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Eating the Future: Food, Power, and Gender in Marge Piercy's Woman on the Edge of Time

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Abstract

Aim: The paper examines how Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976) uses food and nourishment as a lens for social critique. The study seeks to explore how the novel juxtaposes dystopian, chemically mediated food systems of 1970s New York with the collective, ecological, and ethical food practices of the imagined future community of Mattapoisett, and how this contrast interrogates intersections of gender, race, class, and power.

Methodology and Approach: The researcher has adopted a qualitative and interpretative textual approach for the study. Close reading of the novel is undertaken to analyze the contrasting representations of food systems. The analysis is informed by feminist theory and socio-political critique to understand how control over bodies and sustenance operates through similar political logics.

Outcome: Through the paper, the researcher has found that food functions not merely as a backdrop but as a central medium of feminist critique in the novel. The dystopian food structures reflect mechanisms of control and inequality, whereas the imagined community's practices embody ecological ethics, care, and collective responsibility, thereby revealing the political dimensions of nourishment.

Conclusion and Suggestions: The study concludes that Piercy's work demonstrates the deep interconnection between food systems and structures of power. It suggests that further scholarly attention should be given to the intersection of gender, food justice, and ecological ethics in feminist speculative fiction to better understand the continuing relevance of the novel in contemporary debates.



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Published in 1976, *Woman on the Edge of Time* engages with the polemical debates surrounding radical feminism and student movements in the United States (McBean 37). It was hailed as one of the prominent works of feminist literature of that era, alongside Ursula Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* (1974) and Joanna Russ's *The Female Man* (1975). The novel tells the story of a Chicana woman, Consuelo Ramos, who lives in the racist, patriarchal society of 1970s New York. Incidentally, Connie's present constitutes one of the dystopian societies that Piercy portrays in the text (Steinem). Critics have read *Woman on the Edge of Time* primarily through feminist frameworks, examining its reconfiguration of motherhood, its proposed responses to gender inequality, its articulation of alternative masculinities, and, most significantly, its imagining of radical femininity (McBean 37).

Often overlooked is the novel's use of food-and its absence-as a critique of corporate food capitalism and the industrialisation of nourishment in 1970s America (Dayen; Krasny). Piercy imagines a collective agro-ecological future that exposes the violence of profit-driven food production, chemically engineered mass consumption, and systemic food insecurity. Moreover, she interrogates gender through the lens of nourishment, situating food production and consumption at the heart of the gendered, racialised, classed, and sexual politics of the 1960s and 1970s. The protagonist of the novel, Connie, is a Chicana woman living on the margins of 1970s New York society. For much of the narrative, her identity is reduced to that of a suffering mother who aches from the separation from her daughter, Angelina, and to that of a woman deemed insane-someone alleged to have beaten her child before being confined to a mental asylum. Positioned between the labels of failed mother and madwoman, Connie's identity is immobilised, preventing any possibility of social mobility, hope, or redemption. She is institutionalised for a second time after striking her niece Dolly's pimp in an attempt to prevent his abuse and her forced abortion (Piercy 11). Institutional authority privileges the man's account over that of a "mad" woman. Yet this supposed mental instability renders her a "catcher"-someone capable of receiving transmissions from the future sent by a "sender" (Piercy 40).

Through this ability, she encounters Luciente, a plant geneticist from Massachusetts in 2137, who reveals a possible future shaped by collective resistance. Initially sceptical of her own historical significance, Connie gradually recognises her role after accidentally encountering an alternative dystopian future and witnessing what is at stake. Though physically confined to the asylum, Connie travels to the future through her mind, occupying a liminal space between containment and possibility. When Connie arrives in Mattapoisett with Luciente for the first time, she is disappointed by what she sees. The future to which Luciente belongs is not what she had imagined. It is a village without skyscrapers or cars. The landscape is rural, with modest infrastructure: cows grazing (“ordinary black-and-white cows chewing ordinary grass past a stone fence”), and “intensive plots of vegetables [that] began between the huts and stretched into the distance” (Piercy 70). The roofs collect rainwater and solar energy, and settlements are organised according to geography and climate.

Unprepared for this bucolic sight, Connie exclaims, “Goats, chickens running around, a lot of huts scavenged out of real houses and the white folk’s garbage. All that lacks are a couple of old cars up on the blocks in the yard!” (Piercy 71) Luciente, proud of her village, responds: “We raise chickens, ducks, pheasants, partridges, turkeys, guinea hens, geese. Goats, cows, rabbits, turtles, pigs. We of Mattapoisett are famous for our turtles and our geese. But our major proteins are plant proteins. Every region tries to be ownfed” (Piercy 71). She explains ownfed as being “as self-sufficient as possible in protein,” and adds happily, “You’re right, Connie, we’re peasants. We are all peasants” (Piercy 72). A disappointed Connie responds simply, “Forward, into the past?” (Piercy 72).

Fish ponds and greenhouses dot the landscape. In Mattapoisett, ancient and traditional knowledge of agriculture and animal husbandry is supplemented by science and technology. Connie, however, had imagined a future in which people fed on capsules—not a village of technologically savvy peasants who still believe in communal eating (Piercy 75).

In Mattapoisett, everyone eats together in a building called the fooder; a communal and lively space where men, women, and children eat and entertain themselves. Luciente explains that “the fooder is a home for all of us. A warm

spot." (Piercy 77). There is no segregation of labour; everyone shares the work of cooking, while cleaning is done by machines. Humans in Mattapoisett also communicate with animals, fundamentally reshaping dietary ethics rather than merely patterns of consumption. Meat is eaten only on holidays, "as a way of culling the herd. We say what we are doing. [The animals] know it" (Piercy 104). In the same spirit, they hunt briefly in November. Decisions regarding the extension of farmland, water use, or experimentation with genetically modified crops are made after intense debates in the Council, shaped by an awareness of depleted resources caused by commercial farming and the environmentally destructive practices of the past. Resources are bartered to ensure equitable distribution (Piercy 132). When Luciente and Connie first make contact, Luciente asks:

It's not true, is it, the horror stories in our histories? That your food was full of chemicals, nitrates, hormone residues, DDT, hydrocarbons, sodium benzoate—that you ate food saturated with preservatives? Such as the idea that you—you plural—put your shit into the drinking water. (Piercy 54)

She refers to unsafe waste disposal practices and the seepage of waste into the water table. Luciente is further horrified upon learning that food waste in Connie's time is either dumped or burned. Reacting to this information, she says:

It's all true. Sometimes I suspect our history is infected with propaganda. Many of my generation suspect the Age of Greed and Waste to be crudely overdrawn. But to burn your compost! To pour your shit into waters others downstream must drink—where fish must live! Into rivers whose estuaries and marshes are links in the whole offshore food chain! (Piercy 55).

When Connie asks how waste is disposed of in Mattapoisett, Luciente replies, "We send it to the earth. We compost everything compostable. We reuse everything else" (Piercy 55). This includes human waste, once it is rendered safe for farming. An unbelieving Connie responds, "Listen, in fifty years they'll take their food in pellets and nobody will shit at all!" (Piercy 56). Luciente counters, "That was tried out late in your century—petrochemical foods. Whooping disaster. Think how people in your time suffered from switching to an overrefined diet—

cancer of the colon." (Piercy 56). To which Connie remarks, "You get so serious when you talk about food and shit" (Piercy 56).

Luciente further explains that commodities such as coffee, tea, sugar, and tobacco once occupied land needed to feed starving local populations. While some land in Mattapoisett is still used for luxuries, most is reserved for necessary crops. She invokes the plantation system, where people starved while foreign-owned fincas produced cash crops for wealthy countries, "a liquid without food value, bad for kidneys, hearts, if drunk in excess." (Piercy 211).

Even the hierarchy of work differs in this future. Luciente rejects the very idea of ranking one kind of labour over another. When Connie asks why someone capable of doing "important" work should chop onions or pick caterpillars off tomato plants, Luciente responds simply: "Eating isn't important?" (Piercy 291). In Mattapoisett, all work—especially food-related labour—is accorded equal value, and everyone contributes at different stages. The 1970s New York in which Consuelo Ramos lives is a dystopia for a poor, non-white woman like her. In the text, Piercy's female characters' use drugs as a form of sustenance to numb themselves against emotional pain. Connie, Dolly, and Luis's blonde wife, Adele, use drugs to survive in a patriarchal society that continuously objectifies and exploits them without love or care. Their dependence reflects a world that is soul-sucking and isolating. For them, numbing themselves becomes the only available strategy of survival.

Dolly, pimped out by her fiancé and later continuing the profession for subsistence, uses drugs both to remain thin - to attract white customers - and to dull her misery. At the mental asylum, patients like Connie are drugged as a means of control. Piercy portrays drugs as a weapon wielded by the powerful throughout the novel. Even in the dystopian New York of the future, the women Connie encounters are heavily medicated. By contrast, the people of Mattapoisett rely on natural remedies and holistic practices to heal the body rather than depending solely on pharmaceuticals.

After Geraldo readmits Connie to the mental asylum- "Man to man, pimp and doctor discussed her condition"- she is immediately placed on a dose of Thorazine (Piercy 14). Fed on the drug, patients remain drowsy and walk

awkwardly; Connie calls it the “old Thorazine shuffle” (Piercy 17). One of its effects is the loss of appetite: “She was not hungry although she had not eaten for a long time. The drug killed her appetite so that she felt hollow, weak, but not hungry” (Piercy 17). It disrupts the natural functions of her body. During one of her visits to Mattapoisett while still institutionalised, she is gently told that they know how “[she is] fed drugs that wound [her] body” (Piercy 34).

In the asylum, the lunch break lasts only fifteen minutes. The setting is sterile and bleak, with no opportunity for communal interaction. Patients are served “a grey stew and an institutional salad of celery and raisins in orange Jell-O. The objects in the stew were mushy, bits of soft flotsam and jetsam in lukewarm glue” (Piercy 19). Through both institutional meals and enforced medication, Piercy conveys a sense of powerlessness, imprisonment, isolation, and the erasure of pleasure. By contrast, freedom for Connie would mean “no more Thorazine and sleeping pills... Nights of sleep with real dreams” (Piercy 25). She would “go hungry for a week for the pleasure of eating a real orange, an avocado” (Piercy 25).

Even in her deprived life, small sensory pleasures persist: “a life crammed overflowing with aromas of coffee, of dope smoke in hallways, of refried cooking oil as she climbed the stairs of her tenement, of the fragrance of fresh-cut grass and new buds in Central Park, sidewalk vendors, cuchifritos” (Piercy 25). Yet she cannot afford the food she smells on her walks to the supermarket. Her staples are limited to bread, bananas, spaghetti, and eggs; meat is a luxury she can rarely purchase. Later, when Luciente describes the 1970s as “such fat, wasteful, thing-filled times!” Connie replies, “They aren’t so fat for me.” (Piercy 70) The most haunting episode of her privation occurs when she buys a can of dog food for her daughter because she cannot afford meat (Piercy 197-98).

Connie and the other inmates are selected as experimental subjects—guinea pigs for a research project. She overhears one of the scientist’s remark that five thousand chimpanzees had been used before they resorted to experiments on mental patients (Piercy 331). During Connie’s brain surgery, in which metal rods are inserted into her skull, she remains conscious throughout: “How wonderful that they did not simply use a great big can opener and take off the top of her skull

and scrape out the brains with a spoon. Some people ate brains" (Piercey 307). She then says aloud, "You could eat them. Fried" (Piercey 307). The scientists assume they have stimulated an appetite centre. In that moment, Connie recognises how she, as a poor woman, is treated as an object to be used and consumed by those who claim to perform "important" work. In Piercey's dystopian imagination, the chemical regulation of bodies through drugs finds its parallel in the industrial processing of food, where nourishment itself is stripped of care, agency, and meaning.

When Connie accidentally encounters another future—one that functions as a warning—Piercey imagines a dystopia shaped by the continued exploitation of women, bodies, and nature. The New York of this future blurs the distinction between objectification and consumption. Women are objectified, and the poor are used for organ harvesting; the imagery of farm animals is not far behind. In this world, consumption no longer applies only to food but to people themselves, as bodies are processed, commodified, and discarded like industrial products. This stands in stark contrast to Mattapoisett, where growth seems to swarm over the land and nourishment is tied to care rather than profit. Here, everything is manufactured and processed.

The woman Connie meets, Gildina 547-921-45-822-KBJ, has been designed for utmost sexual appeal: "her body seemed a cartoon of femininity, with a tiny waist, enormous sharp breasts that stuck out like the brassieres in the fifties — but the woman was not wearing a brassiere. Her stomach was flat but her hips and buttocks were oversized and audaciously curved" (Piercey 314). Her physiognomy is impractical for walking. Segregated and guarded, she is heavily drugged and contracted as a sex worker. Connie discovers that there are two types of women in this future: those who are forced to propagate continuously and those contracted for sex and discarded around the age of forty, when they are deemed too old. The logic of processing governs both food and flesh.

Food itself is hyper-processed and readymade—heavily spiced, tasteless, and gummy. Gildina calls it "Vito-goodies ham dinner" (Piercey 323) This resembles the bleak future Connie once imagined. Gildina knows "ham" only as a flavour, not as something that once came from an animal. She explains that

“everything comes in packets. It’s made from coal and algae and wood by-products” (Piercy 323). She does not know what vegetables are, possessing only a vague idea that the wealthy eat them. She refers to such things as “raw... live things...”-foreign, almost obscene concepts (Piercy 323). She has never seen natural fruits, vegetables, or meat, nor does she understand these categories. When Connie asks whether the food makes her sick, Gildina reveals she suffers from chronic colonic malachosis and her partner from ulceric tumours. In this future, everything- including people- are owned by multi-corporations. Corporate control extends from land and labour to nourishment and the body itself. This encounter solidifies Connie’s resolve to resist the world taking shape around her.

Food—particularly good food—functions as an indicator of social privilege both in Connie’s present and in the dystopian future she visits. The food available to Connie in 1970s New York is the cheapest kind: processed and low in quality. Though she loves to cook, she rarely has the money to buy fresh ingredients. Cooking—not merely reheating beans from a can or frying eggs—is itself a luxury she cannot afford. The 1970s were marked by rapid innovation in food technology, and supermarkets were flooded with processed products, including cheap coffee. In Connie’s impoverished life, a can of good-quality Dominican coffee becomes one of the few small luxuries she possesses (Piercy 26).

In Mattapoisett, by contrast, coffee is ritualised and communal. It is consumed only during significant gatherings, never in isolation. As Luciente explains, “Coffee, tea, sugar, tobacco, they all took land needed to feed local people who were starving. Now, some land is used for world luxuries, but most for necessary crops. Imagine the plantation system, people starving while big fincas owned by foreigners grew for wealth countries as cash crops a liquid without food value...” (Piercy 211). Here, coffee is contextualised within histories of colonial exploitation and global inequality (Avey; Wulff).

In 1970s New York, coffee also marks the divide between the rich and the poor, and the powerful and the powerless. On a visit to her brother Luis, a prosperous plant nursery owner who lives like a white man, Consuelo seizes every opportunity to drink his high-quality coffee. The detailed descriptions of its

smell and of the coffee maker itself signal economic prosperity, especially in a mid-twentieth-century culture shaped by innovations in coffee production, marketing, and preparation. In the mental asylum, the doctors are repeatedly described as carrying cups of coffee, drinking continuously as they administer treatments and conduct experiments. Coffee thus becomes a marker of class privilege and professional authority—a small but telling symbol of who controls bodies and who is controlled. Ultimately, Consuelo's meticulous plan to poison the doctors hinges upon observing their coffee habits. The very substance that signifies power becomes the medium of resistance, as she wages her quiet war against patriarchy in the present in hopes of a better future (Piercy 362-411).

Nourishment as Resistance: The Ethics of Mattapoisett

The future that Mattapoisett represents is a raceless and genderless society in which women have relinquished the exclusive right to biological reproduction in pursuit of universal equality. Co-mothering is practised by three people to break the exclusivity of nuclear mother-child bonding. In her introduction to the 2016 edition of *Women on the Edge of Time*, quoted in *The Guardian*, Piercy notes that “the point of a novel about the future is not to predict it... The point of such writing is to influence the present by extrapolating current trends for advancement or detriment” (Piercy). Mattapoisett must therefore be read not as a blueprint, but as a speculative intervention—one that invites readers to imagine what kinds of futures are worth working toward.

The Mattapoisett landscape is alive and abundant. Its inhabitants cultivate and use single-celled organisms for fences and barriers—living structures that mend themselves (Piercy 158). The continuation and propagation of organic life is the overarching concern of the people of this future. Their ethics of living a wholesome and natural life ultimately circle back to the endeavour of consuming good food free from adulteration. The decision not to have industries is both a rejection of utilitarian efficiency and a response to the destructive capacity of industrial production to pollute rivers, poison fish, and destabilise entire ecosystems. In Mattapoisett, science and a form of animism together inform everyday life. Humans actively participate in the food cycle and accept their place within the web of life. The dead become nourishment for new life. People take

part in every stage of the food cycle—from the decomposition of food and biological waste to the sowing and harvesting of crops. Children, men, and women participate equally in the labour involved in producing food, without exception. What is striking is that nourishment is not abstracted from labour, nor labour from care.

Still dissatisfied with the absence of machines in this future, Connie asks why machines are not used for cooking. Luciente replies that machines can cook, but not inventively: “To be a chef is like mothering: you must volunteer, you must feel called” (Piercy 186). Eating well is described not as indulgence, but as a political and ethical responsibility. “Enough food, good food, nourishing food,” Luciente insists, emphasising that no one in their world is born with less access to nourishment than another (Piercy 187). Unlike the deprivation Connie experiences in the asylum and in her everyday life, food here is guaranteed, communal, and dignified. The contrast between the concrete, supermarket-dependent New York City of the 1970s and the organic green landscapes of the Mouth of Mattapoisett in 2137 is striking.

By the early twentieth century, the world was already grappling with the realities of modern farming, which relied heavily on chemical fertilisers and industrial interventions. Piercy’s imagining of an animistic and ecological future is remarkable for its scientific precision. Even when the knowledge exists to eliminate mosquitoes, the people of Mattapoisett choose instead to alter only their irritant effects, recognising their place in the food chain (Piercy 101). Nothing goes to waste; what is not immediately useful is decomposed and reused as fertiliser. Advanced science is employed not to dominate nature but to align human life with natural cycles of birth, decay, and regeneration. Despite this disciplined ecological ethic, the inhabitants of Mattapoisett enjoy pleasure and celebration. They drink wine, smoke marijuana on occasion, and hold communal gatherings. Clothing for parties is made from algae-engineered fabric that can be composted after use, returning to the soil and ultimately to food production (Piercy 184). The future world is organised into small village communities that grow their own food and strive to be “ownfed” (Piercy 71-72).

There is no commercial production of crops, no processed food economy, and no pretence of human supremacy within the food chain. Food is revered, not commodified, and its production binds the social fabric together. Nourishment is also central to Mattapoisett's understanding of gender equality. Everyone is androgynous; gender as it is known in Connie's time does not exist. The pronoun "per" reflects this non-gendered identity (Piercy 57).

Luciente explains that women relinquished biological childbirth as a means of eliminating a key source of gender inequality, relying instead on reproductive technology known as the brooder (Piercy 105). Mothering becomes a shared social responsibility rather than a biological destiny. Men lactate; care is redistributed; nourishment becomes collective rather than feminised (Piercy 94–96).

Through its juxtaposition of drugged bodies, processed food, and nourished futures, *Woman on the Edge of Time* exposes how control over bodies and control over sustenance operate through the same political logic. In Connie's present, drugs suppress appetite and agency, food is scarce and degraded, and survival itself is precarious. In the dystopian future, both bodies and food are fully processed, owned, and consumed by corporate power. Against these worlds, Mattapoisett offers not perfection but an alternative ethical horizon—one grounded in participation rather than extraction (Piercy). Piercy's treatment of food is particularly prescient. In an era increasingly marked by food insecurity, ecological collapse, and the corporate consolidation of agriculture, the novel urges readers to recognise nourishment as a political question rather than a private concern. If utopias and dystopias are histories of possible futures, then Mattapoisett functions as a speculative critique of the present—asking not what will happen, but what must be resisted. Conditioned to internalise inferiority due to her racialised identity and material deprivation, Connie initially struggles to recognise Mattapoisett as desirable. Food cannot sustain her there, as she is not physically present; she leaves no material trace. Yet it is precisely this contrast—between her hunger and their abundance—that ultimately clarifies what is at stake, and the rebellion that follows pushes her to the edge of time.

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