

**Turn Thanks to the Garden!  
Transmitting the Heritage of the Treasures from  
the Vegetable-garden and the Orchard  
in Jamaican Author Lorna Goodison**

"O la fable généreuse, ô table d'abondance".  
(St John Perse, *Éloges*, p. 28)<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract**

The Caribbean era was historically marked by suffering: colonization, the attempt to eradicate autochthonous populations, the enslavement of Africans, followed by the importation of indentured workers from India and Asia, left indelible traces. They also gave way to cultural cross-breeding, perceptible in cooking, which is born in the fields, but mostly in the orchards and vegetable gardens, the means of survival of the family – the higglers selling their extra crops on markets. The mountainous landscape of Jamaica favoured maroon slaves, and resistance for the Tainos who were able to endure, where settlers thought they had decimated them. The economic exile toward the city severely struck the countryside, creating a double culture. However the link of food kept them attached to the mother-earth, cultivated the satisfaction of the senses, and the cohesion of the family, through generations.

Lorna Goodison's work is saturated by the presence of food and its hedonist, sensuous reading can be done through: 1) a cultural way of cooking according to social class, opposing the subalterns to the gentrified class; the stingy, selfish cooks and those with a sense of solidarity; 2) a motherly way of cooking calling for childhood savours and underlining a gendered fracture 3) a ritual cooking for love, celebration and death, and eventually 4) an oral pleasure which identifies the fruit of innocence of the original garden to poetry, the supreme pleasure that can be transmitted by the nourishing mother.

**Keywords:** *hero, anti-hero, debunking, iconic, contemporary culture*

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.sjperse.org/rigolot.pdf>.

### I. A way of cooking according to class

Lorna Goodison originated from a family of landowners who had known happy and affluent days, until her grandmother's lands were taken away from her. The loss of the family Eden was followed by exile to Kingston, in lodgings which were humiliatingly promiscuous – the kitchen and toilets had to be shared, as Lorna narrates in her mother's biography, *From Harvey River, A Memoir of My Mother and Her Island* (2007). The poems gathered in *Guinea Woman* (2000) evoke family figures, depict humble people in rural Jamaica, and celebrate resilience, which is made possible through an appetite for life, the satisfaction of hunger, the exuberant sensuality of food, charged with affect and memory.

Lorna Goodison's Caribbean food is primarily vegetarian, the reflection and the fruit of a tradition which precedes Christopher Columbus's arrival. In the parish of St Elizabeth where her family lived, the Arawaks were the first ones to cultivate cassava, which provides the basic food. The poet asserts that the area had the best vegetable-producers of the island. Legend had it that wrecked ships had yielded the treasures of their holds, distant spices such as saffron and coriander, as well as breads and cakes baked so they would not rot. (130).<sup>2</sup>

#### I.1. The subalterns' cooking: from the earth to the table

The social fracture between the autochthonous people, the legitimate heirs of the fecund earth, and the settlers coming on ships to loot them is reproduced with that between the dominant and the dominated classes, akin to the slave-master relationship: rural women servants would cook for affluent urban masters and mistresses in comfortable well-equipped kitchens<sup>3</sup>: then, back home

<sup>2</sup> "St Elizabeth farmers are some of the most hardworking and industrious people in the world [...] They grow the nicest Irish potatoes and sweet potatoes in Jamaica and the best peas, pumkin, and cassava. The Arawaks were the ones who first cultivated cassava, you know, and there were Arawaks living in St. Elizabeth before Columbus came, » she [my mother] would say" (*From Harvey River, A Memoir of My Mother and Her Island*, 138).

<sup>3</sup> "Down there, River Mummah had shown her [the Don't Care girl] where her golden table was spread with delicious things to eat, delicacies rescued

at night, they would start again for their families, on open fires outdoors. They would use humbler ingredients, and prepare spicy, tasty meals with strong, animal odours, compared to musk and sweat, as evoked in the poem *In City Gardens Grow No Roses as We Know Them*:

the food of slavery, unfit for high tables.  
Food that smelled like sweat and strong seasoning  
with the musk fragrance of coconut oil [...] 54

That rustic quality of a food inherited from slave-cooking went along with the cheap utensils used for cooking, serving or eating:

[...] they ate  
from enamel or tin plates, cheap utensils set aside  
for the exclusive use of yardboys and maids.  
Bent forks dull knives of base metal  
and for the belly-wash, sangaree of poor people,  
a tin can with a soldered on kimbo of a handle. (54)

The masters sometimes magnanimously gave them the leftovers, which they carried away as precious goods; the planted herbs in old paint cans, or even disused chamber-pots, with holes in the enamel, reformed for the circumstance. Robust medicinal herbs, undemanding flowers, indistinctly brought up to the status of roses<sup>4</sup>, as well as herbs, thrived in those improvised miniature gardens. They adorned the yard, the central spaces between houses, shared by their inhabitants, and facilitating conviviality. Mint, planted next to the entrance-door, signaled the passage of angels.

Planted strategically outside the welcoming doors  
to measure the movement of angels. (54)

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from the holds of sunken galleons which had come from faraway lands, laden with spices like saffron and coriander. She had fed her on cured saddles of mutton and haunches of venison and special breads and light cakes which never went stale and never grew soggy underwater." (130)

<sup>4</sup> "So here we speak a litany of the roses that grow  
in the paint-pan chamber-pot gardens of Kingston." (54)

The yard in the poem owned but one bread-tree, decapitated by a flying sheet of corrugated iron flying off from a roof with a hurricane. But the tree seemed determined to survive and provide its nourishing fruit.<sup>5</sup>

The way of feeding separates the privileged class and the subalterns, but taste is not necessarily the attribute of the former. In the poem *Nayga Bikkle* (69-71), a tropical shower leads a master to seek refuge in the humble hut of a domestic, whom he finds busy eating her dinner. He allows himself to have a plate of black food called "nayga bikkle". As she slumbers during digestion, he leaves without a thank you. We have in mind John Berger's (1995) evocation of digestion among European peasants: "Apart from celebration, the peasant, after eating, accepts the sedative aspects of food. Appetite, once satisfied, keeps silent." When the young woman wakes up, there is nothing left of her master's visit but his empty plate. She feels proud that it did not kill him and rejoices about this ephemeral social equality that the sharing of food provides, a language of the senses, which the master, if asked, would have found too shameful to confess.

massa as always complaining about our cooking  
Massa called it 'Coarse Cuisine'. (69)

The young cook feels rich with the plenty offered by nature: those vegetables sublimated by the art of cooking, combining beans in a way now lauded by vegetarians for the admirable complement to produce proteins. Coconut milk unites them like a caress:

joined by the ubiquitous kindness of coconut milk,  
which give to food a texture, like silk upon the tongue. (71)

Congo beans, become *gungoo* in Jamaica, *calaloo*, aki, give the generous flavours of a regular feast:

Such cooking claims the air, its strong seasoning

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<sup>5</sup> "She once gave me a tamarind leaf bath in her washtub when I had measles, and she told me as she bathed my itching skin that 'every sickness in the world have a bush to cure it.'" (229)

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drawing mouth water in anticipation of high feasting. (71)

Far from recrimination, the cook feels to all these goods and inverts the notions of wealth and poverty:

Behold how good and pleasant it is to taste the food  
the bounty born of the plenty of our poverty. (71)<sup>6</sup>

The poem ends with a litany of ingredients and dishes, a celebration of the senses, an oral delight where words take on the pithy odours and invite the reader to enjoy.

A politics of resistance is at the core of this cooking glorification, and transmits the heritage of the island and the people: just as drums

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<sup>6</sup> “Ah the rich, gold-fleshed pumpkin with the secret spring within the belly, pointed okra pods that slide across the tongue.

The generosity of the quick growing calaloo, verdant, season up, and steamed down. // 69

And these are only some of the wonders of nayga bikkle. [...] 71

Nayga Bikkle o, the integration of rice and peas, //  
red peas and rice or the peas of the congo that in the course of their transplantation

were transformed into gungoo. 71 //

The pretty little black and white black-eyed peas.

As a matter of fact, we call all beans – peas.

It’s a generic tribute to the protein filled legume //

that is so much a foundation stone in the architecture of nayga bikkle.

All peas come together with rice joined by the ubiquitous kindness of coconut milk,

which give to food a texture, like silk upon the tongue. //

Ah, the wonders of the salted cod fish, making tasteful intervention

in every poor somebody’s dish, fried lacelike in a fritter,

mated equally with the yellow aril of the ackee.

Such cooking claims the air, its strong seasoning

drawing mouth water in anticipation of high feasting. //

Behold how good and pleasant it is to taste the food

the bountry born of the plenty of our poverty.

The nayga bikkle of this land, season strong

you smell we hand ?

O the wonders of Nayga Bikkle.” 71

in times of slavery, cauldrons and saucepans convey the spirit of a lively, vibrant community.

The Jamaican table owes a lot to creative imagination, even to the craftiness of the oppressed: a baker in Spanish Town used to commercialize a "Nayga Bun", eaten for Easter. Christian masters gave it to their slaves for the religious celebration, but without the cheese, an expense which was deemed superfluous given their status. So the baker hid the cheese inside the bun and marked the pastry so the plantation mistress would not find it attractive and would reserve it for slaves. Hence the name of *Nayga Nun*, now legendary.

No other baker in Jamaica was as deserving of this name, not even 'Nayga Bun', the cunning baker Bennett from Spanish Town who had invented the hot cross bun with the cheese hidden in its belly. Long ago at Easter time, some Christian masters would sometimes let their slaves have a hot cross bun as a treat, but they considered cheese to be too good for them, so Bennett hid the cheese inside the bun and marked those buns specially. Maybe he made them odd-shaped and thick-faced so that the aesthetic sensibilities of the mistress of the house would cause to reject them (and allow the enslaved to have them). Maybe he made the rugged crosses on them with heavier dough. But whatever the case, he and they both came to be known as 'Nayga Bun'. (68-69)

After the days of slavery, the settlers understood the interest of a regenerative food, conceived for the efforts of field work. That is how Goodison's great-grandmother, an English adventurer, took for a second wife a woman with a very dark skin, whom he had singled out on the occasion of a purchase of pigs. He had noticed her agility, her serenity at work, worthy of a bee. He had immediately measured the price of such a tireless, graceful worker in bare feet. The breakfasts she used to cook for him before daybreak were meant to satisfy his stomach and his taste-buds as well: local, eggs and offal, and the legendary coffee and vegetables.

Nana Frances would get up early every morning after only a few hours' sleep, to make big country breakfasts or 'morning dinners' of roasted yams and breadfruit, bammies made from

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grated cassava, fried plantains, fried eggs, stewed liver, kidneys, coffee and chocolate tea. William was a big man who liked his food. (36)

Two generations later, Lorna's father, also a field-worker, received rations that were as plenty and flavoursome. No fewer than two nourishing breakfasts, the second one speedily served so it remained warm: 'Mr. Harvey don't like cold food.' (54)

Each day David Harvey headed into the world fuelled by large mugs of coffee, fried bammies or dumplings with codfish and ackee, cornmeal or hominy porridge, and thick white slabs of harddough bread. By mid-morning a second breakfast was prepared and packed in straw baskets called « curacu, » and sent to him as he worked in the fields. Other men in surrounding villages took the remains of their first breakfast to the fields with them to eat at mid-morning, but in Margaret Harvey's household, second breakfasts were always delivered to David in the fields by a young boy from the village who ran errands for them. He was told to 'run, run quick before the food cold, Mr. Harvey don't like cold food.' (54)

The housewife foresees fortuitous visitors on top of her eight children, so that her cooking utensils are the largest ones in the city. A healthy, generous food, but unrefined, for that would not be compatible with quantity.

David and Margaret's kitchen boasted some of the largest pots in Hanover, and as there were always relatives and friends visiting, the deep-bottomed pots swelled with rice, the smoke-stained pots boiled 'junks' of yams, sweet potatoes, and dozens of green bananas with pieces of salt pork. There were huge cast-iron pots in which slabs of mutton, beef, or pork, fresh from slaughter, were fried or stewed with garlic, onions, peppers, and salt. Midday dinners often lasted until early afternoon and filled the belly till supper, which was served at sundown, always with mugs of hot cocoa or 'chocolate tea' and hard-dough bread and fried fish, or

sardines and big, thick, sweet cornmeal puddings. A place was always set at the table for David as head of the house, and Margaret usually sat with him when he ate. (54)

Raising eight children and feeding a steady stream of visitors did not make for 'dainty living'. 'My children eat good food, plenty good food, as much as they want, no child of mine ever know hungry', Margaret would say. (55)

There was some kind of sophistication in Lizzie's cooking, who used banana-leaves to wrap food in, "tie-leaf" or "blue-drawers", and who served a finger-licking coconut custard cream.

[Lizzie] made "tie-leaf" or "blue-drawers", delicious portions of grated sweet potato, dark sugar, and coconut milk, spiced with nutmeg then wrapped in banana-leaf parcels and steamed. Lizzie cooked a fine mackerel rundown, flaked salted mackerel cooked in spicy, savoury lick-you-finger coconut custard. (202)

More preoccupied with sheer hunger, Lorna's other made it her pride and duty never to allow her progeny to lack food. In spite of their social demotion, they kept traces of their former affluence, even if the cutlery did not match.

[m]y mother's children never knew hungry, and we ate, too, using a variety of cutlery and dishes. [cf poem] Mixed in with everyday knives and forks were always a few heavy ornate silver forks and spoons and some beautiful bone-handled knives; the dishes we ate from did not all match, and mixed in with them were always one or two with the bird-on-a-limb "Pareek" pattern by Johnson Brothers. (217)

This preoccupation with propriety and class, leads young Cleodine's parents to place her as a boarder on the house of a middle-class woman, who will teach her how to be a good housewife: using a



tea-strainer, making jams and marmelades with guava and orange, the precise timing to steam a fish and the need for fiber in food.<sup>7</sup>

The training bore its fruit, for Cleodine, who now has servants, knows the law of the table, how to favour colonial imported foods with English habits for tea, though avoiding industrial food:

None of those oily saltfish and hard food, morning-dinner type breakfasts were ever served in her house, ever. Only fresh brown bread baked the day before, new-laid brown eggs, New Zealand butter, wholewheat or oats porridge, homemade preserves and tea, lots of good black tea brewed in a warmed pot and served with milk and brown sugar. (123)

This sophistication does not entirely please the Harvey family, for whom this betrayal of tradition results in reducing meat to a minor portion. (55-56).<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Cleodine was in charge with preparing Doris for married life at Rose Cottage: 'Every time I try to sit down she say, 'There is nothing worse than a slothful woman ', and she find something else for me to do. 'Make me a cup of tea. The water must be boiling, and you must rinse the teapot in hot water before you put in the tea leaves. Not more than three minutes, the tea must not steep for more than three minutes and then you are to pour it through a strainer, I am not a tea-leaf reader, so don't bring any cup full of the leaves to me.' Stew guava and orange to make jam and marmalade. Learn to steam fish just the way she like it, because she don't eat meat. She read in some book that she have, how people who don't eat red meat live long, so every day all she cook is fresh fish, fresh fish and so-so fresh fish and stew peas without meat. She say that white bread is like poison, telling me how I must eat roughage, 'Doris, roughage !' Every day she telling me how I must eat roughage, so she ordering me to cut up cabbage and eat it like rabbit. But when she order me to iron one of her husband drill suits that I pack my bag and come back home. (120)

<sup>8</sup> Cleodine's attempts to improve the Harvey family cuisine was, however, not a success. 'Look how she take the good piece a beef and stew it down to nothing, then cover it up with crush pitata as if she shame a it, » was the verdict on her shepherd's pie from her brothers. Country bumpkins, bongoes, you will never amount to anything', Cleodine said. (55-56)

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**I.2. Solidarity cooking**

Stinginess is not allowed, the watershed dividees generous cooks and others. Goodison remembers an avaricious grandmother who used to prefer seeing her plenty of fruit – “sweetsops, soursops, naseberries, starapples, oranges, and mangoes” (132) – rot under the trees rather than allow others to pick them up. Or she would hang them from the ceiling in baskets, where they would get over-ripe, and be corrupted by bees or gnawed at by mice or bats.<sup>9</sup>

As for Fanny’s husband, the baker, who had benefited from the recipe of the Easter Bun inherited from a slave, he refused to share the secrets of his pastries, learned in Panama, to his family who had so dutifully helped him:

He insisted on being alone when he prepared the dough for the buttery gratto and French bread, the meltingly delicious cashew and molasses biscuits, and the fancy pastries. (68)

He carries into the tomb his inimitable know-how that they owed their sustenance to:

[h]e committed to his knotted bowels all his knowledge of the efficacy of eggwhites, the cloudlike consistency of thrice-sifted flour, appropriate measures of leaven, and just how high dough should be allowed to rise before you punched it in the face for

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<sup>9</sup> “My father’s grandmother Dorcas, a tall, dark, brooding, silent woman on whose land flourished a variety of fruit trees, she forbade anyone to ever pick so much as one lime without permission. The sweetsops, soursops, naseberries, starapples, oranges, and mangoes sometimes rotted under the trees because she did not feel like giving her permission for anyone to pick them. Sometimes she would gather baskets of fruit and hang them from the ceiling in the kitchen, where they would over-ripen, dripping their sour nectar down. Bees would buzz around these laden baskets of spite-fruit, mice would nibble on them, and fruit bats would slap their leathery wings against them, but she would not give them away if she didn’t feel like it. My mother, who loved nothing more than feeding people, was stunned and appalled by Dorcas’s miserliness.” (132)

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being too puffed up.' (69) Now his widow, resourceless, must close their shop and move off.<sup>10</sup>

Those attitudes are at jar with the solidarity and generosity which prevail in the countryside. The poem *From the Book of Local Miracles, Largely Unrecorded* (72-74) portrays a friend of the artist's mother, who has nothing left to eat, but, nevertheless, lights a woodfire on which she places a pot full of water, and pretends she is cooking a meal. When the water boils, there comes to her home a procession of neighbours laden with coconuts, goat-meat, the miracle happened thanks to those guardian angels (72-73).

The same solidarity prevails when rural people migrate to the city, where they lose the benefit of their vegetable-garden or their orchard. Their family ten sends them baskets of goods, so many cornucopia, a real blessing:

Country baskets filled with ground provisions, yams, potatoes, vegetables, fruits, corned beef and pork, bottles of coconut oil, baked goods, peas, cassava, plantains. These baskets were the Jamaican equivalent of the manna fed to the Israelites by Yahweh as they wandered in the wilderness. (184)

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<sup>10</sup> *le secret du pâtissier emporté dans la tombe* = the bunch of assorted vegetables – the legumes – that could now be bought in the local market for the Saturday soup were called *leggings* (68): "In his [Aunt Fanny's husband] had learned [in Panama] the *secret* art of baking, for he refused to share the recipes with anyone, including his wife. He insisted on being alone when he prepared the dough for the buttery gratto and French bread, the meltingly delicious cashew and molasses biscuits, and the fancy pastries. All Aunt Fanny and their children were required to do was to place the privately prepared dough in the oven. The man died with his recipes unrevealed; and Hanover people claim that since his death there has not been baked a gratto as delicious as his. (68) [when he died] he committed to his knotted bowels all his knowledge of the efficacy of eggwhites, the cloudlike consistency of thrice-sifted flour, appropriate measures of leaven, and just how high dough should be allowed to rise before you punched it in the face for being too puffed up." (69)

Those gifts had a peculiar meaning, for the beneficiaries used to associate the fruit with the tree that had produced it, where they might have buried their umbilical cord: 'See this soursop here, it come from a tree that my grandfather plant and my navel string bury at the root.' (185) Therefore, they meant a double miracle, for they came thanks to the benevolent connivance of train conductors who took care of their being conveyed safely.

The conductresses knew how gratefully, eagerly, the people of Kingston greeted the arrival of the country baskets filled with fresh, life-sustaining things to eat. (185)<sup>11</sup>

Lorna's family itself benefited from them, and her mother knew how to be generous to the women whose lodgings she shared, and who had been so mean to her. One of them had a son who adored the motherly woman<sup>12</sup>, who compensated for his own mother's indifference. Same thing with visitors, who left with enough to feed on their journey: "a large slice of cornmeal pudding wrapped in a grease-proof bread bag to sustain him on his journey" (263).<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> "...the generosity of some of your relatives, who as soon as they heard that you were now living hard life in Kingston, began to send you regular food baskets. Country baskets filled with ground provisions, yams, potatoes, vegetables, fruits, corned beef and pork, bottles of coconut oil, baked goods, peas, cassava, plantains. These baskets were the Jamaican equivalent of the manna fed to the Israelites by Yahweh as they wandered in the wilderness. (184) 'See this soursop here, it come from a tree that my grandfather plant and my navel string bury at the root.' These food baskets were brought to Kingston on the backs of market trucks, or labeled and loaded onto the train and watched over by kind, considerate conductresses who knew they were doing a form of angel-work by delivering them. The conductresses knew how gratefully, eagerly, the people of Kingston greeted the arrival of the country baskets filled with fresh, life-sustaining things to eat." (185)

<sup>12</sup> *mother bird* - She sometimes fed her children like mother birds do, passing food from her mouth to theirs. (187)

<sup>13</sup> *food for the road*: "my mother wishing him traveling mercies and giving him a large slice of cornmeal pudding wrapped in a grease-proof bread bag to sustain him on his journey. He climbed in and departed for the wharf, driving past the ice cream parlour operated by the beautiful Chinese woman

## II. A gendered way of cooking

### II.1. The miracle of a mother's cooking

In spite of her meager means, Lorna's mother performs miracles – that is also what her compatriot, poet Olive Senior, asserts: the Caribbean mother can feed twenty people on a tiny stew:

[...] a stew made of fallen-from-the-head cabbage leaves  
and a carrot and a cho-cho and a palm full of meat. *For  
My Mother (May I Inherit Half Her Strength)*<sup>14</sup>

Childhood memories are lyrically aroused to the rhythm of a nursery rhyme with very short lines, where sounds evoke the happiness of eating, the taste counts less than the way the fruit or sweet stick to the palate or the teeth. The delightful, carefree world of childhood is transcribed in metaphors, images, texture, appearance, vernacular words, a litany of sounds that form a song, reminding one of St John Perse or Derek Walcott's lyrical lines, Walcott enjoyed the bilingualism of a Saint-Lucian. Local names evoke the sweetness that fills the mouth:

mackafat, pomander, jimbeline, coolie plums, coat plums,  
taheti, naseberry, starapple, tamarind, guava cheese, paradise  
plum, Bustamente backbone, [tie teeth], wangle (*Songs of the  
Fruits and Sweets of Childhood*, 58-62)

Outside the gates of the school, street-vendors used to tempt children to the temptation of home-made pastries and other goodies, sometimes hardly fresh of hygienic. They would chase boys with debts right into the school and would shame them in front of the class. Besides those wicked poisoners, there would stand a magician,

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named Cynthia, past Miss Dinah's grocery, and the barbershop [...] Phantom boarded an Italian banana boat called the *Ascania* [...]" (243)

<sup>14</sup> She could work miracles, she would make a garment from a square in a span that defied time. Or feed twenty people on a stew made of fallen-from-the-head cabbage leaves and a carrot and a cho-cho and a palm full of meat.

who owned a cart and made multi-coloured snowballs with ice and syrups. Everything was emotion, fable, tale (*Outside the Gates*).<sup>15</sup>

Those temptations made up for governmental food, distributed to children, so their stomachs would be full at lunch-time, be it with an unappetizing mixture called "Bullo slush":

Bullo slush came by handcart each day, steaming and sloshing in a big square galvanized tin. (235) It was cooked in a kitchen in the city and dispersed to primary schools throughout Kingston to provide a hot nutritional meal for the city's schoolchildren. Bullo slush was a dark brown lumpy stew in which portions of gristly mystery meat moved like the fins of a shark. Many children claimed to get running belly from eating it. Bullo slush gave off a faintly medicinal smell, the smell given off by the free cheese and milk powder distributed at school. There was rumour that iodine was added to all « government food » so that in case the schoolchildren had any cuts, this food would heal them. (236)

To avoid this ill-famed mixture, the Harvey children's schoolmates would invite themselves at the family-table, so that their mother felt as though she was running a guest-house.

Many of our small friends who came to eat at our house did so to avoid eating Bullo slush, the free school lunch provided by the government for Jamaican schoolchildren. My mother began running a guest house of sorts after all. (236)

With the help of her servant, Miss Mirry, she would personally ensure the seductive power of her menu. She made a point of

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<sup>15</sup> They sold fruits and sweets from wide baskets  
[...] and baked goods [...]  
The fruits were colored like edible jewels ;  
the sweets did not originate in anonymous factories,  
each sweet had its own shape  
stamped with its maker's hand,  
each sweet was an original then. (62)

wrapping the meat with a myriad spices and various vegetables would cook in huge pans, all appreciated by the Rastafarian friends of the children (237).<sup>16</sup>

## II.2. Manly cooking

If cooking was more women's business, Lorna's father occasionally liked to flatter his children's palate.<sup>17</sup> Occasionally, he

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<sup>16</sup> "[Mother] always cooked the midday meal herself. Miss Mirry acted as her assistant, cleaning the seasoning and picking grains from the rice. My mother believed in the culinary power of garlic, always scraped with the edge of a knife; and many white circles of sliced onions, pimento kernels, lengths of escallions were pressed hard to release pungent juices, and were added to with sprigs of fragrant thyme, sliced country pepper, black pepper, and salt. All these were rubbed into the meat with clean, bare hands. And the meat – beef or pork, mutton or chicken – was seasoned then browned in huge iron Dutch pots, then covered with just enough water and left to stew into succulence. To the bubbling gravy she added Marcus's favorite sauce, Pickapepper Sauce, whose bottles had on the label a rendering of a gaudy plumed parrot picking a red pepper. Then tomatoes and thyme were added to the bubbling brown gravy. She cooked deep pots of rice, steamed verdant leafy bundles of iron-rich calaloo, grated carrots, sliced tomatoes, because she believed in the importance of eating vegetables and she fed all the children who came, including a few of my brother's school-friends who had become Rastafarians." (237)

<sup>17</sup> *This Is My Father's Country*  
[...] the land his mother used to own,  
well-fruited land, with the bearing Julie mango  
tree, his navel string coiling at the roots. 95

St Elizabeth, you who changed  
the bread of the poor into roses  
and then converted the roses  
into the bread of the poor again,

grant us consoling strength  
to bear our wounds and losses  
and transform our sufferings  
like the bread and the roses.' (96)

In these parts farmers have been known  
to set straw straps to catch the morning dew.  
In that way they would moisten the roots of escallion

would draw out of their beds the slumbering family to offer them the surprise of a night treat: ice-cream.<sup>18</sup> He also would wake them up on Christmas morning to gratify them with his legendary egg-nog, meant to celebrate and enjoy, without the necessity to feed or of domestic economy (199).<sup>19</sup>

The way of cooking may appear gendered. With Olive Senior, it may be offensive, in bad taste, rustic, uncouth, for a girl to like strong pepper. With Lorna Goodison, it is a lack of femininity, and even a trace of virility. The red-haired girl who finds that the widely famous curry prepared by the Indian Gangalee too mild, while it is known as the most spicy and tasty in the country, leaves Margaret flabbergasted, for she has observed the man at work and names his *tambrik*, or his *curriana*, as legends, which have no equal on other islands:

curry that he had blended himself using turmeric, called *tambrik* by the African Jamaicans, *coriander* or *curriana* as the Jamaicans called it, cumin, sage, and his own secret special ingredients that the Jamaicans did not know, so they had no name for them. He had cut up onions, garlic, and what looked like dozens of hot country peppers and added this to the meat which had been left overnight to soak up in the seasonings.<sup>20</sup>

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thyme, onion, potato, peas and sweet cassava. (97)

<sup>18</sup> "Sometimes he [Marcus] comes in and wakes up her and the children to feed them ice cream. Royal Cremo's Neapolitan Brick ice cream, vanilla-cherry, and chocolate-striped ice cream. These sleepy late-night celebrations took place unexpectedly." (197)

<sup>19</sup> "On Christmas day all the children were awakened early to toast the joyful season with a cup of Marcus's famous eggnog; and every year on the third of April, which was Doris's birthday, Marcus put on a suit" [...] (197)

<sup>20</sup> "When the red-head girl sat down to eat a huge plate heaped with curried goat, Margaret had stared in disbelief when the girl pronounced that the goat was not hot enough. The tender goat mutton had been seasoned and cooked by an East Indian man by the name of Gangalee; from the neighbouring parish of Westmoreland. (99) The night before, Margaret had watched him rub the curry powder into the piece of fresh goat meat, curry that he had blended himself using turmeric, called *tambrik* by the African Jamaicans, *coriander* or *curriana* as the Jamaicans called it, cumin, sage, and his own secret special ingredients that the Jamaicans did not know, so they



She becomes horrified when she spots the young woman eating the pepper known as the hottest in the world, nothing to do with the “bird pepper” or the *jalapeno* – without needing the slightest drop of water or without shedding a tear. At her sight, a man had exclaimed, laughing: “She is a better man than me!” (101)<sup>21</sup>

### III. Childhood flavours

These scents end up incorporating into the cook’s body odours, which delights her grand-daughter, inebriated by cinnamon and escallion.

Doris clung to her grandmother’s waist, pressing her cheek to the woman’s bony back, inhaling her strong body scent of cinnamon and escallions. (205)

The moustache formed on greedy lips by chocolate tea, cassava bammies, compared to the host of the Eucharist after the baptism of bathing in the river, « a pure country communion » (213), bellyfuls of mangoes of all kinds, picked up wild or in orchards, and tasted with a pinch of salt, all these compose the primordial paradise of a blessed

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had no name for them. He had cut up onions, garlic, and what looked like dozens of hot country peppers and added this to the meat which had been left overnight to soak up in the seasonings. The next day it was browned in iron pots of fragrant coconut oil and cooked down in big kerosene tins. You could smell the strength of curry for miles. Gangalee was known to cook the best and hottest curry in the western end of Jamaica. Maybe it was the selfsame Gangalee who was immortalized in what became a popular Jamaican folk song.” (100)

<sup>21</sup> “Margaret watched in horror as the girl ate the red-hot flesh of one of the hottest peppers known to man, without calling for water to cool her tongue. Not a tear came to her eyes as she chewed the vicious hot capsicum. ‘Scotch bonnet pepper, you know, the girl eat one whole Scotch bonnet pepper!’ Margaret had remarked to David afterwards. David had laughed and said, ‘She is a better man than me.’ For of all peppers, there are few as hot as the pepper shaped like a Scotsman’s tam-i’-shanter ; not the small deceptive little bird pepper, not the hot finger pepper or jalapeno ; maybe not even the wicked one called the habanero. It was this Scotch-bonnet eater that was causing Howard to go into Lucea that Sunday.” (101)

childhood with country cousins in the territory of the Harvey family.<sup>22</sup> The bread-tree fruit should be added to those, roasted with codfish on an open fire and eaten casually, sitting on the family tombs.

After noon we would return home for lunch, where we roasted breadfruits and big pieces of salted codfish over a wood fire. Then we would mix big mugs of « lemonade, » made with sour Seville oranges, sugar, and water. We ate al fresco, sitting without shoes on the tombstones of the dead Harveys. (215)

### III.1. Cooking for love

This carefree happiness of childhood knows neither want nor insecurity and seems meant to fill the elementary needs of feeding and relishing in the illusion of a land of plenty: the woman in love tries to reproduce it when she imagines herself cooking for the loved one. She states the sensuousness of Caribbean vegetables (pumpkin, yam, sweet potato, carrot) and the marrow-bone she throws into the soup. She envisions herself carrying the soup-dish like a domestic incense, smelling of spices and herbs, and imagines how carefully she would avoid puncturing the skin of the awesome “hot Scotch

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<sup>22</sup> “For breakfast Aunt Ann had given us big mugs of chocolate tea with coconut milk. The chocolate was made from the cacao trees in Grandfather David’s cacao walk. Rich, dark-brown like sweet mud, the chocolate fat floated on top, painting an oily moustache on your upper lip every time you put the mug to your mouth. There were hot toasted cassava bammies spread with yellow salt butter – cocoa like rich wine, and bammy like fresh host, a pure country communion after my river baptism. After breakfast, I joined the band of the village children roaming all over the countryside, stoning fruit trees and eating fruit in various stages of fitness. Green common mangoes that you sliced and ate with salt (you always walked with some salt twisted in a piece of brown paper for just this reason), ripe common mangoes with names like blackie, stringy, number eleven, and beefy, and sometimes even good mangoes like Hayden, Bombay, and Julie, which were mostly cultivated in people’s yards and did not grow wild in the bush. Common mangoes grew in the bush, and you ate as many of them as you wished, until you got a running belly, which would mean a visit to the pit latrine, which I dreaded as much as I did the lack of electric lights.” (213)

Bonnet pepper" lest it liberates its burning seeds, [...] because like our love its seeds can scorch (*Domestic Incense*, 94). The sacralized ritual of this soup has become a metaphor of a carnal love that must seek ecstasy with caution, the cook and priestess calculates the limit of aphrodisiac substance she must not trespass in order to keep the balance of a happy eros.<sup>23</sup> For aunt Rose, the metaphor is that of honey: the lovers must balance salt and honey, tears and kisses. (*Aunt Rose's Honey Incense*, 92-93)<sup>24</sup>:

### III.2. Cooking for a wedding

Cooking for a wedding involves taking care of the crucial alchemy for the event to be successful. Cleodine underwent an arranged marriage she resented. The preparations for the feat cover the village with a canopy of spices, a symphony of notes.

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<sup>23</sup> "Just then in that early afternoon,  
I wanted to be that simple woman  
who had cooked you Saturday soup //  
using all golden foods. Bellywoman  
pumpkin, yellow yams, sweet potato,  
carrots and deep ivory bones of beef. //  
I would bear it to you in an enamel bowl,  
the smell of fragrant thyme and pimento  
would waft, domestic incense, as I go. //  
How the hot Scotch Bonnet pepper  
would issue its flavor through  
the ripened walls of its own skin //  
but because like our love its seeds  
can scorch, I'd be careful to remove it  
before it cooked itself into breaking. 94

<sup>23</sup> My aunt Rose told me  
that it is always good  
for lovers  
to keep honey  
mixed in with their food." (*Aunt Rose's Honey Incense* 94)

<sup>24</sup> My aunt Rose told me  
that it is always good  
for lovers  
to keep honey  
mixed in with their food. (*Aunt Rose's Honey Incense* 94)

top notes of curry; sharper notes of garlic onions, and pimento; base notes of black pepper and thyme, which flavour the flesh of cows, goats, and chickens. (74)

When she hears of an aphrodisiac dish being cooked with “the genitals of bulls, a cow cod soup to make the groom potent and virile” (74), she felt nauseous.<sup>25</sup> Coffee and chocolate tea, as well as fruit drinks are about the only drinks evoked, fermented drinks do not seem to exist, except for a brief page in the autobiography, for a wedding, when the pitchers are filled with wine and the fruit-cake is flavoured with rum and sweet wine; so “you became deliciously light-headed”. But drunkenness has avoided this prelapsarian paradise.<sup>26</sup>

### III.3. Cooking for the agonizing and the dead

Innocence in this paradise is nevertheless stained by death. To eat is to stay alive: when Marcus suffers from a stomach-ulcer, which degenerates into cancer, he is doomed to bland mashed food and other baby food, adumbrating his approaching end. 261

For a year he [Marcus] suffered from constant indigestion. Eventually his dinner had to be cooked differently from the rest of the family's so that he became like a child again who had to be fed baby food, soft bland foods like steamed chicken

<sup>25</sup> “They were preparing the wedding feast. The aroma of good country cooking hangs like a spice canopy over the village. The domestic perfume of seasoning: top notes of curry; sharper notes of garlic onions, and pimento; base notes of black pepper and thyme, which flavour the flesh of cows, goats, and chickens. Feast food is being prepared in big, black three-legged pots. In kerosene tins they are boiling a fierce pepper soup, made with the rubbery genitals of bulls, a cow cod soup to make the groom potent and virile. At the thought of this Cleodine wants to vomit.” (74)

<sup>26</sup> “The wine filled carafes glowed against the white lace of the tablecloth and set off the architecture of the cake, which was a tall four-storied creation, covered in thick, white icing and studded with flat silver discs, like nail heads. Several smaller round cakes branched off independently from the central one. The cake was rich with raisins, currants, prunes, and cherries and redolent of spices, overproof rum, and sweet Puerto Pruno wine. If you ate enough of it, you became deliciously light-headed.” (233)

and mashed potatoes and egg custards. [stomach ulcer; Gelusil antacid tablets] [sores in his stomach cancerous and spreading rapidly; dies] 261-261

After her parents' death, the poet remembers the Sunday ceremony. Lorna shows how to cook red beans, rice, to season meat, the ritual opening of a coconut by the father of the family. (*The Domestic Science of Sunday Dinner*, 72-73). When these parents age, they are fated to swallow the dead, hospital food, soon replaced by perfusions. Nevertheless, the recipe transmitted by the mother to her daughter will survive her. 87 <sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> *The Domestic Science of Sunday Dinner*

There is the soaking of the peas ; the red kidney beans  
dried out from hard life, which need to be revived  
through the water process, overnight osmosis. //  
There is the seasoning of the meat  
always with garlic which you scrape  
with the serrated edge of an Okapi knife. 85 //  
Mince these cloves of pungent flavor  
then slice the circular onions, weeping  
add the savor of salt and the bite of pepper, //  
add pimento kernels if you want and judicious  
cut confetti of hot country pepper,  
rub all this in with clean bare hands. ;// [...]  
'Put the peas on after breakfast,' my mother said,  
[...] Their cooking requires close careful attention, [...]  
explication de la cuisson, puis l'ajout des oignons, du lait de coco  
Rituel de l'ouverture de la noix de coco par le père 87  
You pour that like a libation  
upon the seasoned red bubbling water  
which is now ready to receive the rice, // [...]  
the bounty of the earth into which  
my father is preparing to return. 88  
mélange subtil du riz, des pois et du lait de coco //  
La nourriture de l'hôpital  
Now they will be serving her bland  
hospital food, spiceless meat, mashed potatoes  
accompanied by pastel vegetables. 88  
[...] an essential mixture, an imitation  
plasma of salt sugar and water //

Sharing food allows the live to honour their dead: the day the poet's mother dies, the daughter promptly goes out to buy vegetables, cassava, large quantities of fish, lime and chocolate for the funeral meal.<sup>28</sup>

#### IV. The song of fruit and vegetables

The celebration of the fruit and vegetables of the Jamaican earth confers a meta-fictional dimension, the artist dealing with words also is a painter and has the phantasm of painting food and feeding on their picture.<sup>29</sup>

The song *Nayga Bikkle* echoes writing and painting, as the artist becomes lyrical and puts in the mouth of a black servant a song of glory for the different varieties of yam, a eulogy to the diversity of islands, and races that people them:

Sing now of the tuberous diversity of yam  
from different race and country. //  
Firm and strong, the negro yam, smooth the snow white yam.  
The subtle eating chinese yam, the powdery golden yellow  
yam,  
the aristocrat of yam the Lucea yam. Small island yam,  
St Vincent yam, miniature yam, the yampie. They even have

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dripping into her veins [...] //  
in the end it will all come together //  
like the Sunday dinner rice and peas. 89

<sup>28</sup> "So I wiped my eyes and walked over to the food stalls, where I thanked the women who had stood in a circle and comforted me. I bought onions and Lucea yams from Peggy, and from the other women, balls of hard cocoa paste to make chocolate tea as Jamaicans call hot cocoa, and cassava bammies and a dozen limes. Then I walked across the market to Fishy the fishman, who once told me how he had fasted for seven days and seven nights, [...]"

'Eight pounds of butterfish please, Fishy.'

'What you doing with so much fish today, Miss Lorna ?'

'Fishy, my mother dead.'

He looked up at me as he scraped the iridescent scales off a butterfish and said, 'She is resting with the angels now.' 276-277

<sup>29</sup> I could reach into the canvas

and eat and fill my belly. (*Hungry Belly Kill Daley* 113)

that nice soft yam, named for the sweetness of the woman. //  
 What could possibly be more pleasing than a hot steaming  
 slice  
 of dry powdery yam protected by a salt ting watch man  
 and floating in a fragrant sea of plenty coconut oil? (*Nayga*  
*Bikkle* 69)

Likewise, the higglers discover the music of the words that name  
 the mango fruit: their calls create a polyphony which is pure poetry.

The mango sellers had complex calls, because more often than  
 not there would be two of them pushing a cart laden with  
 luscious, ripe mangoes. One would sound the call and the  
 other the response:

Mango  
     Hairy mango  
 Number eleven  
     Mango  
 Governor  
     Mango  
 Blackie  
     Mango  
 Sweetie come brush me  
     Mango  
 Ripe and green  
     Mango.

Theirs were the most melodious of all street calls, the most  
 poetic, [except for the call of the Arab dry goods-seller, who  
 would chant [...]] (196)

In the poem *The Mango of Poetry* (103-104), the poet asserts that  
 the mango and poetry are the two facets of one entity: the fruit needs  
 to be tenderized, then a hole is pierced in the skin, and the flesh  
 slowly swallowed, which sums up the sweetness of poetry.  
 Sweetness, words are associated in the woman poet's mind, and she  
 thanks her mother for giving her the gift of words in infancy, from  
 birth, like a sweet baptism: "She dipped her finger in sugar when I  
 was born and rubbed it under my tongue to give me the gift of  
 words."

### Conclusion

Lorna Goodison shares with St John Perse a relish in dishes which are enumerated in encyclopedic lists, an exuberant food imaginary, a pleasure of taste inseparable from the eagerness for words. Carol Rigolot (2004) describes the book *Éloges* as a banquet where food participates in a paradisiac symbolism and plates hold multiple functions. In addition to this symbolism, food offers the writer a rich source of poetic images.

Let us conclude by quoting a metropolitan writer who seems to sum up the mission of female transmission and survival of the species that is to be found in preparing food, a true meditation on existence, its fragility and end, and ultimately on the pursuit of a simple happiness. Marie Rouanet, a regional writer, surprisingly echoes Lorna Goodison when, under her ancestor's gaze in their pictures hanging on the walls, she

perpetuates the gestures of billions of women who, from the dawn of times, were busy around the hearth [so that there would be perpetrated the unwavering certitude of a prepared meal, for there to exist a sweet and fragile place against the fury of the sky, the chaos of the world, the misery of souls and the end of all life.

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