“I Did *Not* Get My Spaghetti O’s”: Death Row Consumption in the Popular Media

Stevie Jeung

Writer’s Comment: I wrote this essay for American Studies 101D: “Crime and Punishment in American Culture,” and I thank Sasha Abramsky for a fantastic class, which really encouraged each student to explore his or her particular interests on the topic. We were required to choose two of three essay assignments, the first of which simply asked us to discuss “the iconography of the penitentiary.” This intriguing first assignment sent so many half-baked ideas whizzing through my head that I almost gave up and resigned myself to the remaining two essay prompts. At just about the last minute, I stumbled upon a topic that compelled me. All of a sudden, I just had to find out what was up with this whole last meal thing. Luckily for me, there was plenty to find. Really, who wouldn’t love compiling research that included morbid cookbooks, mafia TV, and a poignant but absurd last request for Spaghetti-O’s?

—Stevie Jeung

Instructor’s Comment: The American Studies class that I teach, “Crime and Punishment in American Culture,” encourages students to think about the ways in which criminal justice themes, from drug usage to incarceration, permeate the broader culture. Stevie Jeung’s essay “‘I Did Not Get My Spaghetti-o’s’: Death Row Consumption in the Popular Media” was written as a way of exploring these linkages. Many words have been composed on the culture of death row; Stevie’s twist on this theme was to write about last meals requested by the condemned. She wrote about foods ordered, and then expanded her analysis to look at how the broader culture has embraced Last Meal iconography. Stevie found that cookbooks have been published listing famous last meals; that books have been written on what significant cultural figures would eat were they to only have one more meal before they died. From the get-go Stevie’s essay was special. It was extremely well researched

and compellingly narrated. While many students write good essays that, with a lot of editing help could become great essays, Stevie's really was born to be perfect. As her teacher, I watched this essay evolve, made suggestions, and then sat back for the feast. It needed no extra editing, no fine-tuning in order to shine.

—Sasha Abramsky, University Writing Program

Jesus Christ: Roast lamb, matzo, wine; around AD 30. Perry Smith and Richard Hickock: Identical meals of shrimp, french fries, garlic bread, ice cream and strawberries with whipped cream; 1965. Timothy McVeigh: Two pints of Ben & Jerry's mint chocolate chip ice cream; 2001. Tony Soprano: Holsten's onion rings; 2007. Karl Chamberlain: final meal yet to be consumed; 15 days from now.

While executions historically demand a certain degree of morbid curiosity, the last meals of the condemned seem to stimulate heightened interest. Indeed, a prisoner's final feast has almost become an event in its own right, not only for the prisoner, but for the prison staff and the public. Websites, novels, movies, television shows, newspapers, and even cookbooks report, dissect, criticize, and speculate regarding last meals real and imagined. When confronted with the ultimate consumption of dying people in so many areas of our popular media, the truth becomes alarmingly clear: This is odd behavior. There must be some reason that we institutionally allow our most hated and feared prisoners to choose and enjoy their final meal before we execute them, and there must be some reason that we like to watch and reproduce the event in popular culture.

The last meal appears in almost every major arena of public entertainment. In *The Green Mile*, a motion picture based on Stephen King's novel of the same name, protagonist John Coffey is wrongfully executed in a heartbreaking, dramatic scene, but not before careful thought about his last meal: "Meatloaf be nice. Mashed taters with gravy. Okra, maybe. I's not picky." Prisoners are also served their last meals on the small screen. Take, for example, FOX's network TV show, *Prison Break*, in which Lincoln Burrows is served his last blueberry pancakes. In fact, on an episode of *The Simpsons*, a staple of American television, Homer eats Hans Moleman's last meal of lobster tail and raspberry tort just before Hans is executed, protesting, "But he ate my last meal!" Clearly, this animated man did not think it right to be executed without enjoying his

final choice of cuisine. Of course, his expression of outrage is followed by, "Are you really allowed to execute people in local jail?" reminding us that *The Simpsons*, however rich with American icons, is not real. Regardless of actual death row ceremony, the Americans who produce and consume these works of fiction expect that a special meal accompanies execution.

Compulsory inclusion of a last meal in fictional executions is one thing, but our fascination does not stop there. Where convicts are executed, the state documents and even publishes details of the last meal and last words before they administer capital punishment. Until recently, Texas, the number one execution state, posted prisoners' last meals on their Justice Department's website ("Death Row Information"). They discontinued this practice for unclear reasons, but the archived lists from 2003 and earlier are still readily available, and the department continues to publish names, execution dates, case records, and even pictures of the dead and soon-to-be-dead (like Karl Chamberlain, mentioned above). Oklahoma, ranked third among execution states, takes a more voyeuristic approach: "the local newspaper [prints] a blow-by-blow account. Time of injection. Facial expressions. Final meal requests" ("Artist"). While this might seem like a gruesome practice on the state's part, the public does not shy away. In fact, commercial reproduction of this information proves that it's not just reporting; it's entertainment.

It is evident not only that people read this stuff, but that they actually use available execution and last meal information to create and market their own masterpieces of morbid exposition. It becomes at once blatantly, amusingly, and disgustingly clear when you stumble across websites like "Last Suppers: Famous Final Meals from Death Row," "Meals to Die For," and "Dead Man Eating," which faithfully posts the last meal (along with "the skinny" on the day's events and case details) of every person executed in the United States since 2002. The most shocking part is that the website also sells t-shirts, coffee mugs, and even thong underwear, all of which read "Dead Man Eating: looking for a killer meal?" and feature a crude drawing of a dead man hanging with an ice cream cone in his hand. A more tasteful, if just as morbid, strategy is to publish a "last meal" cookbook or coffee table book. A quick search for "last meal" on Amazon.com yields at least four such books (along with Snoop Dogg's album, which is entitled *Tha Last Meal* for reasons I unfortunately could not find). According to its description, one of the books, *Last Suppers: Famous Final Meals from Death Row* (Ty Treadwell and Michelle Vernon),

both lists the gritty details of last meals and uses the public's "appetite" for this last-minute courtesy to comment on the death penalty. *Meals to Die For* comes from Brian D. Price, a former inmate who personally cooked eleven years' worth of final meals for Texas death row inmates. His book reveals recipes, pictures, and even hand-written last meal requests he received during his incarceration (Amazon.com). The last things that our allegedly deadliest murderers eat, then, are not only published for the public, but published *again* with extra details for *sale* to the public. This doubly-consuming public just eats this stuff up.

The more closely we look at it, the more bizarre this cycle of consumption and death appears: a man kills, he eats, we kill him, and then we eat it up. Where does it really begin, though? The "last meal" has had a symbolic and ritualistic significance since, well, Jesus and the Last Supper (Peck). At some point, between Jesus and today's American mega-prisons, we began to recognize the last meal as a ritual of institutionalized execution.

Since the early nineteenth century, Americans have been fascinated with not just execution, but the ritual of a condemned criminal's last day. A large crowd would turn up to hear the death warrant, sermon, and last words before a hood was slipped over the offender's head and he was hanged by the neck. Still more people read the details of the execution as it was published, and "if the offender could not or would not utter any memorable last words, the publisher had no compunction against composing them" (Atwell, 8). The 1840s brought the American death penalty's first decline in a trend of fluctuating popularity that would continue to the present day, but wherever there was a spectacle, there was an audience. As the death penalty remained popular in the South, so did reporting the last days of convicts in gross detail.

Each of the states that employ capital punishment uses its own set of rules and procedures. Some states enforce a price limit, while Texas limits a last meal to the things accessible by the regular prison kitchen staff. In 1995, the Federal Government administered its first execution since 1969. Timothy McVeigh's execution prompted development of a 56-page "Execution Protocol," "meant to ensure that all executions are carried out 'in an efficient and humane manner.'" This document clearly outlines a last meal choice as a scheduled step in the execution process: "At least seven days prior to the execution, the warden or designee will contact the condemned individual to arrange for his/her last meal," and

"The condemned individual will be served a final meal at a time determined by the warden" between twelve and three hours prior to the execution (Fritsch). In Texas, according to death row chef Brian Price, the meal would be ready at 3:45pm and delivered at 4pm, two hours before lethal injection. This last tray of food, which would become very public following the execution, was covered in paper "for privacy." Price reveals that although an inmate could request anything, he often received something different: "The local newspaper would always say they got 24 tacos and 12 enchiladas, but they would actually get four tacos and two enchiladas" ("Confessions"). After all of this procedure, the report sensationalizes the last meal, much as early publications sensationalized the last words.

So, why does the state even allow a last meal? Bob Greene argues that "inviting" prisoners to choose a last meal is "hypocritical and insulting to the memory of the victims" because, he poignantly argues, murderers take that foresight and choice from their victims. Perhaps, Tony Karon of *TIME* suggests, the prisoners accept a last bit of freedom and humanity to make up for the "grim act of violence of the state" that is about to occur. Especially considering that prisoners don't always get what they ask for, this seems unlikely. Daniel LaChance notices that although execution practices have historically moved toward anonymity and bureaucracy, the last meal and final speech have incongruently been sustained. His recent paper, "Last Words, Last Meals, and Last Stands: Agency and Individuality in the Modern Execution Process," argues that in giving the prisoners choice in their final meals and words, the state portrays them as autonomous agents who have chosen their deeds and accepted their fates. In other words, the prison system denies a prisoner individuality until his or her last day of life in order to feel righteous in executing him or her. In the midst of a vengeful prison system (Abramsky), this makes perfect sense. It is much more satisfying to exact revenge on a person than on a number. In fact, despite the moves toward more humane and less painful execution, the state can treat a mentally ill patient with anti-psychotics so that they're "sane enough to be executed" ("Confessions"). Clearly, the "ideal candidate" is an irredeemable individual, and sane enough both to feel and participate in their death. In other words, if they can choose the last thing they eat, they must have chosen to murder, in which case they deserve to die. Furthermore, resemblance to the biblical Last Supper might justify vengeful treatment in the name of religion, especially for prison staff like Oscar Dees, who believed that God intended him to

punish criminals. This powerful, righteous moral logic is published and extended to the public, creating a sense of justice that maintains support for the death penalty. As in *Cool Hand Luke*, this public spectacle of punishment and revenge is a self-serving institution of the prison system itself.

The public, however, has its own incentives for gobbling it all up, so to speak. Revenge is probably one of them, as is pure, unabashed voyeurism. American people tend to take the idea of the last meal to heart, though, and somehow make it their own. Many visitors to the "Dead Man Eating" website and message boards all over the internet do this by submitting their own "last meal requests," as if they were going to die tomorrow. Apparently, then, this fixation on the last meal is not limited to intrusive consumption of execution records; it extends to the public and their own final food choices. In fact, the subject of hypothetical last meals has given this icon of criminality and death a fresh, not-so-morbid vantage point. James L. Dickerson's book, *Last Suppers: If the world ended tomorrow, what would be your last meal?* asks popular celebrities and political figures to divulge their last meal of choice. Bill Clinton, for instance, would like to enjoy chicken enchiladas before his hypothetical death, and professional football coach Mike Ditka fancies pigs in a blanket. *My Last Supper,* by Melanie Dunea, asks the same of chefs.

Still others forego the macabre enjoyment and the distant speculation and use the vivid image of eating for the last time to protest the death penalty through art. Photographer Jacquelyn C. Black organizes pictures of inmates and their meals in a book entitled *Last Meal*, in which she also includes statistics: 10 of the 12 states without the death penalty have homicide rates below the national average, for example. University of Oklahoma professor Julie Green paints a series of dinner plates, each depicting what was on the last plate of a particular inmate. Reading about the executions in the newspaper "humanized death row" for her and struck her as an invasion of privacy ("Artist"). Whether they seek revenge or redemption, Americans see the last meal as a symbol in the life-or-death of justice, on death row and in their living rooms.

I'll leave you with the final episode of *The Sopranos* to illustrate the place of "The Last Supper," generally speaking, in the American psyche. Mob leader Tony Soprano sits down at Holsten's diner in New Jersey and tension builds around him as the other characters bustle about in their respective scenes. The viewer gets the distinct feeling that they are

preparing to kill Tony, who looks nervous, as though he knows that his criminal career is about to end in execution. Tony's family arrives at the diner and as he offers a basket of onion rings around the table, and before we find out whether or not he dies, the scene cuts to black. The end. No more Tony, no more *Sopranos*. This could just be another cliffhanger, but many fans see it as Tony's "Last Supper," and "If Holsten's onion rings—round, crunchy, and, according to one influential diner, the best in the state—didn't symbolize communion wafers, as some viewers of the final scene of 'The Sopranos' have theorized, they do now" (Hyman). The point is that the subsequent pilgrimage to Holsten's taken by many fans of the show proves one of two things. Either a) the mega-hit show *did* intend to showcase a symbolic "last meal" for its main character, or b) all of these people are making it up. Either case gives powerful support to the idea that this last ritual of consumption is popularly recognized as the appropriate ending to a life, whether fictional, criminal, or biblical.

The interplay between the public, the media, and the criminal justice system gives the last meal a unique importance to each. The criminal justice system perpetuates the tradition in its own interest and uses the media to lend righteousness to its questionable and somewhat manipulative actions, but the media and the public interact to derive much greater religious, social, emotional, and political meaning, thus creating a pervasive and lasting icon which permeates popular culture and popular perception. Thomas J. Grasso, executed by lethal injection in Oklahoma (1995) seemed to appreciate the significance of a last meal in the public eye when he gave his last speech: "I did not get my Spaghetti-O's, I got spaghetti. I want the press to know this."

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