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Corinne Florence Bigot

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Chapter 3

In Praise of the Kitchen Poet: Cooking as Kinship in Ethnic Culinary Memoirs

Corinne Bigot

At the beginning of her culinary memoir, *Dream Homes*, Joyce Zonana explains that her mother gave her children a sense of their Jewish Egyptian legacy through her labors in the kitchen: “[I]f we couldn’t have the whole of the life she had left behind in Cairo[,] . . . we would have the food” (24). Since food is both a recognizable marker of ethnic identity and a strong component of family ties, many authors have turned to the ethnic culinary memoir in order to “tell stories of family and nation, ethnic heritage and diasporan mixing” (Smith and Watson 148).

Since the mid-1990s, ethnic culinary memoirs have become increasingly popular in America. They appeared in the wake of the ethnic revival that began in the 1960s that was followed by the emergence of African American cookbooks in the 1970s and the rise in popularity of ethnic culinary cookbooks in the 1980s (Gabaccia 176; 181). The ethnic culinary memoir posits a strong relationship between ethnicity and kinship. Instead of merely being handed down along bloodlines, food is the metaphor of choice for the relationship between ethnicity and kinship, be it harmonious or troubled. Following Lauren Berlant’s insight that “communities are formed by affective ties” (180), ethnic culinary memoirs rely on affect and nostalgia, depicting domestic scenes around the dinner table or in the kitchen while evoking

the author's childhood and strong family ties. Most memoirs include the author's shared family recipes and the presentation of that family through stories and pictures.

As argued by Smith and Watson, the popularity of the ethnic culinary memoir has revealed “an interest in how life writing embodies materiality” (Smith and Watson 148). The ethnic culinary memoir also focuses on the practice of “doing cooking” (Giard 1998) within the domestic space. The French sociologist Luce Giard defines cooking as “a woman's ancient knowledge” that has “integrated [her] into the great corps of women of [her] lineage [and] incorporated [her] into their anonymous ranks” (153). Like the culinary memoir in general, the ethnic culinary memoir, which is mostly populated by female authors,¹ typically celebrates a female line of transmission, and constructs matrilineal genealogies in the same way as cookbooks do (Theophano 85-116). In *Tiger in the Kitchen: A Memoir of Food and Family*, Singapore-born American Cheryl Tan explains, “I had a Singaporean grandmother who was both a force of nature and a legendary cook. And so I believed it was in my blood to excel in the kitchen” (1). Most authors, regardless of culture, evoke a figure of almost mythical proportions—a mother or a grandmother who embodies the author's connection to her ethnic legacy. She is shown to possess some ancient/practical/magical knowledge which the author has preserved or, more often than not, forgotten and/or devalued. Taking my cue from Clarke's remark that his mother is a “poet” (218) as well as Edwidge Danticat's and Paule Marshall's tributes to the women they call “kitchen poets” (Danticat 219) and “poets in the kitchen” (Marshall 1-21), I propose applying the label “kitchen poets” to the mothers and grandmothers of culinary memoirs. Exhibiting this poetic sensibility, they are shown to possess “mysterious” (Ehrlich xi) knowledge and to have inherited “a world without measurements” (Nguyen 248) or recipes (Clarke, Tan).

Cooking in these memoirs is not only a form of reproductive care and labor but a cultural tradition and an art form requiring specialized knowledge that the author strives to recover and

preserve, regardless of her cultural background. Ethnic culinary memoirs are usually analyzed in a specific context, for instance, in South Asian (Roy; Mannur) and pan-Asian (Torreiro-Pazo) food-themed literatures or along generational lines (Gilbert). In this essay, I would like to analyze the representation of kinship and ethnicity in memoirs from different ethnic backgrounds and across generations, focusing on the relationship between the kitchen poets and the authors. I will consider the following questions: Do all ethnic culinary memoirs serve to offer reassuring visions of traditional family structures and, therefore, of kinship as biological? Is the longing to belong they convey limited to their ethnic families, or do they express a “queer belonging” (Freeman 2007) which includes a longing to “be long,” to endure in corporeal form over time? Can paying tribute to embodied knowledge and to cooking as a corporeal practice challenge definitions of kinship as biological while positing kinship as established through practice?

Home-cooked food: enforcing cultural belonging or creating kinship?

As Deborah Lupton observes, the sharing of food is a vital part of kinship, and shared meals are directly related to the construction and reproduction of emotional relationships (37). Food metaphors can be used to symbolize an enduring connection over time and distance: explaining her relationship to her grandmother, Shoba Narayan in *Monsoon Diary* foregrounds a bond that can only be expressed in Tamil, *pasaam*, “which refers to bonds of blood that are nurtured by time” (17). Ethnic culinary memoirs typically feature domestic scenes in which mothers cook food from their respective culinary traditions in an attempt to preserve the family’s sense of cultural belonging and foster an emotional attachment to their roots. Although they all emphasize a strong connection between food, ethnicity and kinship, ethnic culinary memoirs serve contradictory functions. While the first memoir I present revolves around traditional notions of kinship and a particular culinary genealogy—passed down from mothers to

daughters—the memoirs I analyze next introduce more complex relationships between kinship and ethnicity.

Monsoon Diary by Shoba Narayan is perhaps the best example of a “culinary fiction”—to borrow the title of Mannur’s study—that dishes up an uncomplicated, traditional vision of ethnicity and family, in which kinship is portrayed as biological. The emphasis on family lends an air of authenticity to the recipes and invites the reader into the family home. The first photograph (17) corresponds to the first recipe (20) and both pay tribute to Narayan’s maternal grandmother, establishing a strong connection between food, tradition and family. Narayan’s memoir cleverly mediates her personal experience through the collective representation of an Indian woman’s experience—through the collage of traditional family recipes, personal stories, family photographs featuring men and women in traditional dhotis and saris, and “Indian” legends typically focusing on courtship and marriage. Narayan creates intimacy with her readers through recipes that are associated with deeply personal moments—the drink she serves her husband at their wedding (189) and the first dish her sister-in-law cooks for her husband (146).

Opening the memoir with the *choru-unnaal* ceremony at a Hindu temple, Narayan “asserts her integration into her ethnic, cultural and religious community” (Torreiro-Pazo 97). The memoir relies on simple equations: the South Indian vegetarian foods Narayan consumes as a child and later prepares as a wife and mother in America express her sense of belonging to a clearly defined Tamil Brahmin family from Kerala. Narayan’s narrative and her recipes assert her identity as a well-integrated South-Indian American woman who can nurture her family, by means of traditional food and values. Her recipes promise marital bliss (the memoir’s final words) and wholesome, healthy children—as symbolized by her offering *pongal*, “a wholesome, cleansing food” (212).

Few ethnic culinary memoirs, however, offer such unproblematic visions of ethnicity and kinship. Bich Nguyen's *Stealing Buddha's Dinner* focuses on growing up different in "whitebread America" and uses food to convey "an immigrant's dilemma to blend in or remain apart" (Nguyen 255), but her memoir is a journey towards acknowledgement and co-created kinship. As a child, Bich feels that the food cooked by her Vietnamese grandmother, Noi Noi, and by her Mexican stepmother, Rosa, set her apart from her peers. In this phase of her life, she believes that "real people" did not eat the kind of food she ate at home and dreamed of having a "Betty Crocker" mother and a "real" family—as she saw on television. Her complex family structure—her Mexican stepmother who also brings her "half white" daughter into the family, gives birth to Vinh, Bich's half-Mexican, half-Vietnamese half-brother, and is instrumental in the arrival of two Vietnamese foster boys—becomes increasingly difficult to process. Nguyen explains: "It was too much for me to synthesize white American culture, Mexican-American culture, and my own Vietnamese culture all at the same time" (176). Nguyen eventually sees that Rosa, a strong, vocal presence throughout the memoir, and Noi Noi, a strong, albeit silent, presence, have also made her who she is. The memoir thus illustrates the idea that kinship is also a practice; as Elizabeth Freeman argues, "[K]inship can also be viewed as the process by which bodies and the potential for physical and emotional attachment are created, transformed, and sustained over time" (Freeman 298). Hence, from *supa* to ramen to *cha gio*, stir-fries and sloppy joes, Nguyen offers a list of foods she now presents as "real" (247), which symbolizes her family's "queer assemblage" (Park 153–186) and who she is. In her memoir, Nguyen co-creates her complex ethnic identity by paying tribute to these women and their teachings.

When ethnic culinary memoirs depict a difficult, at times even toxic, mother-daughter relationship, they emphasize other intimate relationships and emotional attachments which help the narrator to define ethnic belonging. *Crazy in the Kitchen* by third-generation Italian American Louise DeSalvo describes family feuds as "food wars" between Italian and American

dishes. Louise's mother strives to become "American American" (DeSalvo 13) and sees the Italian food her stepmother prepares—and which her children eat—as an obstacle to integration. While the food Louise's mother cooks is inedible, the Italian food cooked by the woman DeSalvo addresses as grandmother, although she is not biologically related to her, "sustains and nourishes" Louise (22). The stories the old woman tells her, the Italian songs she sings as she cares for her, and the Italian words she uses to claim as her own all give Louise a sense of (cultural) belonging, all the while bypassing a biological connection. Until the day she dies, the old woman calls Louise "*mia figlia*" (74), asserting and creating kinship.

Apricots on the Nile by Colette Rossant provides a striking example of a narrative of kinship that not only circumvents the mother-daughter relationship but also crosses social divides. Born to a French mother and an Egyptian father, Rossant establishes kinship through food. The initial Paris chapter establishes a contrast between Colette's difficult relationships with her cold French mother and grandmother and her warm relationship with the family's cook, Georgette. This woman does not merely feed the girl, she teaches her to experience food sensually, challenging the model of a *jeune fille de bonne famille*, which the family upholds. The memoir then revolves around the tension between her French family and her father's extended Egyptian family, with which Rossant more closely identifies. From the age of five to the age of fifteen, Colette lives with her Palacci family in Cairo, remaining there after her father dies and her mother returns to Paris. The Cairo chapters show that Rossant claims a family, the Palaccis; a city, Cairo; and a country, Egypt. In so doing, she also asserts the Palaccis' cosmopolitan Egyptian identity, which would later be denied by the pan-Arabist Nasser revolution—the Palaccis belonged to Cairo's Jewish community. The scene depicting Colette's arrival in Alexandria is clearly symbolic—the child steps off the boat and is picked up by her grandfather who offers her a crusty *semit*, giving Colette her first taste of Egypt (18). In her family's Cairo kitchen, Colette grows close to Marguerite, her aristocratic grandmother, and the

Sudanese cook, Ahmet, watching them as they prepare family recipes and traditional Egyptian dishes. Social and religious divides are crossed when Colette asks Ahmet to give her the food the servants eat—*ful medames*—instead of the *tartines* she should receive (57) and requests his son smuggle street food into the kitchen for her. The final chapters, perhaps predictably, restore her lapsed connection to Egypt. In America Colette discovers Brooklyn’s ethnic shops, learns to cook Marguerite’s and Ahmet’s dishes and serves them to her American husband and children. Thanks to the food she prepares, her children discover their own (partial) Egyptian roots (166–168). As Colette’s children in turn learn to cook the same dishes, which their own children love (170), a connection emerges to people the Rossants never knew, nor are biologically related to.

Kitchen Poets

Ethnic culinary memoirs all include lists of foods the narrators ate as children—Italian *zeppole*, Vietnamese *cha gio* and mooncakes, Egyptian *ful medammes*, traditional Jewish Passover dishes, South Indian *vatal*, Caribbean pig tails or Chinese-Singaporean *kuek bagkit*. As pointed out by Mannur, inventories of exotic dishes can amount to “food pornography” (82) when their function is to appeal to the imaginations of American readers who can taste them without leaving their own homes. Culinary memoirs, however, rarely focus on food consumption alone, as most authors evoke a strong female presence in the kitchen, whose labor is recalled. This woman, a mother or, more often than not, a grandmother, typically embodies a connection to the family’s ethnic heritage through her ancient knowledge and storytelling. Matrilineal kinship is often asserted: Narayan, describing her grandmother as her “umbilical cord to [her] past,” claims that her grandmother’s practices were inherited from her “mother and grandmother before her” (15). In *Pig Tails ‘n’ Breadfruit*, Austin Clarke explains that his mother ensured his unbroken connection to the history of Barbados through her cooking and

stories (246). In *A Tiger in the Kitchen*, Cheryl Tan centers her narrative on her grandmother with whom she could not verbally communicate since Tan did not speak Teochew, but who “spoke eloquently” to her and to her family by feeding them (3). In the introduction to *Spoonbread and Strawberry Wine*, Norma Jean Darden and Carole Darden draw attention to the women in their family who seemed to possess “some magical instincts unknown to [them]” (xiii), and explain their intention to “capture that elusive magic” (xiii). Second- and third-generation memoirs typically present the connection as fragile or broken. Nguyen laments “the erosion of language” (247) which could threaten her bond with her grandmother. Laura Schenone’s *The Lost Recipes of Hoboken* recounts her quest to acquire a family recipe her great-grandmother had brought from Italy, as she believes the recipe will restore the connection to her family’s Italian past neglected by her father. In her analysis of food-themed South Asian texts, Parama Roy argues that focusing on female ancestors who cook without “the aids of formalized recipes, precise measurements, and modern kitchen equipment” amounts to a “strategy to authenticate the product” (486). In her reading, the function of this figure is to symbolize ethnic traditions, to make the reader believe she is being offered authentic “Indian” recipes. I, however, find that the presence of these women and their non-textual knowledge is not merely a marketing strategy. Their knowledge appears as a source of puzzlement for the author who has “come to devalue her bequest” (Ehrlich xii). I also find Meredith Abarca’s analysis of *sazón*, a sensory way of knowing (*Voices* 50-77), relevant to the analysis of ethnic culinary memoirs—as sensual and corporeal knowledge, *sazón* is based on the interconnection of all the senses (*Voices* 74). One way of forgetting such knowledge “is to rely on too much textually-based knowledge” (ibid.), as educated daughters do; most authors explain that the choices they made, such as pursuing college educations, made them feel different from their (grand)mothers, whose lives were seen as defined and confined by their labors in the kitchen, especially in their continual preparation of “ethnic” food. I propose designating these women

“kitchen poets” since the narrators eventually pay tribute to their magical instincts and embodied knowledge.

Most ethnic culinary memoirs trace “a voyage of discontinuity and connection” (Ehrlich xii). In *Miriam’s Kitchen*, Elizabeth Ehrlich portrays her grandmother “sitting before her stove” in her Brooklyn kitchen, “stirring cabbage soup in a white enamel pot and dishing out salty perceptions of life” (xi), only to confess that she has forgotten her grandmother’s teachings in the process of growing up. The memoirs typically emphasize an antithetical relationship between the world of cooking and the world of books, a rift between the older woman whose world is, or is perceived as, limited to the kitchen and a daughter who wants to escape gender roles and/or ethnic shame. In *Dream Homes*, Joyce Zonana’s passion for books and desire for an academic life are pitted against her mother’s world, defined by a passion for cooking Egyptian dishes (25). Likewise, in *Stealing Buddha’s Dinner*, Nguyen’s craving for American food and her rejection of Vietnamese food go hand in hand with her fascination with reading English classics.

Zonana, who fled the kitchen because she refused traditional gender roles (29), eventually discovers she has inherited what Luce Giard calls “a woman’s knowledge” that emanates from her body (Giard 153). When faculty parties are planned, Joyce finds that she cannot help but offer to prepare stuffed grape leaves (23)—a dish that symbolizes her ethnic legacy and ties to her mother, whose signature dish it was (24). Other authors see their decision to learn to cook ethnic food as a choice to reclaim their cultural legacy and as a way to restore their connection with the family’s kitchen poet(s). Learning to cook kosher food with Miriam, her mother-in-law, offers Ehrlich the possibility to “forge links” with her Jewish grandmothers (xii) and their traditions, to which her parents were not very faithful, as well as to recover her grandmothers’ “practical, mystical teachings” (xi). Nguyen ends her memoir with the possibility of recovering her grandmother’s knowledge: she is “trying to know what [her]

grandmother has always known: this amount of pepper, that amount of fish sauce” (248). She concludes: “She had always been there to show me this world without measurements” (248).

Schenone’s, Tan’s and Ehrlich’s memoirs depict a learning journey in which the narrator tries to recover non-textual knowledge. Schenone travels to Liguria to learn how to make ravioli dough with women who have mastered the art; Ehrlich learns how to cook traditional Jewish food with Miriam, while Tan goes to Singapore to learn to cook with her aunts. There, she “slowly learns to agak-agak” (76), that is, to cook without measurements. The narrators come to realize that culinary activities “demand as much intelligence, imagination, and memory as those traditionally held as superior, such as music and weaving” and, “in this sense, they rightly make up one of the strong aspects of ordinary culture” (Giard 156). Schenone’s fascination with ancient tools is not only nostalgic or symbolic—grasping her great-grandmother’s rolling pin (235), she realizes that handling such a heavy tool requires skill. However nostalgic Narayan’s image of her grandmother making *vatral* and *vadam* on the roof is, it also highlights the practical knowledge, organizational skills and physical strength the work entails (25-29).

Most memoirs attempt to reconcile the world of print and the world of cooking. College professor Zonana sees her memoir as a stuffed grape leaf: “I have been assembling the fragments of my story and the story of my family, attempting to roll them together into tidy packets, letting them simmer in the juice of my imagination” (26). Austin Clarke, an established writer, creates a narrative in which “the literary drips into and melts with the ways of the kitchen” (Kekeh-Dika 3). Perhaps recalling the tribute paid by Danticat to the kitchen poets who told her that all women have a voice even if that tongue is “patois, dialect, Creole” (222), Clarke switches to Bajan, the language of the people who invented the food he wants to write about, using words such as “ingreasements” and “seasning” throughout the memoir.

These authors attempt to “avoid silencing the voices of women who speak, share and assert themselves in ways other than writing” (Abarca, *Chilaquiles* 137). Memoirs typically pay

homage to the kitchen poets' voices and stories—Clarke's mother's Barbadian voice is heard throughout his memoir, just as Miriam's voice dominates in Ehrlich's memoir. Another crucial factor is the emphasis on hands: cooking as a corporeal practice is praised through evocative descriptions. Zonana evokes her mother's "strong large hands [that] were red, rubbed raw . . . and covered with blisters" (25). Writing a cookbook is an act of translation (Theophano 254) and culinary memoirs attempt to represent them with textual images and to translate the "poetry of gestures" (Giard 154) into words. In this way, ordinary gestures are recalled: peeling and chopping vegetables, stirring cabbage soup, kneading dough, and so on. Tan, Ehrlich and Schenone—whose clumsiness when cooking is emphasized—observe the kitchen poets' gestures, trying to capture their "elusive magic" (Dardens xiii). Ehrlich describes Miriam's gestures with precision, much as Tan does the same for her aunt's gestures. Tan also "documents" these with her camera (44), as if words do not suffice. Schenone, who attributes her own struggle to make ravioli dough to the fact that "the rhythm was never imprinted at an early age in [her] body" (6), is fascinated by the old Ligurian women who possess the art. Her memoir includes twenty-three photographs of hands in the process of kneading, cutting, or shaping dough, illustrating her attempt to render elusive gestures permanent.

As an art form that embodies cultural legacies, cooking is a corporeal practice that cements bonds—"a vehicle for transforming food into gestures of love" (Abarca, *Chilaquiles* 120). Clarke resorts to the vocabulary of affect to describe his mother's cooking—she mixes up "the in-goodness" and "feels up" her meats (217). Reflecting on the women in the African American community she grew up in, Wade-Gayles recalls how "cooking was the centerpiece of their bonding" (97). She also describes the tradition of "laying on of hands through cooking," which her mother and her friends practiced, as a tradition that cemented relationships within the community: "[T]he healing hands touch us through the food they prepare" (99).

A longing to belong and “be long”

As the corporeal presence and labors of the kitchen poets are foregrounded, the memoirs also show that “as a practice kinship is resolutely corporeal” (Freeman 298). From ethnic culinary memoirs to autobiographical essays (Wade-Gayles) to community-based projects (Abarca), cooking is presented as a connecting act.

Embodied but not always biological models of kinship are praised. Most authors express a desire or longing to be connected to larger communities across time and space. Schenone’s and Tan’s journeys allow them to recover non-textual knowledge by learning with other women absent a biological connection. Evoking her cooking lessons with her aunts and their relatives, Cheryl Tan depicts an ever-growing community of women that rally around her to help her learn to cook Teochew food in spite of the language barrier. Laura Schenone travels to Liguria to learn how to make ravioli dough with female masters. Her memoir includes photographs of 91-year-old Giusippina Giuffra and 70-year-old Enrichetta, as well as an ekphrastic description of the Senarega sisters with their dresses, aprons, clogs, and flustered faces (140). Although Schenone is not related to these women by blood, the inclusion of their photographs, alongside photographs of her close relatives, make these Ligurian women family. Towards the end of the memoir, the art of cooking without recipes is shown to create kinship between Italian American and Turkish women. Laura’s Turkish brother-in-law shows a video of Laura and her sister making ravioli to his mother and aunt in Istanbul. Likewise, in Turkey, he shoots a video of his Turkish mother and his American wife making *manti* together, and brings it “back, in return,” to Laura, on behalf of his mother (224-225).

Communities of women, both within families and within ethnic communities, are often recalled, creating expansive notions of kinship that supersede genealogical lines. The final section of Carole and Norma Jean Darden’s *Spoonbread and Strawberry Wine* considers friends as family through the food these women prepared and the inclusion of recipes that grant them

kinship—for instance, “Aunt Ruby’s seafood casserole” (292). Nguyen recalls how her grandmother thrived within the Vietnamese community—a dozen or so families—in Grand Rapids, which provided Noi Noi with a sense of belonging. Austin Clarke pays homage to his mother, to his grandmothers, aunts, cousins, his mother’s friends, and “all the neighboring women” who have fed him and told him stories (5) and “turned [him] into the man [he is] today” (41), thus broadening his notion of kinship.

The ethnic culinary memoir embodies a longing to “be long,” to “‘hold out’ a hand across time and touch the dead or those not born yet” (Freeman 299). Clarke’s description of his mother’s way of lovingly preparing the food also incorporates her into a line that started with her ancestors, African slaves, since this is a tradition that “comes from the slave days” (64). Clarke’s memoir is rife with vignettes paying tribute to the resilient Barbadian women who found ingenious ways to feed their families throughout the hardships of slavery and the colonial period.

Conclusion: Textual kinship

As I have argued, the authors forge links to ancestors, family and their respective ethnic communities, while also expressing the desire to pass on the recipes, craft and stories they have either preserved or recovered. In the process, they hope to preserve the “tenacious” memory of their kitchen poets’ lives and pass on their “nourishing knowledge” (Giard 154). To do so, they create textual kinship.

Theophano argues that female authors of cookbooks “construct matrilineal genealogies and their relationships to one another in their cookbooks, binding together the different generations” (86). Zonana’s recipe section opens with her own recipe for stuffed grape leaves, followed by her mother’s (207-208), bringing the two cooks together textually and symbolically. Cheryl Tan’s recipes, from “Tanglin Ah-Ma’s otak” to “Auntie Khar Moi’s

pandan-skin mooncakes,” pay tribute to her female relatives who taught her to cook without measurements.

In some cases, the memoir’s scrapbook-like design turns the book into an object that is both familiar and unfamiliar when ethnic motifs are included. The recipe section in Tan’s memoir is adorned with a flowery banner suggesting a piece of Asian textile binds the pages (285-292). The banner creates a connection between kinship and ethnicity, which Tan, who was educated in America, displays.

The design of *Spoonbread and Strawberry Wine*—through its old-fashioned-style fonts, background evoking a faint, flowered print, family pictures and studio portraits embedded in the main narrative and the recipe section—evokes a scrapbook. While the photographs clearly evidence “race pride” (19), the design turns the book into a familial and African American collection/archive that readers can relate to. While the sisters specifically encourage “African Americans who despair at the loss of so much of [their] history” to “preserve [their] heritage” (xi), they also claim that “everyone” has a legacy such as theirs—in terms of oral history and culinary know-how—which “deserves” (x) to be preserved. Like the Dardens, Schenone underlines the risk of losing the stories, recipes and memories of the kitchen poets. As she collects photographs and recounts interviews with ordinary people who live (and cook) in Liguria, she widens the scope of what constitutes history and knowledge to include ordinary women’s skills. The presence of photographs of cooking utensils that serve to imprint physical patterns—checkered pins, the ravioli press, or *corzetti* stamps—in turn creates a pattern, tracing a personal and collective map of memory and history, from her home town to Liguria, to Hoboken, a town in which many Italian immigrants settled.

Ehrlich calls her memoir a “collage” (xiii) of recipes, stories, and sayings, including those told by Miriam and her atheist father. Her memoir is truly polyphonic. Although her celebration of kosher recipes and cooking articulates a message of purity and implies that kinship is limited

to female transmission within the Jewish community, she becomes less exclusive when she applies the language of religion to describe the memoir: “That collage is my religion and it is what I am passing on” (xiii).

As they target audiences within and outside their own ethnic communities, culinary memoirs negotiate the conceptual divide between understandings of family as ethnic and of kinship as transcending ethnic boundaries as they include an “ever widening circle of people” (Zonana 1). Zonana claims that writing the memoir was a “communal adventure” (1), all the while allowing her to reconnect to her Egyptian heritage and to her mother. The memoir ends with a Rosh Hashanah meal Joyce cooks for her “family,” which includes distant relatives and friends. Her meal brings together the traditional dishes her mother used to cook for Rosh Hashanah and the Italian dishes Joyce likes to cook (203). The meal clearly serves a symbolic function, striking a fine balance between tradition and modernity, more narrow and wider definitions of family, her sense of belonging to an Egyptian Jewish community and to a cosmopolitan nation, while also reasserting the role of cooking as a practice that sustains kinship.

Overall, the ethnic culinary memoir, as an intimate public space where family stories, photographs, and recipes are shared with the reader, rarely serves to only display traditional/reassuring visions of tight-knit family structures. Collectively, ethnic culinary memoirs approach ethnicity and kinship in varying ways, although most read as journeys of recovery and reparation narratives. Certainly, these are meant to repair connections but, likewise, to foster kinship that transcends the biological through the culinary communities they strive to create.

Notes

¹ With the exception of autobiographies written by male chefs. See Soler Nieves (2018).

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