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Writing Women: The Virtual Cookbook and Pinterest

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This article aims to throw new light on the representation of women who cook as necessarily perpetuating a domestic ideology in which women are confined to the home. Traditionally, cookbooks written by women have disseminated both cooking information and rules and practices for running an effective household, which have contributed to the ideologies that underpin female domestic practice. However, the evolution of social media platforms, such as Pinterest, which enable the user to actively select and visually display culinary masterpieces on a digital pinboard, have provided a forum for women's voices and a novel means of expression that is available to the amateur cook and professional chef alike. This article will argue that the creation of a virtual cookbook, via Pinterest, is a means of empowering women, which is central to the lexicon of feminist debate. Rather than being the victims of domestic servitude, this article will argue that the women who create virtual cookbooks do so by choice, and as a means of pleasing the self, irrespective of achieving domestic or marital bliss.

Cookbooks “provide a range of insights into everyday life, such as attitudes towards food, domestic economy and the roles of women” (Wessell and Wishart 1). The proliferation of the cooking industry in the form of television programs, celebrity chefs, and social media channels seemingly devoted to the display of culinary artefacts, has transformed what was once a domestic chore into a professional practice. Traditionally, cookbooks that contained information on both the preparation and cooking of food and advice on how to run an effective household were more like guidebooks for women on how to achieve domestic and marital happiness. According to Jenny Lawson, well-known and highly acclaimed cookbooks such as Mrs. Beeton's *Book of Household Management* were published as a reaction against eating-out, which was drawing men away from the home. “This aligned a cultural expectation of female domestic servitude with gaining the love and respect of a male partner” (Lawson 348) and reinforced the now familiar proverb that the way to a man's heart is through his stomach.

More recently, *How to be a Domestic Goddess* highlights the distance between feminism and cooking (Lawson). The book, according to Joanne Hollows, equates baking with a false consciousness and suggests that baking is not far removed from domestic enslavement. This conceptualisation of the-woman-in-the-kitchen is intimately bound to the views of second-wave feminists who believe that cooking is a sign of traditional femininity, which is at odds with a feminist identity (Ashley et al.). This argument situates cooking and food within debates about the sexual division of labour and positions women as providers of food for

others. “Women frequently use food to offer pleasure to family members, yet have difficulty experiencing food as pleasurable themselves, particularly in a domestic context” (Hollows 184). Anne Murcott’s *It’s a Pleasure to Cook for Him* argues that the choice of what to cook and eat is invariably done in the service of some others. Marjorie DeVault similarly asserts that it is the relationship between cooking and caring that cements the relationship between cooking and femininity, while Charles and Kerr conclude that because women fear gaining weight, they deprive themselves of pleasure and so prepare food for others to give pleasure. Women fundamentally cook to please, and please men in particular (Charles and Kerr). For Charles and Kerr, the pleasure that women get from cooking for men is a by-product of the pleasure they receive from caring for others.

The notion that women cook out of a desire to care for others is an argument left over from the patrilineal delineations outlined in Biblical texts. Western civilisation has drawn its leading metaphors and definitions of gender from the Bible, specifically the Book of Genesis. As a result of the Fall, which proceeded Adam and Eve’s sin in the Garden of Eden, the sexual division of labour emerged. Adam was instructed to work, and Eve was punished with the pain of childbearing and motherhood. Traditionalist assumptions posited that the assignment of different tasks and roles to men and women was evidence of the naturalness of their respective responsibilities. This explanation focused on women’s reproductive capacity and reiterated motherhood—central to which was an obligation to care for and nurture others—as a woman’s chief goal, which was necessary for the continued promulgation of the species (Lerner).

In the nineteenth century, the credibility of this argument was questioned and a scientific explanation was used to justify patriarchy and women’s place within the home. Darwinian theories continued to define women according to their maternal role and justified their exclusion from economic and educational opportunities on the grounds that this was in the best interests of the survival of the species (Lerner). This contributed to the prevailing “cult of domesticity” that was the hallmark of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century. According to this ideological position, true women were supposed to devote themselves to unpaid domestic labour and refrain from paid work. Each of these positions served to reinforce women’s responsibility within the home and, for centuries, women have participated in their own subordination by internalising the proscriptive belief that they exist solely to propagate the human race.

If caring and nurturing others is the condition on which cooking is deemed to be “feminine”, then cooking to please oneself should negate the argument that cooking is a “feminine” activity. This article will suggest that the creation of virtual cookbooks on Pinterest enables women to resist societies continued attempts at defining femininity in increasingly restrictive ways. It will be argued that women who create virtual cookbooks do so by choice and as a means of pleasing the self. The representation of celebrity chef Nigella Lawson will be used to elucidate the reconceptualisation of cooking as a pleasurable activity. She is able to distinguish between leisure time and work-related culinary activity and, in so doing, she is represented as enjoying cooking in and of itself, not as a domestic responsibility. Building on this notion of cooking as pleasure, it will be argued that women who create virtual cookbooks on Pinterest do so by choice, for both personal and professional reasons, and irrespective of a desire to please others.

Whilst Pinterest has raised significant debate as to whether or not it actually perpetuates gender stereotypes traditionally associated with cooking and femininity, this article will

suggest that the desire to cook and a belief in equal rights for women are not mutually exclusive. For the purpose of this article, feminism and contemporary femininity are articulated around the idea of choice. Women are not choosing to create virtual cookbooks on Pinterest for the benefit of men. They are choosing to embrace this platform and are using it as a means of creative expression and an outlet of empowerment that transforms cooking from a domestic chore into an activity with public significance. This “promotes a new female relationship with food, enabling the other sides of femininity, those subversive, darker, abject possibilities to surface” (Lawson, *Food Legacies* 361), which ultimately grants women moments of agency and transcendence through cooking.

Nigella Lawson, who cooks out of a desire for solitary pleasure, epitomises the changing nature of the cookbook throughout the last century. In *Feast*, she advocates the need for self-satisfaction and independence: “At its most basic, perhaps, is the quiet satisfaction of knowing one is fending for oneself, the instrument of one’s own survival” (4). According to Elisabeth Nathanson, “thinking about cooking as personally satisfying, rather than as a task associated with taking care of one’s family, denotes a new articulation of contemporary femininity” (318). For the purpose of this article then, feminism simply refers to the notion of choice and pleasing the self.

Cooking is no longer an activity conducted solely by women in the privacy of their own home, for the purpose of caring for others. Female celebrity chefs, such as Nigella Lawson, draw attention to a particular ethos of pleasing the self as opposed to others. According to Jenny Lawson, Nigella Lawson renegotiates her cooking duties for her own cause (*Food Legacies*). She disrupts notions of female care and responsibility by “embracing self-satisfaction and indulgence” (Lawson, *Disturbing* 82) and, in this way, she negotiates a feminine identity that “hovers between the polarised figures of ‘the feminist’ and ‘the housewife’” (Hollows 180). According to Hollows, Nigella Lawson’s work offers an alternative way of imagining women’s relationship to food, which is based on the pleasure of cooking and eating, rather than pleasing others. The Nigella Lawson cooking philosophy posits that cooking should be pleasurable and should start from a desire to eat. Lawson is represented as aware of what she wants to eat and she does not defer to the preferences of others. She separates cooking from the notion of “cooking for”, which allows us to appreciate cooking as a pleasure in, and of, itself. It should be noted, however, that Nigella Lawson is a successful businesswoman who has made her success from her status as a woman-in-the-kitchen. Her programs are carefully constructed to show her prioritising leisure time and cooking to please the self (Lawson, *Food Legacies*). Although Lawson has encouraged women to cook to please, this is not the sole reason why she cooks. Her brand identity depends on her appearing as though she cooks for pleasure and yet she is undoubtedly, at least in part, driven by economic motivations.

Although the cookbooks of the past have promoted a particular lifestyle for other women to emulate (Lawson, *Disturbing*), they nevertheless represented elements of the private sphere where women were able to wield authority and bequeath their knowledge to other women (Theophano). Throughout history, Janet Theophano notes, women have shared their prize recipes as a vehicle for making themselves visible. As early as the eighteenth century, cookbooks were a way for women to gain economic independence and authority. The formation of cookbooks provided women with an opportunity to enter the professional domain of culinary writing, which served to remove cooking from domestic life. Flora Pell’s *Our Cookery Book*, first published in 1916, blurred the boundary between the notion of private and public spheres. Pell advocated that a woman’s place was in the home and she

upheld socially conservative gender roles and yet she was, paradoxically, a career woman who remained unmarried until she was sixty years old (Wessell and Wishart). Pell's cookbook reinforced stereotypes of the woman-in-the-kitchen and domestic goddess, whose primary occupation in life was to please others and men in particular.

The emergence of Pinterest in 2010, however, a virtual platform that enables the user to post and share images of whatever they choose, has further transformed cooking from a "chore without glamour or choice" (Wessell and Brien 87) into an optional, albeit pleasurable, form of play. This innovative platform has opened up new possibilities for users, more than 70 per cent of whom are women, to find novel means of personal expression via the creation of virtual cookbooks. Pinterest has been self-defined as a space that is perfect for recipe sharing, which is not dissimilar to the practice of compiling family recipes into a book and cutting and pasting extracts from a magazine into one's own personal collection. Pinterest, however, enables the user to share this collection with others and transforms what has been seen as a private practice into a public activity. Pinterest has transformed the creation of a personal recipe collection from a domestic chore into a commercial venture, which is evident when scrolling through endless pins promoting catering businesses and cake-baking services. Pinterest is, potentially, a great tool for enhancing and even structuring the user's culinary dreams.

The platform has not been without its critics who are polarized, between those who believe that women who use this tool to curate digital recipe collections are in some way undoing or even killing feminism by pinning images that reinforce stereotypes of femininity, and those who believe that because women are pinning these images by choice, it defies traditional notions of femininity previously attached to cooking. The former view posits that female users of Pinterest are pinning images that are aligned with the "traditional" woman, such as cooking, do-it-yourself home-wares and crafts, rather than the "modern" woman who does not want to be seen as different from a man. Advocates of Pinterest, in contrast, argue that the platform is a natural path for reform, noting, in particular, the increased opportunity it provides women for voice and creative expression. This latter position supports the central premise of this article, which suggests that a woman can have both an interest in cooking and a belief in equal rights for women. In the words of Antonia Hayes "we have the luxury of choosing what sort of woman we want to be, including the freedom to be both a feminist and a connoisseur of cauliflower pizzas" (online). Pinterest celebrates the fact that there is no right or wrong way to be a woman. As a platform, Pinterest allows women to rewrite the meanings that have been assigned to them as passive individuals, devoid of a voice, and provides women with the opportunity for expression through the self-publication of digital cookbooks.

In Amy Odell's *How Pinterest is Killing Feminism*, she labels Pinterest "the Mormon housewife's image bookmarking service of choice", which creates a "Stepford Wife" version of identity that is hollow and uncreative. Odell argues that the user-generated content, which is made up predominantly of recipes, home décor, fitness, and fashion, is evidence that women are conditioned to "seek out the retrograde, materialistic content that women's magazines have been hawking for decades" (online). She further asserts that, "adult women are still conditioned to think about diet and exercise and looking beautiful ... so it makes sense that they'd pin these things" (online). She takes particular issue with the diet recipes on Pinterest, such as low-carbohydrate pizza crusts made with crumbed cauliflower, which she argues are indicative of women's internalised belief that they must be thin in order to be beautiful. This is an image that she argues is synonymous with women's magazines and

Pinterest alike, which she sees as being similarly inundated with images of unrealistic body types. The difference, however, which Odell overlooks, is that the content on Pinterest does not bombard us like a magazine or billboard. The content on Pinterest is user-generated; it is uploaded by our fellow Pinterest users. Women are curating their own experience on the site. They are not victims but actors.

Odell's stance is the antithesis of a feminist argument as it makes women the victims of the media. In order to buy into her argument, you have to assume that all female Pinterest users are one dimensional and easily led, which hardly sounds like a powerful feminist position. Odell's argument also neglects the role played by male chefs, such as Jamie Oliver, whose recipe books are attempting to curb the obesity epidemic, by focusing on quick and easy meals that are also nutritionally beneficial, hence their respective titles underlining that they are "30-minute" and "15-minute meals". Given that the latter involves the attempted preparation of an entire meal in 15-minutes, you can rest assured that you will be eating salads that can easily be tossed together in this stringent time frame, rather than sweets and treats. That being said, no one is accusing Oliver of being a victim of the media's unrealistic portrayal of the human body simply because he advocates the cooking of healthy recipes. This begs the question as to why women who pin healthy recipes, such as cauliflower pizza crusts, and create virtual cookbooks are necessarily victims of the unattainable body syndrome.

Odell suggests that cooking and feminism are mutually exclusive and she makes the uncomfortable suggestion that by pinning diet recipes that perpetuate negative body image, and posting and disseminating pretty pictures of culinary delights, women are, as the title of her post suggests, killing feminism. Odell's diatribe is being met with fierce opposition by Pinterest users who identify as post-feminists. Post-feminists posit that gender equality has been achieved and that women are free to choose their lifestyles in both public and private worlds (Nathanson). This article builds on the premise that pinners perform post-feminism and that women curate visual manifestations of their capacity to "have-it-all"; choice, empowerment and licensed transgression. Nathan Jurgenson, the author of "Pinterest and Feminism" argues that Pinterest is giving women what they want, which is the whole point. In the same way that Nigella Lawson cooks out of a desire for solitary pleasure, women are using Pinterest as a form of leisure time entertainment that is separate from work time. The creation of virtual cookbooks on Pinterest is a pastime that women engage in selfishly. It is an escape from their domestic responsibilities because it is something that they do for themselves and no one else. Amelia McDonnell acknowledges that she wants to spend time drooling over a recipe that she intends to make on the weekend and invites Odell to share the pork chops she made—the recipe for which she found on Pinterest and cooked for herself because she is single and happy. Her satirical response to Odell reinforces the notion of self-satisfaction and independence that accompanies cooking. Like Nigella Lawson, who promotes a fantasy of domestic pleasure on her own terms, both women renegotiate what it means to be a public woman disseminating cooking practices (Lawson, *Food Legacies*).

Antonia Hayes rejects Odell's premise that Pinterest is killing feminism and accuses the latter of perpetuating the sexism that continues to pervade society. Hayes acknowledges that you can have an interest in cooking and interior design, whilst simultaneously espousing beliefs in equal rights for women: "Kitchen porn and feminism aren't mutually exclusive" (online). As a self-proclaimed feminist and Pinterest user, with an ever-expanding virtual cookbook, it is easy to resent Odell's remark that pinning photos of cauliflower crust pizzas is setting the women's movement back decades. As Hayes asserts "it's just as damaging to tell women that

they're killing feminism by liking pretty pictures as it is to tell them that in order to be feminine you must dress, act, look a certain way. It's the same constructed view albeit from a different angle" (online). Self-proclaimed feminists like Odell, who tell us that "only a certain kind of woman (the Pinterest-rejecting, domesticity hater) deserves equal rights and respect" (online), are actually perpetuating the sexism that they are trying to combat. In so doing, they pose questions about notions of agency, choice and desire, which speak to longstanding debates and dilemmas in feminist theory.

Since when did it become anti-feminist to like something that is visually pleasing? I have a Pinterest account and I am a feminist. However, if recent criticism on Pinterest is to be believed, these two things are antithetical. If traditional femininity posits that women should be passive, submissive, and silent, then the very nature of Pinterest, which requires the user to actively choose, post, and share images with others, is the very antithesis of these traits. Pinterest users, who create virtual cookbooks out of a desire to please the self, irrespective of any domestic obligations, are active, dominant and communicative. Women are choosing to publish cookbooks in their leisure time, which stands in direct contrast to the productive demands of work time. Pinterest, a platform renowned for its capacity to render even the most productive individuals into serial procrastinators and time wasters, is the epitome of a leisure time activity. Rather than cooking for their husbands and children, as is their "heaven-appointed mission," according to Flora Pell, women are scrolling through pins, creating a virtual cookbook of the culinary delights that they will make for themselves to enjoy.

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