

ALT-BURGER

Transforming Populist Food Systems

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Abstract

This article argues that there exists a problematic nexus between the industrial livestock industry, US food system policies, and American propagandist literature. The essay's specific aim is to transform carnivorous appetites by subverting the integrity of America's national gastronomic emblem – the hamburger. The article examines how hamburgers are unsustainable food system commodities that exacerbate state-sanctioned climate change, analyzes the underpinnings of ecophobic beef literature—specifically the graphic narrative—that serves as state propaganda, and shows how American comics can alternately promote sustainability nexuses by creating awareness of how food systems impact climate change.

Keywords

American propaganda; Bob's Burgers; climate change; Fox Broadcasting Network; hamburger; Industrial Livestock

About the Author

Sophie Christman earned her Ph.D. in English Literature at SUNY Stony Brook University. Her research areas include: nineteenth-century literature, environmental humanities, and ecocinema studies. She recently authored the "Foreword" for *The Ecophobia Hypothesis* (Routledge 2018) and her scholarship has been published in *Adaptation*, *Dickens Studies Annual*, *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, *The Journal of Ecocriticism*, and the *Journal of International Comparative Literature*. Her co-authored article "The Climate of Ecocinema" appears in *The Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Communication*. She has been an invited speaker at the Consortium of Humanities Centers and Institutes (CHCI) Annual Meeting in Hong Kong, the Humanities NY Environmental Stewardship Seminar, the Friends of Dickens NY, and the CUNY Victorian Seminar (forthcoming). She has been the principal and co-principal investigator on numerous federal, state, and local grants. She is currently at work on a monograph entitled "The Sustainable Citizen." More information about her scholarship can be found at: drsophiechristman.net.

Long before the twenty-first century preoccupation with climate change, Shakespeare registered the negative effects of humanity's carnivorous appetites when, in *Twelfth Night*, Sir Andrew Aguecheek admits his overconsuming ways to Toby Belch: Aguecheek admits "I am a great eater of beef and I believe that does harm to my wit" (Act I, Scene 3). Even in Shakespeare's fifteenth-century magical land of Illyria, the febrile Aguecheek—a character who is generally regarded as a dunce—was mindful to the negative effects of eating too much meat.

Shakespeare's folly on elite gastronomic appetites is, ironically, an amusement that is nowadays encoded in tragedy since today's global food systems exacerbate climate change through their exploitation of industrial livestock. While Aguecheek's epiphany in *Twelfth Night* acknowledged that his unrestrained appetite for meat spawned a dim wit, modern science has lately proven that beef-eating people are bad for the planet; in short, we humans must transform our gustatory appetites for non-human animals—particularly beef—in order to combat climate change in the Anthropocene.

Food studies' scholars in this special volume of *Kritika Kultura* have done important work theorizing how gastronomic discourses are entangled in canonic literary narratives. This article enhances those conversations by exploring what scholars might consider as literature's less sophisticated and undervalued populist cultural products.¹ "Alt-Burger" utilizes cultural criticism and literary case studies to argue that there exists a problematic nexus between the industrial livestock industry, US food system policies, and American propagandist literature. In this essay, my specific aim is to transform carnivorous appetites by subverting the integrity of America's national gastronomic emblem – the hamburger. To work towards the normalization of alternative non-beef burgers, the article examines the ways in which beef hamburgers can be dubbed as unsustainable food system commodities that hasten state-sanctioned climate change; I evidence how hamburgers are proven instigators of global warming, and how the US beef industry intersects with and receives substantial support from US farm and export policies. I then analyze the ecophobic underpinnings of beef literature that function as propaganda for state policies. I show how the graphic narrative—the comic book—targets mass audiences to destabilize emerging sustainability discourses in response to neoliberal governmental food policies. I argue that graphic narratives, such as the American comic book series *Bob's Burgers*, are serviceable to popular culture in authorizing nationalist modes of ecophobia;² the article concludes by acknowledging that although comics can act as apparati to the state, they can also promote sustainability nexuses by creating awareness of what Ann Kaplan and I have recently termed as "climate change populism" ("The Climate of Ecocinema" 3). Climate change populism is defined as a "global social condition where ordinary people embody and act on an emerging awareness of the destructive human

behaviors that cause climate change,” an example of which is a consumer’s decision to reduce or eliminate carnivory in the diet (“The Climate of Ecocinema” 3). To demonstrate the cultural value of popular climate change comics, the article claims that Chris Madden’s cartoons in *The Beast that Ate the Earth* can promote both stewardship and transformational alternatives to beef food systems by igniting cognitive realignments that spur the mass behaviour changes needed to reduce global warming.

Hamburgers promote climate change; the American hamburger arrived from Western Europe in a mid-nineteenth century *Westward Ho!* moment when the “economic, geographic, and industrial factors combined to favour cow flesh over pig flesh and to deliver this cow flesh to growing markets” (Adams, *Burger* 5). One hundred and fifty years later, US corporate megaliths have systematized the mass industrialization of bovine bodies sanctioned through infrastructures of corporate capitalism that target the working classes; national corporations such as Burger King, McDonald’s, Wendy’s, and White Castle have secured the beef patty as an American institution, where 48 billion burgers are eaten in the United States every year (Barksdale, “Hamburger Helpers: The History of America’s Favorite Sandwich”).

The average American, according to *The Hidden Cost of Hamburgers*, eats three burgers per week, or one hundred and fifty-six burgers each year; this beef consumption shows that Americans consume three times more meat than people in other countries—a statistic that, in terms of greenhouse gas emissions, suggests the global need for Americans to shift their disproportionate overconsumption of beef. As an industrialized nation, America has led an unsustainable global trend towards the Western-style diet, that is, according to Janet Ranganathan, et al, “high in calories, protein, and animal-based foods” (1). In “Shifting Diets for a Sustainable Food Future,” Ranganathan’s global socioeconomic perspective notes that

...at least 3 billion people are expected to join the global middle class by 2030. As nations urbanize and citizens become wealthier, people generally increase their calorie intake and the share of resource-intensive foods—such as meats and dairy—in their diets.” (1)

As Simon C. Estok has shown in *The Ecophobia Hypothesis*, “the very concept of the fully industrialized nation has at its core an ethics of meat” (92). The practice of meat-eating is a normalized form of ecophobia. Ecophobia, argues Estok, exists

on a spectrum and can embody fear, contempt, indifference, or lack of mindfulness (or some combination of these) towards the natural environment. While its genetic origins have functioned, in part, to preserve our species, the ecophobic condition has

also greatly serviced growth economies and ideological interests. Often a product of behaviors serviceable in the past but destructive in the present it is also sometimes a product of the perceived requirements of our seemingly exponential growth. (1)

In the carbon economies of the twenty-first century, ecophobia has become a systematized, invisible appendage to the American human condition. As Estok reminds us, ecophobia embodies modes of “contempt” and “indifference,” particularly in societal food systems that exploit non-human, unenfranchised animals at the expense of planetary health. Estok is correct in arguing that “meat represents the ecophobic condition at its most global extreme because of the absolute nonchalance toward nature’s non-human bodies that are desecrated in the industrial-meat industry” (92). Since ecophobia is due, in large part, to neoliberal growth economies that target mass market consumers, it is fruitful to study the ways in which mass market literature impacts food systems by exploiting non-human animals within the twenty-first century’s food holocausts. Today there is a global urgency to recalibrate unsustainable food systems by challenging the human affinity for beef in order to curb global warming. “As consumers,” Darra Goldstein explains, “we’ve become increasingly sophisticated about what we eat but we also need to become more articulate about our food to be aware of its sources and uses, and not merely on a culinary level” (iv). More than just a culinary process, food acts as a cultural force in American society.

In her chapter “Citizen Burger,” Adams reminds us of the civic lineage of the term: “Burgher: citizen of the city” (1). Deploying a metonymic leap to conflate citizenship with the beloved hamburger, she goes on to note that the American beef patty “is the citizen’s *economic* food choice, the everyman’s lowest common denominator” (emph. mine 1). Adams’ rationalization indicates that inherent in American patriotism there exists a personal pledge to its iconic emblems such as the nation’s flag and its national bird symbol, the bald eagle. In addition to the ways in which citizens ascribe to these emblems, one’s patriotism is largely performed through participation in the US economy—specifically through consumption of symbolic national foods such as apple pie, hot dogs, and hamburgers.

American citizens are strategically groomed to participate in a type of privileged US corporate capitalism based on consuming the flesh of non-human animals—whose species’ status has heretofore excluded them from the rights of citizenship—and who are bred specifically for human gustatory consumption.³ Today’s citizens of the Anthropocene must become cognizant of end climate times and work towards global modes of sustainable citizenship. Whether enfranchised as individual citizens or corporate ones, citizens in a growing number of nations are legislated rights to a healthy planet. Along with these rights, citizens must also extend a responsible duty of care over the earth’s environment.⁴

Since its corporate beginnings in 1955, McDonalds has posed as a promoter of literacy in order to indoctrinate children towards carnivority. The company's most recent corporate manoeuvre includes expanding its Happy Meal brand into literary and online platforms that target children. To launch their new literary platform, McDonalds US recently joined forces with HarperCollins Publishers to offer selected children's books as part of Happy Meals. In 2017, to capitalize on America's National Literacy Month that occurs each September, Harper included a free miniature-sized book, including *Amelia Bedelia's First Day of School* and *If You Take a Mouse to School* in each Happy Meal. The rationale, according to the publisher's website, is to "help make book ownership more accessible to children." This corporate marketing strategy, while admittedly encouraging education through access to reading, promotes the unsustainability of US food systems by targeting carnivority to America's poorest consumers.

To bolster the Happy Meal brand on a digital platform, the new Happy Meal toys contain additional surprises when children scan them using digital devices. The "surprises" include online videos, drawing apps, play activities, and links to the Happy Meal website that urge children to

...think of Happymeal.com as an online version of everything you love about the Happy Meal. It's always fun and full of positive, empowering messages.... It also promotes active lifestyles and balanced eating choices, such as apple slices and low-fat dairy with awesome music videos, games and other activities. ("Spark Imagination and Creativity Through Play!")

Urging child consumers to overlook the ways in which flesh economics are unsustainable, the company markets its kids' meals as value-added through the company's digital enhancements.⁵ Both the literature and digital products produced by McDonald's to target child consumers wholly ignore the problem of sustainability.

This type of methodical consumer grooming in the American burger industry shares similarities with the pederastic grooming practices of child sexual predators. Child sexual predators groom children for exploitation by first targeting them, then gaining their trust, and oftentimes isolating the victim to access and exploit the child. In a somewhat similar fashion, McDonald's uniquely targets each child with its "Happy Meal" brand, gains the child's trust with both a toy and the quirky mascot clown Ronald McDonald, and even isolates children in separate play areas to exploit their consumer experiences. It is important to note that corporate grooming practices do not specifically sexualize the corporate/child relationship, but rather, fast food burger chains aim to *commodify* their relationships with children as they mature to adulthood. By exploiting the various stages of childhood,

children themselves become economically valuable as commodities within the McDonald's corporate gamebook. The commodification of children, like the type that occurs at McDonald's, is a repellent business practice that should be widely viewed as taboo.⁶

Fast food burger franchises require grooming models that promote addictive behaviors to ensure return consumerism. In this case, McDonald's developed a model for the commodification of child consumers similar to ones developed by cigarette companies such as RJ Reynolds and Philip Morris, who encouraged candy cigarettes to promote mass adult smoking behaviors (Klein and St. Clair 362). The generational revenue strategy of corporations like McDonalds involves first ensuring that a child eating a Happy Meal will emerge as an adult who will happily consume not one, but "two all-beef patties, special sauce, lettuce, cheese, pickles, onions on a sesame seed bun," thus intentionally indoctrinating their youngest customers into lifetime habits of overconsumption (Clifford C1).

As Elisabeth Eaves has recently warned in the *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists*, gourmands who regularly consume hamburgers must realize that the patties always come with a side of "climate change":

...livestock are responsible for 12 percent of planet-warming greenhouse gases. Red meat animals, especially the bovine kind, are among the worst offenders. Cattle raised for US consumption emit about 5.5 billion pounds of methane a year. And methane, while it doesn't stay in the atmosphere for as long as carbon dioxide, warms it at 86 times the rate. Cows, moreover, are awfully inefficient calorie-production machines: They convert only 1 percent of all that grass they eat into energy humans can consume.

Science, as Eaves shows, has proven the deleterious global effects of US beef production on global warming and climate change. Instead of taking corporate responsibility for their polluting products that negatively impact global health, the corporate megaliths place the responsibility onto individual US consumers. Mass media has taken the scientific evidence and put it in plain terms for consciousness-raising in the public sphere: in the "Food for 9 Billion" project's YouTube video *The Hidden Cost of Hamburgers*, the unsustainability of beef is clear—American cows annually produce more greenhouse gas than 22 million automobiles. And one McDonald's quarter pounder creates a whopping six and a half pounds of greenhouse gases. So why hasn't the US enacted a duty of care to protect its citizens by enacting agricultural legislation that would remediate beef policies? The reason lies with the 1970s Farm Act, which subsidized US feed grains such as corn.

Today's US food policies are influenced by global agribusiness companies and international food sellers who influence US food policy. The US beef industry has

been aided and abetted through enactment of the many Congressional Farm Bills that have been legislated in the United States; The Agricultural Act of 1970, whose goal was to “establish improved programs for the benefit of producers and consumers of dairy products, wool, wheat, feed grains, cotton, and other commodities,” engaged in a system of loans and purchases to US feed-grain farmers in order to “encourage the exportation of feed grains” and to control national and international food stocks (1368).⁷ As Rachel Carson noted long ago in her polemical *Silent Spring*, which critiques the burgeoning pesticide use in American agricultural practices:

We are told that the enormous and expanding use of pesticides is necessary to maintain farm production. Yet is our real problem not one of overproduction? Our farms, despite measures to remove acreages from production and to pay farmers not to produce, have yielded such a staggering excess of crops that the American taxpayer in 1962 is paying out more than one billion dollars a year as the total carrying cost of the surplus-food storage program. (9)

Carson, writing eight years before the Agricultural Act was signed into law, reveals an emerging trend that has since become embedded in US agricultural policy. The US Government subsidizes the nation’s farmers in order to overproduce feed crops, including corn, to enhance the production capabilities of livestock farms. In the mid-twentieth century, the industrial livestock industry began to mass produce beef consumer goods by “confining extraordinary numbers of farm animals and mechanizing their oversight” and by feeding them crops such as corn (Moses and Tomaselli 186).

A problem is created when cows eat corn, since the ruminants are herbivores—meaning their gastrointestinal systems have evolved to *only* digest grass. Plying beef cows with a corn and grain-based diet has helped caused an exponential global rise in livestock emissions of methane, a gas that, as Nathan Fiala has noted, has “roughly 23 times the global-warming potential of CO₂” (72). Methane is produced both by animal waste and the animals themselves. The transformation from small agricultural grazing systems to large scale industrialized feed stock systems has largely exacerbated the effects of global warming.

Today, the US has almost a half a million concentrated animal feeding operations, commonly known as CAFOs.⁸ According to Moses and Tomaselli, CAFOs exist to “increase profits for large-scale producers... at the expense of the public, which shoulders the hidden costs of CAFOs through federal subsidies, environmental degradation, and public health impacts, as well as at the expense of farm animals’ welfare” (186). What would American citizens think, if they became aware that CAFO-farmed animals are engorged with antibiotics and hormones, excreting upwards of 80% into the nation’s waterways—more than two times the excretion

rate of humans—a rate that exceeds “the carrying capacity of the land around them”? (187) As Moses and Tomaseli explain:

Every year, CAFOs produce hundreds of millions of tons of animal manure and wastewater, which they commonly dispose of by applying it to nearby fields or shipping it offsite. According to the federal government, CAFO waste contains various toxic pollutants, including nutrients like nitrogen and phosphorus; solid manure and materials mixed with manure, such as bedding and litter, spilled feed, hair, feathers, and animal corpses; pathogens; potentially toxic trace elements like arsenic; odorous/volatile compounds like carbon dioxide, methane, and ammonia; antibiotics; and drugs, pesticides, and hormones. CAFOs commonly apply manure to land far in excess of what the land can absorb, so excess waste runs off into waterways, polluting the water and causing algal blooms that harm aquatic plants, kill fish, and ultimately contribute to “dead zones” that are largely uninhabitable for aquatic organisms and affect an estimated 173,000 miles of U.S. waterways. CAFO-generated pollutants also enter the environment through overflows from waste storage, leaching into soil and ground water, and volatilization of hazardous compounds. Through these routes and others, agriculture is the leading contributor of pollutants to identified water quality impairments in American rivers and streams. (188)

Beef cows, in particular, utilize over thirty percent of Earth’s landmass and they require over 1800 gallons of water to produce one pound of beef. As Petr Havlik, et al. note “livestock are responsible for 12% of anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions” (3709). Cow manure is, in fact, responsible for two-thirds of all nitrous oxide pollution in the world.⁹

The World Resource Institute Report, “Shifting Diets for a Sustainable Food Future,” indicates worldwide consumption of animal-based protein will “rise by nearly 80 percent between 2006 and 2050” (3). As Bobby Magill notes about the report in his article “Studies Show Link Between Red Meat and Climate Change,” it is clear “that reducing heavy red meat consumption—primarily beef and lamb—would lead to a per capita food and land use-related greenhouse gas emissions reduction of between 15 and 35 percent by 2050. Going vegetarian could reduce those per capita emissions by half.”

The US Department of Agriculture (USDA) has admitted that America is the “world’s largest producer of beef” (Knight and Chalise). It is alarming, therefore, that in a 2018 USDA report, American per capita use of red meat (including beef and pork) is “projected to rise from roughly 218 pounds per person in 2017 to 222 pounds by 2027” (O’Donoghue, Hansen, and Stallings 44). As the report states, this projected rise in red meat “represents a return to pre-Great Recession availability levels” (44). Although the US could choose to lead food sustainability practices

in the world, it will instead increase its red meat exports in the next ten years to enhance its revenues from exploitation of transnational food systems – currently a \$74 billion industry. As Fiala has evidenced in his now classic *Scientific American* article “The Greenhouse Hamburger,” the world is growing more and more carnivorous:

World beef production is increasing at a rate of about 1 percent a year, in part because of population growth but also because of greater per capita demand in many countries. Economic analysis shows that if all beef were produced under the economically efficient feedlot, or CAFO (concentrated animal feeding operation), system—which generates fewer greenhouse emissions than many other common husbandry systems do—beef production by 2030 would still release 1.3 billion tons of CO₂-equivalent greenhouse gases. If current projections of beef consumption are correct, even under the feedlot production system the buildup of CO₂-equivalent greenhouse gases could amount to 26 billion tons in the next 21 years. (74)

Fiala points to the lack of large-scale systems thinking in US food policy. Rather than engage in needed beef mitigation practices, the current conservative administration of Donald Trump has decided to lift US beef export bans. This policy amounts to basing, in part, the US economy on exported beef products. As Ranganathan, et al. note, “beef uses more land and freshwater and generates more greenhouse gas emissions per unit of protein than any other commonly consumed food” (6). This, in turn, creates the governmental need for a broad public consent that acknowledges beef as an acceptable food choice, and therefore creates the need for propaganda to achieve public compliance.

The TV Sitcom *Bob’s Burgers* is a propaganda tool of the conservative Fox Network and has helped achieve public compliance with the beef industry. When in summer 2018 retired Army Lieutenant Colonel Ralph Peters called his former employer The Fox News Channel “a destructive propaganda machine,” he was referring to the network’s conservative political news bias that has recently helped undermine the democratic system of checks and balances in the United States (Haag, “Former Fox News Analyst”). But in addition to its news analysis, of which many segments feature fake or biased news stories, the network—founded in 1986 and now overseeing a contemporary broadcast base to 80% of American homes—has arrived as a formidable American force for entertainment programming that embodies historically conservative American values.

The network’s subtle influence over American mass media often conflates propagandist entertainment programming that is conformist in nature with more subversive material that represents patriarchs as incompetent fools in shows such as *Family Guy*, *King of the Hill*, *Married with Children*, and *The Simpsons*—the

longest running animated tv series in US history.¹⁰ All of these television shows take the lower-class family unit as their cast of characters, where misogyny often reigns through the preservation of male hierarchies. Though these shows are considered right-wing, the recent *Bob's Burgers* sitcom stands politically at center-left and offers complex critiques of American culture and corporate ideologies. Fox's center-left strategy is all the more dangerous since its ability to incorporate and accommodate subversive material such as feminist and queer discourses exists as a toxic strength when targeting centrist or center-left audiences who vote.

In 2011, Fox Network launched the animated situation comedy *Bob's Burgers*, a show that portrays hamburgers as humorous. Its themes normalize the everyday practice of eating hamburgers as an economical and practical response to busy working-class family life. The use of animation within a comedy genre offers a humorous portrayal of hamburger discourses that undermines the unsustainability of beef food systems. Comedy that invites laughter, in particular, invokes a type of audience participation that downplays the serious reality of beef as an unsustainable food source. The technique of animation, according to Deirdre M. Pike, offers a "pseudo-environment" through a type of "unreality" that denies subjectivity. Recovering the work of propagandist Walter Lippman, Pike notes that the ways in which reality are represented can be utilized as a "tool of social control" (23). *Bob's Burgers* was created by Loren Bouchard and, ironically, is named as part of the *Animation Domination* series that replaced *The King of Hill* and *Family Guy*. Fox's moniker for the series *Animation Domination* quite blatantly projects its mission onto viewers.

Like Army Lieutenant Colonel Ralph Peters, Bouchard has recently criticized his employer Fox for inflammatory rhetoric; in a June 2018 tweet, Bouchard cited his gratitude to the network for airing his animation series, but he also chided it for spreading "fear and lies." Bouchard also criticized First Lady Melania Trump's notorious "I Really Don't Care, Do U?" jacket, but given how his show's primary subject matter, the hamburger, exacerbates climate change, Bouchard should don the jacket since his duty of care towards the planet is absent. The popular show will start its ninth season in the fall of 2018.

The first episode introduces the characters of Bob and Linda Belcher and their children Tina, Gene, and Louise. Bob's hamburger restaurant is set near Ocean City, NJ on the US Atlantic Coast. Although Bob's character is less absurd than Fox's other cartoon patriarchs, the foregrounding of the beef industry may signal a cultural shift to the right. Depending on the socioeconomic status of the viewer, *Bob's Burgers* can be understood as a narrative full of thematic taboos that alternately amuse or mock lower socio-economic classes.

The show's first episode cleverly exposes the grotesque ironies of burger production and consumption by juxtaposing carnivory with cannibalism; in the sitcom's inaugural opening sequence entitled "Human Flesh" that occurs on Labor Day weekend, the working-class Belcher family appear outside their hamburger store, situated in a building between a funeral home/crematorium and an animal rights organization called PFETA—a spoof on the global organization People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, or PETA. This establishing shot frames a dialectic that contrasts the dilemma between varying duties of care for both living non-human animals and dead human ones as they pivot on the levers of capitalist livestock economies. The struggles of the working class are mocked when the Belchers must reopen their store three times as a result of fire, rat infestation and a utility pole that had collapsed into their store.

The setting occurs on Labor Day weekend (significant for the American *working-class*), where Bob recruits the family to "sell some burgers!" His daughter Louise touts the Burger of Day that is macabrely called the "Child Molester. Comes with Candy. \$5.95." The restaurant has encountered multiple past health violations, and rumors abound that their hamburger ingredients contain remains from the nearby crematorium. Parodying the Food and Drug Administration policy, the characters comically explain that the FDA allows up to 4% human flesh in food products. This theme derives from Upton Sinclair's early twentieth-century novel *The Jungle*, which profiled food contamination in Chicago's meatpacking industry. Sinclair described the worst job in the factory as the one in the steam tank room, where oftentimes workers fell into open vats of animal carcasses being processed: "When they were fished out, there was never enough of them left to be worth exhibiting, —sometimes they would be overlooked for days till all but the bones of them had gone out to the world as Durham's Pure Leaf Lard!" (113)

Sinclair's joke about the carnivory of cannibalism is, on a deeper level, a philosophical question for food studies ethicists who analyze value judgments that have evolved over millennia that enable humans to consume non-human flesh but not human meat. The plot problem of *Bob's Burgers* inaugural sequence projects the ultimate taboo, when a corpse in a casket from the funeral home next door mistakenly rolls inside the restaurant. Bob ponders the situation: "the subject of death makes us all uncomfortable.... But what about how we treat the living? We mistreat the living and no one seems to care. But once that body's dead...." Bob's character, while ruminating on the life and death of the human species, represents the ecophobic "indifference" and "lack of mindfulness" towards the non-human animals that are consumed in his burger joint (Estok 1). The segment ends with a second shocking taboo when an adventurous eaters group saves Belcher's business by agreeing to pay \$50 each to eat human flesh burgers. Similar to the carnivorous dilemmas apparent in the 1973 film *Soylent Green*—where the greenhouse effect

causes food shortages and citizens are urged to consume soylent green, a product made from human remains—*Bob's Burgers* normalizes the human participation in flesh economies, even if they are larded with human body parts. After all, business is business.

Bob's Burgers is culturally detrimental to US sustainability practices in two ways: through its weekly screenings the series functions as propaganda to support the US conservative movement's backing of unsustainable livestock industries. The second, and more dangerous problem with the popular show is that it evidences a growing cultural influence over America's working classes: just as McDonalds adapted the Happy Meal to a digital platform, *Bob's Burgers* will no longer be limited to a weekly television broadcast, since it has been adapted into literature and in 2020 will be released in film. These adaptations represent the strategic and systematic normalization and expansion of the highly unsustainable flesh food systems in US culture. In what follows, I will address the adaptation of the television show *Bob's Burgers* into multiple graphic narratives that embed flesh economies in the minds of US consumers.¹¹

The graphic narrative, as Hillary Chute has argued in *PMLA*, is “a book-length work in the medium of comics” (453). Chute defines comics as, “hybrid word-and-image form in which two narrative tracks, one verbal and one visual, register temporality spatially” (452). Historically, comics have largely been viewed as pop culture “antielitist art” forms; it is precisely because comics are compact literary commodities targeted to mass audiences that they hold significant influence over popular US public opinion. The American comic book series *Bob's Burgers*, for instance, rejects the deleterious effects of beef production and consumption on climate change by instead lauding the neoliberal carnivorous lifestyles that are derived from ecophobia. As Hilary Chute mentions, “being aware of the food chain and its industrial manipulations is not simply a matter of remaining personally and politically aware; it is also a matter of class.” (455)

Each issue of the comic has a standard organization that includes graphical narratives, such as “Tina's Erotic Friend Fiction” stories; artistic renderings, such as “Bob's Fantasy Food Truck Concept”; an “Unsolved Mysteries” theme; a family picture; and a hybrid lyric genre called, “Gene's Rhymey Rhymes That Could One Day Be Songs.” Interspersed throughout each issue are both subtle and blatant references—or shall we say, advertisements, that psychologically embed the virtues of the hamburger.

For instance, the cover of the first issue portrays the Belcher family as working-class superheroes, where Bob is dressed like Superman with a cape and a hamburger emblem emblazoned on his chest (Fig. 1). The family stands anchored

in front of high-density housing, signifying their socioeconomic class status. The oldest sister Tina holds a sword, while the younger Louise is donned in a superhero outfit complete with a bullet belt, and the son Gene flies overhead with a Viking-like hat and keyboard that doubles as a machine gun. This type of image works on multiple levels to attract fans (who eat flesh, who own guns, who support violent superheroes, and who subscribe to the conservative heteronormative family model). Other images of the hamburger as an American emblem appear throughout the series—such as the one where Bob, his wife and his family stand atop stacked hamburgers that enable them to ascend to the clouds (Fig. 2). This socioeconomic ascension ominously signals that the Belchers are at the top of the food chain, literally propped up by the flesh of animals.

The inaugural issue of *Bob's Burgers* mocks the aesthetic of those Americans existing in lower socioeconomic classes. The narratives contain repeated references to taboo body parts and processes that involve defecation, vomit, sex, and gendered stereotypes. In the multiple-panel comic “Full Moon Lounge Gene,” the narrative opens with Belcher’s son, who is graphically tied to his bed in chains by his shabbily

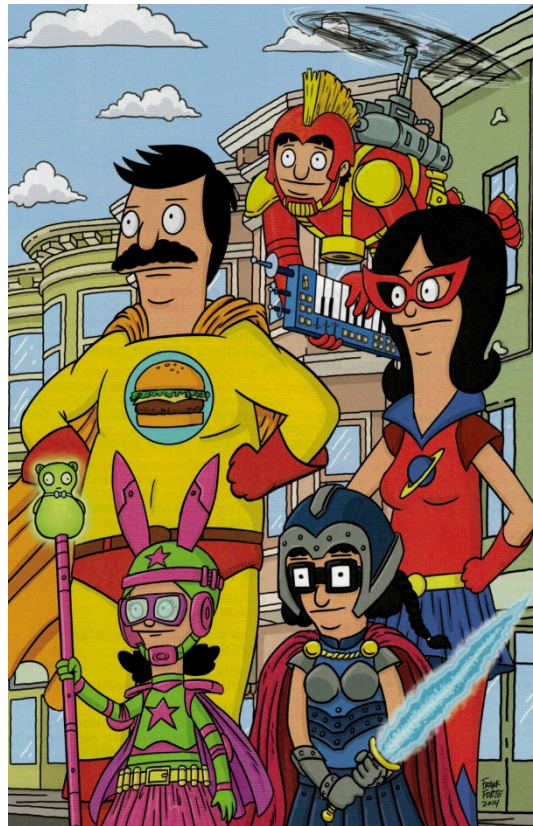


Figure 1. “Issue #1 Cover,” Frank Forte.

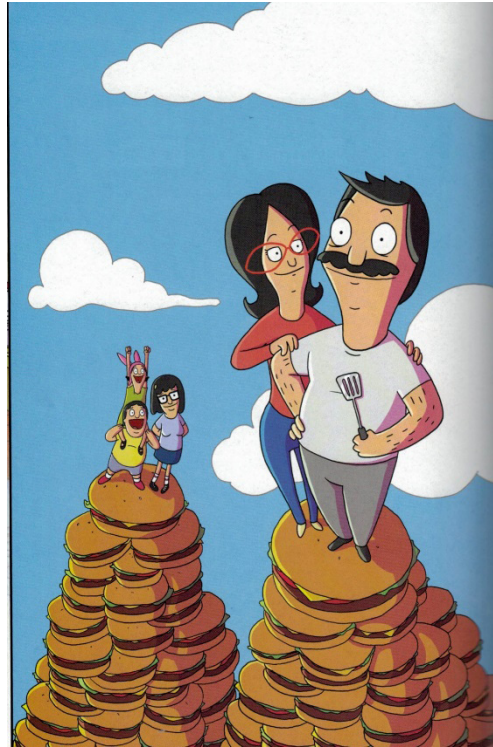


Figure 2. "Issue #7 Cover," Ryan Mattos.

dressed father. The omniscient narration states: "In life there are secrets, secrets we keep, some run shallow, but some run deep." The reader, if not already shocked at the image of two parents tying their son with a chain link to his bed, is made more aware of the taboo situation with the mention of the twice-mentioned word "secrets." As the narrative progresses along with the emergence of a full moon image, the child Gene breaks from his bed chains and is transformed into a tuxedo. He is seen jumping out his apartment window (next to a hamburger sign) to become "more crooner than kid." As a successful "crooner," he is now surrounded by adoring fans, yet soon Gene pines for his "old room" and his family. He decides to leave his crooner identity behind, sheds his upper-class fashion, and heads home to the apartment building where the image of the hamburger sign again appears. In the comics' last panel, Gene sits on the toilet "in time to go poop" (Fig. 3). Though generations of musical crooners have paid romantic homage to the moon as a celestial force, in the *Bob's Burgers* comics, the moon takes on an ambiguous and baser meaning in the last panel: lower-class impropriety is hinted at through Gene's bowel movement that suggests an analogy between hamburgers and shit.¹² Significantly, in the narrative's two final panels, the hamburger sign is juxtaposed



Figure 3. “Full Moon Lounge Gene,” Derek Schroeder.

against Gene’s defecation scene, thus inscribing, normalizing, and grooming the body’s consumption and elimination of the hamburger’s animal flesh.

The second issue of *Bob’s Burgers* comics contains gendered nativist themes that are reminiscent of Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. In “Tina’s Erotic Friend Fiction Presents: Jungle Tina,” the twenty-four series’ *Tarzan* novels by Edgar Rice Burroughs are updated as the Belcher’s oldest daughter is transformed into a jungle girl. In the beginning, various single and multiple-pane panels show a Caucasian Tina swinging on vines through the forest. She tells a story of being “...taken in by a tribe of super compassionate apes” who taught her how to survive in the jungle. Like the narrative, “Full Moon Lounge Gene,” there is an emphasis on the buttocks. Tina comes across a group of male adventurers who admire her ability to “speak English.” One adventurer named Jimmy Jr. is smitten with Tina, and admits “you are a wild thing, and I tame wild things. I would like to bring you back to America.” The colonialist’s sentiment is analogous to the African slave trade, where Africans were viewed as wild animals to be tamed and forcibly brought to America, Britain and Europe. Once Tina arrives in America, she tries to adjust by swinging on lampposts. As a result of her lack of socialization, Jimmy, Jr. decides, in typical patriarchal fashion, to “protect” her by making her a Hottentot Venus type of exhibition in a

theatre show called “Jungle Girl.” Tina eventually chooses to leave the freak show and return to the jungle, where she is reunited with Jimmy Jr., who has been run out of town. The narrative concludes with the two falling in love.

Although “Jungle Tina’s” narrative makes no mention of hamburgers, this episode in the *Bob’s Burgers* comic series re-inscribes the androcentrism that Adams has argued in *The Sexual Politics of Meat*, namely that:

Eating animals acts as a mirror and representation of patriarchal values. Meat eating is the re-inscription of male power at every meal. The patriarchal gaze sees not the fragmented flesh of dead animals but appetizing food. If our appetites re-inscribe patriarchy, our actions regarding eating animals will either reify or challenge this received culture. If meat is a symbol of male dominance then the presence of meat proclaims the disempowering of women. (178)

In this case, Tina’s jungle narrative conflates and normalizes the historic American exploitation of Africans in ways that are similar to the American exploitation of females. Seen through the food studies lenses of neo-colonialism and primitivism, this patriarchal appetite encompasses and attempts to legitimize the exploitation of non-human animals, such as livestock.

Other *Bob’s Burgers’* narratives repurpose fairy tales to emphasize the importance of the burger industry. Issue three, part of the “Gene’s Rhymey Rhymes” sequence, offers an updated version of the Victorian Cinderella story entitled “Genederella,” where predictably a young maiden is abused by her stepsisters and stepmother, and finds solace with animals. Genederella despairs by saying to them: “All I’ve got is this burger, a broom, and you three.” Suddenly, in a twist on the old fairy tale, a gender bending hairy-armed “Fairy Bob Mother” appears. Soon Genederella’s Fairy Bob Mother fashions a decadent double hamburger carriage for her that is tricked out with tomatoes, onions, and a sesame seed bun (Fig. 4)! These liberal adaptations of classic fairy tales and children’s literature tweak the patriarchal American identity in order to reinforce the longstanding normalization of carnivority. However, just as literature can promote livestock holocausts that lead to climate change, there are other examples of graphic narratives that are working to curb global warming.

By articulating how the historic US food system of beef production and consumption negatively impacts climate change, we can begin to create, as Psyche Williams-Forson and Jennifer Cognard-Black have suggested, a national transformation from “industrial” to “sustainable eating” (306). Although the acceleration of climate change has created an urgent global need to remediate the global livestock industry, remediation will be a long process. One of the first steps in the process is an immediate *reduction* of beef consumption in Western



Figure 4. “Genederella,” Marcelo Benavides.

diets; this relatively recent practice is gaining wide attention in the Anglophone media through the branding of a new diet called “Flexitarianism.” Rachel Hosie, in a recent article in *The Independent*, has said it is “time to make friends with broccoli.” Hosie claims that “according to Whole Foods, flexitarianism—eating predominantly, but not strictly vegetarianism—is going to be one of the biggest food trends...” (“Flexitarianism Predicted as Key Food Trend for 2017”). Other authors, such as Pamela Ambler, have claimed that flexitarianism will become embedded in global food systems. As Ambler suggests, the food industry is undergoing a massive global shift to more sustainable foods. Partly driven by the proposed meat taxes in the Paris Climate Agreement, the food industry is moving towards large-scale adaptation to plant-based proteins. Globally, carnivory is becoming taboo and the movement to reduce it is taking hold. As part of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, the supranational organization is working towards globalized forms of “responsible consumption and production” and “climate action.” The UN is capitalizing on its offshoot organization, the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), to effectively transition to sustainable agriculture and sustainable food systems. In short, the

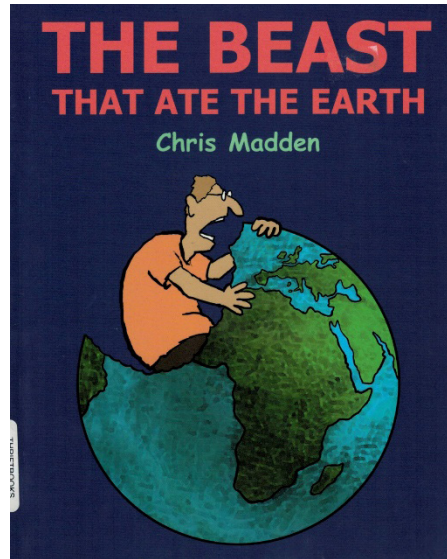


Figure 5. “Book cover.” *The Beast That Ate the Earth*, Madden.

Alt-Burger can be normalized as a sustainable American alternative that is on the spectrum of flexitarian food systems.

While graphic narratives like *Bob’s Burgers* have been utilized by the US conservative movement to maintain the economic value of the livestock industry, there are alternative examples of texts in this genre that work to curb climate change. In *The Beast that Ate the Earth: The Environmental Cartoons of Chris Madden*, the responsibility of climate change is laid at the hands (or mouth) of the human, who has been dubbed as the “beast” who ate the planet (Fig. 5). Madden’s single pane cartoons show, in stark terms, the ways in which humanity’s overconsumption habits have exacerbated global warming. In “Consumption Graph,” he uses a statistical graph to spoof a businessman laden with packages who is running up a flight of stairs only to fall off the edge once he reaches the top; humanity’s ascendancy to the top of the food chain is, like Humpty Dumpty, taking a great fall. Madden satirizes the condition of obesity by showing an overweight businessman who cannot reach the book *How to Stop Overconsuming* (Fig. 6). Madden also takes aim at the corporate megalith McDonalds in his cartoon that portrays Ronald McDonald—off-planet—careening in a garbage truck that carts away a crescent moon; in its place, shining brightly over the universe, McDonalds’ golden arches are secured (Fig. 7). These single pane cartoons offer tweet-like communications that can be effectively used to change the unsustainable behaviors that lead to climate change.



Figure 6. *The Beast That Ate the Earth*, Madden.

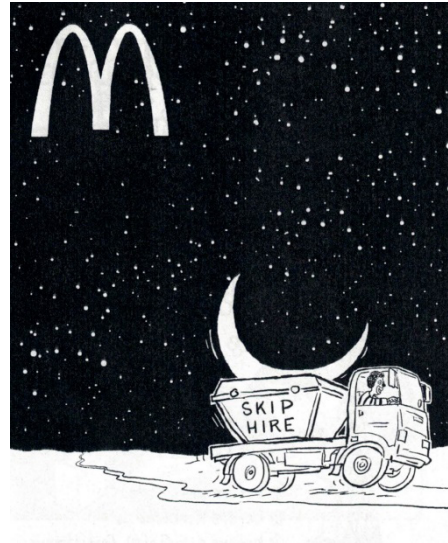


Figure 7. “Skip Hire,” Madden.

Finally, in America, Alt-Burgers that are vegetarian and/or vegan do exist. The popular Boca Burger, produced by Kraft Foods, was originally dubbed the Sun Burger and first produced in 1979. Today the Boca Burger comes in four all vegan flavors. Amy’s Kitchen produces eight types of vegan burgers, while the vegan Beast Burger comes in regular and slider sizes. Dr. Praeger’s Purely Sensible Foods’ California Veggie Burgers offer nine types of burgers and a gluten-free variety.¹³ These and other types of non-beef burgers are burgeoning in the American food system. As the mission statement of the now famous Impossible Burger states:

We’ve been eating meat since we lived in caves. And today, some of our most magical moments together happen around meat: Weekend barbecues. Midnight fast-food runs. Taco Tuesdays. Hot dogs at the ballpark. Those moments are special, and we never want them to end. But using animals to make meat is a prehistoric and destructive technology. Animal agriculture occupies almost half the land on earth, consumes a quarter of our freshwater and destroys our ecosystems. So we’re doing something about it: We found a way to make meat using plants, so that we never have to use animals again. (“We’re on a Mission”)

The CEO and Founder of Impossible Foods, the creator of the Impossible Burger, states that the company was formed in 2011 with sustainability goals in mind:

To drastically reduce humanity's destructive impact on the global environment by completely replacing the use of animals as a food production technology. We intend to accomplish this mission within two decades by creating the world's most delicious, nutritious, affordable and sustainable meat, fish and dairy foods directly from plants.

Today's Impossible Burger requires approximately 75% less water and 95% less land, and generates about 87% lower greenhouse gas emissions than a conventional burger from cows. And while it has the iron and protein, the Impossible Burger is produced without using hormones or antibiotics and contains no cholesterol. (Brown, "The Mission That Motivates Us")

Companies like Impossible Foods are working to address the problematic nexus between the industrial livestock industry and US food system policies. By reducing the land and water needed to create their products, the company is promoting sustainable food systems that will help aid the American future.

Major American broadcasting networks are also working to promote sustainable food systems and lifestyles, such as the Cooking Channel, which offers the popular "Like a Vegan" weekly broadcast and the vegan lifestyle series, "Plant Based by Nafsika," while few graphic narratives speak to the issues of food sustainability—such as the comic series "Vegan Sidekick" and the popular "Violet's Vegan Comics." Rather than a future filled with *Bob's Burgers*, what is needed now is to transform the American food system with statecraft that supports sustainability, and create more populist literature that promotes alternatives to carnivorous lifestyles.

Notes

1. Leagues of critics and supranational organizations have assigned hierarchies to culture; Matthew Arnold, for instance, first distinguished between high and low culture in his *Culture and Anarchy* (1869). In 1945, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) was formed, whose Constitution aims to: “contribute to peace and security by promoting collaboration among nations through education, science and culture in order to further universal respect for justice, for the rule of law and for the human rights and fundamental freedoms which are affirmed for the peoples of the world, without distinction of race, sex, language or religion.” T.S. Eliot’s *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* (1948) acknowledged the spectrum of elitist and popular cultures (35). Raymond Williams has traced the origins of the term noting the term’s earliest function was “the tending of something, basically crops or animals” (48). Williams goes on to explain that “Kultur,” the moniker of which names this journal, was a transmutation from the French to German in the nineteenth century, and he notes it was a “synonym for civilization” (49). By the early twentieth-century, he argues that the term refers to both “material” and “symbolic” productions deriving from “intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development” (51).
2. The comic book series is based on Loren Bouchard’s 2011 animated sitcom *Bob’s Burgers* broadcast by the US Fox Broadcasting Network. The Fox Network is widely known for its climate change denier stance that serves as the media propaganda outlet of the conservative US Republican Party.
3. David Naguib Pellow reminds us that, “...humanness is an unearned privileged status used by the state to legally exclude other species from consideration as sentient beings with the rights of membership in the broader ecological community” (“Anarchism and Anticapitalism” 97).
4. The theme of sustainable citizenship comprises the author’s forthcoming monograph.
5. The company has also piloted a self-ordering computer kiosk at many of its restaurants (“A New Way to Order Using McDonald’s® Self-Ordering Kiosk”), as well as mobile ordering on digital devices through the McDonald’s App.
6. Freud defined “taboo” as “dangerous, forbidden, and unclean” and noted that it is expressed in permanent and temporary ways through “prohibitions and restrictions” (16). Importantly, he distinguished a duty of care to safeguard “weak” persons such as women, children, and commoners, but omitted non-human animals. It is the object of this essay to begin the conceptualization of a duty of care towards non-human, biotic life.
7. In 1933 the US established the Commodity Credit Corporation (CCC) to control American agricultural commodities; the CCC engages in loans and purchases with US farmers, and, significantly, authorizes US agricultural products to foreign markets (Commodity Credit Corporation).
8. CAFOS, ironically, were legislated through the Clean Water Act.

9. Few beef-consuming Americans know that after slaughter, beef is shipped to various geographic processing centers across the nation: it is therefore quite probable that “one burger patty can contain the DNA of more than 1000 cows.” Thus, the typical McDonald’s consumer who enjoys the *amuse-bouche* of a Big Mac, is—in one mouthful—masticating the DNA of one thousand cows whose bodies accelerate the deleterious processes of a warming planet.
10. The Fox Network also prescribes to patriarchal gender norms with its annual “Miss USA” and “Miss Universe” beauty pageants.
11. The series, according to Meg Tully, plans a film adaptation in 2020 (196).
12. In American slang, mooning or to moon means exposing one’s buttocks to insult or amuse.
13. Other brands include Field Roast, Gardein, Gardenburger, Hilary’s Eat Well Veggie Burger, MorningStar Farms, Neat, and Qrunch Quinoa Burgers.

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