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# TASTING WITH WORDS IN BEN OKRI'S *THE FAMISHED ROAD* AND CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE'S *HALF OF A YELLOW SUN*

VANESSA GUIGNERY

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who emphasized the pivotal role the body plays in perception, opens his seminal study *Phenomenology of Perception* with the following statement: 'In beginning the study of perception, we find in *language* the seemingly clear and straightforward notion of sensation.' However, he immediately adds: 'this is the most confused notion there is,' thereby acknowledging that the relationship between language and perception is problematic.<sup>1</sup> Philosopher Michel Serres, who expressed reservations about Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, proves even more adamant in his rejection of the idea that language can in any way approach sensation.<sup>2</sup> Considering the substitution of experience with language as 'an abuse and a violence',<sup>3</sup> Serres recoils from linguistic tools, which he sees as 'petrify[ing] one's skin', 'empt[y] one's mouth of taste', and 'alienat[ing] us from sensation'.<sup>4</sup> In *The Five Senses*, he describes the mouth as performing two different actions: while speech passes through what he calls 'the first mouth', food and drink are ingested through what he names 'the second mouth'. He adds that speech and language can neither smell nor taste, and that, as a consequence, 'one mouth kills the other': '[speech and language]

<sup>1</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* [1945], trans. Donald A. Landes (London: Routledge, 2012), 3; my emphasis.

<sup>2</sup> Michel Serres with Bruno Latour, *Conversations on Science, Culture, and Time*, trans. Roxanne Lapidus (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), 132.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Steven Connor, 'Michel Serres's *Les Cinq Sens*', in Niran Abbas, ed., *Mapping Michel Serres* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 165.

anæsthetize the [second] mouth, which finds the zestiest conversation tasteless... Neither acidic nor astringent, sentences refrain from awakening our tongue to anything but themselves.<sup>5</sup> Serres thereby argues that words are unable to represent what senses provoke in our bodies and adds that taste, in particular, 'is rarely conveyed well' through language: '[taste] is often expressed in language that provokes mirth – our mouth laughs at it – as though in this place language allowed it no voice. One mouth chases the other, the mouth of discourse excludes the mouth of taste, expels it from discourse.'<sup>6</sup>

It is, however, through the means of language that writers (Serres included) give shape and texture to the senses, and a growing number of literary scholars, including the contributors to this volume, are paying increasing attention to the types of techniques literature deploys to communicate the senses. While drawing on some fundamental insights of Merleau-Ponty concerning embodiment and acknowledging the force of Serres's position in general, I will ask whether literary language is capable of at least approaching the ultimately ineffable experience of sensation, and more specifically that of taste. Taste has largely been neglected in studies of the senses, maybe because of a reluctance towards 'its seemingly primitive nature', which, according to Kelli C. Rudolph in her introduction to *Taste and the Ancient Senses*, has led it to be relegated 'to the bottom of the sensory hierarchy'.<sup>7</sup> And yet, the literary means used by writers to evoke the gustatory sensation deserve attention and, in addition to Serres and Merleau-Ponty, I will rely on Mikhail Bakhtin's theories of the grotesque body to show how literature may convey sensory experiences.

The literary texts I will consider here, Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* (1991) and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006), illuminate the particular perspectives literature offers through its use of metaphor, accumulation, hyperbole, dialogue, and other features to reproduce and comment on the human experience of sensation such as its memorial function, its role in the formation of communities and hierarchies, and its ability to form new communities. I have selected these novels in order to investigate the sense of taste because they foreground the symbolic function of food in West African cultures, conveying to the reader its flavours and transcribing the various reactions it provokes in its consumers. Both of these books oscillate between the description of tasty meals that elicit sensory pleasure in the characters and an insistence on the scarcity or blandness of food in times of war or due to poverty, when taste buds tend to be dulled. While each novel develops a different aesthetics to foreground the tension between an enhanced sense of taste and its blunted counterpart, they both suggest that language, contrary to what Serres argues, may have the capacity to evoke a sensual experience or its absence.

<sup>5</sup> Michel Serres, *The Five Senses. A Philosophy of Mingled Bodies* [1985], trans. Margaret Sankey and Peter Cowley (London: Continuum, 2008), 153.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Kelli C. Rudolph, ed., *Taste and the Ancient Senses* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 1.

These works are also illuminating for the way in which they reveal the effects of colonialism, war, poverty, and forced migration on perception.

*The Famished Road*, which won the Booker Prize in 1991, focuses on a spirit child, a magical figure invented by Ben Okri, which is a transformed incarnation of the *abiku* in Yoruba or the *ogbanje* in Igbo. This well-known figure in West African mythology follows an endless cycle of birth, death, and rebirth to the same mother. In Okri's novel, however, the narrator Azaro decides to remain in the palpable world of the living with his parents (simply named Mum and Dad) and to resist the repeated attempts of his spirit companions to take him back to the world of the dead. The book depicts his constant hovering between the dismal reality of a compound inhabited by famished people struggling with poverty in an unnamed West African country (resembling Nigeria) on the verge of independence, and the spiritual world peopled with fantastic creatures. Published fifteen years later, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*, winner of the Orange Prize for Fiction, abides by realist conventions to follow the trajectory of several characters before and during the Biafran War of 1967–70, whose fortunes and misfortunes can be gauged by the type and amount of food they swallow, and the sense of pleasure or pain that experience generates. While Jenni Ramone has examined *Half of a Yellow Sun* and other Nigerian novels through the lens of the relationship between food and resistance,<sup>8</sup> and several scholars have analysed the trope of hunger, the food metaphors, and the social symbolism of food in *The Famished Road*,<sup>9</sup> they have not specifically focused on the literary representation of the sensory perception of taste in the novels.

This chapter aims to examine the ways in which taste may be given an apprehensible form in language in Okri's and Adichie's novels so as to probe whether, as suggested by Serres, 'the mouth of discourse excludes the mouth of taste', or, on the contrary, the two mouths can feed on each other so that language may be able to communicate the sense of taste (or its absence).<sup>10</sup> I will first compare the two authors' literary strategies as they appear in the opening pages of the novels so as to explore the means each of them deploys to evoke sensual experiences. While *Half of a Yellow Sun* is set in a specific historical context and relies on realistic and concrete details to convey the sense of taste, *The Famished Road* mixes realism and a mythopoeic aesthetics within a poetic and inventive prose that sometimes proposes more abstract and indirect paths to sensory perception. This study will then exam-

<sup>8</sup> Jenni Ramone, 'Transforming Hunger into Power. Food and Resistance in Nigerian Literature', in Lorna Piatti-Farnell and Donna Lee Brien, eds, *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Food* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 184–93.

<sup>9</sup> See Mariaconcetta Costantini, 'Hunger and Food Metaphors in Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*', in Vanessa Guignery, ed., *The Famished Road: Ben Okri's Imaginary Homelands* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013), 92–108; Gerd Bayer, 'The Spirit of Conviviality and the Demons of the Marketplace in Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*', in Guignery, ed., *The Famished Road*, 77–91.

<sup>10</sup> Serres, *The Five Senses*, 153.

ine in more detail the diverse literary techniques employed by Okri and Adichie to communicate a variety of tastes and to evoke sensory pleasure or disgust, such as diction and the use of adjectives, plurals, compound nouns, sonorities, anaphora, metaphors, or tropes of aggrandizement. I will then analyse the variations in sensory reactions to food depending on the social class to which the characters belong and the geographical origin of the protagonists themselves (whether they are West African or British) and of the food and drink they ingest (which can be typically West African or imported from Europe or the United States). I will finally explore the ways in which the representation of taste is affected by the emotions of those who experience it and how the loss of taste in times of war and deprivation is inscribed within the very language of Okri's and Adichie's novels.

### Okri's Poetic and Metaphorical Approach to Taste

Both *The Famished Road* and *Half of a Yellow Sun* oscillate between a relish for a multiplicity of tastes and an absence of gustatory pleasure in times of privation, but they communicate this tension through different literary modalities. Food deprivation is mythically evoked in the liminal paratext of Ben Okri's book, its title, and in the first (brief) paragraph, which ends with the adjective 'hungry': 'In the beginning there was a river. The river became a road and the road branched out to the whole world. And because the road was once a river it was always hungry.'<sup>11</sup> The novel thus opens in a mythopoeic mode through a reference to the common trope of the road in Yoruba mythology, bringing to mind both the Yoruba prayer '[m]ay you never walk when the road waits, famished' and the parable of the hungry and insatiable King of the Road, who devours the people who do not bring him sufficient food and eventually ends up eating himself, a story which is related in *The Famished Road* (298–301).<sup>12</sup> Okri's novel is characterized by an extensive deployment of the lexical field of hunger, which is both literal (the inhabitants of the compound suffer from starvation) and metaphorical (the hunger is also spiritual), and exposes the characters' vulnerability in the face of food deprivation. The adjective 'hungry' is thus repeated seventy-two times and the noun 'hunger' sixty times in the novel. People are 'famished', 'ravenous', and 'starving', drowning in a 'world of famine, famishment, and drought' (373).

However, the second paragraph of *The Famished Road* moves away from the focus on hunger to introduce a mysterious plural narrative voice which joyfully

<sup>11</sup> Ben Okri, *The Famished Road* [1991] (London: Vintage, 2003), 3. References are henceforth given in parentheses to the page numbers of this edition.

<sup>12</sup> On the symbolism of the hungry road, see Vanessa Guignery, *Seeing and Being: Ben Okri's The Famished Road* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2012), 33–46; quotations are from this edition, with page numbers in brackets.

celebrates the spirit world: 'In that land of beginnings spirits mingled with the unborn. We could assume numerous forms. Many of us were birds. We knew no boundaries. There was much feasting, playing and sorrowing. We feasted much because of the beautiful terrors of eternity' (3). The spirit world is significantly marked by activities of gustatory revelry—emphasized by the chiasmus '[t]here was much feasting . . . We feasted much' (3)—and the hybrid beings later indicate that they make their vows of returning to the spiritual realm (after a foray into the land of the living) 'in fields of intense flowers and in the sweet-tasting moonlight of that world' (4). The compound adjective 'sweet-tasting' qualifies what can be seen and simultaneously enhances sight (the moonlight), initiating an unexpected combination of the senses or synaesthesia. This mixture or fusion is furthered by the melting echo in the /t/ sonority, which almost turns the compound adjective into a portmanteau word (sounding like 'sweetasting'), thereby also blurring linguistic boundaries (echoing the spirits' knowing 'no boundaries'). From its very opening, *The Famished Road* thus proposes an effective literary technique and a powerful poetic answer to the challenge of giving an apprehensible form to sensory experiences in a literary text. Such an interplay of senses announces an aesthetics which is essentially poetic and not shackled to a conventional (Western) form of realism. It relies on a phenomenological approach to the world, which favours sensation over rationality (as encouraged by Merleau-Ponty). Okri's literary device may thus be considered as an example of the way a writer can communicate mixed sensations through language without excluding 'the mouth of taste' (as feared by Serres). This poetic and imaginative response founded on a circulation of and communication between senses had already been formulated by Shakespeare in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* through Bottom's cue 'I see a voice',<sup>13</sup> and by Baudelaire in his famous poem 'Correspondences': 'There are perfumes as cool as the flesh of children / Sweet as oboes, green as meadows.'<sup>14</sup> These 'inter-sensory correspondences'<sup>15</sup> are here conveyed through poetic language but can also be communicated through other artistic forms, such as painting, as suggested by Cézanne's claim, taken up by Merleau-Ponty, that 'you should be able to paint the smell of trees.'<sup>16</sup> 'Synaesthetic perception is the rule', Merleau-Ponty insists, arguing that we can 'see sounds' and 'hear colors'.<sup>17</sup> The specific challenge of writers is to find ways of transmitting such complex sensory experiences through the linguistic tools at their disposal, and Okri attempts to do so through a poetic, rather than strictly realistic, approach.

<sup>13</sup> William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* [1600] (London: Penguin, 1967), 5.1.189.

<sup>14</sup> Charles Baudelaire, 'Correspondences', *The Flowers of Evil*, trans. William Aggeler (Fresno, CA: Academy Library Guild, 1954), ll. 9–10.

<sup>15</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 341.

<sup>16</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The World of Perception*, trans. Oliver David (London: Routledge, 2004), 62.

<sup>17</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 238, 243.

*The Famished Road* is also replete with poetic images that suggest a sensory connection between nature and human beings, for instance when Azaro sees ‘the air drinking palm-wine’ (72), or when his father announces, ‘I drank the moon tonight’ (386) and is able to signal ‘how sweet the black rocks of the moon tasted, and how he drank of the golden elixir of the sun’ (466).<sup>18</sup> In his essay ‘Food, Ritual, Death,’ Okri notes how the ‘plants and animals from which we derive our nourishment’ are all contingent on the four elements so that food ‘is a repository of the magic of sunlight, the mystery of water, the omnipresence of air, and the steadfastness of the earth.’<sup>19</sup> Okri’s poetic and metaphorical approach to the senses therefore invites us to acknowledge the range of sensual experience that lies behind the sense of taste and to broaden our modes of perception in order to embrace the variety of sensations that produce that one moment of encounter.

As announced by the spirit child Azaro in the opening pages of *The Famished Road*, one of the reasons why he decided to stop his coming and going between the worlds of the living and of the dead is that he ‘wanted to taste of this world’ (6). Soon after, Azaro is separated from his mother, abducted, and then rescued, and the women who accompany his mother after he is brought home ‘too became reasons for staying on this earth, to sometimes taste the joys of homecoming’ (34). In both cases here, taste is related to knowledge (the verb ‘know’ could replace ‘taste’ in the quotations above) as well as to emotions, and Azaro later notes that spirits sometimes borrow ‘bits of human beings to partake of human reality’ because they ‘want to taste human things, pain, drunkenness, laughter, and sex’ (161). The spirits’ relation to the world of the living thus resonates with Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological approach, according to which the world is known through the organs of perception, which are fundamentally corporeal. Indeed, the spirits need to be embodied in order to perform these expansive encounters, know of the world, and feel human emotions. This also brings to mind Serres’s statement that ‘knowledge cannot come to those who have neither tasted nor smelled.’<sup>20</sup> As noted by William Cohen in his chapter on ‘Embodiment and the Senses’ in Victorian literature, ‘the subject mingles with the world through processes of sensory apprehension, and this is what *The Famished Road* repeatedly emphasizes, including for spirit children.’<sup>21</sup> Throughout the novel, taste is thus presented as a sensory experience rooted in the body, which is stimulated by concrete components such as food or drink but can also metaphorically give access to a variety of human emotions. Okri’s aesthetics is one which mixes the corporeal and the emotional, and intertwines realist, poetic, and metaphorical modes to communicate sensory perceptions.

<sup>18</sup> In *The Five Senses*, Michel Serres opens the second chapter with the indication, ‘[f]or the last two hours this morning I have been tasting the sun in the theatre at Epidaurus’ (85).

<sup>19</sup> Ben Okri, ‘Food, Ritual, Death,’ *Callaloo* 38, no. 5 (Fall 2015), 1034–6 (1034).

<sup>20</sup> Serres, *The Five Senses*, 153.

<sup>21</sup> William A. Cohen, *Embodied: Victorian Literature and the Senses* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 17.



## Adichie's Realistic Route to Taste

By comparison with Okri's hybrid novel, Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* relies more clearly on the tools of realism. In its very first pages, *Half of a Yellow Sun* emphasizes a tension between food and taste deprivation, on the one hand, and a sudden opening of the doors of perception on the other. Indeed, as the young Ugwu is about to be employed as houseboy by the university lecturer Odenigbo, his aunt tells him: 'as long as you work well, you will eat well. You will even eat meat every day', thus suggesting that such rich nourishment is lacking at his family home.<sup>22</sup> After exchanging a few words with the young boy, Odenigbo significantly tells Ugwu: 'Ngwa, go to the kitchen; there should be something you can eat in the fridge' (5). Ugwu gasps as he sees '[o]ranges, bread, beer, soft drinks' and 'a roasted, shimmering chicken', off which he yanks a leg that he eats ravenously 'until he had only the cracked, sucked pieces of bones left in his hand' (6), the chicken and chunk of bread he devours afterwards lying 'balmy in his stomach' (6). In keeping with Merleau-Ponty's suggestion, rephrased by Clive Cazeaux, that 'the body becomes experience-of-a-world' as 'one sense [is] finding a correlation in another', the senses of taste, sight ('shimmering'), and touch ('in his hand') combine to convey the character's relish in consuming such a choice dish, the sonorities in plosives ('**cracked, sucked pieces of bones**') seemingly reproducing the sounds made by Ugwu's eating.<sup>23</sup>

This first experience of luscious food points to essential social differences. Indeed, when thinking of his family, Ugwu pictures them having their modest evening meal of *akpu* (a wet paste made from cassava) and 'watery soup', the children 'struggl[ing] over the strips of dried fish in the soup' (7), while he himself can enjoy 'more bread and chicken, quickly stuffing the food in his mouth' (8). As suggested by the words 'quickly stuffing', on his first day at Odenigbo's, Ugwu cannot fully experience the pleasure of taste as he is not yet used to such a great quantity of flavoursome food.<sup>24</sup> The comparison between the two households points to a significant contrast between boiled and roasted food, mirroring an opposition along the lines of social class and gender, which is also explored in *The Famished Road*.<sup>25</sup> According to Claude Lévi-Strauss, boiled food, cooked within a receptacle, is associated with the intimate and feminine sphere; it is often ascribed to 'endo-cuisine' in that it is 'prepared for domestic use, destined to a small closed group'. As it 'entirely conserves the meat and its juices', it 'connotes economy' and is 'plebeian', while roasted food, cooked from the outside and usually served to guests (in banquets, for instance), is

<sup>22</sup> Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *Half of a Yellow Sun* (London: Harper Perennial, 2007), 3. References are henceforth given in parentheses to the page numbers of this edition.

<sup>23</sup> Clive Cazeaux, *Art, Research, Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 2017), 130.

<sup>24</sup> This may be compared to the attitude of the hungry beggars in *The Famished Road*: 'The beggars fell on the food, rushed it, dismembered the chicken, and ate like famished beasts' (479).

<sup>25</sup> Costantini, 'Hunger and Food Metaphors', 95.



linked to ‘prodigality’ and to a masculine world.<sup>26</sup> In *Half of a Yellow Sun*, the succulent roast chicken significantly originates from the lecturer’s (mostly male) staff club. When moving to Odenigbo’s middle-class circle, Ugwu graduates to more diverse types of food which he will learn to cook and whose varied tastes he will come to distinguish.

Both *The Famished Road* and *Half of a Yellow Sun* thus open with references to food and taste, each writer deploying different literary means to capture sensory experiences through which to connect corporeally and emotionally with the world. While Okri exploits the full poetic and metaphorical potential of language, Adichie sets her novel more firmly within a realistic frame and gives palpable form to the sense of taste by emphasizing the body’s materiality and inscribing food within a specific social context. Both writers thereby suggest from the start of their books that different literary techniques can be available to convey sensory perception, of which more diverse and intricate manifestations will be examined below.

### Taste as a Corporeal, Mnemonic, and Convivial Experience

Nigerian literature often includes detailed descriptions of food and drink, and of the physical and emotional sensations their ingestion provokes. In novels written in a realist mode, food and drink feature as symbols of conviviality and hospitality or, in diasporic contexts, as sensual and nostalgic memories of home or childhood. As noted by Jenni Ramone, ‘[i]n Nigerian literature and culture, ... food and eating is indicative of belonging; it is a conduit for community and collective identity, and a means of structuring interactions.’<sup>27</sup> Both Okri (who moved to London at the age of 19) and Adichie (who left Nigeria for the United States at the same age and now splits her time between Lagos and Washington DC) have commented on their emotional relationship to Nigerian food. Okri was born in the Nigerian town of Minna, which he left at the age of 2, but his early memories of the place are associated with food: ‘Minna is a groundnut town and I remember seeing these piles – pyramids – of groundnuts.’ If this memory is related to the sense of sight (‘I remember seeing’), Okri also recalls the taste of the food he liked as a child in his native country: ‘fried plantain, stewed black-eyed beans, yam potage and omelettes.’<sup>28</sup> Adichie, on the other hand, admits to her dislike of *garri* (a popular staple food made from corn, cassava, or yams) and all varieties of soups from an early age, and her preference for

<sup>26</sup> Claude Lévi-Strauss, ‘The Culinary Triangle’ [1966], in Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik, eds, *Food and Culture: A Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 40–7 (42–3).

<sup>27</sup> Ramone, ‘Transforming Hunger’, 184.

<sup>28</sup> John Hind, ‘Ben Okri: “If You’re Hungry, Books Seem Full of Feasts”’, *The Guardian*, 19 January 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/jan/19/life-on-a-plate-ben-okri-books-seem-full-of-feasts>.

boiled yams dipped in palm oil, *jollof* rice, and warm *okpa*.<sup>29</sup> It might be because of what Yannis Hamilakis, in *Archaeology and the Senses: Human Experience, Memory, and Affect*, calls the ‘mnemonic force of food, the links between eating, bodily senses, and memory’,<sup>30</sup> that Okri and Adichie regularly refer to Nigerian food in their work, a fundamental feature of many novels. One famous example of this ‘mnemonic force of food’ is the madeleine the narrator of Marcel Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time* remembers eating with his mother, which involuntarily brings back memories of his Aunt Léonie. As mentioned by Hamilakis, ‘[l]ong forgotten tastes and smells conjure up in a combined, synaesthetic mode past experiences suddenly and unexpectedly.’<sup>31</sup>

In *The Famished Road* and *Half of a Yellow Sun*, eating Nigerian (or foreign) food is shown to provoke sensations of pleasure or discomfort, which are conveyed to the reader through a variety of literary devices and bespeak contrasted relations with one’s community. First of all, Okri and Adichie deploy literary means to suggest, in the wake of Merleau-Ponty, that ‘we experience our own sensory states not merely as states of *mind*, but as states of our bodies and our bodily behaviors.’<sup>32</sup> Indeed, as established by the Aristotelian model, ‘[n]othing is in the intellect that was not first in the senses.’<sup>33</sup> Serres himself concurs (‘our intellect knows nothing that has not first passed through the senses’), but he also asks: ‘How can you taste a pear, using the chattering tongue rather than the sapient tongue?’<sup>34</sup> How can a reader feel a pear melting in a character’s mouth? I argue that Okri and Adichie attempt to communicate such sensations vicariously by using adjectives that evoke a pleasant taste (‘delicious’, ‘savoury’, ‘tasty’, ‘sweet’), a disagreeable one (‘nauseating’, ‘stale’, ‘awful’, ‘unpalatable’), or the lack of it (‘bland’, ‘tasteless’). In their novels, spicy food is positively connoted as it enhances taste, and ‘bitter herbs’ add a rich flavour to pepper soup, while the bitterness of medicine provokes revulsion. In *The Famished Road*, Mum contorts her face when the herbalist has her drink ‘from a bowl of bitter liquid’ (73)—the alliteration in /b/ seemingly mimicking the aggressive taste—while the ‘infernal bitterness’ of the ‘dongoyaro’ drunk by Azaro to cure his illness makes him shake ‘in disgust’ and no ‘cube of sugar’ can sweeten his mouth (142). These examples show how taste directly affects the body, and the reader may experience that sensation vicariously through language. Merleau-Ponty rightly notes that

<sup>29</sup> She explains that *okpa* is ‘a simple, orange-colored, steamed pie of white beans and palm oil that tastes best cooked in banana leaves’. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, ‘Real Food: Writer’s Childhood Dislike of Garri, a Nigerian Staple’, *The New Yorker*, 27 August 2007, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2007/09/03/real-food>.

<sup>30</sup> Yannis Hamilakis, *Archaeology and the Senses: Human Experience, Memory, and Affect* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 84.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> Taylor Cayman, ‘Foreword’, in Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, xiv.

<sup>33</sup> Elio Franzini, ‘Rendering the Sensory World Semantic’, in Francesca Bacci and David Melcher, eds, *Art and the Senses* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 117.

<sup>34</sup> Serres, *The Five Senses*, 162.

‘the heat that I sense by reading the word “*chaud*” [hot] is not an actual heat. It is merely my body that prepares itself for the heat, and that, so to speak, sketches out its form.’<sup>35</sup> In the same way, when coming across such adjectives as ‘bland’ or ‘spicy’ in *Half of a Yellow Sun*, the reader will not taste the food directly but can ‘prepare’ their body for the difference in taste between ‘the bland food Master brought back from the staff club’ and the stews lifted with ‘the spicy sharpness of *arigbe*’ (16)—the equivalent of basil—which Ugwu cooks for him.

Contrary to what Serres argues, the reader may therefore experience what Merleau-Ponty calls a ‘quasi-sensation’ of taste through the consumption of words.<sup>36</sup> This is the case in *The Famished Road* when Azaro describes the dishes he is presented with after being taken to the house of a police officer whose son recently died: ‘We ate a wonderful dish of stew flavoured with shrimps and meat. The rice had a faint aroma of cinnamon. The fried plantain smelt of wild herbs. The fried chicken tasted of delicious spells’ (23). The senses of smell and taste mix in these juxtaposed sentences that communicate the richness of the meal through the literary means of enumeration and the regular rhythm of the last three sentences, all placing a different dish as subject (‘The rice,’ [t]he fried plantain,’ [t]he fried chicken’) followed by a reference to taste or smell (‘aroma of,’ ‘smelt of,’ ‘tasted of’). However, the reference to the taste of ‘spells’ is unsettling, and when Azaro realizes that the house is inhabited by the ghost of the dead son and the spirits of the people for whose deaths the police officer was responsible, he loses his appetite and stops eating. Even when, ‘crazed with hunger,’ ‘[m]esmerized by hunger,’ he is given a plate filled with ‘generous quantities of pounded yam, choice selections of goat meat, and soup rich in vegetables’ (30), he cannot bring himself to eat because he has seen the ghosts ‘play with the food with their bloodied hands’ (31). The conviviality of sharing food, positively connoted through such words as ‘generous,’ ‘choice,’ and ‘rich,’ followed by plural forms, is thus inverted into deadly images which make the food nauseating to the child and, possibly, to the reader.

The spirits, whom only Azaro can see, therefore complicate the phenomenology of tastes by disrupting the festive scene with their eerie appearances. They significantly sport truncated bodies, thereby maybe suggesting a correlation between corporeal and sensorial deficiencies as it is through the entire body that perception occurs. Thus, one spirit has ‘eight fingers and a single twinkling eye,’ another ‘an amputated foot,’ a third one exists ‘only as a pair of milk-white legs, balanced on the head of a woman’ (30), while the ghost of the dead son ‘had lost both his arms, one side of his face was squashed, and both his eyes had burst’ (31). The view of such maimed bodies disturbs Azaro’s sensory perception, and the spirits who are only partly embodied are intent on preventing the boy from enjoying the taste of worldly dishes.

<sup>35</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 245.

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

Such inversions are not rare in *The Famished Road*, where the most coveted and varied tastes in scenes of what Osmund Anigbo<sup>37</sup> and other anthropologists and critics such as Jenni Ramone call ‘commensality’ (‘a code of symbolic practices associated with food and eating which determines social interactions and community regulations’) can lead to frustration when the pleasure of their appreciation is taken away from guests.<sup>38</sup> After Azaro is rescued from the policeman’s house and reunited with his parents in their single-room home, Dad kills a boar and the women prepare a ritualistic feast to celebrate the boy’s homecoming: ‘The whole compound smelt of aromatic stew, peppers, onions, wild earthy herbs, and frying bushmeat’ and ‘everyone was salivating in anticipation’ (49). Smell is presented throughout the scene as the foreshadowing (or foretaste) of taste. Although Mum and Dad are riddled with debts, they organize this convivial feast which, according to Gerd Bayer, forms ‘a counterweight to moments that are more confrontational’ and thus presents ‘a possible path for conciliation.’<sup>39</sup> This conviviality is expressed through an offering of succulent food to guests, even if some of them are strangers or were once enemies or will become so again after the meal. As noted by Okri in *A Time for New Dreams*, hospitality is indeed ‘something we should be able to extend not just to our friends, but even to our enemies.’<sup>40</sup> In *The Infinite Conversation* (1993), Maurice Blanchot refers to the scene in the *Iliad* when Achilles, having wept with his enemy Priam, will not rest until the old man has eaten: ‘Hospitality consists less in nourishing the guest than in restoring in him a taste for food by recalling him to the level of need, to a life where one can say and stand hearing said: “And now, let us not forget to eat”.’<sup>41</sup> Julia Kristeva also evokes this scene of encounter between host and guest in *Strangers to Ourselves* (1991): ‘The meeting often begins with a food fest: bread, salt and wine. A meal, a nutritive communion. The one confesses he is a famished baby, the other welcomes the greedy child; for an instant, they merge within the hospitality ritual.’<sup>42</sup> As suggested by Kristeva and as shown by the banqueting scenes in *The Famished Road*, this response to hospitality is only temporary (‘for an instant’).

In the homecoming feast in *The Famished Road*, the anticipation of tasty food is conveyed via accumulation and hyperbole. The women bring in ‘a great steaming pot of stew’ and ‘basins of jollof rice, yams, beans, eba, and fried plantains’, while ‘large quantities of ogogoro and palm-wine’, stout, and soft drinks are distributed to people ‘sweating with thirst’. As the ‘aroma of the marvellous cooking’ overpowers

<sup>37</sup> Osmund Anigbo, *Commensality and Human Relationships among the Igbo* (Nsukka: University of Nigeria Press, 1987).

<sup>38</sup> Ramone, ‘Transforming Hunger’, 184.

<sup>39</sup> Bayer, ‘The Spirit of Conviviality’, 78.

<sup>40</sup> Okri, *A Time for New Dreams*, 52.

<sup>41</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation* [1969], trans. Susan Hanson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 95.

<sup>42</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 11.

the room, expectant faces are 'bright with aroused appetites', the guests hoping 'for a feast of abundant cooking' and talking 'to disguise the flood of their salivation' (50–1). Such hyperbolic descriptions peppered with appreciative adjectives emphasize the intensity of expectation, 'the smell of food, sumptuous and throat-tickling' preceding the satisfaction of taste, but when food is eventually served and '[p]lates of rice and bushmeat passed before gluttonous faces', discontent spreads as there is not enough food to satiate the guests: 'The rice was swiftly consumed, the boar disappeared into the capacious stomachs of the ravenous gathering, the stew dried out in the pots' (53). What had been anticipated with relish and captured through a wealth of nouns and adjectives leaves the guests even 'hungrier', angry at 'the betrayed promise of an abundant feast' (54). The scene is emblematic of the persisting tension in *The Famished Road* between relishing the prospect of delicious food and convivial sharing and the nagging persistence of hunger. This tension might reflect the expectations of abundance and convivial sharing after independence and the frustrations when corrupt politicians took charge of the country, letting selfishness and greed prevail.<sup>43</sup>

The sensual appeal of the literary language itself is furthered by Okri's Bakhtinian use of excess as his novel often relies on tropes of aggrandizement to convey sensory experiences. The 'grotesque realism' of Rabelaisian carnivalesque scenes, when the eating- and drinking-inflated body is presented as 'grandiose, exaggerated, immeasurable', is another literary means deployed by Okri to give a palpable form to the sense of taste.<sup>44</sup> Although Mum and Dad earn little money and are often unable to buy enough food, Dad is recurrently noted for his 'mighty' (63), 'wonderful' (116), 'tremendous' (362), 'large' (402, 489), and 'legendary' (418) appetite, and is shown devouring vast quantities of food while Azaro and his mother starve:

Not only did he swallow such death-defying dollops of eba, he ate gargantuan quantities as well. He ate as if his body were some sort of abyss. And he ate fast, as if he were attacking the food, ranging counter-gulps and eating-combinations on the massive portion. He ate so much that Mum became very lean indeed and I lost appetite for food. Dad did all our eating for us. And at the end of every meal he always complained about how the eba was never enough and how he could have done with more stew. He never spoke of the taste of the cooking. (419)

Dad's gluttony indicates a psychological as well as physical hunger and echoes that of the mythical King of the Road, who is never satiated. This voracity is conveyed through the use of plurals, compound nouns, and such adjectives as 'gargantuan' and 'massive', as well as the anaphora of 'he ate' and the alliteration in /d/ ('death-defying dollops') which saturate the passage, thus reflecting Dad's

<sup>43</sup> A similar scene occurs near the end of the novel when Dad organizes another party but the 'small chicken pieces' and 'small quantities of beer' are too little for the crowd, who grumble 'that the quantity was an insult to their saliva' (479).

<sup>44</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1936), 18–19.

greed. Significantly, however, this excessive consumption of food, deprived of Rabelais's positive and joyful celebration, eventually seems to cancel all sense of taste, as suggested by the last sentence and the absence of appreciative adjectives connoting the dishes. As rightly noted by Serres, 'without taste, we risk abnegating our human state and returning to that of animals. . . . Animals wolf down their food, man tastes it.'<sup>45</sup> In scenes where his appetite overpowers sensation, Dad appears indeed to let his bestiality prevail and language itself, now pared down, faithfully conveys this disappearance or negation of taste. The reader may feel disgust when reading such passages but probably not any sense of taste.

In the quotation above, the only indication as to the specific type of food ingested by Dad is the reference to *eba* (which consists of cassava flour combined with hot water) and stew, thus pointing to the staple food eaten by the poor family. If this passage features common food, in Okri's and Adichie's novels a contrast is often suggested between a 'plebeian'—to use Lévi-Strauss's term—type of food (which is nevertheless tasty and nutritious) and more sophisticated dishes, often borrowed from the West, a sign of colonial or neocolonial imprint.

### Taste, Culture, and Class

In *The Five Senses*, Serres notes that taste is 'prone to recurrence and stability; its habits are continuous with a culture.'<sup>46</sup> One of the recurrent dishes referred to in both *The Famished Road* and *Half of a Yellow Sun* is pepper soup, a nutritive dish of Nigerian popular cuisine made of pepper, greens, spices, and meat or fish. According to Okri, '[a]ll meals in Nigerian restaurants should be prefixed with pepper soup. Otherwise it's like setting off on a journey without a suitcase, or on seduction without foreplay. It awakens all the taste buds, pores and senses. You inhale differently and feel differently.'<sup>47</sup> In *The Famished Road*, Mum and the formidable bar owner Madame Koto are depicted as nurturers and providers of deliciously flavoured pepper soups, 'hot and spiced with bitter herbs' (141). Clients ask Madame Koto for her 'famous peppersoup' (122, 126), whose scent is as enticing as its taste: 'The aroma of her rich-scented peppersoup floated in from the backyard' (102). When Azaro is sick, she brings out to him 'a bowl steaming with goat-meat peppersoup,' which he eats ravenously: 'It tasted better than the soup she served her customers. I drank it all down and ate all the meat and fish and my stomach bulged' (143). Azaro is nevertheless suspicious of some of the ingredients she puts in her soup after she tells him there were demons in it and he heard the soup make 'a curious hiss' (120) and saw the bubbles 'a little monstrous and glutinous' (121), thereby combining evocations of sight, sound, and taste (and reminding one of the witches' cauldron in

<sup>45</sup> Serres, *The Five Senses*, 154.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 169.

<sup>47</sup> Hind, 'Ben Okri'.



*Macbeth*). When Madame Koto makes Azaro eat the chicken's head he found in her soup, she transforms his relish into disgust: 'I cracked the chicken's head with my teeth. I broke its beak. I swallowed down its red comb. . . . I sucked out the eyes and chewed them' (101). The sonorous verbs and juxtaposed sentences have replaced adjectives connoting taste and flowing syntax to focus on a mechanical action in an effort to ignore the unpleasant experience. In the paradoxical world of *The Famished Road*, an enjoyable sensory experience is thus often inverted into an unpalatable one, and this shift is reflected in lexical and syntactic changes, as well as in sound effects.

In *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Richard Churchill, a British man who has settled in Nigeria and wishes to fit in by learning Igbo and writing a book about Igbo-Ukwu art, delights in Nigerian pepper soup and the 'delicious burning on his tongue' it provokes (108). During the war, he also enjoys the sherry locally made in Biafra, which provides physical pleasure: 'The pink liquid spread a pleasant warmth through his body' (304). A similar type of bodily sensation is experienced by Olanna when she is 'drinking chilled rice milk, laughing at the delicious cold trickle down her throat, at the stickiness on her lips' (146). The 'delicious burning', 'pleasant warmth', and 'delicious cold trickle' all foreground the body's reactions to the sense of taste. While Richard appreciates local food, his Nigerian houseboy Harrison, who used to work for an Irish priest and an American professor, spurns Nigerian dishes and insists on cooking sophisticated foreign food, not knowing how much Richard 'had disliked the food of his childhood, the sharp-tasting kippers full of bones, the porridge with the appalling thick skin on top like a waterproof lining, the overcooked roast beef with fat around the edges drenched in gravy' (73).<sup>48</sup> The precise description marked by the harsh sonorities of plosives mixes evocations of sight and taste to convey Richard's aversion to such typically British food, thereby subverting what might be called a colonial hierarchy of taste according to which the dishes of the Western world are judged more palatable than local food in the colonies (or former colonies).

Both *The Famished Road* and *Half of a Yellow Sun* also show how taste may vary depending on social class. In Adichie's novel, the fried rice Ugwu makes the first time Olanna visits Odenigbo is 'tasteless' and too full of oil (23), but he slowly learns to use less oil, to shred greens with his hands instead of slicing them so that 'they retained more of their vitamins' (86) and 'nutrients' (96), and to boil the yam with butter (121). When Ugwu returns to his mother in the village, he finds her food 'unpalatable. The vegetables were overcooked, the cornmeal was too lumpy, the soup too watery, and the yam slices coarse from being boiled without a dollop of

<sup>48</sup> Harrison prepares such dishes as 'beet salad' (73), 'finger chops', 'sausage rolls', '[s]tuffed garden eggs' (108), 'German chocolate cake', 'rhubarb crumble' (166), and 'meringue pie' (209); one evening, he prepares 'a complicated meal: a bean and mushroom soup, a pawpaw medley, chicken in a cream sauce speckled with greens, and a lemon tart as pudding' (255).



butter' (119). The young man has become used to more refined food (his sister mocks his British accent and his superior ways by referring to his taste for 'boh-tah', 121), and that is also the reason why he resents Odenigbo's mother's 'strong-smelling soups' (212, 239, 299). This change of taste reflects Ugwu's shift in social status and estranges him from his family.

In *The Famished Road*, local people become the victims of a global capitalism which impacts the food they eat. As noted by Jonathan Highfield, deforestation signals a shift in the economy of the region, robbing 'the local community of sources for potential food'.<sup>49</sup> As Madame Koto's capitalist greed develops and her bar becomes the hangout of corrupt politicians and thugs, American drinks come to replace Nigerian ones: 'a Coca-Cola poster' appears on the wall (250) and she 'graduate[s] from palm-wine to beer' because '[t]here was more money in beer' (438). Dad, who used to drink ogogoro, a local distilled spirit extracted from palm trees, moves to 'a steady consumption of beer' because '[l]ife gets better' (472). Boiled pepper soup is replaced by the roast meat of more diverse animals: 'spit-roasted goat-meat and rams' meat and antelopes' flesh' (516), the sense of accumulation being suggested by the polysyndeton. The division of the population along social lines is marked by their access (or lack of access) to these choice dishes: 'The delicious aroma of goat-meat and antelopes' flesh, of bean-cakes, fried plantains and rich stews made us salivate, made us curse with greater bitterness the poverty and outer darkness to which we seemed for ever consigned' (517). While the first part of the sentence is marked by an abundance of food, the pleasure of smell and a craving for taste, the second part relegates the poor population to their 'bitter' condition, a significant polysemic term which evokes the acrid taste of resentment.<sup>50</sup> Barred from the consumption of sophisticated dishes, the poor population of the compound may find comfort in simpler food when it is prepared with love, while others suffer from ageusia (or loss of taste) when confronted with painful experiences. Such reactions involve both body and mind participating in cognitive and affective processes. When writers communicate the sense of taste in their literary texts, they therefore convey not only a bodily experience which the reader may experience vicariously through language but also an emotional one.

### Taste and Affective Processes

If language cannot directly reproduce the sense of taste, words can prepare the reader's body for its effect (as suggested by Merleau-Ponty) as well as point to the

<sup>49</sup> Jonathan Highfield, *Food and Foodways in African Narratives* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 133.

<sup>50</sup> Okri depicts a similar division in his *stoku* (a combination of story and haiku) 'The Mysterious Anxiety of Them and Us,' where the people seated at a table are enjoying a feast of abundant food while the people standing behind them are watching them eat: 'you were at the table, and you began to eat. They weren't at table, and they didn't eat.' Ben Okri, *Tales of Freedom* (London: Rider, 2010), 120.

affects and emotions to which gustatory sensations are intimately related. The sense of taste may indeed provoke affects which, according to Michel Morel, are 'sudden, brutal responses from our reptilian brain,' 'quasi immediate somatic reaction[s]'; as well as emotions which imply more conscious and 'vigilant procedures'.<sup>51</sup> In an interview, Okri pointed to the 'acute relationship between the taste of food and the state of mind of the person cooking it', a connection which may be perceived in *The Famished Road* when Mum spends 'much love creating for [Azaro] the most ravishing dishes' after he stopped eating for two weeks and nearly died (392).<sup>52</sup> Azaro's return to life after an episode of fasting is marked by the restoration of taste for the succulent dishes his loving mother prepares for him and which he enumerates with gusto, accumulating plural forms: 'delicious soups of goat-meat and stockfish, the peppercorn soup full of new yams, the vegetable dishes, the stews with aromatic peppers and bright-red lobsters' (392). What is perceived in this description is not only the taste ('delicious'), smell ('aromatic'), and sight ('bright-red') of the dishes but also the impalpable maternal tenderness and warmth with which such a feast was prepared. Likewise, when Mum, Dad, and Azaro are united by their shared love, this radiance is conveyed through the flavourful food they eat together despite their lack of means: 'Dad kept plying me with choice bits of crayfish and chicken, while Mum carefully took out the bones from the spiky freshfish and fed me juicy morsels' (81–2). The taste experience or sapidness, suggested by the adjective 'juicy' and furthered by the sound echoes and alliterations ('crayfish and chicken,' 'freshfish and fed'), is part of the emotional bond between the characters. On the other hand, when Mum is venting her anger after a catastrophic party, the food she cooks is 'quite tasteless' (489). Such examples show how emotions can shape sensory reactions, exacerbating or numbing them.

In *Half of a Yellow Sun*, taste is related to sensuality and to one's feelings towards another. For instance, when Odenigbo presses his lips to Olanna's, the young woman notes that '[h]e tasted of marmalade' (26). The reference to this imported product from the former colonizing country, here associated with a sensual gesture between people who love each other, is ironical as Odenigbo is systematically critical of the colonial heritage. The houseboy Ugwu, who cherishes Olanna, also relishes the sensuality of sucking the chicken bones the young woman only lightly chewed: 'He sucked languidly, one bone after another' (83); 'The cold marrow was tart on his tongue' (84); 'He had sucked all the bones, and he imagined that the taste of Olanna's mouth was in his' (84). Ugwu's affection and repressed desire for his mistress can be perceived in the languid movement of his tongue and mouth, the tartness of taste being reflective of the excitement he feels at imagining himself so close to Olanna as to sense the taste of her mouth.

<sup>51</sup> Michel Morel, 'Last Orders: An Anatomy of Emotion,' *Études britanniques contemporaines* 41 (December 2011), 61–72 (61).

<sup>52</sup> Hind, 'Ben Okri'.

In more tense circumstances when emotions prove incapacitating, food can become repulsive, for example when Olanna is having dinner at her parents' and knows that she is being used as sex bait for the finance minister so her father can get a contract: 'She usually liked her avocado without salt, but it was bland now, almost nauseating' (31). The smell, sight, and taste of food become offensive when Ugwu hears about the massacres of Igbos in the north of the country: 'The smell of spices nauseated him, as did the sight of soup, of food' (143). Both affects and emotions thus have an effect on bodily reactions and on the senses, and can transform taste, intensify it, or cancel it altogether. When taste becomes bland or absent, the style of Okri's and Adichie's narration also changes, recording the loss of taste in pared-down language.

### The Loss of Taste

In *The Famished Road* and *Half of a Yellow Sun*, food deprivation in specific circumstances and the simultaneous disappearance of taste have a disruptive effect on body and mind. In some cases, however, starvation can lead to a greater awareness of one's surroundings. Okri thus said in an interview that fasting 'can cleanse the appetite and return one's senses to zero', and he noted that his fifth novel, *Astonishing The Gods*, was written while fasting.<sup>53</sup> In *The Famished Road*, Azaro reconnects with the world of spirits when he stops eating for two weeks after being beaten by his father: a three-headed spirit appears to lure him back to the world of the dead, enticing him with the promise of 'a truly wonderful feast awaiting [his] homecoming' (375). In the meantime, Azaro only feeds on his hunger, on the diet of 'a world of famine, famishment, and drought' (373) and on 'the air of famine': 'I drank in the evils of history. I drank in the food of suffering' (374). Such metaphorical images couched in simple language and syntax point to Azaro's enhanced sensory and cognitive perception of the misery and suffering of the world when fasting, but he is significantly brought back to life by his father's words of love—'His words offered me water and food' (386)—and by 'the smell of superb cooking in the air' (391). The restoration of life through the emotion of love is thus symbolized by the return of one's senses. Most of the time, however, *The Famished Road* emphasizes the pangs of literal and metaphorical hunger which the main population suffers from. Starvation deprives them of the sense of taste, and the uneven distribution of food in the novel is emblematic of the division of the unnamed African country between the greedy capitalist elite and the famished majority, as well as a more global separation along colonial or neocolonial lines between the North and the South.<sup>54</sup>

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Okri still drew attention to this inequality in poems dating from the late 1990s: 'The hungry nations are hungry still. / The starving people dream of food', adding '[a] basic pre-condition of civilisation / Is a world free of hunger.' Okri, *Mental Fight*, 23 (ll. 14–15), 41 (ll. 12–13).

In *Half of a Yellow Sun*, several characters lose their appetite or sense of taste—and along with them their connections with the other—after having experienced, provoked, or heard of painful scenes during the war. Olanna can no longer eat after having witnessed the carnage of Igbo people in the north ('except for the chalky pills, she had been unable to taste anything in so long,' 161); Odenigbo stops eating after hearing of his mother's death (300), and when he starts drinking, it neither 'sharpen[s] his mind' nor 'distill[s] his ideas and his confidence' as it used to before the war, but 'silence[s] him' (382), depriving him of both the mouth of speech and that of taste. Adichie noted in an essay that when she wrote *Half of a Yellow Sun*, she was 'concerned with questions about what it means to be *human*': 'when you go from eating sandwiches to eating lizards, how does this change your relationship, your sense of self, your idea of self-confidence, your relationship with the people you love?'<sup>55</sup> The novel traces the deterioration of living and eating conditions during the war, which causes the characters to sip 'weak tea made from a reused tea bag' (262), eat 'thin, meatless soup' (327) and unpalatable relief food: 'The rice was puffy, nothing like the slender grains in Nsukka, and the cornmeal never emerged smooth after being stirred in hot water, and the powdered milk ended up as stubborn clumps at the bottom of teacups' (283). Not only is the sight disgraceful ('The dried egg yolk, fried in red palm oil, looked soggy and unnervingly bright-coloured on the plate' 267), but the taste is also either bland or unpleasant. Olanna refers to 'the awful plastic taste of the dried egg yolk' (270), while a friend mentions that his people only make *chin-chin* (a crunchy deep-fried snack) with flour: 'every day is *chin-chin*, *chin-chin*, and it is the hard kind with no taste!' (284). The adjectives which used to evoke the luscious smell and taste of various types of food in times of peace have disappeared, and descriptions (as well as social communications) are now stripped to the minimum: 'They ate in silence for a while, moulding their *garri* into balls, dipping in soup, swallowing' (324); 'They ate *garri* and water once a day now instead of twice' (389). Harrison, who used to pride himself on his sophisticated European dishes, is now hoping to catch a bush rat for dinner and his new specialty is 'roasted crickets' (402) until he concedes one day that 'there was nothing to eat' (411). Language itself has thus been deprived of its flesh and sensuous components, thereby mimicking the disappearance of taste. In addition, the inability of characters to share luscious meals in times of war and deprivation leads to the disintegration of all sense of commensality and conviviality.

*The Famished Road* and *Half of a Yellow Sun* cover the whole spectrum, from an exacerbated sense of taste shared by individuals of the same community to its obliteration due to food deprivation or emotional shocks. Both novels show how taste manifests one's engagement with the world and the other through bodily responsiveness, and they communicate sensations through a variety of literary devices in

<sup>55</sup> Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, 'African "Authenticity" and the Biafran Experience', *Transition* 99 (2008), 42–53 (51).

an attempt to belie Serres's statement that 'the mouth of discourse excludes the mouth of taste'.<sup>56</sup> It may be argued that Okri and Adichie do not allow 'the speaking tongue' to kill 'the tasting tongue'<sup>57</sup> because, as recommended by Serres, they start from the sensory experience, from the luscious taste of spicy pepper soup and aromatic stews, 'form[ing] their words through the senses' and 'build[ing] their language through the given'.<sup>58</sup> They do not let language and concepts precede the given, as such a process would not grant any access to the senses: 'We could not know how to inhale or smell the idea of the scent of the concept of rose.... The name of the rose has no fragrance', Serres notes. By starting instead from 'the exploding, fragrant bouquet of shapes and hues', writers can retain the vitality of both senses and language, and give, in their novels, an apprehensible form to senses which the reader may experience as a quasi-sensation.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Serres, *The Five Senses*, 153.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 186.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 192.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 191.