American Identity and Culture Alongside the Beef and Dairy Industries

Morgan Miller

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Vassar College

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Advised by José Perillán and Christopher White

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the cultural, historical, and technological significance of food, specifically red meat, milk, and the cow, in shaping American identities and societal values. Through a combination of historical analysis and cultural critique, it explores how food products like meat and milk function as tools of cultural expression and control, reflecting and reinforcing societal norms tied to gender, race, and power. Drawing on feminist and critical race theories, the thesis analyzes the cow's role as a literal and symbolic technology, from its use in colonization and expansion to its influence in constructing modern hierarchies. It highlights the cowboy myth and red meat as symbols of masculinity, alongside milk's portrayal as a nurturing and maternal product, to illustrate how these foods perpetuate power dynamics and societal expectations. Contemporary movements like the Raw Milk Movement underscore how food choices mirror personal and collective identities, particularly during societal tension, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. These movements reveal cultural and political divides, with raw milk becoming a symbol of resistance against government authority and modern food systems. Ultimately, this thesis argues that food is more than sustenance–it is a technology of identity that reflects and shapes societal transformations, offering insight into how Americans define themselves through what they eat in an ever-changing social and political landscape.

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INTRODUCTION

Every Fourth of July in the United States serves as a reminder, or rather an update, on how Americans choose to celebrate their national identity. Many Americans purchase fireworks or attend public firework ceremonies, but fireworks take place at the end of the day. Stereotypical Fourth of July daytime festivities include going to parades, hanging out by swimming pools, or having a barbeque. Arguably, the barbeque is the most integral component of the Fourth of July, maybe next to the act of eating a cheeseburger. The classic barbeque incorporates the fathers firing up the grill, flipping burgers, topping them with cheese, while the mothers prepare the side dishes and keep an eye on the children. Rituals like this, cooking red meat with dairy serving as a supporting ingredient, are culinary traditions as a consequence of their historical and cultural backgrounds in American history. The continual choice Americans make to continue barbequing reflects the importance these foods have for the American identity and the evolution of identities in response to social, political, and historical change.

A central component of this tradition is the cow, both as a literal resource for the ingredients of red meat and dairy products and also as a technology of identity. Oftentimes, technologies are conceived as man-made objects, ranging from simple inventions like handheld tools to more complicated systems like artificial intelligence. While technology is the *product* of human intelligence, it is also the *application* of human intelligence. Cows are biotechnologies as they are the consequence of thousands of years of genetic engineering and because their introduction into nonnative environments was a deliberate act of colonization. Domestic cattle reshaped the social, economic, and political scene of the spaces they invaded, revealing the cows' ability to assist in colonization. As a tool for conquest, Euro-Americans could use cows as the technology they were cultivated for, food or labor, while also using them to symbolize their own culture and belonging in the United States, owing greatly to the American bison, a distant relative of the cow. The first part of this thesis will explore how this story of how the cow grew to

be an essential component of American history and why these events culminated in American culture and identities.

Using the cow as a technology for expansion meant cow products became widespread staples in American diets, bringing along pre-American symbolism tied to red meat and milk. As stated with the example of the American barbeque, there are innate traits tied to meat and milk that give these foods importance for identities, American or not. Masculinity associated with hunting and the strength required to procure meat has historically tied red meat to ideals of power and dominance, values that resonated with the cultural development of the American frontier and the mythos of the cowboy. Similarly, milk, as a product tied to nurturing and domesticity, aligned with the evolving role of women in the household and broader cultural ideals of motherhood and care. These associations were reinforced through centuries of societal norms and media representations, shaping how Americans understood gender roles and cultural identity. As previously mentioned, technology is the product and application of human intelligence and through these two avenues technology is a central component to interpersonal engagements and lifestyles. How individuals go about their day, communicate who they are to others, and move about the world are manipulated by technologies and their modern and historical creations and implementations. Part Two of this thesis examines the origins of these gendered associations with red meat and milk and outlines these technologies' uses and ramifications in modern society.

The cow's dual purpose–as a provider of both red meat and milk–therefore positioned it not just as a resource but as a cultural cornerstone that mediated the way Americans saw themselves and their society. Contemporary challenges such as the COVID-19 pandemic complicate Americans' relationship with food and science. As Americans root for stability and trust in unfamiliar times, there is a clear tendency to rely on simple values and fundamental symbols, such as that of the cow. Consequently, there is an ongoing rebranding of identity as Americans forge their meanings and beliefs, often going back to the natural and simple as an

antidote to the complexities of modern living. The final part of this thesis will explore how these developments represent a continuation of the cow's role in shaping American culture, as debates over food and science intersect with evolving definitions of freedom, trust, and identity in a rapidly changing world. By connecting traditions with current instability, it highlights the enduring influence of the cow in American identity, even amid a modern reckoning with the systems that sustain it.

PART ONE: The Cow as an American Biotechnology

Introduction

Illustrating how and why the cow came to be such a prominent entity in the United States, would be incomplete without an acknowledgment of the bovine that came before–the American Buffalo. Today, this distant relative of the cow is depicted on many American emblems: Wyoming's state flag has the buffalo as a focal piece, Kansas' quarter has a buffalo on the reverse side, and the buffalo is the symbol for the Department of the Interior. It was only in 2016 when the buffalo was finally appointed as the national mammal of the United States (National Bison Legacy Act), but it was long before this decree that the buffalo was revered as such within the nation. In the early stages of the United States, the emerging Americans of the Western world had two characters of representation–the American buffalo along with the American Indian. These two figures were innately intertwined in early US news and culture, acting as representations for the country on a global scale. What made these two figures so symbolic was the termination, or the attempted termination, of the American Indian and the American buffalo. Through this process, new Americans honed their understanding of what it meant to be American and the cattle industry rose to prominence within the United States. The co-mingling of the cattle industry with the roots of United States culture made the cow a pivotal biotechnology for the manipulation of US culture and identity, and the resulting industry maintains a strong pull on current interactions within the United

States.

Early Beginnings

America's Prized Bovine: the American Buffalo

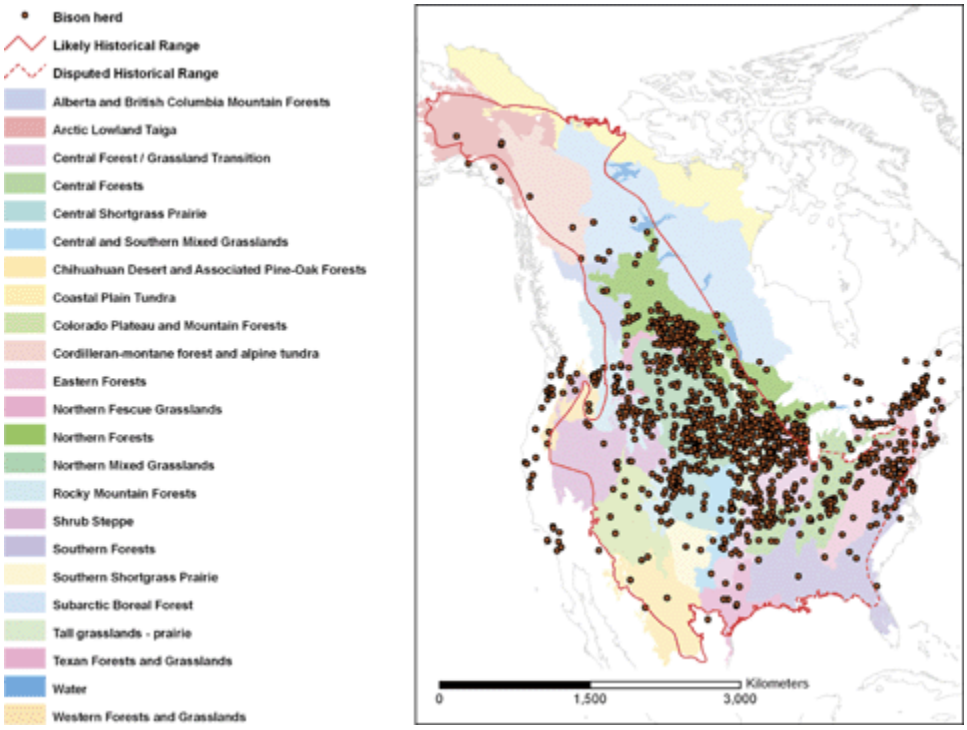
The American bison progressed side by side with the land, plants, and animals of prehistoric North America. More than 20,000 years ago, when the first humans arrived in North America (Duncan, 2023, 0:07:05), there were multiple species of bison and other Pleistocene Epoch, large mammals roaming the land–including mastodons, mammoths, and camels (Lott, 2002, p. 64). The arrival of humans came with the extinction of all of the largest animals of North America, and fifty other species, from "hunting, or changing climate, or a combination of the two" (Duncan, 2023, 0:07:18). Survivors of the mass extinction included the modern buffalo, or *Bison bison*, who emerged about 5,000 years ago (Lott, 2002, p. 59). The evolution of the modern bison brought along the symbiotic relationships within the bison's ecosystem. The microbes in the rumen helped to digest, or sicken; the buffalo birds feasted on the insects the buffalo flushes; the prairie dogs ate and lived amongst the grass the buffalo grazed and fertilized; and it goes on and on (Lott, 2002). North American environments adjusted to the change in climate and animal inhabitants, evolving around the existence of the bison which became an integral component of the American landscape.

A reason why the buffalo was an essential resource for the creatures of North America was the unmistakable size of the buffalo in stature, range, and population size. Weighing in at over a ton when full grown, six feet tall at the shoulder, and ten feet long horizontally (Duncan, 2023, 0:06:36), there was no missing the buffalo. Beyond size, their scope as a group placed them across the continent. Figure 1 depicts the historical range (circa 1500) of *Bison bison* which "spanned from Alaska to Mexico and included areas as far east as New York and as far west as California, an area estimated at 9.4 million km"

(Sanderson et al., 2008, p. 255).

Figure 1.

Distribution of a sample of existing American bison herds across the historical range (and beyond) in North America.



Note. This distribution is an estimate for the historical range (circa 1500). The dot size overestimates the actual area occupied by the herd. From "The Ecological Future of the North American Bison: Conceiving Long-Term, Large-Scale Conservation of Wildlife," by Sanderson et al., 2008, (https://conbio.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1523-1739.2008.00899.x). Copyright 2024 for the Society for Conservation Biology.

No person has ever been able to concretely determine the number of bison that roamed such an expansive land mass at their peak. According to Zoologist Jim Shaw, "One may assume with reasonable certainty that the bison population west of the Mississippi River at the close of the Civil War numbered in the millions, probably in the tens of millions. Any greater accuracy seems impossible" (1995, p. 150). The astounding size of every aspect of the bison left one thing for certain: to be in North America was to experience the American buffalo.

With the remarkable physical presence of the bison, it is no coincidence that tribal

customs and practices included the bison. In his portraits of the American West, American lawyer and artist George Catlin (1796-1892) depicted different tribes' connections to the bison (“George Catlin,” n.d.). One of his paintings, *Crow Lodge of Twenty-five Buffalo Skins*, shows a Crow Indian teepee made of twenty-five bison hides (1832-1833).

Figure 2.

Crow lodge of twenty-five buffalo skins

Note. By G. Catlin, 1832-1833, painting, oil on canvas, located at the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C., United States (https://americanart.si.edu/artwork/crow-lodge-twenty-five-buffalo-skins-4019).

Another painting of his, *Comanche Village, Women Dressing Robes and Drying Meat*, portrays the process of Comanche women preserving bison meat and fleshing bison hides

(1834-1835).

Figure 3.

Comanche Village, Women Dressing Robes and Drying Meat

Note. By G. Catlin, 1834-1835, painting, oil on canvas, located at the Smithsonian American Art Museum, in Washington, D.C., United States (https://americanart.si.edu/artwork/comanche-village-women-dressing-robes-and-drying-meat-4011). Copyright 2024 for the Smithsonian American Art Museum.

Butte de Mort, Sioux Burial Ground, Upper Missouri, displays human burial sites arranged in circular configurations with an inner ring of human skulls and an outer ring of bison skulls, illustrating the importance of bison in ritual (1837-1839).

Figure 4.

Butte de Mort, Sioux burial ground, Upper Missouri

Note. By G. Catlin, 1837-1839, painting, oil on canvas, located at the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C., United States (https://americanart.si.edu/artwork/butte-de-mort-sioux-burial-ground-upper-missouri-3977). Copyright 2024 for the Smithsonian American Art Museum.

These examples of Catlin's portraits of three different tribes, the Crow, the Comanche, and the Sioux, reflect the widespread importance of the buffalo in the survival of tribes and the survival of their culture. Brent Learned of the Cheyenne and Arapaho tribes explains the connection, "We will never forget what the Buffalo meant to us—life itself" (2021, slide 11). In North America, the buffalo was more than a source of food, it was fuel for entire populations of people for thousands of years, growing and evolving together through time as joint tenants of the land.

The Great Slaughter

The near-extinction of the American buffalo was a casualty of the market-oriented economic regime characteristic of the burgeoning American Industry–one that relies on an unsustainable exploitation of nature and its resources. European tastes upon first arrival in North America were centered around the business of beaver pelts. However, when the beavers out East became hard to find, colonists had to venture further west in search of pelts, eventually finding the buffalo (O'Brien, 2017, p. 32). Europeans and American Indians alike participated in the buffalo trades and new technology in the form of steamboats and railroads perpetuated the decimation of the buffalo. Railroad companies such as the Kansas Pacific Railroad Company hired men like William Frederick Cody, famously known as "Buffalo Bill," to provide bison meat to their workers (O'Brien, 2017, p. 35). Hunters of other sorts would use the train as a vantage point, distanced "within a few hundred feet of a railroad train in rapid motion, while the passengers are engaged in shooting, from every available window, with rifles, carbines, and revolvers" (Davis, 1869, as cited in Brister, 2002, p. 19). Economic returns of the buffalo hunts were in the multi-millions. However, most of the buffalo went to waste. In 1889, American zoologist and conservationist William T. Hornaday pointed out how buffalo hides and tongues were the main commodity and stated, "for every buffalo killed two and one-third buffaloes are wasted or eaten on the spot" (1889, p. 437). Unrestrained hunting of the buffalo brought wealth to all involved but brought out an undesirable quality of the forming American culture which sacrificed humanity for capital gains.

While the pursuit of riches was the primary drive behind killing the buffalo, the slaughter served as a covert warfare tactic against American Indians by the US government. In the United States, the government cycled through policies of assimilation, removal, and elimination (Keating, 2020) while trying to solve the "Indian question," or "What shall be done

with the Indian as an obstacle to national progress?" (Walker, 1874, p. 17). With examples of assimilation methods such as nationwide evangelizing of indigenous peoples and the removal practices including the forced exile of tribes into western lands, the mass destruction of the bison was a definitive example of the strategy of extermination. In the mind of the United States government, the persistence of the American buffalo went hand in hand with the persistence of Native Americans. In 1872, Interior Secretary Columbus Delano stated:

> The civilization of the Indian is impossible while the buffalo remains upon the plains...I would not seriously regret the total disappearance of the buffalo from our western prairies, in its effect upon the Indians, regarding it as a means of hastening their sense of dependence upon the products of the soil and their own labors. (Brister, 2002, p. 50)

Delano was not the only government official to support the elimination of the buffalo to harm the survival of Native tribes. The following year, in 1873, General Philip Sheridan supported Delano's statement and said the "hide hunters have done more in the last two years, and will do more in the next year, to settle the vexed Indian question than the entire regular army has done in the last thirty years" (Isenberg, 236, p. 1992). Delano and Sheridan's statements on the buffalo hunt show how US actions were not directly responsible for the buffalo hunt, but found this method of extermination preferable and more efficient than outright war. Without the buffalo, the government imagined they would have the full support and surrender of the American Indians, and the so-called "Indian question" would be solved.

The Cowboy

Spanish Cattle Revolution

The extermination of the buffalo symbolized Euro-American tensions with American Indians and worked as a global political tool to show the power of the new nation of the United States. Biologist Dale F. Lott, in his book *American Bison: A Natural History*, explains, "People don't tame bison to get beasts of burden, they tame them to prove either that they are tamable

or that somebody has got the stuff to do it–in either case, for an audience" (2002, p. 155). Lott's theory regarding the motive of bison taming reveals how the extermination of the buffalo, and the attempt to exterminate the Indigenous peoples alongside them, was a method of establishing the position of the country in the global arena. Similar to how power dynamics are involved in a constant revolution, identities are comparably unstable, continuously evolving to fit the newest paradigm. The cowboy–the rising identity of what it meant to be American–came to represent the new power dynamic and reputation of American conquest by using the cow, a "tamed" version of the bison.

Hundreds of years before the slaughter of the bison, Spaniards introduced cattle of another kind to Central America, creating a social, political, and economic landscape that put the cow in center focus. While there were horses native to North America at one point in time, they went extinct along with the other Pleistocene Epoch animals about 10,000-12,000 years ago (Lott, 2002, p. 64). Horses, along with cattle, were reintroduced to the New World for the first time in centuries in 1494 by Christopher Columbus on his second expedition across the Atlantic (Dary, 1989, p. 4). Columbus' expedition was a costly one due to the immense loss of livestock experienced along the journey, inspiring the Spaniards to depend on self-sufficiency upon landing rather than relying on overseas transport (Dary, 1989, p. 5). In the next 200 years, more Spaniards arrived in what would be called "New Spain," bringing their agricultural knowledge and technologies with them to gain "power, fortunes, and souls" (Jones, 2005, p. 11). Spaniards brought biological and artificial technology from those who lived near the Meseta Central over to the New World; biotechnology including, "horses, burros, mules, and cattle, classified as large livestock, or *ganado mayor*, and small animals such as sheep, goats, and hogs, known as *ganado menor*" and inventions such as the "iron axe," "machete," and the "ox-drawn plow" (Jones, 2005, p. 11). Of all the Old World fixtures brought to New Spain, domesticated cattle were the most influential to local life. As cattle ranching proved successful and numbers increased beyond control, the need to constantly patrol cattle arose. The

herd-owning caballero and padres found this task to be “menial” and “beneath their dignity,” resulting in the Spaniards recruiting or enslaving Africans, Indians, and non-Indians to patrol the cattle for them, eventually producing the *vaquero* or Mexican cowboy as depicted in figure 5 (Dary, 1989, p. 13).

Figure 5.

An old-time Californian vaquero after a wild steer.

Note. From “Toro, toro!” by Frederic Remington, 1893, in *Harper’s Weekly*. Copyright Frederic Remington.

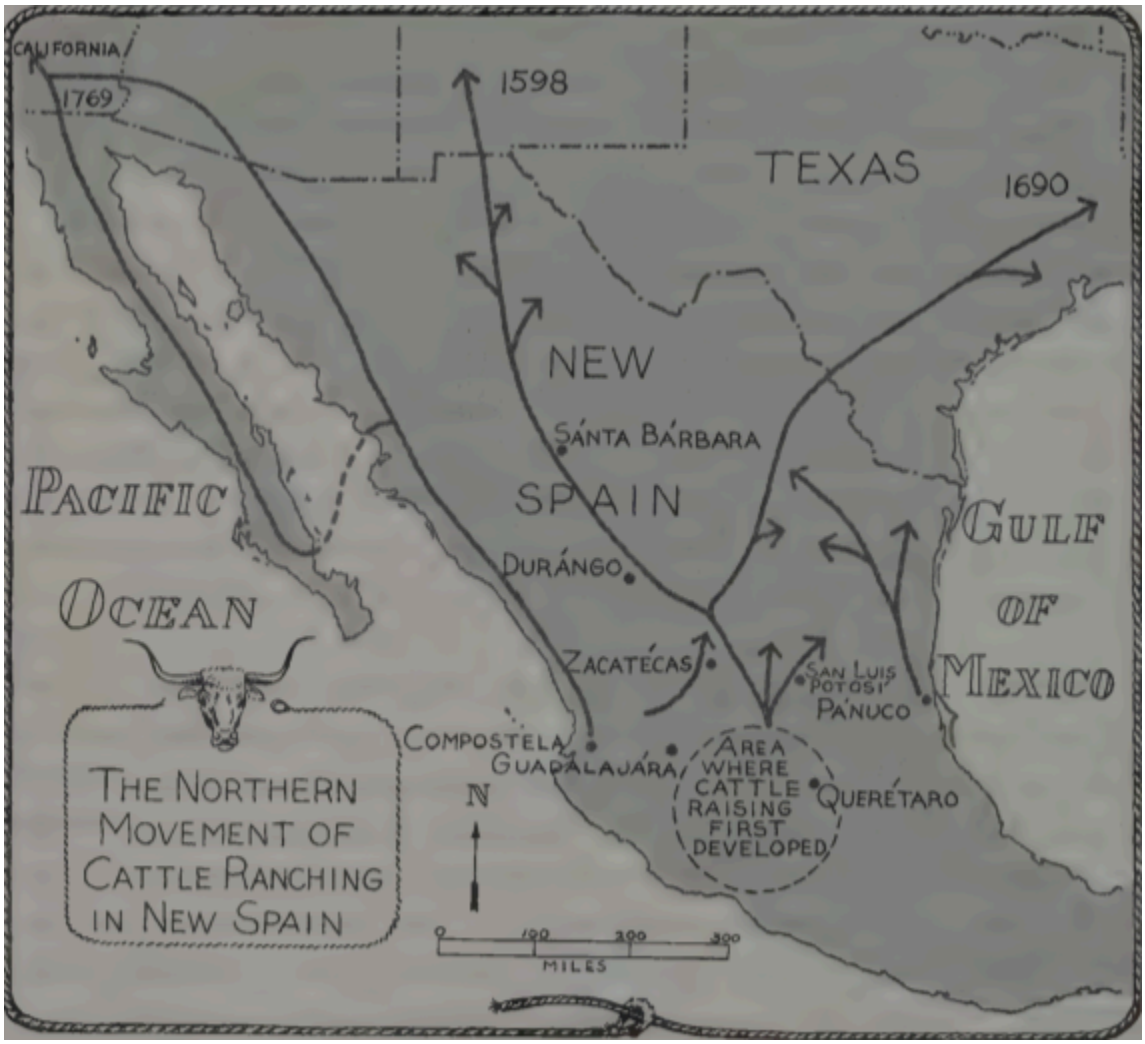
The vaquero became essential for maintaining cattle ranches in Spanish territory. So essential, that as Spaniards spread north, vaqueros and the cattle they minded followed, shaping Spanish-conquered land around the culture of cattle-ranching.

The Vaquero

While the vaqueros were the only cowkeepers in North America for hundreds of years, the roots of the cowboy began to show in the heart of Mexican-owned Texas in the early nineteenth century. Figure 6 shows the Spaniards’ northern expeditions from New Spain in the 1500s which split into three different directions: one group headed along the North Pacific coast, another into central North America, and another along the Eastern coast of New Spain into today’s Texas (Dary, 1989, p. 37).

Figure 6.

The Northern Movement of Cattle Ranching in New Spain



Note. From *Cowboy culture: a saga of five centuries* by D. Dary, 1989, *Cowboy culture: a saga of five centuries*. Copyright 1981, 1989 by University Press of Kansas.

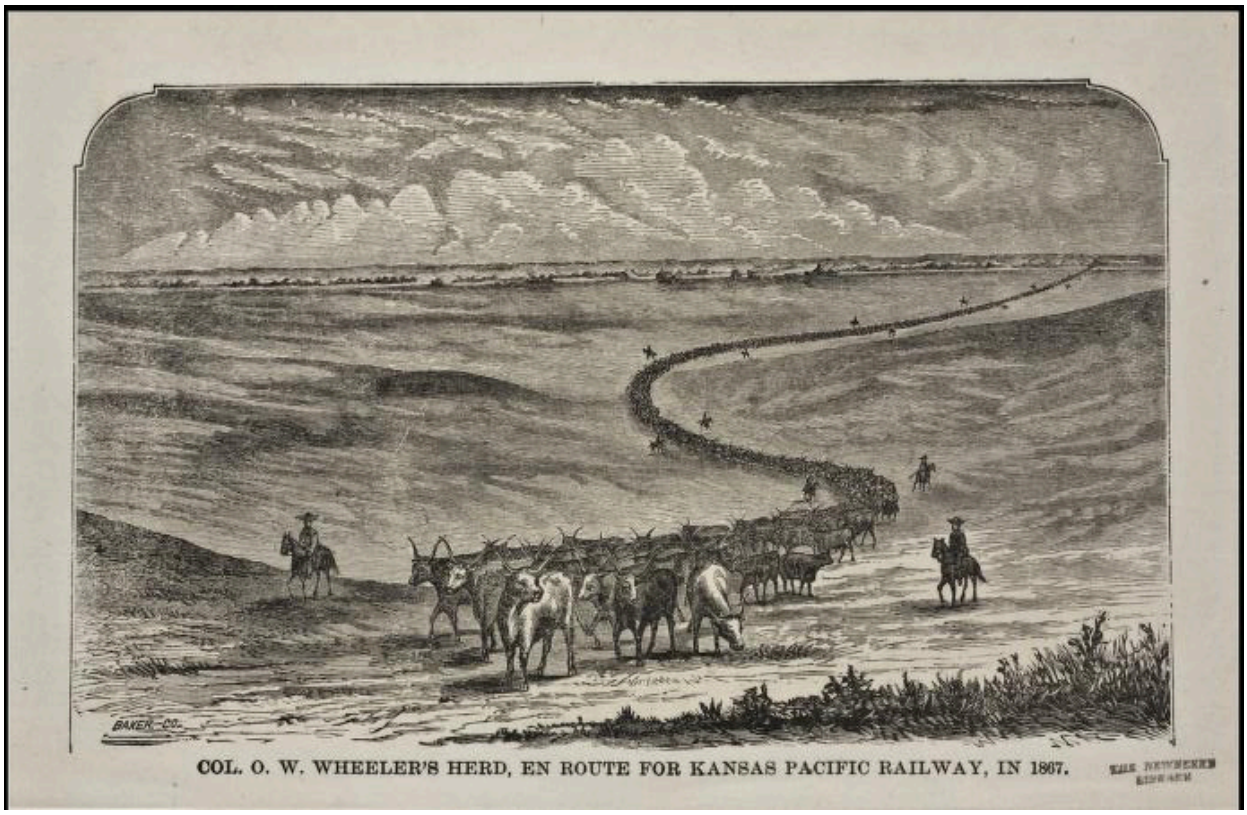
Many of the first settlers were Padres from New Spain who established missions, but in the 1700s, Texas residents included retired Spanish soldiers and other Spanish families who established private cattle ranches along the San Antonio River (Jones, 2005, p. 47). Conflict with native tribes and the lack of riches in the land (ie: gold) made life in Texas a tumultuous one, steering away more settlers from residing in Texas (Dary, 1989). It was only after the Mexican Revolution ended in the early 1820s that Texas experienced a population boom. The

War of 1812 and the Panic of 1819 pushed many Americans westward, inspiring American lawyer Stephen F. Austin to strike a deal between Mexico and America, selling Texas land for much cheaper than the going rate of land in the United States (Dary, 1989, p. 67). Under this deal, Americans who planned to raise livestock could receive up to about 4,615 acres of land, far more than they would receive in the States and far more than they would receive if their intentions were only for farming (Jones, 2005, p. 102). This law provided an initiative to incorporate livestock as biotechnology. By incentivizing settlers to accept land deemed inhabitable due to the presence of native tribes, the government used livestock as a resource to feed the incoming European settlers while simultaneously pushing natives off of their land. Through this plan, a multitude of settlers committed to raising livestock on their land came to Texas, elevating the already prominent cattle culture to a new level.

Many settlers depended on guidance from vaqueros, whose expertise became instrumental for success. Nora Ramirez's PhD thesis dissertation, "The Vaquero and Ranching in the Southwestern United States," notes the significance the vaqueros had for the Anglo-Americans. Ramirez explains how the vaqueros were educators for the Anglo settlers when they came to Texas and were put in a spot to dominate the cattle-ranching industry. She explains how the vaqueros taught the Americans how to work the cattle and how to work around the environment (Ramirez, 1979). Vaquero knowledge was instrumental to the success of the Texas settlers, eventually building the market to span across numerous states and overseas. By the 1850s, well after Texas became its own republic, cattle drives jutted across the nation like that illustrated in Figure 7.

Figure 7.

Cattle Drive in 1867



Note. From *Historic Sketches of the Cattle Trade of the American West and Southwest* (p. 94)*, by* J. G. McCoy, 1874, Ramsey, Millett & Hudson. Copyright Ramsey, Millett & Hudson.

There were trails north to Kansas City, trails east to New Orleans and as far as New York City, and trails west to California for Gold Rush settlers (Moore, 2009, p. 23). Business was booming and cows were taking over the country, driven by the vaqueros and Texas settlers.

Forming American Identities

During this era, the term "cowboy" emerged as the English translation of “vaquero,” marking a significant shift in cultural and political identity. While "vaquero" was originally the sole term for cattle workers in America, the adoption of "cowboy" reflected a transfer of power and cultural dominance favoring the United States. The Vaquero occupation itself was a blend of

diverse cultures and traditions, and this multicultural foundation persisted when Texas settlers adopted and adapted the practice. J. Frank Dobie, author of *Guide to Life and Literature of the Southwest* (1954), describes the cowboy as “an evolvement from and a blend of the riding, shooting, frontier-formed southerner, the Mexican-Indian horseback worker with livestock (the vaquero), and the Spanish open-range rancher” (p. 89). This transformation symbolizes the Americanization of a rich, multicultural heritage, as the identity of the vaquero was subsumed and rebranded under the title "cowboy," aligning it with American values of independence, land, and freedom—key pillars of the nation’s self-image. The shift in terminology underscores an evolution of identity, where cultural appropriation played a role in redefining traditions to fit a distinctly American narrative.

The identity of the cowboy, and the myth of it, grew strong roots pre-Civil War but faced disruption as many cowboys enlisted, either voluntarily or through the draft, causing the cattle industry to halt. By the war’s end, the Southern economy lay in ruins, demand for beef had dwindled, and the nation as a whole was struggling to recover. In this period of uncertainty, Americans turned to unifying symbols and the cowboy, both as a real figure and a romanticized ideal, emerged as a powerful guidepost for national ideologies. Already imbued with an aura of adventure and ruggedness, the cowboy became closely tied to the myth of the frontier, a space celebrated for its lawlessness and potential for transformation. Frederick Jackson Turner captures this sentiment in *The Significance of the Frontier in American History* (1893), stating, “It begins with the Indian and the hunter; it goes on to tell of the disintegration of savagery by the entrance of the trader, the pathfinder of civilization” (p. 207). Many men of the era, such as the aforementioned Joseph McCoy, seized on this narrative, promoting the cowboy and cattle rancher as heroic symbols of the West to encourage settlement and support the growing cattle industry (1874). This myth was deeply intertwined with the idea of the frontier as “places of individualism and justifiable, if at times regrettable, violence in the interests of civilization” (Specht, 2019, p. 25). Cowboys were among other pawns on this interface, painted as the

heroic figures who fought and won endless battles amongst American Indians for the cause of securing the frontier. The myth of the cowboy was effective in the public eye by serving as they provided an option for national self-identification when the country needed a unifying force.

Before, during, and after the war the cowboy worked as an operative, meeting people on the neutral ground of the Western front and serving both sides with beef. Bringing food to plates across the country made the occupation of a cowboy familiar in households. As people learned more about who these people were, their myths grew. In the post-Civil War era, people were uncertain and the nation underwent a major economic shift in cash flow, production, and in workforce transitions accompanied by the abolition of slavery. Alongside the uncertainty, there was the cowboy–one who spends time in nature, writes their destiny, and whose myth satisfies Americans' innate desires for “independence, self-reliance, and individualism” (Dary, 1989, p. 87). The cowboy had life figured out, he ”found a way of life that allowed him to rope and work with his cattle, not bend his back to chop weeds and crawl to pick cotton.” (Clayton, 2001, p. 73) While the original men on horseback were servants or slaves of the wealthy Spaniards or Americans, the cowboy in the public eye was seen as anything but subservient. Looking at the Western cowboy, a figure born within Texas and spread throughout the states, offered a distinctly American figure in a nation lacking commonality. Finding identity through the myth of the cowboy allowed Americans to unite under one nation and define their own identity.

Cowboy culture helped shape American identity as it established who one was and who one was *not*. Americans played with identity throughout their expeditions in North America, particularly with the dynamic of Cowboys and Indians. Yankton Dakota Author Philip J. Deloria in his book *Playing Indian* defines an American identity with two conflicts: first, Americans establish who they are by what they are not, and second, Americans desire to have “civilized order” while also possessing “savage freedom” (1998, p. 3). Cowboys as an American myth formed their culture from two separate entities, the vaquero and the Indian, which Americans manipulate to extract traits they desire. The adoption of cattle culture found with vaqueros

formed one side of American culture by embracing a sense of freedom and a bond with the land that comes with the cultivation of livestock and the wide-scale cattle drives. While Euro-Americans and others of the original Anglo-Texan settlers acquired these qualities from vaqueros and molded them into the cowboy figure, American Indians innately possessed these qualities within their culture. Native peoples had freedom from Britain and Spain, which Early Americans fought to cut ties with, and they had generational belonging to a land that Americans desired to have for themselves in the New World. This interplay between the two identities, much exemplified in the Cowboys versus Indians trope, is a symbol of the creation of American culture. By ranching cattle and adopting cultures such as that of the vaqueros, Americans could find who they were by disguising themselves in the appropriated identity that separates them from their home countries.

For Americans to be who they wanted to be and adopt characteristics that were not theirs, they played with disguises to warp their identities. However, altering your self-identification innately requires an understanding of who you are. Deloria explains, “Disguise readily calls the notion of fixed identity into question. At the same time, however, wearing a mask also makes one self-conscious of a real ‘me’ underneath” (1998, p. 7). To be masked as someone or something else, you have to be cognizantly aware of what you are *not*. Therefore, to pretend you are something, say a cowboy, you must act as if you *are* a cowboy however you can only do this if you know you are actually *not* a cowboy (Fallis, 2018, p. 6-7). Consequently, for one to be a cowboy, they have to convey to others that they are a cowboy by manipulating how others perceive them. Innately, there can be no deception if there is no one to deceive. From this notion of identities and disguises, the American identity forms. For Americans to construct their self-identity, in this case, the mythic cowboy, they had to shape how they looked and how they acted to resemble those they wanted to be–because if others believed it, it was real.

Where's the Beef?

Cows as Political Tools

The cowboy myth depended on the cow for its existence and manipulation of the American landscape and identity, affirming that cows are a form of biotechnology. While animals are not typically considered technology in discourse, their creation and their use prove that they are, indeed, technological innovations. Animals are one of the earliest forms of technological innovations, as humans used animals for hunting, warfare, and food among other reasons. Political theorist Langdon Winner defines two manners in which technologies are political, the first manner is the cases where the technology is a way to resolve a problem within a community and the second is the instances where the technology was made for an inherently political reason, such as nuclear bombs (Winner, 1986, p. 22). Using Winner's philosophy of technology towards the cow, cows were used as a technology to resolve a problem within a community through their domestication and specialization to fill niches in societal needs, for example, the development of dairy.

In the matter of the American bison, cows were used on the frontier for a dual purpose–to solve a societal need and to answer a political motivation. As previously discussed, Americans over hunted the bison to gain riches and to solve the "Indian question." One of the consequences of such was the absence of a vast resource for both Native Americans and the Western-driven settlers. Middle America's profitable cattle industry filled this void of buffalo on the prairies and by doing so occupied more of the public space and the public mind. Anishinaabe activist, economist, and author Winona LaDuke in her book *All Our Relations: Native Struggles for Land and Life* illustrates how the proponents of the cattle industry capitalized off of the loss of the buffalo and cornered the market on American Indian reservations to replace the meat shortage that the buffalo once offered. LaDuke explains, "Feeding those whom the government had deprived of food and sustenance became a major

business and a new commercial opportunity for the fledgling western cattle industries" (2016, p. 172). The US government was replacing the artifacts of American Indians and replacing them with government-controlled tools as a method of enforcing industrialized dependency. Conservationist and Zoologist William T. Hornaday stated, "After the United States Government began to support the buffalo-hunting Indians with annuities and supplies, the woolen blanket and canvas tent took the place of the buffalo robe and the skin-covered teepee, and 'Government beef' took the place of buffalo meat" (1889, p. 438). While the amount of beef the government was buying to sell to Native Americans was small in comparison to the number of beef buyers throughout the nation, "government beef" played an instrumental role in securing an economic safety net for many cattle enterprises. The American government and the cattle industry used cows to not only solve the problem of food scarcity but also to politically and physically exile Native peoples off of their lands.

By removing the Indians from their land, Americans could fill the cultural and physical space left behind and permanently wear the mask of "Indianness" discussed in the previous section. By eliminating the "Indian's cattle" and replacing it with the "white man's cattle," Americans physically took over the space Natives held in the country and adopted another culture that they wanted; they could represent an American identity of freedom and belonging to land while keeping a hold on the cultures they took from. The cow worked as a biotechnology to replace the bison as a food resource and replace the bison as the known animal that roams the prairies of the United States. Instead of the bison, who were wild, unpredictable, and untamable, the cow was under the control of the new American nation. Sending a representation for the world–the bison are out and the Americans are in control. Therefore, the buffalo, a symbol of American identity innately tied with Indigenous American culture, became a permanent reminder of subjugation and power imbalances due to the use of the cow as a technology of colonization.

Conclusion

There is no American identity without the bison. North American history, before and after human contact, included the American buffalo within its fabric. Ecosystems throughout the continent thrived under the grazing of the buffalo, participating in an exchange between organisms that resulted in millions of bison to range the lands. This dependency on the American bison included Native American tribes whose regions intersected that of the buffalo. As a result of centuries-long political tensions between European settlers and the Indigenous people of North America, the US government removed Indigenous peoples from their lands through forced relocation, war, and the overhunting of buffalo to open up the prairies for white Americans to own and to physically and culturally overthrow the nation.

Simultaneously, cattle from Europe made their way northwards into modern-day Texas and began filling the niche left behind by the absence of buffalo. The beef cattle industry grew into a monstrous enterprise, stretching across miles of landscape and bringing with it a figurehead of American ideology–the cowboy. An amalgamation of identities with its foundation originating from the Spanish vaquero, the cowboy emerged in the post-Civil War era when the nation needed a unifying figure. The cowboy was a mix of cultures, emblematic of the “melting pot” that was America, and its myth perpetuated notions of independence, self-reliance, and individualism towards the greater purpose of taking control of one's destiny.

Finding identity through the conflict and appropriation of Native Americans, and introducing a bison-like animal that was under settlers’ control, helped Euro-Americans put on a costume of belonging on land that was never theirs. While the cowboy represented belonging as a counterpart to the American Indian and American bison. It was the cow, through its role as a tool in land acquisition, that enabled Americans to find their definition of identity and their unifying figure of patriotism.

PART TWO: Meat, Milk, and Gender

Introduction

The cow was an instrumental technology for the social, economic, and political growth of the early United States. As just a tool for the expansion of Europeans on North American land, the cow brought numerous transitions to American society and became an eternal figure of American colonization. This is without much consideration of the actual products the cows are raised for. Red meat and milk are two main foods farmers and ranchers raise cattle for, and they come with their contexts outside of the cow. Showing that at the same time the cow was making a name for itself within the burgeoning United States, the food items of meat and milk played their part in manipulating American society based on their histories as gendered artifacts.

Evaluating the role of meat in contemporary society brings up connotations of strength, power, and masculinity. Contrarily, milk has multiple connotations of innocence, motherhood, and femininity. These differing stereotypes are deeply rooted in the historical practices and societal constructs of food procurement and preparation. Meat, due to its ties to hunting, became a symbol of strength and power many believed only men could adequately possess. On the other hand, milk comes from the birth of mammal life, and is therefore tied to motherhood and empathy. As a result of these gendered connotations between meat and milk, the respective foods determine how society manipulates them to fit gender roles in both labor and life. Consequently meat, as an overtly masculine artifact, comes across as stronger and more domineering than feminine milk, permitting milk to be a more subtle and unseen political tool. Modern manipulation of these foods also conveys the ever-changing role of identity and its correspondence to power, asking how food plays a role in self-representation.

I Am a Man, I Eat Meat

Gender and Hunting

Meat in itself was considered a masculine artifact long before the founding of America. Going back to the days of the Roman Empire, author Eric J. Goldberg explains how Romans associated hunting “almost exclusively with men” for reasons including “the inherent dangers of hunting, the equestrian and martial skills it demanded, and its close associations with warfare” (2020, p. 28). Women, in contrast to men, were not to participate in hunting as the inherent nature of it all, namely its violent and physically challenging characteristics, were not deemed as appropriate for the female sex. When the Roman Empire eventually fell and the countries of today formed in its place, the fundamental beliefs that occupied the land persisted and molded gender stereotypes for the region.

Hundreds of years later in a proclamation written by King James I in 1601, it is clear not much changed regarding sexual divisions in hunting. Regarding a new hunting law, King James I explained how there were more trespassing hunters in his current day than there were near the end of his mother’s life. He believed her reckless taking up of hunting inspired such crimes. He stated:

> Neuerthelesse, howsoeuer in her later dayes (being a Lady whose sexe and yeeres were not so apt to that kinde of recreation, hauing no posteritie, and therefore lesse carefull of conseruation of that kinde of Royaltie, which her Progenitors Kings of this Realme had mainteined) people might perhaps for those respects presume of more libertie then became them, or the Lawes of the Realme do permit. (James, 1609, By The King section)

For King James I, there were numerous issues with his mother’s hobby of hunting that he believed negatively influenced the public, one of which was her gender. Much like the Roman opinion of women and hunting, the British believed women were unfit for such tasks. The lack of connection between women and hunting placed meat in the man’s domain, separating women from the product.

Designating men as hunters had little impact on the meat supply anyway as meat was not a common food for most people in Europe besides the wealthy. Leading up to the end of the 19th century in Europe, the only place that would consume meat more than a few times a year was Britain. Anna Kingsford of *The Perfect Way in Diet: A Treatise Advocating a Return to the Natural and Ancient Food of Our Race* (1904) explained, “In fact, it is only in England that we find animal food forming part of the regular alimentation of the lower classes” (pp. 37-38). Even in Britain, however, the amounts of meat served were scarce. Dr. Edward Smith, in an 1864 study, found that wives or mothers of poor British families had small portions of meat two or three times a week while the husband and father consumed most or all of the meat the family had available (pp. 199-200). Over 50 years later, in another analysis of the sexual politics surrounding meat, nothing had changed. Author Maud Pember Reeves observed that in poor households the money must go to the man’s alimentation as “Meat is bought for the men” (1913, pp. 144, 97). These trends were among the poor, and those of wealthier status could afford to have meat at more meals. However, the historical context painting men as hunters impacted the following generations. Beliefs regarding meat, particularly how meat was procured, shaped the sexual politics of food between men and women–women were not associated with meat, so they were not fed any.

Back to the West

In America, beliefs surrounding meat and gender were in full swing, but labor transformations in post-Civil War America elevated red meat from the rest. The end of the Civil War demanded more technological innovation in the form of steel and transportation infrastructure, which impacted the workforce (Kimmel, 2006, p. 57). According to sociologist C. Wright Mills, by 1870 the entire population of self-employed entrepreneurs decreased by more than half the numbers that existed at the start of the century (1951, p. 63). In a similar vein, the number of agriculturalists in 1820 compared to 1880 decreased by a third (Mills, 1951, p. 16).

Mass urbanization occurred throughout the United States as jobs became increasingly industrial. Large factories defining the lives of many American workers, caused men to feel an overwhelming loss of control of wages, the production process, and bodily autonomy as their tasks became repetitive and mechanical. Similarly to what was discussed in Part One, the loss of power in the lives of urban men inspired them to look west to imagine a life free from the bureaucracies and factory labor of the industrialized East–searching for a new identity.

Most men were not able to travel west to see it for themselves, but the men who had the means took advantage of the opportunity and spread the sentiments of the frontier back home. Trips to the Western Frontier were often a prescription for neurasthenia (Bold, 2013, p. 59) which was described as “debility or impaired activity of the nerves” (Beard, 1874, p. 391). Doctors prescribed a trip west to many men suffering from this affliction, one of which was Theodore Roosevelt (pictured in Figure 8).

Figure 8.

Theodore Roosevelt during a hunting trip in Colorado

Note. From “Happy and hardy after his bear hunt - President Theodore Roosevelt returning to Glenwood Springs, Colorado,” 1905, Library of Congress (https://www.loc.gov/resource/ppmsca.35830/). Copyright Underwood & Underwood, N.Y.

The results of Roosevelt’s first trip inspired him to return regularly to the Western Frontier for hunting trips and he was greatly inspired by the lives and the men a part of it all. Roosevelt stated that a cowboy “possesses, in fact, few of the emasculated, milk-and-water moralities admired by the pseudo-philanthropists; but he does possess, to a very high degree, the stern, manly qualities that are invaluable to a nation” (1888, p. 55-56). To Roosevelt, cowboys were a direct contradiction to the metropolitan civilians out East, a group of men he imagined as not only un-American but feminized.

Owen Wister, the creator of the Western genre, aspired to communicate the feelings of the West and the championship of manhood on paper. Wister defined cowboys as men with noble and admirable traits, he explained, “The cow-puncher’s ungoverned hours did not unman him. If he gave his word, he kept it; Wall Street would have found him behind the times. Nor did he talk lewdly to women; Newport would have thought him old-fashioned” (1902, p. ix). Wister’s depictions of cowboys gave American men of the late 19th and early 20th century a domain for male liberation when they could not see the West themselves. The cowboy challenged the aristocratic white-collar society of the East Coast, with their refinements and their snobbery, and presented an alternate perspective of masculinity with legends of great strength and devout respect wherever he went–a showcase of peak masculine performance.

While Eastern men working in a factory could not replicate the lives of the cowboys portrayed so valiantly by men such as Roosevelt and Wister, they could mimic their extracurricular choices. Along these trips, the men would visit dude ranches and eat western meals like real cowboys did. Publicized meals that one could enjoy out west include a recipe for a “Nevada Kidney Casserole” which promises to “please dude ranch epicures and cattle ranch cowboys alike” with a crust made of bacon and fillings of lamb kidneys (Meade, 1913, no. 20).

Another publication discusses how a ranch-hand would enjoy meals consisting of “gold-brown biscuits,” “steak fried to perfection,” canned vegetables like tomatoes and green chiles, and cheese (Kay, 1940, pp. 52-53); and, notably, no butter, “This, you must remember, was a cattle ranch and cattle are creatures to be eaten, not milked” (Kay, 1940, p. 53). In the book *Cooking as Men Like it*, the author discusses how barbecues are the technique of eating throughout the South and West and the meals revolve around roasting a whole chicken along with several small servings of “beef, mutton, or lamb and thick steaks” (Frederick, 1930, p. 123). Further, the so-called “King of the Cowboys” Roy Rogers was also a fan of beef, and according to the book *Famous Recipes of Famous Men* there was nothing Rogers liked more than a “plain old-fashioned beef stew” (Ald, 1949, p. 91). Wide-spread notions of Western life included eating red meat as a staple ingredient in meals, replicable on the dinner plates of men back home. In this era where men felt disempowered by industry, taking on the identity of cowboys, while also reflecting on so-called “simpler times,” enforced a sense of control over their own lives and self-security.

Real Men Eat Steak

Soon enough, buying and consuming red meat became a stand-in for venturing West to reclaim masculinity. When one’s workplace was no longer a place of success or praise, Americans reasserted manhood by enjoying meals of the “real men” out West–primarily entrees of red meat. Early sexual politics of meat played a crucial role in establishing this behavior. Meat was a man’s product by way of hunting, and the cowboy was the figure for American masculinity, therefore eating red meat like the cowboys do acted as a gender-affirming technology to remake one's identity after disempowerment.

Beliefs such as this have persisted into the modern realm of academia, particularly in anthropology. *Man the Hunter* (1968) was a groundbreaking book that laid the theory of hunter-gatherer societies’ labor divisions delegating the men as hunters and the women as

gatherers. While *Man the Hunter* was published centuries after the fall of the Roman Empire, the arguments used within the book were nothing new. The book employed long-held gender stereotypes about the different abilities of men and women to explain why men hunted rather than women, arguments such as women's responsibilities needing to center around caring for their young and the superior strength of men (Lee & Devore, 1968). Another paper reiterates the sexual division in ability, stating not only are women "more sedentary and less aggressive" but also that the "Hunting forays would be seriously impaired by the need to nurse, care for, and carry children." (Hayden, 1981, p. 403). This theory, which has since been debunked (Lacy & Ocobock, 2024), reiterated gender stereotypes that were commonplace in European societies for centuries, following European descendants wherever they went. Lumping women into the basket of child rearers from the get-go made men out to be the strongest sex, shifting beliefs in who should do what when it comes to procuring food.

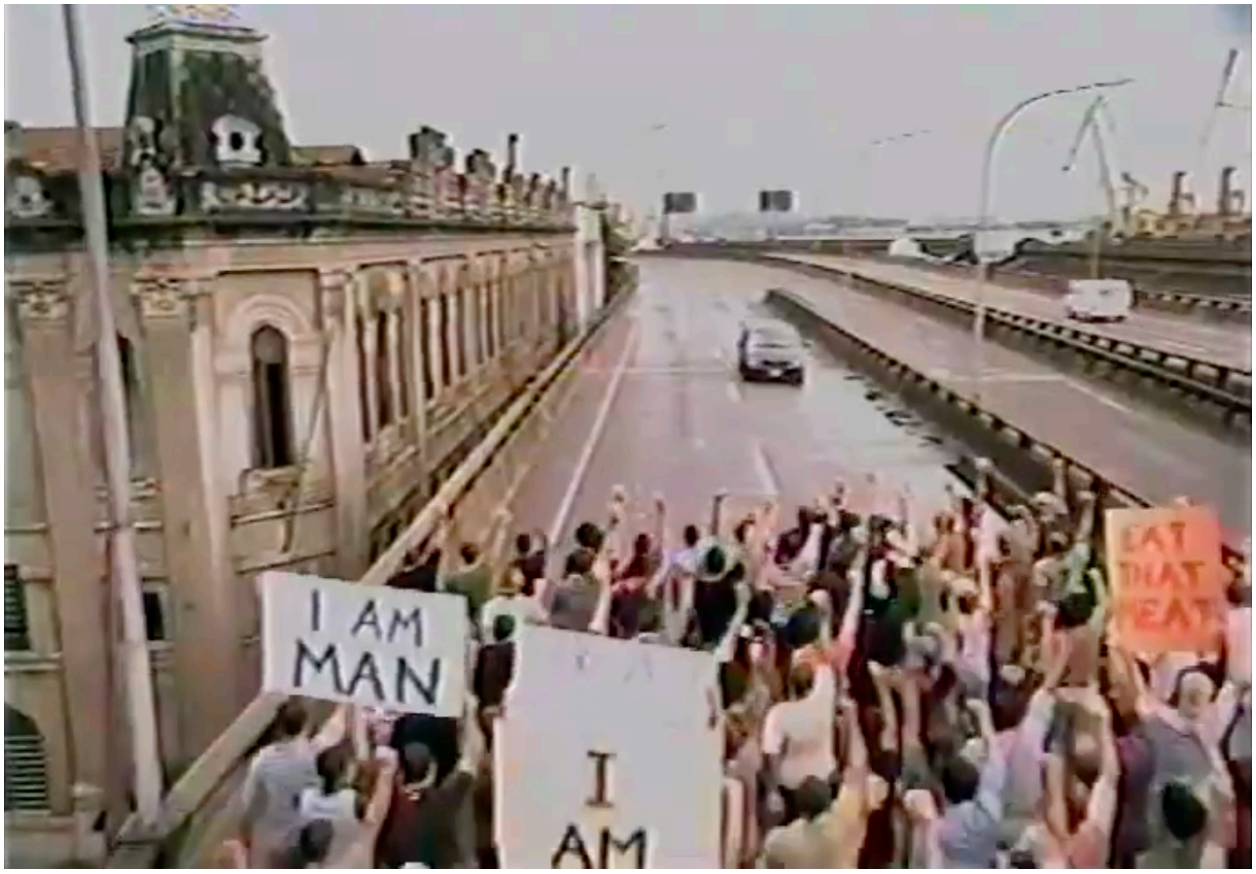
Similar to the conclusions made in anthropology papers regarding gendered labor roles, present-day studies show men have a higher likelihood of overconsuming all types of meat due to the perceived consequences of a carnivorous diet including muscle growth, greater strength, and more power; in contrast to a herbivorous diet which contributes none of the previous qualities, making it suitable for women (Buerkle, 2009). However, when totaling all male consumption of meat, red meat is the variety men consume more than the two other types (white and processed meats) (Daniel et al., 2011). The results show red meat has a certain appeal that men prefer more than other meats. A later study took a closer look at the choices men and women make when it comes to meat, showing that of the varieties of red meat available, including pork and veal, steak and hamburgers are viewed as the manliest foods, overall (Rozin et al., 2019). In the public mind red meat, especially in the form of beef or steak, has the strongest evocation of masculine overtones which impact dietary decisions.

Opinions about the characteristics of meat carry weight when making decisions as a consumer. Within the past twenty years, burger joint commercials used the stereotypes of red

meat as a masculine signifier to help sell burgers. For example, in Burger King's "Manthem" commercial, a still from which is depicted in Figure 9, the lead of the commercial dejected "chick food" and headed to his local Burger King, joining a mass protest of men who were also denouncing non-meat foods in favor of the juicy and manly beef Texas Double Whopper (natha555, 2007).

Figure 9.

A still shot from Burger King's "Manthem" commercial



Note. Men protesting "chick food" with signs labeled "I AM MAN" and "EAT THAT MEAT." From *Burger King Manthem Commercial*, uploaded by natha555, 2007, Youtube (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R3YHrf9fGrw).

This commercial and others like it (such as various advertisements for Carl's Jr. restaurants) implement visuals and messages to tempt hetero masculine desires. The commercials convey the same idea, burgers are masculine and so are you when you eat one. However, red meat has no true innate masculine quality; its effectiveness lies within its historical context.

The effect burgers have on gender identity operates like a placebo effect–there is no biological reason that ties red meat to making a better man, but its stereotypes tell otherwise. Gender and media scholar C. Wesley Buerkle argues that men do not seem to particularly enjoy beef as an instinctive masculine desire, rather they eat beef to appease societal gender roles (2009). Another study corroborated these findings by measuring the rates members of the male sex ate red meat in accordance with the phase of their life cycle. The results of this study revealed that males in early adolescence and early adulthood, or the “masculinity intensifying stages of life,” ate more red meat than in other stages of life (Ritzel & Mann, 2021, p. 10). This study proved that red meat is not a food innately desired by men, it is a food that can be used to feel as if one were a man. Contemporary uses of red meat reflect the evolution of male identities, as it continues to serve as a tool for constructing and performing masculinity in different contexts. While the cowboy myth once tied red meat consumption to rugged individualism and frontier strength, today it is often marketed as a way for men to assert traditional masculine values in an increasingly modern and diverse society. This evolution highlights how cultural narratives around red meat adapt to societal changes, reinforcing gender norms while also revealing the anxieties and pressures tied to maintaining those norms. The continued association of red meat with masculinity underscores its role as more than sustenance—it is a symbolic artifact through which men negotiate their identities in response to shifting cultural expectations.

Mother’s Milk

Biological Roots of Milk

Milk, as opposed to meat, is fundamentally based on biology and reproduction. The defining feature of all mammals is their ability to produce milk immediately after giving birth, a process supported by the “endocrine, anatomical, and physiological systems of the female”

(Damron, 2003, p. 238-239). Even the etymology of the word “dairy,” which originates from the Middle English word “dey” meaning female servant, highlights the historical association of milk with maternal labor and care. (Dohner, 2001, pp. 215-216). This biological and cultural linkage has placed milk at the center of notions of motherhood and nurturing, shaping its role in societal and domestic life.

Milk has long been tied to female identities for both labor and household obligations. Historically, women were expected to manage dairy production for the household, both in terms of the production of milk for human babies and the milking of domestic animals like cows and goats. As the United States expanded, milk became a staple food item throughout the country, especially for children, further enforcing its association with motherhood and caregiving. This connection was reflected in children’s literature, which often anthropomorphized the cow as a gentle mother figure, carefully omitting the biological realities of reproduction to make milk consumption more palatable and comforting. Through this portrayal, milk became more than just nourishment; it became a technology of nurturing and care, integral aspects of feminine identity.

In media and cultural narratives, milk’s associations with motherhood and femininity place it in stark contrast to the dominance of red meat, which is tied to masculinity and power. Feminist scholar Sandra Harding notes that Western culture prioritizes masculinity over femininity, resulting in masculine-coded symbols like meat being more prominently celebrated and valued (1986). Milk, by comparison, is often overlooked as a cultural technology because its ties to femininity make it less overtly political or dominant in discourse. However, this quiet association with care and nurturing makes milk no less influential. By symbolizing domesticity and maternal responsibility, milk plays a subtle yet powerful role in shaping cultural identities, reinforcing traditional gender roles while influencing societal expectations of femininity and family life.

Early Sexual Divisions of Labor

Cattle ranchers of the West and the farmers of the East had vastly different enterprises that depended on different forms of labor. With the movement of Spanish colonizers northward from modern-day Mexico, large cattle-based agricultural practices followed and contributed to the ranching economy. Contrarily, the eastern side of early America saw colonizers from a primarily British background where large herds like those of the Spanish settlements were not as common. Emphasis was on crop cultivation, not the raising of livestock, “most rural New Englanders in the 1650s did not have large stocks of animals...Even medium-sized homesteads (fifteen to twenty acres) averaged only two or three swine and cattle” (McMahon, 1985, p. 35). For smaller farms, livestock was not kept on vast acreages, but in small “town commons,” or communal pastures, where estates housed “more than ten hogs, sows, and pigs in their barnyards and grazed fifteen head of cattle” (McMahon, 1985, p. 35). Large herds of cattle akin to the Spanish cattle ranches required far different tasks than that of the English farms which maintained small livestock herds in addition to crop cultivation.

While a dairy farm necessitates daily (or more frequent) human interventions, a cattle ranch can go for extended periods with little or no human interaction. What this distinction meant for British settlers, who depended on the dairy cow for much food production (McMahon, 1985, p. 38), was there needed to be someone in the household that performed these duties every day. Laurel Ulrich, writer of *Good Wives*, explained how in rural, Puritan, colonial New England, women were the ones in charge of these tasks. Ulrich states, “The housekeeping role was defined by a space…a set of tasks…and an area of authority…A woman may not have milked her own cows or scoured her own kettles, but she was responsible for seeing that someone did” (1982, p. 13). The role of gender in terms of household management in this era reflected the tie of milking livestock to women’s roles as husbands “primarily worked ‘abroad’” (1982, p. 13). Men working “abroad” was evident in the cattle ranching enterprise as the

vaqueros, and later the cowboys, ventured out into the land to perform their cattle chores whereas the women stayed close to home with their dairy cows. Gender dynamics of working at home versus abroad worked in tandem with cultural beliefs regarding the biology of women and what makes them better equipped for certain tasks. As a consequence of biology, women were considered better equipped to milk animals. An article from the *Genesee Farmer* (1840) stated women are gentler, neater, and more patient than men who are not neat or gentle but are abusive, hurried, and tired (McMurry, 1995, p. 78). Sexual politics of labor that determined the place of men and women at work as well as existing gendered stereotypes regarding milking shaped early United States food culture, playing an early role in the development of red meat and milk within American culture and politics.

Industrial Motherhood

Spreading from the Euro-American homesteads of the East, dairy farming and the consumption of milk products boomed as the nation demanded more efficient and widespread food distribution to accommodate soldiers during the Civil War. Food demand for soldiers sparked technological innovations, prompting the dairy industry to grow and expand across the country. A pattern often seen in scientific innovation history is the impact of war on innovation: due to the extreme pressure war places on a country's resources, the need for technological adaptations rises to meet the demand of the war effort. These technological innovations for military solutions are often implemented in nonmilitary environments post-war (Duque et al., 2021, pp. 325). Numerous technologies, including the tin can in America in 1819, the patent for condensing milk in 1856, and the development of refrigerated railroad cars in 1857, set the stage for the production and distribution of condensed milk–a high-calorie, easily transportable food item that transformed soldier nutrition (Weimar & Blayney, 1994; Cohen, 2017, p. 269). Postwar use of these technologies increased consumption of dairy products within the US by 39.11% between 1850 and 1900 (Lee et al., 2022, p. 3). Development of the dairy industry after

the Civil War depended on the war-era technologies that fueled military food distribution, fostering the opportunity for the post-war dairy industry to reach consumers on a wider scale.

Ultimately, the people responsible for the gains in dairy consumption were those responsible for the home economy–women. As stated previously, women held the responsibility to maintain their household in terms of domestic chores and family nourishment. While Ulrich wrote of the household gender roles in rural, Puritan, colonial New England, these sex-based beliefs regarding household responsibilities echoed throughout the United States. Many believed domestic employment to be “better adapted to the constitution of the female sex” (Penny, 1870, p. xii). Likewise, an article written for the *New England Correspondence* in 1848 states, “There is not a more hard-working class of persons on the globe than the Yankee housewives” (p. 122). Another article urges men to try housework themselves and see that housework is no “woman’s paradise” (G, 1871, p. 2). These perspectives illustrate the widespread societal expectation for women to maintain the household. It was her domain, not her husband’s, and that was the norm for American households leading up to and throughout the 19th century.

As the woman was the head of the home economy, she was the one who fed her husband and children and she was expected to feed them the best she could. However, those living in urban and industrialized areas in the post-Civil War era faced a different reality of what food choices were “best.” Nineteenth-century industrial Americans faced a societal decrease in breastfeeding caused by numerous reasons: women working in urban areas left their babies at home with a bottle (expecting older kids to feed them), women became estranged from their own birth and lactation practices as they Americanized themselves, and the sexualization of the breast by men stifled the breasts importance in reproduction (Wolf, 2017, pp. 10). One of the most important campaigns against breastfeeding was germ theory public education which taught women their breast milk was unsanitary and could make their babies sick (Wolf, 2017, pp. 10-11). Dr. J.H. Mason Knox, one of America’s first prominent pediatricians in 1906, stated

that “the wear and tear of modern life” takes its toll on the mother’s strength and time requirements, making it so she can no longer produce enough, or any, quality breast milk for her children (Knox, 1999, p. 409). The solution to her inability to breastfeed adequately was cow’s milk. This substitute for mother’s milk was advertised as good for their babies and the answer for how to feed them, resulting in urban women forgoing breastfeeding and opting for cow's milk to feed their children. Notably, this shift in scientific paradigm shifted the maternal identity from one that relied on their biological roles to one that depended on industrial efficiency and external sources.

Despite doctors’ recommendations against women breastfeeding and the booming production of dairy products with post-war technology, there was no increase in the quality or health of dairy products. For city dwellers, the most affordable and convenient milk available was that from city-based farms. Milk produced in cities came from “crowded, dirty, local dairies” where cows were “penned in small, filthy stalls, and produced sour, dirty milk” (Veit, 2017, p. 12). To cut costs, urban dairymen often fed their cows slop, or spent grain from distilleries, and cut their product with drugs while diluting it with substances such as “starch, sugar, plaster of Paris, chalk, eggs, anatto, etc.” (Hartley, 1842, pp. 109, 184, 198). When there were revolts against city milk, dairy transport by train from rural farms became commonplace instead of city milk. Yet, the health implications changed very little, as the distance and time of train travel brought bacterial contamination to dairy products; a problem only solved after pasteurization became common practice in the 1910s (Veit, 2017, p. 12). Even then there were recurring problems such as too little ice and too much stagnant time with the dealer before the milk reached the customer (Smith-Howard, 2013, p. 15). Milk in this era produced many victims. New York Philanthropist Nathan Straus stated in 1917, “Here in New York the lives of thousands of children are sacrificed every Summer, simply and solely because they are fed with impure milk” (Straus & Straus, p. 179). Food-borne deaths and illnesses were common as consumers lacked knowledge and options. As Upton Sinclair explains in *The Jungle*, even when consumers would

drink the “pale blue milk,” they did not know there was formaldehyde in it; if they were in the know, they were unable to possess any alternative option that was geographically accessible (Sinclair, 1906, p. 89). Consequently, urban women of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century had to make do with what they knew and with what they had–if what they had would hurt their family, then there was no avoiding it.

Dairy advertising during the Progressive Era and beyond strategically shaped public perceptions of milk by emphasizing themes of motherhood and nurturing, while deliberately distancing itself from the realities of production. Figure 10 shows the advertisements for dairy products *before* the Progressive Era: they were pastoral, often depicting a milkmaid.

Figure 10.

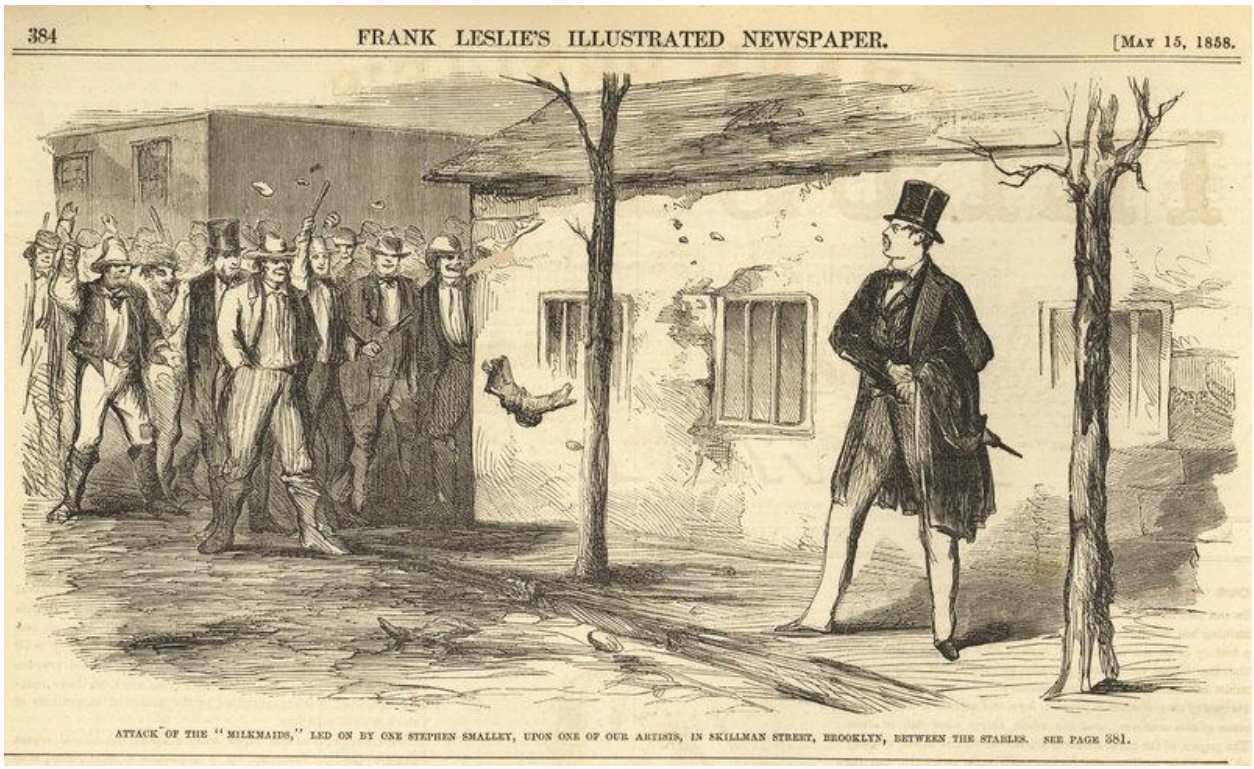
An advertisement for "Lactart"

Note. From "Lactart acid of milk makes a delicious beverage: with water and sugar only," 1884, Wellcome Collection (https://wellcomecollection.org/works/uda6ezju).

According to Carolyn Merchant, author of *The Death of Nature*, milkmaid imagery associates nature as nurturing, yet passive, in order to nourish the urban, therefore active, clientele (1980, p. 9). This depiction was a juxtaposition to Progressive Era exposés of the swill milk epidemic, like that of Figure 11, which showed not only a starkly urban and barren landscape for dairy but also male milkmaids.

Figure 11.

Swill milk "milkmaids" advancing onto an artist for Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper (1858)



Note. From *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper,* uploaded by Andrea Janda, 2018, PUBLIC HISTORY PDX (https://publichistorypdx.org/2017/11/27/the-19th-century-swill-milk-scandal-that-poisoned-infants-with-whiskey-runoff/attack-of-the-milkmaids/).

Swill milk exposés gender-swapped milkmaids to create uneasiness about who was in control of milk production. Replacing women in their milking positions with men unsettled the masculine perception of the comforting and feminine milkmaid, helping to convince viewers of the crime against nature that was urban milk. As shown in Figure 12, to combat the bad reputation caused by swill milk, dairy industries shed pastoral representations and depictions of human and animal milk producers all together[1] to divert attention from the issue and capitalize on the importance of cows' milk for mothers by depicting babies, birds, or the countryside in Progressive Era advertisements (Dupuis, 2002, pp. 97-98).

[1] Human and animal producers of milk, besides Borden Dairy Company's "Elsie the Cow," would not reappear as prominent figures in dairy advertisements until Ben & Jerry's ice cream (Dupuis, 2002, p. 97).

Figure 12.

An advertisement for Nestlé's Milk Food.

Note. From *Trade Cards: Children*, 1894, Adam Matthew, Marlborough, Food And Drink in History (http://www.foodanddrink.amdigital.co.uk/Documents/Details/WL_Col838Grossman_Box158). Copyright 2020 by the Winterthur Library.

Progressive Era dairy advertising afterwards avoided all focus on the milk producer and instead displayed themes of motherhood and nourishment that masked the truth of production; a man may be milking the cows in reality, but masculinity had no place in dairy advertising.

Propagandizing Milk

During the same time frame when dairy advertisements removed the milk producer, children's books followed suit. Cows' reproductive abilities beyond lactation were not included, conveying the idea that cows are made to produce milk for humans, alone. In E. Boyd Smith's

The Farm Book (1910), the main characters of the book, a boy and girl from New York City, visit their farmer uncle and learn about farm life. They learn about the processes of milking the cows, sending the milk to town, and churning butter, but the knowledge regarding cows as mothers to their calves holds no importance. The only acknowledgment of the cows as mothers of their own is the calf partially obscured at the back of the barn in an illustration shown in Figure 13 (Smith, 1910, p. 17).

Figure 13.

Uncle John, the children, and the rest of the family in the barn for a milking

Note. From *The Farm Book* (p. 17)*,* by E. Boyd Smith, 1910, Houghton Mifflin Company.

The erasure of the cow's reproductive capacity in cultural representations of milk reflects the literal role of milk as a product of technology. The natural, biological process of milk production is culturally constructed into a sanitized and commodified product, engineered to meet societal needs and expectations by turning the cow into a human mother figure.

The Farm Book is not the only children's book to intentionally omit factors of cows' reproductive processes, this is a repeat pattern; the books *Animal ABC* (1920) and even later

books such as *Milk For You and Me* (1957)[2] and *Minnie and Moo Go to the Moon* (1998) follow a similar sentiment. All three books position milk, and other dairy products, as “gifts” made just for humans from the cows. No book represents the calf in any capacity. *Milk For You and Me* hammers in the message that milk is for humans by repeating the title phrase, and similar iterations, on every page as a concluding message (Randell, 1957). Further, in *Minnie and Moo Go to the Moon* (1998) one of the cows, Minnie, tells Moo, ”We are cows. Cows give milk. It is what we do” (Cazet, p. 9). These books reframe milk as a product for human children, or the readers of the literature, by transforming the cow into a motherly, nurturing symbol. Anthropomorphizing the cow by erasing her reproductive abilities beyond lactation and making humans the recipients of her milk approves the process of milk production for consumption.

Similar to how red meat manipulates societal beliefs, messages in dairy media beyond children’s literature frame milk as a gift bestowed upon, reinforcing white supremacist ideologies. The European development of dairy as a staple food led to the persistence of the enzyme lactase, enabling the digestion of lactose, a trait common among Europeans but less so among non-Europeans (Swallow, 2003). Dairy promotions capitalized on this biological adaptation, promoting the idea that milk was integral to the physical and mental success of whites. Historian Ulysses Hedrick in his book *A History of Agriculture in the State of New York* (1933) claimed:

> A casual look at the races of people seems to show that those using much milk are the strongest physically and mentally, and the most enduring of the peoples of the world. Of all races, the Aryans seem to have been the heaviest drinkers of milk and the greatest users of butter and cheese, a fact that may in part account for the quick and high development of this division of human beings. (pp. 362-363)

Similarly, in the 1920s, a National Dairy Council publication quoted celebrated nutritionist E. V. McCollum:

> The people who have achieved, who have become large, strong, vigorous people, who have reduced their infant mortality, who have the best trades in the world, who have an appreciation for art, literature and music, who are progressive in science and every activity of the human

[2] Notably, the National Dairy Council published *Milk For You and Me* (1957, Randell).

intellect are the people who have used liberal amounts of milk and its products. (Dupuis, 2002, p. 117)

Hedrick and McCollum's assertions about milk as a key to the development and superiority of whites demonstrate how food, particularly milk, was framed as a technology capable of biologically engineering an entire race. These views highlight how milk, as a technological and cultural product, reinforced racial hierarchies and shaped identities, turning a natural substance into a tool for societal control and the perpetuation of power dynamics.

Modern milk marketing no longer directly targets whites but targets people of color as a form of nutritional racism. Law professor Andrea Freeman discusses how the USDA claimed that high-fat dairy products are harmful and caused a thirty-year decline in milk sales, resulting in a milk surplus (2013, p. 1252). To deal with the surplus, USDA worked through their dairy marketing branch, Dairy Management Incorporated (DMI), which partnered with fast food companies to develop new menu items with high-fat dairy ingredients, such as Taco Bell's steak quesadilla, as well as to launch a now famous ad-campaign, the "Got Milk?" campaign (2013, p. 1251-1252). The USDA's plan to sell surplus milk to fast food restaurants is not only harmful to all Americans, but it disproportionately targets those who live in urban areas dominated by fast food restaurants, namely low-income African American and Latinx people (2013). Further, the "Got Milk?" campaign created advertisements specifically targeting this demographic by featuring African American and Latinx celebrities as well as extending promotions in the Spanish language. Claiming that milk consumption is dangerous for the general public while simultaneously promoting the consumption of it that disproportionately targets specific communities is an example of nutritional racism, or nutritional strategies and procedures that harm socially marginalized groups.

Disproportionate access to and marketing of healthy foods results in unequal health. Reflective of the USDA's targeting of minority groups and as a result of social, economic, and environmental disadvantages, obesity is most common among non-Hispanic black and Hispanic

adults (Stierman, 2021, p. 6). Obesity often causes negative societal judgments against obese individuals, with individuals feeling obese people are ”lazy, lack self-discipline, and are less competent” (Puhl and Brownell, 2001, p. 800). Inferences such as this exemplify healthism, or the boosting of leanness and fitness with the belief that those who do not fit these ideals are harming others (Freeman, 2013, p. 1270). Within the healthism domain, those who do not fit the aesthetic of physical healthiness (thinness and musculature) have a lack of willpower and confidence and are to blame for their failure to make good choices, without regard that the food systems and marketing in place hinder the ability to make and purchase healthy foods (Freeman, 2013, p. 1270). Consequently, healthist ideologies only worsen racist beliefs by reinforcing pre-existing, racist stereotypes of African American and Latinx people (Freeman, 2013 p. 1271). Considering that throughout United States history the reinforcement of negative stereotypes has been a common method of justifying the marginalization of people of color, the disproportionate advertising and information regarding “safe” foods can be seen as another strategy to reinforce social order. Ultimately revealing that milk is a technology, like the cow and red meat, that can perpetuate cultural, racial, and social inequalities.

These food products are more than mere sustenance—they are embedded with powerful cultural meanings and societal messages. As with red meat, milk is not only a biological product but a cultural tool that can reinforce social hierarchies, shaping perceptions of health, race, and identity. The marketing of these foods to different racial and economic groups, particularly through the lens of healthism, underscores how food is deeply intertwined with notions of personal responsibility, discipline, and worth. This narrative, built on cultural biases, reflects how identity, health, and technology intersect, with food serving both as a biological necessity and a tool for reinforcing societal norms and inequalities. The inequities in food access and health outcomes, particularly among marginalized communities, reveal the persistent role of food as a technology used to regulate and shape identities—both individually and collectively.

Conclusion

While the cow had a role in forming the American identity both culturally and geographically, the individual products of red meat and milk made their own role within American society. Beef, or more broadly red meat, operated as a tool to affirm masculinities in an increasingly emasculated environment. As meat can only be procured through violence, and in most cases the meat source must be killed before harvesting, societies deemed strength and power as necessary to hunt. Therefore, the biological separation between males and females, namely that of the strength of males and the reproductive abilities of women, stuck men and women into their respective activities. Men were believed to be better fit for hunting, while women's efforts were best spent close to home with the children. This theory of men and women's roles in hunting, better known as the "Man the Hunter" theory, has since been debunked, but the roots of the theory coursed through many early European societies. These European populations, whose societies fell, evolved and relocated, brought along the intrinsic beliefs of the time. Hunting as a man's game was one of those beliefs, and the consequences of which pitted meat as a male-affirming artifact.

As America grew in size and population, and as modern men struggled with the increasing industrialization and loss of control, meat became a prescription for gender woes and identity affirmation. During this period, Americans looked to the cowboy to define their national identity, with men finding solace in the cowboy's apparent masculinity, as portrayed in works by Owen Wister and other writers of the Western genre. These tales of rugged adventure elicited excitement and reinforced gender norms revered by both men and women. Realistically, most men could not venture west to reclaim their masculinity, so they lived vicariously through these stories to reconnect with their manhood. Promoted through cookbooks and portrayals of cowboy lifestyles, red meat, and other animal products were marketed as food that could help men feel like men again. This association between meat and manliness continues in modern narratives

and studies, suggesting that men's love for meat is a social choice, not an innate biological desire. The connection between men and meat, especially when it comes from a cow—like steaks or hamburgers—becomes even stronger. Contemporary advertisements, particularly from restaurant chains, exploit this male insecurity, selling not just burgers, but manliness in a bun.

Contrarily, milk has no ties to hunting and no direct connection to strength and power, but instead retains ties to its biological source: motherhood and femininity. Perhaps tied to the early connotations of hunting, where men were to venture out into the wild and women were to stay home, gendered politics of labor corroborated this designation of milk as feminine and meat as masculine. In accordance with Sandra Harding's perspectives on masculine viewpoints holding more weight than feminine perspectives, milk as a feminine artifact was less noticed within the public and could be an effective tool in manipulating hierarchies of gender.

Milk, as a technology derived from the biological components of motherhood, is intricately tied to women's gendered roles of providing nourishment and care within the household. When comparing the anthropomorphic cow in children's literature, the contrasting roles of milk and red meat in society become evident. Red meat, associated with strength and power, contrasts with milk's more docile connotation, yet both are politically and socially significant in shaping cultural norms. Despite its nurturing connection to motherhood, milk functions as a tool of control, reinforcing racial and gender hierarchies. As milk became symbolically linked to feminine roles, it also became a vehicle for maintaining patriarchal and white supremacist structures, much like red meat upholds masculine dominance. The idealized depictions of milk production and consumption in advertising—where femininity and motherhood are emphasized—contrast with the more rugged and masculine portrayals of red meat. By promoting these ideals, both industries encourage consumers to adopt certain qualities: masculinity through meat and nurturing through milk. Consequently, the meat and dairy industries play a significant role in shaping identities, desires, and perceptions of self-worth. By

embedding the cultural notion that “real men eat meat” and that milk stands in for comfort and maternal love, the industries manipulate their consumer base, reinforcing societal roles and encouraging unquestioning consumption of their products.

PART THREE: We Are What We Eat

Introduction

A majority of Americans are food secure, meaning most Americans have access to enough food to live a healthy, nourished life (Rabbitt et al., 2024, p. 8). Consequently, food becomes a lot more complicated than survival because there are choices regarding what to eat. While people may choose food because it is cheapest, or because it is most convenient, there are extenuating factors of these foods that make them okay or not okay to consume in the first place. All food has social value and an active political context. What we eat reflects our place in society and our internal thoughts and feelings.

Cows, red meat, and milk all have scientific and societal meaning that manipulates how consumers choose their food. The cow has a rooted history in the founding of the United States and the creation of the American identity through the cowboy myth. Red meat is a byproduct of the cow, and the masculine connotations of meat throughout civilization have rendered meat a technology of gender construction. Men are told red meat is masculine and they will be, too, when they eat it. Contrarily, cow's milk, as a product of dairying, is a technology developed by humans for humans. Milk has roots from thousands of years ago in Europe, but the contemporary education surrounding milk production leaves out this aspect and how milk is made in the first place, opting to situate milk as a "gift" for humans from cows. These aspects of the cow, red meat, and milk are reasons why, or why not, to choose these products to consume.

Choices for food matter as when they are analyzed as a whole, they reflect changes in societal values. Maybe an individual's decision to have steak instead of fish represents a change of individual taste preference, or maybe it is one decision out of many that point toward a societal or cultural transition. Analyzing the historical and cultural significance of food, in this case the cow and its products, helps illuminate broader issues in today's world.

The Meaning of Food

Dinner's Ready!

Red meat and milk aside, one reason the American people choose to eat what they eat is their own beliefs regarding the benefits the food offers for their health. According to author Michael Pollan, while culture used to be the main guide in deciding what, how much, and when to eat, the advancement of science, food marketing, and shifting government regulations means culture has less impact on American diets than before (2008, p. 3). Instead, the rise of nutritionism, or the understanding of food as nutrient inventories rather than whole entities, means food choices exist within the current scientific paradigm and ethnic backgrounds and histories of foods hold no relevance (Pollan, 2008). Scientific research regarding the content of vitamins and minerals within food motivates people to align to certain diets as they believe that is what makes them most healthy. When the USDA claimed high-fat dairy products were harmful, people stopped eating them (Freeman, 2013, p. 1252). When scientists in the 1960s through the 1980s claimed low-fat diets reduced the risk of heart disease and weight gain, many Americans agreed with the studies and focused on eating low-fat foods (La Berge, 2008). American diets are largely determined by the current paradigm, showing cultural value is no longer the only dominant factor in food choice, scientific trends now have a large force on American food decisions.

Nutritional factors are one reason alongside others that dictate why we eat what we eat; social perceptions regarding food choice are another determinant. An individual may manipulate others' perception of them by performatively choosing the foods they eat with consideration to their social context. Sociologist Erving Goffman, in his work *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, elaborated upon this idea that individuals intentionally manipulate their actions and use props to change their self-presentation (1956). Goffman explains that in identity performance, the individual uses props to manipulate their "personal front," defined as the tools

an individual employs to shape their identity performance (1956, p. 13). Choice and use of props enforce the legitimacy, credibility, and social status of the individual and play a major role in constructing our external appearance (Goffman, 1956, pp. 13-19). Goffman's theory is seen in the phenomena where men choose to eat red meat to elevate their perceived masculinity. Revealing that food is not only chosen for nutritional value or cultural significance but as a signal of our identity to others. As identities are constantly evolving, food choice is a constant reconfiguration of one's identity.

Foods may also be chosen because of the perceived ability of that food to transfer its qualities over to the consumer. Claude Fischler specifically addresses the role food plays in creating the self in his article "Food, Self, and Identity" (1988). Fischler explains that because we are omnivores, there is a fundamental anxiety in our relationship to food; omnivores are predisposed to "diversification, innovation, exploration and change" to survive, but this is with a steady opposing force warning of danger regarding any new food (1988, p. 278). Risk when consuming new food is not only because of the physical distress the food may cause but because of the metaphysical properties that may be transferred to the person eating. Eating, or "incorporating" as Fischler calls it, provides energy and facilitates biochemical changes that transform our body composition–what we eat becomes who we physically are (Fischler, 1988, p. 279). By this same logic, if food transforms into the very substance of ourselves we literally are what we eat by "analogical contamination, integration or impregnation" (Fischler, 1988, p. 279). This risk of metaphysical change caused by consumption creates both risk and hope. There is a risk the change will be bad, and there is hope the change will be good. To eliminate the chance of risk, identification, knowledge, and understanding of food within its context is necessary (Fischler, 1988, pp. 280-282). When individuals identify their food and ingest it, they hope that their food choices will result in beneficial physical and metaphysical components. Concluding that another reason why people make certain food choices is because they believe that their chosen food may transfer a quality over to them that they desire and will leave them better off.

Milk in society is an example of Fischler's theory: milk's connotations of femininity, nourishment, and motherhood, operate as a standin for actual motherly love and care. Food can be a powerful tool to recall emotions or memories, and because of this "food is both symbolically and physiologically consumed" and "may elicit nostalgia to the extent that they shape preferences for food in adult life" (Lupton, 1996, p. 47, 49). Milk is a recipient of this strong emotional attachment, demonstrated by the recommendation that someone struggling to fall asleep should drink a glass of warm milk. This sleep remedy is disputed, with studies claiming that while milk has tryptophan content, the amino acid that is used to help produce melatonin, amounts are too low to make any impact on the sleepiness of the consumer (UAMS Health, 2019; Steen, 2016). Therefore, the motivator for what seems to make warm milk a sleep agent is its ability to recall nice childhood moments. Drew Dawson, a sleep and fatigue expert and director at Appleton Institute at Central Queensland University, explains that the amounts of tryptophan and the warm temperature of the milk are probably too unimpactful to influence sleep, therefore there is most likely a psychological response occurring, stating, "The routine of drinking a glass of warm milk may elicit memories of mum, home and childhood which may help us to relax" (Steen, 2016). This phenomenon reveals that the cultural context of milk is a factor in the choice of ingesting it. Using Fischler's theory, milk may be consumed as a way to fulfill psychological needs for comfort or to recall the soothing aspects of childhood.

This illustrates how food, like milk, operates on multiple levels–providing not just physical nourishment but also psychological and emotional fulfillment tied to cultural narratives. The act of consuming milk becomes a way to engage with broader societal ideals of love, care, and comfort, even as these ideals are constructed and shaped by history and culture. This dynamic highlights the profound cultural significance of food choices, revealing how they are less about necessity and more about engaging with the identities and meanings assigned to the food itself. Ultimately, food choices reflect not only individual preferences but also the collective stories and values that shape our understanding of self and society. This concept ties into the broader

exploration of how the cow and its products have historically and culturally shaped—and continue to shape—the identities and values of those who consume them.

Finding New Identities

COVID-19 and its Consequences

Cultural connotations of the cow, red meat, and milk in America—and their role in shaping identities—reflect the intricate intersections of history, technology, and societal anxieties. From their origins as tools of colonization and economic expansion to their modern symbolism in masculinity, femininity, and racial hierarchies, these technologies have continually evolved to reinforce and challenge societal norms. The cow's dual role as a literal and symbolic resource has anchored American identity, from the cowboy myth to contemporary narratives of comfort and strength tied to red meat and milk. National movements and crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, reveal how these technologies are reinterpreted to address broader cultural tensions, serving as focal points for resistance, identity formation, and a yearning for stability. By examining the historical, cultural, and technological significance of the cow and its products, this thesis illuminates how food shapes not only what we eat but also who we are and how we navigate the complexities of modern life.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, overall trust declined within the government for many Americans as a result of widespread disagreement on how the government reacted to and worked to prevent damages from the coronavirus. Many groups during the pandemic felt the government was not adequately promoting or protecting their interests (Suhay et al., 2022, p. 222). FOX News relayed a poll that took place during the beginning of the pandemic and followed up several months later, reporting, "In March [2020], more than half of Americans, 53%, said they trusted the federal government to look out for their best interests. Less than a third, 30%, now [in September 2020] trust the federal government, according to the Axios-Ipsos poll"

(Best, 2020). There was a division of trust on partisan lines, finding that COVID-19 policies proposed by an individual's political ingroup were more likely to be supported than those of the political outgroup (Cole et al., 2022, pp. 1628-1629). Generally, Republicans distrusted government officials more than Democrats, resulting in Republican advice against restrictions placed on public spaces, CDC guidelines, and other mitigation measures for COVID-19 (Pasquini and Saks, 2022). The distrust of the government was also a growing distrust of science. As the government advised Americans to follow their guidelines, but many Americans did not trust the government in the first place, distrust grew rampant across all official levels.

Science was on trial for many reasons; namely, there was inconsistency of public health recommendations that ran against messages of how severe the virus was. In terms of scientific communication, the WHO was to blame for much confusion about what the individual could do to fend off COVID. Repeated instances of contradictory information about the efficacy of mask-wearing caused mass frustration and distrust and led to anti-mask protests (Oreskes, 2021, p. Xi; Curtis, 2020). All the while, these decisions by scientific organizations (contradictory or not) were announced with the message that officials were "Following the data and the science," as then-governor of New York Andrew Cuomo said at a press conference on March 27, 2020 (Ingraham Angle, 2020, 00:47). Inconsistent reports that urged trusting the science, which seemed to be constantly changing, were popular targets of the media. Hosts of political talk shows such as *The Ingraham Angle* outwardly questioned the expertise of scientists and accused them of intentionally provoking fear and panic (The Ingraham Angle, 2020, 00:14; Fox News, 2020, 00:57). This, in unison with then-President Trump's frequent reassurances that COVID-19 is going to "go away" (Rieger, 2020), did not set up science for a warm reception from here on out, and the pandemic was only beginning. Eric Topol, founder and director of the Scripps Research Translational Institute, reflected on this era and stated, "If you were to write a script about how to destroy the credibility of science, we just saw it" (Cross, 2021). The inconsistency of recommendations paired with media confrontation regarding the necessity of

these precautions made many individuals doubt science along with their government. This resulted in Americans questioning science as a whole, longing for a nation that could be depended on to protect and take care of them.

Introducing “Real Milk”

COVID-19 shook American belief systems top-down, highlighting many issues held by Americans and encouraging vast change throughout the country. One food caught in the crossfire of these changing times is raw milk: its role nutritionally, historically, and culturally plays a unique role in a post-COVID environment as America still works to heal from the pandemic and the socioeconomic consequences. Raw milk is not new by any means, but the cow’s role in affirming American ideologies combined with milk as a technology of motherly comfort represents the contemporary American desire for nationwide unification and government protection.

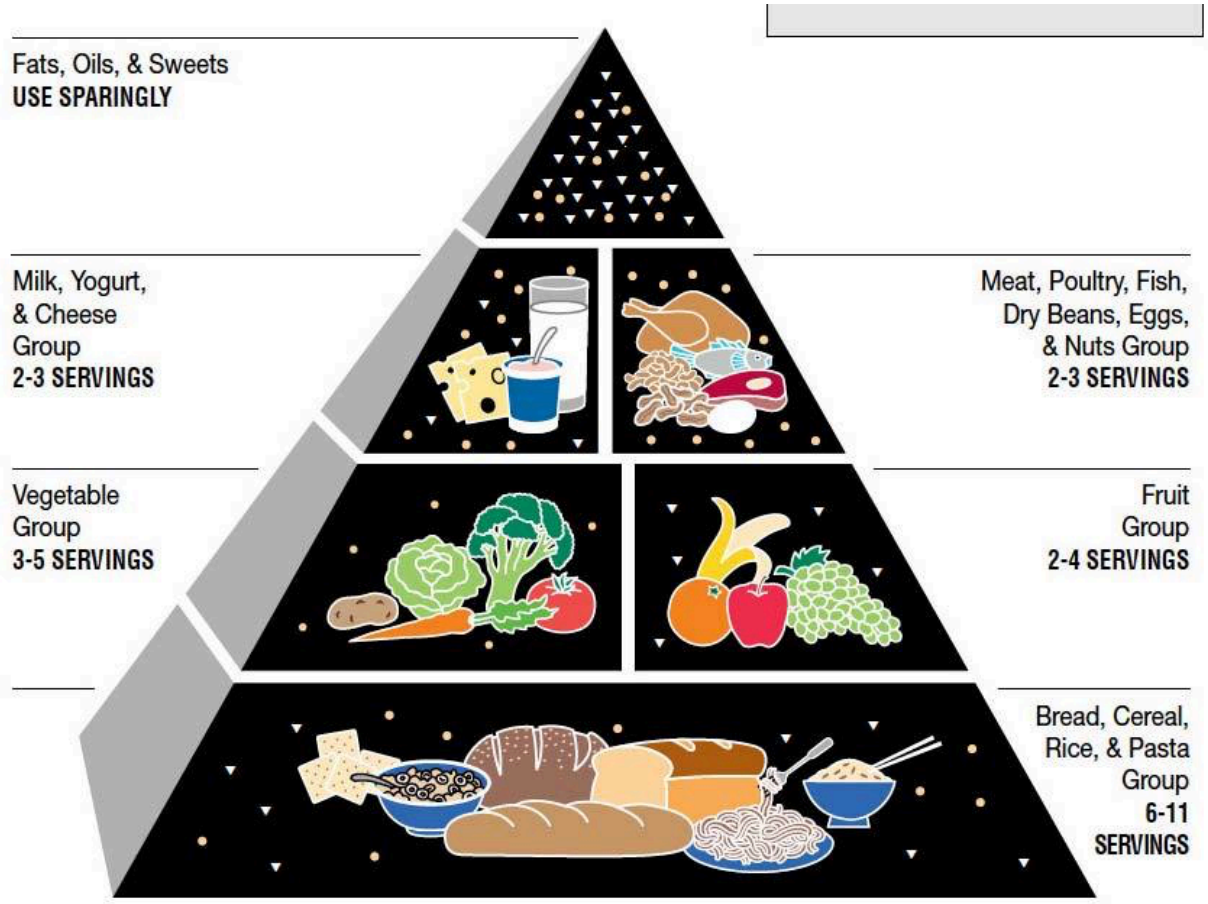
Milk used to always be “raw” until the invention of milk pasteurization which came as a solution to the widespread deaths and illnesses caused by urban milk, as discussed in Part Two. Progressive activists at the time remedied the situation by mandating milk pasteurization, a science-backed process to remove dangerous pathogens from the milk. Pasteurization mandates separated “safe” foods from “unsafe” foods, shifting the perception of food as a whole. While milk pasteurization and legislation were necessary for public health and saved thousands of lives, it encouraged science’s standing within the American food system and influenced science to have a greater holding on food choice than culture. Of course, ingesting diseased and drugged milk is in no one's culture, so the immediate harm was not as obvious, but all technologies have greater consequences and trigger major transformations. Langdon Winner argues that technologies such as this are judged on a small scale, evaluating whether the original problem is solved or a profit is made, without consideration for these greater consequences (Winner, 1986, p. 9). Winner explains this lack of broader thought reveals itself in

the consequences that manifest in the “form and quality of human associations (Winner, 1986, p. 33). Therefore, milk pasteurization was a tremendous, life-saving technology, but its consequences impact human associations with science. Specifically, it marked the beginning of science-based food safety. Shifting not only how Americans choose their food but changing how food is judged. If the public believes in science, this consequence may not be so adverse. But what happens when science is no longer trusted?

Following pasteurization, raw milk faced heavy legislation and was not a publicly supported food for consumption. The Model Milk Health Ordinance, which regulated milk in every part of the country, meant that pasteurized milk was the legal standard throughout the US by 1920 (Wright and Huck, 2002). Of course, dairy farms during and after milk pasteurization legislation continue to drink their farm’s milk unpasteurized or sell it discreetly to friends, neighbors, and friends of friends, as they do today in regulated states. However, later legislation cracked down on raw milk consumption, such as the case of Public Citizen versus Heckler in which a federal court declared that all milk engaged in interstate commerce must be pasteurized (1987). What brought raw milk back into the limelight was the increased popularity of organic food beginning in 1994 onward, experiencing 15% or more annual growth in sales up until 2008 during the Recession (Greene et al., 2016, p. 8). It is no coincidence that this era found the greatest upturn in organic food consumption. At the end of the 20th century, 30.5% of adults were obese and the leading causes of death were heart disease, followed by cancer, and then the sixth leading cause of death was diabetes (Flegal et al., 2002, “Results”; Hoyert et al., 2001, p. 1). Many blamed the food industry and other food-governing agencies for these issues (Novicoff, 2024). The early 1990s saw the first USDA Food Guide Pyramid, seen in Figure 15, suggesting Americans follow a low-fat diet of six to eleven servings of carbohydrates a day, more than double the daily allotment of vegetables recommended (Drexler, 2013).

Figure 14.

The USDA’s 1992 Food Guide Pyramid



Note. From Drexler, 2013, Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health (https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/news/magazine/centennial-food-guides-history/#jp-carousel-111354813230). Copyright The President and Fellows of Harvard College.

As a response to the mayhem, people turned to organic foods, finally seeing the "connection between diet, health and the environment" (Siegner, 2018). More people desiring healthier, environmentally sound foods meant raw milk was back on the table, a stunning blow for nearly a century of public health lockdown regarding raw milk purchase, production, and consumption.

The Raw Milk Movement took a major hit in 2006 and in the following years as government food and agriculture agencies conducted sting operations, grand jury investigations, and raids on small raw milk dairies. David E. Gumpert in *Raw Milk Revolution: Behind America's Emerging Battle Over Food Rights,* argues these agencies orchestrated these crackdowns to disrupt the sale of unpasteurized milk because of public health concerns, concerns such as

unsound laboratory investigations and cases of sick kids which may or may not have become ill over raw milk (2009). Gumpert warns this crackdown on raw milk may be a pattern by the government to sanitize the food supply, despite sound evidence that not all bacteria are bad for human health (2009). While a similar sentiment is shared by the raw milk advocates of today, modern advocates of raw milk hold starkly opposing political beliefs to raw milk advocates of the 2000s.

Around the era Gumpert wrote about in his book, raw milk was a product mostly adored by organic-eating liberals rather than conservatives, as shown by left-leaning news publications printing empathetic appeals for raw milk during the later 2000's. *The New York Times* published an article arguing that legalizing raw milk could breathe new life into American dairy farms (Brenhouse, 2009). Another left-leaning publication, *The Nation*, regularly published articles written by David E. Gumpert advocating for raw milk, including "Old MacDonald Had a Farm… and He Got Arrested?" (2007). Compare this with today's outspoken advocates for raw milk, including President-elect Donald Trump's pick for secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services, Robert F. Kennedy Jr. (The Weston A. Price Foundation, 2023). The politics surrounding raw milk have undergone a vast change in beliefs. How did the once-liberal Raw Milk Movement become a conservative campaign?

What Soured the Milk?

The change in consumers for raw milk owes itself to the coronavirus pandemic and the aforementioned changes in trust in the government and science. Raw milk has never been recommended by the government, particularly by the Food and Drug Administration or the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Both agencies argue that raw milk can lead to serious health risks and that pasteurized dairy is the safe option (Food and Drug Administration, 2024; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2024b). Liberal raw milk drinkers ignored the experts pre-pandemic and drank raw milk despite the warnings. However, during the pandemic,

when liberal politicians urged the public to “listen to the experts,” how could one drink raw milk, which experts did *not* condone, while simultaneously urging people to listen to the experts?

The hypocrisy surrounding raw milk marked the final blow to liberal support, which had already been waning before the pandemic. Whole Foods Market, a natural and organic foods grocery that attracts mostly liberal customers (Epstein, 2014), dropped support for raw milk over a decade ago during the government crackdown (Marler, 2010). However, the pandemic rhetoric and growing political polarization accelerated this shift. Distrust of the government, experts, and science, often fueled by conservative rhetoric, sparked a newfound appreciation for raw milk among Republicans while discouraging Democrats. This ideological divide is evident in the media’s shifting stance: The Washington Post, once sympathetic to raw milk advocates during a 2007 lawsuit (Wan), now criticizes figures like RFK Jr. for endorsing raw milk, warning about its risks and misinformation (Amenabar, 2024). Laws to legalize raw milk, once supported by liberal states like California and Maine, are now opposed by Democrats, while Republicans lead the charge to legalize it in more red states, including Iowa, Wyoming, and Montana (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2024a; LegiScan, n.d.; Novicoff, 2024). Raw milk, once tied to natural and organic ideals, has evolved into a powerful symbol of resistance to perceived governmental overreach and scientific authority. This shift aligns with Goffman’s theory of self-presentation—food choices signal identity to others. By choosing raw milk, right-leaning Americans assert their rejection of expert opinion and embrace an identity rooted in autonomy, tradition, and skepticism toward institutional authority. The evolving political and cultural significance of raw milk reflects the broader shifts in American identity, where food becomes a vehicle for ideological expression and a marker of resistance.

Modern Day Americans

There are benefits to producing and selling raw milk that do not incorporate the greater political climate surrounding government and scientific trust–many people believe in the innate

benefits of raw milk. More grandiose claims, like that of A Campaign for Raw Milk, argue raw milk can cure diseases such as urinary tract infections, heart failure, diabetes, and others (A Campaign for Real Milk, 2023). Small, family-run raw milk dairies tend to appreciate raw milk because of it contributes beneficial bacteria, a sweeter and richer taste, vitamins and nutrients, enzymes that make it easier to digest, and the lack of heat treatment makes it better for cheesemaking (Brookby Farm, n.d.; AKM Farm, n.d.; Vachon, 2023). Socioeconomically, raw milk provides an opportunity to bring the small farm back. Since 1970, there has been an 88% decrease in dairy farms within the United States from 648,000 operations in 1970 to 75,000 in 2006 (MacDonald et al., 2007, p. 2). Reasons include milk pricing policies that favor large farms that can afford more labor and produce greater profits with larger herd sizes (MacDonald et al., 2007; Hunt 2024). Raw milk provides small farms with a viable economic alternative in an industry increasingly dominated by large operations, helping to preserve the values of local farming and direct farmer-consumer relationships. In this sense, raw milk not only sustains a growing movement for more personalized food choices but also revitalizes small-scale farming, fostering community resilience and a deeper connection to the land. Ultimately, many choose raw milk because of their beliefs about how raw milk can shape personal health and positively impact their local social and economic systems.

The Raw Milk Movement carries significance beyond individual consumer choice, reflecting a broader desire within the American public. Growing political polarization in the United States highlights a deeper divide in identity, with conservatives increasingly turning to raw milk as a symbol to reclaim an idealized American identity. Raw milk is an implementation of the cow as a key technology in American history, calling back to the early days of American history when white Americans forced control over the land; Americans idealized cowboy traits of independence, self-reliance, and strength; and large corporations fell to the small family-owned cattle ranches. These historical dynamics, shaped by the cow, have become a tool for

conservatives to reconstruct a version of American identity rooted in nostalgia and a longing for the values associated with the cow's legacy.

Milk factors into the quest to rebuild the American identity due to its role as a technology of motherhood and comfort. The rhetoric surrounding milk production, generally seen in children's books, placed the human as the sole beneficiary of milk. The omission of milk producers from advertisements and the misinformation regarding milk production in children's literature enforces cows' roles as nurturers of humans. Using Fischler's theory that individuals eat foods whose qualities they wish to embody, milk becomes a tool for individuals to manufacture a sense of motherly comfort. The rise in raw milk support during the pandemic was rooted in a time of distrust toward the government and science. Milk, representing nourishment, helped many find not only a rebellious outcry from a noncaring government but also offered personal solace.

Perhaps, the Raw Milk Movement does not have this greater meaning. This campaign could be because people, namely conservatives, are learning about and desiring raw milk for themselves. It could be interpreted as a revolt by white Americans against regulations that prohibit the consumption of the "gift" of milk in its most natural form. Maybe a promotion to consume more raw *red meat* would be a better representation of the issue, as the American technology of the cow remains intact, and masculine entities could render a more powerful movement.[3] However, this femininity in the Raw Milk Movement is right in line with Republican social movements of the past that situate Republicans as underdogs, namely, Nixon's "silent majority" (Ordoñez, 2024). Therefore, a less socially domineering position from conservatives is ripe for the occasion.

The Raw Milk Movement in American history raises a fundamental question regarding the role of science in the future of the United States food industry. David Gumpert's argument

[3] Although there is a growing wave of Americans advocating to eat raw red meat, this has been more difficult to promote (Brown, 2023).

from the early 2000s forewarned government overreach with increasing sanitization efforts of food rather than increasing access to nutritional foods (2009). His argument is similar to Michael Pollan's, who also criticized the role of science in food policy, noting the increasing reliance on science to determine what food to eat rather than relying on a diet of traditional foods (2008). Gumpert, Pollan, and many other critics highlight the role science has played in food policy, and their critiques are evident in movements like the "Make America Healthy Again" campaign, the protest against Kellogg's, and, of course, the Raw Milk Movement. These efforts aim to improve American health, but they are rooted in skepticism of the science that shaped existing policies, revealing a broader cultural tension. Science, once seen as an authoritative and impartial guide, now faces a crisis of trust in the U.S. Without public consensus and trust, science risks becoming a partisan issue, undermining its credibility and posing significant challenges to both public health and societal stability.

Conclusion

Food choice is not just about nutrients, numerous other factors contribute to choosing what to eat. As a majority of Americans do not choose food based on survival situations, whether those are caused by poverty or primitivism, Americans can be more selective about what they decide to eat. Culture played a longtime role in determining what Americans ate, as culture includes geographic and environmentally available foods that travel along with the people of that culture. However, culture is less central in the decision-making process today with the influx of science and nutritionism. Nutritionism, which compartmentalizes food into various components, impedes traditional practices in place of scientific trends. With both of these elements in mind, people may choose food based on how it makes them appear to others or based on how that food instills certain qualities the consumer wants for themselves. Choosing milk showcases each reason: milk has a role in cultural cuisine, particularly that of Europeans; milk offers essential vitamins and nutrients; and those who consume milk may be doing it to

showcase innocence, but also because milk has become a commodified technology for maternal care.

The Coronavirus pandemic proceedings affected American trust in the government and the institution of science. Trust was particularly lost by Republicans who believed the government had inadequate responses and inconsistent scientific recommendations. Democrats, on the other hand, staunchly advocated for “following the science” and heeding the advice of experts. This environment of distrust led many Americans, namely Republicans, to question the credibility of science and government, leaving them yearning for more dependable leadership. In these confusing times, the ongoing issue of Raw Milk Legalization became a figurehead for the current struggle.

As the Raw Milk Legalization debate became more pronounced, it symbolized a deeper yearning for autonomy and self-reliance, with a rejection of perceived governmental overreach. For many, the push for raw milk legalization was not just about access to a specific food product but a broader statement of resistance against what was seen as the politicization of science and public health. Raw milk, historically associated with naturalness and tradition, has come to embody a desire for control over personal choices, with many viewing it as a way to reclaim authority over their bodies and health, outside the influence of governmental mandates and scientific elites. This ideological struggle highlights how food–once purely sustenance–is now a powerful symbol of identity and political resistance. As debates over raw milk and other food-related issues continue, they reflect ongoing cultural tensions and the need for a more unified approach to science, trust, and public health, demonstrating that food choices are not just about nutrition, but about identity, power, and belonging in a fractured society.

CONCLUSION

Just as the classic Fourth of July barbecue serves as a quintessential expression of American identity, so too do the foods we consume continue to shape and redefine who we are as a society. The act of grilling burgers and topping them with cheese during these iconic celebrations is more than just a culinary tradition; it is a reflection of the historical and cultural forces that have molded American identities over time. From the cow's symbolic role in shaping notions of masculinity and self-reliance to the ongoing debates over food choices like raw milk, the foods we consume reveal much about the tensions, desires, and shifting values within American society. The choices Americans make in what they eat, how they eat, and why they eat reflect a deeper narrative of identity formation, political resistance, and the quest for autonomy in an increasingly polarized world. Just as the barbeque is an American tradition passed down through generations, these food practices continue to evolve, mirroring the constant reinvention of the American identity itself.

From the bottom up, this tradition reveals the importance of the cow, red meat, and dairy in affirming American identities. Selecting the cow as the staple ingredient for American cuisine reflects the legacy the cow has had in shaping American culture, particularly on a day celebrating its independence. While cattle were important sources of food pre-America, the introduction of the cow into the United States became an essential move for American colonization, as the cow helped carve American culture and identity out of the preexisting social landscape.

Further, the specific application of red meat and milk in the barbecue illustrates the gendered and racialized significance of these foods. Fathers grilling burgers and mothers preparing the other dishes while watching the children reflect broader societal expectations about masculinity and femininity that are deeply ingrained in American culture. This ritual, which centers on the consumption of cow-related foods, associates the family as agents of conquest

and reinforces traditional gender roles with men cooking the meat and women caring for the children. These gender dynamics mirror larger cultural narratives about food and gender throughout American history. This division not only perpetuates traditional gender norms but also plays a significant role in how individuals identify themselves and desire to be perceived.

Food choices continuously serve as a mirror of evolving identities, illustrating how deeply interconnected cultural practices, personal autonomy, and food systems are in shaping the American experience. Dietary decisions embody personal and national identities, sometimes representing more than just nourishment, but deeper, metaphorical desires. Individual food choices accumulate, and they reflect broader societal shifts, as seen in contemporary food movements like the Raw Milk Movement. During the COVID-19 pandemic, distrust of both the government and science not only challenged the American food industry but also exposed deeper fractures in the nation's collective identity, particularly regarding the role of science in governance and its place in shaping public policy.

The push to legalize raw milk, despite its history of causing deadly outbreaks, underscores a profound challenge to governmental and scientific authority. Innately, raw milk has stood in opposition to public health progress. Pasteurization, the invention that eliminated raw milk's dangers, was a major scientific breakthrough that saved thousands of lives and marked a shift in scientific paradigms for food and public health. By emphasizing sanitation, pasteurization transformed the food industry–for better and for worse. While it embedded science-backed research into food production, it also simplified public health narratives: sanitation is good, and raw milk is bad. This guidance, though life-saving, often disregards the complexities of farming and the communities it seeks to serve, prioritizing uniform regulations over nuanced contexts.

Last summer, I worked on a Wisconsin dairy farm and spent a few shifts working at a "pizza farm" owned by an older couple. They grew produce for sale or use in their homemade pizzas and raised chicken, sheep, and cattle. While every other product was a part of their

business, their cows were for their personal consumption and they drank their milk raw. They told me of a Wisconsin man who I now believe is Vernon Hershberger, an Amish dairy farmer who has been involved in countless legal disputes, some even going as far as raiding his home and farm, over his raw milk and dairy business.[4] In Wisconsin, the sale or distribution of raw milk is illegal, and his seemingly unending disputes with government agencies have not put a stop to his dairy production. When I asked the farmers their opinion about the issue considering they drink raw milk themselves and stand by its benefits, I was surprised to hear they were against the sale of raw milk, particularly when it occurs on a large scale like that of Hershberger's. Their reasons revolved around liability; once raw milk leaves the farm, its treatment is unknown from that point forward, exposing the seller to risks from consumer misuse.

This hesitancy reflects a foundational principle of public health policy–distrust of the consumer. While the farmers are intimately familiar with their context–what the cows eat, where they roam, and every drop of milk is seen before bottling–they cannot control how the milk is handled once leaving their property. This uncertainty makes them wary of selling or giving it away. Public health policy acknowledges this risk, but its sweeping guidelines are designed to cover all scenarios, even when there may be little inherent danger. As a result, modern public health policy often feels overly rigid, prioritizing uniformity over nuance. It regulates food not based on its specific qualities or context but as part of a broader system of control, focusing less on what food *is* and more on what it *represents* within the framework of governance and risk.

For conservatives, raw milk embodies two central themes in the current political landscape. On one hand, the milk producer, the cow, is a technology used to grab power and secure independence. On the other, milk evokes connotations of motherhood and nourishment, providing emotional solace in turbulent times. The Raw Milk movement, therefore, demonstrates how food can reflect and shape societal values. Whether seen as a rejection of scientific

[4] More information on Vernon Hershberger is available on A Campaign for Real Milk's online Vernon Hershberger archive ("Vernon Hershberger archives", n.d.)

authority or a desire to reconnect with simpler, more traditional times, the movement reveals deep-seated desires for autonomy, comfort, and unity in a divided era. By revisiting the historical and cultural significance of the cow, red meat, and milk, Americans confront broader questions about trust, governance, and identity. Ultimately demonstrating how food is more than sustenance–it is a technology of identity wielded to navigate and reflect the ongoing transformation of American society.

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