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Eating (With) You: Exploring Slow Intimacy in the Book of Song of Songs and *Written on The Body* by Jeannette Winterson, Through the Lens of Food

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the link between sex and food imagery to cultivate a sense of slow intimacy in an ancient and contemporary ode to love. The delicious, nutritious, and indulgent nature of food used in both the Hebrew Bible book Song of Songs and Jeannette Winterson's novel, *Written on the Body*, helps us consider the sheer delight of communion between partners. Not only are the bodies of the lovers described in terms of food imagery but also the very act of eating together serves as a way to capture the intimacy and the ecstasy associated with the sexual union. However, it will also be shown how food and eating point to the fleetingness of bodies that live, love, and decay, contemplating the significance of slow intimacy through all of life's stages.

Keywords: Song of Songs, *Written on the Body*, feminist biblical interpretation, intimacy, food imagery

INTRODUCTION

> When she lifted the soup spoon to her lips how I longed to be that innocent piece of stainless steel. I would gladly have traded the blood in my body for half a pint of vegetable stock. Let me be diced carrot, vermicelli, just so that you will take me in your mouth. I envied the French stick. I watched her break and butter each piece, soak it slowly in her bowl, let it float, grow heavy and fat, sink under the deep red weight and then be resurrected to the glorious pleasure of her teeth. (Winterson, 2001: 36)

Food, particularly oysters, chocolate, strawberries, figs, honey, and red wine, has long since been known and celebrated for its aphrodisiac properties. Candlelit dinners and picnics on the beach are all hailed for their romantic quality and for their ability to forge a sense of intimacy as lovers eat together.[1] However, as evident in the succulent quote cited above from Jeannette Winterson's moving novel, *Written on the Body* (2001 [1992]), food imagery in all of its dimensions, including preparing food and eating together, offers rich possibilities to denote desire, intimacy, and sexual union. And in a world long ago, two lovers in a garden of delights that provides a return to the Garden of Eden in the Christian Scriptures[2] praise one another's bodies in the Song of Songs in terms of food imagery when we, for instance, read in Song of Songs 7:7-9:

> 7 You are stately as a palm tree,
> and your breasts are like its clusters.
> 8 I said, "I will climb the palm tree
> and lay hold of its branches."
> O may your breasts be like clusters of the vine,

[1] There is a rich line of inquiry regarding the link between food and relationality and in particular how the act of eating together can forge intimacy, but also how such engagements create boundaries of whom is included and whom not. Cf. e.g., Alice Julier's doctoral work on 'Feeding friends and others: Boundaries of intimacy and distance in sociable meals' (2002) that later would feed into her monograph *Eating Together* (2013).

[2] Song of Songs is one of the 66 books that form part of the Christian Scriptures which consists of two sections – 39 books of the Old Testament or Hebrew Bible that is also shared with Jewish believers – and 27 books of the New Testament that constitute the Sacred Scripture for Christians worldwide.

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and the scent of your breath like apples,
9 and your kisses like the best wine
that goes down smoothly,
gliding over lips and teeth (New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition).

The lover is portrayed as a palm tree, with her breasts being sweet dates. In the next verse, she becomes a vine, and her breasts, luscious grapes. Her breath smells like apples, and kissing is likened to consuming smooth wine that draws a connection between the act of kissing and sexual union with sipping fine wine. In this ancient Ode to Love, one once more finds that the desire for food and the desire for the partner becomes one, as evident in the title of this article, 'Eating (with) You.'

This article will explore the link between sex and food imagery to cultivate a sense of slow intimacy in these ancient and contemporary odes to love. The delicious, nutritious, and indulgent nature of food used in both Song of Songs and Jeannette Winterson's novel, *Written on the Body,* helps us consider the sheer delight of communion between partners. Not only are the lovers' bodies described in terms of food imagery, but the act of eating together serves as a way to capture the intimacy and the ecstasy associated with the sexual union. In particular, the notion of slow food that, as seasoned cooks know, over time and careful tending, allows layer upon layer of flavour to develop and reveals itself over time is a fascinating avenue to explore the theme of slow intimacy. However, there is also a dark side to intimacy evident in the veiled or overt references to violence in both *Written on the Body* and Song of Songs. And finally, it will be shown how food and eating also point to the fleeting nature of bodies that live, love and decay, contemplating the significance of slow intimacy through all life's stages. But before we start this conversation of food and relationality as evident in intimate food encounters, first, some reflection on the conceptual and methodological framework that informs this article that is part of the special volume on Slow Intimacy.

INTIMATE EATING AND INTIMATE READING

In this reflection on the portrayal of food and eating together to facilitate intimate encounters in ancient and contemporary literature, this article brings together two unlikely conversation partners. In the first instance, the biblical book of Song of Songs, which had been penned by some anonymous author(s) more than 2,200 years ago and constitutes a collection of love songs corresponding to love songs elsewhere in the Ancient Near East, notably Egyptian and Sumerian love poetry (James, 2017: 57 Cf. also Exum, 2005: 49-63).

The dating of this biblical book is uncertain. Most scholars, however, place it in the Hellenistic period, even as late as the 2nd century BCE, as evidenced by the numerous Persian and Greek loan words utilised (Landy, 2011: 7-8; Exum, 2005: 66-67). Song of Songs is unique because it is one of the few places in the Hebrew Bible where one hears a woman's voice. The female lover's voice begins and concludes the book and is alternated by her beloved's voice, acknowledging both man and woman's desire (Exum, 2005: 25. Cf. also Walsh, 2000: 34-35 and James, 2017: 82).

The portrayal of food imagery in the context of sexuality and desires is central in the odes to love found in Song of Songs is brought into conversation with a contemporary novel, *Written on the Body* (1993)*,* written by the acclaimed British author Jeanette Winterson whose semi-autobiographical novel, *Orange is Not the Only Fruit* (1985) of a young lesbian woman's coming out story, established Winterson as an important voice in LGBTIQ+ circles. *Written on the Body* is described on its back cover as a 'beguilingly seductive novel' that 'chronicles the consuming affair between the narrator, who is given neither name nor gender, and the beloved, a complex and confused married woman.'

Methodologically, reading biblical and contemporary literature together around a common theme is a novel approach that has gained traction in recent years. For instance, in my monograph *Writing and Reading to Survive* (2020), I cultivate several creative conversations between biblical and contemporary trauma narratives that explore common themes such as reproductive loss, gender-based violence, insidious and intergenerational trauma.[3] Also Rhiannon Graybill invokes a range of contemporary literary works in contemplating how a rape story is told in her recent monograph *Texts after Terror* (2021), arguing that by reading biblical stories of rape 'with and through other

[3] For instance, in one of the chapters in *Writing and Reading to Survive,* I show how the novel *The Light Between the Oceans* (M. L. Stedman, 2012) helps to fill in the gaps regarding the absence of any detailed description of reproductive loss in the Hebrew Bible, giving new significance to Rachel's struggles with infertility that is exemplified in her anguished cry in Gen 30:1, 'Give me children or I'll die!' And in another chapter, bringing together the story of the original handmaids' tales of Rachel, Leah, Bilhah and Zilpah as told in Genesis 29-35 with Margaret Atwood's iconic *The Handmaid's Tale* (1986 [1985]) helps to bring into sharper relief the ongoing effects of systemic violation in terms of gender, race and class in both biblical and contemporary literature that can be described in terms of the category of insidious trauma.

literary works,' helping the reader to contemplate 'alternative ways of narrating sexual violence, rape, consent, harm, desire, and ambivalence.' As she argues, '…Texts crack open when they are made to talk to other texts' (Graybill, 2021: 24-25).

Regarding the conversation on food, desire, and relationality, there is a natural connection between these two divergent narratives that are read together in this article. For instance, I first discovered Jeanette Winterson's beautifully written novel in the work of Fiona Black, who reflects on *Written on the Body* in her exposition of Song of Songs (Black, 2009: 12-13). *Written on the Body* indeed is steeped in the language and the feel of the ancient love poems contained in Song of Songs that stem from more than 2,000 years ago. For instance, one finds biblical imagery in the narrator's reflection: 'I felt like a seed in a pomegranate. Some say that the pomegranate was the real apple of Eve, fruit of the womb, I would eat my way into perdition to taste you' (Winterson, 2001: 91).

Reminiscent of what Anita Mannur describes in her monograph *Intimate Eating* as 'queer curating,' these discourses on intimate eating are brought together in an act of intimate reading. According to Mannur (2022: 7), 'queer curation is embedded…in practices of care and aims to find connections among texts and cultural pasts that might seem discontinuous.' Through careful, slow reading of these two disparate texts, the conversation between Song of Songs and *Written on the Body* reveals new layers of meaning regarding food's ability to facilitate intimate encounters.

Finally, there is a rich body of work regarding the way food and eating correspond to what Lauren Berlant (1998: 282) has described as the 'worldbuilding' aspect of intimacy in which social worlds are 'formed, mediated, and sustained' through cooking and eating together (cf. also Anita Mannur's thought-provoking monograph, *Intimate Eating,* in which she argues that each act of eating together with others or by oneself constitutes a kind of intimacy (2022: 5) as well as her earlier work on *Culinary Fiction* (2009).[4]

As we consider in this article how biblical and contemporary odes to love present discourses of intimacy through food and eating, it is good to keep in mind Berlant's reflection on what story is told regarding intimacy, which she elsewhere describes as a 'cruel optimism' (Berlant, 2011), i.e., the ideal and the promise of happiness that all too often falls short of the reality (Berlant, 1998: 282). In addition, Berlant (1998: 286) warns about the decidedly heteronormative vision of intimacy portrayed in many discourses on intimacy that exclude 'those who don't or can't find their way in that story—the queers, the single, the something else—can become so easily unimaginable, even often to themselves.'

With these conceptual parameters in mind, we now turn to an exploration of food, desire, and sexual imagery as presented to us in *Written on the Body* as well as in Song of Songs, exploring the many different aspects of intimacy that are facilitated through discourses of food and eating.

I WANT TO TASTE YOU THROUGH YOUR COOKING

Written on the Body is teeming with the narrator's fascination with Louise. She enters the narrator's life amidst a long list of failed and rather toxic relationships, narrated in flashbacks juxtaposed with the descriptions of sexual desire as evident in the opening quote. Even though the narrator's relationship with Louise is also fleeting, a mere five months, their union is experienced and remembered vividly as an example of genuine and, one could say, slow intimacy.

For instance, eating an ordinary Greek salad with Louise becomes a wedding feast (Winterson, 2001: 19). And even when they are not together, the act of eating a piece of fruit bread reminds him of her. 'It's the food that's doing it,' he muses as he describes how 'the yeasty smell of raisins and rye' is more arousing than any *Playboy* ever could be (Winterson, 2001: 39).

> 'Eat of me and let me be sweet …. We consume each other and went hungry again' (Winterson, 2001: 20). Throughout their brief time together, the two lovers' insatiable hunger for each other is expressed through food. After a meal of seafood lasagna and a bottle of champagne, acknowledged by the narrator to be the food of love, the couple 'make love so vigorously that the Lady's Occasional was driven across the floor by the turbine of [their] lust'. (Winterson, 2001: 89)

Probably the most vivid description of intimacy in terms of food is in the scene where they cook and eat soup together, cited above. Soup is slow food per excellence and requires cutting, dicing, adding spices, and simmering over low heat, which allows the flavours to develop over a long time and culminate in a comforting, nutritious

[4] Beyond the scope of this article, though offering important avenues for further exploration pertains to Mannur's main focus in *Intimate Eating* (2022) of drawing our attention to the multiplicity of meanings associated with race, class, and gender in terms of discourses that employ food and eating in forging intimate encounters. Cf. also David Goldstein and Amy Tigner's collection of essays in *Culinary Shakespeare* (2016) and Amy Tigner and Alison Carruth's volume, *Literature and Food Studies* (2018).

meal. As evident in the quote at the beginning of this article, *eating with her* is transposed into *eating her* as desire is encapsulated in eating. The narrator longs to become the carrots, the vermicelli, the bread so that he may enter her body and become part of her. He reminisces:

> The potatoes, the celery, the tomatoes, all had been under her hands. When I ate my own soup, I strained to taste her skin. She had been here, there must be something of her left. I would find her in the oil and onions, detect her through the garlic. (Winterson, 2001: 36-37)

As he eats the soup she prepared, he also ingests her, as he knows 'that she spat in the frying pan to determine the readiness of the oil. It's an old trick, every chef does it, or did.' And so, he muses: 'I will taste you if only through your cooking' (Winterson, 2001: 37).

The vivid descriptions of food and intimacy are coupled with acts of being together – of being friends that like to spend time together, 'to pass the day [together] in serious and inconsequential chatter.' As the narrator expresses his desire for slow intimacy, defined as togetherness that knows no time, he ruminates that he 'wouldn't mind washing up beside you, dusting beside you, reading the back half of the essay while you read the front' (Winterson, 2001: 38). Slow intimacy is thus created in the bond between two lovers sharing a meal and sharing one another. This notion of slow intimacy in terms of time spent together is illustrated well in Louise's act of handing half of a pear, and parmesan to the narrator. Beyond this alluring combination, this gesture also signals the passing of time in terms of the observation that the pear came from Louise's own garden from a 220-year-old tree. According to the narrator, these pears 'have seen the world, that is they have stayed still and the world has seen them. At each bite burst war and passion. History was rolled in the pips and the frog-coloured skin' (Winterson, 2001: 37).

In the beautiful songs found in Song of Songs, lovers who are long gone express their love for one another through detailed, itemised descriptions of the other's body, often using agricultural imagery and specific descriptions of food and eating to express their yearning for intimacy, similar to what we have seen in terms of *Written on the Body*. For instance, the male lover sings in Song of Songs 5:1:

> I come to my garden, my sister, my bride;
> I gather my myrrh with my spice;
> I eat my honeycomb with my honey;
> I drink my wine with my milk.
> Eat, friends, drink,
> and be drunk with love.
> (Song 5:1 *NRSVUE*)

And in contrast to *Written on the Body*, in which we only hear the narrator's ruminations regarding his love for Louise, in Song of Songs, one finds how food and eating imagery is also introduced to denote the woman's yearning for intimacy. This reciprocal celebration of love and intimacy is striking in a largely patriarchal world. For instance, the female partner's voice initiates the dialogue in Song 1:2 when she exclaims: 'Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth! / For your love is better than wine.' Also, in Song of Songs 2, it is the young woman who, in a remarkable expression of (sexual) agency, shares that her partner's 'fruit was sweet to my taste' (Song 2:3; cf. 4:10, 11; 5:16; 7:10) (James, 2017: 82).[5] She sings the following ode to her lover:

> 3 As an apple tree among the trees of the wood,
> so is my beloved among young men.
> With great delight I sat in his shadow,
> and his fruit was sweet to my taste.
> 4 He brought me to the banqueting house,
> and his intention toward me was love.
> 5 Sustain me with raisins,
> refresh me with apples,
> for I am faint with love. (Song 2:3-5 *NRSVUE*)

[5] Renita Weems (2004: 2-3) describes the woman of Song of as Songs as 'a woman who takes responsibility for her own happiness.' As she argues: 'She is headstrong, passionate, gutsy, and willing to risk the disapproval of those around her in order to pursue her own happiness' (cf. also McCall, 2008: 419).

Elaine James (2017: 52), who considers the role of agricultural imagery in Song of Songs, argues that 'fruit – and eating – are a kind of agricultural consummation' and hence well suited to symbolise 'sexual consummation.'[6] In both these songs, one could say that food and wine offer 'sustenance and satisfaction' and serve as 'the visible connection between human labor and flourishing.' Significant for our consideration of slow intimacy, one should note that a garden, as also an intimate relationship, requires acts of devotion and care over a long period to yield fruit. As James asks:

> How could a vineyard, or love, flourish? The only way the vines will flourish, the only way that mutual desire will be realized, the poetry suggests, is by attentive long-term cultivation. (James, 2017: 54)

Reminiscent also of the imagery of eating soup in *Written on the Body* that offered a most poignant example of slow intimacy, James (2017: 83) considers the way smell and taste function in Song of Songs 5 cited above: 'First, by smell, and then by taste, the distinction between the garden and the [young man] begin to dissolve,' as 'the young man enters the garden, the garden will also enter the young man.' One finds in this Song how, similar to the soup scene, boundaries between self and other are erased, creating the epitome of intimacy; however, as will be evident later in this article, it is not without its complications.

What is interesting in reading Song of Songs through the lens of *Written on the Body* and vice versa is that food and eating imagery serves the function of creating an almost magical moment in which time and space suspended, a sacred space in which the two lovers come together in the intimate act of eating together. In the counter-world created in both Song of Songs and *Written on the Body*, there is no mention of domesticity or the trappings of patriarchy, including marriage, childbirth, or childrearing.[7] Instead, as Phyllis Trible (1978: 120), in her seminal work on Song of Songs, writes, the garden offers a safe space for the 'lovers to romp and roam in the joys of eroticism,' 'keep[ing] out those who lust, moralize, legislate, or exploit.' And yet, this glorious portrayal of slow intimacy in terms of the luscious food and eating imagery that we have seen thus far should not be romanticised. In the rest of the article, we will explore aspects of this theme that bring quite a bit of reality to the portrayal of lovers eating (with) one another.

THE GRAPES HAVE WITHERED ON THE VINE

> Why is the measure of love loss?.... The grapes have withered on the vine. What should be plump and firm, resisting the touch to give itself in the mouth, is spongy and blistered. Not this year the pleasure of rolling blue grapes between finger and thumb juicing my palm with musk. Even the wasps avoid the thin brown dribble. Even the wasps this year. It was not always so. (Winterson, 2001: 9)

So read the first lines of *Written on the Body*, which already should have given the reader some inclination that even though this novel is about love and intimacy, it is also, perhaps even more so, about loss as the reader, halfway through the novel, is confronted with the harsh truth that Louise has cancer (Winterson, 2001: 100). The narrator, and the reader, are told about this by Louise's soon-to-be ex-husband, Elmer, an oncologist who convinces the narrator that Louise's only hope for survival is to go with him to a clinic in Switzerland for specialised gene therapy (Winterson, 2001: 102). Because of his love for Louise, the narrator acquiesces and leaves her in the hands of her cancer specialist husband.

After having fled London for a cottage in the countryside where he mourns his lost lover, actually twice lost, regarding her impending demise, he rummages through anatomy books that serve as a *lieux de mémoire* of his lost lover's body (Winterson, 2001: 111). For instance, the decay of his lover's body is foreshadowed already in an image early in the book when the narrator expresses how he fed Louise plums the colour of bruises – an image that will return later in the book when he thinks of the effects of leukaemia on her body in terms of leaving bruises the colour of crushed figs (Winterson, 2001: 124).

Once again, food imagery plays a central role in capturing the narrator's memory of her now decaying body, which is all the more touching now that he/one knows this is a body ravaged by a disease that attacks the body from within. So we read in a section called 'The Skin:'

[6] Feminist biblical scholars like Cheryl Exum (2005: 116, 175) and Athalya Brenner (2001) have done important work in considering the gendered nature of the food imagery used to explicate the lovers' burning desire and longing for intimacy.

[7] It is also worth noting that there is never any mention of the woman's role as mother or wife. In a community where women are mostly understood in terms of their relationship with their husbands and children, Song of Songs' focus on love for the purpose of love is unique (Carr, 2000: 140).

> Your skin tastes salty and slightly citrus. When I run my tongue in a long wet line across your breasts I can feel the tiny hair, the puckering of the aureole, the cone of your nipple. Your breasts are beehives pouring honey. (Winterson, 2001: 123)

The beautiful quote that uses food imagery in an ode to Louise's body appears in a section that meditates on the skin, dead cells that 'fall and flake away, fodder to dust mites and bed bugs.' Food imagery thus is not only used to denote the budding of desire or the heights of sexual intimacy but also to capture the decay and the ephemerality of the human body. The deterioration in the living body leads the narrator to muse: 'Odd to think that the piece of you I know best is already dead' (Winterson, 2001: 123).

Food imagery and fruit are well suited to speak about what it means to be alive, including the relentless march toward decay and death. James (2017: 86) writes that 'decay, destruction, and decomposition' are central to the natural world's fruitfulness. In Song of Songs 8:6, one is reminded that 'love is strong like death,' which, according to James (2017: 86), might be read as just such a *memento mori*, the reminder that amid abundance, death is not only present but the ever-present source of regeneration, of life' (cf. also Meredith, 2018: 19).[8]

In his article on food and eating imagery in the Song of Songs, Christopher Meredith (2018: 16) draws on DH Lawrence's poem 'Medlars and Sorb-Apples' to make the point that certain fruits like medlars, or the more well-known persimmons, it only is when the fruit has become overripe, or one could say, has entered the first stages of decay, that it becomes edible. Another example of the decay process evident in our food is in mature steak, which only becomes appetizing after being aged for 28 days or more. The fact that decomposition, decay, and destruction form a natural part of the natural world also draws our attention to the fact that we, ourselves, grow and eat to live, are subjective degeneration and decay, only to eventually die ourselves. As the narrator in *Written on the Body* laments: 'Time that withers you will wither me. We will fall like ripe fruit and roll down the grass together' (Winterson, 2001: 90). No matter how abundant the harvest is, it is also limited and ends when the season passes. And yet the memory lingers, making the absent real.

The culinary feast prepared for us in *Written on the Body* and Song of Songs, which in the case of the narrator's love for Louise, is tied to the short-lived nature of their relationship, reminds us that life is short. Love is fleeting. Time together is all too brief, mere moments. As the narrator charges his lover at the height of their love affair: 'You act as though we will be together forever. You act as though there is infinite pleasure and time without end. How can I know that? My experience has been that time always ends' (Winterson, 2001: 18).

Also, in Song of Songs, even though the book ends midsentence, suspended in time and space, and the lovers are spared the sorrow of aging, deteriorating bodies, as well as certain death, there is a keen awareness that the lovers' time in this garden of delight is limited. And that in the spirit of the book of Ecclesiastes, that all one can do is to eat your bread with joy, drink your wine with a happy heart, and enjoy life with the love of your life (Eccles, 9: 7) before the time comes that the pitcher will break and the chord snaps (Eccles, 12: 6).[9]

PLUMS THE COLOUR OF BRUISES

> We lay on our bed in the rented room and I fed you plums the colour of bruises. Nature is fecund but fickle. One year she leaves you to starve, the next year she kills you with love. That year the branches were torn beneath the weight, this year they sing in the wind. (Winterson, 2001: 17)

There also is a dark side to the rich metaphors regarding food and eating used to portray (slow) intimacy in *Written on the Body* and Song of Songs. Lurking below the sumptuous descriptions of food and eating (with) her, one finds undercurrents of power, control, and violence that characterise both ancient and contemporary sexual relations. Violence is already evident in the reference, 'plums the color of bruises,' that the narrator breaks over his lover's body (Winterson, 2001: 17), as well as in descriptions of 'torn branches' and nature one year 'leav[ing] you to starve,' and the following 'kill[ing] you with love.'

Moreover, there are numerous references to exploring and invading the lover's body, attesting to unequal power relations and the urge to dominate. As the narrator contemplates:

[8] Meredith (2018: 19) cites Cheryl Exum (2005: 3) who writes poignantly that even 'though death is mentioned only once, and that near the poem's end, everything in the poem converges upon and serves to illustrate the affirmation that love is as strong as death. The proof is the poem. Perhaps all literature is a defense against mortality; certainly the Song of Songs is.'

[9] Walsh (2000: 35) argues that 'Ecclesiastes grasped that common wisdom when he equated the end of desire with the very end of life. It is all over when one stops desiring (Eccles, 12: 5), for life is defined by desires.'

> …I will find a map as likely as any treasure hunt. I will explore you and mine you and you will redraw me according to your will. We shall cross one another's boundaries and make ourselves one nation. Scoop me in your hands for I am good soil. (Winterson, 2001: 20)

Food metaphors are also invoked in the quest to colonise fertile land. As noted above, there is at least some evidence of reciprocity with the female partner playing an active role in cultivating intimacy, e.g., in the reference to crossing into each other's boundaries and becoming one country. And yet, the presumably male narrator appears to be the dominant partner throughout the novel. He likens himself to Christopher Columbus entering new territories (Winterson, 2001: 52), or a 'big game hunter' with his lover 'the game' (Winterson, 2001: 10). And elsewhere, the narrator remembers that '[s]he has the scent of her prey on her' (Winterson, 2001: 136), which one could say validates Louise's concern earlier in the novel that she does not merely want to be a trophy, 'another scalp on your pole' (Winterson, 2001: 53).

Also, in the male lover's song in Song of Songs 5 cited above, the 'I' looms large, employing four action-driven verbs 'I enter,' 'I pluck,' 'I eat,' 'I drink' (bāʾtî … ʾārîtî … ʾākaltî … šātîtî). According to James these verbs turn this song into one of 'greedy exploitation, of masculine triumph, expressive of satiety. As James puts it: 'The keynote of the verse is "I" … the ego, the possessive, divisive centre of consciousness, can only be selfish' (James, 2017: 81. Cf. also Landy, 2011: 103).[10]

The portrayal of the female body in Song of Songs and *Written on the Body* may also be viewed as an act of violence. So Fiona Black has been interested in the over-the-top descriptions of the narrator's lover in *Written on the Body. S*imilar to Song of Songs, the body in this novel is itemized in 'a piece-by-piece dissection, a laboratory eroticization of the body for the lover' (Black, 2009: 13). Drawing on a range of metaphors that fuse various parts of his lover's body with parts of the natural world (plants, spices, smells, weapons), 'The beloved's body,' according to Black (2009: 13-14) 'is revered like the dead, hunted like game, consumed. It is dismembered and fetishized.'

For Black (2009: 150), the 'incredible, edible [young] woman' is the target of male exploitation, as the woman/garden, as noted above, is wholly taken up or absorbed into the man (Cf. also James, 2017: 82). In *Written on the Body*, one similarly finds this theme of the female partner/fruit being ingested or absorbed by her male lover when the narrator imagines Louise's body to be an olive tree, with 'pungent and green fruit' that he devours, using language reminiscent of penetration and destruction in terms of the choice of the verb that signals eating: As he declares: 'Our private grove is heavy with fruit. I shall worm you to the stone, the rough swaddle stone' (Winterson, 2001: 137).

Christopher Meredith (2018: 12) rightly warns of the worrying connotations such a line of thinking may hold as the male partner is sustained and flourishes because of the 'edible female body' – her male lover's 'strength, vigour, growth and energy are entirely provided for by the nourishing qualities of the woman's apparently limitless form.' As Meredith describes this almost vampiric relationship between the lovers: 'She is absorbed and translated into male action by virtue of his diet of lovemaking.'

It is further disconcerting to note that a very real context of violence informs both Song of Songs and *Written on the Body*. A direct reference to violence is found in the description of the narrator of *Written on the Body* resorting to physical violence, hitting his former partner who had ransacked his apartment in the presence of Louise (Winterson, 2001: 70, 86). This act of violence is a grim reminder of the dark side of intimacy, which as evident in the very high occurrence of intimate partner violence as well as the shocking statistics of women being killed by their partners.[11]

The propensity of violence that threatens to undo the lovers' bliss also offers a point of connection to Song of Songs, where all is not always well in paradise. One sees, for instance, how the female lover in Song of Songs goes out at night, roaming the city, fraught with danger, in search of her elusive lover (James, 2017: 23). In Song 5:7, the watchmen (sentinels or guards), who are gendered male, and according to James, serve as the epitome of a manifestation of power and social control, found the young woman, and in first person speech, we hear her complaint: 'they beat me; they wounded me; they lifted up my garment' – clear signs of gender-based violence, including rape in the euphemism of lifting up the skirts' (James, 2017: 100).

This notion of the city-as-woman as a vulnerable entity, prone to be invaded and besieged by military forces, has a long tradition in the Hebrew Bible and the Ancient Near East (James, 2017: 104-105). Particularly in the Prophetic books, metaphors of sexual violence and rape are used to capture the invasion, penetration, and destruction of the city during a time of war. This symbolic use of sexual violence also corresponds to the actual

[10] Francis Landy (2011: 103) argues: 'It is a song of greedy exploitation, of masculine triumph, expressive of satiety. This catalogue of satisfactions is the culmination of the process, the consummation of the enclosed garden. … The powerful verbs (…) represent a phallic thrust' (cf. also James, 2017: 81).

[11] The narrator's former lover, Jacqueline, in great anger not only ransacks his/her apartment but also writes in excrement, 'SHIT,' on the bathroom wall (Winterson, 2001: 70).

rape of women (and men), as rape, then as also now, has been instrumentalised as a tactic of war (Lamentations 1; Jeremiah 13).[12]

And yet, in both Song of Songs and *Written on the Body*, one finds how the female partner goes out into public spaces to find love. The surprising confession by Louise in *Written on the Body* that she had pursued the narrator for two years, following him in the park and seeing him in the library, is reminiscent of the female protagonist in Song of Songs, searching throughout the city for her lover. James (2017: 97) writes that in Song of Songs 3, the communal spaces associated with the city also harbour positive connotations concerning the 'gathering and movement of people' which makes it possible to develop social relationships.' In Song 3:2, the woman goes from her bedroom into the city, but in this instance, the cityscape is according to James (2017: 96), 'salve and not wound for loneliness,' which underscores on the one hand female subjectivity and agency, but also the ambiguity associated with searching and finding love, which is and always has been complicated.[13]

REAL AND UNREAL

> '…I couldn't find her. I couldn't even get near finding her. It's as if Louise never existed, like a character in a book. Did I invent her?' 'No, but you tried to,' said Gail. 'She wasn't yours for the making.' (Winterson, 2001: 189)

A final aspect regarding the theme of (slow) intimacy and food imagery concerns whether all these glorious depictions of sexual desire in terms of food that have graced our table are rooted in reality. This question informs *Written on the Body* as the narrator, towards the end of the novel, realizes he made a terrible mistake by leaving Louise before she could leave him by dying. He frantically searches for her, only to discover that her now ex-husband has duped him all along. Long since divorced by Louise, Elmer now had moved on, engaged to be married to another woman. Despite the narrator fervently searching all the places they had been, including cancer wards and even the graveyard, there is no sign of Louise. Absent yet present, the reader is suspended with the narrator in the space where Louise is alive and not alive simultaneously. By the end of the novel, the narrator even wonders whether what he had experienced in terms of Louise has not been a figment of his imagination all along. As he reminisces: 'There are no ripe plums in August. Have I got it wrong, this hesitant chronology? …. I don't know' (Winterson, 2001: 17).

This question of what is real and unreal is likewise evident in the way the narrator's extravagant descriptions of his desire for Louise are juxtaposed with the lack of intimacy he had experienced with his previous partner, Jacqueline – also by using food imagery. He and Jacqueline would also eat spaghetti together, but with none of the passion we saw in the descriptions of eating with Louise.

> We were eating our spaghetti. …. Let the clock go faster. Let me get out of here. At 9 o'clock I told Jacqueline I was exhausted. She reached over and took my hand. I felt nothing. (Winterson, 2001: 41)

The narrator also looks back to his life with Jacqueline and bemoans life in 'the little semi in the suburbs,' in which the appearance of romance has worn off and all that is left is 'the expanding waistline,' 'late-night TV and snoring side by side into the millennium. Till death us do part' (Winterson, 2001: 26).

The narrator's inability to connect with Gail in life after Louise raises the question of whether what the narrator imagined regarding Louise is preventing him from having a meaningful relationship with a flesh-and-blood woman. His friend tells the narrator that '[a]t least [his] relationship with Louise didn't fail. It was the perfect romance' (Winterson, 2001: 187). But was it? The reality is that no real woman can measure up to the glorious Louise, who becomes even more enigmatic and fabulous in her absence (looming death), as evident in the narrator's ode to Louise that elevates her to something beyond what is real:

> Louise, stars in your eyes, my own constellation. I was following you faithfully but I looked down. You took me out beyond the house, over the roofs, way past commonsense and good behaviour. (Winterson, 2001: 187)

[12] Much work has been done showing how the Hebrew Bible prophetic literature, military invasion regular is portrayed in terms of sexual violence as the devastation experienced by the people and their city is expressed in terms of the metaphor of the city as a violated woman (Cf. e.g., O'Connor, 2011: 87; Claassens, 2020, 19-20; Kelle, 2008; Guest, 1999).

[13] Cf. James (2017: 108) who argues that the metaphor of City-as-woman in the Song of Songs not merely harbors connotations of sexual conquest, but also denotes reciprocity and incorporation that is important for the portrayal in Song of Songs of the female protagonist welcoming her lover (113).

This notion of what is real and what is imagined is also important in Song of Songs. In her seminal article, 'Ten Things Every Feminist Should Know,' Cheryl Exum (2000: 27) makes the point that one finds no real women in Song of Songs. Rather one finds a composite image of an imaginary woman, built by edible goods (and also agricultural and military imagery), which tap into what is considered beautiful at the time. Fiona Black (2000: 312) also highlights the unreal, or grotesque, nature of this portrayal of the female lover conjured up by the male speaker, which she likens to a kind of 'Biblical Barbie.' Indeed, this portrayal of the female lover might be no more than a figment of the male imagination. The example of a contemporary photograph, constructed by taking the facial features of several celebrity women, which, respectively, a group of men (and women), found to be most beautiful, comes to mind. The result is a surreal photo of a woman propounding to be beautiful, but which clearly does not exist. [14]

CONCLUSION

> Written on the body is a secret code only visible in certain lights: the accumulations of a lifetime gather there. (Winterson, 2001: 89)

In this article, we have seen how food imagery and, specifically, the act of eating has been used in a contemporary novel as well as an ancient text to denote (slow) intimacy – the act of eating, offering a particularly fitting way to illustrate closeness, of becoming one. The daily bread, the regular meals marking each day, festive food when we celebrate, and comfort food when we mourn; indeed, food is an integral part of the human journey from mother's milk to funeral food. Food also offers a powerful way to speak about (slow) intimacy, given that, similar to food cultivation and preparation, fostering love takes time, requiring daily work. Slow intimacy, as exemplified in slow food, develops over time.

Neither food nor intimacy ought to be taken for granted. Bodies need touch. Intimacy and sex are as necessary to the human body/psyche as water and food. In this article, we have seen how food can just be food. But eating with a particular person, one finds, as evident in the quote above, that a secret code is revealed in a certain light that elevates both food and intimacy written on the body.

However, this article also shows the dark side of slow intimacy in terms of food, showing how decay and death are part of both *Written on the Body* and Song of Songs' portrayal of desire. And the propensity for violence always lingers in the background when we speak of sexual relations, both real and imagined.

Questions of what is real and what is not are essential for how we think about (slow) intimacy in our own context, specifically our relationships. Does the ideal make it impossible to commit to what is real? Are we resigned to living on an 'island with hot and cold running water and regular visits from the milkman,' as the narrator in *Written on the Body*, who dubs himself 'an apostle of ordinariness' describes his old life with Jacqueline? As he contends:

> I lectured my friends on the virtues of the humdrum, praised the gentle bands of my existence and felt that for the first time I had come to know what everyone told me I would know; that passion is for holidays, not homecoming. (Winterson, 2001: 27)

Lauren Berlant (1998: 286) has argued that to critically 'rethink intimacy' as we have done also in this article that read a contemporary novel, *Written on the Body*, together with the biblical ode to love in Song of Songs, is important because as Berlant argues it helps us 'to appraise how we have been and how we live and how we might imagine lives that make more sense than the ones so many are living.'

Perhaps the passionate descriptions of food, eating, and desire central to *Written on the Body* and Song of Songs remind us that desire is an indelible part of human life. As Cary Walsh (2000: 22) so beautifully has reminded us in her book on Song of Songs, desire becomes even more critical if one has been deprived of it for a while. It is the prior experience of pleasure and the very absence of that pleasure that serves as the fuse to ignite desire once more. Thus, one could say that the ideal breaks into the real to infuse, enrich, and spice up our daily grind.

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[14] See also the online article by Megan Blalock (2013), 'Here's What the Perfect Woman Looks Like, According to Both Women and Men,' that compares what men and women respectively consider to be the most beautiful woman. Available at: https://stylecaster.com/beauty/perfect-woman/ (Accessed 28 January 2023).

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