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# Having It His Way

## *The Construction of Masculinity in Fast-Food TV Advertising*

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An attractive twenty-something guy buying organic tofu and produce at a grocery checkout counter looks sheepishly at the man behind him who is buying about half a pig's worth of ribs. The healthy shopper's masculinity is in question when he looks over his choice of wimpy health food. Not to worry. Help is on the way when he spies a Hummer ad in the magazine rack. It is clear what he must do in order to restore his manhood; he leaves the produce and buys the SUV.

Why does this humorous Hummer TV advertisement about meat and masculinity make sense to American viewers? Clearly, advertisers trust we believe that a traditional American male does not eat organic, plant-based proteins — he primarily eats meat, which would also explain the prominence of masculine themes in advertisements for meat products, like burgers and subs.

Anthropologists have documented the historical connection between males and domination of nature and other animals, such as evidenced by humans' traditional role as animal hunters.<sup>1</sup> These historical relations contribute to food remaining a highly gendered cultural object in America today, particularly the gendering of meat as masculine food. Even though most women also eat meat, females are more closely associated with cultivation and consumption of plant-based foods, whereas males are more heavily associated with the killing, grilling, and consuming of animals.<sup>2</sup>

*Ecofeminism* has critiqued this patriarchal domination of animals and nature as being linked to sexist oppression of women, contributing to a larger

environmental and animal rights discourse that seeks to reduce humanity's role in the destruction of other species. Yet, despite these critiques, the masculine identity of man as defined by meat-eating is still celebrated by media in the twenty-first century, particularly in fast-food advertisements. To examine how this identity is often reinforced instead of challenged in American culture, this study conducts a semiotic analysis of representations of masculinity in a small selection of television advertisements for various fast-food restaurants in 2006–2007.

Advertising doesn't just sell things, it articulates values and builds meaning, sometimes through constructing stereotypes that simplify a complex trait such as gender.<sup>3</sup> If largely unchallenged, these carefully cultivated constructions of gender become normalized as a "regime of truth" in the American popular imagination. This analysis of American television fast-food advertising critically explores the techniques used by advertisers to exploit and perpetuate a perceived connection between masculinity and meat. We unpack the connotative messages within these commercials in order to read what they tell us about masculine identity and values in America. As we evaluate what this means for society in the twenty-first century, our analysis is influenced by our roles as feminists, vegetarians, and environmentalists. Thus, we argue that the heteronormative, sex-role stereotypes promoted in fast-food commercials are as unhealthy as the fast food itself.

To begin, we contextualize social problems surrounding the promotion of both masculinity and meat by expanding on: man's anthropological association with meat, ecofeminist perspectives on patriarchy and meat, issues with the fast-food and meat industries, and the construction of masculinity in advertising.

### *Human Anthropological Connections with Eating Meat*

In *An Unnatural Order*, Mason explains that the human practices of killing and eating animals are "virtual sacraments in our culture" because many theories have promoted the belief that humans have been natural hunters throughout our entire evolution.<sup>4</sup> But new evidence suggests that, for millions of years of evolution, we humans were largely vegetarian.<sup>5</sup> Organized hunting of large animals, primarily by men, did not begin until approximately 20,000 years ago. Multiple anthropologists theorize that men created rituals around hunting, most of which excluded women, to gain status for themselves, as previously women had been the more revered sex for their roles as food-gatherers and procreators. As the primary foragers, women likely invented plant agriculture, which accounts for women's association with plant food as well as their importance in early agrarian societies, where many gods were female.

The domestication of animals about 11,000 years ago created a transition for many human societies to a more sedentary, agricultural way of life that included surpluses and a division of wealth. In order to protect this wealth, patriarchal warrior cultures developed, creating oppressive systems of control labor such as slavery and imperialism. Herdsmen of larger, fast-moving animals like cows had to be most warlike herders, which accounts for the later masculine mystique around cowboys and beef. According to Mason, while forager societies often viewed other animals with wonder, respect, and partnership, herder/agrarian societies disempowered animals in order to control and demystify them.<sup>6</sup> Thus, many human groups came to view domesticated animals as commodities and wild animals as competition and pests. Religion was often used to justify this newfound domination over nature.

In the book *Beyond Beef*, Rifkin traces the connection between meat, masculinity, and religion to ancient Egypt, where the first universal religion was bull worship, based on the bull god, Apis, who represented strength, virility and a masculine passion for war and subjugation. To mark the year's end, the Apis bull would be ritually sacrificed and fed to the king so he could incorporate the bull's fierce strength and power. More recently, in American culture, cowboys tamed the "Wild West" (and all its inhabitants), reducing millions of acres to a vast cattle grazing area, forever associating red meat with this supposedly brave and tough category of American men. Meat is further linked to masculinity by its historic association with war and male aggression, as in the practice of reserving meat for warriors.<sup>7</sup> In fact, the Vedic word for "war" means "desire for cows," and the Sanskrit word for "battle," *gavisti*, means "desire for cattle."

### *Ecofeminist Perspectives on Meat and Patriarchy*

In *The Sexual Politics of Meat*, Adams promotes an ecofeminist-vegetarian theory, asserting that "women and animals are similarly positioned in a patriarchal world, as objects rather than subjects,"<sup>8</sup> both enduring a "cycle of objectification, fragmentation, and consumption."<sup>9</sup> This actuality is reinforced through media images where men "consume" women and other animals like pieces of meat. She concludes that "eating animals acts as a mirror and representation of patriarchal values. Meat-eating is the reinscription of male power at every meal."<sup>10</sup>

Adams highlights men's historical role in hunting animals and its perceived high social value in many cultures. "Meat was a valuable economic commodity; those who controlled this commodity achieved power."<sup>11</sup> Sanday found that when economies relied on plant food women held more status, and the society tended to be egalitarian, while meat-based cultures were more

patriarchal.<sup>12</sup> Leakey and Lewin similarly found “women’s social standing is roughly equal to men’s only when society itself is not formalized around roles for distributing meat.”<sup>13</sup>

Because of this history of men as meat-eaters, the men of today who eschew meat often face the stigmatization of being labeled effeminate. Adams cites nutritionist Jean Mayer, who believes that in modern society “the more men sit at their desks all day, the more they want to be reassured about their maleness in eating those large slabs of bleeding meat which are the last symbols of machismo.”<sup>14</sup>

There is a gendered dichotomy in America’s association with certain types of food for men versus women. Adams describes this dichotomy:

Meat is king; this noun describing meat is a noun denoting male power. Vegetables ... have become as associated with women as meat is with men, recalling on a subconscious level the days of Woman the Gatherer. Since women have been made subsidiary in a male-dominated, meat-eating world, so has our food.<sup>15</sup>

Furthermore, nutritional scientist Sobal found this gendering of food persists in modern marriages, “men and women ‘do gender’ by consuming gender appropriate foods. Men emphasize meat.”<sup>16</sup>

### *Issues with the Meat and Fast-Food Industries*

Popular media such as *Fast Food Nation* and *Super Size Me* call attention to problems with the fast-food industry, such as low pay for workers, marketing to children, and unhealthy, and sometimes unsafe, food.<sup>17</sup> Many of their menu items are low in fiber and high in fat, sodium, cholesterol and simple carbohydrates, which can contribute to obesity and disease, especially when consumed in the extra-large portion sizes that are common.<sup>18</sup> Also, fast-food companies are the chief financial supporter of the meat industry, a problematic industry which is associated with labor exploitation (especially of immigrants),<sup>19</sup> mass animal cruelty and death,<sup>20</sup> and environmental destruction, including being a leading cause of global warming.<sup>21</sup> In addition, people who consume large amounts of animal products, and less whole grains and produce, may be at increased risk of contracting diseases like cancer, heart disease, and diabetes, as animal products are devoid of fiber yet contain cholesterol and saturated fat.<sup>22</sup> This is why the American Dietetic Association (ADA) suggests a plant-based diet prevents disease.

But since only 2.5 percent of Americans claim to be vegetarian, the average American is consuming meat, approximately 211 pounds of animal flesh a year, half of which is red meat.<sup>23</sup> While census data on meat consumption are not segmented by gender, at least one study proves the common belief

that men tend to eat more meat than women.<sup>24</sup> Also, physician Emily Senay contends that despite the health risks red meat remains a staple of the masculine diet: “If they had their druthers, many men would eat a big steak and a baked potato every night for dinner.”<sup>25</sup>

### *Constructions of Masculinity in Advertising*

Script theory helps explain manly characters in media stories.<sup>26</sup> The “macho personality constellation” is comprised of three behavioral dispositions: entitlement to callous sex, propensity toward violence, and danger as exciting. When it comes to advertising specifically, research conducted in the 1970s, which has yet to be rebuked, described the basic aspects and attributes of men.<sup>27</sup> In relation to women, men are shown as more autonomous, employed in more occupations, used more often than women as voices of authority in voice-overs, and more often located in the public sphere (offices and outdoors).

Katz claims that today’s advertisers are challenged to maintain historical heteronormative gender differences in a more progressive era “characterized by a loosening of rigid gender distinctions,” so advertising masculinity must be constructed in direct opposition to femininity.<sup>28</sup> One way modern advertisers accomplish this is to “equate masculinity with violence, power, and control (and femininity with passivity).”<sup>29</sup>

Beer advertising is one genre that clearly demonstrates heteronormative male behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs. Strate’s study of beer commercials found men seek acceptance among their male peers and use beer as a reward that “functions as a symbol of initiation and group membership.”<sup>30</sup> Generally, men monopolize activity in beer commercials, although occasionally women enter the story, typically as decorative objects or as the symbolic “other woman.”

The marketing of meat also often relies on gender. As there is a dearth of literature specifically addressing meat and masculinity in advertising, Adams’ *Pornography of Meat* stands out. Her analysis shows how animals are feminized and women are animalized and both are often sexualized, to their ultimate detriment. The provocative title is an accusation that the dominant perspective of our advertising culture is the “pleasurable consumption of consumable beings,” where Adams explains “how someone becomes a piece of meat.”<sup>31</sup> She claims male dominance over women and all other animals virtually “disappears as a privilege and is experienced as ‘desire,’ as ‘appetite,’ as ‘pleasure.’”<sup>32</sup>

### **Meating Men**

To examine meat’s association with masculinity in male-targeted fast-food television advertisements, we conducted an interpretive textual analysis

of approximately 17 ads, using Hall's theory of representation and Barthes' method of semiotic analysis. In selecting texts, we sought fast-food television commercials that appeared to be targeted to males. The following types of codes indicated a male focus: men had the lead parts and did most of the talking, women were used primarily as objects of the male gaze, men hung out with other men and outnumbered women, and/or the narrator mentioned men specifically. In addition, while we cannot prove that other fast-food ads do not associate meat with *femininity*, a rudimentary perusal of most fast-food ads fails to suggest that the industry is constructing an association between meat and women as specifically and frequently as it is between meat and men.

We included ads from Burger King, Carl's Jr., Jack in the Box, Arby's, Quizno's, and Subway. Marketing experts confirm the Burger King and Carl's Jr. campaigns are specifically targeted toward young men.<sup>33</sup> We initially included Subway's 2006 diet campaign with Jared as a counterexample of a more positive and less hypermasculinized approach than that used by Carl's Jr. or Burger King; however, in 2007, even Subway began to exemplify masculinity by using athletes to emphasize the meatiness of its subs.

To analyze the texts, we watched the advertisements multiple times while taking detailed notes. We then analyzed each according to common semiotic signifier including: location, music, slogans, narration, colors, gender roles, gender relations, demographics, bodily appearance, power level by gender, violent acts, food types and descriptions, relationship between food and gender, and values. Taking all the ads into consideration, we looked for themes, patterns, and anomalies across all these signifying elements.

The following are brief descriptions of the ads we included in our analysis, all of which appeared on television in the Pacific Northwest in 2006 and early 2007.

### Burger King (slogan "Have It Your Way")

BK Manthem (Texas Double Whopper)—A man inspires a crowd of men to march in the streets to reclaim their right to eat meat instead of "chick food." The narrative follows an over-the-top, male-themed remake of Helen Reddy's feminist song, "I Am Woman Hear me Roar." Tagline "Eat like a man, man."

BK Stacker Construction (Double, Triple or Quadruple "Stacker" Burgers)—A boss on a mock burger construction site angrily instructs another worker, both played by little people, not to include any veggies on the stacker, as it only contains meat and cheese. He sexually harasses a full-size female employee who flicks him into a bulldozer. Tagline "Stack it high, tough guy."

Hootie Country Song (Tender Crisp Bacon Cheddar Ranch)—The lead

singer from the rock group Hootie and the Blowfish sings a country song about a male fantasy land set around the sandwich. It is located on a colorful, theatrical, Western-themed set with cheerful cowboys and sexualized cowgirls—including Dallas Cowboy Cheerleaders.

Whopper Senior and Junior—A series of humorous commercials where a dad, wearing a large whopper costume, tries to teach life lessons to his rebellious teenage son, wearing the whopper junior costume. It is set in the home with female relatives playing non-burger background characters. Tagline "Whopper Jr. for a buck."

### Carl's Jr

Wings (Buffalo Chicken Sandwich)—A young man chomping on chicken wings stares at a voluptuous, flirty, blond waitress. Then we see his girlfriend giving him a reproachful look, as he innocently asks "What?" The announcer tells us it is more fun to eat wings when out with the guys.

Series of at least four commercials featuring a young woman acting seductively while eating a juicy burger. 1. Paris Hilton wears a leather bathing suit while washing a luxury car, 2. Woman rides a mechanical bull in a warehouse, 3. Woman models lingerie, and 4. Woman in an office almost drips sauce on her white suit while her male coworkers watch from afar. The latter is the only ad in this series in which men appear. None of the women have speaking roles, as male narrators inform us about the sandwiches.

### Jack in the Box

Test Marketing (Diner Melt Combo). Jack (company spokesman) and another executive stand behind a two-way mirror watching a group of male test subjects prove men prefer fast food over other variables meant to capture their attention, such as a motorcycle, a keg of beer, TV with sports, and women having a pillow fight. The executive informs Jack that with these findings they can rule the world. Tagline "Indulge."

### Arby's

Construction Workers (Reuben sandwich)—Three male construction workers on a break stare silently at two attractive women walking by. They only start catcalling when a balding man in a suit walks by carrying an Arby's bag. Guitar music and slow motion lead the viewer to see the man in the unexpected role of a sex object. Tagline "I'm thinking Arby's."

### Quizno's

Testimonials (Submarine sandwiches)—A man displaying a sub next to a Quizno's sub interviews at least seven men on the street who all testify that

the Quizno's subs are better because they are meatier. No females are interviewed in this version.

### Subway (slogan "Eat Fresh")

Low-Fat Subs — Jared, a male spokesman who is known for losing lots of weight on a diet of low-fat Subway sandwiches, informs us that Subway has eight sandwiches with six grams of fat or less (a veggie sub is seen as one of them but is farthest from the camera). He compares this to the BK Stacker that has 54 grams of fat, saying, "That's more fat than in all eight of these subway sandwiches combined."

Athletes say "More Meat" (Foot-long Subway Club) — A series of at least three ads featuring Jared continuing in his role of promoting the low-fat benefit of the subs while a professional athlete promotes its meatiness. The athletes include a large male football player, a large male wrestler, and a petite female ice-skater. Jared proclaims, "A foot-long subway club is half the fat of a McDonald's Big Mac but twice the meat." Reminiscent of the old Miller Lite commercials, the athletes repeat "more meat" while Jared repeats "less fat" until Jared gives in to the athlete's side of the debate. The males use a more bullying approach to convince Jared to agree with their "more meat" argument, while the female uses a coy and sweet approach.

### Coding Masculinity

This section begins with a description of the codes used to signify masculinity in these advertisements, followed by a discussion of the major themes uncovered regarding meat's role in representing freedom from constraints and loyalty to the heterosexual male group identity.

The commercials analyzed for this study illustrate a strong connection between meat and masculinity. These fast-food ads share basic gendered codes that reinforce lessons of heterosexual male socialization. For example, all of the voice-overs and the lead actors with speaking roles are men. In fact, in all but a few ads women are presented as silent and willing objects of the male gaze. Rather than the pastel tones of female targeted advertising, the colors in these ads are grays, neutrals, with some bright primary colors. When music is used, it is either sung by a male lead or is a growling rock guitar riff meant to emphasize a female character's sexuality. While most slogans are gender neutral, Burger King specifically targets men with instructions to "stack it high, tough guy," and "eat like a man, man."

In addition, action in the commercials takes place in groups of men in the public sphere such as outdoors on city streets, reinforcing the traditional locations most advertising situates males instead of female.<sup>34</sup> Only a few scenes

take place inside an office, demonstrating a general sense of freedom from responsibility at home or at work. An exception is Burger King, which uses home and family as a setting to emphasize the father/son relationship of its Whopper Senior and Junior.

Of Mosher and Anderson's three macho personality character traits, sex is emphasized more explicitly than are violence and danger in these food ads.<sup>35</sup> Most ads avoid denotatively demonstrating *violent* acts, with the exception of the BK Manthem's humorous scenes of property destruction and fighting. However, connotatively, violence is implied because animals are killed to produce the meat used in the sandwiches. Whether stated outright or implied, all of the male characters implicitly seek meat sandwiches as prey, and the hunting ground is fast-food restaurants. Third, the only aspect of *danger* demonstrated in these ads is men's overall disregard of health, as the food's unhealthy nutritional content goes unmentioned by all companies except Subway, and no company overtly promotes any vegetarian sandwiches.

The following section provides a discussion of the primary themes found in the ads where men's consumption of meat, and often women, enable them to (1) seek freedom from personal and social constraints and (2) remain loyal to the (heterosexual) male group.

### *Freedom via Food: Having It His Way*

Consistent with Burger King's mandate to "Have It Your Way," fast-food ads promote a narcissistic focus on fulfilling individual short-term desires free from concerns over the consequences to oneself or society. Subway is the only advertiser who raises a rational concern, in this case health, by using Jared to promote low-fat sandwich choices. But most fast-food commercials show a general irreverence to long-term health issues, favoring immediate gratification instead, such as is indicated by Jack in the Box's tagline "indulge." Food becomes just a tool for satisfying desires, even gluttonous ones. Thus size does matter in the burger battles, as Subway brags its sandwiches have twice the meat of burgers, while Quizno's brags its subs are even meatier than Subway's. And Burger King's slogan instructs men to "stack it high, tough guy," emphasizing how customers can choose three or four layers of beef and cheese. Commercials create a sense of plenty by constructing sandwiches that bulge and overflow with condiments literally dripping onto tables and fingers.

Plentitude is part of the male fantasyland that Burger King creates in its Hootie ad, where a guy can get anything he wants, as much as he wants, and when he wants it. In this ad, meat grows on trees, ranch dressing overflows the maidens' buckets, and the streets are paved with cheese. While the basis for this fantasy is abundance of fast food, one also sees an abundance of

sexually available females — attractive, young, Daisy Duke “country” women wear low-cut tops and/or short skirts and dance happily around the Western-themed set. The ad demonstrates how men’s “wildest fantasies” come true by having Dallas Cowboys cheerleaders shave them.

Hootie’s lyrics also list several kinds of freedoms found in its fantasy land — financial freedom (“all the lotto tickets pay”) and freedom from work and obligation (being able to “veg all day”). In this paradise, guys “never get in trouble, never need an excuse” and “no one tells you to behave.” Most fast-food commercials do not show men on the job or dressed for work, preferring to emphasize leisure.

Ads also imply freedom from another constraint, women: nagging wives, girlfriends, and mothers. The annoyance of obligation to women is avoided, as committed or familial relationships between men and women are rarely shown. In fact, besides the Burger King Whopper Senior/Junior commercials showing a wife and daughter in the background, only two other commercials feature a man in a committed relationship with a woman. In both cases, the girlfriends are portrayed as restricting a man’s freedom. First, a Carl’s Jr. buffalo wing commercial reveals a woman giving her boyfriend a disdainful and accusing look after catching him staring at an attractive waitress. The announcer emphasizes that men should only go out with other guys to eat wings if they want to have any fun. Second, the BK Manthem singer walks out on his sophisticated girlfriend because he is sick of her dictating that he eat small-portioned gourmet meals that appear more leafy than meaty.

The Manthem ad states men have been so nutritionally constrained and emasculated by the modern woman, that guys should unite in revolution to regain control over their ability to eat meat. It openly mocks the women’s rights movement by satirizing Helen Reddy’s feminist song “I am woman hear me roar” and showing men burning their underwear in the streets to make fun of alleged “bra burnings” by feminist activists in the 1960s. Similarly, many ads show a preference for disempowered women by either symbolically annihilating them or concentrating on sexualized female body parts instead of female partnership, intelligence, speech, or social contributions. By disempowering women in these commercials, men gain more freedom and control to have it their way.

### *Loyalty to Male Group: Bonding over Beef and Babes*

While the first theme of freedom may seem contradictory to the second theme of group loyalty, they are actually complementary as being “one of the guys” is made to seem effortless and natural. Two commercials in particular strongly emphasize stereotypes of straight, meat-eating men as if they are a

homogenous group with a pack mentality. The first is the Jack in the Box ad demonstrating guys being drawn in packs to a combo meal more so than to other stereotypical male temptations such as motorcycles, kegs of beer, televised sports, and young women pillow-fighting. Second, in the BK Manthem, men’s fervor over their right to eat meat causes them to act out “typical” male exploits, such as flexing muscles, punching each other, chopping cement blocks, destroying property, and playing with big machinery.

In many ways, fast-food commercials stereotype men most according to their gender, rather than by other human characteristics such as age, race, body type, or class. For example, although white is the most common race, the men in these ads are often shown in racially mixed groups, are a wide range of ages, and have a variety of body types. Class, however, is a category where there is some stereotyping, as working- and middle-class men are more common than upper-class, yet when jobs are shown we see both blue and white collar represented. But what most commonly unites all these men in fast-food commercials is their gender identity as heterosexual males who share a desire to communally consume animal meat and symbolically consume the “flesh” of sexualized and objectified women.

### *Objectification of Women*

Commercials sometimes show the meat becoming conflated with the flesh of women as mutual objects of male desire. Burger King’s male fantasy commercial, starring Hootie, refers to products on the sandwich while showing related parts of female actresses. For example, chicken breasts equate with breasts of a woman and ranch dressing overflows like milk from a woman’s breast. Burger King’s stacker commercial has a guy implying that a woman’s rear end is a “bun.” The Carl’s Jr. plastic surgeon commercial equates naturally large chicken breasts with women wanting breast augmentation. In addition, in the series of Carl’s Jr. commercials that focus on a lone, sexualized woman doing something seductive while also eating a burger, the flesh of both humans and nonhumans become objects of the camera’s implied heterosexual male gaze.

### *Meat as the Supreme Male Identity Trait*

As the Jack in the Box commercial indicated, a desire for meat is the quintessential factor defining a homogeneous male identity, even more so than other temptations, like women. For example, Arby’s assumes it is humorous, yet believable, that construction workers would get more excited by a Reuben sandwich, even when carried by a man, than they would by attractive women.

And Burger King's Manthem considers red meat's allure so powerful that it can serve as the sole motivating factor inspiring hundreds of men to unite into a spontaneous men's movement. This ad constructs red meat as distinctly male, in direct opposition to "chick food," such as tofu and quiche. In fact, the lyrics "I will eat this meat, until my innie turns into an outie" tells men that if they have become sissies by giving in to women and eating too many vegetables, meat can literally transform them back into a man. Men must stand up in defiance, presumably against women, for their right to "eat like a man" and have meat.

Guys are the presumed experts when it comes to finding meat, as demonstrated by Quizno's *man-on-the-street* testimonials asking only men about the meatiness of subs. This mirrors most commercials, where meat is a man's food and women need not be consulted.<sup>36</sup> So, perhaps it is no surprise when Burger King went looking for people to portray its Whoppers in costume, who seemed more natural to personify its burgers than guys?

### Conclusion

In this chapter we have identified some recent commercials which illustrate the American fast-food industry's propensity for equating meat with heterosexual masculinity. Many common elements reveal the presumed target audience to be straight males, in accordance with male advertising stereotypes: male characters dominate and do all the speaking; locations are in the public and avoid the domestic sphere; and the male gaze objectifies women, who are relegated to secondary, often mute, status. The ads connote meat is used by men to both experience freedom from constraints and remain loyal to their group identity as heterosexual males.

Despite their health benefits, plant foods are derided as feminine and not as satisfying as meat. The ads suggest men should seek immediate gratification of their hunger by eating meat, often in large quantities, without being hindered by notions of social responsibility, sustainability or health, as may be dictated by women. Even Subway, which shows some respect for women and health, still reinforces some male stereotypes by associating muscular athletes with meat and using Jared, a wimpier "smart" guy, to represent the more feminine concern of dieting; Cebrynski observed that, in all its ads, Subway uses only Jared to promote health while it uses other men, both athletes and comedians, to promote other food traits. Subway's use of a football player and a pro wrestler to emphasize the meatiness of low-fat subs bolsters Katz' contention that advertising uses "violent male athletes to help sell products... that have historically been gendered female."<sup>37</sup> Fast food is part of a hedonistic male fantasy where men have plenty of meat, women, money,

and leisure time and are free from responsibility. Men are stereotyped as a homogeneous group whose most central feature is a shared desire for the consumption of meat, including that of women as silent sexual objects. In cases where human and animal flesh are conflated, as in "breast" meat, it bolsters Adams' contention that advertising often sexualizes animals and animalizes females. In some cases, men's temptations for both kinds of flesh can be enjoyed simultaneously, as in the Carl's Jr. assertion that guys go out to eat wings together so they can ogle waitresses. In other cases (Arby's and Jack in the Box), meat consumption is privileged as being even more tempting to men than looking at women's bodies.

While aspects of these advertisements seem like harmless commercial entertainment, we suggest a concern that the overall message of hedonism is detrimental to social justice (for human and nonhuman animals) and ecological sustainability. To the extent that it perpetuates stereotypes of men in one-dimensional terms as self-indulgent, womanizing carnivores, fast-food advertising lowers society's expectations for the positive contributions men should be and often are making to promoting equality and social responsibility. Many of these commercials urge men to behave in self-interested ways that disregard the social consequences of their actions and prioritize an individualistic sense of *taking* over a more community-oriented sense of giving.

Another disturbing outcome of using gender stereotypes to sell fast food is the resulting reinforcement of the male/female dichotomy that has been the basis for patriarchal oppression. The ads construct the ideal woman as a silent, passive, meat-eating, agreeable stranger who is young, pretty, thin, and fair-skinned with long hair and a voluptuous body willingly put on display for the male viewer. The objectification of women in many of these commercials may in fact be a backlash against the empowerment American women have achieved in the centuries' old struggle for women's rights. And, while we admit that it is challenging to market products which are not particularly socially responsible, we hope that it could be done in a way that does not continue to sacrifice the rights of traditionally oppressed groups in order to further empower a dominant social group such as heterosexual American men. When fast-food companies insist on telling men to "have it your way" in the twenty-first century, they might as well be telling them to turn back the clock on social progress.

Drawing on Strate's study of beer commercials, "the myth of masculinity does have a number of redeeming features (facing challenges and taking risks are valuable activities in many contexts), but the unrelenting one-dimensionality of masculinity as presented by," in this case fast-food commercials, "is clearly anachronistic, possibly laughable, but without a doubt," too filling.<sup>38</sup>



## Notes

1. See Jim Mason, *An Unnatural Order: Why We Are Destroying the Planet and Each Other* (New York: Continuum, 1993), and Jeremy Rifkin, *Beyond Beef* (New York: Plume, 1992).
2. See Carol Adams, *The Pornography of Meat* (New York: Continuum, 2003), and Carol Adams, *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory* (New York: Continuum, 1990).
3. See Stuart Hall, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London: Sage, 1997); Stuart Hall, "Introduction," in *Paper Voices: The Popular Press and Social Change, 1935-1965*, ed. Anthony Charles Smith (London: Chatto & Windus, 1975), 11-24; Judith Williamson, *Decoding Advertisements: Ideology and Meaning in Advertising* (New York: Marion Boyars, 1978).
4. Mason, 81.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. See Carol Adams, *Sexual Politics*.
8. Adams, *Sexual Politics*, 168.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid., 187.
11. Ibid., 34.
12. See Peggy Sanday, *Female Power and Male Dominance: On the Origins of Sexual Inequality* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981).
13. Richard E. Leakey and Roger Lewin, *People of the Lake: Mankind and Its Beginnings* (New York: Doubleday, 1978), x.
14. Adams, *Sexual Politics*, 34.
15. Ibid., 33.
16. Jeffery Sobal, "Men, Meat, and Marriage: Models of Masculinity," *Food & Foodways* 13 (2005): 135.
17. See Eric Schlosser, *Fast-Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal* (New York: Harper Collins, 2002), and Morgan Spurlock (Prod., Dir., and Writer), *Super Size Me*. Film. (Culver City, CA: Columbia TriStar Home Entertainment, 2004).
18. See also Alex Jamieson, *The Great American Detox Diet: Feel Better, Look Better, and Lose Weight by Cleaning up Your Diet* (New York: Rodale, 2005).
19. Schlosser.
20. See also David Fraser, "Farm Animal Production: Changing Agriculture in a Changing Culture," *Journal of Applied Animal Welfare Science* 4 (2001): 3, and Peter Singer and Jim Mason, *The Way We Eat: Why Our Food Choices Matter* (New York: Rodale, 2006).
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35. See Mosher and Anderson.
36. With the lone exception of Subway's use of a female athlete.
37. See Katz, 356.
38. See Strate, 92.

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# Food for Thought

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AND CULTURE

*Edited by Lawrence C. Rubin*

*Foreword by John Shelton Lawrence*



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## Acknowledgments

I unabashedly acknowledge that the initial impetus for this book was the world (in)famous Krystal Square Off, televised live on ESPN2 from the First Tennessee Pavilion in Chattanooga on October 28, 2006. Channel surfing that fateful afternoon, I happened upon this spectacle, and in amazement, watched Takeru “the Tsunami” Kobayashi ingest 97 Krystal Hamburgers in eight minutes. At that moment, I knew I had witnessed something profound.

The event left a bad taste in my wife’s mouth but left me ruminating over its meaning — for the contestants, the spectators and a society that elevates such events. Over the ensuing weeks and months, I would become familiar with the IFOCE (International Federation of Competitive Eaters), attend (not participate in) my first event, which happened to be taking place locally, and begin thinking beyond the bun, to borrow a phrase from Taco Bell, a popular fast-food franchise.

What was this most bizarre phenomenon, and what could it tell me about food, eating and culture? In turn, what was it about food and eating, beyond the hoopla of the professional competitive eating circuit, that could spawn such spectacle? In short order (the opportunity for food-related puns is inexhaustible), I had assembled a team of talented thinkers and writers that you shall soon meet, who promised to share with me (and you) the insights they have gleaned from their own unique intellectual passions for food, eating and culture.

I have long suspected, although I have not fully understood until recently, that eating is far more complex than the simple heuristic — open mouth, insert food, chew, swallow. I must confess that I have been eating all of my life! I was raised on a post-World War II working-class, liberally-interpreted ethnic cuisine, but industrialization, the media and food science quickly replaced my mother’s cooking. On my own as a postmodern-day hunter-gatherer in supermarkets, convenience stores, fast-food restaurants, and gas stations, I evolved from a sit-down eater to a stand-up forager and drive-through grazer.

More germane to this volume, however, is the focus of my intellectual,