

M/C Journal, Vol 17, No 1 (2014)

Taste in the Anthropocene: The Emergence of "Thing-power" in Food Gardens

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Abstract

Taste and Lively Matter in the Anthropocene

This paper is concerned with the role of taste in relation to food produced in backyard or community gardens. Taste, as outlined by Bourdieu, is constructed by many factors driven primarily by one's economic position as well as certain cultural influences. Such arguments tend to work against a naïve reading of the "natural" attributes of food and the biological impulses and responses humans have to taste. Instead, within these frameworks, taste is positioned as a product of the machinations of human society. Along these lines, it is generally accepted that the economic and, consequently, the social shaping of tastes today have been significantly impacted on by the rise of international agribusiness throughout the twentieth century. These processes have greatly reduced the varieties of food commercially available due to an emphasis on economies of scale that require the production of food that can be grown in monocultures and which can withstand long transport times (Norberg-Hodge, Thrupp, Shiva).

Of course, there are also other factors at play in relation to taste that give rise to distinction between classes. This includes the ways in which we perform our bodies and shape them in the face of our social and economic conditions. Many studies in this area focus on eating disorders and how control of food intake cannot be read simply as examples of disciplined or deviant bodies (Bordo, Probyn, Ferreday). Instead, the links between food and subjectivity are much more complex. However, despite the contradictions and nuance acknowledged in relation to understandings of food, it is primarily conceptualised as an economic and symbolic good that is controlled by humans and human informed processes.

In line with the above observations, literature on food provisioning choices in the areas of food sociology and human geography tends to focus on efforts to understand food purchasing decisions and eating habits. There is a strong political-economic dimension to this research even when its cultural-symbolic value is acknowledged. This is highlighted by the work of Julie Guthman which, among other things, explores "the conversion of tastes into commodities (as well as the reverse)" ("Commodified" 296). Guthman's analysis of alternative food networks, particularly the organic sector and farmers markets, has tended to reaffirm a Bourdieuan understanding of class and distinction whereby certain foods become appropriated by elites, driving up price and removing it from the reach of ordinary consumers ("Commodified", "Fast Food").

There has also been, however, some recognition of the limits of such approaches and acknowledgement of the fragility and porous nature of boundaries in the food arena. For example, Jordan points out in her study of the heirloom tomato that, even when a food is appropriated by elites, thereby significantly increasing its cost, consumption of the food and its cultural-symbolic meaning can continue unchanged by those who have traditionally produced and consumed the food privately in their gardens. Guthman is quite right to highlight the presence of huge inequities in both mainstream and alternative food systems throughout the world. Food may, however, be able to disrupt the dominance of these economic and social representations through its very own agentic qualities.

To explore this idea, this paper draws on the work of political theorist, Jane Bennett, and eco-feminist, Val Plumwood, and applies some of their key insights to data gathered through in-depth interviews with 20 community gardeners and 7 Canberra Show exhibitors carried out from 2009 to 2012. These interviews were approximately 1 to 2 hours long in duration and were carried out in, or following, an extensive tour of the gardens of the participants, during which tastings of the produce were regularly offered to the interviewers.

Jane Bennett sets out to develop a theoretical approach which she names "thing-power materialism" which is grounded in the idea that objects, including food, have agency (354). Bennett conceptualises this idea through her notion of "lively matter" and the "thing power" of objects which she defines as "the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle" ("The force" 351, "Vibrant"). The basic idea here is that if we are willing to read agency into the nonhuman things around us, then we become forced to recognise that humans are simply one more element of a world of things which can act on, with or against others through various assemblages (Deleuze and Guatarri). These assemblages can be made, undone and rebuilt in multiple ways. The power of the elements to act within these may not be equal, but nor are they stable and static. For Bennett, this is not simply a return to previous materialist theories premised on naïve notions of object agency. It is, instead, a theory motivated by attempts to develop understandings and strategies that encourage engaged ecological living practices which seek to avoid ongoing human-inflicted environmental damage caused by the "master rationality" (Plumwood) that has fuelled the era of the anthropocene, the first geological era shaped by human action.

Anthropocentric thinking and its assumptions of human superiority and separateness to other elements of our ecological mesh (Morton "Thinking") has been identified as fuelling wasteful, exploitative, environmentally damaging practices. It acts as a key impediment to the embrace of attitudinal and behavioural changes that could promote more ecologically responsible and sustainable living practices. These ideas are particularly prominent in the fields of ecological humanities, ecological feminism and political theory (Bennett "The force", "Vibrant"; Morton "Ecological", "Thinking", "Ecology"; Plumwood). To redress these issues and reduce further human-inflicted environmental damage, work in these spaces tends to highlight the importance of identifying the interconnections and mutual reliance between humans and nonhumans in order to sustain life.

Thus, this work challenges the "master rationality" of the anthropocene by highlighting the agentic (Bennett "The force," "Vibrant") or actant (Latour) qualities of nonhumans. In this spirit, Plumwood writes that we need to develop "an environmental culture that values and fully acknowledges the nonhuman sphere and our dependency on it, and is able to make good decisions about how we live and impact on the nonhuman world" (3). Food, as a basic human need, and its very gustatory taste, is animated by nonhuman elements. The role of these nonhumans is particularly visible to those who engage in their own gardening practices. As such, the ways in which gardeners understand and speak of these processes may provide insights into how an environmental culture as envisaged by Plumwood could be supported, harnessed and shared.

The brevity of this paper means only a quick skim of the murky ontological waters into which its wades can be provided. The overarching aim is to identify how the recent resurgence of cultural materiality can be linked to the ways in which everyday people conceptualise and articulate their food provisioning practices. In so doing, it demonstrates that gardeners can conceptualise their food, and the biological processes as well as the nonhuman labour which bring it to fruition, as having actant qualities. This is most

overtly recognised through the gardeners' discussions of how their daily habits and routines alter in response to the qualities and "needs" of their food producing gardens. The gardeners do not express this in a strict nature/culture binary. Instead, they indicate an awareness of the interconnectedness and mutual reliance of the human and nonhuman worlds. In this way, understandings of "taste," as produced by human centred relations predicated on exchange of capital, are being rethought. This rethinking may offer ways of promoting a more sustainable engagement with ecological beliefs and behaviours which work against the very notion of human dominance that produced the era of the anthropocene.

Local Food, Taste and Nonhuman Agency

Recent years have seen an increase in the purchasing, sale and growing of local food. This has materialised in multiple forms from backyard, verge and community gardens to the significant growth of farmers markets. Such shifts are attributed to increasing resistance to the privileging of globalised and industrial-scale agri-business, practices which highlight the "master rationality" underpinning the anthropocene. This backlash has been linked to environmental motivations (Seyfang "Shopping," "Ecological," "Growing"); desires to support local economies (particularly the financial well-being of farmers) (Norberg-Hodge); and health concerns in relation to the use of chemicals in food production (Goodman and Goodman).

Despite evidence that people grow or buy food based on gustatory taste, this has received less overt attention as a motivator for food provisioning practices in the literature (Hugner). Where it is examined, taste is generally seen as a social/cultural phenomenon shaped by the ideas related to the environmental, economic and health concerns mentioned above. However, when consumers discuss taste they also refer to notions of freshness, the varieties of food that are available, and nostalgia for the "way food used to be".

Taste in its gustatory sense and pleasure from food consumption is alluded to in all of the interviews carried out for this research. While the reasons for gardening are multiple and varied, there is a common desire to produce food that tastes better and, thus, induces greater pleasure than purchased food. As one backyard gardener and successful Royal Canberra Show exhibitor notes: "[e]verything that you put [grow] in the garden [has a] better taste than from the market or from the shop." The extent of this difference was often a surprise for the gardeners: "I never knew a home grown potato could taste so different from a shop bought potato until I grew [my own] [...] and I couldn't believe the taste."

The gardeners in this research all agreed that the taste of commercially available fruit and vegetables was inferior to self-produced food. This was attributed to the multiple characteristics of industrialised food systems. Participants referred specifically to issues ranging from reduction in the varieties available to the chemical intensive practices designed to lead to high yields in short periods of time. The resulting poor taste of such foods was exemplified by comments such as shop bought tomatoes "don't taste like tomatoes" and the belief that "[p]otatoes and strawberries from the shop taste the same as each other". Even when gardeners raised health concerns about mainstream food, emphasising their delight in growing their own because they "knew what had gone into their food" (Turner, "Embodied"), the issue of taste continued to play an important role in influencing their gardening practices. One gardener stated: "I prefer more [food that] is tasty than one that is healthy for me". The tastiest food for her came from her own community garden plot and this motivated her to travel across town most days to tend the garden. While tasty food was often seen as being more nutritious, this was not the key driver in food production.

The superior taste of the fruit and vegetables grown by these gardeners in Canberra calls their bodies and minds into action to avoid poor tasting food. This desire for tasty food was viewed as common to the general population but was strongly identified as only being accessible to people who grow their own. A backyard gardener, speaking of the residents of an aged care facility where he volunteers observes: "[w]hen you...meet these people they've lost that ability to do any gardening and they really express it. They miss the taste, the flavours." Another backyard gardener and Show exhibitor recounted a story from two years prior when he and his wife invited guests for a New Year's Day lunch. While eating their meal, a guest asked "did you grow these carrots?" When he confirmed that he had, she declared: "I can taste it." Others noted that many young people don't know what they are missing out on because they have never tasted home-grown produce.

Through the sense of taste, the tomatoes, potatoes and carrots and myriad of other foodstuffs grown at homes or in community gardens actively encourage resistance to, or questioning of, the industrial agricultural system and its outputs. The gardeners link poor tasting food to a loss of human responsiveness to plants resulting from the spatial characteristics of industrial agriculture. Modern agribusiness requires large-scale, global production and streamlined agricultural processes that aim to limit the need for producers to respond to unique climatic and soil conditions (through genetically modification technology, see Turner, "Reflections") and removes the need, and capacity, for individual care of plants. This has led to heavy reliance on agricultural chemicals.

The gardeners tend to link high-level usage of pesticides and herbicides with poor taste. One highly successful Show exhibitor, states that in his food, "There's better taste ...because they haven't got the chemicals in them, not much spray, not much fertiliser, for that is better". However, when chemical use is limited or removed, the gardeners acknowledge that food plants require more intensive and responsive human care. This involves almost daily inspection of individual plants to pick off and squash (or feed to chickens and birds) the harmful bugs.

The gardeners need to be vigilant and capable of developing innovative techniques to ensure the survival of their plants and the production of tasty food. They are, of course, not always successful. One organic community gardener lamented the rising populations of slaters and earwigs which could decimate whole beds of newly sprouted seedlings overnight. This was a common issue and, in response, the gardeners research and trial new methods of control (including encouraging the introduction of "good" bugs into the ecosystem through particular plantings). Ultimately, however, the gardeners were resigned to "learn[ing] to live with them [the 'bad' bugs]" while exerting regular bodily and mental efforts to reduce their populations and maximise their own food production.

The lack of ultimate control over their growing patch, and the food it could produce, was acknowledged by the gardeners. There was an awareness and understanding of the role nonhuman elements play in food production, ranging from weather conditions to soil microbes to bugs. The gardeners talk of how their care-giving is responsive to these elements. As one community gardener asserts: "...we prefer to ... garden in a way that naturally strengthens the plant immune system." This involves regular attention to soil microbes and the practice of what was referred to as "homeopathic" gardening.

Through a responsive approach to the "needs" of plants, the soil, and other nonhuman elements, the plants then delivered "vitamins and minerals" to the gardeners, packaged in tasty food. The tastiest foods ensured their survival through seed-saving practices: "[i]f something tastes good, we'll save the seed from it". In this way, the plant's taste encourages gardeners to invest

their human labour to secure its future. The production of tasty food was understood to be reliant on collaborative, iterative and ongoing efforts between human and nonhuman elements.

While gardening has often been represented as an attempt to bend nature to the will of humans (Power), the gardeners in this study spoke about working with nature in their quest to produce good tasting food. This was particularly evident in the interviews with gardeners who exhibit produce in the Canberra Show (see NMA for further details). However, despite the fact that taste is the key motivator for growing their own food, it is not a factor in Show judging. Instead, fruit and vegetable entries (those not turned into value added goods such as jams or relishes) are judged on appearance. While this focus on appearance tends to perpetuate the myth that the fruits and vegetables we consume should conform to an ideal type that are blemish free and uniform in size (just as is prized in industrialised agriculture), the act of gardening for the Show and the process of selecting produce to enter, contradicted this assumption.

Instead, entering the Show seemed to reinforce awareness of the limits of human control over nature and emphasise the very agency of nonhuman elements. This is highlighted by one exhibitor and community gardener who states:

I suppose you grow vegetables for the enjoyment of eating them, but there's also that side of getting enough and perfecting the vegetables and getting... sometimes it's all down to the day of whether you've got three of something, if it's the right size and colour and so I'll enter it [in the Show] on the day instead of putting an entry form in before ...you just don't know what you're going to have, the bugs decide to eat this or the mice get it or something. There's always something.

In this way, where "there's always something" waiting to disrupt a gardener's best laid plans, the exhibitors involved in this project seem to be acutely aware of the agency of nonhumans. In these interviews there is evidence that nonhuman elements act on the gardeners, forcing them to alter their behaviours and engage with plants to meet both of their needs. While perfect specimens can sometimes be grown for the Show, the gardeners acknowledge that this can only be done with an element of luck and careful cultivation of the partnership between human and nonhuman elements in the garden. And, even then, you never know what might happen. This lack of ultimate control is part of the challenge and, thus, the appeal, of competing in the Show.

Conclusion

The era of the anthropocene demonstrates the consequences of human blindness to ecological matters. Myths of human supremacy and a failure to respect nonhuman elements have fuelled a destructive and wasteful mentality that is having serious consequences for our environment. This has prompted efforts to identify new environmental cultures to promote the adoption of more sustainable lifestyles. The resurgence of cultural materialism and the agentic capacity of objects is one key way in which this is being explored as a means of promoting new ethical approaches to how humans live their lives enmeshed with nonhumans. Food, as a basic necessity, provides a key way in which the interconnected relationships between humans and nonhumans can be brought to the fore. Taste, as a biological response and organic attribute of foodstuffs, can induce humans to act. It can cause us to alter our daily habits, behaviours and beliefs. Perhaps a more attentive approach to food, its taste and how it is produced could provide a framework for rethinking human/nature relations by emphasising the very limits of human control.

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Acknowledgements

Thank you to the gardeners who volunteered to be part of this study. The interviews related to the Royal Canberra Show were carried out as part of a collaborative project between the Faculty of Arts and Design at the University of Canberra (Joanna Henryks and Bethaney Turner) and the People and the Environment team (George Main and Kirsten Wehner) at the National Museum of Australia.