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The Magic Metabolisms of Competitive Eating

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Professional competitive eaters, or "gurgitators," can rattle off an encyclopedic record of their stats. 66 hot dogs, 12 minutes. 3 lbs. bologna, 6 minutes. 49 donuts, 8 minutes. Men like Badlands Booker, a 450-pound competitive eater who suffers from high blood pressure, often risk the soundness of their health and the stability of their families to compete professionally. Gurgitators have died from this passion – some indirectly, from heart disease and stroke, others on stage, coughing, choking, asphyxiating themselves to death.

What motivates them? What provokes them? And what do we get from watching them eat? What does eating nine pounds of deep-fried asparagus say about our culture, the needs of our bodies, the anxieties in our lives?

Competitive eating is often seen as a trash sport, well below the status of even professional wrestling or Monster Trucks. Called the "junkiest part of America's junk culture," competitive eating is often dismissed as meaningless by critics and gurgitators alike (Fagone 2006, 304). Joey Chestnut, the current reigning champion, told me in one interview that "we can overanalyze it and there could be tons of theories, but it really doesn't amount to much." Undoubtedly, competitive eating is neither viewed by its insiders nor American culture as a viable outlet for political and social expression in the United States.

However, ideas of the carnival, masculinity, consumerism, and the spectacle demonstrate that, like the cockfight, competitive eating can be read as a story that we tell ourselves about ourselves. By drawing together these ideas with ethnographic research of gurgitators, it becomes clear that competitive eating is a deeply meaningful performance of American culture that harnesses the communicative functions of body and food to articulate deep-seated anxiety and serve as grounds for societal rebirth. By applying Bakhtin's ideas of the material bodily principle and the collective body, we can see that eating contests' focus on the degrading apertures of the body—the open, gaping mouth, the buggy, sweaty eyes, the bulging stomach—challenges the power of the self and society. The "rotten babies" or bloated stomachs of the male gurgitators, in particular, use the degrading aspects of the body to direct the eating contest towards rebirth and rejuvenation. Ultimately, the societal rejuvenation emblematized in the gurgitator's "pregnancies" uses the alterity of the carnival to expose everyday constructions of power as similarly ephemeral and arbitrary.

Unlike the medieval carnival, however, competitive eating attends to very modern ideas of consumerism, assimilation, and American abundance. Women like Sonya Thomas and Juliet Lee engage these ideas through the performances of their very thin bodies—often bodies that weigh less than 100 pounds but consume spectacularly large quantities, such as Lee's 13 pounds of cranberry sauce in eight minutes. Lee, Thomas, and others actively participate in the mythopoeia of the magic metabolisms and the public fascination with these slim

eaters speaks to an embedded cultural desire—the fantasy to consume without consequence. The performing body of the competitive eater is only one text this research draws from; a series of interviews with gurgitators, fat activists, and audience members have offered personal understanding and contributed to a richer view of this spectacle.

For the purposes of this study, competitive eating is limited to the public, highly structured events in which contestants qualify to compete against each other to eat as much of one food-stuff as they can in a short period of time. While state fair pie-eating contests have always been popular in the United States, the last few decades have seen a surge in professional, highly publicized eating contests run by the International Federation of Competitive Eating (IFOCE). By their own account, IFOCE is responsible for more than a billion consumer impressions each year, 300 million of which derive from the hugely popular Nathan's International July Fourth Hot Dog Eating Contest which counts its physical attendance at 40,000 and its ESPN broadcast reach in the hundreds of millions. Outside of the events themselves, competitive eating features prominently in American popular culture; ever since Jughead Jones first triumphed in a pie-eating contest, television shows and documentaries such as *The Simpsons* or *Gut Busters* and a spate of newspaper and magazine articles attest to public fascination with the topic.

IDENTITY AND THE IMPURE BODY

While they do diverge in significant ways, the points of alignment between the eating contest and the carnival run deep. To Bakhtin, the carnival offers an "extrapolitical aspect of the world" to the common people in which they build a "second world and second life outside of officialdom" in order to rejuvenate traditional society (Bahhtin 1984, 6). As the "least scrutinized sphere of the people's creation," laughter, merriment, and nonsense offered a true freedom by which medieval people were most able to express political belief (1984, 4).

Just as Bakhtin interprets the performance of carnival to be actually more meaningful for its lack of self-awareness, competitive eating bypasses traditional loci for self-reflection to directly represent us to ourselves. The vast majority of gurgitator interviews demonstrate that, while competitive eating figures prominently into the individual's sense of pride and accomplishment, gurgitators hesitate to attach larger symbolic weight to their actions. Pete "Pretty Boy" Davekos told me that he "does it to hang out with my buddies" and Nathan "Nasty Nate" Biller said, "I eat [competitively] just because it's fun."

The popular press follows suit, dismissing competitive eating as meaningless and juvenile. Newspaper articles are rife with kitschy puns, degrading metaphors, and condescension that often use a bestial vocabulary to describe the "monkeys," "dogs," or "apes" who participate in such debased entertainment (see Fischler 2002; Hesser 2002; Fagone 2006, 24). In light of the Bakhtinian carnival, these themes of inconsequentiality can be read not as an indication of competitive eating's triviality, but of its significance.

Unlike traditional athleticism, the eating contest is premised on the universality of eating. Eating's capacity to transcend cultural and linguistic barriers is directly linked to competitive eatings' claims to be an empathetic and democratic endeavor which, in turn, both aids and masks the serious cultural work of establishing group identity. By creating a sport premised on shared need, competitive eating smuggles serious ideas about nation-building and American identity in an approachable rhetoric of frivolity.

The language of the gurgitators themselves supports these claims explicitly: Crazy Legs Conti told me that unlike "the experience of dunking a basketball or scoring a touchdown," eating is universally

relatable and "always causes a visceral response" in the audience via the physical empathy of shared experience. Patrick "Deep Dish" Bertoletti told me because "people all eat, so it amazes them [the audience] how many pounds of food we eat." The structure of professional eating supports the democratized nature of professional eating; as Lawrence Rubin notes, because eaters are not "drawn from a rarified farm system that grooms the professional athlete," the "gorger is us, and we are the gorger" (2008, 254). World-champion Joey Chestnut echoed this in plain language, reassuring me that he is "as normal as they come."

To Bakhtin, the primary distinction between carnival and art is that the carnival, which belongs to the "borderline between art and life" does not distinguish "between actors and spectators" (1984, 7). In exact accord with Bakhtin's description of the carnival as "not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people," competitive eating audience members frequently expressed their feelings of participation within and influence upon the spectacle on stage (p. 7). Likewise, gurgitators also expressed how the distinction between audience and actor blurred when they credit audience enthusiasm for their abilities, like Joey Chestnut did for his 2008 Nathan's Famous Hot Dog victory. Bakhtin's language echoes gurgitator Pete "Pretty Boy" Davekos when he told me, "But we all eat. If you order a slice of pizza, three or four larges—that's why I think it's so interesting because *everyone participates* without even knowing."

By creating a direct, bodily link between the food consumed on stage and their own feelings of revulsion or nausea, audience members tie their own bodies not only with the gurgitators on stage but also the surrounding crowd. This bodily empathy, combined with the physical closeness of the packed audience, creates a situation where spectators become "a member of the people's mass body" where the individual is subsumed in the "sensual, material bodily unity and community" (Bakhtin 1984, 255). Impressions gathered from audience members support this claim; as one 14-year-old girl attending the Stockton AsparagusFest said, she began to feel "sick to her stomach and gross" as she watched the contest. Her father reiterated this by saying he was so "blown away" by the amount of food consumed that he felt "queasy." Popular descriptions of eating contests also reflect on shared bodily experience: one writer relays that seeing the contest "left a bad taste in my wife's mouth" (Rubin 2008, v).

By looking at the nature of shared bodily experience through the anthropological lens of ritual, it becomes clear that the body of the gurgitator morphs into a social body linking the bodies of the spectators to the body politic via shared corporeal experience. On stage, the eating, spewing, body clearly violates of American social sanctions of decorum and control; it is a living definition of bodily impurity that, as contrast, re-establishes an American definition of bodily purity. The material definition of bodily purity reinstates both a "clear distinction between insiders and outsiders, [and] a stress on loyalty" (Bell 1997, 184). In this sense, the eating may not only reflect and reinforce not only group ties, but also key ideological projects of nation-building.

An analysis of early American eating contest newspaper coverage reveals how the contests used the eating contest's empathetic and participatory nature to build national identity. By communicating through the common language of eating, early American eating contests may have inspired unity and built patriotism through the evocative social symbol of the performative body—a body which transcended the barriers of a multilingual, multi-ethnic society. A survey of one hundred news articles from prominent U.S. newspapers such as the *New York Times*, the *Chicago Daily*

Tribune, and the *Washington Post* has suggested a distinct feature of the pre-1900s eating contests. In contrast to today's contests, the vast majority of these contests used blandly generic, instantly relatable foods. These foods—onions, watermelon, eggs—can be linked to many cuisines but tied to none. Unlike foods such as corn or sauerkraut (which generated their own eating contests in the last hundred years), these foods hold little in common with Native American and even less with Old World foods. While this might simply reflect the restrictions of a pre-industrialized food system, it might also be indicative of an attempt to homogenize immigrant diet, inspire patriotism, and create unity in new Americans.[1]

In this light, we see how competitive eating draws from the individual's knowledge of his own body to create an understanding of the body politic. As Mary Douglas notes, the body is often used in ritual as a "symbolic medium" by which "work upon the body politic" is accomplished; in rituals, the body gives social relations "visible expression" and "they enable people to know their own society" (1966, 129). In this way, the bodies of competitive eaters speak even as their mouths remain full; they literalize and confirm key tenets of the American belief system – classlessness, consumerism, and assimilation. Classlessness finds expression in the athleticization of eating and public binging, in a display of desire, literalizes consumerism. Assimilation takes shape in the evasion of language barriers and ethnic cuisines via the communicative medium of the body and culturally indefinite foods and, perhaps, more elementally, in the assimilatory processes of digestion by which difference is crushed and processed into sameness. Further, the public nature of these early contests, usually held in street fairs, created a situation where casual passers-by were interpellated as Americans who, even if they did not share the same cuisine or language, shared the same bodily frame of reference by which they could judge the enormity of the feat before them.

News coverage of early eating contests demonstrates that, in the meritocracy of the eating contest, the results of the contest often trump the ethnicities or class of the contestants. While most articles never refer to ethnicity or class, the few that do privilege contest results against personal detail. For example, an 1886 *Chicago Daily Tribune* article only mentions that it was an "Italian who won the match by an orange and two bananas" after laboriously chronicling the results and methods of the greased-pig chasing, melon-seed guessing, and fruit-eating contests. By using a common set of instantly relatable referents, competitive eating capitalizes on our visceral understanding of our bodies to teach an understanding of the values of classlessness, consumerism, and assimilation in the American body politic.[2]

However, Bakhtin differentiates between the collective "material bodily principle" and the "biological individual or bourgeois ego" (1984, 19). The biological individual or bourgeois ego limits the expression of the material bodily principle just as the experiences of one person limit the expression of the collective experience of the human race. Drawing from early American contests, we see that, in competitive eating, the biological individual's expression is not subsumed by the collective human body but by the collective *American* body. As a common set of bodily rules, the material bodily principle transcends and subsumes the biological individual, hyperbolizing the group's collective experiences until it becomes "grandiose and exaggerated" (Bakhtin 1984, 19). These exaggerated symbols center around the greatest anxiety-producing parts of the body: apertures of anus, genitals, eyes, and mouth.

Competitive eating's most representative symbols lie in the human body: the wide, gaping, yawning mouth; the lines of

trickling saliva; the rivers of sweat; the bulging, buggy eyes; the sight of half-chewed food in an open mouth; and, of course, the threat of vomit. The open, chewing, wet mouth is the key visual symbol of the American competitive eater. The mouth dominates, even appears to subsume, the face, the body, and, perhaps, the individuality of the person. Bakhtin assigns the gaping mouth "the leading role" of the lower stratum (1984, 325).[3] The mouth, he writes, "is the open gate leading downward into the bodily underworld" and is closely related to "swallowing, the most ancient symbol of death and destruction" (p. 325).[4] Much like medieval gargoyles, competitive eaters serve to represent the collective, living body that emphasizes "the apertures or the convexities, the open mouth . . . the potbelly" (p. 26). This eating body literally "swallows the world and is itself swallowed by the world" and is "continually growing and renewed" (pp. 18–35).

Unsurprisingly, the body parts which produce great anxiety are also the "parts of the body that are open to the outside world," which blur the boundaries of the body and, consequently, the power of the self and society (Bakhtin 1984, 26). Douglas advances the idea that "strong social control demands strong bodily control" and, by extension, the loosening of bodily control implies a loosening of social control (1996, 76). A step further, Bakhtin argues that loose bodily control, in the exhibition of the "bodily lower stratum," is the degradation necessary for metaphoric renewal. "The purely bodily aspect" of degradation is "not clearly distinct from the cosmic," Bakhtin writes, defining degrading body parts as the "life of the belly and the reproductive organs" which "swallows up and gives birth at the same time" (1984, 21). By linking regenerative, ambivalent, and growing body parts to societal regeneration, the loosening of bodily control in the eating contest might ultimately result in societal rejuvenation.

If we consider societal rejuvenation simply the re-instantiation of social order, the impure body would work paradoxically to re-establish the repressive society which limits its expression. However, the impure body and the carnival more broadly can be viewed as more than a short-lived aberration to the dominant social order – more than a release valve for the engine of late capitalism – if we apply David Carroll's notion that the carnival reveals both its own power and larger society's as similarly irrational and constructed (Carroll 1983, 82). Societal rejuvenation, found in all carnivals, is clearly articulated in the grotesque figure of the male gurgitator's bloated "pregnancy."

At first glance, an American eating contest only upholds the first half of Bakhtin's definition of the lower bodily stratum as the "life of the belly and the reproductive organs" which "swallows up and gives birth at the same time" (Bakhtin 1984, 21). Surprisingly, however, the "life of the reproductive organs" is similarly emphasized in competitive eating (p. 21). Over the course of my research, I have found that often after a contest ends, the victor is asked to pull up the front of his shirt. Bloated and bulging, the belly is showcased for the crowd.

Invariably, the sight produces a strong audience reaction – cat-calls, yelling, and astonished applause. A woman watching Kobayashi's display told me, "He looks pregnant! A little guy like that with such a giant belly." This sentiment was repeated elsewhere; another young woman said: "he's got a rotten baby," while a man told me "he almost looks like a pregnant girl." Of the other contests I have attended, all ritualistically display the extended belly of the victor. Additionally, emcees commonly ask the contestants to lift their shirts to the crowd before the contest. The flat and muscular "before-belly" is later contrasted against the swollen distension of the "after-belly."

The Bakhtinian carnival is defined by its ability to "swallow up and give birth

at the same time" and competitive eating combines gorging with growth, eating with pregnancy, consumption with distension, effectively swallowing new life and then, due to the constraints of their sex, miscarrying this "rotten baby" (1984, 21). Gluttony and pregnancy are made more grotesque by the fact that only men have been asked to display their bulging "pregnant" stomachs. Bakhtin explicitly references male pregnancy when he writes that the image of masculine childbirth "is a miniature satirical drama of the word, of its material birth, or the drama of the body giving birth to the word."

Bakhtin cites figurines in the Kerch terracotta collection of "senile pregnant hags" to epitomize "grotesque concept of the body" (1984, 23–24). He writes:

> It is pregnant death, a death that gives birth ... combines a senile, decaying, deformed flesh with the flesh of new life, conceived but as yet unformed. Life is shown in its two-fold contradictory process.

The "rotten babies" of male competitive eaters are much like senile pregnant hags; both combine decay with new life, both are metaphorically conceived but will remain unformed due to constraints of sex and age.[5]

The grotesque tropes, however, realize the carnival's ultimate regenerative purposes. As we have seen, the eating body is an expressive, performative, representative body, yet it is a silent body, a body whose chewing, bursting mouth leaves no room for language. Although the expressions of the performative body speak through embodiment, this body also gives birth to the very vocabulary it eludes. Bakhtin argues that language is birthed by this silent body; explicitly referring to imagery of male pregnancy, Bakhtin writes that the typical symptoms of grotesque life—the "gaping mouth, the protruding eyes, sweat, trembling, suffocation, the swollen face" – are cathected with the meaning of childbirth and, in particular, the birth of the word (1984, 308). In this way, the entire "mechanism of the word is transferred from the apparatus of speech to the abdomen" which acts out a "miniature satyrical drama of the word, of its material birth, or the drama of the body giving birth to the world" (p. 309). Even with their mouths full, these bodies not only talk, but also birth the words which evade their grasp in an extraordinary realism (p. 309).

HIERARCHY AND LANGUAGE

While the body figures principally in Bakhtin's discussion of the carnivalesque, he also cites "comic verbal compositions" to be central to the suspension of hierarchy and, consequently, a carnival's regenerative spirit (1984, p. 15). In the chapter, "Language of the Marketplace," Bakhtin likens the carnival's comic language to that of the "advertising spirit of a barker at a show" which dialectically combines praise and abuse, the elevated and the lowly, and death and life in an active, changing process that resists and reimagines officialdom (p. 160). Full of laughter and irony, this language combines the "exalted and the lowly, the sacred and the profane" until they are "leveled and drawn" together (p. 160).

Drawing from the narratives of the eating contests emcees, we can see the language of competitive eating shares its language of comic, spirited irony with carnivalesque speech. Dressed in three-piece suits, emcees such as Ryan Nerz and George Shea engage the audience before the contest in a non-stop dialogical barrage of nonsensical falsehoods and extravagant exaggerations that situates gurgitators within and against traditional American themes. The tall-tale biographies of contestants, which often position the eater as hero in the drama of their lives, are most emblematic of the emcee's

style. Clear themes of class and hierarchy upheaval thread through these mock biographies which allows for a multiplicity of voices, a dialogism that assimilates the languages of high and popular cultures in order to invigorate them both.

For example, Pete "Pretty Boy" Davekos was introduced at Nathan's Famous in 2008 as a lower-or middle-class young man "who spent his summers chasing well-bred girls whose families summered in Cape Ann." Following ample precedent set by authors like F. Scott Fitzgerald, Davekos transcends class barriers to win the heart of "a fair-haired co-ed" by dint of his eating capabilities. In testament to the generative power of carnivalesque language, Davekos internalized his mythic mock history to the extent that, in an author interview, he linked his compulsive dieting, bingeing, and body-building partly to the pressures to uphold his IFOCE persona. He said, "My nickname is 'Pretty Boy'. You can't be pretty if you're fat. I need to be the best looking guy up there."

Davekos' biography is representative of nearly all competitive eater introductions. Often, the emcee uses both the characters and the form of traditional narratives to introduce eaters to the stage. In an overt comparison, Dale Boone, costumed in overalls and a coonskin cap, rings a wooden liberty bell as he is introduced as Daniel Boone's direct descendant. With mock-scholarly language, Tim "Eater X" is described as an anguished artist, a Heathcliff-like "man of mystery" who disguises both his inner torment and valuable eating secrets beneath his painted mask.

Often, the eater will be situated in a mock-history that parodies not only the eater but also the historical events to which he is compared. This is bellied by bombastic academic language which reveals the very silliness it purports to elevate. Sonya Thomas' biography follows, excerpted from the Major League Eating's website, which I have heard repeated at contests in which she participates:

> There is a century-old prophesy within the competitive eating community, dismissed by most, that foretells the rise of the One Eater, a woman who will electrify America's gurgitators and lead them to international victory once again. Like Joan of Arc before her, this eater will be slender of stature, but mighty in strength.

This "highbrow" language does not simply mock the upper classes but uses its themes to dialectically situate competitive eaters within and against the established traditions of officialdom, to use Bakhtin's word. By creating a dialogue with tradition, emcees are proving the power of dialogic language to affect both the high and popular cultures in which it is deployed.[6]

These class-challenging relationships support what one literary theorist defines as the "basic principle of the carnivalesque" in which "a reversal in fortune is achieved by an individual of low position removed to one that is high" (Danow 1995, 13). Bakhtin names the carnival's main function to present an alternate reality, a second world where the rules of society no longer applied; it was not merely outside the rule of law, but ruleless (Bakhtin 1984, 9). In this second world of the eating contest, we see the suspension of class hierarchy in the juxtapositional mingling of the themes and heroes of high- and popular-culture. By comparing dissimilarities (e.g. Sonya Thomas and Joan of Arc), the language of competitive eating works to suspend hierarchy, allow for multiplicity, and rejuvenate the society in which it was produced.

CLASSICIZING THE GROTESQUE: A STUDY OF THE SLIM EATER

At first glance, competitive eating's celebration of the grotesque, focus on bodily display, and suspension of class hierarchy imply a wholly carnivalesque show of the big-bellied eater. However, contrary to stereotype, the top ten American

gurgitators, ranked by the IFOCE are far from obese. Although official estimates are difficult to attain and rankings change from contest to contest, the top ten eaters range from extraordinarily thin (Sonya Thomas, ranked #4, weighs 105 pounds) to average build.

The stereotype of obese gurgitator persists from an earlier era of competitive eating – the so-called "big man" or "trophy" era which featured large men like Eric "Badlands" Booker or Ed "Cookie" Jarvis who, via the medium of competitive eating, equated size with masculine power.[7] Over the last few decades, however, younger, more athletic eaters have unseated these older, larger eaters. Chestnut, a young, fit eater, voiced his disdain to me in commenting that larger eaters are "lacking discipline and they don't control their diet – they're not real competitive eaters" in contrast to the real gurgitators who are "pretty healthy." Crazy Legs Conti similarly compared older and contemporary eaters as he reflects that he "came out in an era where there wasn't a lot of science, where there wasn't a lot of body knowledge. Today's eaters are much more in tune."

The popular press has similarly noted this trend: in reference to a cannoli-eating contest, reporter Chris Hardesty notes that, unlike most eating contests today, this championship offered no prize money or ESPN broadcast in an effort to "recapture a more innocent era—a time when eaters were mostly rotund fellows who enjoyed a pile of free food, not self-styled athletes with season stats and endorsement contracts" (Hardesty 2010). This trend has not been sudden or dramatic and, contrary to the common idea repeated in even scholarly works that all "American gurgitators are overwhelmingly large, weighing in at or above 300lbs" all of the top ten competitive eaters have been glorified for their average or noticeably fit builds (Halloran 2004, 3).

While the stereotypical body of the overweight and big-bellied competitive eater exhibits all the Bakhtinian traits of the grotesque, the idolized slim competitive eater defies the easy alignment between grotesqueness and public gorging. The slim eater's body exhibits all the symbols of the grotesque yet does so within the archetype of the classical body. The contradiction between the grotesqueries of the open, gorging mouth and the closed, classical body ruptures easy assumptions, and, as interviews with audience members and gurgitators have demonstrated, constitute much of the allure of modern competitive eating. By reframing the grotesque within the classical, the slim eater demonstrates its imperviousness even as it literalizes the glut of American consumerism.

Like all spectacles, the body of the slim eater literalizes a worldview that has always already been established in American culture – that of the ideal citizen who can consume without consequence.[8] The public acknowledgment and adoration of the slim body, alongside its widespread exhibition on stage and in broadcast to millions, demonstrates the full re-conceptualization of the ideal embodiment of an American consumer and citizen. Neither the grotesque nor the classical, the slim eater's body can be considered to constitute a differently embodied ideal – a body that could be termed the American grotesque.

The slim, eating body does not simply literalize a fantasy; it transmutes this fantasy into a performing dreamwork that distorts and condenses its content into a living body. As a breathing embodiment of an ideal, this body directly contrasts to the "ready-made and completed" hierarchy and finds expression only in dynamic "ever unfinished and ever creating body" which stands in for "all-people" (Bakhtin 1984, 9–26). By contextualizing the slim eating body in the rhetoric and activities which produce its myth, the active, living forces that inscribe meaning onto the slim body are brought to light.

Fit eaters often actively participate in the myth-making of their "magic

metabolisms." Sonya Thomas claims she manages a Burger King solely for its employee discount while Juliet Lee said, in an author interview, that "I always knew I was special." A common publicity stunt is the before and after weigh-in: before a contest, the audience will watch eaters weighed on a doctor's scale and, after the contest, the eater will be weighed once more. In Thomas' case, her weight never varies from its set point at 105 pounds – even after eleven pounds of cheesecake in nine minutes.

Sonya Thomas is repeatedly referred to as "petite," "super-skinny," or "bulimic" (Wexler 2008, 4). The visual richness of the contrast between a 105-pound woman who "downs 173 buffalo wings to beat a dozen large men" recurs in almost every article about this "skinny superwoman" who out-eats men four times her weight (Wexler 2008, 5). George Shea, one of the few Major League Eating emcees, regularly introduces Sonya to eating contest crowds by emphasizing her slenderness; for example, "Sonya Thomas, she's so small, it looks as though she could not eat a tin of cottage cheese" (Shea, qtd. in Fagone 2006, 124).

Thomas is now one of a few petite women who belong to the new group of "slim superwomen" who dramatize their slenderness, claim to eat large quantities of high-calorie foods, and have been celebritized on the competitive eating circuit. I cannot overstate the fascination both competitive eating fans and the general public have with Thomas' ability to "eat and eat and never show a thing" (Wexler 2008, 3). Patrick "Deep Dish" Bertoletti even notes that many fans see competitive eating as "some sort of diet, eating like we do and never gaining a pound." One competitive eating fan named has even speculated if Sonya Thomas' "superhuman control over her own stomach" could be capitalized on by pharmaceutical companies to "make a pill to make you skinny" (Fagone 2006, 103). In nearly all of my gurgitator interviews, Thomas' colleagues expressed considerable awe, appreciation, and even resentment of what many condsidered her "natural talent."

Thin eaters like Sonya Thomas and Joey Chestnut directly contradict Bakhtin's grouping of both the "yawning mouth" and the "potbelly" in the material lower bodily strata. In the introduction to *Rabelais and his World,* Bakhtin considers "a fat belly" to be a necessary and direct consequence to "appetite and thirst" (1984, 22). Popular opinion and medical dogma holds that a hearty appetite inevitably leads to a "fat belly," but the bodies of slim gurgitators like Sonya Thomas weaken this argument. These bodies not only do not corporealize the effects of appetite, but, in fact, the slim eater's extraordinary slenderness can be argued to materialize its polarity: the more they eat, the thinner they appear.

As a material contradiction of medical dogma, the slim, eating body also works to symbolically destroy the authority of officialdom; since the Great Depression, American medical views of obesity have simply blamed the obese for consuming too many calories (Levenstein 2003, 10). Harvey Levenstein, American food historian, writes that, since the discovery of vitamins in the 1910s, American diet has been enormously influenced by the restrictive and prohibitive measures of American nutritionists, dieticians, and the medical health establishment. As Halloran has pointed out in her study of extreme eating, "the rebellious disregard of manners, propriety, and moderation involved in the consumption of large amounts of food" allows the public "to project its own guilt about habitual overindulgence in food," or, more broadly, any diet that conflicts with the dominant nutritional tenets outlined by the medical health industry (2004).[9]

Joey Chestnut related to me that, as a competitive eater, he often feels "ashamed" during an eating contest because he is disobeying American diet restrictions. He

said that, during an eating contest, he is "up on stage doing something we're not supposed to do – eating that much food. We've been told and believe that eating that much is really unhealthy, very bad."

However, slim gurgitators like Chestnut do not appear to corporealize any of the effects predicted by the vigilant medical health establishment: no flaccid belly, no rotting teeth, no strained joints. In fact, many eaters pride themselves on their health: Davekos told me that he had just received a sound bill of health from his life insurance company with "perfect blood pressure, perfect cholesterol, perfect everything – I'm in great health." Photos taken of eaters like Davekos outside of the eating contest depict this healthy, muscular classical form; the belly does not protrude, the breasts do not sag, and the posture is erect. Photos of slim eaters show that their forms share more in common with classical sculpture, such as the Venus de Milo, than they do with the artistic emblem of the grotesque: the gargoyle. Juliet Lee, for example, wears tight, flattering clothes and attractive makeup and champion eater Hall Hunt is a muscular and well-groomed young man. However, during the contest, these bodies exhibit all of the characteristics of the grotesque; their open, yawning, spewing mouths contradict the classic form of their bodies. The tight, classical body displays itself in grotesque hyperbole and, as typical to carnival regeneration, destroys an old societal order – in this case, of diet restrictiveness and classical body form – to create a new ideal.

In this instance, the contestant embodies a differently idealized human form: one that exhibits the life-affirming grotesque but within the discipline of the classical. Slim eaters, as representative of the new idealized form, can consume without fearing symbolic repercussions or literal corporealization of fat. American audiences, suffering from the ill effects of both metaphoric and literal consumption themselves, are eager to idolize slim eaters for their "superhuman abilities."

Competitive eating is an exaggeration of the performance of everyday American capitalism much like Bakhtin's medieval festivals exaggerated the everyday medieval European hierarchy. As literary theorist David Danow comments, "The literatures of carnival heaven and carnival hell spring from what is, or had been mundane experience" (1995, 7). Americans have had a long, anxiety-ridden relationship with consumerism that doesn't bear repeating in detail, however, American's anxious relationship to their consumerism stretches back to the country's inception. In one of the first accounts of American life, Alexis de Tocqueville warns new Americans in the early 19th century that democracies are particularly susceptible to materialism, which he calls a "dangerous disease of the human mind," and these anxieties persist throughout American history – from Thorstein Veblen to Naomi Klein (Tocqueville 2004, 631).

Given a history that often applies the economic language to diet and, vice versa, nutritional vocabulary to economic conditions, competitive eating effortlessly appears as a literalization of economic consumption. Hillel Schwartz's cultural history of dieting links an American fear of economic overabundance in form of monetary treasury surplus to the "menace of 'overnutrition' " in the early 1900s.[10] Early 20th-century Americans considered fatness to be "uneconomical" and Schwartz writes, "The crusade against fatness arose from . . . fashions in [economic] consumption" (1986, 88). Economic rhetoric is rife in diet literature: calorie budgets, bargains, and splurges are popular ways to think of weight loss plans and even the official US Department of Agriculture site advises Americans to "Think of the calories you need for energy like money you have to spend" (MyPyramid). Similarly, we find themes of economic efficiency in the language of competitive eating; Crazy Legs Conti reflects on his experiences as a professional gurgitator by saying, "It's about

turning your body into a human processing machine." The act of consuming food in an eating contest literalizes and hyperbolizes everyday American consumerist behavior.

By charting competitive eating's popularity via media coverage over the last hundred years, I have found evidence that may suggest a pattern: the greatest spikes in eating contest popularity occur in periods of heightened consumerist behavior and economic prosperity. If correct, the correlation between competitive eating popularity and economic prosperity would support my argument that the myth of the slim eater drives competitive eating. Drawing from this correlation, we see that during periods of economic prosperity, when American people are most apprehensive about abundance, the slim eater speaks most strongly in the language of consumerism.

During the economic boom of the Roaring Twenties, eating contest popularity was more than double that of the period of wartime economic control. From 1923–1927, 145 references to eating contests appear in major newspapers; from 1941–1947, only 87 contests are chronicled. Likewise, eating contest popularity during the prosperous 1980s is almost triple the popularity of eating contests after the dotcom bubble burst in 2000. While patterns in popularity are difficult to find and even harder to interpret, a correlation between economic prosperity and competitive eating popularity is in keeping with Hillel Schwartz's theory that "thin people are capitalism's ideal consumers" (1986, 329).

Schwartz writes that "thin people are capitalism's ideal consumers for they can devour without seeming gluttonous; they have morality on their side;" likewise, slim competitive eaters appear to be morally good and classically formed yet they, like all good American consumers, can "eat much, eat often, eat sweetly," and yet "remain slender" (1986, 329–330).

From Veblen to de Tocqueville, Americans have had a long and anxious relationship with consumerism. Rising levels of debt, growing health concerns about nutrition, the threat of impending ecological collapse, and the rising popularity of anti-consumerist movements all point to an American anxiety about the nature of our country and its consumerist habits. Alongside the body of the slim gurgitator, the narratives which extol the consumerist habits of the ultra-wealthy articulate the conditions that necessitate their production; the debt, clutter, anxiety, and dependence which besiege American consumers.

Reading the myth of the slim competitive eater as a national fairy tale, we see the American desire to consume without consequence, eat food without becoming fat. Slim competitive eaters flawlessly represent the collective consumerist fantasy of consuming and consuming without fear of repercussion. Individuals like Sonya Thomas and Joey Chestnut are, in Hillel Schwartz's words, the "ideal consumers" of Late Capitalism; they are "never satisfied" and may follow "society's urgings to eat much, eat often, eat sweetly, and be slender" (1986, 329–331).

FINAL THOUGHTS ON AN UNFINISHED TOPIC

Over the course of my research, I have held certain standards of respect for both the competitive eaters and the eating contest audience – I believe they are essentially intelligent, thoughtful, and sincere people participating in a sport that speaks to them and the world in which they live. For this reason, I do not believe the eaters when they say they eat competitively because it's entertaining, because it's cool, because it's a shot at fifteen minutes of fame or five minutes of fun.

I cannot believe these statements because I cannot believe these people – these thoughtful and intelligent people – could sincerely dedicate their lives to eating pounds of apple pie or gallons of

macaroni without it meaning something to them and the thousands who watch them eat. And, as my research indicates, competitive eating does articulate deep-seated ideas about identity, consumerism, and the role of the American body.

While competitive eating appears to affirm all the principles of the carnivalesque, it also adapts to communicate specific meaning about American culture. The forms of the body exhibited and extolled in the American eating contest are markedly different from the traditional bodily forms of the Bakhtinian grotesque: the slender body exhibits traits of the grotesque – the open, wet, gorging mouth – but does so in the form of the closed classical thin body. This paradoxical body performs a national fairy tale, articulating both our fantasy to consume without consequence and the underlying anxieties which necessitate the production of such fantasy. Neither the grotesque nor the classical, the slim eater's body constitutes a differently idealized American body that articulates common fantasies and pervasive anxieties.

NOTES

1. In contrast to the patriotic and assimilatory goals of 18th- and 19th-century eating contests, modern eating contests often differentiate Americans by their regional and ethnic backgrounds. Tiramisu, jalepeños, and kloches contests are now found in ethnic food festivals for Italian-Americans, Mexican-Americans, and Czech-Americans, respectively. For example, Sheboygan, Wisconsin's annual Brat-Eating Contest is rife with German pride. Dressed in lederhosen and dirndle, men and women are encouraged to speak with German accents and a quotation from their website demonstrates this: "Dis heres Fritz an on behaf a da Sheboygan Jaycees me an my lovely lil mustard cup Helga." Additionally, one of the greatest upsets in competitive eating's history was when gentile Hungry Charles Hardy overthrew Don "Moses" Lerman, the longtime Jewish matzoh ball champion, in New York City in 2001.
2. Themes of assimilation and patriotism thread through to contemporary competitive eating, as well. As Sonya Thomas, the Korean-born 105-pound world champion in cheesecake and chicken nuggets, eloquently put it, "and beneath what you may see on the surface, know this: My Yankee Doodle Dandy heart proudly pumps red, white, and blue blood to the beat of "God Bless America."
3. A visual analysis of Japanese and Korean eating contests reveals that bodily emphases are culturally specific. I have found that Asian eating contests place less emphasis on the mouth than American contests and more on the hands; the hands often serve as a covering for the mouth. See a super-sized Japanese gyoza contest, found at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hMGpFUHuym4
4. It is interesting to compare similarities in vocabulary between the Bakhtinian language of the grotesque and the language competitive eaters themselves use to describe their participation: while Bakhtin considers the open mouth the "gate leading downward into the bodily underworld," Pete "Pretty Boy" Davekos describes his hunger and eating habits by saying, "If I open the floodgate, it's like a crack in the dam, open the floodgate, open my mouth. If I allow myself to have one slice of pizza, I'm going to have probably two large pizzas."
5. In popular culture, the image of the pregnant man recurs as a grotesque trope; in April 2008, Thomas Beattie, a woman who lived and looked like a man, made national headlines when "he" became pregnant and agreed to be photographed shirtless, depicting a graphic image that contrasted his 5 o'clock shadow and pregnant stomach. Beattie appeared on the Oprah television show, was featured in the popular press such as *People Magazine* and quickly rose to celebrity in the United States. Further, movies such as *Junior*, starring a pregnant, gruffly effeminate Arnold Schwarzenegger and an episode of Star Trek featuring an interspecies male pregnancy all elaborate on the grotesque theme.
6. Joey Chestnut, the world's #1 champion eater, explicitly insisted upon the class-less nature of competitive eating when he said, "There's a lot of people here who are just working class people. I think that's what's cool to people about competitive eaters. If they look at me they see that I'm just a normal guy. I'm as normal as they come, I'm as normal as everyone else" (Author interview, April 24, 2008).
7. In Booker's case, his career as a rap artist, rapping mainly about the largeness of his body and the strength of his eating skills, makes this movement clear. As Fagone notes, Booker follows in the tradition of large, often African-American, rappers like Biggie Smalls or The Fat Boys, as he recontextualized his fatness as power to "make people see it in a different way" (Fagone 2006, 131). The other very prominent overweight eater, Ed "Cookie" Jarvis, has similarly used his fatness to explore ideas of discipline and power: his

website features Jarvis' dramatic weight loss via two photos contrasting a younger, muscular Jarvis and a photo depicting his overweight body today. In tight spandex shorts and a tank top, Jarvis proudly demonstrated the girth of his large biceps in the first photo and the second, contemporary photo is accompanied by the text declaring that "It's time for me to show some self discipline by eating better" (Janvis 2007). To date, Jarvis has dropped 170 lbs from his originally 525 lbs body in an effort to regain his bodybuilder's physique. His slimmer, post-weight loss self, at 354 lbs, is consequently re-read as a triumph of discipline over fat and not viewed simply as an overweight body.

8. While competitive eating presents the strongest example of this American fantasy, I have found many instances in which fashion models are treated similarly. For example, when supermodel and Victoria's Secret "Angel" Adriana Lima was quizzed on her diet and exercise habits in an interview, the reporter was astonished when Lima "confessed" that she eats "anything [she] wants to" such as "meat, chocolate, cakes." Similarly, FoodNetwork star Paula Deen, in her preface to *Lady & Sons Just Desserts* cookbook retells the story of the very slender "cute little" woman who, after eating 24 pieces of chicken, ate both her peach cobbler and her husband's pound cake. Deen writes, "if only I could eat that way and look that good!" (Deen 2002, xi).
9. The origins of these strict, often confusing, nutritional guidelines are more often rooted in social and political ideas than they are physiological. Journalist Frederick Kauffman has argued that, in the American climate of irreligiousness, strict diet restrictions have come to stand in for religious practices. Similarly, feminist historian Rosalyn Meadow has argued that, for American women, modern food conflicts such as dieting "have taken over the sexual conflicts of yesteryear" (Meadow 1992, 4).
10. The treasury surplus of the 1880s led many Americans to cite "overproduction" and overabundance as the cause for the economic sluggishness of the late 19th century. In 1877, American economist David Wells credited American economic stagnancy to, "not because we have not, but because we have; not from scarcity, but from abundance" (Wells, qtd. in Schwartz 2008, 84).

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