

*Carnal Appetites*  
*FoodSexIdentities*  
Elspeth Probyn

The cover of Elspeth Probyn's latest book appears, at first glance, to feature a photograph of luscious candies—caramels, perhaps, or maybe soft chocolates. But wait, no, those are small sacs of some kind of red fluid—blood? some other bodily fluid?—twisted into a vague spiral reminiscent of the double helix. This visual elision/illusion aptly represents the ways in which Probyn works to show us the tricky, complicated, often illusory ways in which food figures in human being. As the cover photograph suggests, sometimes it's clear that (or how) we're talking about food, and sometimes it's not at all clear.

*Carnal Appetites* does not fully work out a single coherent thesis. Rather, it is a preliminary, often sketchy exploration of a set of issues about food, culture and identity. The ideas are delivered in sleek, sharp prose that occasionally borders on the facile. (It is also regularly very funny. For instance, discussing the Bill-and-Monica story Probyn asks, "If oral sex isn't sex, is it eating?" (59).) The cultural objects prompting her reflections range among television shows (Two Fat Ladies, Naked Chef), restaurant culture (*both* McDonald's *and* the ultra-hip cuisine scene of Sydney), texts (everything from Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* to television actress Camryn Manheim's autobiographical *Wake Up! I'm Fat!*), and films (the various movie versions of Conrad's novel). Among the theoretical sources from which she draws, Deleuze and Guattari are perhaps the most prominent; from them, she borrows the metaphor of the rhizome that serves as both an organizing principle for her method, and also a description of the various terrains she is exploring. (Central figures in the field of food studies play a

relatively minor role in the book, and they serve more often as objects of investigation than as sources of theoretical insight themselves.)

A rhizome is a plant with a branching root system. As employed by Deleuze, the term denotes a mode of investigation that is “antigenealogical[;] ‘it always has multiple entryways’ compelling us to think of how we are connected diversely, to obvious and sometimes not so obvious entities” (17). Following Lawrence Grossberg, Probyn argues that thinking rhizomatically can “return cultural theory to a consideration of ‘the real’—to lead the investigator into a tangle of connections and relations that blur any neat distinctions among subject matters, or between world and representation. Thinking about food rhizomatically leads Probyn to ask questions about ethnicity, sex, class, location. Her project uses eating to “make these categories matter again,” uses eating as a “visceral reminder of how we variously inhabit the axes of economics, intimate relations, gender, sexuality, history, ethnicity and class” (9).

Here is how Probyn describes her project: “The aim of this book is simple but immodest. Through the optic of food and eating, I want to investigate how as individuals we inhabit the present: how we eat into cultures, eat into identities, indeed eat into ourselves. At the same time I am interested in the question of what’s bothering us, what’s eating us now?” (2-3). Chapters explore shame, disgust, caring, sensuality, colonialism, racism, global capitalism, by looking at everything from McDonald’s rhetoric of “familial citizenship and glocalised caring” (8), to the fat pride movement’s employment of queer politics as a tool for challenging fat hatred.

Probyn writes that one of her overarching aims is to “use the materiality of eating, sex and bodies in order to draw out alternative ways of thinking about an ethics of

existence...” (3). In doing so, she appeals to a distinction between morality and ethics, a distinction that seems at times too tidily compartmentalizing to be compelling. Quoting from Nigel Rose’s analysis of Foucault, she writes that, for Foucault, “ethics was ‘a general designation’ for investigation into forms of ‘concern’ for the self,” while “‘moral systems are, by and large, systems of injunction and interdiction—thou shalt do this, or thou shalt not do that’” (4). While succinct in the abstract case, this distinction becomes less powerful when it is employed, for instance, to examine vegetarians’ criticisms of meat eaters, or activists’ critiques of McDonalds’ advertising practices. Probyn rejects the “moralizing” positions offered by, e.g. Peter Singer or the McLibel activists, and distinguishes their presumed “moral subject” from the “ethical person”, who is someone whose behavior cannot be described in relation to pre-determined laws (55). I appreciate her desire to think about humans’ relations to food in ways that do not reduce it to simplistic, right-or-wrong moral injunctions; I agree, for example, that it is important to challenge the view that vegetarianism=good, meat eating=bad. However, in order to make her distinction between morality and ethics compelling, I would like to see further explication of an example of an ethical person’s approach to vegetarianism or their response to McDonald’s.

Indeed, my most global criticism of the book is that it requires more development—perhaps an utterly unsurprising criticism about a book that sets as its task the exploration of multiple, deeply diverse strands of human being. Be that as it may, I found myself frequently longing for expansion, elucidation of passages such as this one: “Bodies eating sex are thus connected rhizomatically in different permutations, and through those connections attract yet more surfaces, bodies and touch” (76).

Probyn is at her most compelling when she is looking from “an oblique angle” (5) at the various claims being made for food and eating these days—for instance, that the kitchen is the site of a new kind of sensual pleasure (ahhh! We women didn’t know cooking was *sexy!* Of *course* we’ll do it every night!), and that food is the “last bastion of authenticity in our lives” (12). Such appeals to the healing/saving/transformational powers of food, Probyn rightly observes, are often “not as innocent as [they] might appear” (25). The claim about authenticity, for example, rests upon a model of ethnic identity that presupposes a kind of pure Past, out of which “ethnic” cuisines emerged, fully formed, only to be sullied in later years by culinary phenomena like fusion. Food writers, she aptly observes, “serve up static social categories and fairly fixed ideas about social relations” (25).

For a reader unfamiliar with Australian culture and politics, some parts of the book can be difficult to read. It is also sometimes difficult to hang onto the thread of food and eating as Probyn follows it further and further afield, as she looks at the ways that trends in food “catch at other tendencies in society” (146). But such difficulty is surely unsurprising, if we agree with Probyn that “reflecting on eating—digesting life, as it were—leads us into whole other realms” (147).