"Feed My Poor Famished Heart": Constructing Womanhood through Consumer Practices

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> "There is one comfort—you will not touch my lips if I say anything you do not like."
>
> —Spoken by Ellen to John in
> Susan Warner, *The Wide, Wide World* (572)

> "Oh! how I longed to take you in my arms and feed my poor famished heart with one touch of your lips! . . . I was a starving beggar . . . Do you see how entirely you fill my mind and heart? . . . Why won't you say what you know well I am longing, hungering to hear? Why won't you say, 'St. Elmo, I love you'?"
>
> —Spoken by St. Elmo to Edna in
> Augusta Evans, *St. Elmo* (277-78)

> The way to a man's heart is through his stomach.
>
> —Fanny Fern (qtd. in Warren 3)

Food appears frequently in the group of nineteenth-century novels variously classified as "the sentimental novel," "woman's fiction," "the exploratory novel," the "female *bildungsroman*," or "the domestic novel." Often glossed as an element of setting, it stands to reason that scenes involving food turn up quite often in texts that focus on girls/women and domestic arrangements. Yet, a closer look reveals that food does far more than provide *mise-en-scène* in these popular texts by, for, and about white, middle-class women. As cultural theorists Stuart Hall and Raymond Williams argue, popular culture—texts and other forms—gives insight into a cultural group's ways of being and believing. Roland Barthes's work on food confirms that food and food ways specifically "form a structure . . . of communication," offering insight into a people's sense of who they are and how they relate to others within and outside of their group (22).

Obviously, the "culture" within a fiction is different from the culture of a place or period. However, a more-or-less realistic fiction's constructed culture, such as the sentimental novel's (re)imagining of the world of nine-

teenth-century white middle-class girls and women, remains a part of the place and period to which the text belongs.[1] It represents that culture; it defines that culture as a culture, and it constructs the group and its place within that culture. Following Judith Butler's, Toril Moi's, Terry Lovell's, and Beverly Skeggs's various appropriations and feminist-oriented reconfigurations of Pierre Bourdieu's social theories, I am suggesting that the category "nineteenth-century white middle-class women" functions as a field, a position, a *habitus*, within the larger social arena. In this, "nineteenth-century white middle-class women" functions in much the same way that social class does in Bourdieu's framework, but it adds the more particularizing characteristics of period, race, and gender. "Nineteenth-century white middle-class women" is an "internalised form of the class condition and the conditionings" acquired through a lifetime and an upbringing in those conditions, along with the possibilities such conditions include or exclude (101). The process of acquisition is both reflected in and formed by the novels under discussion here. Even more, as the essay will argue, such novels use food and food ways to offer commentary on the kinds of lives and ways of thinking represented, on the *habitus* of and, more interestingly, even the possibility of *habitus* for nineteenth-century white middle-class women. As a group, these novels reveal efforts to shape and position (and, in some cases, reshape and reposition) the specific field, those kinds of lives, and the ways of thinking both that they represent and that create them. Within the set, food and food ways stand out as the voice of these efforts.

The above lines from Susan Warner and Augusta Evans represent two of the most prominent nineteenth-century American popular novelists' depictions of women's connection to food: woman is food; woman is herself capital within the social network. The work of their equally popular contemporary, Fanny Fern, constructs a different relationship, however. Fern rejects the notion put forth by her contemporaries, suggesting instead that food is capital that women can use to re-negotiate their (*habitus*'s) place and power within the larger social field. Taken together, the fictions of these three writers expose the process of constructing a sensibility and the ideology that maintains it. In their conversation about the relationship between women and food, we uncover a debate about women's possibilities within an emerging market economy: Is womanhood capital or *habitus*? Is food—a powerful form of capital itself—merely part of women's domain, merely a material condition? Can women use food—perhaps the most potent element of their traditional "place," of the domestic realm—to gain power for themselves? If so, how? If not, why not? With such questions at the forefront, this essay considers the ways mid-nineteenth-century American popular writers Warner, Evans, and Fern draw upon food and food interactions to construct and comment upon women's roles, ways of

thinking, and identities.[2]

The mid-nineteenth century marks the first time in American history when women, through their literary production, were able to define themselves and womanhood more generally in a public forum. When we look to their literature we see that one of the primary ways they did so was through a discourse involving food. In fact, food and its language occupy a central place in the history of women's published writing in North America. While most forms of writing—of coming before the public—were frowned upon in the early republic, woman-authored cookbooks proliferated from the mid-1700s on. Much demanded, especially as girls married outside of their communities and moved to areas of the country where the available foodstuffs were unfamiliar, cookbooks expanded an already-present custom of recipe-exchange, while simultaneously developing a uniquely American cuisine. More importantly, they brought women's voices into the public realm. Through the cookbook, the American publishing industry opened the door for women's voices to carry into the social arena. By the mid-nineteenth century, many women writers, including Warner, Evans, and Fern (who, as some of the most popular writers, had, arguably, the "loudest" voices, and thus stand as the most appropriate examples for a study such as this one), were capitalizing on this feminine food voice in their fiction, poetry, and essays, parlaying it into a discourse on womanhood and, more radically, "her" place in nineteenth-century social, cultural, and economic formations.[3]

While discussions of "woman's place" have occurred in many periods, this particular conversation takes place at a significant moment in American history—namely, at the moment in which America's consumer-based economy was forming. The mid-nineteenth-century debate over woman's place highlights not only a reaction to her social rank and cultural function, but it also reveals an effort to (re)locate her within the newly emerging economic base. To be more precise, it uncovers an attempt to affiliate her with consumerism as both the consumer and the object of consumption. Within the general social field, she functions, almost incongruously, as both agent and capital. Women writers participate in the process of affiliation using the public voice they had already appropriated: food.

In what cookbook historian Carol Fisher calls the "cookbook revolution" of the 1800s, women such as Mary Randolph, Eliza Leslie, Lydia Maria Child, Sarah Josepha Hale, Catherine Beecher, and Marion Harland took on the role of instructing, for the first time, women of their own group (rather than women of the servant class), not only contributing and preserving culinary expertise but also addressing "topics relating to health, education, frugality, temperance, women's suffrage, and the principles of Christianity" (18). In their novels and short stories, women, including some in the list above,

employ food to speak of such topics but also to place women within the emerging market economy. They use food to imply contiguity, not simply similarity, between alimentary and socio-economic practices. Within and through their fictions, food interactions and rituals shift from the realm of metaphor to the realm of metonymy. In substituting the signified—rather than the signifier—per Jane Gallop's distinction between the two tropes, the metonymic comparison suggests eating and other acts of consumption (like shopping) work in the same ways (*Daughter's Seduction* 28-31; *Reading Lacan* 114-32). In employing food metonymically, writers like Warner, Evans, and Fern create a way that makes it right for women to speak about the various relationships between the groups, classes, or *habituses* in a capitalist society. They also create a means to carve out a potentially empowered place for women themselves within this society and the economic structures that determine who has power and who does not.

Warner's 1850 *The Wide, Wide World*, the first run-away, smash-hit best-seller of the nineteenth century, and the oft-cited archetype of the period's popular fiction, establishes, for us, the terms of the conversation about women's place, roles, and possibilities, just as it may have established in its own time food-as-discourse as a convention in its type of fiction. Warner herself quite carefully uses food, as she has her characters use food, in order to claim a voice. Readers clearly responded (and respond) to Warner's own food-speak. In the nineteenth century, they frequently wrote her "asking for the receipts for the biscuit on which 'Captain Parry' set his paw; for 'splitters,' and the cake Desire made" (Anna Warner 158); in the twentieth century, they seemingly unwittingly adopt food-speak in writing about her work (see the scholarship of Fred Lewis Pattee, Helen Waite Papashvily, Ann Douglas, Mabel Baker, Jane Tompkins, and Susan Harris for examples). Such responses suggest the efficacy of the novel's own food voice.

Within the text, Warner's female characters often use food to express the frustrations and discontent generated by the social forces that produced and sustained, as well as the political prescriptions that created and maintained, the ideal of the pious, pure, domestic, and submissive woman.[4] Through food-speak, Warner's female characters represent a range of women's possibilities within the conditions of their social and economic existences. Some speak of their powerlessness within the gendered social and economic networks that regulate women's (and girls') position within those networks. Others use food-speak to show and/or gain power, deploying food as a kind of cultural capital to configure their own place in the larger social field. While speaking in the former manner highlights a resigned critique of social and economic conditions, speaking in the latter reveals agents who have the potential to shape and reshape—to influence at the ideological level—the world in which they live and their situation within it. Although Warner's

novel ultimately seems to accept the position of resignation, it does at times create and justify women as agents in consumer culture.

The Wide, Wide World carefully links womanhood to consumer culture in its opening scenes, using the impending separation of a mother and daughter as a catalyst to articulate the struggles that women face in a world where they have little control over their lives. The novel's trials begin when Mr. Montgomery, a New York businessman who has recently lost a lawsuit, and along with it a great deal of money, decides the best plan of economizing is to take his ailing wife to Europe, leaving their eight-year-old daughter, Ellen, with his half-sister in upstate New York. Mrs. Montgomery, an invalid, objects to the decision, which will separate her from her child most likely forever, but her husband insists "on her compliance" (12). In the little time she has left with her daughter, Mrs. Montgomery tries to equip her for her journey into womanhood. To this end, she takes Ellen shopping, outfitting her with the material things that she will need to be a woman—"everything necessary to the keeping of good habits," everything Ellen might require to help her be "neat, tidy, and industrious," so she can depend "on others as little as possible" and "carefully improve [herself] by every means" (31-32). Warner thus links womanhood to consumer culture through shopping; it is as if womanhood—or at least its trappings—can be bought. Womanhood, in other words, becomes a commodity within consumer culture.[5] At the same time, women (and girls) are the ones who shop for it.

Perhaps even more telling of the novel's construction of women's place is the other way in which Mrs. Montgomery tries to arm her daughter for the world—and for womanhood. Appalled and troubled by Ellen's reaction to their impending separation, Mrs. Montgomery gives her lessons in woman's lot in life and how to cope with it. These lessons center on the twenty-third Psalm ("The Lord is my Shepherd: I shall not want") and Revelation (basically, those who serve God through "great tribulation . . . shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more; neither shall the sun light on them, nor any heat. For the lamb . . . shall feed them, and shall lead them unto living fountains of water: and God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes" [qtd. in Warner 14-15, 28]). Through these biblical references, Warner marks the primary problem of conventional womanhood with an aspect of consumption, namely hunger. To be a woman is to be hungry—to be unfulfilled, to be lacking that which is basic to survival (emotional rather than physical in this case). Mrs. Montgomery urges her daughter to accept this as a condition of her material existence, as a consequence of women's subordinate position in a society ruled by men and, increasingly, money. This emotional hunger is not unlike that of the medieval saints that Caroline Walker Bynum and Rudolph M. Bell write of in their studies of women's asceticism: ascetics refuse to eat to demonstrate not only that

they are "above" such worldly needs but also to physically evidence that they have accepted the state of lack and powerlessness (a form of what I am calling emotional hunger) that God has allotted to them. In other words, denying physical hunger (i.e., not eating) testifies to one's faith and perhaps evidences one's sanctity. In the case of Mrs. Montgomery, it evidences the spiritual character of womanhood; she is above the material. And, yet, she is not. More like the contemporary anoretic than the medieval ascetic, Mrs. Montgomery's hunger—a result of systemic repudiation of her needs that proceed from her subordinate position in the social field—makes her unable to eat. For her, it is not a choice; she cannot eat when subjugated to her husband's fancies and the economic forces that motivate and justify them. As Steph Lawler claims about the visceral emotion disgust, hunger speaks of class contestation. Much like Skeggs's claims about rage, pain, frustration, fear, anger, and resentment, hunger discloses a disconnect between understanding *habitus* as an accrual of value and the central place emotion occupies in class struggle.

Warner does not merely use food to characterize the predicament of conventional womanhood as hunger. She offers a solution, but not through Mrs. Montgomery, who dies, or even through her protagonist, Ellen. As hinted in the essay's epigraph, Ellen becomes food for the social structures that generate such hungers as she allows herself to be cannibalized within the heterosexual romance. Warner's Ellen Montgomery cannot have any concerns outside of those of her husband. At least, as the epigraph indicates, Ellen herself believes that her husband will not "touch [her] lips"—he will not "taste" her—if her thoughts and behaviors do not conform to his tastes or, at least, her conception of what his tastes are (572). One might argue that it is John who is being conceptualized as food here, for the lips that will not be touched are Ellen's. However, the power dynamic at work—that is, who is being active in the kissing and the decision about kissing—privileges John. In other words, Ellen—the woman, like the woman writer who creates her—seems to believe that, in heterosexual interactions, she is an object. And, the object being invoked here seems to be edible as it will (or not) be tasted.

Rather than through her protagonist, Warner's alternative to the hungers generated by women's circumstances emerges out of one of her secondary characters: Fortune Emerson, the spinster aunt to whom Ellen is sent to live while her parents "economize" in Europe. Lucinda Damon-Bach, also focusing on Fortune's importance in the novel, shows that Fortune "is a model for Ellen, the one who initiates Ellen into the world of women's work and instructs her on how to be useful" (30). Through the appropriately-named, self-reliant Fortune Emerson,[6] who plays a significant role in the middle section of *The Wide, Wide World*, the section of the novel that Susan Harris

would term the "subversive middle," Warner uses food—not hunger—to locate womanhood in the social field. Fortune uses food rather than allowing herself to be food. She makes an empowered place for womanhood in the social arena by using food to negotiate economic conditions.

Fortune, who owns her own farm, and who spends the majority of her time in the novel in the kitchen, is food-rich. The shelves of her pantry overflow with "capacious pans and basins of tin and earthenware, filled with milk, and most of them coated with a superb yellow cream . . . and on the higher shelves were rows of yellow cheeses; forty or fifty at least" (141). Fortune also holds a certain amount of authority in her community. People listen to her. She has power. For example, when she contemplates hosting an atypical gathering at her home, her hired-hand assures her, "they'll every soul come that's asked, that you may depend [on]; there ain't one of 'em that would miss it for a dollar," if for no other reason than they can count on getting a good, plentiful supper (229). Here, Warner not only gives Fortune power through economic structures, but she also claims that, through food, women can make new rules and adapt social convention to generate new ways of being.

Warner establishes a food-related identity for woman, and this one is not about woman being consumed but about woman having agency within the economy and, thus, within the social field. Warner does not relegate her into being a mere means of sustaining the economy. Instead, through Fortune, Warner redefines the gendered relations of production, placing woman in the role of producer—of goods and of culture itself. Warner (re)locates woman in the position of the bourgeois—the owner, the empowered capitalist, the one who controls and shapes the economy. She is no longer merely food, merely a tool, for the system. She is not capital but instead is *habitus*. Despite this rather radical argument for woman's place in both the nineteenth-century's emerging economic system and the social field it regulates, it must be remembered that Fortune is not the novel's heroine. She does marry in the end, as Papashvily, Nina Baym, and Harris all claim is the conventional ending for a heroine/reader-role-model of novels of this genre, but the novel's central character and true formal protagonist is Ellen, who, as described, becomes sustenance for the patriarchal machine. Thus, while Warner does proffer several roles that women can have in a market-based economy and in the social structures that emerge from it, her novel ultimately concludes that womanhood best serves these networks; she is food.

Evans also ultimately leaves her female characters in this position. However, she gets there in a slightly different manner. Like Warner's *The Wide, Wide World* and other popular "woman's fiction," Evans's 1859 novel *Beulah* and her 1866 bestseller *St. Elmo* both trace the story of an orphan girl

through the trials and travails of girlhood and adolescence as she learns to make her way in the world. Also like Warner, Evans establishes the problem of womanhood through figures of consumption. Too, Evans relies on hunger as a means of exposing and expressing the frustration attendant to being a woman in a culture economically organized (along gender lines) into producers and consumers, and socially organized (along gender lines) into consumers and consumed. In *Beulah,* her eponymous protagonist believes that she can "hush the hungry cry" of her "lonely heart" through intellectual pursuits—specifically, through reading and writing (31). As she enters womanhood, she rejects all offers of help and doggedly pursues her ambitions to be fully responsible for herself by embarking on a career writing novels. Similarly, Edna Earl, the protagonist of *St. Elmo,* rejects marriage proposal after marriage proposal in favor of "earning her own bread" by her "own work"—also writing (203, 324). She insists on participating in the economic structures of her day, as she refuses to be sustenance for her suitor, for St. Elmo's "poor famished heart" (277).

In the version of woman represented through these two determined, strong-minded young women, Evans constructs a wholly empowered female identity: a woman who can take care of herself, who feeds herself (rather than being food for others), and who shapes the world by producing culture. She has a place and power in the social field because she has a place in the economy. In many ways, this identity mirrors that of Fortune Emerson in Warner's novel. The major difference is that Evans's characters produce tangible artifacts of culture (well-crafted essays and novels), and they are more directly immersed in the market in their interactions with the publishing industry. There are many possible reasons for the difference, including the regional sensibilities that mark Northerner Warner and Southerner Evans as being from slightly differently groups—or classes. One might, in fact, understand Evans's characters' more direct involvement in the market as a Southerner's engagement with the growing tensions surrounding the increasingly divergent economic models of the antebellum North and the antebellum South. Whatever the reason, though, in establishing her protagonists as members of the culture industry, Evans posits that woman's place in the nineteenth century's emerging market economy is that of an agent, a producer—not a consumer or an object of consumption. She is habitus. Moreover, as writers, Evans's characters and what they produce—arguments, fiction—function to shape and/or reshape the sensibilities that support and sustain the general social field. Much like Evans herself, who used her books to shape readers' thoughts about gender and politics, and much like the legion of women cookbook writers, who used their books to claim authority for themselves while they shaped their readers' material existence, Beulah's and Edna's labors claim a position

within and a right to mold the social field.

Yet, in the end, neither of Evans's protagonists can maintain the culturally unwomanly identity of producer. Neither can maintain her position in the face of the conflict between her own efforts to be an agent of culture and the other forces in her period that are working to define her as cultural capital. Beulah finds that the world of publishing will not allow her to fulfill both her intellectual and emotional hungers. To be a producer of culture, she must choose between human relationships and her writing, between friendship, community, and marriage and being "useful in 'her day and generation' . . . an instrument of some good" (203). Slightly differently, Edna discovers that she cannot escape her status of woman-as-food. Even though she becomes quite successful as a writer, she learns that the publishing industry, as well as the reading public, want to "consume" her—the female writer and her female-ness—as much as they do her "products." The reading public focuses on the fact that Edna is a woman more than on what she actually writes. Her reviewers and critics concede that her work is "not devoid of merit," but they first accuse her of plagiarism and then later assert, "the subject she has undertaken is beyond [her] capacity—no woman could successfully handle it" (200). Furthermore, Edna is not compensated for her work in a way that will allow her to "earn her bread" through writing. Her dream is to write, but, in order to do so, she must also work another job, sacrificing sleep, all moments to herself, and even her health for her craft. She becomes food for the publishing industry—a means by which editors and the press can make money. In other words, the woman writer, even though she produces a product, does not gain the status of producer; she remains a worker, a mere tool. The public's reaction and the publishing industry's treatment suggest that it is impossible for women to become producers of culture, to re-make ideology, to claim habitus. Even in their efforts to accrue social capital by participating in the economic system that distributes that capital, women fail. Voice is silenced.

Ultimately, Evans, like Warner, concludes that, despite her capabilities and ambitions, woman has no choice but to be cannibalized, to become sustenance, capital, for others. For example, at the end of *St. Elmo*, Edna's new husband, St. Elmo, outright forbids her to write, declaring the following on their wedding day:

> "To-day I snap the fetters of your literary bondage. There shall be no books written! No more study, no more toil . . . You belong solely to me now, and I shall take care of the life you have nearly destroyed in your inordinate ambition." (489)

Although she earlier refuses to "feed [St. Elmo's] poor famished heart" by marrying him, in changing her mind, in sating his hunger, in becoming his, Edna must now deny her own hungers. In the end, despite the other

possibilities their girl-protagonists hold, Warner and Evans consign them (as women) to the position of food, serving and sustaining the social field rather then actively, purposefully shaping it to their own thinking and perhaps their own benefit. Using food metonymically to speak of and define women's place within the emerging consumer culture, Warner's and Evans's novels ultimately suggest (with resignation, with bitterness, even) that there is no active, productive place for women within the emerging market-based economy. Evans's purpose is to expose flaws in the system the nineteenth-century North wanted to impose on the nineteenth-century South, ultimately arguing that a consumer-based economy leaves no room for women—or art. Regardless of purpose, though, both Warner and Evans conclude that, within a capital-oriented economy, woman is food; she is capital, not *habitus*.

Fanny Fern, however, offers another perspective, though. Fern, no less popular and perhaps even more esteemed by her contemporaries than either Warner or Evans, may be most frequently remembered (or perhaps, more accurately, not remembered) for her pithy remark "the way to a man's heart is through his stomach." While the quip appears to participate in the same conflation of woman with food that produces woman-as-food, Fern's fiction uses food to empower women to participate in the shaping of society. She employs food to locate women within the economic realm. She draws on food to justify women's place, to justify womanhood as a place, in the social field. Fern's fiction relies on food not only to expose the construction of the ideology of woman-as-food-for-consumer-culture but also to submit a workable alternative to such an understanding. In her short story for children, "Only a Penny," and in her novel for adults, *Ruth Hall*, Fern uses food to locate her female characters in an autonomous, empowered position within consumer culture. She uses food in a highly literal way to detail the difficulties women face in this culture, as well as to structure an active, engaged identity for women in America's emerging market economy and the social field it structures.

"Only a Penny" opens with the adult narrator in the consumer world, "walking in Broadway . . . looking at the ladies who passed in their gay clothes, . . . gazing at the pretty shop windows, full of silks, and satins, and ribbons . . . very much as if a rainbow had shivered there" (47-48). The narrator's people-watching and window-shopping are interrupted by the plaintive cries of a beggar girl: "Please give me penny, Madam—only a penny—to buy a loaf of bread?" (48). In this moment, Fern jarringly brings together the two forms of consumption: buying and eating. The juxtaposition of excess and deprivation exposes ideology itself, revealing a crack in the system, disclosing the man behind the curtain. As Terry Eagleton points out, one of the effects of ideology is to make us unaware of

the contradictions in our beliefs and ways of being. He uses the example of someone who believes that democracy denotes both equivalent power for all and the freedom to seek power over others: "The fact that I employ a team of six hard-pressed servants around the clock does not prevent me from believing in some suitably nebulous way that all men and women are created equal" (41). The moment from Fern's text reveals that a system that values conspicuous (material) consumption does so at the expense of human (alimental) consumption. Fern's female narrator reconciles the split and asserts women's power within the capitalist, market economy by buying the beggar girl something to eat. In this act, Fern also claims a place for woman in the system, restructuring the sensibilities that shape womanhood itself. Put another way, the story suggests that by participating in consumer practices, by buying things, the middle-class woman can mitigate the ills of society produced by that society's economic ways of being.

Yet, the story also reveals that there is only so much a woman can do to counter the circumstances that produce children with hands "so bony" they look "like a skeleton's," circumstances that include absent fathers, as well as mothers who are incapacitated by the weight of their poverty (48-49). When Fern's narrator later tries to save the beggar girl by going to her home, she finds the girl dead. With a bitter irony that contrasts startlingly with Warner's use of the same Bible verse, the narrator laments: the girl "hungers no more—nor thirsts any more—neither shall the sun light on her, nor any heat" (51). In this short story, Fern suggests that woman can participate in the market economy. Her role, however, is not producer, worker, consumer, nor consumed. Instead, it is mediator. She occupies the space that exists between the capitalist and the worker. Her role in the system is not merely to fill in the gap created by the methods of production but to highlight the gap's existence, thus pointing out the real, unjust, oppressive conditions of existence generated by the modes of capitalistic production and the consumer economy it was beginning to feed in mid-nineteenth-century America. As the story reveals through the young girl's death, however, woman's powers in this capacity are limited by the horrifying realities of lived conditions.

In her novel *Ruth Hall*, Fern likewise creates a role for women in consumer society, justifying their participation in the market economy through food. From the novel's opening, Fern suggests that, within the developing market economy, women have different roles than they had in previous times. For example, Ruth, whose story, atypically for the genre, begins rather than ends with marriage, defends her preparedness for the domestic demands of marriage by telling her mother-in-law it does not matter whether or not she can make bread because "people in the city always buy baker's bread" (13). Fern is not rejecting domesticity as one of women's roles, but she

redefines it in the terms of the emerging consumer economy. Nonetheless, as the novel develops, Fern illustrates how vulnerable women are within this economy, for woman's role—buying—depends on her having access to the world of money.

After Ruth's husband dies, leaving her penniless, and her in-laws and her father refuse to take financial responsibility for her and her children, Ruth must find a way to earn her own bread—literally. The near-impossibility of this makes her spiteful father-in-law, who wants Ruth's children so he can raise them in "a sensible manner," declare with satisfaction: "Let her try to support [her children] then, till she gets starved out" (78). And, the fact of the matter is Ruth is nearly "starved out." She cannot find a job appropriate to her skills. Sewing does not pay enough, and teaching is hard to get. As her funds dwindle, she economizes by moving from a boarding house to a rooming house, and she buys progressively less and less food: "a smaller loaf [of bread] every time"; one pint of milk over the course of several days (149). Eventually, she even relinquishes one of her daughters to her in-laws because she cannot afford to feed her. Meanwhile, her other daughter pleads, "more supper, please, Mamma" (159). Ruth gives her her own portion of their meager fare.

Like Evans's Beulah and Edna, Fern's Ruth turns to writing as a means to assuage her hungers—literal hunger in Ruth's case. Unlike Beulah and Edna, however, Ruth finds satisfaction and, eventually, success in her pursuit. Being a woman in a male-dominated publishing world, she encounters the same problems Edna did: inadequate compensation, overwork, and publishers and readers who refuse to recognize her writing as anything other than female vanity. Despite the fact that Ruth exhausts herself through her writing as she tries to make ends meet, despite the fact that she has "only a crust left at night," she finds satisfaction in being able to "*earn* that crust" (160). Moreover, in the end, through persistence and clever negotiations with publishers, by refusing to allow herself to become mere "food" for the publishing industry, Ruth is able to participate fully in the economy. Eventually earning far more than "crusts," Ruth becomes a bank stockholder—a position that stands, throughout the book, as a symbol of power. Fern, unlike Warner and Evans, structures a position and an identity for women that allows them to participate actively and with agency in the emerging market economy. To eat, to feed her children, Ruth engages in that world rather than removing herself from it. Thus, she can be a part of that world—not merely fodder for sustaining it. She is *habitus*. In Fern's fiction, food serves as a catalyst for women to create and sustain an active, productive identity within consumer culture, within the capitalistic economic system. Food ceases to be woman's identity. It is a means to fashion her as a presence—rather than as an absence—in the economy

and the social field it generates.

Taken together, Warner's, Evans's, and Fern's fiction uncover competing manners of understanding white middle-class woman's place, roles, and identities within nineteenth-century economic structures and the social relationships they regulate. While Warner's and Evans's engagement with the topic, though food, ultimately places women in the role of capital for the system, Fern makes a case, through food, for womanhood as *habitus*, as a class engaged in the economic system, earning capital in various guises that allow and justify participation in shaping ways of thinking, being, and feeling. There is much to learn from these writers' conversation about womanhood through food and food processes. In our own age, we readily accept the idea that womanhood is defined, in part, by and through food. Woman, as an idea, serves as a commodity, as consumable, within mass culture. She—more specifically, her body—is used to sell products. American consumer culture constructs her as something to be bought, sold, and eaten. Woman is not the only category that prompts the American consumer to a kind of cannibalism; manhood, childhood, entire social classes and racial/ethnic groups—or more specifically, their bodies—also pique the American consumer's appetite. Such cannibalism may in fact be intrinsic to the basic operation of consumer culture, as Maud Ellmann argues in her work. Yet, woman and her body occupy a singular place within the ideologies that drive and shape our socio-economic system. Susan Bordo, for example, goes so far as to suggest that contemporary American women's eating disorders—specifically anorexia—succinctly evidence the psychopathologies generated by gendered positions within consumer culture. The slippage around the idea of consumer not only defines womanhood, but it encourages actual women to see and understand themselves through the ways they engage with food—specifically, though their literal eating practices. Eira Patnaik points out that understanding women as food is a long-standing tradition in Western cultures; however, this essay's claim is the idea of woman-as-food that has come to manifest itself in such woman-destructive ways in present-day America finds its roots in nineteenth-century America—at the moment in which our current economic base and the social relationships it regulates were coming into being. The fictions of writers such as Susan Warner, Augusta Evans, and Fanny Fern expose the process of definition at work.

Although Warner's and Evans's novels do ultimately function to naturalize the "myth" (à la Roland Barthes) of woman-as-food, a close reading of them exposes the myth. *The Wide, Wide World*, *Beulah*, and *St. Elmo* contain other potentially more empowered roles for women within the social and economic systems of the day even if they are not advocating these roles. In addition, the cannibalistic solutions they offer to the problem of hunger

do not imply entirely happy endings. Ellen, for example, ends her story merely "satisfied . . . that is enough" (583), while the world loses out when Beulah and Edna stop contributing their art to it. Warner and Evans really see woman-as-food as a solution to the problem of hunger; at the very least they offer a resigned—or even bitter—invective against perceiving the world in terms of consumption. Placed alongside Fern's bolder, less conciliatory perspective on women's place, we can see all three writers construct alternate ways of connecting womanhood to consumer practices within a capitalistic economy. In this, the texts not only reveal the construction of ideologies that link American womanhood to food in harmful manners, but they also uncover some long-forgotten alternatives. In other words, to draw on Philip Fisher's ideas about the construction of habits of perception, Warner's, Evans's, and Fern's fictions, together, expose the strenuous work behind such construction and reveal them as design rather than fact. Returning to these texts forces us to remember the process of construction, and, in doing so, the texts themselves offer ways of breaking one of the ideological bonds of contemporary notions of womanhood.

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Notes

[1] In "Reclaiming Sentimental Literature," Joanne Dobson claims that the sentimental novel is a precursor to Realism. She creates a convincing case for trying to develop a set of literary characteristics for the sentimental novel, such as exist for other literary movements (i.e., Realism, Naturalism, the Romance). This essay's exploration of food as a trope is, to a degree, inspired by Dobson's call.

[2] There has been much discussion about how contemporary African-American women use food—in particular cooking and meals—to cast voice and assert power within both the African-American community and American culture more broadly. Doris Witt's and Marvalene H. Hughes's work on soul food, Sally Bishop Shigley's study of African-American community cookbooks, and Tracy N. Poe's exploration of African-American urban identity stand as a few examples from this body of scholarship. There is much less discussion of how white women use food productively, and even less discussion of how American women writers or characters of either race or class use food (positively or negatively) in texts from the nineteenth century. I begin this work with texts by and about white-middle-class American women not because they have the most or the most interesting things to say but because I am beginning with the negative—"woman as food" rather than "food as voice" or "food as power" for women.

[3] In addition to the writers discussed in the essay, I am thinking of writers such as Lydia Maria Child, Emily Dickinson, Harriet Jacobs, Eliza Leslie, Marion Harland, E.D.E.N. Southworth, Elizabeth Stoddard, and Harriet Beecher Stowe.

[4] See Barbara Welter and/or Frances B. Cogan for theories of nineteenth-century womanhood.

[5] In her seminal work on nineteenth-century women's fiction, *The Feminization of American Culture*, Ann Douglas makes a similar claim; however, her point is that Ellen "is a symbol of expenditure" (64), while I want to insist that Ellen represents a process—not a static state.

[6] There has been some discussion of Susan Warner's invocation of Emerson's work through Fortune's name. Jane Weiss suggests that Warner is using the name to "offer a scathing rejection of Emersonian autonomy" (456), while David Leverenz argues that the name is parodic: "Any woman would find it a 'misfortune' to be an Emerson, self-reliant, taking responsibility for her own life" (181). Offering a different perspective, and one more in line with my own, Lucinda Damon-Bach contends that, through Fortune, Warner appears to reject canonical Emersonianism but appropriates the possibilities it offers in the form of a more pragmatic and Christian variety of individualism (30).

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