Food porn, pro-anorexia and the viscerality of virtual affect

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Food porn, pro-anorexia and the viscerality of virtual affect: Exploring eating in cyberspace

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Highlights

• Intersecting with work on food, affect and viscerality, this paper explores the act of eating.

• The paper engages with two empirical contexts: food porn and pro-anorexia.

• Geographical discussions of food are enhanced by exploring what eating does and is in cyberspace.

• This reveals eating to take place among and beyond bodies, blurring boundaries of virtual and actual.

• This invites further interrogation of eating's uncertain relationship with materialities of bodies and foods, and of the act of eating more widely.

Abstract

By engaging with 'pro-anorexia' and 'food porn' on the Internet, this paper explores eating in cyberspace. Reflecting on the ways in which virtual, but affective, consumption is central to both food porn and pro-anorexia websites, the paper asks what the act of eating 'triggers' and produces, connects and displaces. It traces how eating in, and through, cyberspace shapes the biological materialities of bodies whilst also collapsing neat distinctions between offline and online worlds. Virtual vectors of spectating, salivating and digesting are disembodied and yet corporeal. Eating is seen to take place beyond and among bodies and to be dissipated both spatially and temporally. As such, cyberspace is outside and other to lived corporeality, and yet also folded into and productive of the intimate geographies and embodied subjectivities of everyday lives. As eating takes myriad forms across the de-materialised viscerality of the Internet, it also emerges as central to the production and 'matter(ing)' of cyberspace itself; this is (an) eating space in which what is eaten, by whom and with what bodies, perpetually shifts. Thus, seeking to contribute to geographical scholarship on affect and food, this paper engages with eating as both the subject of enquiry and also as a productive pathway into an interrogation of cyberspace and its place within the affective productions of the everyday. It suggests that this is a key site in which to explore the intimate socialities, materialities and biopolitics of food.

1. Introduction

At first glance food porn and pro-anorexia websites might seem to have little in common other than their 'location' in cyberspace. Yet, taking an interrogation of the act of eating as its focus, this paper suggests that the virtual consumption of imagised food is central to both. Beginning by exploring food porn as viewed, the discussion sets out to unearth the affective viscerality of looking at images of foods whose material presence is spatially and temporally elsewhere. This reveals such engagements to go beyond visceral viewing and constitute, instead, acts of eating. Conceptualising food porn as corporeally consumed in this way opens up an analytic pathway into an interrogation of eating itself. This has been argued to be an act that forges connections between bodies across distances (cf. Abbots and Lavis, 2013a and Probyn, 2000).

Extending that work, here it is eating itself that is dis-assembled and reconnected in diverging ways; the consumption of food porn gives rise to nascent and contingent forms of eating. It emerges as an act that not only transcends and produces the materiality of food but also that is enacted in myriad ways which stretch beyond and among bodies. As such, although recent scholarship has argued for the need to take account of eating bodies in social and cultural explorations of food (cf. Abbots and Lavis, 2013b), turning our attention to cyberspace also suggests the necessity of interrogating the uncertainty and contingency in eating's relationship to bodily materialities, as these may become dislocated. With this reconfiguring of eating in mind, the final part of the paper 'follows' (Appadurai, 1986, Cook et al., 2004 and Cook et al., 2006) food porn into pro-anorexia websites to explore how imagised food is engaged with by participants there. Although an attention to these cyberspaces might seem to signify a focus on only one highly-specific enactment of the eating of food porn, it is one that is analytically central to this paper. How some individuals with anorexia eat in ways that bypass bodily incorporation, and the role of food porn in these processes, underpin the analysis of this paper and its theorising about eating. I have suggested elsewhere that such enactments of eating maintain an illness that is profoundly dangerous and distressing and yet which may also offer a way of being in the world to individuals affected by it (Lavis, 2013 and Lavis, 2015). Against the background of those discussions, and maintaining a constant recognition of anorexia as a frequently 'miserable and life blighting' (Palmer, 2014: iii) illness, my focus here is different. This paper asks how the eating of food porn, and the ways in which this calls into question what is meant both by 'food' and 'eating,' further wider theorising of the act of eating. As such, it seeks to contribute to existing geographical enquiry into affect and food.

Ian Cook et al. has suggested that 'food is more than just an area of geographical enquiry. It offers rich, tangible entryways into almost any issue in which you might be interested' (2013: 343). Echoing more literal reflections on circulations and flows, such as those of food 'from farm to fork' (Jackson et al., 2006. See also Coles, 2013, Cook et al., 2004 and Cook et al., 2006), one area into which food has recently offered geographers an entryway is an exploration of affect. An attention to affect in geography (cf. Anderson, 2006, Pile, 2011b, Thrift, 2004 and Woodward and Lea, 2009) has included reflections on differences or slippages between affect and emotion (Dawney, 2011, Pile, 2010 and Pile,

2011a) and even engagements with the molecular (McCormack, 2007). This has echoed a wider concern across the social sciences with the 'capacities to affect and be affected that give everyday life the quality of a continual motion of relations' (Stewart, 2007: 2. See also Clough, 2008, Clough and Halley, 2007, Massumi, 2002 and Navaro-Yashin, 2012).

As such, alongside more literal interrogations of the Internet as virtual space, scholars have explored the 'virtuality' (Deleuze, 1991; see also Grosz, 2005) embedded in material life. Characterised by potentiality, this has arguably been at the heart of many geographical reflections on affects as 'virtual synesthetic perspectives anchored in (functionally limited by) the actually existing, particular things that embody them' (Massumi, 2002, 35–6. See also McCormack, 2003 and Thrift, 2004). Keeping both meanings of the virtual visible, and exploring their intersections, thus, this paper will explore how eating and not eating maps materiality as virtual and the Internet as visceral. Defined by Longhurst et al. as 'the sensations, moods and ways of being that emerge from our sensory engagement with the material and discursive environments in which we live' (2009: 334), the visceral has been argued to be a way in which to understand identity and power through the materiality of everyday experience (Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy, 2008. See also Guthman, 2003 and Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy, 2010). Viscerality therefore offers up the possibility of reflecting on the materiality of social relations. Elspeth Probyn, for example, has suggested that eating 'can be a mundane exposition of the visceral nature of our connectedness and distance from each other, from ourselves and from our social environment' (2000: 13).

Complementing this focus on viscerality, work beyond geography has also explored connections and relations that are produced or ruptured, mattered or displaced by eating. This has emphasised that 'in the act of placing food in the mouth, landscapes, people, objects and imaginings not only juxtapose with and fold into one another, but are also reconstituted and reordered' (Abbots and Lavis, 2013b: 5). At the level of lived corporeality, moreover, eating has been argued to be both individual and yet universal (Simmel, 1994). It is integral to the continuation of selfhood and bodily integrity, whilst also being mired in cultural symbolism. As such, it has been suggested that interrogating eating may offer nuanced and inclusive ways to re-figure subjectivity and agency (Mol, 2008). Eating, thus, is an act that draws paradoxes of agency and affect, singularity and multiplicity, to the fore. By engaging with these as they are played out in cyberspace, this paper seeks to extend existing explorations of the biopolitics of food (cf. Mansfield, 2012a, Mansfield, 2012B and Nally, 2011). In tracing the role of eating in the productions and mediations of selves, day-to-day lives and spaces, it scopes the edges and possibilities for an intimate biopolitics of food, one both visceral and affective.

2. Methods

In order to explore eating in cyberspace, this paper draws on content analysis of 'food porn' websites and blogs (2013–2014) and participant observation and interviewing on pro-anorexia websites (2005–2013). Data from this latter are presented against the background of wider ethnographic research into individuals' lived experiences of eating disorders

comprised of participant observation and interviewing in an English NHS inpatient eating disorders unit (2007–2008). Informed consent was obtained both for interviews and for participant observation in this setting, and the study received ethical approval from the NHS.

Food porn websites were identified through a scoping exercise which led to a snowballing effect as links from food porn blogs led to others and still others were identified through press coverage. Archived content on these blogs was read and noted. Pro-anorexia websites were initially scoped in a similar manner. Having identified ten pro-anorexia websites on which to focus, consent was obtained from website creators to 'hang out' and observe the processual unfolding of these spaces. Interviews were then conducted with some participants to pro-anorexia sites. These were conducted online and informed consent was obtained.

The Internet has been much explored in terms of the shifting dynamics of virtual space (cf. Dodge and Kitchin, 2006, Graham, 2013, Grosz, 2001 and Kinsley, 2013). Such discussions remind us that cyberspaces are not merely technologies. Rather, in these spaces, lives are lived out, and identities made and exchanged, as 'people do things' (Hine, 2000: 21). Thus, when asking 'just exactly what it is they do, and why, in their terms, they do it' (Hine, 2000 21), ethics is key. There has been much debate regarding whether websites, chat rooms, and blogs offer 'a free source of data for researchers to use, or must they negotiate access' (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007: 213). Although there are differing views, three stances prevail (Hookway, 2008. See also Flicker et al., 2004). Some researchers argue that archived material is publicly available and therefore consent is unnecessary (see Walther, 2002). Others suggest that although online postings may be publicly accessibly, they are written with an expectation of privacy (Elgesem, 2002). The third position states that there is no clear-cut definition, but rather that the Internet is both 'publicly private' and 'privately public' (Waskul and Douglas, 1996). This latter argues for a contextual approach, with researchers taking our lead from how actors within cyberspaces themselves frame their participation. This offers up the argument that 'accessible blogs may be personal but they are not private' as they are written for an audience (Hookway, 2008: 105) in contrast to the way in which 'blogs that are interpreted by bloggers as "private" are made "friends only"' (Hookway, 2008: 105). As such, there is a 'strong case for blog researchers to adopt the "fair game–public domain' position"' (Hookway, 2008: 105) alongside a need to be being mindful of the differential public and private spaces within each blog, even if these may appear public.Taking its lead from Waskul and Douglas's (1996) stance, for the food porn blogs, this paper takes a doubled approach. I draw on the archived blog posts themselves as public, and therefore also mention the names of some blogs. However, quotations from creators are not attributed to individual sites or persons, in line with other studies of online blogs (cf. Campbell and Longhurst, 2013). Moreover, I regard postings by commentators to the blogs as private and therefore no quotations from these appear in this paper.

Diverging stances on this issue of public and private have been taken in relation to pro-anorexia websites. For example, Mulveen and Hepworth (2006) requested retrospective consent for the use of discussion forum postings that they had found in the public domain,

whereas Williams and Reid (2007) obtained consent from the creators but not from participants for interactions observed and then quoted. Although participants to the conversations unfurling in real time on the sites knew that they were potentially public, in the midst of conversation it probably also did not occur to them that they would be 'used' by a researcher. Quotations from archived conversations therefore do not appear in this paper, nor do any names of pro-anorexia websites or their participants. Interview quotations with participants to pro-anorexia websites do appear with consent, and all names are pseudonyms.

3. Visceral viewings: food porn as media(ted) materiality

From Facebook to Pinterest, Tumblr to Instagram, cyberspace abounds with spectacular imagery, or perhaps imaginaries, of food. Glossy depictions of 'Nutella pound cake' and 'buttermilk chicken' jostle with hurried snaps of 'date food', restaurant visits and culinary artefacts of foreign holidays. Such foodie moments seep beyond the Internet into other forms of popular media, such as UK fashion magazine Marie Claire's 'Insta-grub' section, which comprises seven photographs of food taken by a different celebrity each month. However, this photography is most found in blogs and boards on the Internet. Recipes and food photographs sometimes stand alone in such blogs (Food porn daily; Food Porn is the Best Porn; Culinary Orgasm), with one of the most well-known of this pared down genre being described recently as 'a blog dedicated to deliciousness. The high-res images will have you salivating click after click' (Gohar, 2011). Other blogs pictorially document the stages of a recipe – grating, cutting, caramelising (*Happyolks*) – and some the eating, as cakes acquire cream before diminishing from shot to shot (*Lemon Fire Brigade*).

Many of these blogs, like still photographs on Tumblr, Instagram and Pinterest, refer to themselves as 'food porn' or, sometimes, alternatively, 'gastro porn'. It has been suggested that 'the term "gastro-porn" can be traced back to a 1977 book review written by Alexander Cockburn to describe the then burgeoning, now very familiar, trend in gastronomic representation' (Cruz, 2013: 331. See Cockburn, 1977). Food porn is said to have originated in a 1979 Center for Science in the Public Interest Nutrition Action Healthletter (McBride, 2010). Although food porn most usually describes food itself, it can also refer to chefs and the mingling of foods and bodies in some cookery programmes (Kaufman, 2005. See also Chan, 2003). This is perhaps most frequently used in arguably gendered media discussions of Nigella Lawson (cf. Sands, 2006). This paper focuses on the former category, in which the imagised food itself is the object of desire that 'glistens. It drips. It uses props. It is both lusty and intimate' (The Skinny Gourmet, 2008). It has been argued that food porn demonstrates pornography to have entered into domestic spaces in novel ways (see Cruz, 2013) and the corporeality of this is evinced by comments responding to blogs or photography. These often speak of an arousal that affectively entangles various bodily hungers and parts, as well as a fluent 'porno chic' (Cruz, 2013: 331); the tagline to one food porn blog reads: 'Have fun touching yourself!' As well as perhaps seeming to be an unimaginative coupling, this intermingling of food and/as sex (see Probyn, 2000) obscures other affects, cultural imaginings and connections that are transacted by food porn.

Food porn's popularity arguably intersects with a growing current fetishization of domesticity in Euro-American cultures. In the UK, this has been seen in programmes such as the Great British Bake Off (BBC 2010–2014), which invoked fantasies of a nationalistic authenticity and the nostalgia for an idealised past conjured up through the kneading of dough. The gendering of this repackaging of domesticity has not been lost on scholars (see Jensen, 2012) and it has been suggested that this is also apparent in food porn. As Rosalind Coward has put it, 'cooking food and presenting it beautifully is an act of servitude…food pornography exactly sustains these meanings relating to the preparation of food. The kinds of picture used always repress the process of production of a meal. They are always beautifully lit, often touched up' (Coward, 1984: 103). It is in relation to a similarly paradoxical performance of foregrounding and yet occluding that race and the production of 'otherness' has been discussed in relation to cookery programmes (see Cruz, 2013). Such a construction of reified consumable 'otherness' also imbues food porn. A blog devoted to Hawaiian food frames itself as reclaiming and sustaining a past that is at once individual (as the author is a Hawaiian expat), and also collective. The doubled meanings of photo captions such as 'Oh how I miss you!' coalesce an individual longing and collective nostalgia into desire-as-hunger, with spam sushi proposing an essentialised Hawaianness to be virtually consumed by the blog's visitors. Likewise, food porn offers spectacularized commensality through themed pages such as Thanksgiving boards on Pinterest, which overflow with de-contextualised roast turkeys.

This packaging of nostalgia and commensality into the glossy unattainability of photography elucidates how food porn could be regarded simply as an index or perhaps, to borrow from Jacques Derrida (1978), a 'trace'. Indexical artefacts of foods that are geographically or temporally elsewhere resonate with a sense of their own absence. Like porn does to sex perhaps, food porn performs, and yet stands in stark contrast to, the messy materiality of food itself. It is 'concerned with the surface appearance of food, since that is all that is available' (Magee, 2007). This stance not only frames the eating of food porn as having already happened, but also sees such imagery only as a precursor – a 'trigger' perhaps – to an alternative eating that will take place later offline. For example, Food Porn Daily, a website with the tagline 'click, drool, repeat' argues that 'the purpose of food porn is to get your (salivary gland) juices flowing. This would seem to instigate a distinction between not one but two stages of mimetic eating: there is first.

An act of eating that leaves only this photograph as trace (Derrida, 1978), followed by a later material ingestion offline, which could be said to mime food porn into being (see Taussig, 1993). Framing food porn only as an index or artefact thereby serves to produce a binary, with bodies rooted either in virtual or actual space, related only by mimesis not embodiment. Importantly, it also precludes the possibility of eating as something that may happen in the space of the present moment online, rather than in the past or future offline. To reflect for a moment of this troubling binary, I turn to the use of food porn as a weight-loss tool.

It has been suggested (Longhurst, 2012) that a greater attention to weight-loss in geographical discussions would complement existing interrogations of the politics of 'fat'

(see Evans, 2006, Guthman, 2011 and Rothblum and Solovay, 2009). Although weight-loss itself is beyond the bounds of this paper, exploring eating in cyberspace reveals the Internet to be a key site in which such investigations might be situated as virtual spaces dedicated to weight loss are multiple and diverse. Alongside chat rooms in which diet advice and encouragement are exchanged, these spaces range from calorie counting apps to spaces to which you can upload a photograph of yourself and invite complete strangers to tell you why 'you should not eat'. Although at first glance seemingly dichotomous perhaps, food porn features frequently in this landscape as it finds itself reconfigured into a weight-loss tool. On the website xojane, for example, an anonymous writer explains 'why food porn helps me stay in shape' with the words: 'Photos of food don't expand your waistline quite like the real thing […] above all, it helps me to keep my weight down. For me resistance isn't futile, it's fierce' (Xojane, anonymous 2013 October). Such descriptions of visually engaging with food porn in order to resist the 'real thing' foregrounds the binary noted above: here there is a doubling of bodies, which arguably maps a distinction between online and offline space onto that age-old split between mind and body.

Exploring such layering of new dualism onto old in her research into cyberspace, Elizabeth Grosz has critiqued 'the idea that one could take on a second-order or virtual body and somehow leave one's real body behind with no trace or residue, with no effects or repercussions' (2001: 42). Whilst acknowledging geographical reflections on virtual spaces as folded into physical environments (see Dodge and Kitchin, 2006) and recognising 'the material nature of the virtual' (Kinsley, 2013: 8), in the use of food porn as a weight-loss tool, we see a separation between these two spaces being employed in a very particular way. Imagised food is agentially pitted against the fleshy corporeality of offline bodies in order to aid their sculpting, even diminishing. This situates offline and online spaces as distinct realms of subjectivity and also of differing – even opposing – corporeality. As such, it would seem that although a visceral geography is sceptical of boundaries (Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy, 2010), we also need to recognise that individuals' engagements with food may comprise agential moves between virtual and actual spaces and, therefore, bodies. And yet, the language describing such divisive enactments shows them to be less clear-cut. Rather, as Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy put it, binaries are 'called into question and destabilized through the haphazard interactions of daily life' (Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy, 2010: 1280). Using food porn as a weight-loss tool does not disrupt the two stages of mimetic eating explored above only by negating the later stage of eating. It also replaces this with a sense of satiety – of having eaten. It is this that connects doubled bodies and spaces even at the moment of their disjuncture.

A recent study has suggested that viewing images of food may reduce the desire to eat by engendering a feeling of having eaten. Framing this in terms of 'imagined consumption' the authors conclude that such visual ingestion may 'be enough to produce satiation' (Larson et al., 2014: 188. See also Morewedge et al., 2010). Whilst this research engendered a flurry of press articles reflecting on food porn as a weight-loss tool (cf. Berry, 2013 and Laufik, 2013), for this discussion, the idea of being satiated by food porn is analytically useful more widely. Food porn has been described as 'salvation for those hungry at their desks' (Gohar, 2011) and the tagline of a current blog reads 'feast your eyes'. With a

linguistic and corporeal slippage from 'salvation' to 'satiation', we are beginning to see here that food porn itself enters salivating bodies in a way that goes beyond the merely visual and is not anchored in offline food encounters; viewing and digesting come to be intertwined as food porn is, rather, eaten.

4. Food porn as eaten: ingestion without incorporation

Arguing that food porn is not only viewed, albeit viscerally, but also eaten begins to blur distinctions between eating as actual, anticipated or imagined. Perhaps performed on all levels at once, eating in cyberspace emerges here as having, to borrow from Brian Massumi, a 'felt quality' (2010: 61) that is visceral and affective. This suggests the need to go beyond a paradigm of eating only as something that happens in encounters with the materiality of mouths and stomachs; rather, it takes place in, and assembles together, brains, eyes and computer screens. Such remapped vectors of a dematerialised digestive system demonstrate eating food porn to be simultaneously disembodied and yet embodied. Eating thereby renders boundaries between offline and online spaces and bodies porous, as imagised food enters corporeal bodies. This not only takes us beyond a binary of online and offline bodies but also begins to call into question what is meant by food. Food porn comes into being inchoately and continuously with and, perhaps, even in the lived 'drooling' and 'clicking' body of the spectator. This not only sees it positioned at the uncertain intersections between food and not food, but also, following Emma Roe (2006), shows it to become food (see also Whatmore, 2006). Food porn's conjoining with material bodies elucidates that food porn may be imagined or imagised, but also that it is 'a real without origin or reality' (Baudrillard, 1983: 1) made material through its ingestion. Food porn, therefore, becomes at once 'hyperreal' (Baudrillard, 1983) and yet, to borrow a word from Elspeth Probyn, utterly 'mundane' (2001) as substance and medium are enfolded.

One blogger recently described how, by exchanging and uploading food porn, she had entered 'an international world of gastronomy' and hoped to 'continue to meet foodies from all across the globe'; she wrote:

'You know what, we're all the same. The foods we eat might be different but the satisfaction that comes along with full bellies is priceless'.

Alongside invoking an imagining of humanity as dwelling in this sharing of affect, this blogger's words suggest that it is not only food that offers the opportunity of a full belly; it is food porn itself. This positions food porn as always imbued with the potential to become food in the event of its eating whilst also demonstrating that we need to consider the materiality of the sociality that this eating sets in motion.

Earlier, I reflected on food porn as a 'trace'. Although Derrida resisted too finitely defining his conception of a 'trace', he did remind us that a trace is always contradictory, its temporality not linear; he wrote that it 'relates no less to what is called the future than what is called the past, and it constitutes what is called the present by the very relation to what it is not,' (1978: 394). Food porn as a 'trace' simmers with potentiality to be both wholly

within and also productive of the present moment, and it does this by generating affective sociality. As such, food porn 'is not a collection of images; rather it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images' (Debord, 1983: 7). It thereby invites reflection not simply on the sociality that might be said to inhere in the Internet itself, which has been much discussed (cf. Long, 2012 and Miller and Slater, 2000), but that which is generated by eating. It has been suggested that eating not only always places the self in relation to others (see Goody, 1982), but is also a 'participatory practice not just in the sense of what is eaten, where it is eaten and with whom it is eaten (or not), but also in terms of individual eating bodies and their relations with other social actors, both human and non-human' (Abbots and Lavis, 2013b: 3. See also Probyn, 2000). Food porn's mobilisations of sociality, I suggest, not only lie in the 'social lives' (Appadurai, 1986) of the photographs themselves as they travel across cyber-geographies, but rather in their matter – as 'stuff' (Miller, 2009) that is ingested both online and offline at once.

It is by watching food being prepared and eaten in food porn videos that the spectator is perhaps most drawn into the visceral depths of another's eating body as well as domesticity. Sizzling pans are accompanied by exclamations off-camera such as 'wow, this smells so good', which offer up a shared physicality as taste buds are stimulated across distances. However, still photographs also afford the spectator mimetic eating experiences through which we become (at one with) this eating other. Eating here arguably enacts what Lisa Blackman has termed 'affective transfer' (2012: 130). This, she writes, is where 'the other is "embodied" as a voice or trace registered corporeally' (Blackman, 2012: 130), my italics). Discussions of affect, which have traced 'the transmission of force or intensity across bodies' (Clough, 2010: 224) have furthered existing understandings of bodies as 'unfinished entities which are formed through their participation in social life' (Shilling, 2003: 113). These have thereby allowed recognition of both bodies and personhood as 'transpersonal' (Pile, 2010: 11) – as connected rather than singular (see Blackman, 2008). Here, as bodies and selves come into being through mimetic moments of eating, an affective somatic identification through the sizzling pans and eating mouths of others draws bodies not only into encounter but arguably into one another as eating is shared among a multitude of bodies.

To think through eating as an act that is performed among, and thus beyond, bodies the concept of 'visceral identification' (Hayes-Conroy and Martin, 2010) is useful. Viscerality as a way in which to traverse dualisms and reflect on identity as implicating the entire minded-body, has been productive in geographical enquiry into the biopolitics of food more widely. Here it offers a more intimate way to reflect on the dynamics processes through which both bodies and foods are made material by the eating of food porn, because 'visceral identification' is 'inherently relational, whereby relations are seen as the foundation of everything including matter' (Hayes-Conroy and Martin, 2010: 272). Just as food porn is materialised through its ingestion, bodies come into being here through other bodies and the visceral social relations set in motion by eating. This takes us beyond static imaginings of individual bodies as the sharing of eating among bodies draws our attention to 'contextualized and interactive versions of the self and other' (Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy, 2010: 1273). Through alternative vectors of ingestion and digestion thus, eating's

many forms map the space of the Internet as a continuous plane of viscerality that encompasses, rather than separates from, body space; the Internet, we see, is (an) eating space.

It is by holding in mind this dual sense of eating as both a subject that mobilises and matters whilst also being an object that is reconfigured and retextured, that the paper now turns to explore the affective coming together of food porn and anorexia, notably on pro-anorexia websites. This will extend the discussion of food porn as not only viewed but eaten; it will ask what is triggered, mattered and produced by this eating in the particular context of pro-anorexia, and how this illuminates wider reflections on what eating is and what it does, as it is multiplied and repositioned.

5. Food porn and pro-anorexia: eating as multiplicity

Pro-anorexia websites are Internet spaces established and participated in by individuals living with eating disorders. They have given rise to scholarly and media discussion, much of which has regarded the sites as centrally about the 'promotion of anorexia and competitive dieting' (Laurance, 2012. See also Borzekowski et al., 2010). Such a viewpoint positions these websites as extreme manifestations of the wider weight-loss focus on the Internet, noted above. It frames them as existing for the purpose of sculpting or mediating offline bodies and, thus, as always secondary to material corporeality. At first glance, these discussions of food porn on the part of pro-anorexia website participants might seem to support such a conceptualisation:

> 'I'm obsessed with food porn and looking up recipes for things that I would never consume!' (Linda, pro-anorexia website participant)

> 'I love food porn! my fav is chocolate and just anything i refuse to eat.' (Josie, pro-anorexia website participant)

There is a familiar resonance to Linda and Josie's words of engaging with food porn in order to avoid 'actual' eating offline, which seemingly reinstates the problematic binary that we saw in relation to weight-loss, above. Yet, engaging with participants to pro-anorexia websites shows the sites not primarily to be about the achievement of corporeal emaciation; thinness is not central to their narratives. In her interview, one participant, Leanne, explained that these cyberspaces are 'not like some evil cult trying to brainwash people into starving themselves it's about giving people support in some of the toughest times of their lives'. This sense of support has also been highlighted in academic analyses (cf. Dias, 2003 and Yeshua-Katz and Martins, 2012). Whilst such a dynamic can arguably be detrimental to participants' health through its potential to normalise illness (see Bardone-Cone and Cass, 2007 and Lavis, 2014), it also highlights the need for a nuanced attention to these websites. Moreover, many research participants have elucidated that this sense of thinness as peripheral rather than central is a component not only of these spaces, but also of the illness of anorexia itself. In her interview, Miriam said:

There's lots of people who think it's just a vanity thing like, you know, anorexia is just the thinness and wanting to look thin but it's not a vanity thing, it's not at all. People go 'oh everyone's trying to copy this size zero trend' and it's not, it's not! You don't open a picture…look at a picture, and say 'oh I must look like that girl, therefore I must lose weight, therefore I'm an anorexic!' It's absolutely nothing to do with that. (Miriam, inpatient)

Anorexia has frequently been described by my research participants in ways that articulate belonging and the inter-subjective dynamics of identity. Many individuals have talked of it both as 'a part of me' and as a 'friend' (see also Grahame, 2009 and Serpell et al., 1999). Myriad reasons have been offered for describing anorexia in this way; it is referred to as 'helpful', 'protective' and a 'safe space', as well as 'torturing' and 'awful', with these polarities often juxtaposed in the same sentence. Such articulations, especially as expressed in cyberspace, have been argued to ensue from a 'rejection of the idea that anorexia nervosa is an eating disorder' (Udovitch, 2002). This, however, is not supported by participant observation on pro-anorexia websites (See Williams and Reid, 2007) or in treatment spaces. Rather, participants' narratives elucidate how anorexia can be felt to be a (albeit extremely painful) way of being. As 'living through anorexia' is articulated as a way of 'living through' more widely, the illness is described as a coping strategy that individuals know is harmful, that they may indeed find profoundly painful, and yet which they may sometimes wish to maintain (see also Fox and Leung, 2009: Treasure et al., 2007). That it can be both acknowledged as an illness and yet felt to be a modality of caring for the self (see Lavis, 2015) emphasises the necessity of recognising both the extreme suffering that anorexia causes and how it comes to matter to, and is mattered by, individuals living with it. This aligns with the work of other scholars who have also recently engaged with the practices, meanings and subjectivities of individuals with anorexia (cf. Eli, 2014, Gooldin, 2008 and Warin, 2010).

Against this background, the desire (see Lavis, 2011), albeit ambivalent, that some individuals express towards anorexia in interviews – and which underpins pro-anorexia websites – is arguably not for thinness as an end goal. Rather, thinness is seen to become important as a temporally-later way in which to measure the continuing presence of this 'friend' anorexia. This, however, poses a question regarding the relationship between eating and anorexia. It necessitates an interrogation of what (not) eating does within anorexia if it is delinked from the production of corporeal emaciation. Identifying individuals' articulations of desire as pertaining to the wish to hold onto an existing illness rather than become thin elucidates that it is this holding on that is performed through (not) eating.

Yet, food – material, discursive and imagised – is a central feature of pro-anorexia websites. Discussions among participants regarding how much they plan to eat on a particular day are interwoven with expressions of fear over having eaten 'too much'; there are also calorie counting tables and exchanges of starvation tips and tactics; and the sites also feature many conversations about, and links to, food porn. Whilst the fears and starvation tips articulate the threat posed to the presence of anorexia by eating, the engagements with food porn are modalities of attenuating this threat. As Josie and Linda's

words above make clear, a dual process of viscerally viewing food porn whilst also ingesting as little 'actual' food as possible offers a way in which to draw close to food – desire it even – whilst also testing one's ability to resist it. Food porn thereby allows participants to confirm to themselves that they 'do not want to eat' and, thus, that they are 'still anorexic'. As such, where the eating of food porn described above saw imagised food made material through its ingestion, here it is anorexia that is materialised and 'mattered' by its eating. When the continuing presence of anorexia can no longer be checked through thinness as the body changes shape with weight gain, such as in treatment, the Internet becomes a key way in which to maintain and reproduce it. This presence – this 'friend' – can be kept close even at odds with the lived body, such as if a participant is in treatment and, after months on a re-feeding regimen, clinical markers such as BMI problematize the diagnosis.

This is because the doubled process of drawing near to, and yet rejecting, food engenders what I have termed elsewhere relationships of absence with food (Lavis, 2013) which keep anorexia present. As such, it is clear how not eating may not be as simple as we might assume; rather than being primarily directed at mediating or disappearing an offline body, it maintains an online presence, perpetuating the 'safe space' of anorexia noted by participants. This recognition goes some way towards getting us beyond the binary of offline and online seen above; food porn, invested with rejection rather than desire, becomes a tool to processually re-materialise anorexia and this enacts a different relationship between these two spaces. Yet, this also does not go far enough in recognising the increasing blurring of a further binary – that between eating and not eating. Although food porn clearly affords a way of avoiding ingestion, following this paper's discussions of food porn as eaten, perhaps that is not the end of the story.

In her interview Nancy, a pro-anorexia website participant, wrote:

i have a few pages in my ed notebook devoted to food porn to satisfy cravings. lots of chinese food, pizza, pasta, and ice cream. i used to collect menus too and read them. i had so many, but i forced myself to throw them out.

Through Nancy's words we begin to see once again, that food porn is not only engaged with and rejected in this context of pro-anorexia. It is also eaten in ways that simultaneously articulate 'imagined consumption' (Larson et al., 2014) and yet material embodiment. There is an affective enfolding of starvation and satiety in Nancy's discussion of the 'satisfying of cravings'; each produces the other as both are held and felt within bodily spaces. Likewise, another participant to a pro-anorexia website described how she 'look[s] at pictures of food until I feel sick, like I ate too much.' In this mingling of satiety and starving, eating is simultaneously absent and present, with both of these poles processually made through the emergent materiality of ingested food porn. This suggests that whilst anorexia is an illness profoundly associated with dangerous and distressing starvation, eating is not simply absent to it. Rather, the recognition of food porn as eaten suggests that anorexia is maintained not only by not eating but also, seemingly-paradoxically perhaps, by eating – in ways that draw the virtual into the actual.

If engaging with food porn, constitutes a modality of eating, it is the blurred boundaries around eating itself, which have arguably resonated throughout this paper, that are drawn finally to the fore here. Whilst we have seen what eating and not eating do (specifically, to anorexia), now in this entangled context of illness, desire and satiety, there is an emergent questioning of what eating is. As practices to reject eating also signify ways of eating, they trouble what we might think of as the habitual boundaries and positionings of this act (see also Lavis 2015). Eating itself is reconfigured and retextured; this is an act that may comprise tasting without swallowing, viewing without chewing, ingesting without incorporating food. Each one of these moments is, itself, an act of eating, as this becomes multiple, and is shared across many eating bodies and virtual and actual spaces. As these diverse forms of eating contingently arise and dissolve in online interactions, eating is therefore processually broken down and re-assembled moment by moment. Importantly, it is also disconnected from, and yet absorbed into, offline bodies as virtual and actual meet in digestive depths.

6. Conclusion

By reflecting on imagised food, this paper has explored ways in which eating on the Internet remaps vectors of ingestion and digestion beyond individual or bounded biologies. In so doing, it has drawn into view not only the virtuality of the material, but also the materiality of the virtual. From eating food porn to mediating anorexia, I have interrogated how bodies, selves and affects may all be engendered, ruptured and mobilised by eating. This has shown eating to be not only an act that 'conducts force and maps connections, routes and disjunctures' (Stewart, 2007: 3), but which takes many, often contingent and situated, forms in multiple temporal and spatial locations. This recognition of eating's multiplicity has elucidated what eating is and does not only in cyberspace, but more widely. It has highlighted a need to reflect on the uncertain, contingent and even, potential or anticipated, relationships that may arise among eating, foods and bodies.

In turn, by enhancing such theoretical understandings of this act, this analysis has also sought to pay attention to the role of food and eating in the matter and mattering of cyberspace itself. The Internet might be said to be an archive of the immediately-disappeared present. Yet, it is also part of the continual production of that present, and in this latter it is imbued with a virtuality that goes beyond descriptions of its online contours. In their entanglement with the lived processual materialities of foods and bodies, the dual meanings of the virtual, which have echoed throughout this paper, are drawn into analytical encounter. We have seen, as Elizabeth Grosz puts it in dialogue with Gilles Deleuze, 'a reciprocal interaction between the virtual and the real […] Each makes a certain imperceptible contribution to the other, not adding any particular feature or quality but a depth of potential, a richer resonance' (Grosz, 2001: 79). Eating takes us beyond the binary of virtual and actual, mapping pathways of ingestion and digestion that are shared among bodies and across temporal and spatial distances. Tracing the dynamic slippages between becoming and consuming the other in such shared eating experiences moves us towards a recognition of the Internet as a space not only in which eating takes place, but that is forged

by food and eating. As body space and cyberspace become enfolded, the Internet emerges as visceral and affective.

Geographical reflections on affect have suggested that it is the 'driving force in the collectivisation and singularisation of bodies' (Woodward and Lea, 2009: 156). Tracing the 'affective register', to borrow from Thrift (2004: 57) of the many moments of encounter between foods, bodies and cyberspace, has offered a way to follow 'the course from what's singular – the subject's irreducible specificity – to the means by which the matter of the senses becomes general within a collectively lived situation' (Berlant, 2011: 53). In so doing, this paper has sought to dialogue with, and contribute to, wider discussions both within and beyond geography, of affect, agency and the ways in which we might craft analytic approaches that reconcile these. Eating on the Internet, I have argued, is a mode of self-production, abeyance and reconfiguration, as well as generative of intra- as well as inter-subjectivity. In tracking the shared intimacies of how bodies and spaces are lived, configured and enfolded, we have seen how affect continually 'shapes new ordinaries' (Berlant, 2011: 54; see also Stewart, 2007). It is perhaps attending to this production and moulding of the 'ordinary' that lies at the heart of an interrogation of an intimate cultural biopolitics of food.

Reflecting on eating offers up a way in which to pay attention to modes and movements of both politics and power. Food, after all, 'and its relations to bodies is fundamentally about power' (Goody, 1982: 37), and, as Dawney has argued, an attention to affect traces 'the insidious ways through which power works on and produces bodies' (2011: 600). As such, it has been suggested that paying attention to affect interrogates emergent ways of living (Anderson, 2012) and this, in turn, 'refuses the biopolitical imperative to divide between a valued life and a threat to that valued life' (Anderson, 2012). It is particularly the empirical exploration of pro-anorexia that has brought into sharp relief the role of eating and not eating in the production of selves and worlds. Yet, I suggest that exploring eating more widely offers an analytic pathway into ways in which intimate mediations and productions of the everyday are always inherently visceral on a number of scales at once. Interrogating eating in – or perhaps through – cyberspace, and cyberspace through eating, casts light on the intimate geographies and embodied subjectivities of the everyday, illustrating these to be always virtual and material.

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