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"The Bitter Taste of Extinction": Writing the Environmental Crisis Through Food

L. Sasha Gora

Introduction

Jonathan Gold—the first food writer to have won a Pulitzer Prize—started his career in the 1980s covering music, but it was when he turned his attention from his ears to his mouth and started reviewing restaurants that he found his voice. In 2011 he penned a *Los Angeles Times* op-ed. Gold's name appeared regularly in newspaper and magazine food sections, but not in the op-eds. He begins the story recounting the last time he ate shark fin—a delicacy in China—fifteen years ago, at a now-defunct "seafood palace." Remembering the specialities exhibited in glass cases, "where they had the stark, ghostly presence of museum displays," the scene Gold

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sets feels out of time.[1] His memory transitions to a description of why shark fin is prized—its "ethereal, gelatinous texture"—before delivering a reality check: "there is no sustainable source." This adds new meaning to its "ghostly presence," and leaves a haunting aftertaste. Gold drifts between memories and reports. Attaining a balanced respect for both traditional practices and fishing regulations, he channels cultural sensitivity while taking an environmental stance. Although Gold confesses shark fin soup is "delicious," he concludes: "It is hard to work up an appetite for the bitter taste of extinction."

Gold's brother Mark—an environmental scientist and California's Deputy Secretary for Oceans and Coastal Policy—encouraged him to write this op-ed. Two assemblymen had introduced a bill in California that would ban the sale of shark fin, only for it to meet resistance in the state Senate out of concern that, as an inadvertent side effect, it would discriminate against Chinese Americans, a point Gold addresses. "It's true," he says—the bill would require them, as opposed to other California communities, to give up a food seasoned with tradition. But he argues that Chinese culinary culture is resilient, it adapts. Shark numbers, however, are not. "There is no third way with shark's fin," Gold explains, "—we either stop eating it because we choose to preserve the species, or we stop eating it because soon there will be none left to eat." Food today, a culinary ghost tomorrow. Following Jonathan's 2018 death, his brother claimed this piece was central in California's decision to ban shark fin sales.[2]

Although his tattered Dodge Ram 1500 was green, Gold's lifestyle was far from eco-friendly. His culinary research across Los Angeles clocked in at 20,000 miles a year. "I'm an L.A. guy," he said. "I drive. I am my truck. My truck is me."[3] Yet his op-ed had such a positive environmental impact that it begs the question: how is food writing a means for social and environmental activism?

Shark fin only begins to reveal how human appetites contribute to the environmental crisis. Food systems account for more than one-third of

[1] Jonathan Gold, "Shark Fin Soup: The taste of extinction," *Los Angeles Times*, 7 August 7, 2011, https://www.latimes.com/opinion/la-xpm-2011-aug-07-la-oe-gold-shark-fin-20110807-story.html.

[2] Mark Gold, "He Bridged Cultural Divides and Saved the Sharks: Jonathan Gold's Brother Remembers his Impact," *Los Angeles Times*, July 24, 2018, https://www.latimes.com/food/la-fo-jonathan-gold-sharks-20180724-story.html.

[3] Laura Gabbert, *City of Gold* (New York: IFC Films, 2015).

global greenhouse gas emissions.[4] To eat is, thus, to harm the world.[5] Writer and farmer Wendell Berry describes eating as an agricultural act.[6] However, it is an act that goes beyond agriculture alone. Eating is an environmental act. In addition to the plants and livestock that humans cultivate, eating practices involve water and air, from aquaculture to irrigation and from transportation to waste management. In addition to greenhouse gas emissions, food systems contribute to deforestation, biodiversity loss, and water pollution.[7] Simply put, the environmental crisis is also a food production crisis. As the climate continues to change, current global food systems—which rely "on just about twelve plant and five animal species to provide 76% of the world's food"—become more and more vulnerable.[8] In fact, Sarah Bridle, the author of *Food and Climate Change Without the Hot Air*, quotes climate change policy researcher Tim Gore, who believes that "[the] main way that most people will experience climate change is through the impact on food: the food they eat, the price they pay for it, and the availability and choice they have."[9]

Gold was neither the first nor the last writer to make the connection between eating and the environment. This environmental consciousness motivates academics, journalists, and recipe writers alike to promote what scientist Dave Reay calls "climate-smart food."[10] For example, in 2019 Jonathan Safran Foer published *We Are the Weather*, whose subtitle reveals food's role in countering climate change: *Saving the Planet Begins at Breakfast*. A best-selling novelist's decision to address this topic represents an increasing awareness of how our culinary decisions affect our planet just as much as our bodies. From veganism and environmental vegetarianism to locavorism and flexitarianism, since there has been an environmental

[4] United Nations, "Food Systems Account for Over One-third of Global Greenhouse Gas Emissions," *UN News*, March 9, 2021, https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/03/1086822.

[5] Krishnendu Ray, *The Ethnic Restaurateur* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2016), xx.

[6] Wendell Berry, "The Pleasures of Eating," in *American Food Writing: An Anthology with Classic Recipes*, ed. Molly O'Neill (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 2007), 552.

[7] FAO, *Sustainable Healthy Diets: Guiding Principles* (Rome: WHO, 2019), 8.

[8] Michael P. Hoffmann, Carrie Koplinka-Loehr, and Danielle L. Eiseman, *Our Changing Menu: Climate Change and the Foods We Love and Need* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2021), 45.

[9] Sarah L. Bridle, *Food and Climate Change Without the Hot Air* (Cambridge: UIT, 2020), 18.

[10] Dave Reay, *Climate-Smart Food* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

movement, there have been environmentally conscious doctrines about what to eat—and what not to. Like Gold's, different articles rally different causes. Beyond voicing environmental concerns, others document and mourn foods that have already been lost.

Surveying food writing's growing environmental consciousness, this essay considers how American food writing represents, activates, or seeks to preserve the environment. Unfolding in three parts, this study fleshes out food writing as a genre. Departing from the seemingly simple question of what food writing is, it first demonstrates that to write about hunger is to write about the world at large. Then, it considers what I call the "environmental turn" in American food writing. Building off the previous section, it argues that culinary practices double as environmental manifestos. Together these sections flesh out how food writing is a means with which to uphold or, alternatively, to resist and challenge the social and environmental status quo. To conclude, the paper returns to discuss the relationship between food and extinction and how contemporary food writing doubles as a form of activism.

Wordy Appetites: Drafting the Culinary Genre

What is food writing? From describing ingredients in soil to food on plates, there is writing about planting and harvesting, writing about cooking, and writing about eating. "Most food writing is about cooking," claimed John Seabrook in *The New Yorker* in 2002, "—it's less about the ingredients than about the rendering of those ingredients, and the consuming of them in communal settings."[11] However, as the genre has developed, more and more food writers have ventured out of the kitchen, trekking through factory fields of corn, serving as witnesses in slaughterhouses, and adopting a fish—or shark's—eye view.

An elastic term, food writing spans cookbooks and recipes to reported features. It captures a meal's many life cycles, from production and distribution to consumption and waste. The literature of food pops up in publications centred on edibles alone—like *Bon Appétit* and its late Condé Nast sibling *Gourmet*—but also travels to other contexts, weaving together history, journalism, and biography. Although food writing has typically

[11] John Seabrook, "The Fruit Detective," in *Secret Ingredients: The New Yorker Book of Food and Drink*, ed. David Remnick (New York: The Modern Library, 2008 [2002]), 239.

been assigned to the lifestyle section of newspapers and magazines, as a genre it has begun to push against these boundaries.

Writing about food is a means of documenting a time and a place and profiling its inhabitants, human and more-than-human. There is a large body of historical writing that has featured food—from travel accounts and ethnographic studies to journals, letters, poems, and cookery manuals. Out of these documental forms emerged a genre. The work of M.F.K. Fisher (1908–1992), who, after spending years in France learning how to prepare snails and finish a bottle of wine by herself, returned to California and established a blueprint for American food writing, is a prominent example. Fisher's work inspired the likes of Craig Claiborne and James Beard and also established a model for the American version of what literary critic Rosalia Baena terms a "gastro-graphy."[12]

In 1937, Fisher published *Serve it Forth*, the first of many books that marry history, recipes, and cultural musings. "There are two kinds of books about eating," she begins, "those that try to imitate Brillat-Savarin's, and those that try not to."[13] She assumes the reader's familiarity with the French gastronome (and lawyer) Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin (1755–1826). Considered the gastronomic essay's founder, it is impossible to read about food without encountering his *Physiologie du Goût*. This 1825 publication marks the beginning of "the genre of gastronomic writing."[14] Over the years, Brillat-Savarin's aphorism "*Dis-moi ce que tu manges, je te dirai ce que tu es*" has melted down to "you are what you eat." Fisher later contributed her own translation of his seminal book, but his influence on her eating and writing was clear from the start.

Just like how this quote stands in for Brillat-Savarin's work, the first lines in Fisher's *The Gastronomical Me* (1943) play again and again in all sorts of food writing. A collection of essays penned between 1912 and 1941, she opens with: "People ask me: Why do you write about food, and eating and drinking? Why don't you write about the struggle for power and security, and about love, the way others do?"[15] The shortest answer—hunger—is the easiest, but she confesses there is more. "It seems to me

[12] Rosalia Baena, "Gastro-Graphy: Food as Metaphor in Fred Wah's *Diamond Grill* and Austin Clarke's *Pig Tails 'N Breadfruit*." *Canadian Ethnic Studies* 38, no. 1 (2006): 105–16.

[13] M.F.K. Fisher, *Serve It Forth* (San Francisco: North Print Press, 1989 [1937]), 3.

[14] Arlene Avakian, "Cooking Up Lives: Feminist Food Memoirs," *Feminist Studies* 40, no. 2 (2014): 277–303.

[15] M.F.K. Fisher, *The Gastronomical Me* (San Francisco: North Print Press, 1989 [1943]), ix.

that our three basic needs, for food and security and love, are so mixed and mingled and entwined that we cannot straightly think of one without the others. So it happens that when I write of hunger, I am really writing about love and the hunger for it."[16] This answer yields two revelations: the first is that food writing requires an explanation. As food studies scholar Meryl S. Rosofsky points out: "Implicit in this question is a subtle indictment: How can so talented a writer squander her enormous gift on something so trivial, even frivolous, as food?"[17] The second revelation is that food writing is not always about food.

More than half a century after Fisher's treaty, Molly O'Neill (1952–2019), a *New York Times* food columnist, edited *American Food Writing: An Anthology with Classic Recipes* (2007). In her introduction to 250 years of culinary history, she calls food writing "a relatively recent-almost a contemporary—invention" but draws from its predecessors, miscellaneous literary works documenting affairs of the stomach and the mouth.[18] Historically, those who have been able to find space to write about food reflects hierarchies of gender, class, race, and ethnicity. Fisher represents an early breakthrough—a woman writing about the pleasure of eating as opposed to cooking as domestic labour. But she was a privileged white woman who had grown up with a family cook.

American Food Writing employs a "voice of God" style of narration. O'Neill's commentary is present but her own contributions are not. However, in her obituary, the *New York Times* credits her with "[ushering in] an era of food writing in the 1990s that was as much about journalism as deliciousness." As *American Food Writing* began to reveal, food writing had expanded. Moving beyond a venue that traditionally upheld the status quo, it increasingly began to host voices that challenged it, critically

[16] Ibid., ix.

[17] Meryl S. Rosofsky, "Writing the Wolf Away: Food Meaning & Memories from World War II," *Food, Culture & Society* 7 no. 1 (2004): 48

[18] Molly O'Neill, ed., *American Food Writing: An Anthology with Classic Recipes* (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 2007), xx.

reflecting on the relationship between food and power and who is able to claim American cultural citizenship through their foodways.[19]

This concern with reporting—and not just culinary critique—continues. Its timing also overlaps with the emergence of a new field of academic study. Although there were earlier scholars studying edibles, such as the anthropologists Sidney Mintz and Mary Douglas, food studies scholar Marion Nestle points out that "it was only in 1996 that this collective term began to describe a legitimate field of academic study."[20] The growth of food studies meant a growth in critical writing about food and its role in the human experience.

In an era of social media and online reviews, contemporary food writing is less about how pillowy a restaurant's tortillas are and more about how the restaurant treats its employees and sources its ingredients. More reporting today focuses on food's entanglement with larger social issues, as exemplified by Soleil Ho, who became the *San Francisco Chronicle*'s restaurant critic in 2019, and Alicia Kennedy, who pens a newsletter that is as equally popular as it is critical of mainstream food systems. Stories of sexual harassment and unethical labour practices are difficult to swallow, no matter how fiery a homemade, lacto-fermented hot sauce is or how fresh the bread.[21] So, if cooking is an act of transforming plants and animals into meals—a transformation that is equally about culture as it is about raw materials—how do food writers represent the environment?

[19] I address the relationship between food writing, memory, immigration, and assimilation in L. Sasha Gora, "Secret Ingredient: Food, Knowledge, and Migration," *Arts of the Working Class* 16 (2021): 14. See also: Rebecca J. Kinney, "Riding Shotgun with an LA Son: Narratives of Race, Place, and Mobility in Roy Choi's Culinary Autobiography," *Food, Culture & Society* 20, no. 1 (2017): 59–75. Rosalia Baena, "Gastro-Graphy: Food as Metaphor in Fred Wah's *Diamond Grill* and Austin Clarke's *Pig Tails 'N Breadfruit*," *Canadian Ethnic Studies* 38, no. 1 (2006): 105–16.

[20] Marion Nestle and W. Alex McIntosh, "Writing the Food Studies Movement," *Food, Culture & Society* 13 no. 2 (2010): 160. For the difference between food studies and food writing see: Andrew Smith, Jeffrey M. Pilcher, and Darra Goldstein, "Food Scholarship and Food Writing," *Food, Culture & Society* 13 no. 3 (2010): 319–329.

[21] Theodore Gioia, "The Midlife Crisis of the American Restaurant Review," *Los Angeles Review of Books*, December 31, 2019, https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/midlife-crisis-american-restaurant-review/.

Green Gourmets: An Environmental Turn

Early American food writing was concerned with experience and taste—applauding that bistro that serves the perfect trout amandine or unmasking a secret ingredient. The environmental turn started in the 1960s. Around that time, both an environmental and a culinary consciousness awoke. Food writing grants a vantage point from which to view how the two have met, crossed, and merged. The term *turn* is a cliché and yet I like that it stipulates a direction something takes without being descriptive of how—a sharp turn maybe, or perhaps a sudden one that sneaks up on you, or maybe even a long creeping one.

But one could also consider a culinary turn in environmental writing. In 2008 Bill McKibben edited *American Earth: Environmental Writing Since Thoreau*, which is the environmental equivalent of O'Neill's food volume. In the anthology, McKibben defines environmental writing as something that "takes as its subject the collision between people and the rest of the world, and asks searching questions about this collision…"[22] He finds environmental writing in political speeches, song lyrics—like "Mercy Mercy Me (The Ecology)" by Marvin Gaye—cartoons, fiction, and essays.

In his summary of the genre's ebbs and flows, McKibben includes food. He begins with Wendell Berry, who started writing in the 1960s and 1970s, and became "the father of the farmers' market" and "the voice of the new agrarianism."[23] McKibben reports that a surprising amount of writing "follows Berry's lead and concentrates on food—just in the past year or so, Michael Pollan and Barbara Kingsolver have written best sellers about relocalising our eating, about escaping the republic of irresponsibility."[24] This brings McKibben to the conclusion, in 2008, that "the farmer's market is as potent an emblem as the wilderness area, the smell of fresh-baked local bread as tonic as the tang of mountain air."[25] In this 1047-page anthology, there are texts about preparing food—heating dehydrated peaches and milk while backpacking in Colin Fletcher's "A Sample Day in the Kitchen" (1968)—growing it—Berry's reflection on healing land and himself in "The Making of a Marginal Farm" (1981)

[22] Bill McKibben, ed., *American Earth: Environmental Writing Since Thoreau* (New York: Library of America, 2008), xxii.

[23] Ibid., 504.

[24] Ibid., xxix.

[25] Ibid., xxviii–xxx.

—and contaminated food as a health hazard in Sandra Steingraber's "Having Faith" (2001) and César Chávez's "Wrath of Grapes Boycott Speech" (1986). Food also appears in discussions of ecosystems—as demonstrated by an excerpt from Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962)—as well as through the many plants and animals humans eat, from beans to bison and from fish to maple sap.

However, most prominently, food appears in the context of raising industrial cows with cheap field corn and petroleum: an excerpt from Pollan's 2006 bestseller *The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals*. In this passage, Pollan (born in 1955) follows steer 534 from the ranch to the feedlot to profile a production system that casts cows as protein machines capable of converting "thirty-two pounds of feed into four pounds of gain."[26] An equation that turns corn into hamburgers. Unlike Fisher (who, when asked why she writes about food, replied that she was, first, hungry), Pollan admits hunger was the last thing he felt.[27] But, as many can attest, the stomach plays tricks on the eyes, nose, and mind. "Yet I'm sure that after enough time goes by, and the stink of this place is gone from my nostrils," writes Pollan, "I will eat feedlot beef again. Eating industrial meat takes an almost heroic act of not knowing or, now, forgetting."[28] An example of food writing as environmental exposé.

It is telling that *American Food Writing*—which contains over 150 texts, with the oldest dating to 1753–61—ends with an excerpt from Pollan's *The Omnivore's Dilemma*. His "gastro-opus"[29] begins with the question: "What should we have for dinner?"[30] *American Food Writing* reprints a section where Pollan reckons with organic as an ideal and as an industry, complicating the belief that it is a panacea.

[26] Michael Pollan, "From The Omnivore's Dilemma," in *American Earth: Environmental Writing Since Thoreau*, ed. Bill McKibben (New York: Library of America, 2008 [2006]), 956.

[27] Ibid., 959.

[28] Ibid., 959.

[29] Robert Ji-Song Ku, *Dubious Gastronomy: The Cultural Politics of Eating Asian in the USA* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2013), 36.

[30] Michael Pollan, *The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2006), 1. Two years later, Pollan published *In Defense of Food: An Eater's Manifesto*, which provides an answer: "Eat food. Not too much. Mostly plants." Michael Pollan, *In Defense of Food: An Eater's Manifesto* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2008), 1. He also gave this away in "Unhappy Meals." Michael Pollan, "Unhappy Meals," *New York Times Magazine*, January 28, 2007. https://www.nytimes.com/2007/01/28/magazine/28nutritionism.t.html.

Predating *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, Nestle credits journalist Eric Schlosser's 2001 bestseller *Fast Food Nation* for igniting a general public interest in food issues. "His account," Nestle writes, "turned masses of readers into food advocates eager to transform the current food system into something healthier for people, food animals and farm workers, as well as for the environment."[31] Sociologist W. Alex McIntosh agrees, but he also points out that earlier ethnographies made similar points about fast food and labour.[32] He then says the same about Pollan, asking himself, "Haven't I read this elsewhere?"[33] Like geographer Julie Guthman, McIntosh points out that Pollan's work erases the names of the scholars whose work he is in dialogue with.[34] Nonetheless, McIntosh recognises that Pollan, like Schlosser, "should be credited with making a broader audience aware of changes in agriculture and their relationship to changes in food consumption…"[35] Pollan's influence is undeniable.

Pollan lives in Berkeley, the epicentre of California's—and America's—farm-to-table movement, as exemplified by Alice Waters' seminal restaurant Chez Panisse. With the exception of Schlosser's success, comparing Pollan's work to what came before—penned by back-to-the-landers or health aficionados—is on par with comparing a small organic co-op to the organic aisle in a big box grocery store. Pollan reaches a mainstream audience. This, too, is what Waters does and is what the historian Paul Freedman calls the Chez Panisse paradoxes. He names one he considers particularly revolutionary: "viewing naturalness as something that enhances sensual pleasure, not as a form of penance. …it's not enough to have environmentally virtuous food if the food is boring."[36] A prestigious restaurant—once considered the nation's best—serving gourmet dishes seasoned with ideas for radical agricultural change. Green gourmets.

Just like Fisher, Pollan's name is now synonymous with American food writing. When historian Neil Prendergast polls students in his Food and Environment course about their motivation for enrolling, many mention

[31] Nestle and McIntosh, "Writing the Food Studies Movement," 163.

[32] Ibid., 172.

[33] Ibid., 172.

[34] Julie Guthman, "Commentary on Teaching Food: Why I am Fed Up with Michael Pollan et al," *Agriculture and Human Values* 24 (2007): 261–264.

[35] Nestle and McIntosh, "Writing the Food Studies Movement," 172.

[36] Paul Freedman, *Ten Restaurants that Changed America* (New York and London: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2016), 369.

The Omnivore's Dilemma.[37] Many college courses also assign Pollan's texts. A 2013 study found his book did indeed influence undergraduate students. However, their change in attitude generally vanished after a year, a reminder that culinary habits die hard.[38]

Short-lived change connects to Guthman's critique of "how to eat" books.[39] She questions their ability to "move toward a more just and ecological way of producing and consuming food."[40] Instead of pioneering systemic change, the views that such books deal in often encourage conscious eaters to simply "opt out." Alternatives like farmers markets and organic and heritage livestock production provide alternatives to corporate grocery stores and factory farming; they do not reform mainstream food systems. Although Meghan Lynch and Audrey Giles, public health scholars, recognise that Pollan dominates "the field of sustainable eating in North America,"[41] they assert that his advice, like other mainstream media prescriptions, omits a "*critical* examination of the underlying relations of power that inform discourses about sustainable eating initiatives" and overlooks the complexities of everyday life that determine food decisions.[42] For these reasons, books like Pollan's give readers an easier, a lighter, a more nostalgic version of environmentalism.

In addition, interdisciplinary scholar Emily Lind Johnston draws attention to how Pollan "invokes a pastoral agrarian imaginary" that reconstructs "an agrarian past that never was."[43] A celebration of small-scale farms operated by those who own them—the Berry model of new agrarianism—on soil that is now American overlooks agrarianism's dirty laundry: how it is the outcome of colonisation, Indigenous removal, slavery, and gendered and racialised labour.[44] Pollan's writing, like Berry's, is

[37] Neil Prendergast, "Food and the Environment," in *The Routledge History of American Foodways*, eds. Michael D. Wise and Jennifer Jensen Wallach (New York and London: Routledge, 2016), 261.

[38] Julia M. Hormes, Paul Rozin, Melanie C. Green, and Katrina Fincher, "Reading A Book Can Change Your Mind, But Only Some Changes Last For a Year: Food Attitude Changes in Readers of *The Omnivore's Dilemma*," *Frontiers in Psychology* 4 (2013): 6.

[39] Guthman, "Commentary on Teaching Food," 261.

[40] Ibid., 263.

[41] Meghan Lynch and Audrey Giles, "Let Them Eat Organic Cake: Discourses in Sustainable Food Initiatives," *Food, Culture & Society* 16 no. 3 (2013): 482.

[42] Ibid., 480, 485.

[43] Emily Lind Johnston, "Agrarian Dreams and Neoliberal Futures in Life Writing of The Alternative Food Movement," *Food and Foodways* 24 no. 1–2 (2016): 10–11.

[44] Ibid., 15.

seasoned with nostalgia that overlooks who in the United States has historically been allowed to own land and, therefore, participate in agrarianism.[45] Heidi Zimmerman, a media studies scholar, makes it clear that what she calls the "Pollan phenomenon" is "profoundly classed."[46] This, she argues, is not reason to dismiss his influence. Instead, it gives context with which to better understand class formation and "its relationship to food, environmentalism and politics."[47] Pollan as a cultural phenomenon, Zimmerman writes, "is part of a broader upswing in 'ethical consumerism'" and one of the reasons to which she attributes Pollan's appeal is: "it also speaks to longings for a different, less environmentally destructive, more equitable kind of world."[48] In short, he speaks to nostalgia.

Pollan inherited decades of work that connected eating with environmental concerns. Nine years after *Silent Spring*, one year after the first Earth Day (1970), and the same year Waters opened Chez Panisse, Frances Moore Lappé published *Diet for a Small Planet* (1971). Besides *Silent Spring*, journalist Jonathan Kauffman claims, "no single book had a greater impact on the way her generation thought about food."[49] *Diet for a Small Planet*—Lappé's first of many books—also departed from hunger. Instead of a search for pleasure, she prioritised politics. In the twentieth anniversary edition, she summarises her original mission: "to awaken people to this simple fact: Hunger is human made."[50] This mission came out of having learned: "half of our harvested acreage went to feed livestock" and that cattle—America's preferred meat—require 16 pounds of grain and soybeans for 1 pound of beef—a match to Pollan's description of steer 534.[51] Part detailed report and part recipe collection, the book critiques "the machine model of nature."[52] The recipes encourage people not to eat

[45] Sarah D. Wald, "Visible Farmers/Invisible Workers: Locating Immigrant Labor in Food Studies," *Food, Culture & Society* 14 no. 4 (2011): 567–586. Janet Fisko, "Unsettling Ecocriticism: Rethinking Agrarianism, Place, and Citizenship," *American Literature* 84, no. 2 (2012): 301–325.

[46] Heidi Zimmerman, "Caring for the Middle Class Soul: Ambivalence, Ethical Eating and the Michael Pollan Phenomenon," *Food, Culture & Society* 18 no. 1 (2015): 32.

[47] Ibid., 33.

[48] Ibid., 35, 33.

[49] Jonathan Kauffman, *Hippie Food: How Back-to-the-Landers, Longhairs, and Revolutionaries Changed the Way We Eat* (New York: William Morrow, 2018), 143.

[50] Frances Moore Lappé, *Diet for a Small Planet* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1991 [1971]), xvii.

[51] Ibid., 9.

[52] Ibid., xxviii.

meat, coaching them how. Kauffman considers the recipes quintessential "hippie food," an example of the relationship between food—a populist subject—and counterculture values. Cuisine of the counterculture, or what American studies scholar Warren Belasco calls countercuisine.[53] The belief that what people eat doubles as a manifesto of how they treat the earth. The objective to save the planet by eating ethically marked an early environmental turn in food writing, but one limited to the counterculture.

Silent Spring hit shelves on September 27, 1962, and that summer *The New Yorker* published a three-part serialisation, informing readers of Carson's pesticide research. The weekly magazine is also an important home for food writing. In 2008 its editor, David Remnick, assembled *Secret Ingredients: The New Yorker Book of Food and Drink*. The text provides an overview of how food writing has developed. Organised thematically, the first cluster of articles gather under "Dining Out." All of these pieces are by-lined by white men. The next section—"Eating In"—begins with three Fisher essays (including "The Secret Ingredient," from which the volume borrows its name)—a woman's voice at the table, but at a kitchen table. The following section—"Fishing and Foraging"—returns to an all-male choir but samples how food writing represents American environments. The most obvious example is John McPhee's "A Forager," a 1968 piece that would feel at home in McKibben's volume. A long-form profile of Euell Gibbons (1911–1975), wild plant expert and author of *Stalking the Wild Asparagus* (1962), McPhee persuades Gibbons to go on a six-day November trip to central Pennsylvania to live off the land. They begin by eating only what they forage and gradually introduce store-bought ingredients. While cooking over a Coleman camp stove, the two discuss the "sorry mistake" of framing nature as something to conquer. Gibbons remarks: "Nature has many, many balances, and we have to find a balance that includes man. If man accepts that he has to be a part of the balance, he must reject the idea of the conquest of nature."[54] To eat nature without crushing it.

[53] Warren J. Belasco, *Appetite for Change: How the Counterculture Took on the Food Industry* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2007 [1989]), 4, 28.

[54] John McPhee, "A Forager," in *Secret Ingredients: The New Yorker Book of Food and Drink*, 188–227, ed. David Remnick (New York: The Modern Library, 2008 [1968]), 196.

Conclusion: Burns and Ghosts

As I write this, the American food media is on fire. Writers and editors are reaching for buckets of water, trying to save their careers, their field. There have been high-profile resignations and a much-needed conversation about labour, race, and industry gatekeepers. In the words of artist and chef Tunde Wey: "Can you renovate a burning house?"[55] The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed the many still-active ghosts of structural racism and social inequality. These ghosts loom large in food writing in a country where the history of slavery is a history of forced agriculture and culinary labour.[56] Publishing has prioritised the appetites of only a privileged few and although this has started to change, the pace of this change has been too slow.

Despite these limitations, food writing is an influential form of record-keeping—of documenting extinct and forgotten foods.[57] And as food writing's environmental turn demonstrates, the genre is increasingly becoming a means of advocacy. Gold's conclusion that although shark fin soup tastes wonderful, extinction does not, is an example of food writing as a means for encouraging environmental action. It documents all that can go extinct—animals and plants, environments and seasons, traditions and ways of life. It eulogises and commemorates while also warning about future loss. About culinary responsibility.

The environmental turn in American food writing demonstrates that food writers also play an important role in discussions about sustainable appetites and the future of planetary health. In 2021 the popular American recipe site *Epicurious* announced that it had "cut out beef," meaning the nation's favourite meat will no longer appear in new recipes or articles.[58]

[55] Helen Rosner, "The Case for Letting the Restaurant Industry Die," *The New Yorker*, May 22, 2020, https://www.newyorker.com/culture/annals-of-gastronomy/the-case-for-letting-the-restaurant-industry-die.

[56] See: Michael W. Twitty, *The Cooking Gene: A Journey through African American Culinary History in the Old South* (New York: Amistad, 2017); Frederick Douglass Opie, *Hog & Hominy: Soul Food from Africa to America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008); and Psyche A. Williams-Forson, *Building Houses Out of Chicken Legs: Black Women, Food and Power* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

[57] Lenore Newman, *Lost Feast: Culinary Extinction and the Future of Food* (Toronto: ECW Press, 2019).

[58] David Tamarkin and Maggie Hoffman, "The Planet on the Plate: Why Epicurious Left Beef Behind," *Epicurious*, April 26, 2021, https://www.epicurious.com/expert-advice/why-epicurious-left-beef-behind-article.

Recognising the sensitivity of this decision in a "Red Meat Republic,"[59] *Epicurious* explained to its readers that this decision was not "anti-beef but rather pro-planet." In an interview, cookbook author and *New York Times* recipe writer Melissa Clark revealed that environmental concerns were now an essential ingredient in the recipes she develops. "I really think the environment is our number-one impending crisis," Clark explained, "And we can help. Food writers can help. We can make a difference. Maybe it's not a huge difference. But I know that the work I do can be important in that way."[60] A recipe codes what is—as well as what is not—acceptable to eat and, thus, demands social, cultural, and environmental responsibility.

Responsibility also guides Foer's *We Are the Weather*. Nearly too abstract to classify as a "what to eat book," it is instead rich in analogies. Stories about his childhood home and life as a father, about the guilt of craving—and even eating—hamburgers after his 2009 book *Eating Animals*, stories about the history of farming, the Frozen Ark Project that collects DNA from endangered animals, and a civil rights lawyer who set himself on fire as a "protest suicide" in Brooklyn's Prospect Park on a Saturday morning in April 2018 as a statement about protecting the environment. *We Are the Weather* begins with a different suicide note, the world's oldest—written in ancient Egypt around 2181 to 2040 BCE. This sets up Foer's thinking about history, death, and sacrifice, topics he threads together while leaving readers with this haunting climate change protest-cum suicide. As Foer makes clear: "We cannot keep the kinds of meals we have known and also keep the planet we have known. We must either let some eating habits go or let the planet go."[61] The world as we know it is endangered, he warns, and our appetites are largely to blame.

What leads a novelist to write about diet and suicide? Why write about food? O'Neill suggests one answer: "Perhaps because reading about food reminds us that we are humans and alive and a tangle of contradictions, some of which can be eased by a meal and some of which can be resolved by remembering and imagining what it feels like to bite off a piece of the world, to pull it across the tongue, and to swallow it."[62] More and more

[59] Joshua Specht, *Red Meat Republic: A Hoof-to-Table History of How Beef Changed America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019).

[60] Alicia Kennedy, "A Conversation with Melissa Clark," *From the Desk of Alicia Kennedy*. October 29, 2021, https://www.aliciakennedy.news/p/a-conversation-with-melissa-clark.

[61] Jonathan Safran Foer, *We Are the Weather: Saving the Planet Begins at Breakfast* (New York: Macmillan, 2019), 71.

[62] O'Neill, *American Food Writing*, xxiii.

pieces of the world are burning—so hot they singe the tongue—or are too dry to swallow. Other bits are swarmed by ghosts, just like wasps crashing a picnic. Food writing records these connections. It charts the contradictions between the foods people are hungry for and the environmental crisis they cultivate—or attempt to heal.

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