

# **Biting Reality: Extreme Eating and the Fascination with the Gustatory Object**

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Extreme eating is fast becoming the newest televised spectator sport. Competitive eating events cater to large audiences eager to watch people perform a simple act with which they themselves are intimately familiar—the ingestion of food—under highly unusual circumstances like time constraints. These events have made the rounds of “reality” programming both in cable television outlets like the *Food Network* and *The Travel Channel*, which have recently broadcast shows dedicated to competitive eating events, as well as in network television through prime-time hits like NBC’s game show *Fear Factor* and occasional specials, such as FOX’s *The Glutton Bowl*. Even on-line chat rooms, e-journals, and newspapers have begun reporting of late on the efforts of the International Federation of Competitive Eating (IFOCE) to raise awareness of the various events they sponsor as well as their quest to legitimize this practice and earn the respect associated with other organized sports.

Our health-conscious society has deemed high-fat, high-calorie foods to be taboo or forbidden; they are precariously perched atop the government-sanctioned USDA food pyramid. The constant barrage of contradictory information and research reported on the topics of nutrition, weight-loss, and proper dietary habits has prompted popular culture to embrace the spectacle of extreme eating as a form of entertainment. The rebellious disregard of manners, propriety, and moderation involved in the consumption of large amounts of food speaks to the social anxiety

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and guilt regarding what we actually eat versus the diets we think we should be following. Extreme eating events or competitions may be considered signs of rebellion against the abundance of food in the industrialized world. The writing about and reporting of them, though, render eating competitions, stunts involving food, and even eating disorders into spectacles available for our amusement. The appeal of these accounts may be ultimately more cathartic than entertaining, in that they allow the reading public to project its own guilt about habitual overindulgence in food into its enthusiasm for one-time or occasional public displays of total excess. As long as the general public is confused and concerned about its weight and eating practices, it seems, eating events will continue to amuse and entertain the masses.

The fascination that public acts of extreme feats of ingestion—be they by degree, kind, or quantity—have for those who watch them can be understood by applying Julia Kristeva's notion of the abject to a reading of their textual representations. The three types of extreme eating I discuss in this context are: professional eating contests, the eating stunts performed within the larger context of a game show atmosphere, and the eating disorder memoir genre, specifically Marya Hornbacher's *Wasted* and Camryn Manheim's *Wake Up, I'm Fat!* Both of these texts chronicle the private eating practices of individuals afflicted with bulimia, anorexia, and overeating. Manheim's text also discusses the subculture of erotic weight gain, which flourishes in the personals section of fat-acceptance magazines. While the progression of extreme eating instances I have outlined here goes from advertising gimmicks to public entertainment to private enjoyment and torture, my analysis concentrates on how mass media print outlets, such as books, newspapers, and magazines, recast these events through narration in order to increase their popularity and reach the largest possible audience. Although the appeal and entertainment value of these different extreme approaches to eating vary widely, they all speak to our lowest common denominator—hunger—and elicit primal emotional responses like revulsion and nausea to provide a cathartic release from everyday pressures and anxieties.

Public displays of digestive prowess capture the public's imagination by promising suspense, excitement, and the thrilling possibility of watching somebody else throw up. We can read the sudden popularity of these shows on television and the overabundance of food items available for consumption in any one of these competitions as elements of a postmodern spectacle as defined by Slavoj Žižek in "The Obscene Object of Postmodernity." Žižek contrasts the modernist ethos of a text like Antonioni's *Blow Up*, which depicts the simulacrum of a tennis game played with an imaginary ball, to the postmodern emphasis on the presence of the object made arbitrary or banal by its own representation. He argues that in a postmodern context "[t]he same object can function successively as a disgusting reject and as a sublime, charismatic apparition: the difference, strictly structural, does not pertain to the 'effective properties' of the object, but only to its place in the symbolic order" (41). In the textual accounts of eating competitions, eating stunts, and eating disorders or fetishes under consideration in this study, the featured food items' place within the symbolic order of hunger, desire, and national cuisine changes

due to the artificial constraints of time pressures, prize money, and warped self-perception. The end result is a shift away from the synesthetic textual references to the taste, texture, and appearance of the featured food item, which is typical of food writing, to the fast, play-by-play tempo more characteristic of sports writing.

To understand the new role that food plays within this textual dynamic, I will now turn to a discussion of the reader as spectator, affected by and reacting to the action he/she reads about. In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva suggests that people may simultaneously experience *jouissance* and revulsion from both recognizing the source of their fear and disgust and facing the inevitable outcome of disgusting situations. She describes what she calls “food loathing” as “perhaps the most elementary and most archaic form of abjection” (2). According to Kristeva, people may experience food loathing merely by seeing a detested food item or even just watching someone consume or ingest a particular type of food. She discusses the physical manifestations of food loathing as abjection, the “sight-clouding dizziness, *nausea*” (3), and celebrates the “spasms and vomiting that protect me” and the “repugnance, the retching that thrusts me to the side and turns me away from defilement, sewage, and muck” (2). While pointing to the biological function of self-preservation inherent in the gag reflex, which acts as a kind of detection mechanism to discourage the consumption of possibly poisonous or harmful substances, Kristeva’s diction suggests that the physical experience of the abject can be enjoyed as the kind of sensual pleasure or *jouissance* that comes from feeling taken care of, safe. Thus, since the audience does not physically experience the revulsion inherent in nausea, but recognizes the gagging of the competitors and bulimics as familiar, they can more easily enjoy the suspense created by the possibility that these same people’s excesses will result in vomiting, which constitutes a further level of the abject by manifesting the sensation of discomfort outward through the involuntary display of unappetizing, half-digested, malodorous waste matter that used to be plain food.

Despite the traditional Christian injunction against excessive eating or gluttony, considered one of the seven deadly sins, public exhibitions and accounts of extreme eating have become morally acceptable vehicles through which the watching/reading public can collectively experience what I call the gustatory abject, a term adapting Kristeva’s notion of the abject to the Zizekian postmodern elements of these spectacles of extreme eating. The gustatory abject works by decoupling the act of eating from its most basic *raison d’être*: hunger. Extreme eating events have no relation to appetite or the need for nourishment; they are merely designed to demonstrate a competitor’s stomach capacity, willpower, and determination. A second way in which the gustatory abject operates is by downplaying the idea of a food’s inherent appeal through flavor or taste. Professional and amateur competitors at eating/stunt events eat food items regardless, and sometimes in spite of, their individual taste, flavor, appearance, or aroma. A third characteristic of the gustatory abject is the overwhelming repetition of the same. Eating contests and/or stunts depend for their entertainment or shock value on the very idea of quantity as an objective standard through which to evaluate an individual’s performance. Winners are determined according to how many of the same type of comestible

they consume within a given time limit.<sup>1</sup>

My analysis of the recent proliferation of extreme eating events in popular culture investigates the narrative mechanisms through which this simultaneous experience of sensual revulsion and pleasure, or *jouissance*, are magnified by being re-told and/or reported. In what follows, I read these events as postmodern social spectacles, contemporary tests of bravery, or private, sadomasochistic rituals of excessive consumption and regurgitation and analyze the reader's experience of the gustatory abject.

## Eating Contests

Professional eating contests like the long-running Nathan's Famous Fourth of July International Hot Dog Eating Contest are all organized along the same basic principles.<sup>2</sup> They feature a single type of food item and an agreed-upon amount of time in which contestants must ingest as much of the food as possible. Vomiting results in the immediate disqualification of the contestant. Once time has expired, the outcome of the competition is determined either by the official count of items consumed by the various competitors or by weighing the amount of food left per competitor in their respective official containers. Results are then announced to the assembled crowd or viewing audience, and a winner is crowned. The governing body of this emerging sport, the International Federation of Competitive Eating (IFOCE), keeps track of and publicizes world records in various categories besides hot dogs, including figures for sticks of butter, pickles, and cow's brains (see *IFOCE*). A recent issue of *Parade* featured not merely the records for the individual food items but also miniature photos of competitive eaters, or "gurgitators" (their preferred term), at work along with their respective eating specialties (Clavin 11). One further sign of the growing mainstream acceptance of these feats of excess is that winners of high-profile contests like Nathan's regularly rate a mention on the evening news as well as have their pictures and achievement reported on local and national newspapers.

The success of the IFOCE's campaign to legitimate competitive eating's claim to sport status depends on the establishment of recognizable rivalries between its own athletes and those of a formidable Other power, different enough from "us" to cause uneasiness yet with a shared commitment to excellence. Competitive eating associations or leagues throughout the world share some structural similarities, like membership based on performance at qualifying events, certification procedures, participation of sponsoring restaurants, and an agreed-upon set of criteria that must be observed in competition. However, prize money, commercial endorsements, and other compensation for gurgitators vary from country to country. In the United States, for example, purses are comparatively small; although they hold the promise of monetary reward, competitions and/or stunts are fundamentally egalitarian because they appeal to Everyman rather than to the elite or initiated few. In contrast, gurgitators in Japan can actually afford to make a living from their sport. Maria Puente reports that "[p]rizes [for eating contests] can be as high as \$50,000 in Japan; in the USA, they are \$5—to \$25,000." This monetary inequity, along with

the recent dominance of Japanese competitive eaters like Takeru Kobayashi, a three-time Nathan's winner, at prestige competitions in the United States, has fostered a sense of antagonism and resentment in the American professional eating community.<sup>3</sup>

The journalistic rhetoric surrounding the Japanese-American rivalry borders on xenophobia. Reporting on the outcome of Nathan's contest last year, John O'Connor quotes the official IFOCE website's partisan interpretation of Kobayashi's victory as follows: "The overwhelming emotion at the arena was sadness, as the Japanese once again took possession of the Mustard Yellow International Belt" ("In a Bit of a Pickle"). The tone of the statement recalls the fear of a perceived Japanese takeover of the American real estate market during the 1980s.

Cultural differences beyond mere contest results also help differentiate the Japanese and American factions of gurgitators. While the televised broadcast of eating competitions in the United States is a relatively recent phenomenon, Japanese television audiences are used to watching food-related competitions, such as the culinary showdown *Iron Chef*, on a daily basis.<sup>4</sup> American and Japanese cultures also have contrasting aesthetics for both food and bodies. Japanese competitors tend to have a slight build, while American gurgitators are overwhelmingly large, weighing in at or above 300 lbs. This variance in competitor physique has its roots in the training regimes favored by the gurgitators to prepare for competition: Americans train their stomachs to extend by conducting what amounts to "practice runs" by frequenting "all you can eat" restaurants and consuming large amounts of a given food item at a time. Kobayashi and other Japanese gurgitators prefer to train by ingesting foods that are high in bulk or fiber but low in fat, like cabbage. Patrick Hruby reports that American gurgitator Eric "Badlands" Booker modified his training regimen after watching Kobayashi in action. He quotes Booker about his preparation: "I eat a lot of cabbage. It expands your stomach, and it's healthier than going to a buffet." Hruby adds that Booker "learned the cabbage trick from hot dog record holder Takeru 'The Tsunami' Kobayashi." The perceived rivalry between American and Japanese competitive eaters, especially in the tense global climate of renewed patriotism after September 11th, could do more to popularize competitive eating in the U.S. than any other promotional tool so far employed by the IFOCE.

From all accounts, competitive eating enjoys support from a growing fan-base in both the U.S. and Japan. A news release on July 5th, 2003 reported that a crowd of "more than 3000 fans" was in attendance to witness Kobayashi's victory at Nathan's ("Coney Island Hot Dog Champion"). A picture of the victorious gurgitator, sporting a sweatband, accompanied the piece. O'Connor reported a much larger attendance figure for the same event: "This summer's hotdog eating contest at Nathan's Famous Restaurant in Coney Island was the biggest speed-eating event in memory, with an estimated 10,000 people in attendance and media coverage from around the world" ("In a Bit of a Pickle"). The magnitude of this event stands in stark contrast to what he observed the previous year, when only 200 people turned out for the First Annual Burrito Snackdown! In Lower Manhattan ("Is That a Burrito"). Eating competitions have increased in popularity in the past twelve

months, due perhaps in part to enthusiastic reporting by writers like O'Connor, who clearly relish the task of conveying a sense of the showmanship and spectacle involved in these events.

Advertising executives are banking that the television audiences for eating competitions, such as FOX's *The Glutton Bowl*, The Travel Channel's *Battle of Vegas Buffets*, and The Discovery Channel's *GutBusters*, are larger still than the crowds of people willing to attend a live event. Reporting on the recent proliferation of new and unusual professional sports, among them competitive eating, Andrew Ralaf claims that "[e]ntrepreneurs are capitalizing on the current boom in cable and satellite channels to create new leagues." Ralaf's article profiles the Shea Brothers, founders of the IFOCE, as a successful case study: "The Sheas sign up a primary sponsor, such as New Orleans' Acme Oysters, and scour the countryside for other local sponsors, which pony up \$1,500 to \$50,000 to get their name in the paper." The success of this small-scale business plan suggests that the national market may soon be ready for a national professional competitive eating circuit. Indeed, Tom Clavin reports that "35 eating events were staged in 2002, but 75 are set to take place this year" (11). The recent spate of articles about competitive eating published since Kobayashi's third win at Nathan's on July 4, 2003 suggests that reporters are trying to reconnect with their readers, already bored by the year's much-ballyhooed international culinary crisis, in which members of the U.S. Congress officially voted to change the name of a popular side dish served at the workplace cafeteria from "french fries" to "freedom fries" to convey their displeasure with France's official disapproval of the war in Iraq.

Despite the growing number of spectators interested in witnessing acts of extreme eating, the sheer entertainment value of the competitions themselves is hard to comprehend. One aspect of the gustatory abject that spectators at these eating competitions experience is the thrill of knowing that at any moment contestants might push themselves too far and vomit away their chance of winning. This uncertainty surrounding the intestinal fortitude of the various contestants increases both the imagined transgression involved in eating large amounts of food as well as the perceived value of the accomplishment of those competitors who maintain full control over their bodies during the event. Reporting on the outcome of Nathan's hotdog eating competition, Hruby interviewed a "former Nathan's contestant," 'Kid' Cary DeGrosa, who admitted to coming close to regurgitating during competition. DeGrosa tells Hruby that experience has led him to conclude that, "[j]ust like people go to a boxing match to see a guy get knocked out, some people do come out to see the hurling." Whereas spectators may enjoy watching people struggle to keep large amounts of food in their stomachs, gurgitators fear vomiting because it is immediate grounds for disqualification from an event.

Puente acknowledges the lure of the abject spectacle from a more detached perspective when she describes competitive eating as "America's wackiest (or most repulsive, depending on your point of view) 'athletic' entertainment" and reports that "[a]cross the country, people are watching highly organized contests to see who can down the most food in the least amount of time and not fall victim to, ahem, food 'reversal.'" While Puente correctly identifies one segment of the popu-

lation who avidly follow the outcomes of professional food eating contests, she also simultaneously caters to a secondary audience who may not enjoy watching people stuff themselves with food but who do not mind reading articles like hers that cover these events and report the outcomes. The fact that newspapers make their articles available on-line considerably expands the potential pool of readers who are amused or entertained by a single contest. The permutations of available *jouissance* are therefore triple: contestants may experience the pleasure of (over)eating, observers may enjoy the visual pleasure of watching someone defy the limits of their bodies, and voyeurs may obtain pleasure from reading about people eating large amounts of a single food item in public competitions.

While Puente's and Hruby's light-hearted pieces on the topic of competitive eating use humor to appeal to readers who may otherwise be put off by the sheer excess involved in the very events about which they are reading, no one has captured the drama and level of intense audience participation in this would-be sport better than O'Connor. He narrates the growing frustration and excitement of the assembled crowd at the Burrito Snackdown! through his effective use of run-on sentences:

The crowd, seemingly unconcerned for the eater's safety, urged them on with a sustained chorus of "Eat! Eat! Eat!" The gurgitators complied, cramming burritos into their mouths at an astonishing rate, their faces caked in black beans and sour cream. Bodies betrayed the physical toll involved: chests heaving, shoulders arching and eyes watering. I had asked Badlands if he had ever seen anyone vomit at a contest and he said no. Professional eaters consider themselves serious athletes, and loss of gurgitational control is a cardinal sin. At certain moments during the Snackdown! However, a few of the competitors appeared on the verge. ("Is That a Burrito")

He builds suspense by shifting his narrative focus from a third-person observation of the crowd's behavior to an intrusive first-person inquiry and then forward yet again to a third-person emphasis on the competitors themselves. Unlike Puente, who describes competitive eating as an emerging trend or passing fad, O'Connor recreates for his readers the experience of watching gurgitators at work. He contributes to their experience of the gustatory abject by describing the competitors' obvious physical discomfort while also mentioning the visual spectacle presented by their filthy, food-smearing faces. Finally, he teases his readers by hinting at the possibility that at least one gurgitator might vomit; when none actually do, O'Connor sounds disappointed. More than relaying information, O'Connor's article delivers the vicarious thrill of feeling grossed out without actually having to witness anyone demean himself.<sup>5</sup> By reading this article, even squeamish people can enjoy the gustatory abject produced by the play-by-play description of risk takers who brave public vomiting in search of glory.

Although the Shea brothers and their IFOCE may profit from organizing and publicizing these extreme eating competitions, greed is not the main motivation driving professional gurgitators to break records and beat their rivals. Since the typical money prize for an American eating competition is small, the reward that

gurgitators derive from competition must be related to the prestige and respect from their peers that come along with earning the individual event “belt” and perhaps improving their IFOCE ranking. Restaurant and product sponsors also stand to benefit from the publicity generated by news reports of these events as well as from the sale of souvenir merchandise, like logo-bearing T-shirts and caps or even on-site food purchases. Finally, fans of extreme eating can usually watch and, later, read about the outcomes, rivalries, and competitions without having to pay admission or even purchase a magazine or newspaper.<sup>6</sup>

## Eating Stunts

Greed is the only explicit motivation driving contestants on NBC’s prime-time extreme game show *Fear Factor*. In each episode, participants have to compete in various physical stunts, among them the ingestion of a repulsive substance, organism, or animal body part, as part of the winnowing process to arrive at a single winner of the \$50,000 prize money. Unlike the gurgitators I described in the previous section, contestants in *Fear Factor* are not professionals. Few, if any, would describe themselves as “extreme eaters” outside the context of the television show.

The eating stunts featured in *Fear Factor* have some elements in common with more mainstream eating competitions. The first of these is a time limit. *Fear Factor* contestants must finish consuming a predetermined amount of a vile item before the time runs out. The second element is the automatic disqualification by vomit. Like gurgitators, *Fear Factor* contestants must keep down the food they ingest for them to successfully complete the stunt and move on to the final round of competition. The third similarity between the two kinds of extreme eating events is the complete dissociation between the act of eating and the feeling of hunger. Neither the gastronomic stunts in *Fear Factor* nor eating competitions require that their participants either feel hungry or even like the selected food item.

*Fear Factor* eating stunts also differ markedly from other types of competitive eating situations. For one thing, the items featured on the program and presented for the contestants’ consumption are not considered a normal part of the American diet. Instead, the show regularly presents exotic dishes from foreign cuisines, which more often than not tend to be Asian, alongside living insects or animal reproductive organs. Past episodes of *Fear Factor* have required contestants to eat worms and coagulated cow’s blood or to eat from five to ten reindeer testicles and wash them down with 1,000 year-old eggnog. The “gross-out” factor of each of these stunts depends for its success on evoking the experience of the uncanny in the contestants as well as in the viewers and web log readers. Freud’s concept of the uncanny results from the recognition of something familiar in a completely denatured context; the effect of this recognition is similar to the disconnect assigned to the postmodern object outside of the symbolic order. Thus, the presentation of the worms and coagulated cow’s blood resembled spaghetti and meatballs, while the eggnog recipe recalled the Christmas treat in name only. The abject in each of these instances results as much from the offerings themselves—insects and viscera—as from the visual (for competitors and viewing audiences) and gus-



tatory (for competitors and host) contrast between what the dish actually *is* and what it is supposed to *be* like.

The contestants featured in the Christmas show found the idea of consuming the testicles of Santa's reindeer repulsive because of its (homo)sexual connotations and suggestion of bestiality. Whereas a disproportionately high percentage of competitive eaters are male, *Fear Factor* typically includes an equal number of male and female participants. Thus, the act of consuming reindeer testicles had different gendered connotations for the participants. Competitors of both genders "read" the performance of female contestants as proof of either sexual wantonness, frigidity, or antipathy towards men, whereas the performance of male competitors was interpreted simultaneously as evidence of male prowess (or lack thereof) and masculine and/or heterosexual virility. The contestants themselves expressed ambivalence regarding the meaning of their performance in the brief question-and-answer period following the successful completion of the stunt or, alternatively, during the introspective voice-over narration segment played as the losing contestants walk away from the set in slow-motion. This commentary aspect of the show crosses boundaries by publicly airing the private thoughts of the contestants, allowing the viewing audience an intimate glimpse into their motivations and regrets ("Episode 311").<sup>7</sup> By conflating the gustatory and sexual experience of the abject and linking it to speech, this particular episode recalls Michel Foucault's discussion of the interrelationship between speech, sex, Christianity, and confession:

From the Christian penance to the present day, sex was a privileged theme of confession. A thing that was hidden, we are told. But what if, on the contrary, it was what, in a quite particular way, one confessed? Suppose the obligation to conceal it was but another aspect of the duty to admit to it . . . ? What if sex in our society, on a scale of several centuries, was something that was placed within an unrelenting system of confession? The transformation of sex into discourse . . . the dissemination and reinforcement of heterogeneous sexualities, are perhaps two elements of the same deployment: they are linked together with the help of the central element of a confession that compels individuals to articulate their sexual peculiarity—no matter how extreme. (61)

Thus, in its conflation of discourse, action, and visual spectacle, the Christmas episode creates three simultaneous levels of discourse: it narrates the process of repression of the abject that the successful competitors undergo, dramatizes the losers' failure to achieve the same level of repression, and also disseminates disturbing imagery that viewers will have to repress to overcome the negative *jouissance* of the gustatory abject.

By focusing on one contestant's performance at a time, instead of the simultaneous participation characteristic of eating competitions, *Fear Factor* allows its viewers to experience multiple levels of disgust: first, by just seeing the items offered to the contestants as a meal; second, by watching each contestant consume the vile item in turn; third, by watching contestants gag, throw up, or fail to finish the stunt; and fourth, by hearing the remaining contestants try to "psych

out” their competitors by remarking upon the unappetizing smell and/or appearance of the item as the competitor eats it, making catcalls and insulting their fellows or, simply, crying. The frequent commercial breaks inherently add to the suspense of the show as a whole. Editing is key to the success of this part of the show because the director tends to cut away just as someone’s chest starts to heave or his/her eyes begin to water. Viewers then have to endure the two-minute delay before finding out the outcome. As most competitors agree, this portion of the game show requires more mental toughness than anything else.

The third element that varies between *Fear Factor* and professional eating contests is the presence of the host, Joe. Unlike the announcers at eating competitions, whose duties are mainly to relate what is taking place for the benefit of those spectators/viewers who are either not physically present at the event or who are sitting too far away, the host of *Fear Factor* simultaneously comments on the contestants’ experience of eating the revolting meal and also encourages the competitors to complete the stunt in a timely manner. Joe’s charming, engaging demeanor and his seeming concern for the well-being of the competitors endear him to the television audience even as he sometimes resorts to blatant manipulation to inflame one player’s dislike for his/her fellows. Since the show’s contestants change from week to week, Joe’s duties as host provide the only on-air element of continuity to *Fear Factor*.

The game show does provide another sense of continuity through its website, which dedicates an inordinate amount of attention to discussing both past and upcoming food items on the eating segment of the show. The first thing visitors to this site encounter is Rich Brown’s “Producer’s Diary.”<sup>8</sup> This pseudo-blog or on-line journal entry discusses the food stunt for the upcoming show from the perspectives of the producers, whose task it is to select, prepare, and even “taste-test” the items themselves before serving them to the contestants. Entries for previous shows are also archived and easily accessible on the website. A mixture of anecdote and gossip, the “Producer’s Diary” capitalizes on the revulsion/fascination of the show’s regular viewers, who log on to the site for the sole purpose of reliving the vicarious amusement they first derived by watching the contestants eat disgusting items on television. The subtle anti-Asian rhetoric evident in the selection of food items and in the program’s website emphasizes the exoticism and strangeness of the various Asian “delicacies”; it resonates with the anti-Japanese tension among professional gurgitators fueled in large part by Kobayashi’s domination of Nathan’s contest. The pseudo-confessional tone and the behind-the-scenes aspect of the diary format immediately appeal to those who would like to find out what it takes to win approval for the gross and wacky dishes featured on the show.

This diary employs a direct appeal to the reader/viewer through the use of the second person, which creates the illusion of inclusion and conveys a sense of the immediacy of the experience. For instance, in his entry on “balut eggs,” the “soft-boiled eggs containing partially developed duck embryos,” Brown suddenly switches from the first-person account of purchasing the eggs from a vendor in Los Angeles’s Little Vietnam area to a second-person direct address to communicate the depths of revulsion involved in eating this Asian delicacy: “Nothing quite

braces you for the first time you crack open a balut egg. As you dig into the yolky mess, you discover a miniature duck inside, complete with feathers and a beak! Adding to the horror is a terrible smell that works its way into your nostrils and just won't let go." The sensory references to the smell and look of the balut eggs are vivid, but they do not measure up to the vileness suggested by the task of ingesting what amounts to a duckling's corpse. The nature of the stunt demands that contestants overcome their olfactory, gustatory, and cultural repulsion and eat an item existentially suspended between the categories of the cooked and the raw, to paraphrase Lévi-Strauss, as well as between life (symbolized by the egg) and death (made manifest by the presence of bones). Because it suggests the association of the human stomach as both an organ of digestion and also a tomb, of sorts, for the bird skeleton, the uncanniness of this experience of abjection goes beyond the primal "food loathing" Kristeva describes in the context of cow's milk, which is at once different from and reminiscent of mother's milk. Kristeva explains the disturbing quality of coming face to face with the physical reality of death: "The corpse (or cadaver: *cadere*, to fall) that which has irremediably come a cropper, is cesspool, and death; it upsets even more violently the one who confronts it as fragile and fallacious chance" (3). For the reader, who does not have to eat the balut egg, the mere written description of its taste and smell causes the experience of the gustatory object. *Jouissance* comes in through the cathartic awareness that though it may have been a shocking thing for the reader to imagine, it would be even worse to actually smell and taste, as both the show's test-kitchen staff and later the contestants have to do. This type of voyeuristic delight is related to that experienced by people who witness executions or attend bullfights. By reading about the discomfort of others even before watching them compete on television, *Fear Factor* fans can magnify the pleasure/revulsion they experience and ask themselves whether they would be able to meet the challenge they just read about.

### Eating Related Fetishes

While competitive eating events and eating stunts on game shows neither depend on nor foment an explicit discourse of self-hatred, the third category of extreme eating—private, sadomasochistic eating rituals—requires the experience of disgust and self-loathing. Another textual venue for adventurous readers looking for a first-person look at extreme eating is the non-fiction genre of the memoir. Alternatively described as either "inspirational" or "educational" literature, individual memoirs of battles with eating disorders inform their readers about the private experience of abject revulsion and humiliation that fuels these extreme subcultures. Among the best of these books are Hornbacher's *Wasted*, a haunting account of her anorexia and bulimia, and Manheim's *Wake Up, I'm Fat!*, a humorous look at growing up heavy in a family of thin people.

Although Manheim is a prominent spokesperson for the fat acceptance movement, the entertainment value of Manheim's book stems from the writer's high profile as a regular cast member of ABC's legal drama *The Practice*. Like the *Fear Factor* website, *Wake Up, I'm Fat!* gives its readers a glimpse of what goes on

behind the scenes in Hollywood.<sup>9</sup> One topic she rarely mentions, however, is food. While Manheim happily defines herself through her weight in the title of the book and the picture on the cover, where she appears as a beauty queen clad in a black bathing suit and wearing a tiara, she never depicts herself as either a cook or even an eating subject. Manheim discusses eating only indirectly as part of her involvement in the size-acceptance movement. She tells her readers that finding size acceptance magazines helped her develop a healthy self-esteem after years of loathing herself for not measuring up to the beauty ideals propagated by popular fashion magazines. Like Brown's "Producer's Diary," Manheim hopes to build enthusiasm for her redefined version of mainstream culture when she uses the second-person direct address to recommend these publications: "[I]f you've ever felt overlooked and ignored by mainstream periodicals because you're not a size 4, do whatever it takes to get your hands on these magazines. You'll be glad you did" (133). Although Manheim's explicit motivation may be more socially conscious than Brown's entertainment hype, both writers hope to increase their respective target audiences, which will translate into higher sales or ratings.

However, Manheim reveals the darker side to these same publications. Lurking in the classifieds section of less mainstream publications, like *Belly Busters*, Manheim discovered the S&M subculture of "erotic weight gain" (131). There, Manheim found ads from people looking for "master feeders" (132) or submissive women "willing to gain weight" (131). By quoting these excerpts within her own memoir, Manheim tries to rouse her audience's disgust for, and moral condemnation of, this practice despite the unlikelihood of them ever meeting anyone involved in this lifestyle.<sup>10</sup> Since the potential for fixing the "problem" of erotic weight gain through raising public awareness is limited at best, the most likely result of Manheim's strategic intertextuality is the provocation of the experience of the gustatory object in her readers, who are simultaneously fascinated by this new sexual perversion and also disgusted by the extreme feeding mechanisms involved in it.

In its insistence on perceivable results (weight gain) over a (limited) period of time rather than on the pleasures of the table, Manheim's description of erotic weight gain recalls the excess involved in American competitive eating events that, as I mentioned earlier, also feature extremely overweight competitors. Even though Manheim acknowledges that erotic weight gain "appears to be rather rare" (133), she nonetheless reports feeling "disturbed" by her accidental discovery of it (132). She includes several representative ads from another publication, *Gutbusters*, and attempts to invoke the same disgust in her readers that she felt when reading them. One of these ads is from "Cathy," who describes herself as follows:

I'm a 681-lb. submissive eating machine that is addicted to eating and being so stuffed I can't move! Would like to talk to anyone who is supportive of my lifestyle. I am actively being force-fed and funnel fed, and the fatter I get, the fatter I WANT TO BE. Would like to talk to women and men who share my relentless need to be stuffed and packed with fattening foods till I can't move. (131)

This ad reveals the writer's isolation and desire for companionship/communication even as it also attests to her defiant defense of her lifestyle choices. "Cathy"

repeatedly expresses her desire for immobility—she reportedly enjoys feeling so full that she “can’t move.” The many references to feeling or being “stuffed” suggests the parallel between “Cathy” as an eater and food items like turkey that are regularly prepared through the inclusion of “stuffing.” The specific practices she describes, force-feeding and funnel-feeding, evoke the feeling of revulsion in the reader because they are designed to override the body’s natural reluctance to ingest food beyond a basic level of satiety. These feeding mechanisms also involve the efficient delivery of liquid substances—another instance of Kristeva’s food loathing—directly to the stomach, thereby bypassing any need for enjoyment of the individual tastes and textures of a meal, yet another way in which this extreme eating fetish recalls professional eating competitions.

For her part, Manheim does not have anything specific to say about “Cathy’s” ad after including it in full for her audience’s inspection or criticism. Her narrative silence implies that the moral and ethical problems of this ad are self-evident and need no further explanation. Despite her feminist disapproval of the abject humiliation involved in erotic weight gain fetishes, Manheim represses her own obesity within the narrative by relegating it to rather schizophrenic sections entitled “Conversations with my Fat.”<sup>11</sup> The tone of these segments is adversarial; Manheim neither “accepts” her “fat” nor gives in to its degradation. Like the interviews with *Fear Factor* contestants, these confessional sections act as a rhetorical simulacrum of the psychological process of repression Manheim herself undergoes.

Whereas Manheim’s cursory glance at sadomasochistic extreme eating practices solicit her reader’s condemnation of a lifestyle they know next to nothing about, Hornbacher’s powerful memoir of bulimia and anorexia reveals and explains two illnesses that are widely misunderstood and sensationalized in the media coverage of the fattening of America. Hornbacher’s first-person account of the years she spent bingeing, purging, and eventually fasting strives for neither pity nor admiration, but simply accuracy. The book is not explicitly pitched as a self-help manual in how to overcome extreme eating obsessions, but rather it conveys the author’s sense of wonder that she was able to do it at all as well as her affirmation that her struggle is not yet over. The entertainment value of this memoir, then, could accurately be described as “human interest” because it provides an honest and unapologetic look at an individual life in very unique and extreme circumstances. Hornbacher’s detailed description of her promiscuity and drug addiction during this period in her life amount to both a confession of wrong-doing and a testimony to the resilience of the human body to ill-treatment.

Although Hornbacher writes predominantly about her own struggles, early on she resorts to the same narrative technique of direct address to break the boundary separating her readers from her own experience of extreme eating. Hornbacher’s account of throwing up during the first “make out” party she ever attends is one of the few in which she forces the reader to interpret normalcy directly through the eyes of the sick (bulimic) individual: Hornbacher-the-preteen.

If you are bulimic, when the lights go out and cute kiddie couples pair off, slurpily kissing and fumbling on the couches, you will walk up the plush-carpeted stairs,

heart pounding, face flushed with fear that the food is going to be digested before you can get it out . . . You will go into the bathroom, take note of the brass fixtures on the sink, the Laura Ashley print wallpaper, the fresh flowers in a Waterford vase, the wicker magazine rack holding *Condé Nast Traveler* and *Forbes*. You will take a mental inventory of these things and scrutinize your face in the mirror. You will beg God to keep your face normal after you puke as you turn on the water full force to drown out the retching and splashing, hoping to hell that the walls are thick so nobody hears. You will lift the toilet seat, carefully slide your fingers inside your mouth and down your throat, and puke until you see orange. The Doritos. You ate them first because you, like most bulimics, have developed a system of “markers,” eating brightly colored food first so you can tell when it’s all out and it all comes out, in reverse order: the pizza, cookies, Ruffles, pretzels, Doritos, all swimming in dark swirls of Coke. (60-61)

This situation is the complete opposite of the erotic weight gain Manheim discussed in her book. Its driving impulse is the refusal to equate the visual image of the emaciated body with the mental image of that same body as obese and bloated. Because this passage fully satisfies the urge that extreme eating fans feel to see someone throw up, reading it at one’s leisure results in a more complete experience of the gustatory abject or *jouissance* than the mere hint offered by visual spectacles, like the eating stunts of *Fear Factor* or even the professional eating competitions. The written text provides a more intimate and immediate level of satisfaction of the primal urge and revulsion to face vomit, that most uncanny transformation of food: its premature rejection by the stomach means that the matter is no longer edible, nor is it fully digested like excrement. By skipping this passage or, alternatively, reading it over and over again, readers may choose to repress or relive the experience of the gustatory abject.

Unlike the anonymous enjoyment that television shows like *Fear Factor*, *Battle of the Vegas Buffets*, and *Gutbusters* offer, as viewers can watch them within the privacy of their own homes, books about extreme eating disorders demand some level of self-disclosure, whether through the actual face-to-face transaction involved in buying the text at a bookstore or checking it out of the library, or through the revelation of an e-customer’s name, address, and credit card number required to purchase it on-line. Either way, there is a textual record of a person’s interest in extreme eating or, at the very least, on food-related subjects. Fear of publicly defining themselves in this way may cause some extreme eating fans to shy away from reading books like Manheim’s and Hornbacher’s. However, anonymity also marks the interaction between author and reader of these confessional memoirs because they are one-sided. While Manheim and Hornbacher confess their faults and shortcomings in print, they do not ask for expiation from their readers. Through the use of second-person narration, these writers declare their solidarity with their readers by demonstrating that they, too, understand the appeal of the gustatory abject.

The strangest, yet most reassuring, aspect of the various eating practices I have discussed throughout this essay is the sense of community that surrounds these events. Perhaps this is due to the nature of food as an equalizer among strangers: eating, overeating, and vomiting are experiences we all have in common.

The written celebration of eating competitions, stunts, and fetishes may ultimately amount to nothing more than a way for people to project their private anxieties about their own weight and diet onto a third party who is distinctly different from the self, a “not-I,” which, according to Kristeva, is the primary marker of abjection:

It is simply a frontier, a repulsive gift that the Other, having become *alter ego*, drops so that “I” does not disappear in it but finds, in that sublime alienation, a forfeited existence. Hence a *jouissance* in which the subject is swallowed up but in which the Other, in return, keeps the subject by foundering by making it repugnant. One thus understands why so many victims of the abject are its fascinated victims—if not its submissive and willing ones. (9)

Alternatively, the writers of abject prose bridge this psychic divide that preserves difference by conflating the narrating “I” with the reading “I” through the use of the second person. Thus, the tensions inherent in writing and reading about abjection ensure that the process continues, so as to prolong the experience of pleasure and revulsion.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The type of excess involved in supplying mounds of food for extreme eating events means that no particular care or attention is paid to the preparation of said food items, especially since the aim of the experience is not to critique the cuisine, but rather to ingest food quickly and in large quantities. Thus, one appeal of buffet style restaurants as well as food competitions and/or stunts is that they cater to people who enjoy straight-forward meals with no pretensions. The very act of eating to excess and getting one’s money’s worth for food becomes more important than any affected interest in a chef’s culinary skill or training.

<sup>2</sup> Tom Clavin dates the origin of Nathan’s contest to 1916 (11).

<sup>3</sup> American reporters regularly compare Kobayashi to more “traditional” sports heroes, like Michael Jordan and Tiger Woods (see Hruby).

<sup>4</sup> The entertainment value and profit of these shows is not limited to the amount of money broadcasters can charge advertisers to run spots during their timeslots; instead, viewers wager on the likely outcome of the battles between the hand-picked Iron Chefs and their cocky challengers.

<sup>5</sup> The international professional competitive eating circuit is dominated by male competitors, although it is not exclusive.

<sup>6</sup> This claim is based on my own research. Most of the articles I consulted are available free of charge on the internet through a basic search. Individual enthusiasts or even competitors themselves also have the option of creating their own websites in support of particular gurgitators or events.

<sup>7</sup> The rules of the show require losing contestants to immediately leave the premises. Thus, the voice-overs viewers hear as they watch contestants exit the playing arena are recorded in interviews after the fact and included during editing.

<sup>8</sup> This website has been revamped since I first consulted it. Visitors can now locate written versions of the eating stunts under the archive category called “Rewind,” whereas the earlier “Producer’s Diary” used to hype the week’s featured “dish” immediately when one accessed the site. The current emphasis of the site is on the themed episodes coming up this season.

<sup>9</sup> Manheim discusses in detail the trials and tribulations of auditioning for and losing roles because of her weight.

<sup>10</sup> By including these “depraved” personal ads, Manheim also makes the ads she posted herself seem more mainstream and “normal.”

<sup>11</sup> Not surprisingly, the conversations Manheim has with her “fat” have to do with her own anxieties about sex appeal, desire, and dating.

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