

# *Food geographies I: relational foodscapes and the busy-ness of being more-than-food*

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## Food Geographies I: Of relational foodscapes and the busy-ness of being more-than-food

Forthcoming in *Progress in Human Geography*

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### Abstract:

The study of foodscapes has spread throughout geography at the same time as food scholarship has spearheaded post-disciplinary research. This report argues that geographers have taken to post-disciplinarity to explore the ways that food is 'more-than-food' through analyses of the visceral nature of eating and politics and the vital (re)materialisations of food's cultural geographies. Visceral food geographies illuminate what I call the 'contingent relationalities' of food in the critical evaluation of the indeterminate, situated politics of 'feeling food' and those of the embodied collectivities of obesity. Questions remain, however, about how a visceral framework might be deployed for broader critiques within foodscapes and the study of human geography. The study of food's vital materialisms opens up investigation into the practices of the 'makings' of meat, food waste and eating networks. Analysis of affect, embodiment and cultural practices are central to these theorisations and suggest consideration of the multiple materialisms of food, space and eating. There is, I contend, in the more radical, 'post-relational' approaches to food, the need for a note of caution: Exuberant claims for the ontological, vital agency of food should be tempered by, or at least run parallel to, critical questions of the *real politik* of political and practical agency in light of recent struggles over austerity, food poverty and food justice.

Keywords: food geography, post-disciplinarity, relationality, more-than-food, viscosity, bodies, embodiment, vital materialisms

### I Introduction

I want to start my first progress report on food geographies with a casual observation: The study of food is now not only embedded within disciplinary sub-fields—such as cultural, political, economic, social and development geographies—but has become integral to geographical questions of health, gender, race and the environment. Food's study has paved the way for cross-fertilisation between and within these sub-fields, not least within political ecology, which it might be argued had food (production) at the centre of its mercurial origins. Food is also seemingly positioned as one of the topics that works to facilitate a 'crossing of the divides' of human and physical geography through, for example, work on so-called 'ecosystems services'. And, in what can either be called 'agro-food' or 'agri-food' studies, the nomenclature depending on one's etymological proclivities more than anything else, geographers have continued to play a central conceptual and epistemological role in developing the outlines of this explicitly inclusive field of study. Indeed, in attempting to take food geographies a step further, Ian Cook et al (2013, 1) have argued that 'food is more than just an area of geographical inquiry' as its study offers 'rich, tangible entryways into almost any issue in which you might be interested'. Thus, while the study of food has spread throughout much of the discipline, it has also stood at the forefront of post-disciplinarity given that, when one studies food, it is impossible to separate out the notions of culture, space, economy, politics, and materiality with which it is so thoroughly imbued.

Most recently, geographers have begun to approach food as 'more-than-food' in the multitudinous, shifting and contingent ontological, epistemological and methodological ways this hyphenated convention suggests.<sup>1</sup> Many are doing this in ways that stitch together the deeper as

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<sup>1</sup> I am shamelessly drawing from, yet also hoping to build on, Lorimer's (2005) original 'more-than' formulation that previously appeared in these pages.

well as more quotidian stories of the relationalities of food, space and place—a kind of ‘more-than-following’ of food if you will (cf. Cook et al, 2004). But, just as importantly, geographers are approaching this ‘more-than’ foodscape at a multiplicity of discrete sites along food networks, from production to consumption to places in-between. Still others have heeded the ongoing calls for epistemological, methodological and ontological ‘holism’ from within agri-food studies that might bring production-consumption relationalities under one framework. The continuing difficulty of doing this lends further support for Freidberg’s (2003, 6) now long-standing aphorism about the troublesome nature of representing and analysing the ‘nature, culture and political economy’ of food on the same page. This is why, I suspect, the old standby of ‘place’—through the topologies of (sustainable) food (e.g. Coles, 2014; Coles and Crang, 2011)—has seen a resurgence. Investigating food place provides the opportunities to explore the production and consumption of food without privileging one over the other and/or allows scholars to transcend them as essentialised categories.

Below, I explore two particular areas where this more-than-food approach has found specific expression and development: The first might be called the ‘visceral’ turn in food geographies and the second involves a number of different threads exploring the ‘vital’ (re)materialities of food. While for scholars like Mike Carolan (2011), these areas share both ontological and political overlaps, for analytical and narrative purposes, I separate them here as discrete turns and returns. Either way, both have been crucial in refracting questions about and hosting debates on the spatial politics of bodies, moralities and affects, enabling critical explorations of eating in the spaces, places and relationalities of foodscapes. In addition, both have proponents and critics outside of geography and so I have selectively drawn in some of this work in order to continue the ethos of post-disciplinarity that characterises and adds value to these fruitful exchanges.

## **II Visceral Embodied Food Geographies**

Drawing on but also contributing to an effervescent mix of feminist and practice research, more-than-representational theory, relational geographies and body ‘work’, Jessica and Alison Hayes-Conroy have used food and eating to outline what they call ‘visceral geographies’. Developed through conversations with Elspeth Probyn and Robyn Longhurst, they utilise Longhurst *et al.*’s (2009, 334) definition of the visceral—‘the sensations, moods, and ways of being that emerge from our sensory engagement with the material and discursive environments in which we live’—to state the following:

[T]his definition ... captures at once the physical capacities, relational processes, and fuzzy boundaries of the human body. Following from this definition, we propose that visceral geography can be thought of as a conceptually broad, dynamic, and sometimes inconsistent array of geographic scholarship on the body that collectively promotes and expands at least three analytical projects. First, visceral geography advances a greater understanding of the agency of physical matter, both within and between bodies. Second, visceral geography moves beyond static notions of the individual (body) and toward more contextualized and interactive versions of the self and other, combining both structural (political-economic) and post-structural (fluid) concerns. Third, visceral geography encourages skepticism of boundaries – e.g. mind/body, representation/non-representation – not through a complete dismissal of such dualisms but through insistence on the imagining and practicing of our (political) lives in, through, and beyond such tensions. (Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy, 2010, 1274)

These theorisations have occurred in the context of the ‘alternative food networks’ (AFNs) (Goodman et al, 2012) of Slow Food and school garden/healthy eating programmes in the US and Canada.

While difficult to pin down, at the centre of their work is an accounting of the crucial ways that we ‘feel’ food in ‘the gut’. For them, ‘eating—due to its sensual, visceral nature—is a strategic

place from which to begin to understand identity, difference and power. ... [S]tudying food in this way could allow geography to make a powerful link between the everyday judgements that bodies make (e.g. preferences, cravings) and the ethico-political decision-making that happens in thinking through the consequences of consumption' (Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy, 2008, 462). Echoing Bourdieu, taste and tasting is powerful and, importantly, political: 'In emphasizing a visceral politics we are not advocating a move towards individualistic forms of *being-political*; rather we move towards a radically relational view of the world, in which structural modes of critique are brought together with an appreciation of chaotic, unstructured ways in which bodily intensities unfold in the production of everyday life' (Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy, 2008, 462) that then get us moving '...towards the creation of effective political strategies for affecting progressive social change' (2010, 1274). This visceral approach explores the ways that food is more-than-food: it is multiple, it is liminal, it is shifting, it is fully situated in temporal, social, material and spatial relationalities—and needs to be approached, researched and 'bettered' this way.

In addition, the Hayes-Conroys have developed what they call a 'political ecology of the body'—echoing the work of Guthman (2011) and Mansfield (2012)—that situates these questions of food's effects on bodies but also those of access. Here, the definitions of food access in traditional agro-food research are broadened to include not only the questions of economic and spatial access but also 'how emotions and affective relationships also shape the practices and politics surrounding the procurement of food' (Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy, 2013b, 88). Put crudely, this is about exploring the role of everyday, organoleptic food taste in the context of food politics. Most broadly, a political ecology of the body, 'in facilitating a concurrent awareness of the structural, epistemological and material forces that affect food judgements and behaviours[,] can encourage an approach to food-body intervention that is both more progressive and more true-to-life' (Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy, 2013b, 88).

There is now, in the context of this visceral work, a great deal of innovative research—much of it building on the earlier excellent writing of Gil Valentine (2002) and extended by Emma-Jayne Abbotts and Anna Lavis (2013)—focusing on bodies, embodiments and food. From exploring the embodied connections in community gardens (Turner, 2011) to questions of food-based belonging and 'translocal subjectivities' (Johnston and Longhurst, 2012), to food movement 'mobilisations' (Hayes-Conroy and Martin, 2010), to a growing body of research on racialised embodiments and food (Slocum and Saldanha, 2013), to the political possibilities of embodied food practices (Carolan, 2011), this work explores the ways that 'being with' and the 'doings with' of and through food matter in the co-production of spatial politics.

One particularly important area that these relationalities of embodiment and food are developing new insights is in the growing field of the critical geographies of obesity/fatness (Colls and Evans, 2013). Centred on the writings of Rachel Colls, Bethan Evans, Robyn Longhurst and Julie Guthman, this work makes innovative theoretical, empirical and methodologically 'space for fat bodies' (Colls and Evans, 2013) by disturbing the 'received wisdom' of the causes and consequences of the 'epistemological violence' obesity can do to individual and social bodies. One of the key points of disturbance is that of the relationship of bodies, food and (urban) space/place in the context of 'obesogenic environments'. Colls and Evans (2013, 14; emphasis in original) 'argue that it is necessary to open up ideas about 'nature' and the spatiotemporal relations between bodies and environments to alternative, *non-causal*, theoretical frameworks which also politicize these relationships'. Focus is thus directed to more indeterminate, situated and relational pathways of exploring, understanding and conceptualising obesity/fatness to include Evans et al's (2011) 'embodied collectives' that have inter-corporealities, inter-subjectivities and people's lifecourses at their centre. This research specifically advocates for critical questions of responsibility, power and emotion in the context of the socio-economic and material environments of bodies, health and size. The ultimate goal here is '... a geographical engagement with obesity/fatness which directs attention to the injustices and inequalities in the spatial politics which surround body size, but which

does not contribute to a stigmatization and pathologization of particular bodies and spaces/environments' (Colls and Evans, 2013, 16).

Relatedly, part of the Hayes-Conroy's project is designed to disturb the determinism—namely 'taste determinism'—that surrounds various AFN projects and especially that of Slow Food. Through a visceral approach to food, they wish to move us beyond those dichotomies that have AFNs as 'good'/'better' tasting and industrial foods as 'bad'/'worse', as well as away from the AFN proselytising encapsulated in the idea that 'if they only knew' others would choose to buy healthier foods (Guthman, 2008). Rather, a visceral approach to food geographies points to the shifting, contextualised and indeterminate nature—albeit bounded and privileged by relations of power, geography and political economy—of the everyday tasting, eating and engagements with food. Indeed, this indeterminate characteristic of eating/taste, what I like to think of as the 'relational contingency' of food, is core to their political project of working through the visceral: Because taste and the 'feeling of food' is indeterminate, albeit conditioned and contingent, it opens up spaces of hope for greater understanding, appreciation of difference and acceptance that, ultimately, might ground a progressive politics of change. Thus, this visceral food approach critiques the sometimes marginalising, scolding and stigmatising aspects of AFNs to also concomitantly suggest the progressive possibilities contained within these movements.

On the whole, this work on visceral food geographies is rich, powerful and full of possibility as a more-than-food, critical approach to food-society relationalities. There needs to be, however, an equally critical reckoning of what is gained but also lost through this overtly body-centric and 'eater'-oriented approach to food geographies. While of effect rather than design, making space for food's visceral geographies might be interpreted as a further 'responsibilisation' of bodies and eaters as the location and fulcrum for progressive change in the food system. Moreover, what and/or who, *specifically*, are bodies/eaters relational to and how does this literally and figuratively 'matter'? Is there room in this perspective to understand the other seemingly very powerful actors on the foodscape that have a socio-economic stake in manipulating our visceral reactions to food (e.g. health agencies, the media, food multinationals)? And, what about the relational visceralities to Other bodies along the food chain, such as those who labour over, stack, prepare and sell our food? Finally, what about the relational visceralities outside of the relative comforts of AFNs that, like Slow Food, have the conscious feeling of food at their centre? In particular, how might this framework provide insight into the visceral violence of hunger and deprivation as well as the lower-level stress caused by the inability to buy the 'right' kind of 'good' food for one's family (i.e. Bowen et al, 2014; Cairns and Johnston, 2015)? In this, a visceral approach to food is well positioned to tell us the deeply personal and troubling stories of the continuing inequalities across the foodscape.

### **III The Spaces of Food's Vital (Re)Materialisations**

Visceral food geographies' concern for the relationalities of food, bodies, affects and practices unsurprisingly makes the case for the need to take food's materialities seriously. This ontological and empirical interest contributes to wider trends of the re-materialisations of cultural geography (e.g. Kirsch, 2013) and the so-called 'new materialisms' (Braun, 2011). And, yet, the more-than-food approach has really come alive here with both an implicit and explicit desire to analyse the 'vibrant' materialisms in food, a move situated heavily within the work of Jane Bennett (2010) as well as Mol (2008) and Probyn (2012). Begun some time ago through David Goodman (1999) and others' forays into ANT, there is a desire to recover and re-purpose the material agency of food for ontological, empirical as well as affective, moral reasons, much like the rationale embedded in more-than-human and posthuman debates. Here, modernist and other dualisms get chucked onto the dustbin of history to be replaced with agent-like, food(y) things, assemblages, networks and 'radical relationalities' that do this vitalist work on foodscapes and bodies.

But this is too minimalist and politically inert for Bennett who wishes to take us into a 'post-relational' ontological era (Braun, 2011). For her, 'food is an active inducer-producer of salient, public effects, rather than a passive resource at the disposal of consumers. [F]ood . . . possess[es] an

agentic capacity irreducible to (though rarely divorced from) human agency' (Bennett, 2007, 45). She formulates this through an analysis of the ways that fat acts to shift bodily moods and affective states as well as the political a/effects that Slow Food has on the relationalities of eating. Richardson-Ngwenya (2012, 1132) applies this approach to a more specifically productionist landscape in the breeding of sugar cane in Barbados where she illuminates the ways that '...vital materialism is a useful approach for engaging constructively with the policies and practices that shape agro-environments and political economies'. In moving us beyond the 'surface' recognition of materialisms Tolia-Kelly (2013) is rightfully concerned about and by putting meat on the bones of Bennett's ontological claims, Richardson-Ngwenya analyses the 'nexus of policy, practice and materiality [which] is pivotal to the character of the sugar industry and to the (possible) future economies of sugarcane' (1135) such that she gets at the 'material dimensions of politics' (1138).

Other research, while positioning food's vitalisms in more implicit terms, has explored the complex practices by which 'things' become food. Here, inspired by Caliskan and Callon's (2009, 2010) interest in the processes of 'marketisation', concern focuses on the 'food-isation' of things and how these processes are as equally political economic, cultural and affective as they are material. Seen through the lens of meatscapes, Mara Miele and colleagues have explored the techno-social-material relations of care that have come with a European project working to improve animal welfare. This theoretically cosmopolitan work analyses the ways that meat/food is 'made to matter' both figuratively and literally for consumers (Evans and Miele, 2012), how this is translated onto food labels (Miele and Evans, 2010) and the 'techno-ethics' of the 'welfare friendly' production practices that give us free-range chickens (Miele and Lever, 2013) and halal meats (Lever and Miele, 2012). Miele and colleagues' key interventions include the idea of 'foodsensing' (Evans and Miele, 2012)—which further works through the relational contingencies of the visceral and 'knowing' (dis)connections of foods to eaters—and that of a critical accounting of the politicised processes that create 'happy' chickens and, thus, more affectively and organoleptically 'tasty' meat (Miele, 2011; see also Buller and Roe, 2014). This research not only opens up novel perspectives on (multi-species) affective viscerality (Buller, 2014; Latimer and Meile, 2013), but also begins to work through Goodman's (1999) adage of the 'shared corporeality of food, bodies and nature' when species meet as 'eater' and 'eaten'.

A related, emerging area of work is that of the 'everyday' sociological research of David Evans (2011; 2014) who explores the processes by which things/food become waste and, in effect become 'un-corporeal' and 'separated' from eaters. Tied to the wider trend of waste scholarship (e.g. Gregson and Cragg, 2010), this research analyses the shifting socio-material life of food as it moves across different registers of value, knowledge, action, space/place and 'smell' to those moments of disposal. Importantly, food waste research is not only disturbing notions of how 'waste' has been defined, but is also unsettling the notion that food waste can only be found at the end of the (human/animal) pipe (Evans et al, 2013). In taking Miele's body of work one step further, Coles and Hallet (2013) uncover the shifting geographies of (in)edible salmon heads to not only suggest that food waste is a 'matter of geography', but also contend that as things become either food, waste or both they offer invaluable insights into the cultural materialisms of place-making.

Alkon (2012), Puig De La Bellacasa (2010) and Herman (2010, 2012) have taken the material politics of food in theoretical and empirical directions that lend credence to Bennett's point about the politicising and public a/effects of food. Alkon (2012, 664), who suggests that 'food is the ultimate socio-nature', explores the intricate ways that the co-production of society and nature is practiced in local organic AFN movements and the political a/effects these practices create. As she argues, the romanticising vision of local organic farming as 'natural' and industrial farming as 'unnatural' serves to entrench class privilege in AFN movements at the same time it disappears farm labour from the production of organic, local 'good' food (676). Puig De La Bellacasa (2010), in a sophisticated theorisation of permaculture, holds out more hope for this particular AFN; for her, permaculture centres a politics of hope on the collective biopolitics of the 'naturecultures' that surround its material praxis, socio-nature, and social activism. Herman (2010, 2012), in a rejoinder to

Latour's 'immutable mobiles', interrogates the 'tactical ethics' that animate the shifting materialities of South African fair trade and organic wine networks. The mobile agent/object of wine took on *mutable* social and ethical meanings—as well as materialities—depending on how the same wines needed to be marketed to different consumer segments in the UK. These market(ing) 'makings' were as political as they were ethical, with far-reaching material effects for South African farmworkers.

Finally, Peter Jackson and colleagues have worked to interrogate the relationalities of affect, space and materiality in food networks. Viewed through the lens of eater, industry and public anxieties over food safety, their more-than-food, more-than-following stories provide insight into the complex and contradictory moral, political and material economies of food in the form of sugar and chicken (Jackson, 2010; Jackson et al, 2009). Explored through a unique set of lifecourse ethnographies with commodity chain actors, these 'anxious' socio-materialisms are shot through with instances of remembering and forgetting, connecting and disconnecting and visibility and invisibility (Jackson et al, 2009). And, much like Miele (2011) and Buller and Roe's (2014) stories of the ways that consumers' and policy makers' desires to care shifted the materialities of chicken supply chains, here, consumer anxieties of 'unsafe' chicken worked to alter the materialities of conventional supply chains by the transference of this anxiety onto chicken meat retailers, corporations and farmers. As they put it (Jackson et al, 2010; 165), "...the complex process of 'manufacturing meaning' at various points along the supply chain where subjective notions of myth and memory [of unsafe chicken] are as important as the more narrowly-conceived commercial imperatives of technological innovation and product development." In this, the affects, emotions and meanings surrounding food are just as 'vital'—if not more so—than the vital materialities produced through food's visceral and embodied relationalities.

Overall, these contributions surrounding food's materialities are engaged in the critical analysis of multiple, spatially-inflected materialisms of food. Through this, they explore the complex social relations that inhabit and co-construct the multiple, contingent materialisms of food as it travels from outside the body to the inside, how it moves in and out of our affective registers and thought-processes and its journeys in and out of our practices and personalised taste regimes.

In light of Bennett's looming shadow over food geographies, I want to end with a few concerns and questions. First, much like my worry above about the potentially narrowing focus of visceral food geographies, I don't want to lose sight of the politicised and political economic routes through which foods become 'vital' in the first place. Bennett's food work and ontological intervention is situated mainly at the eater/food interface and the variable a/effects this has on bodies. This is where the work of material geographers such as Buller and Roe, Meile and Richardson-Ngwenya is so, pardon the pun, vital: Their work brings into focus the powerful material processes by which we might understand how particular foods *become* vital in particular ways to particular bodies and so afford a much wider critical edge to food geographies. Put another way, *more* more-than-food, more-than-following needs to be done to analyse the powerful social, spatial and economic relations that get foods—in the first instance—into the vital material states of 'healthy', 'unhealthy', 'industrial', and/or 'alternative'. Second, food's vital materialisms and material effects on bodies have been of concern to critical nutritionists for quite some time now (e.g. Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy, 2013a) and are a part of the expanding work on health geographies (e.g. Mansfield, 2012). How a spatialised approach to vital materialisms and also the visceralities of food can be informed by and inform the geographies of health opens up important opportunities for food's post-disciplinarity. Third, issues of food choice and its differential ability seem to have been erased from some of this early vital food work with its overt focus on the agency of food things. Ontological agency should not begin to overtake that of food's political agency nor its practical agency to effect the changes needed to abolish the austere and unequal foodscapes of the moment. Again, much like the question asked about visceral geographies, what is gained and what is lost *politically* in this ontological shift to the post-relationalities of vital materialisms? Finally, given that food's vitalities and materialities are crucially brought 'alive' through ingestion, more needs to be made of the cultural and media grammars that articulate what is appropriate or not to eat,



especially in the context of austerity-conditioned economic access (e.g. Johnston and Goodman, 2015). Working through these questions of the grammars of eating will only serve to further situate the relationalities of food's vital materialisms and its shifting geographies.

#### **IV Conclusion**

This report has analysed what I see as geographers' contributions to a kind of more-than-food approach that explores the relational contingencies of eaters and foods through questions of the visceral embodiments and (re)materialisations of food. Important questions remain, however, across this more-than-food, more-than-following post-disciplinary foodscape, namely the ways that visceral food geographies might be applied at broader scales to focus more specifically on food inequalities and hunger and the ways that food's vital materialisms should be tempered by critical human and cultural geographies of austerity and food justice. How these two approaches, in a clear nod to Carolan's (2011) early excursions, might work together in their collective relational splendour will no doubt provide ample empirical and theoretical innovation for further post-disciplinarity in future foodscape research. In my next two reviews, I explore the shifting 'topologies' of food biopolitics—and the use of these concepts in post-disciplinary food geographies—as well as the ways that urban and more alternative political ecologies of justice raise key questions about food access and quality in this, the Anthropocene era.

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