

EDIBLE MATTER

DO THE WAYS in which we conceive of politics sufficiently acknowledge the force of ‘things’?¹ Does our thinking about political agency—about what can make things happen in the public arena—take adequate account of material agency? The traditional approach is exemplified by Leon Kass, appointed by George W. Bush in 2001 to the President’s Council on Bioethics and its one-time chair. He argues in *The Hungry Soul: Eating and the Perfecting of Our Nature* that this everyday activity reveals humanity’s place at the top of the hierarchy of being and our rightful mastery over things. According to Kass, ‘in eating, we do not become the something that we eat; rather the edible gets assimilated to what we are . . . the edible object is thoroughly transformed by and re-formed into the eater.’²

This conquest model of consumption disregards the effectivity of not only animal bodies, but also the ‘bodies’ of vegetables, minerals, and pharmaceutical, bacterial or viral agents. It presents nonhuman matter as merely the environment for or the means to human action. But does there not exist, as the notion of a viral agent suggests, a form of agentic capacity not restricted to the human actor, a potentiality within materiality per se? This material agency would include the negative power to resist or obstruct human projects, but it would also entail the active power to exert forces and create effects.

In this essay, I seek to bring to the fore this vital power as it exists within nonhuman ‘actants’.³ Bruno Latour defines an actant as ‘something that acts or to which activity is granted by others. It implies no special motivation of human individual actors, nor of humans in general’.⁴ Proceeding from this definition, I will horizontalize the relations between humans, biota and abiota—presenting all of them as actors vying for efficacy. However, each of these can express its agentic capacity only within an

assemblage congenial to it—only, that is, within a specific configuration of other actants (each itself an effect of the interactions between the multiple actants internal to *it*). Agency is then a force distributed across multiple, overlapping bodies, disseminated in degrees—rather than the capacity of a unitary subject of consciousness.

Edible material is an agent inside and alongside intention-forming, morality-(dis)obeying, language-using, reflexivity-wielding, culture-making human beings. Food is an active inducer-producer of salient, public effects, rather than a passive resource at the disposal of consumers. The case for food as a co-participant in our world, as possessing an agentic capacity irreducible to (though rarely divorced from) human agency, has two prongs. The first seeks support in scientific studies of the effects of dietary fat on the moods and cognitive dispositions of humans, not only on the thickness of their flesh. The second revisits the robust discussions around the moral and political efficacy of diet in the nineteenth century. Here I will focus on motifs from the work of Friedrich Nietzsche and Henry Thoreau, where eating becomes a series of mutual transformations in which the border between inside and outside becomes blurred. My meal is and is not mine; you are and are not what you eat. Human and nonhuman bodies re-corporealize in response to each other; both exercise formative power and also offer themselves as matter to be acted upon. Eating, then, reveals not only the interdependence of humans and edible matter, but also a capacity to effect social change inherent in human and nonhuman bodies alike. I conclude by asking whether an enhanced alertness to material agency might help us to reimagine what materiality is—to move it away from the image of inert, brute matter.

What is materiality?

If the eaten is to become ‘food’, it must be digestible to a formerly foreign body. Likewise, if the eater is to be nourished, it must accommodate itself to a formerly foreign body. Both, then, have to have been mutable,

¹ Thanks to Anders Berg-Sørensen, John Buell, Bill Connolly, Jonathan Goldberg, Jake Greear, Hadley Leach, Jennifer Lin, Patchen Markell, Noortje Marres, Nicholas Tampio and Lars Tønder for their contributions to this essay.

² Leon Kass, *The Hungry Soul*, Chicago 1994, pp. 25–6.

³ By ‘nonhumans’ I do not mean that which is untouched by or utterly unrelated to humans, but rather an independent dimension of things, an aspect irreducible to what people invest or insert into them.

⁴ Bruno Latour, ‘On actor-network theory: a few clarifications’ (1998), available at www.nettime.org. See also Latour, *The Politics of Nature*, Cambridge, MA 2004, p. 75.

to have always been a materiality that is hustle and flow as well as sedimentation and substance. The rhetorical thrust of the noun ‘matter’ and the adjective ‘material’ is precisely the opposite: to denote *stable stuff*. Ben Anderson and Divya Tolia-Kelly note that there are two dominant figurations of materiality, both of which associate it with stability or grounding: ‘The first is the familiar realist equation between matter and unmediated, static, physicality’ and ‘the second is the use of “the material”, or “material conditions”, to refer to an ostensive social structure that over-determines “the cultural”’.⁵

Materiality does, of course, sometimes act as solid ground and recalcitrant structure. But edible materiality discloses what Deleuze calls a ‘vagabond materiality’.⁶ For him metal and metallurgy reveal the nomadism of what has traditionally been conceived as matter awaiting form. Playing on the notion of metal as a ‘conductor’ of electricity, he describes how metal ‘conducts’ materiality through a series of self-transformations—not a sequential movement from one fixed point to another, but a tumbling of continuous variations with fuzzy borders. Metals do not settle forever into one determinate state; alloys bleed into each other. Their efficacy does not depend only on periods of stability: a certain ‘incorporeality’ is not incompatible with the ability to act or to produce powerful effects.

Surveying its various incarnations, Maud Ellman illustrates how food exemplifies this becoming over being:

its disintegration in the stomach, its assimilation in the blood, its diaphoresis in the epidermis, its metempsychosis in the large intestine; its viscosity in okra, gumbo, oysters; its elasticity in jellies, its deliquescence in blanc-manges; its tumescence in the throats of serpents, its slow erosion in the bellies of sharks; its odysseys through pastures, orchards, wheat-fields, stock-yards, supermarkets, kitchens, pig troughs, rubbish dumps, disposals; the industries of sowing, hunting, cooking, milling, processing and canning it; the wizardry of its mutations, ballooning in bread, subsiding in soufflés; raw and cooked, solid and melting, vegetable and mineral, fish, flesh and fowl, encompassing the whole compendium of living substance.⁷

⁵ Ben Anderson and Divya Tolia-Kelly, ‘Matter(s) in social and cultural geography’, *Geoforum*, vol. 35, no. 6 (November 2004), pp. 669–70.

⁶ Gilles Deleuze, ‘Metal, metallurgy, music, Husserl, Simondon’, delivered in Vincennes, 27 February 1979, available at www.webdeleuze.com.

⁷ Maud Ellman, *The Hunger Artists: Starving, Writing and Imprisonment*, Cambridge, MA 1993, cited in Terry Eagleton, ‘Edible Ecriture’, in Sian Griffiths and Jennifer Wallace, eds, *Consuming Passions: Food in the Age of Anxiety*, Manchester 1998, p. 207.

Deleuze claims that metallurgy exposes the ‘vague essence’ of materiality to be ‘continuous variation’ and ‘continuous development of form’.⁸ Food too reveals materiality’s instability, vagrancy, activeness.

Effects and agents

In 1917, the English physiologist W. M. Bayliss wrote that ‘it may be taken for granted that everyone is sincerely desirous of avoiding unnecessary consumption of food’.⁹ However, 70 per cent of Americans surveyed in a 2000 Roper Report said that they ate ‘pretty much whatever they want.’ That means, on an average day, 52 teaspoons of sugar and corn sweeteners, over half a pound of meat, and a fifth of a pound of butter and oils. Overall, what Americans ‘want’ is to eat between 500 and 800 more calories a day than they did fifty years ago.¹⁰ That would explain why their bodies are larger and heavier than ever before. Here we stumble upon a banal instance of what Michel Foucault might have called the ‘productive power’ of food: the generation of new human tissue.

That food can make people fatter is a fact so ordinary and obvious that it is difficult to perceive it as an example of food’s agentic capacity. The case becomes stronger when we learn of hitherto unrecognized powers of dietary fat, in particular its ability to alter not just bodies but minds. Several recent studies suggest that omega-3 fatty acids, a kind of fat prevalent in certain fish, can make disruptive prisoners less violent, inattentive schoolchildren more focused and bipolar persons less depressed. A widely cited 2002 ‘double-blind, placebo-controlled, randomized trial of nutritional supplements on 231 young adult prisoners, comparing disciplinary offences before and during supplementation’ shows a 35 per cent reduction of offences among British prisoners given omega-3 fatty acids.¹¹ A similarly designed study of fatty acids given to children with ‘difficulties in learning, behaviour and psychosocial adjustment’

⁸ Deleuze, ‘Metal, metallurgy’.

⁹ W. M. Bayliss, *The Physiology of Food and Economy in Diet*, London 1917, p. 1.

¹⁰ Since 1950, the consumption of sweeteners has increased by 39 per cent, red meat by 7 lb and poultry by 46 lb per year, and added fats by 67 per cent. All statistics taken from the United States Department of Agriculture’s *Agriculture Fact Book: 2001–2002*, ‘Profiling Food Consumption in America’. ‘Consumption’ refers to what is used up of the aggregate food supply; because of ‘spoilage, plate waste, and . . . other losses’, amounts are greater than the actual amount of food ingested.

¹¹ C. Bernard Gesch et al., ‘Influence of supplementary vitamins, minerals and essential fatty acids on the antisocial behaviour of young adult prisoners’, *British Journal of Psychiatry*, vol. 181, no. 1 (July 2002), pp. 22–8.

finds ‘significant improvement’ in reading, spelling and conduct.¹² Meanwhile, the ‘60-fold variation across countries in the annual prevalence of major depression is strongly inversely correlated with national fish consumption . . . For bipolar affective disorder . . . prevalence rates rise precipitously below an apparent annual fish intake threshold of approximately 75 lb per person, with prevalence rates of . . . 0.04 per cent in Taiwan (81.6 lb per person) and 6.5 per cent in Germany (27.6 lb per person).’ Americans in 2000 ate about 15 lb per person.¹³

Results such as these are always subject to further research and to various interpretations. They do support the idea that lipids have the power not just to increase human flesh but also to induce human moods, modes of sociality and states of mind. But I do not imagine that this effectiveness is a mechanical causality, nor that we will someday arrive at a nutritional science which demonstrates certain quantifiable cognitive or behavioural enhancements to be the invariant effects of specific fats. It is more likely that an emergent causality is at work: particular fats, acting in different ways in different bodies and with different intensities, even within the same body at different times, may produce patterns of effects but not in ways that are fully predictable—for a small change in the assemblage may issue in a significant disruption of the pattern. The agentic assemblage in which persons and fats are participants ought to be figured as a nonlinear system:

In a linear system, the ultimate effect of the combined action of two different causes is merely the [addition] . . . of the effects of each cause taken individually. But in a nonlinear system, adding a small cause to one that is already present can induce dramatic effects that have no common measure of the amplitude of the cause.¹⁴

In nonlinear assemblages, ‘effects’ resonate with and against their ‘causes’ such that the impact of any added element (omega-3 fatty acid) or set of elements (high fish diet) cannot be grasped at a glance. Instead, their agency

¹² Alexandra Richardson and Paul Montgomery, ‘The Oxford–Durham Study: A randomized, controlled trial of dietary supplementation with fatty acids in children with Developmental Coordination Disorder,’ *Pediatrics*, vol. 115, no. 5 (May 2005), pp. 1360–6.

¹³ Brian Hallahan and Malcolm Garland, ‘Essential fatty acids and mental health’, *British Journal of Psychiatry*, vol. 186, no. 4 (April 2005), pp. 275–7.

¹⁴ Grégoire Nicolis and Ilya Prigogine, *Exploring Complexity*, New York 1989, p. 59, cited in Manuel DeLanda, *Intensive Science and Virtual Philosophy*, London 2002, p. 131.

is ‘slowly brought to light as the assemblage stabilizes itself through the mutual accommodation of its heterogeneous components.’¹⁵

Within these assemblages, particular elements can be so contingently well-positioned that they can significantly alter the direction or function of the assemblage; Deleuze and Guattari term these particularly efficacious elements ‘operators’. They give the example of a piece of grass used by a finch both to make a nest and find a mate. The grass stem ‘acts as a component of passage between the territorial assemblage and the courtship assemblage . . . It is an operator, a vector. It is an *assemblage converter*.’¹⁶ Food can be what Michel Serres calls a ‘thermal exciter’: it does not effect a revolutionary transformation in the assemblage it enters, instead making it ‘change state differentially. It inclines it. It makes the equilibrium of the energetic distribution fluctuate . . . It irritates it. It inflames it. Often this inclination has no effect. But it can produce gigantic ones by chain reactions or reproduction.’¹⁷

What counts as an actor is no longer the individual but actants-in-assemblages. In the case of fat, for instance, we need to bear in mind not only larger humans and their economic-cultural prostheses (agribusiness, snack food vending machines, serving sizes, microwave ovens, bariatric surgery) but also the strivings and trajectories of the fats themselves, as they vie with—or more indirectly, weaken or strengthen—human wills, practices, habits and ideas.

Flatulent vegetables

Most evidence of the active power of foodstuffs comes by way of the physical or biological sciences, as in the studies cited above. The social sciences and humanities, when they take up the question of food, mainly focus on human acts in, for example, the rhetoric of culinary self-expression or the socio-cultural rituals and practices through which meaningful food objects are produced, or the aesthetic-commercial techniques through which desire for a new food product is induced. With the exception of the cookbook author or restaurant reviewer who describes the colour, texture and aroma of ingredients, food writing seldom attends

¹⁵ DeLanda, *Intensive Science*, p. 144.

¹⁶ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Minneapolis 1987, pp. 324–5.

¹⁷ Michel Serres, *Parasite* [1980], Minneapolis 2007, p. 191.

to the force of materiality. As David Goodman puts it in his critique of agro-food studies in sociology, conceptualizations of food's materiality as a 'real and active, lively presence' are all too rare.¹⁸

In the nineteenth century, however, certain philosophers posited that food is capable of producing significant alterations in the dispositions of individuals and even nations. Nietzsche, for example—without the benefit of experiments of the randomized, double-blind sort—claimed that psychological, cognitive, aesthetic and moral complexions were altered by what was ingested: 'an incorrect diet (the alcoholism of the Middle Ages; the absurdity of the vegetarians)' is one source of 'the deep depression, the leaden exhaustion, the black melancholy of the physiologically inhibited'.¹⁹

Nietzsche attended to the material agency proper to not only alcohol and other drugs, but food. This includes the capacity to induce what one might call a corporeal spirituality. Zarathustra proclaims, 'My virile food taketh effect, my strong and savoury sayings: and verily, I did not nourish them with flatulent vegetables! But with warrior-food, with conqueror-food: new desires did I awaken.'²⁰ However 'warrior food' (raw meat?) alone does not make a warrior. Rather, the effectivity of any particular food depends upon the specific temper of the body into which it enters. Nietzsche makes this point in his discussion of a popular diet book of his day, Luigi Cornaro's *La Vita Sobria*. Cornaro, born in 1464, lived to 102 by eating only 12 ounces of solid food ('bread, the yolk of an egg, a little meat, and some soup') and 14 ounces of wine a day ('waters, in whatever way they may be doctored or prepared, have not the virtue of wine, and fail to relieve me').²¹ Nietzsche complains that 'a scholar of our day, with his rapid consumption of nervous energy, would kill himself with Cornaro's regimen'.²²

¹⁸ David Goodman, 'Ontology Matters: The Relational Materiality of Nature and Agro-Food Studies', *Sociologia Ruralis*, vol. 41, no. 2 (April 2001), p. 183.

¹⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals/Ecce Homo*, New York 1969, p. 130.

²⁰ Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, New York 1954, p. 311.

²¹ Luigi Cornaro, *Art of Living Long* [1915], Milwaukee 1998, pp. 55, 94.

²² Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, London and New York 1983, p. 47. Nietzsche seems not to have read Cornaro carefully enough: 'I was compelled to be extremely careful with regard to the quality and quantity of my food and drink. However those persons who are blessed with strong constitutions may make use of many other kinds and qualities of food and drink, and partake of them in greater quantities, than I do'. Cornaro, *Art of Living Long*, p. 97.

The effectivity of a foodstuff varies from body to body, but what is even more interesting about Nietzsche's discussion of Cornaro is his suggestion that the effectivity of the 'same' food in the 'same' body will vary over time as actants enter and leave the scene. Nietzsche makes a similar point when he writes that 'warrior food', if it is to produce warriors, must join forces with a whole host of other actants. He again gestures towards a kind of assemblage, rather than the individual, as the real locus of agency in his discussion of anti-Semitism's hold on Bismarck's Germany, 'connected with the undeniable and palpable stagnation of the German spirit; and the cause of that I seek in a too exclusive diet of newspapers, politics, beer and Wagnerian music'.²³

A material foodstuff—beer—comes alive to its powers when in the presence of cultural artefacts: broadsheets, politics, opera. These latter are what Donna Haraway would call 'material-semiotic actors', hybrids of sounds, thought, symbols, hopes, affects and physical matter.²⁴ Any science of diet, then, would have to take account not only of foods acting in conjunction with other materialities such as digestive liquids or micro-organisms, but also with the not-quite materialities of perception, belief, memory, meaning. Still, Nietzsche warns against exaggerating the force of such 'higher' things: 'nutrition, place, climate . . . are inconceivably more important than everything one has taken to be important so far: "God", "soul", "virtue", "sin", "beyond", "truth", "eternal life".'²⁵

Much like Russian *matryoshki* dolls, assemblages contain a sequence of ever smaller ones—functioning collectivities of actants within a series of larger, more complex assemblages. But there is also a sense in which Nietzsche continues to imagine the assemblage of consumption as issuing in predictable, rather than emergent, outcomes—whose predictability increases as one's knowledge of the system becomes more detailed, up-to-the-minute and comprehensive. Perhaps this supposition of a reliable mechanism is a necessary illusion, required if one is to pursue a deliberate regime of consumption, a plan of action in which one part of the body (the will?) issues orders to others (limbs, mouth, eyes, nose) about what and how much it ought to take in.

²³ Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, pp. 158–9.

²⁴ Donna Haraway, *Modest_Witness@Second-Millennium.FemaleMan-Meets-OncoMouse*, London and New York 1997, p. 2.

²⁵ Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, p. 256.

Reflecting on the material components of an ethical-existential disposition, Nietzsche began to craft a programme of artful eating. On the other side of the Atlantic, Henry Thoreau engaged in his own programme of consumption, one designed to induce a different set of effects. Both experimentalists sought to benefit in mind and body from the vital, active powers of food. Nietzsche rejected vegetables because of their role in ascetic practices associated with *ressentiment*. Thoreau shared his sense of a vegetal agency but located it within a different assemblage, which produced a different effect, at least on his body: a wakeful, creative, nonconformist sensibility.

While walking home one night, Thoreau catches a ‘glimpse of a wood-chuck stealing across my path, and I felt a strange thrill of savage delight, and was strongly tempted to seize and devour him raw; not that I was hungry then, except for that wildness which he represented.’²⁶ But then he stops to wonder: will its vitality really become his? After years of consuming animal bodies, he finally asks just how eating works. Just what transpires when these bodies mix with mine?²⁷ Thoreau ultimately concludes that ‘devouring’ wild flesh does not in fact result in his own vitalization, but in the mortification—the rotting—of his imagination.

With every year, meat becomes more and more viscerally unappealing to Thoreau. Eventually, he stops consuming ‘animal food’ (and tea and coffee) altogether, finding ‘something essentially unclean’ about it. The irresistible wildness of a lively woodchuck had turned into the repellent uncleanness of its corpse. He calls this a ‘practical objection’—meat oozes and drips, whereas ‘a little bread or a few potatoes would have done as well, with less trouble and filth.’²⁸ But more than housekeeping is at stake here. Meat, he declares, is ‘not agreeable to my imagination . . . I believe that every man who has ever been earnest to preserve his higher or poetic faculties in the best condition has been particularly inclined to abstain from animal food . . . It may be vain to ask why the imagination will not be reconciled to flesh and fat. I am satisfied that it is not.’

²⁶ Henry Thoreau, *Walden and Resistance to Civil Government*, New York 1992, p. 140.

²⁷ Walt Whitman engages in a similar consideration in *Leaves of Grass*, ‘Song of Myself’, lines 389–90: ‘Who goes there? hankering, gross, mystical, nude; / How is it that I extract strength from the beef I eat?’

²⁸ ‘Most men would feel shame if caught preparing with their own hands’ the bloody meat dinner that is ‘everyday prepared for them by others’—that is, by women. Thoreau, *Walden*, pp. 143–4.

Thoreau resists ingesting the viscous slime of decaying animal bodies, and seeks an alternative that can leaven his flesh and refine his imagination. He is ‘thrilled’ to find that ‘some berries which I had eaten on the hill-side had fed my genius.’²⁹

Thoreau allows the untamed vitality of things, including the foods he eats, to come to the fore in a way that renders him finer, leaner and cleaner. He enters into and helps maintain an assemblage—a shimmering web of solid and wispy materialities. But if nonhumans ‘have’ agentic capacity, its actualization and strength is affected by the character of human engagements with materiality. Thoreau had a sense of this from his regular supper of huckleberries and blueberries: ‘The fruits do not yield their true flavour to the purchaser of them, nor to him who raises them for the market . . . It is a vulgar error to suppose that you have tasted huckleberries who never plucked them . . . The ambrosial and essential part of the fruit is lost with the bloom which is rubbed off in the market cart, and they become mere provender.’³⁰ In Thoreau’s account, then, both nonhumans (berries, meat) and humans (Thoreau, berry-sellers) exhibit agentic force.

How food matters

Against the dissipating effects of food commodification, the Slow Food Movement stands out as a collective example of artful consumption. Founded in Italy in 1986, this international network contests the McDonaldization, environmental unsustainability and petroleum intensity of a globalized system of food production, marketing and distribution. According to its manifesto:

Slow Food is dedicated to stewardship of the land and ecologically sound food production; to the revival of the kitchen and the table as centres of pleasure, culture and community; to the invigoration and proliferation of regional, seasonal culinary traditions; to the creation of a collaborative, ecologically-oriented and virtuous globalization; and to living a slower and more harmonious rhythm of life.³¹

What is distinctive about Slow Food, and what might enable it to have an impact, is its dual invocation of environmental and gastronomical

²⁹ Thoreau, *Walden*, pp. 144–6.

³⁰ Thoreau, *Walden*, pp. 116–17.

³¹ See www.slowfoodusa.org.

concerns. It simultaneously advocates ecological sustainability, cultural specificity, nutritional economy, aesthetic pleasure and the skills needed to make meals from scratch. In grouping these interests together and forming this particular assemblage, Slow Food just might have a chance to stir an American public that environmentalism alone was not quite able to activate, especially in a political setting where wasteful and unhealthy consumption is encouraged at the highest levels of policy.

The Slow Food programme involves taking the time not only to prepare and savour food, but also to reflect upon the economic, labour, agricultural and transportation events preceding its arrival to the market, consonant with a commodity chain approach that chronicles the 'life-history' of a food product and traces 'the links that connect people and places at different points along the chain'.³² The strength of this method resides in its ability to give consumers better insight into just what goes into their mouths: not only in terms of ingredients such as pesticides, animal hormones, fats, sugars, vitamins, minerals, etc, but also the exploitation of food workers, and the greed of agribusiness and its agents in Congress.³³ But its weakness may be its anthropocentric allegiances, its tendency, which it shares with Kass, to figure food as merely a resource or means.

If politics, in its broadest definition, consists in those activities pursued on behalf of the public, then we are left with the thorny questions of what counts as a public and what it would mean to act on its behalf. Here it is useful to return to the idea of emergent causality, which is implicit in John Dewey's claim that the public and its interests do not

³² Peter Jackson, 'Manufacturing meaning along the food commodity chain', Birkbeck Cultures of Consumption project, 2003. An example is Michael Pollan, *The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals*, New York, 2006. It gives a genealogy of four American meals—one from McDonald's, one from items bought at a 'Whole Foods' supermarket, one whose ingredients came from a small, self-sustaining farm, and one from what the author had hunted or gathered.

³³ Good examples include Cheri Lucas Jennings's and Bruce Jennings's exposé of the poverty wages and poisonous working conditions embedded in the shiny red, wormless supermarket apple and Greg Critser's account of the link between agribusiness interests, subsidized corn production, high-fructose corn syrup and obesity. See Cheri Lucas Jennings and Bruce Jennings, 'Green Fields/Brown Skin: Posting as a Sign of Recognition', in Jane Bennett and William Chaloupka, eds, *In the Nature of Things: Language, Politics and the Environment*, Minnesota 1993; Greg Critser, *Fat Land: How Americans Became the Fattest People in the World*, Boston 2003.

pre-exist the real-time events that call them into being. How is it that sometimes scattered, unrelated individuals are aroused to join forces and engender a public, while at other times they are content to remain in private or in apolitical forms of association?³⁴ The crystallization of a public requires a catalyst, which Dewey identifies as a dynamic event that causes harm.³⁵ Since such a problem is itself a contingency, its effect—a public—is also a temporal assemblage, always in the process of forming and dissolving. As he puts it, ‘the ramifications of the issues before the public are so wide and intricate . . . the details are so many and so shifting, that the public cannot for any length of time identify and hold itself. It is not that there is no public . . . there are too many publics, for conjoint actions’ have multitudinous consequences ‘and each one of them crosses the others and generates its own group of persons especially affected’.³⁶

Taking a cue from Dewey’s pragmatic focus on consequences rather than authorial intentions, I have tried to show that the public consists of more than ‘persons’ and that the locus of political agency is a (mortal) assemblage of humans *and* nonhumans. In *Art as Experience*, Dewey uses the figure of skin to draw readers’ attention to the interconnections between humans and other materialities. He gestures towards the idea of an agentic assemblage:

The epidermis is only in the most superficial way an indication of where an organism ends and its environment begins. There are things inside the body that are foreign to it, and there are things outside of it that belong to it de jure if not de facto; that must, that is, be taken possession of if life is to continue. On the lower scale, air and food materials are such things; on the higher, tools, whether the pen of the writer or the anvil of the blacksmith, utensils and furnishings, property, friends and institutions—all the supports

³⁴ As Noortje Marres rightly notes, for Dewey (and also Walter Lippmann), the ‘public is precisely *not* a social community . . . [T]hose who are jointly implicated in the issue *must* organize a community. What the members of the public share is that they are all affected . . . but they do not already belong to the same community.’ Noortje Marres, ‘Issues Spark a Public into Being: A key but often forgotten point of the Lippmann–Dewey debate’, in Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel, eds, *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy*, Cambridge, MA 2005, p. 214.

³⁵ A public ‘consists of all those who are affected by the indirect consequences of transactions to such an extent that it is deemed necessary to have those consequences systematically cared for.’ John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, New York 1927, p. 16.

³⁶ Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, p. 137.

and sustenances without which a civilized life cannot be. The need that is manifest in the urgent impulsions that demand completion through what the environment—and it alone—can supply, is a dynamic acknowledgment of this dependence of the self for wholeness upon its surroundings.³⁷

This picture of food, however, as a tool to ‘be taken possession of’, perpetuates the notion of nonhuman materiality as essentially passive stuff—on one side of an ontological divide between life and matter. In contrast, I have construed food as itself an actant within an agentic assemblage that includes among its members my metabolism, cognition and moral sensibility. My goal has been to uncover what modern thought—in its tireless quest to extricate humans from the order of nature and to isolate what is unique about our capacities—has worked so hard to obscure: the presence of the ‘active principle’ in matter.

What would happen if movements like Slow Food incorporated a greater sense of the active vitality of foodstuffs? If an image of inert matter helps to animate aggressively wasteful and planet-endangering consumption, then a materiality experienced as a lively force could animate a more ecologically sustainable public. Human intentionality is surely an essential element of the public that is emerging around the issues of obesity, public health and food security, but it is not the only or even the key operator in it. Food—as a self-altering, dissipative materiality—is also a player. It enters into what we become. It is one of the many agencies operative when we engage in the questions of what to eat, how to get it, and when to stop.

³⁷ Dewey, *Art as Experience*, New York 1934, p. 59.