

“Meat's gonna be the death of ole Pete” | *A Queer Reading of “Butcher Pete”*
Sarah Hajkowski

Not all critical questions or artistic endeavors arise from immediately literary sources. Cream’s “White Room” was literally about Pete Brown’s apartment before having his things moved into it. The “Dude” Aerosmith immortalized as “Looking Like a Lady” was actually Vince Neil of the Motley Crue. So too this review credits its birthright to the reviewer (that’s me) playing too much *Fallout 3* and fancying myself some kind of Kushnerite. “Butcher Pete, Pts. 1 and 2” is an early (nearly proto-) rock’n’roll song utilized on the atomic era soundtrack of Bethesda Games’ 2008 action role-playing game *Fallout 3*. Its catchy tune and repeated motifs of violence pair well with the indiscriminate shooting and detonating one is obliged to do in the fictional surface world of *Fallout*, based in an alternate timeline where the Cold War world was actually devastated by its mutually assured destruction. The song’s subject, a reputed assailant known as “Butcher Pete” has apparently little factual basis in the annals of serial killers on U.S. soil. The evolution of prison anthems from the tradition of field songs from enslaved people interweave history with legend. But despite the apparent body count behind Roy Brown’s titular slayer, one finds virtually no accounts of a convicted Pete-anybody while scouring historic record. This along with other textual details in the Butcher Pete narrative open its lyrics to other curiosities of meaning.

SAMPSON: When I have fought with the men, I will be civil with the maids; I will cut off their heads.

GREGORY: The heads of the maids?

SAMPSON: Ay, the heads of the maids, or their maidenheads. Take it in what sense thou wilt.

GREGORY: They must take it in sense that feel it.

SAMPSON: Me they shall feel while I am able to stand, and ’tis known I am a pretty piece of flesh.

GREGORY: ...Draw thy tool. Here comes of the house of Montagues.

Enter Abram with another Servingman.

SAMPSON: My naked weapon is out.

(Romeo and Juliet, Act I Scene I)

Texts global and immemorial have established swords, blades, and similar implements as representative of the phallus. Literary sex and violence between two or more participants often have much in common. The above example from Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* calls up a particular manifestation of this in the Medieval or Elizabethan West, the extension of “man” by the weapon “he” carries.

For additional improvisations on the same theme, look no further than the ballock dagger. Swinging dicks indeed. Returning to “Butcher Pete,” Parts 1 & 2 being released in 1949 by Roy Brown and his Mighty-Mighty Men, the repeated action of the text is relatively simple. Pete is “hackin' and wackin' and smackin'!/He just hacks, wacks, choppin' that meat.” As the speaker elaborates the story of Pete, we encounter him with a “long sharp knife” to chop “single women, married women, old maids and all.”

There is of course room for characterizing Pete’s acts exclusively as homicidal violence with no sexual dimension apart from the gendered nature of a man acting against women in the early twentieth century. Considering the occasion of writing, the compulsive heterosexual climate of the midcentury—leaving aside its specific implications for Black men in masculinity—it is profoundly unlikely the original intent of the text was conscious or even unconsciously queer. Too, it is important to note the titillating slapdash of the song’s lyrical structure; it is racy rock’n’roll for pleasing the ears and lightening the heels, especially after dark. Not expected are rigorous readings of every line and letter. All this being said, the number crafts genuine intrigue in its close listener and constructs a defined central character with fluid relationships to space, vitality, and sexuality.

To start off easy, the question of Pete’s occupation. Some interpretations* of the song’s text wonder whether “Butcher Pete” earned his nickname in the most obvious way, that is to say, he may actually be a butcher—independently of whatever else he does with clientele. Is his butchery literal in both classes of body, i.e. slaughter of animals and women? Or is it more sordid than that? “Butcher Pete” would be far from the first intimation that quotidian American professions such as ice delivery or vacuum salesmanship ran aground of provoking marital infidelity by going door-to-door in the contemporary period. Another song, this one from the pre-electric days, danced around a similar heterosexual tension; “How’d you like to be the iceman?” by vaudeville composer J. Fred Helf gained popular favor in the Gay 90s for its provocative survey of the well-toned and even better traveled icemen who “came to be perceived as a working-class lothario—sort of a 19th-century version of a buff pool boy” (Robinson, AtlasObscura.com). In further support, the subject of “Butcher Pete Pt. 2” on being released from jail, canonically “goes back to his store,” hinting that the moniker does partly derive from competency with consumable cadavers. It’s elusive to know for certain whether Butcher Pete is skilled strictly with a solid-steel, honest-and-true cleaver and carcass which just happens to hit bone gruesomely in his off-hours, or if the “long knife” in question is a euphemism primarily. In either case, we may engage the possibility that whatever Pete does for a living, the subject matter of the song—especially Pete’s arrest—extends beyond honest meat-marketing.

*for scholarly example, Reddit

If we first assume that Pete's incidence of "chopping" these women's "meat" is more ambiguous than the—ahem—cut-and-dried reality of axe-murder or even just run-of-the-mill butchery, we can inspect what other plasticity exists in the song's account. Another unpleasant realism herein; women, Black and non- alike, are hardly unfamiliar as terms synonymous with another used in-text, that of "meat." From pop culture to the literary arts, people socialized as female are well acquainted with the notion of being objectified. In the West we have a thicker illusion that this term-hegemony is changing, however an enduring rift created by the inscription of two binary genders still remains to render acts, ideas, and bodies aligned "feminine" as to be overpowered, conquered, owned the world over. Writer Helen Addison-Smith published her thought-provoking takes on the same concept, "The meaning of meat," to *Overland* literary journal in Summer of 2020. In the latter paragraphs of the article, Addison-Smith neatly summarizes:

"To make something into meat is to 'thingify' it... We [women] know this on an everyday level. We say, 'He treated me like meat' when we feel sexually exploited by someone."

In this exploration, we glossily speed through the more overt understanding that people socialized as male may in more colloquial, ickier contexts, refer to their own genitals as "meat" as well. If in the space created by "Butcher Pete" meat is at once more than the body (as hacked-up corpse, for example) yet still located in its same site (as sexual potential), then the relationship between Pete and these women is distinctly sexualized. The listener's imagination both in the Fifties (a period when the song was, quote, "Not for airplay") and in modern times may rush to flesh out the makeup of which acts precisely suggest "hackin', wackin,' and smackin'" in intimate circumstances, regardless, the language seems to operate such that almost intentional space is left for this suggestiveness. Which brings us to the disruption of its heteronormative status quo. It transpires that after Pete has had many encounters with the aforementioned variety of women—broadly erotic as we are authorizing them to be—Butcher Pete is arrested and thrown in jail.

"The police put Pete in jail," the speaker recounts,
"Yes, he finally met his fate/ But when they came to pay his bail/ They found him choppin' up his cell mate."

Did Roy Brown and perhaps other uncredited writers have any intention of implying that Butcher Pete was engaged in a non-heterosexual sex act when his bail was being paid? After all, the speaker is using the same lyrical coding in this instance as in prior ones, heterosexual ones, which we have above interrogated as markedly open to interpretations as sexually explicit. Yet the answer is a resounding certainly

not. One could likely rouse Brown from the grave and restore him in it just as quickly by posing the question. Still, the liminal space in the word-life of “Butcher Pete” emerges for those who seek it without pretense.

For one thing, the phenomenon—at best misunderstood and at worst made light of—known as deprivation theory, was no less a factor for the incarcerated of Butcher Pete’s era than our own. Sociologist and 1912-21 Federal Inspector of Prisons Joseph F. Fishman wrote illuminatingly on prison sexual culture in the Twenties and Thirties, at which time what a collective societal opposition of all things queer lacked in compassion it made up for in closet cases and complex trauma. Fishman openly acknowledged what many imprisoned people of the past and present likewise know, “incarcerated men, driven by the irrepressible need for sexual release, and deprived of “normal” heterosexual outlets, engage in same-sex relations.” (Fleischer & Krienert) We let Fishman be Fishman as far as his position on sexual degradation goes. Men were having furtive, frequently self-loathing, too often coercive or non-consensual sex with other men behind iron bars when the fictional Butcher Pete would have been there. Even if outside the boundaries of imprisonment Pete performs rigid (perhaps even murderous) heterosexuality, he is found here to be “choppin” in a fashion that digresses from the norm.

Secondarily, we look to how the aforementioned “word-life-space” of Pete is developed in further stanzas. Paul is writing to the Romans in explanation of the gospels when in the Christian Bible it is written, “For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace.” (Romans 8:6) This was an ineffably popular ideal for Abrahamics particularly in the moral panic of being shackled to temperance and conformity in the first half of the century. Taking pages from the very oldest likeminded scholars—we’re talking Augustine and his crew—Christian American youth were indoctrinated to despise their bodies. Development was a misfortune, sensation was unnatural. Of course the plethora of socioeconomics complicated the lesson further, Blackness presented its own liability, so too homosexuality in the age of the Bugle Boy Chesterfield-smoking man’s man and Buck Davy Daniel Clark Rogers Crockett Boone Kent saturation raised conflict about a gay boy or man’s relationship with masculinity. And that impossible archetype 9.6 out of 10 times went to church on Sundays. So what is Butcher Pete’s angle when post-bailing out he not only attends a late night mass, but too “gives the preacher a fit” and commences with “hackin’ on the pulpit”? Is there some baby-faced butcher’s assistant wagging the church keys from the end of one finger that we should know about? Some former altar boy with almond-shaped eyes? Is the hacking more metaphorical than metallic this time? This is our license, as queer people facing new and stealthier operations to undo and erase our selves, to imagine innocuous spaces for our young people to exist in the old books, to idly trifle with the notion that peeking out from

beneath innuendos, donning antique garb like the genres of Blues-Rock—inherently Black and queer domains in the first place—are boy kisses to laugh between, girl sleepovers to reclaim, silly stories to tell our children: we are here. We always have been.