

Mythologizing Food: Marion Halligan's non-fiction

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Abstract: This paper discusses Marion Halligan's non-fiction, particularly her writing on food: *Those Women who go to Hotels*, *Eat my Words*, *Cockles of the Heart*, *Out of the Picture*, and *The Taste of Memory*. The focus is on how Halligan deconstructs and reconstruct a mythology of food, in a Barthesian sense, revealing the contradictions at the heart of food mythology. The texts lay bare Halligan's own personal and at times idiosyncratic mythology of food, where food is much more than just that. Venturing into areas of autobiography, memory, travel, place and gardens, this paper discusses how Halligan's mythologizing of food doubles up, especially in her most recent food writing, as a rethinking and celebration of suburbia, which is figured as a site where nature and culture meet, and where paradise can be regained.

Keywords: Marion Halligan; Roland Barthes; mythology; non-fiction; food; memory; suburbia; paradise

In the essay "The Beach", Marion Halligan describes Merewether Beach in Newcastle, NSW, where she grew up. "Sometimes I think people are born with a gene that makes them love the place they're born in," she initially muses and then continues:

Once the area behind the dunes [of the beach] blossomed with banksias and wattles, flannel flowers, coastal rosemary and ti-trees, while further inland were dense stands of eucalypts and the gullies harboured patches of rainforest. This makes me suspect that the loss of the Garden of Eden was not a single event but an ongoing story (Halligan 1996b: 54-5).

It is the ongoing story of the loss of the Garden of Eden that I want to use as my cue for a reflection on the significance of food in Marion Halligan's non-fiction. The continuing loss of Paradise is to all intents and purposes a poetic way of describing mankind's gradual destruction of our natural surroundings in our greed for space and our disregard for the increasingly fragile state of our planet earth. So does Marion Halligan propose a

solution to this devastation? I think she does, but in a poetic and playfully humble way. I will argue in this paper that Halligan uses food as a means of showing how we can slowly recreate the Garden of Eden in our own suburban backyards. She develops, I suggest, a personal and rich mythology of food in her non-fiction, which surprisingly evolves into a reconsideration and celebration of the much-maligned suburbia. The result is that suburbia becomes a site of creativity and happiness, and a natural habitat of man, flora and fauna – a paradisiacal marriage of nature and culture.

In order to support my suggestion that Halligan develops her own at times idiosyncratic mythology of food I want to draw on Roland Barthes' deconstruction of all kinds of bourgeois myths in his 1957 *Mythologies*, a book that Halligan references in much of her non-fiction. In *Cockles of the Heart*, for example, Halligan explains: "One of the things I like about Barthes is the connection he made between language and gastronomy. Between food and words. They both have the same organ, the tongue" (Halligan 1996a: 19). Barthes' notion of the link between language and food is also illustrated in an unexpectedly amusing way in *These Women who go to Hotels*, co-written with Lucy Frost, when Frost admits stealing Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* in a Parisian bookshop: "I stole *A Room of One's Own*. Like couscous, that book always reminds me of Paris" (Frost and Halligan 1997: 186). This is a truly Halliganian moment – even though it is Frost's recollection. It fuses food, with memory, language, cities and stories in a delightfully defamiliarising way, and Halligan's non-fiction writing is replete with such clusters.¹

After the Barthesian appetiser, I want to explore how we may see Halligan as a modern mythologist for whom food is, naturally enough, food, but also in a Barthesian second-order signification, autobiography,ⁱⁱ memory, storytelling, history, travel, tourism, art, gardening, as well as a sign of nationality and place. In connection with travelling, Rebecca Solnit's thoughts on walking, in *Wanderlust: A History of Walking* (2000), could easily be applied to Halligan's thinking about food: "Like eating or breathing, it [i.e. walking] can be invested with wildly different cultural meanings from the erotic to the spiritual, from the revolutionary to the artistic. [...] Walking is a subject that is always straying" (Solnit 2000: 3 and 8). Food is also a subject that is always straying in Halligan's non-fiction. Perhaps this is so because Halligan's mythologizing of food is elaborated along with what she calls a gastronomic memory which is part fictional, part real, and which has the alchemical knack of storing experiences in a "safely delicious" way (Halligan 1991: 11). As Halligan writes in *The Taste of Memory*: "Food is so much about memory, about the past, and about happiness in the past – unless we are very unlucky. It is not often that the miserable moments are remembered in delicious food" (Halligan 2004: 149). There is thus a continuous slipping and sliding between food as simply food and food as signifying something else. There are, as Barthes would say in his description of the excess of myth, multiple contingencies between signifier and signified when it comes to decoding the Halliganian sign food. And even when food is food, it is not really that simple: food is raw material, shopping for food, reading recipes, cooking, eating, talking, writing and dreaming about food. And all these second-order significations are again invested with mythologies of their own, in an ongoing and unfinished gastronomic story. This rich area of signifieds to the signifier food gives Halligan ample scope to develop and play around with her mythology of food.

In *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes discusses how myths are created through an exploration of disparate mass culture phenomena such as wrestling, striptease and fashion magazines. His discussion leads to a gradual unmasking and demystification of myth since he time and again exposes the ideology behind such myths, and reveals what is considered natural. Barthes describes contemporary myth in the chapter called “Myth Today” as “a type of speech [...] a system of communication [...] a message [...] a mode of signification, a form” (Barthes 2000: 109). In other words, myth is a truly variegated phenomenon, where the emphasis is always on its fluidity and movement, not the thing, object or concept itself. That instable flow is embodied in myth as a meta-language (Barthes 2000: 115) that constantly and self-consciously speaks about itself as language. It takes its starting point in a Saussurian description of the sign as a component simultaneously consisting of signifier and signified whose link is arbitrary. Yet since myth adds another layer to this dualism, the link is not quite as arbitrary in the language of myth, not least because the mythologist deciphers the myth for us (Barthes 2000: 128). In this way myth has a double function, Barthes suggests, “it points out and it notifies, it makes us understand and it imposes on us” (Barthes 2000: 117). Myth is thus speech “justified in excess”, the result, Barthes claims, of myth as a type of “language robbery” (Barthes 2000: 130-131). This linguistic excess coupled with the double function of myth also shows us that myths tend to develop along with an ulterior motive. Barthes describes myths on both the right and the left of the political scene in France. In Halligan’s case, however, there is nothing overtly political or sinister in her mythmaking – it is, as I argue, a method through which she can restore and elevate suburbia into paradise regained. Like Barthes, she is concerned with the image of food as myth, with the connotative meanings, the second-order signification food holds for her, and by implication, the readers, as they become seduced by the pleasure of reading Halligan’s texts.

There are some recurring references in Halligan’s non-fiction writing to the method behind her mythologizing of food, behind the focus on the second-order cultural meaning of food: invention, experiment and bricolage being the foremost. There is a continuous sense of playful experimentation, a kind of post-modern willingness to mix the old and the new, the strange and the familiar, the foreign and the local. Added to this is the specific use of words to evoke and provoke the senses: eating words, tasting memory, smelling garden produce, touching food and hearing fruit ripen. As in Barthes’ exploration of our commonplace myths, the word is central. Halligan’s self-proclaimed “desire for words” (Halligan 2004: 52) is obvious in all of her writing. There is something hedonistic and blissful in Halligan’s sensual yet practical evocation of food – like Barthes pleasure and bodily joy are not considered unimportant areas in contemporary discourses. In her food books she explains that she prefers the old-fashioned cookery books with food history and recipes to the sumptuous coffee table books where the lavish pictures demand attention, not the words. Such books are read primarily as art books (Halligan 2004: 36), whereas the old, wordy cookbooks rely on the powers of the imagination and the willingness of the body to enjoy connotations and evocations of the apparent dullness of the printed words.

Or we can use an image from *Eat My Words* as a symbolic description of how food is mythologized in Halligan’s writing – in her description of beating egg whites:

The transformation of this small puddle of slimy eggwhite into clouds of white foam is one of the several mysteries of cooking (I mean mystery in the sense of a

skill and an art as well as hidden or secret thing and possibly even a rite requiring initiation) which are best performed by the right and proper tools (Halligan 1991: 42).

Similarly Halligan takes the on-the-surface simple signifier food and transforms it into a wonderfully rich mythology by continually juxtaposing the commonplace with the wonderful, the real with the fanciful. In this way she demystifies and defamiliarises the way we regard food, and at the same time encourages us to look at food again, taste food differently, with new eyes and awakened senses. The emphasis is on the transformation – the metamorphosis of cooking. She is fascinated by how the simple – slimy egg white – is by the alchemy of cooking transformed into something else all together – clouds of white foam. This metamorphosis is the only way to understand how, for example, “the monstrous purgative of porridge was transmogrified into a delicate dessert” (Halligan 1991: 49) and a clue to Halligan’s personal mythologizing of food.

Food, as I have already pointed out, is memory, autobiography and history. For Halligan it is also intimately linked to place, specifically to Australia in Halligan’s edible universe, from *Eat my Words* to *The Taste of Memory*. In the latter book, Halligan suggests that “[f]ood is a kind of carnal spirit of a place. It is where its most essential nature is to be found” (Halligan 2004: 47). This is not an uncommon way of regarding the cultural meanings of food. In Ugandan-born, British-based journalist Yasmin Alibhai-Brown’s *The Settler’s Cookbook: A Memoir of Love, Migration and Food* (2010), the author shares many of Halligan’s assumptions about food, though her prose is not as sensual and mouth-watering. For Alibhai-Brown, writing as an immigrant to Britain, pinning down recipes is compared to a relay race, where recipes act as batons that you pass on to the next generation, passing on history and memory of places simultaneously: “The next generation picks up this baton at least. While they eat I reminisce, linking the dishes to time and places, so that when I am gone, my voice will echo in their heads to remind them who they are” (Alibhai-Brown 2010: 15). Food thus becomes a discourse of personal identity and belonging, evoking as it does, a carnal spirit of place.

That carnal spirit is evoked in Barthes too, when he writes about the mythology of wine and how wine is the “totem-drink” of the French that “supports a varied mythology, which does not trouble about contradictions” (Barthes 2000: 58). Barthes elaborates on this conundrum: “[W]ine is objectively good, and *at the same time*, the goodness of wine is a myth: here is the aporia” (Barthes 2000: 158)]. Jonathan Culler elucidates this “mythologist’s dilemma”: “Though the ‘excellence of wine’ is a myth, it is not exactly a delusion [...] The mythologist is concerned with the image of wine – not its properties and effects but the second-order meanings attached to it by social convention” (Culler 2002: 24-5). Those contradictions do not trouble Halligan either, as she reflects on antipodean spins on food, on the image of food and fashionable food in particular: In Australia in the 1950s, Halligan writes, “spaghetti came, and we were proud we knew not to serve it with mashed potatoes, unlike some people, though I’m not sure we ever got the proportions of pasta to sauce right; we always piled up the meat” (Halligan 1991: 6-7). With the benefit of gastronomic hindsight, we can giggle at the very thought of serving pasta and potatoes together (imagine all the starch and carbohydrates!), yet the anecdote also shows the fluidity of the second-order signification of, in this particular case, the once-exotic, now dreary and commonplace, food pasta. In this

particular case of “edible memory”, food for Halligan is also intimately linked to being Australian – there is even what we might call an Australian sensibility attached to her mythologizing of food. Australia is the new world in Halligan’s universe, Europe the old, seeped in history, legend and stories, there for the picking and tasting, and raw material for the bricoleur: “Prawns and Christmas pudding: the Old World and the New. Everybody’s allowed a bit of ethnic food for the festive season,” and “[t]he whole country I live in doesn’t care either. We live in a melting pot. Things get mixed up,” Halligan writes in *Cockles of the Heart* (Halligan 1996a: 99 and 125). This idea is developed in *These Women who go to Hotels*, where Halligan elaborates on the ways in which “Australian food is inventing itself out of the melting pot of Europe and Asia,” (Frost and Halligan 1997: 137).ⁱⁱⁱ The result of this gastronomic hodgepodge, this edible hybridity, is a worrying obsession with food purity and authenticity, with that “essential nature” as we saw above: “You can spend a lot of time wondering if we’ll ever have a genuine Australian cuisine” (Halligan 1991: 53 and again on page 126).

But why worry? Why not regard Australian cuisine in a somewhat oxymoronic way as a genuine mixture of old and new? There is no choice for Australia but to be eclectic in the construction of a true Australian cuisine, Halligan insists, as the result of its multicultural population (Halligan 1991: 126). Thus Australians are:

borrowers, bowerbirds, magpies. We make our own pretty glittering nests from whatever we can find that we like the look of, and this nest, this culinary habitat, is in its own way all our own work. Maybe what is destined to become our great tradition is the art of borrowing (Halligan 1991: 148).

In that sense Halligan the bricoleur and mythologist is genuinely Australian, a human magpie moulding her suburban nest into a new paradise. Halligan the traveller claims that she can borrow Paris in *These women who go to Hotels* (Frost and Halligan 1997: 9). Halligan the food tourist concludes *Cockles of the Heart*, her pilgrimage story, which never takes her to Santiago de Compostela, because she would rather stay in France, with an interesting reflection on going home:

To Australia where we are inventing our way of life along with our cuisine, inventing as people always do, taking the works of others and adding that little fizz of genius that makes it our own [...] Knowing we need not choose, we can have both (Halligan 1996a: 266)

Inventing a lifestyle along with cooking is the beginning of the long process of rebuilding the Garden of Eden literally closer to home. The little fizz of genius is Halligan’s own personal contribution – both in the shape of her non-fiction but also through what she actually does in “real life” as described in the autobiographical elements of those texts – to that ongoing and pleasurable shaping of the Edenic but, or rather, *and* suburban habitat.

That garden is particularly well developed in *The Taste of Memory*, where gardens are figured as “nourishing spaces that we like to surround ourselves with” (Halligan 2004: 10). In this book the autobiographical skeleton that Halligan had used in her first non-fiction about food, *Eat my Words*, but not noticed until after the book’s publication, is here foregrounded, almost as a homage to her late husband, Cosmo of the earlier texts, Graham in this one. There is a sense of nostalgia and bittersweet regret in this book, a sense of loss, but also of restoration. We read about a gentleman caller now and again in

the text. We also read about the much-loved Canberra house, its garden and about suburbia. In this latest book about food Halligan is not ashamed to openly admit her “admiration for suburbia” (Halligan 2004: 48). It is in this most recent of her food books that her own unique and at times private brand of food mythologizing doubles up as a celebration of suburbia, where she shows that just as you mix nature and culture in cooking, so too in suburbia. Food and suburbia are both messy and fluid sites in this sense – a potent mixture of nature and culture, and both replete with second-order signification.

Halligan refers in that connection in *The Taste of Memory* to David Malouf’s remark that “‘the real achievement’ of Australian writers ‘might be in pioneering the experience of suburban man’ [...] I entirely agree with him [...] This is because I think suburbia a great achievement” (Halligan 2004: 167). However, suburbia suffers from a rather bad reputation as alienating, homogenising and suffocating. Halligan suggests that although she used to think the alienation of suburbia a “nourishing myth” she now celebrates “the fact of suburbia” as nourishing (Halligan 2004: 166). The word nourishing is of course chosen deliberately here – Halligan’s universe is constructed in a sensual way after all. And even more than that: In the process of rebuilding the paradise in your backyard, you also transform the suburban garden into art. Again Halligan draws on alchemical metamorphoses: “I like to think of suburbia as full of small republics of pleasure where words and food and the colour of the walls and the paintings on them and the crab apples in the spring and the bird feeder hanging in the tree are all part of the minor works of art we make of our lives” (Halligan 2004: 167). We may fault Halligan here for succumbing to a middle class fantasy, where the reality of hard work and busy lives is conveniently forgotten or swept aside. We could castigate Halligan for being an apolitical liberal humanist, because liberal humanism is the ideology of suburbia, if we believe Terry Eagleton: “Liberal humanism is a suburban moral ideology, limited in practice to largely interpersonal matters. It is stronger on adultery than on armaments, and its valuable concern with freedom, democracy and individual rights are simply not concrete enough” (Eagleton 1990: 207). But that criticism seems beside the point. There is something sumptuous and appetizing, even something important, about refiguring suburbia as a republic of pleasure, that such reality-check criticism tends to be quickly forgotten, as we are drawn into and feed on Halligan’s tempting vision. The suburban republic of pleasure is the site where Halligan’s culinary hedonism and bliss is now anchored, homely, yet spiced with recollections of France in particular, in the shape of recipes and food paraphernalia. Suburbia it is worth remembering is not pure either, but alive with multicultural second-order signification.

Halligan’s mythology of food is intimate, personal and autobiographical as such writing tends to be – it is “a whole life of food and conversation” (Halligan 2004: 7). Perhaps this intimacy is a result of the subject matter, food, as well as of the ways in which Halligan treats food, as emblematic of so much more than just sustenance. The language of food is a kind of lingua franca, especially now when globalisation has us all eating ciabatta with mozzarella and sun-dried tomatoes and drinking caffè lattes. Halligan links the lingua franca of food also with human relations: “Since food is something that we all know a good deal about, and indeed have an intimate relationship with several times a day, it’s a language we all speak, so it’s a good way of expressing human relations” (Halligan 2004: 94). Food as a language we speak is a very Barthesian way of putting it – linking as it does food and words through the organ of the tongue. This common language makes possible an intimacy that deeply affects the reader. The reader is a

friend, a voyeur, somebody who eats her words, travels to hotels with her and enjoys the taste of memory with her – to cannibalise some of the titles of Halligan's non-fiction. And food is a noticeable presence in all of Halligan's writing, fiction and non-fiction alike. Halligan explains her gastronomic obsession thus: "It [i.e. food] is where the real dramas of the human condition enact themselves" (Halligan 2004: 97). The "real dramas of the human condition" is a way of expressing food's second-order signification, the multiple functions of food for Halligan, both complex and simple at the same time, as food can be.

Reading Halligan's non-fiction back-to-back is a good way of extracting Halligan's values, especially linked to her perceptions on food and to what will develop into what I like to think of as a suburban Eden. She writes about a cumquat tree and making preserves thus: "It's just that growing your own adds a comfortable sense of thrift to the already satisfying practice of bricolage. And the final pleasure is aesthetic" (Halligan 1991: 60). Here you have a summary of some of Halligan's central values: thrift, bricolage, pleasure, aesthetics – and again a wonderfully contrary mixture of what we might construe as the old and the new. I have already commented on pleasure: like Barthes, Halligan enjoys corporeal bliss, whether the result of food, language or conversation. The word "thrift" is also interesting here, and a notion Halligan self-consciously returns to in *The Taste of Memory*, where she admits that the idea of thrift delights her – but that it is a word you do not hear much nowadays (Halligan 2004: 114). Thrift lends Halligan's celebration of suburbia an interesting ambience of the old and the new: thrift is of course a well-known and slightly embarrassing Victorian virtue. But it is also a self-consciously contemporary one, especially in green middle-class suburban households, that want to reduce their carbon footprint by being self-sufficient and growing their own garden produce. Again it is in that suburban garden where thrift – and plenitude – can be enjoyed: put one humble potato in the soil and wait for the magical process of nature to take its turn before you begin to dig up great tasting home-grown potatoes. And in *Cockles of the Heart* Halligan writes about Floating Island as a dish "traditionally made at home", thus intimately connected to another one of her central values and, I would argue, a central building block in the reconstructing of the suburban Eden: "the homely simple deliciousness" (Halligan 1996a: 158-9). All three words are meaningful. The homely – both in a metaphorical and in a literal sense – is of pivotal importance, especially in her latest food book, *The Taste of Memory*, which has her Canberra house at its centre. Simple is a virtue characteristic in all of the food that Halligan particularly cares for. And delicious – what is the point of food if it is not that? Halligan is a gourmand after all – drawn towards the hedonistic pleasures of food, family and friends.

Halligan's personal mythologizing of food is in many ways twofold: by exposing the accepted ideology of food, she demystifies and defamiliarises it for us, yet at the same time she also adds new idiosyncratic layers of cultural meaning. In her non-fiction food writing, this is an ongoing process, just like the loss and reconstruction of the Garden of Eden, and the emphasis on development is evident already in her early writing. The first chapter of *Eat my Words* sketches "a gastronomic education" focussing on the development "from castor oil to olive oil in one generation" (Halligan 1991: 1). In this text Halligan can "pinpoint her first olive" – which in her personal myth becomes elevated to a significant semiotic moment (Halligan 1991: 27-28) – but, maddeningly, not when she first tasted garlic – these once-exotic gastronomic treats in the Antipodes of her youth. In the end, and like Barthes in his *Mythologies*, who describes the weekly

magazine *Elle* as a “real mythological treasure” (Barthes 2000: 78), Halligan mythologizes the everyday, the commonplace, the stuff of life. Food is “giving pleasure to friends”, “food is love” and cooking is central because “I like to eat. Well” (Halligan 1991: 13, 50, 29). That is why suburbia – where most people live – is also where we can begin to recreate our own gardens of Eden.

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ⁱ “Food is memory; memory is food” Halligan succinctly puts it in *The Taste of Memory* (Halligan 2004: 223).

ⁱⁱ “Books like bodies, need skeletons. A skeleton might be a plot, or a theme, an idea. The writer might not always know what it is. *Eat my Words* was finished and between covers and out in the world before I realised that its skeleton was my autobiography.” Thus Halligan writes at the beginning of *Cockles of the*

Heart (Halligan 1996a: 8) – though for the reader the autobiographical aspect of *Eat my Words* is apparent from the very first page. See also *These Women who go to Hotels*, where Halligan writes that *Eat my Words* “had my autobiography as its spine, its backbone, a fact I didn’t actually notice until after I’d written it” (Frost and Halligan 1997: 1).

ⁱⁱⁱ There is no mention of aboriginal food in Halligan’s non-fiction. This is an interesting void in her food writing, a striking aporia in her texts that the reader cannot help but notice. It is tempting to critique Halligan’s lack of curiosity and her silence in this respect. Can we see Halligan’s dearth of interest in aboriginal food as an example of what W.E.H. Stanner long ago called Australia’s “history of indifference”, its “cult of disremembering” which characterises “the great Australian silence” in the nation’s attitude to the original inhabitants (Stanner 1969: 9, 25)? Halligan’s memorialising of Australian food is skewed towards Europe and France in particular, as we have seen. So much so that she forgets to incorporate what might indeed be uniquely Australian.