reminds the West of our implication in colonial regimes. In one of the classic texts on colonial appetite, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1902/1983) uses the cannibal to represent the figure of restraint and civility, and indeed humanity, in contrast to the ravenous colonial traders. Conrad allows us to appreciate again the full power of hunger as the limit that divides the civilised (the cannibal) from the inhuman (the commodity traders). In Chapter 5 I examine the ways in which food has been used in Australia and other white-settler nations as a mode of power and control. Following Locke's arguments about the necessity of 'labouring the land', in Australia, whites constructed influential images of 'eating in black and white': images of what and how the Indigenous eat are then the enduring basis for the impasse that reverberates between white and black Australians. As an Indigenous elder, Molly Nungarrayi, puts it, 'white men are hungry men' (in Vaarzon-Morel, 1995:94). If this history bequeaths a mantle of shame, in Chapter 6 I examine the effectiveness of eating shame and disgust as a way of revitalising the politics of bodies. Looking at the disgust engendered by the anorexic body, I also examine closely the workings of fat pride. I argue that the widespread tendency of queer-inspired politics has been to render shame abject. However, by bringing the dynamics of shame and disgust into prominence we are forced to envision a more visceral and powerful corporeal politics.

Following Douglas's claim that 'we simply do not know the uses of food' (1982:124), my argument is that eating sends us off in unexpected directions and orders alternative connections. As eating reactivates the force of identities, it also may enable modes of cultural analysis that are attentive to the categories with which we are now perhaps overly familiar: sex, ethnicity, wealth, poverty, geopolitical location, class and gender. Eating, I suggest, makes these categories matter again: it roots actual bodies within these relations. Eating then becomes a visceral reminder of how we variously inhabit the axes of economics, intimate relations, gender, sexuality, history, ethnicity, and class. In this way, we really are what we eat, but equally what, how, and with whom we eat