



## Consumption

—Mavis Reimer

From the time that the word *consumption* entered English from Latin in the late fourteenth century, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, it carried a double meaning: it could refer to the “wasting of the body” generally (and so came to signify such illnesses as pulmonary disease) and it could refer to the “action or fact of destroying or being destroyed,” such as when a fire reduces something to ashes. Following these nominal uses in English, the verb *consume* was coined almost immediately to mean, first, to destroy something physically, and shortly thereafter, in its intransitive form, “to eat or drink; to ingest” specifically and to use or exploit resources more generally, and, in its transitive form, to spend (for example, money), especially wastefully, and to squander (for example, goods), as well as to “engage the full attention or energy of (a person).” Linked, then, from its beginnings as an English word to the body, the market, and forms of response, and associated simultaneously

or alternately with necessity, engagement, disease, destruction, and waste, *consumption* has never been a simple idea.

Its complications persist. In the introduction to *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Consumption*—a thirty-four-chapter, 695-page overview, published in 2012, of the state of scholarly study in the field—Frank Trentmann defines the contemporary study of consumption as including questions about “[t]he acquisition, use, and waste of things, taste and desire” (1); as “a major point of interface” between history and such disciplines as anthropology, sociology, and geography, “stimulating new directions in cultural, global, and material history” (2); and as a prompt to historians, including historians of the present, “to think about the production, representation, and circulation of things, and about the nature of symbolic communication, material practices, and identity formations” (2). Given all of this, Trentmann’s

opening assertion—that “[c]onsumption is a mirror of the human condition” (1)—does not seem to be an overreaching claim.

Eating has been said to be “the prototype” of consumption, as Alan Warde observes in his chapter in Trentmann’s volume (377), the first instance from which other kinds of consumption are derived. There are some senses in which this would seem obviously to be true. Standard anthropological accounts of the long history of the development of human societies, for example, focus on the transitions in food sources available to those societies, with forager or hunter-gatherer groups displaying social organizations distinctly different from those of agricultural groups. In *The Raw and the Cooked*, Claude Lévi-Strauss famously argues that cooking food is the means by which humans first distinguish themselves from other animals and begin to manufacture culture: “not only does cooking mark the transition from nature to culture, but through it and by means of it, the human state can be defined with all its attributes” (164). While he maintains that the categorization of food as raw, cooked, or rotten is basic to all human cuisines (and metaphorically extended to other social activities), what is assigned to each of these categories varies from culture to culture. Once established, however, “culinary traditions remain recognizable over centuries,” according to food researchers, with “eating habits . . . among the most resistant to change” and

“food behaviours . . . among the last to be abandoned by migrants” (Warde 376–77).

The complex commitments of groups to particular food and eating behaviours are noted by Roland Barthes in “Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption” when he proposes that food is not only a source of nutrition but also “a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations, and behavior” that can be “read” for its semiotic codes as many other everyday practices can be (29).<sup>1</sup> In *Mythologies*, published before the essay on method, Barthes performs such readings of wine and milk, steak and chips, and ornamental cookery, refusing to accept the “falsely obvious” notions of his society (11) and demonstrating that food can be read in relation to national imaginaries, capitalist systems of production, morphological structures of language, temporal organization, and the display of class identities, among other protocols and systems. In *Distinction*, his detailed analysis of the principles of class differentiation in France, Pierre Bourdieu observes that “[t]aste is the practical operator of the transmutation of things into distinct and distinctive signs” (174), and, for that reason, he begins his excursus on taste with a consideration of “the field of primary tastes” or “the realm of food” consumption (177).

If food and eating behaviours are key markers of a culture, clearly they will be important behaviours

to teach to the young of a community. Learning what to eat, when to eat, how to eat, and with whom to eat are likely to be among the core cultural competencies group members need in order to demonstrate their belonging. Texts directed to children are an “underutilized source of historically relevant information” about such details of “everyday life” as food and eating behaviours, according to Carolyn Daniel (1). In *Voracious Children: Who Eats Whom in Children’s Literature*, Daniel focuses on the ways in which English-language texts of children’s literature feed into the ideological structures of their societies by teaching children “how to be human” (12) within the terms of their culture: “it is vital, for the sake of individual and social order,” she observes, “that every human subject literally embodies culture” (4).

As Daniel implies, signifying belonging is an aspect of the social function of food, but the potency of that signification nevertheless is a consequence of its physiological function. Water, food, and excretion are three of the needs that form the first and most fundamental of the strata of A. H. Maslow’s “hierarchy” of needs (97), for example, upon which all other needs that must be met for humans to flourish are built. Meeting these basic needs is a primary obligation of adults to children: the inability or refusal of parents to provide children with food, for example, typically is a trigger for the intervention of the state in developed societies. The close association of well-fed children

with a well-functioning society also means that children’s bodies are understood to register the health of their families and larger communities. Children with food allergies, anorexic and bulimic children, and fat children are figures that are read as symptoms of failed families, degraded environments, and/or a diseased civilization. For example, in a recent set of articles entitled “Fit to Learn” and published by the *Globe and Mail* in Toronto—articles also cited by Lauren Bosc in her review article in this issue—Tamara Baluja and Kate Hammer assert that “child obesity [is] a growing national problem,” implying an obvious connection between the size of children’s bodies and the condition of the nation.

“[A] mission to respond to public anxieties about food consumption” defines much of the recent research in food studies, according to Warde, notably including studies of the implications of “the destructuring of meal arrangements” and of “the system of industrial manufacture of food” (379). This industrial system is the target of various movements, among them youth movements, that seek to make visible the politics of food. Dylan Clark, for example, argues that “eating is a cauldron for the domination of states, genders, and ideologies and the practice through which these discourses are often resisted” in the opening to his analysis of punk cuisine, specifically his study of “an assortment of young adults who exercised and debated punk praxis in and through the premises” of the Black



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Cat Café in Seattle during the 1990s (19). Believing that “industrial food fills a person’s body with the norms, rationale, and moral pollution of corporate-capitalism and imperialism” (19), these punks sought food that was not “processed, sterilized, brand-named, and fetishized” (25)—or “cooked,” in Lévi-Strauss’s terms—and closer to the “raw” and “rotten” poles of normative American food culture. “From a punk perspective,” Clark comments, “American food has reached an unprecedented and remarkable state: nearly all of the food that nearly all Americans eat is received in the form of a commodity” (25). It is a commodity not only in the Marxist sense that the social relations and the condition and extent of human labour involved in its production are concealed, but also in that the recognizable body parts of animals used in producing food are concealed, with the commodification of food most apparent in the fetishization of the clean within the industry.

In this analysis, food in contemporary North American society—and in societies of abundance more generally—has become part of a consumer identity driven by individual choice, so that food and eating behaviours are not materially separable from other kinds of commodities, consumption practices, and everyday behaviours. Alissa Quart, for example, quotes the text of a controversial McDonald’s ad featuring a baby that reminded parents that “[t]here will be a first step, a first word and, of course, a first French fry” in an attempt to solicit their business (xii). Indeed, fast-food corporations often bundle meals targeted to children with toys as a way to build brand loyalty with consumers from a very young age. In studies of children’s and youth cultures, however, *consumer culture* frequently is taken first to mean the plethora of toys, dolls, games, books, films, and digital devices that can be purchased by

or for young people, as well as the marketing texts and cultural sites and events that surround, support, and extend the purchase of these commodities.

Like the punks who analyze industrial foodways, many commentators assume that participating in consumer culture immerses young people in the norms, the reasoning, and the morality typical of corporate capitalism. Quart's condemnation of the "dangerous consequences of our current materialism" for teenagers (xiv) is one example of this point of view:

Today's teens are victims of the contemporary luxury economy. They have grown up in the age of the brand, bombarded and defined by name products and intrusive and clever advertising strategies. Raised by a commodity culture from the cradle, teens['] dependably fragile self-images and their need to belong to groups are perfect qualities for advertisers to exploit. (xii)

Quart's emphasis on the exploitive techniques of advertisers marks her study as framed by the approach to consumption described by Trentmann as being concerned with "the production and manipulation of taste and lifestyle in capitalist society" (Introduction 9). Associated with the Frankfurt School of Social Research, the critique of the advertising industry was made most forcefully by Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, as Trentmann

notes (Introduction 10). Consumer culture was a "mass deception" in Horkheimer and Adorno's view (94) and was associated with the diffusion of bourgeois values across society, the fabrication of false needs through advertising, the standardization of cultural products, and the destruction of "the faculty for critical thought and civic action" (Trentmann, Introduction 11). The principle of the culture industry was self-replication, Horkheimer and Adorno claimed, requiring not only that "all needs should be presented to individuals as capable of fulfillment by the culture industry," but also that those needs be "so set up in advance that individuals experience themselves through their needs only as eternal consumers, as the culture industry's object" (113). Published during the Second World War while Horkheimer and Adorno were in exile from Germany and living in the United States, their critique "seemed to bear out the affinity between mass consumption and totalitarian politics" and provided this analysis with considerable "public appeal and urgency," according to Trentmann (Introduction 10).

In the field of study of young people's cultures, the critique of consumer culture has a long history, with many influential critics pointing to the ways in which mass-marketed texts and other cultural commodities consumed by young readers and viewers feed their desire to experience ever more of the same and blunt their ability to think critically about the dominant values of their society. Popular series texts directed

to children, for example, have long been “scorned” on these grounds, as several of the essays in Lydia Cushman Schurman and Deidre Johnson’s volume on the history and criticism of mass-produced children’s fiction in the United States demonstrate. Schurman and Johnson suggest in their introduction to the volume that the mass production of print texts made possible by mechanization was associated from its beginnings in the nineteenth century with commodification, conventionality, standardized formats, formulaic plots and underdeveloped characters, speed and carelessness on the part of both writers and readers, ephemerality (“easy to buy, easy to discard” [xiii]), and the general “brutalization” of society. Much scholarly critique of the Disney empire proceeds from similar assumptions. In their introduction to a collection of essays deconstructing “Disney’s Magic Kingdom,” for example, Susan Hines and Brenda Ayres argue that Disney’s animated feature films stand at “the very heart” of its strategies for “ideological hegemony and capitalist expansion” (3): the hegemonic designs of the corporation are taken for granted. In Henry A. Giroux’s view, the Disney enterprise “points to the ways in which corporate culture uses its power as an educational force to define the relationship between childhood and innocence, citizenship and consumption, civic values and commercial values” (19–20). The commercial success of Disney, he contends, suggests the pervasiveness in contemporary

American society of “a market logic that provides neither a context for moral considerations nor a language for defending vital social institutions and policies as a public good” (20). Simply put, the power of corporations to produce and distribute commercial culture and its values often seems to social and cultural commentators as too immense or overwhelming to be resisted by young people successfully. The sense of immensity is exacerbated under contemporary conditions of world trade: Paolo Capuzzo notes, for example, that “global branding,” “global commercial infrastructures and cultural industries,” and global communication tools extend the reach and the effectiveness of corporate “material and symbolic production systems” that target the young (616).

Indeed, young people have been seen as central to consolidating consumer culture in the twentieth century by a number of scholars, as Daniel Thomas Cook notes in his overview of the scholarship on children’s consumption practices in Trentmann’s volume. For example, Lisa Jacobson argues, in Cook’s words, that “[i]t is ultimately the power of advertising to ‘imagine’ children as consumers and ‘imagine’ the consuming household that helps to usher in a new social order based on consumption” in the 1920s and 1930s (Cook 593). Gary Cross, according to Cook, maintains that middle-class parents, longing nostalgically for their own lost childhoods “in the face of social change” during the century, attempt to

summon the “wondrous child” through “Christmas, Halloween, and other rituals” defined through gift giving and other consumption practices (Cook 591). Other scholars, including Cook himself, have demonstrated that such forms of childhood as the adolescent, the teenager, the toddler, and the tween arose during the twentieth century “as both named phases of the early life course and as marketing/merchandising categories” in trade journals, catalogues, and department stores (587). In this way, Cook concludes, “[m]arket recognition” can be said to have “had a hand in creating some of the categories, transitions, and perhaps emergent meanings of childhood itself” (594). Natalie Coulter pushes this conclusion still further in her recent book *Tweening the Girl: The Crystallization of the Tween Market*. Capitalism survives, she observes, by “finding new areas to colonize,” because colonization “provides an outlet for overproduction.” The new stages of youth installed during the twentieth century have provided such outlets, all of which are, in turn, “consolidated and produced as lucrative market segments, customers, and audiences” (17).

Coulter understands the tween, the focus of her analysis, as “a commercial persona,” a descriptor she borrows from Cook, in the sense that the tween is “a social construction of a girl consumer that has been discursively situated” by the institutions of both consumer culture and media culture “as a way to define, explain and sell the market to stakeholders”

(4). She also points out, however, that a commercial persona cannot take hold if individuals do not “buy into it” (26). In the case of the tween, the figure succeeds not only because “she sells the [market] segment,” but also because “she explains the cohort” to the public and “provides resources of subjectivity for girls growing up” (26). In this sense, the tween cannot be seen only as a victimized consumer or an inauthentic identity but must be understood also as a position produced in part by girls themselves. This view, that young people operate “somewhere between the self-made and the industry initiated” in their cultural transactions and interactions (Jones 442), is commonly identified with such commentators as Henry Jenkins and with the theorization of participatory fan culture in the Web 2.0 era. Leisha Jones adopts the portmanteau term prosumer to name this figure that straddles the categories of producer/provider/professional and consumer in the realm of fangirl culture: while prosumption “requires the production of new texts,” these are texts based upon engagements with an originating text (439). Nevertheless, Jones argues, prosumer culture—in which “girls *enculture* and produce one another, actualizing one or any number of selves online” (439)—sponsors new forms of collective intelligence and distributed subjectivities.

Prosumption is a relatively recent coinage as a word, but is not, perhaps, a recent practice. In his chapter on youth and consumption in Trentmann’s

compendium, Capuzzo documents a series of historical moments during which teenagers took up new technologies and media texts and, through their consumption practices, not only produced themselves as recognizable subcultures but also shaped social spaces and cultural trajectories. One of his examples is jazz: a 1917 American recording touched off a dance hall phenomenon associated with such commodities as cigarettes and cosmetics, specific styles of clothing and haircuts, and such recognizable identities as the flapper. Disseminated through film, the new style and identity were circulated “across social classes” and internationally (607). An example such as this demonstrates, Capuzzo proposes, that the expressive practices of young people and “the semiotic production of a commercial sphere are inevitably intertwined in historical processes” (602).

The essays in this special themed issue of *Jeunesse* explore a number of the complications inherent in the idea of consumption. The first three articles explore the discourses of food in young adult fiction. Beppie Keane draws on Carol J. Adams’s observations about the semiotic relation of meat and masculinity—a theoretical context also used by Clark in his analysis of punk veganism—to consider the meaning of eating meat in Michael Logan’s zombie satire *Apocalypse Cow* and Scott Westerfeld’s pseudo-vampire novel *Peeps*. Both authors, Keane concludes, use “vegetarian interruptions” to interrogate the sustainability of

conventional models of masculinity. Jamie Tsai sets two YA novels with affluent white girls as central protagonists—Meg Rosoff’s *How I Live Now* and Laurie Halse Anderson’s *Wintergirls*—beside sociological analyses of anorexia to consider what it means when girls who live in societies of abundance refuse to eat. Her exploration reveals the extent to which these girls’ bodies are commonly understood as texts that speak about the health of their families and their society. Read in relation to one another, Keane’s and Tsai’s essays make visible the implication of such bodily responses as hunger and disgust in gender politics.

Kara K. Keeling and Scott Pollard, in their article about two of Polly Horvath’s novels, argue that Horvath resists the conventional association in children’s literature of comfort food with nostalgic constructions of childhood. Keeling and Pollard demonstrate that Horvath not only represents comfort food as a pleasure for the child in the moment of consumption but also as a product that the child must help to cook. Notably, Horvath populates her novel with adult mentors who grow and prepare their own food “from scratch.”

In her article about *Charlotte’s Web*, Gabrielle Ceraldi argues that E. B. White’s mid-twentieth-century novel documents the emergence of American consumer society and the “culture of personality” that accompanied it. White both acknowledges the need for the confident self-promotion that consumer



society requires, Ceraldi maintains, and proposes that the residual “culture of character” can be a resource for the amelioration of the social consequences of the competitive excesses of modern life.

Beginning with an overview of the contemporary context in which children play out their stories in virtual, digital worlds, Eric M. Meyers, Julia P. McKnight, and Lindsey M. Krabbenhoft examine three “moments” in the history of the remediations of the character Tinker Bell as evidence for their contention that there is a reflexive relation between the development of media forms and social constructions of childhood. Their long view allows them to complicate contemporary views of participatory culture. Specifically, they argue that, as children’s media evolve in ways that afford increased potential for children to exercise agency, commercial applications move to structure children’s access and participation.

Also beginning from the assumption that media platforms and social practices are mutually constitutive, Sidneyeve Matrix documents teenagers’ commentaries about the recent phenomenon of on-demand media engagement. While mass media reportage about the Netflix effect takes up the language of moral panic—and the metaphors of disordered eating—teenagers themselves, she finds, focus on the possibilities of social connections fostered by the new format and the opportunities to enjoy commercial-free, high-quality content.

The final article in this issue, by Christie Barber, moves away from the focus on North American and British texts to consider three Japanese films for young people about makeovers. These films demonstrate clearly the role that consumption plays in the construction of the self in contemporary developed societies. Indeed, the films might be said to code the transformation-through-consumption practices of makeovers as morally good because the female protagonists in the films find meaningful roles in their post-makeover lives. Barber remains uneasy, however, about the conclusions she sees the films drawing: in her conclusion, she points to the problematic and unequal gender relations—young girls being remade at the direction of men—on which the films are premised.

The two review essays in this issue return to the motif of food in children’s texts. Jenny Wills reviews Jennifer Ann Ho’s study *Consumption and Identity in Asian American Coming-of-Age Novels*. Like the food researchers Warde summarizes, Ho is interested in food behaviours as identity practices. Wills tests the usefulness of Ho’s categorization of the representations of food consumption in Asian American literature for an understanding of the representations of young people of Asian ancestry in Canadian texts. Lauren Bosc reads two Canadian picture books for children about growing food within the context of the general public anxiety about “obese” children. Borrowing the frame of

fatness studies, Bosc demonstrates that these cheerful books about healthy food choices implicitly condemn fat children not only as irresponsible eaters but also as careless about the future they represent.

A recurring question in studies of young people and consumption is the extent to which young people can and do exercise agency as consumers. Academic discourses about young people's creation and exchange of content on the web are among the most optimistic on this question. Lev Manovich suggests, in fact, that these critics tend to "celebrat[e] user-generated content and implicitly equat[e] *user-generated and progressive*" (321). He proposes that critics might rethink this equation, pointing out that the "web 2.0 paradigm" represents a "dramatic reconfiguration" (324) of the relationship between Michel de Certeau's categories of

"strategies"—the institutional rules and official maps that attempt to determine the path individuals must follow—and "tactics"—"the ways in which individuals negotiate strategies that were set out for them" (322). In the era of participatory media, Manovich observes, many "born-digital industries and media" are "explicitly designed to be customized by users" (323): "The logic of tactics has now become the logic of strategies" (324). Does this mean, he asks, that twenty-first-century media "constitute a further stage in the development of the culture industry as analyzed by Adorno and Horkheimer" (321)? Or will the global exchanges and collaborations promoted by Web 2.0 culture and the "innovation," "energy," and "unpredictability" of Web 2.0 culture itself (331) yet result in the emergence of real challenges and changes?

## Note

<sup>1</sup> Kara K. Keeling and Scott T. Pollard pointed me to this essay by Barthes in the introduction to their volume.

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