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**Creative material practices as response-abilities: entanglings with food insecurities and vulnerable subjectivities.**

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There is increasing need to create integrated studies of health, environment and society to address contemporary food policy (Lang, Barling and Caraher 2008). These calls share an interest in understanding the complex connections between agro-food provisioning and production systems, the environment and social justice at a global level (Godfray et al 2010). Morgan (2010) has argued that for these concerns to become politically meaningful will require rethinking of the public spatialities of a politics of care, articulated through the concept of ecological citizenship as opposed to the actions of the ethical consumer in the private sphere. We begin to consider in this paper how co-produced art-based research enquiry can contribute to addressing these connections and commitments.

In the Northern world, it is in the area of local food initiatives where some of these connections are being made, to provide healthy foodstuffs to communities who experience ‘hidden hunger’, (Kennedy et al 2003) from difficulties accessing fresh foodstuffs or who are particularly vulnerable to becoming food insecure. The plight of people living in the UK who struggle to keep above the food poverty line was outlined this spring in an Oxfam/Church Action on Poverty report (Cooper and Dumbleton 2013) explaining the context for the growth in emergency food aid service-providers to meet this demand. Indeed the two local alternative food initiatives that this research project focuses on in the city of Bristol, UK, addresses ‘hidden hunger’ and ‘food poverty’. The first is a volunteer-run free-food provisioning service that offers local people-in-need a mock shopping experience of food donated by local supermarket shoppers across the major food groups. The second was a community food growing and provisioning project that supplied fresh vegetables, fruit and baked goods to a community living in an area identified as a ‘food desert’, where local people have no access to fresh foods, where small grocers have been forced out of business, and consumers must drive to distant supermarkets to purchase their foods ([Lang and Rayner, 2007](#_ENREF_10)).

The important place of the two local food initiatives to those who rely on them cannot be underplayed and yet there has been recent criticism with regards to how they should be studied. The criticism stems from how studies have tended to position these local food projects in opposition to the major corporate-led food provisioning system. Marsden and Franklin (2013) have called this “the local trap”, to focus only on the inevitable and infinitesimal heterogeneity, embeddedness and hybridity of alternative re-localised food movements (p. 637), to effectively conceptually marginalize their activities because of their embeddedness and variety in place. They instead make the argument that alternative local food initiatives, rather than be dismissed as irrelevant our interpretations and engagement with them should position them in opposition to conventional food production systems. They should be seen as illustrations of society in transition, transition from ethical consumption towards ‘ecological citizenship’ (Dobson 2003). For Morgan (2010), ethical consumption – ‘the private purchasing power that sustains the products of the ethical foodscape and which signals the private expression of care on the part of the concerned consumer’ (ibid: 1860) in the form of buying local food from (super)markets, is a rather narrow definition of how broader society is becoming involved with these initiatives. In contrast ‘ecological citizenship ‘ (Dobson 2003) embodies a political will and the hope of more substantial support if mobilized to address food access and sustainability issues across the globe.

To mobilise ecological citizenship effectively requires providing more than the opportunity to buy ethical foodstuff in food shopping outlets. It means supporting what Morgan calls the development of a new *politics of care* in the public sphere not private consumption of ethical goods, that operates at spatialities of distance rather than just nearest and dearest, and that includes care-receivers in a renewed commitment to democratic processes that shape the politics of care to rethink questions about autonomy and self-sufficiency*.* As Morgan (2010) explains and argues:

‘We care for others because this is what being sustainable means in an ecologically-interdependent world. The fact that some citizens may be motivated less by disinterested notions of social justice and more by enlightened self-interest neither diminishes or invalidates the basic argument.’ (ibid:1863)

How does one mobilise, generate, and sustain a new politics of care around food that embraces the health of society, the sustainability of the environment and social justice? It is in the interpretative approach to how care is generated and practiced where we differ in thinking with Morgan. Rather than focusing on the evaluative mind of a vulnerable, sentient subject, capable of flourishing and suffering, depending on how people treat us (Sayer 2010), we work with an embodied, fleshy human subject. This human subject entangles, assembles, and becomes caught up in relations with other human and non-human materialities in the world through both thought-through and un-thought - through practices. Consequently, the human subject is not autonomous or self-sufficient but achieves expression as a sentient being through being with others (humans and nonhumans). Ultimately it is what *happens*, what is *performed*, where care practices are actualized, received and felt that matters. In this way a politics of care and how concern for the other generates, occurs through a non-linear process with significant lack of thought and rather more bodily response to the encounters in the world. These ideas on care have developed by material-feminist inspired science and technology scholars such as Karen Barad, Donna Haraway and Annemarie Mol. In interpreting what the project achieved and how it relates to existing literature on the co-production of knowledge and social justice in food studies, we address how cultures of concern arise? How to connect people to the ‘other’ whose material circumstance is so different to their own? How does self-sufficiency become obsolete as a set of inter-relations is made obvious?

The project created a 10-day art performance installation. Local food initiatives were invited to become active participants in co-designing the art performance installation. Within the art space, the general public were invited into a food-related experience that was composed of different food-related practices – growing, baking, eating, preparing meals, shopping – that carried the traces of these events taking place in different material circumstances across the city. We make some concluding points that draw on material feminist literature to analyze how creative material practices can engage Morgan’s ‘ecological citizens’ in a ‘politics of care’ that is performative, participatory and embedded in sharing food experiences/practices in the micro-scale entanglings between beings, food and different material circumstances.

**Co-producing work with non-academic and non-human participants.**

Our Foodscapes project drew on a number of developing approaches across the arts, humanities and social science literature. We focus here on the participatory action research approach we used and developed, and how that can be broadened to include non-human participants. The diverse project team included three academic researchers and three community partners and an artist, and was brought together to provide thinking and expertise around food, food insecurity, community, and art and performance. Informed by post-structural thinking on the embodied subject and performance theory and their relevance in studying human-food relations, the project sought to draw out ‘micro’ level engagements with food as a means to consider entanglements between daily practices and sense-making. As such, there was an interest in engaging people in the ‘doing’ of food practices whether that be shopping, growing, cooking or eating food, for example (among other food practices). To in effect participate as an audience through ‘doing’ what one would normally do with food. As has been argued in arts-centered material feminist writings, ‘knowledge is derived from doing and from the senses’ (Barrett and Bolt 2010:1), applying this thinking in relation to food, encourages different consumer/citizen understanding about food. As argued elsewhere (Carolan 2010; Roe *forthcoming*) this must involve experiencing food differently, importantly not solely within the food-eating event but as part of a broader range of events that foodstuff passes through. This means to not solely engage consumer minds, but engage embodied citizens in what other people eat, new understanding about food they eat, yet importantly through the sensory experiences of food practices - handling, creating, cooking, preparing things becoming food, rather than didactic knowledge.

In developing the work, we held a series of group meetings and focus group workshops, volunteered with the food charity, and engaged directly in the activities of our project partners. In time, we began to focus more and more on the volunteers and clients at The Matthew Tree Project as this organization offered us a clear community of interest where food insecurity was paramount. ELM consisted of a handful of small-scale producers, whilst The Matthew Tree encompassed a dozen or so volunteers and staff and over 60 individuals who come to the charity for food aid each Friday. During group discussions, we decided to focus our arts and creative work on *Big Green Week*, a 10-day national sustainability festival held in Bristol, to magnify the project’s profile and draw attention to the issues of food insecurity, sustainability and resilience. Our festival space, the Parlour Showrooms, was located right in the centre of Bristol and at the heart of the festival.

Within our artistic programming, it was important to include opportunities for project partners and their stakeholders to feel that the materials and outputs they created reflected their real world experiences. Working with The Matthew Tree Project (TMTP), we needed a non-obtrusive but engaging way of thinking about food, health and nutrition, and the experience of food poverty with volunteers and clients. At TMTP, clients in need are not handed a food parcel. Rather, following an interview with staff, they perform a shopping experience, selecting their items from shelves in the foodstore stocked with food donated to the charity. However, we were also interested to know how clients cooked, supplemented and created meals with these items once they left the foodstore.

Following a few weeks of working as volunteers and speaking with people accessing food through TMTP, we decided photovoice methods would be an ideal mechanism to engage clients in a meaningful but unobtrusive way. Photovoice is a participatory research approach in which people use video and/or photo images to capture aspects of their environment and experiences for sharing with others. Clients and volunteers were provided with disposable cameras and asked to take pictures of each meal they ate during the week, and return them during a de-brief the following week. The pictures were displayed on the walls of our exhibition during Big Green Week. Some of the clients who took photos were able to see their work at the Parlour Showrooms and gave further insights into the experience.

Our other community partner – the Edible Landscapes Movement – donated a range of edible plants. These plants, displayed along the walls off the shop front entrance to the showroom, were responsible for drawing in intrigued passersby’s. In total, over 900 people came into our space during Big Green Week. Later, a volunteer from ELM led a chicken-plucking demonstration during our Summer Solstice event while another conducted a planting workshop. Each of these elements provided unique opportunities for dialogue, sharing and expression.

The participatory action research involved a number of community interest groups to support the direction and activity within the art event, but as important was how the materials of foodstuffs in different forms were not just passive objects but agentive materials generating ideas and practices in the event that unfolded. This follows the thinking of Karen Barad (2003) whose anti-reflexive, pro-intra-active and pro-entangling thinking emphasizes practice as an ability to respond, to shape the becoming of world, to shape bodies in becoming (Dolphijn and van Tuin 2012; Haraway 2008) through our intra-actions with matter itself. As art theorist Bolt puts it:

*‘..the materials are not just passive objects to be used instrumentally by the artist, but rather, the materials and processes of production have their own intelligence that come into play in interaction with the artist’s creative intelligence’ (Bolt 2010: 29-20).*

This links back to the earlier discussion on developing a ‘politics of care’ centered around ‘care as performed’ rather than a moral obligation. It was bread-making that offered us the greatest opportunity to include bread-making materials as participants in how knowledge co-production process and practices could support knowledge sharing in the art-space.

Led by artist-in-residence Paul Hurley, we baked bread with festival-goers, food aid clients, passers-by, friends and family for 10 straight days. All told, we baked with over 60 people, many of whom went home with information about food and food insecurity, new cooking and baking skills, and of course, a loaf of bread.

We invited our community partners to join us – however, the bread-baking effort was also open to the public – and many people who walked into the showroom also took us up on our offer to teach them to bake bread. During these sessions, we found that it was the slowness of the process – even the soda bread takes over an hour to bake – which helped to forge dialogue, communication and exchange.

Hands kneading bread, slowly, rhythmically – sharing ingredients, sharing stories, sharing knowledge. In these moments, we forged new types of connections. We found that research/community barriers – while they did not evaporate – did indeed diminish as we ‘co-produced’ –bread, knowledge, narratives and histories.

‘it amazes me you can just mix these two dry ingredients , or three dry ingredients and some water and it’s like a sticky mess and then just kneading action with it and then it changes and then you just leave it and it changes again and then put it in the oven and it changes again into bread, […] Even having heard people talk about the science of it, blows their tiny mind’ (Paul)

Our project let the materialities ‘speak’ to the sensual expressions and gestures of the human audience that are established in their everyday food practices of feeding themselves, as opposed to creating text or talk to give clear messages about the politics and ethics of the activities/materialities/presences in the space. A broad array of non-academic participants and non-human participants were important agencies in the research-making process of the art event, through sharing practical experiences and new practices that were forged because of the need to work with them. These practices were responses that democratized the process of knowledge-making, for they were responses to a

world-in-the making/-in-the-unfolding where Barad argues is located ethics and justice. We more concretely explore ideas around ethics and justice in our final points*.*

**Politics of care/ engaging the ecological citizens**

Firstly, the experiences of people involved with the local food initiatives had affected us as researchers engendering a responsibility to generate greater understanding of their predicament and politics of their plight.

“…something that was really striking which we talked about during the process was how I guess our coming into it with that connection with the food bank clients, […] a sort of sense of protectiveness towards them, […] a kind of bond, the care, the duty, because [now] they were volunteering [to be involved in the project]”. (Paul the artist)

We wondered how this affect on us, could be mobilized to influence the experiences of the audience-participants through how the materialities of the space intra-acted with their previous food practices and histories. Here following Latour we were enacting ethics and justice through how bodies were marked, or how matter comes to matter as ‘matters of concern’ (Latour 2005) or ‘matters of care’ (Puig 2011), the latter a term which includes the tendency for parts of the assemblage to be neglected. This was something which those involved in setting-up, managing and facilitating a food-bank are actively working to avoid and which we as researchers bought-into through our involvement with them. Yet at no point was any single situated food experience connected to the various organisations we were involved with over-stated in the space. As Paul the artist speaking about how the space was composed recognizes, that by actively

“toning down the profile, dominance of those organisations made for more kind of open and liberated space …. occasionally people would think that Foodscapes was what we were trying to do, what we were trying to sell people, are we trying to tell people about nutrition or are we trying to get people to shop locally or are we trying to, you know expecting that kind of organizational objective or [a] clear set of aims or things that…” (Paul)

Secondly, we argue that the audience was invited to respond not as ethical consumers’ but as ‘ecological citizens’ through the constellation of methods of engagement with the ‘audience’ and yet from what Paul says this shift in position didn’t always happen. Here Paul the artist speaks again:

[…] but then when visitors were coming in and out of the gallery, and I think maybe at first, because it was the nature, and because of where it [was….] [There are] a lot of kind of middleclass Bristol foodie people, you know, which I’m kind of partly one , I guess. But actually reading them to see how much food and ideals or opinions about food are kind of bound up with class prejudice and wealth and poverty and it just becomes so apparent when you’re looking at a basket of tinned baked beans and someone’s telling you why, where or what people should be eating organic, you know, and its that – this reality is so out of whack. Do you know what I mean?’ Paul

Paul articulates the juxtapositions the space offered to him. Juxtapositions as Massumi would express it are ‘the direct “pairedness” of pure, open contrast’ (2010), from which emerges ‘relating’. Massumi argues that it is from the contrasts that a figure of stability can emerge. This appears an interesting way to approach how the art-space engaged audience. How did the juxtapositions support the assembling of a figure of stability, a message assembling from experiences of the space? And where and how did the constellation of juxtapositions fail to deliver a clear message?

Thirdly, this leads us to how creative material practices can support, inform or form ethical relating? Specifically, we think here of Haraway’s term ‘response-abilities’, a capacity to respond (as opposed to expressing a reasoned argument through language) as a starting point for ethical relating. Haraway emphasizes co-presencing for ethical relating as necessary to allow us to ‘share suffering’ and it is here within the myriad of shared food practices – eating, cooking, shopping, digesting, making a meal, pouring out cereal into a bowl, boiling pasta in a pan etc etc that juxtapositions can emerge through the co-presencing of shared experiences. Thus by foregrounding food practices that are performed across all communities in some sort of fashion and are indeed all central in sustaining our access to food, co-presencing and sharing suffering was made available to those becoming ecological citizens.

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