

Performing 'Meat'

Meat Replacement as Drag

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Cite as:

Efstathiou, S. (2022). Performing 'meat': Meat replacement as drag. In Bruce, D. and Bruce, A. (Eds.) *Transforming food systems: Ethics, innovation and responsibility*. Wageningen Academic Publishers, pp. 412-417. Available online at https://www.wageningenacademic.com/doi/abs/10.3920/978-90-8686-939-8_64

Abstract

I propose that meat replacement is to meat, as drag is to gender. Meat replacement has the potential to shake concepts of meat, like drag does for gender. There is a rich literature on meat and gender. This paper also explores such connections but by analysing the concept of meat by analogy to that of gender: as an 'identity' that can be performed and performed otherwise. Meat replacements not only mimic meat but disclose how meat itself is performed in carnivorous culture -and show that it may be performed otherwise. My approach is inspired by the show *RuPaul's Drag Race*. The argument builds on an imitation of Judith Butler's work on gender performativity, performed by replacing 'drag/ gender/ sex/ heterosexism' terms and relations in Butler's text with 'meat replacement/ meat/ species/ carnism' ones.

Keywords: Identity, gender, realness, performativity, RuPaul's Drag Race

Introduction

I propose that meat replacement is to meat, as drag is to gender. Meat replacement practices and products have the potential to shake our concepts of meat like drag has done for gender. Consider the plant-based sausage Beyond Sausage, produced by the company Beyond Meat. With a caped super-cow as its logo, Beyond Meat claim:

We started with simple questions. Why do you need an animal to create meat? Why can't you build meat directly from plants? That's our company's mission. We hope our plant-based meats allow you and your family to eat more, not less, of the traditional dishes you love. Together, we can truly bring exciting change to the plate -and beyond. GO BEYOND! (Beyond Sausage product packaging)

Plant-based sausage, burger, nugget -these products exist; but plant-based *meat*? How can this not be a contradiction?

Products like Beyond Sausage are dubbed 'second-generation' plant-based meat replacements (He et al. 2020). While first-generation replacements aimed to emulate the fibrous structure of meat, second-generation replacements go further to achieve meat's taste, odour and mouthfeel (e.g. melting fat), its appearance (e.g. whether the meat 'bleeds') and functionality (e.g. whether it changes from red to brown when cooked) (McClements et al. 2021). Using sophisticated

technology to replicate properties of animal-based meat, second-generation meat replacements are often mistaken for meat. This ambiguity of second-generation products also marks synthetic or cell-based laboratory meats. These meats provoke: for vegetarians they can seem too meat-like, and for meat-eaters unnatural or artificial (Varela et al. 2022). The 'deviance' of these products contributes to shaking dominant concepts of meat (Mulhauser et al. 2021) in some cases making 'normal' meat itself seem ambiguous (Van Der Weele and Driessen 2019).



Figure 1. RuPaul. A big inspiration for this paper was the reality show RuPaul's Drag Race. Image retrieved from: [https://rupaulsdragrace.fandom.com/wiki/RuPaul%27s_Drag_Race_\(Season_9\)](https://rupaulsdragrace.fandom.com/wiki/RuPaul%27s_Drag_Race_(Season_9))

This paper explores how. It proposes that products like Beyond Sausage illustrate that vegetables can perform 'meat', achieve meat 'realness' and become (plant-based) meat. After briefly situating my work within existing literature, I explore how the ideas of performing meat and of achieving meat realness were stimulated by the reality show *RuPaul's Drag Race* (Figure 1). I then build my argument by transfiguring or 'trans-phrasing' some of Judith Butler's writings on performativity, sex and gender: I substitute 'drag/ gender/ sex/ heterosexism' terms and relations, in Butler for, respectively, 'meat-replacement/ meat/ species/ carnivorism' ones. The derived text offers another imitation, a trans-text that argues that, like heterosexual identity, the ideal of a carnivorous identity is performatively constituted and could be performed otherwise: 'there is no 'proper' [meat], some [meat] proper to one [species] rather than another, which is in some sense that [species's] cultural property' (Butler 1991, 21 [my text]). But first, allow me to situate this work within existing research on gender and meat culture.

Meat and gender

There is a rich body of work on gender norms and meat culture. Social science research reports that meat attitudes and consumption patterns differ significantly across self-identified men and women (Kalof et al. 1999, Bugge and Alfnes 2018, Kubberød et al. 2002). Further, experiments exploring "the meat paradox" -an aversion to harming animals that many meat-eaters have (Loughnan et al. 2010)- also report gender differences. Highlighting meat's animal origin seems to affect women negatively towards eating meat, while reinforcing self-identified men's choice to eat meat (Dowsett et al 2018). Meat work is also gendered, with butchering primarily done by men who may find meaning in such difficult work through ideals of 'self-sacrifice' (Simpson

2014). Finally, sexuality has been linked to meat preferences in the phenomenon of “vegan sexuality” when vegans choose to date other vegans (Potts and Parry 2010). Carol Adams argues that meat-eating is a way of ‘doing’ gender (Connell 1995): within heteronormative, patriarchal cultures women’s and animals’ bodies become ‘absent referents’ that get collectivised, objectified and sexualised - at times interchangeably so (1990, 2010; Fiddes 2004). Jacques Derrida’s concept of *carnophallogocentrism* goes further to claim that eating other animals (*carne-*), the primacy given to reason, or rationalisation (*logos-*) and phallogocentric ideals all overlap and mark current Western dominant subjectivities (Adams and Calarco 2016).

Connections between carnivorousness and heterosexist culture are rife with interest. But they run orthogonal to my focus here which is the transgression of such norms. Food practices are socially and historically constituted, and they change (Warde 2016). I propose that meat -like gender- can be performed but also troubled, and that meat replacement products and practices emulate gender-troubling practices found in drag. This idea, that the arrangement and signification of gender’s relation to sex can be interestingly thought of as analogous to the relationship between meat and particular animal or vegetable bodies (or laboratory creations of them) came to me while watching -or rather binging- *RuPaul’s Drag Race*.

Gender trouble and meat trouble

In the winter of 2021, in the middle of a COVID pandemic and while recovering from a - thankfully ‘kind’- case of breast cancer, there was nothing more joyful to me than watching the reality show *RuPaul’s Drag Race*. Structured in the form of a competition or ‘race’ the show selects ‘drag queens’ auditioning from all over the USA and its territories to compete for a cash prize of 100,000 USD through a set of challenges, ranging from creating costumes to performing comedy skits and lip-synching. The show is legitimately criticized on multiple grounds: for commodifying and mainstreaming practices of minoritised and oppressed groups (Heller 2020), for reinforcing stereotypes about race and gender (Strings and Bui 2013) and -like other reality shows- for inviting participants to fashion themselves into sellable commodities (Ouellette and Hay 2008). Still, I found myself devouring episode after episode, season after season, only to realise that they were inspiring new research.



Figure 2. Fleshy Thighs: How does something become meat?

The cast of Season 10 – Image retrieved from:

<https://www.vox.com/culture/2018/3/22/17144202/rupauls-drag-race-history-season-10>

Here they were a set of beautiful and creative -mostly- cis-gendered men who wanted to embody female anatomies and fashions, personas, and gestures (Figure 2). As a cis-gendered female, admittedly suffering from her own female-sexed anatomy (including breasts with a higher risk of cancer), it was affirmative to see a show that celebrated notions and bodies of women beyond the given. –*You want fleshy thighs like mine, and get them by cutting thigh pieces out of Styrofoam? Amazing! Power to us!* – This attention to detail and to form-fitting, the liberation and provocation created, echoed for me the making, and specifically the ‘faking’ of meat.



Figure 3. Beyond Meat: How does something become meat?
Beyond Sausage packaging – one of my recent culinary fascinations. Photo taken by the author.

Can we think of ‘doing’ meat or of ‘performing’ meat by analogy to how gender identity is performed? Can food be analysed as performing a meat identity while being ‘really’ a vegetable? In that case, what is meat, really? If we follow feminist thinking, the possibility of imitation, of approximating sensual, functional, symbolic or material properties of some original, signals a fluidity in the very idea of an ‘original’ itself. Indeed, I argue, meat replacements do not only mimic meat: they disclose how meat itself is performed in carnivorous culture -and show that it can be performed otherwise. The rest of the text argues for these theses with the help of Judith Butler’s work. But perhaps a brief discussion on the concept of realness -as opposed to the real- is warranted first.

Realness and reality

‘Realness’ is a term commonly used in ‘ballroom’ culture: ballroom was a platform for competition created by queer people of colour in New York to counter the racist and exclusionist drag queen pageants of the 1960s and 1970s in the USA (Street 2016). Realness, or how close one came to emulate or “blend in” with dominant heterosexual culture was a key criterion for winning a ball trophy. For example, when competing in the category of ‘executive realness’, performers would be judged on how well they embodied a (usually white, straight) business executive - whether their choice of fashion, posture or walk, conveyed this reality.



Figure 4. Executive Realness.

Drag queen Alaska accomplishing realness as a construction site executive on RuPaul's Drag Race Season 5.
Image retrieved from: <https://poll-maker.com/poll581288x4f814185-25>

The proposal that realness can be achieved makes an important contribution for projects aimed at remaking reality -and resisting it (Haslanger 2012). The idea of realness opens up to an understanding of reality as possibly having (or lacking) a property: that of realness. Things, people or ideas marked as Y might pose or perform as X, or thus embody 'X realness'. Realness thus becomes an attribute that can be accomplished as opposed to had, and that can be exercised and performed differently according to context. Further, performing realness -in this case by drag- has the potential to change reality while -seemingly- reproducing it. This possibility for realness to upstage reality shows reality up as itself contingent: it 'outs' reality as a project and a process of constantly achieving and performing what is taken-to-be-real in majoritarian-enforced, or otherwise 'canonical', views of reality. And this also goes for meat.

Meat replacement as drag

Much like Judith Butler argues that sexual practices can 'destabilize gender' (Butler 1999, xi), so I propose that food practices like meat replacement can destabilize meat. My argument is performed by imitating two texts of the feminist and queer scholar whose work has been crucial for shaping philosophical social constructionist thinking: the introduction to *Gender Trouble*, and her chapter on "Imitation and Gender Insubordination" (Butler 1999 and 1991 respectively). By reading these works of Butler while thinking about meat I produce a text that is a replica, but also new, inserting meat where it -maybe- should not be.

First, I argue that meat-replacement practices question the reality of meat. Plant-based meat seemingly 'lacks 'reality', and is taken to constitute an illusory appearance' (Butler 1999, xxii). But then comes a challenge to the reality of what we see. Trans-phrasing Butler, inserting 'meat' and 'chemical' in the place of 'gender' and 'anatomical' illustrates how the foundation of these assumptions can be questioned:

In such perceptions in which an ostensible reality is coupled with an unreality, we think we know what the reality is, and take the secondary appearance of [meat] to

be mere artifice, play, falsehood, and illusion. But what is this sense of '[meat] reality' that founds this perception in this way? Perhaps we think we know what the [chemical composition] of [the meat] is (sometimes we do not, and we certainly have not appreciated the variation that exists at the level of [chemical] description). ... Indeed, if we shift the example from [meat replacement] to [cultured meat] (transsexuality), then it is no longer possible to derive a judgment about stable [chemistry] from the [shapes and materials that articulate the meat]. ... The moment in which one's staid and usual cultural perceptions fail, when one cannot with surety read the [meat] that one sees, is precisely the moment when one is no longer sure whether the body encountered is that of a [vegetable] or [an animal]. The vacillation between the categories itself constitutes the experience of the body in question.

When such categories come into question, the *reality* of [meat] is also put into crisis: it becomes unclear how to distinguish the real from the unreal. And this is the occasion in which we come to understand that what we take to be 'real', what we invoke as the naturalised knowledge of [meat] is, in fact, a changeable and revisable reality. ... At this point the sedimented and reified field of [meat] 'reality' is understood as one that might be made differently and, indeed, less violently (trans-phrased from Butler 1999, xxii-xxiii [my terms], *emphasis in original*).

The possibility of a less violent meat reality is precisely what plant-based meats promise, by resisting killing animals for their flesh. As the reality of meat is challenged by replacements, judgements about how 'weird' or 'artificial' plant-based meats only evidence -and question- the dominance of meat-eating, or carnist ideology (Joy 2020). Meat replacement practices show that carnivorism is itself contingent on its own repetition, to the effect of its reality (See Figure 5.).



Figure 5. Transfiguration: There is nothing necessarily porkchoppy about Ivar.

I met Ivar in Trondheim, Norway and took this photo (left). Right, an image of a porkchop retrieved from https://www.simplyrecipes.com/recipes/brined_pork_chops_with_gremolata/. A lot of work is needed to get us from Ivar to a porkchop. A series of literal and symbolic 'cuts' between animals and their original contexts are needed before we can find these animals as meat on a plate (see also Nöellie Vialles's book *From Animal to Edible*). There is nothing necessarily porkchoppy about Ivar.

[Meat replacement] is not the putting on of a [meatness] that belongs properly to some other [species], i.e. an act of expropriation, or appropriation that assumes that [meat] is the rightful property of [animal bodies], that ['beef'] belongs to ['cow'], and ['pork'] to ['pig']. There is no 'proper' [meat], a [meat] proper to one [species] rather than another, which is in some sense that [species's] cultural property. Where that notion of the 'proper' operates, it is always and only *improperly* installed as the effect of a compulsory system. [Replacement] constitutes the mundane way in which [meatness] is appropriated, theatricalised, worn and done; it implies that all [meat-ing] is a kind of impersonation and approximation. If this is true, it seems, there is no original or primary [meat] that replacement imitates, but [meat] is a kind of imitation for which there is no original; in fact, it is a kind of imitation that produces the very notion of the original as an effect and consequence of the imitation itself. In other words, the naturalistic effects of [animal-based meats] are produced through imitative strategies; what they imitate is a phantasmatic ideal of [carnivorous] identity, one that is produced by the imitation as its effect. In this sense, the 'reality' of [carnivorous] identities is performatively constituted through an imitation that sets itself up as the origin and ground of all imitations. In other words, [carnism] is always in the process of imitating and approximating its own phantasmatic idealization of itself -and failing (trans-phrasing Butler 1991, 21 [my terms], emphasis in the original).

Being a carnivore is thus seen as an identity relying on a consumption of 'proper' meat, that is iteratively performed to embody an idealisation of some 'proper' -perhaps presumed male, or virile or strong, if we follow Adams- meat-eater, and continuously failing to achieve that reality.

Liberation and liberalism

Perhaps a note of caution is warranted here. Writing about *Drag Race*, Meredith Heller argues that the term 'realness' has come to convey what she dubs 'neoliberal ideologies of authenticity' (2020). Instead of 'realness' defined in relation to -and holding visible- a dominant heterosexist culture, in *Drag Race* queens are prized for being 'really' themselves -true to their 'authentic' self. Heller claims that presuming that authenticity will be rewarded -despite structural and economic inequality- feeds into a neoliberal, 'American dream': 'the neoliberal ideology that publicly embracing one's identity differences is economically and culturally beneficial' (2016, 134).

One might note that the production of meat replacements may similarly feed into neoliberal politics. There is arguably reason to worry about the capitalist and ecomodernist politics of what Alexandra Sexton and colleagues dub 'Big Veganism' (Sexton et al. 2022; Volden 2022) as about the neoliberal politics of *RuPaul's Drag Race*. As markets for second-generation meat replacements grow and products and investments multiply, the potential for planetary resource depletion and degradation through monoculture farming, of injustice through exploitative labour and land politics and of the perpetuation of anthropocentric ideologies persists, despite an opportunity granted to some animals to escape their meat fates.

Conclusion

This paper has explored the phenomenon of meat replacement by analogy to drag. By replacing notions of gender and sex in the work of Judith Butler with ideas about meat/meatness and animal bodies, I offered an argument for thinking of how things become food (Roe 2006), and in this case meat. I argued that this process of 'doing meat' involves the iterative

performance of dominant carnivorous concepts and practices around meat. More broadly I argued that meat replacement practices and concepts have the potential to destabilize normative concepts of meat as animal-based, by analogy to how drag challenges heteronormative notions of gender. To trans-phrase J. Butler on lesbianism and how it questions heterosexual priority: 'the negative constructions of [plant-based meat] as a fake or a bad copy can be occupied and reworked to call into question the claims of [carnivorous] priority' (Butler 1991, 17).

My aim in this paper was not to defend plant-based meat as an 'ideal' or better meat. Big Veganism and *RuPaul's Drag Race* can both be criticised for their politics. Still, as the present text offers, analysing meat replacement as a performance of meat 'realness' can destabilise carnist (Joy 2020) readings of meat as exclusively animal-based. Perhaps in the end meat will return -to imitate- again, itself, not in its current animal-based concept but in some revision of its pre-1300s, middle English notion incarnation as *mete* "food, nourishment, sustenance" (www.etymonline.com).

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