



## Umwelt, food, and the limits of control

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### ABSTRACT

This paper draws on the work of the early 20th century ethologist Jakob von Uexküll to formulate a notion of *food as a process of bodies becoming other bodies*. I begin by situating my argument in relation to two strands of critical food research – feminist-inspired work on food and embodiment, and post-humanist approaches that focus on non-humans as mediators of food assemblages. I then discuss Uexküll's work, focusing on three key concepts: *umwelt*, “the island of the senses” that envelops each being; subjectivity as an intra- and intercorporeal phenomenon; and the variation among *umwelten* available to humans. These ideas, I contend, illustrate the inherently political nature of ‘food,’ which in turn calls for a realignment of food ethics and critical food scholarship. To illustrate this contention, I draw on my research with the Oklahoma Food Cooperative, considering this socio-ecological experiment as an effort to create a food system in better accord with the affective imperatives (or *umwelten*) of its constituent components. Throughout the paper, I develop the argument that food systems will always present limits to control by even those actors who seem to enjoy hegemonic positions. Uexküll's work helps us understand these limits in a way that allows critical analysis of dominant food systems and the alternatives proliferating in response to them, but does not prematurely foreclose the actual and virtual possibilities contained in the present heterogeneity of foodways.

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### 1. Introduction

For the past decade or more, critical food scholarship has often been at the forefront of explorations into the theoretical and philosophical terrain(s) of posthumanism. ‘Food,’ constituted as an ongoing synthesis of humans and a wide range of non-humans, serves as a compelling point of departure for such theoretical forays, provoking questions of embodiment, relationality, power, and collective becomings. In this paper, I seek to build on this research, bringing the early 20th century writings of the Estonian ethologist Jakob von Uexküll into conversation with the work of critical food scholars, particularly feminist inspired research on embodiment and viscerality, and posthumanist approaches that foreground the roles of non-human actors in food systems. After a brief discussion of these approaches to food studies, I consider Uexküll's work at some length, focusing on three central aspects therein: his conception of *umwelt*, or the ‘island of the senses’ that envelops all beings; the notion of subjectivity as both intra- and intercorporeal that emerges from *umwelt*-research; and his understanding of the human *umwelt*, which emphasized the role of science and scientific instruments. In the next section, I argue that Uexküll's writings, despite not specifically addressing questions of

power, politics, and ethics, can nevertheless fruitfully inform food practices and critical food scholarship by helping us understand ‘food’ as a collective, contentious process in which bodies become other bodies. This Uexküllian understanding of food, I contend, both resonates with and contributes to food research focusing on embodiment and non-human actors, profiting from some of the tensions and bridging gaps between these two related but distinct realms of inquiry.

Throughout the paper, I develop the argument, following Goodman et al. (1987), that food systems will always present limits to control by even those actors who seem to enjoy hegemonic positions. Uexküll's work helps us understand these limits in a way that allows critical analysis of dominant food systems and the alternatives proliferating in response to them, but does not prematurely foreclose the actual and virtual possibilities contained in the present heterogeneity of foodways. Whether as scholars, consumers, or those who labor in food-related industries, we need to be able to reflexively critique the seemingly ubiquitous damaging relationships that constitute contemporary food practices and systems. But how can we lodge those critiques in a way that maximizes the possibility of *other* geographies of food, which actively helps to usher in different ways of relating to food and eating? In exploring these questions, I offer examples from feminist and posthumanist food scholars and from my own field research with the Oklahoma Food Cooperative.

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## 2. Embodiment, viscosity, and posthumanism in food scholarship

A recent spate of food scholarship (e.g. Colls, 2007; Hayes-Conroy, 2010; Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy, 2012; Probyn, 2000) has focused on the embodied or ‘visceral’ register of food practices, underscoring the dynamic materiality of bodies that eat as complex assemblages articulated within shifting, cross-cutting social contexts and histories. Drawing on critical reexaminations of the body undertaken by feminist theorists (e.g. Barad, 2001; Grosz, 1994, 2005), these authors advance an understanding of food consumption practices as contingent and, at least to some extent, open to the possibility of transformation or modification. Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy (2008), for example, argue that consuming bodies are indeed disciplined through various discursive interventions flowing through structures of class, race, and gender. However, these processes are also mediated by “tastes, as well as cravings, hunger, sensations, shifts in mood and states of being, all [of which] play a part in determining food actualities,” (Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy, 2008: 45). These forces may connect (or fail to connect) in unexpected and surprising ways, but none of them can be granted *a priori* status as a foundational agent or driver of food practice. For the Hayes-Conroys and other theorists emphasizing food and embodiment, this focus is explicitly political and radical: it is in the visceral conjunctions of consuming bodies and a range of external forces that one might adumbrate potential openings for the resistance of dominant discourses and the apparent hegemony of industrialized and corporate food systems. In other words, focusing on the visceral experience of eating localizes more or less durable, expansive arrangements of power and at the same time presents one of the potential limits to the extent or reach of those arrangements in space and time.

Given the emphasis on materiality in much of this work, it is perhaps curious that in several recent explorations of food and embodiment scant attention is devoted to the capacities and drives of the myriad plants, animals, and things entangled in eating encounters and in the constitution of human food systems. To consider these capacities, I now turn to a second strand of contemporary writings on food that attends more directly to the roles of non-human actors, drawing on and contributing to scholarship of recent decades considered under the umbrella term ‘posthumanist’ (e.g. De Landa, 1997; Haraway, 1992; Latour, 1993; Wolfe, 2010).

Jane Bennett’s (2010) writings on food appear among a host of other topics in her explorations of agency, the vitality of matter, and the potential of a posthumanist politics (e.g. 2001, 2004). Orienting her discussion around the so-called “crisis of obesity” entangled with the “assemblage [of] American consumption,” (2010: 39), Bennett cites several recent studies demonstrating the capacity of dietary fats to affect human moods and cognitive dispositions, ultimately arguing that if we were to take seriously the agencies of non-humans such as dietary fats, “(t)he problem of obesity would thus have to index not only the large humans and their economic-cultural prostheses (agribusiness, snack-food vending machines, insulin injections, bariatric surgery, serving sizes, systems of food marketing and distribution, microwave ovens) but also the strivings and trajectories of fats as they weaken or enhance the power of human wills, habits, and ideas” (2010: 43). In Bennett’s work, as this passage suggests, the relations between dietary fats and human bodies do not unfold in a linear fashion, causality cannot be attributed primarily to any one ‘variable’ or agent, and outcomes cannot be reduced to the effects of neoliberalism, culture, or structure on the one hand, or matter, nature, or environment on the other. Instead, many actors, human and non-human, must engage in the often-contentious process of assembling, through which

more or less stable arrangements emerge in “the mutual accommodation [of] heterogeneous components” (2010: 42).

In an analysis perhaps more trenchantly critical of particular actors in contemporary agribusiness networks, Sarah Whatmore (2002) offers a detailed tracing of the soya plant family’s 3000 year development from East Asian staple crop to genetically modified “Frankenstein food” in Europe in the early years of the new millennium. In each of several key moments in this trajectory, Whatmore describes how various human actors attempt to harness particular capacities of the plant to suit their own goals. Early records of its cultivation in China, for example, reveal that the plant was prized for both its nutritional content and its capacity (a capacity actually produced through a symbiotic relation between the plant’s root nodules and soil bacteria) to enrich soil by ‘fixing’ nitrogen. These desirable characteristics led to the development of thousands of varieties of soya, presumably adapted for a range of environmental conditions and production approaches. By contrast, Whatmore argues, many 20th century efforts to ‘improve’ soya have not aimed at augmenting its nutritional content or nitrogen-fixing capacities, but instead have been increasingly driven by the “monopolistic impetus of corporate efforts to enroll the seed into the service of other product lines in the agro-industrial stable” (Whatmore, 2002: 130). Critically, soya itself has resisted and actively thwarted efforts associated with this monopolistic drive at each step along the path of industrialization and genetic modification, first through its morphology, and later through problems thought to be associated with its transformation into genetically modified RoundUp Ready<sup>®</sup> soy. In this most recent becoming, soya’s “lively potencies find expression in deviant and unintended directions,” including physiological and biochemical changes that inhibit the beneficial interactions between the roots and their microbes, and raise phyto-estrogen levels, potentially posing risks to human health (Whatmore, 2002: 133). In Europe, these deviancies in turn joined with extensive media coverage, public outcry, and boycotts of GM food by retailers to produce considerable frictions for Monsanto and other chemical/biotech firms, as well as state officials, regulatory agencies, and scientific experts.

Bennett’s reflections on the efficacy of dietary fats and Whatmore’s explorations of the multiple, shifting cast of agents converging in the trajectory of soya over space and time exemplify a theme common to much posthumanist thought: to whatever extent we view consuming human bodies as the contested border between personal experience and representation or structure, the host of non-human bodies involved in ‘food’ bring their own capacities and agendas into play as constitutive components of our bodies and of our food systems more broadly. Those capacities and agendas, then, and the unintended consequences they often produce, represent a possible limit to the potential for any actor, however seemingly hegemonic, to control a given arrangement of power relations in food systems. Note that this limit is located not specifically in the experiential viscosity of the human body that eats, as in the feminist literature discussed above, but rather in the contingent, sometimes emergent nature of relations between a range of heterogeneous actors, or what Jane Bennett (2005) has called the “agency of the assemblage”.

At the risk of stating the obvious, I will mention here that in its explorations of the mediating roles played by non-humans, posthumanist (food) research does not typically foreground questions of human subjectivity or embodied experience. There is no fundamental opposition, however, between the concerns with embodiment and subjectivity raised by feminist food scholars, on the one hand, and the emphasis on non-human actors and the notion of agency as distributed that is central to much posthumanist thought, on the other hand. Indeed, in the remainder of this article, I will develop the argument that a specifically

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