

Richard Rorty and Three Food Poets: Rortyan Humanism and Beyond in the Writings of Ruth Reichl, Anthony Bourdain, and Michael Pollan¹

Silvia Rosivalová Baučeková, Pavol Jozef Šafárik University in Košice

Abstract

Literature is a key element in the philosophy of the American neopragmatist Richard Rorty. In this paper, I take as a starting point Rorty's understanding of imaginative literature as the driving force of social change. I conduct an analysis of three books by three American food writers, Ruth Reichl, Anthony Bourdain, and Michael Pollan. I argue that while the selected works by Reichl and Bourdain echo aspects of Rorty's humanistic moral philosophy, Michael Pollan moves beyond humanism, dismantling the dichotomy of human/nonhuman to offer a new moral philosophy for the 21st century.

Keywords: Richard Rorty, humanism, food writing, Anthony Bourdain, Michael Pollan, Ruth Reichl

Introduction: Food Writing as Philosophical Manifesto

Richard Rorty was a well-known, albeit controversial figure in contemporary American philosophy. He formulated his own version of neopragmatism, in which he rejected Platonism and analytical philosophy and instead turned to language as a means of understanding and coping with the world. Rorty believed that language is the only medium that makes it possible for us to think, create, and communicate, and that finding new ways to use language, or new vocabularies, is how we can create a better future for humankind (see for example Rorty 1979: 359). Rorty claimed that poets “in the generic sense of maker[s] of new words, the shaper[s] of new languages” are the “vanguard” of the human species (1989: 20). He maintained that it is through literary imagination rather than philosophical reflection that people can come to know, understand, and change themselves and the world. “This understanding of language brought Rorty closer to his ‘literary turn’ – the literary conception of philosophy and literary humanistic culture” (Višňovský 2020: 5).

In this sense, Rorty understood writing literature as world-making, as envisaging possible better futures. He thought it “unhelpful to distinguish between philosophical texts as content based and literary ones as aesthetically pleasing” (Leypoldt 2008: 147). In “Looking Back at ‘Literary Theory’” he proposed that “both comparative literature and philosophy departments should be places in which students receive plenty of suggestions about what sorts of books they might like to read, and are then left free to follow their noses” (Rorty 2006b: 65). Philosophy and fiction are here understood simply as two genres of writing whose purpose is the same as the purpose of any other “imaginative conversation” (Višňovský 2020: 5): to create common good. In fact, Rorty believed that narrative and fiction were even better suited to this purpose because “the novel’s thick description of human particularities offers richer explorations of ethical complexities than the theoretical treatise” (Leypoldt 2008: 146).

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In this paper I take as a starting point Rorty's understanding of imaginative literature "as the principal [vehicle] of moral change and progress" in contemporary societies (Rorty 1989: xvi). However, I argue that this function is not limited to literary fiction but is also performed by literary nonfiction and by the hybrid literary forms that make up the genre of food writing. The term "food writing" refers to a wide array of texts, from cookbooks and restaurant reviews to culinary mysteries and food memoirs. Although these texts are not typically considered part of the literary canon, I argue that their authors engage in writing as a form of literary world-making. Food writers make use of their imagination to carve their private place in the world or to envisage a better, more ethical, and more just future for the society as a whole. In this respect they are very much akin to the Romantic poets or Realist novelists whom Rorty so admired.

In what follows I present a reading of three books by three famous American food writers, Ruth Reichl, Anthony Bourdain, and Michael Pollan as examples of literary world-making. As such, I propose an analysis of these texts through the lens of Richard Rorty's humanistic moral philosophy. First, I argue that in Reichl's *My Kitchen Year: 136 Recipes that Saved My Life* (2015) the protagonist represents Rorty's ideal citizen: the liberal ironist. Second, I show how in *Kitchen Confidential: Adventures in the Culinary Underbelly* (2000) Bourdain depicts the community of chefs in New York as a Rortyan "band of eccentrics": a group of independent individuals who work together to achieve shared goals. Lastly, I demonstrate how in *Cooked: A Natural History of Transformation* (2013) Pollan moves beyond Rorty's humanism and incorporates the human and the nonhuman as equal components of a new moral philosophy.

The Neopragmatism of Richard Rorty

Throughout his life Richard Rorty developed a unique and controversial version of pragmatism. The main tenets of his neopragmatism include the "linguistic turn", that is a focus on language, rather than on the mind or consciousness, as a force defining the human condition; an insistence on anti-foundationalism and anti-essentialism; and a radical humanism. Rorty understood philosophy as a conversation (see for example "Spinoza, Pragmatism and the Love of Wisdom" in Rorty 2006a), and he believed that "philosophical problems are problems which may be solved (or dissolved) either by reforming language, or by understanding more about the language we presently use" (Rorty 1992: 3). In a pragmatist fashion, Rorty rejected the "notion of language as a medium" (Rorty 1989: 13), and instead viewed it as a tool, "a practical and social creative instrument for constructing and re-constructing our human world" (Višňovský 2020: 5).

Rorty's focus on language as a vehicle for change is intertwined with his anti-essentialist and anti-foundationalist views. He believed that humans possess no essence or universal inner nature, but instead that "the human self is created by the use of a vocabulary rather than being adequately or inadequately expressed in a vocabulary" (Rorty 1989: 7). Similarly, he rejected the notion of an ultimate Truth. He claimed that "truth is a property of linguistic entities, of sentences" (ibid.), and thus it is not found but created by language users, that is humans. Consequently, he argued that it should not be the aim of philosophy to look for the ultimate Truth and eternal universals, but rather to try to devise new languages that will make possible new and improved ways of life (Rorty 2006a: 52-53, 109, 113, and elsewhere).

Lastly, Rorty's belief in the centrality of language served as a foundation for his humanism. Rorty divided the world into the human and the nonhuman along the lines of

linguistic competence. Language, he claimed, is what makes us human. In *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* he wrote: “The world does not speak. Only we do. The world can, once we have programmed ourselves with a language, cause us to hold beliefs. But it cannot propose a language for us to speak. Only other human beings can do that.” (1989: 6) In other words, Rorty understood humans as detached from the nonhuman, and believed they were only accountable to other humans (1989: 7; see also Višňovský 2020).

This radical humanism served as the basis of Rorty’s moral philosophy. In *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* he envisioned the ideal culture as

one which was enlightened, secular, through and through. It would be one in which no trace of divinity remained, either in the form of a divinized world or a divinized self. Such a culture would have no room for the notion that there are nonhuman forces to which human beings should be responsible.

(1989: 45)

Rorty described the ideal citizen for this humanistic utopia as a “liberal ironist”, that is someone with “a sense of the contingency of their language of moral deliberation, and thus of their consciences, and thus of their community” (61). The ironist is defined first by their skepticism: they constantly ask questions about the language which they were brought up to use, and about what kind of person they became as a result of using this language; and second by their unending search for a “final vocabulary”, that is for a language unique to them that would make it possible to create a new, better version of themselves (75-77). The ironist’s ability to self-create is understood as their ultimate freedom. The yearning for a new language, or for the reinvention of the self, is inspired by Nietzsche, and Rorty also followed Nietzsche in claiming that it is poets or artists rather than philosophers who are most capable of self-creation.

However, Rorty did not envision his utopia as a society of individuals. On the contrary, he believed that “our connections with our fellow humans are of the utmost importance” (Višňovský 2020: 6), and that humans are ultimately accountable to other humans. Here Rorty stressed the distinction between the private and the public: the citizens of his liberal utopia would be free to be absolutely self-creating and passion-driven in their private lives, but in the public sphere they would become a collective working towards common goals:

I want to see freely arrived at agreement as agreement on how to accomplish common purposes [...], but I want to see these common purposes against the background of an increasing sense of the radical diversity of private purposes, of the radically poetic character of individual lives, and of the merely poetic foundations of the ‘we-consciousness’ which lies behind our social institutions. [...] My “poeticized” culture is one which *has given up the attempt to unite one’s private ways of dealing with one’s finitude and one’s sense of obligation to other human beings.*

(67-68, emphasis mine)

The “poeticized culture” of Rorty’s utopia is one in which people would strive for “aesthetic enhancement” rather than for objectivity, and “in which religion may flourish without gods, science without representations, and philosophy without confrontations” (Višňovský 2020: 14).

Ruth Reichl: The Reluctant Ironist

The American food critic and writer Ruth Reichl published *My Kitchen Year: 136 Recipes that Saved My Life* in 2015, but the book was actually written in 2009-2010, in the period immediately after the closing of the *Gourmet* magazine, where Reichl had served as editor-in-chief since 1999. Like a lot of food writing, *My Kitchen Year* falls somewhere in the fuzzy area between various genres: it is a cookbook, containing instructions for preparing the 136 recipes from its title, but at the same time it is a memoir chronicling what Reichl refers to as her “kitchen year” — a year of struggle, fear, but also of self-creation. The book is also the author’s manifesto about what she has come to believe makes up good food and good life. In this sense, although it is certainly not a philosophical treatise, *My Kitchen Year* is a philosophical text, inasmuch as it asks moral questions about how one should live in order to be happy.

The narrative of the book begins with Reichl, the protagonist, in a state of profound crisis. The magazine in which she had hoped to end her long career was closed by its publisher without warning, the many plans for future issues and projects scrapped mercilessly. Thus, at the age of sixty-one, Reichl was left to look for a new job and a new purpose in life. She makes it clear in the book that she did not plan any of this. She had felt satisfied with her life as it used to be, enjoying the dazzling, fast-paced world of magazine publishing and glitzy New York restaurants. However, chance (or, to use Rorty’s vocabulary, the contingency of future events) made her into an ironist, albeit a reluctant one. Reichl suddenly became just like Rorty’s ideal citizen, who

spends her time worrying about the possibility that she has been initiated into the wrong tribe, taught to play the wrong language game. She worries that the process of socialization which turned her into a human being by giving her a language may have given her the wrong language, and so turned her into the wrong kind of human being.

(Rorty 1989: 75)

It takes some time for the facts of the situation to sink in. At first, Reichl is busy finishing projects, deliberately immersing herself in what few responsibilities to the magazine she has left to avoid pondering the future. However, the day when there is nothing left to do inevitably arrives:

On the first day of my new life I woke, alone, to frosted windows in New York City. Michael was out of town, and for a moment I thought gratefully that I had no responsibilities, nowhere to go. Then the empty day rose before me, and I realized that that was literally true. I had nowhere to go. What would I do with myself? I went into the kitchen and opened the refrigerator door.

(Reichl 2015: 59)

Reichl realizes that she must start building a new life and a new self: start constructing her “final vocabulary” (Rorty 1989: 77). And throughout the book, she makes it explicit that it is cooking and, later, writing about food, that enables her to do this. Cooking represents for Reichl a meditative, that is philosophical, but at the same time imaginative and creative process. While coming up with recipes, transforming the food she handles, thinking of new ways of combining ingredients, she also creates her new self. This creative, or self-creative,

aspect of cookery is highlighted by the images used in the book. In addition to the stylized pictures of meals typical of cookbooks, there are many photographs featuring the protagonist herself. However, it is not her face that is pictured, but her hands: a symbol of the creative work that goes into both making a meal and making an authentic life for oneself.

Reichl's process of self-creation is a deeply personal, private matter. This is in line with Rorty's belief that "we should treat vocabularies for deliberation about public goods and social and political arrangements, on the one hand, and vocabularies developed or created in pursuit of personal fulfilment, self-creation, and self-realization, on the other, as distinct tools" (Ramberg and Dieleman 2021). This is symbolically underscored in the text by the change of setting. After losing her job in the magazine, Reichl and her husband move from their New York City apartment to a cabin in the countryside. Here they spend a solitary winter, confined to the house for long stretches of time by severe snowstorms. Reichl uses this time to focus inward, cook and think, evaluating her past life and carving out possible future ones.

Once spring has come, Reichl is ready to be reborn, just like the nature around her. She can finally leave her house in the country and get back to New York City, even just for a stroll. By now she is a different woman. She is ready for a new adventure, although she is not yet quite sure what it may be:

I'd gone out for a fresh loaf of bread, intending nothing more impressive than toast. But it was a beautiful day, and the good feelings on the street were so infectious that I came home eager to cook. French toast, I thought, *wondering how I might make it my own.*

(Reichl 2015: 169, emphasis mine)

As the first sentence in the quote above suggest, her final vocabulary has not yet fully taken shape. But like the Romantic poets revered by Rorty, she is inspired by her surroundings and by the food she prepares. They lead her to the decision that she wants to write a cookbook. By the end of summer, Reichl is writing and feeling much happier than ever before. Her kitchen year has ended, and the journey has taken her full circle from the death of her old life, and her old language, through the painful process of self-creation, finally arriving at a new, improved vocabulary with which she can describe herself.

Remembering how miserable I'd been at this time the year before, I smiled. Since then, I'd discovered the many things that I will never need. [...] Living in that fast-paced world, I would not have thought to come home and make a quiet meal.

I looked over at my computer, where the novel was waiting. I poured a glass of wine and sipped it slowly. Then I gathered up the dishes, took them to the kitchen, and plunged my hands into the warm water.

(Reichl 2015: 304)

Reichl has become a food poet, someone who makes things using her imagination, not only metaphorically, but also literally, as she has become a fiction writer. The book ends with a couple of images. One is a blurry photograph of the protagonist's face. Throughout the book, Reichl's hands were depicted at work making things, and now, finally, we are shown her face: she has succeeded at creating herself. However, the blurriness of the image echoes Rorty's insistence that no language is ever completely final; that even what today seems like the "final vocabulary" is always open to new and better redescriptions. And fittingly, the last image in the book depicts a blue sky with white clouds: the open horizon offering never-ending possibilities for self-recreation.

Anthony Bourdain and his Band of Eccentrics

Like Reichl's *My Kitchen Year*, Anthony Bourdain's *Kitchen Confidential: Adventures in the Culinary Underbelly* is a culinary memoir, a story of Bourdain's life as a cook, from his childhood, when he was dragged along on his parents' foodie travels across France, up until his latest job as executive chef at Brasserie Les Halles in New York City. And just like Reichl, Bourdain depicts his protagonist's journey of self-creation: from the moment little Anthony decided to become the most adventurous eater in his family up until he completes his self-creation as a successful professional chef. Throughout the book, Bourdain stylizes himself as a dark Romantic hero, a social outcast who lives by a self-imposed ethical code, but also a culinary poet and visionary, creating both meals and books.

However, while Reichl's is a private journey, undertaken in isolation from the outside world, *Kitchen Confidential* contains a second narrative in addition to the story of the hero's self-creation, and that is the story of his community. Although Bourdain presents himself as a lone wolf, wandering the streets of New York City or Tokyo at night, eating and drinking in solitude, he also understands himself as part of what he calls the "culinary underbelly": the world of urban restaurant kitchens, hidden from view of most, and thus representing a society of its own. The "culinary underbelly" can be read as an example of the second element present in Rorty's vision of a liberal utopia: the public domain in which citizens take part in productive arguments and collaborative work in order to achieve a common good. Rorty believed that engagement with the languages of others was inevitable; that "there can be no fully Nietzschean lives, lives which are pure action rather than reaction" (1989: 42). He also maintained that "the deepening and widening of solidarity" with as large and as diverse group of others as possible was "the hallmark of social progress" (Ramberg and Dieleman 2021). Thus, in Rorty's utopia the citizens, in addition to being independent liberal ironists, would also be capable of recognizing the humanity in others irrespective of their differences

In Rorty's vision, such a utopian liberal society would be one with a strictly humanistic moral code. Rorty rejected the notion of universal moral values or of values imposed from above. In his secular vision, "the notion of 'morality'" could have a place only "insofar as we can cease to think of morality as the voice of the divine part of ourselves and instead think of it as the voice of ourselves as members of a community, speakers of a common language" (1989: 59). In other words, humans only have responsibilities towards other humans, and the nature of these responsibilities is to be decided amongst them. Bourdain's narrative echoes both Rorty's humanism and his insistence that moral codes are created rather than pre-existent. The characters in *Kitchen Confidential* ostentatiously reject any rules dictated from above: they use illegal drugs, lead unconventional sexual lives, use profane language, and sometimes actually break the law. However, in the kitchen they all conform to a mutually agreed code of behavior. All members of the kitchen staff share this "common language" — the "knowledge that there are some things you *must* do—and some things you absolutely *must not* [...] maybe not moral distinctions, but practical ones" (Bourdain 2000: 250, original emphasis).

Bourdain depicts the world of restaurant kitchens in New York City as a perfect example of "a society conceived as a band of eccentrics collaborating for purposes of mutual protection rather than as a band of fellow spirits united by a common goal" (Rorty 1989: 59). In his romanticized portrayal it becomes a world where chefs and other kitchen laborers from all walks of life and corners of the earth work side by side, preparing food and earning a living. Bourdain repeatedly emphasizes the fact that his "kitchen crew" are a diverse group of weirdos, outcasts, immigrants, miscreants, drug addicts, or outright criminals. In an answer to the

question “Who cooks?” he writes: “If the chef is anything like me, the cooks are a dysfunctional, mercenary lot, fringe-dwellers motivated by money, the peculiar lifestyle of cooking and a grim pride. *They’re probably not even American.*” (2000: 55, emphasis mine)

The book is populated by numerous examples of eccentric crew members from various stages of Bourdain’s career. Bourdain was first initiated into the world of professional cooking as a college student looking for a part-time job during the summer break he spent in Provincetown, Cape Cod. And it was in the kitchen of one of the local restaurants where he met Tyrone, the awe-inspiring “broiler man”. Tyrone was a huge and terrifying figure, but what fascinated young Bourdain most were his chef’s hands:

the hideous constellation of water-filled blisters, angry red welts from grill marks, the old scars, the raw flesh where steam or hot fat had made the skin simply roll off. They looked like the claws of some monstrous science-fiction crustacean, knobby and calloused under wounds old and new. I watched, transfixed, as Tyrone—his eyes never leaving mine—reached slowly under the broiler and, with one naked hand, picked up a glowing-hot sizzle-platter, moved it over to the cutting board, and set it down in front of me. He never flinched.

(Bourdain 2000: 34)

Tyrone is awe-inspiring: powerful, dangerous, immune to pain, even monstrous. For Bourdain, he is definitely Other: black, huge, with a “silver-capped front tooth, and the ubiquitous fist-sized gold hoop earring” (31). This memorable episode foreshadows many other similar encounters yet to come. Segundo, Bourdain’s assistant, is described as “a mean-looking bastard”, a “headband-sporting, baggy-pantsed, top button-buttoned, bottom button open, moon boot-shod, half Puerto Rican, half cholo *vato loco*, with his crude prison-style tats and his butterfly knife tucked in his wristband” (223-24, original emphasis) who is rumored to have done “a lot of prison time” (190). The talented baker Adam Real-Last-Name-Unknown

claims to be of Sicilian heritage, affecting the mannerisms and gestures and expressions of the street guinea from some Scorsese-inspired Brooklyn—but is he, actually of Italian lineage? No one knows for sure. Steven claims to have seen his birth certificate—the real one, mind you—and that his real last name is Turkish or Arab. But who knows? Documentation from Adam is always of dubious provenance.

(Bourdain 2000: 239-40)

Tyrone, Segundo, and Adam are among the many chefs, assistants, dishwashers, busboys, and other restaurants staff described in the book as seeming different and exotic to Bourdain, and to each other. But somehow these diverse un-American others, among whom Bourdain proudly counts himself, manage not only to coexist, but work together, produce food, and thrive. They achieve this in a Rortyan manner by “widening their solidarity” and respecting each other’s peculiarities. As Bourdain put it, “[i]n most kitchens, one’s freakish personal proclivities matter little if at all” (2000: 62) as the crew are “too busy, and too close, and [...] spend too much time together as an extended, dysfunctional family to care about sex, gender preference, race or national origin” (223). In this sense, the restaurant kitchen is home to a “poeticized” culture, in which “chances for fulfillment of idiosyncratic fantasies [are] equalized” (Rorty 1989: 53). As such, the kitchen becomes a liberal space where differences are overcome by adopting a shared language: the language of cookery.

Michael Pollan in Conversation with the Nonhuman

Richard Rorty's anti-representationalist philosophy is based on the assumption that "any vocabulary is optional and mutable" (Ramberg and Dieleman, 2021). Rorty insisted that there is nothing important outside of language and that the only criterion for determining the validity of a vocabulary is its usefulness in a certain community and context. This standpoint has important consequences for Rorty's cultural politics. By adopting it, he hoped to create a framework which would protect the freedom of diverse citizens in liberal societies and prevent such societies from lapsing into totalitarianism, in which all would be subject to a dogmatic moral code imposed from above.

However, Rorty's approach comes with its own problems, too. Nicholas Gaskill notes that Rorty's anti-foundationalism can easily be condemned as yet another example of "postmodern relativism" (2022: 12). Such criticism is particularly damning in the 21st century, which is steeped in "a climate of 'post-truth' politics, where 'alternative facts' are invoked to justify deplorable acts" (2). Secondly, since Rorty's moral philosophy and cultural politics were based on the notion of "conversation" or finding a common language, he believed that morality is limited to language users, that is humans. In other words, we only have responsibility to other speakers, not to the mute nonhuman world. Rorty's philosophy thus hinges on an implied nature/culture dichotomy. Gaskill observes that Rorty did not "argue the [nature/culture] distinction so much as take it as self-evident. Rorty knows what counts as social (namely, practices of justification) and what counts as natural (brute forces), and his gambit is to get us to stop thinking that the latter sets any conditions upon the former." (Gaskill 2022: 13)

However, considering what we believe about humans, nature, the environment, and their interconnections today, such callous repudiation of the nonhuman from philosophy and ethics seems highly problematic. Instead, contemporary philosophy highlights the inseparability and mutual dependence of the human and the nonhuman. The feminist scholar Donna Haraway, for example, suggests that the nonhuman has agency, just like the human:

Actors come in many and wonderful forms. Accounts of a "real" world do not, then, depend on a logic of "discovery" but on a power-charged social relation of "conversation." The world neither speaks itself nor disappears in favor of a master decoder. The codes of the world are not still, waiting only to be read. The world is not raw material for humanization [...]. In some critical sense that is crudely hinted at by the clumsy category of the social or of agency, the world encountered in knowledge projects is an active entity.

(1988: 593)

Haraway, like Rorty, understands production of knowledge as a form of conversation. In Haraway's vision, however, the conversation is not just a chat between humans about the world. Instead, it is a conversation we are having with the world itself.

Philosophers such as Haraway, Bruno Latour, or Isabelle Stengers have persuasively argued that "the self-evident division between Nature and Culture is not only not that evident but also downright harmful" (Gaskill 2022: 14). If we are to survive as part of the world, we should substitute this division with a convivialist outlook; one in which existence is "built around the slogan 'to be is always to be-with'" (Boisvert 2010: 60). Raymond Boisvert defines a convivialist philosophy as one in which "association and conjunction" take precedence over

individual units (ibid.), and humans are “neither projectors nor mirrors. [They] are sapient, tasters, and, as such, look to trials, experimentations, lived experience, and conversations with others to enhance [their] understandings” (63). For humans who think of themselves as “convives”, the nature/culture or human/nonhuman distinctions cease to make sense. They understand community as a “collectivity” of human and nonhuman entities “rather than a freestanding ‘society’ set against a natural, material backdrop” (65).

The food writing of Michael Pollan echoes many of the philosophical ideas outlined above. Just like Boisvert or Latour, Pollan rejects the human/nonhuman dichotomy. In *Cooked* he explains how people, plants, animals, bacteria, fungi, and inanimate objects each play an essential part in the preparation of our human food. Pollan emphasizes that without the input of numerous human and nonhuman entities we would never be able to sit down to a meal. *Cooked* is not the first text in which Pollan deals with these issues. In two of his earlier books, *The Botany of Desire: A Plant’s-Eye View of the World* (2001) and *The Omnivore’s Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals* (2006), he discusses the coevolution of humans and various plant species, such as tulips or corn. In *Omnivore’s Dilemma* he writes:

Corn is the hero of its own story, and though we humans played a crucial supporting role in its rise to world domination, it would be wrong to suggest we have been calling the shots, or acting always on our own best interests. Indeed, there is every reason to believe that corn has succeeded in domesticating us.

(Pollan 2006: 23)

If we were to describe this passage using literary terminology, we would say that corn is being personified here. However, in *The Omnivore’s Dilemma*, as well as in *Cooked*, Pollan makes it clear that he does not use such personification metaphorically. Corn, just like the wheat berry that beckons the baker to find out “how it thinks” (Pollan 2013: 284), or the yeast and bacteria in sourdough starter who are “temperamental” and require expert care (265) are literally understood as — to use Haraway’s phrase — “active entities” with interests, plans, and desires of their own.

Yet Pollan goes further than simply claiming that human and nonhuman entities are both active agents in the world. He problematizes the human/nonhuman dichotomy itself by pointing out that even people are not one hundred percent human. In an interview with Pollan, the food activist Sandor Katz points out that our bodies contain ten times more bacterial cells than human cells. Katz claims that “[m]ost of the DNA we’re carrying around is microbial DNA, not human”, which, naturally, leads him to the question “Who exactly are we?” (Pollan 2013: 300). Are we really, fully human? And who are the bacteria living inside of us? Are they human, too? Or are we hybrid entities “stretch[ing] over the supposed chasm of mute things and speaking humans” (Gaskill 2022: 15)? Pollan and Katz conclude that, indeed, we are. Katz muses that “a visitor from another planet would be forced to conclude who we are is a superorganism, a symbiotic community of several hundred species, with *Homo sapiens* serving as unwitting front man and ambulatory device” (Pollan 2013: 300). And once even the definition of what is human is thus problematized, a convivialist philosophy becomes the only philosophy that makes sense.

Pollan presents the convivialist approach not only as the key to a healthier life, as it helps us produce and consume the best, highest quality foods, but also as a remedy for the ills of capitalism and contemporary hyperconsumerism. As he sees it

[t]o brew beer, to make cheese, to bake a loaf of bread, to braise a pork shoulder, is to be forcibly reminded that all these things are not just products, *in fact are not even really “things.”* Most of what presents itself to us in the marketplace as a product is in truth a *web of relationships*, between people, yes, but also between ourselves and all the other species on which we still depend. Eating and drinking especially implicate us in the natural world in ways that the industrial economy, with its long and illegible supply chains, would have us forget.

(2013: 407-408, emphasis mine)

To bake good bread, cook nutritious food, or brew tasty beer, that is in order to be healthy and happy, we humans must understand our place in the complex “web of relationships” that ties us to the nonhuman others both beyond and within ourselves. Only once we get to know them and learn to respect them can we live truly ethical lives.

Conclusion

Language, narrative, and conversation are at the center of Richard Rorty’s neopragmatism. As a result, Rorty’s cultural politics and moral philosophy are characterized by a profound humanism. Rorty believed that maintaining human freedom and reducing human suffering were paramount if we hoped to create a good society. Rorty conceived his philosophy with the threat of totalitarianism in mind. His anti-representationalism, anti-essentialism, and his focus on the individual all aim to problematize the belief in universalizing moral or philosophical outlooks, which could be used as justification for imposing a dogmatic version of knowledge or an oppressive code of conduct on humankind. Instead, Rorty was an advocate of self-creation and of building communities in which members are ultimately responsible only to each other, not to some outside or divine force. However, while there is much value in Rorty’s philosophical ideas, his insistence on ignoring the nonhuman is problematic. In the 21st century, food insecurity, climate change, and the epidemic of diseases of civilization serve as daily reminders that to detach ourselves from the nonhuman has disastrous consequences. Contemporary philosophers instead attempt to create conceptual and moral frameworks in which the human/nonhuman dichotomy is overcome.

In this paper I presented a reading of three works of food writing through the lens of Rortyan humanism and contemporary convivialist philosophy. I argued that while Ruth Reichl’s *My Kitchen Year* and Anthony Bourdain’s *Kitchen Confidential* can be interpreted as examples of Rortyan ethical ideals, namely the ideal liberal individual and the utopian liberal community, Michael Pollan’s *Cooked* moves beyond Rorty’s humanistic moral philosophy. Echoing contemporary philosophers such as Donna Haraway, Bruno Latour, or Isabelle Stengers, Pollan attempts to construct a new moral philosophy for the 21st century: one in which justice and care are not limited to people but are instead extended to all the objects and beings that, together with us humans, make up this community we call the world.

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Silvia Rosivalová Baučeková
 Pavol Jozef Šafárik University in Košice
 Department of British and American Studies
 Faculty of Arts
 Moyzesova 9
 040 01 Košice
 silvia.baucekova@upjs.sk

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