When I met Joe, we were both vegetarians, and following a violent illness, both of us were so weak, we decided to reintroduce meat into our diets. It was at this time that he admitted to me that the ten years sans meat were some of his most difficult, and that indeed, he was addicted to McDonald’s burgers and fries. I clearly remember going to McDonald’s the day he went back to the burger, and watching him down two cheeseburgers and two bags of fries. I had always hated fast food in general, and McDonald’s specifically, and was amazed that this man I loved could have hidden such an addiction. While we were at McDonald’s he started to tell me an elongated story about his childhood, and the first McDonald’s in Kingsport, Tennessee. As we sat and talked, he looked around, and started to make semiotic remarks about the restaurant. The conversation continued for weeks as Joe was determined to make up for lost hamburgers, and we paid very close attention to McDonald’s TV ads. While in Atlanta (for my first time), I noticed that all the McDonald’s TV ads contained only Black people, and that a decidedly African American text was used. I commented on the cholesterol issues plaguing Black men (recently on the news), and Joe started to frantically write. He said he would do an entire book on McDonald’s as a cultural and political signifier. This was a piece in Kinderculture: The Corporate Construction of Childhood, and led to his book, The Sign of the Burger: McDonald’s and the Culture of Power. After writing the book for Westview Press, the publishers refused to publish it due to their fear of litigation from McDonald’s. Stanley Aronowitz made a call to Temple University Press and got Joe a new contract. SS

JOE L. KINCHELOE

7. MCDONALD’S, POWER, AND CHILDREN

Ronald McDonald (Aka Ray Kroec) Does it All for You

IN HIS BOOK The Hawkline Monster: A Gothic Western (1974, p. 11), the late Richard Brautigan develops the character, Cameron, who is a counter:

Cameron was a counter. He vomited nineteen times to San Francisco. He liked to count everything that he did. This had made Greer a little nervous when he first met up with Cameron years ago, but he’d gotten used to it by now.

People would sometimes wonder what Cameron was doing and Greer would say, “He’s counting something,” and people would ask, “What’s he counting?” and Greer would say, “What difference does it make?” and the people would say, “Oh.”
People usually wouldn’t go into it any further because Greer and Cameron were very self-assured in that big relaxed casual kind of way that makes people nervous.

I can relate to Cameron, for I, too am a counter. McDonald’s also is a counter—and like the people who noticed Cameron’s peculiar proclivity, most Americans don’t go very far in analyzing the company’s propensity for counting or, for that matter, anything else about the fast-food behemoth. Like Greer and Cameron, the company’s self-assurance (that is, its power) must make people a little nervous.

I was destined to write about McDonald’s, for my life has always intersected with the Golden Arches. As part of my undergraduate comedy shtick I told my listeners (truthfully) that I had consumed 6,000 McDonald’s hamburgers before graduating from high school. In junior high and high school we were allowed to go off campus to eat. My friends and I (before we had our driver’s licenses) would tromp through the Tennessee woods rain or shine to McDonaldland—by high school we drove. After six years of three-hamburger lunches, not to mention the Wednesday-night burgers with my parents and several more on weekend nights after cruising with friends, the count began to mount. A secondary bonus for my fifteen-centburgermania involved the opportunity to count my cholesterol numbers as they crept higher and higher. Ray Kroc, the man who made McDonald’s a household name, would have been proud.

Somewhere in my small-town Tennessee adolescent consciousness, I understood that McDonald’s was the future. I couldn’t name it, but the standardized hamburger was a symbol of some vague social phenomenon. Like Italian or Polish immigrants of another place and time, I was ethnic (hillbilly). And like all children of traditional ethnic parents I struggled for an American identity free from the taint of ethnicity. Though it hadn’t yet assumed the mantle of all-American symbol around the world, I knew that the McDonald’s of the early 1960s was mainstream American through and through. As such, my participation in the burger ritual was an act of shedding my ethnic identity. Understanding the company’s regulation of customer behavior, I complied readily, knowing the menu in advance and placing my order quickly and accurately. My parents, in contrast, raised in the rural South during the early twentieth century, were lost at the ordering counter—never understanding the menu, always unsure of the expected behavior; the effort to shape their customer conduct was a bust.

On a very different level, however, my parents were seduced by McDonald’s. Students of media have come to understand that readings of film, TV, and TV commercials are idiosyncratic, differing significantly from individual to individual. So it was in my home. As victims of the Great Depression in southern Appalachia (a double economic whammy), my mother and father came to see excessive spending as a moral weakness. Eating out, when it was possible to prepare food at home, was especially depraved. My father would darken the door of McDonald’s only if he was convinced of its economic “good sense.” Indeed, advertisers struck an emotional chord when they pitted fifteen-cent McDonald’s hamburgers and twelve-cent French fries as an alternative to the extravagant cost of eating out. To my self-identified working-class father, eating McDonald’s was an act of class resistance. He never