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**(Re)Writing sites of food preparation as spaces of women's authority and autonomy**

Abstract:

Women who cook are responsible for the foodways decisions of their family and their community. (Re)writing sites of food preparation, as well as women's roles in the creation of food, allows for a re-examination of the power that women wielded within this sphere. This paper will focus on the findings of food studies scholars as they relate to my creative practice of short story writing where women and their role in food production are given priority. This paper argues that when women make foodways choices, it gives them authority and autonomy. This is because foodways knowledge is an important asset in cultural maintenance. Most importantly, this article will consider the impact of foodways on individual and community ethnic identity where food has been shown to be a highly significant factors in establishing and expressing cultural identity. It argues that women's knowledge of foodways is considered an asset because of this significance to the maintenance of culture, which is especially important to groups that have migrated to a new place. The women of the food studies investigation and within my fiction are the custodians of their cultures, and as the author, I have been required to borrow (or steal) from their store of knowledge in order to write the pieces of fiction but this paper focuses more on the alternative theme of authority than it does on ideas of theft.

Biographical note:

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Keywords:

Women – Cultural maintenance – Foodways practices – Authority – Creative Practice

## Introduction

When women do the cooking they are responsible for foodways decisions. Foodways is a term used in the food studies discipline and one that I will use in this article, despite my discussion of creative practice and fiction writing, because it encompasses both the eating habits and the culinary practices of people, regions and historical periods as these intersect with cultural identity. This paper argues that when women make foodways choices, it gives them authority and autonomy. This is because, as food studies scholars, Linda Brown & Kay Mussell (1984), and Kathleen LeBesco and Peter Naccarato (2008), argue, foodways knowledge is an important asset. Most importantly, this article will consider the impact of foodways on individual and community ethnic identity where food is shown to be more significant than other factors such as birthplace, language or religion (Tuomainen 2009; D'Sylva & Beagan 2011). It argues, in line with cultural theorist Stuart Hall (1996), that knowledge of foodways is considered an asset because of its significance to cultural maintenance, which is especially important to migrant groups.

This paper will draw from the findings of food studies scholars such as Andrea D'Sylva and Brenda Beagan (2011) who interviewed Goan Canadian women about their roles in food preparation; Josephine Beoku-Betts (1995) and her research on the roles of Gullah women, and the ways in which their foodways practices and stories support cultural maintenance; and Arlene Avakian's (2005) interviews with Armenian American women on their relationships to specifically Armenian food. The ideas developed within these food studies investigations, are reflected in a more individual focus within the collection of essays edited by Arlene Avakian, *Through the kitchen window* (1997) and the likes of food memoirs such as that written by Elizabeth Erlich in *Miriam's Kitchen* (1997). The findings of the food studies investigations are discussed as they relate to my creative practice of short story writing where women and their role in food production are given centrality, leading to female characters that are matriarchs of their cultural groups, teachers of intergenerational knowledge, and wielders of social and cultural power.

Sites of food preparation are productive sites for women. They are sites of storytelling, knowledge sharing, and bonding with other women as noted in the food memoir writing of Erlich (1997) and as supported by the food studies of Beoku-Betts (1995), D'Sylva & Beagan (2011), and Avakian (2005). Women acting within sites of food preparation are the focal point of short fiction in my creative practice, which has resulted in stories that have allowed for these women's roles to be acknowledged, honoured, and rewritten. The links between writing and food preparation explain why looking at women, food, and culture through the creation of short stories is a valid and valuable technique. Rachel Franks (2013), in her study of food within crime writing, notes that the women who make up the majority of the protagonists in this genre are independent, capable, and resourceful at both creating food and solving crimes. Food historian and chef, Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire (2014) explores the links between food and the arts while food studies scholar Anne Bower (1997) makes explicit the links between cookbooks and other narratives. Scholar, Kevin Brophy (2003, 116) says, 'We are said to lose ourselves in stories. But we have no selves without them.' He continues to explain that who we are 'has already been written' within us by 'those stories [we] have read and read again' (Brophy 2003, 120). The ability of fiction to reimagine the role of women in order to return authority to them makes writing about women, food, and culture, a way of celebrating an identity of agency that exists within women's food preparation.

The power and influence available to women through their engagement with culturally significant foodways practices has been researched within the area of food studies. My creative practice and this paper are framed within this context where the scholars have addressed ideas about oppression of women within the home but acknowledge that, largely through the choices available to women today, this is no longer how the participants within the studies see the sites of food preparation. This is not a traditional feminist context of the kitchen as a site that can only be one of oppression. By engaging with the findings of feminist food studies scholars, and through my creative practice, I show that women should be acknowledged and honoured as custodians of their cultures, which is an authoritative role that they achieve through their foodways practices.

### **Sites of food preparation as empowering for women as keepers of culture**

Women have historically been allocated the role of food preparation within the family as detailed in feminist Judith Brown's (1970) *A Note on the Division of Labour by Sex*. It is the empowering and authoritative nature of these roles as they relate to food and women's agency, by virtue of the ways that food impacts on culture that I will address in the first section of this paper.

Despite their authority and autonomy within the sites of food preparation, it must be acknowledged that the gender division of this type of labour has been a source of oppression for women within many cultures and across time. The Gullah women interviewed by Beoku-Betts (1995) admit that the gendered role of food preparation perpetuates gender inequality within households. Avakian and Haber (2005), in discussing Mary J Weismantel's study of colonialism and its impacts on meal times in the Zumbagua parish of the Andes, address the problem of unpaid work in the home performed by women being compared to paid work carried out by men. This leads to a devaluation of both women's input and, because it is the women maintaining the culture, the culture itself, which is a result of the separation of valued qualities such as professionalism, discipline, and knowledge from what is seen as feminine domesticity (Avakian and Haber 2005; Ashley et al. 2004). By (re)writing women in sites of food preparation, my creative practice of short story writing has focused its attention on these roles undertaken by women and acknowledges them as powerful and authoritative as a means of reattributing value to these roles.

Avakian and Haber also acknowledge Cindy Dorfman's analysis of the kitchen and its inherently 'limiting space for women' (Avakian and Haber 2005). In her analysis of the ultimate failure of the Betty Crocker cake mix in the 1950s, Laura Shapiro points out there was much pressure placed on women to show their love for their family which was, in the words of Marjorie Husted, the home economist behind the character of Betty Crocker, best depicted by 'the fragrance of good things baking in the oven' (Husted 1948 quoted in Shapiro) and for whom a cake mix was 'guilt in a box' (Shapiro 2005: 35). The limits and pressures discussed here are unarguably oppressive; particularly when the agency related to the significant roles women have in cultural maintenance is removed from consideration.

Avakian's interviewees note that the skills women exhibit in cooking Armenian food are 'not usually recognized by the men in their lives' (2005: 275) and that many women endured criticism about their cooking. In her introduction to the collected essays by women on their relationships with food, Avakian notes that the nightly discussions between her aunt and her

mother ‘revealed that the women cooked to please their men’ (1997: 1). Avakian’s interviews also showed that participants tended to agree that ‘cooking within the Armenian community has been compulsory for women and has signified and constructed their oppression’ (2005: 261). In contrast, they also noted that cooking was no longer compulsory in *their* lives and that their mothers and grandmothers were still able to create ‘authority and control’ in their sites of food preparation which often became ‘a space where they bonded with other women’ (Avakian 2005: 261). This indicates, as argued by feminist scholar, Miriam López-Rodríguez in her chapter, *Writing the recipe for subversion*, that women within an oppressive context are still able to use food and foodways as a ‘source of resistance against those patriarchal ideas that oppress them’ (2009: 69). Women, even within a site of oppression, have been able to harness the authority available within foodways practices and use it to defy the patriarchal conventions that wish to limit them. I have created characters within my creative practice to mirror these food studies findings: sisters, Dalays and Samiira, in a story of the same name, use food preparation to establish bonds with new neighbours and to create a business opportunity, in 'Gabriella' Gabriella's mother Rosetta uses food to maintain a connection with her sister back in Italy by writing letters to Caterina while she cooks, and the female protagonist and narrator in 'Jingfei' uses the act of cooking to establish her sense of home in a foreign place despite persecution by the police.

The role of decision-maker facilitates the ability of women to wield power within the home and the community, where their foodways practices have the greatest impact on the lives of those around them. Within their families, the women who create the food are responsible for the related foodways decisions. What is eaten when, especially what is eaten during times of celebration, is a significant decision in the hands of the women who prepare the food (D’Sylva & Beagan 2011; Lockie 2001). This, in turn, ensures that the sites of food preparation are places of female authority. This authority provides women who prepare food with position and power in regards to what scholars David Bell and Gill Valentine refer to as a ‘universal and commonplace’ aspect of our everyday existence whose ‘centrality’ means that it ‘serves to structure our lives’ (1997: 3). This demonstrates the ways in which women’s decisions impact upon this central and powerful aspect of our everyday lives, which makes food preparation an empowering role for women—one that confers authority and autonomy.

The women who are responsible for food choices and food preparation have authority not only within the home, but also within their wider communities. The significant role of food in relation to cultural maintenance in groups that have migrated to new places cannot be overstated. The links between culturally significant foods, its importance to the community, and women ensures that women have potency in this role as keepers of culture. Food is afforded a significant role in the ‘community and familial transmission of identity’ (D’Sylva & Beagan 2011: 280) and, through this process of identity, in the development of a sense of belonging (Lockie 2001; Kalivas 2007). Social scientist, Doreen Massey discusses the idea that the ‘*real* France’ (1995: 39) could only be found through the smells and tastes to be experienced in a real French café, which highlights the centrality of food as the essence of a place. According to cross-cultural food researcher, Timothy Choo, the sensory aspects of food are able to draw up memories of home for those who have left it, and for second and subsequent generations, food has the capacity to transport us to places that we ‘have come from but never been’ (2004: 211). This is a powerful quality inherent in food and, by being those responsible for the foodways of a defined cultural group, an authoritative role in which

women engage. Historian, Alison Wishart explains that our food practices ‘are often culturally specific’ (2010: 2) and that such practices help to distinguish one group from the next. These ‘food rituals’ then become ‘traditions that migrants cling to and try to retain as markers of their identity when they move to a new country’ (Wishart 2010: 2) and the ‘distinctive taste’ (D’Sylva & Beagan 2011: 282) of culturally specific food is something yearned for when it is unable to be obtained (Mac Con Iomaire 2014). In her introduction to the collection of essays by women on their relationship to food, Avakian discusses her childhood notion that she could become an American by eating American foods, acknowledging that food is ‘central to cultural identification’ (2005: 258).

This idea of the link between food, place, and culture extends to writing about food, which Timothy Yun Hui Tsu (2010) suggests is a form of discourse on ourselves and our own culture even when we are writing about foods from the cultures of others. So, food, and food writing, whether fiction or nonfiction, is critical to our understanding of place. For migrant groups, this ability of food to reconstruct place, and their history within that place, is vital to their sense of ethnic identity. This is the responsibility, authority and autonomy inherent in sites of food preparation for the women who create the culturally significant foods.

Feminist scholar, Uma Narayan points out that the allocation of women as cultural custodians, which she refers to as a ‘problematic’ role for women, occurs in ‘both colonial and postcolonial immigration’ and, referencing Susan Zlotnick, explains that just as ‘British women were considered to have a significant role in preserving Englishmen and English culture in the colonies’ so too were Indian women ‘assigned a significant and peculiar role in maintaining expatriate Indian identity in England, and in other immigrant Indian communities’ (Narayan 1995: 73). Similar levels of significance are attributed to food and women, as the preparers of such food, in relation to cultural maintenance in the studies by D’Sylva & Beagan (2011) talking to Goan Canadian women, Beoku-Betts (1995) researching the roles of Gullah women and Avakian (2005) interviewing Armenian American women. So, far from being ‘problematic’ and ‘peculiar’ as Narayan suggests, women taking on such roles is actually common across various cultures and times. I would argue that these authoritative roles are less problematic than they are powerful. Bell and Valentine make the significance of cultural foodways explicit:

In the literature on migration and food ways, food habits are seen as a fundamental way of shoring up a sense of (usually ethnic) community identity (eg Brown & Mussell 1984), while material on local, place-bounded communities (or neighbourhoods) considers food as social glue ... (Bell and Valentine 1997: 15).

So, when women are acknowledged as responsible for these foodways and food habits, we must conclude they are also responsible for shoring up a community’s sense of ethnic identity and for providing the social glue that holds communities together. Food is an important element that impacts on the identity of a community, particularly at times of community celebration (Beoku-Betts 1995; D’Sylva & Beagan 2011). Carole Counihan’s study of Chicana women notes that they were able to minimise food preparation’s ‘oppressive dimensions’ (Counihan 2008: 75) and focus on its ability to provide them with power and instrumentality in that ‘the performance of foodwork provided the opportunity to draw family together and, in so doing, gave them agency and autonomy not otherwise afforded in domestic work’ (D’Sylva & Beagan 2011: 287). This agency provided by foodways practices

is what I have engaged with in my creative practice and it is the site where women's authority and autonomy are located.

D'Sylva & Beagan (2011) found that, for the Goan women of their study, what signified Goan ethnic identity had less to do with birthplace, religion or language than it did with food. They explain that the 'distinctly gendered' everyday practices of 'cooking and eating were the most significant, perhaps only, concrete and symbolic manifestations of an ethnic identity' (D'Sylva & Beagan 2011: 280, 279). They go on to argue that the centrality of cooking and eating to the construction and maintenance of these Goan Canadian women's ethnic and gender identities allowed for a 'particular form of gendered power' (D'Sylva & Beagan 2011: 280) based on what scholars Kathleen LeBesco and Peter Naccarato have referred to as 'culinary capital' (LeBesco & Naccarato 2008: 225)<sup>1</sup>. Through their role as those responsible for culturally important foodways practices, women are (and were) able to wield significant power to decide, define and sustain even within what some would determine to be an oppressive space. This role as custodians of culture, then, can be said to provide status and self-determination for women.

Despite the acknowledgement of food preparation as a site of oppression, the women within these studies unflinchingly described the authority provided by their role as keepers of culture as the more important and significant aspect of this role (Beoku-Betts 1995; Avakian 2005; Avakian & Haber 2005; D'Sylva & Beagan 2011). This indicates that, like the Chicana women interviewed by Counihan, they are aware of the oppressive nature of the sites of food preparation but that this awareness enables them to minimise the oppressive aspects of these sites and of food production while enhancing the power and privilege they provide.

### **(Re)writing women's roles in food preparation—honouring women's positions as conscious keepers of culture within my creative practice**

Sites of food preparation are productive sites beyond the expected production of food. These locations are sites of sharing stories and knowledge; of establishing bonds between women; and of establishing women's communities, beyond that of the cultural ethnicity to which the women belong, all of which provides an enhanced sense of belonging for women. I argue too, that a woman's role as the preparer of food is not an insignificant one and that, by making this role a focal point for a collection of fiction pieces, I am honouring the central role that women play in cultural maintenance. Within literary studies, the productivity of sites of food preparation has been ignored in favour of their consideration as sites of oppression. I have made use of the idea of sites of food preparation as being sites of expression and creativity for women within my own creative product in order to reflect and magnify the findings of these food studies scholars, which are in contrast to this common representation. Within my creative practice the female characters are matriarchs of their cultural groups, teachers of cultural knowledge, and keepers of culture.

In terms of storytelling and communication, sites of food preparation are productive spaces for women. As one Goan Canadian respondent to D'Sylva & Beagan noted, 'food is used to comfort. Food is used to ... communicate' (2012: 285) and one of Avakian's Armenian American interview subjects explained that there were some things that could not be discussed unless through food (2005). Beoku-Betts found that when she stayed in participants' homes as a guest and helped them to prepare a meal, the 'women often shared

stories and folktales with me, as well as songs and dances connected to their rice culture' (1995: 543). She notes that women in different generations are important in establishing the stories as part of a 'collective memory in their children' (Beoku-Betts 1995: 551) and, in doing so, they utilise a conversational means of teaching their history and cultural traditions. In this way, the act of preparing food provides the kind of openness into which storytelling, conversations, and teaching can expand because sites of food preparation provide safe, communal places for women where sharing about food, and through food, is an established norm. I have utilised this idea within a number of stories but very explicitly within a piece called 'Malaika' which details Malaika's storytelling within the site of food preparation as the women sit together rolling the traditional Somali noodle, kalaamuddo. Malaika is presented as knowledgeable, understanding, and wise but it is through the act of food preparation that she is able to share her wisdom.

This openness, inherent in the sites of food preparation, leads to the spaces of food production being productive sites of knowledge and sharing. Women, when preparing food as part of an extended family and within their cultural group, share ideas, knowledge and understandings which facilitates the transfer of 'culinary capital' (LeBesco & Naccarato 2008; Shepherd Black 2010). This knowledge is passed from mother to daughter to granddaughter in a matrilineal intergenerational transfer of knowledge (D'Sylva & Beagan 2011; Beoku-Betts 1995; Erlich 1997). Erlich, in discussing the many and varied achievements and skills of her grandmother, makes the point that the kitchen was 'her truest sphere', a place where 'she handed on traditions' and where 'so much life has been lived' (Erlich 1997: xi). Both Erlich and Avakian express an initial turning away from their culture, its food, and the role of food preparer and yet, they acknowledge that the sites of food preparation, and the women of generations before them acting within these sites, have taught them and nurtured them within these sites (Avakian 1997; Erlich 1997). Respondents to D'Sylva & Beagan (2011) highlighted this matrilineal intergenerational knowledge transfer when they were asked how they had learned to cook. Most of the interviewees had learned from their mothers because, as one respondent put it, 'nobody cooks like your mother' (D'Sylva & Beagan 2011: 284). Another interviewee explained: 'Food is considered almost a sacred experience in my grandmother's kitchen ... She is a very good cook. But she wouldn't teach you by a recipe. You had to sit and watch' (D'Sylva & Beagan 2011: 284). In this same manner the Gullah women of Beoku-Betts' (1995) study reported having learned much from their mothers and grandmothers about the observance and practice of the traditions that are pivotal to the survival of their culture. My creative practice reflects this importance of mothers and grandmothers, whether biological or surrogate, by depicting these relationships as ones of powerful knowledge transfer but also by highlighting the dysfunction and difficulty that results when these relationships are non-existent, or broken. One of my short stories depicts the beginning of a relationship between two characters who are lost, or unanchored, due to their lack of cultural grounding provided by mothers and food, and others detail the anguish of daughters who have to deal with the loss of their mothers, and therefore the access to their knowledge, either in childhood or as teenagers.

The bonds that develop within sites of food preparation allow for more than simple knowledge transfer, as important as that is to cultural maintenance. There is another layer of community that is allowed to develop within the sites of food preparation. The sites themselves became places where women 'bonded with other women' (Avakian 2005: 261) in

order to create a community of women. This adds to the sense of belonging that is elicited through the cooking and sharing of culturally significant foods (Choo 2004; D'Sylva & Beagan 2011). When there exists a disconnect between the geography, language and history that signifies cultural belonging, or where a sense of belonging may be fragile or tenuous (Anthias 2006), the role of the food and the importance of those who prepare it takes on additional significance. All of the fiction within my recent creative writing project addresses instances of diaspora through the specific focalisation of the women within specific cultural communities.

Cooking as an act within the site of food preparation provides means by which women engage in creative expression. The links between food preparation and other creative arts are made clear by the willingness of a number of scholars to engage in discussion of discussions of the parallels between them. Writer and anthropologist, Margaret Visser, discussing the symbolism of the meal, likens food preparation to the organisation of words and actions into the dramatic whole of a theatrical play describing the results of food preparation as 'an artistic social construct' (1986: 14). Historian, Simon Schama (quoted in Mac Con Iomaire) suggested in a keynote address to the Oxford Symposium on Food and Cookery 2009 that food preparation is a 'performance art' (Mac Con Iomaire 2014: 2) and the respondents to Avakian's 2005 study reflected this by describing food as 'both a performance and an offering' (D'Sylva & Beagan 2011: 285). In order to acknowledge and explore the nature of authority and agency for women my creative practice reflects this notion of the sites of food preparation as sites of creativity and expression by establishing links between creative practice and the act of cooking. The opportunity to engage in creative expression within the sites of food preparation reinforces these sites as empowering to women.

A woman's role as preparer of food is not an insignificant one and by writing about it, by making it the focal point for a number of different pieces of fiction, I am foregrounding and celebrating this central role that women play in the maintenance of culture. Bernice Johnson Reagon, cultural historian, argues that women in African-American communities have been 'central to the continuance of many of the traditional practices' (1986: 78) found within the community. She insists that women, through their traditional female roles, have opened a space within which community can exist, which is now expanded through the non-traditional role of female scholarship (Reagon 1986). It is this connectedness to culture and foodways practices that is significant to my study of women and food through short stories. Shapiro discusses the ultimate failure of Betty Crocker packet cake mixes which related to their dubious promise of 'a perfect cake, every time you bake—cake after cake after cake' which had the effect of ensuring that the 'woman in the kitchen effectively became redundant' but rather than this being a liberation, it resulted in an act of cooking that was 'fundamentally unsatisfying' (Shapiro 2005: 38, 39). My creative practice reflects this fundamental role of the food preparer and the importance of food to both the family and community by depicted women and food as the central characters within the narratives. The stories then function to prioritise women, and the roles that women have, in order to elevate broader thinking about these positions.

Anne Bower, literature and writing scholar, puts forward the idea of being able to read a collection of recipes as a narrative, drawing from her reading of *Our Sisters' Recipes* ideas about the women, who were its authors, 'asserting of themselves' (1997: 3) within their society. This interdisciplinarity that embraces food and writing is furthered by historian,

Adele Wessell's assertion that although many things are edible, 'what counts as food is narrated into being' (Wessell 2010: 2). Looking specifically at the relationship between crime fiction and food, Franks explains that 'cookbooks and fictional works are reflections of each other in terms of creativity, function and structure' (2013: 7) and Visser puts forward the notion that 'a meal has a definite plot' (1986: 14).

The stories constructed as my creative practice attempts to prioritise the authoritative nature of the gendered role of food preparation, so that we might see that women's positions keepers of culture have always been important roles but ones that has been buried beneath the idea of food production as a task that is one of oppression alone. My short stories on women and food acknowledge that, even within a site of oppression, women have had choices that can be read as powerful and empowering, sustaining and subversive, optimistic and allegoric (Avakian 2005; Avakian 1997; Erlich 1997; Arnold 2009). These are the stories of resistance that reflect the reactions of contributors to Avakian's (1997) collection of essays. Avakian also acknowledged that there was opposition to the idea of putting together 'a book on women and food' because 'cooking has been conceptualised as part of our oppression' and liberation from such oppression 'has often meant freedom from being connected to food' (1997: 5). By (re)connecting with the act of food preparation, the women in the studies undertaken by the previously mentioned food studies scholars, and the characters within the short stories that are the results of my creative practice, are able to move beyond the assumption that any activity or role—in this case the act of food preparation—is only ever oppressive. Within the act of writing lies the '*very possibility of change*, the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought' (Cixous 1976: 879) and in this way, both my writing and the writings collected by Avakian, have disrupted this assumption of oppression.

My writing is, instead, a celebration of women's agency, autonomy and power where women find a 'sense of joy and safety in cooking with their mothers and grandmothers' (Avakian 2005: 264), where the food they create is honoured as a 'a repository of migrant culture' (Sen 2005: 195) and where the connection between food and identity motivates women in 'an impossible wish to make the world whole' (Erlich 1997: 14). This engagement with food preparation as a way of maintaining culture is a conscious decision for women within diasporic groups. The women within the food studies cited, as well as the female characters within my creative practice, are aware of the important roles that they hold as keepers of culture, particularly when dealing with foods for special occasions and community gatherings, and they use this awareness to develop and maintain their agency within the sites of food preparation.

## Conclusion

(Re)writing sites of food preparation as well as women's role in the creation of food allows for a re-examination of the power that women wielded within this sphere. This creative reimagining of women's roles within the family and the community engages with the food studies findings that women maintain culture through their foodways knowledge and practices, and that this creates the sites of food preparation as sites of female authority and autonomy. It is with this in mind that I suggest the foodways practices for which women are responsible can provide them with a gendered power that needs to be explored.

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<sup>1</sup> LeBesco and Naccarato have coined the term 'culinary capital' by drawing on Bourdieu's idea of 'cultural capital'. They note that in the same way that cultural capital is a powerful non-monetary asset, so too is this notion of culinary capital as a means for attaining authority and autonomy. See Bourdieu, P 1985 'The Social Space and the Genesis of Groups' *Theory and Society* 14:6, 723-744