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Urban

In Richard Jefferies's 1848 novel *After London*, London has been flooded and a noxious, poisonous marsh sprung up in its place. London and other cities face similar fates in more contemporary imaginations of disaster and climate crisis: in *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004), the Statue of Liberty in New York rises from the frozen landscape, father and son pass by a deserted network of roads on the edge of a city in *The Road* (2009) and a tidal surge threatens London in *Flood* (2007). The iconic features of cities such as New York, London and San Francisco are especially suitable for bringing home the severity, and perhaps immediacy, of a disaster. Disaster, they suggest, will destroy even familiar landmarks. Yet, cities are not only a particularly popular setting for climate change stories,¹ they are spaces of climate crisis themselves, as I'll explore in this chapter. In 2014, 54 per cent of the world's population lived in cities, and the United Nations predict that by 2050 that figure will have risen to 66 per cent (2014: 1). At the same time, urban environments are key sites in which global climate change is played out. The majority of anthropogenic carbon dioxide emissions are produced through urban activities, while cities themselves are often the most vulnerable to effects of climate crisis such as flooding.² Urban environments are increasingly positioned as important environmental sites in sociological and political scholarship (cf. Loftus 2012: xxii). Part of rethinking the role that cities play in our understanding of the non-human natural environment, as well as how we come to terms with climate crisis, lies in the stories we tell about cities.

In this chapter, I read the narrative of urban nature as a key, though often overlooked, narrative of climate crisis. Not only is climate crisis increasingly played out in cities, many urban trends – such as urban gardening, farmers' markets and the existence of green 'wild spaces' – are a direct response to an

environmental awareness fuelled in large parts by climate crisis. The three novels I discuss in this chapter reflect and engage in a reshaping and retelling of urban natures that is also happening in cities themselves. The popularity of the city in British realist literature since 2000 includes the multicultural novels of Zadie Smith and Stephen Kelman, as well as Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* (2003), Philip Hensher's *The Northern Clemency* (2008), Ian McEwan's *Saturday* (2005), Jon McGregor's *If Nobody Speaks of Remarkable Things* (2003) and *Even the Dogs* (2011) and John Lancaster's *Capital* (2012). This increase of urban novels runs parallel to new ways of thinking about the city developed in the field of urban studies since the 1970s. Though the focus of urban studies has long been on the social and political dimensions of urban life, a number of scholars explicitly foreground the non-human natural aspects of cities. An early and influential scholar in this respect is Anne Spirn, whose *The Granite Garden* (1965) argues for the inclusion and utilization of natural processes in urban planning. The city, she proposes, 'is a granite garden, composed of many smaller gardens, set in a garden world. Parts of the granite garden are cultivated intensively, but the greater part is unrecognized and neglected' (1984: 4). More radically, Spirn does not see the city as an artificial or unnatural space. Rather, she suggests, 'cities do not obliterate nature, they transform it, producing a characteristically urban natural environment' (1985: 42). In a British context, the landscape architects Nan Fairbrother and Ian McHarg have published works that emphasize the importance of including nature in cities.³ The British movement to protect nature in towns goes back at last forty years (Goode 2014: 285) and Britain has a relatively long tradition of interest in urban nature starting in the mid-nineteenth century (Goode 2014: 286). The Victorian age similarly saw the beginnings of urban nature writing. Richard Jefferies and W. H. Hudson form the precursors to Richard Mabey's *The Unofficial Countryside* (1973), Paul Farley's and Michael Symmons Roberts's *Edgelands* (2011) and Esther Woolfson's *Field Notes from a Hidden City* (2013). Parallel to this new vogue of urban nature writing, urban political ecologists have continued the work of Spirn and others. These scholars recognize the existence of a specific *urban* nature and ecology, separate from – and thereby certainly not lesser than – traditional natures and ecologies (Keil 2003: 726).⁴

This chapter traces the appearance of the narrative of twenty-first-century urban nature in three postmillennial British novels set in cities: *The Translation*

of the Bones (Francesca Kay 2011), *NW* (Zadie Smith 2012) and *Clay* (Melissa Harrison 2013). Much scholarship on the city in literature focuses on how the development of urban environments can be read in tandem with the development of literary environments.⁵ In this chapter, however, I focus not on the city as a catalyst for new forms of writing, but on the city as a site in which the twenty-first-century novel comes to terms with changing environmental conditions. Moreover the chapter presents a corrective, or contrast, to the argument that the contemporary city 'seems to be increasingly unmoored from its spatial specificity, from the city as a fixed point of collective reference, memory, and identity' (Soja 2000: 150). Postmillennial British novels are increasingly sensitive to the actual, material city and fictions such as the ones I explore are firmly grounded in the material city through, for instance, the frequent use of spatial cues or markers and the use of food narratives as a way of connecting to nature.

The environmental justice movement, which intersects with especially American ecocriticism, has since the 1970s paid particular attention to urban environments. It is especially concerned with highlighting and addressing the relationship between environmental hazards – and hazardous environments – on the one hand, and race and class, on the other.⁶ While such approaches generally succeed in the important task of foregrounding the ways in which human and natural concerns intersect in urban environments, environmental justice is also problematic as a lens through which to study urban nature. Through its critique of the connections between race, class and environmental degradation, environmental justice focuses largely, if not solely, on disadvantaged communities, hereby creating a one-sided critique of nature in urban environments. Consequently, little room is given to the (positive) possibilities urban nature offers.⁷ Ecocritical engagements with urban nature as a positive and productive space are few and far between. Implicitly or explicitly, many ecocritical discussions are predicated on the idea that urban nature is somehow 'less than' non-urban, more traditional natural landscapes. Lawrence Buell, for example, mentions urban spaces in the same breath as 'other severely altered, damaged landscapes' (2005: 88), and argues that in contrast to the holicism advocated by many environmentalists and ecocritics, urban nature allows only for 'short takes and small grains at micro-level ... ventured against the background of enclosure' (2005: 88). Similarly,

and more explicitly, Lee Rozelle concludes that ‘the terms *urban* and *ecology*, when placed together, seem a most dangerous oxymoron; to make such easy semantic fusions, however intriguing the academic result, leaves the door open for the referent – voiceless nature – to become critically restricted’ (2002: 109, original emphasis). Attempts to truly see urban nature for what it is, rather than as representing ‘absence’ (Tallmadge 2004: 111), or fearing that it may become ‘critically restricted’ as Rozelle argues, have been slow to develop. The recent expansion of the field through material ecocriticism and other philosophical or cultural approaches would invite more explicit attention to the influence of urban nature on conceptions of nature. The exploration of non-traditional landscapes in material ecocriticism focuses on nuclear landscapes (Glotfelty 2014), degraded environments and pollution (Iovino 2016), dirt (Phillips and Sullivan 2012; Sullivan 2012), corporality (Iovino 2014) – often in association with toxicity (Alaimo 2010) – and, as Dana Phillips has put it, ‘knowing where your shit goes’ (2014), though not cities. While these approaches no doubt expand the field beyond the concept of ideal nature, not engaging explicitly with the positive possibilities offered by urban environments keeps the dichotomy between nature and the city largely intact. Indeed, material ecocriticism’s limited engagement with the city is especially poignant given that urban environments demonstrate the intra-action of nature and society, to use Karen Barad’s concept of ‘relata-within-phenomena’ emerging through intra-rather than inter-action (2003: 815).

One of the most sustained efforts to develop an ecocriticism more attuned to urban environments has been made by Michael Bennett, who argues for a ‘social ecocriticism’ focusing on ‘how the social, political, and economic decisions made by humans effect [*sic*] our interaction with the environment’ (2001: 33). Yet, Bennett’s social ecocriticism has been picked up by few ecocritics, most likely because it intersects with, and even appears to have been absorbed by, the environmental justice movement. More recently, Ashton Nichols has proposed ‘urbanatural roosting’ as a way of existing in the world that recognizes that nature and cities are not as distinct as is traditionally believed. Urbanature, Nichols argues, ‘insists that human beings are not *out of* nature when they stand in the streets of Manhattan any more than they are *in* nature when they stand above the tree-line in Montana’ (2011: xiii, original emphasis). The argument he makes is the reverse of the one usually made by

critics – that humankind has become so pervasive that ‘real’ nature has ceased to exist⁸ – but it is no less intriguing: ‘Crucial to *urbanature* is the idea that human beings are never cut off from wild nature by human culture... Nothing I can do can take me out of nature. There is nowhere for me to go. I am a natural being from the moment I am born (biologically) until the moment I die (organically)’ (2011: xv, original emphasis). Yet, *urbanature*’s expansiveness may also negatively impact the concept’s usefulness. While focusing on urban nature, as I do in this chapter, suggests a dichotomy between urban and non-urban nature that is unfeasible, arguing that *urbanature* includes ‘the biggest of all pictures ... as well as the smallest of all small pictures’ (Nichols 2011: xv) – in other words, everything – may obscure the distinctive qualities of urban nature. Urban nature and non-urban nature are in many ways different – just as they are in many ways similar and interconnected. Postmillennial British fiction engages with these differences and similarities and presents a variety of narratives in which urban spaces function as sites of changing twenty-first-century human–nature relations as a result of, and developing in parallel with, climate crisis.⁹ In the rest of this chapter, I will first discuss the different varieties of urban nature suggested by the novels, relate experiences of nature to socio-economic circumstances and, developing from that, explore food as a way in which especially well-off urbanites attempt to forge a connection to nature.

Varieties of urban nature

Perhaps more than any of the other narratives of climate crisis discussed in this book, the narrative of urban nature bumps up against definitions of ‘nature’. In this chapter, I frequently use the term ‘nature’ to refer to landscapes that traditionally were not seen as such, and may still not be. I write about urban wastelands as wildernesses, about an abandoned garden as an example of nature, and about food providing a connection to the natural world. Yet, it is not my aim to provide an overarching definition of what nature is in a time of climate crisis.¹⁰ Rather, I want to argue that nature is defined and potentially redefined by those who use the term. Seeing nature and perceiving it as more than a textual construct does not rely on clear-cut definitions. The potential of

the term, and in any story that we tell about our engagements with the non-human natural environment, lies precisely in it remaining undefined. Hence, especially in this chapter, I am interested in *experiences* rather than *definitions*, in exploring what characters and narrators in postmillennial novels perceive as nature. The nature that surfaces from these works is often much less glamorous, and much more immediate, than traditionally understood.

In being concerned with the city as a site of climate crisis and particularly as a site of a distinct kind of nature, my focus in this chapter is on space and how the novels work to depict urban spaces on a narratological level. Spatial cues provide the reader access to the storyworld of the narrative and, importantly, make urban nature visible to readers perhaps used to seeing only non-urban landscapes as natural. In *Clay* (re)connecting with urban nature happens primarily through descriptions of a local park:

a strip of land between the noisy high road and the flats. The council had laid tarmac paths across it here and there, but narrow tracks of beaten earth – what the planners called ‘desire paths’ – had been made by feet and better reflected where people wanted to go: from the estate to the bus stop, for instance, and from the benches to the pedestrian crossing.

(Harrison 2013: 14)

The title of Zadie Smith’s novel *NW* is a spatial cue in itself and points at the area in which the novel is set: north-west London. In *The Translation of the Bones*, spatial cues are almost specific enough to be directions: Stella and Rufus travel to Dorset via the ‘M3, the A303, past Andover, through Sherborne’ (Kay 2011: 22) and the church in which many of the novel’s important events take place is ‘on the corner of Riverside Crescent’ (Kay 2011: 22). The location of the church is fictional: though it is never made explicit, the novel is most likely set in London, yet there is no street called Riverside Crescent in the city.¹¹

Spatial markers participate in the reconfiguration of urban environments in a time of climate crisis by foregrounding urban nature, creating meaningful connections and reflecting a sense of belonging to uniquely urban natural spaces. I will approach the significance of space to twenty-first-century British urban novels through the narrative distinction between topological and projective locations. A topological location is a location that is described according to its geometric properties, like on a map.¹² Projective locations, on

the other hand, ‘vary in value and interpretation depending on how they are viewed’ (Frawley 1992: 262). David Herman uses the example of a cube and a tree to clarify the difference: ‘What counts as the *inside* of a cube is invariant and thus a topological location; but what counts as *in front of* a tree is a projective location, varying with one’s angle of vision’ (2002: 280, original emphasis). William Frawley emphasizes the significance of perspective in projective locations and suggests that these locations ‘involve *a frame of reference*’ (1992: 263, original emphasis). Frawley’s definition leaves the way open for an extension of topological and projective locations through the concept of space and place more familiar to ecocritics. Spaces become places through (emotional) attachment, knowledge and memories, as happens in *NW*.¹³ The directions that make up chapter 9 of *NW* are an example of topological locations:

Turn left on Yates Lane	40 feet
Head southwest toward Edgware Rd	315 feet
Turn right at A5/Edgware Rd	1.6 miles
Continue to follow A5	
Turn left at A4003/Willesden Ln	0.7 mile
Turn left at Bartlett Avenue	0.1 mile
Destination will be on the left	
Bartlett Avenue, London NW6, UK	

(Smith 2012: 33, original emphasis)

The chapter that follows provides a projective perspective of the same route:

From A to B redux:

Sweet stink of the hookah, couscous, kebab, exhaust fumes of a bus deadlock. 98, 16, 32, standing room only – quicker to walk! Escapees from St Mary’s, Paddington: expectant father smoking, old lady wheeling herself in a wheelchair smoking, die-hard holding urine sack, blood sack, smoking.... Casino! TV screen in the TV shop. TV cable, computer cable, audiovisual cables, I give you good price, good price. Leaflets, call abroad 4 less, learn English, eyebrow wax, Falun Gong, have you accepted Jesus as your personal plan? ... Here is the school where they stabbed the headmaster. Here is the Islamic Center of England opposite the Queen’s Arms.

(Smith 2012: 34)

Here, the topological location has become a projective location, particularly when projective locations are understood as functioning as places, rather than spaces. Extending the narratological concepts of topological and projective locations through the ecocritical concepts of space and place – and vice versa – adds the dimension of the topological, or map-like, to space. At the same time, this extension highlights the extent to which a place is not just a space to which someone feels a sense of belonging, but especially a space that is overlaid with meaning – whether societal, cultural or personal. As I discuss in Chapter 4 on polar narratives, the seemingly empty polar landscapes are projective landscapes because nationalistic discourses are projected unto them. Moreover, the hostile environments of the Arctic and Antarctic show that a sense of place need not always be positive but can also rely on negative sense of belonging. Of course, projective locations needn't always necessarily also be places: as Herman's example of the tree implies, being in front of a tree, from whatever perspective, does not necessarily mean attachment to the tree, or even knowledge of it. Yet, in many novels, including the ones discussed in this chapter, the shift from topological to projective location is a shift from space to place. When his father leaves, TC, the young boy in *Clay*, no longer feels at ease at home. He begins to explore the urban natural areas around the block of flats where he lives:

In the weeks without his father those few nondescript city acres – the park by the Plestor Estate, the common and the few godforsaken corners of scrub between the estate and the high road – had become overlaid with the landmarks of all his solitary imaginings, until every tree and fence post and path and thicket was charged with an almost mystical significance.

(Harrison 2013: 8)

The topological location – 'those few nondescript city acres' – has become a projective location, as space has become place and the area has become 'charged with an almost mythical significance'. Achieving a sense of place, and turning a topological location into a projective location, this example illustrates, is essential to becoming aware of urban nature. It is also, by extension, central to becoming attuned to the kinds of nature that do not fit many traditional ideas – a project that gains in urgency as climate crisis worsens.

For TC, much of the park's mythical significance lies with the wilderness he discovers there. Crawling through the bushes of the park he finds tracks of what he is sure is 'something lonely and wild,' which he decides must be a wolf (Harrison 2013: 39). That a wild animal such as a wolf would roam the London estate, he tells his friend Jozef, isn't all that unusual: '[t]here are panthers out there, all sorts. People see them all the time. A man got bit by a big cat in Luton, taking his bins out, I saw it' (Harrison 2013: 103). TC's story of the panther in Luton echoes the widely publicized case of the Sydenham Panther that attacked a man in 2005 (Barkham 2005). Indeed, reports of big cat sightings have over the past decade-and-a-half risen from a few dozen a year to thousands. George Monbiot, who has written extensively about this phenomenon, suggests that the chances of actually encountering one of these animals are small. Human perceptions are moreover distorted by darkness and the human brain is unable to adequately tell an animal's size, particularly at a distance. Yet, at the same time, Monbiot argues, big cat sightings also tap into deeper sentiments and are comparable to the many UFO sightings during the Cold War space race between the United States and the Soviet Union (Monbiot 2013). Sightings of wild animals and the desire for the wild are not unique to *Clay*. Other postmillennial British novels such as Evie Wyld's *All the Birds Singing* (2013) and Sarah Hall's *The Wolf Border* (2015) also feature actual or imagined wild animals in Britain. Perhaps, Monbiot suggests, big cats activate an ancient evolutionary template in our minds which is stimulated especially by the disappearance of these creatures from our environments (Monbiot 2013: 58; 60). In twenty-first-century novels, I'd argue, the desire for and appearance of the wild is yet another way in which contemporary fictions renegotiate contemporary climate crisis.

TC eventually discovers that the paw prints he found were not those of a wolf, but of a large dog. The experience doesn't diminish his desire for the wild, however, and he finds an even wilder space in an abandoned garden a few streets away from the park. It is 'a forgotten half-acre, fenced off, overgrown and utterly abandoned' (Harrison 2013: 145). Overlooked by town planners and neglected by its owners, the garden has gone wild: 'kingcups marked the boggy place where once there was a pond; there were three stunted rhododendrons amid the brambles; and almost lost among the lime and sycamore saplings were two rusty sequoias and a larch, nearly 120 foot high, survivors of the garden's Victorian

apogee' (Harrison 2013: 145). TC's sense of wonder and joy at finding the garden echoes a similar experience described by the poets Farley and Symmons Roberts. In their 2011 book *Edgelands*, they set out to chart and describe what they call 'England's true wilderness' – not the manicured wilderness of craggy hills, but instead the 'feral' wilderness of the spaces in between, of the edgelands between country and city, and of inner city wastegrounds and forgotten lots. An urban wasteland, they suggest, takes you by surprise. Entering it often carries a sense of suspense or trespassing that manicured nature trails up mountains or through the countryside do not offer (Farley and Symmons Robert 2011: 137). Both the narrator of *Clay* as well as Farley and Symmons Roberts emphasize the emptiness and non-human qualities of urban wastelands. TC nonetheless immediately sets about making the garden his own: 'It was a lost world, and it belonged to him.... He decided to find out every single thing that lived there, so he could take care of it all' (Harrison 2013: 145–146). His desire to get to know and take care of every part of the garden and even become part of it himself illustrates what William Cronon has described as the wilderness paradox shaping many conceptions of wilderness. Wilderness, Cronon argues, is explicitly where we are not: 'wilderness embodies a dualistic vision in which the human is entirely outside the natural. If we allow ourselves to believe that nature, to be true, must also be wild, then our very presence in nature represents its fall. The place where we are is the place where nature is not' (1991: 80–81).¹⁴ Although TC may not realize it, his sheer presence compromises the very wildness he loves so much. Indeed, he ends up literally compromising the garden and his own access to it. When TC decides to show the garden to Jozef – a Polish man who'd become his friend – he loses the garden forever: Jozef is arrested on suspicions of child abuse and TC is forced to move in with his father, away from the city and his hidden garden.

Wilderness is both the embodiment of the sublime, as well as a sacred space in which the boundaries between human and non-human, natural and supernatural have always been more fluid than elsewhere. It is, as Leo Mellor suggests, a term thick with layered meanings, yet also a way to imagine a landscape as a '*tabula rasa* for the imagination, thronged with natural forces and ripe with possibilities' (2014: 111). The wild depends on the peculiar combination of being a space loaded with meanings yet necessarily empty because in order to be true wilderness it can never be wholly captured or

imagined. As such, the wilderness paradox is an especially apt way of thinking through human–nature relations, especially in a time of climate crisis that is caused by a desire for, and destruction of, the wild, the loss of which is subsequently lamented in environmental campaigns. The urban wilderness Father Diamond visits in *The Translation of the Bones* is a good example of a space that is both physically empty as well as full of meanings, especially – Father Diamond being a Catholic priest – religious meanings. The central event that the novel leads up to is the murder of a young boy in a London church. After being interviewed about this by the police once again, Father Diamond gets out of his car at the edge of an estate. The landscape he encounters is a typical urban or post-industrial wasteland, smelling of marsh water and compost. The allegorical significance of this space soon becomes clear: ‘In this abandoned place he cried out loud. Why? he asked... Father Diamond tramped across the marshy waste ground and heard nothing. No voice came in answer to his questions. But at least he’d voiced them; and the wind blew sea-whispers to him and at the end of this long day he would be tired enough to sleep’ (Kay 2011: 160). The murder and Father Diamond’s subsequent walk take place at the end of Lent, the period in the religious calendar that references Christ’s temptation and forty days of fasting in a desert wilderness. The wilderness is also a place of literal and spiritual hunger, as in the story of the Israelites fleeing Egypt. Father Diamond’s experience in the urban wasteland takes the form more of spiritual hunger than satanic temptation: the death of the boy shakes his faith at a time when it is already fragile. For Father Diamond, an inner-city priest, the urban wasteland becomes a contemporary version of the Biblical wasteland – a wilderness or desert that is not only bare of landscape features generally seen as meaningful, but also empty of answers and void of spiritual support.

Contemporary urban natural spaces, then, can take many different forms: from the small and nearby of a park, to the vaster and perhaps more alienating spaces of the post-industrial wasteland Father Diamond wanders. In both cases, older conceptions of nature – as a wild space, for instance, or a space untouched by humans – are reconfigured and reshaped to fit in with a twenty-first-century urban context. While these examples draw on familiar language, other examples of urban nature elude it. An example of this is a small wood that Linda, one of the characters in *Clay*, encounters by the side of a busy road. Not only is she surprised to find it, it is so different

from the kinds of environments that she typically sees as nature that she cannot quite grasp it. Getting out of her car on one of her many business trips she discovers a small forest that is quite a bit more substantial than the windbreak she had expected: 'it began to seem as if she was in another world. The trees had closed around her, and for a moment she felt that the wood could well go on forever' (Harrison 2013: 89). She imagines that once the bluebells in the wood are in bloom, 'this tiny, forgotten corner of woodland would be a paradise' (Harrison 2013: 90). Its unlikely location confuses her: it is not in a place that she would associate with nature, nor does it seem to have any other real purpose. She wonders about it: 'What was the point of it? It didn't look as though people were cutting it for timber, and it was too close to the motorway for paintballing. She wondered if it had a name, and who it belonged to' (Harrison 2013: 89). The forest is literally wild: seemingly without an economic purpose, without a name, and without an owner. Whereas in a rural environment Linda would most likely classify it as 'countryside' or indeed 'wild', here, at the side of a busy road, she finds it difficult to name, or even place it amongst the ideas she has about nature.

Marion Shoard – who first coined the term 'edgelands' – suggests that one of the reasons why these spaces are not seen as valuable or natural is because they don't fit existing ideas about what counts as nature. Edgelands 'certainly do not conform to people's idea of the picturesque by presenting a chocolate-box image, suitably composed and textural. On the contrary, they seem desolate, forsaken and unconnected even to their own elements let alone to our preferred version of human life' (Shoard 2002: 3). This might be just the reason why Linda – a person generally not very interested in nature at all – finds it hard to place the wood she encounters. Knowing only 'official nature', and most probably not at first hand, an edgeland space does not fit into her framework of ideas about what is nature and what isn't. Instead, the forest is an example of Mabey's 'unofficial countryside' that in its indeterminate state at the side of a road provides 'a story of co-existence, of how it is possible for the natural world to live alongside man, even amongst his grimmest eyesores' (2010: 21).¹⁵ Indeed, for a brief period, Linda's encounter with the wood leads to a rekindling of her interest in nature that had lain buried since her youth.

Urban nature at the intersection of socio-economic processes

In *Clay*, Linda's socio-economic status is suggested to be one of the reasons why she does not recognize urban nature as valuable, or even as nature at all. Postmillennial novels like *The Translation of the Bones*, *NW* and *Clay* emphasize that urban environments are made up of different dimensions: social and natural, political and economic, as well as cultural and discursive. Much of *Clay* is set in and around a small, unnamed park, built in the 1960s as part of the Plestor estate, while *NW* takes a bigger area – the London postal code NW – as its setting. In both cases, the characters feel an intense attachment to these spaces: as the narrator of *NW* relates, one of the novels' main characters, Leah, 'is faithful in her allegiance to this two-mile square of the city as other people are to their families, or their countries' (Smith 2012: 5). Not only do these spaces consequently function as emotional geographies, both the park and *NW* are presented as being at the intersection of socio-economic, cultural and natural processes. Kilburn, in north-west London, is a particularly apt example of the way in which socio-economic processes shape an area. Developed in the 1880s to provide '[w]ell-appointed country living for those tired of the city', over a century later it now offers '[d]isappointed city living for those tired of their countries' (Smith 2012: 42).

While environmental justice movements have been particularly concerned with race and socio-economic status on the one hand, and degraded environments on the other, urban scholars explore the interplay of socio-economic status and environment in relation to all environments. Power, Erik Swyngedouw suggests, plays a decisive role in experiences of the city, and becomes particularly visible in struggles of class, gender and ethnicity. These processes 'produce socio-environmental processes that are both enabling, for powerful individuals and groups, and disabling, for marginalized individuals and groups. They precisely produce positions of empowerment and disempowerment' (Swyngedouw 2006: 115). Sophia's daughter Linda grew up in the house that Sophia still lives in and that borders the park. Well-off and able to afford a house in a desired part of the city, she tries to forget about the estate she grew up on all together: 'the Plestor was yet another part of the city she tried to blank out, like the awful high road, the tower blocks and the terraced row of squats near the station' (Harrison 2013: 46). This view

extends to not only the park but to her views of nature altogether: to Linda, nature is mostly a hassle, an inconvenience that needs to be kept in check and controlled. When she does briefly take an interest in nature, this interest disappears after she discovers that TC – who has become a friend of Daisy – has been ‘taken’ by Jozef to the urban wasteland. Not only does Linda hereby draw a hasty and completely wrong conclusion about the friendship between TC and Jozef, the experience itself also reaffirms her beliefs of urban nature as dangerous. Consequently, she gets rid of the tools she had bought to do some gardening herself, and rehires the gardener. Like Linda, TC’s mother Kelly also pays little attention to nature. The reason behind this is crucial to an understanding of experiences of urban nature: whereas Linda is well-off and hires a gardener to deal with the nature she finds so inconvenient, Kelly cannot afford to be concerned with nature. The kind of concerns that Linda has when it comes to her garden and urban nature in general are a luxury to Kelly, who can barely keep her head above water financially and has trouble raising and understanding her son. To put it differently, whereas Linda is privileged enough to enjoy the nature that she finds worthwhile and derides those urban natural spaces she associates with danger, Kelly’s financial problems and socio-economic status prevent her from doing so. In the novel, this very real difference in experiences of nature is illustrated by creating a literal, physical barrier between Kelly and the earth: she lives ‘four floors and forty-two feet up in the night sky’ (Harrison 2013: 55).

Different social perspectives also bring with them different associations and connotations of natural and built spaces. In Smith’s novel *NW*, Felix is a young man from a poorer background determined to make something of his life. Travelling through the city on the tube, he looks at a map of the London tube network and realizes that it does not ‘express his reality. The centre was not “Oxford Circus” but the bright lights of Kilburn High Road. “Wimbledon” was the countryside, “Pimlico” pure science fiction. He put his right index finger over Pimlico’s blue bar. It was nowhere. Who lived there? Who even passed through it?’ (Smith 2012: 143). For Felix, who’s been outside of the city only a handful of times, *NW* is the centre, and everything else – including the ‘official’ centre of Oxford Circus and the ‘countryside’ of Wimbledon – is marginal and unimportant. For Natalie, a lawyer in the same novel who has worked hard to escape her upbringing on the Caldwell estate, nature

also has a socio-economic dimension: for her, those spaces that in the novel are associated with urban nature are significant primarily – if not, only – in terms of social status. When she and her husband buy their first home, what matters to Natalie is not that the garden is tiny, but rather that it is far away enough from the estate (Smith 2012: 221). Similarly, the one space in *NW* that is something of an urban natural oasis – a typical country church on a small plot of land – is important to Natalie only because joining this church will enable her children to get into a good school. The lengthy description of the church – as well as the long trek that Leah, Natalie and her children undertake to get there – stands out for the suggestions it makes about the role of nature in the city:

A little country church, a medieval country church, stranded on this half-acre, in the middle of a roundabout. Out of time, out of place. A force field of serenity surrounds it. A cherry tree at the east window. A low encircling brick wall that marks the ancient boundary, no more a defence than a ring of daisies. The family vaults have their doors kicked in. Many brightly tagged gravestones. Leah and Nat and the children pass through the lychgate and pause under the bell tower. Blue clockface brilliant in the sun. It is eleven thirty in the morning, in another century, another England.

(Smith 2012: 60)

The little church, on an island in the middle of a roundabout, appears to exist in a spatial and temporal bubble in the city – not only is it surrounded by ‘a forcefield of serenity’ that cancels the chaos of the city, it is reminiscent of ‘another century, another England’. On the one hand, this scene implies the significance and benefits of nature, even its ever-lastingness. Inside the church is a statue of a black Madonna, given voice by the narrator as the spirit of both the city and the countryside that preceded it. Older than church and city, the Madonna comes to embody ‘[u]nruly England of the real life, the animal life!’ (Smith 2012: 64). Yet, while emphasizing the perpetuity of nature in the city reflects the way in which, as urban political ecologists suggest, cultural, natural, social, economic and political processes all play a role in shaping the environment, presenting nature as spatially and temporally removed from the city is also problematic. In a novel in which nature is defined in several different ways – as associated with food, for instance – the description of the

church stands out as especially anachronistic in its depiction of nature as that which is separate from the city, even separate from humans.

Yet, while the novels overall emphasize a positive reconceptualization of nature, they too include instances in which urban natural spaces are potentially dangerous. Indeed, in *Clay*, the issue of the possible danger that lurks in inner-city parks and commons is central to the narrative. On the one hand, that precisely *Clay* explores this is remarkable: of the three novels discussed in this chapter, Harrison's novel is the most explicit about urban nature, and at first sight, also the one that most explicitly celebrates it. Characters such as Sophia, an elderly lady who has lived next to the park for over forty years, are fiercely loyal and attached to it. On the level of the *fabula*, or story, the novel traces a year in and around the park which in one way or another plays a role in the characters' lives: Sophia's, TC's, Jozef's, but also Linda's, who is glad to have moved away from it, and Daisy's, Linda's daughter, who frequently visits her grandmother. On this level, the story ends with the loss of the kind of urban nature Sophia celebrates: Jozef is arrested when TC shows him the secret garden, an event that for Linda confirms that urban nature is dangerous. While it ends in loss, the *fabula* nonetheless paints a largely positive image of urban nature. At the same time, if approached in terms of its structure or *syuzhet*, all of the novel's urban spaces are framed by the possible danger these spaces form to children. The novel is not structured exactly chronologically: it begins with the event that follows Jozef's arrest, when TC is questioned by social services. As such, the novel is circular, since the final pages of the novel depict what follows this conversation, namely that TC is driven to his new home, far away from the park, by his father. On a structural level, *Clay* frames urban nature in terms of danger – even though Jozef did TC no harm and is not charged. The novel's *syuzhet*, then, illustrates a contemporary culture in which many children are no longer free to roam and in which urban nature is often associated with danger. A study from the late 1980s characterizes this culture. Many respondents explicitly mention the importance of open and natural urban spaces to children and lament the disappearance of such open spaces and the time that their children spend indoors watching television. An important factor in not letting children play outdoors, though, is the supposed danger of urban nature, resulting in them having 'so much less freedom to roam' (Burgess, Harrison and Limb 1988: 465). In *Clay* playing outside in the

park with minimal supervision gives Daisy one of the best times she's ever had (Harrison 2013: 130), since she's rarely allowed to leave the garden or 'explore' nature unsupervised. TC, on the other hand, just a year older than Daisy, spends most of his time outdoors, exploring the park and its undergrowth. His adventures are cut short when he is forced to move. *Clay*, then, aptly shows how what counts as nature depends on what a person – a character – perceives as such: for TJ it is the park, and for Linda, albeit briefly, the wood by the side of the road. How we define nature, novels such as *Clay* and *NW* suggest, depends on a host of other factors as well, ranging from socio-economic status, to ideas about danger and safety. In the final section of this chapter I explore another permutation of twenty-first-century (urban) nature: the natural connotations attributed to 'real' food.

Real food and (re-)connecting to nature in the city

The past decades have seen increased demand for 'real' – often local and/or organic – food, of the kind Natalie and Frank serve in *NW*: spinach that is 'farm to table' and a salad of 'heirloom' tomatoes (Smith 2012: 76). Food ties us to our environment – both human and non-human – in the most common yet most intimate ways. It also illustrates our conceptions of nature: our associations of certain products as 'pure', 'real' and healthy are direct echoes of connotations we attribute to nature. Moreover, particularly in urban environments, food and food narratives serve to define and redefine human–nature relations. While food is largely produced in non-urban environments, certain food practices are associated especially with the city – particularly the kind of food that popular and marketing discourse calls 'real' food. Indeed, the rise of 'alternative food practices'¹⁶ is frequently related to urbanization: 'urbanization yields more farmers markets and increases demand for local produce in line with a variety of economic and political agendas and consumer beliefs and desires. This may be especially pronounced in cities with well-educated residents who have high incomes' (Jarosz 2008: 242). Urban food narratives in *The Translation of the Bones*, *NW* and *Clay* have two dimensions: firstly, they point to food as a marker of socio-economic status and secondly, they suggest that food creates a connection to nature. On a deeper level, these

two dimensions are closely connected: socio-economic status is tied to the consumption of food – turning socio-economic elites into food elites – that either enables or precludes ties to nature. In *The Translation of the Bones*, mother and daughter Fidelma and Mary-Margaret are poor, generally eat fatty and salty foods and are never referred to in relation to nature. Stella, on the other hand, is well-off, cooks elaborate dishes for her husband's dinner parties and is frequently associated with nature, especially with flowers. This connection between socio-economic status and food is hardly new. Yet, while in contemporary discourses the affluent are generally positively associated with food, and food itself is seen as a status symbol, disadvantaged and poorer people were in the past typically negatively associated with food. Both the people and any sensuous pleasure derived from food were seen as gross, as food scholars such as Jennifer L. Fleissner propose. This view of food goes back to Plato's hierarchy of the senses where taste, 'weighed down by its associations with gross sensuality and "selfish interest"' was put last (Fleissner 2008: 28). The appreciation of food as other than purely aesthetic has consequently long been connected with lower socio-economic status,¹⁷ a sentiment that is echoed in *The Translation of the Bones*. Yet, the positive association between good or 'real' food and the positive connotations of nature is in the contemporary urban nature narrative reserved for those people who are better educated and more affluent.

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

Such beautiful things, she thought, these mussels. Their sleek shells gleaming in the water, pearl-tinged at the hinges, a darkness that was full of colour – green and grey and bronze. It was their ordinariness that put them beyond remark. As with many other things – the iridescent feathers on a drake's neck in the winter, so startling a green; the buds of a magnolia; the high polish of a newly released conker – the mussels were too familiar to be a real

cause of wonder. We look out for the rare and exotic. The magnificence of a peacock's tail, the flash of diamonds in a seam of coal. And yet what could be more exotic than a cock pheasant in a field of frozen turnips on a winter morning, his ruby markings and his emerald-green head?

(Kay 2011: 72)

The mussels, Stella thinks, are 'too familiar to be a real cause of wonder', because we tend to 'look out for the rare and exotic'. This seems to be particularly the case in urban environments, where much nature is left unseen and unremarked on because it does not fit the dominant image of spectacular, non-urban, nature. Yet, in all of their ordinariness, these mussels provide Stella with a sensuous experience of the non-human natural. Her aesthetic appreciation of the mussels emphasizes the connection she has to both food and nature, creating the possibility of an embodied relationship with the non-human natural. Rachel Slocum refers to the potential that alternative food practices hold in this respect as enabling 'embodied ecologies': 'situated, corporeal ways of connecting' (2007: 523). In an urban narrative such as *The Translation of the Bodies* food provides precisely such situated and corporeal ways of relating to nature that are generally not associated with urban living.

Alternative food practices and related networks such as farmers' markets are associated with environmental, social and economic benefits, and as such play a significant role in shaping human-nature relations in the city. 'Real' food is often even felt to provide ties to the land and the non-human natural that urbanization is believed to have destroyed. Hence, as Lewis Holloway and Moya Kneafsey argue:

the association of FM [farmers' markets] with the rural and the local may be read as a search for localized identity, an attempt to fix identity or build a sense of community within a context of perceived threats to local identities and communities in the face of the power of multi-nationals associated with, for example, food retailing and new and diffuse forms of risk, such as genetically modified crops.

(2000: 295)

Strikingly, the meanings attributed to alternative food practices echo many of the concerns and aims of the bioregionalist movement, which generally rejects urban life in favour of small-scale communities. Alternative food practices,

then, provide a way of rooting to the non-human natural that does not depend on 'staying put' (Sanders 1993) or living in the countryside, and are in that respect particularly valuable in re-shaping human-nature relationships in urban environments. At the same time, the dinner scene that follows Stella's preparation of the mussels foregrounds the problematic dimension of reconnecting to nature through food. While Stella praises the mussels for their 'ordinariness', they are hardly ordinary for many people that fall outside of Stella's social class, like Fidelma and Mary-Margaret. In many ways, these characters function as foils of each other. Stella seemingly leads an ideal and privileged life with her husband and three children, alternating between their London and Dorset homes. Fidelma left Ireland after becoming pregnant with a man who was married to another woman. She ended up supporting herself and her young daughter by prostituting herself in England, before shutting herself in her flat, vowing never to leave. She is morbidly obese and relies completely on Mary-Margaret, her thirty-two-year-old daughter who has a learning disability. While Stella is continually associated with flowers, Mary-Margaret and Fidelma are associated with confusion and darkness, especially in Fidelma's dreams. The contrast between these characters is emphasized by the foods they eat. Mary-Margaret buys their food at a poorly stocked corner shop, and she and her mother live off 'soft things, sweet things – white bread, chocolate sponge' (Kay 2011: 195). They are not able to buy 'real' food, and with their desire for soft, sweet and fatty things, enjoy food generally looked down on by those belonging to the food elite. The food they prefer, however, nonetheless holds similar importance to them as the 'real' foods do to the other characters, and creates a similar relationship of identity. When buying food for herself and her mother, Mary-Margaret likes to splurge every now and then on Irish Cream, which reminds her of her own, and her mother's, Irish heritage. The beverage itself is every bit as important to her as the connotations that the package promotes: 'She was drawn to things that reminded her of her heritage, with green fields on the labels and words on them like cream. Cream was a word that tasted of itself, she thought, and filled the mouth exactly like the real thing' (Kay 2011: 100). Food and particularly comfort foods play a special role in the formation of identity – or attempts to hold on to an identity that has been lost, as in the case of Fidelma and Mary-Margaret. Julie Locher et al. argue that people rely on food 'to define who we are as both individuals

and as groups, and both the media and advertisers of consumer goods use this social function of food for their own benefit' (2005: 275). The green fields on the Irish cream label are a prime example of such a relationship of identity suggested by food. Comfort food especially is also associated with physical comfort, much more so than healthier food, and convenience, two further elements that define the relationship Fidelma and Mary-Margaret have with food. In the context of British imperialism, Fidelma's and Mary-Margaret's limited access to healthy food moreover echoes food shortages and famines caused and exacerbated by predatory British politics in Ireland up to the early twentieth century. The importance of socio-economic status to who has access to certain types of 'real' foods hence gives British food narratives an added, troubling dimension.

Socio-economic position, then, functions as a marker of a positive or negative relationship to food and nature, both in postmillennial British fiction and in the world outside of the text. Conversely, food itself may reveal socio-economic status. The absence of 'proper' food in *Clay*, for instance, is yet another example that TC's mother is unable to take care of him and is struggling with unemployment and addiction. For Natalie in *NW*, food is a way of distinguishing herself from the estate she came from. As a trainee barrister she realizes that the dinners she is required to attend with her colleagues play an important function: they show that she has become an important person and that she is no longer 'an accidental guest at the table – as she has always understood herself to be – but a host, with other hosts, continuing a tradition' (Smith 2012: 190). Food subsequently becomes a mark of privilege to Natalie and she aims to mimic this at her own home. At a dinner party she serves her friends farm to table spinach, heirloom tomato salad, green beans with shaved almonds, lemon tart and 'extremely good coffee' (Smith 2012: 77). People who have not achieved similar status and happiness eat other kinds of food and are ridiculed for it, like Natalie's ex-boyfriend Rodney whom Leah spots in Sainsbury's buying 'a meat pie and two cans of ginger beer and a bottle of that hot sauce that you put on everything' (Smith 2012: 187).

Food is not only a socio-economic marker, but also gendered. In both *NW* and *The Translation of the Bones*, the preparation of food is completely in the hands of women. Natalie obsesses over a picnic and ends up cooking 'everything from scratch' and bringing 'a hamper with real crockery and glasses'

(Smith 2012: 225). Likewise, the dinners Stella's husband Rufus organizes as part of his work as an MP may be no big deal for him – 'Spag bol. No need for your best bib and tuckers' (Kay 2011: 71) – but Stella goes to considerable trouble and work. During the dinner, Stella is essentially left to herself: no one asks for her opinion on any of the (political) topics discussed and 'she was left to produce dinner and consider the assorted guests' (Kay 2011: 74). While cooking for others is often seen as feminine, 'offering food as love' (Lupton 1996: 108–109), masculinity is associated with eating food that others have prepared. Since thinking about food and preparing it is a largely female affair in *NW* and *The Translation of the Bones*, the novels suggest that the connection to the non-human natural that food offers is distinctly female as well. This, of course, replicates problematic associations of women being more natural – and also, traditionally, less rational or valuable – than men, tying issues of gender in with food and nature in yet another way. As *The Translation of the Bones* illustrates, food is also tied to religion, as in the case of Father Diamond. Set in the final weeks of Lent, the novel describes the priest's Lenten diet of 'black coffee, unbuttered toast, pieces of fish' (Kay 2011: 88). The spiritual hunger he feels leading up to Easter – and Felix's murder – is echoed by his physical hunger. He also misses the spiritual connection he usually experiences: 'This year he experienced only hunger. Hunger of the acid, nauseous kind and a sort of tiredness; sensations as flat and as discreditable as a habitual drunkard's headache' (Kay 2011: 88). In this part of the novel, *The Translation of the Bones* shows how contemporary food practices are rewritings of older food traditions such as that of fasting in some form or another during Lent. Yet, for Father Diamond, food does not provide access to nature, nor does the religious dimension it is part of have a natural counterpart, as was the case in his experiences in the urban wasteland. Rather, food in this case identifies his state of mind, and the crisis of faith he experiences. When he cannot remember what he had for dinner yesterday or the day before, this is not so much a denial of a connection to the natural world, but a disconnection to the material world as a whole that forms the background to 'his one acute and conscious feeling: a helpless ache for Stella' (Kay 2011: 171) after her son has been killed.

Finally, although alternative food practices may provide affluent urbanites such as Stella with a sense of connection to their regional context – and as such foster bioregionalism – it often remains unclear what exactly this connection

entails, since ideas about 'real' food are largely based on assumptions of health and environmental benefits only. As *The Translation of the Bones* shows, alternative food practices hold complex meanings that have little to do with the health and environmental benefits frequently associated with them. Although ideas about the benefits of alternative food practices are common, eating local, adopting a bioregional lifestyle and other elements of alternative food practices are not necessarily good or beneficial to people and planet.¹⁸ The small-scale farmers that are supposedly supported by alternative food practices are particularly vulnerable, since they often rely heavily on unpaid family labour and lack the resources to juggle demands of processing, marketing and transport to farmers' markets (Jarosz 2008: 241). Given the distances that many of these farmers have to travel to bring their products to a farmers' market in town, the question can be asked to what extent the local community is really supported.¹⁹ Indeed, pleas to 'buy British' and eat local have not led to a more sustainable British countryside, as the picture that is painted of the countryside in *The Translation of the Bones* illustrates. Since Stella's husband Rufus is an MP for a county in Dorset, they own a house in a small rural village, which they only visit, however, during weekends. Stella feels uncomfortable about this – 'fraudulent' even: 'For the generations who had lived there it had represented permanence, a place of work, a settled place in life... Now there was nowhere in the village where a person could earn a living except as a cleaner or an odd-job man. Or, of course, as an MP' (Kay 2011: 29). Even the local produce – in the form of the apple juice in Stella's fridge – is not marketed towards those actually living locally, but to those like Stella and Rufus, tourists and visitors. Urban food narratives, then, may also emphasize a disconnection from methods of food production, and a lack of true knowledge of the earth it came from. NW references the eruption of the Icelandic volcano Eyjafjallajökull in May 2010, causing one of the characters to remark that there's '[n]o fruit and veg in the shops ... Makes sense if you think about it. Of course, it's an island we're on here' (Smith 2012: 42). Only when the volcano's ash cloud prevents transport by air, do people suddenly realize that their broccoli comes from Kenya (Smith 2012: 44). Critics have also suggested that alternative food practices lead to the further commodification of nature. This is not only the case for the kinds of foods Natalie buys – organic ketchup, 'real' coffee (Smith 2012: 221) – but especially for the food available to disadvantaged families like Fidelma and

Mary-Margaret's, who experience the other side of the commodification of food and live in a food desert. Supermarkets, whether expensive or the poorly stocked corner shop where Mary-Margaret shops, become spaces of reification which, as Allison Carruth (2009) argues, downplay environmental and social histories.²⁰ In twenty-first-century urban narratives, then, food functions as a nexus point of environment, economics and politics, as well as identity, gender, race and class.²¹ In a biting satire on the availability of 'real' food, the narrator of *NW* comments on one of the characters' complaints that croissants will never be as good as in France by noting: 'This is because they are made in the back of a sweet shop, off Willesden Lane. *Real* croissants may be purchased from the organic market, on a Sunday, in the playground on Leah's old school' (Smith 2012: 18, emphasis mine). Real food is available to those who have the resources to pay for it: those primarily well-educated and affluent consumers who shop at organic and farmers' markets.²²

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Postmillennial British novels depict an ongoing engagement with cities as sites of a particular kind of urban nature that is especially poignant in a time of climate crisis. Much like the pastoral narrative explored in the previous chapter, the narrative of urban nature runs parallel to other climate crisis narratives such as those of environmental collapse (Chapter 1) and polar environments (Chapter 4). While climate crisis forces us to take a global view, the narrative of urban nature draws attention to the immediate natural spaces surrounding many of us. Seeing urban nature as nature, leads to a more varied and less rarefied idea about which spaces count as natural. Such an awareness may not only lead to empowerment and even activism, but also counter the often debilitating effect of the environmental destruction of more typical natural landscapes, such as glaciers. Indeed, sociological research shows that so-called unofficial green areas – such as greenery by the side of the road – are more valued by urbanites than 'official green areas', such as parks and gardens (Burgess, Harrison and Limb 1988: 460). Subjects in these studies treasure urban nature particularly for enhancing positive qualities of urban life: for the 'variety of opportunities and physical settings; sociability and cultural diversity' (Burgess, Harrison and Limb 1988: 471). To put it differently, urban green areas are valued precisely for being urban nature, not as signs

of the absence of 'real' nature. Urban natural spaces may even have the same restorative potential that many environmentalists and ecocritics attribute to non-urban environments (Karmanov and Hamel 2008: 122). For ecocriticism, the narrative of urban nature requires an extension of much of its traditional, and contemporary, corpus as well as its methodologies that is slowly underway (Bracke 2013). Recent ecocritical analyses of non-traditional landscapes have yet to lead to a sustained engagement with the positive possibilities that urban natural environment presents.

The Translation of the Bones, *Clay* and *NW* hence participate in a reconfiguration of nature narratives that is acutely aware of the significance of the man-made in natural spaces, without lamenting its presence. What emerges in twenty-first-century fiction is a narrative of urban nature that is both old and new, both enchanted with nature and aware of its loss, a narrative which reflects the problems and complexity of nature in cities, particularly concerning those who have access to it. Most importantly, it is a narrative that is acutely attuned to contemporary environmental circumstances, and depicts the full breadth and variety of postmillennial experiences of nature.