

Exposé and Excess

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Eric Schlosser may be the Upton Sinclair for this age of mad cow disease.

Los Angeles Times, 2001

Eric Schlosser's best-selling *Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal*, narratively maps the post–World War II demographic pattern of US food production, interstate highways, and ubiquitous fast-food outlets from McDonald's to Subway and Taco Bell. Schlosser, a contributor to *Rolling Stone* and *The Atlantic Monthly* and a former student of the acclaimed nonfiction writer John McPhee, exposes the treacherous working conditions and abysmal pay of meat-processing workers and the growing labor peonage of ranchers enfeoffed to the meat-packing oligopoly. He juxtaposes individual entrepreneurship in the food industry to the incursions of corporate food and agribusiness into schools and other public places. Schlosser's is a narrative that is dense with facts, stylistically elegant, and narratively cunning.

The problematic position of *Fast Food Nation* and complementary texts in literary studies, however, can be traced to its generic lineage. Because Schlosser's book describes dire c. 2000 meat-processing conditions (call it Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times* meets Hieronymus Bosch), it invites comparison to *The Jungle* (1906). It links itself, thereby, to the narrative tradition of early-twentieth-century writers who called theirs a literature of exposé or disclosure. These writers—including Ray Stannard Baker, Lincoln Steffens, and Ida M. Tarbell—lost the naming rights to their projects when, in 1906, President Theodore Roosevelt dubbed them muckrakers. Modifying an image from John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, Roosevelt acknowledged the prevalent “filth” of corruption in business and public life in the US and asserted the need to remove it with a Bunyanesque “muck-rake” (226). Warning, however, that those writers who relentlessly plied that rake threatened the social order and were agents of “evil,” he

arguably hobbled the cohort of literary social critics even as he named them (226).

US literary critical history has ignored or given this group short shrift for decades. They (together with their heirs, including Schlosser and a cohort of c. 2000 new muckrakers) were damned with faintest praise in Alfred Kazin's influential *On Native Grounds*. Kazin judged the movement in terms reminiscent of natural disaster: "[S]uddenly released in a flood," the American "native grounds" were inundated when a collective mental dam broke (91). The muckraking movement, said Kazin, was one raging intellectual and emotional tumult (see chapter 4). Segue to Van Wyck Brooks's *The Confident Years: 1885–1915* and we find the movement characterized in Cold War terms of alien invasion and infection festering in the body politic. Brooks understood the muckrakers to be acolytes of Russian immigrant anarchists still fighting the tyranny of czarist Russia in Manhattan's lower East side (see chapter 21).

Post-1940s–1950s literary critical practices further eclipsed the muckrakers because New Criticism favored literary forms hostile to the muckrakers' own. Against a critical regimen of knowledge pursued through the interpretation of distinct linguistic features, principally metaphor and symbol, the muckrakers' ethos of discursive transparency appeared unliterary and thus unworthy of critical attention. (In this sense, Brooks's barb about muckrakers' "superficialities" struck true even as he turned their salient and carefully honed feature—accessibility—against them [381].) In the interdisciplinary field of American studies, meanwhile, the muckrakers fared no better because New Criticism made itself felt in the myth-and-symbol school, which argued that societal conflict could be codified in complex cultural symbols such as machines, gardens, and public figures, notably Charles Lindbergh or Andrew Jackson. No muckraker text was plumbed for its cultural symbol, nor for its divers types of ambiguity à la William Empson's landmark *New Critical Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1966).

The division between two categories—"literature" and "journalism"—further suppressed reevaluation of the muckrakers. From the long-standing literary studies standpoint, these writers are *merely* journalists. The literary critic, both in and out of the academy, has the higher calling, in the true meaning of vocation (from the Latin *vocare*). The journalist, on the other hand, is merely a Voc-Ed worker. (Programs in journalism and in English typically exist in separate academic departments, schools, or university colleges, an arrangement normalized over decades, with writers designated as "creative" separated from those in journalistic "training.")

The inclusion of *Fast Food Nation* in literary studies (along with new muckraker texts of c. 2000, such as Barbara Ehrenreich's *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America* and Naomi Klein's *No Logo: Taking Aim at the Brand Bullies*) thus requires an analysis of texts according to different criteria, most promisingly those of narrative studies. Of practical value here are the work of Peter Brooks on plot and melodrama, the discussion by Hayden White of truth claims, and the argument of James Phelan on narrative design and the use of facts. According to Christopher Nash, a theorist of narrative, muckraker narratives arguably open themselves to the kind of "radical writing" that "claims to strike at the root (social, for example) of things 'outside' the text"—which is to say, narrative able to intercede directly in the sociopolitical realm (206).

The notion of Schlosser as reprise of Upton Sinclair nonetheless prompts distinctions across a century. In *The Jungle*, for instance, the main characters, Lithuanian immigrants, are all downtrodden workers whose bosses are purebred villains. *Fast Food Nation*, on the other hand, widens the spectrum of its dramatic personae by featuring several compelling and sympathetic biographies of self-made American entrepreneurs, such as John Richard Simplot, a onetime Idaho potato farmer who became one of America's richest men through a potato empire supplying the military and McDonald's. (Simplot's is the name responsible for the crispy golden arch fries.)

Other differences are equally salient. In *The Jungle*, Sinclair made the cri de coeur of the Chicago packinghouse worker the metaphoric "hog squeal of the universe" (45). Sinclair's metaphor exploits his audience's assenting familiarity with the sensational tradition of nineteenth-century sentimental-melodramatic narrative. Its decibel level is high, its appeal to emotion direct and intense.

In 2001, in contrast, *Fast Food Nation* deploys an aesthetic image of slaughterhouse "Whizzards peeling meat off decapitated heads [of cattle], picking them almost as clean as the white skulls painted by Georgia O'Keeffe" (171). Schlosser, like Sinclair, presents a slaughterhouse that is alien to bourgeois readers. Schlosser's art image, however, avoids such techniques of nineteenth-century sensationalism. His antiphony of narrative and metaphor works within an interpretive framework of emotional containment. It operates in accord with an understated narrative style typified by his former teacher, McPhee. It stabilizes the horrific for a reading community whose class identity is affirmed by reference to exhibition spectatorship of art. The reference to O'Keeffe signals a narrator who construes his readers as late-twentieth-

century art devotees aware of metropolitan museum showings, such as the Georgia O'Keeffe multicity exhibit of the late 1980s (with ancillary gift-shop reproductions, coffee table books, and documentary TV footage). Each narrative, Sinclair's and Schlosser's, rhetorically shapes, and is shaped by, the reading community it serves.

The reception of *Fast Food Nation*, however, reveals the challenge of investigative narrative in its relation to the reading public(s) of varying class status, gender, and ethnoracial identities. A major issue in Schlosser, to take one case in point, concerns contemporary workplace conditions in the meat-packing industry, a topic that is framed in telling detail: "[T]he voices and faces of these workers are indelibly with me, as is the sight of their hands, the light brown skin criss-crossed with white scars" (186). Schlosser characterizes one loyal packinghouse worker, Kenny, whose body, from his skeletal-muscular system to his immune system, his respiratory system, and his heart, is permanently damaged by work-related injuries that tally the careless indifference of his employer, the Monfort company, which has fired him. Totally disabled and destitute in his mid-forties, Kenny says, "They used me to the point where I had no body parts to give" (190). Schlosser's narrative voice maintains its understated dispassion: "His anger at Monfort, his feelings of betrayal, are of truly biblical proportions" (190). Readers of *Fast Food Nation* are thus reminded of Schlosser's stated fact, that the death and injury rates of packinghouse workers are the highest of any occupational group, making packinghouses the most dangerous workplaces in America.

However, public response to *Fast Food Nation* has largely ignored the topic of workplace conditions, whether in the packing plants or nationwide in the fast-food industry in which employees earn the minimum hourly wage without health care or other benefits. These workers, so prominent in *Fast Food Nation*, are the "disappeareds" in the glowing excerpts from 39 reviews that preface the 2002 paperback edition. The blurbs praise Schlosser's narrative skill, his exhaustive research into every area of the topic, his wit and "flair for dazzling scene-setting and an arsenal of startling facts," as the *Los Angeles Times* put it.

Only 3 of the 39 reviewers, however, name working conditions as significant in Schlosser's project. "This is a book about America's stomach," according to the *Baltimore Sun*, and thus does reader response make *Fast Food Nation* another *The Jungle* in recalling Upton Sinclair's wry remark that he had aimed for the public's heart and hit the stomach instead. Schlosser's own observation on the post-1960s disappearance of the working middle class in part explains why the workers' stories have received scant

attention in reviews of *Fast Food Nation*. Yet reading practices in the academy in the latter half of the twentieth century may have a significant role in shaping such critical response. Academic reading practices are arguably complicitous with a normalization of class division that effectively effaces non-elites.

Suppose, for instance, that some of Schlosser's reviewers, like many of his readers, have studied a certain well-known narrative combining the slaughterhouse and its workers. *Moby-Dick* features several chapters on whale slaughter and butchering, as Melville invites readers to consider the terms of their own red meat diets—the “meat-market of a Saturday night” (406), the “gourmand dining off that roast beef” (407), the mate Stubb's delectable dinner of grilled whale steak (404).

Melville precedes Schlosser by one and a half centuries, but he, too, had specified the danger and risk of the slaughtering-butchering work of whale oil production for lighting and lubrication in the pre-petroleum era. For instance, the thin hemp whale-line, which is tied to the harpoon to be thrust into the unsuspecting whale, must be coiled in perfect “minute spiralizations” free of any tangle or kink (385). Failure to take this “utmost precaution” can mean the loss of a crewman's arm, leg, or “entire body” when the harpooned whale dives deep (385).

A second line from an additional whale boat is sometimes needed, the second boat hovering nearby “to assist its consort,” lest the first boat “be dragged down . . . into the profundity of the sea” (385), that is, “doomed” (386). “This arrangement,” says Melville, “is indispensable for common safety's sake” (385). The work is terribly dangerous, the pitching boat more perilous than the comparable earthly industrial scene of “manifold whizzings of a steam-engine in full play, when every flying beam, and shaft, and wheel, is grazing you” (387). For mutual self-protection, however, the crew follow safety procedures, which Melville specifies in detail.

Have classroom teachers of American literature asked students to pay attention to working conditions on this factory ship, the *Pequod*, and thereby helped educate students—future book reviewers and readers—about the importance of the topic in their civic lives? In the last 20 years, as the workplace safety protections mandated in union contracts (and middle-class pay scales) disappeared, have we resorted to this American classic to frame classroom discussions of the workplace in canonical American literature?

No. We leap eagerly, instead, to Melville's philosophical musing that “all men live enveloped in whale-lines,” that “all are born with halters round their necks” and realize the “silent, subtle, ever-present perils of life” only when “caught in the swift, sudden

turn of death” (387). These are the phrases underscored in our classroom desk copies, these the metaphysical statements we call to students’ attention. These, we emphasize, are the so-called enduring truths, or conundrums of the human condition worldwide across millennia. Perhaps, additionally, we might link these statements to the act of writing itself and claim that Melville was meditating on his own literary peril. Or we venture a psychoanalytic suggestion of birth crisis as the umbilical lifeline becomes death’s noose.

None of these approaches, however, focuses on labor, its risks, the protocols for “common safety’s sake.” None, that is, encourages civic obligation to take legislative responsibility for worksite conditions. They appeal instead to a community of readers predisposed to expect a high-minded “classic” text, classicism itself understood to exclude direct social engagement. After all, our college and university students are not and never will be slaughterhouse or long-term fast-food workers.

Five years following the publication of *The Jungle*, the American Academy of Political and Social Science published a volume entitled *Risks in Modern Industry* (1911). It is a compilation of statements by a wide range of officials voicing differing viewpoints on a topic that all participants agreed needed urgent attention in the US: the high rates of industrial-era injury and death of workers. The Secretary of Commerce and Labor weighed in, as did a consulting engineer, a vice president of the American Federation of Labor, an assistant district attorney of New York, a Unitarian minister, a member of the executive committee of the American Red Cross, and the General Secretary of the National Consumers’ League.

Given their positions, their statements were to some degree predictable. The Secretary of Commerce and Labor voiced the business goal to minimize waste with a minimum of governmental regulation, while the labor union leader promoted workers’ health. The district attorney emphasized mutual responsibility of management and workers for meeting provisions of the new worker compensation law in his state, New York, while the Red Cross spokeswoman highlighted the need to prevent workplace disasters.

The pages of *Risks in Modern Industry*, however, are rife with convergent statements on “accidents . . . out of proportion” (72), on “the number of men and women annually killed and maimed in the industrial occupations of America . . . [being] greater than in the bloodiest battles of history” (74), on victims’ “dependents who suffer the direct and terrible consequences of the family of a wage earner . . . carried lifeless into his home” (76). They speak of the “enormous” social and economic costs, of the new possibility for “elementary justice” (84, 86), and of the fact that the very term *disaster* refers not only to “pestilence, famine, fire, and floods” but

also to the “calamity” of industrial accidents in which a half-million people are estimated to be annually killed or injured in the US (90, 91).

Slaughterhouse workers were not singled out for attention in the 1911 volume, nor in its 1926 successor, *Industrial Safety*, whose title accentuated the gains made over 15 years in worker protection via an organized safety movement. Heavy industry—notably steel, coal, and railroads—took precedence, and no food-processing industry was named. The trend toward worker protection, however, was clear. A fast-food nation was then decades in the offing, as was the rise—and subsequent decline—of unionized work in the US. As Schlosser states toward the close of *Fast Food Nation*, “Over the past twenty-five years the United States has swung too far in one direction, weakening the regulations that safeguard workers, consumers, and the environment. An economic system promising freedom has too often become a means of denying it, as the narrow dictates of the market gain precedence over more important democratic values” (261).

Workplace conditions in the downsizing era of the second, c. 2000, Gilded Age, however, may tend to aggregate workers, if not into a uniform collar, at least into proximity and mutual regard. The individual workers in *Fast Food Nation*, Schlosser argues, typify groups “linked by common elements” that prove to be common not only to blue-collar workers but also to those in high-rise towers and office parks and even college and university campuses—“the same struggle to receive proper medical care, the same fear of speaking out, the same underlying corporate indifference” (186). Those at the desk may come to see kindred spirits, or at least distant relations, across the fast-food counter and over the computer keyboard to the boning knife. Classroom reading practices can change, and the American literature syllabus can diversify to include a literature of exposé and disclosure. “There is nothing inevitable about the fast food nation that surrounds us,” as Schlosser writes in his afterword to the 2002 paperback edition (260). “Things don’t have to be the way they are” (288).

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