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Volume 16

Issue 1 *The 10th Anniversary of the FWSA  
Essay Competition: New Directions in Feminist  
Studies - Emotions, Activisms, Intersectionality*

Article 3

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November 2014

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### Recommended Citation

Calvert, Amy (2014). You Are What You (M)eat: Explorations of Meat-eating, Masculinity and Masquerade. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 16(1), 18-33.

Available at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol16/iss1/3>

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## You Are What You (M)eat: Explorations of Meat-eating, Masculinity and Masquerade

By Amy Calvert<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

Food consumption is frequently linked to identity and to who we are as individuals, which I explore through the analysis of the US reality television series *Man V. Food*. Through close readings of various scenes, I look at representations of hegemonic masculine performance<sup>2</sup>, and the sexualisation of women and meat. In light of my analysis, I argue that the show is both post-feminist and part of a wider backlash against feminist action. *Man V. Food* is analysed in consideration of the wider phenomena of masculine crisis and backlash against various social movements, specifically recent feminist and vegetarian/vegan movements. This article explores the intersections between the treatment of women and that of nonhuman animals in contemporary Western patriarchal society, and is particularly interested in the gendering of food, specifically meat, as a means of establishing hegemonic male dominance in contemporary Western society.

*Key Words:* Masculinity, Consumption, Performance, Post-Feminism

### Introduction

Much emphasis has been placed on the symbolic significance of what we consume. 'Food is a system of communication, a collection of images, and a cultural set of conventions for usages, situations and behavior' (Willard, 2002:105). According to Deborah Lupton, the link between food, identity and selfhood is vital as: '[f]ood structures what counts as a person in our culture' (*in* Blichfeldt et al., 2012:67). As this suggests, an individual's consumption directly affects how they are perceived. Elspeth Probyn (2000:11) asks insightful questions regarding the linkages between consumption and identity, which I ask in relation to *Man V. Food*: 'in eating, do we confirm our identities, or are our identities reformed, and refracted by what and how we eat?' *Man V. Food* promotes meat, extending the significance of consumption to the construction and confirmation of masculine identity.

The consumption of meat entails the power and domination of the nonhuman animal. Over the centuries, the image of man and meat has prevailed through the paradigm of 'man as hunter'. Philosopher Michael Allen-Fox (1999:25) notes that '[t]his and related forms of self-definition not only identified the entire species with the male half, but also elevated the concept

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<sup>2</sup> I interpret hegemonic masculinity in accordance with Ricciardelli et al.'s definition, as determined by 'discourses of appearances (e.g., strength and size), affects (e.g., work ethic and emotional strength), sexualities (e.g., homosexual vs. heterosexual), behaviors (e.g., violent and assertive), occupations (e.g., valuing career over family and housework) and dominations (e.g., subordination of women and children)' (2010:64-65).

of humans as aggressive, warlike, and predatory'. Thus, meat-eating can be seen to feed into the patriarchal structure of human-male supremacy, celebrating a primitive masculinity and normalising aggressive characteristics by tying them to male, gendered ('natural'), behaviours. 'Eating meat is an activity loaded in symbolism' (Birke, 1994:21), which involves the establishment of a power structure with human-(male)-animals as dominant, nonhuman-(female/feminised)-animals as subordinate. Rhetoric saturated with connotations of the 'natural' and 'normal', deems meat-eating socially acceptable, thus evading critique, and avoiding moral and ethical arguments contesting it. Carol Adams' pioneering work in the field of critical feminist-vegetarian/vegan studies has highlighted the semiotics of meat-eating, demonstrating meat's affiliations with patriarchy, virility and power (2010a, 2010b), and by extension, the cultural connotations of meat are bequeathed upon the devourer of flesh. This article explores the intersections of masculinity and meat, and the treatment of nonhumans and of women. It undertakes this analysis whilst exploring how *Man V. Food* can be understood as post-feminist, and as a response to notions of masculinity in crisis. Here, crisis is understood as a response to civil rights, gay rights, women's rights and anti-war movements in the 60s and 70s, which can all be seen to challenge hegemonic masculinity through destabilising once unquestioned dominance (Rogers, 2009:297).

The emphasis on meat as an important element of the human-male diet highlights the conflation of dominance, meat, masculinity and Western culture: 'Meat is not just central to contemporary Western meals, it is privileged and celebrated as the essence of a meal' (Sobal, 2006:142). This focus on meat resonates with established binary oppositions: man/woman, meat/vegetable, West/East. Therefore, to eat meat is also to consume, and thus embody, dominance. Meat is thereby linked to power, and 'flesh [consequently] provides perhaps the ultimate authentication of human superiority over the rest of nature' (Fiddes *in* Fox, 1999:26). Meat, masculinity and the West are thus identified with power: consuming meat, becomes linked to *becoming masculine*, and to embodying power, while alternative dietary practices are marginalised, mocked and maligned.

Meat serves as a solution to a perceived masculine crisis (Rogers, 2009), enabling a reversion to more primitive masculine performances through conceptualisations of 'man as hunter'. Meat production and consumption are implicated in large scale damage to the environment, with deforestation and the destruction of nonhuman animal's natural habitats continually increasing, for the purpose of producing grain to feed livestock (Goodland, 1997). A vegetarian/vegan diet is increasingly promoted as a more sustainable alternative, one which could also, incidentally, help contribute to reducing world hunger, as '[o]ne acre of cereals can produce twice to ten times as much protein as an acre devoted to beef production' (Goodland, 1997:195). Yet, 'according to the Vegetarian Society, the average British carnivore eats 11,000 animals in a lifetime' (Vidal, 2010). Moreover, global meat consumption has increased, humans consuming 'about 230m tonnes of animals a year, twice as much as we did 30 years ago' (*ibid*).

[A] climate of increased scrutiny toward eating meat combined with public, unsuccessful efforts to restrict meat eating... should create pressure on meat eaters in contemporary Western society to justify their dietary practices. (Rothgerber, 2012:2)

Hank Rothgerber highlights how increasing awareness as to the moral and environmental implications of meat-eating has resulted in greater pressures being placed on meat-eaters to

defend their dietary practices. His study considers how male undergraduates justify a meat-eating diet, exploring how their strategies for justification are gendered. Attempts to destabilise meat-eating as innate, and specifically as being masculine, can result in backlash<sup>3</sup>. Rothgerber's findings may suggest that increased meat-consumption is, at least partially, a backlash against challenges to hegemonic masculine power. It is through this framing of backlash and masculine crisis that *Man V. Food* is analysed and critiqued, exploring the position of men in relation to meat, and vice versa.

### ***Man V. Food***

*Man V. Food* is a programme which stems from a wider proliferation of reality food television in the US, with similar programmes such as *Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives*<sup>4</sup> suggesting a broader context of gendered food production and consumption. Indeed, hyper-masculine performances of meat consumption in particular are pervasive, particularly in fast food advertisements, such as the 'Manthem' advertisement by Burger King (2012), which parodies Helen Reddy's 'I am Woman' song which celebrates female empowerment. *Man V. Food* is a US food-reality television series which was broadcasted in 2008; after the airing of three popular series', it discontinued in 2010. It was originally broadcast on *Travel Channel*, which boasts a multifarious menu of viewing possibilities: 'Adventure experience...Factual travel...Food...Luxury...Travel passions...[and] Lifestyle' (*TravelChannel*, 2013). It has more recently been repeated on *Dave*, a channel whose by-line deems it: 'the home of witty banter' (*Dave*, 2013). The programme is hosted by Adam Richman, an American actor and self-confessed food fanatic. Richman travels to various US states, samples local cuisines, and partakes in supersized food competitions<sup>5</sup>. Generally, the show follows a four-part structure: Richman samples a local delicacy or popular dish; he observes the creation of a supersized food challenge; he attempts the challenge; and the programme concludes with a pseudo-press conference with Richman facing an adoring 'paparazzi' interviewing him about his latest victory or defeat.

Through close semiotic analysis of episodes in the second series, I will consider the links between man and meat through reading the visual, auditory and textual signs within specific scenes in *Man V. Food*. I will investigate to what extent the show is ironic and playful in its representations of masculinity, meat and women, and assess the ramifications of ironic representations within wider social contexts. Although a plethora of scenes were thought-provoking, I decided to take a thematic approach in analysing the segments from episodes, examined in detail below, because of the prevalence of these themes throughout the series, and their social and cultural importance.

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<sup>3</sup> Here, backlash is understood as a rebuttal against challenges to hegemonic masculine power, and an attempt to re-establish patriarchal values. In this example, backlash can be seen through the encouragement of a meat-eating diet, in spite of aforementioned ethical and moral concerns.

<sup>4</sup> A strikingly similar programme to *Man V. Food*, this programme premiered in 2007 on *Food Network*.

<sup>5</sup> These competitions generally consist of plates of food excessive in quantity and calorie intake, considerably more than the average meal with some plates of food weighing around 6lbs.

### **I Am Man: Hear Me Chew**

Pierre Bourdieu (1979:79) states: '[T]he style of meal that people like to offer is no doubt a very good indicator of the image they wish to give or avoid giving to others'. *Man V. Food*'s explicit references to the manliness of meat, and the excessively large portions it displays entail a very specific image of masculinity. If *Man V. Food* offers the impression of manhood being made *through* food, it intimates dominance through the consumption of excessively large portions, and the presence of nonhuman-animal flesh on the plate. *Man V. Food* presents excess as masculine, desirable and aspirational. The tumultuous roars of solidarity between Richman and men in his audience appear to be a unifying call to all men to resist and retaliate against new modes of masculinity, and health movements, which may threaten male dominance. Here, I consider the utilisation of disgust in relation to the foods Richman consumes, and the way he consumes them, as a backlash against a perceived domestication of man, the latter being cast as something which seemingly departs from rugged, 'natural', masculinity. Richman's excessive eating and lack of etiquette can be understood as reactionary against the domesticated (feminised) influences of culinary norms and practices. Richman conjures images of the traditional 1950s male, invoking old phrases such as 'the way to a man's heart is through his stomach'.

In the episode based in Philadelphia, Richman attempts a Cheesesteak Sandwich challenge: a twenty-inch sandwich with steak, cheese and onion, to be eaten within sixty minutes. In preparation for this challenge, Richman is filmed jogging down the street past Independence Hall.<sup>6</sup> This may be evocative of Richman's eating challenges being a fight for male independence, cutting ties from the 'new man', and communicating a desire to return to something commonly understood as more traditionally masculine. The 'new man', in this instance, blurs gender lines; incorporating some stereotypically feminine attributes, such as apparent emotionality (Cambridge Dictionaries Online, 2013). The new man is a divergence from rugged masculinity, often portrayed as resultant of female influences.

Richman's display of athleticism here is somewhat ironic, considering the likely negative health impacts of the food challenges in which he partakes. Such invocation of athleticism is, however, a common trope of the programme. For example, when Richman is asked how he prepares for challenges, both the questions and responses seem to be offered in pseudo-athletic terms, as if Richman were preparing to a run a marathon, as opposed to preparing for marathon-eating.

If I do have a day off I don't eat, or eat very minimally, and I drink a lot of water and club soda to keep my stomach stretched and full and to keep myself hydrated. The most important aspect is that I work out like a beast. I work out like a beast the night before and the morning of [a challenge]. (Richman *in* Norton, 2009)

This pseudo-athleticism is undoubtedly problematic, particularly given recent awareness of the health risks of obesity. Concerns about obesity have been extensively explored in recent

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<sup>6</sup> This is consciously intertextual as the scene emulates a key scene in the popular Hollywood film *Rocky II* (Sylvester Stallone, 1979), in which Rocky Balboa runs up the steps toward Independence Hall, the location where the Declaration of Independence was debated.

publications and films, such as the documentary film *Supersize Me*<sup>7</sup>, which investigates a love affair with fast food, focusing on the US. Such investigations contrast sharply with *Man V. Food*, which does not tackle these issues.

Richman clearly deviates from conventionally 'polite' eating behaviours and table manners, with constant close-ups of Richman's face mid-challenge, sweating, often with sauce on his face and/or clothing. Spicy challenges are particularly interesting, as Richman suffers, often quite graphically. In Sarasota, Florida, Richman faces the 'Fire in Your Hole' chicken wings (*Man V. Food*, 2010g), a challenge he fails to complete due to its severe spice. Richman flouts established rules of acceptable dining by taking multiple bites before proceeding to chew, mouth open, sauce smeared on his cheeks and around his mouth. The heat of the dish causes him to hiccup repeatedly, and he messily articulates the intense heat of the wings, his mouth full of food. Richman's disregard of table manners may be construed as resisting figurations of 'new manliness' and affiliations with domestication. In his manner of eating, Richman appears to reject conventional social practices in food consumption, instead opting to embody a raw, more rugged masculinity through alluding to more primitive, hunter-like, and predatory manners of eating.

### **Backlash with Beef Steak**

Carol Adams highlights how gastronomic rhetoric enables the separation from, and denial of, the origins of meat: 'we do not conjure dead, butchered animals, but cuisine' (2010b:304). Adams refers to the neglected nonhuman as the 'absent referent' (2010a), as the nonhuman-animals are absent, even unmentioned, in relation to meat, in ways that obscure or deny their consumption. Why does meat provide 'the ultimate authentication of human superiority over the rest of nature' (Fiddes *in* Fox, 1999:26)?

[T]he 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 symbol of machismo. (Mayer, *in* Adams, 2010a:57-58)

The preceding quote invokes a grisly and primitive image, indicating how meat is bloodily emblematic of dominance and strength. Meat connotes power in that it signifies domination over nonhumans, reducing the latter to consumable flesh. The naturalisation of a meat-eating diet enacts human supremacy, while links constructed between meat and masculinity extend these connotations, establishing male dominance. Fox (1999:27) concurs: '[M]eat is a highly visible reminder and reinforcer of patriarchal control in all of its manifestations.'

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<sup>7</sup> A film by Morgan Spurlock who experiments upon himself, eating three meals a day in McDonalds for one month. The results of this experiment are shockingly detrimental to Spurlock's health, demonstrating the dangers of unhealthy eating (Spurlock, 2004).

**Figure 1: “The Four Horsemen Burger” (*Man V. Food*, 2010a)**

A recurring theme in *Man V. Food*'s portrayals of masculinity is toughness. Richman is seen to perform one variant or another of 'tough'/hegemonic masculinity in many episodes, which are often identified with stereotypes associated with the location he is visiting. In Las Vegas he impersonates a NASCAR racer; in Philadelphia a boxer; and in Michigan a baseball player (*ManV.Food*, 2010b,h,i). There is a sense of irony around Richman's excessively performative depictions of masculinity. However, irony is mostly overridden by underlying pressures to incorporate the commonalities of the racer, boxer and athlete into accepted and acceptable embodiments of masculinity. The following scene analysis shows Richman in Texas, imitating a Ranger/cowboy.

The scene begins with a shot of a 'Wanted' poster, the 'Four Horsemen Burger', wanted 'well done or bloody' (Fig.1). 'Bloody' is written in bold red lettering, giving it a gruesome appearance. The reward of 'eternal glory' (*ibid*) is clearly intended to be humorous, while simultaneously establishing a connection between glory (honour/acceptance/reverence) and the consumption of meat. 'The Four Horsemen' is a half-pound burger with four varieties of chilli, including the ghost chilli, infamous for its intense heat. Laid-back acoustic guitar music plays and is punctuated by cartoon-like gun shots, encapsulating typified depictions of Texas and the 'Wild West'. Richman states 'the "Four Horsemen" may pack a lot of heat, but so do I' (*Man V. Food*, 2010a). He appears on screen loading a gun, chewing on a match stick, and wearing Ray Ban sunglasses; a cocky half-smile sits on his lips as he steps out onto a shooting range. Richman sets himself up as an opponent for the burger, creating an 'us and them' binary, 'other'ing the burger through its inhumanity. He takes aim, and shoots cheeseburgers being thrown into the air, with brutal electric sounds of heavy metal music accompanying the dull thud of bullet to burger before Richman turns to the "bulls-eye" target boards with burgers emblazoned upon them. Unashamedly ridiculous, this scene is inevitably difficult to critique: a middle-class, white, presumably heterosexual<sup>8</sup> male is shooting cheeseburgers. The irony of this scene is reinforced with Richman's allusion to *Tombstone*, an American Western film from 1993; as he yells

<sup>8</sup> Not an unfounded assumption, Richman makes frequent allusions to women in a heavily sexualised manner which utilises and celebrates the hetero-male objectifying gaze.

aggressively, 'I'm coming for you Four Horsemen burger, and hell's coming with me, ya hear? Hell's coming with me!' (ibid).

The gun is an obvious phallic symbol. Richman fuels the power and influence of the phallus, loading the gun with bullets on camera. Where the phallic gun is seen to shoot the burger, there is an allusion to hierarchical power- man ruling over the nonhuman. The scene is emblematic in the battle of man (read: masculinity) versus food (read: meat). The war-like masculinity represented by *Man V. Food* may also be understood as an endorsement of hegemonic masculinity; Richman's personas demonstrating a readiness to fight to preserve masculine authority. The hyper-masculinised actions of the scene cited above, and others like it, are clearly excessive. The image of a cowboy signals a western phallus, branding the West as masculine, dominant and powerful. Richman's performance of masculinity is informed by a distinctly US version of masculinity, a war-mongering warrior ethos. The scene described is emblematic of the general portrayal of masculinity within the programme as explicitly Western, and specifically American.

Richman's performances also involve a supposedly humorous disparagement of non-hegemonic masculinities. In Boise, Idaho, Richman faces the 'Johnny B Goode' Challenge. A burger weighing over four pounds, plus side dishes and a milkshake are to be consumed within thirty minutes. Richman is served this colossal meal by three waitresses in short skirts and roller skates. He then calls in an effeminate voice: 'umm...I had the salad' (*Man V. Food*, 2010k), and the audience laughs. This caricatured enactment of femininity contrasts with Richman's typically macho self-presentation. This ostensibly humorous moment simultaneously mocks vegetarian/vegan lifestyles, women, and masculinities which deviate from the hegemonic norm. Further, the supposed comedy of the scene reinforces associations between meat and hegemonic masculinity. The treatment of opposing masculinities in *Man V. Food* supports the argument for the programme as part of a backlash in the wake of masculine crisis. Masculinity is strictly regimented within the show, through the performance of specific versions of acceptable (macho 'cowboy') and unacceptable (feminine, non-meat-eating) masculine behaviour.

A study in New Zealand has correlated ethical consumption (a diet free of animal products) with what it identifies as 'ethical sexuality'<sup>9</sup> (Potts and Parry, 2010:54). The article reports that this phenomenon, labelled vegansexuality, was met with great hostility, particularly from 'heterosexual meat-eating men' (2010:53). As authors noted: '[Vegansexuality] stood to impact negatively on the sexual possibilities of omnivorous heterosexual men' (Potts and Parry, 2010:59) and as such, a torrent of abuse ensued, and meat consumption was challenged in a new way that also threatened to topple the tyranny of heteronormative living. One example of this hostility towards vegansexuality is the use of sexual innuendo to undermine the vegetarian/vegan lifestyle, as seen in responses to the study's findings: 'I can't date a girl who won't put sausage in her mouth' (Potts and Parry, 2010:60). Adams' (2010a) observations of meat as a signifier of virility are agonisingly apparent as vegetarians/vegans come to embody a hetero-sexless stereotype by proxy. The preceding dismissal resonates with post-feminist lad culture and banter, blending irony and contempt for non-meat-eaters through ridicule. The suggestion that vegetarians/vegans may not wish to partake in sexual relationships with meat-eaters generated angry dismissals of vegans as 'bitter, unhappy and morbid people [who] possess a paralyzing inability to give or receive love' (Potts and Parry, 2010:60).

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<sup>9</sup> Vegans/vegetarians only engaging in sexual relationships with other vegans/vegetarians.



Hegemonic masculine power is threatened, its practices questioned, and its allegedly innate dominance challenged through the interrogation of the supposedly inherent subjugation of non-dominant 'others'. Lifestyle choices such as vegetarianism/veganism challenge normalised meat-eating practices, presenting a direct challenge to cultural norms (Haenfler et al., 2012:1), and interrogating ideas surrounding human supremacy and the justification of nonhuman exploitation. It becomes apparent that 'dominant subjectivity in patriarchal culture—men's—is constructed through objectifying others' (Adams, 1995:39), as these challenges are met with attempts to degrade and disparage any others, alternative to the idealised human-heterosexual-meat-eating-male.

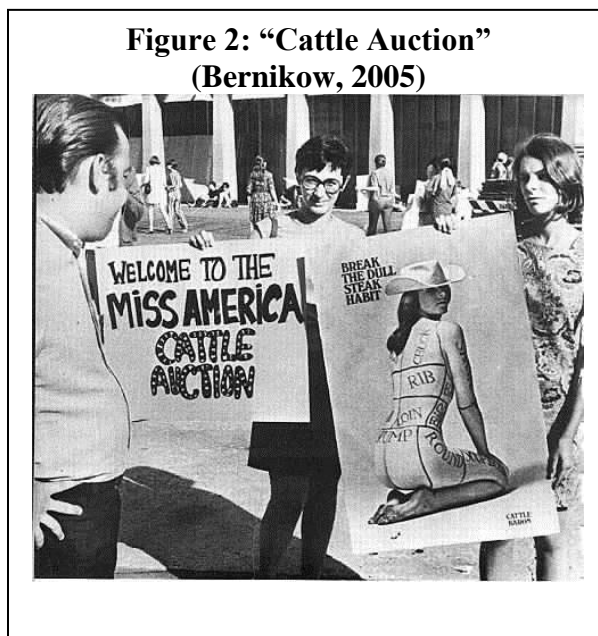
### Dead (Sexy) Meat

'The Great Steak Challenge', filmed in Baltimore, required Richman to devour seventy-four ounces of steak, and side dishes, in one hour. After introducing the challenge, Richman asks the audience 'You wanna know where the beef is?' then roars 'it's on the battlefield!' (*Man V. Food*, 2010m). He stares aggressively into the camera, and throws his arms into the air, twenty dollar bills in his fists. The audience cheers and applauds. Richman appears to have established himself as warrior-like and heroic.

'Where's the Beef?' is a catchphrase from US fast food chain Wendy's (JiroSu, 2006). This phrase was appropriated in the 1984 presidential campaign when Walter Mondale disparaged Gary Hart's policies, asking him scathingly: 'where's the Beef' (Lawford83, 2008). Utilising 'beef' as a metaphor for substance and importance, beef becomes further entangled in notions of dominance and power, and ever more alienated from its sentient origins in nonhuman animal flesh. Adams comments:

[The phrase] confirms the fluidity of the absent referent while reinforcing the extremely specific, assaultive ways in which "meat" is used to refer to women. Part of making "beef" into "meat" is rendering it nonmale. (2010a:75)

Adams elaborates: "'Meat" is made nonmale through violent dismemberment' (ibid). This is reproduced in *Man V. Food*, as the challenge is explained through a primal cuts diagram, showing how the cow is fragmented; the cuts of meat resultant of 'violent dismemberment'. This image is evocative of protests outside Miss America pageants (and Adams' book cover for *The Sexual Politics of Meat*), where protesters challenged the animalisation of contestants, re-appropriating the cuts diagram to reflect the bodily fragmentation of women (Fig.2). In 'The Great Steak Challenge', the status of women and nonhuman animals converge within patriarchy, similarly oppressed because of their inability to conform to hegemonic male ideals, as Richman refers to the filet mignon as 'she' (*Man V. Food*,



2010m). With every mouthful, he demonstrates his command over the now feminised meal, and thus, Richman's masculinity and dominance are enacted.

Word choice is crucial in *Man V. Food*, given the strong sexual overtones to various descriptions of food described in the programme. Richman reinforces male dominance through reducing women and nonhumans to the body. There are references to the 'biggest buns in Texas' (*Man V. Food*, 2010a) and 'hot and juicy crawfish' (*Man V. Food*, 2010b), which demonstrate a clear blurring distinctions between nonhumans-as-food and women, and enacting sexual objectification. Nigella Lawson coined the term 'gastropornographers' (*in Probyn*, 2000:59) to characterise recent sexualised food fixations, as a term which refers to the intensive cultural investment in preparing, cooking and consuming food. Body-only perceptions of women have become normalised in contemporary Western cultures, indeed it is even encouraged (Gill, 2010; Walter, 2009). Hence, there are countless references to the female form as a series of parts, or indeed, 'cuts' to be gazed upon or consumed. This objectification intersects with food consumption, specifically the consumption of meat, resulting in patterns of reinforcing oppression for both nonhuman animals as they become sexualised, and women as they are animalised (Adams, 2010a).

In Charleston, South Carolina, Richman narrates a scene which describes the creation of the 'Big Nasty' sandwich, a sandwich which, I argue, serves as an emblem of tradition and which invokes nostalgia. The scene begins with the triumphant chords of organ music and bells, evoking religious rituals, and depicting the 'Big Nasty' as something sacred and saint-like, deeply rooted within tradition. The sandwich consists of a chicken breast fried in bacon-infused oil, cheesy sausage sauce and cheddar cheese. As the sandwich is described, the gentle vocals of a church choir aid in the perpetuation of the divinity of the 'Big Nasty', identifying the sandwich as salvation.

During the cooking process Richman states 'this is going to be sexy' (*Man V. Food*, 2010c), deploying language which has traditionally been used in relation to women. This comment is also in light of ostensible discovery of the traditional method of frying chicken in a pan, rather than in a deep-fat-fryer. This may signal a desire to return to tradition in more than just cookery practices. Indeed, it also seems to indicate a reversion to traditional gender roles involving representations of women as decorative objects to-be-looked-at (Mulvey, 1989). The backing music at this point is seductively smooth jazz music with female vocals, endowing the sandwich with a provocative subtext, tantalising both sexual and gastronomic appetites. It is to-be-looked-at by the male voyeur, offering a visually appealing promise of sexual and appetitive gratification. The scene concludes with Richman stating 'I officially found a sandwich I wanna make love to' (*ibid*), recognising the convergence between the female and nonhuman-animal-as-food categories. As Kheel observes:

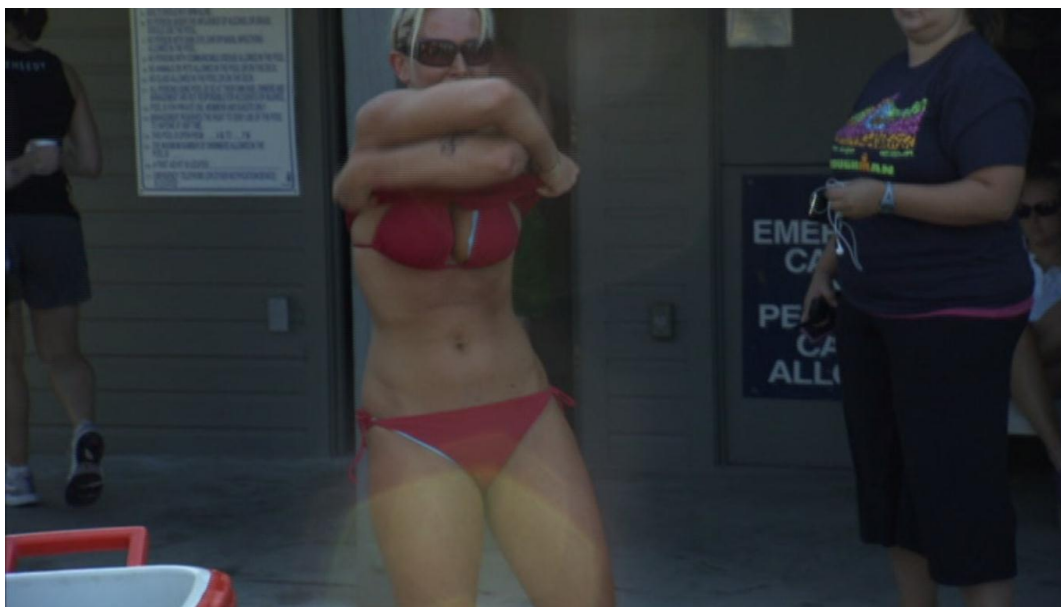
'Men consume women's bodies in sex shows, houses of prostitution, and pornographic magazines. Their sexual "appetites" are aroused by women's bodies in the same way that their taste buds are aroused by animal flesh'. (2004:334)

Richman illustrates this behaviour directly in the programme, as indicated by this declaration: 'I officially found a sandwich I wanna make love to' (*Man V. Food*, 2010c). And so, the connotations of meat as a source of virility has bled into descriptors for meat itself.

### The Post-Feminist Woman: The Empowerment Fallacy

The subordination of women and femininity is a prevalent trope in *Man V. Food*, with the use of objectifying innuendo and focus upon conventional norms of feminine ‘beauty’ (Wolf, 1991). Countless examples of this highlight a desire to condemn women to a two-dimensional existence, where the embodiment of femininity through acceptable appearance is represented as crucial. Amongst the audience from *Man V. Food*, women are in the minority. Nevertheless, those there encourage Richman to succeed in the challenges, restricted to supportive roles which disable female agency and independence. Women frequently cheer Richman on, offering encouragement through a kiss on the cheek, and flattering his ego (as one female audience member commented: ‘you’re a rock star’ (*Man V. Food*, 2010l)). The ambivalence of a kiss on the cheek offers an interesting tension, and impossible contradiction, between motherly nurturance and sexualised subordination. This is something that women must negotiate daily, and the pressures to embody both are clearly reflected in the ambiguity of a kiss on the cheek. This section aims to explore the figuring of women in *Man V. Food* more closely, complicating notions of ‘choice’ in a post-feminist era.

**Figure 3: “The best part of the whole show” (*Man V. Food*, 2010e)**



In Durham, North Carolina, Richman and three fellow competitors (two male athletes, one female cheerleader-Tiffany) partake in ‘The Doughman’—a fifteen mile relay consisting of running, cycling, swimming and eating. Prior to the scene of the above quotation, Richman gathers his comrades to discuss tactics for the challenge, instructing Tiffany: ‘I want you to strip into that bikini as *slowly* as possible’ (*Man V. Food*, 2010e). This statement seems superficially ironic and playful; however, there is an underlying perpetuation of sexism and female objectification. Tiffany, the only female of the group, is seen to strip down to her bikini before entering into the swimming portion of the race (Fig.3). Richman states ‘this is the best part of the whole show’ (ibid) as suggestive, brassy, trumpeting music, simulating ‘The Stripper’ by David Rose and His Orchestra (Scratchyoldies, 2011) reinforces Tiffany’s role as sexual object, to-be-looked-at and fragmented by the male gaze (Mulvey, 1989). The pace slows as Tiffany jogs to

the edge of the pool, her slim, toned, and bronzed body the focus of the camera. Her red bikini is undeniably *Baywatch*-esque<sup>10</sup>, inviting, encouraging, even enforcing the heterosexual desiring male gaze upon her. Tiffany jumps into the pool, and Richman says ‘you’re welcome America’ (*Man V. Food*, 2010e), as if he has done America a great service in creating a scenario where Tiffany was required to ‘bare all’. This further implies that the male gaze is celebratory, and the audience (constructed as heterosexual and male) should be grateful for the preceding the objectification of women.

Post-feminism is a complicated term which alludes to various movements and attitudes. The above scene is particularly evocative of what Genz and Brabon term ‘do-me feminism’ (2009:91); a standpoint of seeing ‘[apparent] sexual freedom as the key to female independence and emancipation’ (ibid). It is recurrently argued that contemporary Western women today are knowingly and freely opting to display their bodies, making themselves ‘desiring subjects’ (ibid), doing so in a playful and ironic manner. Inciting the male gaze has been re-shaped as positive for women, who are in control of their own bodies, and allegedly empowered by a new-found status of ‘to-be-looked-at-ness’ (Mulvey, 1989:25). This is, however, incredibly problematic, since such claims of sexual empowerment are not fuelled by freedom, but by misogynistic narrowings of femininity. This was evident in a study undertaken by Natasha Walter, who interviewed women involved in the sex industry. Many of these women had entered into this work under the impression there was something liberating about it, but in reality finding something entirely different: ‘She was shocked to discover quite how demeaning and dehumanising she found the work [lap-dancing]’ (Walter,2010:6). In this, we see how being-looked-at is not necessarily empowering. Tiffany’s body is an archetype for the contemporary female ideal-slim, toned and tanned. One cannot help but wonder whether Richman would dub a semi-naked female who did not coincide with this physicality the ‘best part of the show’. Indeed, while Tiffany’s figure is foregrounded, another female figure stands in the background, her face cut out of the shot. This second female does not seem to conform to the idealised female form. She has been cast in shadow, and hence, this figure may serve as a reminder of the investment in the ideal of the slender female body.

## Conclusions

### *Authentic Masculinity: Community and Space*

Asserting his dominance through depictions of power, strength and virility, Richman is represented as an aspirational figure for male audiences. I have considered masculine crisis as a mode of challenging new non-hegemonic conceptualisations of masculinity, specifically aforementioned notions of gender blending, through the reassertion of traditional constructions of manliness, and the resistance of alternative masculinities. Tragos’ (2009:547) findings<sup>11</sup> depicted American car programmes as a ‘safe retreat’ to re-enact traditional masculinity. He emphasises that this retreat is temporary, lasting only the length of an episode (ibid), bookended by ‘real life’. It is possible that *Man V. Food* provides a similarly momentary escape from a perceived masculine crisis. *Man V. Food* represents travel to various US states and it involves shooting in public areas such as restaurants. It creates hyper-masculinised spaces through hyperbolic performances of masculinity in everyday spaces, which help to naturalise these

<sup>10</sup> *Baywatch* was a US drama series broadcasted in the 1990s. The series’ revolved around the activities of a set of life guards known for their signature red bathing suits.

<sup>11</sup> Researching television programmes set in a masculine domain *American Chopper* and *Monster Garage*.

behaviours. Each state and each space visited is imbued with hyper-masculinity through association with the programme, and thus the US, and more broadly, the West, is hyper-masculinised. The solidarity created between Richman and male members of the on-screen and off-screen audiences creates an imagined community of aspiring-to-be-hegemonic men. Influenced by gender, class, race and ultimately, power, they unite through a mutual defiance against domesticated control, celebrating a wild, primitive mode of masculine performance, as highlighted by their supportive chants: 'Do it, do it' and 'Man versus meat' (*Man V. Food*, 2010a,h).

The authority of hegemonic masculinity is continuously reiterated throughout the *Man V. Food* series. The war-like rhetoric is so ridiculous it enables the programme refuge from critique because it is represented as blatantly banter-esque. The summoning of conventionally masculine figures, like the cowboy or boxer, attempt to resurrect traditional embodiments of masculinity, encouraging the perpetuation of aggressive, dominant behaviours as 'properly' masculine. Richman's actions may be seen to call for the solidarity of fellow men, refuting contemporary figurations of the 'new man'.

### *Playful, Protest, A Problem?*

The tension of irony and seriousness is a common trope of *Man V. Food*; it is elusive, and difficult to critique because of the distinctly playful façade the programme purports. *Man V. Food*, and programmes like it, are troublesome due to the near-impossible feat of unveiling where the playfulness ends. 'Banter' is a prevalent motif of post-feminist 'lad' culture. 'Unilad' is a website for male students to share ironic anecdotes intended as amusing. The website was temporarily closed due to some rape 'banter'<sup>12</sup> which resulted in an onslaught of criticism and complaint (Wiseman, 2010). While *Man V. Food* does not make any references to violent sexual assault, the programme is targeting the 'Unilad' audience, and promotes 'banter' as a supposed source of comedy value. The witty veneer in *Man V. Food* glosses over deep-rooted and dangerous power structures of human-male supremacy; upholding hegemonic ideals through the ironic subordination of women and stereotypically feminine performances, heterosexist declarations, and the naturalisation of nonhuman-animal exploitation.

To conclude, *Man V. Food* aims to re-establish traditional understandings of gendered behaviours, it also promotes the subordination of women, nonhumans and non-heterosexuals in the process. I have presented *Man V. Food* as multiply entangled in post-feminist conceptions of irony, and considering the programme as part of a wider context of masculine crisis and backlash. I believe that *Man V. Food* employs irony and banter in promoting hegemonic-masculine ideals in a light-hearted fashion that deflects criticism. Given that it pre-empts critique, it encourages nostalgically based investments in traditional masculinity. *Man V. Food* promotes not only a particular version of masculinity, but it also disparages and degrades alternative identities, behaviours and traits diverging from the hegemonic masculine norm.

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<sup>12</sup> "If the girl you've taken for a drink... won't spread for your head, think about this mathematical statistic," they wrote, "85% of rape cases go unreported. That seems to be fairly good odds." (Wiseman, *The Guardian*, 2010)

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