Posthumanism Invited to Dinner: Exploring the Potential of a More-Than-Human Perspective in Food Studies

A PLATE OF FOOD AWAITS. A chicken thigh seasoned with the lemony accents of sumac. On the side, rice cooked with small brown lentils topped with onions, fried until brown and crispy. Leafy greens, steamed, salted, dressed with olive oil. What is happening here? Well, dinner awaits the diner, a hungry human wishing to nourish the body and satisfy the taste buds. Food will be tasted, digested, and transformed by bodily functions into nutrients and waste. Or maybe not.

What happens at the dinner table if we take a posthumanist perspective and consider the agency of the nonhuman? Posthumanism is the term I use to group the theories and approaches that seek to remove humans from a self-appointed role as supreme actor on planet earth and recognize meaning and agency in other life forms—and even phenomena and matter. Posthumanism levels the playing field—flattens the ontology—and provides a framework for a radically different world of networks, assemblages, companionship, relating and interrelating.

Food studies has yet to fully reckon with nonhuman agency. Typical in food studies is what Bennett (2007: 133) calls the “conquest model of consumption,” a conception of eating that involves humans consuming and digesting inert matter. I add production to this model since the prevailing conception of farming and agri-food systems casts the human as the grower, producer, and transformer of food (as noted by Goodman 1999). This conquest model of production and consumption disregards the agency of the vegetable or animal, bacteria, soil biota, watersheds, climate, and all the nonhuman things and systems that act, influence, shape, and make food for humans possible—or not. The theoretical framework of posthumanism upends so much of what we know and think about food and how it is produced, transformed, and even what happens when we eat. Shift your ontology and the chicken dinner on the plate, with those potentially flatulent lentils, the simple carbohydrates in the white rice that spike the glycemic index, and the leafy greens packed with iron that the body needs to get oxygen to the brain—not to mention salmonella potentially lurking in an undercooked crease in the meat—are more than inert matter. All the foodstuffs are acting upon the human, causing effects, and providing plenty of evidence of nonhuman agency. Plus all the nonhuman causes and effects that took place along the food chain.

My aim in this article is to encourage food scholars to explore posthumanism and advance debate that decenters the human and contemplates the nonhuman. The opportunity is ontological—to flatten one’s ontology and put yourself on the same plane as the chicken you have roasted is to never see dinner quite the same way again. (But interestingly, it does not necessarily lead to veganism; see Haraway 2008: 105–6.) The opportunity is also political. Much has been written about the inequality and injustice (for example, Raja, Ma, and Yadav 2008; Tarasuk, Dachner, and Loopstra 2014; Weis 2015) as well as the unsustainability of the current global industrial food system (Islam and Wong 2017; Willett et al. 2019). Posthumanism offers another path toward addressing these serious grievances. It is also important. We live during the Anthropocene epoch, the current geological age named for the impact of human activity on the geological record. The Anthropocene is the product of destructive colonial projects (Davis and Todd 2017) as well as the Industrial Revolution combined with a capitalist worldview that sees the biosphere as a natural resource to be exploited (J. W. Moore 2017, 2018). Braidotti (2017), writing on posthumanism in the age of Anthropocene, notes that this epoch is also intertwined with
rapid technological change and growing inequality, which makes the posthuman project so salient today. She writes that “to discuss the posthuman is also to stare into the abyss of the inhumanity of our times” (84).

Posthumanist avenues of inquiry are particularly relevant to those of us with ample food to eat because we are implicated in this morass. When we take to social media with pictures of the meat pie we procrastibaked, the food system that brought us the multipurpose flour and the minced beef contributes substantially to environmental degradation and climate change (Steinfeld 2006). Reckoning with our complicity in the system as eaters is a political project that posthumanism can help to ferment. First I will synthesize ideas fundamental to posthumanist discourse and look at how they have been explored in food studies so far. I will discuss prospects for scholars looking to apply these ideas and then demonstrate how a posthumanist framework shifts common assumptions we make when thinking about food by applying this theory to the idea of healthy food. I conclude by arguing that an ecological understanding of healthy food could lead to a more sustainable and equitable food system in this era of uncertain ecological futures.

Eating, in Theory

Posthumanist theories are increasingly being explored and applied in disciplines across the humanities and social sciences, including in philosophy (Braidotti 2018), geography (Whatmore 2002a), and public health (Rock, Degeling, and Blue 2014). New Materialism, nonrepresentational theory, multispecies ethnography, as well as more-than-human, nature-culture(s), and postqualitative lines of inquiry, all explore the epistemological, ontological, and methodological possibilities of seeing the world and all its life forms in a tangle of relationships. These approaches are grounded in the work of theorists such as Haraway (2008), Latour (1993), Deleuze and Guattari (2004), Barad (2003), Ingold (2000), and Braidotti (2007).

Posthumanism rejects the dominant Western worldview that constructs nature as something that exists apart from humans. As Haraway (2003: 65) writes, “nature is not other (or mother).” Nor are humans an exceptional species for whom the earth has been created. Rather, in a posthumanist framework, humanity exists in relation to all other life, and matter, here on planet earth. This is a multispecies world, where all sorts of relationships bind us together with microbes (Heldke 2018) and mushrooms (Tsing 2012), dogs (Haraway 2008) and bees (L. J. Moore and Kosut 2014). Some of these relationships are kinship relations (Haraway 2008), others are relationships of dependence (Yong 2016).

Yet shifting one’s ontology and working to erase the ontological fracture between human and nonhuman nature is not about embracing ecotopia. The human and the nonhuman also exist in relationships of antagonism and struggle, life and death—relationships suffused with power dynamics where the human is not on top (Lorimer 2016; Standley and Bogich 2013).

Posthumanism contributes to the discourse that problematizes the category of human, including feminist theory, disability studies, antiracist and anticolonial work (for example, Wynter 2003; Deckha 2012; Goodley, Lawthom, and Runswick Cole 2014; Luciano and Chen 2019). As thinkers such as Wynter (2003) and Plumwood (1993) document, this category of human—or more specifically, man—has been used to separate man from nature. On the one side of the man-nature dualism is the European male and on the other, nature, women, and the rest of humanity. Whereas man has been associated with reason and culture, the contrasting “category of nature is a field of multiple exclusion and control, not only of non-humans, but of various groups of humans and aspects of human life which are cast as nature” (Plumwood, 4). Posthumanism in some cases builds on this work and looks at what has been constructed as other and left at the scholarly sidelines. By widening the gaze, a more complex and inclusive world is revealed. Sundberg (2014) reminds scholars working in this area of how it is imperative not to universalize the European erasure of the more-than-human. The ontological split between humans and nature is by no means a universally held human point of view, as Todd (2014), Theriault (2017), and Ingold (2000) demonstrate in their research. It is important to recognize that while posthumanism offers an alternative perspective to dominant European epistemology and ontology, there are other ways of knowing that do not create a dualism between nature and culture. Tallbear (2011), for one, calls on colleagues to include Indigenous philosophies in the discourse. By recognizing that posthumanism is just one perspective along with other ontologies espoused by different cultures and religions (see Gethmann and Ehlers 2003), I attempt to take steps in this article to avoid reproducing what Sundberg (2014) describes as “colonial ways of knowing” while also recognizing that more work needs to be done in this area.

Nonhuman Agency for Lunch

So the posthumanist view that humans are no longer the exceptional species with the starring role stands in contrast to the assumption at the root of Western philosophy that humans are this world’s leading actors—and moreover the only actors here on planet earth who have agency. Humans,
as opposed to nonhuman life forms such as trees, have been viewed in the Western European tradition as being the only actors with meaningful agency, who act with intent (Jones and Cloke 2002; see also Watts 2013, who explores an Indigenous perspective of nonhuman agency and argues that colonialism has worked to stifle Indigenous conceptions of land as “alive and thinking” [21]). In a posthumanist framework, more-than-humans have agency too. They can make things happen, trigger effects, influence outcomes. A foundational line of questioning is, If humans are not the sole actors in this world, then what kind of agency can be ascribed to other life forms and even things? In what ways do nonhumans have the capacity to act upon others, cause things to happen? Scholars such as Haraway, Whatmore, and Bennett all stress the relational nature of agency and often use food to illustrate their claims. Whatmore (2002: 4) describes a “heterogenous conception of social life” where agency is something that is “spun” between social actors. Food, she writes, is a “ready messenger of connectedness” (119) and “one of the most potent vectors of the ‘bodily imperatives’ that enmesh us in the material fabric and diverse company of ‘livingness’” (162). Bennett (2007) identifies agency in what is often dismissed as inert and sees humans and nonhumans in an agentic assemblage—“humans, biota and abiotah expressing their agency in relation to other actants (155). Food itself, she holds, is a co-participant. This is evident in the ways food affects one’s mood, one’s body, even one’s ability to learn (154–57). Sayes (2014), in his exploration of Bruno Latour’s Actor Network Theory, does not look at food per se, but aptly recognizes the constant relating that takes place in our multiplicitous world when he writes: “nonhumans do not have agency by themselves, if only because they are never by themselves” (144). Extrapolating this to food means you are never alone with the chicken dinner, even if you are dining alone.

These theories applied to food also challenge assumptions about human agency that are implicit in the conquest model of production and consumption. A posthumanist approach to food, says Steel (2018), is to resist “the cultural practices of human supremacy.” He writes, we “must counter the idea of the ‘uneaten eater’ by requiring a recognition of the shared immanence of at least our bodies and their enabling, uneven interdependencies” (161). Heldke (2018) considers these uneven interdependencies that we are enmeshed in through food and eating, such as when you ingest a parasite along with your meal or drink—oh dear. Considering this parasite entering the intestinal tract, she explores a relational ontology whereby eating is just as central to being as being eaten. “The individual is the sum not only of its beneficial relationships, but of all the relationships in which it is enmeshed,” she explains (249).

More-than-human frameworks have been drawn on to approach many other aspects of food and food systems in disruptive ways. For one, critical animal studies engages with posthumanist ideas (see Buller 2014, 2015, 2016). Scholars working in this area problematize the livestock industry that provides dairy products and meats, questioning a system that makes nonhumans “killable” (Haraway 2008) and renders into commodities living, breathing, sentient beings. Coulter (2016) approaches animal-human relations through the lens of work and looks at the social reproduction
of animals including farm animals, critiquing their exploitation and repression. Wadiwel (2018) too considers the labor of the animals that feed us, specifically chickens, and considers their resistance to capitalism. Such critiques are founded upon a rejection of the dualism enacted by industrial livestock agriculture that separates humans from nature and that perpetuates the belief that humans are a superior animal to the pigs and chickens reared to kill and to eat. Animals, including livestock, are understood as beings and actors with the capacity to love, work, and even resist—beings who express their agency in many ways.

Other scholars have pushed further in breaking down the nature/human dualism not only by taking sentient animals as ontological equals but also affording agency to things with which we have little in common, like food-producing plants (Marder 2013) and insects. Fleming (2017) uses a posthumanist approach to understand how walnut trees in Kyrgyzstan are actors that have political effects. Brice (2014) sees the agency of grapevines in Australia where, among other things, the plants’ ripening time determines the harvest as opposed to the vintner’s clock. Posthumanist theories have also been used to understand what happens in a garden (Power 2005) and to strengthen alternative food network research (Sarmiento 2017). Tsing (2012) compellingly finds interspecies relationships fundamental to eating over a swathe of human history, from the domestication of cereals to the slave-sugar-plantation economy. She famously writes that “human nature is an interspecies relationship” (141).

This diversity of topics in the social sciences and the humanities demonstrates posthumanism’s theoretical dexterity. There are many opportunities awaiting scholars looking to apply this perspective to food studies for, as Heldke (2018: 254) writes, “imagine just how vastly different would be our individual daily lives, and how differently we would construct social,
political, and economic systems, were we not creatures who must eat and eliminate on a very regular basis.” And this world looks much different if you seek out agency beyond the human realm. It raises questions such as, were the crops and livestock that humans domesticated about 12,000 years ago truly the product of ingenious farmers working their mastery over the plants and animals? Or was this a co-production, or even an outright expression of agency with regard to plants, as Pollan (2002) has suggested? Apply a relational perspective to cooking, and one can question whether the artfully plated chicken captured on Instagram is truly the creation of the chef who cooked it. Or might it be a multispecies collaboration? If human nature is a multispecies relationship, what does it mean for food production, as well as cooking and eating, to never be acting alone?

An awareness of more-than-human agency in food studies could lead to profound insight into questions of power, which are so critical to understanding food systems. Marchand (2018) notes that when nonhuman agency is discounted, so-called nature is rendered powerless. However, nonhuman agencies produce effects, including shaping human societies and exercising power in agri-food systems. This we have seen in the work of Besky and Padwe (2016), who argue that plants, such as wheat, long have participated in the creation of territory, in particular in a colonial context. They write that “plants are both victims and agents of ‘slow violence,’ exacted over decades and even centuries on landscapes and their occupants” (22). Mitchell (2002), too, reveals how an assemblage of human and nonhuman agencies—mosquitoes, water, sugar cane, engineers, and more—together profoundly shaped the politics of Egypt in the 1940s, countering the dominant narrative of events.² These examples raise the important question of how nonhuman agency undoes human intention with regard to food systems. Where do humans and nonhumans stand vis-à-vis rot, weeds, pests, toxicity, drought, flood? And what happens when nonhuman and human agencies work together? By allowing for the agency of the nonhuman, we gain deeper insight into how food systems are constructed as well as insight into how notions we hold about food are produced—such as what makes food healthy, or not.

Posthumanism Applied to Healthy Food

One way posthumanism disrupts long-held notions about food is in the area of health. There is a strong push in North American society today to get individuals to make healthy food choices.³ The medical community, public health, as well as the fields of lifestyle and health journalism, all promote the idea that healthy food choices will help to address what is characterized as lifestyle-related chronic disease. The American government’s Dietary Guidelines for Americans 2015–2020 describe a healthy diet as containing fruits and vegetables, some whole grains, and less sugar and saturated fats than in the Standard American Diet. The new Canadian Food Guide similarly states that a healthy diet is made up of largely plant-based foods (Health Canada 2019). The nutritional content of food is not the only consideration when it comes to healthy food. The food or retail environment also shapes health. The term “obesogenic environment”, for example, describes the biological, behavioral, and environmental influences that help to determine body size (see for example Egger and Swinburn 1997; Smith and Cummins 2009). And food environments that provide little access to healthy foods or too much access to unhealthy foods (respectively called food deserts and food swamps; see Elton 2018 for a critique) are also recognized for promoting ill health.⁴ These are mainstream approaches to healthy food that support the idea that healthy nutrition is possible for someone who has easy access to affordable fruits, vegetables, and whole grains, the money to buy

![Figure 3: The food environment in the Toronto PanAm Sports Centre.](https://example.com/food-environment.jpg)
them, as well as the self-control to hold back on eating too much sugar and saturated fats. Yet when one applies a posthumanist perspective, what counts as healthy food becomes more complicated.

A posthumanist approach to health sees health as relational (Cohn and Lynch 2017; Nading 2013). Applied to food, a posthumanist approach to healthy eating looks beyond the plate and considers the relationships, networks, systems, and assemblages that make that food. “Healthy” is not merely a property of a product you buy or a neighborhood where you grocery-shop. Rather, healthy is a confluence of everything that happens along the food chain, between the seeds and the soil, the insects and the hydrologic systems, the nutrients cycling in ecosystems, the sun, and so on. Community health in terms of food and nutrition extends beyond the body, beyond the retail environment, to all relationships and to the biosphere. If one part of the system is harmful to health, the whole system is compromised. The concept of the ecological determinants of health (Canadian Public Health Association [CPHA] 2015), emerging from the ecosystems approaches to health discourse in public health scholarship, makes these connections. Water, air, and food are the three main ecological determinants of health, as articulated by the CPHA, as they are the foundation for life. Other ecological determinants that relate specifically to food include water systems that clean and detoxify water, provide for irrigation as well as the habitat for foods harvested from marine and freshwater ecosystems; the nitrogen and phosphorus cycles that agriculture depends on; and a stable climate. In a similar way to how the social determinants of health, such as racialization, gender, and socioeconomic status, shape community health, the ecological determinants of health directly connect human well-being to nonhuman nature. Your health depends on healthy ecosystems and a healthy biosphere and your well-being is determined by the environment.

Not only does a posthumanist approach to healthy food invoke a relational conception of health, but it also makes room for nonhuman agency. Nonhuman systems and nonhuman beings (sentient and not) are food system actors (Goodman 1999). Water, soil nematodes, plants and animals, all contribute to the growing of food to nourish humans. Then even more nonhuman life forms participate with producers and cooks to transform raw ingredients into tasty foods—just think of all the work we need microorganisms to perform, like *Lactobacillus sanfranciscensis* in sourdough bread or the different bacteria that bring us Camembert versus Pecorino, miso versus natto. Nonhumans are not only key food system actors but are also direct participants in the production of human health; without these actors, we would have no food, and therefore no health—or life for that matter. So our chicken dinner, with the steamed greens on the side, may be considered a healthy choice in January by many for Northern Hemisphere dwellers. But evaluate that dinner from a posthumanist perspective and things change. How healthy are those greens grown in fields irrigated by the diminishing waters of a Southern Hemisphere aquifer, shipped in greenhouse gas-spewing vehicles, and refrigerated using electricity produced in a coal-fired plant? Can we call rice healthy if the plants were sprayed with pesticide that kills insects that ducks and fish in the paddies rely on for food? Even if the food provides needed nutrients to the body and keeps disease at bay, if food production damages water systems and contributes to climate change, we cannot continue to call this healthy food if we embrace a relational notion of health. This is important for food studies because it firstly questions the values embedded in the production of knowledge and the assumptions that are often implicit in ideas about food and foodways. Further, it leads us in the direction of a more sustainable and equitable food system.
Another common theme in the posthumanist literature that is relevant to food studies is the view that by recognizing the more-than-human and its relations with humans, we might usher in a new way of being that is more ethical and just (see Bennett 2007, 2010; and Braun 2005 on cities). Bawaka Country et al. is a group of writers and researchers who, in Australia, draw on the Yolŋu ontology. This way of knowing the world belongs to the Yolŋu, an Indigenous people in Australia to whom some of the research team belong. The Yolŋu offer a relational perspective so profound that the human writers belonging to the research group “Bawaka Country et al.” share authorship of their papers with the country where they work (Bawaka Country et al. 2015, 2016, 2018). By giving Bawaka Country first authorship, they recognize that the land itself, the country, is involved in creation just as much as the humans are. They call this co-becoming and they use food to demonstrate how it takes place. They situate their work in the context of posthumanist scholarship and efforts to decenter the human and recognize human agency. In their essay titled “Co-becoming Bawaka,” the reader is invited to go digging for yams in an attempt to share what it means to understand space and place from their perspective. Of particular relevance here is that the authors hold that this co-becoming with the more-than-human everything that surrounds them leads to an ethics of care. Their “emergent relationality of care” is described as an ontology of nature where you are not caring for nature, for country, for other, for something else, but rather you care along with all other life. They write: “It is... not a matter of caring for Country, but caring as Country.”
It is in this way that a posthumanist ontology offers promise for a radical rethinking of food systems and food itself in food studies. If a relational ontology leads to such a “relationality of care,” as Bawaka Country et al. demonstrate, then it provides a context in which to reconsider relationships that are often ignored, taken for granted, or even exploited in the food system. The contest model of production and consumption is replaced with a collaborative and relational view of food and food systems. Posthumanism alerts the eater to every relationship than the one we currently are embroiled in.

A key insight that posthumanism offers food studies, and agri-food studies, is the idea that what has been understood as inanimate nature in fact is working, regulating, causing, stopping, making things happen at every stage of the food chain. To fundamentally disrupt the contest model of production and consumption is to rethink food. Considering the Anthropocene and the role the global industrial food system plays in climate change, a posthumanist perspective offers the possibility to rethink the human-nature dualism in such a way that may lead to creating a more just human-nature relationship than the one we currently are embroiled in.

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NOTES

1. By using the word human, I do not intend to imply that human supremacy is a universally-held worldview by all people, a topic which I touch on later in the essay. I use the word human here to distinguish human animals from nonhuman animals.

2. Of course scholars have long used food as a lens to understand power and politics, including Sidney Mintz (1985). Scholars interested in questions of power and politics in agri-food systems have drawn on political ecology to consider the interplay between politics, economies, and ecology. However, political ecology has generally stopped short of considering nonhuman agency, something that Sundberg (2011) for one aims to change by articulating a posthumanist political ecology.

3. See Crawford (1980) and subsequent work on healthism, the idea that the medicalization of health in North America since the 1970s has constructed health as an individual responsibility and a “supervalue” that depoliticizes health. See also Mayes and Thomson (2014) for a critique of healthy food discourse.

REFERENCES


