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Here I am—food. But I won't nourish you.
—Joyce Carol Oates, "What Then, My Life?"

Introduction

In the essay "Writer's Hunger: Food as Metaphor," Joyce Carol Oates looks briefly at a number of authors for whom food is significant. She mentions "food as sheer sensuality" in Henry Fielding's art, "the claustrophobic holiday dinner" in James Joyce's "The Dead," and Charles Dickens's descriptions of "many-coursed Victorian dinners of stupefying-excess," among others. Although she does not go into depth as to the meaning of food for these authors, she points towards the importance of food: "In literature, eating and not eating are always symbolic. Food always 'means' something other than mere food." This sense of the meaning of food extends into her art.

In Oates's writing, the human relationship with food tends to be unhealthy. There is overindulgence and self-starvation; there are orgies of food and a corresponding sense of nausea and vomiting. These are depictions of American appetites. In her portrayals of the unhealthy interactions of food and people, Oates provides a critique of American consumer culture. In addition, her characters often use food—a plethora of food—to attempt to fill a spiritual emptiness.

In her essay "Food Mysteries," she mentions "Our ancestor's curious conviction that *God cares what we eat, and when, and how prepared*" (32, italics in the original). The ways in which people eat and prepare food can reveal something about their spiritual nature or spiritual depth (or lack thereof). We are not what we eat; we are *how* we eat.

For Oates, food is both metaphor and a deeply significant part of how people respond to their worlds. She writes, "A hypothesis: Civilization is the multiplicity of strategies, dazzling as precious gems inlaid in a golden crown, to

obscure from human beings the sound of, the terrible meaning of, their jaws grinding" ("Food Mysteries" 25). In *Wonderland*, she writes of the Pedersen family, "The lips parted, the mouth opened, something was inserted into the opening, then the jaws began their centuries of instinct, raw instinct, and the food was moistened, ground into pulp, swallowed" (118). For the Pedersens, eating is the instinctual insertion of a raw "something" into an open mouth.

Oates elaborates on her hypothesis that civilization is a series of strategies to distract us from the raw truth of our grinding jaws: "The meaning of man's place in the food cycle that, by way of our imaginations, we had imagined might not apply to *us*" ("Food Mysteries" 25). Our ultimate animal nature, our need for food, belies the "dazzling" distractions of civilization, exhibiting the primal in the midst of our refinements.

Expensive People: This Peculiar Hollowness

Food is a central significance to the narrator of *Expensive People*. As he is telling his story, he is overeating to the point where food has overwhelmed his sense of self. The narrator, Richard Everett, describes his overindulgences: "I have to fight back an impulse to type out a list of the things I ate this evening, so you can judge for yourself the depth of my degradation . . . Wong's Chop Suey in the can . . . Teutonic Stewed Tomatoes, and canned spaghetti, crumbly cookies, greasy potato chips" (209-210). His inability to control his intake is a sign of his "degradation." His disgust toward his sense of food reflects a disgust with himself. His desire to reveal his degradation to the reader borders on pornographic.

He is aware, though, that this uncontrolled intake reflects his culture, mentioning "the bottles and bottles of all those beverages you see tanned teenagers holding aloft in advertisements, the meat, the potatoes, the gravy, the lobster, the shrimp, the chicken (fried, baked, stewed, barbecued, diced, quartered, fricasseed) . . ." (210). Somehow a simple list of food items and methods for preparing a chicken convey the unhealthy American obsession with food. The narrator states that the list conveys "not simply a sense of my sinking into a slough of food but an idea of social conditions as well" (210). It is the American social environment, at least in part, that has caused Richard Everett to wallow in a world of meat, potatoes, gravy, and so on.

There is an emptiness at the core of the culture and the characters. His mother is named Nada. Susana Araújo writes, "Richard's writing is accompanied by his compulsive eating. This is an attempt to fill an emptiness created by and around the figure of his mother, known by the name of Nadia Romanov, whom Richard calls 'Nada'" (402). John Knowles's 1968 review of the book in *The New York Times* is entitled "Nada at the Core." With this reading, the excesses of food are not only critiques of American food culture, but also of an American absence

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of values that nourish the soul. Mary Allen writes, "There are a great many fat people in Oates's fiction, fat often as a result of efforts to fill up the empty self" (64). There is a hunger to fill in that empty self, a hunger that can never be fulfilled with food. Still, the characters continue the attempt, filling themselves with food without realizing something else is needed to complete their hollow selves.

There is also a core of violence in this narrator and in the culture depicted. Food is connected to this violence, from the "steaks pierced through their bloody hearts on silver sticks" (20) to the uncle who "committed suicide by overeating. He decided to kill himself by forcing food down his throat and into his bursting stomach, eating his way through a roomful of food" (27). Oates often portrays overconsumption as something typically American and typically grotesque. In this novel, though, the overconsumption overtakes the individuals, eradicating or dominating their identities. Eating food is portrayed as something that makes us less than human: "It occurred to me then that music was like eating, and both of them were like sleep: something to do that drew you into it, hadn't anything to do with you as a person" (116). Food can overtake and obliterate a person. What we eat becomes who we are. Hunger becomes us: "Have I ever mentioned how Nada ate? She ate as if she expected a disembodied hand suddenly to pull her plate away from her, and if it had she would have continued eating, leaning over the table until she could no longer reach the plate" (65). Hunger overtakes us to the point where there is little left other than hunger.

It is not only meat that is included in this grotesquerie of food. Oates is not merely commenting on the American intake of animal flesh. We also see "sweet, ghastly sweet, little pickles—baby midget gherkins he'd eat by the handful, chomping and chomping his way with his big teeth" (20). All kinds of intake are portrayed as "ghastly," even eating cereal: "I had cereal: it looked and tasted like wood shavings from Father's workbench. I poured milk on it" (219). Food is never represented as pleasurable or healthy in this novel.

One chapter of *Expensive People* includes snippets of some reviews of Richard Everett's memoir *Expensive People*. Among the reviews is one by "Stuart Hingham, a famous critic" who focuses on "the crude oral fantasies of one Richard Everett" (123). In this critic's Freudian reading of the food imagery of Everett's book, food represents sex: "Sex is metamorphosed into the more immediate, more salivating form of food, so that it can be taken legally and morally through the mouth." Hingham then criticizes Everett for not writing this theme adequately. That is, Hingham imposes a reading on the text, then criticizes the text for not living up to that reading. He writes, "Author Everett . . . failed to make the best use of his oral theme by his crudity of material. He should have had the crazy young hero gobble down hotdogs, ice-cream cones, ladyfingers, all-day suckers" (124). Clearly, Stuart Hingham sees something potentially sexual in "all-

day suckers." Thus Oates includes a parodic reading of the food theme of Everett's fictional book, while drawing attention to the centrality of food in her book. There appears to be a pun in the word crudity/crudité; I also wonder about the "ham" at the end of the critic's name.

Oates finally discredits this Hingham's interpretive skills by having him state that Nabokov is the type of author who can achieve the "Freudian responses of the sort that make Great Literature." Nabokov was actually a great critic of Freud, as shown by a number of scholars, including Stephen Blackwell in his nicely titled "Nabokov's Wiener-schnitzel Dreams: *Despair* and Anti-Freudian Poetics." Thus, the inclusion of this fictional critic's opinion on the food of *Expensive People* is a misreading in a number of ways. Rather than a Freudian fantasy, this world full of food may represent "this peculiar hollowness inside me that I had to fill," as Everett states.

Coinciding with this overconsumption is a sense of nausea and vomiting. This reaction to food is also a violent obliteration of one's self: "I was vomiting over everything, summoning up from my depths the most vile streams of fluid" (100). Well-read Richard refers to "the story of the old grouch Juvenal" who "vomited as he ate" (176). This topic adds to the unnatural interaction of humans and their food, which in itself makes the characters seem less-than-comfortable with being human. As the good critic Stuart Hingham states: "the novel is also filled with vomit" (123).

In an afterword to this novel, written in 1990, Oates describes *Expensive People* and two other novels of this time period, *them* and *Wonderland*, as "critiques of America—American culture, American values, American dreams" (239). It is not simply the unhealthy relationship with food that is on display in this novel. It is the American trait of overconsumption, of consumption to the point of self-destruction. Suicide by food, eating to the point where one's identity is erased, vomit, nausea—all of these elements of *Expensive People* point to an unnatural American obsession with hunger and consumption, an unnatural attempt to fill an unacknowledged void.

Although not much has been written about Oates's depictions of food, Hilde Bruch, a prominent psychotherapist and theorist of eating disorders, recognized the significance of food in a couple of Oates's novels. In *Eating Disorders: Obesity, Anorexia Nervosa, and the Person Within*, Bruch argues that Oates depicts eating disorders in *Expensive People* and *them* as personal, rather than social, concerns: "That the individual emotional experiences, not social conditions, are involved in the development of obesity, is described with brilliant psychological awareness in two novels by Joyce Carol Oates" (22). Bruch compares Everett's overeating in response to emotional trauma to Maureen's obesity and anorexia in *them*. Bruch provides the following quote from *them*, depicting the obesity phase: "Maureen lying in bed, forever lying in bed and

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stuffing her face with coffee cake and cookies and whatever sweet crap Loretta gave her." Bruch provides this quote showing Maureen's phase of radical weight loss: "I liked to fast, to make up for the days I ate so much, so I got dizzy sometimes at night . . . I liked to feel my stomach ache with hunger, knowing I was hungry and not filled up, not fat anymore." Bruch is also the author of *The Golden Cage: The Enigma of Anorexia Nervosa*. Her assessment of Oates's "brilliant psychological awareness" is an early recognition of this theme, although I disagree with her point that the "social conditions" are not part of the problem.

Janet Polivy and C. Peter Herman, in the article, "The Causes of Eating Disorders," write,

> The consensual approach to integrating various factors that contribute to ED's [eating disorders] is the "biopsychosocial" model. This model has the advantage of taking into account all sorts of factors—ranging from the broadly cultural to the narrowly biological, with stops along the way for familial, social, cognitive, learning, personality, and other factors . . . (191)

The causes of any eating disorder are multiple and vary with each individual. This is true for literary eating disorders as well, at least for those depicted by Joyce Carol Oates. Oates's eating disorders are produced by a combination of social conditions and personal reactions. Richard Everett's obsession with food may be a commentary on American attitudes toward eating and consuming, as Oates suggests, but it is also a specific portrayal of an individual. Everett has, as he states, a "peculiar hollowness." Ultimately, it is not an either-or question as to whether Oates's characters overeat (or undereat) as a reflection of their culture or for "peculiar" psychological responses. It can be both.

The penultimate paragraph of the novel emphasizes the topic of food, once again listing an excess of food items—"eight bananas, just flecked with brown and therefore ready to be guzzled, and as soon as you turn your back I will begin" (236). The narrator assures us that when the book is finished, one paragraph further on, the consumption will continue. Of course, it is not only bananas: "I have sauces and jams which I will pour over those pieces of bread and those cookies." Among other items, he mentions "the pliant cool sanity of lettuce!" He finds his "sanity" within his food or, at least, he feels a need for some sort of external sanity and he hopes food will fulfill that need. Again, it is about the peculiar emptiness of the narrator: "All I ask is the strength to fill the emptiness inside me, to stuff it once and for all!" His peculiarly American emptiness will not, of course, ultimately be satiated by the endless supply of food.

Wonderland: Oatesian Overeaters

In her afterword to *Wonderland*, Oates describes this as "obviously the most bizarre and obsessive" of her early novels (479). One of those obsessions is food. As with *Expensive People*, this novel includes a satire of American gluttony, specifically, suburban gluttony. Among the ways in which Oates develops this satire is by showing that the most religious of holidays, Christmas, is all about food: "He had never understood Christmas before. The house was filled with the smells of Christmas food—roasting turkeys, roasting ham, baking pies, Christmas cookies, Christmas candy. Christmas dinner itself lasted for many hours" (106). This is from the perspective of Jesse, an orphan who has been adopted into a wealthy suburban home. The repetition of the word "Christmas" in association with specific foods—"Christmas cookies, Christmas candies"—effectively turns the word into an adjective, a descriptive word for a variety of seasonal foods. Suburban America turns the birth of Christ into a ritual of gluttony.

Food in this novel not only lasts "for many hours," it lasts for many pages. Mindless indulgence is the method of American eating habits. Repetition renders the intake of food meaningless, or at least unconnected to nutrition or pleasure: "food, bowls of food, food wrapped carefully in waxed paper" (108). The intake never ends, and Oates makes sure to account for every morsel:

> They had warmed up turkey and gravy and dressing; warmed-up ham; several loaves of good rye bread; whipped potatoes; and omelettes stuffed with mushrooms and chunks of ham . . . And slabs of leftover apple pie and minced meat pie . . . and en entire orange chiffon cake. (108)

This is Christmas dinner for the Pedersen family, where the celebration is an orgy of food.

Oates often uses holiday time as the setting for her commentary on American intake of food. In the short story "Thanksgiving," Oates takes this holiday obsession with food and distorts it into a nightmare. That story seems to be about post-apocalyptic holiday shopping, where a father and daughter fight through a destroyed supermarket to find what they need for Thanksgiving dinner:

> We had to get potatoes to be mashed, and yams to be baked, and cranberries for the sauce, and a pumpkin for the pie, and apples for applesauce; we had to get carrots, lima beans, celery . . . but the best heads of lettuce I could find were wilted and brown and looked as if insects had been chewing on them." (225, ellipsis in the original)

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All sorts of food is spoiled or chewed upon in this story, but the theme is the same as in *Wonderland*: the obsession with excess food represents a distortion of the soul, a distorted culture. The need for food is obsessive and mindless.

The fact that this intake is mindless is expressed perfectly in this depiction of a dropped jelly bean or "something" in *Wonderland*:

> Frederich was just now taking out a handkerchief from his pocket, and along with the handkerchief something flew out and hit the carpet—it looked like a black, lint-covered piece of something, maybe a jellybean—and, stooping sluggishly, Frederich picked it up and popped it into his mouth mechanically, as if he hadn't known exactly what he was doing." (109)

American food habits are as mindless as a machine made for eating. It does not matter what one is eating: a lint-covered, black something is as edible as anything. Calvin Bedient writes that the purpose of such intake is "to fill the place where . . . love should have been" (125).

For quite a few characters in this novel, food overtakes their identity and transforms them:

> Jesse saw how this Mary Shirer was transformed gradually into Mrs. Pedersen—heavier hips, arms, a face that grew rounder, that grew almost round, a bosom that suddenly billowed out, the breasts like sacks of something soft and protruding, the upper arms fleshing out like sausages, the whole body thickening, growing outward like the trunk of a giant tree . . . (110)

It takes an expansive sentence to capture the expansion of Mary Shirer into the mother of the Pedersen family. If those sausage-arms are not enough to make it clear that food is responsible for this growth, the next sentence offers more to eat: "One recent photograph was of Mrs. Pedersen standing—perhaps half riding—behind a large table piled with baked goods for a bazaar at the church, pies and cakes and tarts and brownies and cookies, baked goods piled everywhere on the table" (110-111). The multiple ands add to the expansive depiction of Mrs. Pedersen "half riding" these sweets into a new self.

The characters of this novel are attempting to fill themselves without knowing why they are hungry. Their hunger is metaphorical, a misguided quest to satisfy an empty life. As Sanford Pinsker writes, "The Pedersens are consumed by a 'hunger' which *no* amount of food can possibly satisfy" (64). Oates is not only criticizing American eating habits; she is creating a metaphor for the way in

which Americans tend to search outwardly for a way to fill a spiritual hunger of which they are only vaguely aware, if at all: "as if the psychodynamics of eating can fill an ill-defined void" (Pinsker 65). While Pinsker argues that these hungry characters are attempting to find a "personality," I would argue they are using food as a substitute for a deeper understanding of the self and its place in the world. Either way, the members of the Pedersen family are attempting to stuff a disturbing psychic emptiness.

Food is a substitute for a self for Mrs. Pedersen's expansive daughter, Hilda, as well. However, her expansion has more to do with hiding within her flesh, as though the more of her there is, the less likely people will be able to see her: "She subsided into herself. Eating . . . She subsided into that secret part of her, as if she were the baby growing inside this immense body, herself the body, nourishing herself. At the outermost level of her flesh there was activity—she was eating" (119). The body is a place where one can lose one's self. This, too, is a comment on America, the land of expansion. Dr. Pedersen enthusiastically tells Jesse, "When this war is over, Jesse, there will be marvelous growth. Everything will grow, expand" (101). The national obsession with "growth" is one way in which it fails to achieve a stable identity.

In contrast to this food-fueled expanse of self, there is in this novel an idea of a non-physical realm, a place that is pure and not connected to the raw nature of a body. Hilda is a mathematical genius. She thinks of the "bodiless purity of numbers" (123). However, her physical existence and obsession with food drag her back to the impure earth. This phrase about "bodiless purity" comes in a paragraph where she is eating a banana split: "an enormous dish of puffs of cream, walnuts, dyed cherries, strawberry ice cream, chocolate ice cream, peppermint ice cream, and large bruised slices of banana . . . She discovered that she was ravenously hungry" (123). The food comes first, then the hunger. But the hunger is always there, waiting to be lured out by "an enormous dish" of goodies. The physical self is like a permanently hungry animal with which one has been burdened. Hilda thinks, "*We have not chosen our bodies*." The intake of food is mindless, an uncontrollable action that obliterates the self: "*I cram my mouth with something—some chocolate—I am ravenously hungry . . . I hardly bother to chew the chocolate in my mouth; it is my jaws, my perfect teeth, that do the work*" (129). As with her brother's dropped jelly bean, Hilda crams "something" into her mouth before she is aware of what it is. Only when it is in her mouth does she realize it is "some chocolate." Food delivers its own meaning, which replaces the self along with any ideal of "bodiless purity."

This bodiless ideal is presented in a number of ways in *Wonderland*, always in contrast to the undeniable presence of the body and fat. Most often, the ideal is expressed by the science-minded in the novel. While Mary Shirer transforms physically into Mrs. Pedersen, Jesse hopes to transform beyond

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physicality, into an invisible Dr. Vogel: "I would like to do this impersonally. Out of sight. I don't especially want to be Dr. Vogel, *Dr. Vogel* . . . I'd like to be a presence that is invisible, impersonal" (202). The repetition of his name, with the italicized "*Dr. Vogel*" emphasizes his sense of not being connected to his name. As he strives for a bodiless ideal, he is not that self, that name, that personality.

The scientific ideal is starkly contrasted to fat, as though fat represents, as for Hilda, the body overtaking that ideal. This, too, is about food; as Jesse becomes more science-minded, he loses his taste for food:

> Maybe he had forgotten to eat. Maybe he should eat. But his stomach cringed at the thought . . . Look at that man on the sidewalk ahead, strained and heaving with fat! Jesse stared. Fat, fat, a fat man, a fat face and body, even the feet big, swollen, a human being bursting with fat creamy flesh. Jesse could barely keep the disgust from showing on his face. But this man was sick. Fat people were sick. (210)

The ellipsis is in the original, showing the transition of Jesse's thought from hunger and nausea ("his stomach cringed") to disgust with the fat man. Later, Jesse says that "such quantities of flesh . . . were a kind of spiritual obscenity" (284). The purest self would be, once again, bodiless. Jesse's mentor, Dr. Perrault, expresses the same idea: "The brain would be better off without a body . . . It would be pure" (335). This purity would include no need for food. The food of *Wonderland* is spiritually obscene because it detracts from the purity of the self.

However, the food keeps coming. Mrs. Perrault brings "plate after plate, loaded with beef and potatoes and string beans and creamed onions" (328). As in the description of Hilda's banana split, Oates expands the sentence with multiple ands. The meals of this novel are abundant to the point of disgust: "Mrs. Perrault came back with more food . . . *Eat, Eat. Don't listen to them talking, just eat*. There was hardly room on the table for another bowl. A big red ceramic bowl of mashed potatoes" (330). The message from Mrs. Perrault is the opposite of science, the opposite of that ideal of purity. She suggests to Jesse that he focus on the food, not the conversation. The message is to turn off the mind and *eat*.

It is significant that the food is associated with Mrs. Perrault, not the husband or any of the other males at the meal. The ideals of science and the denial of the body are associated with the men of the novel. The women are the providers of food. The women, therefore, often represent physical existence. It is just this physical existence that Dr. Perrault does not recognize: "Jesse realized slowly that the old man did not believe in women, in their existence" (332). To be pure, one must refuse food, deny physicality and neglect women. That is the scientific ideal in the minds of these men.

Wonderland, which begins in 1939 and spans "more than thirty years," also includes characters who do not take on traditional roles (3). One such character is T.W. Monk, whose poem, "Wonderland," is placed at the start of the novel. Monk, who has a particular emptiness that he attempts to fulfill—one time, by cannibalism ("I helped myself to a piece of human being" (251))—writes a collection of poems entitled "Poems without People." When we see him later in the novel, the ideal of bodilessness is depicted once again. As always, this ideal is presented in contrast to the insistent presence of the body: "'I have consecrated myself to purity of all kinds,' Monk said. 'My only grossness is a craving for Milky Way bars'" (454). The purity of this poetic Monk is only impeded by candy and "shooting" drugs of some kind, perhaps "speed" (455). Oates again critiques the false ideal of attempting to live as an "essence" instead of a self: "You see before you not a man but an abstraction, an essence. My only grossness is chocolate candy" (454). In "Food Mysteries," Oates writes of "that ostensibly religious/spiritual activity whose intention is to detach the mind from the body, as if that were possible, or in any way desirable" (28). Monk's "grossness," his addiction to candy, shows the absurdity of this ideal. He is surrounded by the garbage of his addiction: "piles of candy wrappers on the cushions around him" (450). Candy even finds its way into the way he speaks: "he said with a snicker" (451). Ironically, Monk makes a statement that expresses the reason why his ideal is misdirected: "I have to take care of my head, you know, and the only way is by tending to the stalk that leads up" (454-455). He recognizes the need to take care of his physical self, but he fails to understand that Milky Way and speed do not provide the necessary nutrition.

When Jesse goes to Toronto to rescue his daughter who has been living with drug addicts (among other decadence), the drugs are also referred to as "nutrition": "Angel will be all right as soon as the nutrition man arrives" (471). Clearly, the characters who consider drugs to be a source of nutrition are unhealthy, but they are only a degree less healthy than those who consume food in this novel. Nutrition is distorted in the culture of all of these characters. None of them know where to turn for true sustenance. In fact, the novel does not offer such options. All we see are the distortions, with little or no hope for a healthy sense of food and nutrition.

One reason for this unhealthy sense is the disconnect each character has between flesh and self. None of these characters identify with their bodies. None of them think of themselves as physical beings. The ideal of the bodiless self is as distorted as finding "nutrition" through anything other than a healthy relationship with food. In addition, this lack of awareness of themselves as physical beings connects to Oates's most prominent theme, the instability of identity. Because Jesse (like the other characters) is not grounded by a body, he can change his identity at each stage of his life: from Jesse Harte (10) to Jesse Pedersen (72) to

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Jesse Vogel (182) and, at work, Dr. Vogel (202). An unnatural intake of food is caused, at least in part, by this intangible sense of self or, in other words, an absence of any consciousness about one's tangible self, one's body. Hunger becomes unappeasable because the characters have no sense of themselves as living bodies.

The endless and misguided search for a self is depicted as constant hunger. Young Jesse hungers for a home:

> . . . he felt a strange despair, a sense of hollowness, emptiness, that was located in the center of his body, beneath his heart. It was a hunger that alarmed him. And when he turned toward home, headed home, his hunger increased as he walked, until by the time he entered the Pedersen home he was ravenous with hunger. This seemed to happen all the time. (81)

Hunger and home are the repeated words in this passage. Jesse's hunger grows as he approaches home because of the "emptiness . . . beneath his heart." Unfortunately, when he arrives at home, he will find a house full of people with a similar "hollowness."[1] The daily attempts to fill this hollowness with food prove to be unfulfilling. Nonetheless, they keep eating.

> "You know that my nature is coarse and greasy and bottomless. You know there is no end to me. You know I am always hungry," Hilda said.
>
> And Mrs. Pedersen hurried out to the kitchen. (139)

In America, one responds to moments of existential emptiness with ice cream, even though one knows ice cream is not enough: "Mrs. Pedersen brought them ice cream, sometimes fudge or cake, puddings, candies, slabs of pie with whipped cream; tall icy milkshakes in hot weather, or fruit drinks with scoops of sherbet in them" (139).

There is another moment in this novel when it becomes clear that hunger is about much more than food. Jesse looks at the roses in Mrs. Pedersen's garden: "Jesse was dazzled by the roses. So many of them! Their lovely petals moved gently in the breeze, he had never seen such beauty; for some reason he felt a little hungry" (92). Jesse has not learned how to respond to beauty, to nature. All he

[1] In her journal, Oates quotes Anne Sexton: "my hunger for love is as immense as your eating people in *Wonderland*" (34). While Sexton is commenting on herself, this is also a good insight into the significance of those "eating people" and their need for love.

knows, on some level, is that it is something he lacks. The scene continues as Mrs. Pedersen has something of a spiritual crisis, stating, "I can't go on" (92).[2] The fact that food is the constant response to such existential moments is again alluded to in the description of Mrs. Pedersen: "she looked enormous, sad and enormous in the sunlight" (92). In *Wonderland*, Oates has created a family so empty they have no way to respond to the beauty of a rose, other than hunger. Food is the only motivation for them to "go on."

***Broke Heart Blues*: The Spell of the Pig**

The final imagery of Oates's *Broke Heart Blues*, a novel about the students of Willowsville Senior High School, becomes an orgy of indulgence, in which those at the thirtieth reunion are equated with the pig they are roasting. Food is the central focus of what turns into a pagan ritual—not a coming-of-age ritual, but a coming-of-middle-age ritual. Those at the reunion engage in an unspoken ritual about facing—or refusing to face—one's mortality.

At the "traditional pig-roast buffet," the pig casts a spell over the reunion party: "And so we fell under the spell of the Pig" (331). This phrase—"fell under the spell of the Pig," with its capital P—is repeated six times. Here, as elsewhere in Oates's work, the people are both attracted and repelled by the food: "You stare appalled, fascinated" (331). The ritual devouring of this "succulent" pig is not, of course, due to an actual need for food: "Even those of us who'd stuffed ourselves earlier in the evening are panting with desire by the time the Pig is served" (331). The capital-p Pig is an American deity at the center of this pagan ritual of gluttony.

Ironically, overindulgence is a form of self-denial, as each character loses a sense of self while consuming the food. Even the classmate who has become a celebrity, Verrie Myers, succumbs to "the spell of the Pig": "Eating ravenously the morsels we fed her, not taking the time to use a fork, panting, 'Mmm! Mmmm! *Mmmm!*' as in the throes of cinematic sex" (332). The most refined—and created—personality among them partakes of this exhibition of hunger. The sound track for the scene is a "hit single by Made in the USA, 'Hunger Hunger'" (333). Those at this after-party are not sure what exactly they hunger for—food, sex, recognition—all they know is that they have this insatiable hunger. They are vaguely aware of the emptiness within that Richard Everett mentions in *Expensive People*, and it is the "emptiness" that drives them to consume. They are empty; therefore, they eat.

The inspiration for this pig may have been found in an essay by Charles Lamb. A 1992 edition of *Antaeus* featured essays on food (essays that are now

[2] This line echoes the final words of Samuel Beckett's *The Unnamable*, where the protagonist does, somehow, find a way to "go on": "I can't go on, I'll go on" (407).

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collected in the book *Not for Bread Alone: Writers on Food, Wine, and the Art of Eating*). This collection includes Oates's essay "Food Mysteries" and Lamb's 1822 essay "A Dissertation Upon a Roast Pig." In this essay, Lamb describes a boy in China, son of a swineherd, and his accidental discovery of cooked pig meat: "he fell to tearing up whole handfuls of the scorched skin with the flesh next it, and was cramming it down his throat in his beastly fashion." Lamb describes the boy as "surrendering himself up" to the lure of the food (155). The boy is clearly under the spell of the Pig. Lamb and Oates both show that when under this spell, one's hunger can cause one to surrender an identity: one is nothing other than one's hunger.

As Lamb's discussion of roast suckling pig continues, it appears that the author is also under the spell of the Pig. He capitalizes, "ROAST PIG," and he writes,

> Of all the delicacies in the whole *mundus edibilis*, I will maintain it to be the most delicate . . . I speak not of your grown porkers—things between pig and pork . . . but a young and tender suckling—under a moon old—guiltless as yet of the sty . . . There is no flavor comparable, I will contend, to that of the crisp, tawny, well-watched, not over-roasted, *crackling*, as it is well called—the very teeth are invited to their share of the pleasure at this banquet in overcoming the coy, brittle resistance—with the adhesive oleaginous—O call it not fat! But an indefinable sweetness growing up to it—the tender blossoming of fat . . . (157)

This is only an excerpt of Lamb's paean to the pig.

Oates's depiction of the reunion ritual, therefore, may be a satire of Lamb's tribute to pig meat. Whereas Lamb's essay is a celebration of roast pig, Oates's novel portrays a hallucinatory ritual. For Lamb, "no flavor [is] comparable," even the "tender blossoming fat" has "an indefinable sweetness"; for Oates the experience is more destructive than it is succulent.

For both writers, a suckling pig is the center of attention. Lamb emphasizes this in the above quotation: "I speak not of your grown porkers." In *Broke Heart Blues* it is somehow a very large suckling pig, one-hundred-six pounds: "'That's a lot of pig!' 'And we're a lot of appetite. *That's our tradition*'" (330). Depicting a suckling pig that is big enough for this American ritual of appetite adds to the satire and to Oates's critique of American appetites.

Plus, pig is not enough for this American tradition. After stuffing themselves with pig, they continue to stuff themselves with "party pizzas (twenty-inch diameter)," almost against their collective will: "Somehow, who knew how (for we all protested we were stuffed to the gills with succulent roast pig), the

enormous party pizzas, this with slices of pepperoni and Italian sausage, had been devoured" (351, 352). No one is responsible for eating this quantity of food: "Somehow . . . [the pizza] had been devoured." This eating is not intended to satisfy anyone's need for food; they were already "stuffed to the gills." It is eating itself that is necessary. As the song says, this is all about "Hunger Hunger," not a need for nutrition. It is a ritual of unfulfilled individuals who are attempting to relive their high school years; it is ritual denial of middle-age and impending mortality. It is a hunger that will never end: "Still, there was a hunger for dancing!" (352).

Because of the unappeasable hunger, bordering on the suicide by food that we hear about in *Expensive People*, food is associated with violence. The pizza is dangerous: "Crusts sharp as broken glass if you happened to step on them with bare feet" (352). The pig meat is also associated with violence: "steaming pork fumes rose out of the lacerated flesh" (333). This is a violent reunion ritual, intended not to celebrate a memory of high school, but to obliterate the fact of coming to middle age. Some dead classmates show up, complete with the wounds incurred in their violent deaths.

The idea that this pig is associated with their sense of death is emphasized in the description of Smoke Filer, a classmate who had been killed in a car wreck: "They said the T-Bird steering column had pierced him like a spit" (356). The classmates devour the details of his death as hungrily as they devour that roasted pig. The need for such details, such rumors and stories, is another appetite of the classmates, another means for stuffing their empty selves.

Sex, violence and food imagery all combine in the description of a group of female classmates practically raping Dwayne Hewson "star Wolverine quarterback, Willowsville mayor and well-respected local businessman, a husband and father of four kids" and host of the after-party: "We stared in amazement as they bore our buck-naked hairy host like a pig to the spit" (355, 356). The most respected of citizens is reduced to a hairy pig—"his hairy legs like sausage" (356)—who the women go on to toss into the swimming pool "with screams of female triumph," before tearing off their clothes and joining him.

It does not matter if he dies of a heart attack due to this logical extension of the orgy of food: "Literal death seemed somehow beside the point" (360). These middle age people seem to have lost the lives they had in high school, and the reunion is a desperate attempt to relive those times. In other words, they are dead anyway. Food is a substitute for a soul.

In addition, this novel is about the myths people create to give their lives meaning. They had lived for their version of John Reddy Heart, the mysterious student who becomes the center of their high school mythology. Mr. Feldman, a teacher who the students mock for his sense of superiority, states a significant theme of the novel and of the students' lives:

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> There is an undeclared war between the ninety-nine percent of human beings who persist in believing in fairy tales and 'myths' and the valiant one-percent who use their intellects, reason, analyze . . . The human instinct to create myths seems to be as deeply rooted in our species as the instinct to bond, to mate, to reproduce . . . it's a primitive remnant that does not belong in such a civilization.

The students dislike this ambitious young teacher because "this guy, this jerk, reported to be completing his Ph.D. at Syracuse University, headed for university teaching, had the right to lecture us about our souls" (199). When Feldman shows some insight into the students' souls and their addiction to myths, the students do not have the spiritual depth to grasp these concepts.

By showing the same people at their thirtieth reunion, having been unable to find a replacement myth, a meaning for their lives, Oates extends the novel to a larger commentary on American life: when the myth becomes unsustainable, the believers are left with little reason to live, even if the appetite remains. Food—pig and pizza—comes to represent their insatiable appetites, their vacuous souls, their craving for something that they cannot articulate: "*our words are so fucking inadequate*" (47).

American Nausea: "Ugly"

In the short story "Ugly," from the collection *Haunted: Tales of the Grotesque*, the protagonist (Alice[3]) shows how one's sense of self affects one's sense food. She is both nauseated by food and attracted to it, a sense that is connected to her self-loathing, specifically her disgust with her physical self. She feels compelled to eat other customers' leftovers, even if such behavior disgusts her. This unhealthy interaction with food reflects her unhealthy sense of self.

In the art of Joyce Carol Oates, an unhealthy sense of self will result in an unhealthy attitude toward food. Xavia works as a waitress at the Sandy Hook Inn, and she is disgusted by her attraction to leftovers:

[3] She is named only once, in a Thanksgiving discussion with her mother (29). The fact that she only has this name when she is in a family context demonstrates the idea that she loses this identity of daughter and family member when she is on her own. In most of the story, she lives alone, away from her family, and the name "Alice" no longer applies. In a discussion with her former teacher, Mr. Cantry, she spontaneously renames herself "Xavia": "Xavia was not a name I'd heard of until that moment. Like static it had flown into my head" (23).

> My only weakness, which I tried to keep secret, was eating leftovers from customers' plates. Like most food workers, I had quickly developed a repugnance for food; yet I continued to eat, despite the repugnance; once I began eating, no matter what the food, no matter how unappetizing, my mouth flooded with saliva and it was impossible for me to stop eating (36).

Her lack of self-awareness makes her vulnerable to the urges of her physical self. She is disgusted by food but finds it "impossible" to stop eating. Among the items she is compelled to consume are "the remains of a cheeseburger almost raw at its center, leaking blood" (36). In the "Afterword" to *Haunted*, Oates writes of the literary effects of "blunt *physicality*" (304, italics in the original). It is this physicality that Xavia is both attracted to and repelled from, whether in regard to herself or food. Xavia's unhealthy sense of her physicality carries over into her unhealthy sense of food.

Her sense of ugliness is her sense of being an adult, her sense of sexuality. She fails to identify with the pictures of herself as a child: "This is a pretty little girl and I'm ugly" (29). This first-person narrative is about her lack of self-awareness. Although she thinks of herself as ugly, she admits that she does not know how she looks: "What did I look like, aged twenty-one? I wasn't sure" (19). She develops a sense of self based on the idea that she is "ugly." She even discusses the advantages of being "ugly": "you don't waste time trying to look your best, you will never look your best" (19).[4] Mary Allen discusses some of Oates's female protagonists who choose to be "ugly": "Since so much stress comes with sexual involvement, it is preferable to discourage men by being ugly" (65). She discusses a number of short stories in this context, including "Normal Love," "What is the Connection Between Men and Women?" and "Stalking." The sense of ugliness as a defense against sexuality is a theme Oates explores in a number of contexts.

Xavia could be said to have an Avoidant Personality. Len Sperry discusses the differences between an Avoidant Style and an Avoidant Disorder (35). Xavia seems to be closer to a disorder. Among the traits that would place one within this

[4] One might compare Alice/Xavia to Flannery O'Connor's Joy/Hulga in "Good Country People." Both change their names in an attempt to suit their sense of adult ugliness. Both feel detached from their physical selves. Both express a sense of spiritual emptiness; although Xavia connects this with the "belly" (32) and Hulga connects it with the brain. Greg Johnson refers to O'Connor as "to some degree . . . the literary mentor Joyce lacked in her personal life" (107). Harold Bloom refers to O'Connor as "Oates's inescapable precursor" (5). Brian Sutton argues that Oates had an "unconscious obsession" with O'Connor and that "comparing the two is almost commonplace among scholarly writers" (54).

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category are "longstanding dysfunctional beliefs about others" (34). This is clearly the case when Xavia fails to accept the photographs of herself as a baby as truly depicting her: "This is someone else, this isn't me! This is a pretty girl and I'm ugly and *this isn't me*!" (29). Dr. Sperry writes that "parental rejection" can be a key factor in an Avoidant Personality. Xavia's mother responds to her rejection of those photographs by saying, "You break my heart! You *are* ugly! Go away, get away! We don't want you here! You don't belong here with normal people!" (29). Clearly, this complete rejection has been a formative factor for her personality.

Drs. Randy Sansone and John Levitt indicate an avoidant "individual's self-concept is significantly negative" and that he or she will "perceive that they are inherently undesirable" (153). They cite a study that links this disorder to an eating disorder (ED): "*the ED might replace intimate relationships by providing an important life focus for time, energy and emotions*" (159, italics in the original). Xavia is using food as an escape from her negative emotions. Eating leftovers may reflect her uncertain sense of self and avoidance of healthy social interactions.

Xavia's sense of self, food, physicality and sexuality all combine in this image from her "rare dream":

> *They were eating pieces of meat, with their fingers. I saw bright blood smeared on their mouths and fingers. I saw that they were eating female parts. Breasts and genitals. Slices of pink-glistening meat, picked out of hairy skin-pouches they way you'd pick oysters out of their shells*" (26-27).

Her refusal (or inability) to achieve any level of self-awareness leads to this subconscious response to being the object of sexual attraction. Sexuality, like leftovers, combines the qualities of attraction and repugnance. Xavia becomes as passive as Connie at the end of "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?"; when her boss, Mr. Yardboro, invites her for "a ride," she accepts and thinks, "*Where are we going? What will you do to me?*" (28). Xavia's lack of self-awareness leads to an uncertain sense of her physicality and a refusal to develop an active understanding of her sexuality. Unlike fifteen year old Connie, Xavia is twenty-one and uncomfortably placed in an adult setting.

As in the story "Thanksgiving" and the novel *Wonderland*, North America's most gustatory holiday is present in "Ugly." Discomfort of domestic family life is associated with the ritual of Thanskgiving, a sickening ritual: "there I was, in the old house, the house of one thousand and one associations and all of them depressing, the smell of the roasting turkey sickened me, the smell of the basting grease, the smell of my mother's hair spray" (29). The "associations" of

this brief scene show that Xavia's disgust with food is related to her disgust with her mother and her family life. As in Oates's other depictions of Thanksgiving, this holiday has a way of intensifying these themes.

"Ugly" ends with the gutting of fish, a scene that combines violence, "blunt *physicality*," self-disgust and the attraction/nausea that is often associated with Oates's images of food: "Guts stuck to my fingers. Blood, tissue. Bits of broken bone beneath my nails . . . Later I'd discover a strand of translucent fish gut in my hair and I'd understand why Mr. Yardboro smiled at me in that way of his" (43). Xavia's discomfort with her physical self—with herself as a physical being—combines with her repulsion/attraction toward sexuality in the story's final image: "Through my life I'd never be able to eat fish without smelling the odors of the Sandy Hook kitchen and feeling a wave of excitement shading into nausea. Raw fish guts, fried fish, greasy bread crumbs. I was sickened but still I ate" (44). Here Xavia's attitude toward physicality and food is expressed in a way that shows a lifelong memory of the experience ("Through my life . . ."). Perhaps there is a hint of her overcoming this combination of nausea and disgust, as the final sentence suggests the narrator remembers rather than continues to experience this feeling. If there is a slight sense of development in the narrator, a small sense of hope, it only comes with the statement that she does, in her life, eat fish. Perhaps that offers just enough information to argue she has developed a healthier sense of food and, more significantly, a healthier sense of her physical self.

The key point is that the eating disorder is not about food: Drs. Sansone and Levitt explain that "beneath the façade of avoidance lies the desire to connect with others" (159); Xavia thinks, "Loneliness is like starvation: you don't realize how hungry you are until you begin to eat" (23). This sentence also offers a hint of hope, a bit of self-awareness that transcends the events in the story.

Conclusion

Hilde Bruch wrote, "There is no human society that deals rationally with food in its environment, that eats according to the availability, edibility, and nutritional value alone" (3). The art of Joyce Carol Oates illustrates this irrational sense of food. Most of her characters fail to eat for "the availability, edibility, and nutritional value alone." For Oates, the way one eats reflects not only on one's psychological flaws, but the flaws of American culture. The American intake of food ranges from the gluttonous to the disgusted, with little in between. There is often a meeting of those apparent opposites, where nausea combines with obsession.

While I have been discussing primarily those characters who overindulge in food (and often feel disgust at the overindulgence), Greg Johnson has stated:

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> [Oates's] female protagonists in every decade of her career—Karen Herz in *With Shuddering Fall* (1964), Elena Howe in *Do With Me What You Will* (1971), Marya Knauer in *Marya: A Life* (1986), and Marianne Mulvaney in *We Were the Mulvaneys* (1996)—disdain the process of eating. (173)

I would add to this list the unnamed girl of "Orange" (a brief stage piece in Oates's *I Stand Before You Naked*). This scene, less than eight pages in length, portrays a number of Oates's concerns with food. Johnson goes on to discuss the correlation between anorexia and the denial or refusal of sexuality: "This drive toward anorexia is often coupled with a portrayal of female sexual experience in wholly negative and destructive terms" (173). While this is certainly true of characters such as the protagonist of "Ugly," it should be clear that Oates is not only interested in anorexia. She is intrigued by all kinds of unhealthy attitudes toward food and the physical self.

It should be noted, though, that her depictions of food are not always negative. One positive example is the meal that Marianne cooks for her brother Patrick in *We Were the Mulvaneys*: "Marianne's minestrone was the most delicious soup Patrick had ever tasted: steaming-hot, in stoneware bowls, a thick broth seasoned with fresh basil and oregano, containing chunks of celery, tomato, carrots, red onion, beans, chickpeas and macaroni" (221). More details of the meal follow. This delicious soup may represent Marianne's attempts to make her own life, at this point in the novel. This soup represents the self and the soul she has created at the Green Isle Co-Op. Even when the depiction of food is positive, for Oates, it represents not just good food, but the state of a character's soul.

In *Missing Mom*, food plays a complex though primarily positive role. Specifically, the making and sharing of bread is a positive spiritual process for Gwen Eaton and her daughter Nikki. The daughter learns this by recalling the words of her deceased mother: "*kneading is happiness, when you knead bread you enter a zone of happiness . . . when you share bread with others it's happiness*" (282). We learn later, however, that it is the making and the sharing that create this happiness, not necessarily the taste of the bread. When Nikki shares her homemade bread with Alyce Proxmire, made from her mother's recipe for "Alyce's Bread," the bread "hasn't much taste except a kind of sawdust-carrot taste"; nonetheless, "she seemed happy, and in a way it made me happy, too" (348). The happiness comes from the creating and the interaction, not the food itself.

Johnson also writes that in 1967 "Joyce was five foot nine [and] sometimes weighed as little as ninety-five pounds": "Joyce would speculate that she had been suffering a form of anorexia" (172). In 1976, Oates writes in her journal: "the necessity of eating appalls me, as it did some years ago . . . I mean

the fact that one must eat" (113). However, her depictions of unhealthy behaviors in relation to food are too various to attach a biographical meaning to them. What is certain, though, is that she consistently expresses disgust toward overindulgence: "Joyce sometimes expressed a revulsion toward food and toward parties generally, describing an event at the Detroit Golf Club where she had witnessed heaping displays of food that she found disgusting" (Johnson 172). Her "revulsion" and "disgust" towards such abundance works its way into her fiction as a critique of American hunger and emptiness.

In "Writer's Hunger," Oates writes, "Of course I understand that food is symbolic: a kind of poetry." Oates's depictions of food consistently symbolize the spiritual hunger that comes from misguided values. American values create an emptiness that her characters fail to understand. In the art of Joyce Carol Oates, food is often symbolic of a misdirected spiritual need.

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