From food studies to food stories, commenting, writing and eating the American Dream in the memoirs of Louise DeSalvo and Shoba Narayan

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The culinary memoir, a recent narrative approach to autobiography, appears to exert a far-reaching influence even amongst writers not pre-destined to food-flavoured self-writing. It is characterized by its capacity to allow immigrant authors (first or subsequent generations) to write about their relationship to America and to the American Dream, an ideal which comforted or seduced their parents with utopian promises. In recent years a multi-genre and multi-layered approach has emerged in both food writing and food studies, the prefix to whose labels suggests the plenty with which immigrants associated the American Dream, the grail epitomized in Italian immigrant Angelo Pellegrini's subsistence story, *The Unprejudiced Palate* (2005).[1] The Dream is the omnipresent symbol, albeit flawed or even illusory, that blurs the hardship of the homeland. Beyond social and anthropological studies, researchers have explored the narrative dimension of women's food literature. Cookbooks have long been considered autobiographical forms of expression for women who, sometimes barely literate in their host's language, and having lost material and linguistic possessions when they left their homeland, cling to their culinary language, with its power to consolidate expatriate communities and even offer a timid cultural invitation to their hosts.

In an attempt to define the genre and sub-genres of culinary-centred self-writing, Traci Marie Kelly identifies three forms of narratives with recipes. Foremostly, there are works that she names culinary memoirs, defined as personal memories of the author with recipes as a recurring theme. Examples of such works are Shoba Narayan's *Monsoon Diary* (2008) and Elizabeth Ehrlich's *Miriam's Kitchen* (1997). Secondly, Kelly evokes highly-readable autobiographical cookbooks in which recipes and cooking instructions are intertwined with memories, such as Alice B. Toklas' eponymous cookbook-memoir (1954). Finally, Kelly defines auto-ethnographic cookbooks which illuminate practices of community and family wherein food is presented contextually and is representative of values and behaviours. They seek to represent a group with an identarian history and culture. An example is *The Book of Middle Eastern Food* (1968) by Claudia Roden (255).

[1] Pellegrini's tale of the close-to-the-earth good life of old-fashioned virtues, reverence for earth's fruits, and for the moral uprightness of the enlightened peasant gourmet, is morally instructive to his hosts, while he acknowledges having tried to absorb the best of American culture without losing what is valuable in his own (230). The American Dream was necessary for he had seen too early in life 'the terrible meaning of black despair' (159). "As an immigrant, the discovery of abundance has been the most palpable and the most impressive of my discoveries in America." (232). His food-focused narrative helps him to make sense of his New World. The quality but simple meal of bread, cheese and wine is 'the luncheon that binds me close to my ancestors' (141).

Culinary memoir writers are often caught in their parents' vacillation between home- and host land, both enticed and repulsed by the American Dream, such as Diana Abu-Jaber and her nomadic Jordanian father; those who live in a shadow land such as Linda Furiya's parents, marginalized in rural Indiana, and living within their fiercely defended Japanese cultural enclave; and those whose diasporic exile forced them to cling to the American Dream, such as Joyce Zonana's Jewish parents who had to flee Egypt in 1956, or Elizabeth's Ehrlich's Holocaust survivor parents-in-law. The courage of these multi-generational voices expresses the need for survival, for assimilation[2] and a belief in the tenacity of the pioneer spirit. Historically, as disenfranchised immigrant women reappropriated the kitchen, ethnic cooking offered a lesson to American cooks, proposing pragmatic and authentic 'settler' nutrition in the place of culinary whimsy, while, according to Donna Gabaccia, becoming an inherent element of the American Dream. Mary Drake McFeely writes: "[…] it has been in the kitchen that a great deal of middle-class culture has been and is powerfully asserted as the American norm" (103).

Authored for the most part, by writers or academics who interweave their personal stories with recipes, culinary memoirs celebrate family legacies, while paying homage to their cookbook heritage. Gaining momentum in the 1990s, many of these memoirs such as those by Louise DeSalvo and Shoba Narayan, wrestle diasporic transnational identities with often illusory contemplations of the American Dream. Several culinary forms emerge as satellites of the memoir genre that recount immigrant women's lives as they confront American culture, from early gastronomic writings that express the settler traits of resilience, to the creativity of recent hybrid narratives.

Tamar Heller and Patricia Moran discuss the synthesis between writing and eating in food studies and food stories as exemplified in Arlene Voski Avakian's work, *Through the Kitchen Window: Women explore the Intimate Meanings of Food and Cooking* (2006): "an important collection of meditations on women's connections to ethnic cultures through cooking." (7). Avakian herself writes "Cooking becomes a vehicle for artistic expression, a source of sensual pleasure, an opportunity for resistance and even power" (6), offering a multiform hybridity that articulates women's relation to food narratives. Tropes of food cross boundaries between countries, cultures and genres, from memoirs to criticism "in literature, both critical and creative" (Heller and Moran, 5). Avakian writes of women who are proud to resist the American lifestyle, while others want to believe in the Dream. Sharon L. Jansen's contribution "Family Liked 1956: My Mother's Recipes", tells the story of her mother's letters full of recipe annotations and self-searching:

> […] her special genre is the recipe […] for my mother, a recipe represents an opportunity to experiment with composing as well as cooking. Her recipes are exercises in narration, description, analysis, even

[2] Ethnic food becomes part of the American Dream melting pot idiom, that, for example, Judith Friedlander discusses in her article "Jewish Cooking in the American Melting Pot" (1986).

> argument. For me, they raise questions about texts and context, about text and subtext, about textual authority and textual subversion. (55-56).

Gloria Wade Gayles in "'Laying of Hands' through Cooking: Black Women's Majesty and Mystery in Their Own Kitchens" writes of the women who were excluded from the American Dream. However, "[i]n their kitchens, the women experienced influence, authority, achievement, and healing" (97) from their origins in slavery they had to produce miracles to eat well and with pride.

Food study writers use homely food idioms and plays on words in food study titles that are a sign of a generic blending, and also a desire to be part of the intimacy and nurture of the culinary genre: "Through the Kitchen Window" (Avakian), "From Hardtack to Home Fries" (Haber), "Secret Ingredients", "Dinner Roles" and "Perfection Salad" (Inness). Janet Theophano's study *Eat my Words* implies the critics' analysis even aspires to be nutritious as well as informative.[3] Avakian explains that: "Reading a recipe along with an essay, she was convinced, could provide another perspective on an issue, a relationship, or an individual." (2005, vii).

Researchers such as Avakian and Sandra M. Gilbert address ethnicity and feminism while exploring narrative approaches themselves, pulling food stories into the realm of academic studies, making the study of conditions of exile both object and subject. Gilbert, in her critical work *The Culinary Imagination*, slips her own incipient culinary memoir into a chapter entitled "Bitter herbs or the Spices of Life", reaching back to her grandfather's Italian and French origins. The title of Gilbert's book is a further indication that we may approach the mysteries of our personal histories through literary devices offered by food stories. Gilbert's book is an example of how parasite forms are developing even around an informally-defined corpus, from the necessity to explore one's relationship to the host land. Gilbert writes: "Our recipes are histories of who we are, transmitting the taste of the past through precept and example, even as we can sometimes revise our lives by adjusting the menu." (8). Food stories emerge from food studies in articles, blogs, memoirs and critical inquiry. The immigrant-to-homesteader belief in the boundlessness and invincibility of the American Dream is symbolically at the source of this flux and flow between forms: anything is possible.

Louise DeSalvo, American writer, professor and Virginia Woolf scholar, wrote about the intersection of Italian-American culture at whose juncture the American Dream shines as a beacon to immigrants in search of identity. She expressed this generic blending amongst diasporic multi-profile writers, between literary criticism, memoir and creative writing in the titles of some of her books: *Between Women: Biographers, Novelists, Critics, Teachers, and Artists Write About Their Work on Women* (1993), *Writing as a Way of Healing: How Telling Our Stories Transforms Our Lives* (2000), *The Milk of Almonds: Italian American Women Writers on Food and Culture* (2003).

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[3] Culinary memoir titles of similar resonance include *The Language of Baklava* (Abu-Jaber, 2005), *Bento Box in the Heartland* (Furiya, 2006), *Life from Scratch*, Martin, 2015) *Tender at the Bone* (Reichl, 1998), *Apricots on the Nile* (Rossant, 1999) and *A Homemade Life* (Wizenberg, 2009).

For DeSalvo, women authors have multiple and coinciding paths. Like her, they may be critics, teachers, but also cooks and food writers. Her 2004 memoir *Crazy in the Kitchen. Food, Feuds and Forgiveness in an Italian American family*[4] is the story of her family's adaptation to American society, its belief in the American Dream, but also the tenacity of its Italian history. In the closing pages, DeSalvo describes a dream of finally being at peace with her mother, cooking the food from home that her mother claimed prevented her from being "American American". Breaking the loathed Italian bread with the thick crust that her grandmother made, there is a moment of communion when she makes peace with Italy and America for her family: "It is hard to break the bread. But it is not impossible." (252). She explores the relationship between writing and food: her life and work are an example of cooking and writing inextricably intertwined:

> With every excellent meal I make using my special ingredients, I drive away the phantom of my mother's kitchen, try to obliterate the want of my ancestors [...] It's a cheerful kitchen and its right next to my study, so I can run back and forth all day long, from writing to cooking, from cooking to writing. And I do. My kitchen is my refuge. My cooking makes my writing possible [...] (2004, 187, 188).

She lives the American Dream in her writing and teaching while honouring the family history in her cooking with the hope of possibility.

Alone, DeSalvo's grandmother had understood how to remain attached to the homeland: "Wherever you could earn your crust of bread, wherever you didn't go hungry, my grandparents said, is where you should call home [...] their stories, which I believed were fabrications when I was young were true, all true." (5). Her grandparents were lured to America with the promise of a dream that quickly dissipates. While they say nothing, DeSalvo becomes a writer and a cook, finding safety in the order and discipline of food preparation (51) and in words: "a breaker of the silences, not a keeper of the secrets" (215-216). "About the most painful truths of their lives, of my family's history, my grandparents were silent [...]" Without a history, there can be no present, without a past there can be no future [...] Perhaps this is why I hoard food, treat it was if it's sacred, bless it, revere it, let it nourish me [...] Perhaps I do this because my people could not." (137).

The American Dream offers the possibility to write a new history. In *Monsoon Diary: A Memoir with Recipes* (2003), Shoba Narayan, author and journalist, describes her pursuit of the grail that America offers. In *Return to India: An Immigrant Memoir* (2008), she reconsiders it in the light of the realization that "'[b]eing cosmopolitan is all very well for adults with set identities. It is a disaster for your children [...]'" (130). She describes the decision to return to India leaving behind the country that embodied her desire for otherness "Mine wasn't a desire born out of fear—of political persecution or economic privation [...] America was so fabled, so far away; hard to reach yet so

[4] DeSalvo's work is not a culinary memoir as such as it does not include recipes, merely rich food descriptions.

pervasive." (5). When she was young her mother drenched her with cold water when she mentioned America "as if she were exorcising evil spirits from my body" (6). Her parents even took her to a psychic as "[her] America dreams were getting out of hand" (9). Yet her writing career could only be successful in America; her father reminds her that she may be successful but will lose her identity: "What if you become so successful that you forget what you have to say? [...] What if you become so successful that you lose your voice; your soul?" (42). Yet the Dream offers dignity: "They [the immigrants] walked taller and lighter, as if realizing with amazement that they could reinvent themselves in this new land." (61). As the desire to return home grows she writes:

> I began cooking traditional Indian food for every meal instead of the fusion food I had favored. [...] America had been a welcoming land where I had spent ten glorious years being young and free. It had denied me nothing because of the color of my skin or the foreignness of my character. Indeed, it had allowed me to fly and freed me from the constraints of my homeland. (134).

However, the decisive sign appeared "Much as I enjoyed American cuisine, I couldn't last four days without my curd rice. I was Indian after all." (143).

Food studies have embraced forms of food narrative as universal scripts to express immigrant conditions and identity in America, notably carrying elements of the personal and the familiar, the emotional and the sentimental that embrace ideals of egalitarianism and prosperity which represent the American Dream, while expressing nostalgia for an idealized past that often did not exist. Barbara Haber writes: "the interpretation of attitudes and customs about food can be a shortcut to understanding the deepest or most hidden truths of people and groups." (69). Just as cooking makes writing possible for DeSalvo, so writing also makes the healing return to the kitchen possible via the food narrative.

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