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The Intricacies of M.F.K. Fisher: Discovering a Kaleidoscopic Hybridity

Abstract

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Document Type

Thesis

Degree Name

M.A.

Department

English

First Advisor

Clark Davis, Ph.D.

Second Advisor

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Third Advisor

Lawrence Conyers

Keywords

American women writers, Feminism, Genre theory, Hybridity, Memoir, M.F.K. Fisher

Subject Categories

English Language and Literature | Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies

Publication Statement

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THE INTRICACIES OF M.F.K. FISHER:
DISCOVERING A KALEIDOSCOPIC HYBRIDITY

A Thesis
Presented to
the Faculty of Arts and Humanities
University of Denver

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of English

by
Elizabeth Lee Sleeper
June 2011
Advisor: Clark Davis

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Introduction

Mary Francis Kennedy Fisher, author of such well known books as *Serve it Forth*, *Consider the Oyster*, *Gastronomical Me*, and *Alphabet for Gourmets*, was a prolific writer for almost six decades, whose craft has only recently been venerated by the literary community. Most scholars and critics consider Fisher a food writer and believe that she pioneered a new genre, the food-memoir. Needless to say, Fisher's literary gastronomic contributions generated an American appreciation of food. Few scholars, however, examine Fisher's work beyond her sensuous descriptions of food; but those who do, find a deeper appreciation for her writing. M.F.K. Fisher's ability to amalgamate poetry and prose, fiction and non-fiction, travel, gastronomy, history, and theory all into one text has captured the attention of many, but not enough, readers. Her readership may increase if her work is liberated from categorical constraints, like food writing, and we begin to read her through a new lens, possibly a "kaleidoscopic" one (Reardon xiii). Fisher's biographer, Joan Reardon, points out that Fisher's "art was kaleidoscopic—the same words telling different stories, the same story told with different words" (xiii). Fisher uses language or "the same words" to tell the stories of others, stories of places, in addition to her thoughts and feelings in a multitude of ways. She simultaneously tells "the same story," or the stories of her past, in different ways—with "different words." But before

we can investigate this idea of the “kaleidoscopic,” we need to understand hybridity and the way it functions in literature.

The idea of multiplicity, the combining of parts like the pieces of a kaleidoscope, to make something bigger, grander, more beautiful, is not new. And maybe it would be best explained through one of Fisher’s favorite metaphors, food. Consider food as a discourse, and cooking/consuming as participation within that discourse. One does not make a meal with just starches, or vegetables, or meat. And hardly does one ever make or eat an item without the combination of another substance with it. Does anyone eat just bread without garlic, or butter, or chocolate? Does anyone eat a tomato alone without an accompanying piece of cheese, basil, or a dash of salt? Similarly, writing within one theme, genre, or style can be equally as bland as a plain tomato and can lack the enigmatic quality that makes the reader (or eater) pause and ask, “What’s in this?” However, a text like Fisher’s which has amalgamated genres, styles, and discourses, is often a site of resonance and satisfaction. Combinations and mixtures of disparate categories may make food, life, and literature more enjoyable and exciting—it doesn’t always work, but the effort is always worth noting.

The effort worth noting may be described as multifaceted—demonstrating a kind of hybridity. Hybrid is a term used to describe a combining or mixture of two or more things. The first recorded use was in 1601 in *Pliny’s Historie of the World*; for centuries the term was used to describe the cross breeding between two distinct animal or plant species (*OED*). Often used in cultural terms, hybrid can refer to a type of identity, a person or thing that identifies with more than one set of social conventions. Postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha defines hybridity as an “object that is new, neither the one nor the

other” (2385). Moreover, the hybrid subject is the formation of a “new” culture: belonging to “neither the one or the other” cultures that comprise it. However, hybridity may be easier to describe by highlighting what it is not. In terms of literature, hybridity is not in any way a singular category or genre; it does not have any static defining characteristics (which makes it hard to compare one hybrid text to another). Mark Wallace, in his essay “Against Unity,” defines literary hybridity. He states, “In literature, the hybrid distorts the normal unifying marks of many literary concepts. Genre, technique, tradition, or the identifying marks of a movement or school: in the hybrid, all these things are subject to mismatching and deforming” (121). He also writes about literary hybridity in his article “Toward a Free Multiplicity of Form,” when he proposes that poets, or in this case writers, “work in multiple and intersecting forms, mixing and reshaping forms from a variety of traditions to fit the needs of their poetry [or prose] at a given moment” (196). This theory of how literary hybrid writers work corresponds to what Reardon is trying to describe when she labeled Fisher’s craft as “kaleidoscopic.” The action of “mixing and reshaping” in order “to fit the needs” of the writer is similar to Reardon’s idea that Fisher engages in various techniques, like telling “the same old story using different words.” Whether Fisher participated in hybrid writing consciously is something I doubt since this notion of literary hybridity seems to be a newly coined term. However, that does not detract from the multidimensional quality of Fisher’s texts. Therefore, literary hybridity seems to be the best newly developed way of understanding Fisher’s work.

Fisher’s writing has a multifaceted quality which indicates that her literary value goes beyond food/gastronomical prose. The notion of a kaleidoscopic hybridity can be

used as a critical lens through which to analyze her work. Now, within any given text of Fisher's we can discern a hybridity of genres, a hybridity of styles, and of forms. And because her prose exhibits a multitude of disparate genres, styles, discourses, and theories, it therefore functions as a kaleidoscope would. The word 'kaleidoscope' is comprised of three Greek root words: the first is *kalos*, meaning beautiful, the second is *eidos*, meaning form, and the third Greek word is *skopein*, meaning "an instrument for seeing or observing." (*Webster's* 351, 572) Therefore, the kaleidoscope is an instrument we can use to observe beautiful forms. When we think of a kaleidoscope, we envision a long tube, a peep hole, and at the other end tiny colorful pieces that are shifted around and make a seemingly unified picture with the help of strategically placed mirrors. But please keep in mind that I am using the term "kaleidoscopic" in a very specific metaphoric sense. I am using it as a tool of vision and the nature of its function is twofold: firstly, like pieces in a kaleidoscope, texts are comprised of multiple pieces to make the whole and therefore readings may become fragmented; secondly, and maybe most importantly, the kaleidoscope moves and shifts the pieces around. Each person has the ability to create this movement, view a new picture, and effectually "read" the pieces in different ways. The reader or critic has the power to focus on one of the parts in the center (whether themes, a hybrid compound, or a specific metaphor) or they have the option to take in the magnificence of the whole. The pieces are never removed from the kaleidoscope, nor are new ones added. Similarly, the material we analyze never changes. Yet, how are new meanings extracted from the text? The answer lies with the reader. The reader brings their own perspective, bias, and experiences to the text which alters the interpretation of it. The readings of Fisher's texts discussed in this thesis are in effect, my

interpretation of them. I am not claiming that it is the right way to analyze her work (generally, in the literary field, probing the individual components of a text has proven to yield fruitful critical inquiries), but simply that it is another way. Through the kaleidoscope metaphor, we can discern the ways in which Fisher's texts are fragmented—they are composed of various disparate pieces. The pieces form and compose a reading (for instance, Fisher's texts are genre hybrids). The kaleidoscope turns, it shifts the pieces around and a new reading is discerned (for instance, now we perceive Fisher's hybrid voice). If we use this notion of a shifting 'kaleidoscopic' hybridity, Fisher's texts will be illuminated with new meaning and we will no longer be left the dark trying to concretely categorize texts that by nature resist definition.

Context

Mary Francis Kennedy was born on July 3rd, 1908. The predominant portion of her upbringing was in a Quaker town named Whittier, California. Some of her early education consisted of a boarding school in La Jolla and one term at Illinois College. These biographical facts are an important backdrop for setting up the standards and social traditions of women to which Fisher was held, and which she tries to undermine in her writing. But despite the limited successful attempts to do so, Fisher's silences and obscurities may be attributed to early twentieth century female gender constructions and social status. Society constructed female identities through multiple modes of literature like magazine articles, manuals, newspaper ads, and political propaganda. Martha J. Cutter, author of *Unruly Tongue: Identity and Voice in American Women's Writing, 1850-1930*, says that the cult of domesticity appropriated women's role in society as a

“True Woman.” She states, “Women’s voices were to parallel the attributes of the cult of domesticity itself: to be passive, submissive, domestic, and self-denying” (xv). Furthermore, Cutter says that manuals were produced to instruct women on how to behave in public, how to raise children, and how to obey one’s husband (4). These manuals helped to construct gender roles. Through them, “women’s lives are defined through their love of others and spurred by relational, internal, and selfless goals. Men’s lives, on the other hand, are defined through autonomous, external goals such as search for fame, career, gold, or a wife” (Cutter 5). The manuals therefore helped to engrain the linkage between female identity and its “relational” status to a woman’s father, husband, and children. In addition to literature, formal and familial education reinforced constructions of female identity. For example, her all-girl boarding school encourages “Simplicity. Serenity. and Sincerity” in its motto (Reardon 28). Not only does this motto underpin the school’s expectations of its pupils’ behavior, but it implies a collective commonality in “simplicity,” silence in “serenity,” and purity in “sincerity.” The school fortified this motto by enforcing a dress code that was considered appropriate for young ladies. It was only during festivals, earthy celebrations, and outings to the beach that they were allowed to venture out wearing their “full pleated gym bloomers and *no stockings*” (GM 23).

While literature and educational institutions constructed female identity through enforcing social codes of public behavior, personal relationships, and attire, in time, (partly as a result of industrialization, urbanization, and suffrage), the construction of women’s identity began to change (Cutter 15). In the 1920s and 1930s, opportunities to work outside the home increased, and the number of women educated at the collegiate

level also increased in profound numbers (Chafe 89). This cultural change gave Fisher opportunities that her mother never had, and it enabled her to attend Illinois College, if even only for one term. But, despite these new opportunities, women were restricted to “female” occupations like nursing and teaching and were paid less than men (Chafe 90). Consequently, the new professional opportunities engendered a new identity for women: the “New Woman” (as opposed to the “True Woman”). Cutter purposes that “the most crucial feature of New Womanhood was the recognition of woman’s right to an autonomous selfhood” (xv). The freedom of the twenties, the frivolity, flappers, sexual discussions, and premarital sex contributed to the construction of the New Woman. Fisher demonstrates this freedom when she describes a scene at Illinois College:

Now and then one or another of us would get up, go to a window and open it, bare her little breasts to the cold sweep of the air, and intone dramatically, ‘Pneu-mo-o-o-onia!’ Then we would all burst into completely helpless giggles, until we had laughed enough to hold a little more lettuce. (*GM* 39)

The way Fisher and her friends “bare [their] little breasts” out of the window and their ensuing “helpless giggles” demonstrate this attitude of sexual freedom and frivolity of the twenties.

Although this new identity offered an alternative to the socially repressive one that was encouraged in the past, it was not met without criticism. The New Woman was described as “Monstrous. Titanic. Hideous. Revolting. Rebellious. Screeching. Shrieking. Shrill. Extraneous. Odd. Queer. Mannish. Sexless. Oversexed. Undersexed. Indecent. Abnormal. Disobedient. Self-Centered. Self-Assertive. Self-Defined. Immoderate. Excessive. Wild” (Cutter 14). Society then tried to redefine women’s identity through more propaganda about the values of domesticity and the dangers of being a New

Woman. William Henry Chafe, author of *The American Woman; Her Changing Social, Economic, and Political Roles, 1920-1970*, notes, “Women’s magazines urged their readers to return to femininity and constructed an elaborate ideology in support of the home and marriage to facilitate the process” (105). The freedom of the twenties and of the New Woman came to an end, even if temporarily, to make way for the austere thirties.

The thirties brought traditional gender roles back into focus. The depression hit, and the number of jobs available and PhDs granted to women declined (Chafe 91). The public disapproved of married women leaving the home and working. This was when Fisher left the United States for France to live there with her first husband, Al Fisher. She did not move to intentionally escape the stifling social air of the United States but to follow her husband as he pursued his doctorate in Dijon, France. The fact that she moved across the globe, away from all the support of her friends and her family, however, shows that she was adhering to one of the main tenants of the traditional female role: obeying one’s husband. In *Gastronomical Me*, Fisher portrays this period of her life enacting the role of the dutiful housewife:

While Al was blissfully submerging himself in the warm safe bath of University life, filling out scholarly questionnaires and choosing his own library corner for writing (which he soon exchanged for a quiet table at the Café de Paris), I hopped in and out of fiacres looking for a flat to live in. (53)

In France, Al played the typical male role, that of the academic and the provider. Fisher on the other hand, was in charge of the domestic sphere, responsible for securing their lodgings for the next three years. Al wrote, worked on his thesis, and attended lectures during their stay in France, and Fisher took a couple of classes, but spent most of her time

waiting for her husband to return home. Even toward the end of their life in France, it seems as though not much had changed. Reardon reports that “Larry remembered that [Fisher] usually sat knitting while he and Al read their work to each other. For the moment, [Fisher] chose to limit herself to the role of Al’s reader and critic” (PA 57). Although she could have offered to read her own work to Al and Larry (in France she started a “thriller”), M.F.K. Fisher chose to be the True Woman Cutter describes: “passive, submissive, domestic, and self-denying” (xv). Elaine Showalter, author of *Jury of Her Peers*, observes that “while tensions in [women’s] personal lives led to divorce and breakdowns, the divisions in their writing selves produced writing blocks, silences, and many unfinished or unpublished books” (337). “Silences,” “writing blocks,” and “unpublished books” were common in Fisher’s early career. For example, when she lived in Germany with her first husband Al, she was the unhappiest she had ever been. Fisher’s writing froze to a standstill because she was constantly alone, cold, and starving for attention. She explains in *GM*, “I tried to write... I think then I decided, with mistaken smugness that I could turn out a much better shilling-shocker than many already in print... but my hands and my head were too cold” (115). The ellipses are the silences. Why were her writing attempts unsuccessful? Did the loneliness factor into the coldness? Even if the stifling of her creative process was attributed to the temperature rather than to her emotional breakdown that she describes further on in that scene, or to her growing dissatisfaction with her marriage, Fisher had yet to publish anything. She did not publish until 1937, almost five years later.

Two major factors affected women’s writing: the contemporary literary movements in the universities and World War II both bolstered and abated women’s

attempts to enter and have a voice in the literary world. The first, literary movements in the university culture, eventually paved way for women writers to enter into the discourse. But it took a while to get there. In the late 1800s, literary authorship had taken on a façade of seriousness:

The literary ‘author’ became recognizable as an identifiable social figure whose ‘genius’ and presumed endurance was constituted in opposition to the supposed commercialism of hacks and lady writers and to the purported technicism and obsessional specializations of university-based academics. (Radway 198-99)

This distinction between the “author” as “genius” and the rest of the writers, whether academic, female, or ethnic, created a literary dichotomy between what was considered “low” and “high” brow. Then, in the wake of modernism, publishers like Alfred Knopf, “were willing to publish avant-garde and experimental fiction as well as non fiction that took on difficult issues of the moment, whether social, political, or cultural” (Radway 221). These modern writers paved the way for women and ethnic writers to enter the scene by introducing new diverse perspectives. However, their work did not solve the problem of elitism in the literary field. In fact, their work fractured the field even more than the high and low art dichotomy because their work was so difficult to read, and only the most learned and “culturally informed” could understand it (Radway 223).

When New Criticism entered the scene in the thirties and forties, critical emphasis shifted from value to the interpretation of meaning (Radway 223). Janice Radway contends that this movement led to the inclusion of women, ethnic, working class, and socialist writers to contribute to the definition of what is literary. In contrast, Showalter maintains that “The rise of New Criticism in the academy also had the effect of marginalizing women’s writing” (*Jury* 366). This was because critics paid “strict

attention to the text itself, rather than the historical or biographical context” (*Jury* 366-67). Based on the research outlined above, it seems that Showalter is more accurate in her historical reading. The majority of women writers have been historically excluded from the literary field, and their public as well as their private lives affected their writing process. It seems illogical to exclude history and biography from the critical analysis of their work. For example, it is difficult to separate Fisher’s life from her work because the majority of her writing is autobiographical in content. Furthermore, America’s social history impacted her work and its reception dramatically (as I am trying to prove here). Needless to say, New Criticism was not the open door that would allow women’s writing to be worthy of consideration.

The second event, World War II, seemed to offer the opportunity women needed to enter into the professional world. Showalter notes, “The years 1941-1945 gave women the opportunities to work outside the home, and gave them the psychological and social encouragement to do so” (*Jury* 387). With the men abroad fighting in the war, women were needed in all kinds of jobs from manufacturing to newspaper reporting. Women felt empowered because developments like the paperback book made publishing and the dissemination of their material easier. Furthermore, females were characterized as “headstrong, beautiful, and resilient” in novels. From these developments, women had the “psychological and social encouragement” to continue to produce literary work (Showalter 385). This social climate was, for Fisher, her most productive period. Some critics even propose that it was the zenith of her career. Divorced and widowed, Fisher went on to publish her most popular books in just three years including *Consider the Oyster* (1941), *How to Cook a Wolf* (1942), and *Gastronomical Me* (1943). She was also

working on numerous other projects that she published in subsequent years like *Here Let Us Feast: A Book of Banquets* (1946), *Not Now But Now* (1947), and *Alphabet for Gourmets* (1949). It seems as though the changing roles of women during these years had a productive impact on Fisher's life. But after the war ended, the men returned home and the majority of society felt that it was time for women to return to their previous domestic roles (Chafe 176). Chafe notes, "Magazines were full of articles which revived Shibboleths about women's inferiority and questioned the ability of females to compete with men" (177). And Showalter points out, women rarely published writing that was not targeted for this audience immediately after the war. Fisher's *Here Let Us Feast: A Book of Banquets* and *An Alphabet for Gourmets* are good examples of the domesticating titles that followed the war. The reappropriation of female identity into the domestic sphere by society may hint that these roles never really ceased. It may prove that in times of crisis, society is willing to put up with even the most "extreme" ideas if they enable survival. Chafe explains that "women working represented a threat to the cohesion and sanity of social life. It might be tolerated as a temporary necessity, but not as a permanent reality" (150). Even though women's writing may reflect a regression into domesticity in their silences, obliqueness, and passivity, it was just the calm before the storm. The taste of autonomy, however short lived, planted the seed that would lead to a full-fledged movement years later.

Now that we understand the dynamics of what I would like formally to call 'kaleidoscopic' hybridity, in addition to the context in which Fisher wrote, we may be able to understand one of the problems I am trying to address: Fisher has been miscategorized as a food writer. The critics who categorize her as such seem lost in her

highly metaphoric and enigmatic texts searching in the dark for meaning. On the surface level, it is easy to spot her affinity for food, and not just any food, but good food. It is easy to perceive her “pleasures of the table” (Reardon). Critics’ food analyses range from describing Fisher’s attempt to narrate a gastronomic *bildungsroman* to guidebooks on how simultaneously to eat simply *and* sumptuously, as well as investigate the uses of food as metaphor. Fisher critics like Julie Campbell (“M. F. K. Fisher and the Embodiment of Desire: A Study in Autobiography and Food as Metaphor”), Susan Derwin (“The Poetics of M.F.K. Fisher”), and Max Rudin (“M.F.K. Fisher and the Consolations of Food”) for instance, have found Fisher’s texts to be laden with metaphors: food describes the love, loss, and desire in her life. Reardon asserts this theory as well in her statement that Fisher uses “the same words telling different stories.” The “same words” are the constant references to food and the enjoyment of eating, and the “different stories” are the events and feelings she writes about. Biographical information is key to unlocking the food metaphors in her work for some critics. David Lazar’s “The Useable Past of M.F.K. Fisher: An Essay on Projects,” Elizabeth Moulton’s “M.F.K. Fisher 1908-1992,” as well as Rudin’s essay, have a biographical focus whose goal seems to pay tribute to Fisher as a food writing pioneer, to commemorate her sensuous gastronomic descriptions, as well as to offer opinions about her metaphors and their meanings. Despite the seemingly prolific amount of food/biographic criticism, scholarship dedicated to the work of M.F.K. Fisher is wanting. The food/bibliographic methodology comprises the majority of what little criticism exists. This may hint at a difficulty to move past the descriptions of food. On the other hand, it may prove that her

texts are multifaceted and that it takes something else to illuminate the crux of her writing.

Few critics have dared to delve into the courses Fisher serves or have the audacity to look what's under the table or even to peek inside the kitchen. Under the dish, under the table, and behind those doors lie very personal narratives and beautifully intriguing insights. But without a social and cultural context, that is what they remain. When one superimposes cultural and theoretical issues onto Fisher's texts, one gains a new awareness of her work. This awareness may illuminate our understanding of Fisher's (as well as our own) place in society. Some articles like "The Poetics of M.F.K. Fisher" by Susan Derwin, "A Place at the Counter: The Onus of Oneness" by Mary Lukanuski, and Alice McLean's dissertation *Eat and Be Eaten: The Aesthetic Pleasures of M.F.K. Fisher and Elizabeth David*, analyze Fisher's work through post-structuralist and psychoanalytic perspectives. They more or less describe the social control of sexual expression and indicate how Fisher's food narratives are linked to social sexual repression and the exploration of her sexuality. One author, Cathryn Halverson, writes about how Fisher's narratives are not sexually metaphoric, but are metaphors of class consciousness in her essay "I Felt More Beautiful Than Possible... and the Sommelier Agreed': Service And Selfhood in *The Gastronomical Me*." Halverson superimposed a Marxist methodology on Fisher's memoir in order to extract a different reading, one about class and service. All of these critics, however, analyze Fisher's body of work mostly through its content. Besides the minimal attention to form performed by Derwin, Campbell and Lazar, scholarship on genre, style, and form is lacking.

Methodology

Considering theme and structure, I plan to examine Fisher's body of work in terms of form and genre in order to demonstrate that she is a 'kaleidoscopic' hybrid writer. I will focus more specifically on her memoirs and the function of utilizing memoiric material in other texts to prove that she does not conform nicely to any of the categories in which she is placed, especially to the genre of food writing. Her subject matter and style blur the definitions and boundaries of the genres applied to her texts. As readers, we can discover multiple genres within each one of Fisher's pieces thereby making it difficult to codify her work under one genre. I believe that the terms and definitions of genres and structures are integral to set up a context from which I am working. I will elaborate on definitions and/or notions of typical creative nonfiction genres like memoir and travel writing to show the ways in which she both conforms to and negates those definitions. But my primary interest involves the genre of memoir, what makes a memoir, and what it means to write a memoir as a woman in the 1940s. I want to analyze Fisher's socio-historic role and the components of Fisher's texts as a means to interrogate the categorization of her writing, to identify her authorial voice, and to see how it all contributes to and proves that Fisher is a 'kaleidoscopic' hybrid writer.

I utilize a number of theoretical positions to help me identify and explain tendencies in Fisher's writing. Through a New Historicist perspective, I am able to analyze her texts while simultaneously analyzing the culture in which the texts were produced. I argue that Fisher's motivations, subject matter, inclusions, and exclusions are directly correlated with the social environment in which she lived. Feminism is extremely important in the development of my ideas about Fisher and her social climate. Feminism

helps to expose the power relations from which Fisher struggled with throughout her writing career. Key Feminist figures like Elaine Showalter, Hélène Cixous, and Adrienne Rich provide excellent theories about women's place in society, female modes of writing, and narrative identities that speak to Fisher's content and writing style. Genre theory is also very important in this thesis. I argue that Fisher hybridizes genres, and I use Derrida's genre theory to explain the difficulty (or perhaps impossibility) of categorization of Fisher's texts. I also use the tenants of the creative nonfiction genre and its subsequent subgenres to critically explore Fisher's participation in them. Finally, Everyday Theory is integral in explaining some of the micro-tendencies of people operating in society in regards to performance, humor, memory, and estrangement. I use those identifications to support my own ideas about how Fisher manipulates genre and voice in her writing.

Section 1

In section one, I discuss how the social implications of the True Woman have residual effects of women writers, like Fisher. I examine Fisher's struggle to propitiate the competing forces in her literary life: propriety and her compulsion to write about what is in her head. The struggle plays itself out in Fisher's mercurial writing style which permits the act of hybridity. Using the definitions and outlines provided by major creative non-fiction writers, I will show how Fisher participates and negates the principles of disparate subgenres of creative non-fiction. I will also use Jacques Derrida's genre theory to show how Fisher's involvement in different genres prevents her being categorized by one. In conclusion, by hybridizing multiple genres, especially the subgenres of creative

non-fiction, Fisher finds a way to appease her irresistible impulse to write while maintaining her “sense of literary decorum” (Lazar 530).

Section 2

The focus of our discussion moves from the hybridity of genres in section one to the hybridity of styles in section two. I continue to investigate and use the struggle theme in Fisher’s writing to explain the presence of shifting voices in her book *The Gastronomical Me*. I argue that the two identities of the True Woman and the New Woman affect Fisher’s writing, and thus, multiple styles emanate from its pages. Specifically, the New Woman identity is responsible for what I argue is Fisher’s genuine voice. It is modern, personal, grotesque, uncanny, sarcastic, and sexual. This voice represents an autonomous version of Fisher—possibly feminist—whose persona is directly oppositional to the confining social climate of women. Contrarily, *The Gastronomical Me* also exhibits a different side to Fisher’s authorial style. This other version of Fisher’s voice is subdued and penumbral. Fisher perpetuates the True Woman identity through silence and ambiguity and by upholding social norms in her writing. Ultimately, we can read Fisher through kaleidoscopic hybridity because her voice successfully functions in both of the ways I described earlier. Firstly, the separate voices are made up of various characteristics that, when discerned together, create the effects of a New Woman or True Woman voice. Secondly, Fisher’s style has movement; her style shifts back and forth between these competing voices.

Appendix A, “Between Fact and Fiction: An Essay on M.F.K. Fisher and the Intricacies of Truth,” is a related but separate essay pertaining to what is considered

female truth and Fisher's perception of truth. Fisher wrote during a time when the validity of the female experience was resisted. In addition to the personal ramifications of denied experience, I show how the conception of 'truth' impacts the reception of the material. Lastly, I address the age-old argument about what is 'true': subjective versus objective experience. Performance, narrative consciousness, and memory are analyzed to assert that truth is subjective and Fisher's text should not be held to the standards of what is perceived as objective truth.

Conclusions and Beyond

The importance of examining Fisher through this version of hybridity is to speculate where it will lead us in the end. Where I leave off will hopefully inspire others to analyze Fisher's writing in new ways, from multiple and divergent perspectives. Food writing is just one scope through which to think about Fisher's work. I hope my readers and future Fisher scholars contemplate her categorization and her placement among other writers within different literary traditions. Will they ask what she has been excluded from and why? Will this inform us about the categorization process as a whole? Do we see any patterns between her and her contemporaries in terms of categorization? Do these issues speak to a larger dilemma in our field? By using the idea of a 'kaleidoscopic' hybridity, we will help to widen the range of critical approaches we use to analyze Fisher's work, and encourage participation in the ongoing discussions of what's critically favored within the spheres of genre, style, and form.

Section 1: Creative Non-Fiction Hybrid

It is apparently impossible for me to say anything about gastronomy, the art and science of satisfying one of our three basic human needs, without involving myself in what might be called side issues—might be, that is, by anyone who does not believe, as I do, that it is futile to consider hunger as a thing separate from people who are hungry. (AG ix)

Introduction

The epigraph above is the first paragraph of Fisher's book *An Alphabet for Gourmets*. In it, Fisher shows us two things: one, her books are a blend of personal stories and commentary about food; two, that some people will call her personal anecdotes and stories "side issues" and disregard their signification in her work. Fisher's critics in the late thirties and into the forties sought to emphasize socially acceptable topics for women to write about like food and travel. Although descriptions of food and theories on the art of eating are central to Fisher's work, they should not be taken at face value. Gastronomy is used as a rhetorical device to simultaneously please her audience and signify her personal life. One of her early critics, Lewis Gannett, deems *Serve it Forth* as demonstrating "an ignorant French fantasy about American culinary barbarism" (Reardon 104). It seems as though this critic disregards her personal lessons, her sarcastic tone, her fictional stories, and her historical anecdotes. Instead, the critic concentrates on a perceived opinion of Fisher's: that Americans do not know how to eat. Even modern scholars like Laura Shapiro, Janette Ferrary, and Alice McLean seek to commemorate

Fisher by focusing on the relationship of food to her biographical facts. While I agree that the significance of food as metaphor should not be overlooked, I also believe her multifaceted approach to creative non-fiction should not be discounted. Fisher describes the genre of her first book, *Serve it Forth* (1937), as “humanistic-gastronomic writing” (Reardon 105). She contends the book is as much about food as it is about the “human” condition. Therefore, through the compound of the terms “humanistic” and “gastronomic,” the theme of her work loses a pure singularity and can be characterized as thematically hybrid. Despite that her early books have predominately main themes (*Serve it Forth* is “about eating and about what to eat and about people who eat” (SF 4), *Consider the Oyster* includes stories, recipes, and personal experiences about oysters, and *The Gastronomical Me* is dominated by memoir), they all are an amalgamation of personal experiences, fiction, food writing, travel writing, historical facts, and theoretical insights. She manipulates language and subject matter (gastronomy) as metaphor because domesticity sells and she can maintain the “female voice” sanctioned by mainstream conventions. At the same time, through those manipulations, Fisher can deviate from traditional forms and utilize a variety of techniques and styles in order to fit her needs. The multiplicity employed by Fisher (what I propose is an act of hybridity) satisfies her compulsion to write; as a result, Fisher produces a creative non-fiction hybrid as the site of her negotiation of societal standards and self expression.

Context

There are many reasons why writers pick up the pen and set it to paper. In the case of M.F.K. Fisher, she felt she was *compelled* to write. She says, “But I write without

really wanting to. I write probably ten hours a day, mostly in my mind” (*SMOCM* 66). Whether the act of writing was therapeutic or a means to survive financially, writing was a process of negotiation between what she was compelled to do and what society expected of her. Fisher, like many woman writers in the past, had to struggle with this dilemma every day, every time she wrote, and every time she wanted to publish. Fisher surmises:

Probably there is in all intelligent people, of whom I consider myself one (perhaps mistakenly, I add without any apparent coyness), a constant warfare between the innate delicacy and reserve, and the desire to talk, to Tell All. I am often conscious of it and oftener than not I refuse to indulge in my natural itch to write because of the over fastidious fear of what might be scratched into being, into the light of the paper. (*SMOCM* 149)

This journal entry demonstrates the struggle, or the “constant warfare,” within Fisher to write what she wanted to write and to write with “delicacy and reserve” which was socially encouraged. The expectation of propriety in female memoirs dates back to the late 19th century. In the True Woman era “women’s speech, then, like her identity, should be self denying, domestic, subservient, and (at its best) silent” (Cutter 8). In 1938, Fisher’s journals reflect her tendency to be, in Cutter’s words, “self denying” and “silent.” She openly admits that her perception of herself as an intelligent human may be a “mistake.” She refuses to “indulge” in her “natural itch” to write what she truly thinks, and the thought of doing so creates a “fastidious fear.” Her journal entries from this time in her life show that the True Woman era still had residual effects on woman’s lives and their writing.

The literary community reinforced a fear of the “Tell All” book and continued to discourage the production of literature written by women. Even the most popular female

writers of the time faced an impossible mountain of criticism belittling their efforts and literary contributions. Showalter notes, “Critics also derided women’s best sellers of the 1930’s as evidence of innate female talent for a debased commercial fiction that could never compete with serious art” (*Jury* 332). Not only did Fisher have to curb her subject matter in order to contend with other female “best sellers,” her “talent” would “never compete with serious art,” or male literary production. There was insufficient liberty to write about the intimate details of one’s life. However, Fisher was compelled to write about everything she thought: she wrote about food, travelling, foreign countries, and especially about her personal life. While these topics provided excellent material, her personal subject matter was frowned upon. One critic, Isabelle Mallet of *The New York Times*, wrote, “Mrs. Fisher is at her best when she draws up a chair, puts both elbows on the table and discusses what she eats, watching the people she eats with, and reporting the sights and sounds and smells as she finds them” (par. 5). Mallet encourages domesticity by claiming that Fisher’s “best” writing materializes through her descriptions of “the table.” She also reinforces the idea that women should not focus on themselves as autonomous beings, but that their importance is located in their relationality to other people. In this critic’s eyes, Fisher’s self comes second to “the people she eats with” and the “sights and smells and sounds” of the various locations she inhabits. Mallet furthers her domestic agenda by proposing Fisher’s “personal narrative” is only “sometimes moving” and is “rambling and often too disconnected for comfort” (par. 3). It is clear that the “personal narrative” is decried in favor of the narrative that constructs a self-denying and domestic woman. One reviewer of *Serve it Forth* commented that even though the book was about food, her illustrations were “quaint” (H.G. 75). Another critic of the same

book said that Fisher's "occasional desire to be shocking is really rather tiresome" (PA 104). These critics try to simplify her efforts to express her experiences, her thoughts, and her feelings. By designating them to be "quaint" and "tiresome," they discredit her voice and reestablish female subjectivity.

The reading public was not ready for women to write about their personal lives and bring them to the forefront. David Richter, editor of *The Critical Tradition* anthology, says, "Within a patriarchy, women's writing cannot fully express itself; as a result, women writers (consciously or unconsciously) revised their own meanings to make them acceptable to their culture" (1511). Fisher may have had to hide her memoirs in domestic metaphors and relational narratives "to make them acceptable" in her cultural environment. For example, Fisher uses oysters as a metaphor for her identity and her position within the patriarchal system. She surmises:

An oyster's life is worse. She lives motionless, soundless, her own cold ugly shape her only dissipation, and if she escapes the menace of duck-slipper-mussel-Black-Drum-leech-sponge-borer-starfish, it is for man to eat, because of man's own hunger. (CO 7)

At the surface level Fisher is describing the difficult life of an oyster. Yet on a deeper level, Fisher may be describing her existence as a woman. Fisher insinuates discontent with her "motionless" and "soundless" position and her "cold ugly shape," or in other words her physical appearance. While "duck-slipper-mussels" molest, yet fail to destroy her, she is left to be consumed by men, to be subjugated by their "hunger." The oyster's equivocal nature makes it one of the strongest metaphors in her work. Not only is it a domestic metaphor because it is an ingredient for recipes, but it is also a relational narrative because Fisher's story is told through the oyster's story.

Mary Jean Corbett offers a possible answer as to why women writers hide behind metaphors in her article “Literary Domesticity and Women Writer’s Subjectivities.” She says, “Most secular women autobiographers... can master their anxiety about being circulated, read, and interpreted only by carefully shaping the personae they present and, more especially, by subordinating their histories of themselves to others’ histories” (255). This is important in two ways: first, Fisher “carefully shapes” her identity, or “personae,” as the gastronomic traveler who will teach Americans the proper way to dine and eat. In her first chapter of *An Alphabet for Gourmets*, titled “A is for Dining Alone,” Fisher gives off the impression that her gastronomic reputation pushed people away from her. As a result, Fisher had to develop a routine for dining alone, which in turn fostered a spinster yet self-sufficient persona. She says, “...snug misanthropic solitude is better than hit-or-miss congeniality. If *One* could not be with me, ‘feasting silently in sympathy,’ then I was my best companion” (AG 8). Fisher demonstrates spinster qualities when she proposes that “snug misanthropic solitude” is better than waiting for polite invitations for company. Reardon notices that the construction of Fisher’s persona hits full stride in *An Alphabet for Gourmets*. She claims Fisher “had honed her role-playing skills there, mastering the basics of the ‘center stage’ persona that she cultivated throughout her life. She had learned how to enter a room and be noticed, she could command an audience” (PA 163-164). Another possible explanation of the “persona that she cultivated” can be found in Erving Goffman’s essay, “Front and Back Regions of Everyday Life” (1949). He maintains “that when one’s activity occurs in the presence of other persons, some aspects of the activity are expressively accentuated and other aspects, which might discredit the fostered impression, are suppressed” (53). In regards to Fisher, the “activity”

of writing becomes a public act when the text is published. Because Fisher was aware of her intent to publish, she “accentuates” certain aspects of her life, like travel and food, and “suppresses” others that may “discredit” her personae as the self-reliant, intrepid, gastronomical genius.

The second aspect of Corbett’s theory is how women autobiographers write their narratives into the narratives of other people. Fisher’s stories are personal yet relational to people who eat, people who cook, students, family, servers, places, landladies, and animals. Fisher’s personal narrative interweaves through these stories and consequently binds them together. Her history becomes secondary to the metaphors of food and to “other’s histories,” or the stories of the people in her books. According to Corbett, when women write about their lives in a relational fashion, it allows them “to tell their stories between the lines, to narrate their histories as part of a larger story; the memoir legitimates the telling of their own lives without demanding that they commit full disclosure” (257). In *GM*, Fisher recounts her past in relation to the history of the women in her family. Fisher remembers:

Women in those days made much more of a ritual of their household duties than they do now. Sometimes it was indistinguishable from a dogged if unconscious martyrdom. There were times for This, and other equally definite times for That. There was one set week a year for “the sewing woman.” Of course, there was Spring Cleaning. And there were other periods, almost like festivals in that they disrupted normal life, which were observed no matter what the weather, finances, or health of the family. (3)

Fisher orchestrates her first gastronomical experience within the tale of the frenzied women in her house. Their story, the story of meaningless domestic ritual made seemingly important, allowed Fisher the space to narrate her first memory of taste. Their

pandemonium not only provided Fisher alone time with her father (which had personal significance¹), but it also functioned as the setting for the memory to be retold. This example exhibits Fisher's attempt to express her experiences and feelings in relation to "a larger story." By writing about the "women in those days" and the events that helped shape her childhood, her history is not told as a personal history but as a communal one. She reaches a happy medium by fulfilling societal expectations of discretion while simultaneously expressing her inner thoughts.

This negotiation between what she wants to express and what is expected of her is enacted by Fisher's utilization of different forms and genres. This utilization challenges the categorization of her writing. Is it what she says it is, "human-gastronomic writing?" Is she an autobiographer, a memoirist, a travel writer, a personal essayist, or a lyric essayist? The answer is all and none. In "The Law of Genre," Jacques Derrida says, "Every text participates in one or several genres, there is no genreless text; there is always a genre and genres, yet such a participation never amounts to a belonging" (230). Fisher demonstrates this "participation" as she hybridizes multiple subgenres of creative nonfiction. For that reason, the hybrid nature of her texts problematizes categorization because "participation never amounts to a belonging." For Fisher, to write organically, which is to write without set rules or structure, propitiates both forces pulling at her. Genre hybrids assist in feeding her compulsion to write without inciting ostracism in the literary community.

¹ For further criticism about Fisher's relationship with her father, read Susan Derwin's "The Poetics of M.F.K. Fisher." She identifies the parts of Fisher's writing that come together to represent desire in the form of the Electra complex.

Creating a Genre Hybrid

Fisher's writing functions organically in that the genres and styles of her writing serve her immediate needs. Rather than adhering to the rules of one genre, Fisher incorporates aspects of multiple genres. Generally, the four main genres in literature are poetry, fiction, non-fiction, and creative nonfiction. Within those main categories, there are various subcategories. We could probably find instances in Fisher's writing where she incorporates all of these main genres, but none as prevalent as her participation in the subgenres of creative non-fiction. In order to discern Fisher as a creative non-fiction writer, I will use definitions outlined by Bill Roorbach, author of *Contemporary Creative Non-Fiction: The Art of Truth*, and writer Sue Silverman, associate editor of the journal *Forth Genre: Explorations in Nonfiction*. By definition, creative non-fiction "must have a discernable and subjective self at its center: the writer. The writer may reveal himself in different ways, depending on his approach, but he's always a presence, most often a direct presence, using the first person freely" (Roorbach 4). M.F.K. Fisher's books may be about people who eat, oysters, or travel, but there is one thing that they all have in common: the narrating "I" or the "subjective self" is always at the "center" of the book. Even though she is not always the subject of the story, Fisher's "presence" never leaves. Fisher "reveals" herself through metaphor and relational narrating. Another aspect of the genre is that it is multi-factional. Silverman outlines different subgenres of creative non-fiction in her book *Fearless Confessions: A Writer's Guide to Memoir*. They include biography, autobiography, immersion, memoir, personal essay, meditative essay, and lyric essay. In addition, Roorbach includes literary journalism and literary travel narrative as subgenres. I will use these subgenres as explanations of different kinds of Fisher's

writing. Her work possesses components of multiple subgenres indicating shifting hybridity rather than unity.

Autobiography is one subgenre outlined by Silverman and Roorbach and it is ostensible in Fisher's work. Her subject matter revolves around her life, her experiences, and her place in the world as it was presented to her. Fisher points out:

I tell about myself, and how I ate bread on a lasting hillside, or drank red wine in a room blown to bits, and it happens without my willing it that I am telling too about the people with me then, and their other deeper needs for love and happiness. (*GM ix*)

Fisher writes about herself, about her life, and about the people around her. Silverman describes autobiography as a form that lacks reflection, or psychological analysis, and that it is a "factual retelling of events" (145). It privileges fact over feeling. Often in Fisher's work, events are the only details she gives us. She will describe the red wine or the "bread on a lasting hillside" but she will not candidly divulge how it made her feel or what it meant at that moment in her life. Fisher states facts, sometimes rather bluntly and void of emotion. Moreover, there are a lot of silences in her memoirs (we will discuss silences in section two) and instances where we expect some emotional explanation. In short, we are left wanting. For example, in *The Gastronomical Me*, Fisher writes about significant events in her life but does not elaborate on her feelings about them or what kind of emotional impact they left. She recollects, "In 1929 the stock market crashed, and I got married for the first time and traveled into a foreign land across an ocean. All those things affected me, and the voyage perhaps most" (*GM 40*). Fisher does not expound on the worst financial crisis her country had ever seen, nor does she examine the effects of moving halfway across the world away from the only home she had ever known. She

states plainly, “All those things affected me,” but she does not explain how those events “affected” her, why they affected her, what the results were, etc. This example shows how, throughout her books, Fisher employs autobiographical style.

Furthermore, autobiography typically adheres to a strict chronological timeline. *The Gastronomical Me* is seemingly chronological; the chapters progress in chronological order from 1912 to 1941. While autobiographies usually span the entire life of the author and sometimes of one’s parents, Fisher’s starts with her first memory of something tasted. In traditional standards, *The Gastronomical Me* would not be considered an autobiography, but it is autobiographical. By using this form, she ignores her “itch to Tell All” and maintains her “sense of literary decorum” by keeping her personal thoughts private (Lazar 530).

We must keep in mind however, although her writing has autobiographical tendencies, her books are not autobiographies. In fact, many of her books lack autobiographical style altogether. And the one book that we would expect to be predominately autobiographical is not. The chapters of *The Gastronomical Me* may be in chronological order, but some chapters transgress time through associative memories. Furthermore, at times she may seem emotionally vacant, but then she surprises us with a very real and profound conclusion about herself. She writes, “I think that by now I am old enough, though, to know why such things happen, or at least how to cope with the ramifications and complexities of loneliness, which is by now my intimate and, I believe, my friend” (*GM* 42). She opens up to the reader about the “complexities of loneliness” and establishes that she has thought about the past and learned “how to cope.” This is one

instance in Fisher's book where her psyche breaks through and she demonstrates the emotional depth that resists the qualifications of an autobiography.

If Fisher did not write an autobiography, in what other subgenre of creative nonfiction does she participate? We may find an answer if we take a look at the forms of her books, specifically *Serve it Forth*, *Consider the Oyster*, *The Gastronomical Me*, and *Alphabet for Gourmets*. In them, Fisher's essay style is blatantly manifest. It is true that her books are not novels with a linear plot, with a beginning and an end (except for *Not Now but Now* whose plot is still disjointed and disconnected violating boundaries of time and geography). It is true that Fisher's stories are not composed of epic verse or highly structured prose. Her style is more desultory; it is more stream of consciousness. A story will take her to another thought, maybe unrelated, but an important thought nonetheless. And after Fisher fleshes out that thought onto paper, she returns to the story she was telling. Each chapter or each section has its own theme, mood, and lesson. Sometimes one chapter is filled with recipes and the next chapter retells a personal travel story. For instance, in *Consider the Oyster*, the first chapter "Love and Death Among the Molluscs" is a highly metaphoric chapter that focuses on the oyster's travail to survive in a not so friendly sea. Immediately following is a chapter titled "A Supper to Sleep On." This chapter focuses on oyster stews, their composition, and Fisher's personal experiences with the best stews she had ever tasted. Then her next chapter, "R is for Oyster," continues the oyster theme but focuses on oysters gone bad. She combines fictitious stories about dead men with her own theories about eating oysters and her opinions about men's ignorance. This example shows how the variety of chapter lengths, forms, and

themes generate the feeling that she compiles and carefully selects short, personal essays for inclusion in the greater whole that is her book.

If we are to consider Fisher's participation in the personal essay form, let us refer back to the characteristics of the personal essay. Silverman contends that "the personal essayist usually explores one facet of the self within a larger social context" and that the essays themselves "encompass such topics as nature and travel, or social and political issues" (152). In *Serve It Forth*, each chapter focuses on different topics that are historical, "social and political," as well as gastronomical. "The Curious Nose" is an interesting chapter because Fisher makes subtle innuendos about the subjugation and gender construction of women. She says that women "are not called to the kitchen by the divine inner voice of a Vatel or an Escoffier. Rather are they lured there, willy-nilly, by the piping of their husbands' empty stomachs" (19). Fisher scoffs at women's propensity to cook because their men want them to and not because they have been summoned by "the divine inner voice." At the end of the chapter Fisher's biting sense of humor reveals itself a final time:

Then it was a man again, all-knowing Markham, who made it stylish. And since that day he and all his followers, both male and female, have instructed the world's woman in what she rarely escapes and sometimes never learns, *Common Sense in the Household*. (SF 24)

Fisher is not only "exploring" herself in the context of other women, but she is making a very social statement that is political as well². Fisher insinuates that this misguided man, the "all knowing Markham," is wrongly instructing "*Common Sense in the Household*." It is Fisher's opinion that manuals about "housewifery" are silly, or "willy-nilly" (SF 20).

² Hanisch, Carol. "Personal is Political." 1969. *Women of the World Unite! Writings by Carol Hanisch*. Carol Hanisch. 2009. Web. 15 Dec. 2010.

Yet again, Fisher is demonstrating how she navigates the dangerous waters of being too personal by superimposing herself onto other's histories. And although she expresses her opinions and her beliefs, the point of the essay is not about her outright rejection of "housewifery." Instead, it describes her rejection of silly cookbooks and manuals, especially those born in Britain. Fisher dodges denigration by remaining within the boundaries of American values. She does not openly communicate her rejection of certain social practices, yet she uses the personal essay form coupled with sarcasm as an avenue to express her ideals.

The personal essay is also a haven for Fisher's stream of consciousness style. In order to feed her compulsion to write, she writes what is in her head. Roorbach says, "Like thinking itself, the personal essay makes use of whatever is available among all those layers in the mind" (191). Fisher uses "whatever is available" when she writes sometimes for "ten hours" in her mind. Fisher writes about what she knows best: her life and her passion of food. She also records her opinions, theories, and beliefs about how to eat, how to cook, how to live, and how to satisfy "the more insistent hungers" (*GM* ix). Fisher's mercurial style may be elucidated further by Roorbach's statement asserting "the personal essayist is more comfortable with contradiction, she likes to wander, to sidle up to a point, is even willing at times to forget the point altogether in favor of a felicitous phrase or observation" (192). Fisher "wanders" and meanders through her stories at times and demonstrates exactly what Roorbach describes. This type of writing style reminds me of what it means to write in the female mode, or "*l'écriture féminine*." The female mode is "a style associative, nonhierarchal, personal, and open-ended" (Freedman 3). Showalter says that the style, in addition to the characteristics above, is "playful, avant-garde,

audacious, [and] nonlinear” (*Critical* 1597). In “The Measure of My Powers 1930-1931,” Fisher’s history is described in “association” with one of her landladies, Madame Rigagnier. This chapter is a paragon for what later French feminists would term *l’écriture féminine*. In the middle of a paragraph she trails off with ellipses and resumes like this:

It is strange... or perhaps natural... that I cannot go on as I had planned.

I meant to write about what I learned, my gastronomic progression there with the Rigagniers... and even if I’d willed it otherwise there would have been some of that progression [...]

But now when I think of the hot quarrelsome laughing meals: [...] My mind is filled with wonderment at them as they were then, and with dread and a deep wish that they are now past hunger. (*GM* 79)

The personal essay allows Fisher to wander from one idea, stop, and proceed to another. Her stream of consciousness style is “nonlinear,” “personal,” and “open-ended.” This example shows how Fisher (using Roorbach’s phrases) “forgets the point” of her “gastronomic progression,” and she continues to narrate “in favor” of her “felicitous” memories of the Rigagniers.

Additionally, the personal essay form is the perfect space for negotiating between societal expectations and writing to serve her needs. David Lazar, in “The Useable Past of M.F.K. Fisher: An Essay on Projects,” suggests Fisher’s ideas change as her needs change. He states, “Since Fisher has no system of ideas, intellectually or gastronomically, other than accepting and understanding one’s multitudinous appetites, perceptions and positions can be momentary experiences, subject to changing circumstances and mood” (519). For Lazar, the personal essay permits the transformation of ideas and beliefs. Instead of continuing on the domestic narrative she planned to write, she breaks from it in order to feed her compulsion to recount her personal memories of the family. Her focus

shifts from a gastronomical narrative to a personal narrative, and therefore navigates those controversial waters again.

Although Fisher's craft seems like a great example of the personal essay, it does not fit into this category perfectly. Roorbach believes that the personal essayist privileges "exposition" over "narrative," "ideas" over "images," and "theses" over "chronologies." In every book we find narrative (sometimes meta-narrative), dialog, images, and in *The Gastronomical Me* we find chronologies. One example of imagistic writing can be found in *Serve it Forth*. Her depiction of a nasty kitchen has the ability to transport us to her side, looking in on what she sees:

The floor, slick and black, is uneven where dishtowels and utensils have been half-swallowed in its eternal ooze. Water from the grease-ridged sink runs over it in iridescent trickles, and crusts of bread and slippery wilted lettuce scraps lie everywhere, never too trodden for the rats of dawn. (*SF* 121)

This vivid description gives us specific details of a restaurant she visited. She successfully makes us disgusted at the "eternal ooze" and the "slick and black" floor. But to what use? Despite the imagism of this one paragraph, she is doing more than painting a picture. Fisher is forwarding her belief that good food cannot come from bad kitchens (*SF* 120). She is not privileging the emphasis of "ideas" over "images" or vice versa. She employs both. Fisher uses whatever is needed to tell her story, share her ideas, or to entertain. And although Lazar senses the similarity between the personal essay form and Fisher's works, he ultimately believes that she cannot be categorized as a personal essayist. He says, "Her personal essays work against the traditional strategy of the form: against personality as expressed by idiosyncrasy" (528). According to Lazar, Fisher does

not highlight her eccentricities as topic, or as something that needs to be interrogated, but rather, she accentuates a carefully constructed persona.

Autobiography and personal essay are just a few of the creative non-fiction subgenres applicable to Fisher's texts. We can also read Fisher in terms of the meditative and lyric essay. We have already established that her chapters resemble the essay form, but what makes them meditative or lyric? Usually, Fisher focuses on one topic or idea in each chapter. They each teach us something about Fisher or about life in general. Silverman says that the meditative essay "explores or meditates upon an emotion or an idea by drawing upon a range of experience" (153). In various chapters of her books we find Fisher hovering over a certain idea and her use of whatever means necessary to underline that idea. The main ideas she meditates over are hunger, desire, and survival. Susan Derwin, author of "Poetics of M.F.K. Fisher," proposes that hunger, not food, is the meditative fulcrum of her work. Below, Fisher describes her conscious focus on hunger:

It seems to me that our three basic needs, for food and security and love, are so mixed and mingled and entwined that we cannot straightly think of one without the others. So it happens that when I write of hunger, I am really writing about love and the hunger for it, and the warmth and the love of it and the hunger for it... and then the warmth and the richness and fine reality of hunger satisfied... and it is all one. (*GM ix*)

After this introduction, Fisher's chapters demonstrate the "needs" and "hunger" she writes about in this excerpt. She uses everything in her memory arsenal, her "range of experience," to describe "food and security and love." Each chapter meditates on one of these ideas in different ways using the stories and experiences of her life. This method of writing extends beyond *GM*. In her other books, her chapters are an amalgamation of

instructional, fictional, and personal narratives. We can distinguish Fisher's female mode of writing because, "her speech, even when 'theoretical' or political, is never simple or linear or 'objectified,' generalized: she draws her story into history" (Cixous 1647). Fisher can contemplate the great questions of life, social injustices, or emotions stemmed from her personal "story" and her experiences with political turmoil without being banal or repetitive. And she uses the discourse of domesticity in order to be ambiguous, vague, and metaphoric about her personal investigation of those great questions. Yet, she still conveys meaning across the page in her own way, despite those obscurities.

Beyond meditation, one of the most profound literary devices Fisher makes use of is lyric prose. At times her writing is so beautiful and so entrancing that it walks the line between prose and verse. Silverman notes that in lyric essays "the writer is not constrained by narrative action; the movement is from image to image, not from event to event" (155). It is precisely the "movement" of disparate images that makes Fisher's prose lyric. In one essay titled "Stay Me Oh Comfort Me" (1937), Fisher describes her emotional turmoil over her failing marriage. Fisher confesses:

I was tired. I wanted love, but I was tired of it, wearied by its involutions, convolutions, its complex intraplexities. I had fled from it, leaving there in Vevey the husk and the bud, the empty and the refilled, renewed, revived, recrucified... And it was the same thing again: Stay with me flagons, for I am tired, sick, tired, tired of love. (*SMOCM* 109)

The images of the "husk and the bud" and the "empty and refilled" create a sense of ongoing turmoil. The physical images represent attainment and loss, and the repetition of such images function like a pattern. The passage behaves in comparable ways to how meter and poetry function. Furthermore, the use of rhyme, slant rhyme, and alliteration give this passage rhythm and creates lyric prose. Analogous to poetry, the lyric essay is a

dialogic process between the writer and the reader. The author writes the lines and creates images, and the reader is left to assemble the pieces. It is the reader's responsibility to find meaning. "The reader is required to fill in the blanks as much as possible while, at the same time, accepting that much will remain mysterious" (Silverman 155). The application of poetic devices not only make Fisher's texts more profound and interesting, but they also contributed to her reputation as a "tragic heroine with all the lonely passion and elegant, lyric sorrow of a forties movie siren" (Rudin 137). By using "lyric sorrow" or elegiac devices in her writing, Fisher again positions herself within the hegemonic discourse by performing another accepted role of women: the "forties movie siren." Her participation in these creative non-fiction subgenres once again keeps her centered between the oppositional forces that pull her.

The meditative and lyric qualities of Fisher's texts are undeniable, but those qualities do not make her a meditative or lyric essayist. The lyric sections are few and far between and sometimes her chapters do not meditate on any one specific idea but many. Fisher will focus on love, hunger, and desire, but she also will simultaneously stress the importance of other themes, like travel. Fisher could be considered a literary travel writer when we take into account her reflections of place, the actual voyage, and her ideas about what it means to travel. In particular, Fisher experiences place transcendently through food and cuisine in books like *Serve it Forth* and *Consider the Oyster*. In "A Lusty Bit of Nourishment," Fisher gets to know a place by the oysters they serve. She travels everywhere from the east and west coasts of America to the Gulf of Mexico and New Orleans. Her most vivid travel descriptions however, occur across the Atlantic Ocean in France. Throughout her life, Fisher visited and stayed for long periods of time in France.

The first duration lasted three years in Dijon. *GM* contains her memories from this time in her life, which later inspired its own book called *Long Ago in France: The Years in Dijon* (1991). Fisher has other travel books devoted to the description of a place like *Map of Another Town: a Memoir of Provence* (1964) and *A Considerable Town* (1978). These travel narratives operate on many levels. Her descriptions are so vivid that it positions the reader in her shoes. We experience not only a foreign land as she sees it, but we learn how she made that land a home, why that place is important to her, and what she took from it. These travel narratives further attend to her female mode of writing. The emphasis is “not about destiny, but about the adventure of such and such a drive, about trips, crossings, trudges, abrupt and gradual awakenings, discoveries of a zone at one time timorous and soon to be forthright” (Cixous 1650).

Fisher gives accounts of the physical act of the “trips, crossings, and trudges” that Cixous describes. Whether Fisher is on foot, on a train, or on a boat, we acquire a sense of what it was like to travel those various modes of transportation. Accounts of Fisher’s numerous voyages across the ocean describe the types of ships, class separation, the people aboard, the food served, and what she and other passengers did to pass the time. One of the most interesting things about the voyage across the sea, however, is how living on the water affects its passengers. Fisher tells us that part of her “sea change” causes her fingertips and toes go numb (*GM* 41). It also instigates different behaviors. She remembers, “I mistrusted myself alone at sea. I found myself doing, or perhaps only considering doing, many things I did not quite approve of” (*GM* 41). Fisher is quick to point out that this “sea change” was not a solitary experience. She observes other passengers as well, acting in a way that she “did not quite approve of.” Moreover, Fisher

believes that the sea does strange things to the body and the mind. “But at sea even males are victims of the rise and fall, the twice-daily surge of the waters they float on, and willy-nilly the planetary rhythm stirs them and all the other voyagers” (*GM* 40). Fisher’s use of the “sea change” and her allocation of it to the “other voyagers” is strategic. Natural processes become the scapegoat for an individual’s improper thoughts and behavior. Fisher blames the tides, or the “twice-daily surge,” as well as the “planetary rhythm.” This strategy attenuates her personal breach against decorum. Not only does she blame her private transformations on the natural forces of the world, but she strengthens her position by aligning herself with others who participate in the same contemptible acts. This undertaking exemplifies yet another way Fisher conciliates the expression of the personal and emotional changes of her life with the female role society demands.

Fisher’s travel narratives do not always require this balance within them. Sometimes they function as the weight on the other side of the scales, adding conventional substance to the more personal sections of the book. By the 1930s, the traveling expatriate was more common and consequently the travel narrative increased in popularity too. Her travel stories include the physical acts of travel as well as descriptions of location, people, and experiences of place. “Travel narratives necessarily engage the essential themes of human experience: estrangement, acclimation, endurance, loss, wonder”(Morano 98). Fisher captures the travel “experience” in many of these same ways. She feels “estranged,” cold, and lonely in Germany with Al. Fisher describes her “endurance” and “acclimation” to French provincial life. Cooking in their tiny kitchen “was only a little less complicated than performing an appendectomy on a life raft,” and she had “learned a hundred things, all the hard way” (*GM* 99-100). Fisher illustrates the

difficult life of an expatriate: she describes what it is like to have to go to a million different stores to get exactly what one needs and what it felt like to be rejected. One would think that these would have negative effects on the couple but Fisher says, “We basked in the new freedom, and absorbed sounds and vapors never met in a politer life” (*GM* 97). She shows us that “loss” in travel does not always denote something unfavorable. One can find “wonder” in the smallest things like “freedom,” “sounds,” and “vapors.”

Fisher’s travel narratives are profound and abundant, but their presence alone does not make her a travel writer. Fisher’s range is much wider. Finally, we will discuss perhaps the most important creative non-fiction subgenre that Fisher utilizes: memoir. One thing that all of these subgenres have in common is that the author is at the center of the story. The writer is subject; the subject is author. But how does memoir differ from the subgenres described above? Silverman notes that there are “similar techniques” applied in fiction as there are in memoir such as dialog, setting, character development, plot, and metaphor (148-49). *GM* contains intimate scenes full of dialog and character development like in “To Feed Such Hunger.” She instills a sense of repugnance for the German named Klorr, and irritation and compassion toward his Czech girlfriend Maritza Nankova. Yet we do not forget who the heroine is. It is Fisher’s perception of them that counts and it is Fisher who saves Maritza from Klorr’s inimical influence on the night of Maritza’s “extreme sexual overexcitement” (*GM* 76).

As we have discussed, metaphors abound in Fisher’s texts. According to Silverman, a metaphoric memoir is “the whole constellation of ways in which we slat specific images so that they create with immediacy our own unique emotional

perspective” (71). When Fisher implements food as metaphor or tells a fictional story to symbolize a personal story, she is manipulating the tools she has to “create” and express her “own unique emotional perspective.” Part of the female mode includes the use of the symbolic and the personal—for Cixous, they are one. “For once she blazes *her* trail in the symbolic, she cannot fail to make of it the chaosmos of the ‘personal’—in her pronouns, her nouns, and her clique of referents” (Cixous 1652). For instance, Fisher uses a replica of an old cathedral made out of “white and pink sugar” to symbolize personal thoughts about her marriage with Al:

It was a little dusty. It had undoubtedly been mended, after mighty storms, in the dim galleys of a hundred ships, better but never worse than this. It was like a flag flying for the chef, a bulwark all in spun sugar against the breath of corruption. It was his masterpiece, made years ago in some famous kitchen, and he showed it to us now with dignity. (*GM* 126-27)

The odd and “ridiculous” cathedral represents more than just the “masterpiece” of the ocean liner’s chef (*GM* 125). This passage takes place at the end of a paragraph latent with indications of a strained marriage. The very next chapter begins with Fisher’s separation from Al and her return to France with another man she loves. In context, we can presume that the image of the sugar cathedral is a symbol of Fisher’s marriage to Al. Firstly, it is in the shape of a cathedral, a place where marriage is sanctified. Secondly, the colors “white and pink” are reminiscent of typical colors one finds at a wedding. Thirdly, the replica is made up of sugar; the sweet substance signifies the sweet nature of love and marriage. But the depiction of the cathedral is hardly the romantic take on marriage one would expect. The sculpture has seen better days. Much like her marriage, the cathedral was getting old, or in other words “dusty.” Similar to the cathedral, Fisher’s marriage had its share of difficulties, or “mighty storms.” She and Al tried to “mend” or

fix their problems by going on trips without each other, moving from place to place, and even by returning to the country where they found happiness in their honeymoon days. Nevertheless, it was all for show. Like the replica, their marriage was a “bulwark” for their “dignity.” In the same way the chef clings to his “masterpiece,” they cling to the marriage that was “made years ago” and they denied their unhappiness, the “breath of corruption.”

Another tenant of literary memoir is its scope. The memoir is a narrative about a moment in the author’s life; “one aspect” is focused on and fleshed out (Silverman 149). For Fisher, the “one aspect” may take on the form of travel, her gastronomic awareness, or period inundated with change. Contrary to the autobiographical way of retelling events, Fisher’s stories exhibit a deeper cognition of her “needs for love and happiness” (*GM* ix). Thomas Larson, author of *The Memoir and the Memoirist: Reading and Writing Personal Narratives*, believes, “What is faced and lost is crucial. Only by lingering on something outside the self, which he has had intimate experience, can the author disclose himself. Memoir is a relational form” (22). Similar to Corbett’s idea that “women narrate their histories as part of a larger story,” Larson purposes that the memoir is a narrative of experiences. The narrative is composed of “what is faced” and the “intimate” conclusions of those experiences in “relation” to the self. A scene in “To Feed Such Hunger” epitomizes this very idea. When Fisher returns to her room to grab supplies in order to bring Maritza out of her sexual trance, she recalls, “I suddenly felt a strange kind of antagonism toward him, toward all men. It was as if Maritza had been ashamed in some way that only women could know about. It was as if I must protect her, because we were both females, fighting all the males” (*GM* 75). In this scene, Fisher confronts the

exploitation of women's bodies. Klorr used Maritza for his own gain and left her in an upsetting state. Fisher's story is "relational" to Maritza's, and through this shared experience Fisher "discloses" her antagonism toward Al and "toward all men." Rather than state the facts and then move on, Fisher delves into her psyche and reveals her inner thoughts and emotional state.

Could we say that Fisher is a memoirist? Yes, we could. But we would not be doing her craft justice. Fisher incorporates far more genres and forms than strictly memoir. Her participation in the multiple subgenres of creative non-fiction allowed Fisher to reconcile the social pressures to be discreet with her desire to "Tell All." If Fisher only wrote what she was compelled to write and if she only wrote memoirs to discover and understand more about her past, she may have lacked the agency to be a professional author. Corbett explains, "Engaging in that kind of self scrutiny (non-secular self discovery) in public would be wholly inappropriate and perhaps impossible" (260). To rephrase, it would have been "wholly inappropriate" for Fisher to examine her ideals and ethics "in public." Fisher succeeds in doing the necessary introspection of her past by masking her stories in metaphor, relating her history to others' histories, and by interweaving her narrative through a complex compilation of essays, lyricism, facts, travel experiences, theories, and themes.

Conclusion

Fisher's work cannot be categorized as an autobiography, a personal, meditative, or lyric essay, nor can we classify it as a literary travel narrative or memoir. Fisher blurs the lines of genre by aggregating multiple genres into one. Alastair Fowler, in his essay

“The Transformations of Genre,” says that aggregation happens when “several short works are grouped in an ordered collection” (234). Fisher regularly aggregates essays, experiences, memories, journal entries, and short stories into one book. The ways in which genre transformations take place, like aggregation, are qualities themselves in the process of hybridization. Through combination, aggregation, and inclusion, Fisher’s books become creative non-fiction hybrids (Fowler 233-47). They “belong to no genre,” yet they are not “without or less a genre” (Derrida 230). Her books employ a multiplicity of subgenres. However, “such a participation never amounts to a belonging” (Derrida 230). So in which category can Fisher be placed? Does the multiplicity somehow work to create a new literary category? The short answer is no. Although her works are composed of various creative nonfiction subgenres, the amalgamation of such does not equal a new genre. Hybridity is only a characteristic, not a unifying principle. It is Derrida’s belief that “as soon as the word ‘genre’ is sounded... a limit is drawn” (221). Hybridity in essence has no limits. A hybrid text is *capable* of an infinite amount of deformations and combinations of style, genre, and form. Hybrid texts cannot be classified into a cohesive group because the type of hybridity is specific to each work in which it is present. In other words, multiplicity cannot be the common denominator among her texts (Wallace “Against Unity,” 121-22). What we can say about Fisher’s craft is that she embraces multiple forms and genres in all her texts. Her intent was not to be a hybrid writer, but to write as it served her immediate needs and moods.

I stress the importance of intent again because I believe it was not Fisher’s purpose to utilize hybridity or the female mode for that matter. The hybrid and feminine nature of her books came out of her eclectic efforts to express herself in a society that

shunned intimate revelations. But as readers, we can find hybridity and the female mode of writing in her texts because her negotiations of societal standards forced the manipulation of various literary forms. Diane Freedman, author of *An Alchemy of Genres: Cross-Genre Writing by American Feminist Poet Critics*, states:

To avoid monolithic monotony, to express a many-layered identity more adequately, or to achieve a closer connection with the self and reader, border-crossing poet-critics may write alternately or simultaneously in multiple genres, crossing discursive boundaries even as they blur the distinctions between writer and reader, author and subject. (38)

While Fisher was not a “poet-critic” (and this was written well after her time), I think Freedman makes an important point about female writers that write in the feminine mode. Fisher’s participation in “multiple genres” transcends “discursive boundaries” in her enigmatic retelling of memories. By doing so, she effectually “blurs” the limits of author as subject and the borders “between writer and reader.” We are left to write in our own version of the story where Fisher’s description or retelling is lacking. Furthermore, we can discern the female mode because “woman un-thinks the unifying regulating history that homogenizes and channels forces, herding contradictions into a single battlefield” (Cixous 1648). Fisher “un-thinks” or rejects “regulating history” through her manipulation of genre. If categorization “homogenizes” and “channels [writing] forces,” Fisher’s female mode destabilizes those categories. Genre hybridity is just one way in which we can read Fisher’s work. To bring back the metaphor of kaleidoscopic hybridity, it is one view through the kaleidoscope in which to understand Fisher’s method. The image we perceive is the visual presentation of the combination of different parts. The whole image symbolizes a creative non-fiction hybrid. The fragments of color however, are the subgenres that combine to make the whole. With our eyes (or our minds), we can

focus in on the individual pieces. Such an investigation of these segments may yield other rewarding scholarly inquires. Or we can take in the entire image and appreciate the multitudinous elements that coalesce to create a mirage of unity. And with a single turn, we can jumble the pieces to instigate a new and insightful reading.

Section 2: Hybrid Style

... I am not always the correct and coherent woman, turning the neat and sometimes witty phrase with God-Damned Poise? Perhaps now I should have a wild affair with a *book*, since there's no man around to fasten my hungry mind-and-body to? (PA 220)

Introduction

M.F.K. Fisher's personality permeates her work, revealing a highly dynamic person. As the epigraph shows, Fisher was a conflicted woman struggling with the demands of her mind and body. Similar to the way Fisher hybridized subgenres of creative nonfiction, she implemented a variety of writing styles in *The Gastronomical Me* creating a unique and hybrid voice. Kaleidoscopic hybridity results from the presence of multiple elements discerned in one text, and these elements are combined to make a unifying whole. This second section focuses on the disparate elements that make *The Gastronomical Me* stylistically diverse. Style, according to *The Bedford Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms*, is defined as "the way in which a literary work is written, the devices the author uses to express his or her thoughts and convey the work's subject matter" (463). The "devices" employed by the author range from diction, imagery, literary periods and movements, to the way that sentences work (Murfin 463). But I am investigating Fisher's style in terms of her individual writing voice. Style can sometimes be synonymous with voice, which is "a term referring to the authorial presence that pervades a literary work, lying behind or beyond such things as imagery, character [or

persona], plot, or even theme,” (Murfin 482). One of the most noticeable qualities of *GM* is Fisher’s contrasting voice that fluctuates between the strikingly gritty and modern against the penumbral and subdued. *GM* has the ability to make the reader blush, gasp, and stare in disbelief. At the same time, it makes us quizzical and wanting more information. We can trace the causes of her diametrical styles back to the social struggle of women’s identity and its construction.

In the beginning of the century, women were torn between two identities: the True Woman of the past and the New Woman of the present. Fisher’s voice demonstrated tendencies toward favoring the New Woman identity. Her most jarring and fascinating material is narrated in a modern, racy voice. Fisher is personal, sensual, sexual, sarcastic, and raw. But social pressures encouraged compliance with the mores of the True Woman. Whether Fisher was cognizant of how societal pressures explicitly affected her writing is unknown, but her writing shows that they may have had an influence on how she wrote. For example, certain details of her life are ambiguous; time and context are obscure and some aspects are completely excluded altogether. In *GM*, Fisher never openly discusses her sexual attraction to other females, but she discreetly hints at her feelings when she describes the androgynous oyster, the scene with Maritza, and her description of her own identity as “predominately female” (*GM* 183). We know that the feelings for other women existed because Reardon exposed multiple same sex love relationships in Fisher’s biography. Furthermore, Fisher excluded the suicide of her true love and the suicide of her brother (both of which occurred before *GM* was composed) because of her sense of what was appropriate to write about. In other words, certain facts of Fisher’s life were glossed over and occasionally excluded as a response to the social climate in which she

lived. Consequently, Fisher's style exposes her struggle with cultural expectations and her true self. Fisher's double voice is undeniable and her incorporation of both registers in *GM* makes her text stylistically hybrid. Her literary voice is divided between the oppositional voices of the socially sanctioned True Woman and the dangerous New Woman. The majority of her literary voice is New Womanesque and negates the standard decorum of public writing and yet, Fisher uses silence, ambiguity, and dialogism rhetorically to uphold her notions of literary propriety.

Constructed Identity

In David Lazar's article, "The Useable Past of M.F.K. Fisher: an Essay on Projects," he observes that Fisher considers some topics too personal to include in her narrative. Instead, "they appear as shadows: dark tones and oblique allusions" (530). He reports, "Fisher later explained that she had never written about her tragedies because of a sense of literary decorum," (530). Where did Fisher's "sense of literary decorum" stem from? Why, in a book that focuses on her personal growth, did she leave out two integral events that impacted her emotional state, her memories, and in turn, her writing? Lazar contends that "it is the useable past that concerns her" (530). But he does not address *what* is "useable," *why* it is useable, and *who* judges the content's usability. Fisher did not live in a vacuum, nor did she write in one. Her belief in "decorum" attests to the presence of social underpinnings of female gender construction in her text. This belief in propriety establishes that public opinion and cultural constructs influenced what she wrote.

One of the main genres Fisher utilizes, memoir, has somewhat of a rocky history with public opinion. Memoirs, home of the private, the personal, and the confessional,

have long housed controversy in terms of decency and propriety. Sue Silverman notes, “Until recently, it was considered impolite for *anyone*, regardless of background, ethnicity, religion, or gender, to share intimate secrets in public” (130). Silverman points out that to use the personal as subject matter was an uphill battle. Memoirs were considered “impolite” and therefore, they resisted decorum. The difficulty of writing about one’s own life was assuaged by famous men who wrote memoirs. They wrote about their public life from their point-of-view, allowing the reader access to a much coveted and hidden perspective. But how is this issue reconciled for someone like M.F.K. Fisher? Fisher was not an international celebrity, nor was she a best-selling author. Adrienne Rich, in her book *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose*, observes, “Women have been driven mad... for centuries by the refutation of our experience and our instincts in a culture which validates only male experience” (Silverman 140, Rich 190). Fisher has not “been driven mad,” but she has “been driven” into silence. For Fisher, some topics are too intimate to share with her readers. The potential impact of reliving the traumatic events of her life and discovering chilling self revelations may have inspired anxiety and dread. Fear could have been the driving force. Silverman points out, “Sometimes the fear evolves from the material itself; other times it’s a fear about what others might think of it” (119). Rather than fear of personal rejection, social pressures to perform the prescribed role instilled a fear of professional rejection.

This prescribed role, the role of the True Woman, had its lasting effects on women writers like Fisher. To summarize Martha Cutter, the True Woman was an identity constructed by what she calls “the cult of domesticity.” Multiple manuals,

pamphlets, books, newspapers, magazines, and journal articles shaped a female identity that was silent, subservient, domestic, relational, modest, proper, submissive, and self-denying (Cutter 4-8). From the late 19th century and into the early 20th century, society encouraged and accepted well-behaved women who displayed these qualities. Women who acted differently, however, were regarded as rebellious and dangerous. Cutter believes that for women “to be in the public sphere is to demand an unruly—potentially sexual, and certainly not submissive—voice” (7). Fisher’s ambiguities, silences, and dialogisms can be attributed to her efforts to avoid the stigma of being an “unruly” woman.

Although the True Woman identity continued to impact women, it did not overshadow the emerging New Woman identity. Let us not forget when Fisher actually started publishing. Fisher’s first book was published in 1937, well after the Roarin’ Twenties. Some aspects of the True Woman era were wearing off and women’s suffrage coupled with new sexual freedom found in the twenties brought about a new female identity: the New Woman. With the rise of education among women and the social/political groups they formed, women had the agency to enter the professional world. Janice Radway, in her essay “Learned and Literary Print Cultures in an Age of Professionalization and Diversification,” notes:

These pursuits of educated women of the early twentieth century allowed them to explore new forms of economic independence, homosocial relationships with other women, different forms of femininity, and new uses of knowledge and literacy. (225)

Women who preceded Fisher paved the way for others to “explore” different ways to support themselves and their families. Their examples encouraged autonomous living. As

a result, women tested “different forms of femininity” and were acting more like men professionally. Fisher, however, was not one of these well “educated women.” She did attend one semester of college and she also took some courses in Dijon, but she never displayed fervor for traditional learning. Her education was experiential, which in turn fed her “knowledge” of life, gave her material for her writing, and allowed for a different kind of “economic independence.”

Although these changes were transforming female identity, movement from the True Woman to the New Woman did not happen overnight and was not absolute. Many women were still affected by the True Woman persona. Like Fisher, they had to struggle with the competing constructions of female identity. Nevertheless, the freedom provided by the twenties was a determinative factor in their struggle with identity: shaping who the New Woman was to become. This new freedom was housed in politics, sexuality, professional undertakings, and especially in writing. Unlike the True Woman, the New Woman was not solely characterized by her actions, but by her voice as well. Women had to find a new voice if they wanted to break free from the stifling identity of the True Woman. Cutter argues, “The problem with women’s voice” is silence; “theories of language grant men the right to be articulate subjects, while portraying women and ‘others’ as silent objects” (xviii). How can women find a new voice if their current voice is “silent”?

The only way to assuage this problem is to be heard, to demand an audience, and to find a voice that cannot be ignored. Cutter says, “The most crucial feature of New Womanhood was its recognition of woman’s right to an autonomous selfhood and voice,” (xv). To fully break away from the True Woman, women had to be “autonomous” in their

day to day lives, as well as in their voice. For Fisher, her “New Womanhood” shines through her work. She shows us that can she be alone, and she can comfortably do so without resentment. She writes:

And men are puzzled too, in a more personal way. I anger them as males. I am sorry. I do not like to do that, or puzzle the women either. But if I must be alone, I refuse to be alone as if it were something weak and distasteful, like convalescence. Men see me eating in public, and look as if “I knew my way around”; and yet I make it plain that I know my way around without them, and that upsets them. (*GM* 190).

Fisher demonstrates her autonomous selfhood by eating and traveling alone. She does not need company nor does she need pity. For Fisher, the act of being alone is not “weak” or “distasteful,” and she holds herself high with pride and dignity. Fisher’s New Womanhood is also exhibited through the sexual reference she makes. To openly discuss sexual topics like promiscuousness or prostitution was taboo. But Fisher bravely acknowledges that men and women thought that she “knew my [her] way around,” and that they were false to believe so.

Fisher’s intrepidity to discuss sexual topics and to embrace autonomy reveals that the effects of New Womanhood have taken hold. Not only does New Womanhood impact her life and her actions, but it also impacts what she writes and how she writes it. I propose that Fisher’s style is also New Womanesque. Max Rudin, author of “M.F.K. Fisher and the Consolations of Food,” offers evidence to my theory. He believes that “Fisher was a product of the liberated twenties, and she understood marriage to be a creative, sexual, and intellectual partnership” (131). This relatively modern perspective on marriage is just one of the progressive ideas Fisher adopted. These concepts reveal themselves in the stories she tells, as well as stimulate a new writing style. Rudin thinks

the “mature M.F.K. voice” is “confidently American and modern, elegant and colloquial, practical but feisty and coyly provocative” (134). Her “mature voice” is the embodiment of the New Woman. Fisher expresses her true identity through writing the personal, the confessional or the “Tell All,” the sexual, and the grit of everyday life.

A Modern Female Voice

When I think about M.F.K. Fisher’s style, I think bold, daring, racy, witty, feminine, raw, and in short, wonderful. These are the qualities that attract me to her writing and I have come to realize that these same qualities characterize her voice. New Womanhood emanates from the pages of *GM* because of her highly personal, almost confessional narrative. *GM* is said to be a gastronomic-memoir, tracing the growth and changes of one woman’s gastronomic awareness. Although her gastronomic journey traces her experiences with food, it is not her entire story. Fisher’s text takes us through her travels, her experiences, and her emotions. She narrates loneliness, love, divorce, an affair, second marriage, and her grief. She opens the doors of her heart to reveal a very intimate reality of her life that was not accessible to anyone else. For example, she writes, “Chexbres was a man with one leg gone, the other and the two arms soon to go... a small wracked man with snowy hair and eyes large with suffering. And I was a woman condemned, plucked at by demons, watching her true love die too slowly” (*GM* 209). Instead of discussing typical female topics such as child rearing, cooking, or tending the household, Fisher elaborated on her emotions and the personal struggles she endured in her life. Fisher excluded socially sanctioned domestic topics; however, she wrote from the domestic sphere (if domestic is to connote private and from the home). She took

writing about domesticity to another level. Fisher divulges intimate details of her suffering (“plucked at by demons”) and of her second husband’s suffering. Hence, Fisher’s style is characteristically personal. Her “authorial presence” never leaves and is always evident. Silverman notes, “A memoirist must follow one clear, thematically congruent design embedded in the palate of all of life’s colors—and erase the rest” (31). Fisher’s “congruent design” is made up of her highly personal experiences with love, food, and loss during a time of her life when it was the most unstable and volatile. Her voice is always perceived *because* her content is personal; we do not discover her voice from behind a fictional character, but from Fisher herself.

One question that modern critics still grapple with is, how personal is too personal? Fisher was pulled by two competing forces within her: the first was to “Tell All” and the second was to uphold her sense of literary propriety. In *GM*, she seeks to satisfy her “itch.” The text is beyond mere gastronomic narrative and is charged with intensely intimate revelations. It is so charged, in fact, that it may border on confessional style. If we think about confession and what it means to confess, we may think of a priest, a dark cupboard-like room, and someone blurting out everything she did wrong over the weekend. In terms of style, “conventional readings of confessional writing identify a determinate ‘I’ speaking directly and colloquially to the reader” (Gill 7). Fisher uses ‘I’ and “writes colloquially to the reader” as if we were in her confidence. She says, “I was keeping quiet about it; I liked him[...] Even while I hurried to New York for such an odd jaunt, with Al’s apparently hearty approval, I was making plans for the next years with him, the rest of my life with him” (*GM* 128). Fisher confides in us the history of her second husband, and coyly alludes to a possible affair with him. The reader is in on her

secret. Further on in the chapter, Fisher tries to reveal her sentiments about her current situation:

I found myself standing alone in the cold moonlight, with spray everywhere and my black cape whipping, and my face probably looking a little sick but covering, I am sure, wild and unspeakable thoughts. Suddenly I seemed so ridiculous, so melodramatically Mid-Victorian about my Hopeless Passion, that I blushed with embarrassment, straightened my hair, and went down to the bar. (*GM* 129)

Fisher confesses that she had “wild and unspeakable thoughts” about another man. She also indicates that some secrets, secrets you only relate in a confessional, are too “embarrass[ing]” to say out loud. Fisher discloses that she felt “ridiculous” to ponder her feelings alone, and that she was chagrined to entertain such “wild” ideas. Rita Felski writes, in her article “On Confession,” that a confessional voice includes writing that focuses on the most “intimate details of the author’s life.” She continues, “The questioning of the self is frequently inspired by a personal crisis which acts as a catalyst” (83). In the passage above, the “catalyst” to the confession was Fisher’s failing marriage with Al and her impending affair with “Chexbres,” Dillwyn Parrish. Furthermore, the two suicides in her family and her self-exile (in order to deliver her baby out of wedlock) served as “catalysts.” Fisher was bombarded by numerous “crises” that “inspired” a highly confessional voice.

In the passage above, Fisher recalls feeling a certain way, and then she tries to repent for it by expressing feelings of embarrassment and self ridicule. Michel Foucault gives a possible explanation for this type of behavior. He proposes that:

The confession is a ritual of discourse in which the speaking subject is also the subject of the statement; it is also a ritual that unfolds within a power relationship, for one does not confess without the presence (or virtual presence) of a partner that is not simply the interlocutor but the

authority who requires the confession, prescribes and appreciates it, and intervenes in order to judge, punish, forgive, console, and reconcile. (Gill 4, Foucault 61-62)

Foucault's definition of the confession is important because it shows us that Fisher's confessional style is not only a way of giving into her desire to express herself, but it is also "require[d]" by "authority," or in other words, by her audience who has power over her professional success. If Fisher's work is too personal it will be disparaged and she will be professionally "punished." But if she stays within the socially accepted boundaries of propriety, her confession is "appreciate[d]" and she is "forgive[n]." Not only does she confess to the "authority" of her audience, she also demonstrates a self-confessional—she is the confessor and the judge. Fisher recalls her thoughts and actions, and judges them "ridiculous." We expect Fisher to fully disclose her most intimate thoughts to herself; however, we must remember that she was always writing with the intent to publish. She is always under the public light. Maintaining her public persona through a structured performance explains the presence of opaque gaps in her confession. What were the "wild unspeakable thoughts?" What is her "Hopeless Passion?" These ambiguities are hardly the materials that one uses to make a traditional confessional piece. Where is the "Tell All?"

Today, readers are well acquainted with full-disclosure of the author who divulges every gritty detail. Confessionals are thought to be a method of therapy for the author, a way to overcome or come to terms with the events of the past. But Fisher did not have the power to participate in this type of confessional writing. She could not commit full-disclosure. Freedman believes that style is intimately connected with the author, and it is also connected to the society in which the author is writing. She says, "If why and how

women write is not separable from their lives, it is also not separable from a history of silence and the nonacademic forms of expression [like confessionals] that served lives formerly (and formally) circumscribed” (5). Fisher’s lack of full-disclosure speaks to the “history of silence” of women. Fisher, however, was progressive for her time because she utilizes “the nonacademic forms of expression” which come to resemble current day confessional writing. Jo Gill, editor of *Modern Confessional Writing: New Critical Essays*, specifies that “the ‘I’ of modern confessional writing is more complex, mutable and fluid” (7). Rather than the therapeutic “tell all” of former confessional writing, Fisher’s style seems to typify “modern confessional writing” because her voice, although consistently personal, is ever changing. In certain instances she is gritty and raw, and other times she is feminine and witty. Similar to the characteristics of shifting kaleidoscope hybridity and the feminine mode I described in section one, Fisher’s transforming voice is “complex” and “fluid,” oftentimes flowing from one writing style or voice to another within a single paragraph.

In addition to Fisher’s personally charged prose, her writing constantly defies propriety in terms of diction. While reading *GM*, one may read about a pleasant voyage on a ship, the people she encounters, and the food that is served. Then her narrative will shift to a very real and unabashed description. She writes, “When the ship rolled I could feel my guts shift delicately against my spine,” (*GM* 131). Rather than saying the waves tossed her body, or that she experienced constant movement, she reveals a raw and genuine experience. Fisher does not deny the experience, nor does she remain silent about bodily functions. Fisher uses the word “guts” in place of organs which, consequently, paints a vivid picture in the minds of her readers. Usually, people do not

refer to their organs as guts. Guts are the entrails of animals that we eat. Fish are gutted for consumption. Or, the word “guts” is used to describe organs that are outside of the body. We envision blood and gore, and not how the guts “shift delicately” inside her body. There is nothing characteristically “delicate” about guts. Her amalgamation of “delicate” and “guts” is paragon of her raw style. Fisher’s voice demonstrates how a “writerly voice emerges as the result of an individual’s idiosyncratic way of mixing and matching words, of inserting punctuation, of vocabulary” (Roorbach 5). In the example above, Fisher juxtaposes two different ideas and utilizes them in her description of a biological experience. In result, her voice is unique or “idiosyncratic.”

Fisher’s “idiosyncratic” voice is a little unnerving because of the way she juxtapositions the disparate. By doing so, she brings the everyday voyage or meal to life. She strips the banality away from everyday functions and intrigues us with an unexpected description. This style pulls the reader in because she makes the everyday motions of life (that may possibly be overlooked because of their normality) seem strange and interesting. According to Ben Highmore, editor of *The Everyday Life Reader*, “The antidote to our negligence towards the everyday is a kind of purposefully alienating perspective that refuses to utilise ready-made descriptions” (21). Fisher’s raw voice is an example of the “alienating perspective” that Highmore refers to. She does not use “ready-made descriptions,” but rather, she incorporates her imagination with reality and juxtaposes contrasting themes to shock and intrigue her audience. In “The Measure of My Powers 1931-1932,” Fisher’s portrayal of a restaurant in France “estranges” us from a normal restaurant scene. She sketches a restaurant of “frantic lavishness” with descriptions of pâtés, mousses, and wine (*GM* 113). But the jarring and unexpected detail

of the restaurant is found in her metaphor of it. She observes, “There was something exciting about the whole place, and very wrong, like a beautiful young woman with a cancer” (114). Two separate things, a restaurant and a woman with cancer, are brought together and are analogous for Fisher. Similar to the effect the word “guts” has on the reader, the “beautiful young woman with a cancer” makes us uncomfortable. We cannot go on. We must stop and think about the horrible context that Fisher provides. As readers, we must think about the relationship of the woman with cancer and the ostentatious restaurant. In effect, Fisher’s uncanny voice “alienates” us from any preconceived notions of what extravagant restaurants should be like and successfully estranges us from our everyday reading of them.

If Fisher’s voice is described as being uncanny, I am merely pointing to her use of the grotesque body. For Fisher, the body is discerned as something related to animality, being uncomfortably real, and susceptible to death and disease. Her ideas of the body may be a rejection of the social conditioning of our perceptions of what bodies should be. Alice McLean, in her dissertation *Eat and Be Eaten: The Aesthetic Pleasures of M.F.K. Fisher and Elizabeth David*, states, “The female body [is] a site where social forces constrain and deform woman’s capacity to nourish and articulate her desires,” (1). Cixous expounds this idea in “The Laugh of The Medusa.” She elucidates:

By writing her self, woman will return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her, which has been turned into the uncanny stranger on display—the ailing or dead figure, which so often turns out to be the nasty companion, the cause and location of inhibitions. (1646)

Furthermore, the body was believed to be a “source of fear and anxiety” (McLean 3). What expresses fear better than the grotesque? Fisher dehumanizes the body through

shock value and terrific descriptions. On page 226 and 227 of *GM*, her voice strikes an uncomfortable chord yet again:

We looked silently at one another, pale because of the sickening finality of the noise, and before David got up unwillingly to see what had happened, I thought of a book I'd read long ago in France, in which a pregnant girl jumped from a window and 'split open on the pavement like a ripe melon.' It sounded like that.

Fisher estranges the reader from what a broken clay pot sounds like by comparing the sound she hears to the suicide of a "pregnant girl." The sound of the suicide is not one she has heard, but a sound that she has imagined. Terror resounds in the grotesque image of the suicide of a sympathetic victim, in the verb "splits," and in the image of a watermelon exploding at impact. Moreover, the simile "like a ripe melon" further demonstrates Fisher's uncanny voice because it dehumanizes the hypothetical pregnant girl.

We cannot deny that Fisher's voice is raw and uncanny, but it also is hybrid: containing one or more parts that are successfully blended together. Like most aspects of Fisher's writing, her voice is not immune to contradictions. Even though she depicts the body grotesquely, she also hybridizes the grotesque with the beautiful and the delicate. In one short chapter in *GM* called "Once I Dreamed," Fisher recollects a dream of her cat:

She came to my side, and laid the mouse on one of my bare feet while she curled herself, crouching, around my legs. I looked down at her beautiful rippled brownness. I felt tender and loving, as I knew she did, and I understood the gentility of her hunger.

She drew the little blue mouse onto her tongue, and crunched delicately once, and on my foot was a cool feeling from a spot of soft cerulean blood. (169-70)

When I first read this I thought... what a very odd, yet delicate description of a grotesque scene. Fisher describes a cat "crunch[ing]" the bones of a field mouse. There is blood on

her foot and yet it does not affect her. Instead, she finds the habits of the cat as “delicate” and “beautiful.” The countenance of the cat is not of a hungry beast, or of a cat that has savagely caught a mouse and killed it, but it is “tender and loving.” This scene can remind the reader of the shifting nature of Fisher’s voice. When we believe that we have figured out Fisher’s style, Fisher surprises us with scenes like this. Fisher can be raw and delicate. She can be grotesque and beautiful. Her styles are disparate yet they are all part of one voice: Fisher’s ever-changing hybrid voice.

Another attribute of Fisher’s amalgamated voice is her rhetorical use of sarcasm. In fact, it is difficult to read Fisher and not pick up on her sarcastic tone. I have noticed that her sarcasm is the strongest when she comments about other women embodying the traditional female role. She looks down her nose at the people who conform or do not act the way she does in a mocking manner. One humor theorist, Simon Critchley in his book *On Humor* (2002), says that mocking habits are like “comic scapegoating.” It is a type of humor that “seeks to confirm the status quo either by denigrating a certain sector of society, as in sexist humor, or by laughing at the alleged stupidity of a social outsider” (12). Fisher’s sarcasm about women is “comic scapegoating.” She “confirms” the existence of a typical female role by laughing at it. She jokes about women’s properness (or lack thereof). She derides the silly roles they conform to, and the ridiculous things they eat because they do not have the temerity to try something new. Fisher considers what this role would feel like if she had never left her first husband in the chapter “Sea Change: 1935.” The idea of being the normative faculty wife disgusted her. She rejects the wife role and jokes about it using her classic sarcasm: “A few more years, and I’d have been wearing brown-satin afternoon dresses and wearily eating marshmallow salads

at committee luncheons with the best of them” (*GM* 128). By “wearily” eating “marshmallow salads” when she is used to eating watercress, she makes it clear that it was not the life she wanted. In addition, “the best of them” is clearly a sarcastic phrase. If “the best” is with whom she would be sitting, why would she be “wearily” doing it? If they really were “the best,” why would she disdain that kind of life? The only logical answer is that she is using sarcasm as comic scapegoating. She is not laughing at the women as “social outsiders” but as social insiders because they are conforming to a life she disdains and resists. Critchley provides that a certain “glory” is experienced when laughing at others. Therefore, this type of “humor is not the laughter at power, but the powerful laughing at the powerless” (12). For Fisher, these women are “powerless” because they lack autonomy, and conversely, she has power because she is autonomous. The women she mocks are “faculty wives” and their importance is only relational to their powerful husbands.

This may seem like a harsh criticism of Fisher’s sarcasm, but she is not only laughing at others, she is laughing at herself as well. Critchley believes that “true humor does not wound a specific victim and always contains self mockery” (14). By making fun of women’s roles, she is making fun of herself. Although the autonomy of New Womanhood gives her more power, she is still susceptible to public opinion. Her experience as a faculty wife and a woman impedes her separation from her sex. Their plight is her plight. For as long as she continues to reject the gender roles constructed by society, she will have to struggle in her personal and her professional writing life. This kind of “self mockery” is in tune with the conflict of her personal voice. She continues to keep the focus on her life in all of its highs and lows. Furthermore, her literary voice

defamiliarizes us with common aspects of life utilizing her sarcasm. Faculty wives, luncheons, and marshmallow salads may seem everyday, but by making fun of it, “the ordinary [is] made extraordinary” (Critchley 10). To end on a final note on humor, Critchley believes that, “humor is a paradoxical form of speech and action that defeats our expectations, producing laughter with its unexpected verbalizations, contortions and explosions, a refusal of everyday speech that lights up the everyday” (19). Fisher’s voice “defeats our expectations” by using a voice that combines the personal, the raw, the delicate, and the grotesque. Her sarcastic humor, in addition to the “paradoxical” styles she uses, “lights up the everyday.” She hybridizes these qualities of style generating a unique idiosyncratic voice. Not only does this voice simultaneously please and shock us, but it estranges us from the familiar aspects of life, causing us to question cultural constructions like body perception and gender roles.

Finally, the last element of Fisher’s New Womanesque voice is her sexual and sensual language. I will not exhaust the subject here because the critics who have addressed this topic have done so rather thoroughly.³ But I think it is important to recognize Fisher’s sexual voice as contributing to her identity as a New Woman. Fisher expresses, “Once I told you that writing for me was (is?) a form of making love” (*PA* 32). Fisher believes that writing and language are interconnected with sex and sensualism. When she engages language to express her personal thoughts, it is “a form of making love.” If we refer back to the epigraph, she purposes to “have a wild affair with a book,” because she did not have a man handy. Cutter stresses that language and sexuality were inexorably linked for the New Woman’s identity. She explains:

³ Please refer to Susan Derwin, Mary Lukanuski, Alice McLean, Liza Potvin, and Brenda Sully.

The New Woman's sexual freedom extended beyond actual behavior, for she insisted on a sexual candor that was very different from the True Woman's voice [...] Early twentieth century critics of New Womanhood were quick to notice that women's unruly sexual behavior connected to their language. (20)

Fisher's voice is representative of the "sexual candor" that Cutter mentions. Not only does Fisher discuss sexual topics, but she also uses sexual terms in the descriptions of food. For instance, the ritual of eating and the enjoyment of eating in groups is often depicted as "orgiastic" (*GM* 92). The adjective "orgiastic," comes from the noun "orgy" and contains two meanings. The first is an "unrestrained indulgence in any activity" (*Webster's* 450). In this context, the term is not sexualized and simply describes the type of eating she participated in. The second is "a wild party, esp. with sexual activity" (*Webster's* 450). "Orgy" (which is similar phonetically and in meaning to "orgasm") links the act of eating to the act of sex. The word cannot be separated from either of its meanings because Fisher intended for both meanings to be understood. Her favorite activities, eating and writing, are both tied in with sex and sexuality, demonstrating a New Woman voice.

As Rudin claims, "Fisher is a product of the liberated twenties." It was a time of frivolity, flappers, sexual discussions, and premarital sex (Chafe 94). This backdrop allowed her to describe sexual scenes and use sexual language twenty years later without much social disparagement. She engaged in "orgiastic eating," she described food and dining experiences with shocking sensuality, and she confessed moments of self-exhibition. But the most strikingly sexual account in *GM* is her memory of Maritza Nankova. In a chapter titled "To Feed Such Hunger," Fisher recalls an incident when she was awakened in the middle of the night by the son of her landlord. He heard strange

noises coming from Maritza's room. When Fisher went to investigate, this is what she saw:

The bed was covered with a big white sheet, as if it were a smooth table, and she motionless in the middle, lying with her arms at her sides. I was surprised at how beautiful her body was, so white and clean, with high firm breasts and a clear triangle of golden hair, like an autumn leaf. There were no pillows on the bed, so that her head tilted back and I could see pulses beating hard in her throat. Her eyes were closed, and she kept on breathing in those low soft moans. (*GM 74*)

This paragraph indicates that Fisher connected food with sexuality. The bed was like a "smooth table," and Maritza was "motionless," like a main course to be eaten. Fisher connects the image of a dinner table to Maritza's "low soft moans," which were the effects of an orgasm. Her delineation between the two solidifies the connection of orgasm and orgy, to eating. Fisher's description of this scene is the quintessential New Woman voice. She exhibits an uninhibited sexual self. For instance, she does not immediately feel embarrassed for walking in on her fellow tenant naked and in a trance of "sexual overexcitement" (*GM 76*). On the contrary, she looks over Maritza with pleasure noticing her "high firm breasts" and her "clear triangle of golden hair." Fisher's lack of propriety attends to her New Womanhood. She denies prescribed roles and expectations of female voice because they are not representative of how she truly feels. Further in the chapter she says, "I must laugh now, in spite of the feminine shame I feel to think of that table laid in the bright room and the strange ways of satisfying hunger" (*GM 77*). Fisher "laugh[s]" at her "feminine shame" because in that room, not only were Klorr and Maritza's physical "hunger[s]" fed, but her desire to participate and express sexuality as she felt it was "satisfy[ied]."

Fisher's "feminine shame" is important because it shows that her sense of decorum was never forgotten. She still experienced "shame" even though the sexual encounter with Maritza was a pleasurable one. Although Fisher applies her New Woman voice, it is not without consequence. Cutter points out, for women "to be in the public sphere is to demand an unruly—potentially sexual, and certainly not submissive voice" (7). The identity of an "unruly" woman violated social norms of female identity. In the twenties, the New Woman broke out; but by the thirties and especially into the forties, women's roles were reappropriated by society and were domesticated once again. This was a reaction against the New Woman because she "inspired fear" (Cutter 19). Her sexual autonomy made her "Sexless. Oversexed. Undersexed" (Cutter 14). Cixous believes, "Smug-faced readers, managing editors, and big bosses don't like the true texts of women—female sexed texts. That kind scares them" (1644). Therefore, to mollify the effects of the New Woman, there had to be social control over language. Cutter explains, "Control of language is also linked to control of sexuality: to speak out is to be immodest, sexual, unruly" (7). Fisher had to control herself in terms of language if she wanted the readership she desired. As a result, her control of language blossomed in the form of ambiguity and silence. While some topics were okay to address, there were others that she barely touched on in order to conform to the standards of female public writing.

"Silence is Golden"

Although Fisher identified with the New Woman, she wrote *GM* during a time when women were not completely liberated from the True Woman. In fact, her biography, letters, and journal entries exhibit a side of her that one would not expect to

find. Oftentimes, she is self-reflexive, self-conscious, and self-denying. In short, she performs part of the role that typifies a True Woman. It would be wrong to label Fisher as a New Woman or a True Woman in totality because she is neither. Her voice does, however, resemble different aspects of the two opposing identity constructions. It is hinged upon an unstable construction that is continually at war with itself. She is persistently fighting to give into her unique style *and* obey her “sense of literary decorum” (Lazar 530). Her uncertainty about her literary voice is apparent in her letters to her psychiatrist. She asks, “Why am I so afraid of being *undignified*? [...] and by it I mean a thousand things like ugly, formless, messy, graceless, incoherent, undisciplined” (PA 221). Fisher questions her fear of betraying her public appearance. Even Cixous asks, “Who, surprised and horrified by the fantastic tumult of her drives (for she was made to believe that a well-adjusted woman has a... divine composure), hasn’t accused herself of being a monster?” (1644) For Fisher, to be dignified is to have “composure” or control over one’s appearance and one’s actions. This control has “form,” and “grace,” it is neat and ordered, but most of all it is “disciplined.” With discipline comes authority, and Fisher questions if she has disregarded the authority of the public. Reardon asks, “Did she, in fact, outrage her sense of modesty by figuratively playing with herself in public?” (PA 220) And again Fisher questions, “But am I admirable? Or am I simply a skillful exhibitionist who can use words?” (PA 220). Fisher interrogates her actions and her work with propriety always in mind and on the back burner

Fisher came from a society that encouraged secrecy of the private life—secrets were to linger in silence. The secrets that were to remain “secrets” included everything that was considered taboo: pregnancies out of wedlock, “abnormal” sexual habits (like

homosexuality), and “wrongful” death (like murder or suicide). Janet Ellerby describes “the cultural shift from sanctioned secrecy in the fifties [and forties] to today’s clinical and social encouragement to tell all,” in her book *Intimate Reading: The Contemporary Woman’s Memoir* (xviii). She says that in memoirs today, it is culturally encouraged for the author to “tell all” because of the possible therapeutic results of doing so. But in the mid twentieth century, telling one’s secrets was considered disreputable. Furthermore, Fisher was not interested in therapeutic writing (Lazar 530). Ellerby proposes that the prevalent practice of the forties possessed “Nietzsche’s concerted practice of ‘active forgetfulness’: the willful and purposeful erasure of scars that repeated remembering would turn into open wounds” (32). The act of silence, or “active forgetting,” resulted from social pressures to keep secrets hidden, as well as the personal “practice” to protect the self from painful recollections that were presumed to be harmful. Ellerby’s ideas are important in regards to Fisher’s silences about the traumatic events in her life because they may lead us to answers about what she left out and why.

Fisher’s book, *GM*, leaves the reader with many questions because some ideas and events of her life are not fully fledged out. After reading her biography, we may become even more puzzled as to why she left so many important details of her life. Fisher wrote *GM* after the suicides of her second husband and her brother. Her husband committed suicide in 1941, and her brother committed suicide shortly afterwards in 1942 to escape the WWII draft (*PA* 150). In *GM*, there is no description of either suicide. She simply states that Chexbres, or Dillwyn Parrish, dies and the reader is left to assume that it is from his sickness, Buerger’s disease. Furthermore, she leaves out the death of her brother all together. The book ends with her in Mexico and witnessing a very strange and

unhealthy relationship between her brother and a cross-dressing singer named Juanito. Why did she leave out the crucial details of her past? Her memoir (if we are to generalize the genre) is a recollection of her past and her place within that space. If we are to believe Felski when she says that a “personal crisis,” such as the suicide of a loved one, acts as a “catalyst” for self discovery, then we must believe that these events are important enough to be included in this highly intimate text.

Fisher omits details of the events or leaves the events out altogether despite their life changing effects. In her journal she wrote:

There are too many things that I cannot write yet. They're in words in my head, but I am afraid of writing them. It is as if they might make a little crack in me and let out some of all the howling, hideous, frightful grief. It is difficult to know, certainly, how to live at all. (PA 137)

Fisher excludes the suicides of her loved ones because she is engaging in “active forgetfulness.” If she opens up those memories and records them in *GM*, she will reopen the “wounds” of her past. The wound is described as a “crack” that will release the “howling, hideous, frightful grief.” Consequently, Fisher excludes the suicides to keep from opening the emotional wounds they left on her. She conforms to the socially sanctioned activity of silence. She denies her “itch to Tell All” and performs the self-denying role of the True Woman by refusing to succumb to the personal anguish that these events caused.

Fisher’s pain and confusion, however, do not always play out in the form of silence. Oftentimes, Fisher maintains her literary propriety by writing in an ambiguous mode. Lazar proposes that Fisher deliberately excludes the details of her family tragedies but represents them in “dark tones and oblique allusions” (530). Lazar touches on an

important aspect of Fisher's voice: it contains "dark tones," or shadows. *GM* is laden with Fisher's penumbral style; she is difficult to figure out and the prose can be unclear. For example, on page 122 she says, "Nothing was real except what happened in my mind." What does she mean by this? Is she saying that she is dazed by the voyage and everything seemed distant? Is she hinting at her failing marriage by insinuating that they are keeping up appearances and only she knows the truth? Or is she saying that she is disconnected to everything and everyone outside of her mind? She does not expatiate on this idea further and the reader is left with questions similar to the ones above.

Fisher, however, is not entirely impenetrable. As I said, her style is penumbral. We can discern that a problem exists, but like shadows, the definitions are blurry. At times the magnitude of her problems seems great, and other times they seem miniscule. But they are always present and they never leave. Some of Fisher's problems include her failing marriage, the slow dissipation of her second husband Dillwyn, and her brother's inability to operate normally at a social level. Time and again Fisher alludes to these problems but never fully divulges her feelings. On page 116, Fisher recollects a dinner scene with Al. After eating something that did not agree with her, she has an emotional breakdown. She recounts:

I sat in the gradually chilling room, thinking of my whole past the way a drowning man is supposed to, and it seemed part of the present, part of the gray cold and the beggar woman without a face and the moulting birds frozen to their own filth in the Orangerie. I know now I was in the throes of some glandular crisis, a sublimated bilious attack, a flick of the whip of melancholia, but then it was terrifying... nameless....

If we take a close look at this paragraph, we will see the way Fisher is trying to hide her discontent with her marriage. There are at least two ways to read this excerpt. The first is

literal: she is cold from the German weather, she is truly shaken by the image of the faceless beggar woman, and she genuinely experiences a “bilious attack.” The second way is to read it metaphorically. The room “gradually” gets cold because the love in her marriage is diminishing. She mentions the “drowning man” because she feels inundated with grief and the feeling is killing her spirit. Fisher thinks about her “whole past,” but the past also “seemed part of the present.” Her life is without color and warmth (gray cold), and she becomes the “beggar woman without a face” because she is begging for a way out of her loveless marriage. The “moulting” signifies shedding in the way she wants to shed her marriage. But Fisher hides these emotions in a description of a “bilious” attack and “melancholia.” Fisher suggests unhappiness in her marriage but the reader does not know for sure. Fisher’s metaphor of the “tamale pie” and its effects on her person produces uncertainty about the cause of her painful reaction. Her ambiguous style keeps the reader in the dark. She is not over revelatory about their relationship and therefore does not cross the line of what is considered socially acceptable to write.

The digression away from Fisher’s modern voice is especially apparent after the death of her second husband. Her prose is flighty; it jumps time and stimulates more questions about her emotional stability and about her brother. Cixous declares, “Flying is woman’s gesture—flying in language and making it fly [...] we’ve lived in flight, stealing away, finding when desired, narrow passageways, hidden crossovers” (1651). In the beginning of “The Measure of My Powers: 1941,” Fisher says that she “was in flight” (*GM* 210). She is “flying in language” because her prose embodies her content: she is constantly “stealing away,” jumping from one subject to the next, her prose is quick at times and slow at others, and she forfeits herself to numerous contradictions. She

remembers that Dillwyn's death "dulled parts" of her, but that other parts were "bright and alive" (*GM* 210). Her emotional stability is also called into question in "Feminine Ending." She jumps from descriptions of her airline flight and her sensory numbness to a love story that is not about her. She exudes her emotional stability in the introduction of the story. One would expect a love story to begin with love, but she begins the chapter with a discussion on hate. She asks, "Shall I hate myself, as part of the life that molded us all [...] shall I get drunk on hatred, or sit back tranquilly, listening to the quiet voices of the long and newly dead, peacefully now as I should have been on the lake?" (*GM* 229-30). This curious beginning to a love story instigates additional questions. Why is she so angry? Why does she blame herself? If Dillwyn died of a disease, like she insinuates, how can anyone be blamed? Who are the "voices of the long and newly dead?" At this point in the book we know that Dillwyn has died, but she says "voices" alluding to multiple deaths. Who else has died? She does not discuss death of anyone in her family, so is she talking about the deaths of people she has known? Not known? The questions remain unanswered. Fisher keeps the family tragedy of David's suicide out of her story and as a result, the story contains gaps which cause the reader to question the reliability of her narrative. Her feelings are veiled and facts are shrouded in mystery. By remaining ambiguous, Fisher performs the socially encouraged silence because she abstains from revealing her secrets.

The ambiguous and penumbral quality of Fisher's writing creates questions about the text, and in turn, the questions require interpretive answers. Thus, a discussion between the reader and the text is created. Fisher's metaphors and enigmatic endings produce this dialogism between the text and the reader. If she is not going to tell us

everything, it is up to us to read between the lines to obtain meaning and explanation. We already discussed Fisher's metaphors, now let us turn to the way she finishes her chapters in *GM*. Her chapter endings are exceedingly enigmatic. One questions if the ending is meant to be a closure of the chapter or if it is meant to encourage the reader to ask questions, to look at the text closer, and to keep reading. She gives us just enough information to keep us interested but still leaves us wanting more. The second to last chapter in *GM*, the narrative about her flight to Mexico, ends with a scene about a peasant woman who drops a pot of beans she was going to sell in the village. The woman was devastated and sat motionless the rest of the day. Fisher recalls:

And at sundown she was gone. None of us saw her go. She took all the pieces of clay with her, back to the hills. We could go out past the place where she had been, then, to eat some supper. We went to the Nido, and spent a lot of money, and drank cocktails first by the lake, still feeling shocked by the sound of the pot falling on the stones, and her long silence. It was her own kind of flight, as good as perhaps mine... (227-28)

Similar to the tamale pie scene with Al, this moment also can be read multiple ways. Like other endings in this book, this chapter closes on a discursive note. It is the closure of a story about a peasant woman who dropped beans. It also functions as a simile to Fisher's "flight." She says that the peasant's flight was "as good as perhaps mine." She doesn't flesh out this idea, but instead, trails off in ellipses. Her thought is unfinished. We are compelled to pick up where she left off. If we want any closure, we have to figure out *why* the peasant's flight is analogous to hers. By not explaining the basis of the simile, Fisher does not disclose intimate information. She does not indulge her "itch to Tell All." she performs secrecy and participates in silence. She is protecting herself from harmful revelations and from the disparagement from the literary community. She does not deny

her feelings, but she does deny the opportunity to reveal them to the public. The passage is opaque, penumbral, dialogic, and discursive. These qualities help her participate in socially solicited silence.

Fisher's shifting voice shows a discord in her identity. Competing identities of the True and New Woman keep her from giving in to the "mature M.F.K. voice." She is continually concerned with propriety in her writing and what she reveals to the public audience. Showalter says that "divisions in [women's] writing selves produced writing blocks and silences." Fisher demonstrates how "silences" pervade her work. Her struggle with the "divisions" of her voice makes it liminal and "unstable" in nature. Sidonie Smith, author of "Performativity, Autobiographical Practice, Resistance," explains:

It is as if the autobiographical subject finds him/herself on multiple stages simultaneously, called to heterogeneous recitations of identity. These multiple calls never align perfectly. Rather they create spaces or gaps, ruptures, unstable boundaries, incursions, excursions, limits and their transgressions. (110)

Fisher is constantly "called to heterogeneous recitations of identity." She struggles with the expression of herself as a sexual, sarcastic, and imaginative New Woman. The public's opinion of her, however, still affects her. It still encourages her to be the domestic and silent woman, opposed to the autonomous woman she desires to be. Her ambiguous style and her silence demonstrate how these opposing forces create "spaces, gaps, ruptures" in her writing.

Conclusion

Hopefully I have shown the ways in which Fisher's voice is multifaceted. Her voice consists of different elements that are discernable in their separate parts, but when

they are combined, they compose Fisher's unique style. Fisher's authorial presence pervades her narrative and shows us the complications of expressing one's self and conforming to social norms. Her writing exhibits how gender constructions of the New Woman and the True Woman influenced her voice to be racy, raw, sarcastic, and sexual as well as ambiguous, enigmatic, and silent. Fisher's voice is New Womanesque in terms of her highly personal, sexual, and sarcastic voice. She estranges everyday experiences by describing said events in an oddly grotesque and raw fashion. Her imagery establishes Fisher's highly modern idiosyncratic voice. Despite her tendency to shockingly push the limits, she tries to maintain her "sense of literary decorum" by keeping certain feelings and experiences to herself. She does not ostentatiously reveal any homosexual feelings or her personal traumas with suicide. Rather, she plays into the construction of a True Woman by remaining silent about these issues and enigmatically describing others. Fisher's ambiguity makes her writing dialogic; she invites us to generate our own answers to the questions that arise. She encourages us to investigate her text in order to find meaning from the clues she gives. The presence of both versions of female identity problematizes pinning down a concrete Fisher voice. She is not a New Woman, nor is she a True Woman: which leads us to believe that her voice is a combination or hybrid of the two.

Fisher uses the separate elements of her style as she needs in order to express herself. Like the image in a kaleidoscope a new vision of Fisher is fashioned. The shifting movement can convey different authorial voices as required. Fisher uses some aspects of her identity to convey a modern racy voice, and she uses others to veil the voice that she considers too intimate and too real to share. If we refer back to Goffman and his idea of

performativity, he said that people will hide or “suppress” those actions that “discredit” the persona. If we believe that Fisher is trying to perform the role of the professional writer, we can understand why she would assume the role of a True Woman in order to sustain her professional career. When she maneuvers the different aspects of her writerly voice, she can highlight one over the other. But this does not mean that Fisher is flip-floppy or cannot commit to one true voice. It just signifies that the struggle between the two is part of her voice. Although one may be more apparent at times, the other does not disappear. Fisher writes *GM* at a time of growth and change in female identity. She does not belong to the generation of the silent woman, nor does she belong to the generation of the fully liberated woman. She is, however, influenced by both. These generations influenced her form, her style, and her literary integrity.

“Feminine Ending”: Conclusion

I hope that sections one and two of my thesis provide my readers and future M.F.K. Fisher scholars with enough information and insight about what I am trying to accomplish. I set out to show how the value Fisher’s writing goes beyond the mere categorization of food writing or even food-memoir. My goal is to provide enough evidence to explain why I think Fisher is a literary hybrid writer; and not just a literary hybrid writer, but a kaleidoscopic hybrid writer. I point out that Fisher’s texts function the way a kaleidoscope would: they are composed of disparate parts that make up the whole, and their hybridity is shifting—her texts display multiple hybridities—vacillating between possible readings like, for example, hybrid genre and hybrid voice. Fisher’s texts show a hybridization of genres, discourses, forms, styles, and voice. The kaleidoscope metaphor bolsters my effort to explicate the difficulty in categorizing Fisher’s work. The kaleidoscope speaks to Fisher’s multifaceted approach to writing which affected her approach to genre and style.

Fisher utilized a multifaceted approach because she had to navigate between the contemporary social roles for women. At one end, there was the True Woman. This gender construction was based on the social expectations of women who lived generations before Fisher. They were the self-denying, self-sacrificing daughters, wives, and mothers who lived to serve and please their families. At the other end, there was the

New Woman. She had a voice, autonomy, sexual freedom, and power over her person. She chose to work, to write, or play the traditional female role. She spoke out, spoke what was on her mind, and told all. She discovered her body, reclaimed her sexuality, and she wrote through them both. Fisher struggled with these competing forces pulling at her, and as a result, she employed a multitudinous array of literary devices and forms to serve her immediate needs of self expression. While her sense of propriety led to silences, shadows, and enigmatic passages in her writing, her need to “tell all” led to highly personalized material that exhibited her raw, gritty, and modern style. Fisher’s method of writing is similar to the female mode of writing later theorized later by the French Feminists of the second wave. Her mercurial approach facilitates the blurring of genres and styles in order to feed her compulsion to write and appease the social expectations of her. Sometimes Fisher’s more spirited side parades her temerity and tendency to be shocking. Sometimes her reserve portrays a more socially conscious Fisher, who is keener in her observations of literary decorum and of female gender roles.

In order to investigate this duality of Fisher’s writing self, I incorporate several theoretical methodologies to back my own ideas about her writing. The most important theoretical positions I use are New Historicism and Feminism. They provide the avenues which allow me to critically analyze Fisher’s and other writers’ socio-historical role and female subjectivity in the literary field as well as within contemporary culture. In addition, I was able to investigate Fisher’s writing in terms of genre theory. By taking a closer look at different genres, and specifically the different subgenres of creative nonfiction, I demonstrate the difficulty in the categorization of Fisher’s texts and offer a new reading of them as genre hybrids. Lastly, Everyday Theory effectively explains why

Fisher's voice fluctuated between a more traditional female voice and a New Womanesque voice. Goffman's theory of performance, Highmore's theory of estrangement, and Critchley's theory of humor are especially useful to elucidate Fisher's motivations for writing one way over another.

This thesis is by no means an exhausted analysis on hybridity in Fisher's texts. I have tried to thoroughly explain my reasoning about Fisher's writing, and I anticipate that this work will lead to further research on the topic. The great thing about hybridity is that the disparate parts can lead to individual and intensive studies of their own. Future Fisher scholars can investigate her work in terms of each of the creative nonfiction subgenres, each of the themes she addresses, and each of the voices she presents. However, my particular study can be expanded into a comparative study of Fisher and both American female writers and European female writers of her time. I would be interested to find the similarities between Fisher and her literary inspirations like Virginia Woolf and Sidonie-Gabrielle Collette. Moreover, a comparative study between Fisher and her contemporaries, both male and female, might speak to what was/is included in the literary canon. The study might illuminate us as to why Fisher is not widely read by the literary community and why most of the scholarship on Fisher is relegated to her food writing.

Lastly, I believe that more exhaustive studies are possible through different theoretical lenses. I have glossed over a few theories trying to prove Fisher's literary hybridity, but I think that they are worthy of their own critical studies in regards to Fisher's writing. Narrative consciousness, memory, and the subjective 'I' could be an entire dissertation or thesis alone. It would also be interesting to study Fisher's texts through the scope of Queer Theory to expose her homosexual tendencies and her struggle

with compulsory heterosexuality. Another possible area of study is Semiotics and Fisher's signs and symbols. A Psychoanalytic reading may offer possible answers as to why Fisher struggles with identity. Psychoanalytic theory may illuminate different aspects of her personal relationships, and it may offer insight about the latent sexual overtones in her writing. I guess the point that I am trying to make is that the possibilities are endless. Fisher's work is capable of yielding fruitful inquiries that go beyond what I discussed in this thesis. The value of her texts transcends the boundaries of food writing and I hope that this thesis inspires more critical analysis of her work.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

“Between Fact and Fiction: An Essay on M.F.K. Fisher and the Intricacies of Truth”

Introduction:

By now some of my notes sound like fabrications, invented to prove a point in an argument. This is because it is my way of explaining, and it has always been a personal problem, even a handicap. When I tell of a stubbed toe or childbirth or how to serve peacocks’ tongues on toast it sounds made-up, embroidered. But it is as it happened to *me*. (TMHP 363)

What is Truth? What are its characteristics? What codifies it, explains it, and what are the values that surround it? What are the necessary stipulations of Truth? Philosophers, both secular and non-secular, critics, literary theorists, women, and men have investigated these questions for ages. There are as many definitions of Truth as there are people to theorize about it. In this way, Truth becomes subjective to the individual. In fact, there are so many meanings and inferences of Truth, it slips into non-meaning⁴. Therefore, Truth becomes truth. Yet still, people find ways to claim that *their* version of truth is the correct one. They disregard other truths in order to privilege their own. The epigraph above indicates that the idea of truth is far more slippery than we previously thought. Fisher acknowledges that her stories sound “made-up” or “embroidered.” She acknowledges that they have a certain quality about them that

⁴ Please refer to Derrida’s theory of “freeplay” in language and meaning. Derrida, Jacques. “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences.” and “Difference.” Ed. David Richter. *The Critical Tradition: Classic Texts and Contemporary Trends*. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2007. Print

exhibits an indifference to objective reality. But she refuses to admit she lied. She asserts her stories “sound like fabrications” rather than being fabrications themselves. She mixes the ordinary—“stubbed toe” and “childbirth”—with the seemingly extra-ordinary (and possibly prevaricated) “peacock’s tongues on toast.” But for Fisher, these things are without differentiation—they are described in the same way. Although her stories may seem like they are “embroidered” or are “fabrications,” she candidly emphasizes she described them as they happened to *her*. She disclaims the objective reality of her writing, but quite the contrary, she writes subjectively. She writes *her* world through *her* eyes.

Both sections of my thesis show that the cultural context from which Fisher lived and wrote affected her writing in every sense. The multiplicity of the genres, forms, and styles she used can be attributed to her internal struggle to genuinely express herself and comply with social gender norms. This vacillation caused her to deviate from the traditional ways of writing, and as a result, Fisher embraced a more female mode that allowed for liminality, discursivity, and categorical transgressions. Fisher’s perception of reality—or at least her description of it—was another consequence of this deviation. This essay will address Fisher’s conception of truth in response to her biographer’s claim that “every experience, book read, childhood and adult memory recalled became grist for the mill of her storytelling prowess, with varying degrees of disrespect for the truth” (*PA* 154). Joan Reardon maintains that Fisher fictionalized certain details in her books throughout her writing career. Reardon’s goal for the biography was to show that Fisher was a complicated woman who wove stories of fiction and reality to represent a kind of persona that she wanted everyone to see. Reardon wants to show the real life of Fisher,

and not as Fisher portrayed it. What Reardon grossly misses, however, is the importance of Fisher's version. It isn't any less real or true, but rather, it reveals more about Fisher's life in the way she experienced it. Fisher never intended to write a history, and it would be unfair to hold her to the standards of one. Fisher claims:

Since the beginning of my talking years, my family had teasingly warned me and gullible listeners that I never spoil a story by sticking to the truth. This is a plain lie, because I do not lie. But I have never seen any reason to be dull, and since I was less than four I have enjoyed entertaining and occasionally startling anyone who may be listening. (*PA 3*)

Fisher claims, "I do not lie," yet some people disbelieve her because of her ability to be "startling." She disputes the allegations and indicates that the only charge that can be brought against her is her refusal to be "dull." Why should we not believe her? Why, in Showalter's words, do we continue to refute her subjective experiences?

The goal of this essay is to show how truth is manipulated in order to convey Fisher's unique experiences according to how she saw and judged them. Generally, our culture values "historical truth" and projects that value onto a form that negates its very definition. "Historical truth is what exists prior to our biases, our selectivity and defenses" (Freeman 120). Contrarily, the autobiography or memoir is "selective" and "biased" in essence. Our histories are subject to "such problems as wishful thinking, defenses, illusions, delusions, and so on, all of which will likely find their way into one's story" (Freeman 116). Fisher reiterates that her stories are "each written by *me*, shaped, molded, and, to some minds, distorted by my own vision, which depends in turn on my state of health, passion, finances, and my general glandular balance" (*AG ix*). Her stories, she admits, may be "distorted" but they are *her* stories. We notice a pattern: she emphasizes the self every time she italicizes the word "me." She points out that her

stories only come from her perspective. Rhetorically, these declarations function as cautionary statements meant to warn the reader about the personal and subjective nature of the memories she recounts.

For Fisher, truth operates in similar ways to genre, form, and style. She manipulates them all in order to serve her needs and her compulsion to express her thoughts and emotions. In the prologue to *Among Friends* she says, “Every lesson, every lecture listened to, must be interpreted into a personal dialect of the human language, and that is what I keep trying to do....” (18). Fisher’s “interpretation” of events and emotions in her life is narrated in conjunction with her unique perspective. Moreover, social pressures shape those interpretations, and things like memory and subjective perception impact them as well. Like other aspects of Fisher’s writing, we can perceive her idea of truth and reality as a conglomeration of different types of truths and thereby offering a version of the truth, *her* truth.

Feminine Truth

This section is titled “Feminine Truth” not because I think that truth contains masculine or feminine characteristics or that masculine truth is objective and feminine truth is subjective but because I want to discuss how truth has different implications for the sexes. In regards to women, truth is adopted, manipulated, or rejected in order to stay within the bounds of patriarchal discourse. Adrienne Rich addresses this issue in an article called “Woman and Honor: Some Notes on Lying.” Her “notes” make a very convincing argument concerning women, truth, and lying. Rich scrutinizes the relationships of women and men and the effects on female communication. She says,

“Patriarchal lying has manipulated women both through falsehood and through silence. Facts we needed have been withheld from us. False witness has been born against us” (189). Rich believes that this type of female subjugation has constructed a negative perception, or “false witness,” of women. She believes that “honesty in women has not been considered important. We have been depicted as generically whimsical, deceitful, subtle, vacillating. And we have been rewarded for lying” (186). This destructive view of women stems from the True Woman gender constructions I spoke of in sections one and two of my thesis. Rich strongly asserts that this image affected women’s relationships and their notion of truth.

This antipathy towards the woman’s voice reveals itself in Reardon’s reading of Fisher. Reardon believes that Fisher “played fast and loose in her rendition of events” (*PA* xii). Furthermore, she quotes Fisher’s nephew saying, “Trouble is, she embroiders the facts to the point where what she ends up with is virtually fiction” (*PA* xii). They accuse Fisher of fallacious writing because she did not stick to the hard facts—the objective reality. But what they forget is the social context in which she wrote. Women were thought of as “deceitful” and “vacillating.” According to Rich, their true experiences were constantly being “refuted.” If society was constantly denying woman’s claims, what would she have to do to be heard? Or in Fisher’s case, what would she have to do in order to be read? Rich proposes, “In the struggle for survival we tell lies. To bosses, to prison guards, the police, men who have power over us, who legally own us and our children, lovers who need us as proof of their manhood” (189). Women lied because they had to. In the subjugation of “power” (i.e. “bosses,” “prison guards,” “police,” and “men”) women had to manipulate the truth in order to survive. If Fisher

desired to be heard, she had to “lie” about or silence her desires in order to be socially accepted. Reardon and her nephew do not take this into account. They are solely focused on the facts, black and white, yes or no.

Reardon skims the surface of this problem when she mentions that writing was a source of power for Fisher. She says that Fisher “gradually realized that writing, like cooking, was not so much about the facts as it was about a certain kind of control over reality and power over the one who consumed” (*PA* 22). In a world where power was denied to women, Fisher found a medium where she could rule. Reardon says this power is “over the one who consumed,” or the reader, but I will argue that it was power over her life and power over self expression. Fisher could attain a level of autonomy through writing what most women did not have access to. Writing gave Fisher power; to keep it, she had to maneuver through society’s rules in order to keep writing. Rich maintains, “The liar lives in fear of losing control. She cannot even desire a relationship without manipulation, since to be vulnerable to another person means for her the loss of control” (187). In other words, if Fisher were to commit full disclosure, she would be “vulnerable.” She would open herself up to ridicule. But she avoided denigration and operated with a different sense of truth (what Rich and Reardon would consider lying) to avoid “the loss of control.”

The truth/lie dichotomy is interesting because it disallows for shades of gray. The statement is either right or it’s wrong. The speaker is either good or bad. Rich points out, “There is nothing simple or easy about this idea” (187). She continues, “There is no ‘the truth,’ ‘a truth’—truth is not one thing or even a system. It is an increasing complexity[...] Lies are usually attempts to make everything simpler—for the liar—than

it really is, or ought to be” (187-88). If Fisher manipulated the truth in order to survive, she did it “to make everything simpler” for herself. Telling the whole truth, revealing the circumstances of her divorce and the deaths of her husband and brother, and embracing her latent bisexuality would complicate her writing career and probably instigate derisive criticism of her work. Instead, Fisher told versions of truth, in addition to participating in silence. “Lying is done with words, and also with silence” (Rich 186). The tweaking of truth is perceived in Fisher’s description of Dillwyn’s death in *SMOCCM*. She writes, “We lived there intensely until he died three years later, according to medical schedule, of Buerger’s disease” (*TMHP*128). Dillwyn actually died from a suicidal gunshot wound that he inflicted upon himself in a canyon on their property. Why does she lie about this fact? Was it because suicide was a taboo topic? Was it because the memory is too real and too sad to recall? Or does she lie at all? He indeed had Buerger’s disease and was dying from it. That was no lie. But what about the “according to medical schedule” part? I ask, according to whose medical schedule? Notice she did not say according to nature, or according to the natural course of the disease, but she said “according to medical schedule.” It is known that Dillwyn constantly thought about suicide because his pain was unbearable. He even had Fisher lock up the bullets to the gun they owned (*PA* 135). It seems to me that her statement has some truth to it. According to *Dillwyn’s* medical schedule, his life was ended. But this would be considered a lie as far as Rich is concerned. Fisher’s silence about the suicide leads her to modify the truth about the nature of her husband’s death. It is this type of thinking that gives Reardon and other fact-finders fuel to charge Fisher with “disrespect for the truth.”

Recall Goffman's theory about performance: "When one's activity occurs in the presence of other persons, some aspects of the activity are expressively accentuated and other aspects, which might discredit the fostered impression, are suppressed" (53). Certain "aspects" of the truth may "discredit" Fisher's persona and take away her control, or her sense of power. With this in mind, we can understand why she chose to privilege some versions of the truth over others. Fear of rejection and disparagement impelled Fisher to adopt a certain persona. If we look at her writing and at her manipulation of facts in light of this performance, we can discern her stories as a type of truth. They are true to the persona she is trying to establish. Smith analyzes this type of performance on page 110. She argues:

A specific recitation [performance] of identity involves the inclusion of certain identity contents and exclusion of others; the incorporation of certain narrative itineraries and intentionalities, the silencing of others; the adoption of certain autobiographical voices, the muting of others.

Fisher's agenda was not to write the "Tell All." It never was. Fisher wrote stories for her "beloved few" in order "sustain them truly against the hungers of the world" (*GM* 18). She "adopt[ed]" the persona of storyteller. Thus, she utilized the tools, or "narrative itineraries," to support this "identity." And like most narrator's, she insists on her reliability.

Reliability was important for Fisher. She maintains repeatedly that "I never lied" (*PA* xii). All around her, people questioned the validity of her stories. Over and over again the people that she loved contested her narratives. In *AF*, she writes about how her elders asked her to recant the stories she told. She recalls, "Certainly it was no time to correct Father's statement that I had lied, which in my own eyes I had not done" (61).

Fisher says “in my own eyes” which may point to Fisher’s view that truth is subjective. It is inconsequential if her father thought she was lying because she was being true to herself. She was telling the truth through her perspective. It may not be historical truth or objective truth, but as it seemed to *her*. Another example is when her grandmother accused her of lying. She remembers, “My grandmother flatly said I was lying about this, until I repeated to her some of the Northern Chinese legends I had heard, and Cousin Lizzie nodded in complete agreement, although neither of us remembered how I had learned them” (AF 103). The point is not how Fisher remembered the stories she heard, but of the innocence she is trying to get across to the reader: two young girls, entranced by the exotic stories of the Orient, and in defiance of their austere grandmother, assert the veracity of their claim. The truth (since we cannot verify if she had or had not remembered the actual stories) is found in the ingenuous persona Fisher is trying to exhibit. The truth is found in the genuineness of the experience of a little girl. Her elders discredited Fisher because of her youth, or maybe they saw her as a foolish girl. But Fisher defended her position. Rich explains, “The liar may resist confrontation, denying that she lied. Or she may use other language: forgetfulness, privacy, the protection of someone else” (192). Fisher may have feared the backlash or the “confrontation” that results from telling the whole truth to her elders. Or Fisher defended the veracity of her experience because it was the way she saw it. Her experience may belong to different kind of truth, a subjective truth that is no less valid than the perceptions of others being forced upon her.

Narrative Truth

“Truth,” as it pertains to narrative, has been a source of critical inquiry in autobiographical forms for some time. Most agree that “truths,” or facts described like those in a history book, are different than those described in an autobiography. That is because the author gets in the way. The author sees things differently than the reader or the people in the narrative. Even if the proceedings of an event are agreed upon, each will take away her own perspective. The author will see it in a different light or from a different angle than everybody else. Consequently, there is room for autobiographical works in the literary field. They offer something that no one else has access to: a unique and different perspective. Thus, talking about objective truth in autobiographical works is a futile task; the autobiographical text is subjective in essence. Freeman describes a common held belief about truth in his essay “Rethinking the Fictive, Reclaiming the Real: Autobiography, Narrative Time, and the Burden of Truth.” He states, “Narrative truth is the domain of the fictitious, historical truth the domain of the real, untouched by all that analytic talk” (121). Freeman contests the common belief that there is something “fictitious” about narrative truth, that there is something that is not quite “real” about it, and that history is composed of hard facts, without “analytic talk.” Not only do I argue against the perception of “narrative truth” as “fictitious,” I also dismiss the view that history is objective because *someone* has to interpret the facts and decide what to include and what to leave out. There is a subjective component in everything. Nothing is outside

our mind that is not interpreted⁵. Although Freeman believes there is something “fictitious” about narrative truth, it is his opinion that events of the past and the retelling of those events through narrative are “a possible truth, a possible entry into autobiographical self-understanding—provisional and revisable though it may be” (126). He accepts this “possible truth” is not perfect and it is “provisional” or “revisable.” But this truth is not without its merits. It may illuminate parts of the self that was previously unattainable. Like Freeman, I advocate “a truth *made available* by narrative and by the poetic processes that go into telling of the past” (126).

In regards to autobiographical texts, like the memoir and the confessional, some critics and writers embrace subjective truth. Silverman calls it “memory truth.” She defines memory truth as “how events *felt* and *seemed* to me, what they mean to me *now*” and as “your individual version of events” (126). This definition shows that Silverman believes in the subjective experience and the importance of the experience after time has passed. In the context of the memoir and the confessional, subjective reality is valued, validated, and emphasized. Silverman explains, “Memoir relies on twining objective facts with subjective truth” (128). The story unfolds through the “twining” of verifiable specifics with the internal impressions that were felt in the past through to the present. Memoirs unveil the internal struggles of the author. Who is to verify these struggles other than the author herself? Fisher’s texts are filled with words like maybe, perhaps, possibly, and seems. These words point to where her memory failed her, and how she filled in the gaps with impressions. Although they are not recorded impressions of the past, they are

⁵ Please refer to Charles Sanders Pierce’s view of the interpretant. Pierce, Charles Sanders. *Pierce on Signs: Writings on Semiotic by Charles Sanders Pierce*. Ed. James Hoopes. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1991. Print.

her imaginative impressions during the moment of narration. Fisher says, “I am gradually hewing out some remarks about being a minority-group child in a Quaker ghetto. It is tough to stick to my actual recall and not embroider” (*PA* 364). She does not explain why it is tough to narrate her “recall,” but nevertheless, the quotation indicates that her imaginative impressions make their way into her stories. Are these any less valid than her memories? Rather than historical impressions, they are current impressions of the past. Are they not subjective perceptions just the same? If Fisher’s “embroidery” is fabricated, the “liar” label is a possibility for her. But I believe that if she embroiders the facts, it is because she is trying to portray a certain view of the situation, and she is trying to translate her feelings about a place, a person, or an event of the past. The embroidery becomes symbolic of her narrating perception. It is metaphoric. Silverman believes, “Metaphoric truth is as important as historical fact” (128). The metaphor acts as an interpretation of the cold hard facts “in order to bring the thought or emotion into clearer focus” (Silverman 71).

While Silverman maintains the subjective truth of memoir is an “interpretive” truth, and Freeman contends it is “a possible truth,” we can gather that truth can come from personal experience. The subjective experience is present in most autobiographical works. Similar to memoir:

Confession is, paradoxically given confession’s apparent proximity to truthful revelation, to enter into profound uncertainty... to think about confession is to abandon conventional and hitherto dependable notions of reliability, authority and authenticity and to embrace, and find new ways of addressing, the difficulty and slipperiness—which is also the fascination—of modern variations on the form. (Gill 1)

At the core, the confessional (which is a more intimate form of the memoir) “abandons” preconceived “notions of reliability.” Silverman, Gill, and Freeman ask us to think about truth differently. The “fascination” of memoir and confessionals is not whether the story is factually accurate, or how much “reliability” the narrator has, but it is in the “variations” of truth and the subjective experience. So when Fisher says, “Then maybe I went into a little dream standing up,” (*GM* 212) we should analyze why the “maybe” has inserted itself in her memory. We should investigate the emotional and situational causes of her lapse of memory. And when Fisher illustrates, “There sat most of the people in the world I loved, in a thin light that was pink with Alpen glow, blue with a veil of pine smoke from the hearth” (*AG* 113-14), why would we pass this off as an embellished romantic description? Should we not look into the symbolic or metaphoric qualities of such a description? In order to more completely substantiate my opinion, Roorbach’s take on memoiric truth is especially useful:

In memoir we get the whole truth, and not only the verifiable facts. In memoir, we get how it feels to be at the center of an exotic kingdom—the kingdom of the self, and from this we learn what it is to have a self. In memoir we get memory whole, even when faulty, is what people are made of. (81)

Memory (and its Problems)

One important element of narrative/autobiographical truth is memory. For Freeman, autobiographical narration requires the act of memory. “Remembering and narrating,” he says, “means situating the experiences of the past—rewriting them—in accordance with and in relation to what has happened since, as understood and reunderstood from now, the moment of narration” (123). In other words, to narrate

history, a certain distance from the events is required in order to make sense of them “in relation” to everything that has affected our lives up until “the moment of narration.”

Reardon writes of Fisher’s inability to “look clearly” into the past. She writes:

Despite Mary Frances’s effort to look clearly at her childhood and its setting, her stories were, as always, embellished in the telling. Anne’s playground love affair, an enticing suspicion planted about Rex’s fondness for the cook “Anita Perdita,” even the frequency of Edith’s pregnancies were played up—perhaps consciously, to reflect the youth of the narrator, but their inclusion revealed an authorial voice that could not resist the lure of a good story. (*PA* 388-89)

In *AF*, Fisher narrates these events that Reardon describes as “embellished.” Are they fictionalized as Reardon claims, or are they examples of how Fisher remembers details with a more mature and broader mind? As a child, would she have thought that the “playground love affair” was sexual or naughty? Or is she recalling this specific memory to somehow express her own bisexuality? Would she have thought her father was capable of loving another woman other than her mother? Or, by looking back with a less naïve perspective, does she see something there that she did not see before? Fisher says, “As more or less of an adult, I understand so much (too much) that was mercifully Greek to me when I was younger” (*PA* 361). Fisher acknowledges that there were some things that she didn’t understand as a child. They were like a foreign language or “Greek” to her. But with the mind of an adult, it may have been difficult to tell the stories of her past excluding her more experienced knowledge. Reardon attributes the memoir’s embellishments to Fisher’s attempt to demonstrate the “youth of the narrator.” The manipulation of historical truth, however, was not only for the preservation of the youthful persona, but to also express an understanding of the past by a more mature author. Reardon assumes Fisher fictionalized aspects of her life for the sake of

storytelling and not for the expression of life as she experienced it and how she understands it now.

Almost all of Fisher's books were written in retrospect. She uses the material of her past to express her ideas and thoughts about life, love, loss, and food. As Freeman says, the investigation of the past requires "reorganization" and reflection about the events that took place then and the events that have transpired since. This reflection is oddly similar to what William Wordsworth describes about composing poetry. He asserts:

[...] poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility: the emotion is contemplated till by a species of reaction the tranquility disappears, and an emotion, kindred to that which was before the subject of contemplation, is gradually produced, and does itself actually exist in the mind. (316)

Fisher's prose similarly functions like the poetry (remember the lyric essay form explained in section one) Wordsworth describes. In "recollection" Fisher awakens the emotions of the past and narrates them as if they were fresh in her mind. These moments "exist in [her] mind" when "recollected in tranquility," or temporal distance from the actual events. One example of this act of "recollection" is in her essay "Stay Me, Oh Comfort Me." She writes, "There is an urgency, an insistent beauty, about the words written while they are hot in the mind, soon after something has happened to make them burn there" (*TMHP* 88). She communicates a moment of composition that is similar to Wordsworth's "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings." The words she wants to write are "hot in the mind" after a particularly moving experience. But rather than let these feelings subside, she writes them out. It is not an ordered method of writing, but for Fisher "the words flowed onto the letter paper like melted stone, swirling in strange

shapes and mysterious shadowy meanings that I can never find again” (*THMP* 88). She continues, “[...] the paper is gone. I shall have to tell this from recollection, and it is a kind of consolation to admit to myself that I can do it in tranquility, the way the poet said it might be” (*THMP* 88). Fisher alludes to Wordsworth when she mentions “the poet.” She uses his exact words “recollection” and “tranquility” in describing the same act of narrating events and emotions of the past.

Wordsworth, Freeman, and Fisher emphasize the importance of memory in narrative truth. For an experience to be understood and expressed in a way that is true to the original experience, one must have a certain distance from it for narration to take place. When the distance is obtained, memory and rumination must do the work. According to Freeman, the experience will then be situated in terms of what has happened since. He states:

Memory is not about returning to an earlier immediacy. Nor is it a matter of constructing a story in such a way as to place significance on an event. It is about drawing out meanings and explicating a significance that could only emerge as a function of what came after—and, of course, what did not. (125)

“Meanings” and emotions are drawn out of memories. They produce a type of truth about life as it is lived now. Therefore, these meanings are born into a present reality. According to Wordsworth, the “emotion” that is “gradually produced, does itself actually exist in the mind.” Lastly, for Fisher, the act of “recollection” is “a kind of consolation” for losing the exact words and impressions the experience immediately gave her. But the “consolation” serves her in the present.

Memory is an integral component of autobiographical pieces. Wordsworth and Freeman believe that memory is necessary to recollect the past and situate yourself in the

present. But memory is intricate. Memories are manufactured by the individual as well as a collective consensus⁶. Another problem with truth lies in the discrepancies between these two perspectives. Individual memories are more prone to adulteration than those of the collective memory (which I will discuss in a moment). First, let us turn to collective memory. The memories that emerge from the collective decide how the memories will be recalled. The sentiment is usually uniform; most can agree about the affective qualities of the events. These resuscitations of previous lives often take the form of oral histories. Oral histories do have their own problems, however, stories may be inflated with each telling or certain aspects may or may not be accentuated depending on the teller. But the collective nature of oral histories has the ability to shape who we are. They align us with a group and we feel less alone in the world. Annette Kuhn, author of “From Home to Nation,” classifies oral histories as “memory texts.” She says, “Such memory texts create, rework, repeat and recontextualise the stories people tell each other about the kinds of lives they lead” (165). Oral “memory texts” contributed to Fisher’s memory of her parents and her upbringing. Fisher heard stories “secondhand” about her parents and their life in Albion and Whittier. These stories found their way into the narrative about her early childhood. In *AF*, Fisher “reworks, repeats, and recontextualises” these stories to convey what life was like as a little girl growing up in a Quaker town. Fisher comments, “I know a few apocryphal things about my parents’ life in Albion, some of them obviously worth having been retold to me, but the only actual memories I have of my own two-plus years there are vivid although secondhand” (*AF* 22). Fisher goes on to

⁶ For further reading on memory, please refer to Kuhn, Annette. *Family Secrets: Acts of Memory and Imagination*. London: Verso, 2002. Print.

describe two people in Albion who played important roles in her family's life. Fisher's youth prevented her from retaining her own memories of this period in her life, and so her memories are not her own. They are collective recollections and they come to her "secondhand." The memories are important to Fisher. So much in fact, she started *AF* with them. They are important to her image of her childhood, especially in relation to her own imaginings of her parents. Kuhn states, "Telling and retelling their memories is one of the strategies people use not only to make sense of the world, but to create their own world and to give themselves and others like them a place, a place of some dignity and worth, within it" (166).

While Fisher incorporates collective memory in *AF*, most of her work relies on her individual memory. The allegation that she is an unreliable narrator is traced to the discrepancies between her memories and the memories of her family and friends. Individual memory is subject to adulterants like "wishful thinking, defenses, illusions, [and] delusions" (Freeman 116). Kuhn recognizes the fragility of the individual memory also. She suggests, "Memory is partial: things get forgotten, misremembered, repressed" (155). "Partial" memory is something familiar for Fisher. She often forgets and "misremembers" events in her life. For instance, in *GM* she complains about her memory:

I forget the name of the town now where the train stops and the passport men come on. Is it Domodossola? How strange, not to know! It is as if I have deliberately wiped from my mind a great many names. Some of them I thought would stay there forever, whether I wanted them or not, like old telephone numbers that suddenly come between you and the sound of a new love's voice. I never thought to disremember this town, that man, such and such a river. Was it Domodossola? (206)

This passage is interesting because it shows not only that memory is not the most reliable source for information, but it also shows us Fisher is cognizant of this flaw in her narration. She could easily leave out the name of the town, or she could do research to obtain the details. But relaying hard facts is not her intention. Fisher is trying to show us that truth, in the sense of historical truth, is not as important as other things in life. This intimate revelation illustrates realities of life: how things “suddenly come between you” and a loved one, and how some memories are more paramount to the narration than others. Consequently, we understand and accept that some facts are forgotten.

According to Silverman, individual memory is a version of the truth. She states, “Memory itself is a reality. The way that events are tinted through individual experience—like a hand-colored photograph—is one of the great themes of memoir” (129). In the world of memoir and other autobiographical texts, there is no reality outside the “individual experience;” it is all the author/narrator knows and sees. The author can only perceive the world through their eyes and no one else’s. This is true of memoir, confessionals, personal essays, lyric and meditative essays, as well as travel memoirs. One travel writer, Michele Morano, was interviewed for an article in the journal *Fourth Genre: Explorations in Nonfiction* about the characteristics of travel writing. She was asked a question about authenticity and she replied, “I don’t know what it means to write authentically about a place. Authenticity implies an underlying stable truth, but places—like people—are endlessly complex and contradictory” (91). She brings up an important point: people are constantly changing, making mistakes, learning from those mistakes, and shifting perspectives. How can we apply any “underlying stable truth” if the subjects of that truth are unstable? She says authenticity “comes from a mixture of firsthand

observation, reflection, and a little bit of research. And then all the mysteries of the page, where we craft the fictions of memory into what feels like truth” (91). For Morano, the authenticity of memory is itself a fiction. “Crafting” those memories involves “observation, reflection” and “research” which is the source of authenticity. The art of “crafting,” or narrating, produces truth. In Fisher’s introduction to *A Map of Another Town*, she demonstrates Morano’s notion of crafting. She writes, “Here before me now is my picture, my map, of a place and therefore of myself, and as much that can never be said adds to its reality for me, just as much of its reality is based on my own shadows, my inventions” (*TMHP* 289). Fisher never claims that the “reality” of the town is a verifiable truth. The point is that the reality belongs to her when she says “my picture, my map” and “reality for me.” Fisher only makes claims within her individual experience. Her “shadows” and her “inventions” add to the process of narrating, or “crafting,” her experiences of that town. The book, which is her “picture” and her “map,” is the product of her “craft.” It produced a reality, or a truth, as she understood it.

Conclusion

I came across a quotation in Freeman’s essay that I thought fit into our discussion rather perfectly. He quotes Joanna Field, author of *A Life of One’s Own*, saying, “The facts were not separate things which were there for anyone to pick up, but an ever changing pattern against the boundless background of the unknown, an immense kaleidoscope changing constantly according to the different ways you looked at it” (116). “Facts,” memories, and experiences must be interpreted by the author. They are not “for anyone” to interpret and they are “not separate things;” they are interconnected. The past

mixes with the present and the present mixes with what's to come. The past inspired the author to write and narrate, and the narration itself will serve as a record of the past. The record remains, and the author can move forward. Field's quotation also speaks not only to the author's role as interpreter, but it shows how the idea of truth in autobiographical texts is complicated and resists definable boundaries. The "pattern," or perception of the past, is "ever changing." But that does not take away from the veracity of its claims. The idea of truth is just as multifaceted as an "immense kaleidoscope." The "pattern" changes and becomes multiple versions of the truth with each new view. Whether Fisher's writings are historically correct, are genuine impressions of the past, are sincere to Fisher's understanding looking back, or are figments of her imagination, the versions of truth comprise her reality. She never claims that she lied to anyone, because in her mind, she did not lie. In her mind, Fisher represented life as she saw it, as she imagined it, and as she lived it.

Fisher narrated her story through numerous creative nonfiction forms, intermingling genres, styles, and truths. It is Larson's opinion that "fabulists and other genre-blenders, by definition, don't possess the regard for personal truth that memoirists do" (108). Somehow "genre-blending" is a loss of truth. "Fabulists," or liars, have no notion of "personal truth." But have I not shown that these maxims are untrue? That by hybridizing genres and styles one may lead to another kind of truth? Is it not the prerogative of the author to choose her forms and speak through numerous voices to express the self more earnestly and more truly? I have argued that fictionalizing, embroidering, and symbolically representing the truth can only speak to the author's perception as well as to the pressure to tell a socially sanctioned truth. Fisher is judged

for not telling the “right” kind of truth, for adulterating the art of memoir with what is perceived as fiction. To take this view of Fisher’s work is to deny her of her voice and the veracity of her claims. To take this view is to align oneself with the repressive culture that has labeled women liars. To take this view is to refute the validity of autobiographical forms. Subjective reality is a version of the truth, a memory truth, an intimate truth, and a metaphoric truth, and all are valid and encouraged in personal forms like memoir and confession. Morano says:

Writing from personal experience and from memory involves negotiating with ourselves over every piece we write, grappling with questions of truth and accuracy and fairness, which is really hard. But the positive side is that tremendous power can come from those negotiations as well. (91)

The only thing about truth that we can say with certainty is that truth requires belief. And if the author “grapples” with “truth and accuracy and fairness” and afterwards, still believes in her own claims, who are we to judge differently? We may see one design, or “pattern” in the kaleidoscope, but one movement, in the changing of hands, shifts the design. To deny existence of the new design is an imprecation on truth. The saying “the only thing constant is change” rings true. The design is “ever changing” because discursive and eclectic perceptions and readings are constant. Let us give the gift of “tremendous power.” Let us embrace a multifaceted, shifting truth and deny no one.

APPENDIX B

Primary sources cited in the text are abbreviated as follows:

<i>AG</i>	<i>An Alphabet for Gourmets</i>
<i>CO</i>	<i>Consider the Oyster</i>
<i>GM</i>	<i>The Gastronomical Me</i>
<i>PA</i>	<i>Poet of the Appetites: The Lives and Loves of M.F.K. Fisher</i> by Joan Reardon
<i>SF</i>	<i>Serve it Forth</i>
<i>SMOCM</i>	<i>Stay Me, Oh Comfort Me</i>
<i>TMHP</i>	<i>The Measure of Her Powers: An M.F.K. Fisher Reader</i> Ed. Dominique Gioia