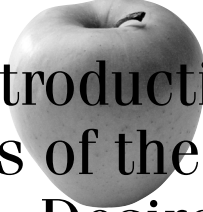


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Introduction Scenes of the Apple: Appetite, Desire, Writing

Tamar Heller and Patricia Moran

[L]et us take the scene of the apple . . . The first fable of our first book is a fable in which what is at stake is the relationship to the law . . . It's a struggle between the Apple and the discourse of God. . . . [W]hat Eve will discover in her relationship to simple reality, is the inside of the apple, and that this inside is good. This story tells us that the genesis of woman goes through the mouth, through a certain oral pleasure . . .

—Hélène Cixous, “Extreme Fidelity”

In the Genesis narrative of the fall, sin and death enter the world when a woman eats. In “Extreme Fidelity,” Hélène Cixous claims that this Eve story, the “scene of the apple,” is the guiding myth of Western culture, a fable about the subjection of female “oral pleasure” to the regulation of patriarchal law. An allegory of what she calls “libidinal education”—the individual’s discovery of the body and the cultural prohibitions surrounding it—the Genesis myth is also, according to Cixous, about the genesis of “artistic being” (15), a *Künstlerroman* in which the writer, whom she represents as a transgressive woman, encounters not only the cultural taboos surrounding the body but the realm of language which encodes them. To “shake [words] like apple trees” (15)—to repeat Eve’s

transgression, and to question cultural law—is the way the artist can achieve the goal that Cixous, in “The Laugh of the Medusa,” calls “writing the body”: breaking down the dualism of flesh and spirit that has traditionally devalued and silenced women.

Using Cixous’s hungry Eve as our touchstone, these chapters explore how women write about food and oral pleasure, and, in so doing, negotiate their relation to the body as well as to language and culture. We are thus interested in food on two levels, both the literal and the figurative. To discuss how food and cooking are represented in women’s writing is on one level to recognize the important role that this quotidian reality has played, and still does play, in women’s lives.¹ On a second level, however, we wish to examine the multiple symbolic meanings that food acquires in women’s writing.² Food can symbolize the realm Cixous calls “libidinal”—bodily and sexual experience—while also signifying, as it does in her version of the scene of the apple, language and voice, a symbolism drawing on the dual association of the mouth with both eating and speaking. As Helena Michie writes, “If Eve’s desire for the apple represents the decentering force of women’s power, it is also deeply linked with the question of authority and, finally, of authorship” (28). As an example of orality as authorial power, Michie cites Louisa May Alcott’s Jo March in *Little Women*, “stuffing apples into her mouth as she writes in her garret,” an image that emblemizes how Victorian women writers, in their revisions of the Genesis story, were “transgressing in their hunger to write and to know, and translating trespass into the source of their power” (28). According to Michie, this reappropriation of the Fall myth also animates the work of those contemporary women writers who, “feasting on Eve’s apples,” celebrate rather than censor “female hunger . . . for sex, authority, creativity, and power” (131).

That Michie’s example of orality as authorship is Alcott’s Jo March, however, reveals as much about women’s anxiety about appetite as it does their vindication of it. In a fit of guilt, Jo will later destroy melodramatic stories of the type she had written while feasting on apples: a containment of creative energy that recalls Alcott’s own double life in the 1860s as a pseudonymous writer of sensation fiction and its tales of illicit sexuality and power-hungry women. Like Jo, Alcott shelved this double life to devote herself to domestic fiction like *Little Women*, which she referred to dismissively, in a telling oral metaphor, as “moral pap for the young.” The conflict between the transgressive and the domestic in Alcott’s own career is another version of what Alcott’s biographer Madelon Bedell called “the Drama of the Apple,” in which Alcott’s father tried to tame his daughter’s unruly appetite by shutting her in a room with an apple she was forbidden to eat—a test she promptly failed (81–82), and which,

as Elaine Showalter says, is reenacted over and over again in her fiction in scenes of tension between “patriarchal authority” and “female self-assertion” (Introduction to *Little Women*, x). Alcott’s ambivalence about female appetite—an advocate of women’s suffrage and higher education, she championed women’s hunger for power at the same time she often chastened it in her fiction—is emblematic of how the scene of the apple can, for women writers of the twentieth as well as the nineteenth century, express deeply conflicted feelings about appetite and desire, authority and assertion. This collection explores the many, many ways in which women’s relationship to food is gendered—as forbidden knowledge, as nurturance, as disordered and symptomatic—even as it also shows that cultural constructions of woman as desiring, self-denying, or nurturing are more complicated than they initially appear.³ To that end, this collection includes pieces not only on classic and contemporary literary texts, but on memoirs, literary theories, and advertisements—the multiple venues in which women writers have engaged with “scenes of the apple.”

Many books have appeared on food, literature, anorexia, disordered eating, and cooking in relation to women in recent years, but our collection is the first to bring together a variety of ways in which literary women have specifically engaged with these topics. Individual chapters resonate with and play off one another, moreover, thereby complicating important conceptualizations that have been developed in the areas of social history, politics, and feminist theory as well as literary and cultural studies. While we are now familiar with the image of the self-effacing anorexic of Victorian literature, for example, that image becomes considerably less ubiquitous when we consider her in relation to the hefty Queen Victoria. Similarly, the stereotypical image of the anorexic as a middle-class white daughter caught in a “golden cage” of her own devising changes when disordered eating is represented as a response to racial or colonial oppressions.⁴ Female appetite, so often represented as a continuum—overeaters on one side, bulimics and anorexics on the other—here appears in cannibalistic, grotesque, and ghostly contexts. That “room of one’s own,” the kitchen, can serve as the locale for female authority, for the preservation of ethnic and religious identities, or for the nostalgic reanimation of the stable “feeding mother” of fifties ideology.⁵ In anorexia and other disordered eating, in female consumerism, in cooking and recipe writing, in kitchens, and in political life, female authority and female appetite emerge as related issues.⁶

This collection builds upon several decades of scholarship, a body of work that exists in large part because feminist scholars have insisted that food and eating have been and remain central concerns in women’s lives

as well as in their literary texts. It arrives, moreover, at the end of a decade that saw the emergence of food studies as a distinct discipline within academia and the publication of a wealth of new scholarship on food and eating.⁷ In the following pages, we situate this collection within that body of work; a description of these multiple strands is crucial in order to map out the critical complexity that informs our topic.

EATING AND WRITING IN LITERARY CONTEXTS

Feminist literary scholars first began to study the interrelationships between eating and literary authority in women's literary texts in the late 1970s and early 1980s. In their groundbreaking *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), for example, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar drew from the fairy tale of Snow White a paradigm of female conflict, embodied in the poisonous "Eve's apple" the wicked Queen offers Snow White (40). Half-red, half-white, half-poisonous, half-pure, the apple represented for Gilbert and Gubar nineteenth-century female choices between plotting and plotlessness, assertion and silence, sexual energy and self-abnegation: "the Queen, adult and demonic, plainly wants a life of 'significant action,' by definition an 'unfeminine' life of stories and story telling. And therefore, to the extent that Snow White, as her daughter, is a part of herself, she wants to kill the Snow White in *herself*, the angel who would keep deeds and dramas out of her own house" (39). Gilbert and Gubar went on to argue that hunger and starvation on the one hand, speech and story telling on the other, serve as central tropes dramatizing the conflicts of female literary authority in the nineteenth century:

Rejecting the poisoned apples her culture offers her, the woman writer often becomes in some sense anorexic, resolutely closing her mouth on silence . . . even while she complains of starvation. Thus both Charlotte and Emily Brontë depict the travails of starved or starving anorexic heroines, while Emily Dickinson declares in one breath that she "had been hungry, all the Years," and in another opts for "Sumptuous Destitution." Similarly, Christina Rossetti represents her own anxiety of authorship in the split between one heroine who longs to "suck and suck" on goblin fruit and another who locks her lips fiercely together in a gesture of silent and passionate renunciation. (58)

A number of noteworthy studies appeared further elaborating on the connections between anorexia and self-expression in literary women's texts, including important works by Helena Michie, Paula Marantz Cohen, Leslie Heywood, and others. Women writers themselves anticipated this critical work, deliberately making use of tropes of hunger, starvation, and eating to explore complex issues of female identity and expression. From

Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman* (1969) and *Lady Oracle* (1976) to Gloria Naylor's multi-generational study of eating disorders in *Linden Hills* (1985) and Toni Morrison's harrowing *Beloved* (1987), women writers relied upon images of feeding and starvation to explore the issues of female voice, identity, and authority.

Although literature both critical and creative of this time foregrounded tropes of hunger and starvation, it is important to remember that work on female pleasure in orality was also taking place. The exuberant and influential "womanifestoes" of Hélène Cixous, for example, urged women to challenge the constraints placed upon female desire and aspiration in images of appetite and ingestion. For Cixous, as we have indicated in the epigraph to this introduction, Eve's defiant eating of the forbidden apple is a paradigmatic moment of female rebellion against the invisible and negative force of patriarchal law: "[W]hat we are told is that knowledge might begin with the mouth, with the discovery of the taste of something, knowledge and taste go together. . . . [T]he apple is, is, is. . . . the apple is visible and it can be held up to the mouth, it is full, it has an *inside*" ("Fidelity" 16). In a similar vein, Patricia Yaeger questioned feminist literary critics' focus on the anorexic and hungering woman writer. Exploring the "pleasurable, powerful aspects of orality," Yaeger celebrated the figure of the "honey-mad woman," an appetitive woman who is "language mad": "A blissful consumer and purveyor of language, the honey-mad writer is a symbol of verbal plenitude, of woman's capacity to rewrite her culture," she charged (28–29). In yet another context, Audre Lorde's 1982 "biomythography" *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* powerfully celebrated the erotic/poetic bonds among women and more particularly within lesbian relationships in terms of food and eating. Sitting between her mother's legs as a child, Lorde is a "nutmeg nestled inside its covering of mace" (33); later, in an important scene that highlights both Lorde's erotic connection with her mother and her lesbian difference, Lorde contrasts her method of mashing garlic and spices—" [M]y downward thrusts of the pestle grew gentler and gentler, until its velvety surface seemed to caress the liquefying mash at the bottom of the mortar" (79)—with her mother's conventional "heterosexual" mashing—"the thump of wood brought down heavily upon wood. . . . Thump, thump, went the pestle, purposefully, up and down, in the old familiar way" (79–80). This episode, which takes place on the occasion of Lorde's first menstrual period, encapsulates for her the location of her poetic voice in the preverbal space of her mother's womb, Lorde's mythical "home," a Caribbean island redolant with spices and "the delicate breadfruit smell, womansmell, warm, shameful, but secretly utterly delicious" (77):

As I continued to pound the spice, a vital connection seemed to establish itself between the muscles of my fingers curved

tightly around the smooth pestle in its insistent downward motion, and the molten core of my body whose source emanated from a new ripe fullness just beneath the pit of my stomach. That invisible thread, taut and sensitive as a clitoris exposed, stretched through my curled fingers up my round brown arm into the moist reality of my armpits, whose warm sharp odor with a strange new overlay mixed with the ripe garlic smells from the mortar and the general sweat-heavy aromas of high summer.

The thread ran over my ribs and along my spine, tingling and singing, into a basin that was poised between my hips, now pressed against the low kitchen counter before which I stood, pounding spice. And within that basin was a tiding ocean of blood beginning to be made real and available to me for strength and information. (78)⁸

Near the end of *Zami* Lorde again merges erotic life and food when she describes a celebratory banquet for lesbians in stunningly rich gastronomic and erotic images: “[T]he centerpiece of the whole table was a huge platter of succulent and thinly sliced roast beef. . . . Upon the beige platter, each slice of rare meat had been lovingly laid out and individually folded into a vulval pattern, with a tiny dab of mayonnaise at the crucial apex” (242).⁹

Cookbooks and culinary memoirs provided yet another venue for feminist inquiry. In the late 1980s, the publication of Susan J. Leonardi’s “Recipes for Reading: Summer Pasta, Lobster à la Risesholme, and Key Lime Pie” inaugurated the literary study of cookbooks and food writing. Leonardi argued that recipes were a form of literary production, a “highly embedded discourse akin to literary discourse” (342) and she specifically tied that discourse to women:

In the earlier *Joy*, the establishment of a lively narrator with a circle of enthusiastic and helpful friends reproduces the social context of recipe sharing—a loose community of women that crosses the social barriers of class, race, and generation. Many women can attest to the usefulness and importance of this discourse: mothers and daughters—even those who don’t get along well otherwise—old friends who now have little in common, mistresses and their “help,” lawyers and their secretaries—all can participate in this almost prototypical activity. (342–43)

While she objected to Leonardi’s erasure of cultural difference—the “highly embedded discourse” of cookbooks is not an “archetypally feminine language but rather . . . a form of writing that, if coded feminine, is also a culturally contingent production” (172)—Anne Goldman extended the

scope of Leonardi's claims, insisting that "to write about food is to write about the self" (169). Cooking is "a metonym of culture" (169), and hence food writing becomes both "cultural practice and autobiographical assertion": "If it provides an apt metaphor for the reproduction of culture from generation to generation, the act of passing down recipes from mother to daughter works as well to figure a familial space within which self-articulation can begin to take place" (172).¹⁰ Goldman's argument finds ample support, in particular in women's autobiographical and fictional narratives about various types of cultural deracination. Immigrant narratives or postcolonial texts that address the tension between a native and a colonizing culture abound with nostalgic evocations of traditional food, an association strengthened by the role of women (mothers, grandmothers, aunts) in food preparation.¹¹ "Italy is as near to me as appetite," writes Helen Barolini (228), in a collection of essays, *Through the Kitchen Window: Women Explore the Intimate Meanings of Food and Culture*, that in itself represents an important collection of meditations on women's connections to ethnic cultures through cooking. In an essay from the same collection whose title highlights the issues of belonging and rootlessness, "Food and Belonging: At 'Home' in 'Alien Kitchens,'" Ketu H. Katrak connects the names of foods in her mother tongue to her sense of loss of a motherland: "Clanging sounds from the kitchen enter my waking body as mouth-watering aromas waft in—moist *chapatis*, *kando-papeto*, *kheechree-kadhi*, *papeta ma gosh*. These words in Gujarati, my mother tongue, carry the tastes and aromas that are lost in their English translations" (263). In *The Book of Jewish Food*, Claudia Roden succinctly states the connections between cultural identity and cooking: "Every culture tells a story," she writes. "Jewish food tells the story of an uprooted, migrating people and their vanished worlds" (3). A number of women's books about the recovery or preservation of cultural heritage similarly stress women's role in preserving traditions through cooking, as in Cara De Silva's recently reprinted collection of recipes gathered by starving Jewish women in the Terezin concentration camp, *In Memory's Kitchen*, or the collection of writing by Arab-American and Arab-Canadian feminists, *Food for Our Grandmothers*, edited by Joanna Kadi, which intersperses recipes with poetry and prose in order to "give something back to our grandmothers and to our community" by recalling "the Arabic food that many of them made daily" (xx).

The recent development of a distinct subgenre of autobiography, the culinary memoir, is another indication that women's food-writing is increasingly perceived and cast within more formal, literary conventions. Traci Marie Kelly defines culinary autobiography as a "literary extension of this kitchen storytelling" and describes it as a "complex pastiche of recipes, personal anecdotes, family history, public history, photographs, even family trees":

These recipes-with-memories are a natural extension of storytelling, with the recipes acting as a kind of “cue card” giving the memoir a structure and a template to embellish. Some women have appreciated the “canvas” of the kitchen, using that space to create nourishing meals, memories, and art. These works are rich sources for autobiographical assertion because they present the lives of women through their own voices, rendered from a room that has been, truly, a room of their own. (252)

The development of this subgenre is significant, since within the field of food studies it is possible to discern a growing rift between those who perceive women’s primary responsibilities for food making as gender bound and oppressive and those who argue that it can function as a crucial means of self-definition.¹² Sherric A. Inness states “Kitchen culture is a critical way that women are instructed about how to behave like ‘correctly’ gendered beings” (Introduction, 4), while Sally Cline finds that acculturation key in women’s oppression: “By looking at food we can get at the kernel of the political relationship between the sexes. For food is a crucial political area. Women’s subordination is locked into food; an issue even feminists have not yet sufficiently investigated” (3). While acknowledging that such oppression can exist, Arlene Voski Avakian urges feminists to remain open-minded about the positive aspects of women’s cooking: “If we delve into the relationship between women and food we will discover the ways in which women have forged spaces within that oppression. Cooking becomes a vehicle for artistic expression, a source of sensual pleasure, an opportunity for resistance and even power” (6). Barbara Haber has similarly chastised feminists for consistently portraying food preparation as a site “fraught with conflict, coercion, and frustration”. “[D]omestic life can be acknowledged and even celebrated without buying into an oppressive value system,” she declares (68).

Recent culinary memoirs themselves reflect and support both views. Isabelle Allende wrote her celebratory *Aphrodite: A Memoir of the Senses* in part to reawaken her corporeal and sensual appetites after the death of her daughter Paula, while Ruth Reichl’s *Tender at the Bone: Growing Up at the Table* and *Comfort Me with Apples: More Adventures of the Table* trace her journey to writing and sexual fulfillment through the mediums of eating and cooking. Judith Moore’s *Never Eat Your Heart Out*, on the other hand, is much more ambivalent about the labor involved in food preparation; Moore becomes a gourmet cook for her family and friends during the time in which she takes part in an extramarital affair that ends her marriage of twenty years, and she writes her memoir while living alone, writing, and cooking only for herself. Yet another recent memoir, Elizabeth Ehrlich’s *Miriam’s Kitchen: A Memoir*, seems to come

down on both sides of the debate: while Ehrlich explicitly chooses to keep kosher and to become a full-time homemaker as a way of preserving ethnic and religious traditions, she also thereby solves seemingly insurmountable difficulties in the gender divisions she experiences both intrapsychically and interrelationally, gender divisions which form an inextricable part of larger cultural, historical, and social contexts (see Moran, this volume). Yet whether women develop critiques or celebrations of food making in their memoirs, they demonstrate the force of Deborah Lupton's observation that "[f]ood and eating habits and preferences are not simply matters of 'fueling' ourselves. . . . Food and eating are central to our subjectivity, or sense of self" (1). "[T]o write about food is to write about the self," Anne Goldman says (169).

THE PRIMAL FEAST: EATING, FEEDING, AND MOTHER-DAUGHTER RELATIONSHIPS

Thus far we have touched only tangentially on a theme that is central to a volume on women's literary authority, their eating and feeding and cooking, their appetites and desires: the role of the mother-daughter relationship within the food nexus as well as within literary representations of that nexus. Significantly, psychoanalysts, therapists, social historians, and feminist scholars have long agreed upon the centrality of the mother-daughter relationship in women's susceptibility to eating disorders.¹³ Analyzing the emergence of anorexia nervosa as a modern disease in the nineteenth century, for example, historian Joan Jacob Brumberg charts an increasing possessiveness in the Victorian middle-class family that granted very little "autonomous psychic space" to adolescent girls (137): "Because mothers and daughters were supposed to be especially close, some daughters may have been subjected to socially acceptable (but privately intolerable) forms of possessive behavior that rankled and allowed little room for emotional growth. Since emotional freedom was not a common prerogative of the Victorian adolescent girl, it seems reasonable to assert that unhappiness was likely to be expressed in non-verbal forms of behavior. One such behavior was refusal of food" (138). Women writers in the nineteenth century vividly portray how the ideal Victorian wife and mother modelled self-abnegation and self-denial in a manner conducive to, or even suggestive of, this particular nonverbal response. Turning again to *Little Women*, we see not only Marmee's role as moral guide and confidante to her daughters, sharing (or intuiting) all the girls' most intimate problems and aspirations; we see as well her insistence on self-control and her condemnation of anger or rebellion against duty (insistence usually directed at the would-be writer, the self-assertive, angry, and rebellious Jo). Hence Marmee explains to Jo that,

although she herself is angry nearly every day of her life, she has learned not to show it; instead, as Jo observes, “you fold your lips tight together and go out of the room” (79)—a technique Jo learns her mother has acquired through the father’s instruction (80). In a chapter particularly relevant to our analysis, Marmee asks her daughters to sacrifice their Christmas breakfast to a needy immigrant family; she “smile[s] as if satisfied” when they eagerly accede, and the girls discover the (here simultaneous) joys of self-abnegation and hunger: “That was a very happy breakfast, though they didn’t get any of it; and when they went away, leaving comfort behind, I think there were not in all the city four merrier people than the hungry little girls who gave away their breakfasts and contented themselves with bread and milk on Christmas morning” (15–16). The March girls learn their lessons well: “‘That’s loving our neighbor better than ourselves, and I like it,’ said Meg” (16).

Alcott captures brilliantly in this passage the nonverbal codes embedded in food and tacitly exchanged between mother and daughter(s). Although Alcott represents this sacrifice as a request—“My girls, will you give them your breakfast as a Christmas present?” (14)—it functions as a demand: it is impossible to imagine the girls’ refusing to give their breakfast away and Marmee still “smil[ing] as if satisfied.” Maternal approval, in other words, depends upon acquiescence to a feminine code of self-abnegation. Virginia Woolf, herself the daughter of a Victorian Angel in the House, similarly represents maternal approval as contingent upon the daughter’s effacement of herself and similarly codes that self-effacement in terms of food. In the autobiographical essay “Reminiscences,” Woolf imagines Julia Stephen’s joy in seeing early maternal impulses in Woolf’s sister Vanessa, impulses made evident when Vanessa “giv[es] up her bottle” to her brother: “Her mother would smile silently at this” (28).

If the control of appetite was an important indicator of a girl’s ability to control or suppress her libidinal appetites (Brumberg, Michie), then, that control simultaneously functioned as a marker of the mother’s ability to instruct her daughter properly: indeed, a girl’s sexual lapse was not just evidence of her own fallen nature; it reflected a corrupt genetic inheritance through the maternal line, and one girl’s fall could potentially damage the marriageability of her sisters. Katherine Mansfield furnishes tragic evidence of the way in which one rebellious woman writer’s libidinal appetites—for food, for sex, for writing—estranged her from her mother. As a young girl, Mansfield established her rebellion against her mother’s proper womanhood upon the terrain of her body: Mansfield alone among the four daughters was overweight and unkempt, and biographers have documented her mother’s explicit remarks of distaste for Mansfield’s body.¹⁴ Later, after several disastrous sexual exploits, Mansfield’s

mother cut her daughter out of her will and did not see her again, in part as a way of protecting another daughter's engagement and impending marriage. In this context, it is tragic indeed to read Mansfield's later letters to her mother, wherein she celebrates the emaciation consumption has wrought upon her body as proof that her libidinal appetites are (finally) well under control: "Farewell to my portliness. For I who weighed 10 stone 3 at the age of fifteen now weigh 8 stone six. At this rate I will be a midget tooth pick at fifty" (17). Other letters code her eating along conventional cultural lines: for example, Mansfield celebrates her tastes for bland, "feminine" meals like tea and toast, and eschews the libidinal foods of spices and peppers: "I am afraid you took my mention of sausages and stout . . . too much to heart, and have a dreadful fancy that I live almost exclusively upon these highly seasoned comestibles. Nothing could be further from the truth. I am just as simple in my tastes as you. A cup of *good* old-fashioned tea, bread and butter—jam—and eggs plain or in any disguise satisfies me *at* any time and *for* any time" (25).

Mothers' relations to their daughters' appetites changed in the twentieth century, as the ideal of an inner moral purity gave way to an ideal of an external and corporeal norm, a change that made the control of appetite a visible, material emblem of self-discipline and self-control. Both fashion and representations of the normative female body changed dramatically at the turn of the century. Not only did the hourglass figure give way to the ideal of a boyish, prepubescent outline, but the new affordability of and access to ready-made clothing—as opposed to making one's clothing or having it sewn by a dressmaker—meant that middle-class women had to adapt themselves to standard or normal shapes and sizes in order to be fashionable; these new fashions, moreover, did without corsets or other devices that could conceal undesirable flaws. Fashion historian Valerie Steele notes that women now had no choice but to diet or to internalize the constraints of the corset. Some of the most enduring elements of dieting were established during this period: the development of life insurance tables with listings of ideal weights; the development of nutritional science and the counting of calories as a scientific means of reducing; the production of home scales, termed a "materialized conscience" by one 1917 diet manual (Seid 95).

These wide-ranging and powerful changes in fashion and the female form altered the ways in which middle-class mothers related to their own and their daughters' bodies. For, to some extent, the new ideal of a boyish or prepubescent body was a rejection of a mature or overtly maternal outline. As Roberta Pollack Seid explains, "the 'fat' woman . . . symbolized the family; the new slender woman symbolized 'youth' and projected a 'disquieting and alert glamour'" (85). Yet at the same time, the new ideal—and the rise of standardized weights and clothing, of diets

and scales and calorie counting—tied a woman’s lifelong attractiveness to a slender and youthful outline. “If in the past a young married woman could swell gracefully into matronly contours and not compromise her charms, in the twenties she no longer had this luxury,” observes Seid (93). In practice, this meant that many women continued to diet throughout their lives, modeling a very different fear of female appetite for their daughters than that practiced by their Victorian predecessors. For whereas for the Victorians the management of appetite spoke to a woman’s moral purity, now the mark of moral purity came increasingly to be the body itself. And the daughter’s success or lack of success could be seen as a reflection of a mother’s success or lack of success in parenting. As the protagonist of Margaret Atwood’s *Lady Oracle* remarks about her mother’s determination to control her weight, “If she’d ever gone out and done it, she wouldn’t have seen me as a reproach to her, the embodiment of her own failure and depression, a huge endless cloud of inchoate matter which refused to be shaped into anything for which she could get a prize” (64). Instead, “the war between myself and my mother was on in earnest; the disputed territory was my body” (65–6). More recently, in her multiracial study of mother-daughter issues in the etiology of disordered eating, sociologist Becky W. Thompson notes that internalized racism plays an important role in the pressures directed at girls of color; in words that painfully echo Atwood’s white, middle-class protagonist, one African American woman felt that “her body became the contested territory onto which her parents’ pain was projected” (34). The pressures of assimilation and the desire to rise on the social ladder, Thompson writes, means that cultural ideals of thinness impact all women: the experiences of the women she surveyed “dispel the notion that African American and Latina women—as a group—are less exposed to or influenced by a culturally imposed thinness than white women” (35).

Women writers often portray conflicts in eating and feeding as a way of coming to terms with the symbolic weight of maternity or, less typically, with other family members, such as the father. One such response, exemplified by *Lady Oracle*, is what Adrienne Rich defines as “matrophobia,” the fear “not of one’s mother or of motherhood but of *becoming one’s mother*. . . . Where a mother is hated to the point of matrophobia there may also be a deep underlying pull toward her, a dread that if one relaxes one’s guard one will identify with her completely” (236). Matrophobia can then transmute into somatophobia: the rejection of the mother’s life becomes a rejection of the body, the flesh, that which symbolically unites the two, or that which comes to stand for the perceived constraints of the mother’s role. Other women writers use oral imagery to explore the implications of embracing ambition, depict-

ing how it can symbolically signify the abandonment or rejection of the mother. In her study of Edith Wharton, Ellen Glasgow, and Willa Cather, for example, Josephine Donovan has noted the way in which the Demeter-Persephone story becomes emblematic of the mother-daughter relationships represented in their texts: “Persephone represents the daughters who leave the sphere of the mothers and enter a period of patriarchal captivity, sealed by the eating of the pomegranate seed—which emblemizes the betrayal of the mothers” (3). Echoing the story of the Fall, wherein satisfaction of female appetite is imaged as transgression, Persephone’s eating of the pomegranate seed suggests how the desire for the gifts promised by the paternal realm involves the daughter’s loyalties: she must choose between the mother and the father. That choice is fraught with difficulty and ambivalence. As Lynda E. Boose has shown, the myth of the Fall “narrates the daughter’s desire to acquire the father’s knowledge/power through acquiring the sign that has been denied her,” since the “seed bearing fruit” initially signified the father’s phallus (55). But the betrayal of the mother can generate deep guilt, since in complying with the father the daughter participates in what Kim Chernin calls the “primal feast,” the depletion and cannibalization of the mother (*The Hungry Self* 95).

The question of choosing—between maternal and paternal realms, between conventional domesticity and loyalty on the one hand and authority and ambition on the other—is a significant one that resonates with the literature of eating disorders, for as Chernin and a number of other scholars have noted, those disorders become more prevalent during periods in which women must grapple with expanded opportunities and changed expectations—with, that is, different examples of femininity than those experienced and lived by their mothers.¹⁵ Hilde Bruch’s anorexic patients often expressed fear of their increased sexual, educational, and professional options: “Growing girls can experience . . . liberation as a demand and feel that they *have* to do something outstanding. Many of my patients have expressed the feeling that they are overwhelmed by the vast number of potential opportunities available to them which they ‘ought’ to fulfill, that there were too many choices and they had been afraid of not choosing correctly” (37). Sylvia Plath’s Esther Greenwood could pass as one of Bruch’s patients:

I saw my life branching out before me like the green fig in the story.

From the tip of every branch, like a fat purple fig, a wonderful future beckoned and winked. One fig was a husband and a happy home and children, and another fig was a famous poet and another fig was a brilliant professor, and another fig was Ee Gee the amazing editor, and another fig

was Europe and Africa and South America, and another fig was Constantin and Socrates and Attila and a pack of other lovers with queer names and offbeat professions, and another fig was an Olympic lady crew champion and beyond and above these figs were many more figs I couldn't quite make out.

I saw myself in the crotch of this fig tree, starving to death, just because I couldn't make up my mind which of the figs I would choose. I wanted each and every one of them, but choosing one meant losing all the rest, and, as I sat there, unable to decide, the figs began to wrinkle and go black, and, one by one, they plopped to the ground at my feet. (62)

The fig tree's crotch is an appropriate place for Plath's heroine to contemplate her dilemma: as if to dramatize her sense of social and cultural castration, she longs for the testicle-shaped figs; tellingly, she can choose only one. Starving to death because she can't make up her mind, Esther's dilemma counterpoints that of her fellow interns at a popular women's magazine, whose satiation of their appetites at a sumptuous banquet results in food poisoning, a purgation of forbidden fruits. Female hunger poses danger; choice may indeed result in self-poisoning. The literature of eating disorders again supplies a gloss. Joan Jacobs Brumberg writes that in a climate of bewildering choice—one in which both choices about eating and the shape of the female body function as statements about the self—eating disorders might more properly be seen as “consumption disorders”: “In a society where consumption and identity are pervasively linked, [the anorectic] makes nonconsumption the perverse centerpiece of her identity” (271). Scenes of the apple, then, can function as crucial sites that articulate and dramatize the conflicts involved in female ambitions and appetites.

Mothers and daughters can and do figure in more positive contexts in women's writing, particularly in women's more recent creations of culinary memoirs and “recipe” novels. As Janice Jaffe's chapter on Laura Esquivel's *Like Water for Chocolate* points out, for example, the passing of recipes from one generation of women to another functions as an example of a mother-daughter plot, or matrilineal narrative. If, in this sense, the food of an originary culture, and by extension the culture itself, are a kind of “mother country,” so too is the link between food and language strengthened by this association with the maternal. Ketu H. Katrak recites the names of Indian dishes her mother cooked, calling her native dialect of Gujarati her “mother tongue,” which conveys “tastes and aromas that are lost in their English translations” (263), and emphasizing the association of her native food, and language, with maternal love and nurture: “I love to shake out my half-sleep with a cup of hot tea, prepared with lemon grass and mint leaves, and it tastes even better

when made by my mother. I keep lingering in that safe space of being held in unspoken love” (264). Similarly, in *Zami*, Audre Lorde associates her original Caribbean home with her mother’s mouth, with the orality of both eating and speaking: “Once *home* was a long way off, a place I had never been to but knew well out of my mother’s mouth. She breathed exuded hummed the fruit smell of Noel’s hill morning fresh and noon hot, and I spun visions of sapadilla and mango as a net over my Harlem tenement cot in the snoring darkness rank with nightmare sweat. . . .” (13) In a sense, the mother who cooks and eats the dishes of the country of origin is also a muse of language, as in Paule Marshall’s autobiographical essay “From the Poets in the Kitchen,” in which she claims she first fell in love with the poetry of words by listening to her mother and other Barbadian immigrant women speaking in dialect-inflected rhythms in the kitchen—rhythms which incorporated “the few African sounds and words that had survived,” such as “‘yam,’ meaning to eat” (8).

Such narratives about the association between food, culture, and maternity, however, often contain the kinds of matrophobia or ambivalence about the mother that we have discussed above. In these cases, ambivalence toward the mother’s role is complicated yet further by an ambivalence about cultural identity. Often, women’s autobiographical and fictional narratives about cultural identity are about the limbo-land of being caught between cultures, and significantly, between differing versions of gender roles in these cultures. The kinds of ideological tensions that we have identified in women’s literature—where daughters are caught up in changing beliefs about gender roles—are exacerbated when cultural dislocation is part of the brew. For instance, in ethnic and postcolonial narratives, while women can feel nostalgia for an originary culture threatened by assimilation or colonization, they can also feel alienated from a traditional role for women within the originary culture; such dissatisfaction with traditional gender roles, however, does not mean that they can easily find an alternative substitute in the colonizing or assimilating culture which is obliterating or diluting their cultural heritage.

A classic example of such a plot about food, the mother, and cultural dislocation is Anzia Yezierska’s 1925 novel *Bread Givers*, in which the protagonist Sara Smolinsky, a Russian Jewish immigrant, flees the oppressive patriarchy of her orthodox father to become an American—and college-educated—New Woman. Starving as she works and attends night school, she goes to a cafeteria for sustenance and finds that, as in her family where her father got the choicest food, men are given the meat while she only gets watery broth. Such a revelation of the sexism of American culture is ironic, given that the hunger which causes Sara to seek out an American-style cafeteria was awakened by a nostalgia for her mother’s cooking and her own cultural heritage:

One day in the laundry, while busy ironing a shirt, the thought of Mother's cooking came over me. Why was it that Mother's simplest dishes, her plain potato soup, her *gefülte* fish, were so filling? And what was the matter with the cafeteria food that it left me hungrier after eating than before?

For a moment I imagined myself eating Mother's *gefülte* fish. A happy memory floated over me. A feast I was having. What a melting taste in the mouth! (165–66)

At the same time as she yearns for her mother's food, however, Sara feels compelled to flee the example of this self-effacing woman whom neighbors praised at her funeral by claiming that “[n]ever did she allow herself a bite to eat except left-overs” (254). Even when her mother visits her struggling daughter bearing some of the traditional food she had yearned for, Sara is sufficiently threatened by her mother's mixed messages—support of her daughter's rebellion implicit in the visit coupled nonetheless with exhortations to give up her education and marry—that she refuses to visit her family for six years, arriving only when her mother is dying. The conclusion of *Bread Givers* leaves the entwined matrophilic and matrophobic narratives unresolved, as it does Sara's relation to her native culture. When she agrees to take care of her ailing father—the spouse whose vampiric demands had consumed her mother's energy—it is unclear whether Sara will imitate her mother's problematic role or depart from it, just as it is unclear whether she can make her peace with her cultural roots.¹⁶ It is thus not clear which, if any, of her hungers—for love, intellectual fulfillment, autonomy, and community—Sara can finally satisfy.

The representation of gender role confusion in Yeziarska's novel, mediated through images of hunger and consumption, demonstrates how some narratives about cultural dislocation represent women's relation to food as a troubled one. In her study of anorexia, *The Obsession*, Kim Chernin compares Sara of *Bread Givers* to Ellen West, an early twentieth-century Jewish woman whose anorexia drove her to suicide. Though Chernin sees Sara as a spiritual sister to West, she does not discuss Sara's own somatophobia, instead seeing Yeziarska's heroine, who achieves her dream of a college education, as a woman who succeeded while West failed (182, 184). Yet, even if she is not a classic anorexic, Sara also has an ambivalent attitude to orality and embodiment. Since she cannot afford to eat much while pursuing her education, Sara chooses to starve herself in order to satisfy her intellectual hunger, and to see food as temptation in language strikingly similar to an anorexic's: “I hated my stomach. It was like some clawing wild animal in me that I had to stop to feed always. I hated my eating” (173). Ironically, such somatophobia echoes the dualism of the father she is fleeing, a man who had described

women as seductive demons of materiality, “devils and witches” (95) whom the male sage shuns.

A more contemporary example of an ethnic narrative which records a discomfort with food is Ketu H. Katrak’s autobiographical essay, which, as we have seen, revels in nostalgic memories of her mother’s cooking. Yet, ironically, Katrak claims that, much as she may savor it in retrospect, “[f]ood was not pleasurable to me as a child” (266) because of her awareness of her mother’s discontent with her domestic role:

As a child, I remember that the kitchen was expected to be my mother’s domain though she was not happy inhabiting that space. . . . As a child and later as an adolescent, I had observed (though I can only now articulate this) that cooking did not give my mother any authority within the family hierarchy. I recall a deep sense of her powerlessness and invisibility—so much effort and so little acknowledgment. I was stopped short in my sadness for her. I could not enjoy the food, and I could not articulate why I felt distressed. (264, 266–67)

Such ambivalent responses to food as Sara’s or Ketu Katrak’s indicate how cultural identity can complicate women’s attitudes toward orality, and reinforce the insights of recent feminist scholarship that has examined how racism and deracination can affect women’s attitude toward orality. Exploding the myth that eating disorders affect only affluent, white, Western women, Becky W. Thompson’s compassionate analysis of eating problems among women of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds shows how “[t]he stresses of acculturation may also lead to eating problems” (88). Similarly, Mervat Nasser’s *Culture and Weight Consciousness* documents how eating disorders and distorted body image are on the rise in developing countries due to mixed messages about gender roles, and changing attitudes toward body image¹⁷ in the wake of social change:

The majority of non-western societies have undergone social changes in the position of their women, with an increase in the number of educated and working women. Feminist movements, similar to those that arose in the West, also arose in some of these societies, and the traditional gender roles were questioned and revised. . . . Now, in the absence of any clear political or social framework, there is a confusion as to what is really expected of women. The higher the degree of societal ambivalence about its own expectations of women, the greater the ambiguity that women experience of their own role. . . . If eating disorders are indeed metaphors . . . it is likely that what they symbolize now encompasses this social disruption and cultural confusion. (95, 97)

As Nasser concludes, “if we accept that eating disorders are expressions of culture, would it not be more appropriate to call them ‘culture chaos syndromes?’” (106). It is our contention that, whether they represent actual eating disorders, as in Tsitsi Dangarembga’s *Nervous Conditions* and Edwidge Danticat’s *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, or some other form of ambivalence about orality and embodiment, women’s narratives about food and cultural dislocation are literary refractions of “culture chaos syndrome.”

Our overview of the importance of the mother-daughter role in women’s representations of orality and desire would be incomplete without some mention of the role of language—and myths of language—in those representations.¹⁸ The psychoanalyst and literary theorist Julia Kristeva, for example, has developed two powerful and influential models of the maternal body’s role in the development of language. In the first of these two models, elaborated in *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1974) and *Desire in Language* (1980), Kristeva identified two different modalities in language, one associated with the preoedipal, preverbal period that she labeled the “semiotic,” the other associated with the establishment of language and subjectivity, the “symbolic.” These two modalities existed in language dialectically, the first inflecting the second with qualities Kristeva assigned to the maternal body and the mother-infant relationship, qualities such as rhythm and sound that derive from the mother’s nonsense rhymes, singing, and laughter as well as her body and touch: “Indifferent to language, enigmatic and feminine, this space underlying the written is rhythmic, unfettered, irreducible to its intelligible verbal translation; it is musical, anterior to judgment, but restrained by a single guarantee: syntax” (“The Semiotic and the Symbolic” 50). Hence “the imprint of woman’s maternal body is inherent in language itself” (Roman 13).

Kristeva’s later work on abjection, however, complicates this first model. In *The Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1982), Kristeva argues that the maternal body is the infant’s first experience of the abject, an horrific, repudiated, overwhelming sensation of embodiment. The development of language will eventually help the infant demarcate itself from the maternal body, but, significantly, “what [has] been the mother, will turn into an abject” (13). Abjection is, then, primarily a return of the repressed: boundaries fail, what was expelled encroaches, the subject no longer feels secure within a “clean and proper” body. Eating, already a primal event associated with the mother, is also and necessarily an act that involves traversing the body’s boundaries: Kristeva claims that “[f]ood loathing is perhaps the most elementary and most archaic form of abjection” (3). And because abjection entails primal sensations, primal events, the subject experiences an overwhelming, uncontrollable, and

disgusting return to a nonverbal corporeality: the body engulfs and speaks for the subject.

But there's more. Because abjection has its primal and primary source in the relationship to the maternal body, abjection will always recall its maternal origins. For this reason, in those cultures that develop rigid gender distinctions and that subordinate women to men, women seem to possess irrational and uncontrollable powers that must be contained. Although Kristeva does not say so, her work suggests that female subjects are vulnerable to intensified experiences of abjection: already more like the mother than the son, the daughter's boundaries between her body and her mother's might seem even more tenuous; furthermore, because cultural fears of embodiment are routinely projected upon women, the daughter learns to perceive the female body—her own, her mother's, other women's—as an animalistic force that requires containment. “[T]he threat to autonomy which can come from a woman is felt on a less rational, more helpless level, experienced as more primitively dangerous,” writes Dorothy Dinnerstein, for the mother has become the representative of “the one who beckons her loved ones back from selfhood, who wants to engulf, dissolve, drown, suffocate them as autonomous persons” (112). The mother feels like both threat—that which can “swamp the nascent self's own needs and intentions . . . blur its perceptions of its own outlines . . . deflect its inner sense of direction and drown out its inner voice”—and sirenlike solace—“a lure back into non-being,” a “temptation . . . to melt back into that from which we have carved ourselves out” (112). From the perspective of these theories, scenes of eating or hungering; representations of the mother's or the daughter's body, or female bodies in general; or passages in which eating and speaking/writing appear as competing activities, can thus encode gendered conflicts between embodiment and speech that Kristeva attributes to the development of language within a distinctly gendered cultural surround.

Another powerful and influential model of language, embodiment, and cultural production emerges in the work of another psychoanalytic theorist, Luce Irigaray. According to her, women inevitably develop symptomatic or corporeal languages of distress because they exist in a state of “dereliction” within a phallogocentric symbolic that leaves woman “too few figurations, images, or representations by which to represent herself” (*This Sex* 162). This state of dereliction grows out of “women's exile” from their bodies, their mothers, and other women: “She has, imposed on her, a language, fantasms, a desire which does not ‘belong’ to her . . . That kind of *schizo* which every woman experiences, in our socio-cultural system, only leaves her with somatizations, corporal pains, mutism, or mimetism with which to express herself: saying and doing ‘like men’” (“Women's Exile” 95). The mother-daughter relationship suffers

profoundly, for femininity is absorbed into maternity, into a function or use. The mother suffers, cut off from her autonomy, that in her which exceeds her maternal/institutional function (“Women-mothers” 51). In turn, the daughter suffers, cut off from femininity and forced to identify with a function or use: “[H]ow, as daughters, can we have a personal relationship with or construct a personal identity in relation to someone who is no more than a function?” Irigaray asks (“Women-mothers” 50). The relationship becomes fused with anger, ambivalence, and competition, for the daughter can replace the mother, can become her, can, in effect, kill her, without being able to have a relationship with her “in this place” (Whitford 110).

In an essay particularly relevant to a discussion of women’s orality and desire, “And the One Doesn’t Stir without the Other,” Irigaray conveys the painful, impeded, unsymbolized dynamic of the mother-daughter relationship in images of suffocation, choking, smothering, freezing, and hunger. She explores how food and nurturance become the mother’s only way of expressing her love for her daughter; this emphasis on nurturance gives rise to the “good” and “bad” mothers of cultural mythology: the one who gives (feeds) too much and prevents separation, the other who gives too little and creates a state of constant need and hunger. In the dyad Irigaray explores, the mother’s love seems suffocating and overwhelming, and the daughter must leave if she is to experience her own boundaries, her own sense of self; at the same time, if the daughter leaves, she takes with her her mother’s primary source of identity: “You have made me something to eat. You bring me something to eat. But you give yourself too much, as if you wanted to fill me all up with what you bring me. You put yourself into my mouth and I suffocate” (11). As Irigaray elaborates elsewhere, mothers and daughters feed/feed upon one another in the absence of what she terms “a genealogy of women” and a “female symbolic,” both of which require deliberate interventions in the symbolic order. The first would trace a female genealogy of descent, entailing “new kinds of language, new systems of nomenclature, new relations of social and economic exchange—in other words, a complete reorganization of the social order” (Grosz 123). The second demands the creation of a set of powerful metaphors and myths with which women can identify, metaphors and myths that reclaim aspects of female corporeality that have simply vanished from public (or even private) discussion. Irigaray’s notorious image of “lips that speak together” is one such challenge to “sexual indifference” in that the image restores female specificity to the speaker(s). A contemporary example, Eve Ensler’s *The Vagina Monologues*, demonstrates the power of woman-centered interventions into the symbolic: whereas it was once unusual to hear the word “vagina” except in clinical or medical settings,