This essay undertakes a semiotic reading of the familial and national(ist) economies of carnophilia, vegetarianism, and masculinity in the life and work of Gandhi, especially in his autobiography. The topic of Gandhi’s vegetarianism (and his other forms of culinary discipline, including fasting) scarcely needs any introduction for scholarly and popular audiences of South Asian studies, or, indeed, for audiences more broadly conceived. Gandhi was almost as noted, indeed notorious, for his experiments in alimentation and elimination as for those in celibacy and nonviolent political action. The fact of their forming a single associative continuum should be by now almost entirely commonsensical for modern audiences, with their knowledge of the intimacy between the gastronomic and the libidinal, as it was commonsensical for the experimenter himself. Yet while Gandhi’s experiments with sexuality have received some attention, his experiments with dietetics have – with few and often sketchy exceptions – been curiously under-read, or read as though their meaning is uncontestably and reassuringly transparent; they are construed most typically as a simple extension of a lifelong philosophy of ahimsa (nonviolence). A scrutiny of the details and the contexts of Gandhi’s writings and practices on matters dietary demonstrates, on the contrary, the profoundly complicated, equivocal, and transitional character of his gastropolitics, which was heavily reliant on the technology of experimentation.1

The purport of his dietary experiments was unclear to his associates and followers, who frequently had to live with the consequences of his various alimentary trials; occasionally they were none too clear to Gandhi himself. Alternatively his enduring interest in diet, dietary reform, and fasting has been read as a fad, extraneous to any serious consideration of his mahatma-hood. Many commentators have been reluctant to concede
how obsessively somatic Gandhi’s ‘experiments in truth’ were, and how pronounced was his belief that the purification of the body was inseparable from the purification of the mind necessary for swaraj (self-rule). Gandhi’s choice of diet (during his student days in England), as the terrain upon which his politics would be inaugurated, is by no means as anomalous as it might initially appear. The fact that he would make salt the centre of a widely publicised and immensely successful campaign against British rule in 1930, speaks to the ways in which he had refined a gastropolitics of long standing.

Certainly the ethics of Gandhi’s vegetarianism, its relationship to ahimsa and brahmacharya (celibacy), and its relation to a philosophy of bodily administration, representation, and leadership merit more attention than they have received. This article takes up all of these questions. Here I would like to examine not simply the ethics of Gandhi’s dietetics, although the question of ethics is irreducible in any consideration of a Gandhian diet. I would like to examine as well the style of a Gandhian dietetic ethics, its gastropoetics if you will. My analysis is directed then to the figure of the body as vegetarian, especially to the production and transubstantiation of the meat-renouncing (and sometimes food-renouncing) male body. A scrutiny of this figure can help highlight the ambivalent social terrain of vegetarian practice and its modes of gendered self-staging; it can also illuminate the deeply complicated and unsettled ethical logic of a Gandhian vegetarianism.

In its reading of the aesthetics of embodied gender, this essay draws significantly upon modes of literary analysis; and in its focus upon what one might denote a banal lexicon rather than the more lofty forms of nationalist practice, it is indebted to the analytic modes of cultural studies. Above all, it is informed by a sense of the transactional and contextual character of Gandhi’s body talk and body politics. To this end, I insist that the gendered character of his vegetarianism, fasting, and other modes of bodily disciplines cannot be understood without invoking a large and inescapably gendered cast, including his mother, his male friends, his wife, his sons, and his female and male disciples. In particular, the consistently familial contexts of Gandhi’s alimentary practices must be highlighted in any consideration of the gendered character of vegetarianism, sacrifice, and self-sacrifice.

Gandhi’s autobiography, it has often been observed, is marked by an unusual degree of candour, candour that manifests itself most characteristically in the most quotidian (rather than in the exalted) details of everyday behaviour. ‘What is most striking about Gandhi’s experiments’, says Joseph Alter, ‘is their utterly banal character, and Gandhi’s own virtual obsession with seemingly mundane, utilitarian issues of diet, health, and, above all else, the control of sexual passion’. The details seem not so much
the stuff of the quasi-allegorical end proper to the genre of autobiography; they are too numerous, too repetitive, too generically surprising if not outlandish, and too persistently earthbound for that. For instance, in his autobiography much of his account of his three years in England is given over, in contradistinction to other examples of the genre, not to his encounters with bourgeois English culture, his experiences as a student, his homesickness, or his associations with other Indian expatriates, but to what he describes as his ‘new religion’ of vegetarianism. Sandhya Shetty notes another odd, even perverse, moment later in the *Autobiography*: when providing a narrative of his first Congress meeting in 1901, Gandhi allots a significant modicum of narrative space to the other end of the alimentary canal – to the description of the delegates’ odious sanitary habits:

Some of the delegates did not scruple to use the verandahs outside their rooms for calls of nature at night. In the morning I pointed out the spots to the volunteers. No one was ready to undertake the cleaning. ... I saw that, if the Congress session were to be prolonged, conditions would be quite favourable for the outbreak of an epidemic.

This is a reaction that one might expect from the Kipling of ‘The City of Dreadful Night’ but not necessarily from one poised to be a leader of the nationalist movement. (It is a choice irony that they were both speaking of Calcutta.) But such a response to Gandhi’s sanitary concerns misunderstands, or understands only trivially, a figure who was a virtuoso of the symbolic act. Bhikhu Parekh, for example, has remarked upon his immensely successful mobilisation of ‘a new aesthetics’ of political behaviour.

As Lloyd and Susanne Rudolph point out, the details are intimately related to the specific form of a Gandhian politics, a politics that brilliantly transformed mundane items like salt, caps, and *charkhas* (spinning wheels) into potent political symbols:

The autobiography ... must be read with a particularly sensitive ear, one that hears what he has to say concerning his diet, or his relations to his wife, and considers what it might mean for his political style and for how that style was received. To relegate these remarks to the category of personal frills and curiosities that constitute the gossip rather than the serious significance of a great man is to miss what was central to his leadership.

It is in such a spirit that I would wish to examine Gandhi’s experiments in dietetics, reading the details of his vegetarianism, fasting, and food asceticism (which are not necessarily identical with each other) symptomatically as it were, and situating them variously within specifically gendered discourses of bodily management and exhibition, within Indian as well as global and diasporic debates about modernity and its counter-cultures, and within the gendered dynamics of the Hindu vegetarian
household. I thus move from Gandhi’s early life in Kathiawad to his sojourns in England and South Africa and conclude with the ethico-political and gendered economy of the great public fasts of the later years. The document that is known as Gandhi’s *Autobiography*, or what he preferred to call *The Story of My Experiments With Truth*, written in 1927 as a series of didactic articles for his journal *Navajivan*, will be a primary object of my analysis, though I shall also have recourse to his other writings and to the compositions of his associates and fellow travellers.

Gandhi grew up in a milieu marked by contrary principles of dietetics. His mother, upon whose strictures and example, characterised by ‘saintliness’ as well as ‘strong commonsense’, he modelled himself as an adult, is remembered in the *Autobiography* not only for the number and duration of her food-related austerities but also, at least in the admiring grammar of the son’s account(ing), for their sheer cumulative ambitiousness and their spectacular quality:

She would take the hardest vows and keep them without flinching. … To keep two or three consecutive fasts was nothing to her. Living on one meal a day during *Chaturmas* [the four-month period of the rainy season] was a habit with her. Not content with that she fasted every alternate day during one *Chaturmas*.

In significant contrast to this was another dietary philosophy, conceived at least in part in response to the fact of colonialism and its putative effeminisation of Indian and particularly Bengali Hindu males. If the Macaulayan rhetoric of British colonialism had characterised the Bengali and paradigmatically the westernised, English-educated Hindu male as ‘feeble even to effeminacy’, the object of derision had, ironically, made the stereotype of degeneracy his own. Vivekananda’s prescription of ‘beef, biceps, and Bhagvadgita’ as the curative for such feebleness is perhaps only the best-known of the Indian responses to such a reproach. British and Indian commentators agreed substantially not only on the diagnosis of physical and moral inadequacy but also on its positivist and environmental causes: an enervating climate, the precocity and frequency of marital sex that made women out of men through the depletion of seminal reserves, early childbearing and its baneful effects on physical robustness, and a meatless diet.

The self-conception of feebleness was, perhaps, strongest among Bengali Hindu males, but was also effectively internalised by colonised males in other parts of India (though, significantly, Muslim and lower-class males were rarely hailed by such a characterisation). Gandhi recalls a doggerel in fashion among schoolboys in his youth that extolled the preternatural prowess of the Englishman, a prowess conferred by meat-eating: ‘Behold the mighty Englishman/ He rules the Indian small,/ Because being
a meat-eater/ He is five cubits tall.' The carnophilic and carnivorous mandate that resulted from such national disparities in male physical and moral fibre was underlined for him by the tempter of his youth, the persuasive, seductive, and physically compelling Sheikh Mehtab: ‘We are a weak people because we do not eat meat. The English are able to rule over us, because they are meat-eaters. You know how hardy I am, and how great a runner too. It is because I am a meat-eater … You should do likewise.’ This piece of folklore about the flaccid vegetarian Hindu appears to have had a considerable persuasive hold on the adolescent Mohandas, despite the fact that meat-eating was not then (and is not now) prohibited to large numbers of caste Hindus. The prevalence of vegetarianism among Hindu and Jain communities in Gujarat may account for the narrative’s power over him. He appears, after some initial revulsion, to have developed a certain carnophilia that he associated, in common with many of his contemporaries, Muslim and Hindu, Indian and British, with nationalist duty. Meat-eating, or a kind of culinary masculinity (to borrow a term from the Rudolphs), would nourish, in the most literal sense, not just Indian resistance to British rule but an entry into modernity and a condition of post-coloniality. Indeed the two objectives were quite compatible with each other. A newly muscular Hinduism could thus challenge and match a muscular Christianity or a muscular Englishness on its own terms: ‘I wished to be strong and daring and wanted my countrymen also to be such, so that we might defeat the English and make India free.’ Meat, in other words, became a sacrificial substance whose introjection and assimilation enabled an address to, and parity with, a figure both superior and Other. Moreover, meat-eating would free him not just from British rule, but also from his galling sense of physical inferiority to his wife, as the writer recalls:

I knew she had more courage than I, and I felt ashamed of myself. She knew no fear of serpents and ghosts. She could go out anywhere in the dark. My friend … would tell me that he could hold in his hand live serpents, could defy thieves and did not believe in ghosts. And all this was, of course, the result of eating meat.

‘A wave of “reform” was sweeping over Rajkot at the time’, recalls Gandhi; in such a conjuncture, to eat meat was to enter a homosocial community of British and modernising Indian males. Thus the transgression of caste taboos on meat-eating and commensality (with Muslims) constituted Gandhi’s endeavour to be assimilated into modernity. This was somewhat at odds with his prejudice against the Christian missionaries of Rajkot, presumably engaged in analogous virilising activities; they allegedly induced converts to Christianity to eat beef, drink alcohol, and Europeanise their clothing. The mature Gandhi would never, despite his heartfelt reverence for Christ and for the New Testament, shake off this sense of
the de-nationalising character of ‘Christian’ diet and clothing in India. Moreover, the nationalist duty of virilising palate and sinew was also at odds with the mandate of submission to and transparency with one’s parents. He decided therefore to renounce meat-eating until after their death. ‘When they are no more and I have found my freedom, I will eat meat openly’, he resolved. Such a renunciation is nothing if not ambiguously phrased; the death of the parents is a release, at least in light of the male’s nationalist duty. Further, the fantasy/prophecy of public carnivorousness underscores the anthropophagic and parricidal scaffolding of meat-eating in the manner of the incestuous feast in Freud’s *Totem and Taboo*, and anticipates in crucial ways the violence that is an unfailling component of (self-)sacrifice in the Gandhian biography. And yet Gandhi was to render to his dead parents precisely the ‘deferred obedience’ that had been unwillingly extracted from him during their lifetime.

Gandhi’s relationship with Mehtab, the dangerously attractive friend and secret sharer of meat, met with the disapproval of his entire family, including his parents, wife, and brother. The young Muslim seems to have functioned as a form of counter-family to this accredited family – the family-in-law, if you will, to use Spivak’s terms for familial legitimacy – providing those services (food and sex) usually provided by the wife. Mehtab was a purveyor of erotic competition for the sanctioned, yet not guiltless, pleasures of the marital bed, coaxing the adolescent Gandhi into (abortive) encounters with prostitutes, much as he had prepared carnivorous repasts for him. True to the continuing theme of unsanctioned and exorbitant sexuality, Mehtab brought prostitutes into Gandhi’s home in South Africa years later; he threatened, tantalisingly, to ‘expose’ Gandhi when he was discovered *in flagrante delicto*, and was expelled in consequence.

The erotics of meat-eating are accentuated by Gandhi in these particular ways in these early chapters on temptation, but they are also woven in more periphrastic ways into the fabric of his encounters with Mehtab. Indeed, Gandhi’s account, at least in the language of the English-language version, of his encounters with the meat-eating Mehtab are governed by the interlaced tropes of secrecy, infatuation and seduction, in marked contrast to the language of visibility and publicity that marks the narrative of his turn to vegetarianism. He speaks, in a narrative that appears to conjoin the language of religious and erotic temptation, of their rendezvous in secret places, of his being under Mehtab’s spell, of his ‘blind devotion’ to him, and of the ‘infatuation’ that nearly ruined him. The autobiography makes it clear how difficult it was to disavow Mehtab’s appeal, despite the rhetoric, which has been echoed by most biographers, of wishing to reform the reprobate Muslim. Alone among the major commentators on Gandhi, Erik Erikson has recognised the powerful
affective bond between the yet incipient mahatma and the familiar of his adolescence and young manhood:

it is ... clear that Mehtab would have had to be invented if he had not existed. ... For Mehtab played perfectly the personage on whom to project one’s personal devil and thus become the personification of Mohandas’ negative identity, that is, of everything in himself which he tried to isolate and subdue and which yet was part of him.22

Erikson also suggests, provocatively, that it was left to Gandhi’s oldest son, Harilal, a convert to Islam (and therefore to meat-eating), an alcoholic, a disreputable businessman, and a frequenter of prostitutes, to live out the potential embodied in Mehtab and disavowed by his father: ‘It may be that Harilal found in Mehtab the ingredients for that rebellious role with which he later faced his father. At any rate, Harilal later became a Muslim and a derelict who within a year after the mahatma’s assassination, was found in a coma “in some locality”.’23

If the meat-eating of Gandhi’s youth had been marked by secrecy, reserve, and the guilt of filial violence, vegetarianism was invested with a distinctly different set of affective lineaments. Vegetarianism’s import has a great deal to do with its status as the vehicle of Gandhi’s entry into public life during his student years in London. But what is equally if not more significant is the sense that the vegetarian body was, initially in England but later in India as well, a body characterised by its hyperbolic visibility. It was a body characterised by its looked-at-ness and its status, first as freak and then as holy spectacle. This spectacularisation of the vegetarian or, more generally, the renunciant male body demands more than a modicum of our analytic attention. It is most fruitful perhaps to investigate it through certain forms of indirection and metaphoric displacement.

With that in mind, let us turn our attention to the crisis of gendered caste identity provoked by Gandhi’s decision to go to England, and to the structure of prohibitions with which the aspiring traveller was faced. After a frustrating and unsuccessful year at college in Bhavnagar, the young and now fatherless Gandhi decided that the quickest road to advancement was to train as a barrister in England. He received the occasionally wavering support of his oldest brother Lakshmidas and the conditional blessing of his mother for this enterprise, but found himself unable to prevail upon his caste council, which strongly disapproved of overseas voyages as transgressions against orthopraxy, especially its rules of purity and pollution. He went anyway, and was excommunicated for his act.

The strictures of his caste elders and of his uncle when Gandhi announced his desire to journey to England involved, interestingly, the coupling of two forms of transgression. These potential offences against orthopraxy involved not the religiously allied realms of diet and sex which

one might expect, as exemplified in his mother’s demand that he forswear meat, alcohol, and sexual relations with women for the duration of his diaspora. Rather, the incipient transgressions involved ingestion and clothing. His uncle, the head of his clan, whom he had approached about permission to travel overseas, objected thus:

I am not sure whether it is possible for one to stay in England without prejudice to one’s own religion. ... When I meet these big barristers, I see no difference between their life and that of Europeans. They know no scruples regarding food. Cigars are never out of their mouths. They dress as shamelessly as Englishmen. (emphases mine)²⁴

The strictures here against going native in England, especially through the transgression of dietary taboos, are entirely familiar ones. What gives pause to thought in this passage is that curious detail, which for the uncle is of a piece with dietary pollutions, about the ‘shamelessness’ of English male clothing. That the rhetoric of male sartorial shamelessness is not entirely accidental is evidenced by Gandhi’s response to the English wardrobe procured for him in Bombay: he speaks of liking some of his new sartorial acquisitions, but ‘The short jacket I looked upon as immodest’.²⁵

What are we to make of these unexpected idioms of modesty and shame? While there was some debate about the appropriate forms of Indian male attire in the colonial context, when conducted between Britons and Indians they were focused on ‘proper forms of respectful behaviour’ and indexed by headgear and footwear, as Bernard Cohn demonstrates.²⁶ These debates also addressed the deleterious economic effects of British rule, as in the swadeshi movement against British products, especially cloth from Lancashire mills, and the uneasy fit of western clothes into ‘the existing classifications of appropriate caste, regional or religious styles’, as Emma Tarlo notes.²⁷ There was little or no discussion that I am aware of about the masculine modesty, or lack of it, of western clothing. When the western-attired Indian male constituted a spectacle, it was because of the incongruity of his garb rather than his status as an erotic or a potentially and improperly erotic object, as appears to have been the case for Gandhi. The question of modesty was, on the other hand, foregrounded to a significant degree in debates about the new forms of women’s attire.²⁸ What then can we make of what seems to be an aberrant, hyperbolic, or out of place modesty? We might pause here to think of Gandhi’s quite self-conscious androgyny, of which much has been said.²⁹ I wonder if it might be possible to read the language of shame and modesty as the retrospective effeminisation of the autobiographer seeking to recast the gendered project of nationalist struggle?³⁰ One might recollect Gandhi’s well-known identification with his mother’s ideals of purity and austerity; ‘[the] mother-cult of Gandhi’s boyhood days remained throughout his life a very strong element in his philosophy’, as Nirmal
Kumar Bose noted early on. At this point in his life there was also the visible inscription upon his body – in the form of dietary restrictions and his necklace of wooden beads – of the maternal signature. In any event, his sartorial shame, or, more properly, his very marked sartorial self-consciousness, is linked through metonymic as well as figurative affiliation with the feminine-inflected vegetarianism of his youth in colonial India. We should also be mindful of the associations of vegetarianism with feminism in 1880s London, a connection of which Gandhi could not have been oblivious, given his latter-day references to the feminist and suffragist movements in England, and the association of the suffragists with hunger strikes in the early part of the twentieth century.

It is interesting to note the return of the language of modesty at another sartorial crossroads in the Gandhian biography, the moment when he decided, as the combined result of deliberation and contingency, to adopt the reduced dhoti (a length of cloth folded and tucked around the waist and lower limbs) that was to be the signature of the ‘half-naked fakir’. He is said to have anguished, as did his colleagues and companions, over the brevity and modesty of his new garb in a mode that resonates to some degree with debates about respectable women’s attire in public places. As is well known, his sartorial experiments were the product of powerfully felt ideals regarding simplicity, freedom of movement, and an identification with the poorest among his fellow Indians. Abbreviated forms of clothing have always been permissible among Hindu and Jain male ascetics, who however do not generally mingle with the lay public. Nonetheless, their ambiguously gendered logic is palpable in the discussions that accompanied this sartorial shift.

Gandhi’s insistence upon this novel and radical form of ‘nakedness’ speaks to the ways in which he sought, over the course of a long political career, to convert erstwhile badges of humiliation into symbols of carefully chosen renunciation. Thus he was able to convert the shameful vegetarianism of his early days in London into an ethic of eating appropriately. Likewise, his failure to receive spices and condiments from the authorities during a jail sojourn in South Africa persuaded him of the necessity of a plain and unseasoned diet. His abandonment of the England-trained gentleman’s garb was also the fortuitous by-product of an imprisonment during which he was given the prison uniform of a ‘Native’; ‘[it] marked the beginning of a period of sartorial experimentation’, says Tarlo, ‘when Gandhi began to convert his own embarrassment at being wrongly dressed into a strategy for exposing injustice and embarrassing others.’

In the instance of his fateful voyage to England, meatlessness and new forms of clothing were clearly related and were just as clearly associated with certain forms of, sometimes shameful and sometimes exciting, visibility and publicity, a visibility that most conventionally attached itself to the
feminine body. In fact, vegetarian dietetics was to constitute Gandhi’s earliest and perhaps most sustained mode of public performance in political life. Thus, while shipboard, being a vegetarian involved to some degree opening himself up for public scrutiny so that he could be advised and cautioned and so that he could provide public proofs of his dietary virtue. Gandhi’s voyage appears to have been marked by a series of temptations posed by those fellow travellers who were invested not so much in the transformative ethical properties of meat, but in an environmental logic; they argued the necessity of a carnivorous and alcoholic diet after passing through the Suez Canal, that is, in the territory of the West proper.

A good part of the young man’s sense of apprehension about diet and his resultant sensation of exposure must be attributed of course to the significant difficulties that characterised public eating for a vegetarian in England, notwithstanding the availability of vegetarian restaurants in London. Indeed, V. S. Naipaul’s sweeping indictment of the dietary focus seems curiously short-sighted in its estimation of the attentiveness required of fastidious vegetarians in contexts where carnivoracity is normative:

That is the voyage: an internal adventure of anxieties felt and food eaten, with not a word of anything seen or heard that did not directly affect the physical or mental well-being of the writer. The inward concentration is fierce, the self-absorption complete. … His experiments and discoveries and vows answered his own need as a Hindu, the need constantly to define and fortify the self in the midst of hostility; they were not of universal application.

Naipaul’s critique also bypasses the ethico-political coordinates of diet; for Naipaul the vegetarians were mere ‘cranks’ and he judged the eminent scholar Edwin Arnold to have ‘wasted’ his time on a vegetarian club started by Gandhi. What he omits to note here is that the culinary theatre is clearly the occasion for the staging of longstanding ethical dilemmas. But Naipaul is quite right to note the exorbitant character of the dietary theme. The practical difficulties of being a practising vegetarian in beef-eating England are not sufficient to explain the considerable intellectual and emotional charge that the young traveller attaches to meatlessness even prior to his account of the departure from vegetarian-friendly India. Besides, Gandhi’s parting words on his English sojourn in the June 1891 issue of *The Vegetarian*, written though they undoubtedly were for a distinct and circumscribed audience, speak nonetheless to the centrality of an ethic of bodily and dietetic purity to his worldview: ‘In conclusion I am bound to say that during my nearly three years’ stay in England I have left many things undone … yet I carry one great consolation with me, that I shall go back without having taken meat or wine, and that I know from personal experience that there are so many vegetarians.'
We might also note that at this point in the autobiography there is some sense not just of the vegetarian body as spectacle, but also of the self-staging and self-exoticisation of vegetarianism. It appears to be the only topic of social interchange that the mahatma remembered, or remembered initiating. Besides, he solicited, and received from fellow passengers, certificates of his success in the performance of vegetarianism. The publicity associated with vegetarianism was highlighted in London. One of his early acquaintances in London, Dalpatram Shukla, who was not coincidentally a Benthamite (he taught him ‘how to behave and how to use the fork and the spoon’), associated Gandhi’s vow of vegetarianism with feminine superstition and feared that his adherence to a meatless diet would disable him permanently for entrance into cultivated English society. We see that in the company of this friend he did make a spectacle of himself repeatedly by his failure not only to eat meat, but also to manage his vegetarianism discreetly. Vegetarianism repeatedly emerges as that which, by its nature, draws attention to itself. In his fairly long account of Narayan Hemchandra, Gandhi’s sense of the Gujarati writer’s linguistic and sartorial oddness is inseparable from his vegetarianism. He comments on Hemchandra’s predilection for dhotis, his indifference to linguistic form, and his uncompromising dietary preferences. It is tempting to speculate on the mahatma’s ironic identification, in the 1920s, with the dhoti-clad but indomitable provincial who was hooted at by English children and once arrested for the ‘indecency’ of his clothing. In fact, Gandhi’s famous sartorial flirtations with a modish English garb were prompted by a desire to compensate for the ineptitude that his vegetarianism signified: ‘I decided that … I should assure him that I would be clumsy no more, but try to become polished and make up for my vegetarianism by cultivating other accomplishments which fitted one for polite society.’ This dandyism, accompanied by extended rituals of adornment and heavy financial outlays, all described in detail by the author, was a development that did not fail to draw the eye of contemporary observers:

He was wearing a high silk top hat burnished bright, a Gladstonian collar, stiff and starched; a rather flashy tie displaying almost all the colours of the rainbow, under which there was a fine striped silk shirt. He wore as his outer clothes a morning coat, a double-breasted vest, and dark striped trousers to match and not only patent leather boots but spats over them. He carried leather gloves and a silver-mounted stick, but wore no spectacles. He was, to use the contemporary slang, a nut, a masher, a blood – a student more interested in fashion and frivolities than in his studies.

This account, written in the retrospect of Gandhi’s mahatma-hood and martyrdom, is almost too replete with fascinating superfluities to fit entirely convincingly into a narrative of realism. (Is it likely that the author,
Sachidananda Sinha, would have remembered such a plethora of details from a chance encounter with an acquaintance in Piccadilly Circus?) Yet, it is true that Gandhi was never to lose a marked sense of sartorial and bodily drama; even in his most ascetic phase he was meticulously neat about the appearance of his dhoti-clad and oil-massaged body.

Even in a post-dandy mode and as a vegetarian among vegetarians in London’s Vegetarian Society, Gandhi did not become, in his own perception, less of a public spectacle. Though he wrote regularly for The Vegetarian and attended all the meetings of the Vegetarian Society, even becoming a member of its Executive Committee, his account of the association enacts repeatedly and publicly his failure to be a successful public figure; the failure is itself highly public. When attempting a speech at his last meeting of the Vegetarian Society, he ‘only succeeded in making [himself] ridiculous’, as though the attentiveness to one kind of regime of orality sabotaged success in another. Characteristically, it was only through the wry omniscience of retrospection that he was able to convert this awkwardness into moral capital, linking reticence in public speech with other forms of economy and renunciation, including brahmacharya. The subsequent chapter of his autobiography is in fact devoted to an account of the way in which his reserve kept him from successful sexual escapades with English women. The carefully observed ‘days of silence’ during his mahatma-hood were, no doubt, a refuge from the incessant demands upon him, but they were no less an exercise in oral and sexual discipline, cognate with the chastening of the palate and of erotic longing.

No account of the characteristically public nature of Gandhi’s vegetarianism can fail to take into account the public staging of the fasts of his later years. Maud Ellmann has drawn attention to the style of the hunger striker, whose inanition is never self-sufficient but must be supplemented with the visible signature of political intent. Or, as Gang Yue puts it, the modern hunger strike ‘stages itself so that it might generate a tragic effect upon its audience. It is a mortgage of death as a credit for a better life or lives.’ However, one of the texts to which Ellmann returns, and from which she draws the title of her book, is Kafka’s ‘A Hunger Artist’. Kafka’s protagonist is not so much the hunger striker, whose privation is subservient to recognisably political objectives, but rather the faster, a figure whose starvation transgresses the relatively simple transactional logic of political or economic rationality. Kafka speaks with considerable acuity of the incalculable delectation of fasting, which actively solicits, indeed exists for an audience of admirers and worshippers. This occasionally tenuous and troubled distinction between faster and hunger striker, and the pleasures, calculations, uncertainties, and travails of each must be borne in mind in a consideration of Gandhi’s autophagous politics. I can do no more than gesture sparely...
here towards some of the resonances and genealogies of a long and distinguished career of gastropolitics (including fasting).

It is no exaggeration to state that Gandhi was famous for his fasting: he undertook as many as seventeen fasts unto death as well as innumerable fasts of restricted duration in the course of his lifetime. Taken together, they comprised an extraordinary reconstitution of the hyper-visible, maladroit, and anomalous vegetarian male body of his early years as a vegetarian convert. He waged his first fasts in South Africa, but not in the service of overtly political ends, as in India in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s. They were undertaken instead in the context of maintaining the ideals of austerity and the sexual sanctity of communal life in the Phoenix Settlement and in Tolstoy Farm. Both of these were founded – the first in 1904, on the outskirts of Durban, and the second in 1910, near Johannesburg – as experiments in simple, self-supporting religiously and racially heterogeneous communal living. An epicurean at the outset, despite his associations with occasionally puritanical English vegetarians, Gandhi had progressively simplified his diet and that of the commune, although not without some discontent on the part of those who were subject to his preferred saltless, spiceless, and notably Spartan dietetic experiments. This was the beginning of a lifelong interest in discovering a cheap and nutritious diet, especially for the poorest of his compatriots in South Africa and India. Madhu Kishwar notes that ‘his experiments were conducted with a view to finding out the most wholesome food and the most sensible way of preparing it, keeping in mind the conditions of poverty in which a majority of people lived. Equally touching is his deep concern for eliminating the drudgery of women as far as possible.’

Moreover, Gandhi undoubtedly felt, as did medieval European moralists, that gastronomic overindulgence was not simply unhealthful but a crime against the hungry masses. As William Ian Miller has argued for medieval Europe: ‘In an economic order in which there is not food enough to go around, in which starvation and famine are always lurking about, gluttony’s moral stakes ratchet up. … Eating was [in medieval Europe] a zero-sum game. The more you ate the less someone else did. And any ingestion beyond what was necessary for the maintenance of life was an act of injustice.’ In a context of nutritional dearth – a context that was altogether too familiar in early twentieth-century India and South Africa – the most innocuous-seeming act of eating could be construed as an incipient assault, not merely upon what was being ingested, but upon the body politic, and therefore upon one’s fellows as well. Indulgence was impossible to uncouple from aggression. The fact that we now understand, thanks to Amartya Sen, that hunger and famine are caused not from a lack of food resources, but by the inequities of distribution, does not detract from the moral force of Gandhi’s position, even though his scrupulously pursued
simplicity was not without its own unforeseeable ironies and extravagances.\textsuperscript{51} Gandhi insisted on discovering cheap, nutritious, and easily prepared foods, and he had taken a vow to eat no more than five items of food a day, and to eat nothing after nightfall. Yet his rigorous demands for plainness and appropriateness, paradoxically, often made his simple meals difficult to prepare. The poet and nationalist, and unabashed carnophilic gourmet, Sarojini Naidu, the reputed ‘licensed jester of the mahatma’s court’, is said to have remarked a trifle caustically that it took a millionaire (G. D. Birla, a prominent industrialist and a major contributor to Gandhi’s favourite causes) to keep the mahatma in poverty.\textsuperscript{52}

Moreover, Gandhi’s experiments in dietetics, including fasting, are never entirely reducible to the morality of distribution; they gesture simultaneously towards other bodily and moral economies. Not coincidentally, his turn to fasting as a moral instrument was articulated with his endeavour to practise \textit{brahmacharya}, which he pursued with intermittent success from his early thirties and sealed with a vow in 1906, at the age of thirty-seven. While his early and conscious avowals of vegetarianism in England were not explicitly rooted in the desire to achieve \textit{sexual} self-control, they were nonetheless morally and affectively inseparable from it, given the linked character of his mother’s prohibitions. But later in life, increasingly persuaded of the necessity for \textit{brahmacharya} for his own spiritual uplift as well as for the good of a public whose powerfully renunciant leader he was, he removed spices, salt, cow’s milk, and lentils and occasionally even cooked vegetables from his diet.\textsuperscript{53} The link between continence of the palate and of the libido is elaborated in unambiguous terms in his autobiography:

as an external aid to \textit{brahmacharya}, fasting is as necessary as selection and restriction in diet. So overpowering are the senses that they can be kept under control only when they are completely hedged in on all sides, from above and beneath. \ldots it may be said that extinction of the sexual passion is a rule impossible without fasting, which may be said to be indispensable for the observance of \textit{brahmacharya}. Many aspirants after \textit{brahmacharya} fail, because in the use of their other senses they want to carry on like those who are not \textit{brahmacharis}.\textsuperscript{54}

To understand the importance and the potency of \textit{brahmacharya}, it is necessary to come to terms with the seminal economy in which it is grounded. For Gandhi, as for many Hindus, sexual activity was perhaps the most energy-depleting of all human male pursuits, as it led to the loss of seminal fluid, the primary source of energy in the human (and paradigmatically male) body. Semen was and is avowed to be ‘the distillate of most other body fluids and substances – blood, marrow, and bone, in particular – and is therefore thought to contain the essence of the whole body within itself’.\textsuperscript{55} The loss of semen through intercourse was considered the equivalent of one day’s mental activity or three days’ physical labour. But this
semen could, if properly husbanded, be moved upward through the body to the brain and transformed into ojas, spiritual and psychic energy. This was the goal of the spiritual aspirant. In all fairness, it should be noted that such a seminal economy was not the peculiar property of Brahmical Hinduism alone. Its assumptions and calculations were not unknown to vegetarian, hygienic, and health reform movements in western Europe, Russia, and the United States, all of which were absorbed by the question of sex, masturbation, and the ethical entailments of masculinity at a pivotal point in industrial modernity. We know that in his associations with the Vegetarian Society in Britain and in South Africa, Gandhi read more than one article on the physically and spiritually enervating effects of profligate seminal emissions.

Gandhi ardently corroborated the practical efficacy of such a calculus, though not without a touch of his characteristic self-mockery:

Many people have told me – and I also believe it – that I am full of energy and enthusiasm, and that I am by no means weak in mind; some even accuse me of strength bordering on obstinacy . . . It is my full conviction, that if only I had lived a life of unbroken Brahmacarya all through, my energy and enthusiasm would have been a thousandfold greater and I should have been able to devote them all to the furtherance of my country’s cause as my own.

Hence the centrality of fasting as a mode of self-control and, by implication, a more generalised moral and spiritual authority which could exert an influence upon the course of events and upon the actions of others. And if fasting proved efficacious as a means of curbing one’s own libido, Gandhi also deployed it as a corrective to the incontinence of others, by fasting to protest the ‘moral fall’ of two students at the Phoenix Settlement and his twenty-year-old son Manilal’s affair with a married woman. Beyond this, fasting, as a mode of self-suffering that was undertaken to purify oneself, to protest against injustice, and occasionally to mourn for the lapses of one’s intimate acquaintances, was affiliated with the emergent mode of politics that came to be denominated as satyagraha (literally, persistence in the truth). A passage in the Gujarati text of Hind Swaraj explicitly links satyagraha and fasting, and was followed as such by many satyagrahis (including Gandhi’s wife, Kasturba), not just their leader.

But Gandhi possessed from the beginning a particular gift not just for the bodily act of fasting, but for meditating upon its ambivalent ethical terrain. Perhaps Gandhi’s fasts were for this reason the cynosure of public attention in the days of his mahatma-hood. But it is also important to note the significantly gendered character of his fasting, signalled at least in part by its ties to brahmacharya. In fact, the pedagogy of abstemiousness and fasting that Gandhi learned from his mother contrasts significantly with

the masculinisation of fasting and renunciation in the orthodox Hindu tradition. The male sage’s fasting, says Sally Sutherland Goldman, is a mark of his self-control, especially his control over seminal emissions, a role that women can never hope to inhabit. A woman’s restraint is, definitionally, externally imposed, while a man’s is self-imposed. Besides, women’s presumed vulnerability to rape (in an economy that presumes that men cannot be raped) severely limits the possibility of female asceticism. For his national public, which had detailed knowledge of his concomitant experiments in brahmacharya, Gandhi’s great public fasts of the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s were to some degree assimilable within the modes of masculine renunciant practice. By then he was a mahatma, a great soul.

Gandhi spent much of his life refining fasting as a corporeal and spiritual process and as an ethico-political tactic. Initially he was an incompetent faster, losing his voice and experiencing pain and nausea once the fast was broken. But he proved an adept and innovative pupil, and he learned to drink plenty of water, to have twice-daily enemas, and to exercise in bed during his fasts so as to control their effects better. For his pedagogy of fasting he incorporated stratagems and styles from a global canvas, ranging from the fasts familiar to him from the Kathiawad of his youth, where his father had abstained from food in protest against the misconduct of his ruler, to the activities of the Sinn Fein of his early manhood, which were in turn indebted to suffragist modes of activism. Through all this he was singularly cognisant not only of the great power of public fasting, but also of its concomitant corporeal temptations and ethical risks. He was mindful of the ways in which voracity could be the unwonted auxiliary to gastronomic abstinence. Fasting could serve, for instance, as prelude or as an incitement to the self-pleasuring of the palate:

I also saw that, the body now being drained more effectively, the food yielded greater relish and the appetite grew keener. It dawned upon me that fasting could be made as powerful a weapon of indulgence as of restraint. Many similar later experiences of mine as well of others can be adduced as evidence of this startling fact.

Subsequent experiments in selecting specific foods and restricting their quantity only underlined for him the terrifying potency of the palate (even the gastronomically constricted palate), and the absolute necessity not just of restricting ingestion but of extirpating any form of gustatory gratification. All eating, and not just the consumption of meat and alcohol that had been interdicted as a result of the vow to his mother, had to be subjected to a regime of limits and prohibitions. Only then could it be rendered penitential and purified of the violence of enjoyment, and was therefore ‘good to eat’.
The mahatma was also mindful of the status of fasting as a morally ambiguous weapon of satyagraha. He apprehended that the very publicity of fasting could occasionally be inseparable from a violence that was at odds with the professed doctrines of satyagraha. What complicated his own prescriptions for and practice of fasting was the fact that fasting as a form of protest was a practice of long duration in India, and was almost invariably coercive rather than persuasive in its character. He was careful to distinguish in his own pronouncements between the fast proper, an instrument of ‘feminine’ mutuality, love, and reconciliation, and the hunger strike, usually undertaken out of vanity or pique or belligerence, ‘without previous preparation and without adequate thought’. He frequently underlined the dangerous moral enticements and costs of fasting, and its character as both medicine and poison. Fasting had to be mastered as a form of interlocutory reciprocity before it could be deployed:

Fasting is a fiery weapon. It has its own science. No one, as far as I am aware, has a perfect knowledge of it. Unscientific experimentation with it is bound to be harmful to the one who fasts, and it may even harm the cause espoused. No one who has not earned the right to do so should, therefore, use this weapon. A fast may only be undertaken by him who is associated with the person against whom he fasts. The latter must be directly connected with the purpose for which the fast is being undertaken.

Hence he repeatedly insisted that the potential violence of fasting be leavened and neutralised with affectionate intimacy, and that a satyagrahi fast not against a foe but against a ‘lover’. How to guarantee the conspicuous moral force of fasting while reining in its power was one of his continuing preoccupations. In his mind the (reconstituted) practice ideally combined the force of the Hindu ideas of self-purification, asceticism, and penance and the Christian idea of suffering love. In a very real sense, this emphasis upon moral and quasi-erotic suasion constituted an endeavour to ‘feminise’ the practice of public fasting. But in a few instances at least, the already available connotations of fasting might have militated, as Joan Bondurant notes, against a Gandhian re-inscription:

The very fact of Gandhi’s use of traditional methods to effect the education of India in the ways of satyagraha may have functioned as a deterrent in transmitting the full implications of satyagraha to those who participated. Elements which were new in Gandhi’s approach – the various emphases upon the well-being of the opponent and of mutual triumph – were sometimes obscured by a ready understanding of the coercive character of traditional methods.

Practice also demonstrated how difficult it was for the mahatma himself to leach out the violence from this weapon of satyagraha, and how very contestable and far from self-evident its grounds were. In fact, Gandhi undertook his very first fast for a public cause in March 1918, on behalf of striking mill workers in Ahmedabad against the mill-owners. This
strike, led by his friend and host Ambalal Sarabhai, had a significant moral ambivalence for Gandhi, since it could be seen to exploit the mill-owners’ solicitude for him rather than highlighting the justice of the strikers’ demands. Gandhi’s great public fasts, like this one, continued to be marked by the irreducibility of their coerciveness and their utterly earnest high-mindedness. His own colleagues and friends and, more importantly, the disputants or ‘lovers’ against whom he fasted, were often uncertain of the moral value and the efficacy of his fasting; in some instances they were antipathetical to his methods. In the case of the Ahmedabad fast, the mill-owners were peevish about Gandhi’s pronouncement that they should take the proper stand irrespective of his fast. ‘[They] even flung keen, delicate bits of sarcasm at me, as indeed they had a perfect right to do’, he acknowledges ruefully.69 But they conceded the demand for arbitration after three days of fasting, and they appear to have done it, at least in the faster’s telling of it, without significant rancour. The fact that some ‘friends and labourers’ partially shared in the fast resulted in the ‘hearts of the mill-owners [being] touched’.

The more famous instance of the fast of 1932 (the ‘Epic Fast’) against the British government’s decision to create separate electorates for Untouchables was at least as ethically indeterminate. Gandhi regarded this decision as a classic instance of the British policy of ‘divide and rule’, because it would allow the election of Untouchable representatives to provincial legislatures. Even more importantly, he felt that the question of the Untouchables was internal to the Hindu community. Their ‘statutory separation … from the Hindu fold’ would undermine the work of reformers who had fought for their acceptance as an integral part of the Hindu community. The fast, he said, was ‘intended to sting Hindu conscience into right religious action’.70 Many of Gandhi’s associates, the British government, and the leaders of the Untouchables were baffled by the decision to fast, albeit for different reasons. Rabindranath Tagore, who disagreed with Gandhi on many questions and was generally opposed to fasting as a political tactic, did endorse the moral urgency of this fast. Nehru, in a moment of extraordinary moral blindness, dismissed the question of untouchability as a ‘side issue’ which was not worth the ‘final sacrifice’ of the mahatma’s life, but came around, after the commencement of the fast, to acknowledging, even if with some bewilderment, ‘the magic of a fast’.71 Aside from Nehru, many other members of the Congress Party found the fast distasteful in its political style and questionable in its ethical stance.72 Both the British and the Untouchables saw the fast as counter to the empowerment of the latter, whose (sole) advocate he claimed to be, in his capacity as the representative of the Congress Party. This party, in turn, claimed to represent all Indians, in contradistinction to the allegedly communal politics of, say, the Muslim League or Untouchable
B. R. Ambedkar, the leader of the Untouchables and Gandhi’s primary antagonist on the question of separate representation of the Untouchables, angrily dismissed the fast as ‘a political stunt’. In negotiations with Gandhi, however, he reached an agreement known as the Poona or the Yeravda Pact, which abolished the separate electorates granted by Ramsay MacDonald’s Communal Award, but secured a larger number of ‘reserved’ seats for Untouchables. Only Untouchables could be candidates for such seats, but these were to be chosen by the general electorate and therefore by the caste Hindu majority. In later years Ambedkar was to characterise this agreement as a ‘sentimental blunder’.73

The fast had tremendous emotional effect; news of it confirmed Gandhi’s status as a legend, travelling far and wide in a way that no mere newspaper reports or policy statements could have done. As in the case of all his fasts, including the fast of 1924 which he had undertaken in a Muslim home, under the supervision of Muslim physicians to resolve Hindu–Muslim tensions in the Northwest Frontier Province, the 1932 fast was marked by a particular attentiveness to allegorical gesture. These gestures were mimicked, at least temporarily, by a national audience of Hindus unwilling to assume responsibility for the death of the mahatma. Across much of India, temples were thrown open to Untouchables, and some highly publicised instances of caste Hindu–Untouchable commensality were recorded. But the drama of the fast alone could not be expected to effect the transformations that the fasting mahatma had called for. The iterations of the mahatma’s symbolic language proved to be mere burlesque, as some of the temples that had admitted Untouchables were re-purified; certainly there was no appreciable change in the status of the latter.74 Other fasts against intimate antagonists were even less successful in the domain of realpolitik. The Viceroy Lord Linlithgow, for instance, was unmoved by Gandhi’s fast in 1943, characterising it as blackmail and holding its author responsible for the violence of the Quit India movement.75

The one instance in which Gandhi’s fasting appears to have met with success and with approval (even if retrospectively bestowed) was that which he conducted in Calcutta in 1947 to promote harmony among Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs in the aftermath of the violence-racked Partition of the subcontinent. Rioting had broken out in the city, where Gandhi had established a temporary abode in Beliaghata, a poor and violence-stricken neighbourhood, with the Muslim Chief Minister of the state. Gandhi was confronted and threatened by irate and violent Hindu mobs. Gandhi decided to fast, hoping thereby to touch the hearts of the rioters and of the populace whose unspoken sympathy was with them. The result, after a couple of days’ fasting, was a cessation of violence, and pledges by leaders of the different communal groups to maintain peace.
It was a rare triumph of Gandhian fasting, one that justified his moniker, bestowed by an admiring Mountbatten, as a ‘One Man Boundary Force’.

Several scholars have pondered the great symbolic power, coupled with the limited practical effectiveness, of the Gandhian strategy of fasting. Bhikhu Parekh, a sympathetic yet not uncritical scholar of Gandhi’s life and thought, interprets the fasts as defensive measures, undertaken in the aftermath of the failure of conventional negotiations and conventional modes of persuasion. But the incommensurability of what, for want of a better term, we can call the symbolic and political economies of fasting suggests that the accountancy of success and failure may be an inadequate analytic response to the bodily and philosophical mystery of fasting. Gandhi himself frequently engaged in a painstaking public and occasionally self-justifying scrutiny of his methods. He was sometimes at a loss to explain the logic and value of fasting, except in terms of an existential need that transcended calculability and was its own raison d’être: ‘I can as well do without my eyes, for instance, as I can without fasts. What the eyes are for the outer world, fasts are for the inner.’ For the impure and guilty body inhabited and harassed by carnality, fasting could not be only a mode of masculine purification or an affiliated masculine self-assertion; it had to assume the status of an elemental, even a somatic need. The metaphoric substance of Gandhi’s comment cited above suggests that alimentary abstinence may have functioned, moreover, as a mode of revelation or visionary experience not reducible to the hygienic, mental, and societal benefits that Gandhi often adduced as arguments for fasting. The analogy underlines the powerfully positive, even elemental, valence of the fast as an appetite or a yearning inordinate enough and extra-rational enough to be counterposed to those two overwhelming and perennial antagonists of the male ethical self, the palate and the libido.

In his incarnation as a prodigy of alimentary abstinence, Gandhi has persistently been identified with a certain elemental Indianness or, more properly, Hinduness. This is a misconception; Gandhi turned to vegetarianism out of moral conviction, rather than out of fealty to a filial vow. However strongly this turn might have been founded in a belief in the biromoral character of various foods (a belief that was not, as is often believed, peculiar only to Hinduism or Jainism) – it articulated in important ways his critique of colonial modernity and must be read against a global horizon, through the lens of diaspora. A brief consideration of the global vegetarian movement is consequential to a consideration of Gandhi’s renunciation of meat-eating. If Tolstoy was the most famous of western vegetarians at the turn of the century (George Bernard Shaw being a close second), he was not a lone or even a pioneering figure. There was certainly some enthusiasm for vegetarianism, pacifism, socialism, new educational systems, and the Swedenborgian church on both
sides of the Atlantic in the nineteenth century. In 1889, the year following Gandhi’s arrival in the metropolis, there were thirty-four vegetarian restaurants in London. Among these metropolitan vegetarians, vegetarianism was often linked, as it always would be for Gandhi, with an interest in fasting. *The Vegetarian*, for example, carried advice on fasting and accounts of spectacular, forty-day fasts undertaken by members of vegetarian societies. In the United States in the nineteenth century, the health reform movement, led by such figures as Sylvester Graham, William Alcott, and John Harvey Kellogg, urged a meatless diet in order to curb the excesses of male libidinality, which were presumed to have the most deleterious physiological effects. Tolstoy himself was sympathetic to the doctrines of these proponents of the science of a Christian male physiology but was less concerned about physiological corruption than about the spiritual decay incumbent upon the gratuitous expenditure of semen. Many of these proponents were, like Tolstoy, also among the most fervent critics of the project of modernity, especially of industrialisation, urbanisation, and secularisation, and their refashioning of sexual ideology, bodily discipline, and gendered behaviour.

The young Gandhi’s happy discovery of a vegetarian restaurant (the Central, off Farrington Street) in London was therefore no haphazard event. In the *Autobiography*, it is presented as a richly parabolic moment, since it also coincided with the discovery of a gospel, Henry Salt’s pamphlet *A Plea For Vegetarianism*, which was on sale in the window of the restaurant. This was his (first) moment of conversion – indeed, Gandhi speaks of himself as a convert to vegetarianism rather than ‘a person who is born in it’ – and it was to spark off a missionary zeal for the cause that endured during his South African sojourn and was further enlarged in India. His second conversion was consequent upon his reading of Ruskin. He carefully read the extant western literature on vegetarianism available in fin-de-siècle London, including Howard Williams’s *The Ethics of Diet*, Anna Kingsford’s *The Ideal in Diet*, and the writings of Percy Bysshe Shelley. He supplemented this literature in later years with cognate works of greater philosophical ambition, most notably Edward Carpenter’s *Civilization, Its Cause and Cure* (1888), a critique of industrialism and modern medicine, Tolstoy’s *The Kingdom of God Is Within You* (1893), an unorthodox interpretation of Christianity and nonviolence, and Ruskin’s *Unto This Last*, a searing critique of Victorian political economy. It might be well to remind ourselves that the seemingly self-absorbed and dietarily obsessed young Kathiawadi of late nineteenth-century London was also the inhabitant of a world that encompassed William Morris, Henry George, Sidney Webb, William Booth, Edward Carpenter, Annie Besant, and the Fabian Society. Even though the overt evidence of the autobiographical writing betrays little or no consciousness of some of
these figures and movements, their impact is visible in the general tendency and in the details of Gandhi’s response to industrial modernity.\textsuperscript{86} His meatlessness was articulated in relation to the pronouncements and activities of these figures, and to the ‘web of idealistic thinking of action’ that cohered around the vegetarian movement.\textsuperscript{87}

While much has been made, and in some instances correctly, of Gandhi’s tender-hearted response to the suffering of animals as the spur to his vegetarianism, we might wish to nuance this received wisdom slightly by noting that his turn to meatlessness was not prompted primarily or exclusively by any conscious sense of opposing cruelty to animals. This meatlessness is thus more appositely seen not so explicitly or exclusively as \textit{ahimsa} (given that \textit{ahimsa} cannot be entirely isolated from the other details of a Gandhian programme), but rather as a critical response to the project of modernity itself, to which meat-eating was, in colonial India at least, a privileged point of entry. As such, it is of a piece with his impassioned arraignment of industrialism, urbanisation, modern medicine, and scientific progress in \textit{Hind Swaraj} (1909). In fact, throughout much of his life Gandhi’s critique of modernity took the form of dietary and medical endeavours. It is important to note that one of the immediate and most far-reaching effects of his reading of Ruskin’s critique of the rationality of political economy and industrial modernity in \textit{Unto This Last} was his programme of food production at the Phoenix Settlement that endeavoured to bypass as entirely as possible the reliance on machinery and the appurtenances of the industrial production of food. Gandhi also prided himself on being what he jokingly called a ‘quack’ who cured himself and others through fasting and other dietetic cures and was considerably adept at nursing. Indeed, he had hoped in his adolescence to be a doctor but was deflected from it only by his parents’ disapproval of a polluting contact with cadavers. Gandhi maintained throughout his life a passion for alternative forms of doctoring and nursing that was fully equal to his censure of modern (western) medicine. He launched, in the mode of Edward Carpenter, a scathing critique in \textit{Hind Swaraj} of modern medicine’s excessive care for the body, its failure to treat the moral and spiritual causes of disease, and the violence of its methods, which included violent forms of ingestion:

\begin{quote}
 Hospitals are institutions for propagating sin. Men take less care of their bodies, and immorality increases. European doctors are the worst of all. For the sake of a mistaken care of the human body, they kill annually thousands of animals. They practise vivisection. No religion sanctions this. … These doctors violate our religious instinct. Most of their medical preparations contain animal fat or spirituous liquors; both of these are tabooed by Hindus and Mahomedans. … The fact remains that the doctors induce us to indulge, and the result is that we have become deprived of self-control and have become effeminate.\textsuperscript{88}
\end{quote}

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Despite the unyielding character of these assertions, Gandhi’s own practice was more complex and more subtle. He underwent surgery in 1924, permitted his wife Kasturba to undergo surgery in South Africa, urged Chakrayya, a resident of the Sabarmati Ashram, to undergo surgery to remove a brain tumour, and took quinine as a prophylactic against malaria. His personal physician, Dr Sushila Nayyar, was trained in western medicine, though she came to share in large part his belief in the efficacy of brahmacharya and ‘nature cures’.89

I do not deny that Gandhi’s turn to a carefully articulated and chosen, rather than an unreflexive, vegetarianism is also consistent with a Hindu and Jain dietary ethics that views feeding as intimately linked to other features of carnality, including sexual desire, as well as to mental and spiritual health. The sense of the biomoral property of food was widely and globally shared at the turn of the century, however, and was part of a global, rather than an exclusively Indian or Hindu, ethical and corporeal culture. Joan Brumberg, for one, has documented the Victorian belief, shared by doctors and patients alike, that meat was ‘a heat-producing food that stimulated the production of blood and fat as well as passion’.90 Details such as these serve to underline the common assumptions about the biomoral properties of food that were shared by the cultures and the counter-cultures of modernity. If, through his publicly staged vegetarianism, Gandhi literally took the world upon the tongue, he spoke not simply the language of a Hindu dietary ethics, but an unexpectedly global one.91

Despite the full-throatedness of his denunciation of the violent alimentary order of modernity, Gandhi’s engagement with nonviolence, including the nonviolence of vegetarianism, was far from uncomplicated. He was himself hauntingly aware of the occasionally specular relation between aggression and nonviolence. He had participated as a noncombatant in the Anglo-Boer War and the campaign against the Zulu Rebellion in South Africa on the grounds that imperial citizenship entailed such duties. Yet his decision a decade later, in the aftermath of his formulation of satyagraha, to raise an Indian ambulance corps in London to assist the British war effort during the First World War came as a shock to his associates. This last decision reveals the complexity of Gandhian nonviolence. He was aware not only of the proximity of violence and nonviolence, but also of the complicity of the nominally nonviolent in structures of violence: ‘Whilst in England I was enjoying the protection of the British Fleet, and taking shelter as I did under its armed might, I was directly participating in its potential violence.’92 When he had returned to India and assumed a leading role in Congress politics there, British detractors, and occasionally Indian critics as well, frequently accused him of fomenting hatred and violence, rather than nonviolence, and pointed to the
discrepancy between his own elevated ideals and the actions of his followers. A good part of the mahatma’s public correspondence, especially in the 1920s, was devoted to clarifying and controlling the implications of satyagraha. Even in his more mundane communications with correspondents from all over India and the globe, he was possessed by the question of the relative importance of human and animal life, arguing sometimes against an anthropocentric bias and sometimes in favour of the greater moral worth of human beings. The controversy about the ‘mercy-killing’ of an injured calf at Sabarmati Ashram was but one instance of the staging of the dilemma, as was that of the killing of rabid dogs in Ahmedabad. Both events were narrated as the experiments with truth that his (putative) autobiography records.

As we have seen, Gandhi’s meditations upon and experiences of situations that dramatised the limits of nonviolence were sometimes troubled and sometimes ironic. They were especially so in situations of gendered and familial intimacy. Indeed, his account of the toll that he imposed as vegetarian patriarch upon his gravely ill son, Manilal, and his wife, Kasturba, speaks to the ambiguity of the dietary gesture and to its immensely complicated moral arithmetic. The ten-year-old Manilal was suffering from an acute case of typhoid, and Kasturba, from internal haemorrhaging. Both were in grave danger of death, but Gandhi would not permit the administration of beef tea or eggs as advised by the doctors. Gandhi’s repudiation of the therapeutic character of meat might conceivably be read as a critique of the medical common sense of the day. But his own explanation about the refusal of eggs and beef tea is less sceptical of the curative claims of the allopathic medicine than it is desirous of an uncompromising commitment to meatlessness, for nowhere does he seek to deny the efficacy of the eggs-and-beef tea prescription. As such, it raises the question of the discomfiting limits of the sacrificial logic of a premeditated and thoughtful vegetarianism. If the vegetarian is willing to sacrifice himself rather than sacrificing the other that is the non-human animal, what is indeed properly his own to sacrifice? I use the masculine pronoun here advisedly; it is not easy to conjure up a feminine equivalent, at least in the South Asian context, to Gandhi’s tale of principle and sacrifice. The vegetarian patriarch features here as one who cannot escape the contingency of violence; the fact that Gandhi had to tell what is essentially the same tale twice, both with a happy ending, speaks powerfully to the difficulty of encountering and exorcising the occasionally troubled limits of his meatlessness and of his goodwill.

Gandhi was rarely to be tested again as brutally as he had been in the case of his wife and his son. But the dilemma of ingestion that the event stages, about what may ethically be introduced into the body and how it may be introduced, is articulated with Gandhi’s ambivalence, at a much
later point in his career, about allowing his grand-niece Manu to be operated upon for appendicitis rather than treated by naturopathy.95 Likewise, when Kasturba became ill (for the last time) with chronic bronchitis while imprisoned at the Aga Khan’s palace in Poona, Ayurvedic and later allopathic medical efforts failed to ameliorate her condition, so Gandhi ordered that all medicines be stopped, including a rare supply of penicillin ordered from Calcutta by his youngest son Devdas. The fact that penicillin had to be administered by injection was a particularly objectionable point for Gandhi, who detested the suspension of moral volition involved in bypassing orality. When she died, his testimonial for her was marked by an admixture of heartache and rectitude: ‘I cannot imagine life without Ba … Her passing has left a vacuum which never will be filled … We lived together for sixty-two years … If I allowed the penicillin it would not have saved her … And she passed away in my lap. Could it be better? I am happy beyond measure.’96 The guilt that shadows, however negligibly, the remark about penicillin is without question the ineluctable experience of all survivors and mourners. But it also resonates with the South African account of patriarchal austerity in the face of Kasturba’s near-death experience.

The history of Gandhi’s palate and its transactions with the world cannot but take into account its considerable ambiguities. The complicated and often unpredictable logic that attends this history serves to emphasise the haunting ways in which identities are, as it were, tested, sometimes disturbingly, upon the tongue, which is as inescapably a vehicle of violence as it is of pleasure. The accounts of the eating and abjuration of meat in the Gandhian oeuvre can serve as a useful point of entry into the investigation of two linked loci of Gandhi’s dietary practices: the question of meat and modernity, and the question of meat in the gendered dynamics of the Hindu vegetarian household. These accounts can in turn illuminate the intimate and unexpected links among meat-eating, modern formations of masculine identity, and a national-political aesthetics of the body. The focus on ingestion/abstinence as parabolic form in Gandhi’s autobiographical and civic projects allows us – precisely through its reading of the quotidian and the eccentric – to highlight the gendered implications of Gandhi’s preoccupation with his body and with the bodies that he sought to reform.

Notes
My thanks to all those whose comments have gone into the making of this paper: Sandhya Shetty, Paola Bacchetta, Carole-Anne Tyler, Piya Chatterjee, Barbara Metcalf, Lawrence Cohen, Sukanya Banerjee, Geeta Patel, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Ethan Nasreddin-Longo, Michelle Bloom, and the anonymous reader (for Gender & History) of this manuscript.

1. B. R. Nanda, *Gandhi and His Critics* (Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 146. Despite the occasionally defensive tendency of his study of Gandhi’s positions, B. R. Nanda is surely right to insist on their evolving and experiential character.
2. Joseph Alter, ‘Celibacy, Sexuality, and the Transformation of Gender into Nationalism in North India’, *Journal of Asian Studies*, 53 (1994), p. 61. Alter’s more recent work, *Gandhi’s Body: Sex, Diet, and the Politics of Nationalism* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), takes up a few of the questions that this essay broaches. Gender, though, is not a central analytic optic in Alter’s chapters on Gandhi in the way that it is in my essay, which seeks to investigate the relatively unremarked contours of a patriarchal vegetarianism. Besides, Alter’s book is less about Gandhi than it is about a Gandhian legacy in India.

3. Jawaharlal Nehru’s *Toward Freedom: The Autobiography of Jawaharlal Nehru* (John Day Company, 1941) is the most easily cited and the most ideologically appropriate counter-example to Gandhi’s venture.


11. To cite but one example: Katherine Mayo’s *Mother India* (Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1927) specifically exempts the manly and meat-eating Muslim from her indictment of the sins of caste Hindu (and especially Bengali) males: feebleness, cowardice, licentiousness, patriarchal cruelty, seditiousness.


16. Gandhi, *Autobiography*, p. 18. As a vegetarian by conviction in England, Gandhi was to reverse himself on the question of meat-eating and bodily might: ‘it is easy to see that Vegetarianism is not only not injurious, but on the contrary is conducive to bodily strength and that attributing the Hindu weakness to Vegetarianism is simply based on a fallacy’. (*The Vegetarian*, 28 February 1891, repr. *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. 1 (1884–96) (Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 1958), p. 33).


20. G. C. Spivak, ‘Three Women’s Texts and a Critique of Imperialism’, in Race, Writing, and Difference, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr (University of Chicago Press, 1986). It is hardly a surprise, given the lineaments of the Hindu national imaginary in the late nineteenth century, that it is the Muslim boy who performs the role of the seducer and intimate enemy. This is notwithstanding Gandhi’s staunch and unceasing efforts to promote Hindu–Muslim amity in South Africa and India. I thank Barbara Metcalf for underlining this; as she points out, the Muslim could – from the empirical evidence of fasting and other religious practices – just as logically have functioned as a figure of austerity and renunciation. But the affective logic of the Hindu response to Muslim dietary practices is not assimilable to the logic of these modes of empirical evidence.


23. Erikson, Gandhi’s Truth, pp. 140. Gandhi saw in Harilal an embodiment of an earlier self he had cast off: ‘I have always felt that the undesirable traits I see today in my eldest son are an echo of my undisciplined and unformulated early life’ (Autobiography, p. 175). The equivocal character of the phrase ‘in some locality’ is also telling: was this a locality characterised by illicit sexual traffic? Was it a Muslim neighbourhood? I thank Piya Chatterjee for drawing my attention to the nuances of this phrase.

24. Gandhi, Autobiography, p. 34.


30. Without recourse to the Gujarati version, it may be hard to speculate on the precise or, more properly, the alternative resonances of the terms translated as ‘shameless’ and ‘immodest’, but we might recall that Mahadev Desai’s rather priggish English prose was corrected by Mirabehn and approved by Gandhi. See M. K. Gandhi, Bapu’s Letters to Mira (1924–1948) (Navajivan Publishing House, 1949), pp. 12–13.


32. Julia Twigg, ‘Vegetarianism and the Meanings of Meat’, in The Sociology of Food and Eating: Essays on the Sociological Significance of Food, ed. Anne Murcott (Gower, 1983), pp. 27–8; and Maud Ellmann, The Hunger Artists: Starving, Writing, and Imprisonment (Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 12. As we shall see later, not all vegetarians were sympathetic to feminism; some were ferociously critical of the new regime of modernity, with its reconfiguration of gendered relations – a reconfiguration of which the feminist movement was one index.

33. Tarlo, Clothing Matters, pp. 71–82.


35. Tarlo, Clothing Matters, p. 67.


vol. 1, pp. 3–21) and Satyagraha in South Africa (Navajivan, 1928), which bespeak a lively interest in their surroundings. More importantly, he misunderstands the character itself of The Story of My Experiments With Truth, which was intended as a didactic account of certain ethical and spiritual experiments rather than as the exhaustive account of the individual life. For a careful account of the character and purpose of the work, see chapter 8 (‘Indianisation of Autobiography’) of Bhikhu Parekh’s Colonialism, Tradition and Reform: An Analysis of Gandhi’s Political Discourse (Sage Publications, 1989).

40. James D. Hunt, Gandhi in London (Promilla & Co., 1978), p. 9. This Dalpatram Shukla was a different figure from the famous nineteenth-century Gujarati poet.
43. Gandhi, Autobiography, p. 54.
44. Ellmann, The Hunger Artists, p. 18.
47. Prabhudas Gandhi, My Childhood With Gandhiji (Navajivan Press, 1957), pp. 45, 108, and throughout. His account of Gandhi’s years in South Africa describes the contrast between the ‘special dishes’ and parties of the early days at Phoenix, when Gandhi ‘relished good food’, and the subsequent regime for children and adults alike of ‘long days of work and saltless food’, relieved only by the prospect of salted and spiced meals on Sundays.
50. See Kilgour, From Communion to Cannibalism, especially pp. 85–102, for an analysis of the traffic between eating and aggression.
52. Harindranath Chattopadhyaya, ‘Sarojini Naidu: A Sketch’, Perspectives on Sarojini Naidu, ed. K. K. Sharma (Vimal Prakashan, 1989), p. 2. Naidu was perhaps the most sceptical, dietarily speaking, of the mahatma’s associates; she dismissed his diet as ‘grass and goat’s milk’, and noted, in her inimitably waggish mode, the enormous expenditure of resources required to shepherd Gandhi safely through his fasts. See Sarojini Naidu, Selected Letters, 1890s to 1940s, ed. Makarand Paranjpe (Kali for Women, 1996), pp. 291–3. Also see Madeleine Slade’s The Spirit’s Pilgrimage (Coward-McCann, Inc., 1960), pp. 82–5, for an account of some of the less successful dietary experiments at Sabarmati Ashram.
53. Gandhi was relatively unorthodox in his abjuration of cow’s milk, which he saw as deleterious to brahmacharya. Such a position is in significant contrast to the generally accepted satvic (calm, pure, ‘cooling’ rather than ‘heating’ the passions) character of milk and ghi (clarified butter), which is associated with the diet of celibate males and religious aspirants. ‘In Hindu myth and ritual’, says Joseph Alter, ‘milk – particularly cow’s milk – is one of the purest fluids’. See The Wrestler’s Body: Identity and Ideology in North India (University of California Press, 1992), p. 148.
57. Gandhi, Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, vol. 85, p. 216. The elaboration of a seminal economy is curiously silent about women, a silence that Gandhi shares; can it be because
he, in contrast to the tradition in which this economy is grounded, saw women as substantially free of sexual desire?


61. See Goldman’s ‘Soul Food: Consumption, Conception, and Gender in Early Sanskrit Literary Texts’, unpublished manuscript. Sumit Sarkar’s ‘The Conditions and Nature of Subaltern Militancy: Bengal from Swadeshi to Non-Co-operation, c. 1905–22’, *Subaltern Studies III*, ed. Ranajit Guha (Oxford University Press, 1984), pp. 314–15, suggests that Gandhi’s renunciatory mode might have ensured his popularity among ordinary people, the sadhu (ascetic) being a figure of exemption from hierarchy and even of ‘controlled rebellion’.


74. In her analysis of two fictional works, Mulk Raj Anand’s *Untouchable* and Shanta Rameshwar Rao’s *Children of God*, Viswanathan discusses the ambivalent response of the novels’ Untouchables, familiar with the quotidian experience of hunger, to Gandhi’s fasting (*Outside the Fold*, p. 223). The moral non-equivalence of hunger and fasting that is implied by such a response constitutes a powerful critique of Gandhi’s fasting; but it also fails to concede that for Gandhi the action of fasting could not simply be reduced to the experience of bodily hunger.


80. For an instructive account of the gastropolitics of Percy Bysshe Shelley and his circle, see Timothy Morton, *Shelley and the Revolution in Taste: The Body and the Natural World* (Cambridge University Press, 1994). Shelley was to remain an important figure for the British vegetarian movement throughout the nineteenth century.


86. Devanesen’s *The Making of the Mahatma* provides perhaps the best account of the late Victorian milieu of the London whose denizen Gandhi was for three years. Also see Martin Green, *Gandhi: Voice of a New Age Revolution* (Continuum, 1993), pp. 79–117.


94. On the complicated logic of sacrifice, see Rene Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), and Derrida, “‘Eating Well’”. In *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (University of Chicago Press, 1995). Derrida explores the ways in which responsibility to the other to whom one responds is impossible without some degree of irresponsibility towards other duties and subjects. It should be noted that in other times and places, and with respect to persons not bound to him by familial or quasi-familial contexts, Gandhi was far more casual about vegetarianism. Louis Fischer, Nehru, and Maulana Azad were served meat at Sabarmati Ashram, a practice that upset and confused some of his readers.

