

Introduction

Contours of Eating: Mapping the Terrain of Body/Food Encounters

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Ensuing from an international multi-disciplinary one-day conference that took place in London in February 2011, this volume explores the multidimensional act of eating, and turns its attention to the many spatial, cultural and biological moments at which commensality encounters materiality. Recognizing that food has multiple 'regimes of value' (Appadurai 1986) and is simultaneously symbolic, economic, political, material and nutritional, the conference purposefully sought contributions from a wide range of disciplines, drawing into dialogue nutritionists, activists and social scientists. This edited collection takes its lead from that interdisciplinary approach and looks to reflect on, and extend, the scholarly debates that emerged there. Our focus on eating, as a site in which both the symbolic resonances and the material properties of food are brought to the fore, engages with the conceptual crossing points in those discussions. Asking not what, but rather *why* and *how*, we eat offers new avenues for theoretical exploration and interdisciplinary engagement. As all the contributors to this volume elucidate in varying and nuanced ways, why and how are terms more complex and, perhaps, fraught than they might at first appear. They allow us to ask what eating is and, moreover, what it does. Eating, as a conceptual and a physical act, brings both foods and bodies into view; food does not remain on a supermarket shelf, in the kitchen or on a plate, but is placed in the mouth, chewed, tasted, swallowed and digested. Its solidity is thus broken down and rendered into fragments that both pass through, and become, the eater's body. This is a process that concomitantly establishes and ruptures social relations between bodies, whether those of the food's producers, retailers, micro-biological components or even of the original animal sources. Unpacking the encounters between foods and (human and non-human) bodies then, offers a way to take account of the many networks and relations embedded in and performed by eating; these may be obscured by more established paradigms that consider food inside *or* outside the body, rather than inside *and* outside the body. The theoretical 'golden thread' that runs through this volume, therefore, is a simultaneous reflection on foods both within and beyond bodies, and the signifying of how an exploration of this dual perspective can

illuminate the oft-hidden relations of eating. These relations, as well as possibly 'partial' (Strathern 2004) and transient, are, as all the contributors in this volume demonstrate, often unplanned or unknown. Hence our use of the term 'encounters' signifies a way in which to avoid assumptions of intentionality and to engage with its frequent lack, offering instead a tracing of dissipated agency and contingency. Some consumers may purposefully seek out specific relations of eating, as is the case with 'ethical' foods, whereas other meetings between foods, bodies and personhoods may be more haphazard and inchoate. Thus, whilst concurring with Jack Goody's statement that eating signifies 'a way of placing oneself in relation to others' (1982: 37), the chapters in this volume illuminate that in the act of eating, agency cannot, and should not, be located entirely with the consumer; it is dispersed across multiple actors and within both individual and social bodies. Moreover if food, as Elspeth Probyn argues, 'reminds us of others' (2000: 12) then eating *makes* those others; it is an act that (re)orders, constructs, destroys and mobilizes across cultural and geographical distances.

Thus, this volume employs eating as a tool – a novel way of looking – whilst also drawing attention to the term 'eating' itself, and the multiple ways in which it can be constituted. What centrally emerges from this layered analysis is a complex and nuanced portrait of relationality. We suggest that much scholarship of food to date has privileged the symbolic meanings, commensality and political economy of food. The foundations laid by Douglas (2002), Douglas and Isherwood (1979) and Mintz (1985) continue to provide innumerable valuable insights into relationships between food, personhood and belonging through a range of analytical lenses, as well as expounding the historical and contemporary, and local and global, processes through which our food preferences and options are shaped.¹ Debates over the structural mechanisms and political and economic relations through which foods are made available to consumers (cf. Hawkes et al. 2009; Reardon and Berdegue 2002; Ritzer 2010) and the ways they, and their spaces, are in turn appropriated, localized and domesticated (Caldwell 2004; Miller 1998; Turner 2003; Watson 1997) have drawn attention to the individual agency and creativity of purchasing, preparing, and eating foods. However, these discussions have rarely overtly engaged with bodies, embodiment and biologies, and the breadth of work across the humanities and social sciences exploring these facets of human existence; we rarely gain a sense of eating as bodily and affective – of how that piece of fried chicken tastes, smells, and feels as it enters the body and leaves its residue on sticky fingers. The visceral, haptic and sensorial experiences of eating have been discursively shifted into the background and thus our 'understanding of the political importance of food may be hindered by an inability to specify the link between the materiality of food choice (bodily experiences of food) and ideologies regarding food and eating' (Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy 2008: 462).

1 Prolific examples with which the contributors to this volume engage include Bestor (2000), Carsten (1997), Pilcher (2002) and Wilk (1999, 2002, 2006).

Consequently, with a few notable theorists (cf. Bennett 2010; Lupton 1996; Mol 2008; Probyn 2000), scholarship has tended to privilege either the symbolic or the material dimensions of food, and to focus on either the social or the individual body. What might be termed a dislocation between foods and mouths has perhaps become entrenched as reflections on the movements of food through the spaces and socialities outside bodies have blinded us to its traversals of those within them and, importantly, to the relationships between these. As such, the ways in which chewing, ingesting and digesting are profoundly social as well as individual, have become lost from view. We suggest that paying attention to eating offers insights into how foods and bodies both haphazardly encounter, and actively engage with, one another in ways that are *simultaneously* material, social and political. Moreover, unfurling from these body/food encounters is, to borrow from Jane Bennett, a 'complicated web of dissonant connections between bodies' (Bennett 2010: 4) and also between geographical and biological spaces and a multiplicity of actors.

While located in diverse geographical, cultural and disciplinary contexts, all the chapters in this volume therefore explore eating as a participatory practice not just in the sense of what is eaten, where it is eaten and with whom it is eaten (or not), but also in terms of individual eating bodies and their relations with other social actors, both human and non-human. In different but complementary ways, all demonstrate that eating draws together people, places and objects that may never tangibly meet and show how relationships between these are made and unmade with every mouthful. They thereby trace the multiple scales in which eating bodies are entangled and show how eating bodies become coterminous with other bodies over geographic, affective and social distances. Across the volume, these connections engendered by eating emerge as rhizomatic, resembling a 'map that is always detachable, connectable, reversible, modifiable, and has multiple entryways and exits and its own lines of flight' (Deleuze and Guattari 2004: 23). Moreover, given that 'any point in a rhizome can be connected to anything other, and must be' (ibid.: 7), eating itself is also a process in constant movement, always changing its contours and shape as it enfolds, and is folded into, ever-changing actors. As such, eating draws our attention to the 'complex assemblages that come to compose bodies and worlds simultaneously' (Seigworth and Gregg 2010: 6, see also Collier and Ong 2005; Latour 2005). Mapping contradictions and coexistences across these scales, folds and 'assemblages' illuminates how these connections are played out within the mouths and stomachs of eaters themselves, thereby bringing the visceral back into an examination of food and commensality; taking account of the visceral – to the 'sensations, moods, and ways of being that emerge from our sensory engagement with the material and discursive environments in which we live' (Longhurst, Johnston and Ho 2009: 334) – broadens the concept of, and challenges current assumptions about, socialized eating. We suggest that individual acts of eating are always inherently social and relational, and that the socialities they enact or disrupt are as viscerally corporeal as they are political.

Paying attention to the simultaneity of commensality *and* viscosity, of the symbolic *and* material, allows the contributors to this volume to reflect critically on what eating is – what it performs and silences, what it produces and destroys, and what it makes present and absent. In tracing these ever-shifting contours of eating, each chapter in this volume expounds eating's inherent paradoxes by highlighting both the creative and destructive nature of the act; they explore the fundamental tensions and interplays between choice, risk and necessity, and life and death, that are embedded in this quotidian and apparently mundane activity. Eating, as Deane Curtin has argued, highlights that 'some aspects of our experience are valuable just because they are physical, transitory, and completely ordinary' (Curtin 1992: 4).

To this volume there are 13 case studies framed by four theoretical interludes. Mirroring the 'rhizomatic' (see Deleuze and Guattari 2004) connections that are engendered by the moment of placing food in the mouth, the form of this book is also based on rhizomatic resonances that see its arguments unfolding not only across chapters and sections, but also across the many disciplines from which its authors write. We have intentionally resisted any easy narratives about eating, not grouping the chapters into clearly defined 'topics' that might be assumed to 'fit' naturally together. Rather, knowing how ways of looking may become too-easily accepted and solidified, and not seeking to perpetuate established blinkers around eating, we have sought juxtaposition rather than neatness within each of the four sections of the text. We have aimed to put together chapters that touch edges rather than align or dialogue in any neat way, seeking out partiality (see Haraway 1991), tropes and resonances through which to forge new pathways of reflection. Within each section thus, chapters with differing approaches and disciplinary backgrounds are drawn into a dialogue which allows each to illuminate the others. The conceptually-led section headings have been designed not only to reflect key concepts of eating, but also to open up spaces in which chapter authors consider their own topics in relation to common, but productively ambivalent, conceptual hinges. This has allowed them to go beyond and even challenge our own thinking about what eating may be and the ways in which it can be theoretically and methodologically addressed. Each section's interlude also teases out and cements the theoretical synergies and intersections between its chapters. These interludes offer a secondary layer to this exploration of eating, allowing complexities to emerge in clear but nuanced ways throughout. Not only engaging with their own sections, but also echoing the discussions in others, the interludes thereby weave together diverse perspectives into a cohesive multi-disciplinary discussion of the symbolic and material encounters between foods and bodies.

The explorations in this volume intersect with a variety of topical and timely theoretical and applied debates. These wider themes take many guises and engender different, even contradictory, critical reflections on the part of authors, as eating emerges as an act through which outsides and insides, bodies and landscapes, foods and imaginings, are drawn into moments of encounter. This multidimensionality resonates across the volume as the contributors explore shifting intersections of

meaning and materiality. That eating appears to be an ‘assemblage’ (Collier and Ong 2005; Deleuze and Guattari 2004) and can be reflected on in relation to wider theoretical explorations of networks (Callon 1999; Latour 2005), flows (Deleuze 1998; Grosz 1994; Martin 1994) and multiplicity (Law and Mol 2002; Mol 2002) is most tangibly articulated through accounts of circulations of food’s material culture: O’Connor’s seaweed snacks, Coles’s coffee cup and ‘travel brochures’ and the packaging of Baker’s pork sausages are just a few of the examples found in this volume. Yet, networks of many actors are also apparent in other, less tangible ways. Ormond, for example, illustrates how the materiality of milk, such as whether or not it tastes of garlic, is constituted through a bewildering array of actors and agencies positioned temporally and spatially between producer and consumer. In turn, by reflecting on metabolism, Kendrick opens our vision to the many actors of digestion as well as ingestion, suggesting that to understand how and why we eat, it is necessary to take account of connections between the insides and outsides of bodies. Hurn too draws our attention to multiplicity and entanglements, illustrating how in fox hunting and meat eating, sheep, fox and human bodies are triangulated into a network through which each tangibly constitutes the other. Yet, multiplicities can also be collapsed into a shadowy singularity through eating; Baker’s unpacking of a sausage illustrates how in the journey to the plate certain people and places become visible, whilst others are obscured and hidden.

Complementing these tropes is an exploration of how, in the act of placing food in the mouth, landscapes, people, objects and imaginings not only juxtapose with and fold into one another, but are also reconstituted and reordered. As foods circulate and are shaped into edible and affective commodities, they also processually shape the worlds both from which they originate and through which they move. Through these ways that eating itself acts, it always intertwines affective engagements with ethical choices and ramifications. It is in Coles’s chapter that this sense of the processes of eating – or rather, perhaps – eating as process is most explored. By charting how the environment in which it grows is brought to the fore in the marketing of coffee, he argues that the bodies tasting and ingesting the drink reshape, and abstract, its landscape of production. In a very different context, Lavis too traces how eating (and not eating) (re)order, and even constitute, social worlds, by reflecting on ways in which the illness of anorexia may be processually remade through relationships of absence with food. In so doing, she, like O’Connor, illustrates that the absence as well as the presence of eating can be generative; its lack may also make connections. In exploring the not eating of seaweed, through the lens of blue rather than green issues, O’Connor further demonstrates that eating can be a destructive, as well as generative, act. Shaping the world is not always ‘to the good’, and a number of the contributors highlight the ways in which eating can be both detrimental and favourable, not only to material worlds but also to social, economic and cultural worlds; this is suggested by Abbots, Brooks et al., Lavis, Saleh and Yotova, to name but a few. While O’Connor asks how we can eat sustainably in relation to marine resources, Ormond explicitly reflects on what eating sustainably can mean; this is a question

that is further raised, perhaps more obliquely, and widened, throughout the volume through the charting of the ways in which eating can sustain culture, social networks, and economic and political relations.

Sustainable and ethical food practices then do not just relate to the well-trodden paths of food security, scarcity, environmental conservation and 'fairer' relations of production (cf. Altieri 1995, 1998; Barrientos and Dolan 2006; Pottier 1999; Reynolds et al. 2007), but also to the sustainability or destruction of traditions, knowledges, family, community, nations, and ultimately, bodies. As such, eating emerges across the chapters as an everyday enactment of particular, even contradictory, and utterly 'messy' (Probyn 2010), ethical concerns, whether that is deliberate and active on the part of the eater or not. Eating is perhaps, therefore, always constituted by a plethora of macro and micro, relational and affectively intimate, dilemmas. In particular, together the authors in this volume raise questions not only regarding what we should and should not eat, but also of *whether* or not we should eat. Paying attention to how eating is thus, in many ways, problematic, illuminates why, as Abbots, Baker, Brooks et al., Hurn, Lavis and Ormond all stress in diverse ways, eating may require management, governance and regulation. As the authors show, this can take many forms and animal welfare provisions; European Union legislation; healthy eating guidelines; Corporate Social Responsibility frameworks or individual ideological practices are just a few examples addressed in the following chapters.

These discussions chart the ways in which national and supra-national agencies and institutions, markets, and knowledge brokers manipulate and inform people's eating practices – in terms of their palates and understandings of 'good' and 'bad' foods, and their selection of foods from the 'choices' available. Yet the manner in which eating may express individual agency, creativity and action is also a central thread of many of the chapters, which look to expound nuanced and complex dynamics between individual eating bodies and the social bodies in which they are embedded. At their heart is the question most famously posed by Mary Douglas (2002), that of what is edible and what is inedible. As Murcott points out in her interlude, concerns over what food is, let alone what food does, remain central and should not be assumed; before it is eaten it must become edible. It is perhaps O'Connor who most clearly elucidates this process by exploring how seaweed is and is not eaten in two contrasting geographical contexts of Wales and Japan. Exemplified by O'Connor's attention to the cultural reframings of *laver*, throughout the volume is an attention to how food is 'wrapped' both conceptually and materially, and on a number of different scales. Thus, imagined and marketed relations with producers – and other consumers – can be a source of reassurance for consumers, as Baker's discussion of welfare standards and Yotova's account of Bulgarian yogurt consumption indicate. Yet, they can also be disquieting, especially as imaginings become a lived, embodied reality, as Abbots's account of privileged migrants' experiences in Ecuadorean markets demonstrates. In this context, markets, and the physical proximity of producers, are constituted as problematic, and require the construction and maintenance of bodily and social

boundaries. Abbots consequently draws attention to the viscosity of markets, and the ways in which they are experienced, sometimes in deeply unpleasant ways, through the body.

Resonating across the volume, at times implicitly and at others explicitly, thus, are multiple notions of the risk that eating poses to individual and social bodies, landscapes and cultures, and the betterment of risk positions (cf. Beck 1992; Giddens 1991). The viscosity of these diverse paradigms of risk highlights how eating is continually framed and reframed by many, often competing, discursive paradigms within which bodies become entangled. Bodily boundaries themselves may also become fluid (see Longhurst 2001), contested and re-sited when, as the contributors show, these knowledge constructions themselves are weighed, digested and embodied.

In her chapter, Yates-Doerr conjures up the smell of freshly-baked bread to explore how, as this object moves from Guatemala to New York, its meaning – and indeed materiality – remain intact, whilst in Guatemala competing value systems frame and alter the meanings of this materiality. We are thereby reminded of Appadurai's (1986, 1996) observation that ideas, ideologies and knowledges travel with, against and are caught up with, objects and social actors as they all move through different spatial and temporal dimensions. In examining the discursive, as well as material, flows of foods and the ways in which they produce places and people, this volume shows how, just as eating acts to shape social worlds and geographical landscapes, it too is perpetually acted on and reshaped (cf. Coveney 2006; Foucault 1977, 2002; Lupton 1996; Mennell 1987). Whether formalized in nutrition policies and practices; bound up in concerns over animal welfare, environmental protection, fairtrade and industrialization or contributing to the construction of 'imagined communities' (Anderson 1983), the chapters all elucidate how knowledges about eating and eating bodies serve to inform, 'order' (see Bowker and Star 2000), regulate or legitimize eating practices. As such, many also illuminate the multiple ways in which both human and animal bodies become entangled within, sometimes competing, ideologies.

Questions are thus raised over the legitimacy, authenticity and manipulation of competing paradigms, and the issue of whose voices are heard the loudest over the cacophony of claims and counter-claims comes to the fore (cf. Goodman 1999). Aphramor et al., Brooks et al., Cohn and Yates-Doerr tackle these questions directly in the context of diverging constructions of 'healthy eating' and the, often state-sponsored and medicalized, knowledges that are promoted in the UK and Guatemala. All, in their own way, draw attention to knowledge brokers – in the form of nutritionists, doctors, retailers, and the state – and offer a nuanced discussion of the power dynamics and political relations that are produced and maintained, as well as those that are challenged, by 'alternative' approaches and frameworks. Engaging with eating as a participatory practice that may be externally framed, Aphramor et al., show us how 'eaters' are persuaded to eat some foods while also being dissuaded from others and this is a process further elucidated by Yotova in her account of the international branding of

‘national’ yogurt in Bulgaria. Across these accounts, discursive paradigms may overlap as eaters draw together competing knowledges in one mouthful, or they may be incommensurate and invoke an assessment – by producers, policy makers and consumers – of priorities and the negotiation of potential ‘trade-offs’: this kind of discursive layering emerges from the discussions of Brooks et al., Yates-Doerr and Ormond in particular, with the latter pointing to broader concerns and subjective interpretations within such processes. As such, it is not just in the realm of nutrition and ‘healthy’ eating that competing knowledge paradigms emerge. Saleh’s discussion of intergenerational transmission of food knowledges, in both its narrative and embodied forms, elucidates how mobilizations of knowledge can sustain a sense of being and belonging. In tracing the ways in which the embodied experiences of taste and smell communicate values, she highlights ruptures as well as continuities.

Thus, eating, as Holtzman reminds us in his interlude, is inherently fraught and ambivalent; food is a source of comfort and nourishment, and also of guilt and tension. All of these moreover, as much as the swallowing of food itself, are profoundly embodied (Csordas 1990, 1994) and affective (Clough and Halley 2007; Massumi 2002). Eating, as Cohn’s interlude elucidates, cannot be measured as embodied subjectivities do not fit neatly into quantifiable ordered categories or even moments. This is most demonstrated by both Yates-Doerr’s and Aphramor et al.’s critiques of the ‘body as machine’ metaphor. Yet, both Kendrick and Lavis, albeit very differently, also illustrate that the affective, hungry, viscerally-experiencing body cannot be dislocated from explorations of the many agential and unagential ways in which foods and bodies encounter one another. In so doing, Kendrick’s chapter demonstrates that relationships between eating and obesity may themselves be problematically tangential. Taking account of, but going beyond, everyday intimacies of taste, pleasure and revulsion, this sense of the haptic in the volume’s explorations of body/food encounters is also, we suggest, of theoretical importance. It is particularly in relation to debates around ‘globesity’ (Delpuech et al. 2009, see also Gilman 2010) that this is most clear. By elucidating tensions between the sensory and the quantifiable in discussions of ‘fat’ (see Kulick and Meneley 2005), contributors to this volume challenge narrow and linear rhetoric of individual responsibility for obesity and bring the materiality of the body back into view alongside an attention to the ‘topographical’ complexities of subjectivity (see Haraway 1991: 193) in eating.

As many of the authors illustrate, the politics of eating and encounters between foods and bodies are at times explicit, visible and enacted on a global stage. Yet they are also intimate, micro, and bodily. They may be actively sought and produced or unexpected and unplanned. They may also be a source of comfort and sustenance – ‘doing good in the world’ – to communities and to individuals, or disquieting, even harmful and damaging to both social and individual bodies; assessments that are, in themselves, inherently subjective. In its emphasis on the multiplicity of objects, relations, biologies and affects folded into, and enacted by, eating, this volume addresses the ‘mess’ (Law 2004) that we risk not seeing if we

take account only of foods outside or inside bodies. It suggests that, despite the forms food/body encounters take and in whatever mess they are entangled, eating is concomitantly always both ideological and material (see Conroy-Hayes and Conroy-Hayes 2008). As all the contributors demonstrate, thus, asking why and how we eat offers important insights into how every mouthful is political, visceral and, centrally, always relational.

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