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Article abstract

Drawing upon José Esteban Muñoz's notion of queer futurity, this article examines the links between memory, food, and sexuality in Monica Meneghetti's *What the Mouth Wants: A Memoir of Food, Love and Belonging*. The memoir depicts how embodiment and affect are imprinted in memory and recirculated through narratives of familial loss and queer awakenings. It is through physical and emotional nourishment in every sense of the word that the protagonist remembers a past that is both troubling and seductive, and looks toward a future that is both queer and utopic. I suggest that the author's queer identity as a bisexual and polyamorous woman is expressed through the sensations of the flesh and through the affects that shape the world around her, and shaped by one eye toward an untenable queer past and one toward a queer utopic future.

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Abstract: Drawing upon José Esteban Muñoz's notion of queer futurity, this article examines the links between memory, food, and sexuality in Monica Meneghetti's *What the Mouth Wants: A Memoir of Food, Love and Belonging*. The memoir depicts how embodiment and affect are imprinted in memory and recirculated through narratives of familial loss and queer awakenings. It is through physical and emotional nourishment in every sense of the word that the protagonist remembers a past that is both troubling and seductive, and looks toward a future that is both queer and utopic. I suggest that the author's queer identity as a bisexual and polyamorous woman is expressed through the sensations of the flesh and through the affects that shape the world around her, and shaped by one eye toward an untenable queer past and one toward a queer utopic future.

Keywords: memoir, queer, bisexuality, food, embodiment

"We queer children of immigrants have gained more than the privilege of living in a place where some of our rights are protected. We also have the dubious honour of coming out in multiple cultures. If we must weather slurs in more than one language, we also reclaim more slurs than everyone else. We even get to reclaim gestures. I suppose that's something." (Meneghetti 2018)

In her award-winning 2017 memoir,¹ *What the Mouth Wants: A Memoir of Food, Love and Belonging*, Italian-Canadian writer Monica Meneghetti articulates the sometimes—painful link between memory and loss, and how these are intimately imprinted upon the body and the psyche through the sensual experience of food, touch, taste, smell, and sexual desire. This short collection of poetic prose, structured by the traditional four-part Italian meal—*Antipasti, Primi, Secondi e Contorni, Frutti e Formaggi*,—traces the life of the protagonist from earliest childhood impressions and memories, to family life and the discovery of her own body and the bodies of others, the loss of her mother

¹ The memoir was finalist in the Lambda Literary Award for Bisexual Non-Fiction in 2017.

to cancer and finally, to her sexual awakening as a polyamorous bisexual woman in an open relationship with two other people. In this article, I will examine the ways in which the memoir depicts how embodiment and affect are imprinted in memory and recirculated through narratives of familial loss and queer awakenings. It is through physical and emotional *nourishment* in every sense of the word—that the protagonist remembers a past that is both troubling and seductive, and looks toward a future that is both queer and utopic. I suggest that the author's queer identity as a bisexual and polyamorous woman is expressed through the sensations of the flesh and through the affects that shape the world around her, and shaped by one eye toward an untenable queer past and one toward a queer utopic future. To use José Muñoz's words, "Queerness is not yet here. Queerness is an ideality. Put another way, we are not yet queer. We may never touch queerness, but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality... queerness is an aspiration toward the future. To be queer is to imagine better possible futures" (1). *What the Mouth Wants* explores a number of interweaving themes, each of which centre on the embodied sensations and pleasures of the flesh as they imprint and encode experiences and eventually, memories, into the circuitry of the brain. As one of the concluding prose poems in the memoir suggests: "memory depends on human life, on the life of the human brain. It sustains itself on metabolites of perception—what we call 'the past'—on the excreta of consciousness and the humus of layer upon layer of moments" (137). The collection asks: what is memory? Can one's recollections of past experiences authentically reflect that past? How are memories written and modified by one's partial view of the world, by one's situatedness, desires, and embodiment? The memoir thus not only explores the links between the body and language, sexuality, food, and Italian-Canadian identity, it also fascinatingly explores the affects and sensations of the body—from the resonant and dull ache of mourning for the absent mother—which cannot be adequately described through language—to the contrasting affects of fascination and repulsion—pleasure and disgust, on the border zones between the insides and outsides of bodies, between self and other.

Bodily Affects

The desire for nourishment that begins in the very first moments of life is linked, in this memoir, to a lifelong desire to explore the sensual world—the desire for the mother's comforting touch, the infant mouth's desire for the mother's nipple, the desires of the table, and sexual desire. Looming over the entire collection is the memory of the mother who passes away after losing her battle with breast cancer. She is, as the dedication to the volume announces, "*l'ombra al mio fianco.*"

The memoir in moments reads like a collection of prose poems, dense in their evocative and sensual language of the body, of affect, of desires and perceptions, of taste and of smell and of texture—of foods, of other people, and of sexuality. The memoir begins at the very begin-

ning of life, with the first piece titled "Tongue"—in the fusion of mother and child in the womb, where the body of the self and of the other are not discernible. The eponymous organ is instrument of language but also of speech, of taste, and of pleasures beyond. Here we see the whole of a life unfurl in the sensations of touch, of the pre-linguistic body, as the author imagines her own body fused to that of the mother, cocooned in the womb for protection and sustenance: "The tongue lies within. Within, from the beginning. Within the pelvis. Within the flesh. Within nerves, skin, aura, air, Solar system, Milky Way, and cosmos (12)." The tongue here signals a connection to self, other, and the external world. It is the body part that will reveal language, and the first form of bodily penetration: the infant introducing her fingers into her mouth. Sensuality and affect are pre-verbal, and the infant's body is circumscribed by the various sensations through which it will create a physical and psychic boundary between self and mother/other: "And the thumb will be followed by air, by nipple, by milk, and from then on many things will enter our mouths" (12). The tongue "learns to shape vibrating exhalations into intelligible sound and invites the lips to co-create. The tongue wields words, oiled wood or acute steel words, keen stone or rough club words, until our bodies cease" (12). The tongue also later discovers "other tongues"—symbolically here evoking other languages—English, or Italian, but also physical tongues in moments of sexual encounter wherein it "recognizes itself in another and exclaims in pleasure or disgust" (12).

If "Tongue" is ostensibly about the first moments of life—of the child experiencing its own body, of the primordial sensations of the body that emerge into a sense of self distinct from that of the mother—it also suggests a dormant yet emergent queer identity that partakes of sexual intimacy with both genders: "The tongue rediscovers nipple, be it responsive nub or dumb kernel, remembers what we choose to forget: hunger assuaged with spray of milk; the latex-nipple cheat; the fulfillment, the safety, the drowse of mammalian communion" (12). This passage links the pre-linguistic sensory expressions of the infant body to an emerging subjectivity of the child, its desire to quench its needs through nourishment and language, or later, the adult's desire to quench its sexual appetites through that same tongue. This first poem foreshadows things to come, for the milk of the mother's nourishment is conjoined with the "bitter milk of seeds" (13), but also of the thumb's "unjointed cousin" (13) which suggest the male genitalia. The body and its affects are here "emergent" potentiality in the sense described by Seigworth and Gregg. It is also a tongue which "recognizes its own power in that other wetness" (12)—suggesting also sexual intercourse between women.

In the second piece "Octopus," the narrator remembers being in her mother's kitchen watching her prepare the evening meal, and we can see a transposition of the infantile body of the first poem to the second: The flesh of the (human) body of the previous poem seems here to find itself in her mother's bowl, ready for consumption: "Tiny, fleshy

creatures nestled against each other in the bowl. The reddish pink of their insensate tentacles" (14). The flesh of the octopus, slimy and ethereal, is fascinating to the child, and its slimy, delicate flesh evokes both desire and disgust, but also the fragility of flesh itself, forewarning the mother's body that will be consumed by cancer.

The world of the child is one of visual and sensual cues that call up memory through the experiences of the body. In other words, the external world is made body and interpreted through embodiment. In "Halved Fruit," the child sees her mother's clothing hanging out to dry on the clothesline, noticing in particular her bra, "hanging like halved fruit, linked only by their skins" (16), and is fascinated by the "cantaloupe-sized cups... my nose, lips, cheeks, and chin follow" (16). Here, the author's fascination with the female body begins with that of her mother, symbolically transposed as the fruit of knowledge that will quench her adulthood thirst for knowledge of the past, and later, for other women. In "Raw," she remembers spending time with her friend Joan sitting in the front yard delighting in the pleasures to be found in sweet powdered candy: "I lick my index finger to the second joint, I stick it into the foil-lined packet, wiggle it around in the purple powder, then put it back in my mouth... sweet and sour imitation grape flavour bursts against my tongue... [my finger] pops out with the airy, puckered sound of p..." (17). The oral pleasures of the lips, mouth and tongue link to language and sound, another source of pleasure, an exhalation of the breath, followed by a mutual recognition of pleasure: "we extend our tongues to each other for inspection. Stained, like our fingers" (17). Sharing childhood pleasures evokes the recollection of memory through the sensations and memories of the body, striated with the pleasures of taste and sound: flavour, texture, and this private moment of sensual touch suggests moments to come, future queer intimacies.

Abject Bodies

If the body is a surface upon which the external world impresses itself, assigning meaning and creating language, the external world may also evoke fear, discomfort, and disgust. *What the Mouth Wants* explores not only the sensual pleasures of taste, food, and bodies but that which disrupts or disgusts, that which must be expelled from the mouth and from the self—the abject. The abject lingers on the periphery between self and other, as Julia Kristeva explains in *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, a necessary boundary zone between the clean and the unclean that assures a sense of self separate from a dizzying outside:

Loathing an item of food, a piece of filth, waste or dung. The spasms and vomiting that protect me. The repugnance, the retching that thrusts me to the side and turns me away from defilement, sewage, and muck [...] I experience a gagging sensation and, still farther down, spasms in the stomach, the belly; and all the organs shrivel up the body, provoke tears and bile, increase heartbeat, cause forehead and hands to perspire. Along with sight-clouding dizziness, nausea makes me balk. (2)

In this memoir, the abject goes hand in hand with an emergent queer identity, and we can see how early experiences of food—both pleasurable and repugnant, are often equated or contrasted with sensual or sexual experiences.

In “Nutritional Torture,” food is described as an ordeal, a kind of “torture” to the young child as the mother prepares the *trippa* and forces the child to eat it. The reviled offal is indelibly imprinted upon the child’s memory even before her birth, before the possession of mouth and tongue to taste with, as it is imbibed through the mother *in-utero*: “I was lounging in uterine brine, my face relaxed and smooth as a marinated mushroom, my guts naively willing to digest whatever you fed me” (19). Here memory (and disgust) are pre-linguistic and even pre-corporeal—encoded in the very genetic material of the forming zygote. In “Carpaccio,” the abject is also the raw meat that is a delicacy to some and abject to others: “others gagged” on while we expressed “our delectation around mouthfuls of chilled sweet cow” (25). Raw food, offal, tripe elicits disgust and retching because it represents the transgressions of bodily boundaries. We see a similar exploration of abjection in the abject matter of the body—saliva, for instance, or blood and uterine fluid where the unconscious, pre-linguistic spasms of the body are expressed, and where desire and disgust intermingle, creating new neural networks of memory, affect, meaning. She is repulsed, for instance, by the shimmering skin that forms over the milk she heats up for her morning coffee, which she would “gather up with the edge of my spoon, mouth contorted in disgust” (86) or the Italian *fermenti* that her mother would force her to drink for her health, “super-concentrated but liquidy, the consistency of saliva... something you could consistently rely on to induce vomiting” (92). Contact with these fluids presages later experiences of bodily fluids in moments of sexual encounter—saliva, semen, ejaculate—each of these transgress the physical and psychic barriers of self—an intermingling of bodies in moments of intimacy.

What the Mouth Wants also weaves both absence and the obscene into its narrative of mourning. If the ill and even dead body of the mother evokes loss and the unrepresentability of death, it also symbolizes the troubling absences of memory. As Kristeva makes clear, the ill body, the cancerous body, the dead body are those which are most threatening to a sense of self and hence most abject: “the corpse (or cadaver: *cadere, to fall*), that which has irremediably become a cropper, is cesspool, and death; it upsets even more violently the one who confronts it as fragile and fallacious chance” (3). In “Orange Peel,” bodies, like memory, may be absent, may be missing parts, or they are ambiguous, ephemeral, troubling, and even monstrous. Memory is both the “hollow place” in the mattress that signifies the absent dead grandfather and the “hollow place in my hands which expands like the Milky Way” (26). It is also the grandmother’s bra which “had two cups and only one cup was full” (26), intimating both fascination with the female body, the embodied link between three generations of women, and the foreshadowing of her own mother’s death. The grandmother’s missing

breast presages her daughter's consumption through the same disease, but also, perversely, points to the narrator's desires for other women's breasts. The previous image of nutrients and memory passing from mother to daughter is here revived, suggesting also the inheritance of disease and scarred flesh, of the body that blooms and then falls away into illness and abjection. Nonna has "missing parts": "Breast cancer... its symptoms include 'areola takes on texture of orange peel'" (26). Here the nourishment of oranges, the symbols of sensual pleasure are turned on its head to evoke illness and death. It is a scarred body. Cancer is a corruption of the flesh, linked semantically to the carpaccio of the previous poem and to the "raw meat thin as the terra cotta roof of Mom's old convent" (27). Thus, missing parts of the grandfather, the missing breast of the grandmother—the missing mother—are all linked to the holes in memory. This exploration of human flesh corrupted by disease is followed by a piece titled "Barbeque" in which are evoked the childhood impressions of the scent of crisping chicken skin and of "charring of bones [that] "makes my mouth water" (28). Asking her father if she can sleep over at a friend's house after the barbeque, he refuses because "now you have tits and everything," suggesting this adjacement of different fleshy forms: nourishment, ill and scarred flesh, missing flesh, delectable animal meats, sexualized flesh.

Food is also linked with memory and with witnessing, which can bring both pleasure and pain. In "Zest," the narrator remembers a childhood game in which her mother would squeeze the zest of a mandarin peel into the child's eyes. The zest of a mandarin peel—evoking the earlier images of nipples the colours of orange peel, are squeezed between the fingers in a game in which the mother sprays the daughter in her eyes. But despite the potential sting, the child insists on keeping her eyes open: "I knew that sting was coming every time but I kept my eyes wide open anyway. And when they laid her in the ground, I didn't blink" (31). Pleasure and pain are one, and the eyes wide open evoke the desire to feel all of life's sensuous joys and also its pains, further, it suggests eyes wide open to witnessing a mother's life, a kind of window into the memory of the past... memory is also seeing, not missing a scene. This is later repeated at the moment of death of the mother, who dies with "one eye open" (39).

Queer Desires

What the Mouth Wants traces the genealogy of queer desires, from the pre-linguistic affects and affectations of the body as it explores the world, to the proscribed curiosities of the youth's queer sexual explorations. In "Nut," the heteronormative and patriarchal space of the Italian-Canadian suburb becomes the arena of queer desires and explorations as the narrator and her friend Joan find an old rusted toolbox "dirty, glossy red": "She dared me to be the nut for this bolt, so I pressed it against my panties and felt metal and cotton threads meshing" (22). In "Both," she becomes aware of her own body and of its emergent sex-

uality as she shows her friend a copy of *Hustler* magazine. Seemingly unaware, she is “already stroking the perfectly glossy skin of a woman” the helpless captive of a pirate standing over his captive, “nude above voluminous skirts” ... his thighs are taut as he ponders what to do with his wench. His captive” (24). As the young girl’s queer gaze “switches from slave to master, master to slave and back again” she comes to realise that she could be “both captor and captive” (24), suggesting even in childhood a break with the normative scripts of heterosexual monogamy in which women are captives of male desire. In her ability to place herself in the position of captor, she short-circuits the expectations around gender and sexuality, especially that ascribed to women as passive objects. Here the gaze turns away from the male body to the female one, and the desiring eye of the narrator fixes upon new narrative and erotic possibilities.

In “Beached,” the young girl exhibits her fascination with extended bellies, pregnant bellies, corpulent bodies as sources of warmth and comfort. “Zio’s hairy belly bulged out like mine. I pushed a finger into it” (48). “Where is your *umbellico*?” he says as he plays his game of bodily disappearance with the wondering child. The body is here rendered queer—disjointed, missing a part, an imaginary body as seen by the child in which her link with the mother—the umbilical cord—is severed. In “Flesh” the eating of mussels by the beach home on the Adriatic is a fleshly morsel that signals both fascination and abjection, coded as eroticized female parts to be savoured. Walking on the beach, she is shocked to discover how she resembles her mother and describes the *cozze* that will be eaten as “poetry”—food is like a language to be deciphered—with meanings, memories, flesh hiding within their hard shells, secrets that must be pried open, just as the “secret ingredient” of the risotto is time and patience—needed for its “long simmering softness of forgetting” (53).

In “Water Closet” the protagonist hears her female neighbour through her apartment walls as she takes a bath and pleasures herself, the sounds of desire and bodily sensuality bleeding through the boundaries of the apartment walls. The bathroom where she goes to listen is “her confessional” as she hears the “droplets change in tone and she turns the dial...” (63). Bleeding sounds between apartments break down the barriers between self and other, in a shared voyeuristic encounter despite the fact that they will never meet face to face. In “Nearly the First,” we have another fantasy in which the protagonist sees her neighbour sunning herself, imagining her fingers prodding her, unseen, voyeuristic (64). Queer sexuality is expressed in a piece titled “Two Flavours,” where we learn that the protagonist has two lovers, Sheldon and Laura, and they are each associated with their gendered bodies and the food they offer to her—food is here equated to community, longing, desire, nourishment of body and soul: “Sheldon’s upper lips still hiding beneath mustache, his eyebrows sending out feelers to my fingertip” (71) while on some mornings, Laura’s “salty juices jolt me awake instead of coffee” (71).

Conclusion

By way of conclusion, I would like to return once again to Munoz in suggesting that while *What the Mouth Wants* traces a history of memory and desire through food, once that is firmly rooted within the traditions of the Italian immigrant family to Canada, it also looks to a queer future which is expressed in new gastronomic practices. If the narrator looks longingly and nostalgically to her past and her memories of food and family, these are nevertheless framed by what Adrienne Rich has termed “compulsory heterosexuality”—the idea or supposition that everyone in society is both heterosexual and monogamous. As the narrator creates her own queer family, with Sheldon and Tasha, she turns away from the traditional family “unmoored” by the death of the mother and toward new foods, and thus subverts or disrupts that heteronormative tradition by introducing new familial and gastronomic traditions: “Our Thanksgiving menu featured a traditional dish from each of our childhoods. Sheldon would grill two links of Mennonite farmer’s sausage, double-smoked fifty minutes away from his hometown. Tasha would prepare a classic Caribbean dish of peas and rice. I planned to braise a *finocchio* from Peppe’s.” (130).

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