
Introduction to and Bibliography for the Study of Alimentary Life Writing and Recipe Writing as War Literature

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Recommended Citation

Vasvari, Louise O. "Introduction to and Bibliography for the Study of Alimentary Life Writing and Recipe Writing as War Literature." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 17.3 (2015): <<https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.2781>>

This text has been double-blind peer reviewed by 2+1 experts in the field.

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Volume 17 Issue 3 (September 2015) Article 22
Louise O. Vasvári,
"Introduction to and Bibliography for the Study of
Alimentary Life Writing and Recipe Writing as War Literature"
<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol17/iss3/22>>

Contents of **CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 17.3 (2015)**
Thematic Issue **Life Writing and the Trauma of War**. Ed. **Louise O. Vasvári and I-Chun Wang**
<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol17/iss3/>>

Abstract: In her article "Introduction to and Bibliography for the Study of Alimentary Life Writing and Recipe Writing as War Literature" Louise O. Vasvári defines the concept of "alimentary life writing" and locates it in the broader multidisciplinary context of alimentary history, the history of everyday life, gender studies, trauma, and war and holocaust studies. She also underlines and exemplifies the cultural and gendered significance of alimentary life writing in particular in grounding personal and collective identity formation in the female immigrant and ethnic and multicultural writing. Vasvári also compares and contrasts such life writing to wartime food memoirs, as well as to communal wartime food talk and recipe writing as a tool of survival by inmates in prisoner-of-war and in concentration camps.

Louise O. Vasvári**Introduction to and Bibliography for the Study of Alimentary Life Writing and Recipe Writing as War Literature**

The history and significance of food as a category of cultural where culture, tradition, and history intersect has been highlighted in sociology, folklore, and anthropology. As early as 1910 Georges Simmel presented his "gastronomic sociology" that highlighted the economic, social, religious, political, and cultural importance of food (see, e.g., Symons). It was, however primarily anthropologists who recognized the importance of food in culture, most notably Claude Lévi-Strauss, who sought to explore the history of national, ethnic, and religious dietary customs as part of the history of everyday life. Based on the premise that cooking is a language that like any language has an unconscious structure, Lévi-Strauss argued that the roots of storytelling, art, and religion are linked to cooking (see also Barthes on the categorization of food as a system of communication). While initially the history of alimentation was studied primarily as the economic history of rural food production and subsistence, with the process of urbanization it has become part of the history of everyday life intersecting with the history of the family, of sexuality, sociability, and of identity and within the broader multidisciplinary context of alimentary history, gender studies, trauma, and war and holocaust studies. Hence the theoretical framework in which food studies are understood as part of comparative cultural studies as defined by Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek and Vasvári (see also Albala; Arnott; Ashley, Hollows, Jones, Taylor; Flandrin and Montanari; Erickson, Hastie, Roberts; Gilbert; Goody; Scholliers; Teuteberg, Neumann, Wierlacher).

A major cultural function of food and eating is to link the individual to the social sphere first through the mother and the family and then in relation to the larger social group. "Foodways" also serve to validate a group's social, ethnic, and religious relations and self-definition, as well as for demarcation between groups through their food preferences and taboos. Making, eating, and talking about food also create an interface with gender-powered relationships with meals having a particular resonance in the lives and the domestic role of women in mothering, nurturing, in their economic and class situation, and in how their womanhood and femininity is viewed by themselves and by others (see, e.g., Avakian; Counihan; Floyd and Foster; Locher, Yoels, Maurer, van Ellis; McGee). An example of the rich symbolism of foodways in women's lives is exemplified in a study by Susan Starr Sered of elderly illiterate Middle Eastern Jewish women in Jerusalem, a group that normally would be treated as marginal to Jewish history. Rather than focusing on concrete religious activities such as formal prayer or pilgrimage inaccessible to such women, Sered studies their religiosity through examining how for them the sacred is embodied within their everyday domestic work and how their lives and identities center around traditional kosher food preparation and nourishing others. For these women cooking is the essence of the *Sabbath* and holidays and food is more than a mere symbol of Jewishness as they actually seem to hope that their children will ingest their ancestors' faith through the rituals of food.

Associations attached to food, recipes, and recipe books are also crucial to family networks and gender politics. Social and physiological dimensions of food, prepared primarily by women include its function as "comfort" or nostalgic food, which came to be associated with relief of distress and helping modify emotional states or feelings. Talking about or preparation of nostalgic food can serve as central components of nostalgic discourse. Recipe sharing with its roots in oral storytelling is a vehicle for women to share stories and to reaffirm their identity within the community through recounting personal histories, to reminisce with others centered in food talk, to reiterate the importance of food as a storehouse of memories not dependent on happy childhood, but that recreates the fiction of one's memories through food, etc. (see, e.g., Floyd and Forster; Leonardi; Lupton; Duruz). Lynne Ireland introduced the idea that not only are cookbooks cultural documents, but that they can be understood as collective autobiography in which, as Ann Romines explains, the "the home plot" of domestic ritual and domestic language often seems invisible to those who have not learned to read it (17). Linda Murray Berzok's 2011 edited volume *What Family Recipes Tell us About Who We Are and Where We Have Been* is about women from various ethnic backgrounds who share "recipes-as-stories" and the volume's contributors illustrate how recipes reflect the identities of the individual women and communities. Berzok organizes recipes around major themes such as nostalgic tales of women as keepers of women's domestic family traditions, but also as keepers of friendship and bonding and gaining emotional balance. Berzok herself came to her project after finding hundreds of annotated recipes following her mother's death: "some women leave diaries, my mother left recipes" (xvi).

Feminist scholars attempt to read home-centered experiences and domestic rituals as gendered language through which to recover fragments of women's lives, working with artifacts such as scrapbooks, needlework, knitting, samplers, or verbal non-literary discourse forms such as recipes, letters, poetry, diaries all once considered private and trivial, but which women relegated to the domestic sphere used to "write a woman's life" (Heilbrun qtd. in Bower, "Bound" 2). Recipe collections and cookbooks are also examples of women's social exchanges and of collective writing even when appearing under a single name as for example in ubiquitous community fundraising cookbooks (see Theophano). For example, when Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett studied Jewish community cookbooks as unique cultural artifacts for the study of Jewish womanhood and family culinary tradition, she took into consideration Jewish women's philanthropic organizations, the history of immigration patterns, and regional, social and religious influences to show how these cookbooks embody core cultural values and provide meaningful ideas of literacy, empowerment, ethnic, religious, and other group affiliations of women. While feminist scholars re-evaluated recipes and recipe collections as a form of episodic and anecdotal non-chronological and often communal gendered life writing, they also study how domestic

ritual help to shape some of women's literary writing and life writing. For example, Diane McGee explores the importance of meals in the fiction of Virginia Wolf and other first-wave feminist women writers and proposes that their depiction of meals reflect concerns about women's domestic and public roles in a society living in cultural change. Phyllis Thompson Reed studies the role of cooking in the rise of second wave feminism in the 1960s and underlines that because food preparation is a daily performance of routine and an entrenched ritual of women, feminism drove some women away from cooking, but also allowed others to take it more seriously and while the culture of sophisticated cooking (à la Julia Child) that sprang up in the same decade functioned as a counter-discourse to feminism, it also helps to articulate the tricky compromise between individual self-expression and communal, traditional gender conformity (see, e.g., Nyman and Gallardo-Torrano; Romines). Writing women's lives through food extends into the next generation where some daughters write their mother's biography with the help of inherited recipes. For example, Diana Tye, similarly to Berzok also reads her mother's recipes as one would read a diary and presents a portrait of her mother through stories hidden between her index card collection resulting in a window into mid-twentieth century domestic culture.

Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson in the new 2010 revised edition of their *Reading Autobiography* study life writing in all its multicultural inclusiveness in the context of literature, but also in relation to imperialism, patriarchy, and globalism and under the impact of wars and new nationalisms. They propose sixty subcategories of life writing under which they include under what they call "new model narratives of embodiment" which were formerly considered marginal. They include among these new genres "gastography" (personalized recipe books), a term coined by Rosalia Baena to designate life writing in which the story of the self is linked to the production, preparation and/or consumption of food. A variety of alternate designations are listed by Carol Bardenstein such as cookbook memoirs, memoirs with recipes, culinary memoirs, collective memory cookbooks, nostalgia cookbooks, etc., which differ among themselves in relative proportion of recipes to narrative and the relation between the two, as well as authorship by food professionals, professional writers, and others. While I use all of these subcategories as well, a broader concept is needed that encompasses these varieties and in addition the traumatic war and postmemory life writing entailing recipes I discuss in my companion article, "En-gendering Memory Through Alimentary Life Writing of the Holocaust" (<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol17/iss3/10>>), includes recipes. Because "gastography" is both too medical sounding and is already in use in medicine for stomach radiography to detect cancer, I propose the more transparent designation of "alimentary life writing," where "alimentary" refers not only to food, but to the action of nourishing someone and hence to human relationships, and even, as Anne Goldman proposes, with cooking as metonymy for culture, a metaphor for writing about -- mostly women's -- love and desires.

Food preparation in women's life writing can help the protagonist cope with grief, loss of hope, and to provide the comfort that the concentration required to fulfill kitchen tasks can provide. For example, a number of modern women's first person bestsellers open with the protagonists suffering from stress and depression, as their lives are in transition, a situation for which food preparation -- symbolic of sexuality and gender identity -- has a healing power and it resumes their emotional stability (see, e.g., Andrievskikh). In the first bestseller of the genre, Nora Ephron's 1983 *Heartburn*, the slightly fictionalized heroine, a cookbook author, deals with the heartache of her husband having left her for a younger woman when she was seven months pregnant by cooking and sharing some two dozen recipes, some from her own Jewish American immigrant heritage, some US-American ranging from bacon hash and lima beans with pears to sorrel soup and key lime pie. In the more fictionalized international best seller, Laura Esquivel's 1990 *Como pan para chocolate*, a great-aunt's life is turned into a magical realist tale of a youngest daughter in turn-of-the-century Mexico who is forbidden by family tradition to marry in order to take care of her domineering mother (see Jaffe). She can only express herself through cooking stories which turn into a novel in monthly installments with traditional Mexican recipes like turkey mole heading each chapter along with "romances" and home remedies. In Judith Ryan Hendricks's 2001 *Bread Alone*, an emotionally devastated abandoned trophy wife finds herself through bread baking among a community of strong women and in Jeanne Ray's 2003 *Eat Cake*, where the protagonists' husband has left her, she find relief from a stressed housewife's life by baking (see Franks; Stoeger). In Julie Powell's 2005 *Julie and Julia: 365 Day, 524 Recipes, 1 Tiny Apartment Kitchen* and in its subsequent film adaption *Julie & Julia* based on the book and on Child's and Alex Proudhomme's book about Child's memoir *My Life in France*, the heroine revitalizes her marriage and finds a professional direction by blogging about cooking every one of Julia Child's 1983 recipes from *Mastering the Art of French Cooking* (see Child and Beck). In her subsequent 2009 *Cleaving: A Story of Marriage, Meat and Obsession* Powell details the effects on her marriage of an obsessive affair she had after the first book's publication with a man who liked to rough her up, as well as her experiences learning the butcher trade. Sasha Martin in her 2015 *Life from Scratch: A Memoir of Food, Family and Forgiveness* sets out on a marathon cooking project to cook and eat a meal from every country in the world over the course of one hundred and ninety-five weeks as a way to find peace from a troubled life of rejection and a childhood abandonment by her mother. In her negative review of Julie Powell's *Cleaving* Christine Muhlke dubs many of these mass market traumatic recipe memoirs "fodoirs" (food+ [mem]oir), a variety of chick lit.

Another group of writers for whom nostalgic food discourse provides a lifeline are immigrants for whom food represents ethnicity such as, to cite one cleverly titled example, Edvige Giunta's and Joseph Sciorra's 2014 *Embroidered Stories: Interpreting Women's Domestic Needlework from the Italian Diaspora*, where for Italian women immigrants and their descendants domestic chores such as pasta preparation (along with other gendered domestic chores like needlework, sewing, crocheting, knitting etc.) represent a powerful marker to help define who they were. As Jopi Nyman explains using the

example of Madhur Jaffrey, the well-known chef and cookbook author and Arab American Diana Abu-Jaber, some immigrant, ethnic, and postcolonial writers use food, memory, and home to share shape new forms of transcultural identity. For example, Bardenstein's research on Middle Eastern food memoirs shows how complex diasporic versus homeland relations reshape the memory of home (see also Narayan on Indian immigrant women in the United Kingdom; Diner's *Memories of Hunger* and *Hungering for America* on the role of hunger in both driving immigration and in cementing ethnic identity; Counihan and Van Esterik on ethnic women's identity through foodways; and Innes on ethnic cooking representing a complex form of communication). Other examples of immigrant women's alimentary life writing where food figures not only a source of self-affirmation, but as a repository of familial memory include Gina Cascone's 2009 *Life al Dente: Laughter and Love in an Italian American Family*, a humorous memoir of the angst-ridden teenage years of the Italian American daughter of a mobster lawyer who eventually catches her WASP Prince Charming through the power of her recipes (see Goeller) and Helen Barolina's 2002 *Festa: Recipes and Recollection of Italian Holidays*, a memoir of the author's life between two cultures and two countries. Other Italian American alimentary life writing includes Laura Schenone's 2008 *Lost Ravioli Recipes of Hoboken* where the author describes her obsessive search to retrieve the original hand-rolled Christmas ravioli made by her great-grandmother for which only a cryptic recipe exists, a search that takes her on a journey from gritty New Jersey to Liguria where she meets her extended family and finds out some truths about many family myths and about recipes. Michelle Maisto in her 2009 *The Gastronomy of Marriage: A Memoir of Food and Love* writes about how she, an Italian American foodie and her Chinese American husband manage to create a life and fuse two inherited cooking styles "of pasta and tofu" and create something new.

A special category of alimentary life writing is that composed by chefs and food writers, who offer particular combinations of ethnic, sexual, and culinary themes. Alice L. McLean writes about how since the nineteenth century epicurean food writing was a male tradition until M.F.K. Fischer, Alice B. Toklas, and Elizabeth David forged a space for (both heterosexual and lesbian) female desire in gastronomy. A more recent example of what might be called a sexually-charged cookbook memoir outright is food writer Mimi Sheraton's 2014 *1000 Foods to Eat Before You Die* (2014), a follow-up to her 1979 *From My Mother's Kitchen*, which at the same time is also an ethnic memoir of her personal connection with the staples of kosher Ashkenazi cooking in the context of the rising middle-class urban life following World War II, a Jewish American family untouched by the Holocaust. Sheraton includes what she calls the "holy trinity of her mother's kitchen" chicken soup, chopped chicken liver, and gefilte fish, as well as her least favorite Jewish dish, *p'tcha* (calves foot in aspic), a standard shtetl fare and by now a culinary heirloom because it did not attract the younger generation. Ruth Reichl's 1998 *Tender at the Bone* is a coming-of-age memoir of having been raised in the 1950s in the dysfunctional home of a Jewish mother, a predicament mitigated by eating and learning to cook. Reichl's memoir was later followed by two other ones, her 2001 *Comfort Me with Apples* and 2005 *Garlic and Sapphires Memories* both of which include recipes with revelations about her personal life, the pleasures of food and sex, and late motherhood and often illustrated with recipes like the apricot pie she made for her first husband as their marriage was unraveling or the *dacquoise* she was introduced to by a lover on a trip to Paris. Alimentary life writing can reflect on both negative and positive cross-generational female relationships as in Miriam Meyers's 2001 *A Bite off Mama's Plate: Mothers and Daughters Connection Through Food* which celebrates the positive connection that food plays in mother-daughter relationships and Stacey Harwood's 2011 "Pursuit of Poppyness" where she recounts how she never got the recipe for *mohnkichlach* (poppy seed cookie) or anything else from her embittered grandmother who refused to share her recipes saying "they go with me to the grave" (<<http://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-life-and-religion/82946/pursuit-of-poppyness>>).

Anna del Conte's 2009 *Risotto with Nettles* is about the author's privileged childhood in Milano cut short by wartime escape to the countryside to be able to get food followed after the war by emigration, partly to get away from her mother, and marriage in 1949 in England, whose food she describes as a culinary wasteland. In her 2012 *Day of Honey: A Memoir of Food, Love, and War* Anna Ciezadlo, a war correspondent in Baghdad after the 2003 invasion and in Beirut during the 2006 war with Israel, chronicles in equal measure close-up accounts of battle zones, streets, eating, and cooking local food. Ciezadlo points out that one of the secrets of life during wartime is that all one's senses are more attuned and that this includes one's enjoyment of the taste of food. Anya von Bremzen in her 2013 *Mastering the Art of Soviet Cooking* recounts how she grew up in a communal Moscow apartment where eighteen families shared one kitchen and where they lived in terror of the secret police. She recounts the history of the Soviet Union through food stories about her grandparents, mother, and herself explaining how once living in the U.S.A. she and her mother cooked through three generations of Russian food including pre-revolutionary dishes like *kulibiaka* (salmon pie). Bich Minh Nguyen's 2007 *Stealing Buddha's Dinner: A Memoir* begins in a harrowing wartime escape from Saigon and continues with the protagonist's childhood in 1980s conservative Midwest Grand Rapids, Michigan, where her rapacious hunger for assimilation leads her to reject her grandmother's Vietnamese cooking and her longing for junk food like Kool-Aid, Jell-O, and Pringles. Nguyen's superficially amusing talk of US-American food and popular culture hides her silences about family dysfunction and the absence of her biological mother who remained in Saigon. Linda Furiya's 2006 *Bento Box in the Heartland: My Japanese Girlhood in America* is a similar coming-of-age story to Nguyen's, of a Japanese girl living in a difficult home atmosphere with a father who had been in a Russian prisoner of war camp and who on the first day of school in an Indiana farm community hides in the girl's restroom with her bento box of rice balls longing for a peanut butter and jelly sandwich.

A particularly important work of alimentary life writing that deserves mention Clara Sereni's 1987 autobiographical novel *Casalinghitudine*, a reflection on food and rituals going back to her own loss of her mother, difficult childhood, and reaffirmation of her Jewish roots through food such as *pasta e*

fagioli, polpettone, and frittata di zucchini. Structured around one hundred and five recipes, Sereni's chapters are named after courses and follow the order of typical menus where each kind of recipe is linked with a particular moment of her own life. Echoing Lévi-Strauss and Barthes, Sereni claims that food can become a more effective language than words and that her domestic space and time of food preparation with its various rituals represent the ideal location of memory for the recovery of the lost language of women. With the help of recipes she attempts to reconstruct her family legacy of traumatic events starting from an early revolutionary movement in Russia from where both her maternal grandparents came to two world wars and fascist Italy and the persecution of its Jews. Sereni, who worked for women's rights in Italy in the 1960s, believes that by giving up their connection to cooking and food women gave up a powerful source of pleasure in their lives and were cutting themselves off a tradition. She ends her book with *conservare* meaning both making fruit preserves and learning how to preserve memory while not letting her identity be swallowed by it, ultimately saying that her recipes are survival strategies to tie people and things closer to her (see Clementi; Menozzi).

Many of the foregoing examples of alimentary life writing originate out of women's struggle to resolve personal and familial traumas ranging from mourning the loss of a mother to parental abandonment, infidelity, divorce, migration and displacement, and to attempting to create new personal and communal identities in immigrant life. In contrast to such personal works, alimentary life writing during wartime such as in prisoner-of-war camps and concentration camps is no longer an individual activity nor a form of nostalgia, but becomes a crucial and constant component of the everyday life in the camps. Food talk and food writing helped to constitute the *Alltag* of prisoner culture of concentration camps much as did music, described by Guido Fackler in his over six-hundred page *Des Lagers Stimme*. However, while composing and performing music in every form occurred among all prisoners, as did talking about food in the abstract, orally exchanging recipes or writing them down and even creating camp cookbooks was primarily an activity by women whose history is just beginning to be recognized. Although scholarly writing relating to food and war tends to refer to topics such as the impact of war on food production, shortages, allocation, rationing among soldiers and civilians, and about starvation, it is also important to relate food to wartime domestic life. For example, as Marion Kaplan writes, in Nazi Germany the League of Jewish Women, which combined feminist goals with a strong sense of Jewish identity until its dissolution by Hitler in 1938 encouraged women to produce cookbooks as a way of trying to maintain a normal life. During World War II Fisher wrote in her 1942 *How to Cook a Wolf* on war rationing and food politics and instructed home cooks on how to cook with scarce and black market ingredients and in her food-centered coming-of-age 1943 memoir *The Gastronomical Me* she integrated her experiences of gourmet eating while traveling from Europe to the United States shipboard with unsettling geopolitical circumstances including of Jews fleeing Europe who were among her fellow passengers (see Carruth; Gilbert). In a study on the U.S. internment of Japanese Americans during the war Jan Dusselier used letters, diaries, testimonies, and photographs kept by inmates as documentation of the deplorable conditions under which the prisoner families lived, but also how they carved out a space for themselves through their food culture, which included growing vegetables and sharing resourceful recipes in camp newspapers.

The Germans employed deliberate starvation of their victims as a weapon of war, cutting off food supplies to cities in occupied Soviet Union causing a million deaths in Leningrad alone and the death of a similar number of Soviet prisoners of war who were deliberately starved to death, as were another group of "useless eaters" like millions of Jewish slave laborers who were not immediately gassed but starved to death. Of course, starvation was also the rule in Soviet labor camps and in Japanese camps (see Carruth, "War Rationing"; Goldstein; Zweiniger-Bargielowska, Duffett, Druard). Out of the starvation in camps prisoners took risks to produce a previously unrecognized but, as it turns out, a prolific subgenre of war literature of individual and collective recipe writing, which more broadly is also part of prison literature (see Godderis). While it is a genre produced predominantly by women, one of several exceptions is U.S. Army colonel H.C. Fowler's 1946 *Recipes out of Bilibid* who survived the Batan Death March and three years in Bilibid, where he collected recipes on scraps of paper from men from thirteen different nationalities. Anne Georget presented at the 2015 Berlinade her documentary *Festins imaginaires* where she introduces a number of other recipe writers, both Jewish and gentile, including several other men, including another male collector from Bilibid, US-American sergeant Warren Stewart, who recorded in one hundred seventy-five pages the food he craved from his Alabama hometown and also Vera Bekzadian of Potma concentration camp in Stalin's gulag, who made a recipe book out of fabric (see Sogno <<http://teleobs.nouvelobs.com/actualites/20150205.OBS1736/les-festins-imaginaires.html>>; see also Ethel Mulvany's collected recipes from fellow female prisoners in a Japanese camp in Singapore, which she published in 1946 on her return to Canada, where she also wrote an unpublished memoir about her wartime experiences (see Evans). There is also the story of the life of British colonial Lilla Eckfort, who wrote a cookbook in the Weihsien Japanese camp in China (see Osborne).

In conclusion, although it now is beginning to become apparent that thousands of recipe collections emerged out of wars, most of them lost and some unrecognized in family archives, the significance of war alimentary life writing as a survival strategy has been ignored except by a few women historians of the Holocaust (e.g., Goldenberg; Saidel). While I hope to have underlined the pervasive connections between gendered alimentary life writing more broadly and wartime recipe writing, in my companion article "En-gendering Memory through Holocaust Alimentary Life Writing" I focus specifically on recipe writing primarily by women Jewish inmates in concentration camps and the postwar continuation of recipe writing and recipe memoirs by survivors, as well as their daughters and occasionally sons (<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol17/iss3/10>>; see also Vasvári, "Hungarian" <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5195/ahca.2014.139>>).

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