

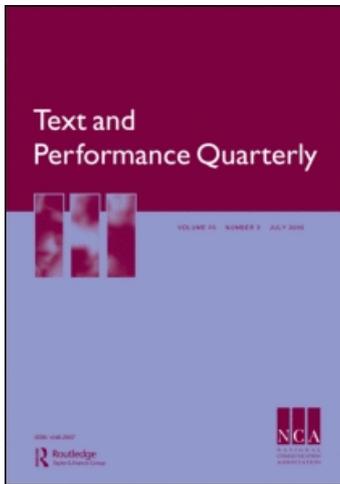
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C. Wesley Buerkle

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Metrosexuality can Stuff it: Beef Consumption as (Heteromasculine) Fortification

C. Wesley Buerkle

In this essay I explore the importance of beef consumption in performing a traditional masculinity that defies the supposed effeminization embodied in the image of the metrosexual. Research on perceptions of men and women eating demonstrates cultural visions of eating as a masculine activity. Furthermore, cultural analysis bears out the link between meat consumption and masculine identity. The recent popularization of metrosexual masculinity has challenged the harsh dichotomies between masculine and feminine gender performances. Against such a trend, burger franchise advertising portrays burger consumption as men's symbolic return to their supposed essence, namely, personal and relational independence, nonfemininity, and virile heterosexuality. In all, I demonstrate the relationship between men and food as productive of a masculinity that perpetuates a male-dominant ideology in juxtaposition to women and metrosexual masculinity.

Keywords: Food Studies; Masculinity; Meat; Metrosexual; Gender Performance

My father once recounted to me that some acquaintances of his felt the need to drive off gay-male clientele from their family-style restaurant. The restaurateurs in question changed their establishment to a steak house because, as my father explained to me, “they [homosexuals] don’t eat meat.” He spoke as though he were citing the 1975 *World Book* encyclopedias we had as children: “Homosexual: . . . non-carnivorous.” To my father, the assumed lack of meat consumption was simply one more sign that homosexuals—especially, gay men—defied normality. In his understanding of the world, gay men had senselessly denounced their God-given right to social dominance

C. Wesley Buerkle (PhD, Louisiana State University) is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Communication at East Tennessee State University. The author would like to thank Kelly Dorgan, the editors of this issue, and the anonymous reviewers for their comments, suggestions, and encouragement. The essay is dedicated to the author's late father who generously sent him shipments of frozen steaks throughout his graduate school career. Correspondence to: C. Wesley Buerkle, Communication Department, East Tennessee State University, Box 70667, Johnson City, TN 37614, USA. Email: buerkle@etsu.edu

by allowing themselves to become effeminized; as a matter of course, they also refused to eat beef products, if not all animal flesh.

Though, clearly, my father held—what can charitably be described as—anachronistic principles on gender and sexual politics, his brash assessment provides an overt statement of otherwise submerged cultural practices and beliefs. Where it may seem “un-ladylike” to eat much, consuming large quantities of food seems expected from men. In western culture, consuming animal flesh, especially beef, has a long association with traditional masculinity. The image of men as hunters with hearty appetites eating their kill cooked over an open flame haunts our cultural conceptions of gender.¹ Despite changes in conceptions of masculinity that include a broader acceptance of men’s participation in the home and of equality with women, men’s eating behaviors remain a characteristic assumed to be biologically driven, a point of gender distinction beyond cultural change. Harry Brod observes that western culture accepts as a given that there exists a natural essence to masculinity as opposed to feminine performance, which openly discusses changes in social fashions and politics (13). The cultural recognition that men too perform their gender began with the emergence of “metrosexuality,” a masculinity concerned with aesthetics and other heretofore interests classed as feminine. Against such a trend, recent burger franchise advertising markets beef consumption as a fundamental masculine activity and a means to resist metrosexuality’s effeminizing influence and defeat the suggestion that the “real” man is itself a fiction. In this essay, I explore the performance of beef consumption in hamburger advertising as a means to fortify a retrograde masculinity against the alternatives represented by metrosexuality.

For the last three decades, discussions within masculinity studies have primarily focused on traditional performance and representations of heteromascularity and gay men’s exclusion from heteronormative culture (Brod and Kaufman; Buchbinder; Craig; Kaufman; Kimmel *Changing*; Kimmel *Manhood*; Kimmel and Messmer; Levine; Messmer; Messmer and Sabo; Pleck and Pleck; Pronger). Two studies even outline fundamental elements of dominant US masculinity, emphasizing men’s physical strength and social dominance (Brannon; Trujillo).² Across all research comes the understanding that heterosexuality is implicit to traditional, dominant US masculinity. In recent years, cultural studies has given more attention to the rise of the metrosexual, a masculinity that challenges heteronormativity by incorporating gender performances heretofore deemed feminine and, thereby, queer (Clarkson; Miller; Ramsey and Santiago; Simpson). Mark Simpson officially introduces the concept of metrosexuality in 2002, pointing to British soccer star David Beckham as a metrosexual *par excellence*, emphasizing the narcissism of culture industry obsession mixed with the heteromascularity assets of desire from straight women and admiration from straight men.

To understand metrosexuality’s function in dominant US culture, much critical attention has gone to Bravo’s popular series *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* and its service to heteronormative culture. *Queer Eye* provides shining examples of how to create metrosexuals by showing five gay men transform stereotypically messy, slovenly, uncultured straight men—those resembling Oscar Madison from Neil

Simon's *The Odd Couple*—into neat, well-groomed and dressed men-about-town—like Felix Unger. Similar to Felix, the metrosexual has an appreciation for the arts, can cook, keeps a tidy home, displays warm human emotions, and dresses dapperly. Unlike Felix, the metrosexual engages in a public performance that invites a gaze upon his body and uses his kinder, gentler masculinity for the purpose of heterosexual conquest. This latter point often serves as the issue around which feminist and queer critics debate metrosexuality's political potential. Jay Clarkson, for one, observes that components of traditional masculinity merely undergo a makeover in *Queer Eye* (e.g., physical perfection replacing physical force) to improve men's heterosexual desirability (252). Similarly, Robert Westerfelhaus and Celeste Lacroix find that *Queer Eye's* episodes purge “potential homoerotic contamination” by concluding with the remade man engaging in a heteronormative performance (e.g., a heterosexual date). Thus, the metrosexual transformation remains a decidedly heterosexual performance.

Because metrosexuality blurs the distinction between masculine and feminine activities, inviting the perception of sexual malleability, we can expect heteromascularity hegemony, as a self-preserving structure, to re-assert traditional masculinity against any challenges to its dominance. This study's interest in the relationship between masculine performance and food consumption contemplates the ways that men eating—especially beef—asserts a retrograde masculinity, one that returns to an undomesticated performance driven by biological desire. I argue, as Judith Butler says, that these performances disguise their fictitiousness as naturalness, thereby “[concealing] gender's performative character and the performative possibilities for proliferating gender configurations outside the restricting frames of masculinist domination and compulsory heterosexuality” (140). To begin the discussion, I demonstrate the link between masculinity and meat ingrained in dominant US culture, relying upon both social-scientific and cultural analyses. Looking to key examples of hamburger franchise advertising, I consider the depiction of burger consumption as a means for men to anchor ever-broadening masculine definitions to a physical compulsion of the body equated to sexual appetite. I focus primary attention on Burger King's commercial, “Manthem,” as a literal protest of men against perceived effeminization. Other advertisements similarly promote and prove the fixity of a retrograde masculinity through hamburger consumption.

Eating Like a Man

Considerable academic research and discussion gives attention to women's experiences with food, their bodies, and weight (e.g., Spitzack; Basow and Kobrynowicz; Martz et al.; Mooney, DeTore, and Malloy; Thompson and Heinberg). Discussing men's relationship to food seems unusual in that we typically focus our attention on women's negotiation of eating and body image concerns. In *Unbearable Weight* Bordo provides careful analysis of women's bodies as cultural products always related to food. Bordo's later book, *The Male Body*, says nothing of men's food consumption, yet eating remains a central, if unspoken, element in men's masculine performance.

As research indicates, men's eating goes largely unnoticed, whereas women often feel the social norms for proper consumption weighing down upon them (Saukko; Scott; Spitzack). The social-scientific research on food consumption demonstrates exactly that point. Likewise, cultural analyses of food reveal the significance of meat consumption for successful masculine performance. In the following I discuss social-scientific literature to reveal the ways in which masculinity claims for itself the right to consume. Turning to cultural analyses, I then review ways in which meat consumption serves as a masculine performance, supposedly innate to the heteromale experience. By bringing into conversation the literature from divergent research perspectives, I mean to create a broad, cultural understanding of the relations between men and food.

Men Eating, Women Wanting

The social scientific literature pertaining to the gendered perceptions of men and women as they eat often directs attention and implications to the perceptions of women, which seems logical in light of eating disorders' prevalence among women.³ Within that research, however, lie gendered meanings of food that serve important functions in the performance of masculinity. Studies consistently show that men and women subject women's eating behaviors to harsh criticism (Basow and Kobrynowicz; Chaiken and Pliner; Mooney et al.; Mori et al.; Pliner and Chaiken). When asked to compare the eating behaviors of men and women, a pattern emerges in which others perceive men as more masculine by merely eating. Beth Bock and Robin Kanarek and Susan Basow and Diane Kobrynowicz find that as meal size increases women are perceived by others as less feminine whereas men are seen as just as masculine if not more so. This suggests that at the very least men enjoy eating as a value free behavior, whereas women never escape scrutiny. Compounding these findings, Kim Mooney and Erica Lorenz show that when men and women eat identical meals, the males are perceived as both consuming more calories and as possessing more favorable social traits (e.g., emotional, conscientious, self-control, strong, and intelligent). Against any hope that a double standard does not exist, their study indicates that observers seemingly root for a man to better perform his masculinity.

Compounding the differences between men and women's experiences with food, young men voice a sense of entitlement to unrestrictive eating entirely absent when women discuss their experiences. Representing this contrast, Annette Levi and associates report anecdotal findings from their study of college men and women: men reported, "I don't care what I eat, as long as there's a lot of it and it's cheap," and, "I eat *what* I want *when* I want" (respondent's emphasis) (94). In contrast, one woman noted, "I usually wonder what I will look like after eating this" (95). The drastic differences embody the sense of entitlement men bring to the table against women's fear of social rejection for daring to enjoy a meal. As Bordo says, "It is a mark of the manly to eat spontaneously and expansively" (*Unbearable* 108). The spontaneity and expansiveness of men's eating behavior mimics the reality that men enjoy greater

social freedoms with few restrictions, whereas women must heed public expectations to restrain themselves.

The division between men and women's relation to food widens as the performance of meal preparation further differentiates gendered expectations. In the common scenarios of men grilling outside and women cooking in the kitchen, men employ fire, whereas women surround themselves with technology that distances them from men's primordial methods (Mechling 81). As a response to having to be in the kitchen, Jonathan Deutsch records that the language among firefighters involved in communal cooking only becomes regularly coarse and sexualized (e.g., "you liked my cock-slaw") when in the kitchen, "[seeming] to use language to 'masculinize' the 'women's' work that they do in the kitchen" (105). Even *Queer Eye's* food "make-over" segment acknowledges the fact that men typically have poor culinary skills, which often change very little on follow-up visits (Julier and Lindenfeld 2). The collective picture tells the story that men do not belong in the kitchen and should maintain a place as the consumer, not the laborer.

From social-scientific research we see men and women engage in drastically different gendered performances of food. Men participate in a performance of privilege in which they may eat expansively and without concern for social repercussions, whereas women must constantly regulate themselves under a scrutinizing social gaze. Sandra Bartky recounts everyday gender performances that demonstrate women's subjection to heteromascularity norms and the demand that they carefully regulate their bodies to those ideals. Though men have largely enjoyed freedom in eating, the appearance of metrosexual masculinity has brought about a new sensibility for men's relationship with food. Just as beauty and consumer cultures' expanded capture of men creates a wider market for high-end blue jeans and hair-care products, metrosexual sensibilities teach men to watch calories and more carefully choose the foods they eat. Fabio Parasecoli says that with men's increased participation in consumer culture, they eat to improve their bodies' beauty and health, not to enjoy themselves (26). In this way, metrosexuality introduces men to the heretofore feminine concern for how food directly affects one's appearance and thus one's sexual appeal, for Katherine O'Doherty Jensen and Lotte Holm document healthy eating habits associated with women, not men (358). Looking at research on gendered perceptions of eating, metrosexuality feminizes men's relationship with food by restricting men's access to pleasure-by-food-consumption. As I will show later, recent hamburger advertising responds to men's perceived effeminization at the dining table by punctuating their desire and capacity to consume despite any effort to place on them gendered expectations similar to women's.

I'm Not a Vegetarian . . . Not that There's Anything Wrong with that

In western culture meat often represents the centerpiece and fullness of a meal. If eating presents an activity reserved for men, then meat, the ideal food, represents the epitome of masculine consumption. Feminist critique and media texts bear out this point. In what follows, I discuss the ways in which men eating meat, especially beef,

constitutes a masculine performance that specifically excludes and rejects femininity. Drawing from cultural critique, I invoke the history and arguments that connect male meat consumption and the deprivileging of women and feminine culture. Meat's importance in masculine culture ultimately plays a role in a resurgence of traditional masculinity against metrosexual effeminization by re-asserting an innate link between males and animal flesh.

Both social-scientific studies and cultural critiques demonstrate a clear pattern of men associated with meat consumption, an act itself often seen as more ideal than a meat-free diet. Reviewing literature on European eating behaviors, O'Doherty Jensen and Holm argue that a food's status relates to its gender association, with men associated with the highest status foods (357). Carol Adams similarly finds a privileging of masculine food in anglophile countries that centers specifically on meat. As a case in point, Adams cites a nineteenth-century British study's findings that in working-class homes, where the budget allowed only limited meat purchases, the husband/father consumed meat on a daily basis, whereas his wife and children could have it only once a week (29). By the twentieth century, when most have access to meat as a regular dietary component, carving—not cooking—the meat becomes a duty and privilege for men that women access only by usurping it from their husbands (Mechling 74).

Within the compulsion toward valuing meat and the predisposition to viewing meat as men's food, we see the perpetuation of dichotomous gender images. The social logic behind presenting meat as a masculine food of choice assumes that by consuming meat men gain strength, whereas vegetables and other nonmeat products provide nothing to the body in the way of substance. The anthropologist James Frazer documents the cross-cultural assumption that consuming animal meat, actual muscle, translates into the acquisition of strength and power, noting many nonindustrialized cultures' belief "that by eating the flesh of an animal or man [sic] he [sic] acquires not only the physical, but even the moral and intellectual qualities which were characteristic of that animal or man" (463). Likewise, in "Eating Muscle," Patrick McGann recounts his experiences as a teenager in West Texas playing football where the young men equate consuming meat with gaining muscle (90). Bettina Heinz and Ronald Lee state the point plainly: "The symbolic linkages among masculinity, strength, and power maintain meat's dominant place in the US diet" (95).

In contrast, vegetable-rich diets in US culture symbolize the lack of aggression and marginal substance associated with feminine ideals. Adams offers the most vivid example of vegetables as powerlessness, citing the adjective "vegetable" when applied to humans in a coma or suffering severe brain damage (36). Furthermore, McGann notes the rhetorical relationships between food and sexuality when "fruit" serves as a homophobic slur against men, which "[denigrates] women since it is gay men's identification with the feminine that is a negative marking" (88). One study even finds that respondents reliably match dietary preferences and personality traits, connecting vegetarianism to noncompetitive pacifists and burgers and fried chicken eaters with logic and competition (Sadalla and Burroughs).

The relationships between dietary behavior and personal and political identities mirror binary gender images of women as docile and men as active. The assumptions that women prefer salads and men prefer meat instantiates beliefs that women would rather lead a life of peace and men a life of action. The cultural tradition of saving meat for men grows from beliefs about meat's effect on the body as emboldening and empowering. Associations between men and meat seen in both social behavior research and cultural critiques solidify underlying notions that men naturally hold strength and power, while women merely stand by watching. Metrosexual food practices, which seek to either refine men's choices in terms of sophistication or health rationale, challenge distinctions between masculinity and femininity that food use in western culture has for so long helped to define and maintain. Examples of recent hamburger advertising discussed below reify the perception that men's new food choices effeminize them. As my primary case in point, I examine Burger King's commercial "Manthem" as a protestation of the heteromasculine belief that desiring beef emanates from a supposed instinctive masculine desire rather than as a function of their gender role performance. In the advertisement, burger consumption serves as a resistance to the fear that metrosexuality seeks to rob men of their social privilege through linkages with feminine performances.

A Feast Fit for a King

Against shifting norms of male food consumption, recent hamburger franchise advertising depicts eating beef as a heteromasculine activity done in the absence and at the expense of women. Burger King's commercial, "Manthem," provides an especially powerful example of beef consumption represented as a means for men to reassert a traditional masculinity, which occurs through rejecting femininity. Other advertisements by Burger King and Hardee's further meat's use as a means for men to re-affirm social dominance by symbolically consuming women. Elisabeth Badinter asserts that dominant US masculinity constitutes itself through a series of rejections, specifically, men refusing subordination and dependence, avoiding those things considered feminine, and denouncing any appearance of homosexuality (54, 115). Metrosexuality creates some obvious conflicts with this image. The advertisements I discuss here seek to restore an innate and traditional masculinity, as described by Badinter and others, against metrosexuality's influence.

Appropriating Helen Reddy's 1972 feminist liberation anthem, "I Am Woman," Burger King's "Manthem"—a *man's anthem*—engages in a parodic emancipation of men from feminine domestication made material in diet. Promoting their Texas Double Whopper—a burger with two beef patties, bacon, jalapenos, and other burger fixings—Burger King suggests that eating a large burger defies efforts to domesticate and feminize men through their diet. Using the imagery of mass protest the commercial creates scenes of men renouncing both women and the foods women eat as an act of rebellion from oppressive and unnatural ways for men. That men eat meat as a rejection of feminine influence renders beef consumption a male activity

that revels in a retrograde masculinity, one that celebrates more traditional gender performances over emerging images like that of the metrosexual.

The series of rejections in “Manthem” begins with the simultaneous rejection of women and feminine cuisine. In the opening scene a waiter in an elegant restaurant sets a plate with a single small shrimp, presented in the manner of an *amuse bouche*, before an attractive 20-something male-female couple. The young, trim man with a five-o’clock shadow looks up from his plate to begin singing, “I am man, hear me roar / In numbers too big to ignore/And I’m way too hungry to settle for chick food!” While singing, the man jilts his assumed date, abruptly leaving the table and storming out of the restaurant, tossing another piece of “chick food” from a plate a server carries past him. As the commercial progresses, we learn more about what constitutes amasculine food: “I’ll admit I’ve been fed quiche!/Wave tofu bye-bye!/Now it’s for Whopper beef I reach.” Adams defines the relation between male-dominated ideology and meat consumption: “According to the mythology of patriarchal culture, meat promotes strength; the attributes of masculinity are achieved through eating these masculine foods” (33). Thus, the men wave “bye-bye” to nonmeat foods that deny them their social dominance. More shots of men pushing away plates of—we can presume—quiche makes clear the idea that women’s feminine influence on men is embodied in the feminine foods women encourage men to eat.⁴

The justifications for rejecting women’s food elaborate on the supposed innate differences between men and women. “Manthem” defines a masculinity associated with an animalistic, carnivorous instinct that requires fully satiating meals. Georg Hegel writes of the differences assumed between men and women as analogous to elements of nature: “The difference between men and women is like that between animals and plants. Men correspond to animals, while women correspond to plants because their development is more placid” (263). Likewise, one of the men of “Manthem” declares, “my stomach’s starting to growl/And I’m going on the prowl.” Where both Helen Reddy and the “Manthem” men want you to “hear me roar,” Burger King reminds its consumers that men, not women, “growl” and “prowl,” as do predatory carnivores of the wild seeking satiation from animal meat:

I will eat this meat / ([Chorus] Eat this meat) /
 ’Til my innie turns into an outie. / I am starved! /
 I am incorrigible! / And I need to scarf a big burger, beef, bacon, jalapeño, good
 thing down!

The men explain that their desire to “scarf. . . down” beef until their navels invert (“innie turns into an outie”) comes from both their deep hunger (“starved”) and their inability to become domesticated (“incorrigible”). Subsequently, men’s desire for eating equates to a wild animal uncontrollably gorging on its kill. Such an image stands entirely opposite to common ideals for feminine behavior and metrosexuality. Having left women and feminine foods behind, the men can glory in a rapacious consumption all their own.

The flight from the feminine in “Manthem” stresses the desire for a retrograde masculinity to denounce women and their influences upon masculinity. Against

recent images of masculinity, especially the metrosexual, that challenge traditional heteromasculine assumptions, the commercial uses beef eating as an opportunity to enliven supposedly fading masculine performances that emphasize men's difference from women. Badinter writes that "To be a man signifies *not* to be feminine, . . . *not* to be effeminate in one's physical appearance or manners" (115, emphasis in original). Though the metrosexual does not necessarily deny carnivorous inclinations, the refinement associated with metrosexuality curbs what is otherwise seen as a base, biological masculine desire. As *Queer Eye* shows us, men with polished tastes eat bluefish from cedar planks, not burgers from wax-paper wrappers.

Against the attempts to be domesticated and refined, Burger King's men publicly protest for freedom to perform a retrograde masculinity. The public demonstration in "Manthem" engages in a parody of liberation that borrows from imagery of struggles for equality, which simultaneously undercuts the signified images' importance. Denouncing an effeminized masculinity, the men in Burger King's commercial take to the streets in mass protest. As a mob of men marches through the streets others rush away from women to join the manly crowd of young men. One man running into the scene wears a moisturizing mud mask, symbolizing the aesthetic influence of feminine culture upon men that "Manthem" means to reject through eating a burger. In the mostly white crowd, some men carry signs that read plainly, "I Am Man." The reference to the 1968 Memphis sanitation-workers strike—when Black men wore sandwich boards reading, "I AM A MAN"—parodies and thereby detracts from more serious fights for equality. In another shot we see men tearing their underwear from under their clothes and tossing them into a burning barrel, both mimicking and mocking 1968 Miss America pageant when women symbolically—not literally—burned their brassieres. As Bonnie Dow says of the bra-burning myth itself, the parody belittles and dismisses women's very serious struggle for social equality (130). Rather than protesting treatment as second-class citizens, the men in "Manthem" are merely "way too hungry to settle for chick food." Even still, "Manthem" expresses the sense that men have endured oppression, here at the hands of women and feminine culture, from which they now wish to escape.

The fullness of the commercial's association between males' meat consumption and championing a retrograde masculinity arrives when the men literally discard a symbol of their familial domestication, the minivan. For the last two decades the minivan, replacing the station wagon, has symbolized utter domestication for men and women, bespeaking familial commitment over personal desires represented by the sporty two-seat automobile. Amidst the mob of men congregating to protest their right to meat, the minivan screeches in, and from it emerges the only man easily visible in the mob that does not have a trim body and only the second man in the commercial to wear glasses. As such, he represents men who have "softened" from domestic life. His slightly zaftig form suggests a man who no longer has the time for the personal indulgences of playing sports or going to the gym in light of familial responsibilities. Stepping away from his vehicle, the minivan driver slams the door behind him to seize a burger and hoist it proudly above his head with both hands in an act of triumphal rebellion. As the mob cheers, they move in on the minivan, which they

proceed to pick up and throw from the elevated roadway onto a dump truck below. In so doing, the men physically reject the trappings of domestication as an act concurrent and equitable with claiming their desire for beef consumption.

As the discarded minivan falls from the bridge, the scene below creates the hyper image of an idealized masculinity and femininity that bares no resemblance to the world the “Manthem” men reject. The minivan discarded from above falls into an oversized dump truck, which when then see linked by chains to a circus strong-man. The large man, valued only for his girth and physical strength, lurches forward with the dump truck and minivan in tow. Before the hulking man stands a slender young blonde woman in a tight, pink top and pant set smiling at the strong man as she holds a shining snow shovel before him on which rests Burger King’s Texas Double Whopper. The man pulling the dump truck represents a hypermasculinity, beyond most men’s actual desire, based strictly in the value of musculature and strength. As an excessive figure of masculinity, merely a body, he represents the end of the spectrum toward which the “Manthem” men run as they flee a feminine diet and a subsequently more delicate frame. By placing the attractive woman holding out a juicy burger before the strong man, we see a man as a carnivorous animal trudging forward in pursuit of his reward, meat. It remains unclear, however, which reward the man craves more, the burger or the woman. Of course, within the retrograde masculinity depicted, women and meat are one in the same. They are both prizes: they both represent dominant masculinity’s goals, and they both emphasize men’s consumptive impulses (both sexual and dietetic) as essential to their maleness.

By relying upon the cultural relationships between men, meat, and masculinity, Burger King sells its oversized hamburger as men’s opportunity to seize a retrograde masculinity, which has supposedly been eroded by the appearance of the metrosexual and men’s increased involvement in the home. The repeated rejections in “Manthem” of women, femininity, and domesticity reiterate the compulsion for a masculinity that places men and men’s concerns as preeminent. Within the laughter the commercial means to provoke, a discourse for supporting men’s social privilege finds new life. Parasecoli’s analysis of men’s health magazines includes the example from one article that encourages men to perform cunnilingus (i.e., *eat her out*) on the kitchen table while snacking on foods to add better flavor to the experience (32). The interchangeability of sexual engagement with women and consuming food further demonstrates the unity of both activities in a misogynistic heteromascularity. Two other recent hamburger advertisements also fuse men’s beef consumption with their heteromascularity desire.

Burger King’s 2006 Super Bowl commercial collapses men’s food and women’s bodies into one and the same idea. In the style of an elaborate 1950s stage show, women dressed as burger patties, hamburger buns, lettuce, tomatoes, and other burger fixings dance and smile prettily, some of whom wear skin-tight clothing cleverly covering their breasts and genital region. Looking into the camera, smiling and winking as appropriate, they sing, “Yes, we’re tasty and eye popping/We don’t blame your jaw for dropping. . . . Ask away, we’re always willing to make one your way.” As the women sing these lines, a woman in a close-fitting, open-back red dress

with tomato slices as a wide hat and skirt leads the camera behind her, glancing seductively over her shoulder as she continues on. The words and sexual teasing mix together heteromascularity desire for food and women's bodies as the food-clad women describe themselves as "tasty," "eye popping," and "jaw dropping." At the commercial's climax the women are thrown in a pile of human flesh to create a living hamburger as the words "Have it your way" drone on. The commercial's completion presents the women as malleable to men's desires and ready for consumption. The 1950s fantasy—a somewhat literal return to a retrograde gender relations—presents men's burger consumption as an escape to their earlier, unrefined ways, when gender relations held a stronger dualism than the vagaries encouraged by metrosexuality.

Hardee's also relates eating burgers to consuming women, but in a more naked celebration of heteromascularity desires. In "Cheater," we see an attractive 20-something man eating a burger as an auto-body crew attempts to buff out from the side of his car the spray-painted word, "CHEATER." As the young man smirks at the scene, the voiceover adds, "Sometimes having three girlfriends is great. Other times it's just expensive." The man's meat intake and the smirking pride of dating three women at once demonstrates his consumptive desires. In both instances we see the frightening reality of meat as a metonym for women's bodies. Against cultural changes seeking gender egalitarianism, the young man in question still enjoys consuming freely unrestrained, whether meat or women.

The images of men and women in the burger advertising discussed above present a world in which men enjoy beef consumption as an extension and performance of their rights to independence, resistance to metrosexual effeminization, and heterosexual desire. Butler contends that binary gender roles, like those perpetuated in the commercials here, maintain a "compulsory and naturalized heterosexuality" (22). In "Manthem," especially, we see young men rejecting a newly popularized masculine image, the metrosexual, in favor of a "true," traditional masculinity based in biological essence rather than a learned gender role. The masculinity "Manthem" embraces suggests men have a primal nature as carnivores that feminine influence seeks to squelch, emblematic of men's natural dominance women likewise wish to tame. Kenneth Burke describes the power of metonymy as its ability to reduce complex relations into something more basic, thus, enabling humans to "to convey some incorporeal or intangible state in terms of the corporeal or tangible" (506). Here, burgers and burger consumption subsume a complex set of changing gender and sexual relations into a statement of men's perpetual right to take what they will as their own. Burger King's 2006 Super Bowl commercial and Hardee's "Cheater" emphasize that women, like the burgers men prefer to eat, exist for men's pleasure. Just as the commercials forgo questioning the assumption that men have a God-given need for beef over any other food, the advertisements accept without question that men also have the right to women's bodies. Richard Nate explains that metonyms, over metaphors, often illustrate social conditions through closely related expressions (496). Put another way, critics need not look far to find the thing represented by a metonym, for it is the placeholder of an object close at hand rather than highly abstract. The utter collapse of women with food, especially in Burger King's Super

Bowl ad, speaks to a conflation of sexual and culinary desires, men having the absolute right to enjoy both at their will and without restraint.

Conclusion: Big Boys, Big Burgers, and Big Cars

Masculinity, as much as femininity, exists in a state of flux without any single definition able to capture either cultural ideals or practices. Retrograde masculinity denies such an assertion about itself, perpetuating the myth that within men lies an essential masculinity corrupted by the likes of metrosexuality. Despite such a protest R. W. Connell stresses that we must speak of masculinities as existing in relation to one another, whether competing or supporting (37). Metrosexuality as a masculinity popularized in recent years, offers but one definition for masculinity, whereas traditional masculinity, as described by Badinter, constitutes itself by fleeing from anything that approaches femininity, signals weakness, or suggests homosexuality. The link between masculinity and meat, suggesting the consumption of strength and muscle, emanates from traditions surpassing those found in the contemporary US. A seeming anthropological imperative of a patriarchal culture, meat connotes men's assumed dominance and thereby women's disassociation from both the food and the privilege. The heterosexist assumption that gay men mimic women, including their dietary behaviors and corporeal discipline, suggests that gay men refrain from eating meat or large quantities of any food for fear of spoiling their "girlish figure." Against homophobic disdain for gay men as necessarily effeminate, metrosexuality accepts those things previously considered too feminine for men and thereby queer. As I have argued here, some recent hamburger franchise advertising seeks to capitalize on the anxieties resulting from ever broadening masculine ideals. The use of beef eating as an evocation of a retrograde masculinity, one celebrating masculine norms challenged by metrosexuality and domestic participation, speaks to the vitality of existing cultural beliefs about meat as a proper male food that attains its virility through the exclusion of women.

Badinter foreshadows metrosexuality in 1992, writing of changes to masculinity in dominant US culture in which "young men do not identify either with the caricatured virility of the past or with a total rejection of masculinity" (183). It is worth noting that protagonist males in the commercials described here all occupy the age group of men whom Badinter describes as "Sons of more virile women and more feminine men" (183). The flux within accepted heteromale performances and an increasing—though never fully realized—gender egalitarianism questions, however subtly, men's presumed privilege and produces anxiety for some men as their status changes. The hamburger commercials discussed above demonstrate a response to these changes and anxieties. Burger King and Hardee's both suggest that by enjoying hamburgers men can seize a supposedly stable component to masculinity, their natural desire for animal flesh. By extension, eating a burger also allows men to engage in a cultural performance of sexual domination. The allusions to a retrograde masculinity fortifies men's sense of self amidst masculinities fluctuating more rapidly than before.

Obviously, the anxieties and tensions resulting from diversifying masculinities play themselves out in venues other than the dinner table. Hummer's "Restore the Balance" commercial promotes men driving a sports utility vehicle as an assertion of masculinity against "feminized" lifestyle choices represented by a health-conscious diet. "Restore the Balance" opens with the mundane scene of an attractive, 20-something white male at the grocery store checkout counter. As the checker rings up his clearly-labeled tofu—which the "Manthem" men "wave bye-bye"—and vegetables, the young man in question looks in the direction of the attractive, 20-something male behind him in line. The second man's items include a rack of ribs, a package of steaks, and bag of charcoal. The look on the first man's face registers self-consciousness about his purchase. The shot of them side-by-side at the checkout counter, facing forward, mimics men's posture at a urinal, with the first man disappointed in himself when he sees what "meat" the second man boasts.⁵ Upon noticing a Hummer advertisement on the magazine rack, the self-doubting man leaves with his groceries and proceeds posthaste in his small, yellow sedan to a Hummer dealership, where he quickly and assertively buys a Hummer off the showroom floor, throwing his groceries in the rear-storage compartment before heading out. As the man drives home, projecting self-assured masculinity, he takes a vigorous bite from a carrot, while the words, "RESTORE THE BALANCE" occupy the screen's lower half.

The question, of course, is "What balance does the Hummer restore?" It would seem that for the commercial's protagonist, it restores the balance in his life between the feminine foods he purchases after leaving his home and the masculinity he buys on his way back. In fact, the commercial's original tagline read, "RESTORE YOUR MANHOOD," but quickly became "RESTORE THE BALANCE" after negative market response (Lavrinc). The idea that the men who select nonmeat foods have lost their manhood, which they can restore by purchasing a large, military-repurposed vehicle, makes it clear that men who eat tofu, vegetables, and the like lose the strength and power crucial to most masculine definitions. General Motor's choice to call for restoring "balance" in place of "manhood" suggests more than the original message concerning meat, strength, and manhood. The emphasis on "balance" also indicates that new ideals of masculinity have become out of balance. The commercial both expresses and responds to an anxiety that men have become too influenced by an effeminizing culture and must grasp at aspects of traditional masculinity to remain stable. The dangers of equating eating meat with successful masculinity need little explanation. The Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine specifically criticizes "Manthem" and "Restore the Balance" for encouraging men to court heart disease and other life-threatening illnesses: "This new genre of TV ads is tantamount to daring men to smoke or abuse alcohol" (Physicians). Sadly, men have also followed just such dares in efforts to prove their manhood.

The need to prove and maintain manhood motivates the celebrations of a retrograde masculinity present in some hamburger advertising. These overtures to a traditional masculinity attempt to fortify manhood as a given against indicators to the contrary. The "Manthem" men predicate their protests on the belief in an essential, biologically determined masculinity. Such an assumption drives the

vernacular notion that men are “uncomplicated” because they act on natural inclinations unlike women who perform their gender, overtly contemplating their choices and practices (e.g., diet and physical appearance). The white, middle-class, able-bodied, straight men depicted in hamburger advertising largely enjoy a social privilege they can take for granted. Men’s cognizance of their food choices and appearance—their gender performances—jeopardizes heteromale hegemony by questioning the presumption that “men are men” and have a natural right to their privilege. To mediate the crisis “Manthem” depicts metrosexuality as a masquerade, a fiction masking truth (Brod 17). Celebrating a retrograde masculinity eschews the suggestion that men have a gender rather than a sex, presupposing that they—unlike women—act merely on the intrinsic impulses of a “real man” rather than out of concern for social prescription. Advertising that attempts to “restore the balance” by re-asserting men’s social position over women ensconces heteromale as prediscursive, thereby fixing heterosexuality itself as natural to the human experience (Butler 148). Certainly men eating meat does not directly correlate to male anxiety. The commercials discussed here, however, do signify, one, some men’s anxieties as “what it means to be man” diversifies, two, the importance of framing a retrograde masculinity as natural to maintain heteronormativity, and, three, the potential to capitalize on male disquietude. Food has long played a role in instantiating a gender hierarchy: the attempts described here to imply that beef consumption anchors masculinity present only the latest examples.

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Notes

- [1] Deutsch notes this assumption as well, drawing from popular press imagery of male-only Neanderthals cooking meat over fire (109–10).
- [2] Robert Brannon defines traditional masculinity’s core elements as the edicts “no sissy stuff,” “be a big wheel,” “be a sturdy oak,” and “give ’em hell.” Similarly, Nick Trujillo finds that idealized masculinity includes physical force and control, occupational achievement, familial patriarchy, frontiersmanship, and heterosexuality.
- [3] Though the numbers suggested vary, the National Eating Disorders Association (NEDA) finds that in the US as many as 10 million women suffer from bulimia or anorexia. Though equally serious in nature but less so in occurrence, the NEDA also estimates one tenth as many US men as women struggle with those same eating disorders. The National Institute of Mental Health, a division of the National Institute of Health, reports similar statistics regarding the number and prevalence of eating disorders among women over men. The Academy for Eating Disorders underscores the frequency of eating disorders among women, noting that beyond the number of women diagnosed, as many as “10 percent or more of late adolescent and adult women report symptoms of eating disorders.”
- [4] Research shows that some men assimilate their eating behaviors to be more like their wives, which often includes reducing the amount of meat consumed (Sobal 146–47).
- [5] My thanks to John Suits for bringing this reading to my attention.

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