Remembering Eating: Cultural Memory and Identity Formation in Three Culinary Memoirs of the Middle East

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Abstract

This paper examines three culinary memoirs of the Middle East from the past twenty years and highlights them as alternative media for transcultural identification and memory formation. By analyzing how authors align recipes, food memories, and personal narratives; and referencing scholarship on food, memory, and semiotics, I find that in each text, food is mechanized as a narrative space in which authors and readers can identify with pasts, places, cultures, and selves. Drawing from these analyses, I conclude that these culinary memoirs demonstrate the potential for food in literary and political-cultural discourses as transcultural movement continues to increase globally.

Foods and food knowledge are sites of memory formation, and food memories play a crucial role in the shaping of personal and cultural identities. In the latter part of the twentieth century, a renewal of scholarship emphasizing the intersections between food, memory, and identity emerged. This renewal stemmed from a global shift toward expressing and understanding differences in identification through cultural practices (Holtzman 366), such as food behaviors and rituals. In response to this shift, and especially in contemporary contexts of increasing transcultural movement, food writing has emerged as a valuable mechanism for examining the complexities of memory and identity formation.[1] This paper focuses on "culinary memoirs," specifically on three texts which center thematically on regions and cultures in and around the Middle East, in an analysis of memory and identity formation through food in literature.[2] Through a close reading of the literary manipulations of food in these culinary memoirs, I show that the texts are alternative media for transcultural identification and memory formation. In this position, culinary memoirs highlight food as a significant theme in literary and political-cultural discourses surrounding the Middle East.

The authors of culinary memoirs manipulate food in literature by aligning recipes, food memories, and personal narratives in different ways, creating texts that are distinct from traditional literary novels in their allowance for the working-through and recounting of through food. In the culinary memoir *Day of Honey: A Memoir of Food, Love, and*

[1] The cultural anthropologist Jon D. Holtzman, in his 2006 article "Food and Memory," reviewed the expanding literature on food and memory studies, citing principal authors including David Sutton and Carole Counihan who understood food as central to the construction of personal and cultural memory and identity (Holtzman 362). Writers such as Claudia Roden and Arjun Appadurai, who published ethnographic cookbooks in the late twentieth century and focused on specific manifestations of cultural identity through food, inspired contemporary food theorists. These seminal texts, among others, paved the way for culinary memoirs to burgeon up until today and have the ability to respond to recent conversations concerning identity, multiculturalism, political conflict, and migration.

[2] The term "Middle East" is used and defined in varying ways in both scholarly literature and social understandings across the world. In this essay, I choose the term as a general geopolitical grouping of a large group of countries and regions, but specifically to include Jordan, Iraq, Lebanon, and the "eastern Mediterranean" (Khan 1) countries Turkey, Greece, and Cyprus. Additionally, as this paper involves transcultural identification through food, the term "Middle Eastern" serves to contextualize diasporic movement.

War, Annia Ciezadlo expresses the felt effect of eating a homemade stuffed grape leaf:

> When they taste right, I am back in Chicagoland, circa 1977. I can hear the asthmatic growl of our old smoke-stained Frigidair, WGN's theme music crackling out of out black-and-white Zenith […] can see my grandmother in the kitchen […] wrapping *yaprakis*. . . . (25, emphasis in original)

In recounting this food memory, the author establishes food as an explication of her personal and cultural identity to readers and introduces food and the memory of it as literary symbols, which will recur in the rest of the narrative. Carol Bardenstein, a scholar of Middle Eastern studies, conducted a 2002 analysis of "cook-book memoirs" of Middle Eastern exiles, and proposed additional terms such as "nostalgia cookbook" and "memoir with recipes," which form a "rubric of genres" in which there is room for movement around and within structures of both cookbooks and memoirs (Bardenstein 257). While scholars and authors draw varying lines distinguishing the two literary forms, this essay considers conventional structures of cookbooks and memoirs to include, respectively, compilations of recipes including methods for preparing and serving food and first-hand accounts of personal histories. The following analysis of three culinary memoirs will highlight the fluid nature of the label.

In the past twenty years, three culinary memoirs entered circulation that reflected different stages of transcultural and transnational movement, shedding light on Middle Eastern food cultures with varying approaches: *The Language of Baklava* by Diana Abu-Jaber (2005), *Day of Honey: A Memoir of Food, Love, and War*[3] by Annia Ciezadlo (2011), and *Ripe Figs: Recipes and Stories from the Eastern Mediterranean*[4] by Yasmin Khan (2021). In her introduction, Abu-Jaber suggests that "lives don't usually correspond to narrative arcs," (13) but that the stories she shares

[3] Hereafter *Day of Honey*.

[4] Hereafter *Ripe Figs*.

are inspired by people, memories, and meals, proposing her book as an idiosyncratic form of storytelling. Ciezadlo and Khan also introduce their culinary texts as unique narratives, offering them, respectively, as a book "about how [people] live before, during, and after […] wars" (Ciezadlo 19) and "a book about the resilience of the human spirit" (Khan 9). Each author writes about human experience through the lens of food, reflecting a broader literary and scholarly tradition in anthropology and sociology that draws attention to the intersections between food, identity, and memory (Counihan and van Esterik 5-7). As identity and diaspora politics came to the forefront of global conversations in recent years, food gained increasing attention as a means of storytelling and cultural communication (Holtzman 367). Consequently, culinary memoirs proliferated, employing food as a literary device for identification with pasts, places, cultures, and selves.[5] The texts analyzed in this paper were written after 9/11 and during both the Arab Spring in the early 2010s and the mid-2010s migrant crisis in the Eastern Mediterranean, when dominant narratives of the Middle East were centered around "perpetual conflict" (Ciezadlo 20) and migration from the region increased as a result of multiple wars. Abu-Jaber, Ciezadlo, and Khan respond to such dominant narratives, focusing instead on the everydayness of food in cultural representation, shaping new routes of memory and identity formation through food. Drawing from these themes, this paper's working definition of "culinary memoir" is a literary locus in which foods, food rituals, and food memories retain as much cultural and textual significance as do people, places, and moments in time.

Foods are institutions that imply sets of meaning. In his 1961 text "Towards a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption," Roland Barthes proposed seminal ruminations on food as a system of communication that became fundamental background for understanding contemporary food literature that centers on food, memory, and identity. Barthes concluded that there is an "entire 'world' (social

[5] Two of the many influential culinary memoirs that inspire this paper are Claudia Roden's 1971 *Book of Middle Eastern Food* and M.F.K. Fisher's 1943 *The Gastronomical Me*, both major pioneering texts of contemporary (female) food literature.

environment) […] present in and signified by food" (17), noting a distinctly commemorative or historical function of food, exhibited in food acts such as preparation, cooking, and sharing, that are "the repository of a whole experience, the accumulated wisdom of […] ancestors" (18, parentheses in original). In culinary memoirs, authors use food as a literary tool through which to signify "entire worlds," specifically those of their personal and cultural pasts. By aligning recipes with narrative, such texts exemplify Barthes' theory of food as language and communication. As the analyses below show, Abu-Jaber, Ciezadlo, and Khan each signify personal and cultural memories and identities in the form of culinary memoirs, using food to allow themselves and their readers to participate in collective pasts through iterations of cultural, national, and intimately personal recipes and food memories.

In *The Language of Baklava*, Diana Abu-Jaber tactically weaves recipe into narrative, using food to complement her personal and cultural past and acknowledging her memories sensory and emotional values. She uses this commemorative function of food to work through her personal story and inform readers of her perception of an "immigrant's story," specifically that of her father and his Jordanian family (Abu-Jaber 224). In one chapter, she recounts the story of an aunt visisting the United States from Jordan. The scene is a crucial moment in Abu-Jaber's reconciliation with her Jordanian (Arab-)American identity, and through her aunt's food she comes to terms with the Jordanian heritage that she had until then been resistant to. During an argument with her father, Abu-Jaber exclaims, "*My* family isn't Jordanian […] My family is American!" (224), sending her father into a flurry of anger. Interjecting the emotional tumult of this section of her narrative, the author offers readers a mnemonic step-by-step recipe for "Shaking Tea Infusion (Modern Version)," which, in her memory, her aunt gives her to "calm down and figure things out" (Abu-Jaber 225-6). She goes on to describe the experience:

> It's a tawny brown liquid. I inhale, and a mist fills my sinuses and chest. It mingles with the brown melancholy inside of me. It tastes a bit like bark and earth and tears, yet somehow

> it's delicious. It releases particles of sleeplessness and sadness embedded within me. (226)

Here, Abu-Jaber's memory complements her recipe, and the narrative becomes a space in which she acknowledges not only her past but also her personal and cultural identity. The adapted "Modern Version" of the recipe speaks to Barthes' notion of a commemorative function for food, signifying the development of the recipe through time from her aunt's kitchen into the textual form offered to the reader. The culinary memoir is interlaced with such instances of recipe and memory working together and, as a literary tool, this harmony also invites readers themselves to pause to "figure things out" and to question the meaning of the recipe to the larger narrative. In this pause, readers may actively participate in Abu-Jaber's memory by recreating the recipe, gaining physical and thus sensory access to Abu-Jaber's past experiences. The affect felt and exerted by readers in the acts of cooking and eating create emotional connections among experiences. Thus, in the literary form of recipes, Abu-Jaber allows readers to gain access to "worlds" that are otherwise inaccessible, figments of her imagination that become embedded in the imaginations of readers. In writing-through and consequently reading-through recipes, both author and readers are transported into a transcending narrative space in which both can identify: Abu-Jaber to her cultural heritage and readers to Abu-Jaber's cultural experiences and memories. It is by means of this space that *The Language of Baklava* becomes a site for memory formation and transcultural identification, as readers can become actively involved in the memory and identity of the author, and through the preparation and consumption of food partake in the world recounted in the memoir.

As narrative spaces, recipes signify literal points in time, sensory embodiments, and emotional memories. In *Day of Honey,* Annia Ciezadlo shows that in culinary memoirs, this signification also works in reverse. Recounting a food memory shared by her partner, she writes:

> She laid down a layer of stuffed grape leaves, and then a layer of stuffed zucchini shells, packing them tightly to-

> gether like masonry, alternating all the way up to the top, pressing them down with a plate, as if by making the most complicated food possible, nesting food within food, a Shahrazad of the stove, she could trick time and keep her family together forever. (33)

In this narrative, the memory of food serves multiple functions. Not only does it effectively transport Ciezadlo to a point in the past, but it also affects the reader by stimulating the senses and even their own memories, invoking distinct sensory images in the mind. Food also functions as a metaphor for the nesting of stories within stories, representative of entire "repositories" (Barthes 18) of culture that Ciezadlo catches glimpses of through observations of ritual food preparation. In her comparison to Shahrazad—the female protagonist and storyteller in the Arabic folktale *One Thousand and One Nights*—Ciezadlo makes a metatextual connection to the memory of her own grandmother wrapping *yaprakis* in 1977 who would "tell [Ciezadlo] stories that crossed from true to make-believe and back again: stories that contained other stories" (27). The multiple references to frame narrative, the literary structure by which *One Thousand and One Nights* is organized, is an admission to the framed structure of culinary memoirs, as they offer personal and cultural histories interspersed with recipes and food memories.

Throughout *Day of Honey*, Ciezadlo continually weaves interconnected stories using the metaphor of stuffed grape leaves. These stories are the catapult for her ultimate move to the Middle East (Ciezadlo 22), from where she makes the observations on food and war that inspire her memoir. "Some recipes are poems," she writes, "a few scene stealers are novellas. But stuffed grape leaves are short stories—tiny fables of transformation, not of people (though the best recipes can do that too) but of food" (25, parentheses in original). She even describes stuffed grape leaves as a "narrative dish," explaining that "each ingredient speaks as the package unfolds, containing multitudes" (27). This description indeed speaks to the concept of frame narrative and makes readers aware of this dimension by inviting them to recognize the narrative functions of food in storytelling and specifically in memoirs. Ciezadlo does not

include a recipe for stuffed grape leaves in the text, but rather elaborates upon her specific memories of them with sensory language, placing her memory in readers' imaginations by describing the smell of "lamb stewing on the stove with tomatoes and zucchini, fogging up the windows" (25). Such elaborations destabilize the cohesive structure of the memoir and provoke readers to, along with Ciezadlo, question the meanings of each story within the frame narrative of food, love, and war.

Ciezadlo's grape leaf metaphor alludes to the nuanced relationships between personal and cultural identity. According to the memory theorist Maurice Halbwachs, collective memory is dependent on social structures (Halbwachs and Coser 22), such as food behaviors in cultural settings. These behaviors, especially as they are recounted in culinary memoirs, show that each personal memory is in essence collective and cultural (Erll 15). In writing about past experiences, the authors of culinary memoirs describe their histories as webs of meals made for others or eaten with others. Eating, though in many ways personal, is at the same time "integrally constituted towards its open sharing" (Holtzman 373). Ciezadlo's multiple memories of eating stuffed grape leaves are not only personal memories, but also signifiers of cultural pasts and essential components of life stories. In culinary memoirs cultural memories, as well as the raw memories of the authors, operate within specific socio-cultural environments, thus creating shared versions of the past through food, which are then shared with readers.

Shared meals are a major theme of *Ripe Figs*, which is a gastronomic documentation of Yasmin Khan's experiences in Turkey, Cyrprus, and Greece in the context of ongoing conflict and humanitarian crises. The British-born Iranian and Pakistani food writer and activist situates herself during the 2015 humanitarian migrant crisis in the Eastern Mediterranean, noting that "at the time of writing, an estimated five million refugees have come through Turkey, Greece, and Cyprus in the last five years: the biggest movement of people the Europe has seen since the Second World War" (29). Khan's framing narrative mechanizes food to investigate concepts of borders and identity as she moves around the region and eats with cooks, activists, locals, and war refugees. Her mantra is that the best way to communicate is over a meal

(30), and during her travels she visits multiple community kitchens that work to provide safe spaces in which refugees can identify with others over shared meals. One such community kitchen is Nan, on the island of Lesvos, Greece, where the menu is designed as a mix of local food, "supporting Greek producers, with iconic recipes from Syria, Pakistan, and Afghanistan because that's where the most […] refugees are coming from at the moment" (195). Khan enjoys *chana masala* on the menu at Nan, a recipe with which she culturally identifies as she remembers the way her Pakistani father cooked it while she was growing up (299). The recipe for the chana masala at Nan originated from a refugee cook of Pakistani descent who worked there, and it is one of the many recipes contributed to the menu by refugees (195). Later in the text, Khan offers readers a step-by-step version of this recipe, allowing them to partake in a piece of her sensory memory, literally guiding them through sensory experiences in textual form, for example when she advises:

> In the US, I find canned chickpeas to be very soft when you open them, so the lesson […] is to taste as you go along. You are aiming for the chickpeas to be so tender that they simply melt in your mouth. Serve this with flatbread […] a crisp chopped salad […] savoury mango […] Delish! (299)

Ripe Figs is a largely sense-driven narrative. Khan's writing is tinged with detailed descriptions of the sensory acts of eating, in a stylistic effort to figuratively bring readers with her through the Eastern Mediterranean as she observes and experiences transcultural movement and communication through the lens of food. The inclusion of not only the memory of but also the recipe for chana masala allows identification on multiple levels: of Khan with her past and of Khan with her readers, and vice versa. In the unique space of recipe within narrative, readers can literally enact Khan's memory of consuming a meal created by a refugee cook, an experience which is fundamental to Khan's understanding of movement and identity in the context of a humanitarian crisis around the Middle East.

As the three culinary memoirs covering three different cultural contexts show, food and food memories are important and useful tools for identity formation and transcultural communication. In *Day of Honey*, recipes serve as extra-narrative signifiers of Ciezadlo's experiences in the Middle East and function as resistances to forgetting, symbols of her experiences that she chooses to retain and subsequently share with readers as means of identifying with her and her past. Abu-Jaber and Khan interweave recipes throughout the narrative as complements to their storytelling. In doing so, they invite readers to identify in-the-moment with their personal and cultural memories as the authors themselves remember them. Abu-Jaber's recipes are largely personal, associated with distinct moments in her embellished memory and even acting to embellish them further. The titles of her recipes: "'Eat it Now' Shish Kabob (22) and "'Stolen Boyfriend' Baba Ghanouj" (260), for example, are allusions to the events in her memoir, mnemonic means of making sense of her story to her readers. Khan, whose recipes make up the bulk of her text, aligns them with the narrative of movement through the Eastern Mediterranean in order to illuminate her framing narrative of an (idealistic) "world without borders" (Khan 441): that of food. Abu-Jaber writes of coming to terms with a nuanced sense of identity through food while remembering her immigrant family's placemaking in a new setting. Ciezadlo, on the other hand, uses food to make sense of her experience observing and documenting a war that she is distanced from. Finally, Khan offers a narrative of movement, displacement, and transcultural communication through food, by eating and cooking with individuals during a tense socio-political period and then sharing these foods, in the form of recipes, with her readers.

Food, in culinary memoirs, manifests as a legitimate means of communication across borders, cultures, and moments in time. In food acts and memories, disconnected worlds, whether between reader and author or author and self, converge. Culinary memoirs, as we have seen from the three examples from the past twenty years, provide settings for identity and memory to be invented and reinvented as food is prepared, shared, and eaten. Especially in their responses to instances of transcultural movement, *The Language of Baklava*, *Day of Honey*, and *Ripe*

Figs place authors and readers in unique subject positions from which they can identify and communicate across cultures. In these positions, authors set themselves in relationship not only to other cultures as observers and documenters, but also to readers by providing sensory images and offering access to cultural knowledge in the form of recipes. As the Middle-Eastern diaspora around the world grows, culinary memoirs focusing on the foods of the region may prove functional as a means of cultural exchange, as they are alternative media for identification and thus representation. In doing so, culinary memoirs of the Middle East can highlight the importance of food not only in literary, but also political-cultural discourses as transcultural movement continues to increase globally and food is mechanized as a signifier of memory and identity.

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Biography

Carla Kay (Amsterdam University College 2020) is an independent culinary anthropologist and chef currently conducting research in New York. She is curator of the website what-we-eat.com. Her research interests include cultural memory, diasporic identity, and urban culture.