HUNGRY FOR REASSURANCE:
TURN-OF-THE-TWENTIETH-CENTURY CULTURAL ANXIETIES AND THE DIET
DEBATE, 1890-1914

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ABSTRACT

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At the turn of the twentieth-century—roughly 1890 to 1914—Americans across the nation were theorizing about diet; what diets were best, what diets could lead to individual and national degeneration, which diets could solidify white American superiority, and how the eating habits of individuals reflected the character of America more broadly. I describe this popular conversation as the diet debate. Although this was not a debate in the sense that there were two individuals or two very distinct camps arguing over a point, I have found patterns in my primary source analysis that reveals an informal debate with various actors expressing contrary opinions on the subject of diet across the nation between 1890 and 1914. This project also specifically looks at the diet debate through the lens of prominent cultural anxieties at the turn of the twentieth-century. Contextualizing the diet debate alongside broader cultural anxieties allows for a nuanced look at turn-of-the-century American culture and the role diet played in identity formation and the negotiation between individual Americans and broader societal fears. The three cultural anxieties explored here are the neurasthenia epidemic, the progressive concerns about poverty, alcoholism, and safe food, and the general anxiety about race deterioration and race relations associated with growing the American empire through immigration and imperialism. This project, by looking at how these general anxieties surfaced in the diet debate, shows how cultural anxieties permeated the diet debate and, conversely, how diet debaters capitalized on those anxieties to stake their claims in both reassuring and inciting ways.
For Grandma and Grandpa
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INTRODUCTION

In 1911 the *El Paso Herald* published the article “Why a Nation’s Brains and Ideals Are Made Up Only of the Food They Eat,” by Dr. H. W. Lathrop of Wisconsin University. Lathrop begins the article with a quote from Nietzsche: “Tell me what a nation eats and I will tell you what its character is.”\(^1\) According to Lathrop, who argues that a mixed-diet—or a diet that incorporates meat—is the best diet for Americans, “national habits and modes of thought and feeling may be directly traced to national food habits, and as a nation eats, so it thinks and acts.”\(^2\)

This was a widely held belief at the time Lathrop was writing and, examining his sentiment through the lens of cultural history, it is telling of the complex relationship turn-of-the-twentieth century Americans had with diet. It is essentially the “you are what you eat” mentality projected onto a national scale. This project traces similar sentiments at the turn of the century—roughly 1890 to 1914. Americans across the nation were theorizing about diet; what diets were best, what diets could lead to individual and national degeneration, which diets could solidify white American superiority, how the eating habits of individuals reflected the character of America more broadly. I describe this popular conversation as the diet debate. Although this was not a debate in the sense that there were two individuals or two very distinct camps arguing over a point, I have found patterns in my primary source analysis that reveals an informal debate with various actors expressing contrary opinions on the subject of diet across the nation between 1890 and 1914.

This project also specifically looks at the diet debate through the lens of prominent cultural anxieties at the turn of the twentieth-century. Contextualizing the diet debate alongside

\(^1\) Lathrop, “Why a Nation’s Brains and Ideals Are Made Up Only of the Food They Eat.”
\(^2\) Ibid.
broader cultural anxieties allows for a nuanced look at turn-of-the-century American culture and the role diet played in identity formation and the negotiation between individual Americans and broader societal fears. The three cultural anxieties explored here are the neurasthenia epidemic, the progressive concerns about poverty, alcoholism, and safe food, and the general anxiety about race deterioration and race relations associated with growing the American empire through immigration and imperialism. How was diet positioned within the public discourse on neurasthenia, progressivism, and race relations? Similarly, how did the public discourse on diet influence American’s understandings of these anxieties? This project, by looking at how these general anxieties surfaced in the diet debate, answers these questions. This project shows how the broader cultural anxieties about neurasthenia, poverty, alcoholism and safe food, and race relations permeated the diet debate and, conversely, how diet debaters capitalized on those anxieties to stake their claims in both reassuring and inciting ways.

**Historical Foundation**

The diet debate waged between 1890 and 1914 was not the first time diet was linked to broader cultural anxieties in America, it was just an amplification of what had come before. In the 1830s, for example, famous health reformer and vegetarian Sylvester Graham published *Treatise on Bread and Breadmaking* and *A Lecture to Young Men on Chastity* which both aimed to prescribe particular vegetarian and bread-based diets to maintain American morality and white racial superiority. In her article “Sylvester Graham’s Imperial Dietetics,” Kayla Wazana Tompkins analyzes both works to argue that Graham’s reforms were designed to promote white imperialism and westward expansion in America. Tompkins writes that bread, specifically homemade and coming from American grown wheat, “signified domestic order, civic health, and moral well-being; ingesting more bread, he promised, would produce healthy bodies and homes
and guarantee the United States’ place in the pantheon of civilized nations.” Wheat was a symbolically American crop; it was planted by the first European settlers and helped fuel the economic drive for westward expansion, soon to be called Manifest Destiny—a term that is laden with racial symbolism. In short, wheat bread symbolized the American—read white Anglo—conquest of the untamed wilderness filled with savage—read Native American—inferiors. In addition, Graham’s bread-centered diet fostered nationalism on an individual level, “To buy and use food that was so central to the westward expansion of the United States was to work within an economic model in which reliance on other nations was kept to a minimum; the home in which bread was produced was a nationally identified home.” Tompkins argues that linking bread making and diet, which were both very personal, with the broader imperial desires of the nation made American bodies implicated in westward expansion. Tompkins also notes that Graham toted wheat as a superior food to corn, even though they were equally nutritious, because wheat was more European-American while corn was associated with Native American cuisine and culture.

It was not just the prescription for American grown wheat and homemade bread that Graham saw as crucial for America to maintain its status as a great independent nation; foreign spices were linked with immorality and forbidden to those who followed the Graham diet. Tompkins explains that the foods that posed the most threat to the American body—specifically “spices, coffee, sugar, tea, and wine”—were both “foreign” and “exotic” while the foods that Graham argued were good for American bodies were domestic—specifically “milk and bread.” The individual diets of Americans, in short, influenced the image and health of the entire nation.

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3 Tompkins, “Sylvester Graham’s Imperial Dietetics,” 51.
4 Ibid., 53.
5 Ibid., 55.
and contributed to the economic conditions that kept America independent. Specifically in the context of nineteenth-century food culture, Tompkins argues that, “Nationalist foodways—and the objects fetishized therein—in turn become allegories through which the expanding nation and its attendant anxieties play out.” In the case of the Graham diet, these anxieties included becoming a dependent nation and the threat of moral decline. This project, looking at the diet debate as it occurred at the turn of the twentieth-century, examines theories about diet through the same lens Tompkins uses to examine the Graham diet of the early and mid-nineteenth century. I argue that diets do have symbolic attachments to broader cultural anxieties and the seemingly never-ending construction of American greatness.

More importantly for this study, Graham’s diet reforms also reveal the historical link between anxieties about gender, race, and diet. For example, Graham believed that certain foods—most notably meat of any kind and foreign spices—stimulated sexual desires in both men and women and led to masturbation and other unproductive and uncivilized actions for those who overindulged. Proper manhood and womanhood, following Graham’s logic, was about self-control, morality, and respectability—all of which were jeopardized by the consumption of certain types of food. The link between the foreign foods and savage sexual behavior was a key tenant of Graham’s philosophy that also incorporated elements of racist ideology—most notably that the distinction between what Graham signified as good food and bad food was often drawn on racial lines. In addition to actions, Graham also believed that diet influenced a person’s morality and, therefore, the moral character of the entire nation. According to Stephen Nissenbaum, Graham’s emphasis on plain and plant-based foods, “stemmed from a belief that

6 Tompkins, Racial Indigestion, 4.
7 Nissenbaum, Sex, Diet, and Debility in Jacksonian America: Sylvester Graham and Health Reform, 35.
human life was poised precariously between two poles, the divine and the bestial, and that people’s spiritual destiny depended on which of these two poles they most closely approached in their daily lives.” Those two poles, not surprisingly, also aligned with the pole of civilization and savagery, white and non-white, adult and child, male and female, human and animal. This connection between diet and gender and race was amplified in the late-nineteenth century as concerns about the three became ever more acute.

Graham’s diet was highly influential well into the late-nineteenth century and, although his particular logic for promoting vegetarianism went slightly out of vogue by the time I pick up the diet debate in 1890, the perceived link between individual diet and the health of the nation and both the gender and racial hierarchies can be found in the diet debate examined here. This project looks at the symbolic function of diet on a much wider scale. Instead of focusing on one diet regime or prominent diet reformer, this project examines arguments in the diet debate to locate the pattern of diet functioning symbolically and addressing social anxieties. Tompkins argues that in the nineteenth-century within, “local, national, and transnational discourses, the mouth became the focus of a disciplinary project within which the correct embodiment of the individual was understood to be of deep importance to the burgeoning nation.” I use this framework to examine the diet debate and to better understand why so many Americans participated and were invested in the national discourse on diet.

Theoretical Frameworks

This project rests on two theoretical frameworks. First, I rely on Kyla Wazana Tompkins’ framework for conducting critical eating studies. According to Tompkins, critical eating studies,

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8 Ibid., 39-40.
9 Tompkins, Racial Indigestion, 6.
“implicitly entails the examination of the field of food studies’ unconscious investments in the commodity itself. It is also a move that weds food studies to body theory.”¹⁰ Tompkins describes critical eating studies as reading orificially—looking at the symbolic nature of ingestion instead of just food as object or commodity. Critical eating studies, therefore:

theorizes a flexible and circular relation between the self and the social world in order to imagine a dialogic in which we—reader and text, self and other, animal and human—recognize our bodies as vulnerable to each other in ways that are terrible—this is, full of terror—and, at times, politically productive.¹¹

Further, Tompkins argues that using critical eating studies can, “push us further toward a critique of the political beliefs and structures that underlie eating as a social practice.”¹² Tompkins’ urges a shift in focus of food studies from food-as-object to eating-as-action is addressed in this project because diet is the interplay between physical food, the act of eating that food, and the symbolic function of both the object and action—analyzing the diet debate, therefore, necessitates the shift away from simply looking at the types of food associated with specific diets towards a more comprehensive examination of the symbolic function of diet. Tompkins’ methodology, which heavily relies on the primary source analysis of visual culture and literature to argue that eating informed and perpetuated racism and racist ideology on the part of white Americans throughout the nineteenth-century, also serves as a template for this project. This project will use both food studies and body theory to draw a link between diet and health, gender, nationalism, and race. In addition, this project will frame diet as a social practice linked to performance.

Another theoretical framework this project draws on is Chad Lavin’s concept that the act of eating connects the body with the world around it and, therefore, food politics are both

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¹¹ Tompkins, Racial Indigestion, 3.
¹² Ibid.
external and internal. In *Eating Anxiety: The Perils of Food Politics*, Lavin argues, “food politics often have their stakes not in the production and distribution of food…but rather in the integrity of the border that supposedly separates the self from the world that remains an axiomatic requirement of personal identity.”¹³ Like Tompkins’ framework for critical eating studies, Lavin similarly locates the symbolic—or in his case political—function of food in the intimate act of ingestion, not necessarily in its production or distribution. For example, Lavin argues that diet fads like the Atkins diet or Weight Watchers that became very popular in the early 2000s were reflective of broader anxieties about control. Lavin writes, “regimens that place on the individual the ultimate responsibility for deciding what to eat, is a narrative of individual empowerment. Narratives of diet respond directly to anxieties about individual sovereignty and offer tools for protecting that.”¹⁴ In the process of identity formation, diet is directly political, although, as Lavin also argues, contemporary neoliberal food politics often take the political and make it private—putting the onus on individual bodies instead of addressing the root of anxieties about sovereignty, ethics, and so on. This project follows a similar theoretical approach; namely that eating and diet *do* connect the individual body and the world around it and that broad, national, and often abstract anxieties *do* influence the popularity of particular diets, diet theory, and even simply conversations about diet.

While this project is grounded with the theoretical frameworks for studying food and eating presented by Tompkins and Lavin, it is not heavily theoretical. Rather, this project touches on theory to develop its broader framework—specifically that eating is a social practice and that diet connects the individual with the social world around them—but mainly focuses on the

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¹³ Lavin, *Eating Anxiety,* x.
¹⁴ Ibid., 20.
patterns revealed in the primary source analysis that makes up the majority of each chapter. While each chapter will have its own introduction and conclusion where I will refer back to this theoretical foundation, the bulk of each chapter is focused on developing an understanding of the cultural anxiety being examined and the diet debate’s reflection and incorporation of that broader cultural anxiety. I consider this project a cultural history that is grounded in primary source analysis rather than theory or secondary source synthesis.

Methodology

The methodology for his project is influenced by the techniques, frameworks, and structure used by Carolyn Thomas De La Peña in *The Body Electric: How Strange Machines Built the Modern America*, John F. Kasson in *Houdini, Tarzan, and The Perfect Man: The White Male Body and the Challenge of Modernity in America*, and Gail Bederman in *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917*. Each of these works focus on particular aspects of turn-of-century American culture in an attempt to better understand race, class, gender, and technology during the period. Their primary arguments center on the symbolic meaning—both conscious and/or unconscious—of cultural practices and performances at the turn of the twentieth century. More specifically, they describe how the symbolic function of particular practices and performances helped Americans mentally and physically cope with and negotiate with the varying pressures and anxieties associated with modern society. This project borrows heavily from each of these works and their methodology and structure in order to argue that diet debaters positioned their diets in the context of broader anxieties and as a response to such anxieties.

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In *The Body Electric*, Carolyn Thomas De La Peña argues that late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century Americans used exercise equipment, electronic invigorators, and consumed radium all in an attempt to catch their physical bodies up with modern technology. Thomas De La Peña writes, “In an age when technology posed the primary threat to human health, the psychological value of consuming technology to improve health should not be underestimated.”\(^{16}\) According to Thomas De La Peña, who draws from scholars such as Kasson, one way Americans coped with the quick, drastic, and often threatening changes brought on by new technology was to incorporate some of those technologies into their everyday lives.

Thomas De La Peña devotes an entire chapter to the ways Americans ingested radium to achieve this effect. Radium was being experimented with by licensed doctors and quacks across the country in the hopes that the element could be used as an unlimited and infinite energy source, which Thomas De La Peña argues, “created a disturbing dissonance,” for Americans, “between the world they knew and the one being revealed by science.”\(^{17}\) Although it would eventually be discovered that radium is actually a poison to the human body, in the early twentieth century many Americans ingested radium in the hopes that they would physically benefit from its awe inspiring potential. For most Americans who participated in the radium craze, they ingested small amounts of the element through innocuous methods like radium infused milk. These methods of ingesting brought the human body closer to the threatening technology in a way that assuaged their fears.

A similar argument can be made in regards to meat-eating and vegetarianism as it was presented in the diet debate. Diet debaters argued that adopting either a mixed-died centered on

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\(^{17}\) Ibid., 182.
meat-eating or a vegetarian diet could help the body cope with anxieties brought on by the rapid modernization of the country that manifested in conditions like neurasthenia. This project argues that particular diets and their ability to address and mitigate cultural anxieties like neurasthenia can be understood using the framework Thomas De La Peña developed for understanding exercise machines, electronic invigorators, and radium; while Thomas De La Peña focuses on the ingestion and intimate use of technology to appease fears about technology in the public sphere, I focus on the arguments made for and against the ingestion of particular foods in order to mitigate fears about neurasthenia, poverty, alcoholism and unsafe food, and race deterioration.

In Houdini, Tarzan, and The Perfect Man, Kasson examines the ways in which Harry Houdini, Eugen Sandow, and Edgar Rice Burrells/Tarzan were representative of the ideal white male body in turn-of-the-century American popular culture and how their images reaffirmed the race and gender hierarchies in a time when those hierarchies were increasingly vulnerable. For example, speaking of body builder Eugen Sandow and entertainer Harry Houdini, Kasson argues, “Sandow spoke to fears of enervating weakness and hopes of commanding strength and virility, Houdini appealed to nightmares of entrapment and dreams of triumphant release.”18 The popularity of these figures, Kasson argues, was in part due to their ability to comfort American men and ease their anxieties about the threat of weakness and powerlessness in modern society. Kasson concludes, “By stressing the centrality of the unclad white male body, each in effect reasserted that gender and racial divisions were fundamentally based in innate and natural difference. At the same time, each appealed to dreams of masculine metamorphosis.”19

18 Kasson, Houdini, Tarzan, and the Perfect Man, 154.
19 Ibid., 223.
Diet debaters capitalized on very similar anxieties and reaffirmed both of these contradictory ideologies; theories presented about certain diets could either support the belief that the social order was inherent or that it was in a state of flux and needed to be addressed. Either way, diet debaters argued that their favored diet was the solution. Although there are numerous mentions of the male body and the various ways each man/character constructed their particular bodies in Kasson’s work, there is almost no mention of diet. Kasson argues that, “modernity was understood in terms of the male body,” but does not examine the ways in which those ideals were achieved through food or diet. Unlike Kasson, who primarily focuses on the built or constructed male body, this project focuses on arguments about the ideal American diet—for both male and females, but also almost exclusively for whites—and how diet debaters argued that particular diets could help Americans achieve the physical, moral, and racial ideals while simultaneously addressing the fears associated with their potential decline.

In *Manliness and Civilization*, Bederman looks at the crisis of masculinity at the turn of the twentieth century through the lives, work, and theories of Ida B. Wells, G. Stanley Hall, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and Theodore Roosevelt. Each chapter, while distinct, works together to reveal the complex intersection of race, class, gender, sexuality, and imperialism in the context of American masculinity. Bederman outlines the ways white American masculinity was threatened and how manhood and masculinity were subsequently reworked to address those threats. For example, the fear that American men were becoming overcivilized and degenerating was addressed by G. Stanley Hall’s recapitulation theory. Hall argued that young boys needed to engage in primitive or “savage” activities to get it out of their system; adults, “could be safely civilized, refined, and cultured—but only if they had fully lived and outgrown a temporary case

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20 Ibid., 19.
of savagery as small boys.” Hall’s theory reassured Americans that overcivilization could be prevented at the same time it reinforced the racial hierarchy where primitivism and savagery, associated with non-whites, was linked with childishness. This project makes similar links as diets positioned as a way for Americans to address anxieties often reinforced the race and gender hierarchies that benefited white males.

This project incorporates many of the same frameworks, methods, and structures used by De La Peña, Kasson, and Bederman. First, I borrow from their demonstration of cultural history presented in vignettes—this project takes a look at the diet debate using three distinct but intersecting cultural anxieties in same way each chapter in their monographs address a distinct aspect of their study. This project is also similarly grounded in primary source analysis rather than secondary source synthesis. I emphasize the primary source analysis in order to highlight the patterns reveled in the diet debate alongside broader cultural trends, anxieties, and ideologies. Each chapter begins with a brief overview of the anxiety being examined through secondary source synthesis but quickly transitions into an in-depth analysis of how arguments in the diet debate and theories about diet were influenced by the anxiety being examined. Although this work does reveal patterns and allows for a nuanced look at how diet was argued to play a role in many national conversations that seemingly did not focus on food, the diet debate was not won—there is no definitive conclusion. In fact, it can be argued that the diet debate never ended; Americans still debate about diet in the context of cultural anxieties—obesity, diabetes, global warming, factory farming. This argument will be reexamined in the conclusion.

Sources

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While the primary sources analyzed in this project come from all over the country, I have selected representative examples based on content instead of location to reveal broader patterns—therefore, this is a project that focuses on American culture in a broad sense and relies on broader patterns that are not necessarily placed within their specific local contexts. I also rely almost exclusively on newspaper articles and editorials. I decided to focus on these sources for multiple reasons. First, while I could have also incorporated publications from medical journals or popular magazines, I wanted to look at the diet debate as it occurred in a medium situated between the official and unofficial. Newspapers have also historically functioned as a virtual debate forum by printing arguments and opinions on their pages for readers to consider. In the context of the diet debate, individual newspaper articles and editorials reveal particular arguments about diet and, in some cases, people would actually write into a newspaper if they wanted to respond to a particular claim—an example of this form of retort makes up a large section of chapter three. In this way, newspapers have allowed me to locate and examine arguments and debates about diet one hundred or more years after they occurred. Newspapers also published different opinions alongside each other to give their readers a full understanding of the diet debate allowing me to unpack multiple sides of the complex national conversation. In addition—logistically—The Library of Congress’ online database Chronicling America, which houses digital copies of over 2,000 individual newspapers from across the nation, allowed me to make very tailored searches that could reveal broader patterns. Within the limitations of a master’s thesis, the set of sources I was able to collect and examine from my searches on Chronicling America are more than sufficient to stake my claim that the diet debate existed and that it was reflective of and responsive to broader cultural anxieties.

Scope and Limitations
This project has clear limitations in regards to geography, scope, demographics, and timeframe. Geographically, this project is primarily focused on the continental United States with the exception of Hawaii—which is examined at length in chapter three. In addition, because this project is mainly concerned with debates about vegetarianism and meat-eating many other dietary regimes and health fads—including milk and water cures—will largely be excluded. I argue, however, that even though I only look at two dietary systems that the framework used to analyze their relation to broader social anxieties can be used to think about other diets not specifically analyzed here. In regards to demographics, this project takes a general approach, however, it is very clear that many of the primary sources directed at a general audience were actually implicitly directed at white men. There is an effort made to make sure that the intersections of diet, gender, and race are fully explored—chapter one unpacks the intersection of diet and gender while chapter three unpacks the complexity of diet and race—however, the majority of the arguments made in the diet debate analyzed in this project were directed at a white male audience. Finally, this project will be limited to a specific timeframe—roughly between 1890 and 1914. This timeframe is both narrow and broad. Although this timeframe only allows for the examination of the diet debate over the course of two decades, it is a long enough period of time to locate patterns and adequately develop a connection between the debates and the broader cultural anxieties of those decades. Each chapter is broken down by argument, therefore each chapter includes primary sources that span from 1890 to 1914 but not necessarily in chronological order. I have also consciously omitted some of the more outspoken figures in the health and diet reform movements of the era in order to distinguish the broader diet debate from the very specific arguments of powerful players. Much has already been written about the Graham diet of the early nineteenth-century and of John Harvey Kellogg’s diet regime at the
turn-of-the-twentieth, but I focus on arguments being made in local newspapers by lesser known figures to provide a wider sampling of arguments. I have also avoided the diet debate as it was connected to particular religious sects—most notably Kellogg’s Seventh-Day Adventists—because the arguments presented by members of those groups extended well beyond that of just diet. Instead, this project examines the diet debate—or the very general and widespread conversation and debate about diet—as it occurred in local newspapers and was waged by both professionals and laypersons.

**Structure**

Similar to the structure of Thomas De La Peña, Kasson, and Bederman’s respective works, this project is broken up into chapters that work as vignettes. Each chapter will look at the diet debate in the context of one specific cultural anxiety. The chapters transition from a focus on the physical body, to the moral body, to the collective/national/white body. Chapter one, “Diet, Health, and Gender: Fighting National Neurasthenia,” focuses on the cultural anxiety of neurasthenia and the threat of weakening bodies and the breakdown of gender norms. The first section of chapter one will provide an outline these anxieties. Chapter two, “Vegetable or Meat Diets: The Diet Debate and Neurasthenia,” will examine the diet debate in the context of neurasthenia more broadly—specifically looking at how particular diets were argued to increase energy, nerve force, strength, and stamina in both men and women. The last section of chapter one, “White Masculinity and Diet: A Look at the Diet Debate and Boxers,” will take a very narrow look at the diet debate and its response to anxieties about weakening bodies in the context of boxers.

Chapter two, “Progressive Era Rhetoric in the Diet Debate: Poverty, Alcoholism, and Pure Food,” will take a very similar structure. The first section will briefly outline what the
Progressive Era was and some of the major ideologies associated with its reform movements.
The second section, “A Diet to Eliminate the Problems of Poverty,” will then examine the ways
diet debaters used progressive rhetoric to link their diets with other reform movements as a
specific response to poverty in American cities. The third section, “Food and Drink: Alcoholism
in the Diet Debate,” will take a narrow look at how diet debaters argued that diet influenced
people’s drinking habits. The last section, “The Jungle and the Pure Food and Drug Act,” will
look at the way Upton Sinclair’s influential novel was used a springboard for vegetarian diet
debaters but, ultimately, how it worked to keep meat on American plates. Chapter two is
primarily about marketing—how diet debaters capitalized on progressive rhetoric and causes to
promote their diet—and how diet debaters generally failed to gain momentum by associating
their diets with other reform movements.

Chapter three, “Race and Civilization in the Diet Debate: Meat vs. Rice as White vs.
Non-White,” focuses on the anxieties about race deterioration. The first section outlines
scientific racism and civilization theories that were used to justify the prevailing racial hierarchy
broad ways diet debaters used scientific racism and civilization theories to advocate for their
diets. This section also reveals the way diet debaters sought to reassure Americans that their diets
would not cause race deterioration or, conversely, that the stability of white superiority in the
country depended on the adoption of specific diets. The last section, “Hawaii: Race, Gender, Diet
and Imperialism,” outlines one debate as it unfolded on the pages on one popular Hawaiian
magazine. The debate illuminates the way race, civilization, and imperialism intersected with
diet.
CHAPTER I.
DIET, HEALTH, AND GENDER:
FIGHTING NATIONAL NEURASTHENIA

Diet debaters reflected and responded to general anxieties about neurasthenia and the physical decline of American bodies by positioning their favored diets with the context of those conversations and as a possible solution to the problem. For example, many arguments in the diet debate specifically focused on how particular diets could restore and produce energy and, even further, how diet functioned as a way for Americans to gain and maintain strength and stamina—all of which were considered to be important for warding off neurasthenia and the physical decline of individual bodies. Analyzing the diet debate and its response to neurasthenia using critical eating studies allows for a nuanced look at the way Americans understood individual diet in the context of national strength and, more specifically, how diet was positioned at the very border between individual bodies and the collective American body—bringing national concerns into the intimate realm of personal eating habits. In addition, the diet debate’s reflection of and response to these anxieties also allow for an examination of the intersection of diet, gender, and race as the fear of physical decline challenged conventional wisdom of both the gender and racial hierarchy.

The first section of this chapter explores the popular understandings concerning neurasthenia’s causes and its broader impact on the gender hierarchy. Section two, “Vegetable or Meat Diets: The Diet Debate and Neurasthenia,” examines the diet debate in the context of neurasthenia—specifically looking at how particular diets were argued to increase energy, nerve force, strength, and stamina in both men and women. The last section, “White Masculinity and Diet: A Look at the Diet Debate and Boxers,” takes a very narrow look at the diet debate and its response to anxieties about weakening bodies in the context of hyper-masculine boxers. This
section, while primarily focusing on vegetarian arguments, reveals the link between gender and fears of physical decline as they played out in the diet debate.

Neurasthenia: America’s Malady

At the turn of the twentieth century, roughly between 1880 and 1910, Americans became increasingly worried about a condition called neurasthenia. The term ‘neurasthenia’ was coined by George Beard in 1869, but it was really just a new label placed on the combination of a similar set of ailments from the early nineteenth-century—most notably dyspepsia and nervous troubles. Although the symptoms for neurasthenia seemed endless, the primary indicators were depression, fatigue or insomnia, restlessness, exhaustion, fear or anxiety, digestive troubles, general yet unspecified pain, and restlessness. Today neurasthenia is understood to be psychosomatic—a catchall term for the physical manifestation of emotional distress and anxiety—but at the time it was categorized as a disease similar to cancer or heart disease. In other words, although the symptoms many people developed were bio-medically real, neurasthenia was a social construction.

Both men and women suffered from neurasthenia, but, in general, white men who worked professional jobs—or jobs that required brain work—were most likely to be diagnosed. Anthony E. Rotundo, describing the impact of neurasthenia on American masculinity, notes that men could have neurasthenic breakdowns once, twice, or constantly, but no matter the frequency there was a persistent fear that symptoms of neurasthenia would reoccur.22 Doctors and intellectuals alike argued that the cause of neurasthenia was linked to over-civilization. Historian Jackson Lears writes, “Neurasthenia encompassed a bewildering variety of symptoms…but they

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all pointed to a single overriding effect: a paralysis of the will.”

In other words, neurasthenia was a manifestation of the general loss of control turn-of-the-century men and women experienced. Americans, especially those in the growing urban centers, were living lives that would have appeared alien to the generation before them; turn-of-the-century Americans were overworked, sedentary, had amplified anxiety about technology, immigration, and disease, and were increasingly dependent on bosses and the changing economy. The loss of will came with the inability to cope with the pressures of modern life. Resting on the widely held belief that the human body was a closed system—almost like a battery that needed to be recharged after use—neurasthenia was blamed on the overuse of bodily energy in an attempt to cope with these new, or at least amplified, stresses.

The white nervous system, it was argued, had not yet evolved to cope with the high level of civilization the race had achieved. Americans believed that the white race was so advanced in terms of civilization that the bodies of those working in the upper levels of society—business, government, trade, intellectual pursuits—just couldn’t keep up.

Neurasthenia also revealed the broader cultural anxiety about gender roles and race. According to Rotundo, neurasthenic men were unwittingly, “inverting the usual roles of the sexes, rejecting “male” and embracing “female,”—instead of showing achievement, ambition, dominance, and independence they showed vulnerability, dependence, passivity, and invalidism. When men had neurasthenic breakdowns, therefore, they were revealing their inability to maintain their masculinity and, because neurasthenia was almost at epidemic proportions among professional white men, it represented the collective inability of all American

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23 Lears, *Rebirth of a Nation*, 7.
26 Ibid., 191.
men to live up to their expectations. According to Michael Kimmel, another masculinity studies scholar, a shift from manhood to masculinity occurred at the same time neurasthenia was on the rise:

At the turn of the century, manhood was replaced gradually with by the term masculinity, which referred to a set of behavioral traits and attitudes that were contrasted now with a new opposite, femininity. Masculinity was something that had to be constantly demonstrated, the attainment of which was forever in question—lest the man be undone by a perception of being too feminine.  

Whereas manhood was achieved when a boy completed the linear progression from childhood to adulthood, masculinity was not so straightforward. Just because a man was an adult with all attached responsibilities did not mean that he was masculine.

Popular understandings about the causes of neurasthenia were a reflection of this ideology. Men all over the country who were diagnosed with neurasthenia were perceived to be adult men who failed to live up to their expectation to be masculine; either their bodies had failed to keep up with them or they had failed to maintain their bodies. This increased need to constantly perform masculinity also lead to the preoccupation with health and fitness, Kimmel eloquently puts it that, “The body did not contain the man, expressing the man within; now, the body was the man.”  

Carolyn Thomas De La Peña echoes this connection, “Muscles,” she writes, “became cultural status symbols largely because of the contemporary obsession with halting physical decline.” Loss of strength in individuals, after all, was seen as a much larger cultural problem. People believed that the entire white American population was weakening and in danger of what Teddy Roosevelt called, “race suicide.”

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28 Ibid., 94.
30 Thomas De La Peña, *The Body Electric*. 
and its symptoms, as Gail Bederman argues, created a gendered and racialized paradox; “Only white male bodies had the capacity to be truly civilized. Yet, at the same time, civilization destroyed white male bodies.”\textsuperscript{31} It is clear that neurasthenia was caused by anxieties about gender and race in the rapidly modernizing American society at the same time it channeled those broader anxieties into one observable medical condition.

Several theories were developed to respond to neurasthenia. Women were often prescribed intense rest cures, including extended periods of bedrest and seclusion. Neurasthenia in women was also commonly conflated with hysteria and treated as a sexual-dysfunction. Just as neurasthenia in men was assumed to stem from a man’s inability to perform his masculine duties, neurasthenia in women was assumed to be the same. Although we now know that women who were diagnosed with hysteria and neurasthenia were primarily women whose behavior did not correspond with the patriarchal norm—women seen as being unable to perform the biologically determined domestic duties associated with marriage and motherhood—at the turn of the century such a diagnosis was perceived as being bio-medical. Neurasthenia in women, however, was not seen as being as threatening as the widespread occurrence of neurasthenia in men. Neurasthenic men were taken more seriously. Rotundo describes the rest cures prescribed to neurasthenic men as being intricately linked to the disease’s gendered component. When men were prescribed rest cures they were sent home, to the feminine domestic sphere, to relax and avoid work, or the public masculine sphere.\textsuperscript{32} In addition, rest cures also symbolized a man’s regression back into childhood with his retreat to the domestic sphere.\textsuperscript{33} On the other hand, men were also advised to go west, engage in primitive activities like ranching or hunting, and get

\textsuperscript{31} Bederman, \textit{Manliness and Civilization}, 88.  
\textsuperscript{32} Rotundo, \textit{American Manhood}, 191.  
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., 192.
fresh air outside of the cities—instead of rest cures that symbolized a man’s regression back to childhood, this type of cure symbolized a man’s regression from civilization back to savagery. Both cures were argued to work, but, regardless of their effectiveness, they reveal the link made between neurasthenia and the more general anxiety about gender and race at the turn of the century.

Vegetable or Meat Diets: The Diet Debate and Neurasthenia

Just as the rest cure and the out-doors cure for neurasthenia represented each side of the gender and racial binary—the rest cure bringing people closer to femininity/domesticity and the out-doors cure closer to masculinity/savagery—diet was argued to have a similar effect.

Although not all cures for neurasthenia included a diet regimen, and not all participants in the diet debate saw curing neurasthenia as their ultimate goal, public conversations about diet frequently alluded to or explicitly mentioned the anxiety of physical decline. Diet debaters argued that diet was the key to solving the neurasthenia problem and, conversely, that some diets actually caused bodies to break down. The sections below detail three ways the diet debate intersected with the national anxiety over neurasthenia through the incorporation of theories about energy, nerve force, strength, and stamina in both white men and women.

Energy and Nerve Force

One common theme in the diet debate was the notion that certain diets could restore, maintain, and/or produce energy in people’s bodies. In the context of neurasthenia, this theme was very important because people believed that the body had a finite amount of energy and, like a battery, could only exert so much energy before running out and causing exhaustion. Health reformers like George Beard argued that modern civilization was causing neurasthenia in American men and women because it took more energy for them to function in cities and
professional environments than it did for previous generations of Americans to function in more rural environments. The energy conservation movement, which promoted rest-cures and health retreats, relied on this assumption—in order to fight neurasthenia, Americans needed to be more aware of how they were exerting their limited supply of bodily energy.34

This assumption also led to turn-of-the-century fads like radium treatments. Radium, which was discovered in 1902, was thought to have natural restorative properties. According to Thomas De La Peña, between 1902 and the early 1940s Americans were fascinated with radium and actually ingested the element because they believed it could make their bodies produce unlimited energy—essentially eliminating the constrictions of the closed system they believed was holding them back.35 Although it is clear now that ingesting radium actually did the body harm, at the time the element was considered to be a cure for the energy problem. When turn-of-the-century diet debaters argued that particular diets could restore, maintain, and/or produce energy they were capitalizing on the same national desire to solve the energy problem and the neurasthenia epidemic.

A very early example was published in 1882 in the Evening Bulletin of Maysville, Kentucky, and, while it is slightly outside of the timeframe of this project, it is representative of similar arguments made throughout the 1890s. In the article “Meat Versus Vegetable Diets,” which was reprinted from Dr. Foote’s Health Monthly, the author argues that the human body absorbs more energy from meat than it does from vegetables—an argument that rests on the assumption that diet is important for restoring energy to the body. The article uses a study conducted by a Professor Hoffman from Boston to stake its claim; “Prof. Hoffman fed a servant

34 Thomas De La Pena, The Body Electric, 4.
on vegetable diet and found that not one half of the albuminous [protean] matter had been
digested. The same man was next fed on beef, fat and flour and only one-fifth of the albuminous
substance passed off as waste.”36 With this logic, the human body takes more energy and creates
less waste on a mixed-diet centered around meat eating than it does on a primarily plant based
diet. For anyone worried about neurasthenia, this argument would have been reassuring because
it did not call for Americans to make any substantial changes in their daily diet—most American
diets were already centered on meat eating.

The article “Diet and Dieting,” published thirteenth years later in 1895 in the San
Francisco Call echoes this sentiment more explicitly. In “Diet and Dieting,” the author argues
that meat is unquestionably, “the cheapest, best and most convenient form for renewing the daily
waste of the body when hard labor is to be performed,” and that meat is better for both manual
laborers and professionals, “for it has been clearly demonstrated that brain labor produces
muscular waste equally with bodily exertion.”37 What causes nervous disorders, like
neurasthenia, then, is simple overeating:

The mistake meat-eaters make is in, apparently, supposing that if a little meat is a good
thing a great deal must be still better. It is not going too far to say that meat, roasted,
broiled, fried, twice or three times a day is more largely responsible for the nervous,
irritable, prematurely broken-down American men and women that is the tea or coffee at
whose door the nervous condition is so often laid. Yet most men and women consider
that they have accomplished something peculiarly commendable when they give up
drinking tea or coffee.38

Here the author is making two claims; first, while meat is necessary in moderation, it is
overeating meat that causes men and women to break down and, second; that those who think
they are being proactive by giving up coffee and tea are not really doing anything substantial to

36 “Meat Versus Vegetable Diet.”
37 Medicus, “Diet and Dieting.”
38 Ibid.
reduce their risk of physical breakdown. The solution, then, is to eat less meat so that its
restorative properties can take effect. In addition, the acknowledgement that brain labor requires
as much energy as manual labor and that meat is the best source of energy for all workers
capitalizes on the general anxiety that overcivilization—which was pushing American men off of
farms and into factories and professional careers—was ruining men at its highest rungs. After all,
as Bederman argues, neurasthenia, “was not necessarily the fault of the neurasthenic. It was,
instead, the fault of the biological limitations and restraints of his highly evolved body” coupled
with the increased pressure put on individual Americans at the turn of the century.39 This article
is also reassuring in the sense that it provides a simple solution to this problem; whether laborer
or brain worker, Americans could prevent possible break-downs by simply eating less meat to
allow it’s natural restorative powers to take effect.

Other participants in the diet debate also explicitly noted that brain laborers needed
particular diets to avoid neurasthenia from energy depletion. In 1902 the San Francisco Call
published “What to Eat if Meat is Dear,” by H. W. Wiley. In the article Wiley argues, like the
author of “Diet and Dieting,” that meat is good for all types of men but, going one step further,
that meat was especially good for brain laborers. Wiley argues that men with sedentary habits
should eat less starchy and sugary foods—which he recommends for manual laborers—because
they are best suited for energy exerted through muscular activity. Meat, on the other hand, is
better for brain laborers because it provides them with the type of energy needed to function
without being converted into fat. “In other words,” Wiley writes, “the well-to-do person, as a
rule, whose habits are sedentary, can eat meat with less danger of acquiring that excess of

39 Bederman, Manliness and Civilization, 86.
adipose [fat].” At a time when there was a shift in the symbolism of weight—when fat, which used to symbolize wealth and power, was beginning to symbolize invalidism and the weakness of will power—Wiley’s argument would have resonated. As in the other pro-mixed diet arguments mentioned here, Wiley’s tone is comforting. At a time when the fear of neurasthenia was very real, Wiley reassured his readers that eating meat—a staple of many diets—was not the culprit. In fact, Wiley contends the brain laborers—those most at risk and concerned about developing neurasthenia—are the very people who need meat in their diets the most.

In 1891 the *Pittsburg Dispatch* published “The Vegetable Diet. It is Better From the Standpoints of Health and Economy,” where M. F. Griswold—using the same argumentative structure and assumptions as the pro-mixed-diet arguments examined above—essentially claims the exact opposite. Griswold first presents the common pro-meat assumptions:

- Meat, it is claimed, is (1) more easily digested, because of having already passed through the process of digestion in the body of the animal slain; and, (2) that because of the immense amount of food consumed by the herbivora in particular, man, by eating its flesh, gets his own in a more concentrated and vitalizing form; (3) that meat is richer in certain elements of physical force, noticeably and superlatively, nerve and motor force.

Griswold moves on to disprove each of these pro-meat points. First, he argues that vegetables are actually easier to digest than meat and, therefore, require the human body to exert less of its valuable energy to digest it. In the context of the fear of neurasthenia, this argument is salient—if you want to reserve energy for work and other tasks of civilization, don’t waste it on digesting meat. Next, he argues that animals eat for the same reason humans do, “to support life and use up their vital forces,” so logically humans do not get the nutrition from the diet of the slaughtered animal because the animal would have already used it before being slaughtered. He then claims

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40 Wiley, “What to Eat If Meat Is Dear.”
41 Griswold, “The Vegetable Diet. It Is Better From the Standpoints of Health and Economy.”
42 Ibid.
that meat’s high “nitrogenous substances” are often why people think it has more nutritional value, however, it is actually “non-nitrogenous substances” found in vegetables that are specifically better for the, “production of nerve and motor force.” In other words, eating vegetables takes less vital force, or energy, to digest and actually gives the body more force after digestion. In comparison to his predecessor Dr. Wiley, Griswold’s claim calls for action on the part of the American people—while Wiley defends the meat-eating habits of the neurasthenic-prone brain workers, Griswold cries fowl.

Griswold’s next argument is also particularly useful for understanding how diet was positioned to be of critical importance for the individual and collective health of the nation during the neurasthenia epidemic. Griswold writes that meat, “is a stimulant of the thermal force consuming kind, kindling up a temporary overplus of heat and energy, to be afterword followed by commensurate languor and depression. Actual intoxication has been known to follow flesh eating by those not habituated to its use.” In other words, eating meat over-heats the body, causes a spike in energy, then causes a low that produces symptoms of neurasthenia. Griswold also argues that abstinence from meat gives people, “a clearer brain and a more vigorous will.”

Keeping in mind Jackson Lears’ description of neurasthenia as “a paralysis of the will,” Griswold’s argument that vegetarianism actually gives people more will power—more control over their body and character—is in response to anxiety about the overarching effect of neurasthenia on both individual bodies and the nation as a whole.

Each of the examples presented in the section—three which were pro-mixed diet and one which was pro-vegetarian—show how the diet debate responded to the anxiety of neurasthenia

43 Ibid.
44 Ibid.
45 Lears, Rebirth of a Nation, 7.
by specifically arguing that particular diets could help Americans maintain the energy that was crucial for preventing neurasthenic breakdowns.

Strength and Stamina

It was not just the maintenance, restoration, and/or production of energy that got attention from diet debaters, strength and stamina were also key to many arguments. As opposed to energy, which was thought of as the body’s fuel, strength and stamina were more associated with the power of the physical body and how one’s body endured during work—in other words, how the body physically manifested and used its energy. As Thomas De La Peña describes, nineteenth-century “physiologists theorized that muscle did not actually increase the total energy in the body; it merely brought that energy to the body’s usable “surface.”46

The critical importance of strength and stamina in combating neurasthenia and addressing the declining state of American masculinity was very public. According to John F. Kasson, the popularity of masculine and muscular figures that possessed incredible strength and endurance, including entertainers like Harry Houdini, body builders such as Eugen Sandow, and fictional men such as Tarzan, tell us, “how modernity was understood in terms of the body and how the white male body became a powerful symbol by which to dramatize modernity’s impact and how to resist it.”47 The popularity of body building and the celebrity of individual body builders perfectly demonstrates how anxieties about neurasthenia and the decline of American masculinity were worked out in the public arena.

Eugen Sandow is a good example of this process. Sandow was an incredibly famous public figure in the 1890s; he was a vaudeville performer, a constant visual presence on the

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pages of popular magazines, and even performed feats of strength at the Chicago World’s Fair.\(^{48}\) According to Kasson, Sandow’s body became a symbol of reassurance for all American men at a time when, “making his body became a sign of a man’s ability to make his way in the world against all adversaries, strictly on his own merits.”\(^{49}\) In other words, despite the challenges of civilization, men could prove their will, merit, and determination by constructing strong bodies. Kasson writes, “By stressing the potential for strength, control, heroism, and virility in the male physique, he [Sandow] reassured a broad public of the continuation of these qualities—and their potential for further development—in the modern world.”\(^{50}\) Thomas De La Peña also notes that the rise in the popularity health machines, or workout machines, in the late nineteenth-century coincided with this same anxiety; “If a fundamental part of the neurasthenic anxiety was the fear that bodies would not measure up to the world of machines, then it is logical that many sufferers sought relief in mechanized physical training.”\(^{51}\)

In the context of the neurasthenia epidemic, white American men were not just worried about maintaining strength and stamina; they were specifically worried that working in professional environments—at the higher rungs of civilization—was preventing them from attaining strength and stamina all together. This fear was one of the reasons why outdoor cures were prescribed. Championed by Teddy Roosevelt, the idea that white professional Americans needed to get in touch with their primitive selves was taken very seriously. According to Roosevelt and other prominent figures, such as G. Stanley Hall, American men needed to get in touch with their savage side in order to secure the superiority of the white race—although it was

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\(^{48}\) Ibid., 23.
\(^{49}\) Ibid., 30.
\(^{50}\) Ibid., 76.
\(^{51}\) Thomas De La Pena, *The Body Electric*, 32.
clear that the white race had reached the highest point of civilization, American men were potentially jeopardizing that position by going soft.\textsuperscript{52} In other words, white men needed to balance civilization and savagery to avoid overcivilization and, therefore, the loss of racial superiority.

One way men did this was by hunting. As Michael Kimmel notes, because modern technology made it so that the majority of men no longer needed to hunt for food, men hunted instead to prove that they could.\textsuperscript{53} Kimmel also describes the symbolic function of eating meat, whether it was shot by the consumer or not, as, “a potent answer to feminized manhood; some claimed that a diet devoid of red meat would prevent the building of full many power.”\textsuperscript{54} The symbolism here is clear and was reassuring to men worried about neurasthenia—even if you cannot go out and hunt, even just the act of eating meat was part of the performance of masculinity. Along with exercise and body building, diet also became a major talking point in the national attempt to relieve neurasthenic anxiety. If performing masculinity was seen as a key to preventing a neurasthenic nation, diet was argued to be a means for individual men to attain such physical embodiment of strength and stamina.

One article, published in the \textit{Bennington Evening Banner} of Vermont in 1909, explicitly addresses the fear that professional American men were losing strength and going soft. The author writes, “men today are guilty in large measure of three particular sins against their bodies—overeating, mental overwork and deficient exercise.”\textsuperscript{55} The article continues, “Our habits of living have changed in such a marked degree that a radical change is necessary in the

\begin{footnotes}
\item[52] Bederman, \textit{Manliness and Civilization}, 182.
\item[53] Kimmel, \textit{Manhood in America}, 101.
\item[54] Ibid.
\item[55] McCurdy, “Physical Education. Why Many Men of Sedentary Habits Are Not Well.”
\end{footnotes}
diet of most of us,” because modern conveniences had greatly reduced the amount of muscular activity performed by men on a daily basis. According to the article, men living sedentary lifestyles overeat in general but that overeating meat is particularly harmful. The article argues that meat takes more energy and a larger toll on the sedentary body to digest; “The man who overeats…in the use of meat is paying a very high first cost for his food.”\textsuperscript{56} This article, however, does not go as far as to promote vegetarianism. Instead, the author simply promotes a reduction in meat consumption: “You ask, am I a vegetarian? I answer no. My only suggestion is that you make your diet correspond with the type of work you are doing.”\textsuperscript{57} This argument, while only suggesting subtle changes in professional men’s diets, approaches the anxiety of neurasthenia by pinpointing the reason professional men were vulnerable and more likely to have neurasthenic breakdowns. Matching their diet with their sedentary lifestyles, this author contends, will help reduce their risk.

One two-part exchange in the \textit{New York Tribune} in April of 1902 also demonstrates how both vegetarian and pro-meat advocates used strength and stamina to argue that their proposed diet was superior. On April 4\textsuperscript{th} the paper published the article “Comparison of Foods” where the opinions of two doctors are laid side by side for the reader. The first doctor, Dr. W. L. Munro, is quoted as saying that Americans eat too much food in general but that meat is still a necessity. Munro argues that, “An ordinary laborer who spends much of his day in the streets or fields could not well get along without meat at least once a day. Meat is needed for the tissues and blood. The average man would be better off if he ate meat once a day.”\textsuperscript{58} The article continues to present the opinion of Dr. W. Gilman Thompson who warns against cutting meat from the

\textsuperscript{56} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{58} “Comparison of Foods. Authorities Say That To Much Meat Is Eaten.”
American diet, “the universal experience [of a vegetarian] has been that while it may keep him in apparent health for some time, it eventually results in a loss of strength…A purely vegetable diet gradually induces a condition of muscular weakness and languor, with disinclination for either physical or mental work,” which were symptomatic of neurasthenia.59

A few days later, on April 12th, the paper printed a response to the doctor’s opinions. In “Vegetarianism and Health,” the author specifically responds to Thompson’s claim that vegetarians cannot maintain strength or an inclination to work. The author, who describes himself as being a vegetarian for twenty years, argues that men who take up vegetarianism quickly become weak initially, abandon the attempt, and then declare that vegetarianism is bad for strength. According to the author, however, when men gradually become vegetarians and stick with the diet they see amazing results. The author claims that he experienced, “exceptional strength and good general health…in spite of two different forms of invalidism, which are now entirely passed.”60 In other words, the author, who had suffered from invalidism—a major symptom of neurasthenia—had recovered and gained strength after becoming a vegetarian. “[My] strength and my power of recuperation,” the author writes, “have been several times thoroughly tested…I have been especially congratulated by physicians upon my possession of those same powers.”61 The author concludes with a recommendation for Sylvester Graham’s “The Science of Health,” which he assures his reader answers the question, “of whether flesh eating, with its attendant evils, is necessary for the strength of the human body.”62 The arguments presented in this section clearly show diet debaters positioning their diet as a means for men to

59 Ibid.
60 “Vegetarianism and Health. Testimony Tending to Show That Meat Is Not Necessary to Maintain Strength.”
61 Ibid.
62 Ibid.
maintain and gain strength and stamina and—although this argument will be specifically unpacked in the last section of this chapter—they reveal the various ways both pro-mixed and pro-vegetarian diet debaters responded to general fears that individual Americans were losing strength.

Dietary Double Standard: Energy, Strength and Stamina in Women

To this point, most of the examples presented about energy, strength, and stamina used in the diet debate have been articles aimed specifically at men or the general public which, in this case, can often be assumed to be men. Women, however, did suffer from neurasthenia and similar illnesses that manifested in physical decline that were associated with modern living and civilization. According to the ideology of separate spheres, the distinct separation of the societal roles of men and women were seen to be a marker of high civilization—the more distinct the roles, the more civilized the society.63 Like the neurasthenic men described above, when women failed to properly occupy their role in the domestic sphere or adequately take on the responsibilities of marriage or motherhood they were often diagnosed with neurasthenia—most often associated with the symptom of exhaustion. According to Bederman, most people thought women became neurasthenic when they attempted to function in civilized society while simultaneously tending to the responsibilities of the domestic sphere and became overloaded as a result.64 Like hysteria, neurasthenia in women was thought to be a biological issue of energy. Like the battery metaphor used for men, women were thought to have only a certain amount of energy but most of that energy was thought to naturally be taken up by their reproductive organs, therefore women were especially susceptible to neurasthenia. That is also why, as described

63 Bederman, Manliness and Civilization, 125.
64 Ibid., 130.
above, rest-cures were associated with neurasthenic women—women were advised by their doctors to rest, relax, and eventually return to simply concerning themselves with their home and children.

Many arguments in the diet debate that were specifically directed towards women alluded to the energy, strength, and stamina arguments directed at men but, following the logic detailed above, they framed them as being either useful or harmful for work in the domestic sphere. For example, in 1904 the *Topeka State Journal* of Kansas published an article by Katherine Blades titled, “Women Adherents of Vegetarianism.” Blades begins by noting that vegetarianism became popular among American women after claims that it would give them strength and quickness on their feet, prevent diseases and many ailments that would have been associated with neurasthenia, “purify the blood, sweeten both the temper and the breath,” as well as “give one a dazzling complexion.” Blade notes, those who subscribed to vegetarian claims, “devoured fruits, nuts and whole wheat bread with the enthusiasm of a feminine martyr,” but unfortunately, “After a time most of them fell back to the fleshpots. They found almost without exception that after a year’s trial vegetarianism did not give them either a dazzling complexion or immunity from human ailments.” Here Blades described a feminized argument in favor of vegetarianism that failed, however, she does not argue that it failed because of the diet itself but because of the motives behind its adoption.

Blades continues to describe what she calls a new sort of vegetarianism that is not adopted for superficial and selfish reasons but for moral and selfless reasons. Women who adopt this new vegetarianism, according to Blades, “do not abstain from flesh eating to acquire a

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65 Blades, “Women Adherents of Vegetarianism.”
66 Ibid.
dazzling complexion. They cut out the meat diet as a matter of sentiment and conscience." In other words, vegetarianism is good for women and can prevent some symptoms of neurasthenia but only if they justify their adherence to the diet as being linked with their already prescribed gender roles—that is, being sentimental, kind, and caring. Blades moves on to mention several prominent vegetarian women in America; “Miss Potter…and uncommonly fine and handsome specimen of healthy womanhood,” and “Adelaide Johnson…a slender little lady, with great power of work and endurance” are just two examples.

It is clear from Blades’ article that strength and stamina were important to American women but not in quiet the same way that they were important to men. In the public sphere strength and stamina were important for men to work and deal with the world, in the private sphere strength and stamina were important to prevent disease and help a woman keep up with her task of running a home while performing proper femininity through morality, selflessness, and the maintenance of physical appearance.

A few years later, the Carrizozo News of New Mexico published an article about a Philadelphia woman who prescribed to the type of vegetarianism advocated by Blades. “Never Tasted Flesh” is about Miss Ora Kress and her views on vegetarianism. According to the author, Kress had been a vegetarian since birth because her father was a Seventh-Day Adventist. Kress is described as, “Healthy and robust, with a clear complexion, a pleasant temperament and genial disposition.” The article quotes Kress in her explanation of her lifestyle. Kress asks, “Why kill living things for food when the earth is so generous with her bounty of healthful, nourishing

67 Ibid.
68 Ibid.
69 “Never Tasted Flesh; Philadelphia Girl Vegetarian All Her Life.”
When asked if she continues to be vegetarianism for health or because it is humane, Kress says both; although she admits that she abstains from meat for health, which would be a selfish reason according to Blades, it is very clear in Kress’ responses that being humane and kind are just as important. Kress even goes so far as to say that meat-eating causes race deterioration—a topic that is thoroughly explored in chapter three—when she claims:

The ancient Greeks, who attained the highest point in the development of the human form and who gave so much to the world that is beautiful and artistic, subsisted almost entirely upon vegetable food. Flesh food was a luxury to them, and when they ate meat abundantly they began to degenerate.

Here Kress is simply expanding her argument beyond herself. By providing the example about the Greeks she is saying that vegetarianism, while good for her personal health, temperament, and looks, is also good for society as a whole. This sentiment is representative of Thompkins argument about the Graham diet of the 1830s—Kress makes a distinct connection between the diet of individuals and the strength and character of the entire society. Like Blades argument that women should adopt vegetarianism for moral and ethical reasons rather than for vanity, Kress argues that both men and women should adopt vegetarianism to make society better as a whole. While both women participated in the diet debate through their respective works, they clearly framed their arguments in terms of their gender and through an adherence to the racial hierarchy.

White Masculinity and Diet: A Look at the Diet Debate and Boxers

Now that the more general arguments about energy, strength, and stamina have been examined, it is worth taking a narrower look at how these themes played out in the diet debate as it related to turn-of-the-century boxing—a topic that is also very useful for unpacking the link

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70 Ibid.
71 Ibid.
between neurasthenia, gender, and race. Gail Bederman’s *Manliness and Civilization* is a quintessential text for unpacking the link between race and gender in at the turn of the century and, although she does not explicitly explore diet in her study, she provides an important foundation for understanding why arguments about diet were important in the context of neurasthenia.\(^{72}\)

Bederman opens her book with the 1910 boxing match between Jim Jeffries and Jack Johnson, the former a retired white heavyweight and the latter the first black world heavyweight champion.\(^{73}\) When Johnson became the world champion it essentially rocked the preconceived expectations for boxing and American masculinity in general. Jeffries came out of retirement to challenge Johnson to, as Bederman describes, “vindicate Anglo-Saxon manhood and save civilization by vanquishing the upstart “Negro.””\(^{74}\) The matchup between Jeffries and Johnson extended far beyond the individual men; Americans understood the match as a symbolic contest between white and black, civilized and savage. It was also important in the context of neurasthenia because Jeffries was symbolic of all white American men; was he strong enough, masculine enough, to overcome the broader fear that American men had gone soft? Unfortunately for the white American men, Johnson won the fight without much struggle and, what proved—in their minds—even worse, his mounting fame also brought companionship from white women.\(^{75}\) The government, with support from the general public, used this to destroy Johnson in a way they had expected Jeffries to do. The National Bureau of Investigation charged Johnson under the Mann Act—normally used in cases of human trafficking—for

\(^{72}\) See introduction for a more general overview of Bederman’s work.  
\(^{74}\) Ibid., 2.  
\(^{75}\) Ibid., 3.
crossing stateliness with a white mistress. Johnson never recovered from the charges, he left the country and did not return for twenty years when he finally served his sentence.

Bederman describes the Jeffries-Johnson controversy, both in the initial push for the fight and the events that transpired after Johnson’s win, as just, “one of the many ways Progressive Era men used ideas about white supremacy to produce a racially based ideology of male power.”76 Debating about diet in the world of boxing, I argue, is another way that turn-of-the-century men did this. Just as Kasson describes the impact famous body builders had on American masculinity, Kimmel notes that boxing was specifically used as a way to perform masculinity using the built body and the physical display of aggression and strength in a society were those exact traits were being weeded out by corporate powers. Kimmel writes;

boxing was more than mere manhood; it heralded the triumphant return of the Heroic Artisan as mythic hero…If the workaday world undermined working-class manhood—requiring obedience to rules and docility toward managers—then boxing celebrated his traditional virtues: toughness, prowess, ferocity.77

Boxing was symbolic in its subversion of expected behavior and for its display and glorification of the male body. How boxers built their bodies provides the link between boxing, neurasthenia, and the diet debate.

In 1903, a few years before the culmination of the racial tension in the Johnson-Jeffries match, another boxer published his opinion on what gives men strength and stamina in the ring. In a full page spread in the San Francisco Call, Mr. and Mrs. William E. Parker discuss the benefits of exercise and diet for both men and women. Mrs. Parker argues that women should exercise in order to keep up with their husbands and maintain their own health. She advocates going on long walks, cycling, and even light boxing, “For the slender girl [boxing] is especially

76 Ibid., 5.
77 Kimmel, Manhood in America, 102.
beneficial…Don’t consider it masculine just because athletes advocate it but think that if it will
do you good, and five minutes’ work on a bag each day will work wonders.”

Her husband, however, does promote boxing as a masculine activity in spite of his wife’s
recommendations for women. The editor introduces Mr. Parker as a “vegetarian in the strictest
sense of the word,” and as a “magnificent specimen of young manhood.” The editor goes on to
note, “He has trained many years for combats in the ring, and has reached the highest
development of his powers. It is a well known fact that men engaged in his strenuous work sap
their vitality by too much training, but the clever fighter declares he will be boxing at 35 and live
to be 100…because he is a vegetarian.”

Although it is clear from the editor’s introduction and Mr. Parker’s own testimony—
which will be examined below—that Parker was a physically strong and masculine advocate for
vegetarianism, Parker was not given the same esteem the year before when the hyper-masculine
National Police Gazette (NPG) published a short blurb about him. Kasson describes the NPG as
being a major contributor to the national anxiety that American men were becoming weak
because it often published advertisements aimed at weak men and stories about men being
emasculated in public. The NPG also often featured articles about boxing and boxers, then
referred to as pugilists, which promoted the strong and aggressive masculinity that boxers
projected. In one blurb, Mr. Parker—boxing by the name of “Kid” Parker—was discussed. The
blurb describes a challenge that played out in Denver between “Kid” Parker and champion
lightweight Jim Corbett. According to their sources, which they admit are “not vouched for,” the

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78 Parker, “Exercises for Women.”
79 Ibid.
80 Ibid.
vegetarian boxer showed up at Corbett’s training quarters looking for a fight. “Although Parker weighs 136 pounds and Corbett 126 pounds,” the blurb continues, “The boys went at it for blood. At the end of the first round, after several savage mixups, Parker was groggy. At the end of the third round he was bleeding, and was all but out twice during the fight. He went home to patch his cuts and meditate on the folly of revenge.”

Although Parker does not confirm or even mention such a match in his article in the San Francisco Call, it is worth noting that his reputation was tarnished on the pages of one of the most popular magazines concerned with masculinity in publication at the time. In light of what has already been examined in the sections above, vegetarianism was often considered antithetical to masculinity and strength because meat-eating was argued to be vital for the development of those traits—the NPG blurb strengthened this association for its male readers. So, although Parker advocates strongly for it in the San Francisco Call, it is important to understand that his argument in favor of vegetarianism for boxers was most likely met with skepticism.

In his article in the San Francisco Call, Parker, despite probable skepticism, makes the argument that vegetarianism is the best diet for boxers, who were then seen as some of the toughest men in the country. Parker writes that his vegetarian diet, “makes me stronger and gives me greater endurance.” He further justifies his activities by noting that, although he is financially stable enough to quit the game, he boxes, “to prove that a vegetarian fighter is superior to the man who gains his strength from eating flesh foods.” According to Parker, before he became vegetarian he had always assumed that a meat diet made men stronger, “I

82 “Kid’ Parker Got It. The Vegetarian Pugilist Was Looking For Blood and It Came His Way.”
83 Ibid.
84 Parker.
85 Ibid.
deemed that the more meat I ate the stronger I would become.”86 Once he started his vegetarian experiment, he realized the opposite was true. After recounting his daily diet and exercise routine, Parker concludes with a few more general arguments about strength and vegetarianism. Parker, using a very common pro-vegetarian argument, notes that ancient men subsisted on vegetarian diets. “Spartans,” he writes, “possessed muscular power and endurance and this is ascribed to the fact that they were vegetarians. The armies of Greece and Rome in the time of their conquests were made up of soldiers who gained sustenance and strength from vegetable foods.”87 He backs up this statement scientifically, claiming that men put on more fat on meat diets and therefore have to strain themselves to compensate.

Finally, foreshadowing the vegetarian arguments that will be examined in chapter three, Parker uses an international argument to end his piece. “It is a mistaken idea,” he argues, “that meat-eaters are stronger than vegetarians. You can go into Africa and find tribes of people who have never tasted meat, and they will endure twice as much hardship as the white people, and when it comes to athletics sports, like running or jumping, they are amazingly faster.”88 In light of what the Johnson-Jefferies match would bring to the forefront of American consciousness only six years after this article, Parker’s argument is important. With this logic, it is not race but diet that determines which group of people is superior in strength and which is inferior. Speaking to the fear of racial deterioration amplified by popular figures like Teddy Roosevelt, Parker’s argument makes the connection between diet and strength that challenges the argument that white supremacy is inherent. If white men are not inherently the strongest or the fastest—as evident by the neurasthenic epidemic—then their diet becomes a critical issue. It is also worth

86 Ibid.
87 Ibid.
88 Ibid.
noting again that body building was very popular at the time and, with this racial argument, it is clear that Parker did not subscribe to the belief that white men were inherently stronger than non-white men. In other words, for white American men concerned with warding off neurasthenia and with their bodily performance of masculinity, diet—in Parker’s estimation, a vegetarian diet—was critical.

In 1914, four years after the Johnson-Jefferies fight, another pro-vegetarian article linking race, gender, diet, and boxing was published in the *Bridgeport Evening Framer* in Connecticut. The short blurb discusses the British boxing champion Freddie Welsh. The article reads, “Those who denounce flesh-eaters as cannibals and savages…usually assert as one of the virtues of vegetarianism that is makes men peaceful and tame and domestic and averse to fighting.”89 This was a common pro-meat argument: in order to maintain a healthy level of aggression and strength—echoing the prescriptions from Hall and Roosevelt—men needed to eat meat. Given the symbolic function of meat eating as a masculine activity, according to Kimmel, this sentiment does not paint meat-eating men as wholly savage, rather it acknowledges the dichotomy between meat and vegetarianism with masculinity and femininity—aggression versus passivity. This article, however, argues against the common assumption that vegetarianism makes men adverse to aggression. “There are at least two examples,” the article continues, “that tend to disprove the theory. One is the Japanese, who did a few things to Russia some years ago that demonstrated that vegetarians could do a right nifty job of scrapping; and the other is Freddie Welsh.”90 This argument incorporates the very common use of the Japanese as a representative vegetarian population—which will be further examined in chapter three. This

89 “Freddie Welsh, 28 Today, Is Vegetarian Champion.”
90 Ibid.
article argues that the Japanese proved that soldiers on plant-based diets had great strength based on their actions in the Russo-Japanese war. It also, like Parker’s argument above, this example helps to shatter the illusion that white male masculinity and strength is racially inherent; if the Japanese can succeed in war against the Russians on a vegetarian diet, any non-white nation could potentially do the same.

The article moves on to note how Welsh, a white European man, specifically benefits from a vegetarian diet. According to the article, Welsh started his vegetarian diet because he could not afford to eat meat at every meal and found that he had more strength and stamina when he left it off his plate. He then became a strict vegetarian to maintain his physical health. The article reads, “Welsh doesn’t believe, with some vegetarians, that meat-eating makes a man blood-thirsty, nor does he hold, with some defenders of meat, that a nut diet makes a man nutty. With him it is just a matter of plan common sense based on experience.” Based on Welsh’s track record—as a noted international boxer and a marathon runner—the article concludes that Welsh’s diet appears to be working to build his strength and increase his endurance. While Welsh was certainly no Eugen Sandow, it is worth noting that as a prominent masculine figure—figure in both the sense of his popularity and in his physicality—Welsh’s experience with vegetarianism could have been convincing.

What both Parker and Welsh demonstrate as vegetarian boxers is the complicated link between diet, gender, and race in the context of declining American bodies at the turn of the twentieth century. Like the diet debaters who argued that their favored diet could restore, maintain, and/or produce energy during the neurasthenia scare, Parker and Welsh both contend

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91 Ibid.
that their bodies—which both observably exerted energy through sport—benefitted from a vegetarian diet. Similarly, they both explicitly argue that their strength and stamina in the ring is directly related to their diet. Parker and Welsh also complicate the prevailing racial hierarchy in much the same way that the Johnson-Jefferies fight did in 1910; both challenged the underlying assumption that a meat-centered diet automatically resulted in good health and, more importantly, that looking at non-white groups who excelled in feats of strength or war against white nations proves that white American men needed to pay more attention to maintaining their superiority.

This complex intersection will by thoroughly explored in chapter three, but it is worth noting that turn of the century anxieties often boiled down to the general anxiety that white American men were not as infallible as previously believed. What Parker, Welsh, and all the other vegetarian and pro-meat arguments presented in the chapter also reveal is the fact that the diet debate was fluid; while there was no clear winner, diet debaters consistently reflected and responded to general cultural anxieties. It is clear that debaters were framing their arguments in the context of the broader anxieties about neurasthenia and its impact on the gender and racial hierarchies in such a way that reinforced the link between individual and nation and the fear that what individual Americans ate could jeopardize the entire nation or white race.
CHAPTER II.
PROGRESSIVE ERA RHETORIC IN THE DIET DEBATE:
POVERTY, ALCOHOLISM, AND PURE FOOD

Chapter one detailed the ways in which the diet debate focused on the physical bodies of Americans, the very specific fear of neurasthenia, and the broader anxieties about the simultaneous strength and vulnerability of the prevailing race and gender hierarchies. This chapter details the ways the diet debate focused on the character of individual Americans and society as a whole—in other words, the moral American body. At the same time efforts to prevent and cure neurasthenia reflected the fear of the physical decline of American bodies, turn-of-the-century progressive reform movements acted as a response to the growing fear of moral, ethical, and general societal decline. This chapter examines the Progressive Era and some of its many reform movements in the context of the diet debate; how was diet positioned as a way to reform, how did diet debaters capitalize on the momentum of progressive reforms to bolster their own claims, and how did diet debaters incorporate progressive rhetoric into their arguments?

This chapter primarily focuses on arguments made by vegetarian diet debaters in their attempt to align their diet reform efforts with other reform movements. The use of progressive rhetoric—which I describe as the implicit or explicit use of language or arguments from progressive reform movements—was one way that diet debaters were able to position their diets alongside other reform projects to gain more support. The first section of this chapter gives a brief overview of the Progressive Era, some of the reform movements that were central to that period of American history, and provides specific examples of diet debaters using progressive rhetoric. The second section, “A Diet to Eliminate the Problems of Poverty,” outlines how vegetarian diet debater’s framed their arguments in the context of reform efforts aimed at alleviating the plight of poor Americans. The second section, Food and Drink: Alcoholism in the Diet Debate, looks at several
arguments that connected particular diets with alcoholism and how diet debaters capitalized on similar conversations sparked by the prohibition movement. The final section, *The Jungle*, Pure Food and Drug Act, and Diet, examines the impact of *The Jungle* and the Pure Food and Drug act on the broader diet debate. Just as the diet debate both reflected and contributed to the national anxiety about neurasthenia, Progressive Era reforms influenced the diet debate and allowed debaters to ride on their argumentative coattails. Although there are many examples of diet debaters doing this, they never seemed to be able to effectively gain broad support for their diets by linking them with other popular reform movements. Progressive Era reformers were more interested in specifically focusing on reforming the already existing structures and social problems than overhauling the American diet as a roundabout way of doing so.

**Progressive Reform Rhetoric in the Diet Debate**

The Progressive Era is characterized for the many social reform movements that developed across the United States between 1890 and 1920. Some of the most notable reform movements included the prohibition movement, the women’s suffrage movement, and the push for the eight-hour work day as well as the public demand for stricter government regulations and inspections of the railroad, banking, and beef industries. Another quintessential Progressive Era characteristic was the widely held belief that reforms could propel individual Americans and the nation at large into real greatness—that the country still had room to progress. These many reform movements, while varied in their specific objectives, all sought to make Americans better people and make the country work for those people. As Jackson Lears describes it, Progressive Era movements were all connected by their “preoccupation with personal and national purification.”

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92 Lears, *Rebirth of a Nation*, 200.
interest that transcended the opportunistic scuffle of private interests." Building upon the foundation of the republican ideology—specifically civic virtue which rested on the belief that it was every American’s duty to make sure the interests of the public were met before the interests of any one private individual—progressives were able to influence the way many Americans viewed their relationship with their government and their fellow citizens. Progressive concerns often overlapped with the concerns of diet debaters—analyzed here in the case of poverty, alcoholism, and unsafe food. Diet debaters often capitalized on progressive reform movements and their arguments in order to bolster their own. These instances where the diet debaters conflated their concerns with that of progressive reform movements show that diet debaters were strategically opportunistic in their attempts to influence widespread dietary change.

Diet debaters—primarily pro-vegetarian debaters—used progressive rhetoric to argue for their favored diets throughout the Progressive Era. For example, in 1905 The Sun quoted Charles A. Montgomery, then secretary of the New York Vegetarian Society, who claimed:

I maintain that pure vegetarianism is the humanitarian foundation stone of all reforms, Most vegetarians are peaceful, progressive, enlightened men. They are opposed to both human and animal murder. They are antivivisectionists; they are opposed to war, opposed to intemperance. They are hygienic and economical reformers, too. Montgomery—by claiming that vegetarianism is the “humanitarian foundation stone” of reform movements—is essentially making the argument that good reform necessitates a diet that reflects and promotes its values. Although he does not distinguish whether he believes that vegetarianism causes people to be more peaceful or if vegetarianism simply supports such temperament, it is clear that he aligns vegetarian and progressive values. Even further, Montgomery claims that

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93 Ibid., 198.
94 Ibid., 197–98.
95 “Eat Vegetables and Be Well. Consumption Not the Only Ill They Are Said to Cure.”
vegetarianism in and of itself is a reform. He claims that promoting vegetarianism as the primary
diet of Americans, “means going back to agriculture—economic improvement—for agriculture
will give more men employment and better employment than stock raising and slaughtering.
That is the point: vegetarianism is the basic reform.”96

Published just before The Jungle made waves in 1906, Montgomery’s use of progressive
rhetoric—of promoting vegetarianism as a cure for social ills—would have resonated. The
widespread adoption of vegetarianism is positioned here as a way to create and support peaceful
temperament and revamp the food production economy to create more jobs and give workers
better conditions. In a similar use of progressive rhetoric, Albert H. Snyder is quoted in the
fourth instalment of the reoccurring section “Methods of Prolonging Life” in the Evening Star of
Washington D.C. in 1909, claiming:

I may be prejudiced when I say it, but I honestly believe that the universal acceptation
and adoption of the vegetarian idea would mean the banishment—indirectly, if not
directly—of most of the ailments and troubles which perplex human kind. Drunkenness
and cruelty would be unknown. War would be unheard of. There would be less poverty.
There would be little excuse for the existence of jails, and insane asylums would cease to
exist.97

Again, vegetarianism is positioned as a reform in and of itself because it would eliminate
many of the social and personal ills that progressive reformers were trying to addresses—
alcoholism, poverty, crime. Although these are both general statements—there are no quotes
from Montgomery or Snyder that outline why vegetarians are necessarily progressive or exactly
how vegetarianism would eliminate societal ills—both opinions reveal the use of progressive
rhetoric as an argumentative tactic. Montgomery and Snyder both aim to get progressive

96 Ibid.
4--Vegetarianism.”
reformers to validate and adopt their diet by linking vegetarianism with other movement’s values and objectives.

A Diet to Eliminate the Problems of Poverty

While Montgomery and Snyder make general claims, other diet debaters narrowed in on specific reform movements and social issues when incorporating progressive rhetoric into their arguments. For example, one major Progressive Era reform movement was focused on alleviating the plight of poor Americans. Prominent reformers, including Jane Addams, argued that enlightened self-interest—or the idea that supporting the interests of those less fortunate than you actually benefits your private interests and the interests of the broader community—was the key to solving the nation’s growing wealth inequality and living standards gap. The establishment of settlement houses in major cities, like Adams’ Hull House in Chicago, was one tangible manifestation of the support for enlightened self-interest and anti-poverty reforms in the Progressive Era. Settlement houses allowed wealthier Americans to give back to their communities through the donation of time and/or money. Settlement Houses provided a place for poor Americans, particularly new immigrants, to access vital resources such as education, shelter, food, community support, and health care. Settlement workers were reformers devoted to solving the issues associated with poverty.

In a similar attempt to address the growing wealth gap and the living conditions of the poor, diet debaters argued that the widespread adoption of particular diets could eliminate poverty and malnourishment across the nation. For example, the New York Tribune published “Reasons for Vegetable Diet” in 1902 which provided a lengthy quote from Bramwell Booth of the Salvation Army—a notable reform organization based out of England but active in the
U.S.—explaining the “gospel of porridge.”

According to Booth, vegetarianism is essential for reform, “because tens of thousands of our poor people, who have now the greatest difficulty to make ends meet after buying flesh food, would, by the substitution of fruit and vegetables and other economical food, be able to get along in comfort and have more money to spare.”

According to Booth—and many of the pro-vegetarian debaters analyzed in chapter one—meat is not a cost effective way to provide the body with the energy it needs. Fostering a cultural standard with meat at the center of the American diet, following this logic, disadvantages the poor who need to sacrifice more financially to maintain a meat-centered diet. In the 1909 article “Economics of Eating,” Dr. J. T. Allen makes this point more succinctly. “I have nothing to say of the ethical objections to meat-eating” Allen argues, “I merely wish in dealing with the economic side of food, to impress, especially upon the working man, that the first step to economy in eating is to omit meat.”

Both Booth and Allen advocate vegetarianism or, at the very least, eating less meat as a way for poor people to save money and help alleviate their financial circumstances while maintaining proper nutrition and strength.

Arguing that the broad adoption of vegetarianism would help alleviate the plight of poor Americans because plant-based foods were less expensive than meat did not gain substantial popularity. Many progressive reformers instead focused on busting the Beef Trust which they faulted as the monopoly that created the economic environment where the poor could not afford good meat in the first place. The Beef Trust was a collection of powerful Chicago meat packing companies that were able to create a monopoly—through both horizontal and vertical

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98 “Reasons for Vegetable Diet.”
99 Ibid.
100 Allen, “Economics of Eating.”
integration—of the meat industry in the late nineteenth-century.\textsuperscript{101} The development of reliable refrigerated railcars in the late 1870s allowed Chicago to function as the hub of meat slaughtering, packing, and distribution while the Beef Trust protected that monopoly and set the prices for all meat products coming out of the city. Significant efforts to eliminate the Beef Trust were made by reformers at the turn of the twentieth century. Much like reform efforts that followed \textit{The Jungle}—which will be discussed in the last section of this chapter—reformers seemed less interested in overhauling the American way of diet as they were with ensuring that meat was both safe and affordable for all Americans.

For example, in 1902 the \textit{New York Tribune} published the article “When Meat is Necessary” that detailed settlement worker’s issues with using vegetarianism to address the poor’s difficulty purchasing meat. Mrs. Clarence Burns, a settlement house worker on New York’s East Side, is quoted: “It is everybody’s duty to try and crush the Beef Trust, so that the poor can get the meat that they need for proper nourishment.”\textsuperscript{102} According to Burns, the poor are not equipped to adopt vegetarian diets to save money because of their living conditions. Burns argues that because they have few cooking utensils and sub-par ovens—if they have ovens at all—the poor cannot easily cook cereals and other vegetarian staples. In addition, poor women simply don’t have the time to cook vegetarian meals. Burns argues that, “The housewife of the poorer tenement…with several children…has no time for the endless stirring that cornmeal and other mushes cooked over the fire demand.”\textsuperscript{103} Burns also argues that children do not eat vegetarian cereals and mushes without sugar and, therefore, vegetarian cooking costs more when

\textsuperscript{101} Gordon, “Swift & Co. v. United States,” 246.
\textsuperscript{102} “When Meat Is Necessary. The Manual Laborer Must Have It, Say Settlement Workers. Women Would Crush The Beef Trust so That the Poor Might Be Benefited.”
\textsuperscript{103} Ibid.
the price of sugar is added. In the end, Burns argues that meat is the better, cheaper, and easier way for the poor to gain nourishment but that the Beef Trust, by regulating prices, is making it impossible for the poor to afford the meat they desperately need. The author of the article picks up after Burn’s quotation and argues that, “settlement workers and others who know the conditions of the East Side are all of the opinion that vegetarianism is not for the people of that quarter.”\footnote{104} In fact, using a point that will be further explored in chapter three, the author contends that employers favor the meat-eating English, Irish, and Americans over the primarily vegetarian Polish, Hungarian, or Italian laborers because they are more sturdy. The article concludes with a call for readers to support the reform efforts aimed at eliminating the Beef Trust—in other words, dismissing vegetarianism as a viable avenue for helping the poor.

Another example of the rejection of the economical vegetarian argument can be found in one response to H. W. Wiley’s 1902 “What to Eat if Meat is Dear”—also referenced in chapter one. Wiley, then Chief of the Bureau of Chemistry in the Department of Agriculture, argues that meat eating is not necessary for proper human nutrition and that the American preference for meat is due to taste. Wiley continues to propose that Americans should learn how to make vegetarian meals more palatable to appease their taste buds while responding to the increased prices of meat. Wiley writes, “Vegetarianism is likely to become the fad if the present prices continue, not so much by reason of any superior merit of its principals as because economical considerations compel its adoption.”\footnote{105} In short, Wiley does not explicitly call for all Americans to adopt vegetarianism completely but he proposes that people should introduce more vegetarian...
meals into their diet as a way of addressing the growing prices of meat while maintaining proper nutrition.

A government official promoting vegetarianism did not sit well with one author in Minneapolis who wrote “Uncle Sam’s Vegetarianism” in response to Wiley’s claims. The article reads, “Is our government becoming so paternal that it has to lay down a dietary for us to follow? Is bluff Uncle Sam gravitating toward vegetarianism? It looks so.”106 Like Burns, the author here would rather aim for reform that would allow Americans to make their own dietary decisions—by making meat affordable and safe—rather than to promote vegetarianism as a solution to the economic problem of high meat prices. The article continues, “an intelligent person is the best judge of the diet which is favorable to the maintenance of his health and strength… [the vegetarian] argument leaves out the important fact that man is a rational creature and is endowed with intelligence.”107 While the author does not mention busting the Beef Trust, it is clear that the promotion of vegetarianism to help Americans save money and address the financial burned of buying meat was not their favored solution. The article ends with the declaration, “No scientist can lay down a definite dietary for the whole race.”108

With the support of reformers like Burns and, assumingly, the author of “Uncle Sam’s Vegetarianism,” the Beef Trust was eventually busted in 1905 when the Supreme Court ruled on Swift & Co. v. United States. The combination of that decision with the Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906 made meat products incrementally—albeit not immediately—more affordable and safer than they had been since the transition to industrial meat production in the 1870s. Although the vegetarian argument for solving poverty through diet was a logical way to link the diet debate

106 “Uncle Sam’s Vegetarianism.”
107 Ibid.
108 Ibid.
with that progressive concern both before and after the Beef Trust was busted, the laws that changed the distribution and production of meat in the 1910s actually nullified the vegetarian arguments that approached the topic from this angle.

Food and Drink: Alcoholism in the Diet Debate

According to Jackson Lears, the cultural emphasis placed on maintaining and building physical health—seen in the various health reform movements described in the introduction—was tied to a similar emphasis on moral health defined by Protestant ethics. Alcohol was one obstacle in the way of such Protestant moral reform efforts. Alcohol was considered to be a major vice and the lack of self-control associated with alcohol consumption was antithetical to Protestant ideals. According to many Progressive Era reformers and capitalists, alcohol also posed a threat to worker’s productivity which—on both an individual and national scale—was considered to be central to progress. In addition, alcohol was tied to broader cultural concerns over immigration and race relations in the United States; mass alcohol consumption and saloons were associated with the new wave of non-white immigrants and, therefore, temperance reform and prohibition were seen as potential methods for urban social control as much as they were methods for the moral reform of white Americans.\(^{109}\)

As opposed to temperance reformers—who, although focusing on alcohol, placed the onus on individuals to practice moderation and abstinence—prohibitionists fought for a national ban on alcohol to federally force their conception of morality on all Americans. This narrow and directed focus allowed many different religious sects across the nation to come together to support prohibition to, as Lear describes, make “personal morality a federal responsibility.”\(^{110}\) As

\(^{109}\) Lears, *Rebirth of a Nation*, 102–3.

\(^{110}\) Ibid., 160.
James H. Timberlake argues, “If the Progressive Movement was nourished on a belief in the moral law, so was prohibition, which sought to remove from commerce an article that was believed to despoil man’s reason and undermine the foundation of religion and representative government.” While not all Progressive Era reformers supported temperance or prohibition and its national success with the eighteenth amendment in 1920 is outside of the timeframe of this study, arguments used by those reformers who did support temperance and prohibition at the turn of the century influenced the diet debate and, conversely, diet debaters positioned their diet in the context of the anxiety over alcoholism to gain support.

Many diet debaters specifically incorporated theories that correlated certain diets with alcoholism. Their arguments show how both vegetarians and pro-meat debaters attempted to link their concerns with that of the temperance and prohibitionist movements. For example, in 1909 the Bismarck Daily Tribune published a short piece titled “Vegetable Diet is Good Cure. Learned Savant Says Excessive Meat Eating Tends to Boozing.” The article presents the advice given by Dr. D. H. Kross on the topic of inebriety. According to Kross, “If you have a strong appetite for king alcohol…and want to be cured of the habit, just eat a vegetable diet for six months.” This argument—that vegetarianism actually makes people lose their appetite for alcohol—was very common.

An early example can be found in M. F. Griswold’s “The Vegetable Diet,” published in 1891—referenced in both the previous and following chapter. Griswold argues, “meat has stimulant and tonic properties peculiar to itself…the like argument holds good with regard to

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111 Timberlake, Prohibition and the Progressive Movement, 2.
112 “Vegetable Diet Is Good Cure. Learned Savant Says Excessive Meat Eating Tends to Boozing.”
113 Kirk, “Methods of Prolonging Life; Plans Hitherto Proposed for Improving and Extending Human Existence. No. 4--Vegetarianism.”
alcohol…Actual intoxication has been known to follow flesh eating by those not habituated to its use.” While they may have been convincing to their readers—like the argument that vegetarianism could solve the plight of poor Americans—these arguments never seemed to gain much support outside of the Seventh-Day Adventists and other niche groups. Following the logic of this argument, instead of focusing on temperance or prohibition, the widespread promotion of vegetarianism could eliminate the principal urge people had to drink in the first place!

Unfortunately, this was not a particularly effective argument. It was already difficult for reformers to encourage temperance because alcohol was a central part of many Americans social and intimate lives. It would have been just as difficult for reformers to encourage vegetarianism when meat was just as central to many American’s diets.

The vegetarian argument that their diet was a proactive way to foster temperance and reduce alcoholism was actively challenged in much the same way their economic argument was. In 1893, as an early example, the Thibodaux Sentinel and Journal of Louisiana published “A Facetious View. Vegetarianism Carried Out to its Logical End,” which outlines the perceived absurd claims of vegetarians on this topic. The article moves through several vegetarian arguments related to the diet’s effect on morality and subtly critiques them using satire. First, the article quotes Professor Mayor, a vegetarian from Chicago, claiming that vegetarians, “encourage dairy at the expense of the brewery.” According to Mayor, vegetarianism—in addition to lowering alcohol consumption—actually causes people to lose thirst altogether! The author of the article claims that vegetarians simply drink water or lemonade out of habit not need because, “thirst is abolished.” The tone of the article makes it clear that the author, while

114 Griswold, “The Vegetable Diet. It Is Better From the Standpoints of Health and Economy.”
115 “A Facetious View. Vegetarianism Carried out to Its Logical End.”
116 Ibid.
presenting the material as if he or she believes it, wants the reader to see the claims made by vegetarians as being purely fantastical—not based in any sort of reality. Poking some more fun at Mayor, the author moves on to the abolition of hunger. The author writes, “We hope that Professor Mayor will now go on to the abolition of hunger… [but] Of course he will be allowed to nibble a radish now and then from habit, even after he has conquered imperious, inexorable instinct.” The underlying joke being that the abolition of both thirst and hunger are impossible and unnatural. The author claims that the abolition of hunger would obviously solve many of the world’s problems, so much so that new problems would arise. The author predicts that the world’s men would go on perpetual strike if the need for thirst and hunger were abolished, but that would be okay, after all, “what’s the use of being wealthy if you can become healthy and virtuous by eating vegetables only.” This comment is clearly meant to be a joke for those followers of the Protestant work ethic because virtue, within that ideological framework, cannot be gained without hard work and dedication to one’s work.

The last major argument presented in “A Facetious View” relates directly to the prohibition of alcohol and vegetarianism’s overarching moral prerogative. The author recounts the claim that meat eating inherently leads to drinking and, therefore, vegetarianism is the cure. “Here’s the real gold cure,” the article reads, “the elixir of temperance, the pill of prohibition.” But, keeping with the article’s satirical style, the author projects this claim to a wider scale. Temperance, the author claims, is not “the only evil which will not and cannot grow in the garden,” and, according to Dr. Paul Foster of Berlin, vegetarianism will “end the war between

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117 Ibid.
118 Ibid.
119 Ibid.
120 Ibid.
the poor and the rich, solve the social problem, complete the work of religion and in all ways ameliorate the unhappy condition of the human race.”

Of course this projection is meant to strengthen the author’s underlying argument that the moral claims of vegetarians are unrealistic. “Reflect upon these things, erring carnivores,” the author urges, “and think that every time you order a beefsteak at the butcher’s, you are ordering unhappiness.” In contrast to the vegetarian argument that meat makes people immoral and crave alcohol, it is clear from this article that some Americans found this claim exceedingly silly.

In 1909 the *Vinita Daily Chieftain* published “A Mixed Diet. Eating Fads Are as Bad as Reckless Intemperance” which, using a more straightforward approach, also provided an argument against vegetarianism for the purpose of curbing alcoholism. The article quotes French scientist Dr. Armand Gauthier to argue that a mixed-diet is best. According to Gauthier, the consumption of alcohol actually increases when people reduce the amount of meat they eat, “If vegetables best agree with a man,” Gauthier is quoted, “and he doesn’t care for meat, he should eat them, and take the chances of a growing desire for alcohol.” Ultimately what these two anti-vegetarian arguments reveal that there was both popular and scientific skepticism about the diet’s ability to prevent alcoholism. In the end, prohibition was passed in 1920 but universal vegetarianism was not. Although the history of both the temperance and prohibition movements is more complex than what has been covered here, it is clear that vegetarian diet debaters attempted to capitalize on the public concern with alcoholism at the same time their arguments were refuted by pro-meat debaters. At the very least, the incorporation of the anxiety surrounding inebriety in America in the diet debates—while they did not lead to any substantial dietary

121 Ibid.
122 Ibid.
123 “A Mixed Diet. Eating Fads Are as Bad and Reckless Intemperance.”
changes—does show how the diet debate responded to broader anxieties by linking their causes/solution to diet.

*The Jungle* and the Pure Food and Drug Act

Diet debaters also capitalized on the Progressive Era concern over pure food and drugs, and, much like today, they used vegetarian public figures and popular culture to support their arguments. Upton Sinclair was often used as a model vegetarian by diet debaters. Sinclair was himself a vegetarian and his most famous novel, *The Jungle*, inspired many Americans to adopt vegetarian diets as well—although he was vocal about his intention for the novel to promote socialism, not vegetarianism. Many articles claimed that *The Jungle* inspired Americans to become vegetarians. In one 1909 article about Sinclair and Teddy Roosevelt, the author claims that *The Jungle*’s, “nauseating revelations made many of its readers—temporarily, at least—practicers of the vegetarian regime.”\(^{124}\) *The Jungle*, published in 1906, follows Jurgis Rudkus and his family as they attempt to make their way in Chicago after emigrating from Lithuania. The novel chronicles Jurgis’ experience working in the slaughterhouses and revealed the ugly side of food production to its readers—including the terrible working and living conditions of Chicago meat packing workers, corrupt inspectors, the variety of chemicals mixed with rancid meat to make it sellable, and even the occasional dismembered human limb that was mixed together with the meat that would eventually make it to the table. *The Jungle* has been a subject of scholarly work since its publication, so, instead of analyzing the text here, I will simply focus on a few mentions of the novel in the diet debate to showcase its impact on vegetarianism in the years immediately following its publication.

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\(^{124}\) “The Book and the Big Stick.”
“The Stuff You Eat,” published a few months after *The Jungle* in 1906 in the *Scott County Kicker* of Benton Missouri, recounts one man’s reaction to the novel. The author mentions his disgust of the millionaire businessmen who sold the spoiled meat and his distrust of the government for turning a blind eye to keep the businessmen happy. More importantly, however, is the impact the novel had on his diet and opinion of food. The author recounts an interaction he had with a Mrs. Hafner on the subject. According to the author, Mrs. Hafner asked him to pick up some bacon for their dinner and he reluctantly agreed. The author tried to find local “country” meat, but could only find trust meat—or industrially produced meat—at the store. Thinking of his eventual dinner, the author describes his inner struggle, “For a time I thought I could make it go down, but the more I thought of that gangrened meat, and the man who falls into the sizzling vat, is fished out and the product put on the market, the less appetite I had for meat.”125 The author describes telling Mrs. Hafner of his reservation upon returning and that it only took reading one passage from *The Jungle* to convince her to abandon the bacon. The author ends, “unless we can get good country meat we will become vegetarians. It is the only way out.”126

This last sentiment highlights the major issue with vegetarianism inspired by *The Jungle*; although the novel certainly brought about an increase in vegetarianism for a time, people seemed to be less concerned with the treatment of the animals, the moral implications of eating industrially produced meat, the potential health benefits of vegetarianism, or the potential economic benefits as they were with making sure that eating meat was safe. In other words, they were shocked into vegetarianism but, once the shock wore off and they were reassured by new

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125 “The Stuff You Eat.”
126 Ibid.
government legislation, they went back to eating meat. While it is impossible to know exactly how many vegetarians inspired by the novel remained vegetarian for the remainder of their lives, there is evidence that shows that many Jungle-inspired vegetarians reverted back to meat-eating once their fear of industrially produced meat was abolished.

It is clear that the vegetarian boom that followed The Jungle did not last forever. In fact, one author claimed that the novel created changes in standards that actually encouraged vegetarians inspired by The Jungle to return to meat-eating rather quickly. According to the author of “Vegetarian Restaurants All Mourn ‘The Jungle,’” published in the Los Angeles Herald in 1908, immediately after The Jungle was published, Americans feverishly avoided meat and flooded vegetarian restaurants. The author jokes about the new customers in vegetarian restaurants, “You’d see a copy of ‘The Jungle’ peeping out of their pockets and then you’d know they’d been scared into coming to their senses.” While it was “good hunting” for a while, vegetarian restaurant owners soon saw a drastic decline in their patronage. Although the article does not mention it by name, it is clear that the Pure Food and Drug Act and the Federal Meat Inspection Act of 1906 clearly assuaged American’s concern about industrially produced meat. The author laments, “they say the slaughter house evils have been eradicated. And all our portly beef eaters are back to the ‘ham and’ joints, and the outlook for our [restaurant owners] gaining many new converts by the wholesale…is dark.” According to this argument, The Jungle only produced a temporary vegetarian boom through fear that—in part because the meat industry wanted customers back—was promptly addressed by the government and meat industries. The

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127 “Vegetarian Restaurants All Mourn ‘The Jungle.’”
128 Ibid.
129 Ibid.
cognitive impact of the Pure Food and Drug Act was enough to eliminate the fear that caused many Americans to temporarily adopt vegetarianism because of *The Jungle*.

While the diet debate’s response to anxieties related to progressive reforms did not necessarily end in any widespread dietary reform, the consistent attempts to align diet with moral reform is telling of the way diet functions in the space between the individual and their social world. When vegetarian diet debaters argued that vegetarianism could solve the plight of poor Americans they were really arguing that one’s personal decision to ingest meat was supporting a system that produced inequality. When vegetarian diet debaters argued that universal vegetarianism could eliminate the urge to drink, they were really asking prohibitionists to consider promoting vegetarianism as part of their efforts. In this way diet, and the reasons for promoting particular diets, were intricately linked with individual American’s relationship with their government and fellow citizens. It is clear, however, that neither claim resonated enough with progressive reformers or the general public to make much change. The vegetarianism inspired by *The Jungle* is a prime example; although progressive concerns may have aligned with those of vegetarian debaters for a time, once Americans were adequately reassured that meat was safe to eat they abandoned vegetarianism. In short, when diet debaters attempted to align their diet with the concerns of other reform movements they simply reinforced the inherent link between diet and society.
CHAPTER III.
RACE AND CIVILIZATION IN THE DIET DEBATE:
MEAT VS. RICE AS WHITE VS. NON-WHITE

In addition to arguments that centered on the anxiety of neurasthenia and progressive concerns, the diet debate also frequently incorporated theories about race and civilization to address the anxiety of white racial deterioration at the turn of the twentieth century. Vegetarian and meat-eating proponents alike argued that diet—in addition to having an impact on individual bodies—contributed to the health and status of the entire nation and white race. According to Kayla Wazana Thompkins, in the nineteenth century food was part of the nation building process and helped to symbolically mark racial and class differences. Thompkins argues that nineteenth-century foodways—including systems like the Graham Diet of the early 1830s—are an example of, “the production of social inequality at the level of the quotidian functioning of the body.”

Diet debaters at the turn of the century contributed to this particular kind of inequality production. By using theories about race and civilization as the foundation of their arguments, diet debaters effectively linked the abstract and national fear of race deterioration with the very intimate and routine act of eating. Pro-meat arguments, for example, claimed that widespread adoption of vegetarian diets could cause race deterioration—facilitating the regression of white Americans from civilization back into the lower stages of barbarism and savagery. Vegetarian arguments, however, claimed that great races and civilizations had eaten primarily vegetarian diets since the dawn of man and, therefore, vegetarianism facilitated the very advancement white Americans were fearful of losing. This chapter analyzes these arguments to better understand how they functioned in the broader debate on diet and to locate the ways ideas about race and civilization permeated the border between individual and nation.

131 Tompkins, Racial Indigestion, 4.
This chapter is broken up into three parts. The first section will briefly introduce the idea of scientific racism and its impact on the diet debate at the turn of the twentieth century. The second section, Beef-Fed Britons and Rice-Fed Japanese: Race, Diet, and Civilization More Broadly, will look at scientific racism and civilization theories used in the diet debate, specifically through the use of international and historical examples. This section will also examine how ideas of race and gender influenced arguments about the proper diet for American workers, both sedentary office workers and manual laborers. Finally, section three, Hawaii: Race, Gender, Diet and Imperialism, will carry the international arguments presented in section three into a case study of the diet debate as it was waged in late nineteenth-century Hawaii. The chapter conclusion will weave these three sections—two that are rather broad and one that is narrow—together to answer the question of how ideas about race and civilization made an impact on the diet debate and vice-versa.

Scientific Racism and Civilization Theory

Throughout the nineteenth-century both hard-scientists and social-scientists developed varying ideas and theories, collectively referred to as scientific racism, to explain how the prevailing racial hierarchy came to be and why it was important. Samuel Morton’s work, specifically his 1839 *Crania Americana*, is often credited with the popularization of scientific racism in the United States and Europe. Morton studied and experimented on the skulls of people from around the world; he came up with various calculations for determining skull capacity and argued that skull size, shape, and capacity was linked with intelligence and racial progression. He used the data collected to argue that the prevailing racial hierarchy was biological—in other words, it was not nurture but nature that made the white Anglican, Teutonic, and Caucasian
peoples superior to yellow, red, and dark skinned Mongolian, Native American, and Negro peoples.\textsuperscript{132}

Of course Morton’s finding were not grounded in real science—some of his measurements were even blatantly fraudulent—but his theories played a major role in the debate over whether human begins evolved through polygenesis or monogenesis. Monogenesis was the belief that all humans evolved from the same ancestors but environmental factors caused some to thrive and become civilized—namely white Europeans—and others to stay stagnant in a state of savagery. Polygenesis, supported by Morton’s work, was the belief that the different races did not evolve from the same ancestors but belonged to completely different species. According to John P. Jackson Jr. and Nadine M. Weidman, the growing popularity of polygenesis had significant social implications. “In the late nineteenth century,” they argue, “the defense of democracy became deemphasized in favor of more general arguments that the very capacity for civilization was racial in nature.”\textsuperscript{133} In other words, social scientists were no longer so sure that changes in environment, religion, or political structure could ever truly civilize “savage” peoples. These ideas would later manifest in tangible ways—most notably the eugenics movement.

Regardless of one’s belief in monogenesis or polygenesis, the collective questioning of the permanence or vulnerability of the racial hierarchy fueled the national anxiety about race deterioration. White Americans were simultaneously secure and nervous; they believed white people were superior but were unsure if that superiority was inherent or acquired, whether it was permanent or vulnerable. Those who believed white supremacy was inherent looked for ways to

\textsuperscript{132} Menand, “Morton, Agassiz, and the Origins of Scientific Racism in the United States.”
\textsuperscript{133} Jackson and Weidman, “The Origins of Scientific Racism,” 70.
prove it and those who believed that race deterioration could happen looked for ways to combat it.

The widespread anxiety about race played a major role in the diet debate. Although many arguments did not explicitly use the language of scientific racism or civilization theories, debaters would frequently allude to one or the other depending on the relevance to their argument. For example, vegetarians often argued that white European people reached civilization on a vegetarian diet and only recently transitioned to a meat-centered diet; the logic being that vegetarianism was not savage but crucial for the progression of a people from savagery to civilization. Pro-mixed-diet arguments turned that logic on its head, claiming that adding meat into the diet of white races was what made them civilized. In a society where the fear of racial deterioration was perceived as being very real, pinpointing what diet could prevent that from happening was important. The diet debate often capitalized on the anxiety of race deterioration as an argumentative tactic. Vegetarians, for example, would argue that meat-eating—linked to gluttony and excess—was actually causing white Americans to digress and, therefore, the adoption of a vegetarian diet was crucial. On the other hand, pro-mixed-diet proponents often linked the meat-free diets with “savage” peoples—with their supposedly inherent racial, and therefore moral, inferiority—and claimed that only meat-eating could prevent race deterioration.

The late nineteenth-century was not the first time theories about race and civilization were used to promote diet reform—see the discussion of Sylvester Graham in the introduction—however, the social environment of the era amplified its relevance in the diet debate. For example, the period between 1877 and 1914 was ripe with racial anxiety linked to the end of Radical Reconstruction in the South and the dramatic increase of non-white and eastern European immigrants to the North. The United States also solidified its role as an imperialist
nation with the Spanish-American war in the 1890s and the annexation of Hawaii in 1900. Americans both at home and aboard were increasingly concerned about race and civilization. This chapter will look at the ways concerns, anxieties, theories, and questions about white racial superiority and notions about civilization influenced the diet debate and, conversely, how the diet debate influenced those ideas in return.

Beef-Fed Britons and Rice-Fed Japanese

Anglo Representation

Lathrop, “Why a Nation’s Brains and Ideals Are Made Up Only of the Food They Eat.”
The two images above were both published in the *El Paso Herald* alongside the article “Why a Nation’s Brains and Ideals Are Made up Only of the Food They Eat.” Written by Dr. H. W. Lathrop of Wisconsin University in 1911, the article claims that, “national habits and modes of thought and feeling may be directly traced to national food habits, and as a nation eats, so it thinks and acts.” This is depicted in the images above. Both a white man and an Asian man are depicted eating with hands coming straight from their heads—clearly symbolizing that food feeds the mind and character of individuals as much as their bodies. Lathrop expands on this argument by using specific examples. First, he links the drinking habits of the English with their meat consumption; consuming one stimulant, he argues, encourages the consumption of others. On the other hand, he also contends that China, Japan, and India have more citizens who are

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135 Ibid.
136 Ibid.
addicted to narcotics because of their rice diet. Eating a primarily rice-based diet, according to Lathrop, has “lamentable consequences in the case of the Orientals,” and, he continues later in his argument, “without the “stimulus for stimulates” which meat provides, a people subsisting upon a starchy diet incline to the opposite extreme and crave narcotics.”\(^{137}\) Although this argument is not scientifically based—the opium dependency in China was caused by the Opium Wars, not the primarily rice-based diet of the Chinese—it is clear that Lathrop’s argument was making a link between diet and national character that appeared to be logical. In other words, by using the example of the drinking habits of the English and the opium habits of the Chinese which were real and, most importantly, observable, Lathrop was making an argument about diet and national character that would have been convincing to the presumably white readers of the *El Paso Herald*.

Lathrop uses the example of the British and Chinese to transition into a more nuanced argument about diet and race. Lathrop argues that when a people consume too much of one thing—like roast beef in England or rice in China—they limit their physical and mental ability to reach their full potential; in other words, a balanced diet is the key. Lathrop uses Native Americans to develop this argument. As opposed to people with mono-diets—like the primarily rice based diet of the Chinese—the diet of Native Americans included a wide variety of plant and animal food. According to Lathrop, “on the whole the diet of this race was well-balanced and calculated to bring out the best qualities latent in the noble red man.”\(^{138}\) In other words, particular diets have the ability to either stunt a people, like in China, or to allow a people to reach their fullest possible potential, like the Native Americans. In the end, Lathrop advocates for a mixed-

\(^{137}\) Ibid.
\(^{138}\) Ibid.
diet and warns against eating too much of one thing because, given his examples, it is clear that mono-diets have a negative impact on the entire group. Although he does not definitively fall on either side of the vegetarian or pro-meat divide, his arguments show a nuanced use of race and civilization theories within the diet debate.

Like Lathrop’s call for a mixed diet, more explicit pro-meat and pro-vegetarian arguments also relied on theories about race and civilization to stake their claims. For example, in January 1891 the *Pittsburg Dispatch* published an article written by M. F. Griswold titled “The Vegetable Diet. It Is Better From the Standpoints of Health and Economy.” Although the article makes other arguments in favor of the vegetarian diet that do not employ race, one of the pivotal claims Griswold makes is that great white men all over the world have lived on a mostly vegetarian diet for hundreds of years. Griswold argues:

> The physically healthiest and strongest portions of mankind are said to be found among these voluntary or enforced followers of Pythagorean doctrine. The—so often quoted—“beef-fed Briton,” is no example to the contrary, his sturdy physique being largely a matter of inheritance from forefathers, who rarely, if ever, used meat as an ordinary article of diet.

Rather than looking at the English, who, along with Americans, were seen as the pinnacle of white civilization and arguing that their beef-diet solidified their racial progress, Griswold argues that the primarily vegetarian history of Great Britain is what allowed its people to progress to the highest rung of civilization in the first place. While it may appear that the strong and sturdy English maintain their physique on meat, Griswold argues that such traits are simply biologically inherited from their vegetarian ancestors.

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139 Griswold, “The Vegetable Diet. It Is Better From the Standpoints of Health and Economy.”

140 Ibid.
Griswold moves on to provide another common argument made by vegetarians regarding diet and race, he claims that meat-eating provokes men to behave savagely. Griswold writes, “Excessive meat eaters are also apt to be pugnacious, irritable and quarrelsome, a fact due to this over stimulating property of its elements. We recognize the principal involved when we feed our house dogs raw meat to make them alert and savage.”\cite{141} It is clear here that Griswold is comparing meat-eating men with savage meat-eating dogs, but this statement has more complexity. As is clear from chapter two, meat-eating was often linked to alcoholism during this period, a connection that would have been implied by Griswold’s claim that meat is over stimulating. Whether the science behind this myth was true or false, the fact remains that many vegetarians used the correlation to associate meat-eating with savage lifestyles, including submitting to addictive tendencies. In addition, by linking savagery with animal behavior, Griswold further solidified the link between “savage” people and animals. It is clear from the examination of diet and gender in chapter one that submitting to savage tendencies was sometimes seen as beneficial—particularly aligning with Teddy Roosevelt’s ideology of barbarian virtues—but, nonetheless, Griswold’s claim harkens back to the negotiation between the two negative poles of savagery and overcivilization and falls on the side of civilization. In other words, by associating meat-eating with savage animal behavior, Griswold addresses the anxiety that individual actions could lead someone too close to savagery in a negative way. Griswold concludes that all vegetarians ask for, “is a candid consideration of the subject in all its bearings, and an honest effort, when possible, to follow the higher and more purely human way of diet.”\cite{142} Meat-eating, therefore, being the non-human or sub-human way of diet.

\footnote{141}{Ibid.}
\footnote{142}{Ibid.}
In 1896 the *Pullman Herald* published a piece titled “Vegetarianism and Strength. Comparisons Drawn Between Meat Eaters and Non-Meat Eaters,” which followed a very similar logic as Griswold’s piece published five years earlier.\(^{143}\) The short article appears to have been written from a British perspective and claims that most laborers and agricultural workers are already vegetarian and doing just fine. The article reads, “How much meat can an agricultural laborer’s family have…If a small quantity of salt pork be occasionally eaten it is of value chiefly as respiratory food. Yet our laborers, who have subsided on this diet for generations, are strong.”\(^{144}\) This is an echo of Griswold’s argument; the laboring classes of world’s greatest civilizations have subsisted on a predominantly vegetarian diet as an economic necessity for generations without losing strength or causing racial deterioration. The article continues, “In other European countries the peasantry are still more evidently vegetarian for all practical purposes. Even in Russia…the peasant gets only corn…Yet the Russian peasant is not wanting in vigor.”\(^{145}\)

While this is clearly an international argument, published in an American newspaper it serves as a reference for those following the diet debate—look at these other European countries, places that your ancestors may have immigrated from, and see that they not only live on a vegetarian diet but they have done so for generations and are strong and civilized. The article sums up this argument, “These instances…show that vegetarianism is the ordinary practice of numerous races which are not among the lowest and which show no signs of race deterioration.”\(^{146}\) In fact, the article continues, those who make the argument that only the

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143 “Vegetarianism and Strength. Comparisons Drawn Between Meat Eaters and Non-Meat Eaters.”
144 Ibid.
145 Ibid.
146 Ibid.
world’s lowest people, the poor, eat vegetarian diets wrongly place diet as causation. Rather, the hygienic conditions of the poor are simply correlating factors that, although they seem to suggest that poor people are less civilized, have nothing to do with diet.

Pro-meat advocates argued the logical opposite, they claimed that meat-eating was what elevated the ancient European peoples to civilization. Although published over a decade after the *Pullman* article examined above, one 1911 article by S. C. B. Lane titled “How Vegetarianism Hurts Us,” provides a good example of this common sentiment. The former University of Illinois research fellow argues that people should be better educated on issues of health and nutrition to prevent them from believing and following false information that could harm their health. Lane specifically argues against vegetarianism by claiming that its supposed health benefits are simply myths;

> Upon what grounds does the practice of vegetarianism rest its claims? The answer is, on no grounds whatsoever, unless it be those of the man who has an “idea” that if he looks over his left shoulder at the moon, or sees a black cat on the thirteenth day of the month, he is dead sure to have bad luck.\(^{147}\)

In his attempt to discredit the validity of vegetarian diets, Lane provides an anecdote about a vegetarian friend who he believes is unintentionally starving himself. According to Lane, vegetarians like his friend unintentionally starve themselves because they believe—like one believes in bad luck—that a lifelong vegetarian diet is natural, healthy, and leads to proper individual and national development. Lane contradicts this notion by developing an argument about the eating patterns of primitive Europeans. He writes argues that the primitive ancestors of Europeans had natural irregularity in their diet—sometimes they would have plenty of food and other times they would have none. This led to a cycle where starvation was common when food

\(^{147}\) Lane, S. C. B., “How Vegetarianism Hurts Us.”
was scarce.\textsuperscript{148} Lane writes, “their hunger made them keen on the hunt, active, bright-eyed, alert, vigorous and pushing. Then, with a successful kill, there would naturally be a little gorging of meat, followed by a long and lazy rest.”\textsuperscript{149} Lane explains that modern humans inherited the stomachs made for this cycle—hunger, hunt, gorge, rest, hunger—and that our bodies function best when replicating that cycle. He argues that vegetarianism for short lengths of time, replicating the starvation or hunger part of the cycle, is beneficial but only if it is followed by reintroducing meat into the diet after a time. In other words, Lane advocated for a mixed-diet revolving around meat-eating to reproduce the cycle of alertness and rest that worked for primitive Europeans. Lane concludes that short bursts of vegetarianism are only beneficial to enhance the effects of a meat in the diet.\textsuperscript{150} Although Lane is not as explicit in his use of race and civilization theories they still shine through. According to Lane’s logic, primitive Europeans ate mixed-diets to progress and, because they inherited their stomachs, contemporary descendants of Europeans should follow the same.

Europeans, however, were not the only people used as a racial example to argue that vegetarianism or meat-eating fueled or destroyed great civilizations. After describing the diet and strength of the Russian peasant, the 1896 \textit{Pullman Herald} article discussed above continues to describe the strength and intelligence of the primarily vegetarian Arabs, Soudanese, Zulu, and Japanese; “The evidence is the same is we glance at non-European races.”\textsuperscript{151} The Japanese in particular were used by both vegetarians and pro-meat debaters alike to argue for what Americans should eat. On the vegetarian side of the argument, the Japanese were said to be an

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{148} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{149} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{150} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{151} “Vegetarianism and Strength. Comparisons Drawn Between Meat Eaters and Non-Meat Eaters.”
\end{flushleft}
advanced civilization that, although non-white, were on par with many white nations or, at the very least, superior to Africans due largely in part to their rice-based vegetarian diet. In 1904 the article “Medical Judgement of Japs,” published by the *Virginia Enterprise*, makes this exact point. The article reads:

> The Japanese have taught Europeans and Americans a lesson and quenched in some degree the conceit of the Caucasian in his superior capacity to do all things. Even in the matter of diet, our long cherished theory that the energy and vitality of the white man is largely due to the amount of animal food consumed, must undergo revision.\(^{152}\)

This statement is acknowledging the cultural anxiety about race deterioration by claiming that white superiority has been significantly challenged by the non-white Japanese and—in the context of the diet debate—claims that the assumption that animal food is needed for energy and vitality is false. The article continues, “The Japanese are allowed to be among the very strongest people on the earth. They are strong mentally and physically, and yet practically they eat no meat at all. The diet which enables them to develop such hardy frames and such well-balanced and keen brains, consists almost wholly of rice.”\(^{153}\) The Japanese are positioned here as an example of non-white race that could give Americans a run for their money if they kept up their omnivorous ways. The article concludes, “The Japanese have proved that a frugal manner of living is consistent with great bodily strength—indeed, is perhaps more so that the meat diet of the white man.”\(^{154}\) This argument goes hand in hand in the common argument that meat-eating was indulgent and that Americans, particularly American men, were harming themselves and the race at large by being gluttonous. In previous chapters this argument has been explored, but it bears repeating that neurasthenia and general weakness was linked to over eating and that the

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\(^{152}\) “Medical Judgement of Japs.”

\(^{153}\) Ibid.

\(^{154}\) Ibid.
ramifications of such activities went far beyond the individual; meat-eating was harming white-Americans as a whole.

That same year *The Citizen*, out of Bereal Kentucky, published a piece by R. Matsuki, who they describe as the, “Prominent Japanese Merchant in This Country.” Matsuki argues that the Japanese have subsisted on a diet without meat for hundreds of years without any hardship and, although it would be difficult, Americans could one day get to that point as well. After arguing that it is possible, Matsuki argues why it would be a positive change. He writes:

> Whether we [Americans] would be as strong and healthy without meat may be answered by referring again to the case of Japan. Where shall we find a people of more endurance and courage than the Japanese? War is supposed to bring out the elements of people's strength, and we find that in the east to-day the Japanese are performing prodigies of hard work and hard fighting without depending on meat as a food. At the battle of Nanshan… [they] had to support themselves for 48 hours on a little dried rice, but they proved themselves fully a match for the great-framed, beef-eating Russians.

Here again are echoes of arguments past. In fact, Matsuki’s statements push the argument even further; not only are the vegetarian Japanese strong, they are of equal strength to their white meat-eating counterparts, specifically the “beef-eating Russians.” Matsuki continues, “The Japanese wrestlers are among the strongest individuals in the world, and they are also the most temperate, while they use meat not at all, and train practically on rice.” If meat-eating, as has been seen before, is linked to savage temperament, Matsuki’s claim here is balanced. The Japanese wrestlers are strong but temperate, they have physical power but have no loss of civilization. Matsuki concludes that, “If anybody would find out how true it is that a meat diet is not the best to promote strength and health, let him give vegetables a fairer test.”

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155 Matsuki, “A Vegetable Diet.”
156 Ibid.
157 Ibid.
158 Ibid.
Vegetarian arguments often relied on case examples of exceptionally strong vegetarian men and ethnic groups to break the cognitive connection between vegetarianism and weakness and, conversely, meat-eating and strength. For example, in 1904 the *The Rising Sun* of Kansas City, Missouri, ran the article “Miners Carry Great Weights. Strengths of Chileans Sustained Without Meat Diet” in their “Odd Corner” section. Just a miscellaneous, or odd, fact; the short article described the great weights carried by Chilean miners every day and their diet of primarily figs and bread. We have seen similar arguments about vegetarian men in America in previous chapters—specifically in the case of Parker and Welsh—but it is important to note that vegetarians were looking all over the world for examples of strong men who subsisted on either wholly or primarily plant-based diets. While the Japanese were the most frequently cited, arguments like this that describe non-white people from outside of Asia functioned in the same way—don’t let the racial hierarchy fool you, although other peoples may seem inferior to the white man, it is clear that feats of strength are not exclusively performed by white races.

Dr. J. T. Allen published an article in *The Virginia Enterprise* using a similar argumentative tactic. Allen argues that, “No fallacy in regard to diet is more erroneous or more unfortunate than the common argument that the working man needs meat. The contrary is true.” Allen quotes Dr. Wiley, then chief of the federal bureau of chemistry, who claims, “A Japanese coolie will carry you around town all day on a pound of rice; you cannot do that on a pound of meat.” Allen then quotes William Jennings Bryan who claims that, “the Japanese ‘riskishaw man will wheel a man 75 miles in a day; and his food is rice…The Bedouin Arab,

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159 “Miners Carry Great Weights. Strength of Chileans Sustained Without Meat Diet.”
160 Allen’s article is also discussed in Chapter I.
161 Allen, “Economics of Eating.”
162 Ibid.
who will run all day by the side of a magnificent Arab horse, lives on dates and figs, never eating meat.”

Allen, relying on the support of Wiley and Bryan, uses international examples to support his claim that meat-eating is not a necessity. In fact, much like the *Pullman Herald* article mentioned above, Allen argues that the connection made by pro-meat supporters that people are poor and uncivilized in part because of their vegetarian diet is simply a projection. “But why,” Allen writes, “…if the Chinese monodiet, is so good, has China been for centuries a by-word for unprogressiveness?”

According to Allen, the abysmal Chinese educational system and opium dependencies are the reason why the Chinese are synonymous with arrested development. The strength of foreign people like the Japanese and Chinese, however poor they are, is not hindered by their primarily vegetarian diets.

Theories about race and civilization were not exclusively used by vegetarians; pro-meat arguments capitalized on the fear of race deterioration as their foundation as well. Dr. Woods Hutchinson is cited in the article “Doctors Disagree” to contrast the vegetarian position of George Howard Jackson—which, in short, was that human teeth and digestive systems were made for vegetarian diets. Hutchinson is quoted in the article as saying:

> Parenthetically speaking, it may be said that vegetarianism is the diet of the enslaved, stagnant and conquered races, and a diet rich in meat is that of the progressive, the dominant and the conquering strains. The rise of any nation is invariably accomplished by an increased abundance in food supply from all possible sources, both vegetable and animal. The degree of vegetarianism of a race or class, is simply the measure of its poverty.

It is clear from Hutchinson’s remarks that diet was looked at as a factor in determining whether a race or nation was civilized or savage and that meat-eating invariably indicated civilization. In

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163 Ibid.
164 Ibid.
165 “Doctor’s Disagree.”
contrast to the arguments used by vegetarians, Hutchinson and other pro-meat advocates saw the addition of meat into a people’s diet as a pivotal step in the process of moving from savagery to civilization. Even further, the increase in the number of vegetarians, or rice-fed immigrants, in the United States was argued to be a threat to the meat-eating white American race.

This sentiment is exemplified in the short pamphlet, titled “Meat vs. Rice: American Manhood Against Asiatic Cooliesm, Which Shall Survive?,” which was co-written by Samuel Gompers and Herman Gutstadt for the American Federation of Labor in 1908. At the time, the AFL was the more exclusive labor organization in comparison to the more inclusive Industrial Workers of the World. The AFL primarily organized white men who were skilled laborers and supported openly racist legislation such as the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. “Meat vs. Rice” was Gompers and Gutstadt’s response to the failure of the U.S. government to address the increase of Japanese and other Asian workers after their response to Chinese workers with the Chinese Exclusion Act.

The pamphlet begins with a recounting of the history of Asian immigration and labor in California. At first, Gompers and Gutstadt admit, the Asian immigrants helped to promote the rapid development of the state, but, in time they became a great limitation on California’s progress. The primary problem from the labor standpoint, according to Gompers and Gutstadt, was that the Chinese worked for lower wages, “Whatever business or trade they entered was, and is yet, absolutely doomed for the white laborer, as competition is simply impossible.”\textsuperscript{166} What was worse, the number of Asian immigrants to the West Coast and Hawaii was increasing even with the Chinese Exclusion Act. Gompers and Gutstadt quote Rudyard Kipling to emphasize this point. Kipling writes, “There are three races who can work,” referring to them as Caucasians,

\\textsuperscript{166} Labor, Gompers, and Gutstadt, \textit{Meat Vs. Rice}. 
Africans, and Mongolians, “but there is only one that can swarm. These [Asian] people work and spread. They pack close and eat everything and can live on nothing. They will overwhelm the world.” Gompers and Gutstadt, building on the simile that Asians are like swarming insects, claim that something needs to be done to combat their threat to America and American territories, specifically Hawaii and the Philippines.

At this point in the pamphlet diet is only tangentially mentioned in reference to wages and cost of living, however, Gompers and Gutstadt use the data collected to argue that Asian immigrants’, “ability to subsist and thrive under conditions which would mean starvation and suicide to the cheapest laborer of Europe secures to them an advantage which baffles the statesman and economist to overcome, how much less the chances of the laborers pitted in competition against them.” The white laborers simply could not compete with the Asian laborers—referred to here as Mongolian—races because they could not survive on the diet and lifestyle of their inferior counterparts. Even further, when white laborers tried to compete they were humiliated; “The negro slave of the South,” Gompers and Gutstadt argue, “was housed and fed, but the white trash of California is placed beneath the Mongolian.”

After making numerous observations about the character and lifestyles of the Asian immigrants, including poor hygiene and opium additions, Gompers and Gutstadt ask their reader, “Is our civilization, our code of morals and social status to be exposed to the contaminating influence herebefore mentioned, in order to sell a few more barrels of flour or other cereals?” Their hypothetical answer is of course not. In the last few pages, Gompers and Gutstadt quote James G. Blaine, who

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167 Ibid., 8.
168 Ibid., 14.
169 Ibid., 21.
spoke before the Senate in favor of Chinese exclusion in 1879. Here the culmination of their arguments intersect with diet explicitly. Gompers and Gutstadt quote Blaine:

— the demoralization of the white race is much more rapid by reason of the contact than is the salvation of the Chinese race. You cannot work a man who must have beef and bread alongside of a man who can live on rice. In all such conflicts and in all such struggles, the result is not to bring up the man who lives on rice to the beef-and-bread standard, but it is to bring down the beef-and-bread man to the rice standard.

Blaine is making two simultaneous arguments here. First, in keeping with the main theme of the pamphlet, Blaine argues that when white workers and Asian workers are put in job competition that Asian workers will always win because they will work for less. The second argument is more nuanced. In this statement Blaine is also alluding to race deterioration by association. In other words, putting beef-and-bread men alongside rice-fed men causes the entire community to deteriorate—an argument which echoes many nativist sentiments of the era.

Although many vegetarians, like Matsuki above, claimed that the rice-based diet of the Chinese and Japanese made them more civilized, many people shared a similar sentiment to Gompers, Gutstadt, and Blaine. In the 1909 article written by Dr. J. T. Allen referenced above, he provides an example of this:

I was trying to show the members of the woman’s club awhile ago that the Chinese system, living on rice (entire rice) almost exclusively, is better than ours, because it furnished better nourishment, avoids sickness and saves dishwashing. To which one woman replied when the time came for questions and criticism: “I suppose they live in that poverty-stricken country because they have to. For my part, I’m glad I don’t have to live on rice all the time. And if it is true that a man is what his food makes him, I think China is a good warning to the rest of the world.”

The woman’s response is reflective of the fact that, despite all arguments, many Americans clung to the ideology cemented by scientific racism; although it was made clear by debaters like Allen and Matsuki that non-white people around the world thrived on plant-based diets, the idea that

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170 Allen, “Economics of Eating.”
you are what you eat prevailed. Plant-based diets were labeled non-white diets and the stigma associated with that label was difficult to overcome. In short, there was an unresolved tension between vegetarians and pro-meat supporters on the issue of diet and race. Both groups believed that they were right, that vegetarianism would either save or end the superiority of white Americans. Although it is near impossible to determine how readers reacted to these claims, it is worth noting that diet debaters uses ideas about race and civilization to make their claims throughout the 1890s and well into the 1910s. In the last section of this chapter traces a very specific debate that unfolded in the pages of one Hawaiian newspaper and provides a narrower look at the use of race in the diet debate.

**Hawaii: Race, Gender, Diet and Imperialism**

Looking at how the diet-debate unfolded in late nineteenth-century Hawaii is particularly useful for unpacking the complex link made between diet, race, and civilization theories in the United States. The Hawaiian Islands were exposed to Western influences in 1778 when they were rediscovered by British Captain James Cook. Throughout the nineteenth-century, white traders, businessmen, and missionaries went to Hawaii in an imperial attempt to capitalize on the islands’ resources and Christianize the native Hawaiians. The Hawaiian monarchy, under the pressure of Western influences, eventually introduced a new system of property ownership that benefitted foreign interests and eliminated their previously communal system. In 1874 David Kalakaua was elected King of Hawaii—after the death of King Lunalilo who governed on a platform to strengthen Hawaii’s independence from foreign powers—in an election that was rigged by American sugar corporations who had been profiting from the islands’ climate and resources for years. Once King, Kalakaua signed the Reciprocity Treaty with the United States.

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which gave the U.S. Navy exclusive control of Pearl Harbor and eliminated the duties on sugar imported into the U.S. from Hawaii—thus giving America a tangible imperial foothold in Hawaii and supported American sugar production on the islands. To sustain the growing industry, other Asian people, specifically the Japanese, were encouraged to immigrate to Hawaii, a move that intensified the racial diversity on the islands—thinking back to the civilization arguments explored above, the Hawaiian Islands put white “civilized” Americans, Native “savage” Hawaiians, and “barbaric” Japanese all in close contact with each other. In fact, Gompers and Gutstadt specifically argue that Hawaii was one of the primary places Americans needed to be worried about Japanese immigration and race deterioration.\footnote{172}{Labor, Gompers, and Gutstadt, \textit{Meat Vs. Rice}, 27.} The Reciprocity Treaty of 1875 set in motion the eventual annexation of Hawaii by the United States in 1898 and its incorporation as a U.S. Territory in 1900.\footnote{173}{Hawkins, \textit{A Pacific Industry}.}

In pre-colonial Hawaii, fish and poi—made from taro root—were the staples of the Hawaiian diet with sweet potatoes, yams, coconut, seaweed, pig, dog, and chicken also occupying important roles.\footnote{174}{Kuyendall, \textit{Hawaii: A History}.} Although meat did factor into the Hawaiian diet, it was not the primary source of protein. Once Hawaii was opened up to the West, their subsistence economy—revolving around fish and poi—was changed. With the influx of whalers in the early nineteenth-century, Hawaii began to diversify its agricultural production to meet the needs of foreign influences.\footnote{175}{Morgan, \textit{Hawaii}.} This shift continued into the late nineteenth-century with sugar becoming the biggest crop and export. When Japanese and other Asian immigrants were brought to the island to join the plantation workforce they brought their plant-based diets and the vegetarian friendly
Buddhism with them. The white settlers also brought their traditional diet to the islands; this stimulated the demand for meat, especially beef, on the islands. Although this dietary history is at surface level, the main point is that there was a clear clash. The native Hawaiians and Asian workforce lived on primarily plant-based diets while the white plantation class lived on the mixed-diet of the American mainland. This division is important to contextualize how the diet-debate played out on the islands in the late nineteenth-century.

The *Pacific Commercial Advertiser* (PCA), published in Honolulu from 1856 until 1921—when it was sold and renamed the *Honolulu Advertiser*—ran many articles that dealt with the diet debate as it unfolded on the American mainland and on the Hawaiian Islands both before and after Hawaii became a U.S. territory. The *PCA* was established as a newspaper specifically meant to cater to the growing white population on the islands and ran both local articles and reprinted articles from other American newspapers.176

In 1898, for example, the *PCA* published “The Vegetarians,” which challenged the argument that vegetarianism produces strong men. The article begins with a mention of the great accomplishments of vegetarian marathon runners in Berlin, noting that such stories from abroad, “appear from time to time in the press, and set the vegetarians and the “antis” by the ears,” acknowledging the presence of the diet-debate in Hawaiian newspapers.177 The article moves on to argue that no valid scientific studies prove that a vegetarian diet really improves health and, in the case of the Berlin runners, “The vegetarians…may have been picked men, while the meat men may have been inferior physically.”178 In other words, the link between vegetarianism and strength or stamina is merely a correlation. The article then points out something that was clearly

176 “The Pacific Commercial Advertiser.”
177 “The Vegetarians.”
178 Ibid.
important in Hawaii at the time and, maybe, on the West Coast of the United States; the author claims that people can point to the Japanese and their strength on a rice diet to argue for vegetarianism but, “At the same time several plantation managers have said that the Japanese laborers were not able to do effective work until they were meat fed.”\textsuperscript{179} The unique social conditions of Hawaii allowed for white Americans to see firsthand how laboring men functioned on specific diets and, even though their observations were not actually scientific in their nature, the landscape impacted their understanding of the debate.

According to this author, the local belief that Japanese laborers worked better when fed meat provided tangible evidence in favor of meat-diets. The article concludes on a balanced note, transitioning from the topic of race to nutrition. The author argues that the quality of the food, rather than the type, is the most important component for health. “The entire Teutonic race,” it concludes:

has a hunger for meat…and it is only when the race is old that the value of the vegetable is appreciated. Even here [in Hawaii], where the vegetable diet is said by some to be absolutely necessary, there is so little appreciation of excellent vegetables that no effort is made to supply this Paradise with either choice meat, or choice vegetables.\textsuperscript{180}

This is a popular sentiment that was presented throughout the diet debate; although vegetables are important, a mixed diet that includes meat is the best. In the context of the \textit{PCA} this argument seems appropriate for their readership who, moving from mainland America to the Hawaiian island, undoubtedly experienced a culture shock that included diet. “The Vegetarians” is comforting in the sense that it reaffirms the mainstream beliefs about the need for meat that were carried over from the mainland to Hawaii by white Americas.

A year later, the diet debate resurfaced on the pages of the \textit{PCA} when the price of meat

\textsuperscript{179} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{180} Ibid.
drastically increased and made the topic economically relevant. One particular four-part exchange published in December of 1899 demonstrates the tension between, as the article above describes them, the vegetarians and the “antis.” Published December 14th 1899, “The Meat Supply” gives the account of Mr. Walter of the Metropolitan Meat Company on the reasons for the price hikes. Walter attributes the rise in demand to the increased number of white families moving to the islands and the increase of men on transport vessels involved in the sugar trade. To compensate for the spike in consumption, the Metropolitan Meat Company had arranged for shipments of beef to arrive monthly from San Francisco but, because Hawaii was not yet a territory, the tariffs imposed made it too expensive. They then decided to import beef from Australia instead, however, the supply was not enough to fully satisfy the demand. In short, there was a higher demand for meat, specifically beef, due to the increase in the number of white families and traders on the islands, and no consistent supply.

On the same date, the PCA also ran a short editorial commenting on the escalating price of meat on the islands. Walter G. Smith, then editor, was a fairly well-known white American journalist who had moved from San Diego to report on the overthrow of the Hawaiian monarchy in the early 1890s. After predicting that the price of meat would continue to rise, Smith jeers, “There is a fine opening for vegetarians in Honolulu which we trust they will take advantage of. Persuasion that people are better off without a “flesh diet” could not be more opportune. Plenty of people are half convinced now.” Although the economic connection is valid, Smith’s tone is rather supercilious. He uses the escalating meat prices to call vegetarians on the islands—assumingly native Hawaiians and Japanese immigrants—opportunistic.

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181 “The Meat Supply. Manager Waller’s Views Obtained.”
182 “Pacific Personalities; Walter Gifford Smith.”
183 Smith, “Editorial.”
Two days later, on December 16th 1899, the PCA ran an article submitted by “a well-known lady in Honolulu society,” or, as she signs her work “An Interested Kamaaina,” which translated means native Hawaiian. The article is addressed to the editor and titled “The Price of Meat,” is clearly a specific response to the comments made by Smith on the 14th.184 The woman begins by saying that she was glad to hear a mention of vegetarianism in the PCA—seemingly matching Smith’s tone with sarcasm. According to the woman, the adoption of a vegetarian diet by two of her friends—assumed to be living in Hawaii—cured their digestive and nervous disorders as well their insomnia.185 Echoing the international arguments present at other points in the debate, the woman then used the Russian Doukhobers as an example of a group of thriving vegetarian people. The Doukhobers were passive dissenters who were immigrating to Canada at the time due to their disapproval of the Russian Orthodox Church and government. The woman quotes a recent “Review of Reviews” in which she learned about the Doukhobers, “All of the reports of these people which have reached us from Canada,” she quotes, “are most flattering. They are a sturdy, strongly built people, we are told, many of the men measuring nearer seven than six feet in height.”186 Analyzing the quote she provided, the woman asks her Hawaiian readers to question if the strength and sturdiness of the Doukhobers should be attributed to their vegetarian diet—a question that she implicitly wants her reader to answer with a yes!

Moving out of the international sphere, the woman then moves to the domestic. She claims that Hawaiian housekeepers would “rejoice” in vegetarianism because they would no longer have to deal with the task or preparing and cleaning up after greasy meat—a comment that suggests that her intended audience is part of the wealthy white population that employed

184 “The Price of Meat. It Suggest the Use of Health Foods.”
185 Ibid.
186 Ibid.
house staff and valued cleanliness. With these arguments presented, the woman sarcastically addresses Smith, “Yes, Mr. Editor, now, as you suggested, would be a favorable time to introduce a vegetable diet.” The woman concludes her article by circling back to her argumentative position. She mentions that the large populations of India, China, and Japan live on plant-based foods like legumes and rice. She even includes a nutritional analysis—based on research that she only specifies as coming from “modern cooking-schools”—of plant-based foods:

![Analysis of Foods]

**Analysis of Foods**

In keeping with the sarcastic yet enlightened tone of the article, the woman ends, “With the kind permission of the Advertiser, an occasional article on this subject, including some receipts, might be useful to those interested.” It would not be too presumptuous to say that this well-known society lady matched Smith’s condescension with sass.

On the 19th the PCA ran Smith’s rebuttal, “What to Eat” in which Smith’s attempts to defend himself from the attacks he received on the 16th. Smith argues, much like “The Vegetarians” published the year before, that fruits, nuts, and vegetables are healthy but meat

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187 Ibid.
188 Ibid.
189 Ibid.
should not be given up entirely, “Variety is not only the spice of life but its physical salvation.” Smith continues, “With the extreme views of the vegetarian cult we do not feel much sympathy” because nature intends for man to eat meat! Smith argues that human teeth are fit to tear flesh and chew vegetables, therefore nature dictates that humans should be omnivores. Smith, like the woman before him, did not stop there. He introduces a racial argument by claiming that vegetarians:

- easily degenerate as races…Japanese are often used as examples of what a grain and vegetable regimen will do for a people, but the Japanese have always eaten fish, eggs, chickens and ducks and are now, as far as they have the means, inculcating the meat habit so—as they say—to increase their physical size and stamina.

This argument is complex. First, Smith connects vegetarianism with backwardness and meat-eating with progress. He notes that the increased means of the Japanese has lead them to take on meat in their diet—linking economic progress with the adoption of meat and echoing the arguments that meat-eating is one of the first transitionary steps between barbarism and civilization. In addition, Smith also cries fowl and claims that the Japanese, although they are always cited as a great vegetarian nation, eat many other sources of protein and do not simply rely on rice. Smith continues:

- The history of the world gives the credit of the most progress to the beef-eating races…They are the ones that push ahead, the pioneers of civilization…Where they go, victory is theirs in trade and commerce and in war and in their presence the nations that see the least of “flesh” on their dinner tables and the most of grain and vegetables, give way and confess themselves inferior.

Smith ends on this racially charged note. The explicit connection he makes between diet and racial progress shows that the late nineteenth-century diet debate was often intrinsically

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190 “What to Eat.”
191 Ibid.
192 Ibid.
193 Ibid.
connected to the anxiety of race deterioration and the attempt by white America to maintain the ideological foundation of racial superiority by any means available.

Smith’s racialized argument was not left unchallenged. On the 19th the PCA published “The Wisest Fare. Further Notes on What We Eat,” written anonymously by a “Malihini” which translates to newcomer. The Malihini directly addresses the comments made by Smith and the woman discussed above, “With your permission,” the newcomer writes, “I would be glad to pass a few comments thereon, not in the spirit of antagonism”—which is evident in the exchange between Smith and the woman—“but with the humble endeavor to, if possible, throw a little more light on the subject.” The Malihini acknowledges that the economic argument made by Smith on the 14th, while perhaps belittling to vegetarians, was correct; it was indeed cheaper to get protein in other foods that were not as expensive as meat on the islands. The Malihini then claims extra economic rewards for vegetarians in the form of lower health costs. He moves on from the remarks made on the 14th to those made on the 16th, and questions Smith’s assertion that omnivorous variety provides the spice of life, “Can you not find variety enough in nature’s storehouse? I humbly think so.” He justifies his stance by claiming that plant-based foods give people nutrients without the animal middle man—by getting nutrients through meat, he claims, “we absorb germs that produce cancer, consumption, tapeworms, trichinae and an endless variety of fatal diseases that otherwise we would escape.” The Malihini’s biggest punch comes in his response to Smith’s civilization claims. He writes:

You, Mr. Editor, assert that flesh-eaters are ever the progressive races and the pioneers of commerce, and I grant that the use of meat makes man aggressive and combative, seeking conquest and fresh fields to exploit. If this tends toward your ideal of civilization, well

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194 “The Wisest Fare. Further Notes on What to Eat.”
195 Ibid.
196 Ibid.
197 Ibid.
and good; I would even suggest that our warriors be feed largely on “rare” meats, but the civilization attained through a people nurtured on a vegetarian diet is that of the fine arts, poetry, high moral culture, respect of property rights, and peace and good will to all men.\textsuperscript{198}

In this argument we again see the imperial landscape of Hawaii come to the surface. The Malihini is turning the civilization narrative on its head by claiming that vegetarianism, not meat-eating, is what truly makes a race progressive and civilized. In addition, claiming that vegetarians respect property rights alludes the imperial conquest of the islands by white Americans. Because the author refers to Smith’s warriors as “our” warriors, I am inclined to assume that the newcomer was a white American, making this exchange especially interesting.

The \textit{PCA} never provided a resolution to this argument. Neither racial claim could actually be verified so, mirroring the larger diet debate, nobody was declared the real winner. Regardless of its conclusion, this exchange between a white wealthy newspaper editor, a well-known native Hawaiian socialite, and anonymous newcomer reveals the real racial tension present in the diet debate both in Hawaii and on the American mainland. It also serves as an example of a real debate in contrast to the more abstract debates presented in other sections.

Kayla Wazana Tompkins argues that, “the mouth is understood as a site \textit{to which} and \textit{within which} various political values unevenly adhere and \textit{through which} food as mediated experience imperfectly bonds with the political to form the fictions that are too often understood within everyday life as racial truths.”\textsuperscript{199} In this chapter, Tompkins’ argument is further solidified through the examination of the diet debate. The anxiety surrounding race deterioration was central to many arguments and played a major role in the debate over diet; while some believed

\textsuperscript{198} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{199} Tompkins, \textit{Racial Indigestion}, 5.
that vegetarianism created strong bodies, strong nations, and strong races, other believed that it caused deterioration. The diet debate was a logical outlet for racial anxiety because diet was seen as clear indicator of different nationalities and, therefore, race. Diet could be used by those who believed in the inherent superiority of the white race to bolster their claims at the same time it could be used to destabilize that idea—most notably through the example of the Japanese.
CHAPTER IV.
CONCLUSION

This thesis opened with a quote from Dr. H. W. Lathrop’s 1911 “Why a Nation’s Brains and Ideals Are Made Up Only of the Food They Eat.” Lathrop argues, “as a nation eats, so it thinks and acts.” This thesis has proven that Lathrop’s theory was taken seriously and, more importantly, that the opposite was just as true for turn-of-the-twentieth-century Americans; as a nation thinks and acts, so it eats! The diet debate waged in American newspapers from roughly 1890 to 1914 demonstrates this phenomenon. Cultural anxieties, broad ideologies, and popular understandings of gender, race, and nation all influenced the debate over what Americans should eat and, conversely, diet debaters positioned their diets as a way to solve, maintain, and reflect them. Each chapter in this thesis has explored the diet debate’s response to and reflection of different cultural anxieties to locate the ways diet was positioned as an individual and collective concern. Diet—which includes food as object and eating as action—blurs the line between individual bodies and their environments and debates about diet reveal the underlying belief that what one person intimately ingests has a ripple effect across the entire nation.

In the first chapter, “Diet, Health, and Gender: Fighting National Neurasthenia,” the diet debate in contextualized alongside the broad cultural anxiety of neurasthenia and degeneration. Diet debaters argued that their favored diet could help individual Americans avoid neurasthenia and the nation avoid widespread deterioration. This fear of neurasthenia and deterioration—intricately linked with the fear of disrupting the prevailing racial and gender hierarchies—was pervasive and diet debaters actively participated in the national attempt to mitigate them. Some diet debaters argued that Americans should just keep eating what they were already eating; that

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200 Lathrop, “Why a Nation’s Brains and Ideals Are Made Up Only of the Food They Eat.”
mixed-diets were the best for warding off neurasthenia and its debilitating symptoms. Others urged Americans to change; a wholesale shift in the American diet from a meat-centered to a vegetarian diet was crucial for Americans to prevent widespread deterioration. Balancing savagery and civilization to avoid overcivilization was often alluded to or explicitly mentioned in the diet debate and reveals the complex connection made between what one intimately ingested and the future of the nation at a time when the future seemed very uncertain.

This connection—between individual diet and the nation’s future—is further exemplified by chapter one’s case study on the diet debate and male boxers during the neurasthenia epidemic. Boxers were unique cultural symbols at the turn of the twentieth century; they simultaneously reflected a new white American masculinity focused on performing strength, independence, and controlled aggression at the same time they validated the racial and gender hierarchies by functioning as visual representations of white male dominance. In the case of “Kid” Parker we can see how diet was positioned within the boxing world. While the National Police Gazette mocked Parker for attempting to fight a meat-fueled boxer on his own vegetarian diet, Parker argued that it was his vegetarian diet that allowed him to push his body to its absolute potential. Parker also argued that Americans should read the writing on the wall; that non-white people all over the world have more endurance on vegetarian diets and, therefore, white male bodies are not inherently superior but need to be actively molded—through exercise and diet—to reach their full potential. The same is evident in Freddie Welsh’s claim that the vegetarian Japanese were superior to their meat-eating Russian opponents in war. This chapter demonstrates how debaters framed their arguments in the context of the broader anxieties about neurasthenia and degeneration and their impact on the gender and racial hierarchies. Their arguments reinforced
the link between the individual and nation and the fear that what individual Americans ate could jeopardize the entire nation or white race.

In the second chapter, “Progressive Era Rhetoric in the Diet Debate: Poverty, Alcoholism, and Pure Food,” we can see how diet debaters actively capitalized on progressive era movements to stake their claims—using the thoughts and actions of the nation to promote their diets. Diet debaters used progressive rhetoric—or the language and arguments from other reform movements—to position their diets within the context of progressive goals. For example, in the case of poverty relief, diet debaters argued that the wide spread adoption of vegetarianism could alleviate the plight of poor Americans. In the case of the prohibition movement, debaters argued that certain diets could either increase or decrease people’s desire to drink. Both of these examples show that diet debaters were opportunistic in their approach; they attempted to use the momentum of other movements to bolster their own. Ultimately, this approach did not work. Settlement house workers in New York blamed the Beef Trust for the high prices of meat and fought to bust that trust instead of promoting vegetarianism. Similarly, the arguments that vegetarianism could curb the nation’s thirst for alcohol was seen as an unrealistic solution.

The final case study of the chapter, “The Jungle and the Pure Food and Drug Act,” also demonstrates that Americans were less inclined to promote wholesale diet reform as they were with reforming the institutions that allowed Americans to make their own dietary choices. When The Jungle was published there was a surge in vegetarianism across the country, however, once the government and the meat industry responded to the public outcry against the practices of the Chicago meat packing industry, Americans quickly returned to their meat-centered diets. What this chapter demonstrates is the clear alignment between arguments in the diet debate and those made by other Progressive movements.
Chapter three, “Race and Civilization in the Diet Debate: Meat vs. Rice and White vs. Non-White,” details the many ways theories about race and civilization were incorporated into the diet debate. Patterns on both sides of the diet debate reveal debater’s reliance on theories of race and civilization to prove their diets were better for white Americans. Some debaters argued that meat-eating was what prompted the white race to advance to the highest stages of civilization while others condemned it for causing degeneration; either way, diet was understood to play a pivotal role in the development or decline of the entire white race. In addition, diet debaters situated the American diet in an international context when they looked at other races to bolster their claims. The Japanese were often cited as proving the theory that non-white nations could reach civilization and have strength comparable to white Americans without eating meat. Each argument that incorporated theories of race or civilization perpetuated the racial hierarchy in nuanced ways. Some debaters encouraged dietary change to avoid degeneration while others ensured Americans that the diets they already practiced were fine; either way diet debaters positioned their diets as either protecting or maintaining white racial superiority.

Each chapter in this thesis—while focusing on different arguments about how the diet debate reflected and responded to cultural anxieties—reveals the link made between an individual’s diet, their health, and the general health of the nation, the prevailing race and gender hierarchies, and the white race. Using Tompkins’ critical eating studies as a foundation, this thesis supports the theory that eating and diet—as the culmination of food as object and eating as action—show the “flexible and circular relation between the self and the social world.” Diet debaters argued for particular diets based on the assumption that the diet of individual Americans connected them to their fellow Americans and was reflective of American anxieties and

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beliefs—diet was positioned as the very thing that both established and reinscribed one’s relationship with their society. In the case of neurasthenia, diet was positioned as a way to mitigate the fear of widespread physical decline through the strengthening of individual bodies. In the case of progressive era reform movements, diet was positioned as an independent form of reform—placing diet in a powerful position. Finally, in relation to fears of white racial deterioration, diet was positioned as the pivotal catalyst for both progression and degeneration.

The positioning of diet as the link between individual and their social world was not unique to the turn of the twentieth-century. The Graham diet of the nineteenth-century functioned in a very similar way; connecting the diet of individuals and America’s ability to function as an independent nation. This link is still made in the twenty-first century. Americans who are anxious about the effects of globalization and corporate greed use their diet to negotiate their relationship with such forces—most notably in adoption of diets that consist of locally sourced foods. Americans who are anxious about the health effects of modern food production—factory farms, pesticides, genetic modification—buy organic or non-GMO food products. Americans who are worried about their impact on the environment and are fearful of the effects of global warming adopt vegetarian or vegan diets as an act of embodied environmentalism. Americans who fully embrace technology utilize Fitbit and other applications to digitally monitor their diets. While these are just a few examples, it is clear that diet is still understood to connect individuals with the larger world around them and, just like the diet debate between 1890 and 1914, people argue for particular diets based on broader cultural trends and anxieties.
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