



Envisioning the  
American Dream by  
Sally E. Delstein,  
April 5 2020.

# MAINTAINING MEAT: CULTURAL REPERTOIRES & THE MEAT PARADOX IN A DIVERSE SOCIOCULTURAL CONTEXT

Oleschuk, Merin, Josee Johnston, and Shyon Baumann. 2019. "Maintaining Meat: Cultural Repertoires and the Meat Paradox in a Diverse Sociocultural Context." *Sociological Forum* 34(2): 337-360. <https://doi.org/10.1111/socf.12500>

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# Introduction

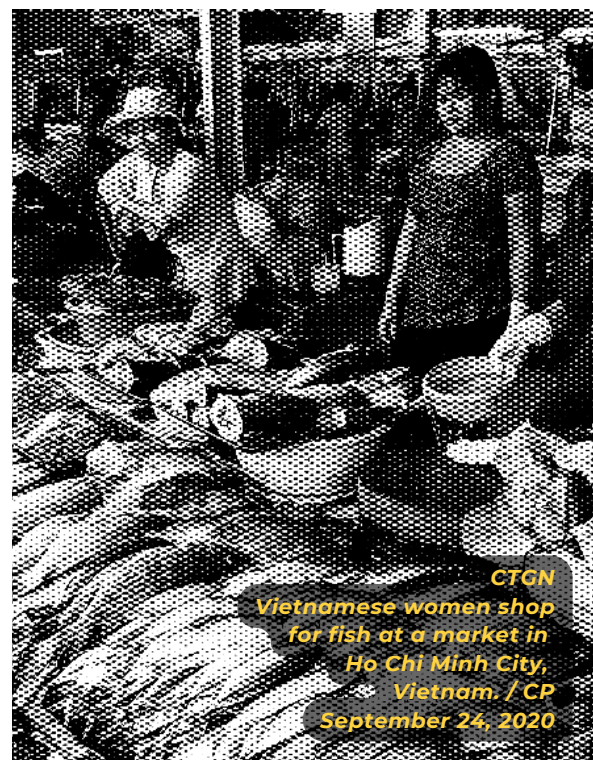
In Europe and North America there exists a “meat paradox”—there is increased awareness of the environmental, animal-welfare, and health concerns related to eating meat, yet meat consumption remains high. The authors argue that beyond the important existing psychology-based explanations, we can expand our understanding of meat consumption, and the meat paradox, by also considering the social and cultural environment in which meat-eating occurs, particularly the meanings we attribute to meat consumption.

The authors conduct an analysis of semi-structured interviews collected by undergraduate students as part of the University of Toronto-Mississauga’s Sociology of Culture senior seminar. The interviews contain an ethno-racially and socioeconomically diverse urban sample of 77 meat eaters and vegetarians in the Peel Region, within the Greater Toronto Area.

The authors focus on the explanations people give to justify eating meat. They analyse these justifications in the context of “cultural repertoires”: taken-for-granted scripts (e.g., understandings, values, habits, routines, ideas) that inform our thoughts and actions.

They identified two broad repertoires in the interviews:

1. identity repertoires, which have a basis in personal group identities and first-person experiences; and
2. liberty repertoires, which reflect an abstract sense of rights in the social world.





# Research Questions & Findings



To what extent does this diverse group of consumers express concerns about eating meat?

Vegetarian and meat-eating respondents expressed a variety of reasons for not eating meat. Their main concerns were:

1. negative perceptions of meat production (e.g., inhumane treatment of animals and undesirable environmental outcomes),
2. the health impacts of meat consumption (e.g., perceptions of association with “fat”), and
3. negative perceptions of meat eaters (e.g., excessive masculinity, lower intelligence, “unrefined” culture)

How do consumers make sense of eating meat in a diverse ethno-racial and socioeconomic context where meat is a contested food?



*Australian Centre for  
International Agricultural  
Research by Conor Ashleigh,  
July 6 2018.*

# 1

## **Identity Repertoire #1: Embodied Masculinity**

This repertoire positively linked eating meat to an embodied form of masculinity emphasizing power, athleticism, and muscles. This “meat-eating body” was positioned in contrast to a thinner, feminine body that favors plant-based foods. These gender scripts helped respondents rationalise meat eating as “necessary”, “normal”, and “natural”, particularly for men. However, interviewees evoking these gendered stereotypes and connections between meat and masculinity sometimes also reflexivity criticized them.

# 2

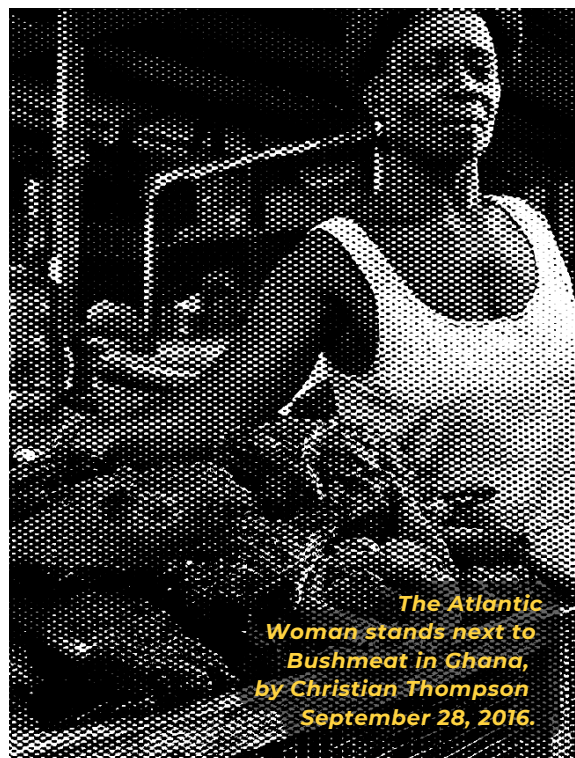
## **Identity Repertoire #2: Cultural Preservation**

Meat was often identified as a staple in dishes that connected people to their ethnocultural identity. In this way, meat acts as a “cultural vessel” that contains rituals, traditions, and bonds between individuals, families, and communities. Food-focused interactions were pleasurable and reinforced shared group identity and senses of belonging. This repertoire was employed by a wide range of the sample, but particularly among those with Muslim faith or roots in South and East Asian, African, and Caribbean countries. There were some conflicted feelings for vegetarians from these backgrounds regarding their decision to avoid eating meat in the broader context of its importance in their cultural or religious traditions.

## 3

### Liberty Repertoire #1: Consumer Apathy

In the “consumer apathy” repertoire, interviewees’ decisions about meat consumption are framed as apolitical and unthinking. Meat eating within a capitalist market was seen as inevitable, which allowed meat-eating respondents to frame their individual consumer choices as insignificant (and therefore justified) amidst the inevitability of widespread meat consumption. Rather than confronting difficult ideas surrounding meat consumption, this script allows the respondent to focus uncritically on their own individual needs and desires, often by cognitively disengaging from these issues and avoiding thinking about them.



## 4

### Liberty Repertoire #2: Consumer Sovereignty

This repertoire emphasizes the respondent’s abstract “right” to make their own consumption choices, regardless of what the choice is. This script was even employed by some of the vegetarian interviewees, who defended the right of meat eaters to choose eating meat. Conversely, availability of plant-based food options was also seen by some meat-eaters as a positive development because it offered consumers more choices.

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