

University of Canberra, Australia and University of Winchester, UK

Jen Webb and Vanessa Harbour

Between the body and the world: food, cookbooks and not-eating

Abstract:

Food is one of the fundamentals in the human experience. It is an important point of connection with others and a symbol of our ‘stylisation of life’ (Bourdieu 1984: 411, Certeau et al. 1998: 86, 165). It is one of the key markers of our being in the social and the symbolic world; and is also our mode of being in the physical world. As Antjie Krog observes, ‘Psychologists say that the action of eating, of taking in food is simply enchanting – because it’s the way we can take up the world inside ourselves, how what is around us becomes part of us. We eat the world’ (1998: 217). Much of the time, most of us in the privileged west can give ourselves over to that enchantment. We can take access to food, and the process of eating, pretty much for granted, and as such can employ it as a marker of our being. But what happens when the relation between self and food breaks down: what does this do to the relationship between self and society, self and the world? This paper is a combination of creative personal narratives and critical commentary by two writers whose experience involves a ‘problem’ with food. For one of us, it was a period of rejecting food (an eating disorder); for the other, it is a continuing condition of being unable to eat (a medical disorder). In fragments of prose we revisit instances of this broken relationship with food, and interleave these with a discussion about alternative ways of ‘taking the world inside ourselves’.

Biographical notes:

Jen Webb is Professor of Creative Practice at the University of Canberra, and Director of the Centre for Creative and Cultural Research. Jen holds a PhD in cultural theory, focusing on the field of creative production, and a DCA in creative writing. She has published widely in poetry, short fiction, and scholarly works: her most recent book is *Understanding Foucault: a Critical Introduction* (Allen & Unwin, 2012). She is currently completing a book on theories of embodiment, and a textbook on research for creative writing. Jen is co-editor of the Sage book series, ‘Understanding Contemporary Culture’, and of the journal *Axon: Creative Explorations*. Her current research investigates representations of critical global events, and the use of research in and through creative practice to generate new knowledge.

Vanessa Harbour is a lecturer in creative writing at Winchester University. Her PhD explores the issues of representing/representation of sex, drugs and alcohol in young adult fiction. She is editor of the journal *Write4Children* (www.write4children.org) and

is currently working on a book that explores the creative, critical and cultural aspects of writing for young adults. Her blog *chaosmos – out of chaos comes order* (<http://chaosmos-outofchaoscomesorder.blogspot.co.uk>) explores all aspects of creative writing and has an international following. She writes young adult fiction and her research interests are: creative practice, writer as researcher, reflexive practice, writing for teenagers/young adults writing for children, creative non-fiction and creative employability.

Keywords:

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In his recent *Eating for England* (2007), Nigel Slater, the poet of food writing, compares British food with other national cuisines. They all start, he notes, with the same basic ingredients: beef, carrots, parsnips, bay leaves; but the French and Moroccans and Italians add to these ingredients the sun, the spices, and the confidence of more southern nations. Their food is therefore redolent of lemon, harissa, salsa verde. While the British version emerges as a sludge of ‘grey, meltingly tender meat ... unapologetic in its frugality’, southern cultures’ stews are ‘the colour of mud, blood or ochre pigment, and taste of thyme and garlic, oranges and almonds, basil and lemon’ (Slater 2007: n.p.). In just a few lines, Slater conjures up two sensory experiences: the southern dishes, whose scents drift through the room, carried by the blend of imagination and words; and the British, which is ‘the colour of washing-up water and smells of old people’, tired and unappetising. When he describes it, food conjures up a world and an experience of being in the world, whether that being is energetic and innovative, or weary and familiar.

In this book Slater is writing as a writer; it is a biography of food, not a recipe book. But food animates this writing as it does his recipe books. In *Tender* (2009), for example, he writes 24 pages about gardening before getting down to the matter of cooking, and even then he does not neglect story. Reading only the section on asparagus, the reader finds six pages of opinion, anecdote, ideas and images about asparagus before reaching the first recipe, a pilaf. That recipe is mostly business: lists of ingredients, details of process. But still he engages as a writer: before reaching the recipe-proper, Slater describes asparagus as ‘something you feel the need to gorge on, rather than finding the odd bit lurking almost apologetically in a salad or main course’ (2009: 32). The use of adverbs and verbs departs from the generic conventions of recipe, and introduces the personal and the sensory. In Slater’s writing, a recipe is not just a recipe, but a statement that urges a way of being, a way of engaging with the senses, a way of observing and being aware. Perhaps this is what good recipe books do: they train readers to live more fully, to experience the fullness of pleasure; they train readers to take care of food, themselves, and others.

Pleasure; the care of the self: these are the topics of Volumes 2 and 3 of Foucault’s *History of sexuality*, a work that is more a history of the constitution of the self than a history of sexuality per se. As Foucault writes in the early pages of Volume 2, the point of his investigation was to undertake a ‘genealogy’, and a ‘hermeneutics’, of desire:

to analyze the practices by which individuals were led to focus their attention on themselves, to decipher, recognize, and acknowledge themselves as subjects of desire, bringing into play between themselves and themselves a certain relationship that allows them to discover, in desire, the truth of their being, be it natural or fallen (1985: 5).

Desire was, he finds, focused not on sex but on food; it was practices of eating, or not eating, that marked the quality of the self (Foucault 1986: 141). Our relation to food – in the ancient world, as in the contemporary world – is fundamental to our relationship to ourselves and to our social order.

Is Foucault overstating it? After all, one could argue that food is merely the fuel that keeps our bodies running. But the history of human society suggests that this is not the case. Pigeons may eat merely in order to refuel; whales may suck up their krill without discernment or any notion of performance; but food is more than fuel for us. It is culture, it is fantasy, it is story, it is community. And it is, therefore, one of the several ‘problems of daily existence’ (Bourdieu 1984: 404). We cannot simply eat; our appetites do not motivate us merely to consume the right balance of protein, carbohydrates and vitamins, but rather are inflected by desire, by the attempt to make a statement about ourselves (if only to ourselves), by an aesthetic gesture and, significantly, by what Bourdieu calls ‘a gentle, indirect, invisible censorship’ designed to inculcate in us ‘an art of living’ (1984: 196). For humans, food is about form more than function; about style more than substance; about living more than life. Recipe books remind us of this. The full colour photographs, the information about ingredients and their properties, the suggestions of when and how and for whom particular dishes should be prepared; all these are manuals for living.

I'm sitting in a soft-cushioned low chair in a salon in the trendy part of Melbourne, waiting out the slow arcs of time and movement as colour is applied and left to cook; as I am led here, then there (head covered in foil, like a conspiracy theorist) to be washed and rinsed and treated and massaged – my neck pressed hard against the hard lip of the basin, the sharp fingertips of the apprentice who is rinsing out the colour, water trickles slowly down my neck, the senior colourist lifts hanks of my hair between her fingers, and studies it, and smiles. Yes. Good colour. And then it's time for the cutting, the Iraqi refugee telling me his story as he sculpts a shape around my head. His first child, born just after he arrived safe in Australia, turned two today, and soon he will be going home for the celebration. He reaches for the blow dryer; rubs product through my hair; confirms the fall and twist with his fingers; holds up the mirror. Yes. Good cut. I am done, after three hours of pampering, and I head out the door, step onto a Number 8 tram, and meet the others in that new Japanese restaurant on Little Collins Street. An early dinner, and then the long night.

My hair is the only thing I have control of now. Something I can feed and tend. The privilege of having it cut and coloured fills me with joy too. The money I would spend on food for myself I use to cultivate a glorious head of hair. The dismissal of the grey to be replaced by a welcoming tone of rich chocolate brown is an important and glossy moment. A cut that allows the hair to fall and curl, lifting (or hiding) the face. Who needs surgery? I love the physical attention because it goes no further than my head. It is safe. No explanations required. The tall ex-Australian called Ezra, who works the magic on my hair, has known me forever, he knew me before, he knows not to ask, just to focus on the future, on laughter and family. No holidays here. No celebration meal for me afterwards but maybe a glass of bubbles if I am feeling wild.

Food – its production, its preparation, its consumption – is the heart of social being, the heart of social intercourse. It paces out the pattern of our lives: the first date, meeting across a table in a café; the wedding breakfast; an elaborate afternoon tea as part of the celebration of a baby's naming ceremony; and, of course, the funeral baked meats. It is at the heart of social difference too, manifested in regional cuisines: Slater's dismal English stew compared with the sultry southern stews; fish and chips

compared with burgers and fries; deep fried tarantulas compared with roast sunflower seeds. The raw and the cooked. Food as culture, food as art. Food as an art that is produced and performed not only by celebrity chefs, but by our grandmothers and great-grandmothers – of whom Michel de Certeau writes, recalling how those women moved about the kitchen, making and tasting and feeding: ‘I would like the poetry of words to translate that of gestures; I would like a writing of words and letters to correspond to your writing of recipes and tastes’ (Certeau et al 1998: 154). The writer of recipes as a poet; the home cook as artist.

The colourist was an artist, not a mere technician. She worked a spiral pattern around my head: a long, slow process, the arrangement designed to match an image only she could see, so she had to concentrate, and we spent an hour in intimate silence. I watched her hands at work, so supple and so knowing. And I saw the bones protruding from her shoulder tips, the network of scars running down her arms, the fragility of those arms as they lifted and fell around my head. She is a woman who is destroying her body.

As was I, years ago, and for years. I was a person who had decided not to eat. A person looking for a way out of the confines of the body. A person who lived on vitamin pills; on a daily diet of one orange and half a bread roll; who lived on ten-twenty-thirty cups of coffee a day; who said to herself ‘I will-not eat’; and ‘I will not-eat’.

The decision not to eat. An interesting one. As a child I was a fussy eater. I must have driven my mother mad. I wouldn’t eat anything. No fish, no vegetables, no meat, no fruit. Eating outside of the family home was pure torture to me. It didn’t get much better as I grew older. Perhaps food never has been important to me. But when I was in PR it was all part of the image. The lie. The restaurants, the canapés, the champagne. Now I don’t even think about food for myself; only ever for others. Any hunger is satisfied by luscious photos in recipe books. I have my chemical feed that I never taste, that doesn’t even touch my lips, straight into the stomach, no diversions. No complications.

Philosophers tell us about the importance of food to community, to the self, to life and death. Food, its preparation and its consumption, is threaded through all we do: ‘the nourishing art has something to do with the art of loving, thus also with the art of dying’ (Certeau 1998: 169). And because food is at the heart of social intercourse, it allows us to shape and craft our lives, it helps us to imagine we are keeping death at bay.

But what if you can’t eat? If a physical condition or a mental illness has taken away that capacity; what happens then to the production of the self, to the markers of style, to the construction of a way of living, a way of dying? It is, after all, one of the key markers of our being in the social and the symbolic world; and it is also our mode of being in the physical world. Poet and social commentator Antjie Krog writes, ‘Psychologists say that the action of eating, of taking in food is simply enchanting – because it’s the way we can take up the world inside ourselves, how what is around us becomes part of us. We eat the world’ (1998: 217). Some of us perhaps reject it; some of us simply lose access to it.

Anorexia is so clichéd. But when it first came to me, in the years before Google, I didn't know it had a name, or that it was a condition. All I knew was that I did not like the feeling of food in my body; I did not like the act of eating; I was ashamed to be seen eating.

The colourist urges me to drink coffee or tea or juice, to eat the chocolate biscuits provided for clients in this expensive salon. It goes with the territory. When anorexia came to me, when I was 19 and had my first baby and lived with my first husband in a rehabilitation home full of recovering alcoholics and junkies, of ex-prisoners and the mentally ill, I cooked every day for those 16 men, and sent them off to their days with huge packed lunches, and leafed through recipe books to find ways to inform their uneducated palates. I did not / would not eat. Instead, I built meals.

But everyone must eat. I can't so you must, don't you see? You must eat my food for me. A surprising reaction for someone who doesn't particularly like food. I cook occasionally now. I watch others eating but have no concept of flavours. It is all about the look now. It is the aesthetics of it. I can't remember taste; that memory has been wiped. Fashion has moved on too; different foods fill the menus that I have never tasted. A strange feeling. The world has moved on and left me behind.

While I push everyone to eat, like an over-enthusiastic hostess, I find they reject the food. They are too embarrassed to eat in front of me, wracked with guilt. How can they eat when I can't? They cannot comprehend that it means nothing to me. I have lost that urge, that need. It got up and moved out the moment my stomach stopped working.

When the body changes, I myself change because as Foucault says 'We are always in the position of beginning again' (1997: 317). And it is not just the idea of 'me' that changes: it may well be a physical, a phenomenological, change. Medical anthropologist Cecil Helman observes that 'The boundaries of an individual's body image are not static ... They may alter with emotional state, disease or disability, surgery and medical treatments as well as physiological states such as pregnancy, obesity and weight loss' (2000: 16).

And then I was pregnant again, and again, and at night I heard the skin across my breasts sigh, and give way against the pressure of the swelling. My fingers and feet were clouds of flesh and fluid. I looked and felt ridiculous. Between pregnancies the magic of no-food restored me to a human form, but I knew, at 22, that I could not trust my body, and it no longer trusted me to take care of it. Twenty-two years old, and my body and I were considering a trial separation.

But my body gave up on me a long time ago. I floated through pregnancy and motherhood unaware of my body. We were comfortable friends apart from the reflux and the ulcers. It objected to me being a single parent and a businesswoman. Surgery was the answer, apparently, but not the answer I was expecting. They took away my reflux, yes, but also my ability to eat, my identity, who I was.

Is the mirror I use broken now? No, it shows the refracted reflection of a body. My body. Scars dissect it, disrupt it. Plastic tubes erupt from it. Self inflicted? No. The art of surgeons. It is not the perfect image of the 21st century woman. I can never be perfect ... except for my hair.

My body; my self. If my body is perfect, I will be perfect – yes? Well, no. ‘Perfection’ is an empty signifier, no more meaningful than ‘excellence’ or ‘beauty’. An army of researchers across the social sciences and the humanities have demonstrated the intimate connection between body and self. The world is delivered to our consciousness through the sensual and sensory experience of our bodies, and we engage with the world, as ‘selves’, by means of our bodies. The body includes the mind; we are body and mind, physical beings and thinking machines. Pierre Bourdieu argues that we always embody both physical and social identity because:

this body which indisputably functions as the principle of individuation (in as much as it localizes in space and time, separates, isolates, etc.), ratified and reinforced by the legal definition of the individual as an abstract, interchangeable being, without qualities, is also – as a real agent, that is to say, as a habitus, with its history, its incorporated properties ... open to the world, and therefore exposed to the world, and so capable of being conditioned by the world, shaped by the material and cultural conditions of existence in which it is placed from the beginning (Bourdieu 2000: 133–34).

Humans are an astonishing blend of nature and culture: the physiological matter that is flesh, the chemical conjunction of elements and neurons, and the technological ramifications of our organisation and function. But signally, we are cultural – which is to say, language-based, called into our cultural being by means of linguistic forms. One effect of this is that we establish norms: of behaviour, of practice, of appearance. And with norms come consequences. Helman makes the frequently observed point that ‘Society’s narrow definitions of physical normality lead it to ignore and marginalize those who do not fit within that definition’ (2000: 24). Or if not ignore and marginalise, then attempt to re-normalise through language:

I wish you’d eat something. You don’t look like you’re eating properly. You’d be so much more attractive if you were a bit fatter. You really must try a slice of this frittata. Are you getting enough to eat? Isn’t it time you saw a therapist?

You look stunning, what diet is it? Can you give me details? It is working really well. You mean you want to look like a woman who is dying, whose skin is so paper thin that every vein, artery and bone sticks through? You want to look like this?

It must be in your mind. Of course, how stupid of me.

I know, you’ve had a stomach band and don’t want to tell anyone. Your secret is safe with me. But there is no secret.

What do you mean you can’t eat? Everyone can eat. You must be able to eat something or you’d die. I couldn’t live without eating. Well obviously you could, because I can, and do.

Let us return, at the end, to Nigel Slater. He has achieved fame and perhaps fortune not simply by marketing; he is no empty signifier. Rather, he has found a way to capture the physicality of being through characters on a page. ‘We love the man’, writes reviewer Matthew Fort, ‘because he both panders to our greed in inimitable prose and we respect him because his recipes work and allow us to fulfil our appetites’ (2003). He is a poet of food writing, a public figure, one who sets out a

joyful discourse of embodied identity. For Michel de Certeau, there are other poets of food, the mothers and grandmothers who have fed us, and have infused us with taste and knowledge. To them he writes, 'as long as the recipes of your tender patience are transmitted from hand to hand and from generation to generation, a fragmentary yet tenacious memory of your life itself will live on' (Certeau et al 1998: 154). For those of us who cannot eat, who will not eat, who have no feeling for food: is there a way to fulfil our own appetites? Is there a way to live on in memory?

Perhaps only in writing.

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