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Nightmares in the Kitchen: Personal Experience Narratives About Cooking and Food

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NIGHTMARES IN THE KITCHEN: PERSONAL EXPERIENCE NARRATIVES
ABOUT COOKING AND FOOD

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of the Department of Folk Studies and Anthropology
Western Kentucky University
Bowling Green, Kentucky

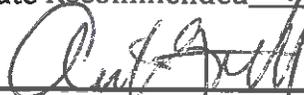
In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

By
Sarah T. Shultz

May 2017

NIGHTMARES IN THE KITCHEN: PERSONAL EXPERIENCE NARRATIVES
ABOUT COOKING AND FOOD

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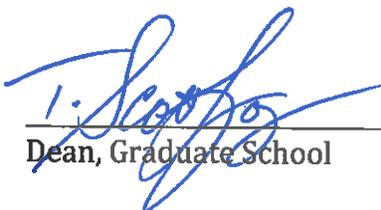
Ann Ferrell, Director of Thesis



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For my family, who have supported my academic pursuits since *Perpetua*.

And for Colin, my partner in everything.

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Directed by: Ann K. Ferrell, Timothy Evans, and Kate Parker Horigan

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This thesis explores personal experience narratives about making mistakes in the preparation and serving of food. In order to understand when these narratives, referred to in the text as “kitchen nightmares,” are told, to whom, in what form, and why, one-on-one and group ethnographic interviews were conducted. In total, 13 interviews were conducted with 25 individuals (men and women) ranging in age from 19 to 70. Six major themes of kitchen nightmare narratives are identified in Chapter One. Chapter Two explores one of these themes, resistance, in the context of the kitchen nightmare stories of heterosexual married women. Chapter Three illustrates how individuals use kitchen nightmare stories to perform aspects of their identity for one another in group interviews, as well as how group members collaborate to tell these stories and negotiate what matters most about them during their telling.

Introduction

In her 2010 book *Baking as Biography: A Life Story in Recipes*, Diane Tye explores the role that foodways played in the life of her mother, Laurene. In her book, Tye recounts an incident in which her mother accidentally used tea leaves instead of brewed tea while baking cookies and was gently corrected by another woman from her neighborhood: “And, as my father is still fond of telling, it was a neighbouring woman who gently told my mother after an early unsuccessful attempt at baking that recipes calling for tea required brewed tea, not tea leaves” (Tye 2010:11). After reading this passage, I called my mother and read it to her. While I expected her to share in my amusement and enjoyment of the anecdote, I was unprepared for her to reply with two similar stories of her own, one of which I had never heard before involving an attempt to make a coffee cake with coffee grounds rather than brewed coffee.

This exchange got me thinking about the stories people tell about the mistakes they make in the kitchen: when and with whom do they share these stories, and what forms do they take? To answer some of these questions, I conducted group and individual interviews with men and women of various ages and backgrounds about their cooking mistake stories. After a process of trial and error I came to think of these narratives as “kitchen nightmare stories,” in which the events being recounted are bad or unfortunate, but also potentially funny or silly.

At the beginning of this project, I struggled to find a way to articulate what I was looking for to my interviewees. The term kitchen “mistake” felt too negative, while kitchen “mishap” felt too mild, and seemed more likely to elicit anecdotes about dropping

a utensil while cooking than a full-blown narrative. “Kitchen fail” was effective at conveying both the scale and tone of what I was looking for to younger interviewees, but a lot of older people I interviewed had a harder time connecting to this term. In my first few interviews I went with the term “disaster.” This worked for my interviewees, who seemed to relish its potential to be used hyperbolically for the sake of humor. But in discussing my project with other folklorists it occurred to me that in this field, the term “disaster” has most commonly been used in the quite serious context of the study of the role of personal narrative in helping individuals and communities to make sense of and heal from serious traumatic events (Lindahl 2012 and Horigan 2010, among others).

I ultimately settled on the term “kitchen nightmares” because I felt that it allowed space for both the humor and the seriousness of the events being related to come through in the narratives without the more serious connotations of a word like “disaster.” It is also worth noting that many times the interviewees supplied their own terms for their stories that they felt were a better fit. Some of these terms were “fiasco,” “catastrophe,” “calamity,” “shitshow,” and, in a few cases, “disaster.” This thesis explores the most common themes featured in kitchen nightmare narratives, as well as their relevance to the construction and performance of both individual and group identities. This introduction will provide a literature review of relevant scholarship, a discussion on the research questions which guided the work, an explanation of the research method used, and brief descriptions of each of the three body chapters.

Literature Review

The work of many folklorists and other scholars of narrative and foodways have informed both the subject and the methodological processes of this project. In his foundational essay in the 1972 anthology *Folklore and Folklife*, “Folk Cookery,” Don Yoder maps out the potential avenues for the study of cookery in folklore, and shares a useful definition for the term “foodways” from John Honigman’s work on the foodways of a group of Canadian natives:

The study of folk cookery includes the study of the foods themselves, their morphology, their preparation, their preservation, their social and psychological functions, and their ramifications into all other aspects of folk-culture. For the total cookery complex, including attitudes, taboos, and meal systems—the whole range of cookery and food habits in a society—Honigman’s term ‘foodways’ has become useful (Yoder 1972:325).

Over the past few decades, foodways scholars have focused in on the ways that food taboos, meal systems, and the social and psychological functions of foods that Yoder mentions have contributed to group and individual conceptions of identity. For instance, Michael Owen Jones provides a wide survey of the different ways that groups and individuals incorporate food choices into their performances of identity in his 2007 article “Food Choice, Symbolism, and Identity: Bread-and-Butter Issues for Folkloristics and Nutrition Studies,” while the works of Susan Kalčík (1984) and Mario Montaña (1997) both shed light on the ways that ethnic and immigrant communities negotiate the boundaries of their identities using foodways. For Kalčík, the American tendency to incorporate and modify the traditional dishes of its immigrants is a testament to American

pluralism and the ultimate success of American multiculturalism, while Montaña sees something darker in his analysis of the fajita's journey from a food associated only with a specific folk group to a mainstay at Tex-Mex restaurants across the country:

In incorporating folk foods, the dominant culture can succeed in neutralizing, reinterpreting, and setting boundaries that separate "acceptable" foods from those perceived as disreputable or threatening. Many Mexican foods have been appropriated successfully with such strategies. Restauranteurs and food promoters have labeled their versions of Mexican food "Tex Mex," resulting in some of the most alien and adulterated Mexican food forms imaginable; among some natives of the Rio Grande region, these are considered merely another form of ethnic slur. (Montaña 1997:62)

Montaña's thoughts on the relationship between ethnic foodways and oppression point to the importance of foodways in the process of creating insider and outsider groups, as well as in the reinforcement of systems of power and inequality. These themes of oppression and inequality played out in the context of the acceptance, rejection, and critique of established gender roles in narratives told by husbands and wives in the group interviews conducted for this project, albeit on a smaller and more intimate scale. I will explore this idea in more detail in Chapter Two.

While writers like Kalčik and Montaña have looked more broadly at the intersections of ethnic/group identities and foodways, others have chosen instead to direct their attention to smaller groups and individuals. Elizabeth Adler examines the artful, creative ways that individuals eat Oreo cookies and other foods in her 1981 article "Creative Eating: The Oreo Syndrome," while Amy Shuman has focused on the underlying assumptions about gender, class, and individual importance which inform the

unspoken decisions about who is served the largest and smallest portions at group and family get-togethers in “The Rhetoric of Portions” (1981). Kathy Neustadt’s exploration of the tradition of the Allen’s Neck Clambake in southeastern Massachusetts, *Clambake: A History and Celebration of an American Tradition* (1992), provides historical context for and close analysis of the Allen’s Neck Clambake, both describing the tradition in detail and providing thoughts on what it means to the community at large as well as to the small “in-group” who put it together and make sure it goes off without a hitch each year.

Because the realm of the domestic and, more specifically, the labor that goes into food preparation is so firmly tied to ideas about femininity in Western culture, a brief survey on women’s and feminist folklore is useful. Up until around the 1970s, studies of women’s traditional expressive culture were few in the field of American folkloristics. In the wake of the women’s movement in the 1960s and 1970s and the postmodern turn in academic inquiry which stressed the existence of multiple sets of discourse rather than one master narrative, folklorists began to address this lacuna of material on women’s folklife, both by studying women’s folklore and by applying feminist analyses to folklore studies and to the field of folklore itself. Anthologies like *Feminist Theory and the Study of Folklore* (Hollis, Pershing, and Young 1993) systematically pursued questions of oppression and agency in women’s folklore while simultaneously interrogating the canon of the field from a feminist perspective. Jennifer Fox’s chapter, “The Creator Gods: Romantic Nationalism and the En-genderment of Women in Folklore” explores how Johann Gottfried von Herder, considered the “father of Romantic Nationalism” and hence one of the scholars whose thinking has been foundational for the field of folklore, viewed tradition (a concept upon which he placed supreme importance) in essentially patriarchal

terms: “In Herder’s thought the very essence of tradition is masculine. Whereas the maternal province is to provide physical nourishment by the breast, the paternal role is to provide spiritual nourishment by instilling tradition” (1993:34).

An earlier collection of women’s folklore scholarship, *Women’s Folklore, Women’s Culture* (Jordan and Kalčík 1985), includes a chapter by Margaret R. Yocom that addresses the unique qualities of the experience of conducting fieldwork with other women, and provides a useful way of thinking about performances of folk narrative which take place in the private rather than the public sphere. Yocom notes that women are more likely to provide their personal experience narratives in the private sphere, often in smaller groups of women, while simultaneously completing small tasks: “The private sphere of women’s storytelling has shared not only confidences and privacy but also work...many of the products of these labors are ephemeral. Paradoxically, they last for a brief period of time...Yet these items as well as those that last longer live on in the women’s storytelling sphere as women comment on their displays of table and food, of sewing and ceramics” (1985:49).

In this private sphere of women’s discourse, according to Yocom, interviewees may view the female ethnographer more as a peer than as a researcher or audience member, and relate to her more personally as a result. While Yocom does point out that the private sphere of women’s storytelling is not necessarily restricted to actual private spaces, or even to exclusively women audiences, she also asserts that this space, and the kinds of discourse that occur in it, may vary significantly from the public sphere and the more masculine forms of folk narrative associated with it. She suggests that ethnographers looking to collect personal experience narratives and other anecdotes from

women will have different, if not markedly superior, success if they do not attempt to collect this information in large, public gatherings.

In *Feminist Theory*, Judith Levin holds up housework as one potential area of women's folklore that has not been adequately addressed in folklore scholarship. In "Why Folklorists Should Study Housework," Levin presents many reasons why housework has been ignored by folklorists in general and, more specifically, by feminist folklorists. She acknowledges that since housework is often understood by women and men as drudgery, with little in the way of obvious aesthetic embellishment and is, ultimately, very difficult to define, it has often been overlooked in favor of other forms of work which seem to provide more avenues for creativity. Additionally, she acknowledges that for many feminist scholars of folklore, housework is a symbol of patriarchal oppression, and to study it may come across as celebratory, and therefore supportive of the idea that women "belong" in the home. Adding up these factors, Levin concludes that "it is not surprising that quilting and cooking are studied, but that sweeping and dishwashing are not" (1993:289). Despite these concerns, Levin argues that folkloristic studies of housework have the potential to be very useful to understanding the values and aesthetic preferences of a given group, and could be conducted without inadvertently reifying traditional gender roles.

Levin places the act of cooking on the "play and art" side of the occupational spectrum, but many people experience food preparation as onerous work that they would much rather not have to bother with. In their introduction to the 1993 anthology *Feminist Messages: Coding in Women's Folk Culture*, Joan N. Radner and Susan S. Lanser suggest that members of oppressed or dominated cultures are sometimes able to critique

existing power structures or express dissatisfaction with roles they are forced to play through the process of coding:

We are not using *code* simply to designate the system of language rules through which communication is possible; in this sense any message is 'in code.' Rather, we mean a set of signals—words, forms, behaviors, signifiers of some kind—that protect the creator from the consequences of openly expressing particular messages (1993:3).

In the first chapter of this anthology, “Burning Dinners: Feminist Subversions of Domesticity,” Susan S. Lanser posits that women who claim incompetence in the kitchen may be implicitly rejecting the role of domestic expert. Claiming that they can’t cook rather than saying that they won’t allows women to escape from having to perform the gendered work of cooking without having to deal with the ramifications of refusing this responsibility outright.

In his article “Making Pancakes on Sunday: The Male Cook in Family Tradition” Thomas A. Adler points out that “the very idea of male cookery often connotes relative incompetence” (1981:45). Adler also notes that when men (usually fathers) do cook for their families, they often do so on the weekends, claiming specific dishes as specialties and spending a lot of money on expensive kitchen gadgets. Adler identifies male cookery as a potential site of symbolic inversion: “Dad’s cooking exists in evident contradistinction to mom’s on every level: his is festal, hers ferial; his is socially and gastronomically experimental, hers mundane; his is dish-specific and temporally marked, hers diversified and quotidian; his is play, hers is work” (1981:51). In “Sexing the Turkey: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality at Thanksgiving,” LuAnne K.

Roth analyzes portrayals of the American holiday of Thanksgiving and makes the point that it is a highly symbolic holiday full of rituals that reinforce traditional gender roles (2014). Her analysis of the practice of carving the Thanksgiving turkey supports Adler's claims about the nature of men's cooking: "In many households, men offer symbolic labor, for example, taking the cooked turkey out of the oven, carrying it to the table, and carving it...men's labor receives publicity and is recorded in photographs. In the iconic Thanksgiving scene, the matriarch steps aside at the moment of high ritual drama, leaving room for the patriarch to present and carve the turkey" (2014:150).

Writing in 2001 Sherrie A. Inness makes a similar claim about men's cooking in her exploration of popular literature, cookbooks, and ad copy from the 1910s to the 1950s and their treatment of the relationship between gender, food preferences, and cooking labor. Inness uncovers what she refers to as a "male cooking mystique" in these materials, a set of assumptions about men's cooking and food preferences that "...has helped to perpetuate traditional gender roles, particularly the long-lasting idea that women are the 'natural' cooks, not men" (Inness 2001:18). Some of the core assumptions that make up the male cooking mystique are the assurance that occasional forays into the kitchen won't serve to feminize men (as long as they cook the right foods and have the right attitude about it); men and women have drastically, irreconcilably different tastes; and, of course, "If men desire to learn how to cook, they will inevitably be better cooks than any woman can be" (Inness 2001:19). Inness points out that cookbooks designed for children most often portray girls serving food and boys eating it, and lay out very specific circumstances in which it might be useful for boys to know how to cook (usually on camping trips, at barbecues, or on special holiday occasions).

Michelle Szabo cautions against oversimplification in the study of gender and foodwork. She points out that analyses that focus exclusively on white, heterosexual men living in domestic partnerships with women leave out a significant portion of the population. In her article “Foodwork or Foodplay?: Men’s Domestic Cooking, Privilege and Leisure,” Szabo studies a small group of men from diverse backgrounds living in Canada. The men are from many different ethnic and racial groups, some are single and others are married, some have children and some do not, and some are gay while others are straight. What these men share in common is that they do somewhere between 50-100% of the foodwork in their households.

By having the men keep a food journal for one week in which they log all of their activities around the kitchen, conducting fieldwork at home with the men while they cooked, and interviewing them and the people they cook for (if applicable), Szabo found that the division between men’s and women’s labor in the kitchen may not be as simple as it is presented in work like Adler’s or Inness’s. Most of the men Szabo studied reported different feelings about their tasks in the kitchen at different times. At some points, preparing food was considered a leisure activity, while at others, a tedious domestic chore that had to be done in order to care for themselves and their loved ones. Szabo writes that many of the men in the study expressed concerns about the health and tastes of their family members, as well as hurt feelings when their cooking was not well received. She links these anxieties and conflicting emotions about food preparation with the types of everyday, workmanlike cooking most often ascribed to women, and theorizes that both “work” and “leisure” time are felt realities rather than static categories.

Jonathan Deutsch further complicates ideas about masculinity and cooking in his 2012 article “‘Please Pass the Chicken Tits’: Rethinking Men and Cooking at an Urban Firehouse.” Deutsch limits his study of men who cook to one specific occupational group: the men who work at an urban firehouse called Engine 3000. The firemen spend a significant portion of each day at the firehouse, and Deutsch notes that they communally prepare and eat at least one large meal during each workday. The meals they cook do not resemble the “huge chunks of greasy meat, signature dishes, and high status items” (Deutsch 2012:266) most commonly associated with male cookery. Additionally, the firemen’s approach to preparing meals is more similar to the everyday, domestic cookery associated with women than with the festal, special occasion performances Adler describes.

In *Baking as Biography*, Tye uses her mother’s collection of recipes for baked goods, along with interviews with family members, friends, and neighbors of her mother, and her own memories of her and the things she baked to try to reconstruct aspects of her mother’s life, and, by association, the lives of other women of the same time and place. The study of stories like the one Tye shares about her mother’s mistake, or the ones I heard from my own mother when I shared the passage from Tye’s book with her, are highly personal, individualized anecdotes. The study of these types of narratives represents an intersection between women’s folklore, foodways, and personal experience narrative.

The personal experience narrative is a relatively newly accepted genre of folk narrative. The practice of recounting personal experiences itself is nothing new, but the idea that the stories and anecdotes of individuals could be considered and studied as

pieces of folklore is a somewhat new concept. In 1977 Sandra K.D. Stahl (now Dolby) made the case for the study of the personal experience narrative as a type of folklore, theorizing that while the content of personal experience narratives may be original, they are also traditional in other ways, such as composition or style: “The experience related in a personal narrative is not exactly like the plot of any traditional story, but its formation into a story plot could and probably does depend upon a model for plot resource as contained in traditional narratives” (Stahl 1977:15). More recently, Amy Shuman has written about the conversational stories that people tell routinely, and the social work these narratives perform. For Instance, in her book *Other People’s Stories: Entitlement Claims and the Critique of Empathy*, Shuman identifies “small world stories” as a specific narrative genre that typically includes similar content and structure, as well as the coda “Small world, isn’t it?” According to Shuman, for people hearing and telling small world stories, the takeaway is that the world is a much smaller and safer place than it might appear to be.

In her chapter in *Women’s Folklore*, “Woof! A Word on Women’s Roles in Family Storytelling,” Karen Baldwin analyzes the group storytelling sessions that occur when members of her mother’s family get together for gatherings or holiday celebrations. In the process of observing and recording her family sharing anecdotes about their history, Baldwin discovers that the men and the women of the group take on different “tasks” in the storytelling process. While the men tend to provide the more traditional linear narrative, describing the event being narrated in a series of episodes or plot points in a chain from beginning to end, the women of the family respond with a nonlinear

“chunk” of data that provides a kind of context for the story, often without any traditional elements of plot.

There is a growing body of work on the intersections between foodways and folk narrative. Scholars of folk tales and ancient myth have investigated the importance of food and eating in the literary versions of these stories. Natalia Andrievskikh, for example, has recently published a comparison between the symbolic importance of food and eating in fairy tales and contemporary popular women’s writing like Elizabeth Gilbert’s *Eat, Pray, Love*. Others have focused their work on the intersection between foodways and urban legends or rumors. Gary Alan Fine’s 1980 article, “The Kentucky Fried Rat: Legends and Modern Society,” traces variations of this then popular urban legend and attempts to provide an explanation for its popularity and an interpretation of its meaning, while Patricia Turner’s “Church’s Fried Chicken and the Klan: A Rhetorical Analysis of Rumor in the Black Community” is an investigation of, as its title suggests, the rumor circulating in the black community that Church’s Fried Chicken is owned by the Ku Klux Klan (1987). Turner collects several variants of the rumor, and notes that in some cases it simply ends with ownership of the chain, while in others, KKK members have put something into the chicken to make black men sterile, or to make the entire African American population sick. She outlines several reasons why Church’s Chicken comes across as a potentially suspicious business, and cites historical precedent for African Americans to have concerns about sterilization: “Black men are apt to be even more alert to castration motifs due to the publicity that accompanied the disclosure of the syphilis experiments conducted by the white medical establishment at the Tuskegee

Institute...Black men and women have also grown accustomed to hearing whites decry the black birth rate” (1987:301).

While these examples have all provided much to the discussion of the connection between foodways and folk narrative, and gender and personal experience narrative, the relationship between foodways and personal experience narrative has been less studied. In “‘We Was Always Pullin’ Jokes’: The Management of Point of View in Personal Experience Narratives,” Richard Bauman analyzes the narration of a practical joke which included the ingestion of a mixture of ketchup and mustard to convince a group of fishermen that the prankster was eating excrement in order to illustrate his argument that “the ‘personal experience’ implies both (1) a particular class of reported events, and (2) a particular point of view,” (Bauman 1986:33). But the focus of his analysis is on the telling itself rather than on the consuming of the condiment mixture. Sheila Bock has collected personal narratives of preparing and eating meals as part of her research on the stigmatizing effects of illnesses like diabetes. In these stories, it is the types of foods prepared and consumed that may be considered incorrect (unhealthy), rather than the method of food preparation itself (2012). Jennifer Rachel Dutch’s 2011 article “Grandma’s Gone Global: Recipe Transmission from the Kitchenette to the Internet” is an exploration of how the Internet can serve as an interactive, community-building cookbook where cooks can trade recipes along with tips and life stories in real time.

Dutch focuses specifically on the ways that women surround the recipes they post online with stories about their mothers and grandmothers, conceptualizing themselves and, by extension, their readers, as links in a chain of tradition stretching simultaneously backwards into the past and forwards into the age of the Internet. She also points out that

the interactive nature of the web makes it possible for commenters to provide feedback on the recipes they use, posting pictures of their finished products and sharing tips or modifications to make the dishes more successful.

By interviewing individuals and groups about their experiences in the kitchen, and specifically asking for stories about the cooking process and what happens when things go wrong, the following work contributes to research on the intersection of foodways and personal experience narratives, particularly in the context of individual and group identity performance.

Research Questions and Methodology

In beginning this project, I was interested in exploring whether there may be one or more genres of short narratives dealing with mistakes that are made in the kitchen, what kind of structures they might have, and when and for what purpose they are told. I was hoping to learn what personal experience narratives about cooking mistakes convey to the people who hear them, and what significance they hold for their tellers, particularly in the context of gender performance. I wanted to know whether or not what I am calling kitchen nightmare stories were used in the creation or rejection of traditional American gender roles for individuals, or if they ever came up as comments on another person's success or failure at performing their assigned gender roles correctly. As the process of interviewing got under way, I became increasingly interested in the group dynamic of the storytelling process as well. I will return to these ideas in the chapters that follow.

To get at the answers to these questions, I conducted ethnographic interviews and asked people about both their cooking experiences in general and their cooking mistakes more specifically. While I did conduct two 45-minute interviews with single individuals, the majority of my interviews were conducted with groups of two or more people. My main inspiration in conducting my research in this way was the work of folklorists like Kenneth S. Goldstein and Elaine Lawless. Lawless assembled a small group of women involved in ministry to discuss ideas about theology and their own life stories. These discussions became the foundational material for her 1993 book *Holy Women, Wholly Women: Sharing Ministries of Wholeness Through Life Stories and Reciprocal Ethnography*, in which Lawless attempted to blend her analysis of the life stories of the women in ministry group with their own thoughts and feelings, as well as the unedited transcripts of their narratives.

While the logistics of living several hours away from most of my interviewees, many of whom did not know one another, made the prospect of conducting my own reciprocal ethnography unfeasible, I was very interested in exploring these stories as they exist in a group setting. I assembled people who knew one another into groups in order to create what Goldstein describes as an induced natural context:

The method of *natural context induction* involves three separate steps. The first of these requires the collector to determine what the natural context or contexts are for the performance of any specific genre of folklore in the community in which he is doing his fieldwork...After the natural context to be recreated is decided upon, the collector proceeds to the second step. At this stage he must find an accomplice or, where the situation permits, be the instigator himself...The accomplice's major role is to bring about the context in which he and others will perform. This he achieves by calling together a group of his cronies or friends for an evening of storytelling, singing, riddling, or any other lore normally

performed in such a context...Once the session starts the collector can either observe as a participant or simply drop into the background, sitting on the fringe of the group where he may take notes on the situation. (1964:87-89).

For this project, I determined that the most “natural” context for the performance of kitchen nightmare narratives was informal group conversation. In order to create a similar situation in my interviews, I asked individuals that I knew to help me assemble small groups of their friends, family members, or acquaintances to discuss food preparation and cooking mistakes. While the idea that there is a natural context lurking just out of the ethnographer’s grasp is potentially problematic, as the interview context is just as natural (or perhaps unnatural), I found that modeling the interview situations to be more like informal group conversations lead to an atmosphere in which individuals shared stories that reminded one another of similar stories, and narrative was used to perform identity for the benefit of the other people in the room. I will return to this idea in Chapter 3.

I was also interested in exploring Margaret Yocom’s ideas about women’s talk and the private sphere throughout the process of conducting my interviews. In order to investigate this idea, I invited both women and men to cook with me while I recorded our conversations about cooking and kitchen nightmares. Ultimately this strategy did not prove to be workable, as most people preferred not to cook during the interview, or agreed to this plan but then cooked whatever the agreed-upon item was before I arrived.

Because kitchen nightmare narratives are not exclusive to any specific group, the fieldwork for this project was not limited to any one group or population. I had hoped to conduct a major group interview at an event at an art gallery in Pittsburgh, but scheduling conflicts made this impossible. Because of my own limited time and mobility as a

graduate student, I basically had to conduct interviews with the people who were available to speak with me. This means that the interviewees featured here are, in many ways, a lot like me. They are mostly white, mostly female, and several of them are or have been college students recently. A significant minority are involved in the field of folklore in some way. The relatively homogenous nature of the individuals interviewed for this project makes further research with a diverse range of individuals and groups necessary before anything definitive can be said about this topic. The ideas expressed in these pages are simply the first steps in what will ideally be a more involved exploration. That being said, the individuals interviewed were diverse in age, occupation, and region. In total, 13 interviews were conducted, and a total of 25 individuals ranging in age from 19 to 70 were interviewed.

Thesis Structure

Chapter One addresses the initial questions that informed this project: what form(s) do cooking nightmare narratives take in the group discussions and one-on-one interviews conducted, and what are the contents of these narratives? When are they told, with whom, and broadly, for what purpose? This chapter offers a rough typology of the themes that came up most frequently in the interviews, and suggests related areas of study for further research on each of these themes.

Chapter Two explores the construction and display of gender identity through personal experience narratives about kitchen nightmares. This exploration is facilitated by a close reading of the resistant or oppositional elements of conversations between

straight women and their husbands about kitchen mistakes, and a specific type of kitchen nightmare story that came up in interviews with straight married women. These stories are about a time when a woman makes a potentially serious mistake in the kitchen, one that her male partner would be very upset about. Through quick thinking and ingenuity, the woman is able to “fix” or cover up the mistake, only to reveal it to the partner later on. These narratives share many things in common with practical joke narratives, with the male partners playing the role of the good natured “dupe” or “butt” of the joke both in the story and, when they were present, during the interview itself.

In the final chapter, issues of methodology, context, and performance are analyzed in an attempt to understand the pros and cons of different forms of ethnographic research in the study of personal experience narrative as a traditional form. Specifically, this chapter investigates the ways that individuals and groups negotiate different forms of identity and acceptable behavior through the prism of kitchen nightmare stories.

Chapter 1: “I feel like a kitchen nightmare for me is...”

What is a kitchen nightmare? While the stories that led to this research involved kitchen mishaps and mistakes resulting in food that was inedible, I have found that stories about kitchen mistakes cover a much wider array of themes. As Michael Owen Jones notes, attitudes about food and cooking are representative of a plethora of personality traits, which people express and perform as part of a wider presentation of self:

To take up the first matter of self in relation to food consumption, some self-images derive from the *range of fare*—that is, foods viewed as acceptable to the individual (Bisogni et al. 2002). One individual admits to being a picky or fussy eater and unwilling to try new foods, another is a food snob, someone else boasts a willingness to eat anything, and yet others identify themselves as omnivores or as one of the six kinds of vegetarians (from occasional meat eater to ovo-lacto vegetarian to vegan; see Beardworth and Keil 1992). Regarding the actual *types of food preferred and consumed* (as distinct from what is within acceptable limits), there is the self-proclaimed junk food junkie (immortalized in Jim Croce’s song by this title), fast-food freak, meat-and-potatoes man, salad lover, sushi addict, chocoholic, adventurous eater (or culinary tourist; see Long 1998), or pasta person (as the buxom Sophia Loren said, ‘All you see here, I owe to spaghetti’)” (2005:142-143, emphasis in original).

This quote represents the breadth of different forms of identity that can become wrapped up in and expressed through food. In asking informants to describe what I eventually came to call a “kitchen nightmare,” a similarly diverse range of responses covering a variety of different themes was recorded. As I mention in the introduction, I chose the term “kitchen nightmare” to describe this kind of narrative because I feel that it allows

enough space for the wide variety of types of stories told in response to the request to hear one, and conveys both the humor and the seriousness of the events being related by the tellers. Some of these kitchen nightmare narratives do deal with the taste of the finished product, as in the following examples given in response to the question “What is a “kitchen nightmare?”:

Ellen: Food that you can't eat.

Collin: Way too much salt in pasta.

Jenny: I imagine putting, like what we were talking about before. Putting all this work into something and having it be like, a gooey mess or something. Especially if you're cooking for other people.

For others, a kitchen nightmare has more to do with the process of cooking than with the final product:

Cassidy: I feel like a kitchen nightmare for me is something being done the way it really shouldn't have been done. I didn't even think about taste when you said that, when we started talking about it.

Jon: My ideal, like, when I imagine a kitchen nightmare, when you first mentioned that, I pictured, like: You're not timing things right, you're running around, you don't understand the rhythm of it. You know, you're overcooking or undercooking. That's what I picture. Just like, not really like a good enough sense of the timing of it.

Evan: [In response to the above quote] I think you're right though. Like the moment of disaster doesn't necessarily happen when you sit down to eat it and it tastes like shit. Like the moment of disaster is kind of when everything's just going wrong when you're in the process. And you're trying to like, put these, put...fix mistakes that

are well past being fixed, and, you know that's really the most-- that's the moment of disaster. It's in the process. It's not the finale.

Still others reference elements of the cooking process that do not directly include food either in the process or the finished product:

Greta: Usually like some sort of dangerous scenario comes to mind or something. I don't know.

Gabs: Probably setting the kitchen on fire. I think that like, I have, like, kitchen fire fears, for some reason. Because I try to be fancy sometimes, and I deglaze pans with wine real, real adventurously. I actually thought I burned my eyebrows off like a few weeks ago.

Lizzie: "I normally hurt myself. Like I'm not the most dexterous in general and I don't have a lot of like, the utensils you should use. Like I don't have a peeler or anything, and I probably don't have the right knives. And so, like, I always cut myself, or burn myself in my oven."

Such a wide variety of responses raises the question of whether or not kitchen nightmare stories are traditional at all. As many scholars have pointed out, dealing with personal experience narratives as a form of folklore can be tricky, as the content of these stories is often highly original and individualistic. In the article "The Personal Narrative as Folklore," Sandra Dolby Stahl argues that personal experience narratives, while they consist of original content, can still contain many traditional elements. She illustrates this point by referencing Henry Glassie's exploration of a song written and performed by a man named Dorrance Weir in his 1979 article "Take That Night Train to Selma: An Excursion to the Outskirts of Scholarship." She makes the case that Weir's song, while composed by one individual, contains traditional elements, and continues to become

more traditional the more times it is performed:

The personal narrative, like Dorrance Weir's song, exhibits what appears to be nontraditional content. However, as with "Night Train to Selma," certain elements in personal narratives reveal a high level of equivalency with analogous elements in various models. We could say that some elements are traditional the first time the story is told. Other elements become increasingly traditional as the story is repeated by the teller, and still others may become traditional in the more conventional folkloric sense if the story is adopted as a whole item by another teller and circulated "in oral tradition." If enough elements can be shown to be "more traditional than innovative" perhaps the discipline will feel safe in accepting the personal narrative as folklore. (1977:12-13).

Stahl identifies the "attitudes" expressed in personal narratives as potentially folkloric, and suggests that even when an individual is telling an original story from his or her own experience, the shaping of the experience into a narrative may depend on preexisting models that could be considered traditional. She also references the telling of the story itself as a potential folkloric performance.

While the ideas about what constitutes a kitchen nightmare and the stories these ideas generate may be disparate, it is my belief that these ideas and narratives do contain elements of the traditional, as Stahl suggests. While I heard a diverse number of personal stories on kitchen nightmares, they can be grouped into a few major categories based on common themes and construction. In the pages that follow, I will introduce the major categories of kitchen nightmare stories I have identified, and provide a few potential traditional attitudes which may be communicated in their telling.

Inedible Food

As stories about food that is not fit to eat were my entry point into this topic, they seem a fitting place to start in this taxonomy of kitchen nightmare stories. While these types of kitchen nightmares are by no means the only or even the most prevalent variety, at least one came up in each interview I conducted. These stories range from brief anecdotes (making salsa that is too spicy to eat, for instance) to longer narratives in which the teller stretches out the story to match the content of the tale. In these cases, the teller provides a lengthy, detailed account of the cooking process which builds anticipation in the listener for the finale. This anticipation is similar to the excitement the teller felt during the narrated event as they went through the steps of preparing a complicated meal. The climax or resolution of the story occurs when the food is judged to be inedible and the cause of the failure (if known) is revealed. In this way, the telling of the narrative seems to be the inverse of the actual experience. Where the failure to prepare the food correctly is a disappointing let down in real life, it serves as an interesting climax in the telling of the story.

In some cases, the story ends only in the disappointment of the narrator, who has been denied the experience of eating a meal they put a lot of time and effort into. More commonly, however, there is a social element at play in these scenarios which contribute to their designation as “kitchen nightmares” in the minds of their tellers. In the example from Diane Tye’s book mentioned in the introduction, Tye’s mother only discovers that she has baked her cookies incorrectly after they have been served to a group of neighborhood women, one of whom discreetly alerts her to her mistake. Mrs. Tye was a

young minister's wife at this point in her life, new to the community and its expectations for how the wife of its spiritual advisor should behave. Tye does not specify whether or not her mother felt embarrassed by this experience, but she does note that this story was one that her father loved to tell, presumably for comedic effect. Cooking is, for many, a daily activity that is both necessary and tedious. But cooking can also be a chance to perform or show off for someone else. For many, the ability to cook and serve a good meal is intertwined with ideas about what it means to be a good spouse, a good host, or even a legitimate adult. A large majority of the "Inedible Food" stories collected included this element of a failure not only of the cooking process, but of identity performance as well, as illustrated in the following example:

Ellen: One time I made a pizza...ugh. I was like, I had been cooking for like a month on my own, in my own apartment. And I was like, "You know what? I've got this. I'm gonna have some friends over for pizza night. I'm gonna make pizza." And I fucked the pizza up so bad. The pizza was like...I don't know how I did it because it's not that hard to make pizza. I didn't even...ugh. The middle of the pizza was like soup. Like the crust was not cooked...I mean it was really embarrassing. I was like "What am I gonna do?" I don't remember what I...I think I may have just...I don't remember if I made something else really quick? Or I ordered food in, for my guests [laughs]. But I was just like, they, "I can not let people eat this." It was terrible. So embarrassing.

This story was told by a young woman who had recently moved into a communal living space in Philadelphia which is owned by a group of musicians who collaborate in several different local bands. Later on in the interview, which was conducted at the house with several members of the group, she returned to this incident, underlining again how embarrassing the situation was for her, and adding that the people she had invited over

for dinner were members of another local band who have had relative success in the Philly music scene:

Ellen: The pizza situation? I could not serve that pizza. It was a disaster. I was so ashamed...And they're all like really funny and super attractive. Like, "Come on over to my house! Eat my pizza! Just kidding, it sucks."

While this and the many other stories like it I heard during my research were told tongue-in-cheek for comedic value, people reference being nervous, anxious, and ashamed of their poor performance in the kitchen in every story. For this young woman, her failure to serve her friends a dish that she considered easy to make was a symbol of her failure to successfully behave like an adult. Many women shared stories about botching a recipe the first time they cooked for their mothers-in-law. One young man who considers himself a good cook told a story about a time when he left a dish on the stove all day that he was planning to bring to a potluck that evening. He discovered the charred remains of the dish hours later in the company of a close friend, and lost his temper. Looking back on it later, he recalled that he was able to quickly throw together a new dish that tasted fine, and summed up the experience by saying "I totally overreacted." Most stories of this type end with a similar "All's well that ends well" coda, with the narrator pointing out that their in-laws didn't mind, or they quickly made something else instead. These codas provide a marked change in tone from the tense narration of the major events of these stories, which are emotionally charged.

These experiences are often recounted as self-deprecatingly humorous by their tellers. Because things typically turn out alright in the end, the audience is invited to share a few laughs at the narrator's expense. Yet these narratives are almost universally

described as being mortifying to live through. This tension between humor and deep discomfort, or perhaps seriousness, to put it more generally, is recurrent throughout the various types of stories collected and is indicative of the ways in which food and cooking play a serious role in our lives, one that may be easy to overlook due to its almost constant presence in our day to day existence.

Technological Mishaps

Another common theme in personal experiences of kitchen nightmares involves the misuse or malfunction of kitchen appliances and cooking tools. They range from short anecdotes about cutting oneself opening a can of cat food or starting a blender with the lid off, to longer stories involving kitchen fires, exploding ceramics, and even the need for a building evacuation. When asked what constitutes a kitchen nightmare, many interviewees indicated that poor interactions with kitchen technology were one of the first things that came to mind.

Scholars like Jan Harold Brunvand have posited that contemporary legends surrounding appliances like the traditional stove or microwave oven may suggest an antipathy towards these items, especially when they are new. While no one interviewed for the present work recounted an experience of exploding a small pet in the microwave¹, this particular kitchen appliance came up consistently in interviews. Most typically, these narratives include accidentally placing a non-microwave safe dish into the microwave

¹ In the 1981 book *The Vanishing Hitchhiker: American Urban Legends and Their Meanings*, Jan Brunvand connected contemporary legends about young children or older women accidentally killing babies or pets by attempting to dry them off in the microwave with earlier versions of the story that featured a convection oven instead. Brunvand suggested that these legends changed with the times to reflect people's anxieties with new and unfamiliar forms of technology.

and being shocked by the results, as in the following anecdote from a 28-year old woman:

Kaila: I wanted to make macaroni and cheese. And I asked Erin [her older sister] for some help on how to do it, and she told me to, just to make it in the microwave. So, I took that literally, to make it in the microwave. And I had the stuff out, the pots and pans to make macaroni and cheese. And I put the pot in the microwave, and [pause] blew up the microwave and had it smoking and there was a terrible smell from putting the pot in the microwave. I was probably eight or nine. It was the first time. Not the last or only time that I've blown up a microwave in this fashion.

As she mentioned, the speaker was very young when this event took place. The story was collected during a group interview with the young woman, her mother, and her father. Her mother prompted her to tell this story and framed the narrative by pointing out that the incident happened during one of the first times the woman and her older sister were allowed to stay home alone without a babysitter for an extended period of time. The idea of tangling with the microwave comes up frequently in stories about early forays into the kitchen in the interviews I collected, especially from informants aged 35 and under. Mastering the microwave seems to be an early symbol of maturing into adulthood in these personal narratives, rather than a source of the unfamiliar and potentially dangerous, as it has been depicted in scholarship of the microwave in contemporary legends.

When technological mishaps appear in kitchen nightmare narratives from later in informants lives, they are framed in terms of frustration, either with the self for not having sufficient mastery of the tools (see the response to the “What is a kitchen nightmare?” question above about constantly getting hurt in the kitchen), or with the appliance itself for causing a disruption, as in the following example from a 24-year old

man during a group interview that included his four housemates and a neighbor:

Alex: Actually I did have a mishap when I decided to cook the chicken that one time. And I decided to preheat the oven, as you do at the beginning of baking chicken. And I realized that there was smoke pouring out of the top of the oven. And I was like, “This is a problem. This doesn’t look like it’s supposed to happen. This has never happened to me when I have preheated the oven. This can’t happen.” And it did. So I opened the oven, and smoke poured out. And I found out that there was some sort of substance on the bottom of the oven. And...I can’t lie I was a little frustrated. I was very frustrated because I had to put off cooking this chicken that I had just prepared for the last half hour. Cause, you know, I make things difficult. And I had to clean the oven before it caught fire. So that was definitely a catastrophe.

He underlines his frustration with the interruption of his cooking process and the postponement of his dinner, as well as with the perceived necessity of cleaning out the oven in order to avoid an even greater and more serious interruption (a kitchen fire). But his roommates took issue with his labeling of this incident as a “catastrophe,” and insisted that it was highly unlikely that the stove would have actually caught on fire. For his part, the teller laughed at the jokes made at his expense, but insisted that his framing of the situation was the correct one, pointing out that he is known to be the most conscientious person who lives in his house. This exchange points to the ways that working with kitchen appliances, and cooking in general, can be quite ambiguous. A scenario that one person reads as perfectly safe or acceptable is a catastrophe to someone else, and these distinctions are often made in accordance with how the individual sees themselves (the conscientious one, someone who is level-headed, etc.).

While kitchen nightmare stories involving technological mishaps have a greater

propensity to be ambiguous than certain other types of these narratives, there are some occasions where the misuse or malfunction of a kitchen appliance is decidedly serious to everyone involved, as in this story from a middle-aged mother and grandmother (the mother of the young woman who microwaved the pot in the story above):

Amy: Yeah, so Erin [her daughter] was home for not this Thanksgiving but the year before maybe? I think when Tessa [her granddaughter] was a baby. And we were having Thanksgiving up here, which was probably one of the first years we didn't have it at Pappy's. And I kept saying it kind of was a weird smell in the house but I couldn't figure out what it was. And then I couldn't figure out why my gravy wasn't thickening because I had everything like, I finally had complete control, I didn't have like four cooks around me? So I had like everything planned out what I needed to do. And so I had everything going fine and my gravy was the next thing and it wouldn't thicken, and it wasn't doing anything. And then it finally clicked. So I was using like three burners at a time on my stove, and it's a gas stove, and for some reason it doesn't support doing that. So I was just pouring gas into the house? Yeah. With a newborn, preemie baby here? And so we had to get, we took, Erin and the kids went out into the car. We I think went all into the carport. We had to open the doors up, and fans.

Tracy: It took a little while to get that smell out.

Amy: It was bad. Yeah. It was. [Laughs] We had everyone coming up...So yeah I went from everything being planned out and timed perfect to just utter chaos. Yeah we laugh about when we almost blew up the house. It was chilly in here but the food turned out ok.

This narrative includes the elements of frustration at the interruption of the cooking process noted in the previous story, but the stakes are higher from the start, as the narrator is preparing a large Thanksgiving meal for extended family. The malfunctioning of the gas oven leads to concerns both for the health of the infant, who had been born

prematurely, and for the entire house, which the family jokes was almost blown up.

The technological mishap narratives I heard very rarely included potential consequences as dire as the ones depicted in the above example, but they did occur a handful of times throughout the interviewing process. Many people shared technological mishap narratives that were less overtly threatening, but still quite frightening for the people involved at the time of the event. Interviewees recalled wrestling with grease fires, faulty garbage disposals, and treacherously sharp implements. Stories like these perhaps provide extra legitimacy to the theories concerning the use of contemporary legends to express anxiety about new and changing appliances mentioned above. Amy told me another story about her mother shoving a flaming dishcloth into a wooden drawer one afternoon, jokingly ending the narrative with the evaluative coda: “Cooking is a dangerous thing.”

Making A Mess

For many people, encountering or creating a huge, unmanageable mess in the kitchen counts as a definite kitchen nightmare scenario. In some of the narratives collected, the mess, while irritating, could be cleaned up relatively quickly. In others, the narrator reports finding evidence of it weeks or months later, or they are left with a permanent reminder of the event such as a scorch on the kitchen floor from where a hot pan was dropped.

In cases where food is spilled, it becomes imperative to clean things up quickly for a number of reasons. Some informants describe themselves or their family members

or roommates as “neat freaks” who can’t tolerate any kind of disorder. Others express concerns about the sanitary conditions of leaving food to rot out in the open. The most unique kitchen nightmare narrative that I collected involving a mess speaks to some of the consequences of failing to clean up food that has been left out, but with a twist.

Rather than a spill that was too daunting to adequately tackle, one of the housemates I interviewed in Philadelphia described what happened when he and his roommates first moved into their place and left all of their nonperishable food lying out on the kitchen floor for a few days:

Alex: Well when we were moving in we had just like a pile of stuff? Like, sitting on the floor, you know. It took a while to actually move in, and that was part of it because we were all moving in at different times. Partly because we didn’t know who had what to put in what cupboard. So we just had like a pile of stuff in the middle of the floor. So what we didn’t expect was that this house would have an ant infestation.

Jon: Oh yeah that was bad.

Alex: And pretty much like everyday we’d kind of move some stuff, and we’d see a crazy amount of ants just sitting underneath of it. And, I mean, me as kind of an OCD freak definitely freaked out a little bit. I went out that night and got like—

Ellen: A billion ant traps.

Alex: Probably like eight ant traps. But I also—

Ellen: Which like, thank you for doing that. There’s no ants here.

Alex: I also had this—

Ellen: Let the record show there’s no ants here. Thank you Alex!

Alex: No ants—

Jon: Thanks Alex!

Alex: But I also had this moment where I was like, alright I also have never lived with a pet before. So like, picking out ant traps was, you know, pet friendly ant traps was a brand new thing for me.

This mess is about the disorganization and chaos of moving in with a large group of people for the first time. For some of the housemates, this was the first place they had lived with a full kitchen. Although the circumstances are unique, the annoyance and frustration involved in dealing with a significant food related mess were repeated in many of the kitchen mess narratives collected. It is also interesting that the retelling of this story provides an opportunity for all of the people involved in the exchange to overtly or subtly perform some aspects of their personality.

Alex describes himself as “kind of an OCD freak” in the context of going out to buy ant traps immediately after realizing that they are likely dealing with a serious ant infestation. He recalls buying around eight traps, while Ellen interjects that he bought “a billion ant traps,” and both Ellen and Jon interrupt him as he explains his concerns about buying traps that will be safe for the group’s cat to enthusiastically thank him for his handling of the situation. These two, who had earlier told me that they celebrate their birthdays each year (they were born one day apart), by cracking eggs on each other’s faces and sprinkling them with shredded cheese and raw bacon, can be read as subtly positioning themselves on the opposite side of the “OCD freak” spectrum by exaggerating the number of traps Alex bought and repeatedly thanking him for taking care of the problem (and thereby making it more difficult for him to finish telling his

story).

While stories about inedible food, malfunctioning technology, making a mess, and working in food service (a topic I'll return to in more detail below), are all relatively specific, there are two broader themes that came up frequently in interviews: stories about others and rebellious stories. These categories may include a mess, an inedible dish, a rogue appliance, or some combination of all three. But the focus of these stories is not on these elements. Instead, the main point of the story will have more to do with someone else in the case of the former category, or with an undermining of some societal expectation in the case of the latter.

Stories About Others

While I asked interviewees to share their own personal experience narratives about their misfortunes in the kitchen, everyone also had at least one story to share that was about someone else. In some cases the narrator was involved or at least present in the events of the story, but in many others the narrator was not involved in the events being described in any way. This last variety could perhaps be called something like second-hand personal experience narratives, and they may serve any number of purposes for the people who tell them. One variety of these might be considered heirloom narratives, passed down in families in a way that is similar to the handing down of old photographs or jewelry. One story I collected was about the interviewee's great-grandparents, and had been told to him by his mother.

In cases where the narrator has a more direct relationship with the subject of the story, they may be choosing to tell it for any number of reasons. I conducted interviews with longtime couples who would jokingly tell stories of one another's kitchen foibles. There is the potential in these instances for a bit of veiled critique to slip through in the guise of a joke:

Ruth: Bob did barbecue, I'll take it back, he did barbecue one time. He had about an 18-pound turkey that he put on early in the morning and it was, we were going, he didn't care for wine, he found that out. But he was basting it with beer and spices and stuff. And every time he came by he and somebody else would have a beer and they would baste it with more beer, and it was delicious. But that evening a whole bunch of people stopped by the lake. And I mean it was gone in no time. An 18-pound turkey you'd think could feed a lot of people. But when they'd been out on the lake all day...And it was good! The best I remember but there wasn't much but bone left when I got to it. I thought that success would really spur him on to more barbecuing but I think he got to feeling sick after drinking beer all day and standing over the [grill?], then he didn't really take to it.

This story was collected during an interview between two older women who are neighbors. They were exchanging stories about attempts their husbands had made to barbecue and laughing about some of the more extravagant failures that had occurred over the years. This story is especially interesting because it was told in this context of barbecue failure stories, but it is actually a story about a barbecuing success. The narrator describes the turkey as "delicious" and points out that it was enthusiastically eaten up in a very short amount of time. But this story's placement in a series of other critical narratives about the foibles of husbands at the grill makes it imperative to take a closer look at what may be going on here.

Although the cooking of the turkey itself was a success, there are still several critiques of Bob, the narrator's husband, embedded in the story. Earlier in the conversation, the woman has pointed out that Bob has a giant, beautiful grill on their back porch that he never uses. She describes this grill as taking up a lot of space, and expresses the hope that someone will soon take it off of her hands. Then she launches into her story, beginning with the sentence "Bob did barbecue, I'll take that back, he did barbecue one time." The "I'll take that back" in the first sentence implies that perhaps the woman feels that she has been unfair to Bob by saying that he never uses his fancy grill, but she also subtly underlines the fact that he never grills by saying "he did barbecue one time." This sentence could thus be read as a critique of Bob's failure to do a lot of barbecuing, an act of food preparation that has long been associated with masculine capabilities and responsibilities as described in the works of scholars like Jeffrey Sobel (2005), and Thomas A. Adler (1981). She also points out that there wasn't much left of the turkey other than bones by the time she got to eat any, further reinforcing the idea that perhaps Bob does not adequately fulfill some of his duties as a husband. Finally, she ends this story by suggesting that perhaps Bob never barbecued again because he was sick from drinking too much all day. A picture has been painted of a man who fails to regularly use his fancy outdoor grill, but who is actually capable of using it to cook a good meal. Furthermore, this man spends his whole day on the lake hanging around with other men and drinking beer, and he fails to even save any turkey for his wife ("An 18 pound turkey you'd think could feed a lot of people").

While it is possible to read the woman's story about her husband as I have done, it is important to pay close attention to the kind of language I have had to use to do so:

“Perhaps,” “might,” “could,” et cetera. The danger with reading the telling of someone else’s kitchen disaster story as a veiled critique of that person (or of any other kind of subtle comment) is that one can very well be wrong. The woman is happily sharing a funny story about her husband with friends, and she may be horrified at the suggestion that she meant to imply any kind of serious critique of his behavior.

Joan N. Radner and Susan S. Lanser tackle similar issues in their 1993 introduction to *Feminist Messages: Coding in Women’s Folk Culture*, “Strategies of Coding in Women’s Cultures.” They begin with a brief overview of the various types of coding that can be studied, and specify that they are most interested in the kinds of coded messages that are critical of some aspect of women’s oppression. Because these kinds of messages may imply some form of risk or danger for the person doing the coding, Radner and Lanser point out that often this form of coding will be not be explicit, and may be difficult to interpret directly:

In this essay, we are looking particularly at acts of coding that (a) are undertaken in situations of risk, (b) are ambiguous in that neither the fact of coding nor the key to the code has been made explicit, and (c) are therefore indeterminate in intentionality. In other words, we are looking at situations in which both the fact that coding has occurred and the nature of what (if anything) has been encoded are uncertain. (1993:4)

While these factors make the study of this kind of coding both difficult and potentially ethically sticky (what happens to the informant if you read something into their words or work that they never intended?), the authors conclude that the identification and study of these messages, when done carefully and respectfully, can shed light on the coping strategies that women and other potentially oppressed groups of people can use to hold on

to a sense of identity and individuality. They also suggest that the study of these types of coded messages can effect social change: “By inscribing into the new context of feminism the evidence of coding by women for whom openly feminist messages would be impossible, taking care to respect the cultural and individual differences and human needs that coding signifies, feminist scholars may help to bring about a social order in which coding will no longer be necessary” (1993:24).

These points about the ambiguity of implicit coded messages and the potential benefits to their continued study despite these risks are useful to keep in mind for the present work. I believe that there are implicit coded messages available to be read in the kitchen nightmare stories collected for this project that can help us understand some of the roles that food and food preparation play in both the performance of individual identity and in power negotiations in different types of social relationships. On the other hand, it is important to keep in mind the potential drawbacks that Radner and Lanser identify in their essay on the subject of women’s coding. Just because coded messages, particularly of social critique, are available to be read in the stories collected here does not mean that they were intentional or purposeful, and I will never describe them as such without the explicit confirmation of my informants. These points are especially relevant in regards to the next group of narratives in this typology.

Narratives of Resistance or Opposition

Throughout the fieldwork phase of this project, narratives would come up that

seemed to have a resistant or oppositional element to them. In some cases they were wildly different in subject matter, but they appeared to express similar (negative) *attitudes* about something in a way that struck me as reminiscent of Sandra Stahl's point about the traditional attitudes that are often expressed in personal narratives, although in this case the attitudes being expressed often seemed to fly in the face of conventional views on good health and cleanliness, or traditional ideas about relationship and gender roles. In one of the most interesting and unusual narratives collected, a middle-aged woman who works as a fitness instructor told the following story with great relish:

Sandy: The only thing I made when I was younger was chocolate chip cookies. Mainly because we liked the dough. So, here's a gross story: So I was in, oh I don't know, probably about the same age [as her husband who has just told a story about his childhood]. And I came home from school with my friend. And, um, we, "Let's make cookies," "Ok." So we, you know, we were making the batter and we were talking and everything. Well, as we made it we ate like half the batter. Then I knew that I couldn't bake the cookies and only come out with that many. My mother would get mad? So we didn't want to throw out the batter because we wanted to eat it. So we covered it up and put it in my sister's toy box. [Laughs] And the next day after school we came home and ate it. And we lived to tell the tale!

The woman identifies the story as "gross" before she tells it, but she does not communicate any particular feelings of shame about it otherwise. Her labeling of it as gross stands in tension with her laughter as she tells it, and with the fond memory of a fun afternoon she spent with a girlfriend. She also demonstrates quick thinking in realizing that her mother will understand that they have eaten half of the cookie dough if they bake what remains, and ingenuity in finding a suitable (if unorthodox) hiding place where the

dough will not be found and can be returned to enjoy at a later time. Additionally, the woman, whose name is Sandy, tells this story after she and her husband Tom have spent several minutes discussing his many food rules and restrictions, as well as the fact that he is a self-described “neat freak” who does not do well if there is a great deal of mess or disorder in his home. When Tom expresses disbelief and disgust at Sandy’s eating of the day-old dough, she happily reaffirms it:

Tom: Day old batter? Oh Jesus.

Sandy: It’s better the second day!

The narratives of resistance I collected were varied in subject, but their tellers seemed to share a feeling of delight in telling them. In the following story, the narrator, a musician who lives in the band house in Philadelphia, expressly links the details of the event he describes to a collective case of “bad morals” amongst himself and his roommates at a previous house:

Jon: Ok. So I lived in a little house. A weird house in Boston with four or five other people, about a couple years ago. And we had a poster of Albert Einstein in the kitchen on the wall. Really gross house, hardly any morals. It was just like weird. I mean we had morals but like in terms of being gross and stuff in the kitchen? It wasn’t that clean. We had mice and stuff. And that whole area was gross, that whole street. So we would, we started this [indistinguishable]. We started this ritual where we would go in the kitchen, Steve and I or whoever would be sitting there. And we’d look up and just be like “Bop!” and we would just throw like a pancake onto Albert Einstein and it would just sort of slip down. And we were like “That’s kind of funny,” and clean it up. But then in a couple days it got to the point where we wouldn’t clean it up. We’d be like “Bop!” and the pancake would slide and stick and we’d be like, “Sure,” and we’d just go on every morning

like, we'd be making breakfast and it'd be like, "Pfft!" Like, throw an egg at him or something. And, he eventually grew mold. And one of our friends visiting hid the poster in the basement and said she threw it out or something. And I went and got it out of the trash and put it back up on the wall. And then it escalated from there and eventually we were stabbing the pancakes and stuff with big butcher knives and like, it was a knife just in the wall through the pancake, and um, weird shenanigans like that.

One of the (many) interesting things about this narrative is the fact that Jon is not recounting a single event. Rather, he describes an escalating set of circumstances that take place over an extended period of time, although it is hard to discern exactly how long. In recording this story, I expected it to end with the restoration of the poster to its place in the kitchen, but from there knives come into play, and there is never any resolution (in listening back to this recording I cursed myself for failing to ask what happened to the poster after the knives were introduced). I ultimately decided to count this story as a kitchen nightmare narrative because it was the first thing that came to mind for this interviewee when I asked the question. His calling into question the morals of himself and his housemates and his use of the word "gross" to describe the situation both indicate that it was a nightmare for him. But like Sandy, quoted above, who also uses the word "gross" to describe her behavior, Jon also seems to take a certain pride in this narrative. Like Sandy, he tells it with distinct glee. He also describes himself as seeing through his friend's lie and rescuing the poster from the trash and returning it to the kitchen. After this, the situation "escalates" with both the poster and the pancakes being more firmly anchored into the wall with the butcher knife than they were previously when his friend removed it.

While some of the resistance narratives I collected seemed to express negative

stances in relation to traditional ideas about cleanliness and order, others seemed to carry a subversive critique of more specific traditional ideas of class or gender. In exploring these, some of the concerns about accurate interpretation mentioned above are especially relevant:

Ruth: I learned real quick how to get rid of burnt beans. Because I loved to read. And I would, mom would have this great big kettle. And we were farmers, and they would be busy working, and we would eat a lot of beans and cornbread because it's a staple. So she'd put this big pot of beans on: "Ruth Evelyn, don't you set around and read and leave these beans to burn." "Ok, ok," like, "Get out of here so I can start reading!" So I'd smell them and I'd run in, and it didn't take me long to figure out when you've got anything burned set it in cold water real quick, so it'll stop the burning. Then you rake the top part off, and be careful and don't get any that's touched the bottom. Then you give them, what's on the bottom, to the chickens, and you scrub out the pan. Well, one day she came in and I had had three episodes of that. Redoing the beans. So what should have been about a half gallon of beans was about a pint. But, I don't know if she was just tired and didn't care or what. She never said a word about it. But I still quite often, you can ask my husband, I quite often set a pan of something in a sink full of cold water because I've gone off and left it.

Ruth displays a lot of the same delight in sharing her story about getting away with reading while she should be watching the beans that Sandy and Jon do in telling their stories. But Ruth's story isn't about being "gross." Instead, the focus of her story is on being able to successfully carve out some time for herself away from the drudgery of working in the kitchen. One possible reading of her story is as a subversion of the expectation that women and girls should excel at domestic tasks. Ruth does excel in the kitchen, but not the way she is expected to. Instead of successfully keeping the beans from burning, she successfully gets away with letting them burn while she spends her time on things she finds more interesting. It is also possible to read her mother's failure to

admonish her for losing almost half of the beans as a coded act of solidarity.

This story also illustrates an important point about kitchen nightmare stories in general. I have categorized this narrative as subversive or resistant, but it also includes elements of a story about someone else (her mother) and tales about inedible food (the burned beans). While I have separated these narratives into distinct groups, the reality is that they often overlap and blend into one another. This is also the case in Jon's story about the Albert Einstein poster. It could easily be counted as a kitchen nightmare story about a mess, and it certainly is that. But the main focus of the narrative is not on the mess itself, but rather on the lack of "morals" in the house that made the mess possible, and the reaction of an outsider, who tries unsuccessfully to get rid of the poster and restore order to the kitchen.

In the chapters that follow, I will explore these narratives of resistance in greater detail, focusing in on one particular construction that I heard several times in individual, couple, and group conversations throughout the interviewing process. These tales provide valuable insights into the ways that people use personal narratives about kitchen nightmares to subtly situate themselves in opposition to traditional ideas about gender, health, and cleanliness.

Food Service Stories

The final category of kitchen nightmare story I will discuss here occurs outside of the home. Because of my background working in the food service industry, many of the

people I interviewed were working or had previously worked in this field. While these individuals often had kitchen nightmare stories to share from other aspects of their lives, at least one story involving their service experiences was told in each interview with people who had these jobs. These narratives feature a variety of subjects from horrible customers or coworkers, to injuring oneself rushing to get an order out, to getting so caught “in the weeds” that it doesn’t seem likely to ever catch up.

While these stories seem disparate, they often involve the common theme of being stuck in a stressful situation without any support or understanding from the other people on the scene. In his 1996 book *Kitchens: The Culture of Restaurant Work*, Gary Alan Fine describes an unexpected lunch rush in the kitchen of a medium-sized American restaurant:

Some twenty orders are waiting at any given moment. One steak falls on the stove and is wiped off and placed back on the plate... There is much banging of pans and anger when a server takes the wrong order, and the cooks have to scramble to prepare another. Jon prepares the vegetables, and Mel, the fish. The dish is ready, but not before the server has been abused for her incompetence. The kitchen is sweltering, smoky, and greasy from the large number of salmon and London broil served that day. Paradise has become hell: a communal one (1996:18).

While Fine is right to call the hell he describes in this backed up kitchen “a communal one,” it is important to note that while the workers are suffering through the situation together, they are not necessarily working together, based on both my own personal experience doing this type of job and on the stories I collected from interviewees. The cooks abuse the servers and, generally speaking, wait staff will often throw the cooks under the bus to appease customers in hectic situations. Most of the kitchen nightmare stories collected for this project surrounding the service industry include similar themes

of feeling like one is working alone even when surrounded by coworkers and customers, as the following example will illustrate:

Collin: So I used to work at a pizza window when I was in high school, in the summer. And...And it was awful. Like, Evan [his housemate] maybe knows how bad my pizzas were. It wasn't that I did a bad job. I was the only one who worked that pizza window, and it was like really busy, so I didn't have a lot of help. So yeah, it was really really tough. And it was awful. It was the worst time in my life. One time I made a pizza, and the bottom got slightly burnt. And I'm not just saying this because I was the guy who was making the pizza. This...it wasn't that bad. Honestly though. And this, the woman who I made it for? She came back, and she, she like, "Look at this pizza!" She flips it over, and she starts like smearing it on the window. Yeah cause she smeared the back of it on there so I could see. Yeah and so I was like "I'm just gonna go to my boss and, like, I just gotta leave and let my boss handle it."

Although the young man who told this story was able to get assistance from his manager, he describes the pizza window where he worked as being physically separate from the rest of the establishment, and points out that he "didn't get a lot of help" while he was working there. For some other cooks and servers I interviewed for this project, the lack of support was much more serious than a physical remove from the rest of the restaurant. One older woman who runs her own cafe and used bookstore related an experience from her days of working as a floor manager in a popular pizza restaurant in her hometown. The owners of the restaurant also own several others in the town, many much fancier than the pizza shop. The story takes place on Valentine's Day, when the owners of the establishments decided that the best course of action was to cut staffing at the pizza restaurant and funnel it into the more upscale establishments in anticipation of dealing with a higher volume of clientele in those locations. The result of this decision

was the kind of “anything that can go wrong will go wrong” fiasco that so many servers and kitchen staff have experienced.

Elaine: So there are four wait staff, and I am one of them. The kitchen is being run by four people when normally there would be nine. And it was a line out the door the entire evening. Just, just a nightmare...We ran out of marinara sauce. And like, a glass dish broke and put shards of glass into every salad that was premade, because we premade the salads. It was just like, if anything could go wrong, it did go wrong. So then another one of the branches had extra marinara sauce. But no one would bring it to me...So I sent the dishwasher. At that point he was the only one who was expendable. And he was this tiny little, probably in high school at that point, because he wasn't much younger than me. But I didn't think about how young he was or I probably...I just get a phone call from the other manager and he says “Elaine. That guy you sent just dropped five gallons of marinara sauce all over the sidewalk..” I know. Cause it was too heavy for him, right? Again, nobody helped him...All over the sidewalk. So now we're still out of marinara sauce, and there's five gallons of it on the sidewalk. So, the manager's like “Well I've gotta keep him, he's gotta clean it up.” So, at this point now there's no dishwasher.

This story goes on to include several “bad customer” elements (screaming children, a rich family who keep sending back a plate of mussels), as well as disagreements with coworkers which culminate in the chef locking the front door of the restaurant behind the manager's back (an angry customer then points out that this is a fire hazard and threatens to alert the authorities). Throughout this experience, the manager reports calling management at other locations and even the owners to request additional help and resources and being met with apathy each time. She describes this incident as being the moment where she decided never to work for someone else again, and sums up her experience in this way: “It was like not knowing which way to turn, and not having

anyone to turn to.” All of the kitchen nightmare stories involving restaurant worker experiences collected for this project include similar themes. I believe further study of these narratives in the wider context of occupational folklore from the service industry would be a very interesting project.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have attempted to set out a rough typology of the kinds of kitchen nightmare stories I collected during the research phase of this project. These are closer to something like common themes than tale types. The variety of different themes that come up in these narratives underline Michael Owen Jones’ point about the myriad of ways that food can be used to help perform individual or group identity. Although there are a great variety of themes, these themes were communicated by a diverse number of people in individual and group interviews, providing support for Sandra Stahl’s assertion that there may be something like traditional attitudes expressed in the personal narratives of individuals. Stahl describes these attitudes as something similar to belief in a memorate, a short first-person account of supernatural experiences which “contains as its core a belief that is in nearly all cases collective...And it seems that the only part of the memorate that is clearly passed on in tradition is the abstract belief itself; it is the only ‘traditional’ part of the story” (1977:20). Stahl suggests that personal narratives often similarly contain a collective idea at their core: “It could in fact be argued that the personal narrative...is the primary traditional narrative genre for expressing traditional attitude just as memorate and legend are the primary genres for expressing supernatural beliefs” (1977:22). My

findings suggest that people may share narratives about traditional topics (the husband who is hopeless in the kitchen, the young wife who cooks the giblets inside the turkey at Thanksgiving) while expressing oppositional attitudes towards the accepted wisdom on these subjects.

In the following chapter I will explore this idea of opposition or resistance in the context of gender identity in detail. I will provide an overview for the types of resistant statements and stories collected from men and women in heterosexual relationships, and then focus in on a specific type of story that came up multiple times in my research. This narrative type can be summarized as follows: Two women working in the kitchen struggle to hide or cover up a cooking mistake from a man in the next room.

Chapter 2: “She did *what?!?*”

Because of its constant presence in day-to-day life, and its often-elevated status in important ritual occasions and holidays, food carries great significance and emotional weight for many people. As Michael Owen Jones points out, food can be useful as a tool that helps people to think about themselves and perform their identities for others (2007). It is not surprising, then, that food often plays a major part in the performance of masculinity and femininity. In America, food is connected to the performance of gender through the related ideas that men should be providers (breadwinners), working hard outside the home to take care of women and children, while women work in the home to provide a clean, pleasant environment for the man to retreat to at the end of a hard day. Food gets intertwined with these notions of masculinity and femininity at a very basic level, as it is the man’s responsibility to provide the food, and the woman’s responsibility to prepare it well and serve it in a timely manner. These ideas about the appropriate roles for men and women became more pronounced and solidified as Americans began to think of the home as a separate private sphere which was the primary domain of women, and the world outside of the home as a public sphere for business and politics which was the primary zone of men. These ideas picked up steam in the 1800s, and arguably reached their actual and ideological apex in American society in the 1950s.²

While ideas about what the appropriate roles are for men and women have been evolving and changing since the 1950s, “traditional” ideas about gender roles still hold

² A lot of work has been done by scholars in various fields on the creation and maintenance of the public and private spheres in American culture. For a succinct history of the idea as it applies to issues of gender specifically, see Angela J. Hattery’s 2009 book *Intimate Partner Violence*, pg. 97-104.

significant sway in American society today. Many religious groups cite the traditional family values of the 1950s as the ideal form for heterosexual partnerships, and as recently as this year a Republican official in Utah was forced to resign after publishing an opinion piece in a local newspaper stating that men *must* make more money than women in order to fulfill their roles as providers.³ Because of the cultural weight placed on providing and preparing food in the context of the performance of gender roles, the kitchen can become a space of significant tension and negotiation for power between women and men in heterosexual partnerships.

In some extreme cases, these negotiations of identity and struggles for power can lead to aggression or outright abuse. In the 2009 book *Intimate Partner Violence*, Angela J. Hattery paints the picture of a stereotypical wife-batterer: “What do you envision when you think of a man who beats up his wife or girlfriend? Is he a factory worker who comes home, puts on a ‘wife beater,’ drinks a beer—an Old Milwaukee—and socks his wife in the mouth when the meatloaf she cooked for dinner is not ready on time” (2009:80)? While Hattery’s point in conjuring up this image is that it is a stereotype, and that men who beat their female partners come from all social backgrounds and walks of life, the failure to cook a meal correctly or at the right time does serve as an excuse for intimate partner violence in some cases. Folklorists like Elaine Lawless have recorded stories from domestic abuse victims in which a mishap in the kitchen leads to assault in her 2001 book *Women Escaping Violence: Empowerment Through Narrative*. Less visceral but no less serious are the consequences for a woman who refuses to cook tamales for her husband that Brett Williams explores in the 1984 article “Why Migrant Women Feed

³ Hafner, Josh. February 20th, 2017. GOP Official in Utah Resigns After Criticizing Equal Pay for Women. *USA Today*.

Their Husbands Tamales.” Here, Williams attempts to contextualize a scenario in which a husband sues his wife for refusing to cook him tamales, with the full support of her family.

With so much pressure placed on women to be talented and cheerful providers of domestic equilibrium, and the threat of potentially violent consequences if they fail to meet expectations, it seems natural that women have developed potential coping strategies. Susan S. Lanser argues that women can sometimes escape from the expectations of their male partners (and society at large) by claiming incompetence in the kitchen. In the 1993 essay “Burning Dinners: Feminist Subversions of Domesticity,” she argues that for some women, doing the cooking badly is not a lack of talent, but a subversive rejection of socially expected domestic responsibilities. Rather than being a simple fact, saying that you are a “bad cook” may be a coded refusal of the traditionally feminine role of homemaker:

Women claim incompetence when they assert that they cannot cook, bake, knit, sew, or keep a clean house...Women demonstrate incompetence when they do one of these tasks poorly—leave it incomplete, neglect it, or spoil it in some way. Our hypothesis is that such performances may function as coded rejections not only of the task in question but also of a culturally constructed female role. Like all coded phenomenon, strategic displays of incompetence are inevitably double-voiced and double-edged, but precisely for this reason they allow a woman to say ‘I can’t’ when she means but cannot say ‘I won’t.’ This claim or enactment of incompetence does require the woman to declare herself a failure in traditional terms (which may be one of several reasons why women usually declare their incompetence only in selective areas), but the declaration also has a certain traditional savor because it plays on notions of female helplessness and delicacy like those associated with the upper-class white ‘lady’ of the antebellum South. (1993:42)

In collecting narratives for this project, I have heard accounts of women's incompetence in the kitchen that I suspect may be examples of the kind of coding that Lanser describes in "Burning Dinners." One woman told me a story about her aunt who once famously baked an unbeaten egg into a pie. When the pie was cut, one slice contained the still-whole egg baked under the crust. After that incident, the woman told me, her aunt was "never allowed" to bake the pies for holiday gatherings again.

While burning a roast or simply stating that one can't cook are potentially effective ways to escape from the daily task of cooking, and can be a coded strategy to reject the Western ideal of woman-as-homemaker, there are times when a jab from within this contested space can hit harder against oppression, if only for a moment. These more aggressive strategies may not afford the women who use them a lifelong respite from foodwork, but they can still be quite satisfying, and provide a way for women to resist or subversively critique oppression without touching on the "notions of female helplessness and delicacy" that Lanser identifies as playing a part in using the coded strategy of incompetence. Collecting accounts of the kitchen nightmares of heterosexual women in partnerships with men has suggested to me that the act of cooking for a family, poorly or well, also provides women with opportunities to resist the patriarchal system without claiming incompetence, if only temporarily. By reframing accounts of their disagreements with their partners over some aspect of cooking or serving food, or retelling a story of a time they were able to "get away" with some cooking mistake, these women are able to relive the events in their narratives and anecdotes from a place of greater agency by presenting them as funny, even if there was nothing humorous about

what happened at the time of the events being recounted. Sometimes the women told these stories and anecdotes in front of their male partners, encouraging them to laugh along at their own experience of being duped. This chapter will explore these kinds of anecdotes and longer narratives, beginning with a brief exploration of the gendered dynamics of food experiences of the people interviewed.

Negotiating Gender Identity and Power in the Kitchen

While the majority of interviewees in heterosexual relationships seemed to view their partnerships as happy and fulfilling, issues of power imbalances and negotiations involving food came up often. When asked to describe her early attempts at cooking, one older woman replied “I started to cook when I got married because I had to. My husband certainly wasn’t going to do it.” Another woman described her late husband as a man who would not cook but did feel entitled to dictate how different dishes should taste. If something did not live up to his ideas of what it should be, he would refuse to eat it. A third woman told the following story about a time when she spent several hours preparing a new dish for her husband to try, only for him to refuse to taste it because it looked unusual:

Ruth: I was fixing that [coq au vin]. We lived at the lake at the time. And Bob, ah, on the weekend he would be out on the boat a lot, and he would be drinking beer with his buddies. And he would come in all sunburned and not in great shape sometimes. But, I had spent all day making this. I even had the Julia Child’s cookbook and everything. And I was really, really on the ball and I spent all day. Made this, he came in, and he sat down, and I set his plate before him, and he looked, “Mm, nuh uh, there’s no way I’m gonna eat that purple chicken.” It was good. I didn’t try it because I was so mad at him [laughs]. But, the people down the street

really enjoyed it. [Laughs] I just took it down, I said “Here, you can have Bob’s purple chicken.”

Other women described as background information before telling a kitchen nightmare story a set of what I’ve come to think of as “food rules” that their partners expected to be followed. A lot of these rules had to do with what foods could be eaten as accompaniments to other foods, the order in which foods would be eaten, and standards of cleanliness in food preparation and serving. Occasionally the food rules were described to me by the men themselves, or collaboratively with their wives or girlfriends, as in the following example:

Sandy: Well, here’s the thing. In Tom’s realm of food that he likes, there’s definitely, there’s definitely favorites. And we would probably have, at least three of the things would be in constant rotation. One of them being steak. And with the steak, you have to have this marinelli sauce which is like a marinara sort of. And you have to eat it with linguine and no other kind of pasta. Ever. He has rules in his food that are—

Tom: That’s the way you ate it.

Sandy: —kind of ridiculous sometimes.

Tom: That’s the way you ate it.

Tom is unperturbed by Sandy’s characterization of his food rules as “kind of ridiculous sometimes,” insisting twice “that’s the way you ate it.” His use of “you” here effectively distances himself from his “kind of ridiculous” food rules, but he goes on to recite a long list of others including only eating one specific brand of potato chips with a tuna sandwich and another with a ham sandwich, having to eat salad as a dessert course after a specific pasta dish, and drinking chocolate milkshakes at only the perfect “medium thick”

consistency when he has an upset stomach. His other food rules deal mostly with the levels of cleanliness in the kitchen. On the surface these rules seem a little silly, as Sandy suggests, but many of the kitchen nightmare stories this couple shared included the violation of one or more of these rules. One specific incidence of this violation is more thoroughly explored below.

These negotiations of power through food rules can occur between parents and children as well as between husbands and wives. Candace Walsh's 2012 memoir and cookbook *Licking the Spoon: A Memoir of Food, Family, and Identity* explores the romantic and professional life of the author using the recipes she most often cooked as a window into her experiences. One persistent thread that runs through the text has to do with Walsh's lifelong struggles with bulimia. She identifies an early traumatic moment in which her father forced her to eat all of the food on her plate when she was already full as a catalyst for many of her later issues with food and eating:

Dad had rules about mealtime. I had to chew everything thirty times, and I couldn't drink anything until I had cleaned my plate...He placed my glass in the center of the table, filled to the top. I looked at my mother...She made a big, big pot of stew, and we'd eat the leftovers tomorrow and maybe even the next day...I took another spoonful, of a shred of meat and some broth.

"Your next bite should have carrot and potato in it."

I dug grimly for that combination, and then closed my mouth around the spoon, pulled it into my mouth, and began to chew. Suddenly the sheer, towering wave of flavor threw grappling hooks into my gag reflex, and I upchucked into the bowl.

"Oh, you think you're so smart," he said, with his angry smile. "You're going to eat that bowl of soup anyway. We do not waste food in this house."

I shook my head, eyes wet with throwing-up tears and disbelief. He grabbed the spoon with one hand, clamped his arm around me, and fed me. I gagged a few more times, but I ate it. (Walsh 2012:41)

I collected stories like Walsh's about negative interactions with fathers (although they did not come up in conversations for this project, these kinds of stories could be told about mothers as well) involving food, mostly from interviewees under thirty, a few times while conducting interviews for this project. This is a different kind of kitchen nightmare story, wherein the narrator was forced to eat past the point of being full, or, conversely, was left to fend for themselves in the kitchen from a very young age. These kinds of experiences often had lasting effects among interviewees, as they did for Walsh. During an interview, one 21-year-old man mentioned that he has always hated hot dogs because of an incident when he was five. He was at a barbeque with his father, who forced him to finish eating a hot dog after he was full. He ended up throwing up all over the lawn in front of the other guests, and described feeling humiliated both by being forced to finish it in the first place, and by throwing up in front of so many adults. His father was very angry with him.

While the coping strategies of children who must deal with this kind of abusive and controlling behavior around food are not the main subject of this chapter, I felt it would be remiss to fail to mention this aspect of the dynamics of power and gender identity that is sometimes staged over the serving and eating of meals. Sometimes men, women, and children all become involved in a complex negotiation of power and authority. I heard a few stories of husbands attempting to force their children or young relatives to eat something they did not have any interest in eating (typically the much-

maligned green vegetable) in which the children offered up significant rebellion. In one case, the husband appealed to his wife for help, unsure of how to force the child to eat their vegetables. The wife laughingly told me that she flat out refused to get involved, that it was his mess and he would have to get himself out of it. This is a much less serious example than some of the others mentioned here about parents (specifically fathers) and children, but it illustrates how authority is negotiated and contested in families around the dinner table.

Re-negotiating Through Narrative

In several anecdotes and stories shared by women with male partners in interviews, the women describe either a potentially tense situation with their partner, or a time when they were able to successfully cover up a cooking mistake or a violation of one of the male partner's food rules without him knowing about it. Though the events recounted in these narratives were mostly not perceived as humorous at the time they took place, they are told as funny later on. Some are short, recalibrations of characterizations of events that may only be told once, while others become full-fledged personal experience narratives over time.

As an example of the first kind, here is an exchange from an interview I conducted with an older couple at their home one afternoon. The woman is a prizewinning baker, and was giving me tips on the best way to bake cakes that come out evenly and are easy to stack:

Sheila: And another, another little secret when you're doing your batter? This cake, I've made a cake today, got up this morning and made it, cause I wanted you to have some. And, but anyway, I always use a measuring cup and fill them about the same amount. It's a little over two cups in each pan that I cook. But then after you get it poured in your pan, to get it level? [pounds hands on table] Jar it before you put it in the oven. Just keep jarring it. And get all the bubbles?

Sarah: Yeah.

Sheila: Air out of the batter?

Sarah: Yeah.

Sheila: And it'll be more even for you. Now sometimes I do have them come out where they're a little lopsided and everything[...]

Wendell: And when you bang on the countertop you know you don't want to do that when anybody's asleep in the house.

[Laughter]

Sheila: Which I, I cook a lot when he's in the bed. That's why he's saying that. I probably woke you up this morning didn't I?

Wendell: Yeah.

Sheila: Jarring the pans. Well, it's time for you to get up anyway.

Neither Wendell nor Sheila laughed at the end of this exchange, although Sheila's tone when she delivered this line was playful. There was a quiet pause, and then Sheila changed the subject to making a good peach cobbler. I am not sure to what extent Sheila and Wendell consider their relationship to be in line with traditional gender roles as described at the beginning of the chapter, but they are religious Christians, and Sheila assumes many traditionally feminine tasks, spending a great deal of time in the kitchen

cooking and baking for her husband, children, grandchildren, and friends. The act of jarring the cake pans could count as a coded moment of protest against a social system which allows for men to sleep in while women are expected to get up early to prepare for anticipated guests. More directly, Sheila uses a humorous one-liner in the retelling of what happened earlier in the day to explicitly criticize Wendell's sleeping in. He first brings up the fact that jarring the cake pans sometimes disturbs his sleep, jokingly suggesting that before I try this trick, I should make sure that there isn't anyone sleeping in the house. Sheila responds to this jab with "Well, it's time for you to get up anyway." In the moment during the interview, this statement implies that her husband has stayed in bed too long, and calls attention to the fact that she is up working to prepare for company while he is still sleeping.

In effect, she has turned the tables on him. Both the act of banging the pans itself and her joking that it was time for him to get up are moments where Sheila seems to push back against the societal expectation that she will cheerfully take care of the domestic responsibilities in the home. In reframing the experience to be about his apparent laziness rather than about her disruption of his sleep in front of an outsider, she puts him on the spot in much the same way that the dupe of a practical joke often is. It becomes his responsibility to laugh along, to prove that he is a good sport and can take the joke (Sawin 2004:137). The fact that he does not laugh, and instead there is a brief silence before Sheila changes the subject, could indicate that he has refused to accept her reframing of the experience, but the damage is done. The situation has been recast, and not in his favor.

Sometimes, the dutiful housewife role is even more openly and clearly resisted, as in the following case. I interviewed a husband, Tracy, his wife Amy, and their 28-year-old daughter, Kaila, at their home in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The topic of conversation was the “food rules” of the husband. In this specific case, the man was explaining his aversion to warm milk, and he and his wife and daughter were laughing about how difficult it is to drive home from the store quickly enough to keep from ruining it in his estimation. Then, this exchange took place:

Tracy: So now, if the milk is sitting out for like half a minute, I’m flipping out, I’ve got to get it back in the fridge. They [his neighbors] traumatized me for life with warm milk for breakfast.

Amy: He’s the only person that likes milk so it’s like really, like, to us we don’t really care. But like yeah, if I’m stopping after work it’s like, “Oh, we need milk but you can’t stop over there on that side of the river to bring it home. That’s, 20 minutes is too long.” And when we get it home, you have to get your milk close to home because it can’t stay in the car that long. And we’re never allowed to have it sit on the counter. [Laughs]

Tracy: And only a certain brand of milk is the best milk.

Sarah: Which brand is it?

Tracy: Turner’s milk.

Sarah: Turner’s.

Amy: I *never* buy Turner’s milk. [Laughs]

Tracy: Yeah. She’ll have cookies and milk and just leave the milk sit out just to see how long before I would say something. Or just, I wouldn’t even say anything, just “Ruh!” I, “Ugh!” I go get the milk and huff and put it back in the fridge.

[Laughter]

Tracy: And you [Kaila] and Amy would just sit there and laugh. They thought it was the funniest thing.

At this point in the conversation, we had been discussing Tracy's food rules, and his aversion to warm milk, for roughly five minutes. When he mentions his preferred brand of milk (Turner's), Amy wastes no time in pointing out that she never buys that brand, provoking laughter from everyone in the room. This statement serves to disrupt the direction the conversation has been taking, and Tracy begins to describe the warm milk-related pranks his wife and daughter play on him (leaving the milk out on the counter to see how long he can stand it), and his own irritated reaction. Similarly to Sheila, Amy is able to turn the tables on the exchange and reframe the context to give herself greater agency. The subject of conversation changes from the things she must do to make sure the milk is acceptable to her husband to a brief, appreciative summing up of all the ways she tests or breaks this particular food rule. In both cases, the act being described (banging the cake pans, refusing to buy the milk or put it back in the refrigerator in a timely manner) can be viewed as good-natured jesting, or (perhaps even *and*) as an act of resistance against established ideas about the domestic responsibilities of women. As mentioned above, the acts being described also share some similarities with practical jokes.

In the 2015 book *Practically Joking*, Moira Marsh points out the difficulty of defining just one form of practical joke or prank, and instead puts forth a few different types. Despite the difficulty in defining the practical joke, Marsh does provide this general guideline: "All these activities are playful performances involving the interaction of two parties; trickster and dupe; who have mutually incompatible ideas about what is going on. The involvement of dupes seems to be an essential characteristic of the genre. The role of the dupe is relatively passive: the trickster acts and initiates while the dupe is

acted upon” (2015:8). Marsh also notes the potential for cruelty and aggression in the form of practical joking or pranking, pointing out that:

Any play activity that designates one of its major protagonists as a victim must contain a heavy dose of aggression, at the very least. A practical joke is always at someone’s expense, at least for a brief time. However, whether that aggression amounts to hostility or cruelty is another question. Practical jokes are intended to cause people discomfort but not necessarily distress, embarrassment but not necessarily humiliation, chagrin but not necessarily mortification. (2015:3-4)

Patricia Sawin echoes these ideas about the acting out of aggression and further suggests that practical jokes can in some contexts serve as a subversive rejection of traditional gender roles in her exploration of the folk repertoire of a North Carolina woman, *Listening for a Life: A Dialogic Ethnography of Bessie Eldreth through Her Songs and Stories* (2004).

In a chapter exploring Bessie Eldreth’s history of playing pranks and practical jokes on her friends and family members, Sawin says: “I believe that joking to some extent momentarily allowed her to slip free from the requirement to be a constantly self-monitoring perfect daughter, mother, wife, or good Christian lady” (2004:136). Bringing together work on practical jokes by other scholars, Sawin also explores the potentially troubling and cruel undertones of practical joking: “Even at its best, practical joking involves a ‘release from suppressed tensions’ (Tallman 1974:260) and may contain an element of hostility, all the more distressing because the victim is under pressure to show she is a good sport by not getting mad and by acknowledging the cleverness of the prank (Bauman 1986)” (Sawin 2004:137). During the fieldwork process for this project I did

not witness any cooking-related practical jokes firsthand, but I was told several stories that, to me, feel very similar to the kinds of practical joke narratives that Marsh identifies in her book. Like in the discussion about the milk cited above, in a few cases the dupe or victim of the original event sat in the room and laughed along to the retelling of a story in which they had been fooled in one way or another, perhaps because they felt they could not express anything other than rueful good nature in the presence of a stranger, or because they genuinely found the events being recounted funny in retrospect. In other cases, the dupe of the story was not present, but their reactions at the time were recounted with great mirth by the teller, as in this longer personal narrative:

Kay: Joel's mom has been teaching me how to make food that she likes to cook. And I'm learning how to make a lot of new food. And one of the things that I learned how to make was tongue.

Sarah: Oh my gosh.

Kay: [Laughs] It was really funny because [Laughs] you had to buy the tongue. And then, you know, you boil it with all these herbs so that it tastes really good?

Sarah: Uh huh.

Kay: And then you take the outside of the tongue off? And then you shred the meat. [Laughs] And so we did this, and it's really good, it's very tender? The way she cooked it was like excellent. And, uh, so we're sitting around eating it, and Joel's niece came with her boyfriend and, and he ate like five tacos, with this tongue. And then at the end someone like, mentioned that it was tongue and he was like "Tongue!" [Laughs]

Sarah: Oh no!

Kay: He got kind of pissed! Yes, he did, because she didn't tell him it was tongue. But it was really, so, yeah, that was kind of fun.

Sarah: I love that.

Kay: Yeah it was fun. Later on his sister posted something on Facebook for me about “Eating tongue was the start of a whole new experience!” I said “Yeah you’re so right!” [Laughs]

While this story has many elements of the practical joke or prank, it also points out a key difference between these narratives and traditional practical joke narratives. A practical joke is intentionally set up with a clear target in mind. In the case of the story above, and the other examples of this theme collected, the context of the telling is the request to hear a kitchen nightmare story. The scenarios recounted, like the serving of tongue to an unsuspecting guest, are not purposeful or deliberate, although the “dupe” or “victim” may suffer in the moment, and their discomfiture is considered amusing by others present. Kay laughs throughout the recounting of this episode, and clearly views the discomfited boyfriend of her partner’s niece as behaving in a humorously inappropriate manner. It’s not clear whether or not the boyfriend ever came around to the idea of having consumed so much tongue, as in the coda Kay describes the man’s sister calling him out publicly on social media about the incident, either sarcastically, or to indicate that unknowingly eating the tongue has in fact lead to more adventurous eating on his part. Either way, he remains the dupe of the story, as it is his sister who has reached out to Kay, with his only definite feelings about the situation communicated in the narrative being anger and shock. There may be an implicit critique of the boyfriend’s manliness embedded in this story as well, as Kay and her mother-in-law have disassembled and eaten the beef tongue without squeamishness, while the boyfriend has a really hard time coming to terms with what he has eaten, only after he learns what it is.

There is a potential coded challenge to patriarchal power structure here. Kay describes her mother-in-law as a great cook, and lists several scenarios in which she has watched her spend long periods of time putting together elaborate meals for her son (Kay's partner) and their extended family. The visiting boyfriend's shock at having been served tongue without his knowledge calls to mind the kind of anxieties about who has been handling food and what is in it that come through in contemporary legends about fast food restaurants.⁴ But here, the danger comes from within the home, and the story is told from the perspective of the person serving the "tainted" item. It is interesting that he apparently never asked what he was eating throughout the meal, perhaps implicitly trusting that it was something more typical, like shredded beef. His shock and anger underline the fact that while domestic activities like cooking and cleaning house are often denigrated in American society, the person who takes care of these things does wield some control and power over the surroundings of the people who benefit from this work.

In the stories I collected which deal with the covering up of a kitchen mistake, this resistant exercise of power in the act of cooking and/or serving a meal also contains descriptions of female ingenuity and complicity. The majority of narratives collected with this theme deal with a mistake taking place during the cooking or serving of meal that the man of the house would deem unacceptable if he was aware of it (hence the fact that they were told in response to the request for a kitchen nightmare story, even when they turn out just fine for everyone involved). In the following narrative, Amy from Pittsburgh recalls what happened when her dog got up on the table and started eating from a bowl of spaghetti just before it was time to serve a large meal:

⁴ See Gary Alan Fine's 1980 article "The Kentucky Fried Rat: Legends and Modern Society."

Amy: And one time—my mom would make like a huge bowl of spaghetti for dinner. And I don't know, I think it was Sunday dinner, but I'm not sure which day it was, but I think it was a weekend dinner. So we had the table all set, spaghetti was on the table. And just her and I were upstairs, everyone else was kind of scattered. And we went to finish something to get it on and I turned around and my little terrier-mix dog was sitting on the table with her butt in the plate. With her head in the giant bowl of spaghetti eating away. [Laughs] So her and I looked at each other, and we scraped off the first layers of spaghetti, and we never told anyone. I told my dad that story like, like five years ago. He's like "She did *what?!?*" [Laughs] But, Snoid [the dog] was *very* happy. She had like found herself quite a feast. [Laughs] That was quite a sight. [Laughs]

The "dad" that Amy is referring to here was a man who really liked to keep things clean. To illustrate to me how important this was for him, Amy shared that he had once famously dropped a donut on the kitchen floor. He picked it up, but instead of dusting it off or throwing it away, he walked over to the sink and rinsed it under the faucet and then sat down to eat it. The dog, Snoid, has contaminated both the bowl of spaghetti by eating out of it, and one of the plates, by sitting on it, so this scenario would be deeply disturbing for him. Amy and her mother work together quickly to rectify the situation as best they can by trying to get rid of the contaminated spaghetti, and act as if nothing has happened. As she says, they never told anyone about it. Years later, after her mother has died, she finally tells her father the story. Later still, she tells it to me, and now her father's horrified reaction to his wife's behavior ("She did *what?!?*") is the punchline. What happened was an accident, except on the part of the dog, but years later the discomfiture of the father transforms the accident into a funny narrative in which Amy and her mother were able to pull one over on him.

In a few cases, stories like this were collected while the men who had served as the dupes in the narrative were actually present. In these cases, as mentioned, the man usually laughed along at his own expense in much the same way that the victim of a practical joke is expected to in order to be considered a good sport:

Sandy: Well, ok so this is the pasta fagioli story. So I have to, I have to ah, set the backdrop, where—you probably know because you were here in our house long enough to know that Tom is a neat freak. And, you know, didn't do well if things got...bad. Well one evening, I think Mia was in high school, maybe a junior in high school. And Mia is our daughter, by the way. Bee tee dubs. [Slang for "by the way"] So, Tom was in this room [sunroom directly off of dining/kitchen area] watching TV after dinner. Mia and I were, um, making pasta fagioli, might have been a Sunday or something. And we were in the kitchen, "blah, blah, blah," and it's got a heavy red sauce. And I, you know I make a big batch for whatever reason. And at one point I set it on the counter and kind of like pushed it back. I thought I pushed it back. And the counter was a little slippier than I thought? So it fell off of the counter into the dining area. It hit the dining room table and just went "PFFT!" Like, everywhere. I mean it was on the ceiling, and on the walls. And, so Tom heard something fall and he's like "What happened?" And Mia and I were just like [pulls a face] making faces at each other, saying "Nothing, we've got it. It's ok." And then we're like, she just like ran down the hall and got the towels and we're like crazy wiping things up. He's like "Is everything alright?" "Yeaahh everything's fine." And we never, we didn't tell him. And it was like, I don't know when it was that—

Tom: I noticed there was some—

Sandy: He spotted a dot on the ceiling—

Tom: Like, "What's on the ceiling?" And Sandy just burst out laughing.

Sandy: Oh my god, the panic mode we both went into cleaning that. Looked like somebody got shot in there.

Both Tom and Sandy find this story deeply funny. Tom's status as a "neat freak" is accepted without critique, as is the attempt by Sandy and her daughter Mia to cover up what happened without telling him about it. Again, the exploding pot of pasta fagioli was not intentional, and the dramatic reveal of what had happened when Tom noticed a spot on the ceiling a few days later was accidental rather than premeditated. But this unfortunate accident takes on new life as a narrative that showcases the ingenuity and quick thinking of Sandy and her daughter Mia, and implicitly pokes fun at Tom's need to have a spotless home. As he sits unknowingly in the next room, *his* kitchen nightmare scenario plays out and is quickly and successfully dealt with. He does not find any evidence of it until a few days later, at which point the giant mess has been cleaned up, and he is free to laugh along with his wife and daughter without having to deal with the aftermath of the spilled pasta fagioli firsthand.

These conversational anecdotes and stories point to the ways in which women can use narrative to reframe moments of disagreement about food preparation or cooking failures more positively in the future. In the context of joking, they can recast themselves as resourceful and in control of the situation, and at times offer a pointed critique of the rules they are expected to follow. But what are the limits of this kind of coded, resistant act? How far does telling these stories go towards unsettling the traditional expectations that women will be competent, cheerful domestic workers? These are difficult questions to answer, especially since I do not wish to presume anything about the women who shared these stories with me or their lives with their male partners. To get at some of these issues, it may be useful to return to the first quote from Moira Marsh's book above: "All these activities [types of practical jokes] are playful performances involving the

interaction of two parties; trickster and dupe; who have mutually incompatible ideas about what is going on.” In the case of these narratives, the women who successfully hide their kitchen mishaps from their husbands only to tell stories about how they were able to pull it off in front of these same husbands are the tricksters, and their partners are the dupes.

In *Mythical Trickster Figures: Contours, Contexts, and Criticisms* William J. Hynes provides a rough typology of characteristics which seem to occur in trickster tales cross-culturally, although he takes care to point out that not all trickster stories will contain all or even most of the six characteristics he identifies: “At the heart of this cluster of manifest trickster traits is (1) the fundamentally ambiguous and anomalous personality of the trickster. Flowing from this are such other features as (2) deceiver/trick-player, (3) shapeshifter, (4) situation-inverter, (5) messenger/imitator of the gods, and (6) sacred/lewd bricoleur” (1993:34). In regards to his fourth point, Hynes notes that tricksters serve to highlight the most valued beliefs of a society, and often invert a situation just to return things to normal, whether intentionally or otherwise:

The trickster often turns a place of safety into a place of danger and back again. He can turn a bad situation into a good one, and then back into a bad one. Bad becomes good, good becomes worse, worse becomes better, and so on...As will be seen in this volume, the trickster is often the official ritual profaner of beliefs. Profaning or inverting social beliefs brings into sharp relief just how much a society values these beliefs. These profanations seem to exhibit a clear pattern of proportionality: the more sacred a belief, the more likely is the trickster to be found profaning it. (1993:37)

I believe there is a corollary here between Hynes' thoughts on tricksters and inversion and the kinds of anecdotes and stories I collected that have to do with a small group of women breaking a rule or violating a taboo in the kitchen (making a mess, failing to maintain high enough standards of cleanliness, etc.). Although the kitchen nightmare scenarios described are not purposeful or intentionally mischievous or malicious (in fact they are not purposeful at all), they do represent moments in which the normal order is disrupted. Whether they acknowledge them as silly or not, these men expect their food rules to be followed. And, as far as they knew during the events recounted by their wives, the rules were being followed. The revelation that these women deliberately hid these transgressions or cut corners in fixing the problem (as Amy and her mother did) contorts the image of the cheerful, efficient woman who strives to create domestic bliss for her family. Instead, these women get tired and fed up, and they are willing to hide things from their husbands to save themselves some trouble and time. The fact that these women recast these events as funny stories in which the listener is invited to laugh at the man as a clueless victim rather than at the woman for failing to do things correctly makes the situation even more disorienting. The men present for the telling of these narratives were good sports, cheerfully laughing along and sometimes adding self-deprecating comments themselves. But these "pulling one over" narratives have the potential to be deeply threatening and disruptive in a society that continues to place so much importance on the successful performances of masculinity and femininity of its individuals. As Tannen points out:

Women's humor tends to attack through subversion the deliberate choices of the powerful; their hypocrisies, affectations and the mindless following of the acquisitive and consumption oriented

social status quo. The way that women's humor challenges authority—its subversive method—is by refusing to take it seriously. This is why the female Trickster is more dangerous than the traditional Trickster, who may serve a cathartic purpose in letting steam off from the symbolic order. The traditional Trickster, although testing boundaries, leaves the basic configuration, the existence of the social order, very much untouched. By not questioning its very existence traditional Tricksters may be boundary crossers, but they do not confront with the anger and truth that energize women's humor...Women using humor become dangerous because they do not want or intend to stop at the steam venting stage...Think of the laughter of Bertha as she burns down the house in *Jane Eyre*. (2007:159)

Tannen argues persuasively for the transgressive power of what she calls the postmodern female Trickster, and there are elements of this threatening, deconstructive humor in the “pulling one over” stories featured above. But while there is a moment of subversion or resistance to be located in these stories, there does not seem to be the focused intent to burn the house down. These retellings often occur months or years after the incident itself, when the women can be said to have definitively “gotten away with” the transgression and feel safe revealing what they have done to their partners, friends, and family members.

The women telling the stories all seem very aware of the “rules” for food preparation, and describe themselves as rushing to try to cover up the violation of these rules before the men find out what has happened. Amy introduced the story about Snoid and the spaghetti by saying “Not, well, that's so funny. Because my dad would never approve of this.” Sandy describes the attempt to clean up the errant pasta fagioli as going into “panic mode,” and ends the story with the coda “Looked like somebody got shot in there,” which is both wonderfully descriptive and shockingly violent, considering the

narrative has been about a dropped pot of sauce. In Kay's story, the women are "caught" serving an unsuspecting man shredded beef tongue, and, according to Kay, "He got kind of pissed! Yes, he did, because she didn't tell him it was tongue." And as mentioned above, all of these stories were told in the context of sharing kitchen nightmare experiences. At first it seemed unusual that these kinds of stories, which are about the successful cover-up of a mistake, would be told along with accounts of dropping pans of lasagna into a hot oven or slicing open a finger. But these incidents are considered "nightmares" because of the stress that occurs when the kitchen rules are violated. The fact that the women were successfully able to cover up what went wrong appears to be of secondary importance.

Conclusion

I have explored the ways that acts of food preparation and storytelling about kitchen nightmares can serve as opportunities for women to express a coded critique or outward rejection of expectations that they will take full and near-constant responsibility for providing meals for the family in accordance with the food rules of the male partner and/or children. Both of these acts can allow women to express outright aggression towards the male partner and his food rules in a way that is similar to what occurs during a practical joke. But it is important to keep in mind that the kitchen can be a heavily contested space, where power struggles of varying degrees of seriousness are played out on a daily basis. All of the stories I collected that shared this theme were lighthearted. They were presented as humorous recountings of the foibles of both partners, and while it

seemed clear that a discovery that the food rules had been breached might have caused an argument in the moment, it did not appear that there had been any long term negative consequences for the female partner. On the other hand, it did not seem that there was any relaxing of the food rules by the male partner as a result of the humorous treatment of his rules and expectations. Reframing these incidents as funny stories that both the dupes and outsiders are invited to laugh at provides women with the opportunity to give themselves greater power and a potentially disruptive influence, although it does not offer the kind of permanent respite from kitchen drudgery and its accompanying expectations that claiming incompetence might.

These kinds of narratives and anecdotes were only shared by older, straight, married women in long-term partnerships with men. This certainly does not mean that younger women and women in different kinds of relationships do not also have and share these stories, but I think it does suggest a kind of generational difference in the kinds of kitchen nightmare stories that women tell at various stages of their lives. In contrast, younger women in committed heterosexual relationships most often told kitchen nightmare narratives about attempting to put together an elaborate meal for their boyfriends only to fail spectacularly at it. These stories seem to be about the embarrassment of failing at performing femininity through cooking, and often include a coda either about how nice and understanding their boyfriends were about the situation, or how funny they found it, as in the following example:

Claire: Back to pancakes again. Um, so it was like the first Valentine's Day with James [her boyfriend] and he was, and I was like, "We're gonna do a pancake breakfast. It's going to be really cute." And so like, I, it's not that it took a long time, but I was like, that was the DAY. That was how that holiday was going to be

spent. And then, that was one of those times when I was like, “James, you’re messing it up, get out of here,” and made him just sit down while I made him pancakes. And then, there was this trick that I learned in Senior Foods [high school class], making pancakes, where you put it on a Corel plate and put it in the oven for like, on like 200 [degrees]. It will keep it warm while you’re making the rest of your pancakes. Ah, but James lived in an engineering dorm. And some dumb freshman engineer decided the put the oven on Celsius instead of Fahrenheit. So my pancakes were sitting in this 200 degree Celsius oven.

Sarah: Oh my gosh.

Claire: And we never realized until we took them out to eat them. And they were like plates themselves, they were just so hard. And we just, I was like, ready to cry, cause that was like the whole day. And James was just laughing at me, and I was like “I hate you.” But we had to throw them all out and, you know, that was it. It was really sad. He still laughs about it.

The women in lesbian relationships I interviewed did not share either of this type of kitchen nightmare narrative. While my sample size is too small to come to any conclusions about this, it is an area in which much further research could be done.

Men also told stories about transgressing a food or cooking related boundary of their wives or female partners, as in the following example from Tracy:

Tracy: But the next cooking, we were making potato soup.

Amy: That’s exactly what I was going to say. Yep.

Tracy: So, Amy’s out there, she’s making it. And, it, she’s stirring it up and I’m looking at it. My family always made theirs real thick. And, more like a milk, it almost looked like. So I say, just married, say, “That doesn’t look how my mother makes it.”

Sarah: Oh no.

Amy: “When’s it gonna get thick,” or something, “like my mom’s?”

Tracy: You know, like my mother’s. I think you said, “You can go to your mother’s and get it,” or something like that.

[Laughter]

Interestingly, Amy still appears to get the upper hand here, as the “punchline” of the narrative is her suggesting that Tracy should return home to his mother if he is unsatisfied with how she makes potato soup. But the humor of the story is also based on stereotypical and potentially misogynist ideas about how mothers-in-law and new wives will struggle for control over the domestic environment of a man, and it depicts the woman involved (Amy) as being deeply concerned with her ability to cook potato soup correctly. Rather than opposing, the humor here seems to work to maintain the status quo. Ultimately, the sample size for this project is much too small to draw any definite conclusion about who tells this kind of story, but the narratives collected do point to some areas for further research.

Chapter 3: “So, the moral of the story is...”

In this chapter I will explore the pros and cons of the main methodological process I used to complete this project, ethnographic interviews with groups of people who knew one another to varying degrees. I will compare my experiences of conducting this kind of interview with the smaller number of one-on-one interviews that are also included here. I will also briefly discuss my difficulties with attempting to create the kind of private interviewing sphere Margaret Yocom describes in “Woman to Woman: Fieldwork in the Private Sphere” by inviting women to cook with me while I recorded our conversations. From a general discussion of the logistics and potential advantages of using the group interview method I will move into an analysis of two specific benefits of using this method to analyze kitchen nightmare stories as performances and in a conversational context. First, participants in group interviews were likely to use declarative statements about their personalities involving food and food preparation preferences in group conversations. Second, these group interviews made it possible to observe how individuals work together to decide the “point” of a kitchen narrative while it is being told, sometimes interrupting or disagreeing with the narrator as the story is told.

Methodological Questions

There were two main methodological questions that informed the way this project was designed: understanding how kitchen nightmare stories actually appear and exist in everyday life, and how the use of food preparation in an interview context might

influence the process and outcome of the interview. These two concerns were inspired by the work of folklore scholars who have explored the limits and possibilities of the ethnographic method in understanding folkloric performance. As mentioned in the introduction, the idea to conduct group interviews as a way to understand how kitchen nightmare stories appear in daily conversation came from the writings of Kenneth S. Goldstein and Elaine Lawless. Goldstein first introduced the idea of the “induced natural context” in his 1964 book *A Guide for Field Workers in Folklore*. As described in the Introduction, Goldstein suggested that the folklorist gather people together in an attempt to recreate the “natural” setting for the performance of a specific genre of folklore. Elaine Lawless assembled women who were involved in ministry into a discussion group that met to explore their life stories and experiences working in their field for her 1993 reciprocal ethnography *Holy Women, Wholly Women: Sharing Ministries Through Life Stories and Reciprocal Ethnography*. Lawless included the women she interviewed in the writing process of the finished product. While I did not exactly mirror the technique of either person in the completion of this project, their utilization of an assembled group as a means of observing and understanding performances of folklore informed both the planning and execution of my interviews.

Food studies scholars from a variety of different fields have commented on food’s central position in everyday life and in both celebratory and somber occasions. Many of the people I interviewed discussed the importance of having “family dinner” in their homes growing up. A repast is typically held after funeral services, and a meal consisting of festive, specialized foods is often served as the centerpiece of American holidays like Thanksgiving or the Fourth of July. One of my main questions in conducting this

research was whether or not the power of food in building bonds between people at social events would translate to the context of the interview. In the 1985 essay “Woman to Woman: Fieldwork in the Private Sphere,” Margaret Yocom suggests that women doing fieldwork with other women might benefit from conducting their interviews in the private sphere, as this is the context in which many women feel most comfortable to talk and tell stories. Yocom argues that often women will talk and swap stories while doing work in the private sphere, and that this can be an excellent time for women ethnographers to build rapport with interviewees and make them feel the most comfortable sharing stories about their lives.

I was interested in exploring how these proposed relationships between women, the private sphere, and work would play out in the context of telling personal experience narratives about kitchen nightmares while cooking, especially since so many of the types of work and the locations of the women’s private sphere proposed by Yocom involve the preparation and serving of food. To do this, I invited many of the women I interviewed and some groups of both women and men to cook with me while we conducted our interviews. Unfortunately, I was only able to conduct one interview, the largest recorded, in which the group was engaged in preparing a meal during the interview. This group consisted of two women and four men. Perhaps because the group included twice as many men as women, I did not get any clear feeling of a private sphere that was especially conducive to facilitating women’s talk and storytelling. I do think that this atmosphere lent itself to promoting a feeling of comfort and community during the interview process, and a mini-kitchen nightmare occurred when creamed corn was almost added into the giant pot of chili instead of whole kernel. Maybe not coincidentally, this

interview also featured some of the most personal stories collected for this project, as will be explored in a bit more detail below. In listening back to this recording, it is sometimes hard to hear everything that is going on, as there are sounds of chopping vegetables and clanging pots throughout. There were also always a few people sitting at the table closest to the microphone while others stood over the stove, creating smaller side conversations throughout the process. This was difficult to transcribe, but ultimately I feel that this may be as natural as an induced natural context could be. The flow of conversation was fairly unstructured, and talk flowed and separated into smaller side conversations and back into the main narrative smoothly.

In the future I would like to continue to explore the possibilities of conducting an interview with a smaller group of women while preparing a meal to see what kinds of results might ensue, but this may be difficult, as many women I proposed this interviewing style to did not seem very interested in it. One woman had planned to make a lasagna during our interview, another said she had to bake a cake that night anyway, and wouldn't mind doing it while the interview was going on. In both cases, I arrived to find that the food had already been prepared. During my interview with Elaine, who owns her own cafe and bookstore, she told me that she was hesitant to dwell too much on her mistakes in the kitchen, and reported that she had been joking with her coworkers earlier in the day that doing this interview was going to jinx her during a catering event she was hired to work later in the week (she also told me she had recently catered Chelsea Clinton's visit to the Penn State Campus to give a speech, but was getting something from her car when Clinton came back to the kitchen to introduce herself to the staff). I suspect that the subject matter of the interview might have made both men and women

less interested in conducting the interview while preparing a meal. It is possible that this process would be more attractive to people if the project were on a more neutral food-related topic like favorite family recipes or holiday traditions more generally.

There are important links between conversation and sharing food that could make ethnographic work on all sorts of subjects feel more natural and comfortable. During the interview with Elaine, we were discussing the various ways you can salvage a meal and act like you always intended for it to come out the way it did when you are serving it to a customer, even if that's not necessarily true. This reminded me of a time when I had attempted to use my slow cooker to make a fennel risotto with brown rice, and it came out so slimy that it was completely inedible and I had to throw it away. This was one of my first interviews, and I was not sure whether or not it would be appropriate to take up time with my own story, but it came to mind, so I thought I would mention it. Elaine, responded with "Oh my gosh I just had a memory that you reminded me of, of throwing out a food," and proceeded to tell me a story about making a half gallon batch of salsa that was so spicy that eating a tiny sample of it made her lips and throat numb (she ended up throwing the batch away). After sharing this story, Elaine thought for a minute, and then said "It's funny when you tell stories, like how many things...That's sort of how we, you know, a dinner table conversation sort of happens as well as it...[laughs] I'll probably remember all sorts of horrible stories later."

Elaine's mentioning that "It's funny when you tell stories, like how many things," when considered in the context of her telling me that my own story had reminded her of the one she was about to tell suggests that what she meant here was that hearing a story can often remind us of one of our own. She also explicitly links the process of

storytelling itself to food and commensality. Many interviews were conducted with pairs or groups of people who knew one another in the hopes of stimulating interesting conversations about food and cooking. Additionally, food was present or played a major part in several of the interviews. As mentioned, the largest group interview was conducted while the members of the group and I collaboratively prepared a pot of chili for ourselves and some visiting friends. In other cases, interviewees offered food to share during the interview, or ate a meal during the process.

Returning to the pros and cons of conducting group interviews (with or without food), one major problem with a project like this one, in which an attempt is made to interpret the stories people tell about their kitchen nightmare scenarios, is that it is impossible to be there when these stories would come up normally in conversation. Scholars like Alan Dundes, Dell Hymes, and Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett have stressed the importance of moving beyond the folkloric text to the actual lived moment and the performance of folklore.⁵ In order to interpret this folkloric performance, understanding the many layers of context that informed and were constituted by the text was considered necessary. In the case of this project, the “texts” of the narratives themselves are of interest, and will be explored further below. But ideas of context are of equal importance in understanding why and how people share stories about their mistakes in the kitchen (if they do), and what they may be communicating about themselves and others when they do exchange these narratives. To make up for the fact that there was no way for me to know when a story like this might come up “organically,” I interviewed people in groups of three or more, as Goldstein suggested in his book. I conducted three different types of

⁵ See Alan Dundes's *Interpreting Folklore* (1980), Dell Hymes's "Breakthrough into Performance" (1975), and Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's "A Parable in Context: A Social Interactional Analysis of Storytelling Performance" (1975).

interviews to complete this project: traditional one-on-one ethnographic interviews, interviews with couples, and group interviews with two or more people who knew one another to varying degrees. In all three types of interviews, my hope was to be able to inspire somewhat spontaneous tellings of kitchen nightmare stories through the telling of similar stories.

Three interviews were conducted that consisted of myself and two interviewees. Two of these three interviews were with married couples who had been together for several decades each. The third interview was with two older women who are neighbors. Obviously, the dynamics were very different in interviews with long-term couples than they were in the interview with the two neighbors. In some ways, the stakes of the interview seemed much lower in the latter interview. They came into the situation with specific stories to share in mind (one of the women had a handwritten list of narratives that she had created with the help of her family), and their sharing of these narratives was relaxed and friendly. We shared a plate of cheese and crackers while we talked about a wide range of topics loosely related to cooking mistakes. While stories shared among and about women friends were mostly unaggressive and friendly, interviews with couples and people who have lived together for a long time platonically had a decidedly more aggressive edge. Many of these dynamics between couples have been explored in Chapter Two. I would add here that these more tense or potentially subversive joking exchanges still seem to be present in group interviews in which a couple is being interviewed along with other acquaintances, friends, or family members.

Interviews with groups of people tended to be longer and less structured than those with one or two people. They were also the ones most likely, in my opinion, to come closest to what

Goldstein would call an “induced natural context.” In all of the group interviews conducted, interviewees asked one another questions and told stories that were inspired by the ones told beforehand. Cooking experiences were compared and contrasted, and one story about a specific type of kitchen nightmare lead to another. With large groups of people who know one another to some extent, stories that follow similar themes flow one after another in a way that seems fairly close to how they would occur if I had not been there with my recording equipment⁶. During the interview at the collective house in Philadelphia, there were several instances of one story inspiring another on a similar topic. The story one man shared about accidentally preparing a steak rare for a customer who had ordered it well done caused a dramatic reaction in the room, and inspired another to tell the story about an irate customer smearing a slice of pizza all over his service window featured in Chapter One. Later on in the interview, the same man who had undercooked the steak shared the story about his father forcing him to eat a hot dog at a barbecue (mentioned in Chapter Two). This caused another housemate to share a similar story of tensions between father and son being played out through food, at the prompting of a third housemate:

Jon: Um, so I had this negative experience where, actually it’s with ramen noodles. So my parents divorced when I was nine, and I would go to my dad’s house every other weekend. And my stepmom and my dad were alcoholics, and they would go to the bar until like six in the morning, they would come home really late. And they weren’t around, and I didn’t know how to cook, and my mom didn’t show me how to cook. So I didn’t really know what I was doing, and I was hungry. And the only thing that they had in the house was *stupid* ramen noodles. And I hate it, and I like didn’t even know what to do. I would like, wouldn’t know what to do with it. And, um, even though I had two step-siblings, they would make it. And I didn’t even want it. It was just like, that’s all they made, it was so stupid. And yeah, to this day I just can’t eat ramen noodles. It just

⁶ For more on “following-on stories” see Hufford 1992:160.

reminds me of that weird, neglectful kind of period in my life. So I just like, I've never really liked ramen noodles. They're not really that great, right?

This group of people seemed fairly open and comfortable with one another, and told increasingly more serious and personal stories as the night went on, but this pattern was not repeated in other interviews of any number of people.

While interviews conducted with larger groups of people contained the most instances of the following-on effect that I was chasing, it also occurred in smaller group interviews of three or more, in interviews with pairs, and in one-on-one interviews. Neighbors Pam and Ruth riffed on failed attempts to cook red beans and rice correctly and swapped stories about their husbands' tribulations at the grill. Amy, Tracy, and Kaila, the family I interviewed at their home in Pittsburgh, exchanged stories about Jell-O salads gone awry. Elaine and I discussed the heartbreak of having to throw out large quantities of inedible food. Interviews with two or more people were also more likely to include instances of individuals using declarative statements about their level of skill in the kitchen to illustrate something deeper about their personalities, although a few of these did occur in one-on-one interviews.

Declarative Food Statements

Declarative "I am" statements using food preparation and consumption as the characterization of a major personality trait occurred with great regularity throughout the group interviews. As Michael Owen Jones points out, there are a myriad of different ways for a person to express who they are using food, from the "chocoholic" to the "meat and potatoes man" (2005:143). These did come up at times in one-on-one interviews, but were much more likely to

occur in interviews with two or more people present besides the interviewer, and more likely to be fleshed out with further evidence. When asked to provide some background information on his cooking style and history, Jon (who shared the story about ramen above) called himself a “kitchen idiot” and explained that he only recently learned to cook:

Jon: I just learned how to cook. Easy mac? Turns out it really is very easy. Um, it’s simple. I can explain it later. Let me see, let me think. So cooking for me has been just a shit show.

He goes on to describe how he “used to” live off of chicken fingers and ranch dressing, and his roommates helpfully point out that he still does that. Jon is also the man who attached pancakes to a poster of Albert Einstein with a kitchen knife and left them until they grew mold, and the one who assembles an omelet on his best friend’s face on her birthday each year.

In my interview with Tom and Sandy, Tom said that he likes to experiment in the kitchen, while Sandy said, “If it comes close to sounding like science, I’m not doing it.” She followed up this statement by showing me a cake she had baked from a box mix earlier that day. A short conversation about the merits of using a mix to make cake followed. This reminded her of the following story, which has some of the same practical joke aspects explored in Chapter Two. In this case, Sandy becomes complicit in an ongoing low-key prank her brother-in-law plays on his wife, who seems to reject the role of good-natured dupe:

Sandy: It’s funny because Tom’s sister is very exact, and she follows the recipe by the book. And she used to get so frustrated with me and like, “Well how much are you putting in there?” I’m like, “I don’t know a little bit of this.” [Laughs] She’d be so exact [...] That’s just sort of a funny thing that, I make these brownies from Duncan Hines mix? Easy. And then melt chocolate chips on top of them and let it harden. And my brother-in-law, Tom’s sister’s husband, loves them. And he’s always, he calls them my,

you know, special, secret recipe brownies. And he'll purposely talk them up, like, cause he knows that it annoys his wife. Cause she knows how I made them. He'll say "Sandy if you've got the time, a couple hours in your day where you could dig out that old recipe. I know you've got it buried somewhere, and make those brownies." [Laughs] And she'll be like, "Oh gad Kyle, it's just out of a box!" [Laughs]

Tom: It takes her 20 minutes!

Sandy: It's like they're this Holy Grail food.

Here, Sandy uses relationships to food to describe her sister-in-law in a way that contrasts her own attitude towards cooking (avoidance of complex recipes, adding a "little bit of this" whenever seems appropriate) with her sister-in-law's more "exact" nature. In the omitted bit of conversation, Sandy directly says that a comparison of their shopping lists would reveal how different their personalities are, as Sandy abbreviates "butter" to "butt," saying that she will know what it means, while her sister-in-law will painstakingly write out "I Can't Believe It's Not Butter" on her own grocery list. The story that follows is technically a personal experience narrative, as Sandy does play a part in it. But the main action of the story rests between her in-laws, with the husband talking up Sandy's brownies and transforming them into the kind of old-timey heirloom recipe that is often glorified on TV and in restaurant menus ("Just like mom used to make!") to annoy his wife, who may potentially have and follow a more complex and involved recipe. This story illustrates how Sandy's carefree attitude towards cooking means that she both gets praise for her cooking without much effort, and gets to take part in a joke at her sister-in-law's expense. Her sister-in-law's exactness ends up looking undesirable by comparison.

In an interview conducted with three women in their mid-twenties who work together in an office in Philadelphia, expressing their feelings about cooking lead to more nuanced explorations of their personality traits and ethnic backgrounds. One woman contrasts her own eating habits with those of her girlfriend. In this case, the speaker considers herself a more cautious, conservative personality, while her partner is the more relaxed, eccentric one. It is interesting to note here that in this case, the positive valuation seems to be placed on the woman's more rigidly structured eating habits than on those of her partner:

Gabs: Yeah, I do a lot of, like, making Rebecca eat leftover food. Because she's the same way. Like, she doesn't care. Like, she'll pretty much eat anything that I'll put in front of her. Like, even if she's like "I don't really like this," you know? Like, she'll still eat it. Whereas if I don't like something, I'm not going to eat it.

What Sandy described as "exactness" and negatively contrasted with her own more relaxed approach to cooking is recast as having a strong, impregnable set of boundaries in comparison with those of her partner, who is described as being willing to eat anything, even if she doesn't like it. Gabs goes on to say that she will often force her partner to eat all of the leftovers in the fridge, as it doesn't bother her as much to eat them.

When I asked this group of three women to describe their backgrounds with cooking, the following exchange took place:

Greta: So, my mom is a really good cook, and I'm from Lithuania, I was born there. And my mom typically still makes Lithuanian food, which is why, like, I love coming home. Because it like, keeps me connected to my Lithuanian culture. Like, for example, I didn't have pasta and meat sauce until college. Because--

Gabs: That's crazy!

Greta: Just to like, show you, like, me coming to college? It introduced me to so many different foods that I'd never tried. But personally, I hate cooking. I only really enjoy cooking when I'm cooking with other people. Like if we're having friends over, or I'm cooking with my boyfriend, like, for the social aspect I like it. But typically if I'm home by myself I won't cook. Or I'll just like snack for dinner and things like that.

This is interesting because Greta says consistently throughout the interview that she does not like to cook. Despite her negative feelings about cooking, she uses food as a way to communicate something important about herself (that she is Lithuanian) to the other two women in the room, and as a tool for illustrating how different from theirs she feels her life has been. It appears to have worked, as Gabs expresses shock that Greta had never tasted pasta with meat sauce until she got to college. Gabs considers herself ethnically Italian, which surely has something to do with her level of disbelief here. For Greta, the foods she grew up eating (and didn't grow up eating) are major parts of her ethnicity, which is an important aspect of her personality. She performs this part of her identity through discussing the connections between Lithuanian food and ideas of home, but not through the actual cooking of Lithuanian food herself. When describing the foods she likes to make with friends or her boyfriend, she mentions chicken parmigiana, tacos, and chocolate cake. But Lithuanian cuisine exists in her narrative repertoire of her personality. It comes up again during a discussion of how the women negotiate differences in tastes when preparing meals with their significant others:

Greta: So like I said, I'm Lithuanian. So Eastern Europeans like their food like pretty bland. Like, I didn't grow up liking spicy food. But my boyfriend is half Mexican.

[Laughter]

Greta: Sooo. He really likes spicy food. So a lot of times, when he cooks for me, cause I no longer cook for him...

[Laughter]

Greta: He'll like, make the food and then he'll always have hot sauce on the side with it.

In addition to declarative statements made by individuals involving food there are interesting group dynamics at work in the evaluative statements of the kitchen nightmare stories.

Group Evaluation of Kitchen Nightmare Narratives

While transcribing these narratives I noticed that I was having difficulty picking out where exactly evaluative statements were occurring in the kitchen nightmare stories collected during group interviews until I came to realize that the groups were collaborating to come up with an evaluative statement that fit for the scenarios being discussed. Because kitchen nightmare stories are about a time when something went counter to plan in the kitchen, the events being recounted constitute a disruption of the typical social order. In group storytelling contexts, tellers and audience members work together to decide what the “point” of the story is, in a way that is similar to how multiple people play a part in the performance of a legend.⁷

In their 1967 work on the structure of orally performed personal experience narrative “Narrative Analysis: Oral Version of Personal Experience,” William Labov and Joshua Waletzky collected personal narratives from a diverse group of individuals, broke the texts of these narratives down into smaller pieces, and then analyzed how these statements all worked together

⁷ See Dégh and Vázsonyi, 1971.

to make up the oral narrative. They argued that narratives consist broadly of an orientation section which serves to inform listeners of the circumstances surrounding the main events of the story, a series of events that complicates the circumstances and sets the main action of the narrative in motion, a resolution of these complicating events, and a coda which signals to the listener that the conversation is returning from the events of the story to the present time.

But these elements are not enough to constitute a complete narrative on their own. According to Labov and Waletzky, narratives including only these four parts can be difficult for listeners to understand, and fail to answer the “so what?” question. They propose that a complete narrative must also include an evaluation which points to the main purpose of the narrative (they remark that many narratives function to call attention to strange or bizarre events, cultivating an air of mystery, or to portray the teller in the best possible light), and that the intended “point” of the narrative will have an effect on its structure. Summing up these ideas, they say: “The *evaluation* of a narrative is defined by us as that part of the narrative that reveals the attitude of the narrator towards the narrative by emphasizing the relative importance of some narrative units as compared to others. This may be done by a variety of means” (1967:32). They provide a list of five potential ways that an evaluative statement can be effected in the narrative: direct statement; lexical intensifiers; formally, by suspending the action of the narrative or repetition of key phrases; or culturally, by describing a symbolic action or by telling all the events to a third person not present during the actual interview.

One of the most interesting parts of doing interviews for this project was listening to the evaluations interviewees used to explore what was most important about the kitchen nightmare stories. Often, these evaluations were just as funny as the main events of the stories themselves, as in the following example that has been alluded to elsewhere in this work:

Amy: And one of my earliest memories is, and I don't know how old I was, I was probably around five though. Is, my mom was cooking at the stove, and she was using a tea towel to, as a potholder or something, and she put it back in the drawer where the tea towels go. But it was on fire, like she had caught the end of it on fire and didn't realize it? And the tea towel drawer was on fire and if you look really closely at that drawer you can see that it's darkened. So I remember sitting at that table and seeing the flames, like, coming out of the tea towel drawer. **Cooking is a dangerous thing** [emphasis mine].

Beyond simple comedic effect, I have noticed that in group storytelling sessions, the evaluation of the narrative itself becomes a collaborative project rather than simply the domain of the teller themselves in a way that seems similar to the findings legend scholars about the performance and significance of legends to the communities in which they exist.

In their 1971 work on legend and belief, Linda Dégh and Andrew Vázsonyi emphasized the active quality of legends in relation to belief—legends are most often not accepted as true at face value by their tellers and listeners. Instead, legends are narratives which ask audiences to claim a position concerning the events being related, whether they believe they are true or not (or fall somewhere in between belief and disbelief). Similarly, Bill Ellis argues that looking to the text of legends alone is not enough. To truly understand them, they have to be studied as performances in their specific contexts:

Hence we can say that two features define the typical legend. It begins by placing the events that follow as precisely as possible in the group's conception of the real world, and the events it narrates or alludes to challenge in some way the boundaries of what the world is or should be. Bearing in mind that the legend is not self-contained but is part of an ongoing conversation, we see why the text cannot be separated from the legend-telling event, since the

performance arises from the group's concerns and in turn provokes further discussion and performance. (2003:11)

He goes on to pose the question "What are people *doing* when they tell legends" (Ellis 2003:11), and he then compares two versions of a legend about a haunted house in Ohio to try to get at the answer.

One version of the legend in Ellis's example, which was transcribed word-for-word rather than boiled down to its simple narrative elements, illustrates how the telling of legends opens up a space for individuals to explore what is normal and what is acceptable, in this case in regard to marriage and domestic violence (the legend-telling session here involves the haunting of an old house by the ghost of a woman who was axe-murdered by her jealous husband). After analyzing the discussions, interruptions, and corrections throughout two women's telling of the haunted house legend, Ellis determines that the "point" of the legend, the reason it is being told and discussed by these young women, has to do with issues about marriage and male behavior:

Where the abstract [legend text] given first would appear to be a narrative explaining why a house is haunted, in fact the legend-telling event transcribed is primarily a discussion of 'men' and how to deal with their unreasonable demands. Whether or not the house is haunted is not important enough for the two to resolve; what is threatening is the possibility of being trapped in a male-dominated marriage. Of course the same legend may appear in other conversations to illustrate entirely different points. (2003:25)

In the case of kitchen nightmare stories, narrative evaluation is often collaborative in a similar way, and can reveal how the people participating in the conversation feel about the disruption of the typical domestic order when a kitchen nightmare occurs. The group interview is

uniquely well suited to the task of making these kinds of interactions between narrators and audience members visible, as ethnographers are not generally encouraged to interrupt their interviewees or offer alternative evaluations for the events they describe.

Audience members contribute to the forming of the evaluative sections of narratives in a number of different ways, at varying levels of interaction. As a general rule, people who knew one another better, and were more familiar with the events being recounted, were more involved in actually negotiating the “so what” of the narratives, but many people of all levels of familiarity with the tellers and the stories participated. Most of the time, these moments of participation were meant to “smooth over” the events of the narrative, or at least put a more positive spin on what happened, perhaps as a way of compensating for the fact that they have been laughing at their acquaintances’ misfortunes in the kitchen. During the interview with the three office workers in Philadelphia, one woman shared a short anecdote about accidentally burning the bottom of a pot while making rice with her boyfriend. “That’s easy to do,” interjected one of her coworkers, and the other one responded with “Yeah, I’ve done that.” Another example of this occurred in the following longer narrative:

Tom: Um, there was another time when I experimented, when I was a youngster and almost burnt my parents’ house down. Um, I wanted Asian vegetables. So we had a cast iron skillet. And my father was out of town and my mother was out that evening. So I was going to make these grilled vegetables for my, which I was instructed not to, but I was gonna do it for my sisters and brothers. And I had this hot oil that was getting real hot on the stove and it flamed up. So, not being very smart, I was thinking well—

Sandy: Well you were, how old were you, like eight?

Tom: No. I was older than that. I was in eighth grade, so I was thirteen. Twelve, thirteen. Um, so I thought, “Well geez, I’ve got

to put this fire out,” so I carried it over to the stove and turned the water on, and put it under the water. Which is not the way you put out a grease fire. So, ah, it just kind of combusted.

Sandy: Learned that one.

Tom: Yeah.

Sandy: Hmm.

Tom: So, that wasn't a good night.

[Laughter]

Tom identifies the cause of the grease fire as his thirteen-year-old self being “not very smart,” but his wife Sandy rejects that interpretation of the events. She first interrupts to clarify how old Tom was at the time of the incident, implying that he may have been too young to understand the mechanics of a grease fire. Tom rejects this interpretation, pointing out that he was an eighth grader at the time of the incident. Sandy breaks into the narrative again a bit further on, after Tom has described his failed efforts to put out the fire by running water over the skillet. This time instead of trying to excuse the mistake by pointing out how young Tom was, she says “Learned that one,” reframing the events in a new context. Tom has made it clear that the story is about him being “not very smart,” but Sandy recasts it as a learning experience that he went through as a child. Her “Hmm,” after his agreement with her statement is a bit ambiguous, but it seems to signal that she has successfully shifted the perspective on the narrative. After a brief pause, Tom concludes with a coda that does not mention intelligence or immaturity, it neutrally (and hilariously) sums up the experience as not “a good night.”

Even in cases where it was not as easy for audience members to reframe the events of the narrative more positively or to assure the teller that they had experienced something similar (“That’s easy to do”), they often offered a positive evaluation of the story based on its ability to make them laugh. This feedback would suggest that the teller had succeeded in answering the “so what” question with the presentation of a story about outlandish or unbelievable events, as Labov and Waletzky mention in their essay. Coincidentally, the following story also involves a grease fire:

Lizzie: And then the one, you just reminded me, of like, when I studied abroad in London, um, I lived in a house with like three other girls. And my best friend and I were cooking dinner one night, we were probably cooking some fajita, I’m sure. And we were cooking it in a pan and we had a grease fire? And like, neither of us had any clue what to do.

[Laughter]

Lizzie: *Any*. Like we had never, we both don’t cook that much. And I think we did try putting it out with water, which I—

Gabs: Nope.

Lizzie: No. That didn’t work. So then we just like dropped the pan on the floor. And—

Gabs: That’s also not good—

Lizzie: —and we, I’m like, I think we like, covered it up. But like, there was a sear that like, a burn mark on our floor, and like we were renting this apartment. I don’t think anyone ever like approached us about it. But like—

Gabs: That’s so funny.

Lizzie: —we burned the floor. Cause we were like “Aaaaahhh!”
dropped the pan. Oh! I think we did get, like, the fire extinguisher.

[Laughter]

Lizzie: I think we got, we dropped it on the floor so we could go
grab the fire extinguisher.

Gabs: That’s really funny. That’s—

Lizzie: It’s been awhile since I’ve thought about that.

Gabs: That’s like the best kitchen disaster story ever.

Looking at the transcription of this part of the interview, it appears that Gabs is being fairly uniformly critical of Lizzie’s handling of the grease fire. The two seemed quite friendly and relaxed with one another in person, and Lizzie never signaled any disapproval of Gabs’s interjections as she told her story. But after Lizzie is done telling the narrative, Gabs offers up an evaluation of it that does not match her previous contributions to the exchange. Whereas before she has been critical of Lizzie’s behavior during the time when the grease fire occurred, Gabs now praises her storytelling, declaring that Lizzie’s narrative is “the best kitchen disaster story ever.”

Sometimes, listening participants in the interview would take over the role of providing an evaluation of someone else’s story completely. After listening to Collin share his story about the woman who smeared pizza on the window at his work place, his housemates provided their own interpretations of what happened:

Ellen: That’s fucked.

Collin: It was pretty lame. Ah, but like, I guess like, maybe I had it coming. [...]⁸

Ellen: That's *terrible*.

Evan: So, moral of the story: Rich people frickin are weird.

[Laughter]

Ellen: They take shit very seriously.

Evan: They are so, so into their pizzas.

After telling the pizza story and wondering whether or not he had it coming, Collin switched topics briefly before returning to the story once again. He explained that the town he was working in at the time was heavily populated by wealthy tourists in the summer, and that they were often difficult customers. Ellen and Evan picked up this refrain, with Evan explicitly saying that the “moral” of Collin’s story is that rich people are weird, not that Collin had it coming or was in some way at fault for what had happened. He and Ellen then sarcastically discuss how seriously rich people take their pizzas (and other “shit”).

In the interview with neighbors Pam and Ruth, Pam shared a story about being gifted a biscuit-cutter for Christmas one year that inspired a humorous closing statement from Ruth:

Pam: Well speaking of biscuits. When Ann was little we would often have biscuits for breakfast and what I would do is get, mix up some Bisquick and make drop biscuits. So Ann went to visit her grandmother. And her grandmother made biscuits rolled them out and cut them with a biscuit cutter. Well, Ann had never seen a biscuit cutter. That was so exciting! So, for Christmas that year, I got a biscuit cutter!

⁸ Here, the conversation topic shifts briefly as the group’s cat, Simone, enters the kitchen and jumps on the table.

[Laughter]

Pam: It was like, “Ok, Mom, you’re going to have to do this right.”
I still have it but I don’t know that I have ever used it [Laughs]

Ruth: Like some people achieve greatness, and some have it thrust
upon them?

[Laughter]

Ruth ironically contrasts a situation that has become a bit of a meme (a woman receiving a home appliance or gadget of some sort as a gift) with the idea of being “called to greatness.” Her statement calls attention to the high expectations placed on women to perform household tasks well and cheerfully. It also casts the narrative as a recognition of these ideas about women and domesticity as a bit absurd, inviting Pam and I to laugh at the scenario depicted in the story.

There are other cases in which members of the audience become active tellers of the story throughout the performance when interviews are conducted with groups. The last (and longest) example to be explored here is of such a storytelling experience, and shows how the members of the collective house in Philadelphia negotiate what is and is not acceptable housemate behavior through the telling of a story about toasting a bagel. While one specific housemate is understood to have ownership over the story, and is invited to tell it by another member, all of the housemates play an active part in the relating of the narrative, correcting one another and filling in the gaps along the way:

Ellen: Do you want to tell the toast story, Jon?

Jon: Yes! So, wow, where do I even begin with this story? It’s so weird.

Evan: This is quite a story.

Jon: So, ok—

Ellen: Oh, just to set the precedent, what you're about to hear happened before I moved in, and I've been hearing about it ever since. It's crazy. I don't know. I just think it's bizarre how recurring this—

Collin: Oh my god. Is that a kitchen nightmare?

Jon: That's it, yeah. Adam's gonna tell his side of it later. So—

Cassidy: Did it happen here in this house?

Jon: It did. This toaster—

Evan: In this very room—

Ellen: This very kitchen. This very toaster.

Evan: This very toaster.

Jon: So here's what happened. Adam teaches [piano] lessons in the other room. And I think he was having, ah, he, ok. So here's what happened. He was getting used to so many people being in the house. And, you know, moving about and stuff. And he's teaching a lesson. We weren't really on good terms then anyway. And I put, I came home, and I had a long dee [sic]. And I was like, I'm coming home,—

Evan: That [dee] means "day."

Jon: Yes, it means day. I am making toast. You know. That's what I'm going to do. So I throw a bagel in there. It was actually a bagel. And all of a sudden it's just like, carrying through the house. I had no clue how much it was affecting Adam. And I hear him, he's teaching this, this child to play piano and he, he just goes, "Oh! Yes! I smell it. Do you?" And he said that again and I was like, "That was a little weird."

[Laughter]

Jon: That seemed a little passive aggressive or something. Like maybe he wanted me to hear it?

Evan: It sounded like he was trying to talk to Jon, but, err, he was trying to talk to Jon, but he was actually talking to the kid.

Jon: Right, which he—

Evan: “Smell that toast!”

Jon: He said he does that—

Collin: So dramatic—

Ellen: He does that all the time. He’ll make weird comments and they’re from the kitchen and you can hear him and he means for you to hear it.

Sarah: Oh.

Jon: And so afterwards—

Collin: It’s so, it’s actually so passive aggressive.

Evan: Passive aggressive.

Jon: So I, the lesson, the lesson ends, right? And Evan and I are in the kitchen. And Adam—

Ellen: Alex! Hey! [Alex joins the conversation]

Jon: He just burst into the room. Very, he was infuriated, I would say. He seemed—

Evan: He was livid. He was as mad as I’ve ever seen him—

Jon: And he goes—

Evan: —over this toast.

Jon: — “That can’t happen. That? Can’t happen. That can’t happen.” And he’s pacing back and forth. And we’re—

Evan: That’s all he said for a while.

[Laughter]

Jon, Evan, Collin [together]: That. Can’t. Happen. That can’t happen.

Jon: That can not happen.

Collin: That? What just happened? Can not happen.

Jon: That was it for a while. That was ten or fifteen minutes. No, I’m just kidding.

Alex: Oh, I remember that!

Collin: You remember that?

Alex: That, that was something.

Jon: It was weird.

Alex: I heard second hand—

Collin: About the toast.

Alex: That was not a thing that could happen.

Jon: So, that happened.

[...] ⁹

Jon: This is the punchline. So he, he paces around for a minute and he says “This can’t happen, this can’t happen. Not at all.” And then we were like,

⁹ During the omitted dialogue, Alex formally greets everyone and tells them a little about his day before the Toast Story resumes.

dumbfounded. We were like, “This can’t be the toast.” Like, this can’t be what he’s mad about—

Evan: This can’t be about the toast.

Jon: And he goes, “The toast? I could smell it.” He said, “It distracted me, I know it distracted the student.” We were like, “Yeah, it distracted him, you were yelling about it.” Like, of course the kid was distracted, you’re yelling into his ear about the toast.

Evan: You’re yelling into his ear about the toast. Like, interrupting the lesson.

Jon: And so, he said, and I, I was offended. I said, I probably was too offended I was like “I, I had a long day, I was so hungry, and I needed that toast.”

Evan: No, I didn’t really read it that way.

Jon: Not exactly. I’m exaggerating slightly—

Evan: Maybe in my, from my perspective, we were both like, dumbfounded that he was so mad—

Jon: Yeah, we didn’t say much actually.

Evan: The toast! We just kind of let him go for awhile I think.

Jon: Yeah. I think you’re right.

Evan: And, uh, ok, back to you.

Jon: Yeah. No, so that’s pretty much it. And we had a personal conflict and stuff, and he apologized to me later and he said “I’m sorry if that affected you like, how I reacted” and stuff. So that’s the whole thing.

Ellen: But it was pretty crazy.

Evan: It was so wild.

Ellen: I moved in, people were talking about it. I've heard about it from everyone's perspective. Everyone's take on the Toast Story, I got.

Alex: It was. Toast was the talk of the house.

Ellen: It was!

Evan: After, after the toast incident happened Adam took to, um, giving us a daily text about when—

Collin: We could cook toast.

Evan: —his lessons would be. With the implication that we wouldn't cook toast.

Ellen: And that still happens today. We still get that text.

Jon: We do and this is when, sorry, what were you going to say?

Evan: So, he sends out this group text like the day or so after the toast incident, and he goes, um, he goes, "Hey everybody," um, "LESSON TEXT," he always starts them with "LESSON TEXT" all caps—

Ellen: And like, flames emoji—

Evan: And then he says, "I'll be teaching today from 5:30-6:00," or whatever. And then Al chimes in,—

Jon: Yeeahhh!

Evan: The joke of a lifetime, Al—

Alex: I chimed in, and I said "Ah damn! That's when I was having my Texas Toast cook-off!"

[Screams, laughter]

Alex: The loser buys the next loaf.

[Laughter]

Alex: I don't know if I made him mad, or—

[All talking at once]

Collin: It was the, it was the joke of a lifetime. It was the [unintelligible].

Jon is initially invited to tell this story, but Evan, who was also present, chimes in throughout to provide his own take, or to disagree with Jon's characterization of some of the events. Notably, it is Evan who attempts to portray Jon, the primary narrator, in the best light. When Jon suggests that he might have overreacted to Adam's anger, Evan disagrees, insisting that they were both too surprised by Adam's rage to fully react to the situation. Ellen provides the orientation before the story really gets going, and everyone remarks on Adam's "passive aggressive" and "dramatic" tendencies before Jon can explain what happened.

For Jon, the story ends on a note of reconciliation, with Adam apologizing for his behavior. He signals that the story is over by saying "So that's the whole thing," but the other members of the house continue the narrative. Ellen and Evan characterize the event as "pretty crazy," and make it clear that the Toast Incident is an event with lasting repercussions. For them, the finale of the story comes with Alex's Texas Toast cook-off joke. While Jon seems willing to write the whole thing off as a one-off event, and accept Adam's apology as all that is required to continue a friendly housemate relationship, the rest of the house seem less willing to let the incident go, or to let Adam's sending of "lesson texts," with their implication that no one will cook (it is unclear if only toast is prohibited) during his lessons pass without comment. Alex becomes the hero of the story, the one who is willing to call attention to the perceived ridiculousness of the incident and

the ensuing text messages and refuses to let bygones be bygones. It is important to note here that Adam was not present for this part of the conversation. I was supposed to get his version of the events later in the evening, but when he arrived home and was encouraged to share his side by his roommates, he said he preferred to let their version stand as the definitive record of the incident.

Conclusion

Based on my experiences working on this project, I believe that conducting group interviews with multiple individuals is an excellent way to study personal experience narratives in a conversational context. It is an especially useful strategy for a study like this one, in which the goal is to learn as much as possible about how personal experience narratives about cooking mistakes are used to perform identity and react to accepted societal ideas about how individuals of a certain group should feel and behave. In Chapter Two I explored this idea as it relates to ideas about traditional gender roles in interviews with couples. Here, I analyzed how group interviews make it possible to observe both the performance of individual identity through declarative statements about preferences in food preparation and the collective negotiation of what kitchen nightmare stories are “about” and how understandable or excusable they might be.

Conclusion

This project has begun exploration into the connections between foodways and personal experience narrative research through the lens of kitchen nightmare stories. These narratives were analyzed both thematically and socially, with questions about their content and their use in conversational situations guiding the research, particularly in the context of the negotiation and performance of traditional American gender roles. Kitchen nightmare stories were also examined as tools in the performance of other kinds of identity, with both the narration of the teller and the active participation of the audience in the storytelling process serving as focal points. How listeners responded to and interacted with the kitchen nightmare narratives of other individuals in the interview was used as a way of understanding how people in groups work out what kinds of mistakes in the kitchen are understandable and excusable, and how they navigate situations in which the events in the story being told are deemed inexcusable by the group at large.

Because food is such a central part of both everyday and festive human interaction, almost every individual will have a few stories involving food and cooking. People have varying levels of interest in food, and some count preparing it as a chore while others see it as an opportunity to express creativity and show love and caring for others. These differing feelings about the relative charms of food and cooking were reflected in the variety of themes represented in the taxonomy put together in Chapter One. While stories were told on a wide variety of topics, most fit under the wider umbrella of one or more of the following six major themes: inedible food, technological mishaps, stories about making a mess, stories about other people's kitchen nightmare experiences, narratives of resistance, and food service stories.

Stories about food that turned out to be inedible were the most commonly collected in this project. Often, these narratives included elements of performance anxiety, as in a scenario where a person was cooking something for an important person in their life such as a new partner or a parent-in-law. This theme also showed up frequently in food service stories, as many of the people I spoke with who worked in this industry experienced a lot of anxiety about preparing and serving food that looked appetizing and tasted good to customers. Most of the narratives of kitchen nightmares involving technological mishaps came from younger interviewees, or were told by older individuals about their earliest forays into learning to cook. A great majority of these stories involved unsuccessfully using the microwave to cook or reheat food unsupervised, and featured smoke, sparks, and occasionally even fire. Many other individuals cited starting grease fires while cooking over the stove and having no idea how to put them out as some of their earliest kitchen nightmares.

Stories about making a mess were often linked to inedible food as, in this type of story, the main course often ends up all over the floor or burning up on the bottom of the oven. Making a mess was also featured in several stories about other people—particularly stories about men who were either considered “neat freaks” who would be very upset about the existence of the mess, or as hopeless bulls in the china shop who were destined to make a mistake in the kitchen. Other kitchen nightmare stories about other people were lovingly told about relatives or friends whose foibles in the kitchen become the stuff of family folklore. Perhaps because a kitchen nightmare is necessarily a situation in which things do not go according to plan, many of the narratives collected included an overarching theme of resistance of one kind or another. One example of this is Ruth’s

description of her technique for getting away with burning beans while reading. The narratives explored in Chapter Two, about women conspiring to hide a kitchen nightmare, also feature this theme.

Finally, there is a whole genre of kitchen nightmare stories that include various aspects of the experience of working in the food industry. These narratives often include other themes, such as inedible food or making a mess, but the context is occupational rather than domestic, so the implications of the mistakes being described are shifted. For example, one man who had worked as a line cook at Ruby Tuesday's described a time when he had accidentally prepared a steak rare for a customer who had ordered it well done. When he said that the steak had gone out almost blue in the center, there was an audible groan of recognition from the other people in the room who had also worked as cooks or wait staff. While serving someone the exact opposite of what they asked for is not a positive experience for anyone preparing a meal, in the context of working as a line cook it means not only an angry consumer but also a disruption of the workflow that can cause delays as the cooks must rush to prepare a replacement item as quickly as possible, pushing all of their other orders back in line. An angry customer also means an angry manager, and the threat of losing one's job. Additionally, the experience of having one's work angrily rejected is potentially upsetting for cooks and wait staff. The man who told this story described the entire experience as "degrading." While many of the kitchen nightmare stories involving food service workers had thematic elements in common with the other narratives collected, there were a few motifs that seemed unique to them, such as the "problem customer" best exemplified by the woman who smeared her pizza all over the service window of the restaurant where one man worked in the summer.

Chapter One attempts to sift through and categorize the large number of different types of narratives collected in response to the request for a kitchen nightmare narrative during interviews. As stated, the wide variety of topics discussed is balanced by the fact that almost all of the narratives deal with one of the six major themes. In exploring these different themes, it becomes possible to understand not only what people see as most funny or unbelievable (and therefore what will make the best story), but also what it means to experience a kitchen nightmare. Often, the “nightmare” element of the story is more involved than it appears on the surface. In collecting stories about inedible food, for example, I was most focused on the disappointment and potential economic stresses of failing to make a meal correctly. It was only on listening back to these narratives later on that I noticed how often they included concerns about how the people who were planning to eat the meal would view the person who failed to prepare it correctly. I heard several more inedible food stories involving an important visit from a family member or boss than I did about a person who cooked a meal that failed to turn out just for themselves. Listening closely to how people describe what the “worst” part of their kitchen nightmare stories was is a useful way to understand what is aesthetically considered good or right about the preparation of a meal or a social situation involving food. It is an important technique in understanding both the values and aesthetics of individuals and the larger cultural groups they belong to.

Chapter Two focuses in on a specific topic that came up in several kitchen nightmare narratives that were thematically resistant. These stories, told by women who are married to or in long-term relationships with men, are about times when these women were able to successfully hide a kitchen mistake from their male partners only to reveal it

to them later on. Sometimes, the male partners were also present during the interview and listened to their wives tell the stories to me and everyone else present. These narratives often feature an orientation in which the women explain the “food rules” of their husbands, the list of allowed food pairings and taboos that must not be violated. In order to understand the stakes of the potential mistakes that were covered up, the women had to make it clear that certain rules would be broken if circumstances were left as they were, and that the breaking of these rules would lead to their husbands being upset and/or disgusted.

In retelling these stories in the interview context, the women were able to reconfigure the events of the narrative in a more positive way. An experience that in the moment was quite stressful and potentially restrictive is transformed in the recounting as a time when the woman was able to use her wit to quickly and successfully get herself out of a jam. These narratives take on elements of the practical joke, with the men being compelled to laugh along at their own expense and at least partially acknowledge what some women called the “ridiculousness” of their food rules. This strategy of reconfiguring events through narrative and using the storytelling context as an opportunity to offer critiques of the established order provides women with a way of resisting traditional gender roles without having to take an overt or permanent position against them.

The final chapter of this work explores how individuals use kitchen nightmare narratives, and personal experience narratives involving food more generally, to perform and present their identities to other people. While this happens in one-on-one interviews with the ethnographer, it is most apparent in larger interview groups, especially ones in

which the members do not know one another especially well. In group interviews, audience members take an active part in the telling of a personal experience narrative (in this case about kitchen nightmares) in much the same way they do during the telling of a legend. They assess whether or not each element of the narrative makes sense, or is being told accurately if they are familiar with the story. They provide reassurances to the teller that what they are describing could have happened to anyone (as the women who work together in Philadelphia did for their coworker when she described burning a pot while trying to cook rice), and refocus the conversation onto what they think is most important about the story if this conflicts with what the teller seems to think is the most valuable.

This is most easily recognized in the story about the toasted bagel shared at the end of the chapter. While Jon, who told the story, saw the most important element of the narrative to be the reconciliation between himself and his roommate Adam after an absurd conflict, the other people present refused to let him end the story there. Because they also live at the house and some were present for the actual event, they pick up the story after Jon leaves off and change the ending. Rather than focusing on how the conflict was quickly and efficiently dealt with, they point out that the consequences of the illicit toasting of the bagel are still felt in their shared space at the time of the interview. The finale of the story becomes a joke about a toast cook-off that one room mate facetiously suggested he was planning to hold during a time that Adam had scheduled a lesson at the house. The roommates applaud this man's handling of the situation and end the story with his telling this joke, effectively refocusing the story onto the seemingly good-natured mocking of Adam, who has overstepped his boundaries by presuming to dictate when his house mates are allowed to use their shared kitchen space.

When audience members are confronted with a kitchen nightmare story that they were not present for, are not familiar with, and can not relate to by offering a similar story or rationalizing the actions of the narrator, they find other ways to positively reinforce the teller. Most often, this occurs by providing a positive evaluation of the narrative *as a narrative*, as Gabs does when she responds to Jenny's story about permanently scorching her kitchen floor during a grease fire by saying "This is the best kitchen nightmare story ever." Because they are moments in which things do not go according to plan, conducting group interviews on the subject of kitchen nightmare narratives provides an opportunity to better understand how members of a cultural group (in the cases of most of the interviews conducted for this project, these were family, friend, and coworking cultural groups) work together to agree upon the significance of a narrative and create the boundaries of acceptable and unacceptable behavior within the group.

This work provides some important first steps in the research of kitchen nightmare stories and hopefully contributes to the meeting of the fields of personal experience narratives and foodways. But while this work has begun to explore the use of this kind of narrative in the construction and performance of group and individual identities, there is much more that could be explored regarding this topic.

As mentioned in the Introduction, the data used to write this work included interviews with 25 individuals. Due to time constraints, no formal follow-up interviews were conducted. It would be useful to conduct a series of interviews about kitchen nightmares with one group over time to get a more detailed, in-depth look at how these narratives are used in the creation and performance of identity with a specific group of

people. One way to do this which seems most intuitive would be to conduct a long-term ethnographic project with individuals employed in some aspect of the food service industry, as this group of people seems to have unique forms of these narratives. A project like this would be modeled after other studies of occupational folklore on restaurant work like Gary Alan Fine's 1996 book *Kitchens: The Culture of Restaurant Work*, but with a specific emphasis on the exchanges of kitchen nightmare narratives.

It would also be useful to further explore the ways that men of all ages and backgrounds tell kitchen nightmare narratives, and for what purposes they are most likely to do so. For a large number of little reasons, only one of the group interviews conducted for this project included a majority of male interviewees, and of the 25 individuals interviewed, less than half were male (10). A more thorough exploration of the kitchen nightmare narratives of men would complement and enhance the work done here on the subversive storytelling of women's cooking mistakes in Chapter Two. Conducting more interviews with couples from the LGBTQIA community would also be helpful in moving this work beyond a heterosexual paradigm in which a masculine/feminine binary is seen as either being upheld or questioned by the storytellers.

The sharing of other people's personal experience narratives about kitchen mishaps came up frequently during interviews. The questions of entitlement and ownership of stories that Amy Shuman explores in the 2005 book *Other People's Stories: Entitlement Claims and the Critique of Empathy* could be fruitfully applied to this phenomenon. As mentioned in Chapter One, some families have "heirloom" stories about the kitchen disasters of long-passed relatives which are told over and over, sometimes by family members who never actually knew the people featured in the narrative. While they

may not have been present at the time of events taking place, family members seem to feel a strong sense of group ownership over these stories, and to really enjoy telling them as way to orient the outsider (in this case that was me, the interviewer), to certain key facts about how the family group operates and what it values. It would be interesting to focus in on these kinds of family stories and attempt to understand who is “allowed” to tell them and when they are most likely to come up in conversation with non-family members.

Other kitchen nightmare stories about other people have a more ambiguous or negative tone. Sometimes they are told with the person who suffered through the experience serving as the butt of the joke, with the listener invited to laugh at their expense. This came up most frequently in stories straight women told about their husbands. On the other hand, most women seemed willing to make allowances for the mistakes of other women in the kitchen, often going out of their way to describe extenuating circumstances that might have lead to the scenario being described. One important exception to this rule concerned the mothers of women telling kitchen nightmare stories. While the other woman relatives and friends of the narrators are provided with a lot of understanding and compassion, at least mild criticism of the mother seems to be allowed, as in the following story:

Claire: We have kind of a continuous family mishap of, every single time we sit down for dinner we put the bread in the oven to toast it. Every single time we burn it. So it's like this constant reminding each other. Someone's always saying like, “Hey! Check the bread! Don't, don't forget the bread.” And there was this one time where we were sitting in the middle of dinner and we had already started, and someone goes “Hey! What about the bread?” And my mom gets up and she goes, and she checks. And she like, opens the oven, stares, closes it and then comes back and sits

down. And we're like, "What? Is it on fire or something?" "Yes it is." So, and we're like, "And you just left it? Like, go do something about it!" So we basically just like turned the oven off and closed it and let it kinda tone down. So the bread was literally on fire. We haven't repeated that, but we still burn it.

While this kitchen nightmare story is a "family" one, the mother's failure to do anything about the burning toast is the focus of the narrative. Critical phrases like "And you just left it? Like, go do something about it!" were most commonly used in the context of stories about mothers. Based on the size of the data set used for this project, it's hard to tell whether or not this observation about mothers is just a fluke, or indicative of something more concrete. But it would be interesting to conduct interviews about other people's kitchen stories with an ear for who is "off-limits" for criticism and who is fair game.

Because of its near constant presence in the daily lives of most Americans, food is sometimes overlooked as a cultural artifact that can reveal important information about the people who prepare and eat it. Foodways scholars from the field of folklore and related fields have put the subject of food back on the table in the social sciences. They have analyzed the customs and traditions surrounding food, as well as the way it is prepared, talked about, and used in the performance and conception of identity. In focusing on personal experience narratives about mistakes in the kitchen, this thesis contributes new research on the latter two areas of interest.

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