

*Food is a Love Language:  
An Analysis of Connection and Desire in Stir-Fry<sup>1</sup>*

*A comida é uma linguagem do amor: Uma análise da  
conexão e do desejo em Stir-Fry*

Esther Borges

**Abstract:** *This paper aims at analysing the Irish contemporary novel Stir-fry (1994), written by Emma Donoghue. The story is set in rural Ireland in the early 1990s, and this study focusses on how food, and the room of the kitchen, is used throughout the novel as a way to represent the emotional connections between the characters as well as the sexual awakening of the main character, Maria. The parallels between Maria's relationship with food and the kitchen back at her original home in opposition to her new home in Dublin help create an understanding of how the character changes perspective on society and her own sexuality, exploring her new Self away from suffocating expectations and prejudices imposed by a highly religious, misogynistic and homophobic society.*

**Keywords:** *Queer Studies; Irish Literature; Food; Lesbian Erasure.*

**Resumo:** *Este artigo tem como objetivo analisar o romance irlandês contemporâneo Stir-fry (1994) escrito por Emma Donoghue. A história se passa na Irlanda rural no início da década de 1990, e o estudo se concentra em como a comida e o espaço da cozinha são utilizados ao longo do livro para representar as conexões emocionais dos personagens entre si, além do descobrimento sexual da personagem principal, Maria. Os paralelos entre o relacionamento de Maria com a comida e a cozinha na sua casa de origem em contraste com a sua nova casa em Dublin ajudam a compreensão de como a personagem muda a sua perspectiva sobre a sociedade e sobre a sua própria sexualidade, explorando o seu novo "eu" longe das expectativas sufocantes e preconceitos impostos por uma sociedade altamente religiosa, misógina e homofóbica.*

**Palavras-Chave:** *Estudos Queer; Literatura Irlandesa; Comida; Apagamento lésbico.*

*Stir-fry*, by Emma Donoghue, tells the story of Maria, a religious, shy and naive girl from rural Ireland after she moves to Dublin to start university. Maria lives with two roommates, Jael and Ruth, to whom the girl grows close. As the year goes by, Maria starts to explore who she is away from her small town and her family beliefs, leading her to question many of the subjects she had tied to her identity, such as her religious beliefs as well as the moral attachments that had come with it. More specifically, while the character starts the book presenting extremely homophobic ideals and not even knowing that lesbian women existed, as the story progresses Maria starts questioning her own sexuality. The beginning of this arc of self questioning and discovery is triggered by Maria learning that Jael and Ruth are a couple. While her initial reaction is of complete rejection, as she grows closer to her roommates, Maria starts to realize that their sexuality does not make them bad people, and that they are, in fact, only human just like her. She empathizes and cares for them and, as they bond with time, her feelings develop from friendship to sexual desire and romantic affection. Multiple moments of bonding presented in the novel are centred around food, either the act of cooking or eating together, presenting food as a bridge, and act of caring, and a motif for both emotional connection and desire through the novel.

Cooking, either by stir-frying or through any other technique, is one of the final steps in a recipe, moving it further towards the complete dish. It is putting all the ingredients together in one pan, mixing and frying them, in order to turn them into something new altogether, joining all different layers and ingredients.

Cooking requires understanding of fire – too hot, and it will burn, too cold and the food will be undercooked. It means to put the ingredients under the influence of heat. It requires the fire being dominated to be tied to two different main aspects in the novel. Firstly, the ability to control and manipulate fire that humanity managed to evolve, a Promethean development that brought us freedom and agency before our environment. The same can be seen in Maria's development through the novel, as the character starts to stand up more and more for herself, distancing herself from the conservative and prejudiced beliefs that had been shoved down her throat her whole life.

Secondly, fire can also be tied to desire. Maria's biggest breakthrough comes not only because of her exposure to her roommates and realizing that they are normal people and their sexuality is not actually something bad, but also through the realization of her own sexual desire and romantic feelings towards them. The events start unfolding in the chapter "Heating" of the novel, and are only even more developed in future chapters, all deal with the matter of desire, of wanting and being wanted physically – something

that Maria had failed to present regarding her male counterparts throughout the entire novel, even though she had been set to find, to date and eventually marry one of them.

Maria starts with specific views of a divided society, having preconceptions against her hometown, how she should act and relaying a moral alignment to different identities, categorizing groups that were not commonly presented to her through her youth as the Other, and more often than not seeing them negatively. Much like the act of stir-frying, throughout her time in Dublin the character ends up slowly mixing more and more with different individuals, gradually erasing the strong barriers and spaces in between her and what she had considered being the Other. As a direct consequence of having her world views challenged, her view of her own Self also suffers a transformation.

### **Mixing together and new perspectives**

Maria's shift in perspective and behaviour can be first noted shortly after she confesses to Yvonne, her college friend, that Ruth and Jael are a couple.

‘Have you decided whether you’ll be moving out?’ . . . ‘You are still upset about them, aren’t you?’

‘I wish you wouldn’t call them *‘Them’*, like they’re *Martians* or something.’

‘I know their names, that’s not the point [...] The point is, they got a month’s rent out of you on false pretenses.’

‘Ah, for god’s sake, it wasn’t a financial scam or anything. . . . They probably *assumed I knew.*’

‘That’s *outrageous*. I mean, it’s not the first thing that’s going to spring into your head when you go house-hunting, is it? I mean, you don’t say to yourself, oh, yes, must check whether my flatmates are *lesbian lovers*, just in case!’ (80)

As Yvonne pushes her about moving out and away from her roommates, Maria is specifically upset about her use of pronouns – “Them,” referring to the girls as if they were “Martians.” This is the first time in which Maria presents a discomfort with the prejudice that becomes clear through Yvonne’s tone in her use of the pronoun. We can see Maria slowly change her perception of what is the Other, seeming to feel closer to her roommates than she does to her heterosexual friend, annoyed by the clear prejudice in her statement. She does not feel uncomfortable or attempts to create more space and separation between herself and her roommates solely because of their sexuality:

“What’s to keep you there?”

“For one thing, *I like them.*”

... ‘But they’re *hardly your sort*. I mean, don’t you find them *a bit, you know?*  
... *Butch and ranty.*’  
‘I can’t believe I’m listening to such *clichés*. You’ve never even met them.’  
‘Well, I know a girl who had one in her school, and apparently she was really aggressive. Like Martina Navratilova.’  
‘Jael wears *mascara* sometimes. And Ruth is a *dote*, I wish you knew her. OK, they’re *feminists*, well, Ruth is anyway, but they don’t rant. Like, the other night for example, they had no objection to my watching the Miss World contest.’  
‘Well *of course.*’  
‘What do you mean, of course?’  
Yvonne leaned toward her and cooed, ‘All those semi-naked women.’  
‘You’re sick.’ She shrugged her shoulders.’  
‘I just can’t believe you’re being so *naive* about this, Maria. You’re defending them as if they’ve been your bosom pals for years.’  
‘At least I know them, which is more than you do. And they never wear boiler suits or’—she scanned her memory frantically—‘studs in their noses or get their hair shaved off or any other clichés you might care to dredge up.’ She grounds to a halt. ‘And neither of them has even a shadow of a moustache, so there.’ (81)

Yvonne continues to push and make offensive comments regarding Maria’s roommates, even though she has never met them. She talks as if Maria was purposely deceived, which Maria argues that they probably assumed she knew, as she is very aware that she lacked social awareness and observation skills. Despite having used stereotypes herself, Maria replies with frustration to the use of those words, calling them clichés. Maria tries to defend her roommates the only way she knows: by pointing out how her roommates *do not* fit those stereotypes, all to which Yvonne argues against. These, paired with her previous comment implying that Ruth and Jael had purposely deceived Maria, infer a much more problematic mentality: Yvonne does not only see them as the Other and a completely separate group of society because of their sexuality, she seems to assume that they would engage in almost predatory behaviour. This is possibly the most dangerous stereotype portrayed until this moment, as it goes far beyond simply assuming non-heterosexual women would look, dress or talk in a specific way, but actually assumes that they are, by default, bad people. They go from being something never even considered existing on a regular daily basis to being portrayed as evil, as an enemy.

It is also important to call attention to the fact that while Maria does appear to be very bothered by the stereotypes used by Yvonne and tries to disapprove of her friend’s negative assumptions regarding her roommates, her own speech still presents a lot of prejudice and misconceptions. The character does not even notice the issue in her own statements, having completely internalized these ideas. This is, of course, a direct

consequence of being raised in a highly patriarchal and misogynistic society that considers anything that questions the system established until then, as something that deserves to be ruled out or even punishable.

### **The Kitchen: a place of change and discovery**

If Maria eventually learns to dismantle her internal prejudices, it is due to her getting to know and getting closer to her roommates – and a large part of these bonding moments and breakthroughs happen in the apartment, more specifically in the kitchen, the place in which they prepare and share their meals. The kitchen is the place of revelations in the novel, and Maria's relationship with the same space back at her family's home holds a significant contrast with the kitchen in the flat in Dublin.

Maria's mentions of the kitchen and food back home reveal her lack of interest in cooking and evoke memories that associate this space with negative emotions. Maria feels constricted, and the feeling perpetrated is of stagnation in general, suffocation by her family that stops her from growing, leading to a possible eternity of her eating the scraps from her mother's cooking. It comes in complete contrast with the feelings of freedom, intimacy and familiarity that are later on introduced in the kitchen in Dublin:

She had always disliked the moment when her mother would send her to turn on the overhead kitchen lamp and snuff out the day . . . it choked her to snap the light switch down and admit that the day was over, with no possibilities left but . . . cereal with hot milk for supper. . . . She used to fear she would always be four foot four as long as she stayed under the thrall of the kitchen light bulb, eating the spirals of sharp peel her mother tossed aside as she made apple pie.  
(82)

This particular reflection comes to Maria while she is helping Ruth with cooking – which is an aspect that holds relevance on its own, considering her previous explanation of lack of talent and patience to it. Her own mother does not teach her to cook and Maria also does not care for it, avoiding it even, but Ruth is patient and understanding enough to try to teach Maria all the steps. Not only that, Ruth is also more alluring, and Maria joins her willingly and voluntarily, not once but multiple times through the novel. During the brief moments in which Maria is back home visiting her family, we do not see her willingly cook once. In fact, besides the moment of eating or to gather her correspondence, Maria is barely in the kitchen at all, instead choosing to isolate herself back in her bedroom. If in Dublin the kitchen becomes a place of gathering and socialization that she welcomes

and anticipates, back home the kitchen becomes smothering, with unwanted comments, gossip or possible judgment.

In terms of edible food items, the ones from back home do not seem to excite Maria nearly as much as the food back in Dublin. She mentions bland foods, such as cereal for dinner, or heavy with flour and heavy with sage – all cooked exclusively by her mother, who is constantly in and out of the kitchen.

The savour of something cooking drifted in from the kitchen: mince tarts? Cursing under her breath . . . After ten minutes Maria staggered up, stretched, and went into the kitchen for a mince tart. (194)

In this specific scene, Maria smells mince tarts being prepared and curses, making it clear that she is not pleased with the prospect of eating them. Regardless, she relents and eats one, as she is well aware that although it is not something delicious or wanted, it is what is available. The dish in itself is also quite different from the foods made back in Dublin, usually filled with colourful vegetables and sauces. The parallel represents Maria's feelings regarding both of the rooms that serve the same purpose in different houses, but evoke completely different meanings and feelings for the character and her story.

In contrast to the kitchen back home, the one in Dublin is lively and warm. It is where Maria first meets Ruth and Jael, where she realizes they are a couple, where Ruth teaches Maria how to cook, initiating the development of Maria's feelings for her, and where later on Ruth indirectly confesses her own interest in Maria:

'I used to be more like you when I was younger,' [Ruth] remarked.  
Maria took a cautious bite of cucumber. 'Like me how?'  
'Oh, you know. . . . Good at saying no to things.'  
. . . 'It's mostly just cowardice.'  
'No, *I've been watching* . . . *You say no to most things, to make room for the things you really want.*'  
She held a slice of cucumber up to the light bulb; it glowed white, like a cell under a microscope. *She fed it to Ruth.* 'So what happened?'  
'Came to college, got happy. Figured I was getting what I wanted, so it would be mean not to give other people what they wanted.' (...) She bent to Maria's hand, taking another sliver of cucumber into her mouth. (84)

The scene is a development of their previous interactions, in which Ruth has cooked for Maria and then, later on, has taught her to cook. In this instance, Maria not only joins Ruth in the cooking, actively wanting to be in her company and helping her, but also feeds

Ruth small pieces of food, in an act of intimacy and care.

The kitchen is the soul of the apartment, the place where change happens, where matter becomes something else, different and improved and tastier. Going even further back, it is the place where all three main characters have their first dinner together and get to know each other. Although an introductory scene, where it was easy to see and explore Maria's cultural background and influenced on her, it is also a scene that introduces Maria's change.

On her way to dinner, Maria snacks on a bag of crisps – childish, highly processed food, almost an example of an anti-cooking food. Later, at the dinner table, Maria is confronted by Jael regarding her drinking choice, as she refuses the wine being served to her:

She wrenched the corkscrew from the wine bottle gripped between her knees and bent toward Maria.

Automatically, Maria covered the glass. 'None for me, thanks.' Jael trickled the wine through Maria's fingers. Maria snatched her hand away. *Red drips scattered on the table*; one ran along a crack in the wood. 'I said I—'

'I heard what you said.' The round-bellied glass was two thirds full. 'But you can't insult Ruth's cooking by drinking water, especially not plague-ridden Dublin tap water.'

Maria *sucked* her fingers dry one by one as the conversation slid away from her.  
(12)

The wine dribbling through her fingers, staining the table, and then sucked from her fingers in an unintentional but sensual act, can be seen as an introduction to Maria's change, a glimpse of her boundaries that will be pushed by her living and relationship with her roommates. Her act of covering the glass displays her initial resistance to change, but it is served regardless, and Maria has no option but to allow it to be served and taste it. It can almost be read as a metaphor for virginity, or even tied to a more sacred level, an almost religious experience, offering a facsimile of the Last Supper. If in Dublin, Maria finds a new home, in the kitchen of that apartment she finds a new religion – leading to her rebirth, the rise of a new Maria.

### **Under heat: discovering desire**

As it slowly becomes more and more obvious, Maria's external change in perspective of the Other, is a mere reflection of her internal realizations of her own Self.

Although there are multiple subtle indications through the novel, the most clear one comes in one specific scene in which Maria, after finding herself alone and unable to sleep, ventures into her roommate's bedroom. In an impulsive act, she opens their closet and looks through their clothes, running her fingers through them with her eyes closed, identifying who the clothes belong to by their shape and texture, and breathing in the smell of the clothes, until she enters the closet, sits down and locks the door behind her, immersing herself in the scent and soft touch of her roommates clothes:

Something infinitely soft touched her cheek. She twitched away in fright, then turned back to find it with her *lips*, but it was gone. Whatever was cutting into her foot mellowed to a gentle ache. Perhaps ten minutes passed in this way, with her breath getting deeper and the slow boom of her heart the only sound. Then Maria reached under her nightshirt and *touched herself* for the first time since she could remember.

Eventually there was a small, familiar sound, like a bird pecking at a tree. The sound of a key in the front door. Maria lifted her head off her knees so fast that a heavy winter coat was pushed backward, and several hangers jangled in protest. She held her breath. The front door was shut, very gently. Footsteps at the top of the corridor. *Remember* 'O Most Gracious *Virgin Mary* that never was it known that anyone who fled to thy protection, implored thy help or sought thy intercession'. (184)

Although there are no words being said or a big “eureka” moment, this is the instance that first solidifies and confirms Maria's attraction to women. For the purposes of the narrative, it is not specified to whom the clothes that she is hanging on belong to, only a brief mention of the smell of lavender that is tied to Ruth. Maria then proceeds to masturbate for the first time, while inhaling their smell and holding their clothes. It is not only a sexual scene, but a sexual awakening, as it is implied that it is the first time she has ever done anything sexual at all.

Through her entire life, Maria has felt like an outsider to her own Self due to the traditional normative culture in her upbringing. The erasure of Queer people, and more specially Lesbians, from history is intentional. As pointed by Hall “Every regime of representation is a regime of Identity power formed . . . It is one thing to position a subject or set of peoples as the Other of a dominant discourse. It is quite another thing to subject them to that ‘knowledge’ . . . by the power of inner compulsion and subjective conformation to the norm.” (225-226)

The lack of lesbian representation not only denies and erases a group of women from history and human rights, leading them to either being invisible or seen only through



the lens of stereotypes, but it also denies Maria's knowledge of her own self. If the sense of estrangement is there from the beginning, the character feels displaced, but never quite knowing why. By denying her representations of the previous existence of women that liked women, and how those women and relationships looked like, the character is denied a part of her own self that she only comes to know and elaborate in adulthood.

When we connect this sentiment of estrangement that is extremely present through the novel, in her interactions to her family and even to Yvonne, to the contrasting feelings of comfort, intimacy and familiarity that Maria finds in her new apartment back in Dublin, we can connect to Tina O'Toole's (2013) description of "home as not-home" in the narratives of lesbian/gay people", explaining the concept of Queer people who experience "estrangement in the original home," such as Maria, and whose process of moving away to an unfamiliar place becomes "a movement away from being estranged" (136). In her work, O'Toole further develops her analysis by giving the example of the novel "As music and Splendour" (1958) by Kate O'Brien. Clare, the main character, struggles to free herself from the Irish cultural expectations and standards, and when the character visits Ireland in her adulthood she realizes that she does not feel "back home," as she does not belong there anymore as she has developed into a different woman after exploring and finding out more about her sexual identity. It is only by moving away from her "home," and finding supportive queer kinship in a different country, that Clare finds freedom and herself. We can see this same process in Maria, in her awkward conversations and lack of connection regarding her own family, especially when dealing with their comments and expectations regarding marriage and her own future. She doesn't know herself before leaving home to move to Dublin, and she does not feel comfortable under the guides and beliefs that she has grown up with, back in her family's home.

All of this operates together to shape one's social practice, and are not always constantly related: the cultural emphasis of some goals varies independently of emphasis upon institutionalized means. There is a social structure that must be followed, and the proper adaptation to it works as a permit – if one achieves the aspirations determined by this structure, then they have a positive value or worth. This can be seen in Maria's thoughts on marriage and heterosexuality and her need to get in relationships with men regardless of her attraction to them, all due to her trying to manage society's expectations and values. If unsuccessful, then she is to be set apart and excluded, being treated as different and foreign, becoming the Other.

The lack of collective memory/identity created by the erasure of Queer existence, more specifically Lesbian existence, aids to further develop the feeling of estrangement from “Home” by simply denying their past existence completely. Donoghue touched on the subject herself, in an interview back in 2008:

Imagine living in a city where there are no monuments, no buildings from before 1970, no proof that you had grandparents or parents, no history at all. Wouldn't that make you feel like you were just a passing fad, that you could be blown away like leaves? . . . For any community to feel substantial and able to change without losing themselves, a history is absolutely crucial.

These conflicting sentiments of knowing that you do not quite fit in, without being able to look back into history and to locate your “place” and others similar to you in society, is present throughout Maria's journey, and it is at the very root of her internal conflict. The erasure of the Lesbian identity from Irish history due to both homophobia and misogyny leads to subjects whose Subjectivity and understanding of Self is not fixed and also not completely fragmented, but instead moving between identifications, places, and categories – it illustrates subjectivity within the process of moving between and across the traditional boundaries that had been until then associated with categories such as gender, class, or sexuality – for example, the disrupting of the traditional understandings of womanly identity of the binaries of heterosexuality and homosexuality. Maria embodies these concepts through her growth and reformulation as a subject and identification, being profoundly affected by the surrounding influences, not only human but also physical, considering her move from rural Ireland to central Dublin.

In a second moment, one in which Jael once again pushes Maria's boundaries and her desires are brought to light, Maria finds herself voiceless. Jael kisses her, and Maria can not find it in herself to say no (or yes, for that matter). She is silent and still as she is kissed, as she is discovered by Ruth, and she is still silent after Jael leaves:

Maria stood still. She craned her neck back to see the full bowl of luminous clouds, satellites and stars. Dizzy, she had the impression she might topple right off the building. Gradually she became aware of Jael standing just behind her, holding a strand of holly high in the air.

‘What's that for?’ she asked.

‘No mistletoe,’ said Jael briefly, and bent round to *kiss her*. Later, trying to remember whether it was a short or a long kiss, an acceptable peck or a dangerous fusion, Maria had *no idea*. It was somehow balanced on the knife edge between these definitions when Ruth's head came through the skylight. (188)

Maria's reaction to being kissed, even though there was no explicit consent, is interesting. Despite the circumstance, she does not reject the kiss. She thinks about it, and reflects on what it was or could be, before it got interrupted by Ruth, but at no moment she feels disgusted or even upset. There's no hatred in her thought process when it comes to it, only curiosity and desire. Later on, she is also plagued by guilt, however this feeling comes out mainly due to the cheating nature of the kiss, and not due to the gender of the person kissing her. Adding on to the previous scene, it's clear that although not openly saying it, Maria is slowly becoming aware and coming to terms with her non-heterosexuality:

'What I wanted to say,' [Jael] murmured at last, 'is that *I want you.*'

A great weariness came over Maria. She longed to lie down on the couch and sleep for a hundred years. 'I thought it might be that,' she said. Then, the silence stiffening between them, she added, 'Since when?'

'Since now.' Jael's eyes were glowing in the firelight.

Maria avoided them. Stirring herself to anger, she went on. 'Twenty hours is your idea of a decent interval, is it?'

'I have been waiting quite a while,' she said in her most gentle tone.

'It wouldn't be worth the wait,' Maria protested.

Instead of the expected denial, Jael said bluntly, 'I don't care what it's like, I just want you.' To make matters worse, she slid over beside Maria and put her arm *around* her. Maria was furious to find herself dissolving into tears like the worst of Hollywood heroines, but it was unstoppable. No one had ever put a hand on the back of her neck like that. Gulping, she *leaned* against Jael's *warm* frame. (227)

As the novel, and Maria's arc of self discovery, comes to an end, honesty and realization start to seep through the pages. Jael and Maria talk, after Ruth has left the apartment for over a week now, and Jael confesses her attraction to Maria, and approaches her, putting her arm around her. Maria initially cries, arguing with herself that it does feel good to be around Jael, because she has never felt wanted like that. It's not only a matter of if she feels attracted or not, but also a matter that it is the first time that she has felt as if someone truly wants her, which definitely has an influence on her reaction. After all, being wanted has a sensual appeal on its own. However, Maria denies right after that she would ever be with Jael, and that her feelings for her are not enough:

... 'The answer is still no. You should have realized that it couldn't happen. . .

You know I'm not—'

'You don't know what you are.'

'Don't patronize me.'

‘Maria, I’ve watched you for three months. You’ve changed under my eyes, you’ve come so far. You can’t be too afraid to jump off the mountain.’

‘It’s not fear, you stupid woman. I couldn’t care less whether I turn out to be a lesbian or whatever. . . . I just don’t want to go to bed with you. This isn’t the right mountain for me to jump off.’

. . . ‘I don’t believe you feel nothing for me.’

‘I care about you.’ . . .

‘So you don’t actually want me at all?’

Jael’s lips were so close, the sound reverberated in her ear, and the scorch of breath made her shiver. ‘Yes, a bit.’

‘Which bit?’ Her lips met on Maria’s cheekbone, then landed lightly an inch below and slid downward. Tiny hairs came alive as they passed. The lips paused, just to the side of her mouth.

‘All right, quite a lot, to be honest.’ Maria’s mouth was itching to turn into the kiss. All at once, she angled her head away, so the lips brushed her ear and were gone. ‘But not enough.’ (228)

After being pressed by Jael, Maria admits that she does feel sexual attraction to her, but that is all it is. She openly says that she does not want to be with her, not because she is not attracted to women, but because she is not in love with Jael. And although Maria might not be a fan of the conservative typical scene of marriage and children, she still cares about love and being in love. She does not deny loving women, she is simply not in love with Jael:

‘Listen, what do you want to do?’

Her mind was blank. She scrambled for times, places, names. And then at once she knew exactly what to do. ‘I have to find Ruth.’

‘To tell her all this? You should know, she won’t be coming back anyway.’

‘No, not to tell her. Just to find her.’

Jael began speaking, then stopped herself, and realization crept across her face.

‘I see. God, I hadn’t even thought of that.’

‘Of what?’ And then Maria stopped, because she knew.

‘That makes sense of a lot of things.’

They looked at each other in bewilderment. ‘It does, doesn’t it,’ said Maria, mostly to herself.

Jael cleared her throat. ‘How come I never saw?’

‘I didn’t either, till now.’ (230)

The closing passages – after Jael’s questioning why she came back, and what does she want after all, Maria realises and openly states that she has come back for Ruth, that she wants Ruth, inferring that she is in love with her, ending once and for all the idea that she might be heterosexual or simply confused – she wants another woman, she loves another

woman. With her words “I didn’t either, till now,” Maria concludes the end of this process in change of identification of what is the Self and what is the other. She had become the foreigner, the different, the Other.

The character, due to her human nature, is under constant change, as her identity is not a final product but rather the process of production itself – As put by Hall (2006), identity is a “production” that is never complete, but instead always being processed, and constituted within representation and not outside it (54). Maria’s identity, as detailed by the plot, is a matter of “becoming” as well as of “being” – her self discovery through exposure to the Other and questioning of her beliefs is as important as the feelings of sexual and romantic attraction to women that she had suppressed and ignored until then. If “identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past” (Hall, 2002, 226), then it becomes even more evident how relevant her change in scenario and environment impact Maria’s self awareness and self identification.

Maria starts the novel with a world-view representative of higher social powers that dictated the knowledge she had accessed until then – which, when regarding minorities, was mostly reflected through stereotypes and a general negative lens. These dominant social structures, in the novel being represented by the church and the rural environment, have the power to make one see and experience themselves as “Other” – leading Maria to have a feeling of estrangement and dislocation that only seems to be relieved in the very end of the novel, as she finally admits to herself, and to Jael, out loud, that she has feelings for another woman and that she does not care if that means she is a lesbian – she just wants to find Ruth. She is hungry for the woman she loves, and tired of denying herself from it – and who could blame her for that?

In the end, unforgiving Gods and restrictive rules of gender and sexuality stereotypes aside, humans are extremely simple.

We tamed fire because we wanted to be warm on the outside, and learned to dominate it into cooking because we wanted to be warm on the inside as well. We cook for the ones we love, because we want them to be healthy and well-fed, and we let them in return feed us too, with food and their words and their presence. In the words of the American poet Christopher Citro (2015): “I love you. I want us both to eat well”.

It makes sense, then, that the kitchen becomes the heart and soul of the house, the place in which love is created and developed. Maria herself states that “The flat smelt empty already, and Ruth was only gone a day.” (211). Although her comment is directly linked to the smell of Ruth’s cooking, it is also a representation of an olfactory memory of Maria’s

feelings for Ruth, her love experience that has been created and developed in the kitchen. Food, and the shared act of cooking and eating, are then undeniably a love language - meals become then, not only a pleasant experience regarding nutrition, but a moment to feed the soul, encompassing the human experience and connection. In an interview in 2010, Chef and food critic Anthony Bourdain stated that “Food is everything we are. It’s an extension of nationalist feeling, ethnic feeling, your personal history, your province, your region, your tribe, your grandma. It’s inseparable from those from the get-go.” This becomes especially relevant as Donoghue’s novel is built around the premise of a recipe, filled with symbolism regarding food and relevant small acts of cooking and feeding, both others and the self. In Dublin, Maria goes through a long process of self discovery, necessary for her to grow and become the final dish that titles the book – A stir-fry made of multiple ingredients that must be mixed together and put under heat – but she does not start as an empty plate. She comes already filled with a long historical background granted to her through her family, religion and geographical placing. Although such knowledge and beliefs will never truly be erased, as they are part of her history as well as her country’s history, by gaining new knowledge and being exposed to different perspectives she now has the tools to select which beliefs and actions she actually wants to apply in her life. By being exposed to the new, Maria unintentionally deconstructs the wall previously created between Self and Other, first by changing the extremely negative image of Others into a neutral image, by dismantling stereotypes, and changing her own positioning regarding the group of others, through indulging and exploring her own desires that had been suppressed until then. Much like the act of cooking, of putting mixed ingredients under heat, Maria is under constant ‘becoming’, making a full transition and presenting an almost complete opposite perception of Self and Other than she had at the beginning of the novel.

## Notes

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