We Ate Them to Destroy Them: Carnivores, Cannibals, and the Critique of Mass-Market Feminism in the Age of Consumption

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> "I thought it was all because of eating meat. […] I thought all I had to do was stop eating meat and then the faces wouldn't come back. But it didn't work. […] The face is inside my stomach. It rose up from inside my stomach. […] But I'm not scared anymore. There's nothing to be scared of now."
> -Yeong-hye speaking in *The Vegetarian* (Kang 122)

As of October 2020, the Instagram account *Celebrities Eating Things* has over 160,000 followers. This inexplicably popular account posts photographs, as the name indicates, of celebrities in the act of eating and allows followers the opportunity to rate the photos, although the criteria for these ratings remain elusive. Of the account's more than 160 posts, a majority depict women. Thanks to *Celebrities Eating Things*, anyone with an internet connection can view pictures of Kourtney Kardashian eating a salad, Susan Sarandon opening a packet of mustard with her teeth, or Michelle Obama devouring a taco. Why do we care about what and how women eat, and why do we feel compelled to brand them with a quantified rating to communicate whether we approve of their eating habits? Given that human food practices exist in relation to material, cultural, and gender-based considerations, we can conclude that the rituals and structures we establish around eating say something about us as individuals and as a society. Acts of consumption, the choices we make about what to eat and how much to eat, enable us to construct an identity. Furthermore, in a late capitalist marketplace economy in which consumers enjoy seemingly unlimited choices without socially articulated

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restrictions,[1] our consumptive choices take on an additional hue, as choices made from an economy of infinite possibilities become more significant than those made under duress or restrictions. Late capitalism depends on consumerism, so we can refer to the marketplace in which we function as an "economy of consumption." Food practices, as literal consumption, form a particularly salient point of entry for critiquing the economy of consumption. After all, we are what we eat. But do we really enjoy unhindered choice in the economy of consumption? Are we free to consume whatever we desire, whenever we want, in as large or small of quantities as we like? The sheer existence of *Celebrities Eating Things* tells us no. As this befuddling Instagram account demonstrates, women in particular fall victim to social critique and castigation if their consumptive choices do not align with socially prescribed culinary or dietary practices. Women who consume always risk, with every decision to consume, being branded as gluttonous monsters. Han Kang's 2016 novel *The Vegetarian*, Alexandra Kleeman's 2017 short story "Lobster Dinner," and Julia Ducournau's 2016 film *Raw* expose the myth of the free consumptive choice narrative by demonstrating how women who participate in the postcapitalist economy of consumption are rendered transgressive, abject, and monstrous.

The question of the female body in the neoliberal era of choice, postcapitalism, and consumption has been widely debated within the field of gender and women's studies, with scholars and cultural critics such as Susan Bordo, Melissa A. Goldthwaite, and Andi Zeisler resisting mainstream "pop" feminism's emphasis on the body as a site for autonomous self-construction free from patriarchal control. However, such critiques have not adequately addressed the ways in which fictionalized accounts of female struggles with food highlight the abjection that underlies the contemporary woman's relationship with her biological body. This work unravels the tidy postfeminist narrative of gender equality as evidenced through free consumptive choice and reveals its lurking tendency to convert consuming women, even women who consume "properly", into monsters. By dismantling this alignment between consumption and equality, we can more clearly

[1] Late capitalism or postindustrial capitalism forms Ernest Mandel's third stage of capitalist expansion, following market capitalism and monopoly/imperialist capitalism. Upon the entry into late capitalism, areas of society that were previously unaffected by the logic of the market, such as media, the arts, education, and critical theory, became subject to laws of capitalism and the globalization of consumerism. Late capitalist subjects become alienated from those aspects of life that they might consider authentic or real because they are engaging with symbolic representations such as commodities, or simulated experiences rather than real, tangible objects.

understand the social and economic pressures, or, more accurately, traumas that haunt women in the so-called postfeminist age. Representations of meat consumption in modern literature and film, with special attention to the role of female carnivorism and cannibalism, in *The Vegetarian,* "Lobster Dinner," and *Raw* reveal how grotesque tales of meat eating critique the postfeminist narrative of female choice and economic consumption. The connections between meat consumption and expressions of female sexuality in these works, juxtaposed against postfeminist assumptions concerning choice and sexual agency as the hallmarks of gender equality, demonstrate how these works unveil such narratives as delusory presumptions that ignore the material and societal constraints on female consumption. Kang, Kleeman, and Ducournau employ hyperbolically gory accounts of women devouring meat products, whether animal or human, as an allegory for female carnality and sexual agency to excoriate mainstream, neoliberal, and postcapitalist assumptions concerning female embodiment and the freedom of commercial choice. By closely examining the relationship between meat consumption, sexual appetites, and consumerism, we can examine the strategies through which contemporary accounts of female appetites critique the illusion of choice that characterizes consumer feminism.

The Act of Consumption in the Postfeminist Era

The term postfeminism initially arose in the 1980s to describe in general terms the theoretical and popular backlash against the second-wave feminism of the 1960s and 1970s (Bolotin 29; Jones 314).[2] I situate these texts within the broad framework of contemporary postfeminist discourse, either as representational of postfeminist concepts and values or as critical of the discourse's assumptions. In all these works, female characters struggle with the challenges and proposed solutions with which postfeminism occupies itself, particularly the deconstruction of second-wave

[2] Susan Bolotin is credited with introducing the term "postfeminism" into popular discourse. In her 1982 *New York Times Magazine* article "Voices from the Post-Feminist Generation," she interviewed women who agreed broadly with the goals of feminism, but did not identify as feminists, whom they perceived as angry, bitter, and man-hating. Susan Faludi's 1991 book *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women*, substantiates this popular interpretation of the stereotypical second-wave feminist. Heavy media attention on such cultural narratives as the "man shortage," the "infertility epidemic," and "female burnout" forwarded the notion that women in the 1980s and 1990s were in fact significantly less happy now that they had supposedly won the fight for equality (Faludi xv).

feminism's reliance on binary thinking, gynocentrism, and essentialism and their vision of sexuality (Hall and Rodriguez 882).[3] However, a complication arises with the very term postfeminism. Postfeminism has become something of a buzzword among contemporary literary and cultural critics who concern themselves with questions of femaleness and femininity, or the current state of gender politics. Among the numerous critics who use the term, either to describe their particular breed of theory or to dismantle the positions and assumptions of other critics whom they classify as postfeminist, the term postfeminism still lacks a comprehensive, universal definition.

We must first explore how the broad term postfeminism applies to the three texts at hand. Postfeminism as used in this paper falls into the "death of feminism" camp, which assumes that feminism, which means the political and legal objectives of the second wave, has been achieved (Hall and Rodriguez 879; Bacchi 37; Aronson 17).[4] It considers the advances made in the areas of reproductive rights, the right to work, and the attitudes toward gender and sexuality as clear indicators that second-wave feminism's political goals have been met (Epstein 1). As a result, contemporary iterations of feminism no longer need the same overtly political focus that dominated the second wave (Hall and Rodriguez 884).[5] Women can generally exercise their right to determine their own reproductive destiny; they can work

[3] One interpretation of postfeminism as a discourse emerges from women of color feminists, transnational feminists, and postcolonial/decolonial feminists. These emerging communities critiqued first- and second-wave feminism for its exclusive focus on white, middle-class women and racist or exclusionary politics. Claudia Wallis, Urvashi Vaid, Naomi Wolf, Gloria Steinem, bell hooks, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak specifically note WOC feminists' rejection of second-wave feminism and their positioning of their objectives within a postfeminist or fourth-wave feminist framework.

[4] Indeed, the prefix "post" to the term "feminism" implies a certain closure of an obsolete or completed project. Angelia McRobbie argues that this "post" undermines second-wave feminism's achievements by creating the illusion that such equality has been fully achieved and that the new generation of feminists could now turn their attention to other, often less political, concerns. Other scholars, including Tanya Ann Kennedy, Rosalind Gill, Patricia R. Boyd, Mary Douglas Vavrus, Imelda Whelehan, and Katherine McClintock question the political objective of affixing "post" to "feminism" — along with other similarly dismissive terms as "postracial" and "postcolonial" —to brand feminism as always-already successful and therefore unnecessary.

[5] For example, in their paper "I Am Not a Feminist, But…," Joan K. Buschman and Silvo Lenart identified one-third of their interviewed women as "postfeminist" because they believed that the second-wave women's movement had virtually eliminated discrimination, thereby negating the need for further collective action. Instead, women should be charged with individual efforts to promote their own professional and personal advancement.

outside the home for relatively equal pay; and they can marry the partner of their choosing regardless of gender identity. As Phoebe, arguably the most feminist of the group, complains in a late season of *Friends*, "We can drive, we can vote, we can work. What more do these broads want?" ("Soap Opera" 00:35-00:39).

What does postfeminism have left to fight for? Postfeminism replaces the battlefields of law and politics with the social and cultural fronts (McRobbie 256; Banet-Weiser 152).[6] As a doctrine, it views choice as the hallmark of both gender equality and feminism's success (Projansky 67; Isbister 6; Tasker and Negra 2). While some critics like Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra focus on freedom of choice with respect to work, relationships, and parenting, a powerful undercurrent within this branch of postfeminism links this emphasis on choice instead with consumer freedom. Georgina Isbister notes that popular postfeminism utilizes "images of consumer success (the purchase of high fashion and beauty) as a means of achieving transformation into empowered femininity," which has become "the new idealized image of female subjectivity" (8). We can observe this emphasis on choice in myriad diverse arenas, from the rhetorical framing of the right to have an abortion as the "right to choose" to the 2017 CoverGirl Cosmetics shift from its famous "Easy, Breezy, Beautiful" tagline to the new slogan, "I Am What I Make Up" to perhaps the most egregiously commodity-driven postfeminist artifact, HBO's *Sex and the City*.[7] Given their equal participation in the American political economy, women in the United States can now turn their attention to enjoying full participation in the cultural economy. The choices that a woman makes in the cultural realm, from her clothes to her taste in music, operate as a form of self-

[6] This connection between feminism (post or otherwise) and popular culture forms its own body of scholarship within feminist theory and cultural criticism. Andi Zeisler's comprehensive study *Feminism and Popular Culture* and Jack Halberstam's *Gaga Feminism* provide broad overviews of both the representations of feminism within popular culture and feminism's uses of popular culture as a means of disseminating its agenda. More specific studies of this intersection include Anna Lebovic's "Refashioning Feminism: American *Vogue*, the Second Wave, and the Transition to Postfeminism"; Jason Middleton's "A Rather Crude Feminism: Amy Schumer, Postfeminism, and Abjection"; Stephanie Patrick's "Breaking Free? Domesticity, Entrapment, and Postfeminism in *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt*"; and Katherine Bell's "Obvie, We're the Ladies!: Postfeminism, Privilege, and HBO's Newest *Girls*."

[7] It is nearly impossible to engage in any kind of comprehensive research on postfeminism without running into at least one article on Carrie Bradshaw and her Imelda Marcos-style shoe obsession. Georgina Isbister's "*Sex and the City*: A Postfeminist Fairy Tale"; Angela McRobbie's "Post-feminism and Popular Culture"; Gigi McNamara's "Coveting Sarah Parker: When Postfeminism Meets Commodity Fetishism"; and Jane Gerhard's "*Sex and the City*, Feminist Media Studies" form just a small portion of the critique of *SATC*'s rampant consumerism.

expression. Through exercising their right to free choice, women can dress how they want, wear as much or as little makeup as they desire, have plastic surgery, work in any field they choose, get married and have children or eschew the marriage/family paradigm. Every one of these choices says something about the woman's essential nature, something about *who she is*. Freed from the political and legal confines that restrained earlier generations of women and against which second-wave feminists fought, the postfeminist woman can exercise her liberation through these choices.

Given this overlap between contemporary postfeminist narratives and the idea of choice as the hallmark of gender equality, we can see how postfeminism has come to represent a uniquely consumerist discourse. To distinguish this particular branch of postfeminism from its broad mother discourse of "death of feminism" postfeminism and separate it entirely from the field of postfeminism that arises from women of color and post/decolonial feminists, I refer to this consumer capitalist "feminism as free market choice" narrative as "consumer feminism." This conceptualization of feminism as a commodified discourse forms one of the defining features of consumer feminism as it manifests in popular culture. Amanda M. Gengler, for example, notes the inclusion of such feminist buzzwords as "empowerment," "self-determination," and "independence" in between articles on makeup application and instructions for interacting with boys in *Seventeen* (68).[8] In her 2017 book *We Were Feminists Once*, Andi Zeisler analyzes the mass-market commodification of feminist language in popular culture. In what she coins as "marketplace feminism", Zeisler tracks the inclusion of feminist rhetoric and terminology in such disparate places as *Cosmopolitan*, Beyoncé concerts, and advertisements for underwear, energy drinks, and cleaning products. Such a proliferation of feminist terms and pro-woman ideology in popular culture and the mass market has certainly broadened feminism's audience. Zeisler states, "It's undeniable that media and pop-culture representations – even surface-skimming

[8] Gengler joins other cultural critics in assessing the instances of "postfeminism" or the intersection of feminism and commodification or consumerism in popular culture. For example, Elane J. Hall and Marnie Salupo Rodriguez engage in content analysis of 90 popular and research sources to develop a comprehensive definition of the postfeminist argument in their study "The Myth of Postfeminism." Rosalind Gill and Ana Sofia Elias examine commodity fetishism in the "Love Your Body" discourse in "'Awaken Your Incredible': Love Your Body Discourses and Postfeminist Contradictions." Furthermore, Sarah Projansky considers representations of postfeminist girlhood on teen magazine covers in "Mass Magazine Cover Girls: Some Reflections in Postfeminist Girls and Postfeminism's Daughters."

ones – of social movements can change attitudes" (xv). She cites organizations like Know Your IX, Hollaback!, Girls Who Code, and SPARK, whose existence she attributes to depictions of feminism in pop culture and the media and their subsequent influence on grassroots activism and organizing.

However, many feminist theorists question the advisability of framing the struggle for gender equality through capitalist or consumerist terms. Nikki Lisa Cole and Alison Dahl Crossley argue, "[S]ince consuming is a singular act of identity formation and expression, we question whether women's empowerment through consumption at the individual level undermines the possibility of gendered social change at the collective level" (2).[9] They note the historical connection between women's independence in the United States and discourses of wealth accumulation, centering their critique of this connection on the realization that the accumulation of wealth and consumer goods remains firmly tied to the dominance of patriarchal hierarchy. Advertising cloaks its purely profit-driven motivations in the language of feminine independence, hailing women as strong, self-sufficient, economically independent, and sexually driven. Campaigns such as the CoverGirl slogan promote the connection between a woman's ability to choose her consumer products and her creation of her own identity. However, consumer feminism does not indicate any progress of actual feminist political or social objectives because these forms of feminism are less about women's rights and more about the perpetuation of the deeply patriarchal system of capitalism.[10]

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[9] Consumer feminism functions as a perpetuation of the status quo, whether that status quo concerns exploitative capitalist economies, political patriarchies, or violent racial regimes. Works such as Tanya Ann Kennedy's *Historicizing Post-Discourses: Postfeminism and Postracialism in United States Culture*, Jess Butler's "For White Girls Only? Postfeminism and the Politics of Inclusion," and Sarah Banet-Weiser's "What's Your Flava? Race and Postfeminism in Media Culture" investigate the ways in which postfeminist discourses reproduce gender, race, and sexual inequalities.

[10] The inherently patriarchal nature of capitalism forms one of the foundational themes of second-wave socialist and Marxist feminism. For example, Nancy Fraser analyzes the ways in which the "political" and the "economic" spheres of life fall into the public, and therefore male, realm, while "domestic" or "personal" spheres fall under women's domain. The relegation of domestic institutions to female control depoliticizes, and therefore devalues, those concerns. Kathi Weeks supports Fraser's conclusion, arguing that the logic of separate spheres "posits a radical difference between men's work and women's work" that implies that women's labor matters less than men's (238). Crucially, Zillah Eisenstein uses the phrase "capitalist patriarchy" to describe "the mutually reinforcing dialectical relationship between capitalist class structure and hierarchical sexual structuring" (5).

The discipline of feminist food studies enables us to connect the broad concern of consumer feminism with metaphorical consumption with physical and material questions of literal consumption, particularly as those forms of consumption overlap thematically in contemporary literature and film. Investigating the relationship between women and food, with particular attention to the material conditions and cultural messaging about food and eating, can inform a broader consideration of the consumptive habits or pressures under which women operate. Food studies scholar Sherrie A. Inness notes the growing attention among feminist scholars to food-related messages about embodiment, culture, economics, and gender roles that women receive and the forces that shape or craft those messages. Inness claims, "Eating is an activity that *always* has cultural reverberations. Food is *never* a simple matter of sustenance. How we eat, what we eat, and who prepares and serves our meals are all issues that shape society" (5). Deborah Lupton echoes this conclusion: "Conceiving of the experience of embodiment as socially produced and of food and eating practices as always mediated through social relations, requires a sophisticated awareness of the ways in which society, subjectivity, and the body are interrelated" (6). From Alexis Baker's study of representations of nourishment and female bodies in Holocaust art to Rebecca Ingall's critique of the controversial diet book *Skinny Bitch* through the lens of the Bakhtinian grotesque, feminist scholars have engaged with cultural reverberations underlying the relationship between women and food consumption and developed a rich body of scholarship that greatly expands the early feminist considerations of women and food which tended to focus solely on eating disorders.

We can view texts that depict women eating or consuming as part of the overarching project of analyzing the social forces that shape and control the female body. However, texts such as these critique this narrative by demonstrating how women do not, in fact, possess total freedom of consumptive choice, or how this supposed freedom remains fraught with gendered tensions. When Yeong-hye gives up meat in *The Vegetarian* or Justine sneaks away to a roadside diner to eat kebabs in secret in *Raw*, they reveal the limitations of postfeminist assumptions about free, unlimited choice by eliciting horrified reactions to their consumptive choices. As these texts show, women such as Yeong-hye, Anne-Marie, and Justine do not possess total consumptive freedom and therefore lack the entirely free ability to construct their own bodies, as postfeminist scholarship would have them believe. Instead, the texts expose how women may only exercise freedom of consumptive choice within a socially established set of limitations. When Yeong-hye, Anne-

Marie, and Justine choose to consume food and thereby construct their bodies in a way that transgresses these limitations, society rejects them, castigates them, and inscribes their bodies as abject and monstrous.

A Body from Which All Desire Had Been Eliminated – Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*

Han Kang's 2015 novel *The Vegetarian* begins with the following observation by protagonist Yeong-hye's husband, Mr. Cheong: "Before my wife turned vegetarian, I'd always thought of her as completely unremarkable in every way" (Kang 11). Yeong-hye had always been an entirely satisfactory wife; she prepared meals, spoke very little, and never embarrassed her husband. One night, however, she has a dream, the description of which is the only instance of interiority that we receive from Yeong-hye. In a narrative told in turn by Mr. Cheong, Yeong-hye's brother-in-law, and her sister, In-hye, we learn about how Yeong-hye's decision to stop consuming meat and animal byproducts alienates her from her husband, drives her family to unspeakable levels of sexual and physical violence, and ultimately results in her involuntary commitment to a mental institution. Given that we only receive glimpses at Yeong-hye's own perspective throughout the novel's first section, we must instead filter depictions of her through the traditional patriarchal and societal forces represented by her husband, brother-in-law, and sister. Each section of the narrative depicts the speaker's struggle to comprehend Yeong-hye's vegetarianism, reveals Yeong-hye's descent into a grotesque and fantastic form of abjection, and ends with a scene that depicts some form of forced penetration, whether by force feeding or rape. What initially appears to be a simple dietary decision, something that postfeminist criticism would claim Yeong-hye is free to make as an equal consumer, becomes the impetus for Yeong-hye's violent expulsion from her family and society.

While each of the novel's three sections details the family's difficulty in comprehending Yeong-hye's vegetarianism, chronicles Yeong-hye's increasing monstrosity, and describes the various ways in which Yeong-hye is expelled from mainstream society, the first section narrated by Mr. Cheong offers the most probing critique of the postfeminist narrative concerning freedom of consumptive choice. Because we learn of Yeong-hye's decision to become a vegetarian and her subsequent transformation into an abject plant-like monster from Mr. Cheong, whose voice functions as the mouthpiece for mainstream society, the first section

provides the most salient means of assessing the societal reaction to a woman's decision not to participate in the consumptive economy. We see through Mr. Cheong how transgressive such a decision is.

Prior to choosing a vegan lifestyle, Yeong-hye displays few transgressive impulses. Mr. Cheong does note in his narrative that Yeong-hye exhibits one unusual tendency: she refuses to wear a bra. He describes the first time he discovered her penchant for going braless when he responded with arousal and excitation at the sexual possibilities Yeong-hye might have been communicating: "In order to judge whether she might possibly have been trying to tell me something, I spent a minute or two looking at her through new eyes, studying her attitude. The outcome of my studies was that she wasn't, in fact, trying to send any kind of signal" (Kang 13). Mr. Cheong immediately assumes that Yeong-hye's decision not to wear a bra on a date must indicate her sexual availability to him. He finds that Yeong-hye opts not to wear a bra purely for reasons of comfort; whether she wears a bra has nothing to do with him or her sexual desire for anyone. When Yeong-hye explains how uncomfortable and constricting she finds wearing a bra, Mr. Cheong dismisses her, claiming, "[C]onsidering I knew for a fact that there were plenty of other women who, unlike her, didn't have anything particularly against bras, I began to have my doubts about this hypersensitivity of hers" (Kang 14). On other instances, Yeong-hye removes her clothes and performs daily activities topless for no reason other than being comfortable or responding to a heat wave. Mr. Cheong cannot comprehend that Yeong-hye might be making a fashion decision solely for her own comfort, without any intention of using her free consumptive choice to communicate her sexual availability to men. This "unusual" tendency of Yeong-hye's provides an early indication of how her husband, her family, and South Korean society as a whole will come to view her vegetarianism. Within a postcapitalist marketplace in which Yeong-hye possesses the freedom to purchase any kind of lingerie she chooses, Yeong-hye instead chooses not to purchase any at all.

Mr. Cheong's bewilderment returns when he awakens one morning to find Yeong-hye throwing away all their meat products. When he asks Yeong-hye what she is doing, she simply responds with a line that she repeatedly offers as her only justification: "I had a dream" (Kang 16). Mr. Cheong responds to Yeong-hye's meat purge with a violence that far exceeds the needs of the moment:

> I hurriedly stumbled my way through the plastic bags and grabbed her wrist, trying to pry the bags from her grip. Stunned to find her fiercely tugging

> back against me, I almost faltered for a moment, but my outrage soon gave me the strength to overpower her. Massaging her reddened wrist, she spoke in the same ordinary, calm tone of voice she'd used before. "I had a dream." (Kang 18)

His anger at Yeong-hye's rebellion against the household and societal norm of eating meat intermingles with his anger at what he perceives to be his wife's waste: "So all because of some ridiculous dream, you've gone and chucked out all the meat? Worth *how* much?" (Kang 20, emphasis in original). Yeong-hye's mother reacts similarly when Yeong-hye vomits up black goat that her mother tricked her into eating: "You, Yeong-hye, do you know how much this is worth? Would you throw it away? Money scraped together with your own parents' sweat and blood!" (Kang 55). Yeong-hye's vegetarianism therefore represents not only an incomprehensible act of self-determination outside traditional dietary structures, but also signifies a revolt against the postcapitalist consumptive economy. This act of beginning to construct the self outside the confines of this economy startles and horrifies Mr. Cheong: "How on earth could she be so self-centered? I stared at her lowered eyes, her expression of cool self-possession. The very idea that there should be this other side to her, one where she selfishly did as she pleased, was astonishing" (Kang 21).

Mr. Cheong's violent reaction seems grossly out of proportion with the circumstances. To him, Yeong-hye throwing away the family's meat signifies more than just a dietary choice; this one decision indicates a growing her transgression, her choice not to participate in mainstream conceptions of female consumption. Mr. Cheong responds with anger, violence, and a declaration that his wife is "insane" and has "completely lost it" (Kang 19) because Yeong-hye is now unwilling to eat the same dishes that she and her family have been eating for years. As his wife's vegetarianism persists, he wrestles with what he thinks is a ludicrous decision to refuse to consume a common food product for no reason other than a dream. He claims, "If it had all been just another instance of a woman's giving up meat in order to lose weight then there would have been no need to worry" (Kang 23). Others express similar attitudes about the unnaturalness of abstaining from eating meat or the socially acceptable reasons for vegetarianism:

> As far as I was concerned, the only reasonable grounds for altering one's eating habits were the desire to lose weight, an attempt to alleviate certain physical ailments, being possessed by an evil spirit, or having your sleep disturbed by indigestion…Meat eating is a fundamental human instinct,

> which means vegetarianism goes against human nature, right? It just isn't natural…People who arbitrarily cut out this or that food, even though they're not actually allergic to anything – that's what I would call narrow-minded. (Kang 22, 31)

Yeong-hye gives up meat not to lose weight or expel a demon, but for an unstated personal reason that Mr. Cheong cannot understand. As such, he construes her vegetarianism as "nothing but sheer obstinacy for a wife to go against her husband's wishes as mine had done" and worries that "there was something more going on here than a simple case of vegetarianism" (Kang 22, 23).

Mr. Cheong and Yeong-hye's family reject Yeong-hye's fear that participating in the consumptive economy of meat eating will turn her into a monster. Faced with a transgressive woman who, when faced with all the choices in the world and the supposed freedom to make any choice she wants decides not to consume at all, Mr. Cheong and Yeong-hye's family respond with extreme violence. When Yeong-hye refuses to have sex with her husband because she claims, "The meat smell. Your body smells of meat" (Kang 24), Mr. Cheong rapes her repeatedly. When she will not succumb to omnivorism, he asks her family to stage an intervention. Yeong-hye still refuses to eat meat at a family dinner, so, in an act of penetration that amounts to oral rape, her father holds her to the ground and shoves pork into her mouth. Just as Mr. Cheong considers Yeong-hye's continued vegetarianism as an act of marital defiance, her father views Yeong-hye's refusal to consume meat as a rebellion against paternal, and by extension patriarchal authority: "Don't you understand what your father's telling you? If he tells you to eat, you eat!" (Kang 45).

By this point, Yeong-hye's dreams have become so overpowering and she so fears her own growing abjection and monstrosity that she physically rejects the meat her father forced on her. She spits out the pork and slashes her wrists, spraying blood over her family and turning her gore-soaked dreams into reality. The boundaries between inside and outside, between Yeong-hye's body, the bodies of the animals she ate, and the bodies of her family have vanished. She has become abject, animalistic, and utterly incomprehensible to her husband and her family. Surgeons manage to stitch Yeong-hye's skin back together, but they have only managed to re-contain the consuming monster. In the haunting final scene of the first section, Yeong-hye escapes from the hospital and Mr. Cheong finds her sitting beside a fountain, topless and clutching a dead bird. He says, "It was a small white-eyed bird, with feathers missing here and there. Below tooth marks that looked to

have been caused by a predator's bite, vivid red bloodstains were spreading" (Kang 60). Yeong-hye's husband, family, and society at large, in their failure to compute how a woman with free consumptive choice could decide to remove herself from the economy of consumption, have violently expelled her and forced her to re-incorporate her animalistic monstrosity.

Pale, Clean, and Queasy: Alexandra Kleeman's "Lobster Dinner"

In contrast with Yeong-hye, whose awareness of the abjection she faces by ingesting another creature's flesh forces her into a confrontation with a society that does not comprehend her refusal to participate in the consumptive economy, Anne-Marie complies with the strictures of the consumptive choices available to her as a contemporary woman, yet transforms into a monster in Alexandra Kleeman's short story "Lobster Dinner." Anne-Marie describes an idyllic day at the Cape that turns gruesome and deadly when an army of lobsters emerges from the ocean to attack innocent beachgoers. Under the advisement of her nameless boyfriend, Anne-Marie eats the lobsters alive to stop their onward assault. The scene of violence ultimately converts into a romantic interlude in which Anne-Marie and her boyfriend profess their love for one another over the lobsters' bloody corpses. By conflating eating, death, and romantic love, Kleeman constructs a brief narrative of the social confines in which a supposedly postfeminist woman must function and reveals the inherent and inevitable monstrosity that threatens any woman who participates in the consumptive economy.

The story commences after Anne-Marie and her boyfriend have forestalled the lobster attack. They lounge on the beach amidst the bloody shells and carcasses, ruminating on the act of violence that they just perpetrated. This scene immediately intermingles violence and romantic love: "We ate them to destroy them but suddenly we felt sad and empty and overly full. I turned to you and for the first time told you I was in love. The lobsters were dead in a pile and with a froth on their shells they waited and watched us undress each other" (Kleeman 19). Anne-Marie justifies her actions, arguing that she and her boyfriend had to consume the lobsters to stop the attack. However, she notes that afterward they felt "sad and empty and overly full" (Kleeman 19). On first glance, this seems oxymoronic: the sadness is understandable following so much death, but how can one feel both empty and overly full? In the first of many contradictory statements, Kleeman uses opposition to reveal the tension between a woman's proper participation in the consumptive

economy and the crisis she faces when she realizes that this economy does not in fact offer the complete freedom of identity and individual choice that consumer feminist narratives would have her believe. Anne-Marie consumes the lobsters not because she wants to eat lobster, but because she must eat them "to forestall our own destruction," even though "it became clear that nothing would" (Kleeman 19-20).

Kleeman describes the economy of consumption in which Anne-Marie must operate with a flashback to the previous evening, in which Anne-Marie had dinner at a seafood restaurant with her friends. She intersperses Anne-Marie's friends' dinner orders with grotesque recipes that highlight the unspoken violence at the center of the consumptive economy. For example, when Susan orders Lobster in Cream Sauce, with the caveat that the server must "make certain the seafood is of local origin: we have all traveled too far to dine on imported creatures" (Kleeman 21), the recipe for Susan's dinner selection bluntly states, "Cut the bodies in slices and lay the shells at the sides, the heads facing up toward you, directly toward you, and pointed away from the sea" (Kleeman 21). Similarly, a recipe for lobster *a la Bordelaise* reads, "A lobster is sweetest and full of the richest flesh right before a molt, when the shell is at its most protective. Before it has shed its sense of safety" (Kleeman 22). The recipes, with their instructions to cut the bodies, face the heads toward the chef and away from the sea, and slaughter the lobsters at the moment when they feel the most invincible, underscore the violence at the heart of human consumptive practices. The brutality of the kitchen, where the lobsters are slaughtered and the chefs are forced to confront the massacre they committed, contrasts sharply with the tranquility of the dining room. At the heart of the kitchen, that prototypical site of consumption, lies a veritable abattoir, made all the more horrifying for its utter commonplaceness. Anne-Marie seems to sense the violence of the kitchen and orders "a cup of corn chowder, with a small salad" (Kleeman 22). Her friends chide her, tempting, "Why not live a little, eat the best? After all, you are what you eat" (Kleeman 22). They serve as society's voice, enticing Anne-Marie into the mainstream consumptive economy by encouraging her to "eat the best," which in this case means ingesting a once-living creature that has been savagely slain as a sacrifice to that icon of traditional luxury and romance, the lobster dinner. When confronted with the cliché tautology "you are what you eat," Anne-Marie thinks, "But I am not" (Kleeman 22). Like Yeong-hye, Anne-Marie fears that by consuming a creature that has been murdered for her own enjoyment,

she will incorporate that animal's flesh into her own and thereby become animalistic.

The next day when the lobsters attack, Anne-Marie chooses to consume the lobsters that she avoided at dinner. Her decision to consume arises not from a genuine desire to eat shellfish, but rather from survivalist need. The lobsters initiate their offensive by crawling onto the shore and literally forcing the beachgoers to consume them: "They fight their way into the mouths and down the airways of vacationers of all ages, indiscriminate" (Kleeman 23). The victims of so many romantic meals and luxurious dinners on the Cape force the humans that consumed them to suffocate on their own abject gluttony. "Eat or be eaten" contorts into "Eat or choke on how much you eat." When faced with this choice, Anne-Marie's boyfriend points her to the only possible answer: eat. She recalls:

> And you are running toward me while the lobsters are killing us all. […] You reach me and then you whisper in my ear that we must kill them all. I nod slowly as you grab one of the largest in your hands and tear it in half. You hold one of the halves out to me, it drips blue on the warm, soft sand. I take it in my hands tentatively, like it could hurt me, and I bite down. (Kleeman 23-4)

The carnage that follows this forced decision to consume is staggering. Anne-Marie recalls the bodies that gush "blue blood, frothing all over the gulls that swoop in to eat from its belly, eat of its belly, it was too tender to move and it is emptying quick" (Kleeman 21). The blue blood stains her hands, and she listens to a haunting, mysterious murmuring that seems to come from the shattered lobster shells. Her boyfriend similarly exhibits new grotesque transformations: "I closed my eyes, stroking your leg and your large right claw, and I was at rest at last" (Kleeman 20). Anne-Marie sits among the corpses that she consumed purely for survival and feels herself becoming monstrous. She thinks, "So full. Full of lobster meat and the sadness of the lobster meat. Full of the feeling of having cracked hundreds upon hundreds of precious shells. Full of the sound and the sight of destruction, the lobsters dead in a pile, some of them with lipstick marks on their empty husks" (Kleeman 24). Anne-Marie ultimately deciphers the lobsters' whispers, not by listening to the corpses or any survivors of the massacre, but by hearing the voices "coming from deep within my belly, the voices not yet at rest" (Kleeman 24). The lobster flesh that she has incorporated into her own body taunt her with one repeated word: "Next Next Next" (Kleeman 24).

The lobsters, the victims of her mandated act of grotesque consumption, warn Anne-Marie that the cycle will not cease. She will continually be forced to engage in acts of consumption that turn her into a blood-soaked monster because the supposed freedom to choose that she enjoys as a postfeminist woman is not actually freedom at all – it is a mandate. When she chose not to consume, she faced the judgment of her friends. When she did consume, she did so because her only other option was to die. The story ends with a final horrifying image of consumption masquerading as a romantic gesture. Anne-Marie says, "And as he leaned in to kiss me, my eye saw his open mouth grow larger and larger until it seemed it could swallow me whole" (Kleeman 24). In the short tale, Kleeman unmasks the violence and monstrosity that lies at the heart of the culinary and sexual consumptive economy. Even though Anne-Marie participates in the carnivorous ingestion of flesh and thereby operates within the hidden limitations of the consumptive choices available to women, she still becomes monstrous. Yeong-hye withdraws from the economy of consumption and transforms into a monster anyway; Anne-Marie reveals that even participating in that economy "correctly" will inevitably result in monstrosity.

I'm Sure You'll Find a Solution, Honey: Julia Ducournau's *Raw*

Finally, moving along the scale from Yeong-hye's decision to withdraw from the consumptive economy to Anne-Marie's socially mandated and survivalist participation in consumption, we arrive at Julia Ducournau's New French Extremist film *Raw*. The film chronicles Justine's transformation from a vegetarian veterinary student to a cannibalistic, abject, sexually predatory monster. *Raw*'s setting at an acclaimed veterinary school provides the perfect ground zero for Justine's conversion. Julia Kristeva notes of the relationship between animalism and abjection, "The abject confronts us, on the one hand, with those fragile states where man strays to the territories of *animal*. Thus, by way of abjection, primitive societies have marked out a precise area of their culture to remove it from the threatening world of animals or animalism, which were imagined as representatives of sex and murder" (12-3). Against the backdrop of an institution whose sole purpose is to train people to care for animals, Justine gets in touch with her own animalism. Prolonged shots of animals undergoing treatment underscore the progression of Justine's cannibalism. For example, after Justine consumes her first meat product, an extended, shadowed shot shows a black horse that is chained to a

machine and forced to run on a large mechanical track. The animals undergo gruesome procedures such as this one to test their health and fitness, but the grotesqueness of these "treatments" highlights the insidious violence that lies within socially acceptable, or even prescribed, practices.

In addition to providing an apropos setting for a tale of abjection and animalistic cannibalism, the veterinary school offers another means of critiquing the economy of consumption. As a first-year student, Justine must undergo initiation, an informal yet elaborate system of hazing through which she will gain membership in the school's community. The veteran students force Justine and her first-year cohort to participate in extensive and humiliating rituals that invoke each student's basic abjection as a means of shaming them into knowing their place. The first-year students pose for their official class photograph as older students douse them with buckets of blood. When Justine fails to comply with the mandatory club dress code for a day of classes, a veteran forces her to wear a diaper. The older students couch the abuse by equating compliance with belonging: "Your profs will make you the best vets out there. Your elders will make you family. But first you must learn. Learn to be a team, to obey, to be good rookies." The loaded term "family" acquires additional meaning because one of the elder students at the center of the hazing ritual is Justine's sister, Alexia. The crucial ritual, to which Justine initially protests, requires the rookies to eat a raw rabbit kidney. When Justine refuses to eat meat, Alexia retorts, "Are you serious? It's nothing. Everybody does it. […] Don't start the year by chickening out. They're watching." Alexia then eats two rabbit kidneys and forces a third into Justine's mouth. Under the dual influence of school family and literal family, Justine succumbs to the economy of meat consumption.

Unaccustomed to ingesting meat, Justine's body initially rejects the kidney. She develops a raw, painful rash that her physician diagnoses as a symptom of food poisoning. When Justine explains the circumstances that caused the poisoning, her doctor asks, "Someone tells you to eat raw rabbit kidney, and you do?" Justine responds, "I said no," to which the doctor retorts, "Did they force you?" Justine answers semi-truthfully: "No." The physician seems to acknowledge the Hobson's choice that Justine faced and seems close to critiquing the consumptive ritual that Justine underwent, but then merely prescribes a topical cream and discharges Justine. Far from heeding the warning from her body, Justine finds herself unable to quench her newfound craving for meat. She quickly progresses to stealing hamburgers in the cafeteria to sneaking off campus to eat kebabs to gnawing raw chicken in the middle of the night. Her participation in the consumptive economy,

initially just a response to a need to belong as a new veterinary student, soon transforms into a dangerous obsession for ingesting flesh.

As Justine's carnivorism progresses, she learns the limitations of the economy of consumption in which she now finds herself participating. Her vegetarianism initially served as a source of ridicule; her dedication to animal rights and her refusal to eat the rabbit kidney threaten to brand her as an outcast. When she expresses remorse for eating the kidney and shows Alexia her rash, Alexia retorts, "Let it go! It was that or you were a reject." She still exhibits shame as indicated by her desire to hide her meat eating. She chews her own hair to suppress her cravings, then vomits to purge herself not of what she ate but of the urge to eat at all. After one of these incidents, Justine encounters a fellow student in the bathroom. The woman, dressed in a lacy white dress, smilingly advises Justine, "Two fingers will make it come up faster," before primping in the mirror and admiring her reflection. This random student, whom we never see again and whose name we never learn, informs Justine of the limitations of the consumptive economy. Justine may consume whatever she wants, but only in quantities that will not diminish her physical appearance. The woman's casually offered tips for bulimic success show Justine how a woman must behave within the consumptive economy. She must eat to belong, but she must not eat so much that it threatens her sexual desirability.

Rather than heed this advice, Justine delves deeper into consumption and eventually gives in to her ultimate desire: eating human flesh. During another traditional ritual of femininity – the bikini wax – Justine accidentally cuts off Alexia's finger. Alexia faints in disgust at the site of her bloody hand. Justine finds the stump of Alexia's finger, licks the dripping blood, and eats it. The way in which Ducournau frames this scene reveals a twisted conflation of romance and consumption. While Alexia waxes Justine to prepare her younger sister for her first sexual encounter, a foreboding soundtrack accompanies a scene that could otherwise appear in any romantic comedy's mandatory makeover sequence. In contrast, a simple, melodic acoustic guitar score plays while Justine consumes the severed finger. Ducournau frames this initial moment of succumbing to cannibalistic desire as another filmmaker would design a love scene, or at least a scene depicting oral sex. In pairing these drastically different moments with opposing soundtracks, Ducournau exposes the violence within the compulsory feminine beautification and self-creation process and simultaneously converts a scene of absolute abjection into a romantic interlude. We are left to wonder which

is really more repulsive: the bikini wax or the consumption of a human finger. The answer may seem obvious, but any woman who has experienced a bikini wax will legitimately pause at this question. Ducournau acknowledges the abjection to which a woman must expose herself to participate in the sexual economy.

The incident with the finger forces Justine to confront her growing monstrosity and the possible consequences of excessive meat consumption. She and Alexia tell their parents that Alexia's dog, Quickey, ate the finger, and when Justine protests to her father's insistence that the dog be immediately euthanized, he responds, "They have to. An animal that has tasted human flesh isn't safe. If he likes it, he'll bite again." Despite this implied warning, Justine dives deeper into her newfound cannibalistic and sexual urges. Cannibalism and sex remain firmly intermingled throughout the rest of the film, as Justine's carnal desires apply both to literal and sexual consumption of human flesh. She more willingly participates in the sexualized aspects of her hazing, but when her cannibalistic urges reveal themselves during her sexual encounters, she finds herself shunned. She initiates a sexual encounter with a stranger but becomes an object of fear when she bites a chunk out of his lip. She loses her virginity to her roommate, Adrien, and bites herself to the point of bleeding during climax. Alexia, who shares Justine's cravings for human flesh and becomes increasingly desperate for fresh meat as the film progresses, publicizes a video of Justine taken at a party, in which Alexia dangles a cadaver arm in front of a heavily intoxicated Justine, who crawls on the ground and tries to bite the arm like an animal. Unable to contain her desires any longer, Alexia murders Adrien and consumes his flesh. The final shot we see of Alexia is in a prison cell, caged like a rabid animal.

What began as innocent-enough participation in a hazing ritual, symbolic of Justine's initiation into a community and her structural buy-in to the existing order of her new school, ultimately unleashes Justine's latent desire to consume human flesh. She became an object of torment because of her lack of inclination to go to parties or clubs, and she risked losing her place in the fraternity of veterinary students when she refused to eat meat. This act of meat eating was a necessary precondition for Justine's membership in the community, so her subsequent desire to consume additional meat products should have been a source of pride rather than shame. The image of a blood-soaked Justine consuming a raw animal organ mimics Yeong-hye's description of the abjectly horrifying dream that compelled her to stop consuming meat altogether, but Justine's reaction to this gory scene is not just to accept it, but to revel in it. The desire and pleasure that she experiences when she

eats meat, particularly human flesh, so far exceeds the proper boundaries of proper female consumption that she transforms into a twisted, hunkered, rabid monster.

Conclusion

Few women have an uncomplicated relationship with food. *Celebrities Eating Things* shows that even the most glamorized or esteemed woman cannot eat a burrito without someone feeling the need and the right to comment on it. Many contemporary women authors grapple with the tension between the pleasure of eating and the social regulations that a patriarchal system places on female acts of consumption. In particular, Roxane Gay's *Hunger,* the British comedy-drama series *My Mad Fat Diary,* and Sarai Walker's novel *Dietland* and its AMC television adaptation engage with the notion of the female body as an instrument of patriarchal political and social control, and their characters rebel in various ways against that control. This rich new body of texts, in which we can count *The Vegetarian,* "Lobster Dinner," and *Raw,* questions whether women actually possess the freedom to make independent consumptive choices in a society that places so many explicit and hidden restrictions on these choices. The consumer feminist discourse would argue that the modern woman possesses free choice within the marketplace and that this freedom to choose signals the achievement of gender equality. After all, feminism itself has become easily consumable as a mainstream discourse, with its proliferation and commodification as a trendy way for women to express their independence with "Girl Power" t-shirts and "Nasty Woman" stickers. Even within this economy in which women can theoretically consume anything, even feminism, women only enjoy the limited socially approved choices that the patriarchy has delimited. Yeong-hye, Anne-Marie, and Justine take the critiques found in Gay and Walker to the extreme, as they unveil the monstrosity that undergirds the consumptive economy and reveal how women within this economy will inevitably be rendered monstrous.

Clearly, a concern that women will literally transform into cannibalistic monsters should not form the primary basis for critiquing the economy of consumption. However, these intentionally and hyperbolically gory depictions of consuming female monsters play into the deep-seated patriarchal fear of woman's fundamental difference and searingly deconstruct the postfeminist tenet of gender equality through free choice. Postfeminism's conflation of women's independence, gender equality, and consumerism raises existential questions about the nature of

contemporary feminism and feminist identities. As Cole and Crossley claim, "Although feminist identities are multi-dimensional, nuanced, and often times individualist, consumption in a capitalist context is a fundamentally un-feminist thing" (4). Any participant in the American economic marketplace can see that feminism is more prominent and popular than ever. Taylor Swift touts the autonomy and industry power of her "girl squad" and Target sells pins that proudly proclaim, "Nevertheless, she persisted." But feminism's pop culture explosion has done little to solve the actual political and social issues that troubled past generations of feminists. As Zeisler states, "Marketplace feminism is seductive. But marketplace feminism itself is not equality" (253). Yeong-hye, Anne-Marie, and Justine involve themselves in the alluring world of marketplace feminism to different degrees: Yeong-hye makes the unacceptable choice to withdraw, Anne-Marie follows society's mandates for proper feminine consumption to the letter, and Justine far exceeds the bounds of her required consumption to transform into a gluttonous cannibal. These women expose the continued need to question the self-satisfied assumption that free choice indicates gender equality or is even free in the first place. Otherwise, we succumb to the temptation of consumption under the misplaced faith in our ability to do so freely, only to find ourselves confronted with the marketplace's inherent abjection and monstrosity.

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