Fasting, feasting: The resistant strategies of (not) eating in Ananda Devi's *Le Voile de Draupadi* and *Manger l'autre*

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Abstract

This article explores representations of fasting and feasting in *Le Voile de Draupadi* (1993) and *Manger l'autre* (2018) by contemporary Francophone Mauritian author, Ananda Devi, teasing out the resistant strategies of (not) eating to the power dynamics entrenched within her global, postcolonial settings in which the politics of gender, neo-colonialism and advanced capitalist consumer culture compete in the regulatory domination of the individual body. Reading these two novels together offers space for reflection on the different meanings – psychical, familial, religious, cultural, political, historical – that converge on the bodies of her protagonists, and the ways that these meanings may exceed singular or conventional interpretations of both fasting and feasting. Written 25 years apart, and set in different locations, one in Mauritius, the second in an unnamed although recognizably western nation, Devi's novels speak to one another across these spaces, tracing the global flows of attitudes towards the body and practices of consumption. In so doing, Devi's writing illuminates the embedded, crisscrossing power dynamics and layered drives exhibited by these fasting, feasting bodies, and their divergent – but resonant – strategies of resistance in the practices of (not)eating across the contemporary, globalized world.

Resumé

Cet article se penche sur les représentations du refus de manger et de la consommation excessive dans *Le Voile de Draupadi* (1993) et *Manger l'autre* (2018) d'Ananda Devi, écrivaine mauricienne francophone; il détermine les stratégies de résistance des actes de (ne

pas) manger aux dynamiques du pouvoir ancrées dans des lieux globaux et postcoloniaux, dans lequels s'entremêlent et se battent les politiques du genre, du néo-colonialisme, et de la culture du nouveau capitalisme, pour la domination régulatrice du corps individuel. L'analyse de ces deux romans offre un espace pour réfléchir sur les significations variées – psychiques, familiales, réligieuses, culturelles, politiques, historiques – qui convergent sur les corps de ses protagonistes, et sur les manières dans lesquelles ces significations pourraient dépasser les catégories singulières et conventionelles du refus de manger et de la consommation excessive. Écrits avec vingt ans d'intervalle, l'un qui se déroule à l'île Maurice, l'autre dans une nation qui n'est pas nommée mais qui exhibe des caractéristiques d'une culture occidentale réconnaissable, les romans de Devi se parlent à travers ces lieux, traçant les flux globaux des attitudes envers le corps et les pratiques de la consommation. En faisant ainsi, l'écriture de Devi éclaire les dynamiques du pouvoir enracinées et entrecroisées et les pulsions polyvalentes manifestées par ces corps sous- et sur- alimentés, ainsi que leurs stratégies de résistance (différentes mais résonantes) dans la pratique de (ne pas) manger à travers le monde globalisé contemporain.

Keywords

anorexia

cannibalism

self-cannibalism

Devi

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fasting

hunger strike

obesity

Introduction

'First we eat, then we do everything else' – this pithy and oft-quoted statement, attributed to the American food writer Mary Frances Kennedy Fisher, heralds food as the very stuff of life (in O'Connor 2015: 15). A vital, driving force, the quest to fulfil hunger structures the patterns of the day and shapes our relations with others. For food is not just a source of nature; as French structuralist thinkers Roland Barthes (1961) and Claude Levi-Strauss (1964) have amply shown, food allows us to think through overlapping boundaries between the structures of nature and culture since food itself becomes, from the raw to the cooked, a cultural artefact. As Gillian Crowther writes:

> Food is our everyday and creative meaningful engagement with nature through culture; indeed food becomes cultured nature, an artifact. The designation as 'food' underscores the cultural construction of what is deemed edible and places it in the category of an artifact, made by human ingenuity, from a series of ingredients and flavours, crafted and aestheticized into a dish. Humans don't just randomly feed; we select, fashion, concoct, and make an edible assemblage that fits our imagining of food. This is an intimate relationship with an artifact, like no other; food is the only consumed cultural artifact that quite literally becomes us. (Crowther 2013: 18)

The consumption, incorporation and absorption of food here underscore and mirror the crisscrossing of nature and culture in the formation of human subjectivity. Food both forms and reflects our cultural worlds; the ways in which we interact with food – how we produce it, assemble it, share it and consume it – have much to tell us about communities and cultures

and the practice of power. While our biological requirement of food means that 'food was, and continues to be, power in a most basic, tangible and inescapable form', social hierarchies tend to be produced and maintained through control over food, while '[r]ace, class, and gender distinctions are manifest through rules about eating and the ability to impose rules upon others' (Counihan 1999: 7–8).

The layers of signification embedded and embodied in food bear a close link to our relation to the other, opening out onto a host of political questions about difference in terms of gender, sexuality and race. In her compelling study of contemporary culture's fascination with food, Elspeth Probyn argues that in its combination of communal practice, visceral immediacy and individual, solitary tastes, eating tends to throw into relief both our connectedness and distance from each other (Probyn 2000: 13). In everyday instances of eating, we move beyond the boundaries of the human self, opening our bodies up to wider structural, sexual, social and historical relations:

> In eating, we grapple with concerns about the animate and the inanimate, about authenticity and sincerity, about changing familial patterns, about the local rendered global, about whether sexual and alimentary predilections tell us anything about ourselves, about colonial legacies of the past for those of us who live in stolen lands, about whether we are eating or being eaten. (Probyn 2000: 3)

In cultures across the world, there is a significant overlap between the practices of eating and sex, both suggesting scenes of intimacy and incorporation that are played out along the borders of the individual body, where the limits of the self are traversed, dispersed and merged. At the same time, the construction of traditional gender roles has of course long

revolved around food, its procurement and its preparation. Much of the historical subordination of femininity to patriarchal power has been formulated through beliefs and practices surrounding food and the body. In their traditional roles as care-givers, nurturers to the young and the vulnerable, and as tending to the private life of the family, women have historically been relegated to the home, and in particular to the kitchen, the domestic universe where food is assembled and so too is the family, brought together through the collective, shared act of eating a meal, lovingly prepared by a doting mother. Meanwhile, the female body continues to be viewed as an object of consumption, an edible commodity, a consumable product. As Probyn intimates above, the complex hierarchies in the relation to the other that are staged by contemporary practices of eating and feeding relate not only to networks of the sexual and the familial but also to a historical colonial legacy. Imperialist discourse has long held on to the imagined construct of the savage, monstrous appetites and terrifying otherness of indigenous peoples, just as the supposedly horrified, civilized, but nonetheless voracious colonizer has sumptuously fed off the delicacies produced by the bodies of slaves and indentured labourers in colonial plantations. In contemporary worlds, this shuttling between disgust and desire in the imperial disavowal of its own greedy appetites translates into a neo-colonial fascination or hunger for ethnic or racial difference. As bell hooks shows in a book chapter entitled 'Eating the other', there is a fine line between cultural appreciation and cultural appropriation: 'The over-riding fear is that cultural, ethnic, and racial differences will be continually commodified and offered up as new dishes to enhance the white palate – that the Other will be eaten, consumed and forgotten' (hooks 1992: 39).

The relationship between food and the body, the practice of composing a recipe or putting together a meal, the politics of consumption and the refusal of food have all been

recurrent themes in recent women's writing, laying bare the tensions, conflicts and power relations at stake in practices of eating (Bagley et al. 2018; Cairns 2020, forthcoming; Damlé 2013a; Githire 2014; Loichot 2013; Meuret 2007; Simek 2016; Jordan and Still 2020, forthcoming). In her important and influential work on food and the female body, Susie Orbach has argued that '[f]ood is the medium through which women are addressed; in turn, food has become the language of women's response' (Orbach 1986: 23). In this article, I am interested in the idea of 'the language of women's response' both as that response might be articulated in and through their own bodies and eating practices, and as bodies and eating practices themselves are represented in women's narratives of identity. Metaphors of food and eating have been particularly abundant in literature by women writing across national boundaries, where gendered tensions and conflicts that arise in relation to food are situated within postcolonial and diasporic settings, such as the Caribbean and the Indian Ocean. Julia Waters observes that '[f]ood is a particularly important social marker in diasporic situations […] serving to maintain a cohesive group identity by means of culinary, and hence cultural, links with an increasingly distant land of origin' (Waters 2011: 249). If food-related activities appear to offer such opportunities for the maintaining of cultural identities through habitual, everyday practices, it generally falls to the self-sacrificing, nurturing feminine to piece together familial and collective identities (see Mehta 2005). However, there are further power relations at stake in such writing, in which the tropes of food and eating are located precisely within the tensions and conflicts of colonial domination. As Njeri Githire reminds us, Caribbean and Indian Ocean societies were brought into the international capitalist order through trade in spice, sugar, coffee, tobacco and so on, whose production depended entirely on the violent uprooting on an enormous scale of peoples from their homes, with the effect that such foods evoke 'familiar sensory experiences that are locked together in a historical drama of power and subordination' (Githire 2014: 3). While the literary treatment of food and

eating may well speak of a desire to preserve the ethnic integrity of diasporic communities, it may also, consciously or otherwise, underscore stereotypes of the colonized subject, or colonized culture, precisely as exotic yet ingestible, assimilable delicacies (see Britton 2014). Practices surrounding food and eating acquire, then, complex, and often conflictual, layers of meaning within gendered and postcolonial contexts. Casting a close eye over relations between food, the body and power in literary works by contemporary Francophone Mauritian author Ananda Devi precisely within these frames, this article seeks instead to tease out the resistant strategies of (not) eating to the power dynamics entrenched within her global, postcolonial settings, in which the politics of gender, neo-colonialism and advanced capitalist consumer culture compete in the regulatory domination of the individual body.

Critically acclaimed as a writer and translator, Devi, who has lived and worked in Switzerland since 1989, is the author of several novels, essays, short stories and collections of poetry. Her trenchant, sinuous, lyrical writing has been celebrated by the award of the Prix des cinq continents de la francophonie in 2006 for *Eve de ses décombres* (Devi 2005), a devastating portrayal of the interconnected lives of four teenagers in contemporary Mauritius, and in 2014 Devi was presented with the Académie française's prestigious *Prix du rayonnement de la langue et de la littérature françaises*. The practices and possibilities of eating and feeding, the relationship between food, gender and the body, and the intricately embedded nexus of power invested in these tropes are recurrent themes in Devi's novels, whose characters' struggles for self-determination generally take place within the context of Indian and Indo-Mauritian postcolonial landscapes. While a character such as *Indian Tango*'s (Devi 2009) unappreciated wife and mother Subhadra aspires to culinary ideals in attending to the multi-layered needs of family members through the preparation and serving of a delicious meal, the protagonist of *Pagli* (Devi 2001), Daya, and the unnamed wife of *Le Sari*

vert's (Devi 2010) narrator exceed convention in their incapacity – and refusal – to conform to cultural expectations and fulfil their wifely duties (Waters 2011). As critics have noted, this fraught movement between positions of absolute subordination and the possibility of transformation or redemption, however fleeting, is characteristic of Devi's literary portrayals of the condition of women in Indian Mauritian society.[1] This article takes the particular optic of food as a way of thinking through further the sites of exclusion and contestation experienced by female characters in Devi's writing. The emphasis here will be on the ways in which female characters feed not others but themselves, and in the extremity of the contestatory positions adopted in the visceral language of women's response to their particular situations. I consider, on the one hand, the refusal of food in Devi's second novel *Le Voile de Draupadi* (Devi 1993), before exploring, on the other hand, the representation of excessive eating in *Manger l'autre* (Devi 2018). In her influential work on the female body, eating disorders and contemporary capitalism, Susan Bordo has shown that, far from being paradoxical, the epidemical coexistence of anorexia and obesity in consumer culture reveals the fraught conundrum of finding balance in identity formation between the producing and consuming elements of the self:

> [a]norexia could be seen […] as an extreme development of the capacity for self-denial and repression of desire (the work ethic in absolute control); obesity as an extreme capacity to capitulate to desire (consumerism in control). Both are rooted in the same consumer-culture construction of desire as overwhelming and overtaking the self. (Bordo 2003: 201)

While Bordo's analysis refers to subject formation within western consumer culture, this article also seeks to take into account the ways in which the poles of pathological eating have

been refracted within the context of (post)colonial cultural climates subjected to the imperialist, consumerist politics upheld by western nations. Significantly, the colonized subject's relation to food has tended to be presented via the two dominant images of a lack of requirement of food and an insatiable hunger, each extreme positioning the colonial other as less than human in ways that distract attention from the responsibility of the imperial enterprise for the material reality of their situation. As Valérie Loichot argues,

> the two attributions of gluttony and asceticism serve the same purpose of justifying and absolving the colonial enterprise. The fictionalised black people's gluttony and unruliness, their proximity to nature, their pretechnological state – their only tools are teeth and fingers – their lack of discrimination, their preference for the raw over the cooked, place them on the side of the natural, the bestial, and therefore justify their enslavement or domination. However, their natural frugality, demonstrated by an inherent sense of 'economy', justifies their enslavement by a naturalist argument and absolves colonists and plantation owners from near-starving them. (Loichot 2013: xvi–xvii)

In this article, I suggest that reading Devi's *Le Voile de Draupadi* and *Manger l'autre* together offers space for reflection on the different meanings – psychical, familial, religious, cultural, political, historical – that converge on the bodies of her protagonists, and the ways in which these meanings may exceed singular or conventional interpretations of both fasting and feasting. Written 25 years apart, and set in different locations, one in Mauritius, the second in an unnamed though recognizably western nation, Devi's novels speak to one another across these spaces, tracing the global flows of attitudes towards the female body and consumption. In so doing, Devi's writing illuminates the embedded, crisscrossing power

dynamics and layered drives exhibited by these fasting, feasting bodies, and their divergent – but resonant – strategies of resistance in the practices of (not) eating across the contemporary, globalized world.

Veils of meaning in *Le Voile de Draupadi*

Set in Mauritius, *Le Voile de Draupadi* is the harrowing tale of a young mother Anjali, who is grappling with the knowledge that her son, Wynn, born with the immunity condition the Rhesus factor, has now developed meningitis and is becoming gravely unwell. Narrated in the first-person, *Le Voile* is an intimate portrait of Anjali's thoughts as she considers her powerlessness in the face of her situation, leading her to reflect on the possibility of female agency within the context of the patriarchal Indian Mauritian world that she inhabits, where religious and cultural norms and the legacy of colonialism place innumerable constraints on the female condition. As a religious fast turns into a more extreme act of starvation, Anjali stages a form of refusal with the limited contestatory tools available to her. In this section, I suggest that Anjali's refusal of food in *Le Voile* remains irreducible to singular interpretative paradigms that might simply position it either as purely a spiritual act or an anorexic pathology. Caught in the circulation of different economies of meaning – religious, cultural, gendered and (post)colonial – this bodily denial mimics the act of sacrifice while also allowing Anjali's distress and dissent to be voicelessly articulated. Ultimately, though, I shall argue that the (non)act of starvation represents an unswerving form of resistance to the very accumulation of meaning layered over Anjali's corpo-reality.

From the opening pages of the text, Devi powerfully evokes the intermingled lives of the young mother and her small child, the gentle proximity of their bodies and the blurring of their boundaries as Anjali confronts her strong sense of maternal responsibility and terrifying

lack of control in governing her son's health (Devi 1993: 6–7). Devi describes with sensitivity the mother's anguished regard as she searches for some signs of vitality, strikingly absent in the child's laughterless room where his toys languish, unplayed with, 'condamnés pour toujours à garder leurs postures écartelées, leurs visages grimaçants, leur futile enjouement' (Devi 1993: 12). Despite their common concern for their child, Anjali and her husband Dev are unable to comfort or support one another in a marriage described by Anjali as 'un peu forcée, factice' (Devi 1993: 20). Although not an arranged marriage as such, it retains the air of something contractual, divested of tenderness, affection or mutual comprehension. Caught between faith in western medicine and Hindu traditions, Dev asks Anjali early in the novel to undertake a sacrifice in the form of the Hindu ritual of a fire-walk, an offering to the gods to implore them to alleviate Wynn's suffering. Although he claims not to impose this task on her, the emotional manipulation of Anjali's maternal bond, and her inevitable internalization of the cultural exigencies of self-sacrificing motherhood, is very much in evidence as he casually, although knowingly, remarks to her: 'Une mère qui refuse de faire une offrande pour son fils n'est pas une mère' (Devi 1993: 24). Yet Anjali's instinctual reaction is to refuse, and although she cannot articulate this to her husband, it is apparent that she privileges what she views as more structured, rational forms of thought, and that she has lost faith in Hindu spirituality after a similar ritual destroyed the life of her cousin Vasanti many years ago. As Wynn's condition worsens, however, and Dev's pleas quickly turn into accusations, Anjali is confronted by her maternal responsibility and the burden of not being able to do anything, voicing her anguish by howling into the wind only to be perceived by those around her as hysterical. The impossibility of inaction, of not being able to do anything, is drawn out within the context of a Hindu culture scripted by karmic destiny, where everything is 'attendu, […] prévisible' (Devi 1993: 20), but where, as Anjali wonders, what may appear to be destiny is perhaps an absence of choice. For Anjali, the

possibility of making any kind of choice at all, in an informed, agentive sense that might be based on personal beliefs is not only inhibited by the notion of *karma*, but burdened with a broader sense of duty, a web of familial, social, ethical and religious responsibilities drawn out in the repetition of the words *devoir* and *dharma*.[2] Despite her outward rejection of Hindu traditions, then, one can sense Anjali's partial internalization of such structuring ideas, particularly in relation to her identity as a mother. In an honest conversation with her friend Fatmah, Anjali admits that '[p]uisqu'il s'agit de mon fils, il y va de mon devoir, j'en suis responsable, j'en suis la gardienne, alors, en dépit de mes croyances profondes, je me dis que je dois le faire' (Devi 1993: 107). When Dev's mother and other female relatives come to plead with Anjali one last time, then, they are pleased to see finally that she will give in to their demands and concede in carrying out the sacrifice.

Described by Dev as 'une offrande', the fire-walk is an ancient Hindu practice originating in Tamil Nadu, India, and commonly practiced among the diasporic Hindu community in Mauritius. The ritual involves walking barefoot on burning coals symbolizing an act of devotion, and it is preceded by a period of spiritual fasting, as an additional act of sacrifice and purification. In *Le Voile*, Devi attends closely to the gender politics of practices of feeding and fasting, illuminating complex relations between food and the female body in this hyperpatriarchal Indian Mauritian world that already culturally demands of women an absolute self-sacrifice in everyday terms and where Dev's expectation is of 'une obéissance inconditionelle, cet homme qui exige que la femme suive, coûte que coûte, même les pieds ensanglantés, même l'âme irrémédiablement meurtrie, qu'elle abandonne à jamais tout libre-arbitre' (Devi 1993: 26). Tending to the rituals of food in everyday practice, and more extravagantly for religious festivals, is very much the domain of the female characters. If the centrality of women, and in particular mothers, to the acts of cooking, feeding and offering is

well documented, such roles are frequently amplified within diasporic communities where the repetition, reinforcement and cross-generational transfer of food rituals becomes a nostalgic practice of cultural preservation. As Anita Mannur writes in her study of culinary fictions in South Asian diasporic culture,

> [p]reserving the domestic familial structure becomes responsibility of women; but cooking and food preparation must be acknowledged for the central role they play in upholding the dynamics of domestic familiality. Preserving the sanctity of the domestic home space, creating a space where members of the household feel nurtured and protected thus become important touchstones of women's labor. (Mannur 2010: 52)

Anjali carries strong associations between the sounds and smells of meals being prepared, and the image of the nurturing feminine represented by the wives and mothers in Dev's family who conform devotedly to the traditional Hindu role. In the following passage, Devi subtly evokes a kind of sensory invasion as Anjali contemplates the performative rituals of feeding and the subordination that she perceives within them:

> Les femmes s'affairent autour de leurs énormes récipients d'étain où bout le riz, où bouillonnent les currys en répandant leur fort et pénétrant parfum, ensoleillé comme les épices qu'elles mettent à sécher dans l'ardeur blanche de Port-Louis avant de les broyer; les marmites émaillées où macère doucement le lait caillé à l'écume blonde; les hommes ameutés par le rhum qui leur arrache des rires de gorge, des jurons épais, des plaisanteries lubriques qui ne s'interrompent – gênés comme des enfants prise en faute – qu'en ma présence. (Devi 1993: 130–31)

In Devi's vivid description of cooking, the combination of layered ingredients is mirrored in the accumulation of clauses, suggesting a burgeoning sense of nausea in Anjali, whose own spectral presence in such domestic scenes and clear sense of difference to the others casts a shadow of incomprehension over the family. If Dev's relations find comfort in the communal practice of eating, cooking and drinking familiar substances as a way of sharing their cultural heritage and piecing together their family, for Anjali, subjecting oneself to the banality of these rites of feeding is itself a form of slavery, the violence of whose bonds go unacknowledged in the establishment of a routine that creates the illusion of freedom in the ordering and assembling of the house. If Anjali is unable to participate in these food rituals or to identify with the female members of Dev's family at this point in her life, this is also partly because she has grown up witnessing her own mother's life conditioned along similar lines of self-sacrifice and self-abnegation, her own frustrated desires represented by the suggestion of her alcoholism. Indeed, beyond being configured merely as a female responsibility, food is universally apprehended as a symbol of the mother's love and often comes to signify the mother herself:

> A mother's presence is always implicit in food. It is almost as if food, in its many and varied forms, becomes a representation of the mother. […] Food is a statement of her love, her power and her giving in the family. (Orbach 1986: 54)

At the same time, as food becomes synonymous with the mother, her act of 'offering' means that she historically – for economic, social and ideological reasons – occupies a position of sacrificial denial (Orbach 1986: 60). When Anjali finally accepts to carry out the ritual for her son, as the only person who should do it, as his mother, Dev is delighted with her

acquiescence and even begins to fast alongside her. But Devi's writing makes clear the gendered meaning of this religious fasting, as the feminine and maternal role of offering food slides metonymically into becoming the offering itself.

As Anjali's act of sacrifice begins to cast some crucial light into the gender politics of the Indian Mauritian community depicted in the novel, Devi draws from the rich mythology of Hinduism to lend further substance to the cultural embeddedness of the relation between women, duty and self-sacrifice. Interwoven through the text are numerous allusions to two of the most well-known female mythological characters drawn from the great Indian epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*: Sita and Draupadi. As she considers her options amid pressures from those around her, Anjali reflects on both these female characters: Sita because she too was required to carry out a fire-walk, and Draupadi, whose veil (the title of the novel) is thought to be figuratively laid down to prevent the fire-walkers' feet from being burned. The figure of Sita is in many ways exemplary of the submissively dutiful role of women in Hindu culture, while Draupadi's story highlights the unchanging status of woman as possession, a pawn to be bargained with, whose destiny is at the mercy of the men who wield power over them.[3] As Srilata Ravi observes,

> [a]ccording the textual (scriptural) tradition a woman fulfils her religious duty (*dharma*) only inasmuch as she devotes herself completely to her husband, home, and family. The ideal woman modelled along the mythological characters of Sita and Draupadi, performs the prescribed rites, conforms to the self-sacrificing and self-denying image expected of her so that the health, prosperity and longevity of her husband, son and the entire lineage is ensured. (Ravi 2006: 68)

While Ravi's reading of this mythological relevance rings true, the possible modes of resistance that Devi teases out for her protagonist are nonetheless created in dialogue with both Sita and Draupadi. Sita originally figures in the novel as a source of inspiration for Anjali's cousin, Vasanti, who at a young age decides to prove her love for Anjali's brother Shyam by copying Sita in carrying out the ritual of the fire-walk. Vasanti, who is regarded by others in their confining social environment as an unruly force, even a witch, is portrayed throughout the novel as a symbol of difference, defiance and transgression, and a kind of alter ego for Anjali: 'Elle était trop gaie, trop passionnée, trop fougueuse, trop belle et surtout trop entière, se donnant à tout ce qu'elle aimait, tout ce qu'elle faisait, sans mesure aucune' (Devi 1993: 36). As the ritual turns into tragedy, Vasanti's body goes up in flames and the crowd looks on, frozen into inaction by the spectacle of this beautiful, vibrant, unconventional young woman who burns with love. Although Anjali initially intends her own refusal to carry out the sacrifice to act as a way of honouring Vasanti's memory, not giving in to cultural or religious demands and making her own informed choices, she begins to view it differently, seeing an opportunity to pay homage to her cousin, and to attend to the guilt and responsibility that circulates in her own mind, in her brother Shyam's and in the collective unconscious of the wider community, speaking as she does of 'notre honte d'immobilité. Notre dette commune' (Devi 1993: 139). Accepting the ritual in many ways responds to these deeply rooted feelings of guilt and responsibility that are now reflected and amplified in her current situation. Anjali begins to view the ritual as an act of feminine solidarity with Vasanti, and with Sita and Draupadi, or rather more accurately with what they represent, for it is crucial that Anjali distinguishes herself from Vasanti in her own lack of spiritual faith and romantic illusions, suggesting that Vasanti 'prétendait suivre la voie de ces femmes ailées, plus qu'humaines, qu'avaient été Sita et Draupadi. Oubliant qu'elles étaient des mythes, amplifiées hors de toute mesure par l'insatiable soif de grandeur de hommes' (Devi

1993: 139). That Anjali is capable of perceiving and reflecting on the structuring Hindu myths of femininity allows her to consider the act as an informed choice rather than as passive allegiance, or internalized faith. Interrogating the ideals of duty and sacrifice represented by Hindu mythology, Anjali seeks to imagine new meanings for the ways in which she will script her own act of self-sacrifice.

As Anjali begins to fast, she experiences a subtle combination of lightness and focus that would seem to be exactly the goal of the spiritual detachment from material needs required for the fire-walk: 'Car, l'esprit espacé, le corps léger, je pénètre tout doucement cet état mystique nécessaire au sacrifice, et je ressens le besoin de me replier de plus en plus à l'intérieur de moi' (Devi 1993: 149). Whittling away the excesses of everyday life allows her to embody the very meaning of her name, Anjali, the Hindi word for prayer. The juxtaposition of emptying one's body and mind, while penetrating even deeper into oneself, provides a 'unique recours' (Devi 1993: 142) from the impossible situation of this young mother, and soon the water and pieces of fruit that should generally accompany a religious fast are left to one side, described as abject remainders, 'devenant mous et brunâtre, exhalant une épaisse odeur, à la fois aigre et sucrée' (Devi 1993: 152). When her friend Fatmah, concerned about Anjali's sudden weight loss, asks her what she is doing to her body, Anjali simply responds 'je le "spiritualise". […] Les ascètes n'ont pas besoin de grand-chose pour vivre' (Devi 1993: 153). While Devi draws attention to the cultural, spiritual and religious pressures placed on Anjali, this notion of spiritualizing the body, uttered by Anjali with some irony, converges with a range of cultural and political meanings that her refusal of food and fasting body now begins to acquire. Dev, too, is confronted by Anjali's suddenly much slighter frame, and when he endeavours to remind her that she is merely fasting, not on some sort of hunger strike, it is a ringing reminder of the political stakes of the refusal of food

within the Indian Mauritian community, indeed within her very own family, for Anjali's grandfather, brought to the island from India at the beginning of the century as one of the Jahaji Bhai, or the indentured labourers, had himself embarked on a number of hunger strikes as a means of assuring better conditions for fellow labourers, becoming a leader among his compatriots: 'Il devint une sorte de saint local, un visionnaire en proie à des accès de générosité et à des accès d'une haine justicière' (Devi 1993: 48). As a form of political protest, the hunger strike dramatizes its revolt through and on the body, creating a kind of embodied politics that becomes particularly potent when staged by those whose bodies have historically been submitted to an economy of circulation and disposal. As Amanda Machin observes, the hunger striking body is one of the earliest forms of protest, witnessed still in contemporary contexts such as Guantánamo or Calais, and it serves 'as a *political actor*; the one who scrawls the text through a self-directed violence. The body is not simply a "docile object" that is passively conditioned or violently constructed; it also creatively contributes to political protest itself' (Machin 2016: 159, original emphasis; see also Ellman 1993). Early in the novel, soon after she reflects on her grandfather's experiences, Anjali attends a corporate event with Dev, a spectacle of wealth and consumerism in which the finest drinks and delicacies are served to guests. The superficiality of the conversations, the regurgitation of clichés and the incorporation and mimicry of western consumer culture on display combine, for Anjali, in the nauseating smell of the 'saumon fumé' presented before her. She is overwhelmed by the dinner and alienated by the subservience to western consumerism by the 'bons petits colonisés que nous sommes' (Devi 1993: 55). There is a strong critique here of the excessive consumerism of the West implicitly linked to colonial expansion that renders Anjali's grandfather's hunger strike all the more resonant as a form of protest. Although Anjali's fasting may be perceived as acquiescence to Dev's request that she offer a sacrifice, then, it acquires further layers of meaning when read within the frame of the postcolonial

context of the Indian Mauritian community. Perversely and paradoxically, her refusal of food becomes an act of defiance; within the structures of her particular world, it becomes a mode of articulation, a way of enacting resistance to the call for the self-sacrifice of the female, or maternal body, at the nexus of contrasting worlds, tradition and modernity, east and west:

> toute ma vie, j'ai été à l'écoute des autres. Personne n'a jamais été disponible pour m'entendre, moi. Cela aussi, la tradition nous l'enseigne dès l'enfance; une femme doit penser avant tout à son mari, à ses enfants, à ses parents. Mais à elle-même jamais. (Devi 1993: 154)

As means of enacting dissent, Anjali mimics the act of self-sacrifice, while stretching its meaning, and turning its logic inside out.

As with the hunger strike, the violence of Anjali's protest is directed outwards, but it arguably turns in on itself, and on the body where that violence is played out. Significantly physically weakened and dehydrated, Anjali's body depletes and her mind empties, and for all of her endeavour to will, there is inevitably a sense of relinquishment as the reality of Wynn's condition deepens: 'Et de ne pas manger, cela éteint en moi toutes les révoltes, c'est d'ailleurs quelque chose de peu essential, manger, se nourrir, pour quoi faire, à quoi cela sert-il?' (Devi 1993: 153) Devi underscores the conflict, tension and ambivalence experienced by Anjali as she hesitates between the conviction of dissent on the one hand and a sense of acquiescence and self-betrayal on the other. As she admits, 'Je vacille entre la conviction que ce que je vais faire est mon unique recours, et le sentiment que je me suis trahie moi-même' (Devi 1993: 142). The paradoxes that are exposed in Anjali's refusal of food are very clearly consistent with medical, sociological and cultural studies of anorexia. Indeed, Wynn's doctor

finally suggests to Dev that Anjali is suffering from anorexia, and that she will require intravenous feeding at some point, although Dev, perennially perplexed, simply rejoins that she is carrying out the much-discussed fast. Famously, elliptically defined by the psychoanalyst Hilde Bruch as the 'relentless pursuit of excessive thinness' (Bruch 1978: ix, original emphasis), anorexia psychosomatically performs a number of paradoxes, allowing the subject to communicate through the signifying practices of not eating and the symbolization of the thin body a host of conflictual desires and tensions. As critics have amply shown, anorexia communicates the plight of self-denial within a politics of protest that is embedded within, and strains against, the enclosing structures of family relations, and the gender politics of the wider surrounding culture (Orbach 1986; Bordo 2003; Chernin 1994; Heywood 1996; Malson 1998; MacSween 1995). Devi sensitively evokes the conflicts and paradoxes that govern Anjali's own refusal to eat. While her slight frame suggests fragility and illness, this is combined with a rigorous sense of control, self-determination and strength of mind. Although she finds it difficult to untangle her own desires from those of others, not eating allows Anjali to resist desire in all forms. As a means of staving off the overwhelming nature of her feelings of distress, guilt and responsibility, the act of starvation brings about an embodied reality that numbs her to all sentiment. Although she may seek to invisibilize herself, the spectacle of her skeletal frame is visually arresting. Although she can only communicate it within the symbolic language of family and cultural tradition, her aim is to shatter the tight grip of the family hold over her. Ultimately, then, just as a refusal of food consigns her to self-erasure, Anjali is invested in a bid for self-autonomy. Not eating allows her to appear to conform to cultural expectation and at the very same time to script a form of non-verbal resistance to familial and cultural dictates on self-sacrificing femininity, and particularly motherhood. For just her actions seem to align with the mother who puts all others' needs before her own even very basic hunger; taken to an extreme the wasting,

anorexic female body is a body that refuses maternity. When Dev, seeming to have lost all hope himself that the fire-walk will make any difference to Wynn, suggests that they could have another child, Anjali is sickened by the thought, since her identity as a mother is so tightly bound to Wynn, to being not a mother, but crucially *his* mother:

> Penser à un autre enfant maintenant, ce serait déjà trahir ce souffle de vie qui demeure en Wynn. D'ailleurs, je ne sens pas qu'il y ait de la place dans mon ventre pour abriter et faire grandir un enfant, mon ventre d'habitude plutôt rond est devenu parfaitement plat, presque concave, et je n'ai presque plus de poitrine. Comment pourrais-je nourrir un autre enfant? Personne d'autre n'aura droit à ce temple dédié à la mémoire de Wynn. Personne. (Devi 1993: 153)

As a form of hunger strike, Anjali's fasting, wasting body symbolizes, then, not only the refusal of food but also the refusal to feed. No longer an act of offering, or supplication, Anjali's resistance to eating empowers in the very sense that it offers respite: 'Ce n'est pas un supplice. C'est un repos que de ne plus avoir de corps' (Devi 1993: 154).

Anorexia has generally been characterized as a western phenomenon, a characteristically turn-of-the-millennium epidemic intimately linked to the body politics of an image-obsessed culture of consumption and objectification. There is significant evidence to suggest, however, that anorexia has been on the rise more globally speaking, particularly within social contexts that have seen significant western influence combined with rapid industrialization. As critics have shown, this increasing global presence of anorexia is also reflected in a growing body of representations of anorexia in Francophone women's writing (Damlé 2013a; see also Meuret 2007). Françoise Lionnet has drawn attention to the effects of

the transformation of the world's markets on the modes of consumption in the developing nation of Mauritius: with open-air markets and bazaars turning into malls and supermarkets selling imported food, and with global tourism's objectification of the exotic Mauritian feminine body, Lionnet argues, women in Mauritius have been caught between their domestic roles as producers and consumers and their fetishized alignment with the image of the paradise island as a means of attracting tourism and global investment. According to Lionnet:

> Women's relationship to food and shopping, work, language and sexuality shifted rapidly and created new pathologies of identification. The social and economic forces that normalize slenderness and gender identity (Bordo) and conflate the exotic Creole or Asian body with stereotypical forms of 'mysterious' femininity became reinforced by public health warnings against the dangers of malnutrition and obesity. Faced with these modern stereotypes (which many well-intentioned campaigns only served to reinforce), *and* had to cope with aspects of their traditional culture that put a definite premium on 'plumpness', Mauritian women had to sort out conflicting signals about body shape, health, and food. From breast milk and baby formula to the preparation of quotidian family meals, everyday choices now carry a heavy symbolic load, and generate stressful reactions of alienation and disembodiment, which continue a pattern of psychosomatic ailments dating from slavery and indentured labor and amount to internalized forms of social and gender oppression […]. (Lionnet 2012: 116–17, original emphasis)

As Anjali's fast develops into a more extreme act of starvation, there is a clear resonance with the definition of anorexia, which, like other eating disorders, is making its presence felt in Mauritius. However, despite the compelling context for such an interpretation, Devi's novel would seem to want to evade such a neat categorization. It is striking to note that Anjali's own reflection on her body at the end of the novel provides a pluralized set of meanings for her corpo-reality: 'Je pense à mon corps décharné, anorexie nerveuse, grève de la faim, suicide à retardement' (Devi 1993: 165). In drawing together the religious and spiritual practices of fasting, the cultural and political purpose of hunger strike and the gendered constructions of anorexia, then, Devi underscores the multiple, shifting meanings that are layered in Anjali's refusal to eat rather than providing a singular definition or overly pathologizing her actions.

In her article on the semiotics of not eating in *Le Voile*, Githire suggests that '[i]t may well be that Devi is emphasizing the impossibility of arriving at a unified and fixed portrait in situations of interlocking legacies. Anjali's rejection of food […] is the complex product of her convoluted world' (Githire 2009: 93). My own reading takes this idea further, suggesting that it is not just that the contradictory drives merely reflect the multiple fronts on which Anjali is engaged, but that her refusal of food itself can be read as carving out resistance to being locked into a singular interpretative paradigm. Anorexia, entangled as it is in a mesh of signification, may be understood as a way of disrupting the ideology of the body,

> as a way of wresting the body away from the accumulation of meaning, as a way of counter-actualizing the given materiality of the body and of working through the very layers of signification that demand particular and fixed meanings for hunger and the body. (Damlé 2014: 76)

As embodied protest and voiceless cry, anorexia (much like hysteria) has long been theorized as a process of somatization and a signifying practice, a form of bodily text or 'an unidiomatic and paradoxical language' (Bagley et al. 2018: 1). It is worth noting, as indeed several critics have, that contemporary narratives of eating disorders explicitly figure textuality, writing and storytelling as part of the experience of anorexia and also of recovery (Damlé 2013a; Meuret 2007; Robson 2016). However, writing is not always a straightforward substitute for eating or not eating; even as the starving body may offer itself up as a text, its script is not necessarily clearly legible or decipherable, and literary narratives of anorexia that depict recovery are not always recuperated to the simple, coherent story of one's life that conventional psychoanalysis might advocate. As Kathryn Robson has shown, literary representations of anorexia tend to disorient the reader,

> reminding us that any attempt to pin down a so-called 'anorexic body' is haunted by its own impossibility, not because this body is lost or hidden, and thus needs to be located and revealed, but because it is constituted in and through shifting narratives within which the reader and the reading encounter, are also inextricably caught up. (Robson 2018: 274)

This sense of displacement is amplified in *Le Voile*, where the 'anorexic body', itself multivalent and impossible to pin down, is just one interpretation of Anjali's embodied refusal. At the end of the novel, after she has completed the fire-walk, Wynn dies, Anjali tells Dev that their marriage is over and the reader is left wondering what the future holds for her. Significantly, Anjali has been increasingly drawn to the night, to the darkness as a place where meanings might be unearthed, but where they are also secreted and remain invisible:

‘la nuit est un moment où je m’évade et pars à la recherche de ces significations éparses de l’existence et du soi, qui résident pas en un seul lieu et en une seule chose, mais bien dans les éléments disparates qui autour de nous agencent tous les secrets’ (Devi 1993: 149). As Anjali describes herself disappearing into the dark shadows of the night in search of meanings that slip away, elusive and indecipherable, there is a striking resonance with her fasting body, patterned with an array of potent meanings, vanishing into the nightscape of veiled secrets and significations. In this sense, her body contains layers and folds of hidden meaning, much like the mythical, redemptive veil that she, despite her own lack of belief, does see mysteriously laid down before her during the fire-walk:

> Et soudain, je l’ai vu, flottant au-dessus du rectangle, formant un passage étroit et mouvant, le tissu mystique de la foi indiscutée, le voile translucide qui recouvre les braises et sur lequel je vais bientôt marcher, le voile de fidelité, le voile de chasteté, le voile de féminité. (Devi 1993: 168)

The image of the sari is a motif that returns across Devi’s literature, and in evoking folds and threads, seamless flow, in its suggestive revealing and veiling of the body, Lionnet has compellingly argued that it can be read as a metaphor for storytelling, a metaphor that also illuminates the theoretical and cultural entanglements in which Devi’s novels engage. It is, according to Lionnet, ‘the (eastern) equivalent of her Ariadne’s thread, the guiding tarn into and out of her labyrinth of language’ (Lionnet 2012: 256). Indeed, it is in *Le Voile* that Devi draws out the connection between Draupadi and Ariadne: ‘Il suffit de savoir que chaque labyrinthe à son fil d’Ariane, ce sari sans fin de Draupadi […]. D’une façon ou d’une autre, chacun est occupé à perpétuer son karma, à suivre son fil invisible à travers le temps’ (Devi 1993: 160). If Ariadne’s thread is a common western metaphor for textuality, Devi, as

Lionnet argues, 'shifts the narratological context to the Indian tradition, indicating similarities while rooting her French-language novel in a different local understanding of universal storytelling' (Lionnet 2012: 259–60). The sari, then, symbolizes an act of reading 'that searches for clues while also letting the text work its magic on us and wrap us up – dangerously within its folds as in a fluid and silky sari' (Lionnet 2012: 281). Much like this fluid and silky sari, then, we might think of Anjali's fasting body as a 'tissu mystique' (Devi 1993: 168), a mystical and mythical body-text entangled with intricate cultural meanings from Indian mythology to the gendered and imperial politics of consumerism. From this perspective, while on the surface her fasting may be interpreted within the language of conformity, Anjali scripts on and through her own body, wrapped up in the *tissu mystique* of Draupadi's veil, an arresting, indecipherable act of resistance to the flows of consumption in the contemporary patriarchal, postcolonial landscape of Mauritius, but also perhaps to our own readerly appetites.

Biting back? Explosions of eating in *Manger l'autre*

While Anjali's act of fasting in *Le Voile* can be read as a critique of the global currents of consumption that is bound up with the politics of imperial appetites, *Manger l'autre* represents a powerful indictment of the contemporary obsessions of the West, where the hypocrisy of excessive consumption combines with the voracious yet disciplinary gaze of a hypervisual, digitalized world. Narrated in the first-person, *Manger* is the sensitive account of a teenage girl whose insatiable appetite and astonishing weight mark her out as an object of disgust and derision from womb into world. Although the exact location is unnamed, the narrator describes a town that has been buttressed by fortifications constructed in the wake of a referendum, insinuating a political environment characterized by the building of walls and the dissolution of unions that resonates with the contemporary realities of two instantly

recognizable western nations in the grip of neo-liberalism and right-wing populism. Abandoned by her mother at an early age, the narrator is brought up by a loving father, whose greatest pleasure is to prepare plates upon plates of food for his daughter. Although the narrator is bullied and spurned by her classmates because of her size, she eventually finds love only to be left heartbroken when intimate photographs of her are uploaded to the Internet. Desolate, the narrator's all-consuming appetite takes an astonishing turn as she defiantly live-streams herself eating her own flesh. In my reading of the novel, I suggest that over-eating and self-cannibalism come into explosive forms of contact as the narrator bites back, seeking to open the eyes of those complicit in feeding her appetite, not least the spectres of advanced consumer capitalism, whose horrified hunger for the spectacle of feasting represents the hypocrisy and disavowal of their own insatiable appetites.

'Car tout est une histoire de corps', claims the narrator at the start of the novel, 'À la fin, il ne s'agit toujours que de cela, et de notre source, à la fois familière et énigmatique, dans le ventre maternel' (Devi 2018: 10). As the story of her body begins not with the determining event of birth itself, but with the secret life of the womb, 'le lieu du plus grand mystère' (Devi 2018: 11), Devi attends from the outset to the permeability of the boundaries of flesh and the incorporation of the other within the self that is evoked in her charged title. As Probyn notes, and as we have already seen, eating the other may be a metaphor for imperial violence, but it is also the point at which knowing the self and caring for the other merge: 'Either way we are faced with the elemental fact of flesh' (Probyn 2000: 70). Flesh dominates the novel in myriad forms, and it opens with the elemental rupture between self and other, as a mother gives birth to a fleshy pink elephant, whose astounding mass (a birth-weight of 10kg and 200g) is so perplexing that the child exceeds language: 'J'étais l'éléphant rose. Je n'avais ni trompe ni grandes oreilles; mais il était impossible de nous réconcilier, moi

et le mot "bébé". Il aurait fallu trouver un autre vocable pour me décrire' (Devi 2018: 12). Her own flesh ravaged by the pregnancy and birth, with stitches after a C-section barely holding her organs together, the mother begins to feed her child and is given over to the inutterable physicality of the experiences of birth and breastfeeding. A previously polished, professional woman, she struggles in being reduced to her reproductive capacities, a 'vache mourante affalée sur le vinyle verdâtre […] vache abattue par l'énormité de son oeuvre' (Devi 2018: 14), 'une image de ruine' (Devi 2018: 15). Paralysed by the interminable feeding of the child, by the cavernous, devouring mouth that swallows her up, the baby's mother at first weans her onto a bottle, and then hires a chain of wet-nurses, none of whom last for longer than a few weeks. Eventually, fearful that she would not be able to love her, or even that she might harm her, the mother flees, leaving her with her father, who turns out to be 'la meilleure nourrice qui soit' (Devi 2018: 19).

If *Le Voile* foregrounds the intimate relationship between mother and child, and a strong, but socially determined and often overwhelming, sense of maternal responsibility, *Manger* indicates outright that 'le sentiment maternel est très surfait' (Devi 2018: 19). However, in Devi's balanced and compassionate writing, while mothers struggle with the constraints of conforming to their roles, the effect on children of absent, abusive or otherwise neglectful mothers is frequently highlighted, such as in *Moi, l'interdite* (Devi 2000) and *La Vie de Joséphin le fou* (Devi 2003), where maternal rejection has a profound impact on the young protagonists' psyches. In *Manger*, the mother's disappearance and ensuing silence infiltrate the narrator's body, thickening into an anger that furrows through her flesh, much like the varicose veins caused by her obesity (Devi 2018: 101), and she understands from an early age that her own boundless corporeality has inspired revulsion. When her mother comes to visit her briefly for the first time since her departure, the now teenage narrator observes

familiar attempts to stifle a pure and sovereign violence towards her child: ‘Je l’ai compris très tôt, m’man. J’ai compris la haine que j’inspirais chez les gens, chez toi, chez tous sauf chez mon père’ (Devi 2018: 118–19). In a perverse manner, one might view her mother’s decision to leave as a form of kindness, reflective of the fine line in Devi’s writing between maternal compassion and cruelty, such as in Mouna’s decision to kill her child to save him from a life of exclusion in *Moi, l’interdite*. In *Manger*, however, this slippage is also borne out in the narrator’s relationship with her father. In an inversion of conventional gender roles, it is the father who plays the devoted, doting parent, and who spends his life in the kitchen, preparing his daughter endless meals, transforming her room ‘en cathédrale de nourriture’ (Devi 2018: 66). Devi evokes in tremendous detail the artistry and alchemy involved in the father’s elaborate food preparation, which speaks of the care and attention that he pays to his daughter, and his welcome normalization of her body, ‘le plus grand acte d’amour que je puisse attendre de mon père’ (Devi 2018: 51). Her father’s love allows her to indulge without guilt in the waves of sensation opened up in episodes of feasting, where the act of consumption is perceived as ‘un assouvissement et une jouissance’ (Devi 2018: 40). Yet the narrator vacillates between the feelings of *jouissance* and shame that are conjured in acts of eating. And as much as her father’s feeding intends to dissipate any sense of self-loathing that his daughter may experience, he has also directly contributed to the narrative of her overwhelming ‘gourmandise’ (Devi 2018: 48). For the father – who refers always to his daughter in the plural as his princesses, his darlings – has fabricated a fantasy to explain the child’s abundant appetite by claiming that she must have had a twin that she had consumed in utero. His justification comes from a place of love, wanting to alleviate any sense of guilt or shame for his daughter, who writes that ‘Papa avait une idée fixe: me déculpabiliser’ (Devi 2018: 66). However, the absence of the mother and the father’s eternal reiteration of this twin fantasy engender an uncertainty in the child’s mind, an imposed schizophrenia (Devi 2018:

24) that reinforces feelings of insufficiency, a drive to compensation and a sense of self that is split, hinging on the structuring fantasies of implacable incorporation: 'Et ma soeur, mon double, mon indeterminée, s'est résorbée dans mes tissus et mes organes et, avec elle, toute mon humanité' (Devi 2018: 11). The idea of having consumed a twin sister, a phantom with whom she continues to converse, and describes as a contained, anorexic other to her overspilling, excessive embodied self, thus instils in the protagonist a peculiarly haunted hunger.

The voice of this phantom sister, 'anorexique, comme se doit de l'être mon double' (Devi 2018: 84), erupts into the narrative at times, reminding her (and us) of the entwined relation between the narrator's fleshy materiality and the sister's invisible existence:

> la seule différence est qu'elle existe sans exister, elle se nourrit du rien, elle aspire l'âme de ce que je consomme tandis que j'en absorbe, moi, la matière. Elle maigrit aussi inéluctablement que je grossis. Et, tandis qu'elle disparaît dans son éther, je m'enlise dans mes déchets. Elle, aérienne; moi, condamnée à la pesanteur. (Devi 2018: 85)

Incorporated within her, the sister claims that '[t]on surpoids est ma manière d'exister' (Devi 2018: 70), and in this doubled figure of restraint and excess Devi invites reflection on the polarized yet symbiotic relation of modes of eating in contemporary culture. As the protagonist's obese body envelops an anorexic other, who goads her appetites, Devi's novel resonates sharply with Bordo's analysis of the coexistence of anorexia and obesity as reflecting a conflict between the producing and consuming elements of the self:

> Far from paradoxical, the coexistence of anorexia and obesity reveals the instability of the contemporary personality construction, the difficulty of finding homeostasis between the producer and the consumer sides of the self. Bulimia embodies the unstable double bind of consumer capitalism, while anorexia and obesity embody an attempted resolution of that double bind. (Bordo 2003: 201)

Indeed, the narrator herself makes some perspicacious observations about the contemporary obsessions of consumption, and the ways in which her own obesity is construed and constructed by the rest of the world. For despite the sensory delights elaborated in the narrator's feasting, Devi attends with pathos to her abject body, as she admits 'la honte […] est ma compagne' (Devi 2018: 41). Endlessly mocked and denigrated, she is one of so many characters in Devi's writing who find themselves at the margins of society, disenfranchised, cast out on the basis of visible difference, or disability. Labelled 'La Couenne', she is subjected to ceaseless name-calling and bullying, designed to showcase the uncontainable excesses of her bursting body (Devi 2018: 36). One scene in particular highlights the enormity of the suffering caused by these insults, when, come sports day, she locks herself in the contained space of a toilet cubicle, foiling in anticipation her peers' annual plans by embracing the abjection of her own excrement, her body reduced to a machine of incorporation and evacuation, 'un processus organique, naturel et terrible' (Devi 2018: 43). As she perceptively remarks elsewhere, obesity, unlike most other forms of disability, is perceived as a choice, indolent, gluttonous, unworthy of compassion (Devi 2018: 98). Devi advances a stinging critique of consumer culture across the novel, as the narrator explains that she sees herself as the visual manifestation and psychical representation of a much broader set of contemporary appetites, in a capitalist society imprisoned and enslaved by its own desires (Devi 2018: 28). Although the rest of society looks on the protagonist as a

feeding parasite, their own insatiable desires are disavowed and displaced, poured into her body:

> Me voir est une preuve de plus de l'échec de l'humanité contre ses pulsions. On peut cacher tout le reste, les excès de l'alcool, de tabac, de drogue ou de sexe, mais la graisse s'éploie dans toute sa splendeur dès les premiers instants, et rien ne peut la dissimuler. (Devi 2018: 99)

As the narrator's body audaciously exhibits the excess of its appetites, the very image of her becomes an abhorrent remainder and a vexing reminder of the uncontrollable desires of others. Here, and throughout the novel, revulsion and judgement are conveyed overwhelmingly via verbs of looking and being seen, and the narrator herself draws attention to the disciplinary politics of the gaze, amplified by the inescapable surveillance of Internet culture, '[l]e lynchage du siècle' (Devi 2018: 98). Yet in the consumer politics of the gaze, revulsion combines with fascination: this is the death penalty of a hypervisual consumer capitalism, whose appetites culminate in a displaced hunger for the spectacles of excess written on the obese body. But, and as the narrative presence of her phantom sister insinuates, the narrator's body is only part of the story. The following passage, an implicit address to the reader, brings into coruscating relief the global implications of an economy of consumption that circulates around the tandem poles of excess and lack:

> Tournez, tournez, restaurants, cafés, étals, marchés, cuisines et cuisiniers: un jour le magma réprimé par l'enveloppe de votre chair jaillira en un charnier aussi inattendu qu'universel – tandis que d'autres populations du monde disparaîtront, elles, dans le dénuement total. Même mouvement paradoxal, même loi de

> conservation de l'énergie, les déséquilibres s'ajustent, comme ma jumelle et moi, les excès et les manques doivent être égaux, notre jeu inhumain n'aurait pas de sens sans cela, le trop-plein et le vide, déguelement et absorption, obésité et anorexie, maladies d'un siècle sans repères autres que l'annihilation sous toutes ses formes. (Devi 2018: 86)

As the narrator makes clear to the reader in this nonetheless quite dizzying passage, itself structurally evocative of the accumulation and surplus in which the (im)balances of the economies of eating swirl, her own feasting body – including its incorporation of a fasting phantom twin – becomes a surface of inscription for the myriad, voracious desires of an advanced consumer capitalism propelled towards destruction by the global flows of excess and lack.

For Probyn, eating can expose 'the visceral nature of our connectedness and distance from each other, from ourselves and from our social environment: it throws into relief the heartfelt, the painful, playful or pleasurable articulations of identity' (Probyn 2000: 13–14). Oscillations between connectedness and distance permeate the text, and they reach an apex in the narrator's love story, which foregrounds in fascinating ways the links between desire, consumerism and fetishization under advanced capitalism. The more she is bullied, the more the narrator steps away from the world, and her exclusion and imprisonment become literalized, when, in one of the most excruciating scenes of the novel, her abundant girth results in her becoming stuck in a doorway at home. It is precisely this incident, however, that leads her to experience the pleasures of connecting corporeally with somebody else. Unable to move for hours until her father calls for help, she is eventually freed with the assistance of a carpenter. Devi describes her liberation from this particular threshold as a

form of rebirth, opening up onto ever new desires and experiences, as René becomes the first man to look at her without judgement or revulsion, instead approaching her with sympathy, tenderness and also desire. Devi's portrayal of their relationship is characteristically complex, and ethically challenging, and it is difficult to know how to interpret René's feelings for the narrator. As they begin to get to know one another, there is on the one hand the blossoming of a genuine sense of care and affection, but underlying tensions remain in how the narrator and in particular her body are perceived. As a way of diminishing her overwhelming embarrassment after the door incident, René distracts her by opening up about his own life, beginning with his long-held interest in working with wood that was inspired by his grandfather. It emerges that René understands social exclusion all too well, having lived on the streets, and from this perspective their relationship appears to involve a mutual understanding described as a form of nourishment:

> René me livre sa solitude et le partage de ses jours et de son corps comme une nourriture secrète; mon égal, mon commensal. Et puis, à un moment, le silence s'installe, enrichi. Je n'ai pas besoin, moi, de parler. Il comprend tout, sait combien le regard des autres à la fois expose et interdit. Annihile et amplifie. Aux marges extrêmes de la vie, nous parvenons en ce lieu où il n'est plus besoin de dire. (Devi 2018: 158)

René, too, has been subject to society's disciplinary gaze, but also striking in these lines is the sense of movement between the notions of amplification and annihilation to describe the effects of that gaze, and in the oscillation between an openness as René and the protagonist share their own experiences and a stillness in their complicit silence. In Devi's subtle writing, such lexical shifts between excess and restraint mimic the novel's broader explorations of

hunger and denial. As their relationship becomes physical, the narrator is incredulous to realize the extent of René's desire for her and to experience the pleasures of his archaeological explorations of her body. Although she wonders whether he is merely taking advantage of her vulnerability, or even her immobility, she emphasizes his tenderness and her own, until now unrealized, sexual desires: 'Je suis prête à tout, prête à explorer jusqu'au bout cette nouvelle manière d'être, aucun refus, jamais: il m'ouvre le monde' (Devi 2018: 167). Devi's writing attends beautifully and with erotic detail to the mingling of their bodies, and to the new sensations conjured by their coupling in the narrator's exhilarated, lyrical narrative voice: 'Échouée, naufragée, son corps me sauve de la noyade' (Devi 2018: 167). At the same time, she avoids overly romanticizing the realities of sex, accounting in refreshing ways for the messiness, awkwardness and often absurd aspects of sex acts, notably in the 'aventure de la pénétration' (Devi 2018: 167) as René places extra chairs by the bed in which to place his lover's legs to accommodate their coming together. There is a sense here of honesty and authenticity in the narration, which affords the narrator sexual experiences in which shame plays no part. 'Grasse de bien-être, molle de satiété, débordante de sexe, dégoulinante de plaisir' (Devi 2018: 175); the narrator gains a greater understanding of the vast potentiality of her bodily appetites. She also attributes a newfound sense of wholeness to René, who has enabled the split halves of her self, 'l'une dévoreuse, l'autre dévorée' (Devi 2018: 174), to integrate as one, as the phantom sister's voice in her head disappears and her father begins to address her in the singular as 'tu' instead of the plural 'vous'. As she discovers more about her own appetites, it is not that sex becomes a substitute for eating; indeed, the lovers experiment with food and with eating in their sexual discoveries. The notion of eating the other seems to acquire new meaning here as eating becomes less a solitary practice of incorporation, but rather a way of experiencing the merging of the boundaries between self and other, and of remapping corporeality: 'Tu ne me quittais plus, la chambre devenait une

cellule carmin où deux creatures étranges s'accouplaient en mangeant, mangeaient en s'accouplant, ne savaient plus où commençait l'une, où finissait l'autre, dormaient, s'éveillaient, le coeur balbutiant de désir' (Devi 2018: 177). As Devi brings eating and sex together here, she seems to echo Probyn in suggesting a move beyond the experience of the body as an inert entity that passively accepts what goes into it, instead viewing eating and sex as 'practices that open ourselves into a multitude of surfaces that tingle and move' (Probyn 2000: 70).

Despite the compassion, tenderness and openness experienced in the narrator's relationship with René, subtle, revelatory undercurrents ripple through the narrative, suggestive of a more ethically ambiguous, fetishistic relation between the two. As he carefully hollows out the wooden doorframe that has imprisoned her, René's regard for her is described as gentle, accompanied by 'sympathie amusée', a 'sourire secret' and 'complicité', although it is swiftly followed by the hardness of his erection as he brushes against her with the words '[j]e suis vraiment désolé, mais c'est plus fort que moi' (Devi 2018: 138). The reader is struck by the possible age difference between the two, magnified in the narration by the teenage naivety and eagerness of the narrator's responses to her 'sauveur' (Devi 2018: 144). That René is the first, and the only, person to have looked at her with desire leaves us wondering whether the narrator gives herself to him with far greater urgency than she otherwise might have. As he fixes her with a gaze of intent, there is something undeniably unsettling in the way that she writes 'je me dis très clairement que je le laisserai faire ce qu'il veut, car je n'aurai pas de deuxième chance' (Devi 2018: 159). Further, although René's seduction of her is gentle and generous, she cannot help but feel that there is something perverse in his desire for her (Devi 2018: 164), a perception that is no doubt fostered by her lack of self-esteem and her internalization of a particular body politic. The reader learns that

René has inherited his passion for ‘les femmes généreuses de leur corps et de leur rire’ (Devi 2018: 153) from his grandfather, who used to take photographs of semi-nude women of this particular body-type, and that he relishes childhood memories of time spent in his grandfather’s studio, encountering these women whose bodies seem to have inspired in him a very particular kind of desire. In their embrace,

> il découvrait, abasourdi, heureux et terrifié à la fois, leur peaux soyeuses, leur poils doux ou drus, roux ou bruns ou blonds, leur bouches trop rouges pour être vraies, leur parfum étrange de sueur et de musc, d’ail et de chocolat – parfois il devinait des creux rouge sombre aux scintillements humides qui faisaient galoper son coeur. (Devi 2018: 152–53)

René’s description gives, on the one hand, a pleasing and non-homogenizing sense of plurality to women’s bodies in the diversity of colours and textures of their body hair. At the same time, there is something quite striking in the description of his awakening desires, in the wonder but also notably the horror that their silky, sumptuous flesh inspires. And in the attention given to the redness of their mouths and olfactory associations that mingle body, sweat, garlic and chocolate, there is a distinctly alimentary frame to these desires. Although it feels apposite in many ways to read sex and eating in the narrator’s relationship with René in terms of the movements opened in the surfaces of the body that might allow for different assemblages of corporeality in Probyn’s terms, it is also possible to read more familiar fantasies of incorporation emerge. While the impossible redness of the mouths in the quotation above is evocative of fantasies of being swallowed up, there is a reversibility to the notion of eating the other as the amplitude of the narrator’s body also assuages an inexorable hunger in René: ‘J’offre mon ampleur à sa maigreur. Je suis la consolation de ses manques’

(Devi 2018: 170). It is worth remembering that René's thinness and hunger has been shaped by time spent on the streets, and in this sense the narrator's body appears to provide welcome warmth, plenitude and refuge (Devi 2018: 168). But the narrator is all too aware that veiled in this seemingly genuine openness to one another, internal perhaps to the very structure of René's desire, is an inevitable sense of illusion. Indeed, as she writes, commenting on the pleasures of the compliments that René pays her despite her perception of his exaggeration, '[a]ucun amour ne survit sans mensonge' (Devi 2018: 165). Underlying the apparent complicity of the relationship, then, there is a relation of fantasy, fetishization and falsity that takes on an increasingly sinister tone. When René brings out his grandfather's camera and asks the narrator to pose naked for him, she is at first reluctant, keenly aware of the stringent expectations of the contemporary hypervisual world, and its cult of the idealized, perfected forms of the female body. But with René's gentle support, she concedes, and he proceeds to take multiple pictures, some staged, some spontaneous, and when she looks at the developed photographs, she even dares to find herself beautiful. There is a sense here of the displacement of the disciplinary gaze that has long construed her body as monstrous and reviled. Yet, it seems significant that she too valorizes her image in arguably fetishistic terms, adopting from René a discomfiting gaze that may in some ways reorient the perception of her body and restore the agency of her desire outside the structures of the body politic, but that also frames her within the exoticizing fantasy of the devouring female of whom he nonetheless takes possession:

> je suis l'odalisque, enfin, rendue à moi-même, enfin, son regard m'irradie, j'ai une belle bouche de dévoreuse, je dévore René par tous les bouts pour le garder en moi, toujours, toujours, souvenir d'un plaisir sans fin et sans ombre, nous sommes le

> monde loin de ses peurs, je suis la femme du charpentier, il est le dieu de mes chairs. (Devi 2018: 182–83)

Intricately layered within René's desire, then, lurks a fetishizing fantasy that reiterates the logic of incorporation that this otherwise expansive and generous relationship would seem to want to disrupt.

As the narrator's love affair with René continues, then, there is an increasing sense of foreboding and tension around the fetishization of her body, which reaches a point of climax when her father, who has until this point bestowed a silent blessing on the couple, comes into her room with the news that the intimate photographs that René had taken of her have found their way onto the Internet. Utterly bereft, the narrator is not surprised that René's affections may have waned as much as she is devastated by the absolute betrayal of trust, '[l]a plus infâme des trahisons' (Devi 2018: 186), in offering her up to such a public gaze. When she looks at the pictures online herself, she now sees what she calls her 'véritable apparence'. 'Ce n'est pas le regard des autres, non', she claims, rather interestingly, 'c'est moi qui suis monstrueuse' (Devi 2018: 189). Yet, in what follows as the narrator reads the thousands of comments that accumulate day to day, the nature of the mockery, insults and sadism reconfirms the idea that her obese body is imprisoned by a politics of the gaze that takes on viral proportions in a hypervisual, digital world (Devi 2018: 190). Reminding her readers that she is not the only person whom this gaze follows, she encourages reflection on our own embeddedness and complicity in such a politics, from the dual perspective of an everyday imprisonment by and (unconscious) perpetration of the gaze, and issues a strident warning about the contemporary spectacularization of reality:

> [l'oeil] ne fait pas que regarder, il alimente les peurs, les suspicions, la paranoïa, la haine. […] Réunis dans cette quatrième dimension, vous verrez le monde réel comme la source de tous les dangers, celui contre lequel il faudra se barricader pour vivre par écran interposé son anéantissement. (Devi 2018: 192)

When online commentators urge her to commit suicide, the narrator knows that she must find a dénouement that will rival her exceptional entry into this world (Devi 2018: 201), and she searches for ways to articulate herself as an emblematic embodiment of the deeply knitted relation between a hypervisual politics occasioned by the sheer force and speed of technological progress and the rampant appetites of consumer capitalism: 'Voici ce que vous risquez de devenir, avec tous ces progrès technologiques qui vous dispensent de bouger et d'agir, vous incitent à devourer toujours plus. Voilà l'utopie imbécile à laquelle vous aspirez' (Devi 2018: 204–05). Much like *Moi, l'interdite*'s Mouna, the narrator positions her own narrative as a 'mise en garde' (Devi 2018: 204). Asking her father to bring her more and more food, she begins to inscribe this cautionary tale on her ever-expanding body, but the interruption in the narrative of the voice of the phantom sister takes her warning in an unexpected direction. For it is the narrator's double, her split self, her anorexic twin, who reveals in the end the devastating truth that it was not René who had posted the photographs, but that she, the narrator, had in fact uploaded them herself. Seduced by her own image, but also hopeful that sharing the photographs might in some way explode mythologies of the obese body (although the reality as can be seen from the comments is the inverse), the narrator admits that her own obsession with her self-image has become her downfall: 'J'ai cédé à la maladie de notre siècle: le besoin de s'exposer' (Devi 2018: 210). Asking her father not to bring her any more food, she resolves not to submit further to the demands of the

online gaze, takes the knife that her father uses to cut into pineapples, slices into her abdomen and tastes her own flesh.

The opening lines of *Manger* hold nothing back: 'Je me dévore dans une exquise absence de souffrance. Autour de moi se fige un lac de sang. Toute ma courte vie, j'ai défié la biologie du corps. Maintenant, je défie la biologie de la mort' (Devi 2018: 9). Introducing the reader to the narrator at this horrific end-point of eating, it is from this perspective that she goes on to recount her life, beginning with the carnal account of her unimaginable birth. Yet, as Devi beautifully orchestrates the atmosphere of tension and foreboding to its conclusion, the reader is somehow still startled by the dénouement's graphic rendering of the narrator taking a mass of flesh between her fingers, cutting a slice of what she describes as having the appearance of pork, and stuffing the bloody meat inside her mouth. An absolute act of transgression, cannibalism incites fascination and horror in reaching beyond widely accepted practices of eating; it titillates in bringing together the viscerality of hunger and the limit-point of the unthinkable. As Jennifer Brown writes,

> [c]annibalism creates ambiguity because it both reduces the body to mere meat and elevates it to a highly desirable, symbolic entity; it is both disgusting and the most rarefied of gastronomic tastes. Cannibalism is a forceful reminder of how the human appetite is a life-driving force, and is the ultimate transgression of cultural mores. (Brown 2013: 4)

In the final pages of the text, Devi describes the narrator's acts of cannibalism with the same voluptuous ecstasy to which the reader has become accustomed: 'Goût de moi en moi. Glissant, tiède, visqueux, odeur fade du gras' (Devi 2018: 214). From behind an initial

blandness in the taste of her own meat in her mouth bursts out the richness and the specificity of her self, her own unique flavour, the very stuff of her being, infused with all the emotional and narrative ingredients that make up her rarefied self. Quite literally dissecting herself provokes a mutilating process of self-discovery, anatomical and otherwise, with different layers of her self and her memories opened up in the sensations of consuming the cells, particles and molecules of her own flesh. It is not only the eating of human flesh that reorients the logic of consumption here; becoming her own meat in a process of self-cannibalism opens altogether new perspectives on notions of eating the other. In medical and psychiatric discourses, self-cannibalism, or autosarcophagy, is described as being a particularly rare phenomenon, generally associated with other forms of self-harm such as the mutilation of the flesh involved in cutting. Seen in patients with personality disorders, self-mutilation is attributed to the desire to rid oneself of 'depersonalization, guilt, rejection, hallucinations, sexual involvements and complex emotional states' (Yilmaz et al. 2014: 701), while autosarcophagy, which goes significantly beyond self-harm (Libbon et al. 2015: 153), more specifically tends to be linked to 'a severe mental disorder such as schizophrenia' (Yilmaz et al. 2014: 702). Such a description of emotional states certainly resonates sharply with the narrator's affective investments, suggesting that self-cannibalism functions as a response to the complexity of her psyche as constructed overwhelmingly – both in the twin fantasy and in interactions with others – in relation to appetite, consumption and incorporation. In a paroxysm of 'violence et volupté' (Devi 2018: 214), the narrator's self-cannibalism seems to offer the unique sense of relief afforded to patients who have practiced autosarcophagy (Libbon et al. 2015: 153). Tearing off chunk after chunk, she reaches the innermost part of herself, close to her heart, to discover her phantom anorexic sister curled against her, bringing the narrative full circle to its originary story of 'eating the other'. Anorexia can be understood, as Priscilla Walton (2004) notes, as the inverse of cannibalism,

in the sense that the body deprived of all sustenance begins to feed on itself; in self-cannibalism, then, anorexia finds a parallel and there is some strange sense of reconciliation between the two parts of narrator's body, between her feasting self and fasting other: 'maintenant, enfin, je suis complète et achevée. Je suis pleine et rassasiée, enfin toi, ma soeur, mon autre, ma complice, plus jamais seule, mon incomparable, et je n'aurai plus jamais faim' (Devi 2018: 217). In this figure of layered, doubled, entangled self-incorporation, then, Devi illuminates the painful experiences and complex affectivity of a young woman whose patterns of feasting reflect the all-consuming appetite for the other that is conditioned by the logic of a consumer capitalism that creates and condemns her in an impossible dynamic of hunger and restraint, but whose carefully considered and staged performance nonetheless shatters those very frames of reference.

For Probyn, contemporary interest in cannibalism 'conjugates questions about markets and late-stage capitalism with issues about basic human existence' (Probyn 2000: 83). It grapples in this way with questions about the threshold beyond which we cease to be human that Devi's writing has always held under particular scrutiny (Damlé 2013b), and that are framed here in particular relation to inexorable forces of advanced capitalism. For Pierre Bourdieu (1979), taste distinguishes in particular ways, forming the basis of how one classifies oneself and is classified by others, but in the narrator's taste of her own raw flesh there is an explosive sense of self-touching. I want to suggest that taste here becomes not a mode of distinction, but of collapsing demarcations in such a way that opens a nuanced understanding of the human condition under advanced capitalism. As the narrator's blood flows, the taste of her own self mingles with a sense of the human as living matter, continuous with the material and the animal, revealing in ever new ways to the narrator the

essence of the human as being entrenched in the falsity and futility of anthropocentric, imperialist and capitalist appetites:

> Je me découvre en m'avalant, je découvre l'essence même de ce qui nous fait; la parenté avec nos amies les bêtes que nous mangeons si volontiers, la futilité de notre condition humaine, de nos certitudes de grandeur et de supériorité, la terrible illusion d'immortalité qui nous pousse en avant, tout ceci m'apparaît clairement. (Devi 2018: 214)

The narrator's bleeding flesh deliberately draws parallels with the carcasses of the meat industry here, and in becoming her own meat and in the self-touching of tasting her own flesh, the narrator undoes the structural economy of eating the other and inverts a capitalist hunger that hinges on the violent incorporation of the other. But further, in live-streaming her act of self-cannibalism, the narrator provides a final spectacle to the determining consumer capitalist gaze that has regulated her body. This is no longer the ordinary spectacle of the othered body that does not fit into its regulatory demands: this inconceivable act of self-cannibalism is intended to incite an ecstatic horror that silences any form of judgement and that condemns the spectators to their own insatiable desires: 'le monde terrorisé s'agglutine autour de la vision de ton corps disséqué, aucun spectacle ne sera comparable, tu les condamnes à rester désormais sur leur faim de sensations extrêmes' (Devi 2018: 216). In a discussion of the film *Dans ma peau*, which also features acts of self-mutilation and self-consumption, Lorna Piatti Farnell writes that the horror effect of the spectacle of the protagonist's self-cannibalism comes from 'being forced to witness her detachment, her estrangement from her own body, and her distinctly absent need for self-preservation' (Piatti-Farnell 2017: 128). She refers to the medical study mentioned above, where autosarcophagic

patients are described as exhibiting in the very act of self-consumption a state of detachment and unresponsiveness, a 'flat and blunted' affectivity (Libbon et al. 2015: 152). Whether the narrator's diegetic audience, whose comments accumulate at a viral pace in 'un chant cruel, apocalyptique' (Devi 2018: 215) that spurs her on, perceive such a detachment in her remains unspoken, but the novel nonetheless affords the narrator a lucidity and self-presence that runs counter to such an interpretation. As readers, in that sense her extra-diegetic audience, we are made privy to this as she reflects with intelligence and passion on the appetites that drive her behaviour. It is interesting to note that the narrator slips into the use of the personal pronoun 'tu' at this point to refer to herself, but this would seem less to suggest the detachment of a flat and blunted sense of self, and instead rather to move in radical although uncertain ways towards a definition of self-preservation. In her chapter on 'eating the other' in race and representation, hooks argues that as cannibals we destroy the difference that we crave (hooks 1992: 31). While the narrator condemns the cannibalistic appetite for the spectacle of her body, her own acts of self-cannibalism intend to restore to her body a form of humanity in the sense of an openness, rather than an incorporation, of the other. For as she and her phantom twin reconcile, the twin strands of hunger and restraint entangle in an altogether different way: 'je lui ai laisse à elle toute l'humanité que j'ai perdue en dévorant, et la voici qui revient se lover contre moi, intime et passionelle' (Devi 2018: 217). Witnessing the spectacle of self-cannibalism may condemn the regulatory gaze to the cycle of its own appetites, and as the narrator notes, 'après t'avoir vue réduire ton corps en fragments si semblables à la viande qu'ils mangent tous les jours, ils retrouveront le bonheur d'avoir, eux, un corps tout entier pour vivre, manger, forniquer, déféquer' (Devi 2018: 216–17). However, in Devi's humanizing depiction of the narrator's self-cannibalism, the reader is implicated in a far broader set of ethical debates.

Although *Manger* is set in the West, the trope of cannibalism draws intriguing connections between the various, overlapping concerns about sexual, capitalist but also colonial appetites that have been central to this article. Cannibalism and cannibalistic tropes feature prominently in (post)colonial cultural works, not least in those emerging from the Caribbean, itself synonymous with cannibalism in the colonial imaginary ever since Columbus' far-reaching misinterpretation of the word 'caríba' called out as self-identification by Amerindians for the monstrous, mythological 'caníba'. As Loichot observes

> [m]etastasizing from this linguistic error, Europeans and other western colonizers, tourists, and readers have associated the Antilles with the primal act of eating, whether in the figure of the cannibal, or in that of its famed counterpart, the Caribbean itself – its land, people, and language – all reduced to delectable objects. (Loichot 2013: vii)

Critics have shown that depictions of the culinary in Francophone Caribbean literature 'bite back', mobilizing modes of irony, and pushing against controlling colonial images and the imperial construction of cannibalism that in fact has much to reveal about its own pathologies (Loichot 2013; Simek 2016). Githire's study of the cannibal in Francophone literature reaches beyond the Caribbean, examining the theme as a way to think through ongoing encounters between the peoples of Caribbean and the Indian Ocean, and the global consumer cultures of Western Europe and North America. Regarding cannibalism as 'the most intimate form of eating which involves control, power and ultimate domination', Githire argues across a range of Caribbean and Indian Ocean literary works that cannibalism emerges 'as a privileged mode for addressing pertinent questions about power, incorporation and counter-tactics' (Githire 2014: 7). In tandem with the prominence of cannibalism in the cultural works

of formerly colonized lands, the cannibal also lurks, as Probyn notes, as a strange figure amid current western obsessions with food and eating. In her words, '[t]he figure of the cannibal has returned to haunt Western societies, from which, of course, it originally came' (Probyn 2000: 79). Devi's *Manger* is positioned in fascinating ways at the nexus of these complex, entwined discourses on cannibalism. Read in isolation, one might be tempted to isolate too the text's engagement with transgressive, excessive eating to the consumerism of the West, but within the context of Devi's wider *oeuvre*, the implicit relation between the psychical effects of consumerism on the individual body and the colonial pathologies that have fed and reified capitalist appetites is pulled into far greater focus. As the narrator's feasting is pushed to the extreme in the form of her cannibalistic appetite, then, it becomes evident that her excessive consumption, of food and of flesh, and the modes of resistance and reflection it inspires are necessarily implicated within the global reach of the consumerism that Devi scrutinizes. If the narrator bites back against a structuring imperial, capitalist hunger, this is no simple reversal or rebalancing of appetites. Devi reorients the trope of cannibalism in a multivalent manner in the narrator's acts of self-cannibalism, as the bite turns inwards, only to reveal the other, her alter ego, and as, instead of devouring her, she finally makes space for her at a point where her own hunger diminishes. As readers we are left with a sense of moral exhaustion, as Probyn might term it, regarding the narrator's body in fragments, imagining her online spectators continuing to disavow their own appetites into her incredible spectacle of otherness, and reminded in this elemental, horrifying – but remarkably familiar – story of feasting 'that we desperately need alternative modes of organizing ourselves and our relation to others' (Probyn 2000: 81).

Conclusion

Fasting, Feasting, Anita Desai's celebrated 1999 work, explores the gender politics of the family and the effects of migration and cultural difference on individual and familial identity in a novel that moves between the characters' lives in India and America. As the title suggests, food occupies a prominent place in the narrative and in Desai's careful observations, one learns much from the novel about the difficulty of translating eating and food practices across cultures, beyond the particularity of the family unit, and also between individuals. In a review of the novel, Francine Prose (2000) writes that Desai subtly reveals how our lives are encoded by tiny, trivial details about what we will and will not ingest: 'These minute, quotidian expressions of conflict and concord, preference and identity, are omnipresent but easily ignored, nearly invisible but all-important in their effect on our relations with one another, on our sense of self, on our very survival'. *Fasting, Feasting* illuminates the determining structures of attitudes about food and eating practices, from everyday decisions regarding the preparation and sharing of a meal, the policing of dietary preference as a way of exerting power, to the more extreme and pernicious effects of restraint and regurgitation. Echoing Desai's text in drawing together the representation of fasting in *Le Voile de Draupadi* and feasting in *Manger l'autre*, this article has traced the resonances and frictions between these charged, over-determined acts of (not) eating, positioning these within the regulatory, embedded and entwined politics of gender, neo-colonialism and advanced capitalism that constitute the contemporary global flows of consumption.

In reading these flows of consumption, and in thinking through the multivalent, layered meanings that fasting and feasting acquire, there emerges in the reading encounter with Devi's texts a sense of the highly fraught nature of the exercise of interpreting such acts of (not) eating. Devi's protagonists struggle with the accumulation of meaning sustained in food acts within a highly gendered, globalized, postcolonial and hypervisual consumer

capitalism. Interpreting the palimpsestic layers of meaning inscribed on their feasting and fasting bodies, uncovering these veils of meaning and decoding the complexities of hunger and restraint within these frames are vital not only to our comprehension of the individual struggles and social, political and historical ills that they may be attempting communicate but also to our wider sense of what practices of (not) eating can tell about our bodies, our relation to one another and indeed our place as humans in the Anthropocene as we increasingly confront the inevitability of ecological collapse. But in the textile puzzle of *Le Voile* that creates a sense of resistance to these attempts to read the body, and in the uneasy tension in *Manger* between the reader's helpless sense of moral exhaustion and the narrator's acknowledgement that the horrifying final act will only nourish the cannibalistic appetites of her spectators, there is a further warning about how we read and regard the body, and about the hypocrisy of our own pathologizing and pathological gaze. Robson writes that

> [t]he question of what and how we 'see' in discourses on eating disorders is called into question by the recurring imagery of haunting bodies that challenge our rational judgement; the reader of narratives of anorexia should beware not only of the limits of our reading, but also of the ways in which this reading is haunted or disordered by what it cannot directly see. (Robson 2018: 272)

Although, as we have seen, Devi's writing exceeds the parameters of singular or conventional definitions of 'eating disorders', in her representations of fasting and feasting as forms of disorderly eating there is a similar sense of haunting, in the *tissu mystique* of Anjali's body, and in *Manger*'s narrator's haunted hunger, suggestive of phantoms, traces and remainders, things not seen, that disrupt our own pathological practices of reading. In his analysis of eating the other, Jacques Derrida argues that it is no longer a question of whether it is good to

eat the other or not; one eats and gets eaten regardless. For Derrida, the emphasis might be more fruitfully laid on the notion of 'bien manger', by which he means a mode of eating that does not involve taking, grasping or incorporating the other, but rather a process of sharing, learning and giving. Eating well, then, is apprehended as 'apprendre-à-donner-à-manger-à-l'autre', and, significantly, as a practice in hospitality, 'une loi de l'hospitalité infinie' (Derrida 1989: 110). As Devi's protagonists grapple with how to eat well, we might be encouraged to approach our reading practices with this hospitality in mind. Reading her fasting, feasting bodies and their strategies of resistance in the practices of (not) eating may reveal to us the embedded, crisscrossing power dynamics and palimpsestic drives layered in the global flows of consumption, but in the haunted remainders, in residual leftovers, in what we cannot quite see, Devi's writing disorients our readerly appetites and reminds us through a disorderly reading encounter – one in which we are unable to take, grasp and incorporate – of the imperatives of an ethics of hospitality as the basis of approaching the other, of 'bien manger'.

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Notes

[1] As Srilata Ravi explains

> Ananda Devi's novels are a stinging indictment of women's condition in Mauritius. In her literary ethnotopography of Mauritius, she reveals their anguished cries and exposes their painful wounds. At the same time, she also shows how these women become transformed from passive victims of patriarchal and bigoted conservatism to human being who take their destinies in their own hands. Devi's writing becomes a site of creative contestation and marginality of these women in Mauritian society. (Ravi 2007: 47–48)

See also my analysis of transformation in Devi as redemptive possibility (Damlé 2013b, 2014). Further criticism on Devi includes two monographs dedicated to her writing,

Kistnareddy (2015) and Tyagi (2013); studies that focus on Francophone Mauritian literature and feature extensive discussion of Devi's work include Bragard and Ravi (2011) and Waters (2018).

[2] An important concept in Hindu scripture, philosophy and culture, *dharma* represents a form of religious or ethical duty.

[3] Sita, from the *Ramayana*, carries out a fire-walk to prove her faithfulness and allegiance to her husband Rama, after she has been abducted by his enemy Ravana. Though Sita 'passes' the test of fire (*agnipariksha*), the people of Rama's kingdom remain doubtful, and Rama, swayed by their opinion and concern about his own honour, eventually banishes her to the forest. Years later, after hearing that Sita has had two sons, Luv and Kush, of whom he is the father, Rama decides to bring her back to the kingdom. When she is told that she will have to undergo another test of fire, Sita implores the mother earth to take her in if she believes her to be pure in mind, thought and deed, and at this point she disappears into the earth never to return. Draupadi is the wife of the great archer Arjuna, one of the heroes of the *Mahabharata*. When Arjuna arrives home having won Draupadi's hand in a contest, he calls out to his mother to come and see what he has brought with him; when she replies that whatever it is he should share it with his brothers, Draupadi becomes without question wife to each of the five Pandava brothers. During a fateful dice-game with their rival cousins, the Pandavas wager all that they own, in the end losing their most prized belonging – Draupadi. But as the winning Kaurava team try to unravel her sari in victory, a miracle is performed by Lord Krishna allowing Draupadi's veil to yield ever more fabric and protect her dignity.