

URBAN RECONCEPTIONS OF PLACE:  
FOOD NARRATIVES AND HUMAN-NATURE RELATIONS IN POST-MILLENNIAL  
LITERATURE

In much bioregionalism, environmentalism and ecocriticism, place and place-attachment continue to be understood primarily in relation to small-scale and non-urban communities. In this paper, I'll discuss the trend of real and local food as potentially providing similar connections, especially in urban environments. The ways in which urban food practices shape identities, create a sense of community and provide connections to the land, echoes many of the concerns of the bioregionalism movement, which advocates closer connections to the land through, for instance, small-scale farming and self sufficiency. Real food and so-called alternative food practices hence provide a way of rooting to the nonhuman natural that does not depend on "staying put" (Scott Russell Sanders) associated with rural life, and are in that respect particularly valuable in shaping urban human-nature relationships. At the same time, place-attachment through food and food narratives also has environmental, class and gender dimensions that make it problematic. I'll be exploring this primarily in relation to Francesca Kay's 2011 novel *The Translation of the Bones* which, like a number of other postmillennial British novels, draws on contemporary food narratives to capture and reconceptualise contemporary human-nature relations.

Food ties us to our environment – both human and nonhuman – in the most common and most intimate ways. Food also serves to illustrate our conceptions of nature – "pure" and "real" food often holds similar connotations as nature. The past decades have seen increased demand for "real" food: a development that scholars call "alternative food practices".<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, this trend is believed to be explicitly tied to urbanization, which increases demands for farmers markets and local produce, particularly in cities with well-educated residents with high incomes (Jarosz 242). At the same time, food scares and crises such as mad cow disease (BSE) and food and mouth disease and scandals about contaminated

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<sup>1</sup> Defined by Rachel Slocum as advocating "more ecologically sound and socially just farming methods, food marketing and distribution and healthier food options" (522).

meat have led to increased concerns about food safety. Consequently, local and organic food has come to be seen as being not only environmentally and ethically better, but also healthier and tastier. Since the first British farmers' market was started in Bath in 1997 – following their popularity in the US – hundreds of similar markets have been started all around the country.<sup>2</sup> These markets allow consumers to supposedly support local economies, while doing something for the planet and eating healthier foods, but farmers' markets are not necessarily environmentally better. Indeed certainly not all produce sold at farmers' markets is organic, and "local" is often a flexible term. Nonetheless, alternative food practices and related networks such as farmers' markets are associated with environmental, social and economic benefits, and as such play a significant role in shaping human-nature relations in the city. These associations go beyond merely personal and environmental health benefits: "real" food is often felt to provide ties to the land and the nonhuman natural that urbanization is traditionally believed to have destroyed. Hence, as Lewis Holloway and Moya Kneafsey argue [SLIDE], "the association of FM [farmers' markets] with the rural and the local may be read as a search for localized identity, an attempt to fix identity or build a sense of community within a context of perceived threats to local identities and communities in the face of the power of multi-nationals associated with, for example, food retailing and new and diffuse forms of risk, such as genetically modified crops" (295). As such, food and food narratives may provide possibilities for reconceptualising human-nature relations in the city.

[SLIDE] At first sight, *The Translation of the Bones* relies heavily on the traditional division between the country and the city, in which the city is a place of little nature. The country even echoes the countryside of old: depopulated and a playground for absentee landlords. Yet through its depiction of the characters' relationship with food, the narrative radically redefines urban relations to nature. A particularly good example, worth quoting at length, is the sense of wonder that Stella, the main character, experiences when preparing mussels for a dinner party: [SLIDE]

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<sup>2</sup> Holloway and Kneafsey 286.

Such beautiful things, she thought, these mussels. Their sleek shells gleaming in the water, pearl-tinged at the hinges, a darkness that was full of colour – green and grey and bronze. It was their ordinariness that put them beyond remark. As with many other things – the iridescent feathers on a drake’s neck in the winter, so startling a green; the buds of a magnolia; the high polish of a newly released conker – the mussels were too familiar to be a real cause of wonder. We look out for the rare and exotic. The magnificence of a peacock’s tail, the flash of diamonds in a seam of coal. And yet what could be more exotic than a cock pheasant in a field of frozen turnips on a winter morning, his ruby markings and his emerald-green head? (72)

The mussels, Stella ponders, are “too familiar to be a real cause of wonder”, because we tend to “look out for the rare and exotic”. This seems to be particularly the case in urban environments, where much nature is left unseen and unremarked because it does not accord to the dominant image of spectacular, non-urban, nature. Stella’s wonder at and attention to the mussels suggests the possibility of an embodied relationship with the nonhuman natural. Rachel Slocum has referred to the potential that alternative food practices hold in this respect as enabling so-called “embodied ecologies”: “situated, corporeal ways of connecting” (523). In an urban narrative such as *The Translation of the Bodies*, food consequently provides the situated and corporeal ways of connecting with nature that are generally not associated with urban living at all.

Yet the dinner scene that follows also shows the drawbacks of reconnecting to nature through food. The mussels that Stella praises for their “ordinariness” are hardly ordinary for many people that fall outside of Stella’s social class: those invited to the dinner party – hosted by her husband Rufus, an MP – are all upper middle class. The connection that the narrative suggests between food and nature is also explicitly gendered. During the dinner, Stella is essentially left to herself: no one asks for her opinion on any of the (political) topics discussed and “she was left to produce dinner and consider the assorted guests” (74). In fact, preparing food – even thinking about it – is a largely female affair in *The Translation of the Bones*, suggesting that the connection to the nonhuman natural that food offers is distinctly female as well. This, of course,

replicates problematic associations of women being more natural – and also, traditionally, less rational or valuable – than men.

In twenty-first-century urban narratives such as *The Translation of the Bones*, then, food functions as a nexus point of environment, economics and politics, as well as identity, gender, race and class. Consequently, not only is the experience of food as a connection to the nonhuman natural essentially unequal, access to food and awareness of which foods are healthy similarly depends on class, race and gender. In a biting satire on the availability of “real” food, the narrator of Zadie Smith’s *N/W* comments on one of the characters’ complaints that croissants will never be as good as in France: “This is because they are made in the back of a sweet shop, off Willesden Lane. *Real* croissants may be purchased from the organic market, on a Sunday, in the playground of Leah’s old school” (18, emphasis mine). In other words, real food is available to those who have the resources to pay for it – those primarily (upper) middle class consumers who shop organic and at farmers’ markets.<sup>3</sup>

Yet the connections with the nonhuman natural through food are also problematic for (upper) middle class urbanites such as Stella – and not just in relation to gender. Although alternative food practices may connect people to their regional context – and as such foster bioregionalism – it often remains unclear what exactly this connection pertains, since ideas about “real” food are largely based on *assumptions* only. In *The Translation of the Bones* a mirror is held up several times about the terms and associations used in contemporary discourse about “real” food – terms such as “quality”, “community”, “natural”, and “healthy”.<sup>4</sup> One character’s thoughts about dinner at a good restaurant illustrate that what we perceive as “good” food is about much more than just food: it’s a “luxury” not having to cook herself, and the anticipation about eating “real food, not vacuum-packed and microwaved” is intimately connected for her to spending the evening with her friends (86-87).

The various connotations that food holds, however, are not only explored in relation to those being able to afford “real” food, but also those who are not, and who enjoy food generally looked down upon by those belonging to the food

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<sup>3</sup> Alternative food practices particularly middle class: Slocum 522; Jarosz 240-241; Weatherall et al. 242.

<sup>4</sup> In the pilot study conducted by Holloway and Kneafsey, the terms quality, community, natural and identity were most frequently used when referring to the products bought at farmers’ markets (293).

elite (Hurst 1998 in Holloway and Kneafsey). The associations that food holds for Mary-Margaret – one of the lower class characters in the novel – show that the supposed connection to nature that Stella experiences are only available to the happy few. Mary-Margaret doesn't ponder the beauty and wonder of mussels – instead, she's drawn to the sweet, fatty and salty foods on offer in her neighbourhood shop. Although she lives on a budget, she occasionally likes to splurge on Irish Cream, which reminds her of her own, and her Irish mother's, heritage. The beverage itself is every bit as important to her as the connotations that the package promotes: "She was drawn to things that reminded her of her heritage, with green fields on the labels and words on them like cream. Cream was a word that tasted of itself, she thought, and filled the mouth exactly like the real thing" (100). When Mary-Margaret is imprisoned and her mother Fidelma left to fend for herself, their priest tries to nurse her back to health by shopping at a different store – a Waitrose outside of the estate – and buying grapes, salads, oatcakes, yoghurt and "the healthiest-looking ready meals he could find" (170). These foods, though, do not hold the relationship of identity that Fidelma's preferred foods hold – and are anyway unattainable for her financially and practically.

Despite the popularity of alternative food practices, various scholars have noted that practices such as eating local food and adopting a bioregional lifestyle are not necessarily good or beneficial to people and planet.<sup>5</sup> The small-scale farmers that are supposedly supported by alternative food practices are particularly vulnerable, since they often rely heavily on unpaid family labour, and lack the resources to juggle the demands of processing, marketing and transport to farmers' markets (Jarosz 241). Given the distances that many of these farmers have to cross to bring their products to a farmers' market in town, the question can be asked to what extent the local community is really supported. As one small-scale organic farmer interviewed by Lucy Jarosz argues, [SLIDE] "in growing your food in a small rural area, are you really supporting your local, rural economy when you take your food into the nearest big city? ... Wouldn't it

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<sup>5</sup> "The simple assertion that bioregional is a good thing ... is not quite so simple" (Estok 682); "The assumption that local, alternative food systems are necessarily beneficial and sustainable for all who participate in them simply because they are 'local' or 'organic' is inaccurate" (Jarosz 241).

be so much more direct if you focused on feeding the people right near you?” (qtd in Jarosz 240). Indeed, pleas to “buy British” and eat local have not led to a more sustainable British countryside, as the picture that is painted of the Dorset countryside in *The Translation of the Bones* illustrates. Since Rufus is MP for a county in Dorset, they own a house in a small rural village, which they only visit, however, in weekends. Stella feels uncomfortable about this – “fraudulent” even: “For the generations who had lived there it had represented permanence, a place of work, a settled place in life... Now there was nowhere in the village where a person could earn a living except as a cleaner or an odd-job man. Or, of course, as an MP” (29). Indeed, the apple juice in Stella’s fridge, “pressed locally from the fruit of nearby orchards” (92), is most likely not bought by those actually living locally either – except by people like Stella and Rufus.

Many scholars have drawn a connection between food being a marker and expression of class, gender, socio-economic status and politics – and as such providing a similarly class, gender, socio-economic and political connection to nature – to the commodification of nature. In a Marxist reading of food injustice in the city, Nik Heynen argues that the commodification of food is tied in with human alienation from nature. Not only does this lead to increasingly less access to (healthy) foods for those less privileged, but it also makes urban environments increasingly vulnerable to environmental crisis. Urban hunger, then, Heynen suggests, [SLIDE] “is both a natural condition created through complex biochemical processes, as well as a social process produced through power relations dictating who eats what and how much, and who goes hungry” (129). These processes, I’d argue, are inherently tied to our narratives of nature, our narratives of food, and the connections we establish between the two.

Contemporary perceptions of nature and food lead to supermarkets, as Allison Carruth notes, becoming spaces of reification, which downplay environmental and social histories.<sup>6</sup> This is not just the case, though, for store-bought food, but equally the case for the kind of real food bought and cooked by Stella. The narrator describes how the dinner guests feel comforted by the excellent food and wine provided at the party while discussing the dire financial

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<sup>6</sup> The term “reification”, Carruth notes, is used by her to signify the process in capitalist economies by which complex social (and I would add ecological) relationships are reduced to the circulation and marketing of *commodities* (“The Chocolate Eater”, n 12 615)

state of the country (73). The contrast that is created here between on the one hand the “comforting” food, and on the other the financial crisis illustrates perfectly just how disconnected food in this instance has become from the social, political and economic circumstances that produce it. Food, and the processes that have led to it being served at the dinner party, are presented as wholly disconnected to the crisis, whereas the collapse of the countryside is one of the aspects that have made the British economy less resilient over the past half century. Similarly, as British research has shown, frequenting farmers’ markets is far less about establishing or supporting a sense of community or environmental care, but much more “a conservative celebration of the local as the supposed repository of specific meanings and values” (Holloway and Kneafsey 294). Rather than establishing a connection to nature – or nonhuman place – then, alternative food practices tap into a different desire to connect to a nostalgic and conservative sense of the past.

The ties to place and the nonhuman natural established by food and the narratives that surround it, then, are at best ambivalent. Indeed, the price paid for urban reconnection to the natural through food seems to be a complete avoidance of the social and economic realities making this reconnection possible. Similarly, post-millennial novels like *The Translation of the Bones* and, to a lesser extent, *N/W*, present the possibilities that food holds for urban reconnection with nature. At the same time, they emphasize the problematic dimensions of this reconnection to suggest that, despite growing environmental awareness, ambiguity, ambivalence and even ignorance remain a defining part of twenty-first-century human-nature relations.

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