Not Another Plant-Based Documentary: A Critical Review of *Eating Our Way to Extinction*

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Abstract: Despite mounting evidence that industrial animal agriculture is a formidable force of climate change and mass extinction, many humans remain impervious to this knowledge. *Eating Our Way to Extinction* is a timely documentary that takes this issue head on. This film review is guided by Alexandra Juhasz's explanation of media praxis as 'an enduring, mutual, and building tradition that theorizes and creates the necessary conditions for media to play an integral role in cultural and individual transformation' (299). *Eating Our Way to Extinction* attends to some of the most popular strawman arguments against veganism and is widely accessible. That being said, it falls short of its sociopolitical potential because it is beholden to the capitalist-colonial norms of self-interested individualism, promotion of consumerism over movement-building, and using Indigenous peoples as a means to an end. *Eating Our Way to Extinction* contrasts a worldview based on extraction and domination with one that could actually shift the tide of climate change. It then follows the logic of the extractive worldview by promoting self-interested solutions to a problem that is only exacerbated by capitalism. The fact that *Eating Our Way to Extinction* acknowledges that Indigenous peoples are more adept at living in an ecologically harmonious way, then silos its viewers into the very mindset that is driving the problem is where the documentary falls flat. At its heart, *Eating Our Way to Extinction* relies on the Western colonial logics of individualism and capitalism that undercut the social justice demands of veganism.

Keywords: vegan, mass extinction, YouTube documentary, plant-based diets, worldview

Despite mounting evidence that industrial animal agriculture is a formidable force of climate change and mass extinction, many humans remain impervious to this knowledge. This is particularly problematic for people who occupy positions of global privilege and power. That people continue to prioritize their comfort and desires over global health is symptomatic of a colonial-capitalist mindset that sees human beings as exceptionally valuable and more important than any other being (Watts 24-25). In the industrialized global north, the material and general contours of how animal agriculture is ecologically harmful have been common knowledge for decades, yet reluctance towards veganism persists. *Eating Our Way to Extinction*, written by Otto Brockway and co-directed with brother Ludovic Brockway, reveals that state and capital forces have a stake in the continuance of animal agriculture. These social institutions have so far been successful in perpetuating strawman arguments in favour of animal agriculture. *Eating Our Way to Extinction* is a timely documentary that takes these issues head on.

Climate activists across the globe continue to emphasize the need for environmental justice to be prioritized alongside other struggles for social justice and systemic transformation. Given the capitalist interests of modern nation-states, culture and the arts are where such transformation could be sparked. This film review is guided by Alexandra Juhasz's explanation of media praxis as 'an enduring, mutual, and building tradition that theorizes and creates the necessary conditions for media to play an integral role in cultural and individual transformation' (299). *Systems change, not climate change* is slogan that should be familiar to climate activists, which refers to the social upheaval necessary to deal with ecological collapse. Unfortunately, *Eating Our Way to Extinction* misses this mark. *Eating Our Way to Extinction* is a widely accessible film that attends to some of the most popular strawman arguments against veganism, including contentions around soy, fish, and greenhouse gases. That being said, it falls short of its sociopolitical potential because it is beholden to capitalist-colonial norms, including anthropo- and ego-centric individualism, the promotion of consumerism over movement-building, and the use of Indigenous peoples as a means to an end.

The problem that *Eating Our Way to Extinction* identifies is 'the global demand for meat products' (3:50-6:47). The documentary opens with a scene of a tree falling in the iconic Amazon rainforest followed by a sequence of a balaclava-clad-machine-gun-wielding farmer

boasting that 'we do what we please' to a feminized land (00:00-2:51). Brockway himself confronts this so-called farmer, pointing out that 'Indigenous tribes have been living on this land for hundreds of years' (1:31-33). The tension in this confrontation, between agricultural domination and Indigenous stewardship, is somewhat relieved by Kate Winslett's narrative presence telling us that 'cultures the world over have called [Earth] their mother', punctuated by b-roll time lapse footage of natural landscapes accompanied by soft non-diegetic inhalations and exhalations that supposedly originate from Earth 'herself' (2:23-41). Notably, both the Brazilian farmer and Winslett use the pronouns 'she' or 'her' to refer to Earth in this sequence, foreclosing the possibility of imagining the planet beyond a rigid and patriarchal gender binary, even in the argument that we should be taking better care of 'her'. The non-patriarchal reverence that Indigenous peoples have for Mother Earth is not reflected but *refracted* through the documentary's production, and Western audiences are geographically siloed away from wherever 'the world over' is, even if they themselves as settlers are occupying stolen Indigenous land (2:25). As a lead from *Titanic*, Winslett's stardom brings the 'sinking ship' metaphor to this documentary: life on Earth is doomed if we don't grab a bucket and start bailing. *Eating Our Way to Extinction* commences by presenting two contrasting worldviews: one that is clearly the problem, and one that is supposedly aspirational. The documentary contextualizes itself in the midst of Earth's sixth mass extinction event, in the Anthropocene, an age which is marked by imperialist expansion and colonial extractivism (Davis and Todd). The opening sequence connects ecological collapse with Western society's consumption habits; some of us are eating the rest of us into extinction.[1]

Eating Our Way to Extinction takes on three common rebuttals to veganism. The first is that the global demand for soy and subsequent deforestation of the Amazon is the fault of vegans/ vegetarians. In continuity with the opening of the documentary, the issue of agribusiness' assaults on Indigenous peoples are used to highlight the severity of the problem (12:10-14:07), and a citation from NASA stating that 'the single greatest cause of deforestation is animal agriculture' is difficult to refute (11:29). The second is the fallacy that pescatarianism is a sustainable alternative to land-animal agriculture. A significant portion of the documentary is dedicated to the ocean's health, one of the most poignant moments being an affectively-charged

montage of various fish, marine mammals, turtles, and even a whale shark dead or dying in discarded fishing nets (23:05-24:19). Brockway effectively and affectively refutes common what-about-isms regarding deforestation for soy and 'sustainable' seafood, making plain that a shift away from animal-based proteins is necessary for Earthly survival.

Our understanding of greenhouse gases is the third way in which veganism is undermined, and this contention is more multifaceted than grievances about soy and fish. Brockway uses a scientific approach for this issue: a hyperspectral imaging camera to capture footage of methane gas being exhaled by cows, which is imperceptible to human eyes (50:38-51:30). Furthermore, Brockway's infrared absorption experiment shows nitrous oxide (N_2O) and methane gas (CH_4), which are heavily linked to farmed animals, melting ice sculptures of Earth faster than carbon dioxide (CO_2) or 'normal air' (51:30-53:09). These results are congruent with Tony Weis' findings that 'the enhanced heat-trapping capacities associated with higher CO_2 concentrations is augmented by rising emissions and atmospheric concentrations of other heat-trapping gases, especially methane and nitrous oxide [...] with nitrous oxide also [being] the leading ozone-depleting emission' (23). Common greenhouse gas discourse centres around 'carbon footprints'; this undoubtably puts CO_2 at centre-stage, demoting other, more damaging greenhouse gases into the wings. The effects of CO_2 being over-accentuated are two-fold. First is that divesting from (what people understand to be) fossil fuel infrastructure becomes a more imperative task than divesting from animal agriculture. Furthermore, the ways in which animal agriculture is entwined with fossil fuel extraction are obscured. In *The Ecological Hoofprint*, Weis reminds his readers about 'the centrality of fossil energy to the global economy, and especially the world's food supply' (31-32). He illustrates how fossil energy is used at every step of animal agriculture, from the use of inorganic fertilizers and chemical pesticides for feed monocultures, to the transport and refrigeration of animals (110). While Brockway importantly highlights the oft-forgotten impacts of greenhouse gases from animal agriculture, his spotlight on cow burps glosses over the larger extractive regimes that underpin animal agriculture. That said, audiences are nonetheless shown the broad strokes of the fact that N_2O and CH_4 pose a higher threat than CO_2 alone. The ways in which *Eating Our Way to Extinction* (re)presents these

arguments, with a fancy camera and vacuum-sealed gas chambers to communicate a particular narrative about atmospheric chemistry, opens the door to considering the documentary's merit as a cultural artefact.

In the context of the global northern techno-capitalist age, it is noteworthy that *Eating Our Way to Extinction* is available on YouTube for free viewing. Cinematic experiences are often marked with class privileges; the low cost barrier to this documentary facilitates its distribution in making it available for widespread consumption. At face value, this is a win: the message that humans need to consume less animal products can be streamed from anywhere in the world with a stable Wi-Fi connection. But as Juhasz reminds us, 'what YouTube gains in access, it lacks in knowledge' (300). The documentary's pathways of distribution bump up against the principles of media praxis; YouTube is, after all, part of Google LLC's multinational monopoly. The discursive field of *Eating Our Way to Extinction*'s appeals to awareness and campaigning is thus shaped by a bedrock of neoliberal, instantly gratifying, and egotistic glamour. Where media praxis invites people into reciprocal and sustained solidarities to change societal conditions (hopefully for the better), YouTube is characterized by superficial engagements that do not lend to movement-building (Juhasz 301). Despite any intentions for *Eating Our Way to Extinction* to be a socially revolutionary film, its loyalty to capitalist interests negates its ability to do so.

While *Eating Our Way to Extinction* paints animal agriculture as the Big Bad Guy, the rationales for adopting a plant-based diet encourage an individualism that is both anthropocentric and egocentric. At no point during the feature-length documentary are audience members encouraged to reflect on their relationships with other humans or non-humans who are being harmed by industrial animal agriculture and/ or climate change. In fact, they are actively *discouraged* from doing so; for example, comedian Lee Camp tells the audience to 'ignore how the animals are treated in our factory torture farming. Let's pretend they're treated amazing, just for a minute' (1:07:44). While the purpose of this joke may be to get on the 'good side' of audience members who have forgotten how to empathize with non-humans, it reinforces the colonial separation of humans from all else (Watts 24-25). The subtext of the joke is that if we are to go vegan, it should not be for the animals, but for our self-interested survival. At another point in the film, Dr. Sylvia Earle repeats the same sentiment in a more academic register.

When discussing ocean dead zones, she recognizes that, 'Okay, people say, "that's too bad for the fish. So sorry, fish." But, we need to understand is that what we do to the ocean, we do to ourselves' (21:08-19). Why would it not be important to understand that what we do to the ocean, *we do to the ocean*? There is a line between recognizing oneself as a fundamentally dependent being who relies on countless nonhuman beings every moment of their life, and not wanting to pollute too much because that will make your life more difficult later. This documentary propagates itself by appealing to self-centred motivations for abstaining from animal-based products.

Eating Our Way to Extinction's markedly individualist tenor also manifests in how it handles the very thing it promotes: a plant-based diet. Despite making the argument for people to stop eating animal products, *Eating Our Way to Extinction* fails to engage with vegan politics – a politics aligned with broader social justice struggles against global systems of oppression, and with a specific critique of speciesism. The documentary's 'identity' and 'lifestyle' discourse and conflating plant-based diets with veganism undercuts veganism as 'a form of activism toward social and political change' (Cochrane and Cojocaru 62). In another montage, vegan athletes under dramatic lighting flex their muscles to triumphant music, and various scientists give their two cents on why 'plant-based whole foods diets' are the healthiest, with the promise of even overcoming (or at least postponing) death (1:12:17-1:14:45). Even as a vegan, I cringed at this celebration of Western beauty standards and able-bodiedness, knowing that socially aware audiences will find this to be in line with (misguided) criticisms of veganism for being capitalist and ableist. As Juhasz explains, 'because YouTube cannot generate an ethics – a shared sensibility and belief system – between its video or its viewers, it also forecloses the possibility for media politics' (309). It is not surprising that a YouTube documentary, no matter its budget, would promote a specific set of consumer habits rather than a social revolution. At the climax of the film, neoliberal spokesperson Tony Robbins says the word 'individual' five times in thirty seconds while explaining to us that our consumer-driven lifestyles (including 'airplanes and cars,' representative of fossil fuel infrastructure) are here to stay, we just need to change our diets (1:16:08-38). It is possible – and likely – that groups of activists are organizing screenings for *Eating Our Way to Extinction*, but the default viewing experience for this documentary is in

isolation, without a community. Despite the shareability of *Eating Our Way to Extinction*, it does not give audiences the option to build solidarities with other humans and nonhumans who are facing mass extinction together.

The issue of individualism in *Eating Our Way to Extinction* may have been less problematic had the documentary not set itself up with two contrasting worldviews, but this is precisely where it loses its ability to hold water. From the get-go, the audience is made aware of the fact that Indigenous and otherwise racialized peoples (such as climate refugees) are experiencing the impacts of climate change the worst. Indigenous groups from across the world are featured throughout the film to contrast with and punctuate how destructive Western forces have been. I am afraid, however, that this is all they serve as: literary (or filmic) devices. When they are interviewed, Indigenous contributors are not given the same title cards as Western celebrities and scientists. This imbalance in authority marks them as Other and lesser-than; we should feel pity and some sort of mysticism about their deep spiritual connection to the natural world, their 'mother,' but they are apparently not here to provide us with solutions to ecological harm. Indigenous critiques of animal agriculture certainly do exist. Driftpile Cree scholar Billy-Ray Belcourt argues that 'anthropocentrism is the fourth logic of white supremacy,' directly naming factory farms as 'violent colonial geographies wherein the animal body is subject to surveillance and death to produce capital/ commodity products and sustain carnivorous food cultures' (4). Likewise, Margaret Robinson contends that animal agriculture breaches her traditional Mi'kmaw values of non-interference with the lives of others, respect for mothers and the reproductive process, and multispecies friendship ('Can Intensive Animal Agriculture be Decolonized' 27:01-23). She explains that 'the commodification of animals is not a traditional Mi'kmaq value, but was absorbed through our relationship with Settlers' ('Is the Moose Still My Brother' 271). Of course, it would not be appropriate for non-Indigenous people to 'go native' by appropriating Indigenous cultures, but the serious work of reflecting on how we perpetuate colonial harm (including through animal agriculture) and shifting towards a more ecologically-minded and hearted mode of existence is necessary if we are to make restitution with the diverse beings with whom we coexist (Narvaez and Topa 7–10). *Eating Our Way to Extinction* first presents its audience with a worldview based on extraction and domination, and then one that could

effectively shift the tide of climate change. It then follows the logic of the extractive worldview by promoting self-interested solutions to a problem that is only exacerbated by capitalism. The fact that *Eating Our Way to Extinction* acknowledges that Indigenous peoples are more adept at living in an ecologically harmonious way, then fails to critically engage with any Indigenous-led climate solutions is where the documentary falls flat.

While *Eating Our Way to Extinction* exists as a valuable resource to rebuke fallacies about the ecological impacts of industrial animal agriculture, it is a double-edged sword. For every what-about-ism that the documentary addresses, it leaves another open for scrutiny. Some of these holes are so paramount that they put the film's authority in jeopardy. Vegans remain a socially contentious group, and I fear that audiences who have a critical awareness of racial, disability, and economic injustice will have an easy time writing off both this film and, I fear, veganism at large. At its heart, *Eating Our Way to Extinction* relies on the Western colonial logics of individualism and capitalism that undercut the social justice demands of veganism. *Eating Our Way to Extinction* is correct to conclude that humans need to shift to plant-based diets on a large scale, and it argues this effectively for a YouTube documentary. But if humans are to truly turn the tide on mass extinction, we also need to look deeper into ourselves and our communities. A documentary born of capitalist hyper-consumption does not have the capacity to invite its audiences to transform their relationships with plants, other animals, and the rest of our kin. Plant-based diets will not save Earth, but taking up our responsibilities to those who share their planet with us – including political commitments to the tenets of veganism – might.

Note

[1] Who is 'us'? That's for you to figure out.

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