Nostalgic nationalism and the banal Anthropocene on Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives

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Across 24 seasons and 260 episodes of the Food Network show *Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives* host Guy Fieri guides viewers through an All-American road trip to discover independent mom-and-pop restaurants that are 'off the beaten path.' With this mission, and through an aesthetic that draws on the symbols of post-war American culture, *Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives* weaves food and car culture together to evoke a nostalgic and idealistic nationalism. While this show does not explicitly reference climate change, I argue that its hypernationalism operates as a cultural counternarrative to climate change discourse. For example, *Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives* showcases the 1950s as a period of futurism, consumerism and optimism, a patriotic narrative that runs parallel to the focus on this same era as the period of 'Great Acceleration' which McNeill and Engelke (2014, p. xvii) argue was a time of unprecedented industrialization, resource extraction and population growth that marks the start date of the Anthropocene. Similarly, the show's un-ending American road trip works to encourage a myopic, national perspective that depicts local economies as reliant on environmentally-harmful consumer practices, rather than a broader-ranging perspective that couples consumption behaviours to global environmental impacts. In this portrayal, it is not planetary ecosystems that are shown to be at risk of extinction but, rather, the American way of life; the personal behaviors that individuals are prompted to modify are not related to energy conservation but to supporting the excesses of American consumer culture and – in so doing – a masculinist version of the American Dream.

Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives' inversion of the Anthropocene narrative is supported through the omnipresence of banality which, as Heidi Swanson (2017) posits, works as a

persistent form of Anthropocene denial that relies on a routinized everydayness to paper over the networked entanglements that govern the global ecosystem. The banality of *Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives* is written into the format of the show, which employs a precise and repetitive formula for each restaurant featured. Segments are edited to alternate between footage of interviews with restaurant owners and chefs, images of the food, and customer testimony, to re-enact on a microscale the food production and consumption process as an endless loop. This formulaic celebration of middle-brow normativity leads to one of the ironies of the show which is that while *Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives* seeks to showcase independent eateries, its form ultimately renders one eatery indistinguishable from the next. While the individual cities and restaurant names are mentioned in each episode, most of this identifying information takes place solely through the audio track rather than through visuals, which are otherwise the predominant, evocative feature of food television. Additionally, although the authentic testimony of 'locals' is obtained for each restaurant, these individuals are anonymous and are only able to offer bland and repetitive soundbites. Ultimately, the effect of the show's banality is to encourage a focus on the nation (and national interests) over a global perspective; to represent consumption behaviours as crucial to the maintenance of the American Dream; and to normalize certain forms of consumption as indicative of national citizenship. That is, in the face of data that increasingly reveals a human-driven movement towards environmental crisis, shows such as *Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives* present banal forms of consumption as crucial to the longevity of the nation, as an alternative to the apocalyptic ending that is predicted by climate change and the rampant consumption that fuels it.

I explore how the banal portrayal of food and car culture on *Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives* results in a nostalgic nationalism that encourages Anthropocene denial. Nostalgic nationalism on

the show operates in two ways: first, through authorizing excess consumption as necessary for the preservation of the American economy and way of life; second, through the use of temporalities that revive an optimistic, consumer-based patriotism and counter the apocalyptic urgency of anthropogenic climate change and calls to action. In this manner, environmentally-damaging consumer behaviours are naturalized as forms of consumer citizenship – in which "the imagined national community references [a] community of consumers, united by 'shared codes' of consumption behavior" (Banet-Weiser, 2007) – required to secure the cultural survival of the nation. Moreover, this nationalist vision is an exclusive one that revives the racialized and classed attachments inherent to the American Dream and, by extension, complicates the common definition of the Anthropocene as a binary relation between humans and nature that largely overlooks the political and cultural frameworks that structure vastly unequal human relationships to the environment.

Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives has established its niche in food media through a focus on the ordinariness of diner menus, which prominently feature meat, cheese and high-carbohydrate items and represent pedestrian tastes that celebrate excesses of consumption. This focus is exaggerated as Fieri expresses awe at the large portion sizes of restaurants, interrupts chefs by tasting and sampling ingredients during the cooking process and emits preverbal grunts of satisfaction while tasting. In this embrace of banal food, the show glorifies the postwar American ideals that accompany the historical symbolism of the diner as a democratic space that offered patrons large, affordable servings of comfort food that erased memories of wartime rations and replaced them with "the myth of unending upward mobility, economic prosperity, and American exceptionalism" (Kelly, 2017, p. 5). Diner food is therefore used to establish a nostalgic nationalism further supported by the revival of 1950s cultural symbols on the show. For instance,

the show's opening sequence begins with Fieri, dressed in his uniform of retro bowling shirts, backed by a kitschy collage of vintage diner signage and an audio track of rock n' roll riffs, to exuberantly convey the sense of optimism and progress that infused post-war nationalism. This spotlight on the post-war period and the nation obscures the damaging global environmental impacts of the Standard American Diet – such as the carbon emissions and environmental degradation caused by factory farming, as well as the global clearing of land to grow the soybeans for animal feed – by depicting the consumption of meat, dairy and potatoes as a patriotic act that sustains American businesses. Moreover, nostalgia is used to decouple food consumption from its ecological impacts by distancing the Standard American Diet from the unsustainability of modern industrial agriculture and naturalizing such food choices as cultural traditions.

Nostalgia, particularly when accessed through food, is often theorized as an attempt to recreate a sense of home or familiarity in response to conditions of social change and flux. For instance, Jean Duruz (2004) writes of the mythic figure of the 'Cooking Woman' who is resigned to her place in the kitchen to soothe various cultural anxieties, which Bell and Hollows elaborate on and further describe the ways that "mythologized figures of domestic femininity are mobilized to anchor the meaning of idealized images of 'authentically' local culinary cultures" (2007, 23). On *Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives*, restaurant owners symbolically play the role of the 'Cooking Woman' as the show embeds them in a seemingly antiquated place and time to champion a wistful version of the American Dream. This can be seen in the pilot episode of the show, titled 'Classics' which begins with a segment on Mac and Ernie's Roadside Diner in Tarpley, Texas. The Roadside Diner is proudly described as a shack next to a creek where customers eat in the parking lot. The isolation of this diner is conveyed through a sweeping

panoramic view of hill country surrounding the shack and its parking lot, and frequent shots of customers huddled together on long wooden picnic tables in the dusty and dry landscape, conjuring up visions of 'simple pioneer living' that plays a prominent role in American history. This lack of pretension is gleefully embraced by the cook and co-owner interviewed in this segment, Naylene, who jokingly calls the picnic tables in the parking lot the 'verandah' and, in response to Fieri's description of the cramped server space as decorated like a dorm, agrees that they like recycling.

Despite the uniquely pre-modern setting of this diner, the churning productivity of the kitchen is conveyed through disjointed editing that frequently moves from the kitchen spaces to the outdoor dining area, and at one point captures Fieri running to keep up with one of the servers. Fieri emphasizes that the diner has a line of people waiting to order from the time it opens at 5am, and that hundreds of customers are served on a single Friday night. Naylene is described as having no formal culinary training but rather, and more importantly, producing her diner's menu through personal creativity and gumption. The segment describes the diner as originating from the need to sell meat from the family's goat farm, and highlights Naylene's original menu items such as country fried lamb shanks and tuna in ginger butter. Naylene, who is in constant motion in this tiny kitchen space, is portrayed as innovative and rebellious, joking that she wanted to call her goat burger "a McMutton, but you know who would sue me over that," a cheeky dig that pits her as David to McDonalds' Goliath and emphasizes the populism espoused by the show. Moreover, Naylene's pioneering and entrepreneurial spirit is referenced later in the segment as the camera lingers briefly but meaningfully on the slogan on the back of her shirt and which reads 'women who behave well rarely make history'. This nostalgic and anti-

corporate spirit situates Naylene and the diner in a mythical golden age that works to reassure viewers of their ability to restore broader historical American cultural practices and values.

Naylene is just one example of the 'Cooking Woman' featured on *Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives*, with others in the pilot episode including a cook in Wichita who becomes a diner owner after having worked as a line cook since the age of 16, and a restaurateur who is self-described as having come to the middle-of-the-desert California to open his thriving restaurant with no money but simple faith in the quality of his family's traditional Greek recipes. These stories, flush with the potential of pioneering entrepreneurialism, revive the fantasy of a meritocratic American Dream. They evoke a nostalgic nationalism that promises to secure American cultural values, although they must be found deep in the American heartland and must be sustained through respecting traditional consumption behaviors. Furthermore, nostalgic nationalism evokes a fluid temporality – both assuring viewers of the possibility of halting social change and promising a timelessness mirrored by Fieri's endless road trip – that displaces the narrative of linear technological progress and its seemingly imminent apocalyptic ending. In this way, banal consumption obliquely pits the survival of nationalist cultural values in opposition to the survival of the global ecosystem.

Although it is primarily classified as a food show, the premise of *Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives* is equally reliant on a representation of car culture, as Fieri embarks on his imagined road trip to sample diner food across the country. Fieri's personal red 1968 Camaro convertible is prominently featured on the show and in the programme's advertising materials, operating as a powerful symbol of nostalgic patriotism that diverts attention from the many ways in which American car culture has detrimental effects on built and natural environments. As environmental historian Martin Melosi (n.d.) writes, automobile culture has significantly

transformed the American landscape, with highway construction influencing settlement patterns and the design of suburban homes, and popularizing businesses and particularly chains that could catch the attention of passing motorists. The naturalization of car culture within America has led to the U.S. being the largest global consumer of oil, with 22 percent of total consumption, a rate that is more than Brazil, Russia, India and China combined (Huber, 2013, p. viii). Cars and trucks currently account for 29% of all US emissions, a figure that is set to increase as oil extraction methods become more unconventional (US Environmental Protection Agency, 2017). Additionally, the suburbanization of the US – facilitated through the normalization of car culture – has led to vast tracts of land being covered by concrete and asphalt which has greatly impacted diversity in the ecological system.

These concerns are deflected through the show's portrayal of cars as central to values of freedom, a concept that is conveyed on the show through the type of mobility facilitated by cars. In a typical segment introduction, Fieri's commentary takes place while driving, with the opening sequence of the pilot episode divided into three separate shots of Fieri driving while framed by pastures and the open road. This sequence shows his car moving in different directions to evoke the length and perpetual motion of his imagined journey. Fieri's car-fuelled hypermobility is further connoted through editing that rapidly transports Fieri across the country, for instance through an itinerary that takes him from Texas to Kansas to California all within the pilot episode. Thus, cars on *Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives* are used to traverse and re-imagine the places and values that comprise America, celebrating the American tradition of the road trip and naturalizing what Matthew Huber (2013) describes as America's 'oil addiction.' Describing the ways that oil is both naturalized within American everyday life and intertwined with the individual expression of American values, Huber suggests that "oil is a powerful force not only

because of the material geographies of mobility it makes possible but also because its combustion often accompanies deeply felt visions of freedom and individualism. It turns out these ideals are much harder to shake than the built environment of petroleum-fired suburbanization" (2013, p. xi). It is through the ordinariness of oil that car culture – and the mobility it promises – has become understood as thoroughly necessary in American culture.

Diners, Drive-ins and Dives draws on this enculturated relationship to oil, linking car culture directly to the patriotism of salvaging non-urban, independent businesses across the country. At the same time, car-fuelled mobility on the show is represented as a privilege accorded to white masculinity. As Diane Negra and Yvonne Tasker (2018) have argued, Fieri's hypermobility and overconsumption works as a roving, consuming recuperation of white American masculinity that is common to male-hosted food media. Moreover, Emily Contois writes that Fieri's performance of masculinity supports the populism of the show, with Fieri presenting himself as "a champion of 'mom-and-pop' restaurants despite his own considerable wealth, privilege, and status" (2018, p. 145). In turn, the mobility afforded by white masculinity highlights the imperialist project of Fieri's imagined American road trip. The show describes its featured eateries as places that are 'off the beaten path,' which is typically code for smaller cities in the heartland or, when diners are located in large urban centers, the suburbs rather than the city (for instance, in the season 1 episode 'Blue Plate Specials,' eateries are described as located in 'beach town' Malibu, rather than Los Angeles, and on the 'south side of Chicago'). In representing cities in this way, emphasis is placed on Fieri's 'discovery' of these eateries and his conquest of the large portions of food on offer. Moreover, each location is presented as a local community with testimonies from regulars who rave about the food and articulate their proximity to each of the establishments through pointing out the seats they always sit in and the menu items

they have inspired. These local communities are used to generate an imagined America that is woven together in a banal tapestry of sameness: a repetition of gestures of intimacy and a uniformity of traditional values that is seemingly replicated across the country.

The conservatism and homogeneity indicated by the show's imagined community ties into the romanticization of the regional in contemporary food television which, as I have previously argued, often stands in for a racial and gendered conservatism (Dejmanee, 2019). In adopting such conservatism to reinstate the mobility of privileged white masculinity, *Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives* is able to salvage car culture from the internal contradictions that have always threatened to unravel it. Mobility has long been emblematic to the optimistic modernity of post-war America, which was expressed through the popularity of aeronautical design, rockets and planes, as well as the diner itself which was historically modelled on the train dining car and then redesigned in the 1950s to incorporate the streamlined and aerodynamic features of modern transport technologies (American Diner Museum, n.d.). Yet, the optimistic account of the freedom and mobility promised by automobiles has always carried within it the threat of containment and alienation, particularly through the roads, highways and suburban enclaves separating land and people, through the congestion and confinement of traffic jams, through the dedication of urban landscapes to parking spaces, and through the reliance on and addiction to oil. *Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives* elides such threats through the recuperation of a white masculine vision of the American Dream. Fieri's road trip follows an itinerary cultivated to drill deep into the country's heartland and a "mission to discover, map, and codify food, people, and places [in a manner that] reif[ies] assumptions that cast white, Western, well-financed men as explorers and immigrants, people of color, and women as those to be explored" (Contois, 2018, p. 153). Each stop offers a place to refuel, with each diner offering an abundance of calorie-

dense comfort food, unbounded by any sense of physical or temporal limitations in a format of soothing repetition that offers the fantasy and promise of perpetuity for American car culture.

A unique paratextual aspect of Fieri's show is the existence of 'Flavortown Fans' who are dedicated to following the routes featured on Fieri's show and have created several websites dedicated to documenting the hundreds of eateries that have been featured in the multi-year run of *Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives*. In so doing, Flavortown Fans demonstrate how as "a nebulous concept, place, and community, Flavortown overlaps in interesting and often inconsistent ways with the America that Fieri constructs" (Contois, 2018, p. 144). Moreover, they bring significant economic boosts to the businesses promoted by the show, with Fieri allegedly telling business owners to expect profits to increase 200% after the episodes air (Fulton, 2016). Through their reconstruction of Fieri's road trips, Flavortown Fans underline the show's mission to promote the economic survival of independent eateries, and to revive nostalgic nationalism as an overarching cultural narrative. In sharp contrast to this, Fieri's Times Square restaurant - which opened in 2012 and closed at the end of 2017 - was subject to a scathing and infamous review by *New York Times* critic Pete Wells, who described the food using vivid phraseology such as "ghostly nubs of unblackened, unspiced white meat," "shiny tissues of breading that exude grease" and meat that tastes like "chewy air" (2012), underlining the continued antagonism between Fieri's food-centric populism and the intellectual elitism represented by the *New York Times*. Both the increase in profits offered to restaurants that are featured on the show and the ultimate financial unsustainability of Fieri's restaurant indicate an atypical crossover between the representations on the show and real-world economic impacts that are useful to consider in mediated representations of the banal Anthropocene.

While the representation of nationalist nostalgia on food television cannot explicitly be correlated to the contemporary political climate, the regional spaces promoted by the show, the use of populism and conservative American values to re-define national community, the celebration of rebellious entrepreneurs as champions of the American Dream, and the use of hyper-consumption and mobility to recuperate white masculinity, all logically conclude in an outcome that clearly has parallels to the election of a figurehead like Donald Trump. It is also not a coincidence that Trump – with his penchant for junk food (Parker, 2016) and his embrace of populism and nationalist rhetoric – is similarly linked to an America First foreign policy, and the rollback of environmental rules and regulations aimed at fighting climate change (Popovich, Albeck-Ripka, & Pierre-Louis, 2019).

Banal cultural narratives such as *Diners, Drive Ins and Dives* shift the project of surviving in the Anthropocene from sustainable environmental policies and practices to a notion of a cultural self-sustainability that is wrought through asserting the dominant normativity of certain consumption practices and thereby defending actions that are clearly detrimental to the global environment. It is important to note that nostalgia and localism are themselves politically neutral. For instance, nostalgia has been used to revive pre-modern food pedagogies and production practices, and an attention to localism is central to the locavore food movement. Yet, too often these alternative food ideologies also result in the romanticization of conservatism and an exclusive definition of community. For instance, Julie Guthman (2011) has pointed out the ways that alternative food movements, steeped in the sensuous pleasures of good food, rely on rhetorics of choice and the free-market to support already-privileged consumers and vilify obesity through the bifurcation of the U.S. food system. Similarly, Pierre Desrochers and Hiroko Shimizu (2012) argue that locavorism amounts to a privileged ignorance of the necessities of a

globalized food system, with international trade crucial to avoiding widespread malnutrition and famine. Finally, Noah Heringman (2014) describes 'evolutionary nostalgia' – an ideology driven by climate change that sentimentalizes premodern practices and is evidenced through activities such as the paleo diet and barefoot running – as a response that allows consumers to escape climate anxiety by accessing a seemingly pre-historic, pre-Anthropocene relationship to the environment. That is, the use of food to focus on the local rather than the global is too often used to reinstate hegemonic community values and identity-based hierarchies, rather than to explore or understand the interconnectedness of food and ecological systems. This problem raises what Gabrielle Hecht writes is "a common critique of the Anthropocene concept: it attributes ecological collapse to an undifferentiated 'humanity', when in practice both responsibility and vulnerability are unevenly distributed" (2018). In the nostalgic nationalism offered by *Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives*, survival is no longer about averting environmental catastrophe but the project in which humans have historically proved much more successful – the conquest, exploitation and out-survival of the Other.

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