

## **Food's cultural geographies: texture, creativity & publics.**

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### **Introduction**

It's February 2012. You're going to the AAG annual conference in New York in a couple of weeks time. You want to find out first hand about the latest research on food geographies. Maybe you're brushing up an undergraduate module in which food plays a major part. Maybe you're in the early stages of putting together a research proposal with food at its heart. You know that food is more than just an area of geographical inquiry. It offers rich, tangible entryways into almost any issue in which you might be interested. You're on the conference website, searching for food sessions and for papers with food as a keyword. The result? 50 sessions and 187 papers. You're spoilt for choice. There's so much going on. The Chicago AAG conference six years earlier had had only 6 food sessions and 44 food papers. That was much easier to manage. Recent years, it seems fair to say, have witnessed an explosion in geographical research on food.

This chapter is about emerging cultural geographies of food. It has 11 authors. We all work on food. Most of us are geographers. Some of us call ourselves cultural geographers. This chapter is the result of a collaborative blog-to-paper process that, last time, led to an experimental, fragmented, dialogic text (Cook *et al* 2011).<sup>ii</sup> This is a more straightforward, single-voiced, text. It's based on two characterisations of cultural geography written by Phil Crang (2010) and John Wylie (2010) to mark the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the publication of Peter Jackson's (1989) *Maps of meaning*. Their papers sparked and orientated our online discussions. Neither, however, discussed, or even mentioned, food. That was fine. What was fascinating to us were the ways in which they described the vast, interconnected and fragmentary field of contemporary cultural geography as sharing certain vitalities, orientations, sensibilities, styles of thought, and practices. These included a "stress ... on the affective, emotive and praxis-based aspects of life" (Wylie 2010: 213); a "desire for different types of writing, methods, formats and 'outputs'" (*ibid.*); a working through of the "tension between the significant and the insignificant, the small and the mighty, the trivial and the momentous" (Crang 2010: 195); and an interest in developing the kinds of "creative writing, ... photography and video, ... site-specific art, etc" that could help to improve "the relatively low profile of the [wider] discipline" (Wylie 2010: 213).

We recognised all of these from the work that we know and do. Food has become an important medium for exploring new practices, methods, outputs and textures of a more praxis-based

geography. Food is often researched precisely because it can help to vividly animate tensions between the small and intimate realms of embodiment, domesticity and “ordinary affect” (Stewart 2007), and the more sweeping terrain of global political economy, sustainability, and the vitality of “nature”. Food’s cultural geographies, like cultural geography more broadly, can be “best characterized by powerful senses of texture, creativity and public engagement” (Crang 2010, p.197). This is what we hope to illustrate, add to, rework, and reflect upon below.

### **i) Texture**

Perhaps the most common starting point in any ‘geographies of food’ discussion is that fact that food, like other commodities, links consumers with unknown and distant others, creating connections “from farm to fork” (Jackson *et al*, 2006) and “between field and plate” (Stassart & Whatmore, 2003). Looking at how food becomes displaced, circulated and performed in different sites, this work focuses on the ways in which the production, marketing and storying of food products is folded into consumer behavior in complex, and often surprising, ways. However, this work could be, and is becoming, more attuned to physicality, the senses, embodiment, affect and materiality: what Crang (2010) calls ‘texture’. First, this is because the location of “field” and “fork” is being questioned. Practices of transforming things into food – such as harvesting, transportation, retail, marketing and cooking – apprehend the body of the eater in a reciprocal exchange which makes a linear conception of those transformations problematic (Roe, 2006). The field is on the plate just as much as the plate is in the field. Second, this is because mapping these transformations has chiefly involved tracing out and following chains that, somewhat surprisingly, end abruptly before the food is ingested (e.g. Cook *et al*, 2004). Thus, recent work has suggested a need to suspend the conceptual boundaries that separate food from the eating body (Abrahamsson & Simpson, 2011), and to pay attention to the physicalities and materialities of food and the ways in which these connect with bodies through eating, or otherwise physically engaging, with food (Mol, 2008).

One mode through which food geographies may attend to these physicalities is by focusing on the feelings that food-body relationships produce. There is a growing recognition of ‘hidden geographies’ undergirding the food system, where ‘food links up with ideas, memories, sounds, visions, beliefs, past experiences, moods [and] worries, all of which combine to become material – to become bodily, physical sensations’ (Cook *et al* 2011: 113). Paying attention to such visceral feelings (Hayes-Conroy and Martin 2010), allows geographers to broaden the task of ‘following food,’ by paying attention to what food does to bodies upon being tasted and ingested or, otherwise smelled, heard, seen, or touched (as in Mann *et al*, 2011). Such a venture into the body is accomplished along a different course to, and with different goals than, nutrition or medical science versions of ‘following’ food in the body. The objectives can be diverse, but center on feelings as significant drivers of food-relevant cultural behavior and cultural (re)production. Here, both bodies and food are recognised as social agents, or at least as possessing ‘agentic’ qualities. Allison Hayes-Conroy and Jessica Hayes-Conroy (2010) argue, for example, that “the body” is not a holistic container that passively awaits food, but rather actively engages with ingested stuff, in different, sometimes surprising ways. Thus, just as there are complex geographies of, for instance, the transportation of food, there are equally complex,

and often hidden, geographies of the eating body. These are not necessarily pre-discursive or unarticulated but, rather, are acted upon and worked with in certain practices. In other words, while there may be patterns and tendencies to food-body relationships, we can mold our bodies to feel food or to respond to various kinds of food in new and different ways.

In her recent work on the political ecology of things, Jane Bennett (2007) argues against the anthropocentrism of commodity chain analysis. The study of food primarily as a resource for human consumption, she argues, fails to engage seriously with food's 'agentic capacities' as vital matter. Attention needs to be paid both to the physical capacities of food itself and to the ways in which these intersect with practices of production, consumption, aesthetics, and morality. These ideas are perhaps best illustrated by recent work on the art and science of cheese-making, where protein bundles, fatty acids and metabolic enzymes all contribute to the lively materiality of the finished product. In Heather Paxson's (2011) work, for example, the process of artisan cheese-making is understood as involving a balance of aesthetic creativity and intuition combined with accurate measurement, meticulous record-keeping and scrupulous hygiene. It is a process that brings together cross-sensory apprehension (of taste, smell and touch) with reasoned analysis, combining 'quasi-mystical' elements with an acknowledgement of market-based tastes and commercial calculation. Other apparent dichotomies are challenged in Annemarie Mol's (2009) recent work on consumer-citizens. Exploring how contemporary food advertising depicts the pleasures of health and fairness, Mol argues that we should not oppose pleasure-seeking consumers with socially-responsible citizens. Instead, we should search for alternative models of the consumer-citizen that bring together the expression of 'private' pleasures and public goods: 'healthy and yummy', 'fair and delicious'.

In addition to research that attends to a diversity of feelings at the point of ingestion, there is also fascinating work that attends to one type of feeling (codified as an emotional category) *across* a commodity chain. Benson and Fischer's (2007) work, for example, focuses on desire — explicitly as a described emotion and implicitly as a bodily feeling — which guides (and connects!) distinct practices of broccoli production and consumption, and works both for and against the "hegemonic constellations" of the global food trade (800). Such work invites us to consider how food exists within a complex and contradictory cultural politics in which the often 'hidden' domain of feeling acts as a central driver of both business-as-usual and the possibility of a different and better system. For a cultural geography of food, paying attention to such an embodied cultural politics, could offer a way to maintain a critical edge and remain relevant to today's diverse and growing struggles over the politics of food. Indeed, while some have sensibly worried that a focus on feeling/affect or mundane/other-than-representational might take us further from a critically oriented cultural politics of food and bodies (e.g. Crang 2010, Jacobs & Nash 2003), thinking through desire (or other named feelings) could indicate a way to merge seemingly disparate calls to attend, on the one hand, to the sensibilities of the everyday, non-representational or affective realm (perhaps the realm of unintentional performance) and, on the other, to the representational realm in which intentional performativity allows for planned and collective forms of (cultural political) resistance. The ways in which Benson and Fischer (2007) think through desire clearly shows the stitching of relations between the "seemingly insignificant ... and the seemingly significant" (Crang, 2010: 194) in the food industry, bringing together the

affective and cognitive realms through acts of physical engagement with the textures of food. But, it's also important to also ask how Mol's (2009) appreciations of consumer-citizenry, and the Hayes-Conroys' (2008, 2010) arguments about visceral politics, can be drawn into food-based projects intended to study and motivate progressive eco-social action. How can the provision of sensory/bodily experiences of food encourage the connection of political *ideas* and bodily *feelings*. As Rachel Slocum (2011: 318) has recently argued, this requires an acknowledgement of both the "radical particularity" of food experiences and the ways in which power and social divisions materially impact people's bodily relations with food.

## ii) Creativity

The texture of food and its precarious position between sustenance and garbage make it a powerful creative medium (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1999, 2007), both in the (un)intentional domestic food practices mentioned above and in the work of chefs and artists. Cultural geographers of food have begun to pay attention to a range of everyday and specialist creative food practice which bring together and experiment with foods' materialities, agentic capacities and visceral politics. We want to begin our discussion of such creative food geographies in the worlds of celebrity chefs, their restaurants, cookbooks and re-creations of (inter)national culinary traditions (see Bardhi *et al* 2010, Lindenfield 2007). This is where emphases on the artistic aspect of cooking as a performance of culinary culture are perhaps most commonly found. Chefs' work operates across materials, people and money, including flows of representations, advertising and commodity networks. Chefs often work in/on the various kinds of relations and distances between the origins of different kinds of 'ethnic' foods and the locations where they prepare and serve food. This affects not only the aesthetic presentation of meals but also the entire style or philosophy of creating a space for serving food to customers. Often, chefs have to represent whole nations, populations and cultures by their culinary art and skills (Cook *et al* 2008). Shoko Imai (2010), for example, discusses the work of Nobuyuki Matsuhisa, a Japanese chef running more than twenty restaurants worldwide, who has created his own "Nobu-style" Japanese food using the essence of Latin American flavors. Matsuhisa worked in many places and countries and established his own way of cooking by negotiating and interacting with his customers, adapting his techniques and knowledge accordingly, and using ingredients obtained locally and from long distances. Imai (2010) argues that he and his "Nobu-style" food perform this story, allowing him to express himself and make himself distinguished, to establish his own brand, and to support its 'authenticity' (see Cook *et al* 2000).

These professional forms of culinary creativity can feed into popular food culture via TV shows, cookbooks, chef-branded foods and equipment, and 'eating out' experiences. They feed into less overtly creative practices of food consumption in the domestic settings, mundane practices and routinised behaviour of everyday life where 'feeding the family' is often the priority (though see Finch 2007). Recent work has emphasised the significance of family practices, examining the dynamic processes through which families are created and reproduced, revealing the multiple ways of 'doing family' in contemporary social life (see Jackson 2009 for a review). Here, paying attention to the textures of food and the interface between the rational and non-cognitive allows for a greater understanding of the subtleties and vagaries that inform choices about shopping,

cooking, eating and waste disposal. Awareness of the non-cognitive effects of dealings with food and its technologies acknowledges that these can shape ideas and actions (Crouch, 2003). Food is performed through many everyday acts which highlight the materialities of what we eat and the social and economic networks shaping and informing our food choices. These kinds of everyday, creative food practices have provided the raw materials for performance art which taps into a long feminist tradition exploring our gendered relationships with food. Bobby Baker's performances, for example, bring together slices of beef, flour, treacle, other foodstuffs, and her own body and experiences – on stage, and in 'real' domestic spaces like her own kitchen – to celebrate and protest against women's (her) 'daily life' (Aston 2000). Caroline Smith, in contrast, dresses as Mertle - a 1950s housewife modeled on celebrity chef Elizabeth Craig – encourages strangers to confess their eating habits, peculiarities, and secrets in one-to-one sessions, and then draws on these confessions in an on-stage monologue which shows how food is less a fuel for our bodies and more a reflection of our anxieties and desires (Groskop 2009: np). Both Baker and Smith work with food memories, emotions, narratives and food itself to create with their audiences visceral, bitter-sweet appreciations of its central role in – primarily women's – everyday lives.

These staged performances are the tip of an iceberg when it comes to artists' engagements with food, its materialities, visceral politics and geographies. As the 2010 'Uneven Geographies' art exhibition in Nottingham vividly illustrated, for example, works of art can help to make "the obscure and labyrinthine causalities of globalisation more visible and legible, and its human consequences more proximate and affective" than is possible via traditional forms of academic writing (Farquharson 2010: 4). No food-based work was included in the exhibition but, we argue, the work of artists Shelley Sacks, Lonnie Van Brummelen and Siebren De Haan, and Kate Rich clearly fits its remit. Sacks' social sculpture 'Exchange values: images of invisible lives', for example, used the dried, cured and stitched skins from 20 boxes of St Lucian bananas – and the recorded voices of their growers telling visitors about their lives and work – to create a social-sculptural 'space for imagination' that was intended to provoke discussion about hidden relations between producers and consumers in contemporary capitalism (see Cook *et al* 2001 for a detailed description). Van Brummelen and De Haan's (2007) film / publication / installation 'Monument of Sugar', was made from cheap subsidized European beet sugar that they purchased in Nigeria (where it undermines the growth of sugar cane), packed and shipped back to Europe "to turn the flow around": this was a sugar import that was only legally permissible because it was a 'work of art'. Finally, 'artist-grocer' Rich's 'Feral Trade' project is made out of social networks through which she encourages in-person commodity chains through which small batches of coffee, sweets, cola and other foods are imported direct from their producers, with each set of transactions, travels, handovers and import documentation logged on her [feraltrade.org](http://feraltrade.org) website. In each case, carefully chosen foods became key artist materials, their physical qualities, malleability, legal status, and agentic and visceral capacities helping both to shape the work and the ways in which it could generate affective appreciations of the complexities of trade.

This brings us to the final point we want to make about creativity and the cultural geographies of food: the potential for cultural geographers to put into creative practice our appreciations of

food's textural qualities; to work with, like and/or as 'artists'; and to gain academic and popular recognition for the work that this produces (Wylie 2010, Crang 2010, Cook & Tolia-Kelly 2010, Regine 2011). What is encouraging are the ways in which the academic concerns we have outlined intersect with recent creative food work involving psychogeography, mobile locative art, and expanded dramaturgy. Take, for example, the (2007-2010) 'Urbanibilism' project, based in Amsterdam and working in explicitly geographical way with edibles in cities. A 2010 workshop was framed as an experiment in performance art, and had an immediate geographical appeal as it cast the "stomach as compass is an expedition and convivium that orientates by eating, or eats to orientate" (Mass & Pasquinelli 2010: np). This situated itself between food strategies during war time (and in times of scarcity) and an expected food shortage in the future. For the participants, it highlighted the many edibles that exist in our immediate environment. Urbanibilism's artists also developed an android app called boskoi with which foragers could map – perform – the city as an edible space, allowing them to add information on where one can find wild apples, rose hip, nuts, fungi, etc. There are lots of similar initiatives – urban and guerrilla gardening, dumpster diving, etc. – being taken in many urban environments, and not necessarily by artists working on food but, rather, by groups of people with different concerns (political, economic, social, environmental) who want to perform cities as edible spaces. Displacing the notion of performance from "art" to performance as "doing", "enacting" or "practicing", this emphasis on performance with respect to food speaks to the ways in which things are done, practiced, lived, as food. Geographers, performers, artists, audiences, and publics seem now to be coming together in new ways, potentially extending the creative edges of food geographies into more engaged and engaging contexts. Under these circumstances, the question for us is what can cultural geography (or social theory more generally) bring into creative practice that is distinctive, research-based, historically-informed, and maybe even transformative?

### **iii) Publics**

These creative engagements with the textures of food have the potential to generate new conceptions of the political, new ethical engagements with agri-food systems, and new forms of activism. They have the potential to show that *public* cultural geographies can do more than increase public understandings of Geography as a discipline (Wylie 2010) and/or to engage publics in academic research through collaborating with museums, broadcasters and other public institutions (Crang 2010: see Fuller 2008, Fuller & Askins 2010 for reviews). We are excited by the prospect of geographers working with publics not only like/as artists, but also like/as activists. Therefore, in this final section, we concentrate on work by cultural and other geographers who have explicitly aimed to appreciate, critique, perform and transform diverse public geographies of food.

Let us start with the sweeping terrain of the 'global food crisis'. Recent food price spikes and related concerns about the sustainability of food systems have led to the re-emergence in international policy contexts of a discourse on 'food security' (MacMillan & Dowler 2011; Mooney & Hunt 2009; McDonald 2010). Food geographers have begun to respond to these concerns by cultivating new scripts for the 'drama of food' (Belasco 2008), critiquing dominant

public policy discourses through highlighting the spatial contradictions and tensions inherent in food-society relations and politics. David Nally (2011) shows, for example, how food security is constructed from a narrow neoliberal viewpoint, which he terms ‘a neoliberal truth regime’ (49). This presents global markets, agrarian biotechnologies and multi-national corporate initiatives as the ‘structural preconditions’ to alleviate hunger. Nally (2011) highlights the interdependency between abundance and scarcity and the way that the modern food regime relies on over-production in some places and under-production in others. Lucy Jarosz (2011) also shows how scaled definitions of food security have been used to serve neoliberal ideology, linking individuals to global modalities of governance that emphasise the instrumentality of agricultural productivity in development strategies.

As Jarosz, Nally and others powerfully show, geographers have important roles to play in public debates about food security. Their work reveals how scale can be used to justify political actions and support ideological objectives on the grounds of ‘moral responsibility’. It challenges claims that suggest food chain resilience can be best achieved via market liberalization and risk management. The challenge now for food geographers is how to make these new food scripts *more* ‘public’ – i.e. how to find ways to enter and inform public debate. To date geographical critiques challenging neoliberal discourse of food security have not really entered public debate. They exist instead alongside a ‘public world’ championed more by social movements (e.g. La Via Campesina) and NGOs (e.g. Oxfam) that explicitly challenge and espouse alternative food security visions, advocating, for instance, food sovereignty, food rights and agro-ecological approaches over market solutions. Some ‘public food scholars’ are influential in these debates. Raj Patel [<http://rajpatel.org/>], a writer, activist and academic, is notable here, often using blogs and other social networking platforms to communicate ideas and challenge convention. Food security thus symbolizes one ‘at large’ debate where geographers can creatively collaborate in future with social and political organizations, journalists and activists to inform public discourse.

In recent years, critiques of global agribusiness have proliferated in the new media ecology of web 2.0. More critiques are now more widely accessible than ever before. Researchers can quickly gain a sense of the reactions that they provoke. And an explosion of user-generated content has, to a significant extent, democratized debate (see Graham & Haarstad 2011). These critiques have pressured corporations to develop more ethical trading practices, and generated new kinds of ‘affective pull’ to engage wider publics in food justice campaigns. Seeds of their activist potential can be traced to the early 2000s, when researchers found UK food industry interviewees admitting that a relentless stream of media exposés of poor pay and working conditions had been “‘the driving force’ behind the adoption of ethical trade standards by supermarkets” (Friedberg 2004: 516; Hughes 2004). Exposés continue to be produced, but their critics have argued that by repeatedly “showing how crappy and messed up our world is, how exploitative and degenerative its ruling class, [and] how grotesque its economic system” (Merrifield 2009: 382) they produce a disempowering fatalism among both activists and potentially concerned consumers. New forms of cultural activism have since emerged that aim both to shame corporations into action, and to imaginatively engage consumers in trade justice activism in visceral, affective, playful ways (Cook & Woodyer 2012).

Many examples of food-based cultural activism are showcased in the grocery department of Ian Cook *et al's* [followthethings.com](http://followthethings.com), a “complex and elaborately composed research centre” designed to resemble an online store (Kneip 2009: 177). Click its bag of ‘Mixed nuts’, for example, and you can watch and read about a short, animated film called “The luckiest nut in the world” and read about the children left humming a song performed by an animated, guitar-playing American peanut about the WTO’s role in the unfair international nut trade (Cook 2011). Click its oven-ready chicken and you can find and read about a TV series documenting the efforts of a celebrity chef to convert low income consumers and big UK supermarkets to both the taste and ethics of organically-raised chickens (Beattie et al 2011). Both pages document these example’s impacts on viewers, corporations and/or food policy, and the effects of both their subversive deployment of TV genres (e.g. eccentric kids’ cartoons and reality TV) *and* their subsequent deployment in NGOs’ trade justice and animal welfare campaigns. [followthethings.com](http://followthethings.com) is one of a number of experiments that draw upon the public, collaborative potentials of web 2.0 to both document and encourage new forms of commodity activism for progressive eco-social change.<sup>iii</sup>

These arguments point us towards a final body of research that adopts an explicitly performative understandings of ‘diverse economic’ relations in which field researchers recognise and take responsibility for “their constitutive role in the worlds that exist, and their power to [help] bring new worlds into being” (Gibson-Graham 2008: 614; Cameron 2011). This literature is critical of both realist understandings of research as truth-finding, and of theoretical understandings of Capitalism as a single monolithic system. It argues that what we might call ‘alternative economic geographies’ are not an alternative to this monolithic system, but are internal to it, fracture it, exist in abundance, can be researched and made public and, as such, can inspire and show others how to bring new diverse economic worlds into being. It employs theory less to confirm what we already know about domination and oppression, and more to “help us see openings, to provide a space of freedom and possibility” in an approach “that welcomes surprise, tolerates coexistence, and cares for the new” (J-K Gibson-Graham 2008: 619). And, it bypasses the individualized consumer at the centre of so much research and policy, to concentrate on the ‘we’ of community members and their/our collective necessities and responsibilities (DeLind 2011, Hill 2011).

Within this body of work, considerable efforts have been made to research and make public ‘possible food economies’ outside of agribusiness-driven production-consumption relations, economies that are cultivated through ethical concerns over how to survive well with others and how to generate and re-distribute social surplus (Holloway et al 2007; Gibson-Graham et al forthcoming). It has also begun to draw on a hybrid research collective (HRC) approach in which the researcher identifies as but one actant in the research process working with other actants to bring about transformative change (Gibson-Graham and Roelvink 2009; Roelvink 2008). As Hill (forthcoming) demonstrates in her research on communal gardening projects in the Philippines, for example, HRC actants may include community or lay-researchers, YouTube films, songs, web-based training tools, gardens, community groups and whatever gathers around particular concerns such as malnutrition or broadening the economy. There is much more we could say here. But, if we want to make a positive difference in the world, what this body of research suggests is that understandings of texture, creativity and activism are not only what we should

take into our research fields to enliven our work. They are also what we should look for when choosing what to study in the first place.

## Conclusions

You're back in front of that computer now. The results from your online search of that AAG conference programme are still on screen. There are 187 papers on food geographies. You've read this paper now. It's not an attempt at a comprehensive review of that work. That too big a task. What it has tried to do is to tie together a field of food-cultural-geographies that aims, in itself, to be both orienting and generative of new work for its readers. We cannot avoid Lévi-Strauss's now seeming cliché that 'food is good to think with'. We find that it is particularly good at helping us to advance, and make diverse connections within, cultural geography's more-than-materialist musings. It is particularly good, for example, at helping us to think sensitivity through non-dualistic approaches/language for describing the world - e.g. bio-social, more-than-representational, minded bodies, visceral politics – helping us to dissolve oppositions like public/private, internal/external and artistic/intellectual. We hope that this chapter has vividly conveyed this in a number of ways.

Doubtless the explosion of academic interest in food geographies is a mirror to the explosion of public interest in, and public discourse about, all kinds of food matters. We believe that the kinds of cultural geographies outlined above can play a key role in helping these public debates to not be boxed into the ways of thinking about food and the food-body relationships that are dictated by the dominant industrial food system, its corporations and government allies. We do have to be cautious, however. When discussing the activist potential of such work, we have to ask how genuinely 'transformative' it can be and if and how it can have more than local and transitory impacts and contribute to wider and longer lasting social movements. We know that we have to better understand the ways in which its appreciations of materiality and affect might (re)connect in meaningful ways with the wider inequalities and injustices of the current agri-food system (what is called 'scaling up' and 'scaling out' in the language of alternative food networks). But we also think that we need to continue discussing these issues, to involve more people in these discussions, and to widen these debates. Performative methods and the new media ecology of web 2.0 can help us to do this, and this chapter can play its part in this process. Each section has been copied onto a separate page on the blog that we used to write it. Each page can be commented on. So, let's keep the conversation going there, at [foodculturalgeographies.wordpress.com](http://foodculturalgeographies.wordpress.com).

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<sup>ii</sup> The discussions on which this chapter is based can be found at <http://foodculturalgeographies.wordpress.com>.

<sup>iii</sup> See, for example, [sourcemap.com](http://sourcemap.com) and [wikichains.com](http://wikichains.com).