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## Put a Taste of the South in Your Mouth: Carnal Appetites and Intersexuality

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BY JAIME CANTRELL

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

There's good and bad things about the South / And some leave a bitter taste in my mouth. / But we won't talk about that 'cause it's understood / Everybody hear about the bad but what about the good?

— Junior Walker and the All Stars, “Way Back Home”<sup>1</sup>

Food is more than sustenance; it is history. I remember women by what we ate together, what they dug out of the freezer after we'd made love for hours.

— Dorothy Allison, in *Trash* <sup>2</sup>

In *The Real South: Southern Narrative in the Age of Cultural Reproduction*, Scott Romine explores cultural consumerism through Mama Dip's Kitchen, located in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, where, with a spoonful of erotic innuendo, “diners are invited to ‘put a taste of the South in your mouth.’”<sup>3</sup> In “The Texts of Southern Food,” a special double issue of the *Southern Quarterly*, Patricia Yaeger evokes childhood kitchen memories in her essay “Edible Labor,” blurring lines between the body and biscuit batter: “Even the biscuits—fluffy as popcorn—reeked of my grandmother's body. Her puffy arms swung too and fro as she kneaded the dough, and I grew dizzy watching her. Which was arm, and which was batter? How to tell flesh from dough or rough skin from biscuit crust?”<sup>4</sup> Romine and Yaeger narrow in on a concept that powerfully resonates with literary representations of lesbian hypervisibility explored in this essay: food is memory and a key marker and component of both identity and community. And yet, like the concept of an authentic South, there is no real agreed upon “Taste of the South”—food is either southern or it isn't. Southerners either cook it or they don't. And yet, certain foods and dishes retain a somewhat recognizable southernness—grits, I think, are paradigmatic. Ask southerner to give you a definition of southern food and they will likely

respond with specific foodways—corn and hog meat, sweet tea, or barbeque—for “as long as there has been a South, and people who think of themselves as Southerners, food has been central to the region’s image, its personality, and its character.”<sup>5</sup>

Despite all the attention paid to the pleasure of food, and food’s usefulness as a critical node for analyzing southern sociality, sexuality is largely neglected in those discussions. Nevertheless, food and sex are intimately linked.

In her introduction to *The Larder: Food Studies Methods from the American South*, Elizabeth Engelhardt explicitly links southern foodways taxonomies with cultural processes and the production of communal relations: “The study of why we eat, what we eat, and what it means” directly reinscribes “social interactions and cultural exchanges.”<sup>6</sup> Engelhardt notes that “for academic audiences focused on examining and criticizing dietary habits and patterns of exclusion,” southern food studies “offer approaches to race, class, gender, and ethnicity.”<sup>7</sup> Despite all the attention paid to the pleasure of food, and food’s usefulness as a critical node for analyzing southern sociality, sexuality is largely neglected in those discussions. Nevertheless, food and sex are intimately linked. Both involve hunger—cravings for satiation, nourishment, and fulfillment. Both convey a sense of pleasurable sustenance; food is often paired with explorative sex, and sex is sometimes prefaced or concluded by the act of eating. Additionally, with regard to preference and choice, each suggests a great deal about who we are and where we come from.

But such connections are far from missing in fiction and poetry by post–civil rights-era southern lesbian authors. Both of the opening quotations from Romine and Yaeger suggest two concurrent strains of thought that pertain to the surface and close readings of poems and fiction in my analysis, works that illustrate what we get by putting the South in our mouths: Yaeger evokes a “foodways” approach where food is immensely salient to memory/history, while Romine evokes *expectations* (imagery/stereotype/association) and rhetorical manipulation (particularly marketing) of those expectations. Both approaches are important for understanding why *southern* food is so significant in the poetry and fiction of southern lesbian writers.

## 2 FEAST YOUR EYES ON THIS: LESBIAN HYPERVISIBILITY

This essay calls attention to representations of food in literary productions as an especially apropos lens for examining lesbian sex and sociality assertions—not in terms of exclusion, but instead, with regard to inclusivity. I focus on how community, sex, and region intersected and produced ways of being and belonging. The fiction and poems I examine here intricately illuminate how “eating, writing, and loving can and must be brought together” to place sex at

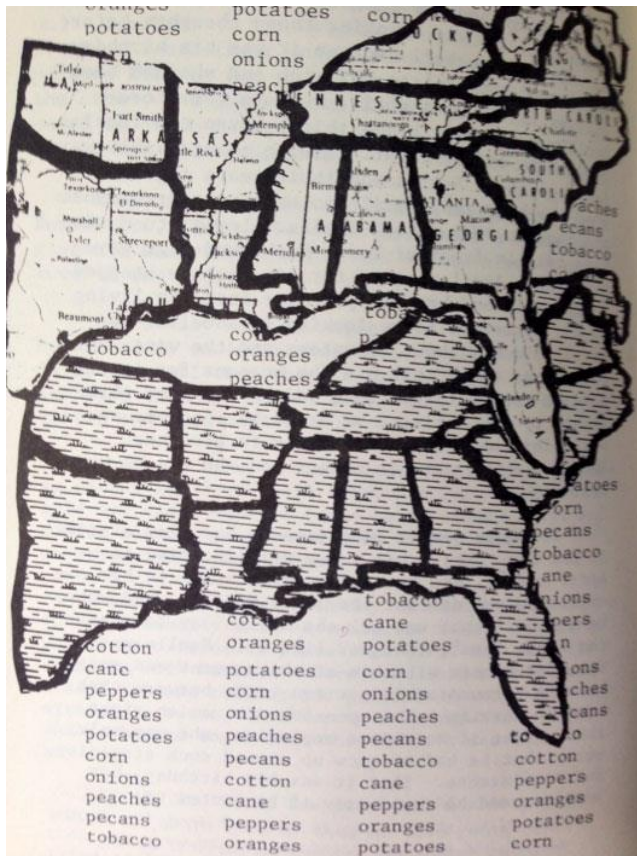
the center of intersectionalities, or what I coin *intersexionalities*.<sup>8</sup> As such, these literary productions engage with Elizabeth Grosz's reconfiguration of lesbian desire, or the drawing together of bodies, pleasures, surfaces, and intensities. Formulated contiguously "with and a part of other relations . . . the bedroom is no more the privileged site of sexuality than any other space; sexuality and desire are a part of the intensity and passion of life itself."<sup>9</sup> Here I seek to develop a line of thinking that interweaves the lesbian body, eating, and food with affective resonances that celebrate and appreciate tactile sensations, the sense of timing that is so important in loving and eating, and the passion these writers have for southern food and satisfying sex.

These works posit lesbian sexuality (and the lesbian body) as a production—energies and pulses that produce, generate, containing history and memory—within a specific space. Looking at and with lesbian hypervisibility, represented through the vehicle of food in these poems, we see writers exploring the tangible connections, social dimensions, and affective possibilities that thinking sex through southern food reveals. By "lesbian hypervisibility" I mean a super saturation or blatant celebration/recognition of lesbian topics and themes in selected texts—*understood relationally* in comparison to mid-century southern literary works where an absence/presence of sexual otherness is a matter of willful denial or careful detection. Indeed, "close" reading suggests a taboo; hypervisibility represents an end of taboo, thus calling into question the necessity of close readings. A shift to hypervisibility opens up the complexity of literary space for critical analysis. If saturation already exists on the textual surface, we as readers must resist looking deeper into the narrative frame, and instead, favor new reading methods that examine how we might look *across* and *with* the surface of literary representations.<sup>10</sup>

Foodstuffs including peaches, plums, oysters, sausages, bananas, and meatballs metaphorically signal sexually specific areas of the body—ultimately delineating a food-consciousness in how the sexed body is perceived.

Considering a politics of sexuality rooted in food and eating, or in production and consumption, foregrounds the role of the body in new ways. Multiple tactile and sensory experiences interweave through alimentary practices—themselves a cacophony of feelings, thoughts, textures, scents, and excesses—revealing the extent to which individuals experience sensation and satisfaction through food and eating. While sexually euphemistic food clichés and puns proliferate in social rhetoric, the axiom "you are what you eat" persists as the customary means of self-examining our consumptive relationship to food. Foodstuffs including peaches, plums, oysters, sausages, bananas, and meatballs metaphorically signal sexually specific areas of the body—ultimately delineating a food-consciousness in how the sexed body is perceived. In *Carnal Appetites: Foodsexidentities*, Elspeth Probyn explores this connectivity: "Intensely social, boringly mundane, simple or complicated, at times eating seemingly connects us to the core of our selves."<sup>11</sup> What we put into our mouths, how much of it, and obsessions

surrounding what comes out of our bodies are commonplace considerations of materiality, as our eating bodies are constantly in flux. Similar changes could be said of our bodies during and after sex. In *Racial Indigestion: Eating Bodies in the 19th Century*, Kyla Wazana Tompkins demarcates the boundaries between food and eating, calling scholars to shift toward a framework that weds food studies to body theory, allowing a “critique of the political beliefs and structures that underlie eating as a social practice.”<sup>12</sup> Eating functions simultaneously as a cultural process and a biological one, as the body maps desire, appetite, and erotic/alimentary pleasure alongside the production of group formation, affirmation, and delineation. The medium for the map is southern food, as exemplified by this sketch from a 1982 issue of the southern lesbian feminist journal *Feminary*, where southern foods and crops are literally mapped onto a state demarcated region.



*Feminary* Vol. XII: 1 (1982)

The poetry and fiction in this essay—characterized by lesbian hypervisibility, the representation of southern food as memory, the evocation of southern food with its many expectations and associations, and the work of a burgeoning lesbian-feminist community bravely writing explicit, “outer limits” sex acts—must be understood within a national frame. During the 1980s, at the height of the polarizing feminist sex wars, these southern writers challenged the marginal status of lesbians—and the marginalized positioning of certain sex acts—through their writings, in an effort to create a transformed lesbian society and a more honest body of lesbian literature that told the truth about sex in a visible, public way.<sup>13</sup> They did so by explicitly representing

specific sex acts that had, to that point, been considered not only nonfeminist, but within the realm of a male, heterosexual sex repertoire. In *Skin: Talking about Sex, Class, and Literature*, Dorothy Allison laments a lack of truth and explicitness in the “brave new world of lesbian fiction,” saying, “Love stories, grief and memory stories, sensual memory stories, one that played on the words *eating her*, featuring the body of the beloved, newly dead, cooked up as stew and savored—nonexplicit to the point of obscurity.”<sup>14</sup> By honing in on what they knew best—region and southern food—and drawing on the expectations of region and southern food through hypervisible imagery and commonplace associations, these lesbian writers truly brought flesh and texture to the act of eating.

### 3 EROS AND EATING, OR YOU EAT WHAT YOU ARE: DOROTHY ALLISON

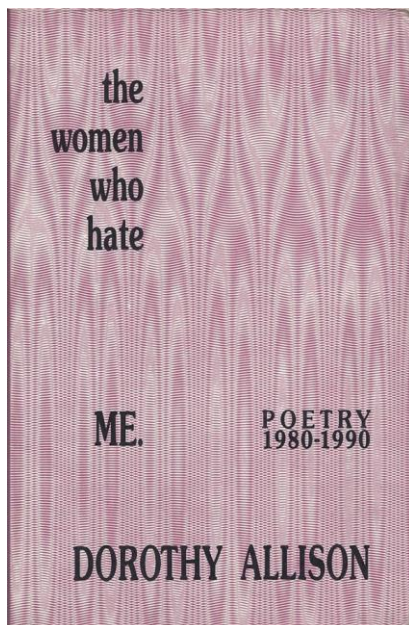
The communities that shape identity are not always welcome or welcoming ones. Self, family, and heterosexist, patriarchal culture are sources of affective anger in Allison’s collection *the women who hate me* (1991). Her poems are seductively engaging for their emotional, linguistic precision, yet violently explicit imagery shocks the reader from that word-spell. Written between 1981 and the summer of 1983 following her participation in the Scholar and the Feminist Conference IX, the landmark and controversial feminist gathering held at Barnard College in New York, Allison’s collection evokes the pleasures and dangers in lesbian relationships. The majority of these poems focus tightly on demystifying lesbian romanticism: “I do not believe anymore in the natural superiority / of the lesbian,” she writes in the title poem, “the women who hate me.”<sup>15</sup> Other poems in the collection analogously trigger a sense of poignant resentment, including topics on childhood sexual abuse, class struggle, volatile female relationships, feminism, and mendacity. Of the 27 collected poems, four prominently feature food in their titles: “dumpling child,” “appetite,” “tomato song,” and “butter my tongue.” Other poems incorporate food imagery, including “i chose this ground,” where Allison laments living “a lifetime away from the cornbread / warm milk hunger of my childhood.”<sup>16</sup> Southern foodstuffs are repeatedly and explicitly used to signal the poetics of food and sex throughout the collection: “Will you sit at my table, / eat my gravy, . . . will you slide your cabbage hands over my belly / your dirty mouth up my thigh?”<sup>17</sup> Far from sublimating or substituting for sexual practice, such imagery foregrounds it, rendering lesbian sexual activity hypervisible. Relieved of searching for the *what* of sexuality, we are freed to focus on the *how*—that is, how the intersections of region, sexuality, and sociality are conveyed and, inevitably, are in tension.

Dorothy Allison’s use of food imagery overwhelmingly gestures toward regional cuisine, bringing lesbian experiences viscerally to life in an assertion of shared gustatory heritage and, thus, community.

Examining “dumpling child” for its literal meaning is an exercise in descriptive carnal desires. Born in Greenville, South Carolina, and raised in Florida, Allison echoes her southern heritage vis-à-vis comfort food in the poem. Her use of food imagery overwhelmingly gestures toward regional cuisine, bringing lesbian experiences viscerally to life in an assertion of shared gustatory heritage and, thus, community. The first five lines of the poem describe down home southern cooking as a primary constituent of identity:

A southern dumpling child  
biscuit eater, tea sipper  
okra slicer, gravy dipper,  
I fry my potatoes with onions  
stew my greens with pork. <sup>18</sup>

The use of “child” suggests a nostalgic orientation toward southern food, while the noun-verbs “eater,” “sipper,” “slicer,” and “dipper” indicate a doer behind the action, a regional subject. Pork-laced greens are particularly relevant to understanding Allison’s roots as a “whitetrash, no-account” southerner. Turnip greens “belong to the South, as firmly rooted as a peanut vine” and are inexpensive and thus widely available to the lower classes; more highbrow dishes such as Spinach Madeline suggests wealth.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, signaling fortune and class—or aspirations thereof—collard greens are traditionally eaten on New Year’s Day, to ensure good luck in the coming year. Allison concretely embraces regional food specialties like okra and tea, biscuits and milk gravy, indicating their centrality to both her individual tastes and her southern subjectivity.



The relationship between food and sex in this poem is even more explicit when considerations of affective sensory pleasures, tastes, and textures come into play. Just the assonance of words like “biscuit,” “sipper,” and “dipper” evokes euphemistic ways of reading. The repeated sounds

link the food, the eater, and the reader just as the poem weds culinary imagery with lovers.<sup>20</sup> Considering the poem at face value and analyzing its types of food for their literal meaning, it is clear that Allison blends salty flavors with savory ones—the flake of a briny biscuit, the thick consistency of flavorful gravy sauce.

Taste is quintessentially intrinsic to food and sex both inside and outside of the kitchen and bedroom.<sup>21</sup> The longer second stanza of “dumpling child” melds food memories with erotic lesbian passion. Allison’s lover tastes sweet like watermelon; sprinkling red watermelon with sea salt expands the palate in a time honored southern tradition:

And ride my lover high up  
on the butterfat shine of her thighs  
where her belly arches and sweetly tastes  
of rock salt on watermelon  
sunshine sharp teeth bite light  
and lick slow like mama’s  
favorite dumpling child.<sup>22</sup>

“Her” thighs are polished like butter fat, the highest concentration of fatty cream in whole milk and velvety yellow butter; both lovers are white. Allison imparts a lush and indulgent female landscape where sex becomes a way to appreciate food and vice versa. Allison tastes her lover—slowly, she dines. The “sunshine sharp teeth bite light” as one’s mouth does into a succulent dish. A child eats with abandon, savoring favorite foods carelessly and messily, never thinking to count calories or refrain from consuming what tastes good. Children are often picky about what they eat, wanting to maximize the delight of consumption; adults meanwhile are often partial to foods not because of the direct sensory pleasure, but because they are nostalgically reminded of home and family.<sup>23</sup> Likewise, Allison’s inclusion of foodstuffs in this poem symbolizes relief and region (southern food as comfort food) while connoting decadence.

Allison makes visible the dual desires of food and sex as integral to her core self—not collapsing the two, but coupling each embodied, tactile experience to maximize their joint concupiscence. Allison’s memories of food are inescapably southern. Lovemaking in the poem is affixed to and articulated through the vehicle of southern food, making her identity visible through this inextricable surface pairing. Thus she asserts lesbian southern identity as a part of the southern social realm, integrating sexual importance and validity while constructing a sexual identity she could be proud of and honest about. An identity that belonged to the broader feminist community, and by extension, to the nation. Her work tells the story of southern lesbian desire and sex made palatable and celebrated through southern food and affirmed through that regional tradition.

Allison continues to explore intersecting relationships between regional affiliation and lesbian identity in her poem “tomato song,” as setting and sense of place establish a fraught divide between urban New York and the rural South. Caught in the balance, Allison muses that she “might as well live up to my reputation” as a lesbian, as a southerner, and as an outsider on



both scores.<sup>24</sup> Allison imagines herself wreaking havoc on the residents of New York, a hyperbolized figure wrecking bridges, ringing in the unwanted reign of a displaced, angry southern lesbian. It is important to emphasize that Allison, as an explicitly southern lesbian, is not playing a catch-up game in the progressive city, but rather is at the forefront of challenging 1980s feminist and lesbian identity politics. Her reputation, and her experiences as a “Whitetrash / no-count / bastard” southerner with deviant S/M lesbian sexual desires were actively invalidated and negated by the lesbian-feminist movement at the time—one caught in a notorious scholar-activist debate surrounding sex negative and sex positive feminist politics.<sup>25</sup> Like “kind of a great red fruit” Allison envisions that she will

. . . grow a rage like a tomato,  
.....  
. . . bring down sauce  
on half the city  
tell low-down jokes  
proposition old ladies  
lick their cheeks, offer to  
climb up under their skirts  
for free.<sup>26</sup>

Allison’s choice of a vine-ripened, juicy tomato is a strategic one—tomatoes are a fruit that would not typically thrive in New York’s concrete jungle. While she presents readers with the image of a single garden tomato, southerners might imagine fields filled with rows and rows of tomatoes ripe for the picking. Both crop images are as foreign to New York City as the imagery of Allison’s great, enraged tomato rolling up Broadway. Looking with the poem, Allison’s juxtaposes this ripe, hardy fruit alongside the hard streets of New York, suggesting the difficulty of non-normative desire in even the most progressive of cities, as well as regional and affective displacements she registers not only as southerner living in New York, but as someone writing sexuality in a national-level lesbian-feminist political moment. Sex was important, serious, a battleground, and writing was an act of self-discovery, self-revelation.<sup>27</sup>



Photo by Robert Couse-Baker

This round, succulent, and crimson-colored fruit is not only symbolic of Allison's southern roots—"last but not least in the pantheon of Southern vegetables"—but of her sexual identity and physiology as well.<sup>28</sup> Her tomato song in this poem is the lyrical melody of an angry vagina. Her rage is both literal and satirical, and above all, very public: she appropriates the stereotype that southerners, women, and in particular, lesbians, are irrational and overly emotional.<sup>29</sup> In *Rabelais*, Bakhtin writes "the grotesque is always satire. Where there is no satirical orientation there is no grotesque."<sup>30</sup> Addressing a regional sexual context, Mab Segrest argues that the figure of the grotesque in southern literature only serves to further marginalize the already marginal: "I knew in my guts that my strongest feelings, for women and girls, put me somehow on the outside, set me apart. Although I did not know what *lesbian* was, I felt myself a closet freak."<sup>31</sup> The grotesque body carries with it considerable potential for transgression by aligning the abject with the figural, the closeted with the exaggerated, and the normal with the freakish.<sup>32</sup> Expanding her fantasy self to grotesque proportions, Allison gives a satirical embrace to the social disorder one might expect from a southern lesbian's presence, body, and sexuality, although ostensibly, she's writing to other feminist-lesbians more broadly. In sarcastic and humorous tones, Allison's epic adventures in the poem satirize the chaos she imagines her very presence as a southern sex-positive S/M kink-loving lesbian might cause.

Color choice is a prominent element in "tomato song," as red is a hue that symbolizes passion and sensuality, and at times, violence. Like the watermelon in "dumpling child," Allison's red, pulsing desire for women parallels the tomato as a source of vitality and nourishment—and, in some senses, sexual and regional orientation. Much as the tomato literally sustains life, so too her vagina enlivens the pleasures of her body; her anger and her desire both stem from that place where blood pumps and pulses. She melds sources of strength, thoroughly infusing the color red, arousal, anger, fruit, and southernness with oxygen and life. The poem concludes with Allison proclaiming that she will make no apologies about who she is as a sexual being, that there will be "nothing but me, my tomato, my rages, / my name, / my name."<sup>33</sup> She accepts and claims her lesbian and southern identities regardless of how she is perceived or (mis)understood. Reading with the grain, her pride is evident, if not—like a tomato—somewhat vulnerable to bruising.

Allison's poem "the terror of my enemies" expresses passions that span from sensuality to rage through the vehicle of sensory receptors. Allison invites an army of lovers to enter her personal space, her bed, and her body. These women are separate from the enemies—homophobes and nonpolitical mainstream society more generally, sex-negative, pro-censorship feminists more specifically—who Allison believes incapable of accepting and supporting her sexual life as a lesbian with sadomasochistic kinks or the tenderness with which her feelings are sensually/sensorially relayed between partners. Sexuality in this poem is hypervisible, blunt, and on the surface. For readers, food elicits meaning and memory of a shared regional identity that appears as an anchor to envision how southern lesbian sexual identity is ventured, celebrated, and represented textually.<sup>34</sup>

Both desire and anger have the potential to become soul consuming. The promise of consumption is inherently tied to the act of eating in the poem, where

I put my tongue,  
my hands to,  
the women whose hands  
widen and fill me,  
whose tongues suck salt  
to the surface  
of my skin.  
The act of murder as I dream it  
is distinct from the terror  
of my enemies.  
They cannot imagine  
the bone speed of my rage,  
the strawberry sweetness  
of my revenge  
measured cold  
and bitter sharp  
behind my tongue<sup>35</sup>

Eating, sucking, and licking evoke more than oral intercourse. Allison seemingly draws strength from skin's salty surface, reinforcing sexual identity and the sense of belonging to a lesbian community. For Allison, her lovers nourish the body's emotional landscape much in the same way that food nourishes her physically. However, in this poem, it does not automatically follow that food and affective registers of emotion always fill the body with comfort and warmth. The first two tastes mentioned are incredibly disparate, signaling two diverse emotions. The saltiness of the skin suggests desire and lovemaking, while strawberry sweetness is contrasted with the satisfying taste of revenge. The fruitlike sweetness of revenge is described as something that is "measured cold and bitter sharp," while at face value, salt suggests an abundance of sweat on hot skin.<sup>36</sup> It is not possible to "measure" the taste of salt on her lover; it is vast, infinite, and found everywhere. And yet the taste of revenge, and the "bone speed of my rage" is measured behind her tongue, strategically subject to careful calculation.

Drawing together the intensities and passions of life itself, Allison illustrates how she embodies rage and love irrespective of what society imagines those experiences to feel like, while powerfully defying her enemies within a feminist movement intent on publicly speaking out against politically incorrect sex.

The blending of hands, tongues, and hips in "the terror of my enemies" unites lovers in a way that makes them virtually indistinguishable from one another. Allison embraces an emotional landscape peppered with love, shame, grief, rage, resentment, and fear largely brought on by the dislocation she felt within the national lesbian-feminist community. While she expresses love and rage with a certain descriptive taste, she draws a distinction: the strawberry sweetness

of rage is not nearly as fulfilling in the same way that love is. Rage is an isolating, solitary taste—not a shared one. Class and privilege as well as entitlement and denial separated her from a wider national feminist movement that increasingly became reactionary and exclusionary—not surprisingly, on the topic of sex. Drawing together the intensities and passions of life itself, Allison illustrates how she embodies rage and love irrespective of what society imagines those experiences to feel like, while powerfully defying her enemies within a feminist movement intent on publicly speaking out against politically incorrect sex. And in the 1980s, sex-negative feminists overwhelmingly considered oral sex between women deviant. The practice itself was invariably enmeshed in a heated national conversation surrounding the political meanings of sexual acts and the radical nature of expressing and speaking about them openly.<sup>37</sup> Such hypervisible representations of lesbian sex would have resonated strongly with pro-sex lesbian feminists, women who talked about explicit sexual desires—fetish specific and/or dominance and submission—and organized around them in the public sphere, building lesbian sociality through intersexuality and positing “radical sex itself as a sign of radical politics.”<sup>38</sup>



Courtesy Rlaferla

#### 4 EROS AND EATING, OR YOU EAT WHAT YOU ARE: MINNIE BRUCE PRATT

Minnie Bruce Pratt’s five-line poem “Peach,” from her collection *We Say We Love Each Other* offers another metaphorical comparison between a uniquely state-specific southern

food—Georgia peaches, anyone?—and lesbian oral/anal sex.<sup>39</sup>

According to Virginia Willis, cookbook author of *Bon Appétit, Y'all* (2008) and frequent contributor to the Southern Foodways Alliance blog, “I’m certainly biased toward Georgia peaches, but it seems to me that the red clay soil and hot sun here create a taste like no other. In keeping with the region’s legendary sweet tooth, many Southern recipes can quickly turn the healthful peach into something terribly unvirtuous—though delicious.” This observation recalls the injunction about putting the South in your mouth, and Pratt’s poem works with and against these associations while stressing the link between food and normative/virtuous and non-normative/nonvirtuous sexual taboos:

My tongue, your ass:  
the center of a peach,  
ripe, soft, pitted, red-fibred flesh,  
dissolving toward earth, lust  
*Eat you?* I ask.<sup>40</sup>

The unvirtuous conflation of peach imagery and ass imagery in Pratt’s “Peach” illustrates the ways in which one’s tongue and ass are similar to a peach. Both are red, soft, and laden with small surface indentions. The center of the peach in this poem is pitted, characterized by absence, whereas the tongue fills the mouth. Indeed, looking at the very center of this poem, one notices absence: the pitted fruit, one’s pitted ass. The word “pitted” falls within the center of a five-line poem: third line, third word. As an evocative focus for both the ass and peach, any lack or absence evidenced by the central placement of “pitted” in fact only illuminates a need to fill, penetrate. And yet while the reader subconsciously sexualizes the peach—perhaps as a central, intended image—it is germane to consider how the tongue is ripe for hypersexualization: like “your ass,” “my tongue” is lustful, juicy, and rutted.

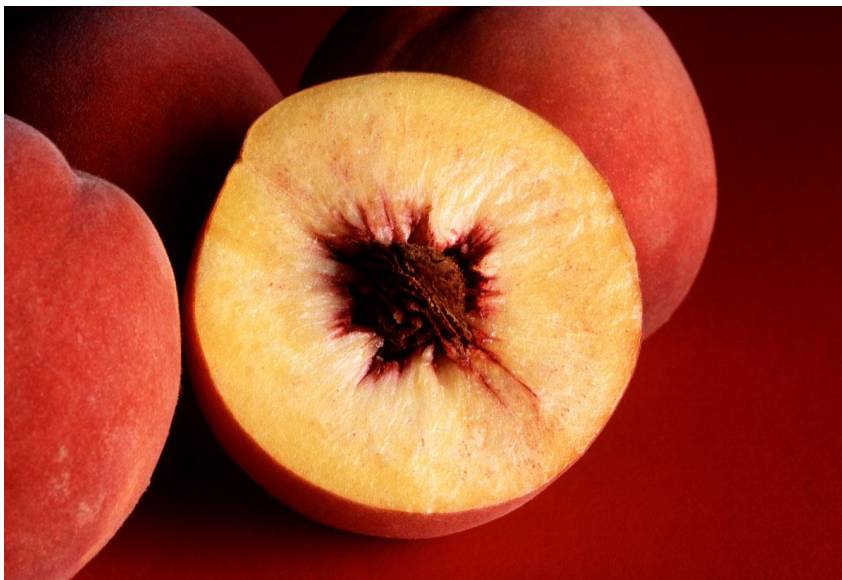
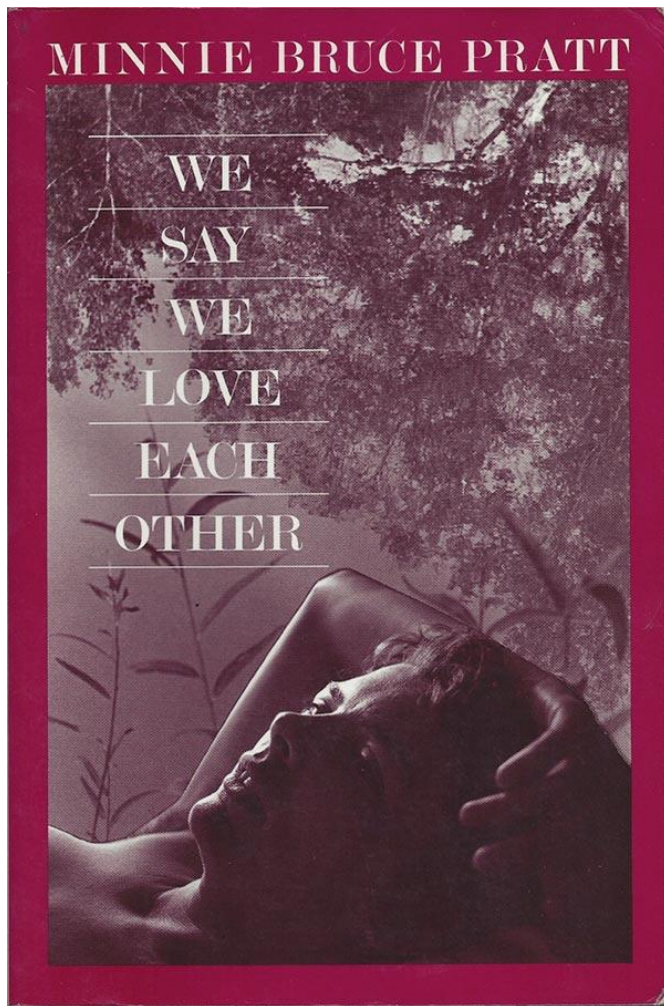


Photo by Jack Dykinga

Notable, too, here are a matter of sequence and questions of forbidden eating and the unvirtuous. The final line of the poem is proleptic, evidenced by the interrogative, “*Eat you? I ask.*” This act of oral anal sex has not yet been acted upon; it is a future act that has not yet been consummated. Unlike our speaker’s romantic attachment to peaches—her sultry tactile descriptions of sight and feel—there is a curious absence of taste sensations with regard to the ass. This speaks to the lack established and performed by “pitted” as the center of the poem. As an interrogative, “*Eat you?*” is not merely an acknowledged invitation—a polite seeking of consent—it is an incredulous one. Presumably, our speaker has never tasted ass, and the interrogative suggests that eating ass would taste as good as a peach would. Sexual taboo is evocatively surfaced—in our face as well as the speaker’s.



We might consider “Peach” at face value in terms of the sexual taboos it evokes, but the poem is also shockingly representative of a sexual conviction bravely steeped in validating her unvirtuous desire for kink. Consider how the adage “tossed salad” serves as a colloquial referent to oral anal sex. Here again we see the rhetoric of food used to discuss the sexed body, or the sex act of licking/eating around or in the ass. In “Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality,” Gayle Rubin theorizes sex negativity endemic to Western culture,

diagramming a hierarchical sexual value system oppressive to erotic misconduct and divergent sexual tastes. This hierarchy of sexual value—where sex is determined to be a sinfully destructive force—operates in much of the same ways as do other ideological systems. Determined by a complex model, socially acceptable sex practices are dependent upon sex object choice (including sex, gender, race, and age), location, degree of familiarity, number of participants, and kind of experience. Rubin posits a diametrically oppositional frame: good, normal sex or “the charmed circle” as relationally superior to bad, abnormal sex or “the outer limits.”<sup>41</sup> Her work calls into question where oral/anal sex between lesbians would fall on a hierarchical table or circle. As a queer sex act, anal sex—at least in the popular imaginary—is frequently attributed to sex between men. The act itself is gendered, and in “Peach” we see a reversal of that attributive gender—much in the same way that peach imagery in the poem is overthrown, subverted, dare I say it—tossed—from its usual conflation with cunt to instead highlight a woman’s ass.

These intersecting taboos bring into focus how occupying the outer limit—lesbian oral/anal sex—is a position of critical periphery. Sexual behaviors classified outside of the charmed circle dispute the normative position of such problematically structured systems of desire. Their positions in fact, constitute one another even as the outer limits call into question how they are both mutually constructed by society’s mores. This discussion is equally applicable to my previous readings of Allison’s poetry as well. In “Sex Writing, the Importance and the Difficulty,” Allison writes, “What was taboo? In what context? Sex had always been so risky. It had seemed enough just to pronounce myself a lesbian. Did I have to say what it was I truly desired, what I did and did not do, and why?”<sup>42</sup> Albeit from different perspectives, both Pratt and Allison are addressing what have been “the outer limits” of socially acceptable sexuality—foregrounding the intersection of not only non-normative sexual identities, but also non-normative sexual acts in what would have been a highly disputed emergent world of lesbian fiction—ultimately centering them, or at the very least, declaring them as legitimate and visible.

Pratt’s poem, “Plums,” strategically placed on the page opposite “Peach,” is comprised of two sentences:

I love the way you  
give me cold plums. I love the  
way you give me tongues.<sup>43</sup>

Here again, relieved of searching for sexuality, we see an exuberant celebration of lesbian sex acts metaphorically juxtaposed against commonplace table fruit. Reading with the grain of the poem, and of curve of the plum itself, we see Pratt gesturing toward oral sex between women as forbidden fruit: frisky, challenging, ironic, and wide open to sensations including hot and cold temperature play. Contrasting ice play with a chilled plum, Pratt intimately shares with readers an expansive sexual repertoire laced with flairs of sexual kink.



Looking with Pratt's poem, "Blueberries," we as readers become more than voyeurs in the sumptuous interplay—we participate. As Pratt looks at her lover eyeing the glistening, rounded blueberries, so, too, do we as readers see the intimate exchange:

Love, I know you well: how you look, desiring,  
upper lip lengthened when you look at what you  
want: some wet fat blueberries heaped in bowls, or  
me, at times, wet too. <sup>44</sup>

Through lesbian hypervisibility in this poem, readers know her lover's look of desire—even if we do not know Pratt's lover (certainly not as well as she does). Pratt's poetry in *We Say We Love Each Other* energizes lesbian desire through the vehicle of southern food; she invents desire as part of the passion of eating, whether bodies or fruit. Focusing on the sensual details of life, Pratt's "Peach," "Plums," and "Blueberries" exhibit an assemblage of fruits swept up in the intensity of lesbian desire—commonplace table fruits are hypersexualized. The sheer force of lesbian eroticism in these works speak to Grosz's reconfiguration of lesbian desire as she asks,

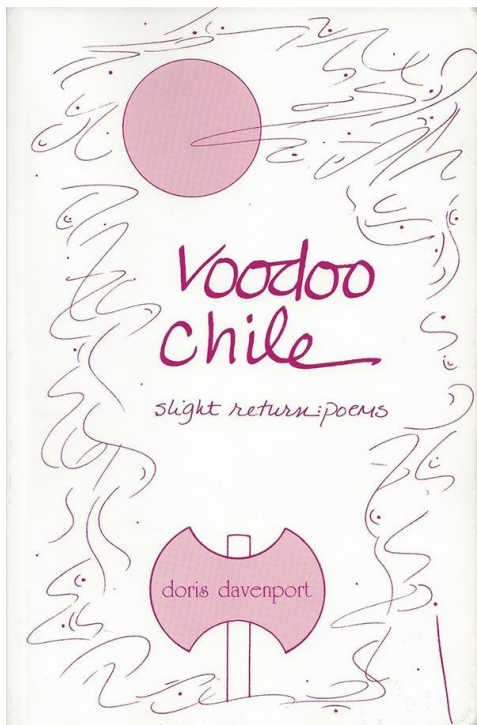
the question is not am I . . . a lesbian, but rather, what kinds of lesbian connections, what kinds of lesbian-machine, we invest our time, energy, and bodies in, what kinds of sexuality we invest ourselves in, with what other kinds of bodies, and to what effects? What it is that together, in parts and bits, and interconnections, we can make that is new, exploratory, opens up further spaces, induces further intensities, speeds up, enervates, and proliferates production. . . . <sup>45</sup>

The power of these poems lies in their multitude of associations: drawing together surfaces through intersexuality, the skin of a woman's body similar to the skin of a fruit's peel, the flesh of both, the tactile sensations of eating warm or cool, and so too the literary production itself in turn producing lesbian sociality and community.



## 5 EROS AND EATING, OR YOU EAT WHAT YOU ARE: DORIS DAVENPORT

Continuing to explore the carnal intersexuality proliferating in southern food, lesbian sexual identity, and unvirtuous, pleasurable acts described in literary productions—invigorated specifically within a lens of succulent fruits—centralizes doris davenport’s three-stanza poem “Blackberry Time.” According to *The Companion to Southern Literature*, davenport is a “lesser-known but important southern lesbian poet” who was born in Gainesville, Georgia.<sup>46</sup> While davenport’s six collections of poetry, in particular her self-published works *It’s Like This* (1980), *Eat Thunder & Drink Rain* (1982), and *Voodoo Chile: Slight Return* (1991), have been neglected in contemporary literary criticism on the women’s liberation movement and black arts movement, as well as within a wider body of southern literature, her work is ripe for examining the intersectionalities/intersexuality in southern lesbian sociality and race.<sup>47</sup> Her contribution to the nationally groundbreaking anthology *This Bridge Called My Back* (1981) titled “The Pathology of Racism: A Conversation with Third World Wimmin” linked late 1970s- and early 1980s-era feminisms with the lived experiences of women negotiating institutional and personal racism within a regional framework. Writing from subjective perspective, and addressing the disparate struggles white women and women of color felt within a changing feminist movement, challenged what Allison has called “the same old, slightly distant, and carefully respectable aura of feminist theory.”<sup>48</sup> That defiant voice—declaring and reveling in explicitness, expanding and shifting early 1970s and 1980s mainstream feminisms—encompasses davenport’s erogenous poetry.



davenport exuberantly and playfully trades on the expectation of blackberry sweetness in her poem “Blackberry Time,” paralleling southern sun ripened imagery associations with a woman’s sexual readiness.

The wide availability of fruits and berries in the South extends to table accompaniments, including jams, jellies, and preserves. Indeed, the processes of drying, salting, stewing, boiling, pickling, potting, freezing, and canning are southern traditions dating from the early 1800s to the post–World War II era, when food was “put up” for later consumption.<sup>49</sup> Blackberries were found “growing in Virginia 380 years ago by the first English settlers,” and the very ripest of blackberries are naturally sweet.<sup>50</sup> davenport exuberantly and playfully trades on the expectation of blackberry sweetness in her poem “Blackberry Time,” paralleling southern sun ripened imagery associations with a woman’s sexual readiness:

at a certain time in summer  
they grow wild  
& lush everywhere each tiny  
grain filled with black  
juice / each little bubble a  
huge berry

blackberries wild and loose—  
mixed with honeysuckles & weeds &  
all you have to do  
is fight off a few bugs, pick off  
a few stuck in the juice to get  
a mouthstained purple-black  
smiling over that  
juice / hot &  
sensuous to the tongue & throat  
& bare brown feet

at that time in summer  
when black berries will  
again  
grow wild, free, unfenced  
& unpolluted i  
can find you  
in honeysuckles & weeds &  
know again your  
hot sweetness.<sup>51</sup>

Soft, erotic tones of delighted discovery work us, the readers, over with honest, lesbian hypervisibility. The adage “eating out” takes on a new layer as the affinity between berries and sugar—the clit or “huge berry”—and corporeal juices crystalizes in sharp relief. The poetic persona in “Blackberry Time” must search for the berries she seeks, picking through obstacles and natural landscape to locate the hot sweetness she desires. And yet, these berries are in abundance as they in fact “grow wild & lush everywhere,” ripe for the plucking and spreading. “Brown feet” walk barefoot over hot, over-ripened blackberries, mirroring her “mouthstained” purple-black grin. Each tactile, sumptuous-laden physical experience is commemorated in this poem, where black/berries are not only wild, but also free.

Link to video: <https://vimeo.com/138649683>



## 6 A PLACE AT THE TABLE

Notably, in these poems, sex, food, and eating aren't conflated concepts or acts. Each is represented in its composite dimensions, yet connected through angry, playful, or suggestive connotations. Allison's delightful short story "A Lesbian Appetite" perhaps engages with these intersexualities more explicitly than any other text considered here, as she interweaves descriptions of poverty with food meanings, all the while paying homage to southern appetites and lesbian sexuality. Southern identity and food thematics take precedence early on in the story and are crucial to understanding her penurious, white-trash childhood. As a young girl, Allison worries that she and her cousins aren't getting enough vitamin D; a teacher offhandedly remarks that "the children of the poor have a lack of brain tissue simply because they don't get the necessary vitamins at the proper age."<sup>52</sup> Her poor diet seems inextricably linked to her poor upbringing, as she interweaves her understandings of class and the painfulness of dieting in ways that limit, control, and shame her. Allison attributes her dietary habits, yearnings for southern comfort foods that nourish both her body and soul, to a catalogue of physical ailments including rotten teeth, bad skin, and rickets. These hypervisible physical markers seem to brand her with a poverty that she can neither fully escape nor entirely forget.

The salience of southern food memory is articulated through her personal sexual history—as she loves women, so too does she love eating—both are sources of pleasure and comfort. Whether achieved through food or sex, both of her drives for pleasure and comfort flirt with the realities of indulging:

“Swallow it,” Jay said. . . . Her . . . hand worked between us, pinching me but forcing the thick cream out of my cunt. She brought it up and pushed it into my mouth, took the hand I’d cleaned and smeared it again with her own musky gravy.<sup>53</sup>

Sex for Allison is messy. It is textured, smelly, sweaty, and consuming. It is not mannerly or refined, but instead, it is thick and hearty, gravy and cream.

Allison’s evocative eroticism mirrors her gastronomic desire for “southern beans, pork fat, buttermilk, barbeque, and hush puppies” as affective resonances stem from a pleasure in remembering: “I’ve only had one lover who didn’t want to eat at all. We didn’t last long. The sex was good, but I couldn’t think what to do with her when the sex was finished. We drank spring water together and fought a lot.”<sup>54</sup> Food is seamlessly linked to sexuality in this story, and the space of the kitchen and home itself—the South—is inscribed with a reconceptualized, distinctive lesbian domesticity. Challenging implicit heteronormative narratives of cooking and kinship in the region, including her own family’s kitchen back in South Carolina, presided over by her mama, Allison queers the home, and by extension, the region and nation through the impact of lesbian hypervisibility. Indeed, Allison dreams of throwing a dinner party at the end of the story, where she invites all of the women from her life—lesbian lovers and girlfriends—to enter the now safe space of her mother’s house and partake in the feast: “My mama is in the kitchen salting a vat of greens. Two of my aunts are arguing over whether to make little baking powder biscuits or big buttermilk hogsheads.”<sup>55</sup> Suddenly, Allison, a woman whose childhood was characterized by hunger, no longer hungers. In the moment that her lovers enter her home—the place where southern food is prepared and the regional space in which she was raised—Allison discovers a unifying fullness.

Living in New York City, Allison nostalgically reflects on the fried, crisp, buttered, slathered, and marinated food of her youth—and the comforting feeling of home it evokes.

Allison’s relief is apparent on the surface, too, after such a long separation from home (the South) and the food she is unable and unwilling to disassociate from it. Living in New York City, Allison nostalgically reflects on the fried, crisp, buttered, slathered, and marinated food of her youth—and the comforting feeling of home it evokes. One girlfriend from the North, Lee, is a health-food nut. In preparing the food for the great Southeastern Feminist Conference, Lee tries to convince Allison that healthy, vegetarian food is the way to go. She plies Allison with “poppyseed cake made with gluten flour,” seven-grain bread, whole-wheat pasta, granola, salad, and fruits—eventually enlisting Allison to peel, slice, and chop loads and loads of fresh vegetables, including “carrots, potatoes, onions, green and red peppers, leeks, tomatoes, and

squash.”<sup>56</sup> Allison believes that the two hundred southern women would rather have “doughnuts and coffee.”<sup>57</sup>

At play in this story are multiple, traditionally diachronically opposed binaries: the North/South divide, healthy/junk food, and a highbrow/lowbrow class-based hierarchy of food preferences. But these binaries go beyond southern regional identity, food, and class to engage with sex and nation: for Allison, what is considered “bad” junk food is actually good and tasty, no matter how it intersects with her body and health. Similarly, what is considered “bad sex” or anti-feminist sex in the nationally waged lesbian sex wars of the 1980s—in particular, S/M kink—is actually good, and preferable to Allison.

Interestingly, nostalgia reverberates throughout this passage, too, as food is associated with comfort, comforting food is associated with southern food, and southern food is associated with home. For Allison, the relationship between food that is comforting and good directly parallels sex that is comforting and good. Even in moments where food is not obviously linked to southernness or region, Allison is able to transform the alimentary experience into a comforting and good sexual encounter, thus indirectly joining narratives of home by way of non-normative, messy, subversive lesbian sex:

I took the wedge of eggplant and rubbed it on the back of her neck.

“What are you doing?”

“Salting the eggplant.” I followed the eggplant with my tongue, pulled up her T-shirt, and slowly ran the tough purple rind up to her small bare breasts. Lee started giggling, wiggling her ass, but not taking her hands out of the flour to stop me. I pulled down her shorts, picked up another dry slice and planted it against her navel, pressed with my fingers and slipped it down toward her pubic mound. . . .

“You are just running salt, girl,” I teased, and pushed slices up between her legs, while I licked one of her nipples and pinched the other between a folded slice of eggplant. She was laughing, her belly bouncing under me.

“I’m going to make you eat all this,” she yelled.<sup>58</sup>

If we understand the home to be a micro-level representation of the nation, then both the home and nation are overwhelmingly fashioned within dominant ideologies of compulsory heterosexuality and normative sexual desires. Allison’s short story “A Lesbian Appetite” subverts these dualistic frames, illustrating how lesbian hypervisibility works to accommodate other forms of sexuality and enable new conceptions of national subjects through the regional. The South functions as tenor concept; southern food is the vehicle for progressive social change, or at least, room for more non-normativity at a national table. This story utilizes the most commonplace, messy, and low quality southern foods (red beans and rice, chicken necks and dumplings, pan-fried pork chops and red-eye gravy, barbeque and coleslaw) to translate large scale, complex metaphors surrounding home, nostalgia, comfort, nation, and sexual (non)-normativity—ultimately foregrounding importance of what we get from critically thinking about sex through food, and putting a taste of the South in our mouths.

And to what end? Intersectionality in these works enables Allison, Pratt, and davenport to transform the obvious, making lesbian eroticism and desire hypervisible through the vehicle of southern food. This gesture asserts lesbian sexual identity as a politically viable subject position in the region, making their voices and writings important and valuable to an increasingly polarized national feminist centrally concerned with the meanings and implications of sex acts. Southern lesbian writers were at the center of those debates, making surface more than their sexuality on the textual page, as their autochthonous regional roots were hypervisible as well.

**Food orients us to our personal, individualized selves, while gesturing toward and resisting cohesive definitional meanings at local, regional, and national levels.**

Whether it suggests experimentation or the commonplace, food signifies a pleasure of practice. It symbolizes culture, memory, and imagined communities. Food orients us to our personal, individualized selves, while gesturing toward and resisting cohesive definitional meanings at local, regional, and national levels.<sup>59</sup> Food illuminates the boundaries and borders surrounding class, race, gender, and regional discourses, calling attention to and even complicating them. If we “stand detached” from sexuality and “bracket its familiarity” within the multiple identity forming sites and fracturing spaces that a model of thinking food reveals, we begin to develop a politics of sexuality rooted in connection and disconnection, where bodies live in food and sex knowledge and through structures of intense sociality.<sup>60</sup> I argue that in thinking lesbian sex through the vehicle of food in these works, we see the production of sociality even as we see women’s bodies celebrated through eating and loving. In these works, sex is the epicenter of intersectionalities that include region, sociality and community, and food.

Moving from marginalization to unification, these women celebrated their lesbianism through love of food and love of region, creating a sense of unity and sociality over the most mundane and routine of southern foods: tomatoes, peaches, blackberries, and biscuits. The ordinary, commonplace quality of these foods, and their effortless availability in the region, suggests something powerful and profound: that lesbians and their literary productions were, and still are, extant, plenteous, and thriving in the South.

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Jaime is the coeditor of *Out of the Closet, Into the Archive: Researching Sexual Histories*, a collection of original essays forthcoming from SUNY Press's Queer Politics and Cultures series in December 2015.

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<sup>1</sup> Jr. Walker and the All Stars, "Way Back Home," 1971, on *Rainbow Funk*, Soul S732L, 33 1/3 rpm. Epigraph appears in doris davenport's *Voodoo Chile* (1991).

<sup>2</sup> Dorothy Allison, *Trash* (Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books, 1988), 151.

<sup>3</sup> Scott Romine, *The Real South: Southern Narrative in the Age of Cultural Reproduction* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2008), 108.

<sup>4</sup> Patricia Yeager, "Edible Labor," *Southern Quarterly* 30, 2–3 (Winter–Spring 1992): 150.

<sup>5</sup> John Egerton, *Southern Food: At Home, on the Road, in History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1987), 2.

<sup>6</sup> Elizabeth Engelhardt, introduction to *The Larder: Food Studies Methods from the American South*, ed. John T. Edge, Elizabeth Engelhardt, and Ted Ownby (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2014), 1–2.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>8</sup> Elspeth Probyn, *Carnal Appetites: Foodsexidentities* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 5.

<sup>9</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, "Refiguring Lesbian Desire," in *Space, Time, and Diversion: Essays on the Politics of Bodies* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 181.

<sup>10</sup> Surface readings, argues Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus in a special issue of *Representations*, make visible the full social field by manifesting the breadth of texts and their generative range of possibilities. This mode of reading seeks to understand the complexity of narratives without slipping into symptomatic elisions that render germane parts of the text unimportant. Repressive interpretations have been characterized by Foucauldian epistemological analysis, but also through the pervasiveness of "a latent meaning behind a manifest one" (Jameson 60). Marcus utilizes critical surface readings by indicating what the text says about itself and how that telling might be literally received at face value. She lists many types of readings that might fall under the surface umbrella including: surface as materiality or the material structures that create perception (history of the book), surface as the verbal structure of literary language (New Formalist), surface reading as affective and ethical (Sedgwick's reparative reading or Timothy Bewes's reading with the grain), surface as a practice of critical description (face value), surface as location of patterns that exist across texts (critic as taxonomist or anatomist), and finally, surface as literal meaning or just reading "without construing presence as absence or affirmation as negation" (Best and Marcus 11–12).

<sup>11</sup> Probyn, *Carnal Appetites*, 1.

<sup>12</sup> Kyla Wazana Thompkins, *Racial Indigestion: Eating Bodies in the 19th Century* (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 2.

<sup>13</sup> For a lengthier discussion of the feminist sex wars or the lesbian sex wars, see Lisa Duggan's *Sex Wars: Sexual Dissent and Political Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1995), Carole S. Vance's canonical edited collection, *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality* (New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), and Jane F. Gerhard's *Desiring Revolution: Second-Wave Feminism and the Rewriting of American Sexual Thought, 1920 to 1982* (New York: Columbia University Press 1992).

<sup>14</sup> Dorothy Allison, *Skin: Talking about Sex, Class, and Literature* (Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books, 1994), 89.

<sup>15</sup> Dorothy Allison, "the women who hate me," in *the women who hate me: poetry, 1980–1990* (Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books, 1991), 29.

<sup>16</sup> Dorothy Allison, "i chose this ground," in *the women who hate me: poetry, 1980–1990* (Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books, 1991), 63.

<sup>17</sup> Dorothy Allison, "liar," in *the women who hate me: poetry, 1980–1990* (Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books, 1991), 35.

<sup>18</sup> Dorothy Allison, "dumpling child," in *the women who hate me: poetry, 1980–1990* (Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books, 1991), 9. I have made every effort in this essay to accurately represent the textual placement of these poems and

fiction as they physically appear on the original page, keeping in mind the author's intentions with regard to form techniques.

<sup>19</sup> Allison, "the women who hate me," 23; and Bunny Crumpacker, *The Sex Life of Food: When Body and Soul Meet to Eat* (New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2006), 8, 109.

<sup>20</sup> For more on the subtleties of rural southern sound, see Southern Culture on the Skids' unapologetic rockabilly song, "Biscuit Eater" (1992).

<sup>21</sup> While this essay is not the place for a discussion of the de-essentializing possibilities of sexuality, this matter of taste raises provocative questions about the nature of sexuality itself. Is it mainly a matter of "taste" (and thus preference, style, "choice," etc.)? See David Halperin's *100 Years of Homosexuality: And Other Essays on Greek Love* (New York: Routledge, 1989) for more on non-essentialist ideas of sexuality.

<sup>22</sup> Allison, "dumpling child," 9.

<sup>23</sup> Crumpacker, *The Sex Life of Food*, 18.v

<sup>24</sup> Dorothy Allison, "tomato song," in *the women who hate me: poetry, 1980–1990* (Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books, 1991), 36.

<sup>25</sup> Allison, "the women who hate me," 23.

<sup>26</sup> Allison, "tomato song," 36.

<sup>27</sup> Allison, *Skin*, 39–40.

<sup>28</sup> Egerton, *Southern Food*, 310. In a July 2013 Southern Foodways Alliance blog, Virginia Willis calls the tomato an "iconic Southern food that defines summer." See also the unique festival nature of the South—its insistence on food as an occasion for social celebration—and in particular, New Orleans' decade-spanning French Market Creole Tomato Festival: "The French Market Creole Tomato Festival is a celebration of Louisiana's produce, farmers, and the Pelican State's unique cultural and cuisine offerings, of which the Creole tomato is emblematic. Originally imported from the West Indies, the Creole tomato thrives in the rich alluvial soil and subtropical climate of south Louisiana, especially in St. Bernard and Plaquemines parishes."

<sup>29</sup> On southerners' irrationality and violence, this is particularly true of white men: see, for example, Bertram Wyatt-Brown's *Honor and Violence in the Old South* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986); but also white women, as recent representations of white women in the film *12 Years a Slave* (2013), among others, show.

<sup>30</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1984), 306.

<sup>31</sup> Mab Segrest, *My Mama's Dead Squirrel: Lesbian Essays on Southern Culture* (Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books, 1985), 20.

<sup>32</sup> For more on the role of the grotesque and its implications in southern lesbian literary productions, see in particular Mab Segrest's essay, "Southern Women Writing: Toward a Literature of Wholeness" in *My Mama's Dead Squirrel* (1985). For a discussion of the southern gothic literary tradition in mid-century writers' work, see Allan Lloyd Smith's *American Gothic Fiction: An Introduction* (2004), and for central problems and theoretical fields within the Gothic tradition, see Robert K. Martin's *American Gothic: New Interventions in National Narrative* (2009).

<sup>33</sup> Allison, "tomato song," 37.

<sup>34</sup> That food elicits these associations and evocations for readers is borne out in my experience of teaching these texts to students, student for whom these foodways are deeply suggestive. In the spring of 2012 I received approval from the Department of English at LSU to teach a general education undergraduate fiction course with a special emphasis on queer sexualities in southern literature. I was given the opportunity to draw from my dissertation research on a wide range of theoretical and historical approaches that examine queer encounters, relationships, and behaviors in southern literary productions, and apply that knowledge to the classroom. I believed the overwhelming saturation of food with its regionally and sexually suggestive meanings in course texts warranted detailed attention in classroom discussions and lecture. Moreover, I was deeply aware of my students' textual unfamiliarity and strived to translate the material as intellectually palatable and creatively relatable. Food became a way to do it; I used the canny to teach the uncanny. While some students in the course may not have identified with the non-normative sexuality expressed in this poem, they could effortlessly and profoundly relate to the nostalgia of food.

<sup>35</sup> Dorothy Allison, "the terror of my enemies," in *the women who hate me: poetry, 1980–1990* (Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books, 1991), 48.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*



<sup>37</sup> See in particular Allison's 1981 consciousness-raising group, Lesbian Sex Mafia, and Pat Califia's groundbreaking book that championed for lesbian sadomasochistic sex, *Sapphistry*, published by the lesbian-feminist Naiad Press in 1980.

<sup>38</sup> Benjamin Kahan, *Celibacies: American Modernism and Sexual Life* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), 152.

<sup>39</sup> Not only do peaches suggest a rather state-specific association in the regional sense, and sexually specific association in the corporeal sense, the fruit itself is frequently embodied as female and feminine. Consider Lynyrd Skynyrd's "Georgia Peaches" lyrics: "Well them Georgia peaches sure do got style / They'll steal your heart with a southern smile / Well they talk a little funny but they look so fine. . . ."

<sup>40</sup> Minnie Bruce Pratt, *We Say We Love Each Other* (San Francisco, CA: Spinsters/Aunt Lute, 1985), 68.

<sup>41</sup> Gayle Rubin, "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality," in *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, ed. Carole S. Vance (London: Pandora Press, 1989), 13.

<sup>42</sup> Allison, *Skin*, 89.

<sup>43</sup> Pratt, *We Say We Love Each Other*, 69.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>45</sup> Grosz, "Refiguring Lesbian Desire," 184.

<sup>46</sup> Joseph M. Flora, Lucinda Hardwick MacKethan, and Todd W. Taylor, eds., *The Companion to Southern Literature: Themes, Genres, Places, People* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2001), 429.

<sup>47</sup> In the front matter of doris davenport's *Voodoo Chile* (1991), AfraShe Asungi writes, "And to get finally to the CENTER of my point; given doris' 'gift of insight' and skill at her 'craft,' there is no SANE reason that I can find for doris' having to 'self-publish' THIS manuscript, and fortunately, she hasn't let THIS slight be a deterrent either, but doris says it better than I in her poem, 'about my manuscript rejected for the sixth time by seven *alternative* feminist-black-lesbian-small-press-publishers." The *Companion to Southern Literature* notes, "Although her books met many rejections even at the hands of small black presses, she persevered by publishing her own work" (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 429). Without fully knowing, we might infer—given the cultural moment from whence these collections were written—davenport's difficulties in getting published might have resulted from her prescribed positionality as a "double minority" from the point of view of the biases and limitations of the 1980s publishing world: small black presses arguably rejected the lesbian content of her poetry, while small lesbian presses might have rejected her work through institutionalized racism. This is, of course, speculation, but it bears noting given that davenport is the only black lesbian poet within this temporal frame (that I have been able to locate) who occasionally frames her lesbian sexuality through the vehicle of southern food.

<sup>48</sup> Allison, *Skin*, 115.

<sup>49</sup> Egerton, *Southern Food*, 179.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 181.

<sup>51</sup> doris davenport, *Voodoo Chile: A Slight Return: Poems* (Charlotte, NC: Soque Street Press, 1991), 17.

<sup>52</sup> Allison, *Trash*, 156.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 157.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 165.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 158–9.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 158.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 155.

<sup>59</sup> Engelhardt, *A Mess of Greens: Southern Gender and Southern Food* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011), 15.

<sup>60</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, vol. 2 of *The History of Sexuality* (1984; repr., New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 3; and Probyn, *Foodsexidentities*, 6.