Imagine…[your great-grandmother] in your midst…as you turn to the oven to withdraw the scones. They have turned a golden brown and their aroma has penetrated every corner of your abode.¹

Now that is what I call shortcake…But even though the berries are fresh, the biscuits are hot, and the cream is cold, this may not be your idea of shortcake. It’s not, because your mother, or your grandma…didn’t do it this way…²

For western imaginations shaped by Anglo-Celtic histories and food cultures, golden brown scones and strawberry shortcake are substantial items of nurturance,³ icons of traditional comfort. The almost magical smells of their baking are redolent of the warmth and sensual activity of country kitchens, the stories of their making passed from grandmothers to mothers to daughters in secret, almost liturgical, rituals. In fact, for Nigella Lawson, British celebrity television chef and author of How to Be a Domestic Goddess, baking itself is both “a useful metaphor for the familial warmth of the kitchen we fondly imagine used to exist, and…a way of reclaiming our lost Eden.”⁴ Furthermore, baking offers women—particularly “the post-modern, post-feminist, overstretched woman”—possibilities for playful performance: the pleasure of feeling like “a domestic goddess, trailing nutmeggy fumes of baking pie in…[her] languorous wake.”⁴

Haunted by the forces of globalization, new technologies, and changing conceptions of time and space, the post-industrial West is rife with nostalgic returns to figures of comfort and the beguiling possibilities they offer for reenactment. This cycle of return is well illustrated by David Harvey’s formulation of “time-space compression.” One of the cultural effects of “things…speeding up and spreading out” is a fear of “placelessness” and fragmentation.⁵ However, the critical question here is who feels discomfort. It is likely that people who are well positioned in First World economies and accustomed to a secure “place” within them now feel threatened; they understandably long to re-create that mythical past of comfort and stability.

So, for the resonating spaces of the kitchen, the replacement of Lawson’s “goddess” by the microwave (a convenient image for changes in both technology and food production) constitutes a particularly poignant moment of First World post-industrial loss. Debates about a decline in the quality and frequency of home cooking are not new.⁶ Likewise, when traditional meanings of “home” seem most under threat, it is not unusual to resort to comfort foods as embodied...
Gabaccia’s connections of food, warmth, love, and storytelling can be extended to the sacred spaces of the kitchen itself, which can then be examined through a particular form of remembering—the culinary biography. Here I will draw on both North American and Australian examples to catch glimpses of ghosts that dodge through the pages of several such works. By following a trail of “good” and “bad” mothers—a trail of nostalgic storytelling and myth-making—I hope to find disruptive moments that challenge society’s desire for women to cook, indeed, to exist, exclusively for others. Deliberately speculative, this journey acknowledges that figures of nostalgic longing may not always behave in ways we might wish.

Livable Kitchens

Much recent writing about the city has explored the urban landscape as an imaginary space structured by fragments of memories, fears, dreams, and longings. It is these “hauntings” that intrigue me, with all of their shadows of desire and loss—the ghosts, perhaps, of other stories attached to the spaces of the city, mundane stories of everyday rituals and practices told against the dominant discourse of urban planning or corporate management. In fact, according to Michel de Certeau, “Haunted places are the only ones people can live in.”

In the continual renewal of everyday spaces in our imaginations, which serve to make space “livable,” the kitchen is central. In a later work, de Certeau and Luce Giard elaborate on its tenacious presence: “Our successive living spaces never disappear completely; we leave them without leaving because they live in turn, invisible and present, in our memories and in our dreams. They journey with us. In the center of these dreams, there is often the kitchen…” Here, possibly, are echoes of Gaston Bachelard’s poignant image of the house as the birthplace, the original site of nurturing, and as a rich emotional resource for dreaming and remembering. At the heart of the house we find the hearth, the stove, the kitchen table—this “warm room” with its presiding maternal figure, steeped in qualities of myth.

Myth proves to have some flexibility, however. These livable kitchens are dynamic ones. They refuse simply to be consigned to the recesses of remembered pasts; instead, meanings are reworked to meet the needs of changing domestic cultures and everyday practices. Consider, for example, the following statement that appeared in a recent review of a Vietnamese restaurant in Sydney: “All in all, a great night out in a buzzy, busy, yet strangely comforting restaurant. It’s food your mum would cook if she were Vietnamese.” Paradoxically, it seems that even in the cities of the post-industrial West, homeliness is to be found among the strange and the exotic, and comfort can exist alongside the “buzzy” cosmopolitanism of the global marketplace. However, this holds true only as long as “your mum’s” shadow (in a new guise) intervenes, domesticating the kitchen and transforming eating out into eating in.

The comforts of appropriating myth are compelling. However, according to Giard, such comforts are based in women’s actual work in the kitchen, which is ritualized yet creative, captured in “the dull thud of the kneading hand.” This work charts a highly charged cultural landscape, its details re-inscribed daily: “[T]he everyday work in kitchens remains a way of unifying matter and memory, life and tenderness, the present moment and the abolished past, invention and necessity, imagination and tradition…Good cooks are never sad or idle—they work at fashioning the world…women’s gestures and women’s voices that make the world livable.”

Such celebrations of women’s work deserve closer scrutiny. “Doing-cooking” is Giard’s term for body rhythms, techniques, repetitive gestures, daydreaming, and “certain tastes, smells and color…all the sounds” associated with food preparation. If gestures and voices haunt these livable kitchens, it is worth crossing their remembered thresholds in search of them. In particular, I want to engage with the romance of Cooking Woman who makes not only kitchens, but the entire world, livable. I also want to trace her phantom Other who, presumably, renders the world unbearable. In following the trails of these mythic figures, I hope to disturb some of the goddesses and monsters of our collective culinary consciousness and unravel more fragmented, contradictory stories than myth implies—political stories that hint at multiple, contingent meanings of cultural belonging and the tactics of this meaning-making.

Where the Ordinary Becomes the Extraordinary

One of the kitchens of Ruth Reichl’s childhood during the 1950s and 60s was in “a modest apartment in Greenwich Village,” New York City. Here, according to Reichl in Tender at the Bone, the first volume of her culinary memoir, her mother reigned as the “Queen of Mold”: “It was just the way she was. Which was taste-blind and unafraid of rot…She had an iron stomach and was incapable of understanding that other people did not…This taught me many things. The first was that food could be dangerous, especially to those who loved it” (pp.4–5).

The chapters that follow outline, in frank, sometimes nauseating, detail, moments of culinary rule-breaking and
invention. These moments disrupt the expectations of middle-class domesticity and culinary propriety generally associated with the “wealthy German-Jewish” background of Reichl’s intellectual father. Such moments range from the sudden appearance of a suckling pig in the refrigerator in the early hours of the morning to catering for an engagement party at the Reichls’ summer house with soup made from a mixture of canned soups, deteriorating crabmeat, and sherry, added to mask the pungent odor (pp.8, 10, 17–19).

Unlike comforting recipes, such as those for scones and shortcake, food becomes a site of anxiety, with the capacity to repel, induce illness, even kill. The image of Cooking Woman here is one of dangerous transgression, in stark contrast to Lawson’s goddess who flaunts mystical powers to repel, induce illness, even kill. The image of Cooking Woman here is one of dangerous transgression, in stark contrast to Lawson’s goddess who flaunts mystical powers and a nutmeggy aura.

Nevertheless, it is not unusual for magic or miracle to be invoked when writing about kitchens and cooking. Akiko Busch, for example, marvels at “small, ordinary miracles” that occur in kitchens—the alchemy of egg whites beaten to produce a soufflé, or sugar “spun to construct a city of flowers.” “The kitchen is the place in the house where the ordinary becomes the extraordinary,”17 she declares. However, surely she does not mean by “extraordinary” something that subsumes the dark side of cooks, cooking, and domestic kitchens—the mythic meanings of the witch. It seems equally unlikely that Busch’s “extraordinary” includes the figure of the monstrous feminine, a dangerous anti-maternal figure capable of either devouring her children or “swallowing” them up in ways “posing a threat of psychic obliteration.”18

Fortunately, Reichl presents a range of other mother figures: good cooks and good mothers who haunt the kitchen when the real mother is absent or when the real mother, in the role of a bad mother, radiates threat. Reichl notes that neither her grandmothers nor Aunt Birdie (the mother of Reichl’s father’s first wife) needed to cook. At the same time, she remembers Alice, Aunt Birdie’s cook, as “a handsome old woman with brown skin, short black hair, and a deeply wrinkled face. She smelt like starch, lemons…cinnamon.” In other words, while social class, economic status, and cultural capital demand that these other “mothers” exclude themselves from the kitchen, Alice is in her rightful place. Like the kitchen itself, she even smells of good housewifery—a veritable madonna of fresh laundry and baking (pp.20, 21, 24).

It is Alice who becomes the real cook, and, in a sense, the real mother for the child Ruth. Together, they perform the wonderfully hypnotic gestures of “doing-cooking”:

I loved helping her, loved the fresh buttery pastry beneath my hands, loved the clean way the core came out of the apple. I loved carefully wrapping each apple in a square of pastry and pinching the top shut, just so. We’d arrange the dumplings on a baking sheet, Alice would put them in the oven, and we’d both go into the living room to watch The Perry Como Show. (p.21)

Here is order instead of disorder; baking according to traditional recipes instead of experimenting with eccentric combinations of ingredients; the ritual pleasures of repetitive and precise movements; the feel, smell, and look of fresh ingredients, in contrast to chaos and decay. And in the center of this kitchen is the figure of the Afro-Caribbean woman, the Black servant who cares for the children of White women; a romantic figure, exotic, mysteriously Other and yet familiar: wholesome, asexual, and nurturing.19

Commenting on the comforting properties of myth, Raphael Samuel and Paul Thompson discuss idealization and denigration as two sides of the same coin.20 By celebrating the “good” mother of childhood, we return to Lawson’s lost Eden of baking or to Bachelard’s “bosom of the house” as the original source of childhood nurturance.21 On the other hand, by demonizing the “bad” mother, we create narratives of successful escape. Reichl herself supports the position of survivor: “Like a hearing child born to deaf parents I was shaped by my mother’s handicap, discovering that food could be a way of making sense of the world” (p.6).

Reichl’s home kitchens, then, are rich with pickings, filled as they are with demons of the “bad, out-of-control” mother, in whose presence the child learns against the grain. Even as these demons encourage (contradictorily, subversively) the child to be a better cook, the child’s true education begins with Alice. And it is here, in the kitchen of a Black woman from Barbados, that conservative class and gender relations and meanings of colonialism appear unruffled.

Forget Froot-Loops

A second story of reassurance from an Other mother emerges from Annette Shun Wah’s biography. This time, however, it is the figure of the real, biological mother who performs comforting culinary gestures. Annette Shun Wah, Australian-born of Cantonese descent, remembers spending her childhood years during the 1960s first in an archetypal wooden house in the suburbs of Brisbane, Queensland’s capital city, and later on her parents’ poultry farm on the outskirts of that city. Her recent book, Banquet, is not so much a personal culinary biography as one that focuses on specific Australian communities and their cultures.22

A second story of reassurance from an Other mother emerges from Annette Shun Wah’s biography. This time, however, it is the figure of the real, biological mother who performs comforting culinary gestures. Annette Shun Wah, Australian-born of Cantonese descent, remembers spending her childhood years during the 1960s first in an archetypal wooden house in the suburbs of Brisbane, Queensland’s capital city, and later on her parents’ poultry farm on the outskirts of that city. Her recent book, Banquet, is not so much a personal culinary biography as one that focuses on specific Australian communities and their cultures.22
Shun Wah’s family story, a minor thread in the book’s “myriad of textures and flavours” (p.183), is poignantly rendered. One of the comfort foods of her childhood is “a fresh steaming bowl of jook, otherwise known as congee, or rice porridge” (p.40) for breakfast:

Some mornings I would wake up to a strange odour wafting through the bedroom, and I knew my mother would have stirred at some ungodly hour to put on a huge pot of rice porridge. The rice would be thrown into some tasty stock and cooked until it had reached a lovely, creamy consistency. The mixture would be flavored with peanuts, salted duck eggs, dried bean curd, tiny dried shrimps... or dried oysters. Like the hundred-year-old eggs, these delicacies were an acquired taste... What choice would we have? It was breakfast. I guess you can’t have Froot-loops every day. (p.41, original emphasis)

Shun Wah declares that traditional dishes like congee are, for her, “nursery food” and issues an injunction to forget the currently fashionable European equivalents such as “your sausage and mash or your bread-and-butter pudding” (p.40).

Interestingly, Alan Saunders, an Australian food journalist born in England, draws on similar examples as he ponders the connections between comfort food and ethnicity, though from the opposite perspective: “A few years ago I mentioned to a Chinese guy that, for me, comfort food is fish and chips when I’m feeling English and congee when I’m feeling cosmopolitan. Ah yes, sighed the Chinese guy, congee—and his voice, I thought, was warm with a lifetime’s memories stretching back to the breakfast congees of childhood. I felt a complete fraud.”

Emerging in both of these stories are the signs of Cooking Woman, variously the “strange odour wafting through the bedroom” or the warmth of “a lifetime’s memories.” Cooking Woman is not only unseen and good (she labors while others sleep), but also different, her distinctive skills and ingredients producing tastes other than those dominating Anglo-Celtic palates. At the same time, this image joins with those of various mamás, nonnas, grandmères, grandmothers across cultures and temporalities, across real and imagined geographies, in a celebration of peasant cooks, slow cooking, and the nostalgic pleasure of being cooked for. Cooking Woman functions not only on behalf of her own sleeping children or her own community in cookshops, street stalls, ethnic cafes, and restaurants; she also feeds the nostalgic cosmopolitan, both literally and figuratively.

It would be easy to align Annette Shun Wah’s mother with Aunt Birdie’s Alice as women burdened, if somewhat differently, by migration, class, colonialism, and gender positioning (Shun Wah’s mother, or rather stepmother, arrived in Australia from Hong Kong in 1960 and “had to teach herself to cook in order to feed a ready-made family of five” [p.189]). However, a more subtle reading of Shun Wah’s memoir goes beyond a celebration of difference in mothering or culinary cultures, and beyond attempts to converge with mainstream cultures by displaying the bridging equivalents (such as “nursery food”) in one’s own. It is possible to read the description of congee prepared for the sleeping children as a dialogue between a culinary “outside” and “inside”—between an imagined Anglo-Celtic observer whose gaze distances and mystifies foreign cultural practices and the Australian-Chinese participant whose experiences demand recognition and affirmation.

Throughout the narrative Shun Wah simultaneously adopts both positions—or rather she shifts rapidly from one to the other. As a representative of her community and someone with insider memories, she takes pleasure in recalling the making of congee and recounting its ingredients. However, for Anglo-Celtic observers (and, perhaps, for children who are “insider” in another sense—born in Australia and familiar with its mainstream culinary cultures), Shun Wah speaks of “strange” and “acquired” smells and tastes, while listing “exotic” ingredients for the interested but uninhibited.

The choice boils down to either the congee of memory, tradition, and “elsewhere,” or modernity’s Froot-Loops—Kelloggs’ ubiquitous product that has been part of the corporate invasion of Australia that first began in the 1920s. However, this dichotomy may be a false one, urging us, as it does, to endorse the “exotic” mother as she cooks her different breakfast rather than the “normal” mother who provisions the household with Australian/American supermarket products. Instead, it may be possible to embrace both breakfasts and both mothers, and to recognize that the concept of identity is multiple, shifting, and contingent.

Nevertheless, lest this interpretation be seen as a politically correct project, it is worth shifting the gaze in order to render the dominant culture exotic and unfamiliar. For example, Shun Wah, in describing her community’s capacity for culinary inventiveness and her mother’s “great talent for never wasting anything,” recalls an occasion when her brothers, during their holiday jobs on a potato farm, were given a couple of sacks of potatoes:

My brothers and I often reminisce about those memorable months when we had chips with everything—stir-fried beef and mushrooms in soy sauce with chips, braised pork with red bean paste and chips; in fact, I can’t believe there’s anything that doesn’t go well with chips. The sauces would seep into them, making them soggy with flavour, while those on the outside still had a bit of crunch to them. (p.40)
The joke about “chips with everything” is carried through to the recipes in *Banquet*. Annette’s mother, Susan Shun Wah, completes a recipe titled *Red Bean Pork with Bitter Melon…and Chips/Naarm Yeu Jue Yuk…toong Chips!* with the following instruction: “For that unique Shun Wah touch, fry up some fresh chips, spread out on a plate, and pour the pork and bitter melon mixture, along with the delicious gravy, over the top!” (p. 41).

Given current concern about the hybridization and loss of authenticity in ethnic food, particularly in the mass market of supermarket production, the above example is intriguing. In a sense, the boot is on the other foot: here, the ethnic Other engages in an ironic form of playfulness with the sacred food of Anglo-Celtic working-class culture. Whereas Alan Saunders feels both cosmopolitan and guilty for consuming someone else’s comfort food and memories, the Shun Wahs (presumably with pleasure, and without guilt) appropriate Saunders’ chips for their own inverted cosmopolitanism and sense of being Australian. The “toong Chips!” becomes a family joke, a disruptive “eating back” into the culinary imagination of the dominant culture, as well as a refusal to ingest romanticized inscriptions of identity.

Thus, in Annette Shun Wah’s stories of “chips with everything,” there are traces of kitchens haunted by other cooks. These figures, in moments of parody, raid dominant forms selectively to produce their own culinary meanings. Implicit in this analysis is Dean Chan’s discussion of “in-betweenness” as a way to conceptualize diasporic identities. Instead of Chinese identity as “an authentic, singular and unchanging referent”—a nostalgic identity defined by fixed meanings of otherness and existing, as it were, solely for Western consumption—Chan suggests more complex, fluid and, importantly, more ambivalent identifications. Perhaps, then, “raids” such as those used to concoct dishes with “the unique Shun Wah touch” provide spaces to negotiate subtle longings and refusals—moments for cultural assertiveness within competing tensions of desire, creativity, and constraint.

In other words, instead of Reichl’s mythical bad mother challenging the romance of nurture, we have a different script for talking back, a script conceived in response to Western sensibilities that seek reassurance from an ethnic mother. Of course, we should remember that “raids” like these are, in de Certeau’s words, “victories of the ‘weak’ over the ‘strong’.” As such, they are minute gestures, often unnoticed in the public arena, and unlikely to cause even a ripple. Nevertheless, as Giard emphasizes, these gestures are deeply embodied, and part of the intricate fabric of everyday life; together they constitute “a way of being-in-the-world and making it one’s home.” After all, as Ien Ang writes, we all have to learn to live in a world “in which we no longer have the secure capacity to draw the line between ‘us’ and ‘them’ in which difference and sameness are inextricably intertwined in complicated entanglement.”

Cooking Woman, it seems, is permitted to leave the kitchen...to enter the milieu of the urbane cosmopolitan...The condition of her leaving, however, is that she guarantee her return, all the better equipped to tell tales of her “grand adventure.”

for consuming someone else’s comfort food and memories, the Shun Wahs (presumably with pleasure, and without guilt) appropriate Saunders’ chips for their own inverted cosmopolitanism and sense of being Australian. The “toong Chips!” becomes a family joke, a disruptive “eating back” into the culinary imagination of the dominant culture, as well as a refusal to ingest romanticized inscriptions of identity.

Thus, in Annette Shun Wah’s stories of “chips with everything,” there are traces of kitchens haunted by other cooks. These figures, in moments of parody, raid dominant forms selectively to produce their own culinary meanings. Implicit in this analysis is Dean Chan’s discussion of “in-betweenness” as a way to conceptualize diasporic identities. Instead of Chinese identity as “an authentic, singular and unchanging referent”—a nostalgic identity defined by fixed meanings of otherness and existing, as it were, solely for Western consumption—Chan suggests more complex, fluid and, importantly, more ambivalent identifications.

Perhaps, then, “raids” such as those used to concoct dishes with “the unique Shun Wah touch” provide spaces to negotiate subtle longings and refusals—moments for cultural assertiveness within competing tensions of desire, creativity, and constraint.

In other words, instead of Reichl’s mythical bad mother challenging the romance of nurture, we have a different script for talking back, a script conceived in response to Western sensibilities that seek reassurance from an ethnic mother. Of course, we should remember that “raids” like these are, in de Certeau’s words, “victories of the ‘weak’ over the ‘strong’.” As such, they are minute gestures, often unnoticed in the public arena, and unlikely to cause even a ripple. Nevertheless, as Giard emphasizes, these gestures are deeply embodied, and part of the intricate fabric of everyday life; together they constitute “a way of being-in-the-world and making it one’s home.” After all, as Ien Ang writes, we all have to learn to live in a world “in which we no longer have the secure capacity to draw the line between ‘us’ and ‘them’ in which difference and sameness are inextricably intertwined in complicated entanglement.”

Requiem for the Kitchen Table

More than fifteen years after her mother’s death, Nora Seton remembers wanting to make a pilgrimage to her childhood home in Massachusetts. Born in 1961, Seton was the youngest of five children who grew up in a seventeen-room house with the kitchen as its *axis mundi*:

Once, years after she died, I sat in my mother’s chair at the old kitchen table...this had been her topography for thirty years, more than half her lifespan, with few changes: the plateau of the pine table, the gully of the bench, the mesa of the bench back we called the Divider, with its litter of skillets, frames, and pencil holders fashioned from cracked casserole pots.

Here, in the remembered spaces of the kitchen, Seton sketches a geography of childhood, mothering, grief, and loss. As *The Kitchen Congregation* maps an imagined journey through memories of being mothered and through stories of her own mothering, Seton enters highly charged emotional territory. In this domain, she assembles a congregation of ghosts, ranging from her mother (who died from cancer when Seton was only twenty years old) and Seton’s own first child (who was stillborn) to her other children, family members, and friends, particularly women. In the
possibilities for intimacy, reciprocity, and comfort that such
friendships offer. Seton detects other outlines of Cooking
Woman. Senta, Ida, and Laura join the kitchen congrega-
tion in the absence of a true maternal figure.

However, it is Seton’s mother whose ghostly presence
resonates most strongly throughout the book. Here, the
good mother not only cooks for a large family but, in the
spirit of hospitality and nurturance, welcomes all manner of
strays to her kitchen table (pp. 28–29). Advice is offered and
tears are shed: “Mothers and daughters share the kitchen
in the common knowledge of women passing their lives
there…Our laughter glazes the countertops…We cry at the
sink, blotting our tears with the damp dishtowel” (p. 57).

A similarly palpable image of the “good woman” pervades
the memories of Australian chef, restaurateur, and
food writer Stephanie Alexander. Recalling her later child-
hood years and adolescence, spent on a bush block near
the sea south of Melbourne, Alexander presents homely
portraits of her mother, Mary Burchett: here she is, “bent
in front of the Aga oven scooping baked potatoes into her
apron,” or there she is setting out to collect honey from the
hive. Like Seton’s childhood kitchen, Alexander’s is a hub
of activity. Alexander remembers that at the kitchen table
“so much was always happening. I felt that I spent whole
days there, helping, watching and listening. I also absorbed
how important friendship was to my mother. Sometimes
she shooed me away if a friend wanted to pour out troubles
considered unsuitable for my adolescent ears. I used to feel
excluded and hurt…”

Despite Seton’s and Alexander’s differences in geogra-
phy, generation, and cultural background, their stories
have a surprising number of points in common. In both
accounts, the good woman is positioned in the heart of
the kitchen, “doing-cooking,” controlling life’s traffic, in touch
with the earth, and following the rhythm of the seasons.
Perhaps this is what Luce Giard means by her declaration
that “[g]ood cooks are never sad or idle—they work at fash-
ioning the world…”

Central to both narratives is the kitchen table, a vortex
of activity and therapy, of nurturance, catharsis, and renewal.
It is also a reminder of loss. Angela Goode comments on
the romance of this table in a deeply nostalgic celebration
of country kitchens, their tables, and home cooking: “No
wonder the city pavements are full of tables and chairs with
people jostling to eat the sort of simple meals that every
farm woman can knock up without a recipe.”

Seton and Alexander echo this sense of loss. “Many
young people never learn to cook at home. Some have little
experience of the family table,” says Alexander (p. 1), while
Seton, defiant in the face of her husband’s plans for their
remodeled kitchen, insists that she needs a table in the
kitchen “so that my friends can cry here” (p. 48). The
implication is, of course, that the disappearance of the mon-
umental, freestanding kitchen table is emblematic of other
losses: the current shakiness of commensal rituals, the
absence of women “fashioning the world” from the kitchen’s
heart. Now, as lost souls, we are obliged to look for comfort
beyond the home and in the cooking of somebody else’s
mother in the marketplace (“It’s food your mum would
cook if she were Vietnamese”).

It seems that Cooking Woman has been captured at
last, ready to be returned to her rightful place. “[N]o matter
how far the kitchen goes in becoming a high-tech laboratory,
it also remains the hearth, the landscape of sustenance,”
declares Akiko Busch. Certainly, the centrality of the
kitchen appears to be a comforting resolution to late moder-
ity’s challenge to tradition, especially in regard to blending
“old” and “new” appliances and styles. Nevertheless,
Seton’s and Alexander’s stories do not end at this point.

In a slender thread that runs throughout her account,
Seton reminds us that her Cooking Woman is not solely the
figure at the table, the bench, or the coal stove. She is also a
novelist. In fact, just when we are seduced by the imagery of
the laughter of mothers and daughters “glazing the counter-
tops,” or of a recipe for lemon chess pie evocative of summers
at Kitty Hawk (p. 23), or of two worn wooden spoons kept
in memory of a mother who died too young (pp. 6, 23, 57),
subversive clues to an Other mother appear. In an account
of kitchen table talk between Seton’s mother and her best
friend and neighbor, for example, we find the following:

Then my mother might recount a trip to her publisher in New York
City, lunch at the Algonquin, a small room at the Carlyle (blue pumps
and a Donald Davies dress), a grand adventure for a serious woman in
a world of patriarchal and enamoured men; while Molly giggled and
mumured ‘No!’ and ‘Did you?’ in between sips of hot coffee. (p. 14)

Cooking Woman, it seems, is permitted to leave the
kitchen, to adopt other identities and styles of dress; to
enter the milieu of the urbane cosmopolitan with its hotels,
restaurants, designer fashion, and whiff of risqué possibili-
ties. The condition of her leaving, however, is that she
guarantee her return, all the better equipped to tell tales of
her “grand adventure.” Meanwhile, the rhythms of the
kitchen continue unabated; indeed, they are spiced by the
knowledge of a different world outside.

Alexander’s mother was also a writer. The first of her
cookbooks, Through My Kitchen Door (1960), is the one that
Alexander, nearly forty years later, re-presents in annotated facsimile as Recipes My Mother Gave Me. Glimpses of Mary Burchett's authorship persist in its pages, raising questions about the multiple and contingent nature of identity and the daughter's desire to shape her own identity in particular ways. Although Mary Burchett repeatedly appears in Alexander's narrative as beekeeper, bread-maker, and keeper of home and hearth, there are also hints, in both Burchett's own writing and in her children's remembering, of an Other mother and of a different life.

A more complicated narrative emerges, with mythic meanings of Cooking Woman challenged and, to some extent, transformed. An educated, middle-class woman, Alexander's mother quotes Ruskin, Burns, and Kipling; as a cosmopolitan, she recalls a trip to Japan in the 1930s, extols the virtues of traveling to “foreign parts,” owned “books on every aspect of Asian cooking,” and took pride in her friendships with Austrian and German refugees (pp. 17, 25, 40, 50, 58, 65, 132). Furthermore, when one of her sons travels to Austria as an adult, he imagines her as a habitué of Viennese cafes: “[I] had the distinct feeling Mum had been there before…swapping recipes with the pastry-chef in her never-to-improve, stilted German (p. 49).”

These images of difference beg questions of our culinary writing and remembering. Specters of disappearing kitchen tables, as well as of women themselves from kitchens, shape generational storytelling in ways that recall eras when women were supposedly always there. Meanwhile, disruptive fragments like a Donald Davies dress or a conversation in stilted German hint at other ghosts, other meanings for identity, and other dreamed-of futures. These fleeting images are fragments produced within the dynamic tension of women’s everyday negotiations with memories of the past, present contingencies, and future possibilities. Returning to de Certeau, they may be seen as “tactics” for finding pleasure within constraint.

From a casual reading of both Alexander's and Seton's accounts, we might assume that these daughters choose to represent their mothers as always there, the kitchen as their mothers' world, and cooking as central to their mothers' lives. If this is the case, a form of collective mourning can be invoked, with nostalgia the focus of its rituals. This, of course, is the gaze of the remembering child, in whose eyes the mother exists solely for that child, as well as the gaze of the Remembering culture, which desires unproblematic returns to unconditional feminine nurturing (that elusive space of Kitchen Women Nation). Either way, Cooking Woman remains the object of desire. On the other hand, there are alternative stories to be sifted from memory—stories of seizing opportunity, of asserting autonomy, of parroting dominant cultures, and, sometimes, of not-doing-cooking.

**Cooking and Embroidering**

At the beginning of her biography, Reichl sounds a warning: “Storytelling, in my family, was highly prized…This book is absolutely in the family tradition. Everything here is true but it may not be entirely factual…I have occasionally embroidered…I learned early that the most important thing in life is a good story” (pp. ix–x). Reichl’s “embroidery” evokes Roland Barthes's analysis of Elle's photographic images of food as “ornamental cookery.” Such images he sees as excessive and artificial, intended for visual consumption alone by the journal's working-class readers. Perhaps Reichl’s account can be reconfigured as a form of “ornamental” storytelling, a narrative in which artifice, spectacle, magic, and fantasy are skillfully combined to produce a good story. Perhaps, too, in the telling the story has become a parable, a morality tale, rather than a factual narrative.

Does this matter? It has been said that “culinary autobiography can be a site of multiple textual assertions that need to be read beyond the recipes.” We could speculate that it is indeed Reichl’s intention to read beyond the literalness of recipes and the details of family stories (“the facts”) to particular constellations of mythic meanings (“the truth”). The story Reichl constructs then becomes one of goddesses and monsters who haunt our kitchens, a story of fears, desires, and doubts, embroidered with the threads of our myth-making, a story we want to be told in particular ways.

The idea of multiple textual assertions can serve as a warning to re-examine our analyses of cultural remembering and to challenge the too-ready assumption that culinary biographies simply replicate the opposing phantoms of “good” and “bad” Cooking Woman. This warning applies even when a diverse collection of good and bad images is proffered for our digestion—the Black mother, the ethnic mother, the countrywoman, the kitchen-table therapist, the monstrous mother. At the very least, we need to acknowledge that stories might be more complicated than they seem at first telling. In fact, subtexts in these accounts raise disconcerting obstructions to the smooth passage of myth. The myth of Cooking Woman is, in its complexity, open to the same possibilities of misinterpretation, or at least of conflicting interpretations, as other myths.

We could, for example, examine the potential of Reichl’s mythologized bad mother for alternative textual assertions and readings. There are certainly occasional somber notes...
in Reich's account: "My mother had lots of energy and education and not a lot to do...She tried one job, and then another, but they never lasted" (p.34); "They're giving my mother lithium," I said as we loaded the van for the trip to Connecticut" (p.176); "My father treated my mother's illness as if it were his cross to bear" (p.245). These hints of mental illness may not be factual, but they serve as a significant narrative device. In the midst of our amusement at a transgressive femininity disrupting culinary convention, we are warned to look again. This time, more sensitive to nuance, we find an account inscribed with moments of sadness, motifs of illness, and images of dogged survival: "[I]n her own strange way she was the glue that kept us together. Being a family meant dealing with Mom" (p.248).

British feminist Elizabeth Wilson, reviewing her earlier work on feminist analysis, says: "[L]ike many writers, I am simply struggling with the chasm between what is and what we desire...Yet, however difficult, it is essential to hold these incompatible views in tension...that we might develop a view of something that might be better."42 This approach, which centers on the tension between what is and what we desire, seems potentially useful for re-imagining the haunting of Cooking Woman in particular cultural contexts, such as the kitchens of North America and Australia. While we seesaw between celebrating scones and shortcake and lamenting the disappearance of ghostly goddesses at the kitchen table (and perhaps, too, the disappearance of the disruptive monsters), there are moments of talking back. The glamour of blue pumps and the cheeky insistence on chips with everything reconfigure our understanding of the shifting grounds of pleasure and constraint and indicate imaginative tactics for cooking up consent. Such attention to the minor chords and discordant notes in eulogies to Cooking Woman might indicate productive ways for rewriting and remembering our landscapes of nourishment.43

Finally, we should consider whether "the hunger is in the memory" after all.44 From this vantage point, my account becomes one in which daughters' desires mediate stories of their mothers; one in which such stories, supposedly of the past, resonate with present and future meanings, too. Who tells the story (whose story it is) is crucial to what is told. And while the stories considered here are portraits in differences and distinctiveness, they are at the same time connected through larger cultures of wanting to be mothered, fears of loss, and attempts to retrieve kitchen pleasures. Our gaze shifts from Cooking Woman to her image-makers—daughters who remember and write about mothers and their cooking. And here, it seems, it is the daughters' own cultural belonging that is at stake.●

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks are due to Carol Johnson, David Sutton, and Paul van Reyk for their comments on earlier drafts of this article, and to Annette Shain Wals for clarifying some biographical details. My thanks, too, go to Dara Goldstein for her editorial assistance, and to Gastronomica's anonymous referees for their comments.

NOTES

2. Teresa Lunt, Pass the Polenta: and Other Writings from the Kitchen (South Royalton, Vermont: Steerforth Press, 1998), 174-175.
5. Lawson, How to Be a Domestic Goddess, vii.
8. Elsewhere, I have discussed recent panics in Australia that focus on femininity, youth, nutrition, and family meals. These fears manifest themselves in warnings about the death of home cooking and the failure of young people to learn to cook. Symptomatic of these concerns is the report of Lyndey Milan, Sydney journalist and food writer, in regard to survey results that signal a dramatic increase in the purchase of takeaway (fast) food during the 1990s. Australia, claims Milan, has now produced a generation of young people who are "cyber literate but food illiterate." (See Jean Duruz, "Home Cooking, Nostalgia and the Purchase of Tradition," Traditional Dwellings and Settlements Review 12, no. 2 [2001]: 23-24.) Marion Nestle cites similar findings for food consumed outside the home in the United States. (Marion Nestle, Food Politics: How the Food Industry Influences Nutrition and Health [Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002], 19.) Meanwhile, Eric Schlosser, in his account of America as a nation of fast food and fat, sees these same issues from a slightly different angle: "The United States now has the highest obesity rate of any industrialized nation in the world...As people eat more meals outside the home, they consume more calories, less fiber, and more fat" (my emphasis). (Eric Schlosser, Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal [Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2001], 240-242.)


15. Ibid., 222.


32. Stephanie Alexander, Recipes My Mother Gave Me (Ringwood, Victoria: Viking, 1997), facing 1; see also Preface, 1–2.

33. Seton’s childhood home was in Massachusetts, Alexander’s was on the Mornington Peninsula, south of Melbourne, Australia. Seton is now in her early fifties, Alexander in her sixties; Seton remembers growing up in a household with middle-class intellectual parents, her mother from a Czechoslovakian-Jewish background; Alexander’s father was a senior public servant, her mother connected to a well-known communist family of British descent.


35. Busch, Geography of Home, 49–50.

36. Here, Busch refers to late-twentieth-century North American kitchen “styles,” particularly those that combine sophisticated and highly specialized kitchen appliances—“oversize mixers and blenders” of a “heavy duty industrial aesthetic” with the “cozy symbols of nostalgia”—the Aga, traditional eggbeaters, a Shaker box (Ibid., 48, 49). Cooking Woman, apparently, does not need to choose between the products of the late industrial era and those of earlier times; conveniently, she can draw on both, for, says Busch, “[w]e want the future in the kitchen, but not at the expense of the past,” and the kitchen is “one of those rare places where we can have it both ways” (Ibid., 48, 50).


40. Traci Marie Kelly, “ ‘If I were a Voodoo Priestess’: Women’s Culinary Autobiographies,” in Inness, Kitchen Culture in America, 264.

41. In discussing different voices and the different ways myth is received, Wendy Doniger notes that “Sorting out the voices in myth that can be placed in context demonstrates how very complex content is, for two different listeners even in the same group may think the myth means two different things.” See Doniger, The Implied Spider: Politics and Theology in Myth (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 118.

42. Wilson, The Contradictions of Culture, 71.


44. Lust, Pass the Polenta, 175.