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# Food Poisoning: Surplus and Suffering in Contemporary Children's Film.

Naarah Sawers & Elizabeth Parsons

It is perhaps unsurprising that the intended viewing audience of mainstream children's films (in the Western world at least) are assumed to be well fed. The opening line of Dreamworks' 2004 hit feature *Shark Tale* foregrounds this relationship between food and film when an undersea sidekick asks the audience directly, "Have you finished with that popcorn?" An investigation into the traffic of ideas indicated by representations of food and hunger in children's films points to the political consequences of taking for granted that the viewer has an adequately filled stomach. This audience positioning principally enables the punishment of those who are hungry in these narratives by indicating their cultural otherness as non-white, as women, as lower-class citizens and as homosexually aligned subjects. The punishment, typically, is hunger and/or food signalled deprivations that leave these characters as unsatisfied as they are unsatisfying political entities by virtue of their disenfranchised state.

Such deployments of hunger demonstrate that, as a symbolic entity, food principally signifies power, particularly the power to be gained by adhering to hierarchical social structures. When Antonio Negri describes poverty as 'biopolitical' (Negri 2003, p. 194), he provides a neologism equally applicable to hunger as a state of being that is both physical and ideological. As Negri argues, the relationship between the oppressed and oppressive force is consistently more difficult to unpack in the contemporary manifestations of capitalism wherein the poor, which he also defines more generally as 'the exploited, the excluded, the oppressed' (p. 195), are 'inserted into production and are determined by it in turn' (p. 197). In fact, he claims, 'the more they are absorbed within consumption (in contrast to the slave)...all the greater is the violence they must suffer' (p. 197). Oppressed others are typically co-opted into (and absorbed by) the capitalist hierarchies of the culture which produces the biopolitics of their existence. The majority do not seek to challenge capitalism, patriarchy or exploitative wealth, rather they serve the interests of the dominant group because they aspire to belong to, rather than to deconstruct, the political superstructure of which their oppression is a function.

Analysis of *The Lion King* (1994), *Stuart Little* (1999), *Shark Tale* (2004) and *The Incredibles* (2004) entails not

the reality but the representation of the biopolitical state of hunger; but, by extension, this exposes the (metaphorical and literal) reciprocal arrangements between characters who are consuming or starving as they exist within broader political agendas. However, the bodies marked by hunger in these films generally coincide with **oppressive** social arrangements underpinning real-world capitalist distributions of wealth, as well as distributions of sexual power between male/female and homosexual/heterosexual characters. This becomes further exacerbated when tracing the distribution of meat and the tensions brought to the fore in representations of the human and non-human. Through a perverse anthropomorphic lens, these texts homogenize material variation and difference under the category of nature. The overarching production of these animations thus work reductively so that 'nature' becomes more universalized while simultaneously encompassing more heterogeneity. As we demonstrate, these animated texts work to polarize differences specific to class, sex, sexuality, race and the non-human, (that is, all the variations of difference in the material world) in order to naturalize a specific body with power.

Negri's articulation of the biopolitical will here be refigured through a close examination of nature as theorized by Donna Haraway. Haraway argues that science, through the method of observation, gave way to the belief that 'competition is the precondition for co-operation' (Haraway 1991, p. 17). The world is constructed as 'an object of knowledge in terms of the appropriation by culture of the resources of nature' (Haraway 1991, p. 134). Like Negri's discussion of capitalism and the poor, the world gets absorbed into this process so that 'the object both guarantees and refreshes the power of the knower, but any status of agent in the productions of knowledge must be denied the object' (Haraway 1991, pp. 197-198). The films under examination in this paper function through the powerful assumption that nature or materiality is passive and inert, ripe then for cultural inscription, anthropomorphism, manipulation and domination. However, any broader biopolitical implications can equally be understood in relation to practices at a representation level. Tracing the traffic of ideas around food and hunger works to produce a more heterogeneous articulation of the bodies absorbed in the processes of

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capitalism, culture and globalization as these forces are filmically depicted.

In 1980, Wendy Katz explored a similar thesis by analyzing representations of and practices around food and consumption in children's literature. She argued that:

*In the most general terms, a child's attitude to food is an index to that child's emotional stability. That the practice of using meals as a measure of the child's adjustment to the social order, the child's observance of social requirements, is especially pronounced in English children's literature* (Katz 1980, p.193)

The 'social order' and 'social requirements' Katz points to remain on the periphery of her discussion, but it is precisely this outworking of the food metaphor that is relevant to the ideological stances of these contemporary films. While Katz's assessment of food as a measure of the child's adjustment to the social order is applicable in this analysis, her conclusion, that 'Happily, in the case of children's writing, the artistic form and the real-life appetites of its readers are superbly matched' (Katz 1980, p.199) will here be problematised and contested. An investigation into the interchange of food and power in *The Lion King*, *Stuart Little*, *Shark Tale*, and *The Incredibles* suggests that the requirements of this 'superb match' keep certain culturally marked individuals hungry as a representational hegemonic enterprise.

Disney's *The Lion King* can be read as an allegory that naturalizes first-world domination over developing nations through the employment of food. The good lions are never depicted in the act of eating other animals to avoid reminding viewers of this seemingly unpleasant necessity. Nonetheless, the land under their rule is always in surplus. On the other hand, the hyenas are, as they describe themselves, 'dangling at the bottom of the food chain' and they 'hate dangling'. Their bid to satiate their hunger entails sharing in the food source of the prosperous pride lands where the lions rule. Equally hungry for food but also for power is the evil lion Scar, the king's brother who wishes to usurp the throne. In the opening scenes of the film, Scar is depicted tormenting a mouse that is going to be his lunch. When King Mufasa arrives to chastise Scar this measly

meal is able to escape and the animation foregrounds the thin and angularly drawn Scar with protruding hipbones made prominent as he walks away from the exchange. Given that he lives in the prosperous pride-lands this starved body is a metaphor of Scar's 'unnatural' (by the film's distorted logic) desire for power. By comparison, Mufasa and his son, heir-apparent Simba, are both drawn to indicate well-fed roundedness.

Ecocritical and ecofeminist discourses clearly make an important contribution to any analysis of films so steeped in natural metaphors and anthropomorphized animals. Nandita Batra, for example, produces a long list of traits in her reading of the metaphoric exploitation of animals in literary texts. She argues that 'Appropriated for whichever rhetoric they serve, animals occupy a Procrustean bed of order and disorder, innocence and depravity, violence and peacefulness, masculinity and femininity, monarchy and democracy, wisdom and ignorance, as well as sacrifice, sexuality (both innocent and depraved), gluttony, drunkenness and other seemingly disparate qualities' (Batra 2003, p.155). Many of these imposed uniformities will be canvassed as this essay ranges across the four films, three of which employ anthropomorphized animal subjects. Additionally, and pertinently, in his study of such anthropomorphic gestures in *Picturing the Beast*, Steve Baker coined the term 'disnification' (Baker 1993, p.174) which encompasses the trivializing and thus derogatory nature of these filmic tropes.

A case in point is *The Lion King* which expressly manipulates environmental lessons about the circle of life, the principle that all elements in an ecosystem are interdependent. It does this in order to naturalize a politically wrought harmony where animals that would otherwise eat each other exist happily together. This natural law is then broken and manipulated so as to exclude the hyenas who are marked as the film's evil others. In particular they are characterized as 'poachers' stealing food that is not rightfully theirs in order to survive. The territory they are allowed to inhabit is a barren elephant graveyard over which they are given rights in order to cement their exclusion from the abundance of the pride lands. This condition allows Scar to use the hyena's hunger to co-opt them into his plan to satisfy his craving for power. He does this principally with a gift of

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food, a zebra's hindquarter indicated by the distinctive markings on the pelt. As zebras have been depicted dancing and celebrating with the other animals in the pride lands this appears cannibalistic, despite the necessities for eating in the circle of life.

The imperative of maintaining this distortion is demonstrated when Simba excommunicates himself from the pride-lands. He befriends the outcasts Timon and Pumba, represented as animals he would typically eat, and consequently, Simba must only eat worms and insects. As John Levi Martin succinctly argues in his class-driven reading of Richard Scarry's *Busytown*, anthropomorphic animals indicate class hierarchy through the obvious external (and natural) codes of species difference. This entails the grossest distortion of food for political purposes perpetrated in this film. Simba's power, and paradoxically his desirability to these two companions, is predicated on him being a predator. This power then translates into his kingship, when he is, as Timon says, '...the same guy, but with power'. Timon and Pumba follow Simba when he returns to the pride lands in order to reap the benefits of their powerful alliance. But Simba returns to find the pride lands ravaged by drought and famine. The land itself is starving in the power vacuum created by Scar as the evil leader who has allowed the hyenas to eat at the table of these tablelands.

*The Lion King* thus reinstates the borders and divisions between the sated animals of the pride lands and the starving hyenas kept beyond the borders. This is reinforced for those viewers who can not resist alignment with Simba and his achievement of success and happiness at the film's close. A similar thesis has been powerfully argued by Lee Artz who sees Disney consistently animating hierarchy regardless of the differences in the surface gloss in relation to 'era, geography, or species' (Artz 2004, p.122). His focus is on the continual reproduction of class hierarchies used to dictate and affirm a position of privileged individualism. Themes of 'self-fulfillment through consumption' (p.140) and the 'employment of deceit' (p.133) are rewarded and reserved only for the elite and powerful few. *The Lion King* adheres closely to this agenda, naturalizing the rule and power of the monarchy. This is translated through the power to distribute food along social hierarchies

where marginalised groups are further fixed by the film according to this logic.

Disney does not have a monopoly of this anti-democratic message; it is taken up by Columbia with a pervasive use of character relations in *Stuart Little*. In this film food operates symbolically in an extended commentary about class. The main plot and the subplot adhere to a doubled middleclass agenda that is played out via anthropomorphic metaphors involving a game of cat and mouse in terms of both characterization and of hierarchy. The main plot focuses on white, mouse-like (but in all respects other than this animal embodiment, human) Stuart, who is adopted into the Little family. To reach successful narrative conclusion, Stuart must learn not only to conform to the Little family's social position but also to desire this social position above all others. This is problematised by Stuart's initial inability to 'fit in'. His discomforts, particularly the rejection he initially suffers from his adoptive brother, George, are played out in a scene set around a dining room table. The setting is powerfully class marked by the gloss of the wood and the fine dining service. Stuart, as a mouse, is contrasted in size to the domestic objects which surround him. This is graphically demonstrated when George asks if Stuart can pass the gravy, thus signalling Stuart's inability to participate in this world, and to consume its foods. These tensions are overcome by the film's close, but, rather than indicating upward mobility, Stuart's suitability to his new class is consistently prefigured in the film so as to make him something of an *Oliver Twist* in terms of finding his rightful place in the world.

Food is also crucial in indicating the inappropriate, or 'fake' (to use the terminology of the film) parents for Stuart. The Stouts are a mouse couple who contest the Littles as Stuart's parents, but they are poor and come from Brooklyn, as opposed to the uptown Manhattan where the wealthy Littles live. The Stouts claim Stuart as their long-lost son whom they had abandoned because they were too poor to feed him. As it transpires, the Stout family is an elaborate ruse orchestrated by the Little's envious and humiliated cat, Snowbell, who cannot abide a mouse as a member of his family.

The Stout's poverty and attendant hunger is central to their negative characterization that is first demonstrated

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in the scene in which the Stouts arrive at the Little house. The camera lingers on Mr. Stout's greedy and uncultured devouring of a bowl of peanuts and their oily sheen. Only Mr. Stout eats, and his questions about the peanuts indicate his fascinated desire for these luxurious treats. It is only after Stuart has been consigned to the Stouts that their poverty-induced hunger is made to seem a good deal more animal than their clothes and English-language skills would suggest. On arrival home, Mrs. Stout says to Stuart that she'll have to learn how to prepare his favourite meals (as part of the highly conservative gender role-modelling dominating the text). Mr. Stout then asks Stuart if he likes corned beef to which Stuart responds with a question about how the dish is prepared. This sends Mr. Stout into gales of laughter because 'preparation' entails the corned beef falling out of the delicatessen owner's mouth and the mice stealing the scraps. The image is designed to elicit revulsion in both Stuart and the child audiences whose sympathies are aligned with Stuart.

The other hungry and eating-focused character is Monty, the street cat who is central to the narrative dilemmas driving the film's cat subplot. The Little's cat, Snowbell, is class-defined as a 'house-cat' against his friend Monty who is a 'street-cat', or by human standards a stray cat. Monty runs with the street-cat mafia who are culturally marked with Italianate accents in the film's coded use of dialect. The street cats ridicule the upper-class white and fluffy Snowbell and cast aspersions on both his heterosexuality and masculinity by referring to his various emasculating weaknesses. The gang leader calls him 'Tinkerbelle' to make evident that he is 'a fairy'. The class difference between Monty and Snowbell means that their friendship must be dissolved for the film to reach its middleclass-serving conclusion. Food is again the divisive factor in the equation. When Monty visits Snowbell in order to eat, he says, 'Come on, let me in, I'm starving', but complains that the meatloaf served at the Little's house gives him gas. This class of food disagrees with him and his uncouth choice of conversational topic equally marks him in terms of social mores. As he says when the meatloaf is served, 'beggars can't be choosers', and his poverty and hunger otherwise reduce him to eating out of trash cans (to use the appropriate American idiom).

The defiled and abject (in the Kristevan sense) nature of food from trash cans and scraps from the delicatessen owner's mouth are signifiers of class difference that indicate not only that Stuart's relationship with the Stouts is undesirable and inappropriate in terms of maintaining class distinctions, but equally Snowbell's relationship with Monty must be terminated for the same reasons. Mary Douglas' (1966) readings of cultural deployments of purity speak to these moments in that they indicate the boundaries enclosing class groups as aligned with the ways in which human bodies are closed to such impure foodstuffs and individuals. For child audiences watching *Stuart Little* the lesson being promoted entails the alignment of a rejection of the lower-class characters with the rejection of eating defiled foods. The revulsion of such contamination is thus symbolically transported into class hierarchy.

It could be argued that this use of impurity is linked to the animal coding, given that the consumption of foods deemed so defiled would be rejected by the majority of humans in the Western world, regardless of their class status as upper, middle or lower. That both Stuart and Snowbell are non-human animals is telling, but being conspicuously white makes them available subjects for the transition from their non-human (lower class) to human (upper class) status within the film. Their ability to talk, and in Stuart's case to be understood and to wear human clothes, indicates the impossibility of maintaining any clear sense of demarcation. Given that, the film's agenda is to maintain the class-bound inequities that leave the Stouts and the street cats hungry at the film's close. This biopolitical state is necessarily maintained in order to convince child viewers that such cultural shifts are both impossible and undesirable: Stuart could never have been happy with the Stouts, and Monty could never have fitted in to a life of luxury with the Littles. This is part of the narrative's encoding of capitalist desires for wealth as representative of happiness. It is both a product and proponent of the inequitable divisions of wealth that contemporary American capitalism both causes and maintains.

As Negri argues, the capitalist regime has become totalitarian because 'it no longer produces through factories alone, but makes the whole of society work for its own enrichment; it no longer exploits only workers, but all

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citizens...capitalism has invested the whole of life; its production is biopolitical; in production Power is the superstructure of that which stretches out and is produced through society' (Negri 2003, p.144). Thus the categories of otherness examinable across the range of films considered in this paper blur into each other, each slippage reinforcing the superstructure so that gender/sexuality, race and class collide and intertwine in ways that makes them all the more difficult to unpack as separate entities. They are not, it seems, separate, but are functions of the same system.

For example, despite the fact that the hungry in *Stuart Little* are predominantly male, they are arguably feminized. The deviation from heterosexual norms in the Stouts' relationship, where Mrs. Stout is both taller and physically stronger than Mr. Stout, works to emasculate him. Monty and the hungry street-cats are disempowered through their position in class hierarchies which is an adjunct to the racial baggage of the Italian other. These markings of ethnicity as connected to the mob, work to associate them with displaced (and therefore unnatural) phallic symbols (guns, knives etc). This is compared to the assumed 'natural' masculine attributes, such as courage and bravery, pervading representations of hegemonic masculinity in children's films. As part of the closure, they are further emasculated by being, as they say, 'beaten by a mouse and his pet cat'.

Female characters in *Stuart Little* are so entirely sidelined by the film's overarching quests for masculinity that they only figure as household and maternal subjects in charge of, among other domestic chores, food preparation. These norms of labour distributions within heterosexual relationships are underscored by the overt dissolution of Snowbell's potentially queer relationship with Monty in which sharing the same bowl of food is arguably part of this intimacy (as eating from the same plate is figured in many versions of *The Princess and the Frog* fairytale). Significantly Monty mourns the break up with Snowbell crying, 'After all we've meant to each other! I loved that guy'.

*The Lion King* works on a similar premise wherein the gender roles are equally limited so as to present Simba's family as nuclear, rather than acknowledging the typically harem-like arrangements in lion prides. Like Snowbell,

Simba must abandon his homosocial relationships with Timon and Pumba (now relegated to a period of childhood innocence) in order to 'marry' Naala. This heterosexual conclusion tallies with Scar's evilness in the film as decidedly queered. In relation to the categorically conservative constructions of sexuality in *The Lion King*, Lucy Hamilton's analysis of the film takes careful note of the regressive gender mores for which Disney is renowned. The lack of agency and power associated with being female is overtly directed through the access of food in her analysis: 'The lionesses, verging on starvation, cannot convince Scar the problem is beyond redemption; being Disney females they must await the return of a male leader to deal with their problem' (Hamilton 1999, p.16).

The subordination of female agency is compounded through the representation of the hyenas, lead by Shenzi who is female-voiced by Whoopi Goldberg. Anna Wilson's (2003) exploration of the production of gender through a genealogy of the hyena illustrates the construction of the 'sexual nature' of the hyena (particularly the spotted hyena) as deviant. Deviance in contemporary western culture and in the production of knowledge on hyenas, in Wilson's argument, is associated specifically with the presumed 'abnormality' of female dominance. Female hyenas have a penis-like appendage making sex difficult to distinguish, they are often physically larger than male hyenas, and their behavior is markedly aggressive. This has led to authoritative discourses surrounding the hyena rarely differing from assumptions of sexual excess and abhorrence linked to female sexuality. *The Lion King* draws on these traditional discourses of the hyena and can then be read as naturalising the marginalisation and starvation of those that deviate from sex/gender norms. The film punishes the presumed divergence from mammalian norms of female dominance specifically through distribution of food thereby aligning class aspiration and female sexuality in an interconnected representation strategy which resists any alteration of biopolitical status across a divergent range of categories.

This points to what Katz famously and contentiously claimed: that 'food may be, in fact, the sex of children's literature' (Katz 1980, p.192). In addition to the currency of her claim in relation to starving the deviant hyenas, her

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position is further validated by *Shark Tale*'s use of food as a metaphor for sexual difference. This elision is played out via the oxymoron of the vegetarian shark, Lenny, wherein vegetarianism operates as a subtle code for homosexuality. Lenny's homosexual plot entails 'coming out' to his fish friend Oscar while simultaneously closeting himself away from his father, the patriarch of the exaggeratedly macho, mob-style shark family. Lenny, while trying to 'pass' as a gentle dolphin with the camp gesture of a yellow scarf tied around his neck, is exposed and then eventually accepted by his father at the film's close. This potentially queer subplot is, however, subsumed within the larger heterosexual narrative embodied by Oscar's conquests of all available women (female fish) in the film.

To signal Oscar's narrative primacy, the film begins with his dreams of wealth and penthouse apartments contrasted to his class reality as a lowly fish working in a whale-wash (ie car-wash). He is cast as an African American by the recognizable voice and caricatured features of Will Smith, while his relations with a teenage graffiti gang indicate that he is a product of the ghetto. His desire for power is, in the same gesture employed by *The Lion King*, metaphorically figured through the food chain. Oscar is shown to be lower than rocks and whale crap in a pull-down chart used by his employer to ridicule him within this allegory for material success. To indicate the film's overarching political agendas, the coral reef in *Shark Tale* has been semiotically merged with New York as a foil for the ideological landscape of capitalist enterprise propelling the narrative. In particular the iconic use of Times Square equates the bright colours of coral with neon lights and large advertising screens.

It becomes clear that Oscar's tale is simply augmented by Lenny's existence given that the vegetarian shark's true purpose is to be a vehicle for Oscar's climb up the social ladder. These two characters are interrelated in being polar opposites: Lenny the compassion-driven vegetarian shark counterpoints Oscar, the shark-slaying fish. Both animals act in contradistinction to the requirements of their species. For Oscar, the violence of shark-slaying is central to his performance of masculinity.

Examining the logic of narrative rewards made available by each of these plots indicates that Lenny remains infantilized in his relationship with his father, while Oscar achieves

the greater success in securing an adult relationship with the girl of his dreams. Oscar also achieves at least half of the upward social mobility he has sought by becoming joint-owner in the whale-wash business where he used to be a mere worker. In this way, as an African-American from the ghetto, he can gain narrative success in a happy ending (mandatory for protagonists in children's films) but the plot maintains white American supremacy in that he is not allowed to infiltrate the upper echelons of the predominantly white elite. This is underscored by the fact that Oscar's brief success in getting to the top of the reef (before his subsequent fall), was predicated on a lie and is therefore shown to be invalid in ways that demonstrate similar logics oppressing lower classes and non-white subjects as those employed in *The Lion King*. Just as a shark couldn't really be a vegetarian, Oscar didn't really slay a shark; he invented this story in a bid for fame and fortune. The pairing of these logical impossibilities makes any class mobility (or animal liberation) gestures that might have emerged from this rendering entirely parodic.

In terms of gender scripts, as a vegetarian shark, Lenny is laughably emasculated by his inability to live up to the excessive machismo of the mob. Carol Adam's 1990 study of the 'texts of meat' (Adams 2004, p.24) succinctly demonstrates the connections between male dominance and eating meat, and the corollary link between animal and female oppression. Her thesis has a range of implications for male vegetarians given that 'to remove meat is to threaten the structure of the larger patriarchal culture' (p.47). Because a non-meat diet feminizes Lenny, this makes him a particularly available subject for an effeminate stereotype of homosexuality. It equally makes him the butt of jokes from the male sharks who assess his incapability to manage 'hegemonic masculinity', to use Bob Connell's formulation. Thus, both vegetarianism and gayness are ridiculed by the scenario in which they are encased, namely the improbability of a shark surviving as a vegetarian. For this reason Lenny is never shown actually eating in the film although he is, on a number of occasions, shown spitting out things that he could not bear to ingest in another example of the Kristevan abject in these representations.

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The cinematic focus on these acts, especially Lenny's desperate bids to hold things inside, signal the similar cultural rejections he suffers as a result of his marginalised difference. When he actually vomits, the contents of his stomach display a range of completely inedible objects, including a car number plate, to underscore the impossibility of his sexuality/vegetarianism. Lenny is thus depicted as weak. He is referred to as Oscar's pet shark, which equally entails his being dependent on Oscar to look after him and hide him from the mob. This is part of the film's indication that pretending to be a powerfully masculine shark slayer ends in triumph, while coming out to your father as a vegetarian only achieves comfortable closure of healing the paternal breach; this cycles back the narrative beginning rather than making forward progression.

Also challenging any sense that Lenny's tolerated homosexuality is in fact advocated by this film, is the contrast between Lenny's single status against Oscar's pervasive sexual successes in attracting the glamorous femme fatale only to reject her for the faithful long term love.

This stereotypical deployment of female sexuality is played out between Lola and Angie in ways that indicate the cultural embeddedness of the film. In effect, the limits to female sexuality become astoundingly contained and dichotomised as those associated with masculinity become potentially more acceptably fluid. This fluidity is inherent in the depiction of Lenny's gayness as at least an option, albeit not a highly promoted one. Lola, voiced by 'man-eater' Angelina Jolie, is clearly represented as the whore where her profuse sexual appetite is reassuringly (for the implied conservative audience) condemned. Angie, voiced by 'you had me at hello' Renee Zellweger, is the virgin pitted against Lola. Not surprisingly then, she is rewarded in the film with heterosexual partnership. Lest the casting history of the two actors be lost on the audience, Zellweger's aforementioned line from *Jerry McGuire* is repeated in the film. Conversely, Jolie's recent portrayal of the action heroine Lara Croft in the *Tomb Raider* movies (Paramount, 2001 and 2003) gives Lola an intertextual history of independence and aggressiveness.

The semantic feature 'man-eater' is regularly added to Jolie's name in the popular media (in view of her apparently

insatiable sexual appetite). This all works in the film to allocate female sexuality into the distinct positions of either active or passive, in which the latter is the most obviously valued, and the former punished. Female sexuality is contained within the traditional dichotomies of passive/aggressive and consequently good/evil. Unlike Lenny, women in *Shark Tale* do not get the vegetarian option (such as it is). Only Angie eats in the film, but she gets what she's given in the form of food as a gift from Oscar early in the narrative. She certainly never exercises choice in this regard.

Thus single women's appetites for power are persistently castigated while, in *The Incredibles*, the woman who feeds and nurtures her family, through conservatively domestic and familial paradigms, is endorsed. For the few female characters in these films, self-realization occurs strictly within the two binary subject positions of sexual challenge to, or compliance with, patriarchy. Food is used as a metaphor for sexuality as part of each film's commitment to restrictive and hierarchical gender positions. Again, this all works to reinstate boundaries of power, where the male, only as defined in the most traditional forms of masculinity, is allocated agency and power.

In the case of *The Incredibles*, sexuality and desirability dominate the film's central concern in maintaining marital monogamy. Metaphorically, tasting the forbidden fruits of extra-marital sex underpins the use of food in the film. There are two principal eating scenes that polarize the expression of this ideological agenda just as they are polarized between the good wife and the femme fatale who mirror their counterparts in *Shark Tale*. The first is at the family meal table, followed by a suspiciously private cake-eating interlude; and the second is a lavish feast of reward in the wealthy surrounds into which the film's hero has been lured. An analysis of each of these meals for their political, sexual and nutritional content exposes the film's recipe for mixing power and sexuality.

By way of a brief preamble to the plot, the viewing audience is introduced to Mr Incredible, Elastigirl and Frozone as superheroes discussing their dual identities. Due to excessive litigious battles the superheroes are forced by the government to stay underground; to live only within their secret identity and not perform any heroic

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(‘super’ human) tasks. The main action of the film is set fifteen years later. Mr Incredible (now, Mr Bob Parr) and his wife Elastigirl (now Mrs Helen Parr) have become the archetypal white, American, nuclear family with an adolescent daughter, Violet, a younger son Dash, and a baby boy called Jack Jack.

The first meal consumed is within the Parr’s (The Incredible’s) familial environment in a scene confirming Katz’s proposition that ‘a child’s attitude to food is an index to that child’s emotional stability’ (Katz 1980, p.193). Adults are not exempt from this index and the eating habits of all the characters here indicate the state of their respective psyches. The meal is also indicative of the mediocrity to which the Parr family’s lives have been reduced. They are, as their name suggests, on a par with common humanity. But, like Mr. Incredible’s work suit, nothing quite fits. The table is too small, particularly for Mr. Incredible who is disengaged from his family and rejects his meal as an index of his boredom with, and rejection of, the mediocre life that this plain meal of meat and veg represents.

Mrs. Helen Parr is also not eating, but not as a rejection of this scenario. On the contrary she is actively engaged in feeding the baby, demonstrating that the maternal nurturance embodied by this provision of food locks her squarely within the social and cultural mediocrity her husband rejects. Her superhero powers entail extreme flexibility for not only is she able to conform to the expectations of her culture, she is also able to contain and protect her children on numerous occasions throughout the film. She ropes them in, softens their fall as a parachute and then becomes a boat to transport them to safety in ways that indicate her powers as stereotypically feminized by their maternal functions.<sup>1</sup>

Teenaged Violet plays with her food and is barely perceptible in this scene, a fact exacerbated by the anorexic thinness that entirely circumscribes her animated form. This starved body is linked to her super ability to become invisible, a typically feminized status (or lack thereof) that is confirmed when Frozone enters the house greeting all the family members by name, including the baby, but omits Violet. Her lack of self-worth is illustrated through the misuse of her powers where she relies on her invisibility in the face of her romantic interest, Tony Rydinger. This, as

indicative of her emotional instability, is further intensified as she plays with her meal rather than eating it.

Violet’s appetite, and her identity, is unequivocally linked to her sexuality by Dash who says at the table, ‘She’s hungry for Tony Rydinger’. By the film’s close, Violet becomes empowered to approach Tony with a new-found sense of sexual self, illustrated by the modern female-makeover code of a new hairstyle. Violet’s appetite, sexuality, and concurrently her identity, are consistently constructed via her appropriate availability and visibility to the male subject.

If there is any doubt about the future development of her female sexuality, then her mother, Helen, provides the sanctioned model. Helen’s super-incarnation, Elastigirl, represents the maturation of correct female subjectivity as being flexible in fulfilling the desires of men. Any self-driven deviation from this position is quickly punished. This is exemplified during a brief slippage into narcissism by Elastigirl later in the narrative. Temporarily stepping outside her role as wife and mother she conceptualises herself sexually by checking her buttocks in a mirror. Within seconds she is punished for this lapse by being sectioned between the doors; arm, leg, arse, torso, bust and head. She is essentially carved up into sections as a carcass is butchered into meat. Adams would appreciate this scene as validating her claim that animals are the absent referent ‘in images of women butchered, fragmented, or consumable’ (Adams 2004, p.15).

Adams sees such moments as intrinsically linked to the collapse of sexual violence and meat in broader social-political arrangements regarding ‘assaultive ways in which “meat” is used to refer to women’ (Adams 2004, p.59). That the representation of Elastigirl’s body in this scene typifies an assumed knowledge of, and indirect reference to, the slaughter of non-human bodies belongs to Adams’ argument that ‘Cultural images of sexual violence, often rely on our knowledge of how animals are butchered and eaten’ (Adams 2004, p.54). Meat-as-text inherits or is polluted with absent dead animals, slaughtering and violence, which enables it (or frees it up) to be used metaphorically, linking female and non-human bodies through objectification and consumption.



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Within this structure, Adams argues that there are connections between male dominance and eating meat, that 'hearty meat eating' is a symbol of male power (Adams 2004, p.40). So, it is significant that the final participant in the family meal, Dash, attempts to devour his meat. Mauling aggressively at the steak, which is disproportionately large in relation to both the plate and a single piece of broccoli, Helen refers to him affectionately as a 'carnivore'. Dash is 'cutting' his teeth on the meat, however he is unable to use his implements (knife and fork) correctly, indeed barely at all. The consumption of meat in this text, as occurs in a broader political-cultural context (Adams 2004, p.24), is a specifically male activity. The film's subtext suggests that Dash's apprenticeship is ultimately aimed towards sexual dominance. This is further signified as his father helps him to manage the steak in ways that point to the parallel between Mr. Incredible's masculine subjectivity and Dash's move toward similar patriarchal dominance.

This family scene of eating and not eating explicitly encapsulates the subjectivity that each member of the family is expected to realize as the film progresses. The varied responses to food here indicates that, despite all family members possessing exceptional powers, the life of mediocrity seems suitable and possible only for Helen and Violet. Helen is represented as 'happy' and fulfilled within the home. Violet, as she tells her mother over dinner, 'just wants to be normal'. However, Mr. Incredible and his son, Dash, have much more difficulty containing their super powers. They push against authoritative and institutional boundaries; Dash finds himself in trouble at school, while the major narrative event driving the plot is that Mr. Incredible is distracted from eating his meal because he is illegally performing superhero tasks in secret.

However, the secrecy of these actions leads him to betray his wife and family when he is drawn in by the seductive Mirage. In the precursive but less sexualized betrayal on the night of the family meal, Mr. Incredible is 'caught' by Helen when he arrives home. Indeed, he is caught greedily eating chocolate cake and acting outside the restrictions placed on his identity. As he had previously rejected his meat-meal with the family, and now eats chocolate alone at midnight his dishonesty and distance from his family is consensually chastised. In the West chocolate is aligned

culturally with sin and sexuality and the text goes on to link Mr. Incredible's actions directly to the possibility of sexual infidelity. However, the commonality of indulgence in chocolate eating (in the wealthy western world at least) works to legitimize this lapse in ways that indicate a cultural smirk at male sexual consumption not seen in any of the depictions of females in these films.

Thus the narrative goes on to connect sin and temptation definitively in relation to excessive female sexuality. Again, this is productively symbolized through food, in this case as the fruits of the 'wild' served in the second significant meal of the film. When Mr. Incredible loses his job he secretly takes on a role which enables him to use his super powers. He is taken to an island and unknowingly works for his nemesis, the antagonist of the film, Syndrome. His initial success in defeating the war-machine designed by Syndrome is rewarded with a meal, grapes and wine to be eaten with Mirage. The topics for discussion over this repast centre on anonymity, volcanic instability, power and fertility. Eating, as these two are, on an island that is laden with sexual metaphors involving lushness, the constant fluidity of water and (sticky, red) lava, the abundance of wine, and the fertility of fruit, adds to the flirtatiousness between Mirage and Mr. Incredible. When Mr. Incredible asks Mirage if he is appropriately dressed, she replies that he 'looks dashing', linking father and son through Dash's name. Mirage then asks Mr. Incredible how the food on the table 'compares' (presumably to the food embodied by a typical meal at home) to which he responds, 'Everything is delicious'. This comparison of food is especially laden as a metaphor for sexuality and the audience fears, with Helen, that Mr. Incredible is not going to be able to resist the temptation of feminine sexuality. Intervention comes, however, in the 'correct' cultural form of femininity that this film sanctions; the subordinate wife and mother (unlike Mirage who tells Mr. Incredible over dinner that she is 'attracted to power'). Thus in a later scene Mirage is literally exchanged for Helen in an embrace with Mr. Incredible. This exchange occurs only after Helen has physically disciplined Mirage, placing the blame of infidelity squarely with women and the voracious female sexual appetite represented by the abundant fertility and liquidity of the volcanic island.<sup>2</sup>

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There is a character suspiciously absent from this seductive meal: the host, Syndrome, who is the narrative malefactor. Not partaking of this meal is symbolic because Syndrome can never achieve masculine subjectivity in the terms dictated by the film. Introduced as Buddy, Syndrome initially looks quite similar, apart from his age, to Mr. Incredible. His bodily difference is mainly marked by two small, immature and underdeveloped incisors, the sight of which is facilitated through regular cinematic focus on his face. This is symbolically significant as it foreshadows Buddy's growth towards masculinity by limiting his ability to eat meat. The viewer does not have the same concerns for Dash who gets 'stuck into' his piece of meat, with the assurance of paternal guidance. Meat eating is a measure of both a 'virile culture and individual' (Adams 2004, p.25) which naturalizes Dash as (at least potentially) virile and in line with a dominant and powerful cultural group.

As an adult, Syndrome has only one mature incisor while the other remains underdeveloped, confirming the inadequacy of his masculinity. In Freudian terms, then, Syndrome's masculinity and therefore his sexuality remain underdeveloped or castrated by this dental configuration. His lack in terms of masculinity is further rendered unnatural in the text through a substitution of any natural powers of strength or speed with use of machines and prosthetics, which ultimately fail him. Thus Mr. Incredible and Dash have their masculinity legitimized while Syndrome's is disallowed, and 'correct' masculinity is rewarded definitively with power. Without the mature development of both incisors Syndrome will never be able to eat meat like 'real' (super) men. Consequently, Syndrome inadvertently acts as the instrument to reinstate Mr. Incredible and Dash, and to solidify their correct and powerful name and identity.

In fact as it is the whole family who save the city from Syndrome, they are all reinstated publicly as superheroes, although not equally. Dash and Mr. Incredible have Helen's prohibitions of power displays lifted and are rewarded in the text through governmental approval which allows them to assume their public identities as superheroes. Elastigirl/Helen and Invisigirl/Violet are also publicly acknowledged regardless of their original positioning as 'happy' or desiring 'normality'. This of course suggests

that their needs (identities) like their 'powers' are indeed flexible and invisible.

Finally, it is almost too obvious to explicate, but the form of femininity endorsed by the film is regressive and disturbing as represented through these female characters. Both Elastigirl and Violet are subsumed by and subordinate to a patriarchal framework. Although the text's conclusion seemingly rewards Elastigirl and Violet with traditionally masculine-associated roles, social acceptance of physicality and public power, close analysis of the text's literal and metaphorical distribution of food according to traditional hierarchies of gender suggest that sexualities and identities are conservatively enforced. Power, in this text is allocated strictly within the patriarchal familial framework. The consequence of the surface message of 'gendered equality' in children's mainstream films leads only to further rigidity around female subjectivity and more sexual dominance and power to masculine subjectivity.

The focus on gender conformity in this film arises given that the characters in *The Incredibles* are white, middleclass human figurations. They are thus unlike the anthropomorphised animal characters in the previously discussed films. This points to the binary between human and non-human animals that is accentuated through the use of food. That it is female and inadequately male characters in *The Incredibles* who are unsatiated by the film's closure speaks to ecofeminism's alignment of patriarchal oppression of women and nature as interrelated phenomena. The introductory essay in Sidney Dobrin and Kenneth Kidd's collection of essays on children's literature and ecocriticism, *Wild Things*, reiterates a point made by Marion Copeland. They paraphrase her position by claiming that 'the very sorts of oppression that are leveled against women and other groups are directly linked to the oppression of the natural world, children's texts become a crucial place in which to detect and combat cultural hegemony' (Dobrin and Kidd 2004, p.9).

In the *Lion King*, eating meat symbolizes a kind of cannibalism, an eating of the same species. It is not coincidental that animal characters represented in the process of consuming meat are connected to evil because this has the effect of subsuming all animals (bar insects and grubs perhaps) under the same category; that is, different or

other than human. The eating of meat by humans however takes on an alternative symbolic significance producing very specific forms of gender and power. The construction of masculinity is tied into Western cultural relationships associating men with the consumption of meat. This is unproblematised in texts with human characters due to the very marked difference between the human and non-human, produced through children's animated films. The overarching distortion of nature results in the whole world becoming other as resource for a very small homogeneous group. According to the distributions of food in this text, only the white, male, middleclass and heterosexual human body is sanctioned to eat meat.

If, as originally stated, it is unsurprising that the viewing audience of children's film in the West are assumed to be well fed, perhaps it should be less surprising that the viewing audience is 'unmarked' (that is, as the elite, anglo/American, heterosexual, male, human body). This perspective is what Donna Haraway calls, 'the conquering gaze from nowhere', the 'God-trick' (Haraway 1991, pp.188-189). As Haraway argues, 'This is the gaze that mythically inscribes all the marked bodies, that makes the unmarked category claim the power to see and not be seen, to represent while escaping representation' (Haraway 1991, p.188). Children's animated film takes the viewer to communities existing under water, in the wild, on the streets of Manhattan, into suburban kitchens, and just about everywhere. They produce and reproduce ideas about 'nature', not as diverse materiality, but in order to naturalise existing hierarchies so that an elite group continues to dominate the food chain. 'Vision, in this technological feast becomes unregulated gluttony' (Haraway 1991, p.189) is Haraway's formulation of such events. The biological, political and biopolitical consequences of this as related directly to food then sanctions the suffering through hunger of all those marked as other. Clearly, the traffic of food in children's literature is non-innocent practice.



## NOTES

1. She is also making 'weird faces' at the baby, and this action is condemned by Dash and further judged inappropriate by Bob suggesting, in psychoanalytic terms her regression into the semiotic and interruption by the paternal, symbolic.
2. If the metaphoric link is still unclear please note the scene where Mr Incredible and Mirage enter the interior of the Island in a sperm-like carriage through the big vagina dentata (a waterfall which separates showing teeth-like structure). Barbara Creed (1993) writes that 'The *vagina dentata* is the mouth of hell – a terrifying symbol of woman as the "devil's gateway"' (106). Furthermore, 'it is apparent in popular derogatory terms for women such as "man-eater" and "castrating bitch"' (106). The fear of castration through feminine sexuality is simultaneously perpetuated and constructed through such representations in children's film.



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#### BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

Naarah Sawers is a Ph.D. candidate at Deakin University. She teaches children's literature and her thesis, in literary studies, focuses on feminist corporeal philosophy and science studies.

Elizabeth Parsons lectures in children's literature at Deakin University. Her research is predominantly interdisciplinary, encompassing children's texts, Australian literature, theatre semiotics, identity construction and contemporary poetry. She is currently working on a collaborative project entitled: Risk, Resilience and Children's Literature.