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Queer Tastes: An Exploration of Food and Sexuality in Southern Lesbian Literature

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Queer Tastes: An Exploration of Food and Sexuality in Southern Lesbian Literature

Queer Tastes: An Exploration of Food and Sexuality in Southern Lesbian Literature

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirement for the degree of
Master of Arts in English

By

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ABSTRACT

Southern identities are undoubtedly influenced by the region's foodways. However, the South tends to neglect and even to negate certain peoples and their identities. Women, especially lesbians, are often silenced within southern literature. Where Tennessee Williams and James Baldwin used literature to bridge gaps between gay men and the South, southern lesbian literature severely lacks a traceable history of such connections. The principal objective of this thesis is to explore the ways in which southern lesbians manipulate food metaphors to describe their sexual desires and identities. This thesis only begins to lay out a history of southern lesbian literature as many lesbian writers were unable to state their sexuality explicitly. They then used southern foodways and food metaphors as a way to express and discuss their sexuality. Understanding how lesbians utilize these metaphors helps us to understand better how female sexuality is constructed in the South. This thesis seeks to reveal the intricate lattice of being southern, being female, and being gay. It is about reconciling a person's roots with a sexual identity that is not always accepted or even acknowledged. A better understanding of food's connection to female identity will enable people to notice these repressed voices. Readers need to examine southern literature more closely for stifled female and lesbian voices and read beyond what is on the page.

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my wonderful partner, Bobbie Galloway, without whose constant support and encouragement, I could not have completed this project.

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Introduction:

Queer Tastes: An Exploration of Food and Sexuality in Southern Lesbian Literature

“Greens. Mustard greens, collards, turnip greens and poke—can’t find them anywhere in the shops up North. ... Red beans and rice, chicken necks and dumplings ... refried beans on warm tortillas, duck with scallions and pancakes, lamb cooked with olive oil and lemon slices, ... potato pancakes with applesauce, polenta with spaghetti sauce floating on top—food is more than sustenance; it is history” (*Trash* 185).

“The walls of the closet - cultural invisibility and erasure - have tended to dull the resonances between works of lesbian literature: to obscure the tradition. [...] Any literary tradition grows in subtlety and complexity as text answers and elaborates on text, author on author, generation after generation, overtime. By this process, writers give their people back a deepened sense of reality, a survival tool if there ever was one. A tradition unburies people, provides context, so no author or work ends up lonesome” (Segrest 141).

Southern food is iconic. It is buttermilk biscuits and sausage gravy; it is pork or chicken fried, barbequed, grilled and smoked; it is pecan pie with homemade vanilla ice cream; it is plump brown pinto beans coupled with sweet, yellow cornbread. In coastal states, it is shrimp and creamy grits, spicy gumbo, and seafood po’boys. It is wilted collard greens, sweet peach cobbler, and hot fried green tomatoes. Historically, the South is known for its affinity for corn and pork as both were staples in a region that valued cotton and tobacco over food production. Now, as the South diversifies, it embraces multiple cuisines and ethnicities. Food, though it varies by state and region, is an essential part of Southern life. It acts as a vessel through which various groups of people across multiple generations are connected.

What modern scholarship, from the likes of Marcie Cohen Ferris and James T. Edge, teaches us is that food plays an intricate role in the creation of Southern identity. In “The Edible South,” Ferris states that “food is entangled in forces that have shaped southern history and culture for more than four centuries” (4). Southern food comes to define and to describe people in the South. Studying food in relation to the South shows “a web of social relations defined by

race, class, ethnicity, gender, and shifting economic forces” (Ferris 5). Food serves as an intersection for the South’s diverse population and history. Many people’s most vivid memories are often tied to congregating around the dinner table and eating food. The preparation of food and the passing down of recipes act as connections between family members and communities. It acts as a cohesive bond that demonstrates a continuation of knowledge and heritage. Food transcends simple nourishment to become a factor in how people view themselves and those around them. Do they make rolled biscuits or dropped biscuits? Do they use flour or cornmeal to fry okra? Can they make it just like my mama did? Food and identity mix to form a patchwork of perceptions for how such food should be prepared and consumed. Furthermore, food can transcribe experiences or ideas that people cannot articulate any other way. It can serve to signify people’s emotional states or their inner thoughts. These feelings could be too painful to express or too taboo to be stated in Southern society. Food remains a safe or acknowledged medium for metaphorical self-expression and self-definition.

While Southern food speaks of family lineage and regionalism, it also demonstrates how poor Southern cooks had little time or little resources when cooking. Access to food correlates with access to power meaning that those less fortunate southerners were forced to eke out a meager existence. After the Civil War, African Americans still found themselves in white kitchens, teaching rich southerners how to make ambrosia salad and hoecakes. Poor whites and African Americans, due to economic hardships, ate heavy diets of pork and corn. The “plantation elite’s commitment to cotton and tobacco [...] ignored the hunger and malnutrition that generations of poor white and black southerners endured” (Ferris 11). People still eat diets heavy in pork fat and cornmeal, liberally applying sugar and salt to their meals. Such food wrecked their bodies and their reputations. It was poor food for poor people. Food denotes socioeconomic

status, and most southerners had to eat what was available to survive. However, despite these societal and racial lines, whites and blacks in the South serve similar dishes to their families, demonstrating how food can cross boundaries and connect different groups. Food, especially southern food, helps to bridge the gap between dichotomies like rich and poor, black and white; food becomes the language to show how arbitrary such hierarchies are. Ferris states that “food reflects power structures” but also that food affects “social change” (10). Food creates a hierarchy among southerners, but food also shows how the South continues to evolve. Food reaches across those racial, economic and societal divides, bringing southerners into a semblance of accord. By signifying a tenuous unity, food signifies what years of oppression and uprising should have accomplished in the South. Rich and poor, black and white become equalized and normalized as each group prepares and consumes similar food across the South.

Southerners know what they like to eat and what they want to eat. However, southerners do not only eat for nutritional value. Their hunger for fried food and sweet tea connects them to a long consumptive history. It distinguishes their taste and themselves from others. People are, also, not just consumers of food, but of a multitude of experiences. This consumption takes place not only in the kitchen, but also in the bedroom. In *Women's Conflicts about Eating and Sexuality: The Relationship between Food and Sex*, Rosalyn Meadow and Lillian Weiss argue that “eating behavior and sexual behavior are primary ways of initiating and maintaining human relationships” (102). People share “meals with family and friends, just as they engage in sexual relations with [lovers]” (Meadow and Weiss 102). People produce and consume sexual experiences in which they perform acts of giving and taking, similar to how they prepare and eat food. Often, women connect sex and food in similar ways. This “desire to eat and desire for sex are filled with craving, longing – a yearning to be fulfilled” (Meadow and Weiss 103). Women

are tempted by luscious food and passionate lovers. Southern lesbians can be seen as partaking in the “forbidden fruit” of other women. Feminine bodies have often been equated with fruit, as female bodies are perceived as being made for consumption and reproduction. The title of Rita Mae Brown’s lesbian *bildungsroman*, *Rubyfruit Jungle*, illustrates how food and sexuality intertwine. Women are allowed to seek out “fruit” or sexual partners outside of the heterosexual construction, like lesbian lovers.

Sexual consumption also has a way of bridging gaps in positive and negative ways. It creates a social understanding of identity, aligning people along gender and sexual preferences. As food diversified with the inclusion of white and black foodways, so did sexual relationships. This diversification of sexuality allows for an expansion of identities and understandings within the South, especially for Southern lesbians. This bridging of gaps via sexual consumption openly began with interracial relationships. With the proliferation of slavery in the South, miscegenation occurred between white slave owners and their black slaves. This crossing of racial lines was bred from violence and subjugation as black women did not have much power or say to resist their slave owners. In reverse, the rich, white South feared for the virginity of fragile, white women in the face of lustful, black men. White women, as Martha Hodes states in *White Women, Black Men*, “were at the center of white Southern ideas about female purity [especially rich, white women]” (6). Women were to remain sexually untouched and held high on a pedestal. Furthermore, as outlined by Anita Mannur in *Culinary Fictions*, “the responsibility of women [was] cooking and food preparation” to uphold “the sanctity of the domestic home space” (52). Whether black or white, women were relegated to the kitchen and told to become feeders and nurturers. The kitchen is “sexualized space” that “exhorted women to maintain [...] traditional domestic familial structures” (Mannur 52). These white women came to represent a way for the

South to exhibit a sense of control after the defeat in the Civil War. This fear of unbridled female sexuality and the need for female confinement continued to manifest through the early 20th century and into the Civil Rights movement.

Women could be sexually corrupted from a multitude of sources. If a white woman was not seduced by a black man, then she could be enticed to leave the company of men entirely. Sometimes, women in the South found sexual and emotional satisfaction with other women. However, much like consenting interracial couples were shunned by Southern society, so were lesbians. In Lillian Faderman's *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, she states that "there were few women before our era [late 20th century] who would have committed confessions regarding erotic [lesbian] exchanges to writing" (2). Women, despite having strong same-sex relationships that were potentially sexual, "were not to feel that they could send [an eligible male] on his way in favor of their romantic friendship" (Faderman 3). While race relations could be discussed somewhat openly, homosexual relationships were taboo and kept completely silent. Facing the "cult of white womanhood," which centered around purity before marriage, lesbians, and women in general, heard about the virtues of finding good husbands, not of finding good wives. As outlined by John Howard in *Carrying on in the Lesbian and Gay South*, these homosexual relationships with their "carryin' on," which means having sexual relations, indicate "a crossing, a stepping over some perceived line of propriety" (1-2). Lesbians by existing in the South and proclaiming their sexuality challenge the notion that women remain in heterosexual relationships. They demonstrate a deconstruction of what is respectable or polite within Southern society.

Furthermore, Southern lesbians rebuke such heteronormative notions, seeking to redefine "sexualized spaces" like the kitchen from a construct of patriarchy to a place of mutual attraction

and desire. Also, southerners dealt with racial relations in multiple forms for over a hundred years by the mid-20th century, resulting in a dialogue existing between blacks and whites. Lesbians were not afforded any type of fair discussion within the South. Across the region, “Christianity - particularly Protestant evangelicalism - proves vital to the South” (Howard 5). Krista McQueeney in “‘We are God’s Children, Y’all.’ Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Lesbian- and Gay-Affirming Congregations” cites how evangelicals eventually “read the New Testament as a call to abolish slavery,” shifting Biblical discourse from condemning African Americans to freeing them (152). Even today across the Bible Belt, homosexual behavior remains largely unmentionable as homosexuals are seen as abhorrent and sinful, since “God’s will is expressed in a heterosexual family in which male and female are complementary and the primary purpose of sex is procreation” (McQueeney 152). Therefore, lesbians in the South, who fulfill neither of those categories, remained in the shadows of society only until recently. According to Mab Segrest in *My Mama’s Dead Squirrel*, “Southern lesbian literature can be traced to the beginning of the century [but] it emerges in the 60s wave of liberations: Black civil rights, women’s, and homosexual. It extends into the 1980s when lesbian writers with Southern roots take their places openly” (103). The Civil Rights Movement and the Women’s Liberation Movement helped lesbians become freer within the South as these movements paved the way for a more open discourse about sexual orientation. Lesbian writers existed before such change, but now Southern lesbian writers were claiming their identity as out and proud.

Because of their exclusion from mainstream Southern society, lesbians sought ways to transcribe their personal experiences. They lacked a clearly defined cultural history to draw from to describe themselves. Southern lesbians lacked the cohesion of the African American community that had branched out and grown since they had been brought to the Americas.

Segrest asserts that it is the “literature of slaves that is the ancestor of Southern lesbian literature” with its roots in “social change” (117). This disjointed narrative history causes disruption for lesbian writers as they attempt to document or fictionalize their lives, lovers, and longings. They lived, if they remained in the South, within an oppressive atmosphere, one where their “lives [...] have been censored, repressed, suppressed, and depressed [...] from official versions of literature, history, and culture” (Segrest 102). Because these women could not pull from a collective narrative, Southern lesbians used what they grew up knowing in order to discuss their identity and sexuality. Lesbian writers from the South utilize figurative language to codify and explore their lives. The South lends itself to this codification with the region’s need to label people as black or white, heterosexual or homosexual, edible or inedible. Lesbian writers have found that food and foodways served as metaphorical vehicles for atypical Southern experiences. Food, with its ability to bridge gaps, allows lesbian writers to discuss their sexuality in a variety of ways. It allows them to articulate their desires in a form that is accessible for homosexual and heterosexual southerners. For these southern lesbian writers, their feminine bodies and the feminine bodies they love are compared to food. They consume and are consumed by others. Cooking and eating transcend from simply physical actions of preparing a meal to a deeply meaningful act of two people joining together. These lesbians have queered the traditional Southern tastes as they discuss their sexuality in terms of deep-frying, gravy-making or biscuit-baking. They are seeking to carve out a place for themselves within a region that historically disenfranchised minority voices.

Southern lesbian authors or books concerning Southern lesbians are hard to find.

However, books by and about Southern gay men are much more plentiful. Perhaps gay men were let “out of the closet,” because they did not threaten the Southern female purity. That is not to

say homosexual men have been greeted with open arms. The South has a history of brutalizing those it marginalizes and homosexuals are no exception. The homosexual community in the South and across the United States feel the pressure of the “containment ethos [...] compulsory heteronormativity” (204). However, it is hard to ignore how disproportionate gay literature is to lesbian literature. Whether flamboyant or reticent, Southern gay narratives line bookstore shelves, while Southern lesbian literature is metaphorically relegated to a single row. Scholarship also abounds about gay men in the South and how they have carved out a niche in the region. Attention needs to be paid to these Southern lesbians who are striving to rewrite what it means to be a Southern “lady.” Dandy men, girlish boys, and down low black men have received their dues in print. It is time that same attention is shown toward lipstick lesbian belles, butch dykes, and genderqueer women. “Lesbian literature,” argues Segrest, “[...] is part of a larger movement by all oppressed people to define ourselves” (102). Like gay literature or African-American literature, lesbian literature is “essential to [lesbians’] own survival and to the survival of the larger culture which has tried so hard to destroy [them]” (Segrest 102). Lesbian literature, in general, needs to be added to that “larger culture” as a way to include such writers and works in the larger American and Southern literary canons.

Moreover, Southern lesbian literature is crucial to study, because it queers conventional notions of gender and sexuality to show a new female experience in the region. These lesbian writers align themselves with food and eating to tie themselves to the South and their experiences growing up. Writers like Lillian Smith, Dorothy Allison, and Shay Youngblood use food to rewrite the traditionally heteronormative southern female experience. These lesbian writers use their familiarity and love of food to discuss their sexuality and how their Southern identity crosses with their lesbian identity. Food links what southerners know to what they can

come to understand. These women are opening doors for more southern lesbian fiction to appear on bookshelves and for a more diverse range of voices in print.

This thesis and its focus on lesbians and food are relevant due to the scant attention and scholarship paid to such Southern female writers. Largely, Southern gay men figure more heavily into the literature of the region, while lesbians are left to the wayside. They are still proverbially “in the closet.” Lacking this collective lesbian history, “the walls of the closet - cultural invisibility and erasure - have tended to dull the resonances between works of lesbian literature: to obscure the tradition” (Segrest 141). It is hard to trace lesbian literature, especially in the South, due to their voices being silenced. However, “any literary tradition grows in subtlety and complexity as text answers and elaborates on text, author on author, generation after generation, overtime. [...] A tradition unburies people, provides context, so no author or work ends up lonesome” (141). Uncovering this tradition and tracing these voices will demonstrate that Southern lesbian fiction can have a literary lineage. It is sad that such vibrant and important voices are being overlooked. Lillian Smith, Dorothy Allison, Shay Youngblood, and other Southern lesbian writers deserve the same attention as Tennessee Williams or Truman Capote. I want to fill the gap that persists between these lesbian voices and demonstrate how they interconnect and construct narratives with food.

When academics discuss Lillian Smith, they focus on her fight for racial equality and her exposé about repression in the South throughout *Killers of the Dream*. Smith’s relationship with a woman, Paula Snelling, is skirted around as well as the lesbian undertones in her novel, *Strange Fruit*. Smith’s main theme is “repression,” and her codification of lesbianism within her texts is largely ignored (Segrest 109). As for Dorothy Allison, she remains an out-and-proud lesbian who embraces her unbridled sexuality and impoverished upbringing. Such themes

surface in her heavily cited *Bastard Out of Carolina*; however, her overtly sexual and political texts, *Skin* and *Trash*, are used as secondary texts to her award-winning novel. The most contemporary of the three, Shay Youngblood, has been noticed by a largely lesbian audience like *Lambda Literary*. Her novel, *Soul Kiss*, is a coming-of-age tale with rich Southern imagery, but next to nothing has been written critically about it. As Mab Segrest says, a writer like Youngblood is in “triple jeopardy [...] Black, female, and lesbian” (105). Current academia remains negligent when it comes to examining lesbian voices from the South or those who write about the South. I aim to bring these women to the forefront and showcase how gender, sexuality, and food intersect to create a unique view of the South.

Chapter one, “Queer Undertones: Writing Homosexuality Through Queer Methods in Lillian Smith’s *Strange Fruit* and *Killers of the Dream*” focuses on Smith’s racially charged novel, *Strange Fruit*. Lillian Smith illustrates “the kinds of problems that lesbians encounter in trying to reconstruct their culture” (105). Her life and work demonstrate “the effects of lines [lesbians] ‘dare not write’” (105). Writing in the 1940s, Smith could not openly cross that line she “dare not write”, or rather, could not detail her sexuality for the public. Instead of writing about her desires for other women, Smith transposes those desires through the lens of a racial narrative. Largely, across *Strange Fruit*, the images of food and eating can be seen as a way that the lesbian desires can be discussed, albeit not openly. This food imagery is first seen in the title *Strange Fruit*, which alludes to the Billie Holiday song and Southern lynchings. The title with its allusions to food seems to be highlighting an unusual or “queer” type of fruit or body to be consumed. It could be that Smith is coding lesbian sexual consumption through the racial association of *Strange Fruit*. Women have long been associated with fruit and their bodies have been compared to fruit as objects that can be taken and eaten. As stated by Mab Segrest, “Queer

literature has its analogy in works of encoding” (140). Smith carefully encodes her lesbian desire and its forbidden nature through *Strange Fruit*'s miscegenation, drawing parallels between the appropriateness and naturalness of lesbian and mixed race couples.

Chapter two, “Queer Desires: Individual and Collective Hunger in Dorothy Allison’s *Trash and Skin*” looks at Allison’s brazen embracing of her sexuality and how she utilizes food in her work to detail lesbian sexual passions. Her fiction “shows the fierce refusal to deny any of her selves, a temptation at least as difficult within the feminist movement as beyond it” (Segrest 129). Unlike Smith, who never claimed her lesbian sexuality, Allison fully acknowledges her sexuality and its troublesome ties to the South. Furthermore, unlike upper middle class or nearly rich Smith, Allison shows how her socioeconomic background and growing up poor affected her identity and sense of self. She loves foods that are bad for her; those foods which are heavy in sugar, corn, bacon fat, and salt. She knows her poor upbringing is responsible for her predilection to eat these foods. While the South has not always been good to her, Allison references the region as what molded her into who she is today. Allison dips heavily into food metaphors, drawing upon Smith’s inability to say and describes in detail for the reader lesbian consumptive desires. Good sex, for Allison, is related to sugary, fatty foods, while bad sex is tasteless and bland. For Allison, the kitchen becomes a place of passion, where frying eggplant can turn into sex. She is not conforming to anyone else’s ideas of gender roles, whether heterosexual or homosexual. Southern food becomes the metaphor for which Allison retells her stories of sexual conquests or failures. Lacking that collective lesbian tradition to lean upon, she pulls upon those food metaphors and memories to describe her own personal experiences.

The final chapter, “Queer Realities: The Intersection of Food, Rhetoric, and Sexuality in Shay Youngblood’s *Soul Kiss*” outlines how Youngblood utilizes food as a rhetorical tool and

the power that words possess. This novel complicates sexuality further as the protagonist, Maria Santos, cannot be clearly labeled lesbian as her desires extend beyond that of simply women. She also does not conform to gender roles, especially in her dress or ambitions. Maria then seems to further complicate labels as she takes on the pansexual and genderqueer identity. She demonstrates a fluidity as she constantly changes her identity. Youngblood continually demonstrates Maria's changing self-esteem and self-identification through what she eats and how she feels about food. Maria feels the most at home with her two, "maiden" aunts in Georgia, who push against heteronormativity and hint at another lesbian relationship. Maria in her youth and as she grows older finds words and their meanings so powerful that she eats them. She will literally eat paper or mix ashes with honey in order to consume words. This need to eat words is ritualistic for Maria in the hopes of bettering her life; however, it is not until the end of the novel when Maria gains control over words and their consumption that she can harness the power of words for her own use.

I firmly believe if such writers like Smith, Allison and Youngblood are examined in terms of that lesbian literary history then more Southern lesbian texts will become open for reading and studying. These women come from a region that disenfranchises their voice because they are queer and because they are women. Through the use of Southern foodways, they have found a way to vocalize their own unique experiences living in and out of the South. Eating and consuming cross boundaries between appeasing physical hunger to satisfying sexual desires. Such women are helping to build that nearly invisible lineage between lesbian writers, especially those in the South, who seek to construct a new way of viewing of sexuality, gender and food.

Chapter I:

Queer Undertones: Writing Homosexuality Through Queer Methods in Lillian Smith's *Strange*

Fruit and Killers of the Dream

“It [*Strange Fruit*] is not only a story of a love relationship [...] it is the story of the White South and Negro South and their relationship to each other...the affectionate pull toward each other, the loss of esteem, always the loss of it just as it is about to be gained...the pull of cultural taboos against the desires of the heart...the pull of family against one's own personal conscience...I think it is first a love story of perhaps special tenderness, but I think it is also a racial fable that applies not only to the South but to the white race in its relationships the world over (*Heard* 1943).

“This is the age of whole men, living in a whole world. I wanted my book [*Killers of the Dream*] to give insight, to stir imaginations, so that we can accept ourselves and all the earth's people as human beings, and once accepting, can go on with the job of making our new world—a world of open spaces with no walls in minds or between nations to throw their shadows across our children's lives. That was my dream” (*Heard* 1950).

In her 1988 article, “Sexual Indifference and Lesbian Representation,” Teresa de Lauretis asserts that lesbian authors have frequently and through various modes sought to “inscribe the erotic in [the] cryptic, allegorical, realistic, [and] camp[y]” (159). These encrypted messages and experiences account for blaring silences and gaping holes in lesbian literature and criticism, specifically within the American South where women are traditionally valued for their passivity, sexlessness, and domestic qualities. As a woman living and writing in the 1940s American South, Lillian Smith was acutely aware of the hindrances placed upon her by her gender. Nevertheless, as the author of seven books, dozens of essays, and co-founder and editor of the *South Today*, Smith fearlessly spoke out about the injustices imposed on the African-American community in the South. Drawing upon her own experiences growing up, Smith exposed the dirty underbelly of Jim Crow. Her first novel, *Strange Fruit*, deals with the prohibited theme of interracial love and criticizes Southern racial dynamics. The book was initially met with resistance and banned in many cities, including Boston for “indecent language” (Greene 113).

Strange Fruit was salvaged from obscurity by an endorsement from Eleanor Roosevelt and was eventually adapted to fit the stage in 1945 and was turned into a short film in 1978. Despite the novel's success, Smith felt that more work needed to be done to express her desire to end racial inequalities. She continued to publish articles and essays speaking out on racism, but the pinnacle of Smith's advocacy was the 1949 publication of her memoir, *Killers of the Dream*. Smith's reflective narrative utilizes her childhood memories and experiences to condemn and dismantle Old South ideas of race as well as to illustrate how racism has crippled both blacks and whites. The forefront of Smith's work will always remain the fight for racial justice; however, it is essential that readers understand that *Strange Fruit* and *Killers of the Dream* delve into more than racial inequalities. If we read Smith's work as articulation of difference rather than just race, we can better appreciate how Smith writes homosexuality upon the female body as a steady undercurrent flowing through both texts.

Born in 1897 to a wealthy family in Jasper, Florida, Smith was the eighth of ten children. Her father was a prominent business man who owned a series of naval stores. Because World War I put a halt to American shipping, the family's business crumbled. In 1915, Smith's father moved his family to their summer home on Old Screamer Mountain in northeast Georgia (Watson 470). Over the next decade, Smith studied at Piedmont College in Demorest, Georgia, and Peabody Conservatory in Baltimore, Maryland. She then spent three years teaching music at a Methodist school for girls in Huchow, China. It was here that Smith witnessed the negative effects of European colonialism in China and began to question the racial injustices in her own hometown. When her parents fell ill, she was asked to return to Georgia to run Laurel Falls Camp for girls that her father had opened in 1920. By 1925, Smith had moved back to Old Screamer and accepted the directorship of the camp (Watson 470-471). It was at Laurel Falls that

Smith met Paula Snelling and began the single most important relationship that would nourish and fulfill both women's private, academic, and professional lives.

Snelling, a native of Pinehurst, Georgia was a counselor at Laurel Falls. Along with running the camp together, the pair shared an apartment, co-edited one of the most liberal literary magazines in the South, and committed their lives to one another for the next thirty years.

Although Smith never admitted to lesbianism during her lifetime, it is important to recognize the homosocial, if not homoerotic, relationship she had with Snelling. The purpose of this essay is not to 'out' Smith. Still, it is necessary to establish the dynamics of Smith's relationship with Snelling to facilitate the reader's understanding of *Strange Fruit* and *Killers of the Dream* as texts on difference and not merely texts on race.

Margaret Rose Gladney, editor of *How Am I to Be Heard? Letters of Lillian Smith* and "Personalizing the Political, Politicizing the Personal: Reflections on Editing the Letters of Lillian Smith," recounts finding the personal letters of Smith and Snelling at Smith's home and the anxiety of having to discuss them with Snelling. Gladney remembers, "I had interviewed her [Snelling] on several occasions about Laurel Falls camp but had never asked her about the 'nature' of her relationship with Lillian Smith" (*Personalizing* 97). However, the letters so powerfully demonstrated a strong emotional and physical relationship between the two women that Gladney could no longer avoid the question of Smith's sexuality. In a June 1952 letter to Snelling, Smith writes:

Paula—

What a nice letter you write to me! It did you good to go through the old letters, didn't it. The picture of you swung me back through the years. You were so darned cute and attractive. You are "sweeter," "finer" now but you had something then that was so *young* and—nice, that bi-sexual charm which no one dares admit is so seductive—except in real life. I'm sorry my letters are burned, that is my ambivalence. My shame that has destroyed the keen edge of a pattern of love that was creative and good. Blurring it, dulling it. (*Personalizing* 98)

This letter is particularly indicative of both Smith's nameless relationship with Snelling and the large number of ambivalences toward sexuality that exist in Smith's work. Just as Smith is unable to label or name her relationship with Snelling, merely referring to it as "my shame," so is she unable to directly address homosexuality in her texts. In 1940, four years prior to Smith's publications, Sandor Rado published "A Critical Examination of the Concept of Bisexuality," which classified homosexuality as a disease and a sign of childhood development gone awry. Rado rejected "Freud's view of innate bisexuality," while Smith was an avid reader and follower of Freudian theory. Rado's model of homosexuality as a "disorder resulting from a dysfunctional family" would lead to the idea that homosexuality would be "curable" (Cantor 29). Procedures to cure homosexuals included hysterectomies for lesbians, castration for gay males, lobotomies and shock treatment for both (Cantor 30-31). It is no wonder that words often fail Smith and account for the large number of ellipses and dashes in her writing. For example, in a 1946 letter written to Snelling, Smith writes, "I'd love to feel your lips on mine... and I can imagine other feelings too..." (*Personalizing* 101). Again, Smith is unable to name her feelings or to admit blatantly her sexual desire to be intimate with Snelling. Smith allows the reader to fill in the blank. She gives up her voice and avoids accountability for, what would have been considered in the 1940s, perversity, which should be conditioned out of a person.

When Gladney asked Snelling to clarify the relationship that Smith could not articulate, Snelling remembered, "We shared everything; we loved each other very much, and sometimes we expressed that love physically" (*Personalizing* 99). Interestingly though, Snelling did not agree with critics' assessment that Smith was a lesbian; rather she insisted that she, Snelling, "was the lesbian in the relationship [...] Lil, by contrast, could have been happily married had the right man come along" (*Personalizing* 99). Snelling's understanding of her own sexuality

was limited by the time period during which she came to maturation. While the word “lesbian” was used to indicate females sexually satisfied by other females in the late 19th century, the *Oxford English Dictionary* lists words like “dyke” not being in print until 1942 when Snelling and Smith were middle-aged (“Lesbian,” “Dyke”). Snelling’s sexual understanding comes at a time when homosexuals lacked the vocabulary to define their experiences. It would not be until later in the 20th century when Gladney remembers that Snelling “accepted her lesbian sexuality” but still considered it to be an “abnormality of the genes” (*Personalizing* 100). Furthermore, Snelling chose to believe that Smith concealed their relationship to shelter it, rather than to deny it. Yet, Snelling’s desire to burn the letters nearly twenty years after Smith’s death illustrates Snelling’s lifelong facilitation of Smith’s coding, hiding, and guarding.

Because Smith could not articulate her sexuality, she, instead, coded it as racial tension in *Strange Fruit*. The central conflict of Smith’s debut novel begins with the relationship between Tracy Deen, a well-to-do white man living in a small Georgia town, and Nonnie Anderson, a beautiful, black servant of another prominent family. When Nonnie winds up pregnant and Tracy refuses to accept his role as the baby’s father, Tracy winds up dead. Henry McIntosh, Tracy’s longtime friend and black servant, is wrongfully accused of Tracy’s murder. Henry is subsequently hung and his body burned, never having received a trial or being given the opportunity to explain himself. As Cheryl L. Johnson writes in her 2001 article “The Language of Sexuality and Silence in Lillian Smith’s *Strange Fruit*,” Henry’s lynching, “is yet another horrifying reminder of the South’s gothic tradition of moral degeneration and racial hysteria that are fed and sustained by the blacks’ political, economic, and social powerlessness” (3). The distorting effects of Jim Crow on both blacks and whites is highlighted by Henry’s brutal death, which marks the climax of the novel and is the main source of what Johnson calls the “noise” in

the text (3). Nonetheless, it is not the “noise” in the novel that is necessarily important to this project. Rather, it is the silences characterized by gaps, ellipses, and dashes that provide a glimpse into the world of sexual otherness.

Before delving directly into the silences in the texts, Smith’s title of *Strange Fruit* bears examination. Smith named the novel after Billie Holiday’s 1939 blues hit of the same name. Dorian Lynskey in *33 Revolutions Per Minute* states that the song was originally a poem written by high-school teacher, Abel Meeropol. Upon seeing a “grotesque photograph of a double hanging,” Meeropol was moved to write the piece, which was originally titled, “Bitter Fruit,” but was later changed to “Strange Fruit” in order to create “a haunting sense of something out of joint” (Lynskey 7). Eventually, Holiday’s rendition made its way into the Grammy Hall of Fame. Meeropol writes how “Southern trees bear a strange fruit / Blood on the leaves / And blood on the roots.” This strange fruit is “Black bodies swinging in the Southern breeze.” Meeropol correlates the lynching of African Americans to trees producing fruit. In the South, “Here is the fruit for the crows to pluck [...] / Here is the strange and bitter crop.” Bodies become the harvest as whites in the South reap a “crop” of discord and death, instead of harmony and life. Employing *Strange Fruit* as her title evokes a long racial history with only two words. This title sets up the tension between blacks and whites, foreshadowing the violence of Henry’s own lynching and burning. Furthermore, the word ‘fruit’ with its connotations of life and abundance, connects the title to femininity, sexuality, and traditional southern foodways.

As Antje Lindenmeyer so aptly points out in her article, “Food, Sexuality and Community in Feminist Autobiography,” any proper feminist exploration of food must first reflect on the “gendered,” and I would argue, racial “hierarchies” associated with the preparation and consumption of food and how such habits effect the status of a “good woman” (470). In the

South, African American women fed not only their own families, but also the families they worked for. Their status meant they must produce double or triple the food in order to garner the praise of being a “good woman.” Racial hierarchies place them below white women, demonstrating that they work more for less recognition as food providers. Conventionally, real women are thought to be “feeders” and men “eaters” (Lindenmeyer 470). These types of gendered divisions are all too familiar to Smith who grew up in conservative, God-fearing Georgia. From the moment Eve fed Adam the forbidden fruit, women were marked as the ones who prepare and feed the food to men who mindlessly eat it.

Moreover, women adopted the multiple connotations which fruit bear. For instance, the *Oxford English Dictionary* makes note of two definitions of the word “fruit.” “Fruit” the noun is a “vegetable product” that people consume while “fruit” the verb assumes the “bearing” of something (“Fruit” def. 1&2). Women are tied to both definitions. The obvious connection between women and fruit is clear; as the beings that hold the ability to carry offspring, women are thus the bearers of fruit or children. However, the associations between fruit and women go deeper. Fruit’s sweet yet seductive nature is transposable with the female body and sexuality. On one hand, the feminine form is accessible to man and sometimes easily plucked and eaten, which furthers the connection between women and fruit. Consequently, one might hear a southern woman referred to as a “Georgia peach.” The emasculated bodies of the lynched men are compared to fruit, aligning them with idea of a female body. The use of “strange” reminds readers these men are on par with women, but still not female. These men have been plucked and consumed like women are supposed to be. Despite the negative connotations, feminists and lesbians alike have taken advantage of the links between women and fruit in an effort to regain power of this connection.

For example, Zora Neale Hurston's famous soliloquy in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) compares the protagonist, Janie's sexuality to budding fruit on a tree. Nevertheless, Hurston's imagining of female sexuality as budding fruit still posits a female to male relationship where a man plucks and consumes the fruit. While Smith draws from this tradition of exploring female sexuality, she approaches it from a homosocial perspective. Smith's description of Tracy's sister, Laura, and her queer relationship with Jane barely scratches the surface of a lesbian relationship. Words fail Smith, and she cannot adequately articulate homosexuality in the text. The two brief chapters of the novel dedicated to Laura are filled with terminology that describe lesbians but never explicitly names them as such. These women are termed "unnatural" or "women like that" (*Fruit* 207). While the central conflict centers on race relations, Smith cannot help but include Laura's otherness in the novel. Laura's narrative is only expressed in "cryptic and unobtrusive" language, but her inclusion, however finite, illustrates that Smith has concern for the "intolerance and prejudice" surrounding not only racism but homophobia as well (Johnson 17). Still, Smith continues to employ the female-fruit metaphor; through which, she paves the way for future lesbian authors to articulate their own queerness.

For instance, Rita Mae Brown's 1973 *bildungsroman*, *Rubyfruit Jungle*, about an impoverished Southern lesbian feeds well into the female-fruit cannon. The title of Brown's work purposefully plays on the imagery of female genitalia. It overturns the typical dynamics of female consumption where women become the consumers of other women. Similarly, Jeannette Winterson's 1985 semi-autobiographical novel, *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, takes female consumption a step further and envisions charging fruit with erotic lesbian meaning as Winterson's breaking fruit with other women has been symbolically read as giving herself up to

other women. Once again, women are consuming each other like the consumption of the “forbidden” fruit from the Garden of Good and Evil.

Smith’s relationship with Snelling, her use of female-fruit metaphor, and the inclusion of Laura in *Strange Fruit* preface a lesbian reading of *Killers of the Dream*. Throughout her life, Smith fought for racial justice, so it is reasonable that she would bring gay issues to light as well. In examining the sexuality of Southern white women, Smith often queers heterosexuality in *Killers*. In the South, where traditionalist values of marriage, children and religion inform the region, women and queer individuals are shunned if they deviate from heteronormative behavior. Smith writes that “a few [white women] ‘solved it all’ by rejecting their womanly qualities. They seem to envy men’s freedom from pain and their access to pleasure [...] though every other man was not ‘fit to be lived with’” (*Killers* 140). Smith writes that these women are often seen “cropping their hair short” and “walking in heavy awkward strides” (*Killers* 140). These women have rejected their feminine qualities in favor of a more masculine persona; they read like butch lesbians fighting for access to pleasure. In summarizing these women, Smith attempts to put into words what she herself cannot articulate about her own sexuality. Such women are “not daring in the secret places of their minds to confess what they really wanted, they demanded to be treated ‘exactly like men’” (*Killers* 140). Smith explores female pleasure and the way in which it is denied to women but freely awarded to men. It is important to note that the women who are able to find pleasure through their own means are the women that Smith describes as being “like men.” The presence of pleasure through lesbianism is obvious here; although, Smith admits “there is no comfortable place for such women in the South” (*Killers* 141). Therefore, though lesbians reside in the South, their access to pleasure is extremely limited and most abundant in spaces outside of the region, where homosexuality is more openly embraced. For example,

places in the northeastern United States like New York, saw the emergence of gay/lesbian bars by the 1930s and 1940s while Georgia, Lillian Smith's home state, could not boast openly gay/lesbian bars before the late 1960s (Murphy 76, Fleischmann 413). Women who dress "like men" could not simply walk around unnoticed in the South during Lillian Smith's time without creating a stir. These women did not have a place to go and mingle, to access "man-like" pleasure. However, their northern counterparts could find, though still a rarity, places to go where their gaits and hairstyles would not be questioned or ridiculed.

The undertones of homosexuality arise again in *Killers* as Smith nods to how women roamed away from their roles as "chilly" statues. Raised high by the white male authority as symbols of purity, women did find opportunities to "clim[b] down from the pedestal when no one was looking and explor[e] a bit" (*Killers* 144). This section serves the dual purpose of illustrating that Southern white women could find succor in the embrace of the taboo African-American males and also unspeakably with other women (*Killers* 144). Moreover, Smith goes on to say that those women who sought release from their sexual constraints did not dream "of breaking the letter of their marriage vows or, when not married, their technical chastity" (*Killers* 144). This statement directs the focus of the 'exploration' as lesbianism because the act of being with a woman is not always viewed as 'real' sex. Therefore, a woman having a relationship or liaison with another woman would not be breaking any marital rules or be seen as "technical[ly]" losing one's chastity, whereas a rendezvous with another male could taint one's purity.

The one place that Smith explicitly mentions homosexuality occurs when she explains how women become "guardians of southern tradition" (*Killers* 151-152). These frigid mothers "did a thorough job of closing the path to mature genitality for many of their sons and daughters, and an equally good job of leaving little cleared detours that led downhill to homosexual and

infantile green pastures” (*Killers* 253). According to Gary Richards in *Lovers and Beloveds*, what may at first read look like a negative connotation of homosexuality, akin to the “back trails” to the slave quarters, is actually highlighting the connection between the mother’s desexualization and her daughter’s homosexuality (111). Furthermore, Richards states that Laura’s lesbianism in *Strange Fruit* comes from her cold mother’s treatment of her. The white sexless mother provides an example as to what her daughter will have to face when she becomes older, indicating to the child that she must find another avenue to fulfill bodily desires.

The theme of the sexless mother was first evident in *Strange Fruit*. Though not willing to name her relationship with Jane, Laura is willing to profess her love:

And you loved her. Yes, you loved her and wanted to be with her. And now Mother was labeling it with those names that the dean of women at college had warned you about. Yes, you knew. You knew and you did not know. Your mother knew and did not know. But you also knew if Mother made an issue, if she labeled this feeling for Jane with those names, there’d be no more feeling...[...] Maybe you could go away and never come back. Never come back to Mother—and Jane. You wouldn’t want it. You wouldn’t want your relationship with Jane when Mother finished with it. You wouldn’t want—anything. (210-211)

Alma, Laura and Tracy’s mother, cannot comprehend the relationship between Jane and Laura. Alma is accustomed to submitting to her husband’s “embraces quietly, without protest” which is why she views sex as cold and mechanical, not something that enlivens a relationship (*Fruit* 66). Throughout *Strange Fruit*, Alma is described much like the Southern woman held high on a pedestal. She is a “good wife” who submits to her husband’s and children’s needs but simultaneously stunts her children’s ability to express their sexuality (*Fruit* 66). Other references to lesbianism in *Killers* are not as obvious as those in *Strange Fruit*. In her memoir *Killers*,

Lillian Smith did not have fictional characters like Laura or Jane to transcribe her lesbian identity onto, so she must find other bodies or experiences for translating her sexuality.

Smith codes her commentary on lesbianism in *Killers* through her discussions of racial issues. Overall, lesbianism remains a silent undercurrent flowing throughout the memoir. Though her liberal stance on racial topics was highly controversial, it remained more acceptable to speak out on issues of race than of homosexuality. Richards agrees stating that “the sexual mixing of the races was at least utterable, while homosexuality – and in particular between women – remained [...] the love that dare not speak its name” or even be acknowledged (101). Thus, Smith found ways to code lesbianism in race while writing a new and unique tradition which subverts social and patriarchal hierarchies still today. Moreover, Richards argues that “even *Killers of the Dream* [...] with [its] intense focus on race spends much time examining Smith’s multiple points of conclusion that are often only tangentially related to race and frequently [...] foreground same sex desire” (103). Richards is correct when he identifies that *Killers* largely serves as a sounding board for Smith’s own personal struggles as opposed to her simply viewing the struggles of African Americans around her. Because homosexuality was silenced, Smith rewrites it through race, which makes it seem that the oppression of homosexuals is the same as that of African Americans. Smith sees the marginalization of African Americans under segregation and Jim Crow as the same suppression she feels as a lesbian living in a society which frowns upon homosexuality. This equation of homophobia and racism is problematic to say the very least:

I began to understand [...] that the warped, distorted frame we have put around every Negro child from birth is around every white child also. Each is on a different side of the frame but each is pinioned there. And I knew that what cruelly shapes and cripples the personality of one is as cruelly shaping and

crippling the personality of the other [...] we are stunted and warped and in our lifetime cannot grow straight again. (*Killers* 39)

Though completely equating slavery with homosexual oppression is a major fault on Smith's behalf, her intentions were not to negate the abuse of African Americans under the institution of slavery. The exploitation and anguish experienced by African Americans under years of slavery, where their personal worth was comparable to horses, should not be held up to be equal with people who have largely enjoyed human rights, assuming they are white and have been silent about their sexual orientation. She recognizes the extremely negative past of African Americans. Rather Smith wishes to express the extreme, "crippling" constraints she felt as a lesbian. By rewriting the oppression of African Americans on the body, Smith is actually rewriting her own sexuality. In using "we," Smith qualifies herself as one of the "stunted and warped" southerners who "cannot grow straight." Utilizing the word "straight" gives the dual image of a broken body but also of heterosexuality. *OED* gives the earliest date for "straight" meaning heterosexuality as being 1941, which places its emergence parallel to Smith's writing career ("Straight"). Smith transforms the slang for heterosexual, "straight," into a physical action happening upon the body. Therefore, Smith is insinuating that once an individual, like herself, accepts homosexuality, there is no way of fixing oneself to fit heterosexual standards. She is now "crooked" or a lesbian and cannot make herself metaphorically or sexually "straight" again.

Smith envisions a more accurate comparison of homosexuality and race when she describes the compartmentalized body. She writes that "parts of your body are segregated areas which you must stay away from and keep others away from. These areas you touch only when necessary. In other words, you cannot associate freely with them any more than you can associate freely with colored children" (*Killers* 87). The idea of segregation is not equated but

rather paralleled in both the taboos of sex and race. As African Americans were stigmatized within Southern society as an inferior people and kept separate from whites, the same sentiment was applied to sexual areas of the body and the desires that stemmed from them. In a sense, racial segregation creates space for homosexuality. African Americans and bodily urges were demonized and expected to be silenced. Each was dangerous in their ability to upset the Southern order created by image-conscious whites, who portrayed blacks as lascivious and the body as corrupt. As stated earlier, frigid mothers and sexual repression create “back trails” for miscegenation and homosexuality. The compartmentalization of the body and others makes room for alternate paths as individuals cope with the severe taboos of Southern society.

Later, Smith goes on to say that “the instinctual drives of the body were more difficult to cope with” (*Killers* 115). These “instinctual drives” that were never to be entertained can be read as ‘lesbian desires.’ Upon first read, “instinctual drives” appear to be any sexual longing; however, for Smith, her “instinctual” does not equate to “heterosexual.” Her long-term relationship with Snelling points to Smith having to quell any “instinctual [homosexual] drives.” Such sexual urges would be even more repressed than racial segregation because racial oppression could at least be articulated whereas lesbianism could not. Smith is expressing the difficulty in suppressing the unspoken homosexual desires southerners felt. The established “sex line” of the body is not to be crossed, and they are not to be “played with” (*Killers* 84). For lesbians, the sex line is even more deeply drawn into the sand. If it is taboo to masturbate thinking of the opposite sex, it is extremely taboo to play with one’s body with the same sex desire driving the impure act. Self-pleasure is shamed and such shame would be doubled with any “back trails” in mind. With “only a fear of consequences more violent than the desire” being able to stop such sexual urges, Smith shows how difficult it is for culture to wholly eradicate

differences in race and sexual orientation. While race relations may foster homosexuality, such a space created is intolerably small. Smith shows the intertwining of race with underlying homosexual themes that are burrowed deep within her and within the pages of *Killers of the Dream*.

A subsequent way Smith ties homosexuality and Southern culture is through religion. Smith's discussion of religion in her chapter "The Lessons" illustrates how all bodily forms of pleasure were discouraged. Like modern feminists, Smith is skeptical of limiting the body's access to pleasure, because in doing so, one's body no longer becomes one's own. Smith writes "the body itself is a Thing of Shame and you must never show its nakedness to anyone [...]" Indeed, you should not look at it much yourself, especially in mirrors. It is true that in a sense your body is 'yours' but it isn't yours to feel at home with. It is God's holy temple and must never be desecrated by pleasures" (*Killers* 87). Christianity has taken agency away from the body, especially in the area of sexuality. Though Smith is highly critical of this idea, her criticism stems from problems far greater than religious doctrine, as pleasure can coincide with love. If Smith accepts the body as sinful and pleasure as immoral, then she completely undermines her desires for other women, which in her letters to Snelling she defines as the most "deep, rich, mutually rewarding relationship" (*Personalizing* 277). Consequently, Smith finds herself between religion and homosexuality. Common thought states that religion and homosexuality cannot coexist within one body as each hates the other. Smith sees "sin" and the "body" being wrapped up in "punishment" and "guilt" all of which were "tied close to God" (*Killers* 84). Yet Smith never condemns religion. Rather, she denounces those who suggest that God cannot love all aspects of a person, including the body. The view that religion and homosexuality are divergent is perpetuated by a large a majority of churches in the South,

particularly by conservative evangelical Christians. Homosexuality is viewed as a sin against God and natural order, which, for them, states only one man and one woman should be together. However, Smith remains most critical of a patriarchal system seen in conservative churches that perpetuate the idea of a fire and brimstone God who cannot accept women much less homosexuals or African Americans.

With great irony Smith recalls “emptiness was the natural way women should feel! Like childbirth pangs and menstrual cramps, the sexual blankness of [women’s] lives was ‘God’s way’” (*Killers* 140). Again, Smith does not lay blame wholly on God but more so the institution of religion which man has created. She maintains that the female body is used as a restricting agent to women under the patriarchy and that this agent extends to an even greater restriction of lesbianism. She asks “who long ago made Mom and her sex ‘inferior’ and stripped her of economic and political and sexual rights?” (*Killers* 153). Throughout *Killers*, Smith returns continuously to the imagery of the grotesque female body. She describes men “fastened to two umbilical cords which wrap themselves together in a terrifying tangle” and how breasts are “sugar-tits” (*Killers* 132). Smith frequently uses the umbilical cord and breasts as examples of how the patriarchy objectifies the female body. She insinuates that authoritative male figures speak of women in terms of their bodies and hysteria in order to assert their control over them (*Killers* 122). Smith believes that the objectification of the female extends years into the past to a patriarchal position, established by “that old misogynist St. Paul,” which distorted God’s message (*Killers* 153). Paul states repeatedly that “a woman should learn in quietness” and “a woman should neither teach nor exercise authority over a man” (*New International Version* 1 Timothy 2:11-15). The apostle Paul is also infamous for stating that “men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed

shameful acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their error” (Romans 1:27). This quote denigrates homosexual behavior and deems it to be lustful and perverse. It shows homosexuality as being “shameful” and being against “natural relations” (Romans 1:27). Smith sees how God’s message has been taken and distorted by man to suppress all those who are not heterosexual, white males. She ironizes the fact that the same patriarchal configurations of oppression which date back to biblical times, still dictate the lives of racial minorities, women and homosexuals.

Smith goes on to express anger that these ancient practices are continually indoctrinated in the South’s children, leaving them without the ability to define themselves as anything other than ‘pure.’ At the beginning of the chapter “The Lessons,” Smith describes how she and other youngsters learned “to fear God and [...] to fear that power that was in our body” (*Killers* 83). Before children in the South were “five years old,” they had learned “that masturbation is wrong” and “had become a dreaded taboo” with God writing the rules of not only religion but also their “bodies” (*Killers* 84). The damning of the body’s free exploration by stringent religion stunts the children’s ability to realize fully their sexual maturity. From the time southerners were children, they were told not to trust their bodily instincts and were sexually stunted into heteronormativity. Will Brantley in *Feminine Sense in Southern Memoir* emphasizes that for Smith, God “becomes another manifestation of authority – always the enemy of Smith – another embodiment of the forces that restrict creative maturation” (57). This authority crushes sexual exploration and robs homosexual children from developing the language to define their bodies. No “creative” maturation will develop within them as they are unable to articulate their desires. Children living in a world of segregation, where they are used to seeing doorways and water fountains labeled with definite signs, lacked the ability to categorize themselves. Grace Hale

states in *Making Whiteness* that segregation “left little room” for Southern whites to define themselves. They only had a large, generalized regional identity to go off of (202). Smith herself was never able to fully reach her own lesbian realization as she never outwardly articulated her same sex desire. The taboos of the body intertwined with God remained too heavy of a weight for many homosexual southerners to escape.

Smith’s description of the body as twisted and marred by the South lends itself to the grotesque. She utilizes the deformed body to write about lesbianism and oppression. Smith, long-time friends with Carson McCullers and Flannery O’Connor, was very familiar with the use of the Southern grotesque in literature as McCullers and O’Connor filled their fiction with mentally and physically diseased characters. In “The Body As Testimony,” Patricia Yaeger writes, “the body is fetishized as the site of both self and culture-- a place where culture is mapped onto subjectivity and the pain of this mapping becomes visible” (224). Smith uses the body in quite the same way as Yaeger describes. For Smith, the body is a battleground where sexual identity and social politics wage war. There is no combination of identity and politics which make a perfect union, because there will always be some aspect of the self which is denied access to its full pleasure. As a result, Smith believes that her “body has been split from [her] mind and both from [her] ‘soul’” (*Killers* 27). Reconciling a lesbian or racial identity with a culture which despises these identities is impossible. Smith goes on to further illustrate how the split not only affected her “self” but all aspects of her essence. She writes, “[I was taught] to split my conscience from my acts and Christianity from Southern tradition” (*Killers* 27). In other words, Smith was taught to disown the parts of her which do not comply with “Southern Tradition” and to silence them so she does not have to be held responsible for her “sins” (*Killers* 84). Smith describes how her consciousness has been carved up and how she must disassociate from what

her body wants. The grotesque Southern body consisting of severed parts is all that is left after all identity has been “split” away, and Smith utilizes this body to highlight the dangers and pitfalls of racism and hate.

Smith makes it very clear that the splitting in the self begins at a very young age in the South. Of the children she grew up with, Smith writes that they were “under the weight of the taboo [...] the children were squeezed by its weight, shaped by it as were all until they, like the rest, became little crooked wedges that fit into the intricately twisting serrated design of life which THEY WHO MAKE THE RULES had prepared for us in Dixie” (*Killers* 92). Using extremely grotesque images of the body Smith demonstrates how children were split from their own personal, sexual, and independent needs and desires. Children were molded by culture into identical cogs to be put to work inside the Southern machine. Lesbianism does not fit into this “intricately twisting serrated design” that ‘Southern tradition’ has mandated (*Killers* 92). Those who made the rules about the body and segregation twisted individuals with distinct desires into puppets for Southern society. A hierarchy of place existed in the South. African Americans had a visible place in segregation, which was below heterosexual whites. Lesbians, on the other hand, did not have an “other” place designated to them. Instead, if they chose, they could pass amongst the heterosexual crowd, but if they chose to claim their identity, they did not have a safe space to express it.

Lack of space leaves the lesbian body visible and open to scrutiny. One of the most remarkable instances of the grotesque body is recounted in a memory of the annual circus in Smith’s hometown. Up until this point in the memoir, Smith, like others, makes it very clear that spatiality is problematic in the South. For instance, bodies that are supposed to be private are made public to God and scrutiny, the women who wanted to be “like men” found no comfortable

space, and biracial sex acts which were thought to be private were made public by children with mixed skin tones. In the circus scene, Smith further complicates public and private space through use of the grotesque body:

Once in the tent, we were shown monstrosities that Mr. Barnum would not have dared exhibit to his gawking audiences. Queer misshapen vices, strange abnormal sins were marched out before our eyes [...] We learned about the horrors of delirium tremens and the lush pleasures those scarlet women dangle before men's eyes. *Whore, harlot, unnatural sins, self abuse*—words we never heard in our homes [...] became an August vocabulary. (108)

Within the space of the circus, private bodies and “sins” become public entertainment for “gawking” eyes. Smith’s use of the word “Queer” is especially pertinent. While the term does mean “strange” or “odd,” Smith uses it as another way of hinting at homosexuality. The circus is a space where difference can be tolerated even if it is only for the enjoyment of others. In this small area, the ‘queer’ body, although not accepted, is at least viewable. The other side of this visibility is detrimental as it is a violation of the private self. Just as the “scarlet women dangle” in the open while being peered at and subjected to the onslaught of derogatory terms, so too does the Southern lesbian feel that her body leaves her vulnerable to public searches of her private spheres. Smith is not implying that lesbians are identifiable based on outward appearance. Rather, Smith illustrates how lesbians fear voyeurism from a society that has the ability to ostracize anyone who represents aspects of the ‘other.’

A final exploration of the body leads Smith to reveal the role of ‘passing’ and the problems of performance. At the end of *Killers of the Dream* in the section entitled, “The Chasm and the Bridge,” Smith takes up the issue of how role-playing has become a norm of the South. For her the trouble occurs “when ‘ordinary acting’ is suddenly, without warning, transformed

into symbolic acting” (*Killers* 244). African Americans with light skin and Anglo features have often ‘passed’ themselves off as white to the public; now, Smith is demonstrating how others make use of deceptive performances. Lesbians can maneuver from “ordinary acting,” that most people do every day in social situations, to “symbolic acting” which masks the woman in a veil of heteronormativity or “passing” as a heterosexual. Instead of trying to pass for white, these women attempt to pass for straight in the traditionalist South. Now the body is forced to perform actions that are counterintuitive to internal desires, in order to fit within the larger public sphere. This performance, however, cannot happen without consequences for the person taking up such a mask. For them, the world is “turned upside down;” it has become a ‘queer’ space to reside in. Smith states in such “a situation we are likely to decide that we are no longer in a reasonable, factual world [...] we might as well face the dreary fact that things are out of order in our own heads” (*Killers* 244). The play-acting as straight becomes unnatural for homosexuals in the Southern society that declares their sexuality as the deviation from ‘normal.’

Denying their bodily desires and personal inner truths, the lesbian mind becomes “out of order” and their “factual world” has ceased to exist. In Jay Watson’s article “Uncovering the Body, Discovering Ideology,” he delves into the “theatrical” nature of cultural ideologies that seize a person’s bodily wisdom (495). Watson quotes Terry Eagleton who states that “ideology is fundamentally theatrical” as it “hijacks, exhausts, and paralyzes their bodies” (495). However, if this is true of attempting to pass through conventional ideologies, then Watson offers up the idea of the “counter-ideological practice [...] an active ‘staging’ or working through of conflicts [...] resulting in an altered practical self-understanding” (495). Smith sees this counter-acting as a viable solution to what is happening across the South. In her compilation of letters, she says that it is “terribly urgent for us to work out means, technics of changing people’s mind” through “a

form of dramatic presentation” (109). This “revolutionary” way to incite “*a new way of acting*” needs to be taken to a “real-life stage” (109). The concept of engaging with cultural performativity beyond the self is crucial for in people to actualize how much of their agency is out of their hands and is actually in society’s grasp. Not only do other southerners need to “see their own relation to ideology,” they need to take a critical look at such cultural knowledge so as not to completely lose their own body’s knowledge.

The numerous silences surrounding homosexuality in both *Strange Fruit* and *Killers of the Dream* may be, as Johnson puts it, “connected to the epistemology of Smith’s own closet” (17). As a queer woman writing in the 1940s South, Smith had a countless number of handicaps. Racial equality, having only recently garnered public favor, pales in comparison to sexual equality during this time period. In modern society, the need for Southern lesbian texts is immense. With so few authors willing to admit their own sexuality or label their texts as queer, it is more important than ever to establish a lesbian tradition with which current writers can learn from and build upon for the future. Unfortunately, most scholars do not read *Killers of the Dream* or *Strange Fruit* with a queer lens, which is an injustice to both texts. Throughout these works, Smith queers her subjects in order to comment upon her own unspoken otherness. Though very few acknowledge her as such, I would argue that Smith is the grandmother of modern Southern lesbian literature. It is imperative that we not forget the strides Smith made for racial equality, but it is also key that we understand her texts are not just racial parables; rather, they are tales of difference.

Chapter II:

Queer Desires: Individual and Collective Hunger in Dorothy Allison's *Trash* and *Skin*

“The best cookbooks are storybooks, their purpose as much to document the communal draw of the meal table as to show the curious cook how to bake a gravity-defying biscuit or stir up a tasty kettle of Brunswick stew” (*Plenty* VI).

“Oh yes, that question of gender [...] I feel some days that I inhabit a purely unique category not commonly recognized by the general population. Lesbian, feminist, Southern femme partnered to a self-defined butch musician, incest survivor, forty-six-year-old mother of a three-year-old son, perimenopausal, working class escapee. All these categories have led me to develop a rich sense of humor about the world's routine judgments on sexuality, gender, and the familiar concept of role-defined behavior” (“Gendered Appetites: Feminisms, Dorothy Allison, and the Body” 1).

According to Karen Stimson, a longtime activist, 1969 was a year marked by earth shattering transition. That year welcomed (1) the founding of the National Organization for Women along with the second wave of U.S. feminism; (2) the creation of the National Association to Aid Fat Americans; and (3) the Stonewall Rebellion, which ignited the LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer) rights movement (Atkins xxxi). Examined singularly, these three events seem to have little to do with one another, but it is the fusion of food, body image, sexuality, and gender that produced a new avenue for queer and feminist studies. What we put in our bodies and what we did with our bodies acutely affected how we defined our bodies. Such emerging definitions helped minorities carve a space for themselves in the diversifying American landscape. Now, the South and the rest of the nation have progressed from the 1940s and 1950s of Lillian Smith's era. The silences and missing words of Smith's text are being filled in and fleshed out by lesbians who feel free to claim their identity. Thankfully, as a result of the upheaval in the late 60s, homosexuals started ‘coming out’ in mass numbers.

Subsequently, the 1970s brought an increased visibility for gay people and several milestones in gay rights. In 1973 homosexuality was removed from the American Psychological Association's list of psychotic disorders, homosexual decriminalization laws were passed in several states, and in 1977 Harvey Milk made history by being the first openly gay elected public official in California (Murphy 479, 527). Meanwhile, feminists and lesbians alike started making "connections between sexism and weight discrimination" (Atkins xxxi). Not only were women being discriminated against, overweight women even more so felt the oppressive stigma of being female in an undesirable body. These activists published articles on size discrimination in multiple feminist publications; the most famous of which being *Shadow on a Tightrope: Writings by Women on Fat Oppression* edited by Lisa Schoenfelder and Barb Wieser and published in its entirety in 1983. The book was a collection of personal narratives that addressed weight acceptance and weight discrimination within feminist circles. These women opened the discussion of body image within the skinny landscape of American culture. Jane Feuer in "Averting the Male Gaze: Visual Pleasure and Images of Fat Women" details how organizations like the NAAFA (National Association to Aid Fat Americans, later changed to Advance Fat Acceptance) aligned themselves with previous "quests for equal rights under the law" (Feuer 182). Fat women sought to dispel the need for diets, pills or eating disorders.

By the 1980s activists had successfully allied weight acceptance with feminism. They viewed all bodies, in their varying shapes and sizes, as having intrinsic worth. However, the 80s were a rather dark time for many minorities including women, homosexuals, and the impoverished. The feminist movement hit a serious roadblock when feminists split over the issue of the place of sex in women's lives in what has now come to be known as the Sex Wars. On one side stood the anti-pornography feminists who believed that pornography should be regulated as

it was a way for the patriarchy to continue to exploit women. On the other side were the sex-positive feminists who believed that sex was an avenue that provided access to pleasure and gave women agency over their bodies (Glick 20-21). Even more disheartening was the presidency of Ronald Reagan. Under Reagan, progressive federal programs were cut in favor of attempting to balance the budget. Military spending increased while his administration stiffened “eligibility for the food stamps program [...] reducing the rolls [...] by about 1 million and [...] cutting \$1.5 billion from school meals, tightening eligibility for free or reduced-price meals and curtailing supplemental feeding programs for women, infants, and children” (Sloan 232). Americans, especially women and the poor, were cut off from affordable, healthy food. It is no surprise that the obesity epidemic came to fruition during the 1980s as many Americans turned to cheap, fatty foods to feed their families.

Reagan’s economic policies, colloquially Reaganomics, focused on “the Republican propensity for trickle-down economics and top down policies that aid the already privileged and ignore the problems of the poor” (Sloan 310). From 1968 to 1994, the Census Bureau reports that “while the average income of households in the bottom 20 percent of earners rose from \$7,702 to \$7,762, the average in the top 5 percent of earners surged from \$111,189 to \$183,044” (Sloan 311). Largely, political advisors of Reagan’s shared the sentiment that “the broken families, dependent mothers and fatherless children [...] are the real victims” of government spending (Sloan 315). The reality was “nearly one in five children were living in poverty” by the end of Reagan’s presidency (Sloan 319). Amidst this political tension, Dorothy Allison began her career as an activist, essayist, and novelist. Occupying the body of an impoverished, overweight, homosexual woman (lesbian) herself, Allison’s work illustrates the struggles she underwent to coexist with a majorly heteronormative society. Her work reflects the upheaval taking place in

the 1980s feminist movement and the angst she felt toward Reaganomics' role in widening the economic gap.

Allison was born in 1949 in Greenville, South Carolina to a fifteen-year-old unwed waitress. She was molested by her stepfather from the age of five until she was eleven. Allison's semi-autobiographical first novel, *Bastard Out of Carolina* (1992), chronicles her experiences coping with this childhood abuse. She examines her own sexual awakening through the novel's protagonist, Bone, Allison's fictional doppelgänger. The novel was a finalist for a National Book Award in 1992; Allison's other fictional work includes *Cavedweller* (1998) and two books of poetry: *The Women Who Hate Me* (1983) and *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure* (1995). However, it is Allison's more intimate works like *Trash* and *Skin: Talking About Sex, Class and Literature* that reveal Allison's inner demons and tell of a larger collective anxiety in the lesbian, feminist, and poor communities. *Skin*, published in 1994, is a compilation of Allison's nonfiction essays, while *Trash*, published earlier in 1988, is a thinly veiled collection of short stories based on Allison's own experiences. The undercurrents flowing throughout both *Skin* and *Trash* expose the mounting political tension and double standards imposed by the government on minorities. In "Beyond Food/Sex," Elspeth Probyn states that Allison's "text strangely echoes Foucault's argument [...] he argue[s] 'homosexuality...is an historic occasion to re-open affective and relational virtualities'" (226). These possibilities for the underrepresented "are embodied in the slow caress given to each detail, each ingredient, the sense of timing and movement so essential to eating, cooking, loving and being" (Probyn 226). Allison's writing is indicative of the time when women, homosexuals and overweight Americans began rallying for acceptance amidst a culture that privileged straight, fit males.

Even still, these groups have not gained full admittance into American culture. Allison's descriptions of food and relationships are telling of her larger political stance. Living in a Republican-perpetuated state of poverty forms Allison's liberal taste for pork fat and passionate lovers and blurs the lines between taste, desire and wealth. She is an embodiment of the "one in five children" as she herself grew up a victim of poverty. Allison was nourished with fatty, salty foods and now uses her "white trash" foodways to describe her relationships. She writes against mainstream feminism and the added pressures it puts on women to conform to an anti-conformist lifestyle. Allison admits, "I know that I have been hated as a lesbian by 'society' [...] but I have also been hated or held in contempt by lesbians for behavior and sexual practices shaped in large part by my class" (*Skin* 23). Allison's objective is to expose the connections that exist between sexual preference, regional distinctiveness, and social status and to disprove the idea that identity can easily be classified or categorized. Throughout her work, Allison transforms conceptions of being white trash, of being lesbian and of being large in the hips. She exploits traditional views of food, class, and sex to deconstruct codified cultural classifications of womanhood in order to craft a more rounded image of female sexuality.

While Smith focused her discussion of food on race and female sexuality, Allison examines her own lesbian sexuality through the metaphor of food. Allison greatly extends this correlation beyond Smith's capabilities. In both texts, women remain the primary producers and prepares of food. The most common domestic space for the woman to this day is still the kitchen. Females are expected to make the meal, providing for their men and family first. As Smith previously asserted, women and food are easily linked to race and class. Black women literally nurtured the South for decades. White children consumed the milk of their "mammies" and leaned on them for maternal comfort. Black women like Smith's fictional Dessie occupied the

kitchens of well-to-do white families mixing their own cultural foodways of okra and hoecakes with the taste preferences of the families for which they worked. Black women's role in constructing modern southern foodways cannot be ignored. The types of foods, varieties of foods, the flavors and spices are all indicative of a person's regional and economic background.

Moreover, Elizabeth S. D. Engelhardt's 2011 book, *A Mess of Greens: Southern Gender and Southern Food* accentuates the intrinsic role food plays in connecting southerners across generations and races. And while food unites southerners, it is also important to understand that southern food has as many variations as its people. Coastal southern states appreciate seafood while certain states like Louisiana and Texas have an affinity for gumbo or spicy Mexican cuisine. Allison, like Engelhardt, shares a common bond for Carolina food:

Biscuits. I dream about baking biscuits: sifting flour, baking powder, and salt together; measuring out shortening and buttermilk by eye; and rolling it all out with flour-dusted fingers. Beans. I dream about picking over beans, soaking them overnight, chopping pork fat, slicing onions, putting it all in a great iron pot to bubble for hour after hour. (*Trash* 161).

Despite regional differences, the preparation and consumption of food in the South has commonalities created by collective histories, nostalgias, politics and gendered hierarchies. Englehardt points out that slavery forced black and white women into kitchens where they shared recipes and ingredients. Nostalgia for "Mammy's Cooking" then gripped the South thanks in large part to movies like *Birth of a Nation* and *Gone With the Wind* (3). Furthermore, environmental and economic changes "brought by textile mills, the soil exhausting sharecropping economy, and the exploration of raw materials such as timber, paper, cotton, and tobacco" forced the South away from a primarily farming economy to a "money economy" where "questions of class and social hierarchies [...] played out on the pages of community

cookbooks” (Englehardt 3). These movements that swept the South insured that largely, food would remain and still remains a common ground for different races in the South as we come from a common food history.

Acutely aware of the commonalities Southerners share because of food, Allison begins “A Lesbian Appetite” with a hunger for “Greens. Mustard greens, collards, turnip greens and poke—can’t find them anywhere in the shops up North [...] Red beans and rice, chicken necks and dumplings” (*Trash* 185). Her taste for greens links her to the South and the soul food that emerged from African-American kitchens. However, Allison does not fully explore this connection between food and race. Interconnection between herself and southern blacks is an aspect of Allison’s work that could use bolstering. Admittedly, Allison’s texts are firsthand accounts of her experiences in the South; therefore, being a white woman giving voice to an African-American woman’s experience is problematic. Nonetheless, Allison should have done more in the text to underscore the similarities between poverty, sexuality, and race. Her reluctance to do so perpetuates a history of silence on the subject. Allison even admits, “No one talked about it [race], except to announce occasionally that they were not racist crackers like their parents, and to insist somewhat nervously that they all got along fine” (*Skin* 235). Still, while Allison does not directly address southern blacks, her food yearnings align her “white trash” background with that of poor blacks. Allison could have utilized this connection between poor white and black food in order to demonstrate a common bond.

As Marcie Ferris states in “The Edible South,” blacks and poor whites have “barely enough food, barely enough room to eat, barely enough dishes to eat from” (13). Poor whites and blacks in the South historically share limited access to foods. Thus, dishes comprised of spare animal parts and bitter vegetables make up much of the southern diet. The consumption of such

foods is partly born out of necessity. As Lindenmeyer asserts, “At its core, the intersection of food and history in the American South is about power. Those who control the food – its quantity, its taste, its access – control everything” (13). While government food aid programs exist, they often do not reach all of those in need. Also, many southerners would maintain their pride before asking for assistance, especially from the government. In a way, women hold power over food that men do not possess. They are the conduit through which themselves and their families have access to meals. This view of the woman as “feeder” illustrates the complex power play created by women producing food for others to eat. The types of food associated with each gender belie complexities modern scholarship has highlighted about the gender binary.

For example, as recently as 1979, theorist Pierre Bourdieu was disseminating such notions that eating patterns of men and women are intrinsically connected to their sex. Bourdieu argues in *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* that meat, “the nourishing food par excellence, strong and strong-making, giving vigour, blood, and health, is the dish for men [...] women are satisfied with small portions [...] stinting themselves [...] they really don’t want what others might need, especially men, the natural meat-eaters” (192). What Bourdieu does by differentiating men’s eating habits from women is to create unnecessary and excluding binaries. In fact, much of Bourdieu’s work perpetuates said binaries. In *The Logic of Practice* (1980) Bourdieu claims that “winter food” is overall feminine while “summer food” is masculine. Men eat food that is “solid and nourishing” while women eat food that is “more liquid, less nourishing, more highly spiced” (252). The “whole masculine identity” involves eating with “whole-hearted male gulps and mouthfuls” while women eat by “nibbling and picking” (*Distinctions* 190). Bourdieu’s statements are sweeping generalizations that cannot be applied to all men and women. His work perpetuates the view that only men possess a lust for food, while

women remain passive and weak in comparison. It ignores the gradients of personal preferences even amidst cultural conventions that might align men with voracious meat eating and women with dainty vegetable bites. While Bourdieu attempts to make judgments about taste, he fails to compensate for people who do not ascribe to supposed societal norms.

Allison's work not only disrupts Bourdieu's gendered binaries, but she also creates alternative possibilities for female consumption both gustatory and sexual. Meat-eating, even within the feminist communities, carries with it a stigma. Carnal desire for meat and flesh are often associated with butch lesbians who are considered the most "manly" of women. Allison takes advantage of the gendered binaries associated with meat eating and domination that Bourdieu maintains in order to enter into a "debate about the acceptability of a female masculinity [...] reading the repudiation of meat as a repudiation of [...] sexual pleasures" (Lindemeyer 478). In an episode with her girlfriend, Lee, the narrator in Allison's "A Lesbian Appetite," recalls how Lee instructs her to chop mounds of vegetables into "bite-sized" pieces in preparation for a lesbian, weekend retreat. The raw vegetables and "iridescent" noodles to which Lee has subjected the narrator for days, causes the narrator to resent her girlfriend and concurrently causes her stomach to "curl up into a knot inside" of her (*Trash* 172). Consecutive days on a vegetarian diet cause the narrator's desire for meat to bubble to the surface. Thus, when promised pork, beef, ribs, and barbeque from another woman at the conference, the narrator steals away to Atlanta for a weekend full of carnal and gustatory consumption (173). Allison not only mocks Bourdieu's accusations that women have a propensity for small portions and tiny bites, but she also complicates the notion that most feminists and lesbians embrace a vegetarian lifestyle. Furthermore, she forces the associations between desire for food and sexual desires.

For some feminists, the idea of women eating meat is equal to the celebration of male domination. Classic feminist thought equates man's use of animals with his use of women. Both are preyed upon by the male hunter and consumed for his pleasure. However, lesbianism itself obfuscates this notion. For lesbians, to "eat" becomes a sexualized act. In "A Lesbian Appetite," many of the narrator's sexual encounters are prefaced with descriptions of food. These interactions are coded through puns that encrypt the language of sex through eating. Christina Jarvis in "Gendered Appetites: Feminisms, Dorothy Allison, and the Body" emphasizes that instead of detailing lesbians through "genitality or complementarity," desire is configured in terms of consuming food (764). For Probyn, "flesh confuses the limits of what we are and what we eat, what or who we are; flesh encapsulates the quandary of whether the body in question is edible, fuckable, or both" (221). Allison's text may reference food, but in actuality she is likening her insatiable appetite for food with her desire for women. "Eating" takes on new meaning when applied to the bedroom. For lesbians, "eating" out has little to do with the consumption of takeout food, but rather with cunnilingus. With Jay, yet another inamorata, the narrator describes sex in terms of "thick cream" and "musky gravy," as the women taste each other (*Trash* 168-169).

Allison illustrates how the preparation and consumption of meat within lesbian relationships is both a unifying and dividing process for women. Where the narrator and her lover at the lesbian retreat find satisfaction in "slow pit cooking" related to the preparation of barbeque and gratification from consuming the meat, other lesbians at the retreat find the duo's disregard for vegetarianism as playing into the patriarchy. The idea of consuming within lesbian sexual relations adds another element of power to the feeding/eating binary. Feminists, considering lesbian relationships, cannot simply assign one woman the role of consumer and the

other woman the role of consumed merely because meat is a factor in their sexual relationship. Allison acknowledges that feeding and eating within lesbian relationships is a shared experience, and thus, the power struggle created by meat eating is not singularly male/female. Bourdieu's neat and tidy binaries separated by categories and labels do not hold up next to Allison's clearly muddled explanation of sexuality and desire.

The binaries created in food – of “healthy” and “junk” – are also harmful when determining the value of foodways. Multiple factors influence what a person eats: time, place, need, and desire. It is naïve to believe that the continuation of “trashy” or “bad” foods in current pop culture is purely a result of societal pressures or governmental tyranny. Slavery and poverty may have created many of the traditional southern dishes we know today, but these dishes persevere for other reasons all together. Foods fried in “pork fat” or “chicken grease”, vegetables cooked “to limp strands”, starches, butters, and gravies are still staples in the South because they, much like the soul food of southern blacks, connect southerners to a sense of home, self, and identity (*Trash* 162). For Allison, the connection to the past that southern foods provide her overcomes any negative effects that the food may have. She is acutely aware of the stigma that such food carries, but she admits, “I am always hungry for it—the smell and taste of the food my mama fed me [...] I eat shit food and am not worthy” (*Trash* 162). While giving up the food of her childhood might improve Allison's health, it also removes her from her individual background, familial history and regional influences. In “Don't Tell Me You Don't Know,” Allison's narrator demonstrates this connection between taste and family during a discussion with her aunt. With the women standing face-to-face, the narrator “open[s] [her] mouth, put [her] tongue out, and tasted [her] aunt's check and [her] own. Butter and salt, dust and beer, sweat and

stink flesh of my flesh” (*Trash* 108). Her aunt serves as a reminder of the ties to “butter and salt,” which flavor and fatten southern food and act as a comfort to the narrator.

Allison’s food preferences cast her not only as an outsider within the typical feminist gender frame, but demonstrate a “class-based hierarchy of foodstuffs, where some foods express sophistication or moral superiority” (Lindenmeyer 476). The feminists with which she works and several of her girlfriends extol the virtues of a vegetarian lifestyle, of eating less sugar and of giving up fatty treats. The health-conscious girlfriend, Lee, would list the results of a bad diet: “rickets, poor eyesight, appendicitis, warts, and bad skin” (*Trash* 162). Allison admits that “the diet of poor southerners is among the worst in world, though it’s tasty, very tasty” (162). These food choices result in family members’ teeth falling out and “five of [her] cousins bleeding to death before thirty-five, their stomachs finally surrendering to sugar and whiskey and fat and death” (*Trash* 162). According to “White Trash Girl” by Laura Kipnis, body image for the lower class oscillates between two extremes with “white trashy bodies as either being like really big and fat and sweaty or [...] really, really emaciated” (125). When eaten every day, this “poor southern” food may feed “the soul,” but it feeds and expands the body the most. This “discourse of ‘bad food’ marks the eater as lower class” with the large consequence being “obesity and diet-related health problems” (Lindenmeyer 470; Winnie xviii). For Gael Sweeney in “The King of White Trash Culture”, the “carnavalesque” aspects of being working class, white trash glorify “laughter, eating, drinking, and excreting [...] of collective bodies” (225). As a lesbian from the working class, Allison knows that “workers wear their labor on their bodies” demonstrating their penchant for “excess” (Sweeny 225). Their need for more sugar, more fat and more drink tie them together in a “collective” body. In Allison’s fiction, class highlights the “territorialization of lesbian appetites and the shaping of bodies” (Jarvis 782). Food causes us to grow upward and

outward. For Le'a Kent in "Fat Abjection: Representing Fat Women," the feminists who Allison works with "see an individual and [...] see FAT. Oh my God it's a FAAAAAAAAAAT dyke!" (Kent 144). For Allison "claiming [her] dykehood [...] is wrapped up in [her] physical presentation" (Kent 144). She cannot separate these two aspects of her self-identity.

Allison stands along feminists who took a stance against size discrimination, because as several public ads have proclaimed, all bodies are beautiful. In "Lesbians and the (Re/De)Construction of the Female Body," Diane Crowder maintains that "fat liberation [...] begins with an analysis of the prejudices against fat ingrained in a heterosexual society that imposes an ideal of thinness on women" (60). Furthermore, the seemingly "more radical politics of fat liberation stems from lesbian feminist politics" and the "failure of these women's movements to critique their own fat phobia" (Feuer 183). Tensions remain within feminist circles to accept those women who ignored the seemingly common sense of eating steamed vegetables and continued to be identified with "bad" and "trashy" food. Instead of feminists accepting "women's fat bodies," the larger female forms "are represented as a kind of abject" (Kent 135). These bodies come to embody "the horror of the body itself for the culture at large" (135). This horror can be extended to a fear of transgressive feminists.

Within feminist circles, "the connection between the economics of race and class as they intersect with gender and sexuality when it comes to fatness have also become clear" (Crowder 60). Allison's narrator "glower[s] at the women who came in and wanted hot water for tea [...] and the skinny, muscled women dancing continuously in the rec room" at a Southeastern Feminist Conference, which served "vegetarian spaghetti sauce, whole wheat pasta and salad" (*Trash* 172, 170). Allison's conception of "bad food" and "bad women" delineates from the ideas of the mainstream lesbians she worked and lived with. Allison's "radical feminism" calls into

questions the “valorization process” committed by those who judge any type of female form, regardless of “fat versus thin” (Crowder 60). Hypocritically, these mainstream feminists looked to empower females beyond objectification, while simultaneously claiming that women who ate trashy, looked trashy, and acted trashy are not truly feminist.

Continually, Allison “exhibits a sustained social awareness of the complex ways that food and eating signify, reminding the reader that class and ethnicity intersect with a myriad of social factors to shape lesbian identities” (Jarvis 764-765). Her concept of “bad food” leads to her also embracing “bad sex;” both of which clash with mainstream feminism. “Bad” does not mean that the food tasted terrible or that the sex was unsatisfying, but rather “bad” in the sense that they were frowned upon. In *Skin and Trash*, Allison “takes issue with strident feminist disapproval of her upfront sexuality and self-identification as a masochist that is [...] linked to her childhood and a personal history of sexual abuse” (Lindenmeyer 477). Sex, class, and taste intersect as Allison has been “hated or held in contempt [...] by lesbians for behavior and sexual practices shaped in large part by class” (*Skin* 23). Many feminists, she claims, ignore how class shapes sexuality and the self. Though still a feminist, Allison commits “to claiming the right to act on [her] sexual desires without tailoring [her] lust to a sex-fearing society” (*Skin* 23). Suzanne Walters in “From Here to Queer” states that “the seventies feminism [...] sanitized lesbianism. Lesbophobia forced lesbians to cling to feminism [...] However, the eighties, discussions of sadomasochism permantly altered the relationship of many lesbians to feminism” (17). A part of this progressive movement in the eighties, Allison uses the term “queer” to imply that she is a “transgressive lesbian – femme, masochistic, as sexually aggressive as the women [she] seek[s] out, and as pornographic in [her] imagination and sexual activities as the heterosexual hegemony has ever believed” (*Skin* 23). Traditional feminists should also be

included with those of the heterosexual hegemony as they expected Allison to “abandon her desires, to become the normalized woman who flirts with fetishization” (*Skin* 24). Mainstream feminism and some within lesbian feminism clung to the binary of porn/erotica and bad/good in relation to sex, which marginalized women within their groups.

However, Allison aligns herself with the pro-sex feminists as a “sex radical,” arguing for anti-censorship. She laughs at the Sex Wars, begging the question who even won, and advocates for inclusion. These “highly publicized ‘lesbian sex wars’ are accompanied by generational ‘food wars’ waged between worthy vegetarians and [...] meat-eating sexual radicals” (Lindenmeyer 479). Unfortunately as feminists sought equal rights, they perpetuated the “horror of all horrors: THE BINARY [...] feminism/patriarchy, inside/outside, [...] porn/erotica” and proper/improper (Walters 17). Allison’s proclivity for salty, fatty foods correlates with desires for S&M (somasochism) and other bedroom pleasures, mostly marginalized by society. The “fat dyke” magazine *FaT GiRL* “revels in writing the fat body into forbidden sexual scripts” (Kent 142). It shows “fat bodies in sexual acts, fat women actively desiring fat women, fat women in S/M scenarios” (Kent 142). Allison in *Trash* utilizes the idea of “the erotic to envision a good, pleasurable body in which there is an interplay between the body’s desires and the self’s expression” (Kent 142). Lee, her vegetarian girlfriend, brings home eggplant for Allison’s narrator to try and prepares to fry it, presumably so the narrator will eat it. She admits that if Lee “put enough cornmeal on it and fr[ied] it in bacon fat” that she would probably “like most anything” (*Trash* 165). Before any eggplant is cooked, the two women end up on the floor as the narrator “pushed slices up between [Lee’s] legs, while [she] licked one of her nipples and pinched the other between a folded slice of eggplant” (*Trash* 166). Later, they pick “up all the eggplant on the floor and fried it [...] It was delicious” (167). Deep-frying foods, a token of

southern food, is juxtaposed with “atypical” sex as the women intermingle with vegetables, flour, and sweat on the kitchen floor.

In a later scene with Jay, Allison’s narrator drinks her lover’s “bitter yellow piss” while they have sex (*Trash* 169). Jay admonishes her to “swallow it” and says she will put the narrator “in a tub of hot lemonade” (*Trash* 170). Then Jay will “drink it off [her]. Eat [her] for dinner” (170). Acrid urine is compared to lemonade, a beverage filled with sugar to offset the sourness of lemons. Lemonade, like sweet tea, if drunk enough, can loosen teeth, but the taste is unparalleled. As the narrator drinks what Jay gives her, she feels her “thighs [shake] and [her] teeth [ache]” with pleasure (*Trash* 170). Many feminists, presenting a strong face against the patriarchy, would not dare make such admissions about their bedroom habits. Allison resists the ideas that certain sex is “bad” or demoralizing, much like she pushes against the notion southern food is “trashy.” Phrases like “the thick cream out of my cunt” and Jay’s “musky gravy” are not only lesbian appropriations of food, but also queer descriptions (*Trash* 169). “Cream” and “gravy” are transgressive to the raw vegetarian feminists, but also to the anti-sex feminists. Moreover, “cream” and “gravy” are fattening foods filled with calories and sodium. They are associated with poor southerners, with white trash eating. This sex is gluttonous with pleasure. Such words explicitly describe lesbian sex in a nonconforming manner and does not treat “deviant desire with humor” as was to be expected (*Skin* 24). Allison does not nervously laugh off masochistic desires or sex toys. Instead, her prose is fat with descriptions of food and sex meant to celebrate femininity and the female body as opposed to shaming them.

In fact, Allison’s narrator contrasts her explicit, free sexual relationship with Jay and Lee to her relationship with Bobby. The narrator admonishes Bobby, whom the narrator “hunger[s]” for but who insists that the couple submit to “a bath, bath powder, and tooth brushing” before

having sex because not doing so is “dirty” (*Trash* 120). The narrator is not to touch Bobby until they “entered into the sanctuary of her bedroom [...] lit only by the lamp in the alley outside;” it was only in that private, dark space that Allison is permitted to “bite, scratch, and call her name” (*Trash* 120). For Bobby, Allison’s narrator reminds her of “the taste of hunger,” of the want for food and sex. Bobby cannot come to terms with her desires, like Jay and Lee have done. Unlike the narrator, Bobby has “contempt” and “terror,” which contrasts with the shameless embracing of sexual desire by the narrator (*Trash* 122). Bobby’s aversion to unconventional, open sex might be applauded by mainstream feminists, but for Allison reigning in her sexual desire is fundamentally the same as stifling her personhood. Bobby does not feed Allison’s narrator as the other girlfriends have done.

The main point of Allison’s work, her fundamental thesis, is that sex, preference, class, region, and food “form an intricate lattice that restricts and shapes” our identity (*Skin* 23). Being southern is as important to who Allison is as the fact that she’s a lesbian, sadomasochist, who enjoys trashy food and grew up in a state of perpetual poverty. She does not back away from the heterosexual supremacy or the mainstream feminists and lesbians who asserted themselves in the 80s. In fact, Allison admits:

When in the 1980s I ran into the concept of feminist sexuality, I genuinely did not know what it meant. Though I was, and am a feminist, and committed to claiming the right to act on my sexual desires without tailoring my lust to a sex-fearing society, demands that I explain or justify my sexual fantasies have left me at a loss [...] my sense of humor may be a little obscure to women who have never felt threatened by the way most lesbians use and mean the words *pervert* and *queer*. I use the word queer to mean more than lesbian. Since I first used it in 1980 I have always meant it to imply that I am not only a lesbian but a transgressive lesbian—femme, masochistic, as sexually aggressive as the women I seek out, and as pornographic in my imagination and sexual activities as the heterosexual hegemony has ever believed. (*Skin* 23)

As a person who would normally reject societal boundaries, labels, and classifications, Allison adopts the labels which most would consider negative. What others would whisper about or look down upon, she calls attention to being *queer*. Allison attempts to transform the transgressive into the accepted. She embraces such labels because she understands the power of words. On the other hand, Allison does not let labels limit her. Sexuality cannot be placed into neat categories and Allison recognizes this inability in her fiction. She disrupts the types of black and white boundaries imposed by the likes of Bourdieu, and demonstrates that sexuality comes in a multitude of greys.

Chapter III:

Queer Realities: The Intersection of Food, Rhetoric, and Sexuality in Shay Youngblood's

Soul Kiss

“Rhetoric- The art of using language effectively so as to persuade or influence others, especially the exploitation of figures of speech and other compositional techniques to this end; the study of principles and rules to be followed by a speaker or writer striving for eloquence, especially as formulated by ancient Greek and Roman writers” (“Rhetoric” def. 1)

“I begin collecting words. Their meanings don't matter. I want to taste deliciously long vowels and sweet consonants, hear the sound of their music and eat the rich letters of memory like cake. *Pellucid... winsome... vicissitudes... languish...* I collect foreign words. *Amore... bisons... habibi... querencia...* Words with color, pitch, tone, texture, shape, tang. I put them in my dream book and hide them under my mattress. I boil them, bake them, fry them in hot grease and I feed on them, trying to understand the life that I am living” (Youngblood 168).

Both Lillian Smith and Dorothy Allison elaborate on the symbiotic relationship food has with collective and individual identities. While Smith is unable to quite articulate her own sexuality through food metaphors, Allison boldly associates her sexuality with food and eating in order to emphasize differing degrees of sexual consumption and to label her own identity and experience as a working-class dyke. Working in the same vein, Shay Youngblood uses the rhetorical nature of food to suggest alternative possibilities for identity outside the realms of binaries like heterosexual/homosexual and white/black. Youngblood recognizes that consumption is an articulation of the connections between food, sex, and rhetoric. Moreover, she uses her novel as a tool to unpack the complexities of the relatively new concepts of genderqueer and pansexual identities. In doing so, she is able to provide a fresher, more modern take on the relationship between food and identity. She expands and transforms Allison's correlation of food and sex. Throwing off labels, Youngblood uses the act of eating and pleasure to demonstrate the

fluidity of sexual identities. While Allison was explicitly autobiographical in her fiction, Youngblood uses pieces from her past that inform her narrative and her characters.

As a recognized playwright, poet, and novelist, Youngblood dissects race and belonging throughout her fiction. She has written, produced, and directed multiple plays, novels, and books of poetry. Her most notable works include *The Big Mama Stories* (1989), *Shakin' the Mess Outta Misery* (1994), *Soul Kiss* (1997), and *Black Girl in Paris* (2000) (Gardner). Born in Columbus, Georgia in 1959, Youngblood was orphaned by the age of two and raised by a community of family members: grandmothers, aunts, cousins, grandfathers, and uncles (Gardner).

Youngblood's family serves as inspiration for much of her work. She credits her female relatives or "big mamas" with teaching her the art of storytelling, and she passes this characteristic on to her female heroines. Both Mariah in *Soul Kiss* and Eden in *Black Girl in Paris* aspire to be writers. Youngblood's characters are strong, outspoken, and self-sufficient. These women seek to find new avenues to express themselves and their experiences. Though Youngblood has multiple texts worthy of closer examination, it is *Soul Kiss* and its protagonist, Mariah Santos, which disrupts conventional notions of sexual and gustatory desire; Youngblood uses the rhetoric of food and foodways to influence social constructions of sexuality, demonstrating that sexual desire, in particular black female sexual desire, is a fluid, amorphous concept. As Mariah moves between different racial and sexual identities, she uses language and food to transcribe and translate her experiences growing up. Mariah transcends the time period's fascination with codifying people as her identity changes throughout the novel. Youngblood never allows Mariah to be labeled; instead, Mariah shifts like a kaleidoscope – from black to Hispanic, from straight to lesbian, and from male to female. Mariah's fluid nature allows her to breakdown socially constructed binaries and demonstrates how identity exists on a spectrum of difference.

Soul Kiss is a *bildungsroman* based on the capricious life of Mariah Santos. Youngblood contextualizes the novel's time frame by having Mariah recount the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. The novel starts with Mariah stating how "Mama said somebody important had died. She was crying so hard I thought she knew this Martin Luther King Jr., personally" (Youngblood 12). Dr. King's death on April 4, 1968 marked the end of Mariah's second-grade-year in school making her age approximately seven or eight years old at the beginning of the book ("Civil Rights" 1968, Youngblood 8). Taken soon after King's death from her Kansas home and abandoned by her drug-addicted, transient mother in Georgia on the doorstep of her two aunts, Faith and Merleen, Mariah must learn to exist in a world of rules and boundaries where they did not exist for the first seven years of her life. In the wake of Dr. King's murder, Mariah clashes with the cultural shock of living in the deep-fried and frequently racist South. Though she comes to love her aunts, Mariah still aches for the closeness of a biological parent.

Having never known her father, Matisse, Mariah leaves the red dirt of Georgia at the age of fifteen when she learns of his whereabouts and joins him in California. Enduring rape and sexual abuse at the hands of a stranger at the bus station, Mariah perseveres and manages to travel to Los Angeles. She keeps the rape a secret from her father and looks to simply build a relationship with Matisse. Yet again, Mariah has to adjust to a new culture and a new set of boundaries. Matisse, though full of good intentions, proves to be a less than ideal father when he begins to confuse Mariah with her mother, often asking her to pose nude for his paintings like her mother once did. Realizing that her relationship with her father is dysfunctional, Mariah returns to Georgia where she finishes out her senior year of school, begins to make plans for her future, and tries to come to terms with her relationship with both her parents.

By starting Mariah's story with Martin Luther King Jr.'s death, Youngblood highlights past and present racial and political tensions. Furthermore, Youngblood weaves food and foodways into the text as a way to show how such tensions connect with and affect Mariah's sense of self. During Mariah's brief time in Kansas where the novel opens, we learn that Mariah has grown accustomed to dinner "directly from tin cans heated on a one-eyed hot plate [...] On special days we had picnics selecting cans of potted meat, stewed tomatoes, fruit cocktail, applesauce, and pork and beans to spread on saltine crackers or speak with sturdy toothpicks and wash down with sweet lemon iced tea" (Youngblood 6-7). At an early age, Mariah begins to understand that her food preferences are connected to her sense of self and home. Though she loves her mother, Coral, Mariah recognizes that the way her mother feeds her is symptomatic of her mother's inability to properly provide for Mariah's physical and emotional needs.

Mariah remembers, "In summer [her mother] said it was too hot to light the oven, in winter she was too tired to cook [...] Around bedtime she [...] left me alone with instructions to stay on the sofa, warning me that if I got off, even to go to the bathroom, I might drown in the ocean [...] she seemed to be sleepwalking through our lives" (Youngblood 7-8). The lack of stability provided by her mother inhibits Mariah's ability to connect to herself and her surroundings. She becomes dependent upon her mother for her identity and seeks to emulate her. Mariah remembers, "Sometimes I wished I were small enough to crawl back inside her stomach [...] I could imagine no greater comfort" (Youngblood 6). Mariah is dependent upon her mother and her Mother's constant abandonment only stimulates Mariah's desire to recreate the prenatal connection the pair shared. Mariah cannot see herself or the world around her clearly as she only perceives life through her mother and their confined life.

Likewise, when Mariah ventures to California to visit Matisse, she is exposed to an entirely new culinary world. After only a few weeks in California, Mariah's preferences begin to change. She has "alphabetized the take-out menus for over twenty restaurants within a five-mile radius;" she learns to like "sushi, California rolls, steamed bok choy, Thai tea with condensed milk, coconut soup with lemongrass, spanakopita, and pizza with bacon and pineapple slices" (Youngblood 129). The diverse range of food available to Mariah in Los Angeles demonstrates how food is becoming globalized. As with her mother, Mariah cannot find a sense of self or home through the food Matisse feeds her. While Coral fed Mariah generic canned food that could be purchased from any store, her father feeds her a diverse range of food that comes from far flung places around the globe. One of the benefits reaped by today's localvores, besides a boost to the local economy, is a connection to place. Though Columbus's voyage to the Americas and even Pangaea calls into question what 'local' food is, eating fruits, vegetables, even meats that were grown locally tie the consumer to a sense of home.

Both Matisse and Coral feed Mariah mass-produced, generic food stuffs available at any grocery store or fast food restaurant. Neither parent cooks for Mariah. The communal act of cooking, of being taught to feed oneself and others is absent. However, Mariah and Matisse do sometimes eat the food together. Though hesitant to try and even to like the takeout food her father lives on, Mariah understands that eating is a communal act, and that by partaking of the food of her father, she is in some way connecting with him. As a silent subject, Mariah is persuaded by the communal meals and intimate moments she shares with Matisse over dinner. Her father does not eat with her often, but as the bringer of food, Matisse holds the power in their relationship. His food choices, while exotic for Mariah, do not quell her hunger for the food of her aunts. Matisse jokes that Mariah does not like his food because she is accustomed to her

aunt's "cornbread and possum parts" (Youngblood 124). Mariah claims to be "happy" with Matisse even "wishing it were true;" however, he "does not understand the deep sadness that flavors every meal" (Youngblood 150 & 124).

Having searched fruitlessly to find a sense of self through her parents, Mariah comes to realize that the only place she ever felt truly rooted was with her aunts in Georgia where she resided between Kansas and California. Mariah's first impression of Georgia is influenced by food. The welcome sign on the state line reads, "Welcome to the Peach State" (Youngblood 15). Mariah's mother, in an attempt to extol the virtues of the South, tells Mariah that she is leaving her with her great aunties. Coral explains, "They're ladies...and they know how to cook [...]. Maybe they'll teach you how to cook a red velvet cake or a blackberry cobbler. I haven't had cobbler since...oh, I don't know when. They sure do know how to cook" (Youngblood 16). While simultaneously convincing Mariah that her abandonment is for her good, Coral admits her failures as a mother and "lady." The food Coral mentions ties the aunts and later Mariah to a communal history and to generations before who have made "red velvet cake or blackberry cobbler" (Youngblood 16).

The first task Aunt Merleen and Aunt Faith undertake to connect with their new house guest is to feed Mariah "a warmed-over chicken leg and a biscuit" with a "short glass of milk" (Youngblood 21). Finally, Mariah is fed food that will link her to community and home. The southern food her aunts make, speak to a larger African-American collective past. Furthermore, Anne Yentsch in "Excavating the South's African American Food History" explains how such foods can establish a lineage of common consumption. Yentsch states that red velvet cake, blackberry cobbler, and even biscuits, though not frequently enjoyed due to economic situations, are types of foods that tie southern African Americans to a "collective memory" (60). Unlike her

mother's canned food and her father's take out dinners, Mariah's aunts introduce her to a "collective memory" of food that cannot be bought from a grocery store or ordered from a menu. Furthermore, Yentsch goes on to argue that what is critical about these foods is "the connection between present and past, between ancestors and descendants" (60). By eating these southern foods and learning to prepare them, Mariah bridges generational gaps and enters into a continuation of heritage. It is understandable then that when Mariah returns to Georgia after leaving California that she begins to "feel the swelling of roots under [her] feet" (Youngblood 176). Mariah is able to establish an identity of her own through the communal history represented in her aunt's cooking.

Mariah fulfills the tradition set forth by her ancestors in the end of the novel when she helps Aunt Faith who suffers from blindness and diabetes cook a red velvet cake. Where her mother failed, Mariah follows through. She not only learns to prepare the recipes of her aunts but she combines tradition with modern elements to create an all-new custom. Near the end of the novel, Aunt Faith exclaims that she "could eat a whole red velvet cake by [herself]" and hands Mariah a "ragged-edged recipe card," indicating how often this cake has been made (Youngblood 186). However, Aunt Faith suffers from diabetes and is not "supposed to eat sugar" (186). Due to Aunt Faith's illness, Mariah substitutes Sweet'n Low in place of sugar (187). This small alteration to the recipe allows Mariah to leave her mark on tradition for future generations. Essentially, Mariah represents a union between past and present, the traditional and the modern. This union speaks to what Kenneth Burke in his 1931 *Counter-Statement* calls a "margin of overlap" (78). The margin of overlap bridges the gap between two different entities. Mariah participates in such an overlap when she changes the red velvet cake recipe to adapt to her aunt's needs. Food is one such avenue that is able to create a bridge between people, cultures, and

racess. By baking the cake, it allows for Mariah to further connect with Aunt Faith across the generational gap that is between them. This margin of overlap with food does not exist between Mariah and her father or Mariah and her mother. Therefore, Mariah suffers a disconnection with her parents that cannot be overcome; a gap still lies between them. Food becomes a common point where differences can be mediated within “the margin of overlap,” where power can be taken or transferred.

The time period of *Soul Kiss* demonstrates a “margin of overlap” as it focuses upon a tumultuous time in American history. Mariah is in the second grade when Martin Luther King Jr. is assassinated. Therefore, because the novel ends as Mariah turns eighteen, the majority of the book transpires between 1968 and 1978. This timeframe places the story deep in the heart of the Civil Rights Movement. Youngblood places her novel during this time period in order to correlate Mariah’s inner turmoil with the nation’s own upheaval. While Mariah tries to interlace her differing identities, America, too, was working on integrating the differing people in its population. Food acts as a grounding mechanism amidst all the change and turmoil happening around Mariah. Understanding Youngblood’s rhetorical use of food hinges on the ability to accept the fluidity of sexuality. Throughout the novel, Mariah’s sexuality and gender preferences change and move along a continuum. Thus, being able to internalize change and variability are key factors in this novel. The late 60s and 70s are the embodiment of such concepts. Not only were African Americans fighting for equal rights but so were other minorities such as women and members of the LGBTQ community as well. Mariah, by searching for her own identity and sense of belonging, mirrors these minority fights for inclusion and acceptance.

Despite mostly focusing on Mariah’s personal growth, she does become caught up in racial violence as African Americans in her town seek justice for the shooting of Samson,

commonly known as Jew Baby, who was a black boy gunned down by the police. The black community is tired of young men being killed by white police officers; several died the previous summer. As Mariah's friend, Joy, details how the community must come together and march, they "turn around and see the plate-glass window of Masterson's Grocery Store gape open like a mouth with ragged glass teeth" (Youngblood 95). Mariah gets caught up in the raid of the white-owned grocery store. She fills a bag with "a jar of pickles and a handful of Pez candies" (Youngblood 96). It is of importance to note that of all the white-owned businesses in town, the store that the rioters choose to break into is a grocery store.

Historically, those with access to food have access to power. In Marcie Cohen Ferris's 2009 article, "The Edible South," she explains that "the passing of scraps to kitchen 'help,' oft-repeated in white, affluent homes across the South at the time (1800s), reflected a racism so deeply ingrained that it shaped every action, including what people were allowed to eat" (11). After the window to the grocery store is broken, Deadman, Samson's best friend, shouts "'White people own everything! They act like they still own us! First-rate prices for second-rate produce!" (Youngblood 96). Entering the store unmediated, the black community controls how much and what kind of food they can access, which eliminates the white middle man. This taking back of the grocery store affirms Ferris claim that "those who control the food—its quantity, its taste, its access—control everything" (13). Gaining power over the grocery store is symbolic of this black community regaining its autonomy.

Furthermore, Youngblood purposefully places Mariah's riot simultaneous to The Black Arts Movement. As Doris Witt explains in "From Fiction to Foodways: Working at the Intersections of African American Literary and Culinary Studies" The Black Arts Movement arose out of the "younger generation of African American students and activists [who] had

grown disillusioned with the Southern, largely church-based Civil Rights movement” (114). The move away from King’s passivism to activism correlates with the rise of the Black Panther organization. Youngblood finds it important to recognize the shift or change in the fight for equal rights. Mariah does not continue protesting or calling for action; she does not align herself with a larger collective seeking change. Soon after the riot, Mariah goes to live with her father in California, leaving behind her aunts. California acts as a safe haven away from the heated racial tension where “white people and black people and Asians and Mexicans all eat together” (Youngblood 158). Mariah goes on to note that “this wouldn’t be a calm evening in Georgia. Race-mixing would be a cause for riot” (Youngblood 158). Therefore, despite her brief stint of activism, food remains the only way that Mariah can find a sense of belonging. Her aunts give Mariah the tools (foodways) to navigate her multiple identities and fluid sexuality. Having absentee parents and facing racial bigotry, foodways give Mariah that sense of being whole and having a connectedness to a larger past. It gives her the “roots” her parents cannot provide; the “roots” that allow her to transcend the racist atmosphere she must contend with.

Mariah’s sexuality is as fluid as her food preferences. At differing stages in her maturation, Mariah shows interest in both sexes. For instance, her first sexual experience is with another girl, Joy. Mariah remembers Joy teaching her how to kiss:

And we kiss for hours, years go by and our lips and our eyes remain closed, together. We discover other secret feelings in my bedroom with the door closed. I like touching her closed eyes with my lips, pressing my tongue in her belly button, brushing against her soft, fat thighs with my cheeks. I hide crayons and nervous fingers between her legs to see how far they go. (Youngblood 40)

The “closed eyes” and “nervous fingers” liken Mariah’s first sexual encounter to a childlike experience. Furthermore, the use of “crayons” as sexual tools represents both girls’ juvenility.

Though their bodies compel them to continue the relationship, their willingness to accept or label their relationship is nonexistent. Although “years go by,” the girls’ “eyes remain closed” and their feelings “secret.” The love affair ends after Mariah and Joy are caught in the act. Joy’s mother likens the relationship to an “abomination,” before God; however, Mariah’s Aunt Merleen does not disapprove of the girl’s relationship for religious or social reasons; rather, she suggests Mariah wait to start kissing until she is “a little bit older” and fully understands the ramifications of her desires (Youngblood 41-42). Despite remaining friends, Joy’s feelings toward Mariah seemingly disappear leaving Mariah without real understanding of her desires.

This lack of closure coupled with a heteronormative society drives her into the arms of Hispanic baseball player Jesus Miguel Monteverde who seems to Mariah to be “everything beautiful and magic and good” (Youngblood 87). Mariah sneaks to his hotel room after a game. While he showers, she consumes an “orange, a deep burgundy color on the inside. The juice drips down [her] arm and onto the bed staining it like blood, *sangre*. [She] even eat[s] the peel which tastes like flowers, *flores*” (86). A later encounter with her rapist leaves Maria feeling like she wants “to peel [herself] like an orange leaving only mangled pulp” (Youngblood 113). The imagery of the fruit, blood, and pulp parallels Mariah’s first male sexual encounters to that of Jeanette Winterson’s lesbian encounter in *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* (1985). Winterson’s descriptions of fruit and female sexuality are analogous to that of Youngblood’s, where fruit comes to stand in for burgeoning sexuality and desire. Winterson’s metaphorical pilgrimage to understand her sexuality plays off biblical imagery. She writes, “Close to the heart [of the garden] is a sundial and at the heart an orange tree” (Winterson 123). The orange represents Winterson’s forbidden yet delicious desires for another woman. Though she recognizes the danger in tasting the orange, because “to eat of the fruit means to leave the garden because the

fruit speaks of other things, other longings,” Winterson acknowledges that, at least for her, “All true quests end in this garden, where the split fruit pours forth blood and the halved fruit is a full bowl for travelers and pilgrims” (123). The “other longings” are queer appetites which Mariah herself is familiar with. The “blood” discussed in both works is indicative of the virginal nature and the loss of innocence by both women. Where Winterson’s fruit is depicted as appetizing and desirous, though potentially dangerous, Mariah’s depiction of sweet fruit is tainted by “blood” and “pulp” when her sexual inclinations are subverted through rape and a heteronormative social pressure to be straight. Thus Youngblood’s use of fruit likens her to a tradition of queer texts that correlates female sexuality with fruit and nature.

Mariah’s sexual desires remain fluid though she does try to gain control of them. The desire to govern her access to pleasure is evident in the feminizing of her cello, Rosemary:

My head sits on top of Rosemary’s body [...] My legs dangle just beneath her hips. [...] My arms are joined to the wood beside her waist. We are transformed into one thing, inseparable. My left hand plucks a lullaby, fingers pinching the strings until they moan, the other hand slides up and down our body until we are dripping wet. Making love with Rosemary is like making love with myself, delicious and forbidden. (Youngblood 56)

Rosemary is representative of Mariah’s unspoken desires. Playing Rosemary is a sexualized act both “delicious and forbidden.” Like masturbation, Mariah’s sliding hands control her own pleasure and the sound that emanates from Rosemary. The cello gives Mariah dominion over her sexual and aesthetic desires.

Exactly what Mariah’s desires tell us about her sexual identity seems unclear. Mariah has shown interest in both men and women, but labeling Mariah as bisexual is an inaccurate representation of her identity. Mariah illustrates a propensity for embracing both genders. As a

child Mariah spends her summers pretending “[she] is a boy, doing boy things, wearing boy clothes” (Youngblood 38). As an adolescent she wears her father’s “boxer shorts [that] are cool and fit loosely” and his “undershirt is tight and binds [her] breasts” (Youngblood 135). Still, Mariah enjoys embracing her feminine side which she adorns with “a long black jersey dress with a scoop neck, sling-back low-heeled silver sandals, and a heart-shaped silver necklace to match [the] heart-shaped ring” (Youngblood 165). What may seem to be gender confusion is better described by the term genderqueer. Mariah is not trying to figure out which gender to conform to, but rather she freely oscillates and embraces aspects of male and female. Therefore, Mariah is best described as “queering” gender and disrupting those binaries.

Popularized in 1995, two year’s prior to *Soul Kiss*’s publication, “genderqueer” is a term “designating a person who does not subscribe to conventional gender distinctions, but identifies with neither, both, or a combination of male and female genders” (“Genderqueer”). The term genderqueer falls under the “transgender umbrella,” which envelopes anyone “whose existence challenges the idea that gender exists only as two mutually exclusive categories of male and female” (“Transgender Umbrella”). Jennifer Lewis in *Resilience Among Transgender Adults Who Identify as Genderqueer* found that many people who identified as genderqueer “desire a tolerance for all forms of gender and sexual expression, including fluid ones” (2). Genderqueer seeks an identity outside of simply male or female. Often, genderqueer is a mixing of the two genders or an abolishing of gender constructs entirely. It queers gender; it nullifies gender in relation to their identity. Emily Lenning in “Moving Beyond the Binary” sees genderqueer as a “gender orientation” as opposed to a “sexual orientation” (51). For an individual, being genderqueer is about how the person perceives themselves and not about how they see others around them. Having an understanding of gender outside of labels and limitations allows

Youngblood to free Mariah. Mariah is given sovereignty over gender by refusing to subscribe to social constructs of gender binaries: male/female.

Though often used in place of one another, gender and sexuality are two very different concepts. These two terms are not exclusive. Sexuality, or sexual preference, is often defined by the gender roles we find attractive. Sexuality plays off gender as gender plays off sexuality. One does not exist without the other. Youngblood is aware of this. When asked in an interview with Debra Riggin Waugh of *Lambda Literary* about Mariah's sexuality, Youngblood claims:

I'm not saying that Mariah is not a lesbian; I'm not saying that she's not heterosexual. I'm saying that by the end of the book, I wanted her to be hopeful that there was good, big, honest love for her in the world and that there are all kind of possibilities for love. I believe that sexuality is very fluid and on a continuum [...] I want her [Mariah] to have a much bigger view of herself (7)

Youngblood goes on to refer to Mariah using the term "pansexual" (*Lambda* 7). Similar to "genderqueer" "pansexual" encompasses "all kinds of sexuality; not limited or inhibited in sexual choice with regards to gender or practice" ("Pansexual") While similar to genderqueer, pansexual is not a direct reflection upon a person's gender identity. Rather, pansexual describes an individual's sexual preference, which is not defined by desiring one gender over the other. This does not mean pansexual is equivalent to bisexual, because bisexual implicates a compliance with the gender binary and being attracted to male or female. "Pan" derives from Ancient Greek and means "all" or "every;" so a pansexual person could be attracted to anyone, regardless of sex or gender identity ("Pansexual"). This "sexual orientation" "suggests the possibility of attraction to a spectrum of gender identities" (Lenning 48). Mariah's sexuality exists outside of heteronormative society's understanding. Youngblood wants Mariah's

inclinations to be above gay, straight, or bisexual. Simply put, Mariah desires and loves; the object of those desires is as relevant as the act of desiring.

For example, Mariah defines herself in relation to one of her love interests as being “mother and daughter. Man and wife. Bride and groom. Lover and beloved. I am a young boy and an old man” (Youngblood 148). The lack of boundaries with her mother and later her father leads Mariah to experience cross-generational desire. Youngblood wants to explore “really intimate, close physical relationships – particularly between a mother and a daughter [...] It’s not about incest [...] But I think the boundaries blur when parents and children have to break off that very physical, very intimate kind of physicalness and the children [...] go out in the world craving that” (*Lambda* 7). Mariah experiences this difficulty as she travels from place to place looking for love. As a small child, Mariah is allowed to caress her mother’s body, willingly and unbidden. Mariah remembers how she “sometimes [her mother] let [Mariah] touch her breasts. [...] [Mariah] felt so close to [her mother] as if [Mariah’s] skin was hers and we were one brown body” (Youngblood 7). Mariah and her mother merge through this physical contact, which in most other circumstances would be sexualized. Her father, who has posed her “bare-breasted, with a piece of African kente cloth” around her waist, “flirts with [Mariah] as if [she is] someone he barely know” (Youngblood 163). Her father continually paints Mariah nude and kisses her, creating undefined desires between them. Mariah desires her father as a lover and desires that he act like a father towards her. Youngblood says she “wanted to write that kind of tension between desire and appropriate behavior” (*Lambda* 6-7). This crossing of generational lines causes Mariah to identify as “mother and daughter. [...] a young boy and an old man” (Youngblood 148). She displays a tension between labeled identities as Mariah represents each side of these relationships; she becomes fluid and can be either one. Her ability to switch and to mold herself

in a multitude of generational roles correlates with Mariah being genderqueer and pansexual. She does fit into gender, sexual or generational dichotomies; however, she transcends them.

In the same way that Youngblood uses the rhetoric of food to influence Mariah's sense of self, she likewise uses rhetoric to inform Mariah's sexuality. For example, "water" remains a persistent current flowing throughout the novel. "Water" is the last word Mariah's mother gives to her before leaving Mariah with her aunts and "water" is where the novel ends: "My thirst is endless, the well has no bottom" (Youngblood 207). Mariah writes the word "*Water*" and she "lift(s) the edge of the paper to [her] lips and drink(s) it off the page [...] she swallow(s) it in two long syllables until it meets the place that is burning brightly as day" (Youngblood 206). Mariah metaphorically consumes the word water as she would the actual substance. Furthermore, Youngblood had originally titled the novel *The Sweet Taste of Water* (*Lambda* 7). Water is the essence of this novel. It defines Mariah. As a biracial, pansexual, Mariah's existence is as fluid and changing as water itself. Colleen Kattau in "Women, Water and the Reclamation of the Feminine" examines how women have been equated with water across history. She highlights water's life-giving nature, which is coupled with women's child-bearing. Kattau shows how such a comparison "corresponds to linguists analyses of French feminist theorists like H  l  ne Cixous, who uses water metaphors to elucidate gender difference in relation to language" (125). Kattau writes that Cixous "uses water as a feminine element [that] impacts how women may enter into the symbolic order of language" (125). It is unsurprising that Mariah would connect water with the shaping of her identity as she tries to find the words and the language to describe herself.

Furthermore, Claudine Fisher in "Cixous' Concept of 'Brushing' as a Gift" examines how H  l  ne Cixous connects water to desire and identity. For, Cixous the thirst for water "goes

through body and soul” (Fisher 114). In water’s “symbolic meaning, the liquid element implies the maternal side, the source of life” (Fisher 114). Throughout Mariah’s life, she has identified the word “water” with her mother and how such a word gives Mariah the will to live once her mother leaves. It is also interesting to note how the novel ends with “water” which implies drinking as opposed to hunger. Cixous characterizes drinking water as “caring for one’s body as well as an acknowledgment of the other,” while hunger “is the total absorption of the “other” [...] one must eat the other in order to survive” (Fisher 114). Water or fluidity is how Mariah cares for her body and her mind; she does not alienate herself into categories by doing so. Hunger is “equated with relationships of devourer/devoured,” which implies a hierarchy and a dichotomy. Such a relationship is confining and does not allow for multiple identities within “devourer/devoured” (Fisher 114). Mariah is aligned with Cixous concept of water as it “presupposes a freedom on both sides” (Fisher 114). Moreover, Mariah exemplifies a type of freedom that is not based on “sides,” but rather the ability to move, like water, among a variety identities. She shapes herself to her current surroundings and to her current desires. Water indicates a thirst for knowledge and knowing as well as thirst for exploring her own self.

The interplay between the metaphorical consumption of the word “water” and the literal act of drinking links Youngblood to Ferdinand de Saussure’s 1916 posthumously published *Course in General Linguistics*. Saussure argues that the “sign” is an entity in linguistics that is comprised of the signifier, or the sound image, and the signified, or the concept (66-67). For instance, Saussure uses the example of a tree. One hears the word “arbor,” the signifier, and creates a mental picture of a tree, the signified (67). This relationship between the signifier and signified is so intense that one cannot exist without the other. In the beginning of *Soul Kiss*, Mariah has a difficult time understanding the relationship between signifier and signified. Words

seem to exist on their own as coping mechanisms. Every day, Coral sends Mariah to school with “a word written on a small square of pink paper folded twice” (Youngblood 4). Her mother sends her off with “...pretty...sweet...blue...music...dream...” as well as the Spanish equivalents “...*bonita...dulce...sueños...agua...azul...*” (Youngblood 5). Mariah values and treasures these words above all else. She uses them to remember her mother whenever she begins to feel sad or lonely. The words, though important to Mariah, are comforting for their aesthetic properties. They sound nice and link Mariah to their mother, but their meaning is not yet clear to Mariah, and rather than utilizing her mother’s words, she lists them to ease her anxiety.

Furthermore, even when her mother is gone, Mariah conjures these English and Spanish words from memory, employing them as a coping mechanism against the crushing depression she feels while separated. Mariah goes to extremes in order to feel this oneness with her mother via the written word. She eats leaves of paper with her mother’s farewell as if it were a sandwich, stating how she wishes “to eat [her mother’s] words” (Youngblood 1). She even plants words into her aunts’ garden in the hopes of helping the plants and helping herself. She wants the “words to grow in the garden of [her] heart, magic words to bring [her] mama back” (Young 32). Later, when she rummages through her mother’s old suitcase, Mariah mixes the ashes of a burned letter with honey and licks it off a spoon. She imagines “that in the letter [her father] asked for [her] and pledged his love always” (Youngblood 66). For Mariah, literally eating words becomes a symbolic communion between her physical body and the magical potential of language. By consuming words, Mariah believes language has the power to change her fate or intercede upon her life.

In transit to see her father, Mariah stops over in a bus station and is subsequently picked up by an older gentleman who promises to take her to a diner. What begins as a promise of food

ends with Mariah being raped by this man who smells of “Irish Springs Soap” (Youngblood 112). As Mariah is being violated, she looks out the window and notes how “there is nothing blue in the landscape” (Youngblood 112). “Blue” and “*azul*” are both words that Mariah aligns with her mother and the happiness of the two being together. Previously, when under duress at school or when being taunted by others, Mariah “focus[es] on the color blue” and “can sometimes hear music in [her] head” (Youngblood 44). She looks at the sky, a page in a book or even someone else’s dress in the hopes of finding “blue” and using the word as an escape mechanism. The color blue reminds her of the word blue, not the other way around. As she is being raped, Mariah searches for the color blue and cannot find it. She falls back on the most basic word association as she instead begins to recite the alphabet – “A is for Apple...B is for boy...C is for car” (Youngblood 113). She cannot articulate her pain, but can only use words to internalize it. After the man is finished with her, Mariah wants “to peel [herself] like an orange leaving only mangled pulp so no one will ever want to touch [her] again” (Youngblood 113). Instead of eating words as a comfort, Mariah sees herself as the one having been consumed and, like ripe fruit, being damaged in the process.

Despite her rape, Mariah continues to find comfort in words even as she lives with her father. She had hoped that moving to California with Matisse would dissolve her previous pain of losing her mother and provide her with a loving father figure. However, Matisse proves to be as ineffectual as Coral at giving Mariah support and love. Now, Mariah feeds words to the dying tree in Matisse’s living room as a way to conjure the magic that language has. She “misses the poetry of southern words in [her] mouth so [she] plants a few in the ficus tree and waters them tenderly...yonder ways...sweet potato pie... [...] and always [she] plant[s] sweet ...blue ...music ...Mama” (Youngblood 128). Initially, the tree seems to grow stronger, but as Mariah

and her father drift farther apart, the ficus tree also seems to become withered again. While with her father, Mariah is able to articulate her ambition in life, which is to “make words so delicious that people will want to eat them” (Youngblood 126). She puts words “in a dream book [...] where [she] boil[s] them, bake[s] them, fr[ies] them in hot grease and [she] feed[s] on them, trying to understand the life [she is] living with [her] father and without [her] mother” (Youngblood 169). Once more, Mariah tries to cope with her surroundings using words, delicious words, to fill the empty and confusing spaces within her. She treats them as a person would treat food they were preparing to eat. Eventually, this hunger for words becomes a hunger for place as she realizes that she misses her aunts. Most importantly while living with her father, Mariah learns where her penchant for eating words comes from and finding solace in language extends all the way back to being in her mother’s womb. She finds a poem Matisse sent to her mother and Coral used to “lick the ink from [his] letters till her tongue turned blue so that [Mariah] could memorize the poems in [her mother’s] belly” (Youngblood 126). Her mother used to recite this poem, “Un río de promesas,” from a book on Matisse’s bedside table; it is the same poem that appears on the back of Matisse’s paintings. Mariah’s mother fed her these words from birth through her childhood and caused them to haunt Mariah for the rest of her life.

However, by the end of the novel after Mariah has returned to her “roots” in the South, she has come to terms with the role words have played in her life. She understands and can articulate the connection between signifier and signified. The word “blue” no longer exists as a singular word that Mariah feels the need to eat or plant to sustain its existence. Rather, Mariah employs the word “blue.” Recognizing that “blue” acts as both signifier and signified, Mariah lets go of the individual lists of words that she used before to cope and now strings them together creating a poem:

Sweet Blue Music

Whispers

Dream Water

Rain Rusty Tears

For the first time and on the last page of the novel, Mariah manipulates words to create meaning, and the manipulation of said words creates a poem that evokes Youngblood's themes of fluidity and rhetoric. This simple poem shows Mariah's various transitions throughout the novel. The "Sweet Blue Music" is representative of Mariah's African-American past, rooted in the South and soulful jazz tunes. She sings Billie Holiday as a little girl, enjoying the melody, but not fully understanding the sorrows until she is an adult. One book reviewer likens Youngblood's lyrical prose to jazz music, describing it as a "moan-jazzy debut novel" (Beebe 1). "Whispers / Dreams" relate to Mariah hanging onto her past with her whispering mother and Matisse offering her promises that remain unfulfilled. She dreams of finding that perfect symbiosis with her parents and instead finds it with her aunts in Georgia. Overall, "Water" ties together the novel as a representation of how fluidly Mariah moves through the multiple identities in her life. Perhaps the most poignant line is the last one that is "Rain Rusty Tears" as Mariah has been forced to deal with heartache her whole life. She cries for her mother, her father and her aunts. However, by the end of the novel, she is no longer held sway by the words; rather she holds the power over them. Where once, she simply recited and even ate words, Mariah now forms and constructs words into shapes of her own making. She passively took words from her mother to hold until her mother returned for her. Now, no longer dependent upon someone else to give her words, Mariah puts them into the form of a poem. She has abandoned her strings of senseless, singular words that could only pacify her. Mariah creates meaning and therefore creates power once she

exhibits her control of the words. She realizes that words function to convey meaning and realizes her accomplishment. Now, Mariah can be that writer she longs to become.

Like Lillian Smith and Dorothy Allison, Shay Youngblood works to carve out a unique place of her own within southern women's literature. Mariah represents a culmination of sexual openness. Mariah represents the modern woman who does not have to be confined by labels and perceived sexual boundaries. Following her desires is not an issue, as it was for Allison or Smith. She eats words and utilizes language as a means of self-definition as opposed to conforming to racial or sexual binaries. Consumption links sex, food, and rhetoric, and Youngblood exploits these links. In the same way that we intake food and convert it to energy, we likewise internalize words and convert them to meaning, and furthermore, we consume one another converting the act of sex into pleasure. Eventually Mariah moves from using language to cope with life and instead uses language to create life. By the end of the novel, Mariah has the capacity to manipulate the words she grew up loving into poetry but did not have the ability to employ as a child.

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