

Why “Flexitarian” Was a Word of the Year: Carno-phallogocentrism and the Lexicon of Vegetable-Based Diets

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Abstract

In 2004, the American Dialect Society gave the term "flexitarian" an award for being "most useful." This article explores the language of food in American culture and suggests that "flexitarian" does indeed serve a useful purpose in helping Americans conceptualize a way of eating that places less emphasis on meat in the diet and more emphasis on vegetable-based meals. The term provides a cultural middle ground between the typically American over-reliance on meaty meals and the more radical approach of vegetarians. The connotations of terms for vegetable-based diets are considered in light of American attitudes toward food and gender.

Keywords: flexitarian, food gender, meat analogs, meat substitutes, vegetarianism, veganism

1. Introduction

Americans had little use for flexitarians in early 2004. With the exception of a few foodies and a handful of linguists, most people had never even heard the word. John Kessler, a dining critic for the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, described it as an “icky neologism touted by the *Food Channel*” (Kessler, 1998). Aside from that pejorative blip, though, the word remained well under the radar. As a graduate student in English and a vegetarian, I was keen on the language of food, but somehow “flexitarian” caught me by surprise. If not for a stint as a newsreader at my alma mater’s radio station,¹ I would have remained in the dark about this new and otherwise obscure word. One day, while conducting a keyword search for “vegetarian,” I linked to the journal of *American Speech*. There, in an article entitled “Among the New Words,” I read that the American Dialect Society (hereafter ADS) had just published their annual list of top-shelf neologisms, and the list happened to include a word closely related to vegetarianism. That was news enough for me. I reduced the article to twenty-seconds worth of news speak, and, a few minutes later, literally spread the word.

The ADS defines “flexitarian” as both a noun and an adjective:

1 *n* [*flexible vegetarian*] Vegetarian occasionally eating meat

2 *adj* Of a vegetarian occasionally eating meat (Glowka, Melançon, and Wyckoff, 2004).

It is impossible to overlook the tension in this seemingly contradictory definition. Because a vegetarian is commonly understood to be someone who never eats meat,² a flexitarian, whose meat consumption is occasional, might very well be perceived as lacking the requisite commitment and discipline with which vegetarianism is typically associated. In this respect, at least, flexitarians would not seem so very different from ordinary consumers. Who, after all, hasn’t gone without meat now and then, either by choice or circumstance?

While “flexitarian” had not been deemed *the* word of the year, it did earn the curious distinction of being the “most useful word of the year.” Most useful, indeed, but, I wondered, for whom? If most people were hearing the term “flexitarian” for the first and, perhaps, last time in 2004, the frequency and breadth of its use were unlikely reasons for its being deemed useful. Details concerning the procedure through which the ADS selects neologisms are scant. However, the “most useful” award is said to be bestowed upon the “word or phrase which most fills a need for a new word.” Just how accurately the *need* for neologisms can be assessed is anyone’s guess. However, if “flexitarian” really does fill a linguistic need, its being “most useful” would suggest that plenty of Americans are already in transition from an omnivorous diet to a significantly more herbivorous one. How in the home of the Whopper could this possibly be true?

Frankly, it isn’t. While approximately two-thirds of the world’s human population subsists primarily on a plant-based diet, most Americans live on a meat-based one. Annual meat consumption in the U.S. has risen steadily, increasing from roughly 192 lbs. of meat per consumer in 2002 to roughly 221 lbs. consumed per capita in 2004 (Pimentel, 2003; United States Department of Agriculture, 2002; USDA, 2005).

In terms of daily protein intake, eating that much meat, along with other foods, provides the average American adult with twice the amount of protein recommended as optimal (United States Centers for Disease Control, 2011). By contrast, in the 1830s, the average American ate approximately 178 lbs. of meat, mostly salt pork, yearly; while, a hundred years later, during the first year of the Great Depression, the average American ate half a pound of meat a day, for a yearly total of 130 lbs. (McIntosh, 1995, p. 82). Even in this latter case, the average American has never suffered for want of protein derived from animal-based foods. Considering these facts, it would seem that the term “flexitarian” is quite useless, especially in American dialects.

Yet, while most recent polls confirm that the number of people who identify as vegetarians has not risen significantly in the past few decades,ⁱⁱⁱ foods marketed as vegetarian-friendly have effectively infiltrated shelf space in mainstream supermarkets nationwide. Almost all of these foods consist of meat substitutes and meat analogs. Consequently, “vegetarian,” used as an adjective, has come to signify plant-based foods with meaty attributes. Twenty years ago, consumers would have had to visit a “health food store” to purchase foods as rarefied as soymilk, veggie burgers, and tofu. In those stores of yore, there were fewer brands and foods, the products were comparatively expensive, and, arguably, their quality was inferior to that of today’s. By the turn of the millennium, however, almost every supermarket chain had begun stocking meat analogs, meat substitutes, and other veggie-friendly foods. The country has not run amok with vegan fitness gurus and animal rights activists. In fact, Americans are among the most overweight, meat-loving people on the planet.^{iv} In a food culture such as this, the notion of vegetarianism as inflexible and strict is perhaps itself too rigid.

By designating “flexitarian” as most useful word of the year, the ADS has made a significant contribution to dietary discourse, insofar as this designation catalyzed the term’s popularization, its use, and the dissemination of its meaning. The term has an additional significance, as well, because it imposes itself onto a semiotic space occupied by “vegetarian,” a term that had already begun to succumb to semantic shift, broadening from an original meaning, (i.e., subsisting solely on fruits and vegetables) to subsequent meanings, like those qualified by the terms “lacto-,” “ovo-,” “pesce-,” “pollo-,” and “semi-,” vegetarian.^v The term “flexitarian” marks a crucial point in the discourse of the American diet, because it provides a conceptual middle ground between an over-reliance on animal-based foods as sources of protein and what some critics have called the “vegan ideal,” or an entirely plant-based diet.^{vi} With continued use, “flexitarian” might serve to narrow not only the broader (i.e., ambiguous) sense of what it means to be vegetarian, but also to diminish the other, often pejorative, connotations associated with vegetarianism as well.

For the purposes of this article, the impulse to gloss the true and definitive vegetarianism, whatever that may be, will be set aside so that we may consider vegetarianism not as a fixed, absolute practice, but as a marginalized, dietary discourse that influences and is influenced by more dominant dietary discourses in American culture. In short, “vegetarianism” is a term with a history constituted by multiple interpretations that invariably prove beneficial to its interpreters. While its meaning is variously affixed by vegetarians and non-vegetarians alike, the term’s most influential glosses can be found in government agencies’ specifications and guidelines, as well as the more pervasive texts of advertising and product packaging. Long before the coining of the term “flexitarian,” the semantics of “vegetarian” had been changing in a way that seemed to indicate the influence of what Jacques Derrida refers to as “carno-phallogocentrism.”

Carno-phallogocentrism usefully names and describes the ideological basis for the predominance of meat-based diets in Western culture. It has been said that the purpose of any ideology is to make the cultural seem natural – that it represents the “imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence” (Althusser, 1998, p. 300). Accordingly, in an omnivorous culture like ours, social norms and mainstream dietary discourses tend to emphasize the naturalness of eating as we do. The plethora of products made of animal ingredients whose commercial names include the word “nature” are a testament to the effectiveness of reminding consumers that their diets are in accord with more than just their taste preferences. Meat eating, for example, is typically regarded as the birthright of human beings, if not the whole point of evolution itself. Consider the popular bumper sticker maxim, “I didn’t claw my way to the top of the food chain to eat vegetables.”^{vii} This phrase’s figures of speech (i.e., claw, top, and chain) contextualize humankind’s dominion over the natural world purely in terms of physical strength when, in reality, any superiority that human beings possess is due more to their unique technological capabilities than to sheer brute force.

However insincere and inaccurate these kinds of statements may be, they are commonly used to dismiss vegetable-based meals in an effort to promote barbecue, burgers, and other animal-based foods. In this bumper sticker version of natural selection, the American diet is highly evolved, the result of eons spent in the purposeful gratification of our taste buds. Meat is the living end of food choice in this fantasy, and vegetables mere garnishes, relegated to the margins of every dish and diet. As yet another common bumper sticker puts it, “Vegetables aren’t food. Vegetables are what food eats” (Café Press, 2011). Other examples of this overriding preference for meat abound in popular culture. Whether it’s families cheering like sports fans for lunchmeat in Hillshire Farms’ television commercials, anthropomorphized cows hawking Chik-Fil-A patties, or the elderly Clara Peller sizing up a burger and inquiring after the whereabouts of “the beef,” the predominant message about American taste is that a meal without meat signals defeat. Advertisements championing the quality or quantity of vegetables are virtually non-existent. With the exception of Popeye the Sailor, vegetables are without a champion in popular culture; the restaurant named after the famous cartoon sailor is but a chicken shack franchise where spinach is conspicuously absent from the menu. It is curious that vegetables are so disdained in American culture when their nutritiousness is so widely, albeit vaguely, understood. Ignoring vegetables’ high nutrient density in making dietary choices is one expression of our culture’s commitment to carno-phallogocentrism (whether or not consumers are consciously committed to it). Our cultural aversion to eating vegetables illustrates the fact that the dominant dietary paradigm is less a function of biology than of ideology. In other words, as an American foodway, meat is more meaningful than it is nutritious.

2. How did Carno-phallogocentrism Come to Pervade Western Culture?

While not a set of values that people consciously adopt, like liberalism or conservatism, carno-phallogocentrism operates as a complex of discourses – or discourse fragments – that pre-exist subjectivity and thus contextualize humankind’s domination of the non-human animal as formative of subjectivity. Although distinctions between the human and animal are fuzzier than our speciesist prejudices are wont to allow, the very cornerstones of Western literature establish the premise that human beings are as superior to as they are different from animals. “In the Genesis tale as much as in the myth of Prometheus,” Derrida (2002) writes, “it is paradoxically on the basis of a fault or failing in man that the latter will be made a subject who is master of nature and of the animal” (p. 389). By providing the discursive parameters within which subjectivity takes shape, carno-phallogocentrism gives the impression *it has always been thus*. Humankind’s dominion over animals is ordinarily expressed through ritualized consumption that often obscures the question of food origins. Accordingly, meat dominates the visual presentation of meals in the home, in most restaurants, and in serving suggestions, often without any allusion to the animals whose lives made such meals possible. Derrida (1991) characterizes the centrality of meat in Western diets as a way of visually representing the presence of power:

This *schema* implies carnivorous virility. I would want to explain *carno-phallogocentrism*, even if this comes down to a sort of tautology [...] which you could translate as ‘speculative idealism,’ [...]: it suffices to take seriously the idealizing interiorization of the phallus and the necessity of its passage through the mouth, whether it’s a matter of words or of things, of sentences, of daily bread or wine, of the tongue, the lips, or the breast of the other. (p.113)

The “speculative idealism” to which Derrida refers involves the association of a visual image with something that is immaterial. This association is not made consciously, in the way a flag may be said to represent freedom, but, fetishistically, in that objects associated with power facilitate the emerging subject’s entrée to the symbolic order simply by being recognized at the moment when unpleasurable tensions arise. Eating meat demonstrates that the subject possesses mastery – whether over objects, hunger, or appetite – and that this mastery remains, even belongs, within us (i.e., the phallus is always present). Furthermore, eating meat fosters identification with patriarchal tastes and reiterates this identification. If, as Derrida suggests, that eating itself is a way of demonstrating the “interiorization of the phallus,” then meat eating is its most carno-phallogocentric mode. Thus, texts of power and privilege shape subjectivity in the act of meat eating, first in infancy and, thereafter, at almost every other American meal.

The habituation to meat eating arises in a social, familial, and discursive context. As children, we are taught by others what we should eat, and how, but seldom why. Consequently, most modern American people discover the connection between food and its origins long after they have learned to consume meat.

Despite the fact that meat is so conspicuously present at the center of the American diet (i.e., the table, the plate, etc.) meat's origins, in particular, are often obscured by myths that differ markedly from the grim realities of industrial and even pre-industrial agriculture. The otherwise elementary facts about meat are often deferred until a taste for animal-based protein has been fostered, acquired, and nutritionally justified. While the same may also be true for other foods, few parents feel the need to shelter their children from the truth about the harvesting of fruits and vegetables. Children do not choose to be meat eaters, they are appointed to the position. Derrida (1991) sees this appointment as a reiteration of socio-political relations:

Authority and autonomy (for even if autonomy is subject to the law, this subjugation is freedom) are, through this schema, attributed to the man (*homo* and *vir*) rather than to the woman, and to the woman rather than to the animal. And of course to the adult rather than to the child. The virile strength of the adult male, the father, the husband, or brother (the canon of friendship, I will show elsewhere, privileges the fraternal schema) belongs to the schema that dominates the concept of subject. The subject does not want just to master and possess nature actively. In our cultures, he accepts sacrifice and eats flesh. [...] In our countries, who would stand any chance of becoming a *chef d'Etat* (a head of State), and of thereby acceding "to the head," by publicly, and therefore exemplarily, declaring him- or herself to be a vegetarian? The *chef* must be an eater of flesh. (p.114)

Following infancy, most peoples' relationship to food is constituted by their role in the patriarchal power structure of family and society. The power of patriarchy is represented by the phallus whether it is literally phallus-shaped or merely associated with omnipotent power, as masculinity and meat tend to be. An awareness of this power structure is fostered in large part by ritual consumption – who eats first, last, most, and least – as well as the question of whose tastes are accommodated and how the labor of food preparation is divided. These aspects of consumption are indicative of the subject's hierarchical position and serve as a strong impetus for upholding it. *Accepting* and consuming "flesh," as Derrida puts it, allays anxieties about the absence, the removal, or the non-existence of the phallus. If unpleasurable tensions should arise from identification with or concern for the sacrificed animal, these may be allayed by the reassurance that the subject has a clearly defined role in the socio-political hierarchy that the family represents. Our allegiance to patriarchy provides us the power to be human, to be free from the forces that would otherwise put us on a more equal footing with the animal.

The subject's introduction to meat eating functions as interpellation, effectively demonstrating patriarchy's power not only to sacrifice and protect, but also to designate subjects' eligibility for either of these treatments. Because meat eating is intertwined with the formation of subjectivity and the perpetuation of patriarchal tastes, it should not seem surprising that adhering to vegetable-based diets may have disruptive effects on social and interpersonal relations. Eating fruits and vegetables rather than meat subverts the carno-phallogocentric order and does so conspicuously. Furthermore, changing from a meat-based diet is not merely a matter of replacing one food or ingredient with another, it also involves finding adequate, alternative significations for one's place in a socio-political hierarchy. As a foodway, meat is perceived as irreplaceable: it nourishes, satisfies, and strengthens. Besides eliciting concerns about adequate nutrition, vegetarianism connotes a deficit of "carnivorous virility." Vegetable-based dishes call attention to the absence of the speculative phallus, the power it represents, and all its power privileges.

3. Carno-phallogocentrism and the Lexicon of Vegetable-Based Diets

If a culture were indeed carno-phallogocentric, then its language would likely reflect this ideological position. This is not to say that terms denoting vegetable-based cuisines and diets would not exist, only that their etymologies would likely reflect the perspective of the dominant culture. Semantic shifts in terms denoting herbivorous foodways suggest that meaning broadens and becomes pejorative whenever those foodways conflict with the dominant dietary paradigm. The etymology of "vegetarian" provides a vivid example of this pejoration. Although the exact year and source of its coinage remains unknown, the written use of the word "vegetarian" began to surface in the mid-nineteenth century. The *Oxford English Dictionary* glosses Francis Anne Kemble's *Journal of a Residence on a Georgia Plantation* as the term's earliest use. In her journal, Kemble, a British actress who marries the American heir to a large plantation, chronicles her experiences in the antebellum South. Written in 1839, the journal is not a treatise on animal or civil rights. As Kemble writes in the epilogue, it presents "a picture of conditions of human existence which I hope and believe have passed away" (Kemble, 1863, p.1).

Kemble is ostensibly an opponent of slavery, although her journal recounts the benefits of white privilege with unmitigated candor. In the following entry, she describes how her dissatisfaction with a recent course of mutton leads to an encounter with the plantation cook. The italicized words indicate the sentence chosen for the *OED*'s gloss:

Abraham appeared at the door of the room brandishing a very long thin knife, and with many bows, grins, and apologies for disturbing me, begged that I would go and cut up a sheep for him. My first impulse of course was to decline the very unusual task offered me with mingled horror and amusement. Abraham, however, insisted and besought, extolled the fineness of his sheep, declared his misery at being unable to cut it as I wished, and his readiness to conform for the future to whatever patterns of mutton "de missis would only please to give him." Upon reflection I thought I might very well contrive to indicate upon the sheep the size and form of the different joints of civilised [sic] mutton, and so, for the future, save much waste of good meat. [...] With a towel closely pinned over my silk dress, and knife in hand, I stood for a minute or two meditating profoundly before the rather unsightly object which Abraham had pronounced "de beautifullest sheep de missis eber saw." The sight and smell of raw meat are especially odious to me, and I have often thought that *if I had had to be my own cook, I should inevitably become a vegetarian, probably, indeed, return entirely to my green and salad days.* Nathless, I screwed my courage to the sticking point, and slowly and delicately traced out with the point of my long carving-knife two shoulders, two legs, a saddle, and a neck of mutton; not probably in the most thoroughly artistic and butcherly style, but as nearly as my memory and the unassisted light of nature would enable me. (p. 197-198)

This journal excerpt provides a far richer context than does the abbreviated version that appears in the *OED*. The term is couched in a cultural logic that illustrates the way that class privilege influences food choice. Kemble's dietary preferences, afforded by her position near the top of the social food chain, stand in contradistinction to vegetarianism. She imagines becoming vegetarian only as a consequence of life without domestic servants. In this sense, a vegetarian diet is an acceptable, but not preferable diet, because it lacks the meat she enjoys and the status she has attained. Her social class allows her the luxury of writing about her preferences and aversions, as well as the power of dictating them to those who serve her meals. Working in the kitchen or on the chopping block is not just an unusual task for someone in Kemble's position, but one mingled with "horror and amusement." Though she may not regularly work in the kitchen, what Kemble does bring to the table is mastery, a specialized knowledge of gourmet dining. She enjoys eating meat, distinguishes good cuts from bad, and happens to know a freshly minted dietary term for the alternative to meat eating.

Finally, Kemble states that she would become vegetarian if necessity required her to prepare and cook her own food; but, her vegetarian fantasy transports her only so far, to the "green and salad days" of her youth, leaving an important aspect of her food choice unexamined. Kemble imagines cooking for herself only, not having to switch places with Abraham or with the majority of women of the era whose families did not rely on slave labor. If, like them, she were responsible for preparing meals for her husband, as well as herself, then becoming vegetarian would not have spared her the sights and smells she so dislikes and, in fact, might have involved extra work. It is important to note that, in a time when "vegetarian" was quite a novel term, it already corresponded to feminine taste. The appeal of becoming vegetarian to Kemble lies not in the food, but rather in the perceived ease and bloodlessness of its preparation. That a man would inevitably eat meat even if he had had to be his own cook is the unstated assumption in the above passage. After all, in this scene, Kemble does indeed have to be her own cook, but not for herself alone.

In the antebellum South, Kemble would have been among the fortunate few who seldom saw the darker side of dinner. Like the towel she pins to her dress, Kemble's role as lady of the house would have ordinarily shielded her from the toil and gore of the kitchen. In less than a century, her unique privilege had become commonplace. The invention of the refrigerated railcar in the late 19th century made meat transportable and paved the way for the emergence of slaughterhouses, where killing, butchering, and packaging took place out of sight, out of mind. By the end the 20th century, Americans had become more estranged from the sources of their food than the omnivores of Kemble's day could ever have imagined. Today, meat marketing assists consumers in focusing on the weight, size, and color of the food, typically to the exclusion of its origins, nutritional value, and effect on health. Due to the emergence of supermarkets, innovative packaging, and product placement, meat has become easy to dissociate from the processes that render it a commodity.

Its public image became sanitized, and, thereby, less of a *memento mori*. Pre-cut, neatly packaged, or displayed in bright, shiny deli cases, supermarket meat is devoid of any sight or smell that one might find “especially odious.” In the context of the supermarket, marketers have succeeded in making meat look like any other packaged product. As the visual and olfactory stimuli that inspired Kemble to consider vegetarianism became increasingly scarce, so did such considerations. In turn, the semantics of “vegetarian” have changed too.

The term is subject to multiple interpretations and almost always requires further clarification. Where “vegetarian” once signified a person who eats only fruits, grains, nuts, and vegetables, the term has broadened to the point where a vegetarian diet is nearly indistinguishable from an omnivorous one. “Vegetarian” has come to denote consumers who avoid only red meats but consume chicken, eggs, fish, pork, as well as cows’ milk, goats’ milk, and every variety of cheese, despite the fact that animals, their eggs, and their secretions are not technically, colloquially, or even figuratively, fruits and vegetables. The broadening of the term became so pronounced that in 1944, several dozen British vegetarians and subscribers to *The Vegetarian Messenger* found it necessary to coin a new term in a direct effort to restore a distinctively different way of eating. This group, headed by Donald Watson, decided upon “vegan,” a term that still manages to retain its original, intended meaning. Their rationale for choosing this word appeared in the first issue of “The Vegan News,” published in November 1944:

“Vegetarian” and “Fruitarian” are already associated with societies that allow the “fruits” (!) of cows and fowls, therefore it seems we must make a new and appropriate word. As the first issue of our periodical had to be named, I used the title “The Vegan News.” Should we adopt this, our diet will soon become known as a VEGAN diet, and we shall aspire to the ranks of VEGANS. Members’ suggestions will be welcomed. The virtue of having a short title is best known by those of us who, as secretaries of vegetarian societies, have had to type the word vegetarian thousands of times a year! (p. 2)

By Watson’s own account, the coining of the term “vegan” did not lack a practical dimension, but, it suffices to say, the need for such a term was primarily ideological. Easy to type and understand, “vegan” designates the narrowest, most exclusive sense of vegetarianism: no meat, no milk, no cheese, and no eggs. In the masthead of the *Vegan News*, the subtitle, *Quarterly Journal of the Non-Dairy Vegetarians*, makes clear the group’s determination to stress their exclusivity. Armed with their newly-coined moniker, the non-dairy vegetarians made the most stable contribution to the lexicon of plant-based diets, arguably striking a significant blow against the force of carno-phallogocentrism. Watson and the non-dairy vegetarians coined a term that anchors the rest of the lexicon.

Since its coining, the term “vegan” has not succumbed to broadening as vegetarian has. Instead, “vegan” has narrowed, in some instances, such that it denotes not only an entirely plant-based diet, but also an overall pattern of consumption that excludes animals and animal by-products. “Cruelty-free,” as this ethic is described on product labels, means no leather, no fur, and no animal testing. Regardless of the degree to which “vegetarianism” may have succumbed to semantic shift, the term “vegan” retains its intended clarity – a signifier that inevitably floats like any other, but always with respect to the term that spawned it. “Vegan” suggests a narrower practice that exists within a larger range of vegetable-based consumption. As such, vegans have earned themselves the dubious distinction of being the “strict” vegetarians. Of course, their reputed strictness depends on the degree to which the dominant dietary discourse casts vegetable-based diets as marginal and animal-based diets as central.

4. Another Word of the Year: *Metrosexual*

One might guess that the ADS chooses its words carefully. Of the ten neologisms that it selected for its 2004 list, the one that rose to the top, that is, *the* word of the year, was “metrosexual.”^{viii} Alongside other winners, such as “freegan,” and “cliterati,” the term fits a definitive pattern. Each denotes an emerging subculture that pairs well-known, normative characteristics with ones that are more obscure or marginal. Heralding these neologisms promotes an awareness of emerging identity categories and broadens the range of discourse about people and culture. Only “metrosexual,” however, has become commonly used and widely recognized. Its popularity suggests that one of the stereotypical markers by which homosexuality has been characterized – dressing fashionably – now connotes a more hetero-normative practice. The term complicates an old stereotype with a new one: the closer one gets to the city, the more commonly one observes men of *un*-certain sexual orientations trying to look their best. Personal style tends to be an over-determined factor in speculations about gender and sexual orientation, simply because it is so apparent, so embodied, and ubiquitous. The term “metrosexual” takes this tendency for granted.

According to *The Metrosexual Guide to Style*, the convergence of stereotypically gay and straight approaches to style has been catalyzed by the realization by “both sides” that there is “a certain power and mystery in ambiguity, and that confidence, security and a sense of style are the defining factors of the modern man” (Flocker, 2003, xii). The guide also suggests that metrosexuality entails a broader range of practices than just dressing up. In fact, “Fashion & Style” is only the sixth, not the first, nor the last, of its twelve chapters. Other chapters delve into other visual aspects of metrosexuality, such as “General Etiquette” and “Body & Fitness,” the latter of which defines the ideal metrosexual physique in terms that would describe a cut of organic beef equally well: “natural, lean, and trim” (p. 117). A metrosexual knows what it means to feel like a piece of meat, and he likes it. His body stands in contradistinction to the “pumped-up, steroid-injecting muscleman” (p. 117) and “the unhealthy, waifish extreme that has been thrust upon women for several decades” (p. 118). Fat is a metrosexual issue too, apparently, and skinny guys, the guide tells us, in a tone reminiscent of *Cosmopolitan* or *Seventeen*, are “in luck,” because they have “the right body type to pull off the latest looks that are headed your way” (p. 119).

Metrosexuals may be as heterosexual as flexitarians are carnivorous, but the indeterminacy of their appearance makes them conspicuous and, to some observers, more than a little unsettling. As it is glossed by the ADS, “metrosexual” is not a pejorative term at all. For many straight men, however, cultivating an interest in the intricacies of appearance is atypical. Style for style’s sake is suspect. The inclusion of the terms, “metrosexual” and “flexitarian,” on the same list may be more than mere coincidence. Both of these terms connote a refined savvy about the way that conspicuous consumption assists in identity construction. Dressing and eating are integral parts of personal appearance. If metrosexuality asks that a man master the semiotics of fashion and physique, then diet becomes another of his most important considerations.

5. Homo-Metrosexualis and the Last Hummer

As we all know, daring to appear “different” requires careful negotiation for a hetero-normative man. What he drives, eats, and wears are personal choices fraught with implications. The flexitarian metrosexual must walk an even thinner line. One 2006 commercial for the Hummer H3 addresses this very issue with surreal clarity. The commercial opens in an ordinary supermarket. Metrosexual man stands in the checkout lane. He is casually, but neatly attired and sports a wash-and-go hairstyle. A cashier begins scanning his groceries, but a repetitive beep tells us something is wrong. A box labeled, “tofu,” in big, blue capitals defies the scanner. Metrosexual man looks on, helplessly. The camera pans to his groceries. They consist of fruits, vegetables, and, yes, several more containers of tofu. The beeping continues. A glance over his shoulder reveals metrosexual man’s self-consciousness about the delay he is causing. Behind him, unloading a cartful of fresh-cut meats and a bag of charcoal, stands another young man. His grin belies a noticeable contempt. Or is it the pride of a hunter having returned from the kill? Another loud beep follows, and, much to metrosexual man’s great relief, his tofu is scanned. As the conveyor springs to life, he inadvertently glimpses the tabloid rack. Amongst the digests and tattlers appears an advertisement for the Hummer H3. With cartoonish haste, metrosexual man gathers his groceries. In a blur, he bounds across the parking lot to his subcompact car. Tires screech. Next stop, Hummer dealer. In the showroom, he points to the Hummer H3. Keys drop into his hand.

A bell rings loudly, as if a register drawer has opened or a boxing match has ended. His shiny, new Hummer H3 roars into the street. The camera slowly zooms in on metrosexual man’s face. Framed by the squat rectangle of the window, he takes a bite of a long carrot. As he confidently chews and drives, a phrase is superimposed on the scene. It reads “Restore The Balance,” in bold, sans-serif capitals, followed briefly by the promise of twenty miles per gallon in highway driving. This 2006 commercial depicts a period-correct version of a metrosexual man. He shops for his own groceries, values a well-balanced diet, looks fit, and is well groomed. He is also highly conscious about how he appears to others, as evidenced by his anxiety about causing a bottleneck in the checkout lane and being spotted as a tofu consumer. His vain attempt to reduce this unpleasurable tension results in one of the costlier, common iterations of conspicuous consumption. Indeed, almost every American needs some form of reliable transportation, but most could do without military transport. This is precisely the point of the Hummer brand. Its excesses of size, weight, and fuel *in*-efficiency signify something other than mere functionality, unless you happen to be a commando. The Hummer brand has fetishistic power, imbuing the driver with control and power over more than his vehicle and the road. This excess of signification is inevitably conferred upon the driver, whose face appears neatly framed, riding high, branded “a man.” But, branding aside, the H3 is not just any old Hummer. While it retains the boxy, military styling of its predecessors, it does so on a noticeably smaller scale.

The reduced proportions but distinctive shape echo the description of an ideal metrosexual physique: “The pumped-up, steroid injecting muscleman is out, and a healthier, slim physique is now in” (Flocker, 2003, p. 115). Larger than a Land Rover, smaller than a tank, the H3 appeals to a particular kind of motorist, one whose need for attention rivals his need for a downtown parking space. The commercial makes clear what marketers would like us to glean from the narrative: the H3 is so unquestionably possessed of masculine mojo that even a tofu-munching “metrosexual” will be transformed by it. Still, the question remains: to which “balance” does the commercial refer? An earlier, original draft of the commercial leaves little to the imagination. It aired several weeks before the later iteration described above. The only discernible difference between the two versions lies in the final caption. Originally, the “Restore the Balance” caption read, “Reclaim Your Manhood,” instead. Negative reactions to the commercial were swift, and the caption was soon changed to the “balance” version (Stevenson, 2006). Despite representations like those in the Hummer commercial, ADS’ recognition of the terms, “flexitarian” and “metrosexual,” indicate that American attitudes toward vegetable-based diets are changing. After all, if a Hummer alone can bridge the metrosexual masculinity gap, it must not have been a very wide gap in the first place.

6. *Flexitarian? What’s the use?*

At first glance, terms for new dietary trends may strike us as superfluous or even absurd. Vegetarians, vegans, and flexitarians are nothing new, despite all the categorical fuss. Why would anyone need special terminology to identify themselves as consumers of foods that have been staples of the human diet for eons? Americans do not need permission to eat meatless meals. After all, it is a free country. On the other hand, it’s the kind of free country in which some legislators felt the need to coin a term like “freedom fries,” when, in 2003, France refused to offer its support for the US invasion of Iraq (Stolberg 2003). The ADS recognized this special coinage as the “most unnecessary” of the year. Nonetheless, gestures like these underscore the importance of naming with respect to food and diet. The words we choose are more than merely descriptive, and are, as likely as not, loaded with pejorative connotation.

If the lexicon of vegetable-based diets seems more heavily loaded than others, it is due to western culture’s carnophallogocentric perspective. The tendency to read vegetables as symbolic of the feminine and meat as symbolic of masculine is enculturated. In *The Sexual Politics of Meat*, Carol Adams (1990) writes that eating animals is a cornerstone of gender:

The word vegetable acts as a synonym for women’s passivity because women are supposedly like plants. Hegel makes this clear: “The difference between men and women is like that between animals and plants. Men correspond to animals, while women correspond to plants because their development is more placid.” From this viewpoint, both women and plants are seen as less developed and less evolved than men and animals. Consequently, women may eat plants, since each is placid; but active men need animal meat. (p. 37)

As meat’s symbolic power became amplified by advertising and mass media throughout the 20th century, it took an interesting turn, signifying not only the sexual difference between male and female, but also differences of sexual orientation as well. Thus, the stakes for eating anything other than steaks became perilous for straight men, whose perceived gender roles depend more on body image and less on physical difference.

The sexual politics of meat may be easy to identify in mass media and other cultural texts, like commercials for fast cars and fast food, but are they as evident in other parts of our food culture as well? The US Centers for Disease Control publishes statistics for “Fruit and Vegetable Consumption Among US Adults.” Their 2005 report describes these food habits in a way that indicates just how rare it is to find Americans flirting with vegetable-based diets.

- Only 32.6% of the U.S. adults surveyed consumed fruit two or more times per day.
- Only 27.2% ate vegetables three or more times per day.
- The prevalence of consuming fruit two or more times per day was 28.7% among men, but 36.4% among women.
- The prevalence of eating vegetables three or more times per day was 22.1% among men and 32.2% among women.

As a whole, Americans demonstrated a repugnance toward fruits and vegetables. Nearly 70% regularly failed to meet the minimum recommended daily allowance for fruits and vegetables. More pertinent to the sexual politics of meat, however, is that men are much less likely to eat a healthy amount of these foods. In addition, a survey conducted by Harris Interactive, a marketing research organization, found that female vegetarians outnumbered male vegetarians by a ratio of three to two. Furthermore, the survey found that female vegetarians were more likely to admit that they do not eat meat than male vegetarians were (Vegetarian Resource Group, 2003). From these statistics, it seems clear that men are more conscious of the stigma against eating vegetable-based foods. If the American diet seems likely to remain carno-phallogocentric for the foreseeable future, we must wonder how useful a word like “flexitarian” really is. For now, the term has spawned a few cookbooks and a restaurant or two^{ix}. If its popularity grows, it may have the potential to make meatless meals seem normal, yet adventurous, instead of strange and strict. Indeed, changes to menus and supermarkets over the past decade suggest the great extent to which meatless options have already become commonplace.

The widespread availability of foods marketed as “vegetarian” and “vegan” indicates that meatless meals are no longer just a niche market or a passing trend (Gates, 2008, p. 34). Meat substitutes and analogs are sold everywhere today, occupying shelf space in close proximity to the very foods for which they are perceived as substitutes. Ultimately, the real value of a term like “flexitarian” may lie more in its utility as part of a social, rather than culinary movement. “Flexitarian” establishes a point on the continuum between carnivorous and herbivorous tastes, just as “metrosexual” marks a point on the continuum between gay and straight. Both terms complicate an entrenched binary opposition, by raising questions about “balance” and “manhood.” Although I’m not sure that the ADS would agree with my reasoning, “flexitarian” is a useful word, a word loaded with potential, not just for 2004, but for the many years it will take for Americans to wean themselves away from the carno-phallogocentric diet that has helped to make them the fattest people on Earth.^x

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Footnotes

- ⁱ WRAS at Georgia State University in Atlanta, GA.
- ⁱⁱ Or someone who “lives wholly or on principally on vegetable foods; *esp.* one who abstains from animal food obtained from the destruction of life,” according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Vegetarians currently represent approximately 2.5% of the US population and vegans .9%, modest increases since the late 1990s (Hadadd, 2003, p. 629S-630S).
- ^{iv} “Data from the most recent NHANES survey shows that among adult men the prevalence of obesity was 31.1% in 2003—2004, and 33.3% in 2005—2006, a small but not statistically significant change. Among adult women, the prevalence of obesity in 2003—2004 was 33.2%, and in 2005—2006 was 35.3%, again a small but not significant change” (USCDC, 2009).
- ^v I do not wish to imply that these terms are not necessary or useful, only that they assist in destabilizing the root word when it is used alone. Their effect recalls the arbitrary nature of signs themselves.
- ^{vi} Feminist critic Kathryn Paxton George (1994) characterizes the vegan ideal as discriminatory because it presupposes “a ‘male physiological norm’ that gives a privileged position to adult, middle-class males living in industrialized countries. Women, children, the aged, and others have substantially different nutritional requirements and would bear a greater burden on vegetarian and vegan diets with respect to health and economic risks.” George recommends a “semi-vegetarian” diet (p. 19).
- ^{vii} At this time of this writing, this expression and the one that follows can easily be found in bumper sticker form, online, at sites like *cafeypress.com* and *instantattitudes.com*.
- ^{viii} According to ADS’s gloss, a “metrosexual” can be defined thus: *n*, a fashion-conscious heterosexual male.
- ^{ix} See Myra Kornfeld’s *The Healthy Hedonist: More Than 225 Delectable Flexitarian Recipes for Relaxed Daily Feasts* (2005) and Peter Berley’s *The Flexitarian Table* (2006).
- ^x “With the exception of the populations of a few small Pacific islands,” according to Keith Sealing (2007, p. 1022). It would be more accurate to say that Americans are the fattest people in the industrialized world.