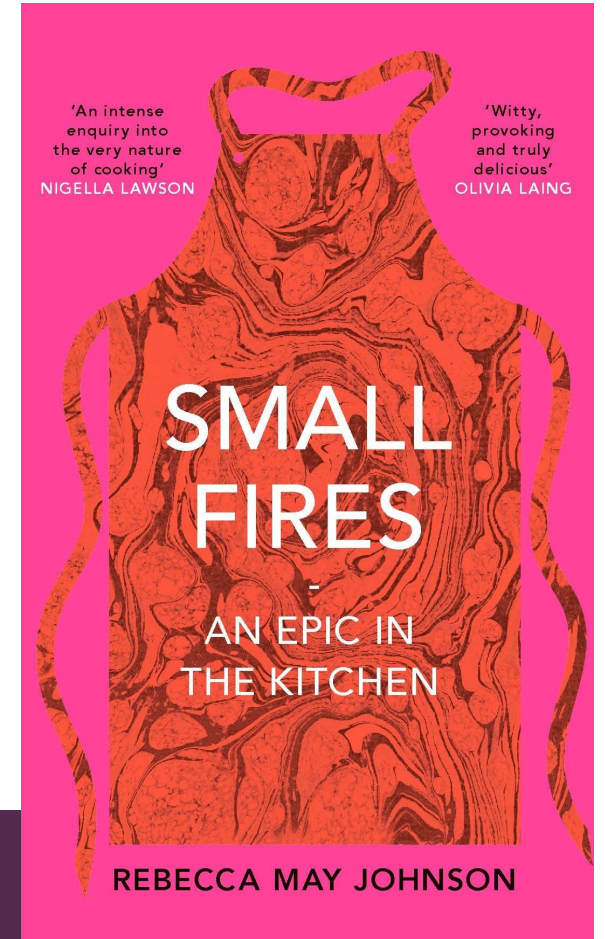


Tomato Sauce Splattered Selves: Subjectivity in Rebecca May Johnson's Small Fires

Dr. Elisabeth Lechner
University of Vienna
Department of English and
American Studies

Mail: elisabeth.lechner@univie.ac.at
Social Media: @femsista
Third Mission: linktr.ee/femsista

A BSA Auto/Biography
Study Group Event
1 October 2025, 5-6pm (GMT)



Overview

- Literary Food Studies, Culinary Life Writing: Food in/as Life Writing
- The “Unruly” Genre of Life Writing – Feminist Perspectives
- Subjectivity and the Affective Turn
- Literary Confections and Bio Bites
- Literary Subjectivity and Social Change in *Small Fires* (2022)
- Conclusion



"I tried to write about cooking, but I wrote a hot red epic" (11)

Literary Food Studies & Culinary Life Writing:

Food in/as Life Writing

- Food in literature can elucidate “the complex relationship between the body, subjectivity and social structures regulating consumption” (Boyce and Fitzpatrick 3).
- Culinary life writing, food memoirs, gastrographies "offer the potential for individual storytelling and collective, feminist agency" (Pazargadi 528)
- Rosalia Baene defines "gastrography" as “the story of the self closely linked to the production, preparation, and/or consumption of food” (qtd. in Smith and Watson 271)

Boyce, Charlotte, and Joan Fitzpatrick. *A History of Food in Literature. From the Fourteenth Century to the Present*. Routledge, 2017.

Pazargadi, Leila Moayeri. “The Language of Food: Semiotics in Diana Abu-Jaber’s Gastrographies.” *Life Writing*, vol. 18, no. 4, 2021, pp. 527-543.

Smith, Sidonie, and Julia Watson. *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life*. University of Minnesota Press, 2010.

The "Unruly" Genre of Life Writing - Feminist Perspectives

- the “unruly” (Dibattista and Wittman 2) genre of life writing
- feminist literary critics like Sidonie Smith challenge “the universalist premise of a unique selfhood” (Dibattista and Wittman 4)
- criticism of 'classical' autobiographies for “reinforcing prevailing cultural modes of Western male identity” (Haffen 13)
- yet, subversive potential: “experimental autobiographical texts disrupt, exceed, and undo the norms they perform” (Haffen 13)

Dibattista, Maria, and Emily O. Wittman. Eds. *The Cambridge Companion to Autobiography*. Cambridge UP, 2014.

Haffen, Aude. “Introduction: Dissident Lives, Queer Texts, Political Is.” *Synthesis*, vol. 14, 2021, pp. 1-18.

Subjectivity & The Affective Turn

- from body < > mind to body/minds
- affect studies, feminist criticism, new materialisms beyond Cartesian dualism
 - "When the affective turn becomes a turn to affect, feminist and queer work are no longer positioned as part of that turn. Even if they are acknowledged as precursors, a shift to affect signals a shift from this body of work." (Ahmed 216)
 - feminist/queer scholarship that has "challenged from the outset mind-body dualisms, as well as the distinction between reason and passion" (Ahmed 206)
- on bodies, fat discrimination and othering:
 - "It is as though these women understand their *selves* as completely separate entities from their *bodies*. These women appear to interpret their 'fatness' as so offensive both to their *selves* and to *others*, that they disavow their bodies (and their co-extensive negative bodily representations), and deny their 'fat' flesh as having anything to do with their sense of *self*." (Murray 91)
 - "This model is one of *disconnectedness* between the self, the body, and the world. It is one in which consciousness (which is conflated with the self) is privileged over the 'flesh'. However, [...] subjectivity is *always already* bodily, and can only ever exist in and through relations with others and a world." (Murray 95)

Ahmed, Sara. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. 2nd ed. Routledge, 2015.

Murray, Samantha. *The 'Fat' Female Body*. Palgrave, 2008.

Subjectivity, Minds, Bodies - OED

1. The quality or condition of being based on subjective **consciousness**, experience, etc.; the fact of existing **in the mind only**.
2. a. **Consciousness** of one's states or actions.
b. A **conscious** being
3. a. The quality in literature or art which depends on the expression of the personality or individuality of the artist; the individuality of an artist as expressed in his work.
b. The quality or condition of **viewing things chiefly or exclusively through the medium of one's own mind or individuality**; the condition of being dominated by or absorbed in one's personal feelings, **thoughts, concerns**, etc.; individuality, personality.

Subjectivity, Body/Minds as Ever-Becoming

- ‘the body’ conceived of as “multiple bodies that are brought into being and held together through complex practices of self-production” (Blackman 13), whereby “bodily affectivity [is seen] as an important part of processes of subject formation” (Blackman 68)
- Deleuze: “a body affects other bodies, or is affected by other bodies; it is this capacity for affecting and being affected that also defines a body in its individuality” (Deleuze 625)

>> body/minds as ever-becoming in human/non-human encounters with their surroundings

Literary Confections and Bio Bites

- I introduce food – morsels of life – as one of the quintessential, political, and affect-laden ways, in which life writers develop forms of individual/collective literary subjectivity and in which they provide signs of life and lives in their works.
- taking fragments and traces (Kadar 2005) seriously, Howes develops "biobits", which "can be thought of as analogous to the morpheme—they are the smallest units recognizable as evidence of a life" (19).
- "bio bites" connect authors, their texts and readers to the planet in multifaceted ways

Howes, Craig. "Life Writing." *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature*. Oxford UP, October 27, 2020.

Kadar, Marlen. "The Devouring: Traces of Roma in the Holocaust; No Tattoo, Sterilized Body, Gypsy Girl," in Kadar et al., *Tracing the Autobiographical*, Wilfrid Laurier UP, 2005, pp. 223–246.

Critical Digestion & Larger Research Context

- I develop the idea of 'critical digestion' to think about the role of food in literary narratives in the context of Ecological Marxism (the Capitalocene, metabolism), feminism and social reproduction theory (see e.g. Barca 2020).
- the present as a crisis-ridden “ecological interregnum” (Haines 103)
- metabolism as “a terrain of political struggle” (Haines 109), which “designates not only the interaction between the human species and the rest of nature but also the social conflicts over how that interaction plays out, especially as it concerns the means of making life”
- Post-doc project:
 - auto/biographical narratives
 - lockdown novels from the Brexit pandemic era in Britain
 - ecofeminist fiction

Barca, Stefania. *The Forces of Reproduction. Notes for a Counter-Hegemonic Anthropocene*. Cambridge UP, 2020.

Haines, Christian. “The Anthropocene Interregnum: Ecological Marxism and the Social Metabolism of the Present.” *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, vol. 124, no. 1, 2025, pp. 95-112.

Moore, Jason W. *Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism*. Kairos, 2016.

"Almost Nothing" - Cooking in Small Fires (2022)

"I tried to write about cooking, but I wrote a hot red epic. [...] The contents of this book might have vanished unrecorded - cooked and eaten and washed up, leaving no trace. Documenting what I do in the kitchen can feel like the task of recording **almost nothing**. But it is the nothing that I am doing, and do almost every day, and have been doing every day for over a decade. It is the nothing that has been part of almost every social interaction of my life as an adult and through which I have come to know almost all the people I love. **It is the nothing through which I have been sustained and transformed.**" (11)

Literary Subjectivity in *Small Fires*

- new – culinary – forms of (literary) subjectivity and self-formation: The self is brought into being by a narrator, who cooks tomato sauce; a seemingly simple act repeatedly performed/told throughout the text.
- “Slowly I realize that when I cook, I am also researching the relationship between the body and language, between self and other; I am learning how to think against a rationalist and patriarchal history of knowledge” (12).
- “allows cooking into the frame of critical enquiry and in which critical enquiry is shaped by cooking” (12), “[t]his does not mean exchanging the kitchen for the library; my clothes must become spattered with oil” (12)

The Home Cook Who Wants to ‘Blow Up the Kitchen’

A new book by the British academic Rebecca May Johnson urges a radical rethinking of just what goes on in the kitchen. For starters, don’t call cooking a labor of love.

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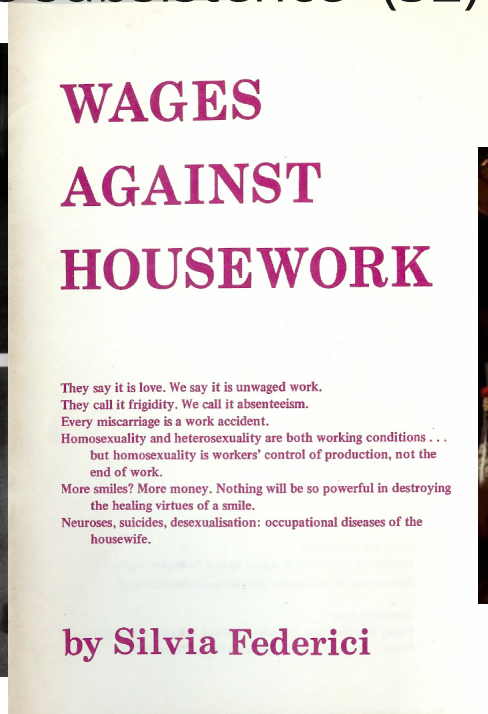
May Johnson, Rebecca. *Small Fires. An Epic in the Kitchen*. One, 2022.

Lange, Maggie. "The Home Cook Who Wants to 'Blow Up the Kitchen'." *The New York Times*, 6 June 2023.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/06/06/style/small-fires-rebecca-may-johnson.html>.

Social Change and Transformation in Small Fires

- "In the kitchen I am standing in between Martha Rosler and Nigella Lawson. Criticism and pleasure enter together, holding hands." (19)
- "*To successfully exploit gendered labour, try using love!*" (22)
- "My a claim to authorship, an insistence on naming" (30) + demand for pleasure, i.e. "more than mere subsistence" (32)



Social Change & Standpoint Epistemologies in Small Fires

- "The choice is not between burning down the kitchen or revisiting it in a nostalgic dream-state; that is a false binary. It is bad faith to burn your grandmother's archive because she wasn't as free as you." (33)
- Donna Haraway's "**situated and embodied knowledges**" (583), "to think from the 'points' at which we stand" (Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology* 5).
- "there is a chorus" (179)
 - *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* - biomythography of Audre Lorde (1982)
 - "cooking as a refusal of racism" (35)

Ahmed, Sara. *Queer Phenomenology. Orientations, Objects, Others*. Duke UP, 2006.

Haraway, Donna. "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective." *Feminist Studies*, vol. 14, no. 3, 1988, pp. 575–599.

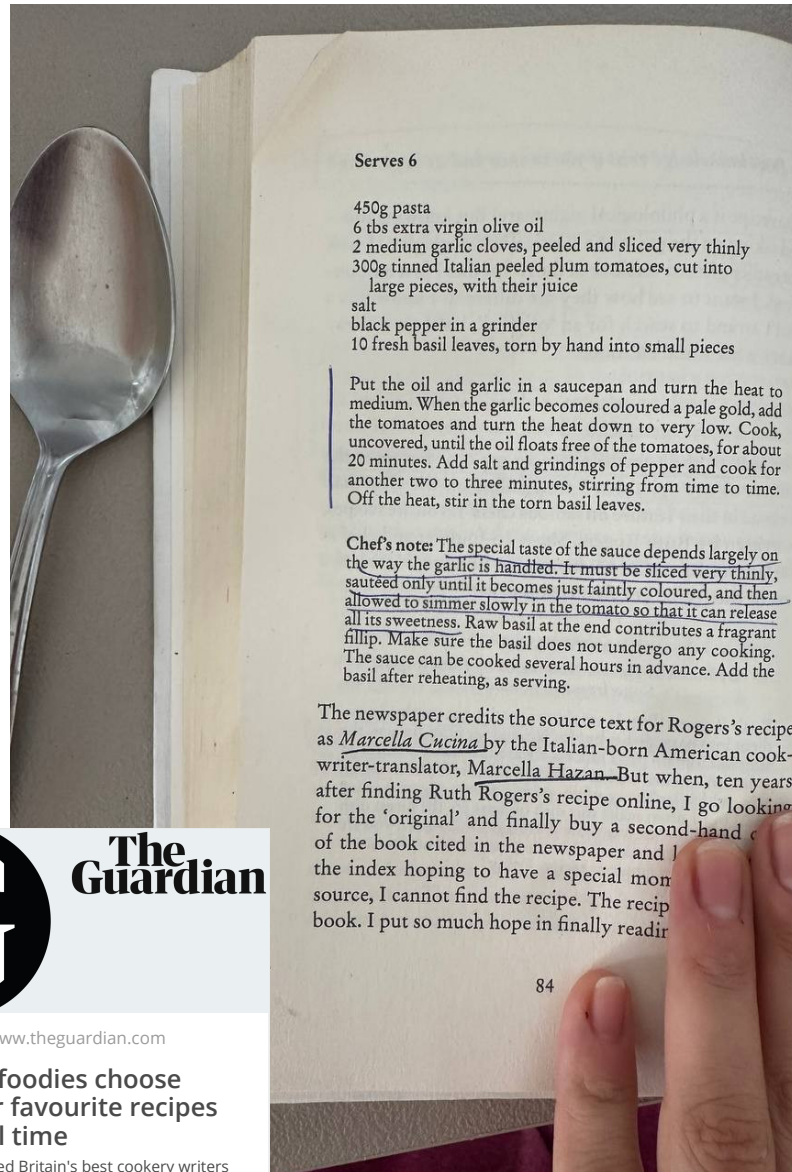
May Johnson, Rebecca. *Small Fires. An Epic in the Kitchen*. One, 2022.

Social Change & Standpoint Epistemologies in Small Fires

- "*Cooking is thinking!*" (38) - from a myriad of perspectives and lived realities
- bio-bites as note-worthy, important elements of self-construction and overall life narratives: "I begin to think about an epic in the kitchen, about devoting my writing to what I do there. I have the suspicion that what I am doing in the kitchen is more than I think I am doing in the kitchen. When I take stock of my life or make a narrative of it, I usually do not include recipes or my understandings of an onion. But if I brush this aside, I will brush myself aside[.]" (41)
- "The act of writing must come from somewhere, from some life. [...] Writing from a position that does not exist is not possible. Making tomato sauce is a position as good and as serious as any other." (43)

The Recipe

- "a hot red sauce text" (82)
- Best pasta by Marcella Hazan, nominated by Ruth Rogers
- "The recipe is pure reception. It is always in many places at once" (82).



May Johnson, Rebecca. *Small Fires. An Epic in the Kitchen*. One, 2022.

The Recipe - Food as "Bio Bites" in Life Writing

- ingredients, or vegetables as "things" (51)
- "Things have agency in many directions" (51), wherefore "[t]he recipe is a method for responding to things":
"Language is only a holding pattern for the recipe – not its origin, nor its terminus. Spattering is not mentioned in the recipe. The text does not anticipate the liveliness of the process it describes, which spatters wildly" (51).
- "[t]he ethics of the recipe text arise from its proximity to life, to hungry bodies" (74), the recipe itself "intends life: language surviving though the body which eats with a different appetite each day" (75), it is "life returned to language a thousand times over" (76).



Consider the Sausage! (118-141)

Consider the Sausage!

Sometimes (always) heroes let you down, which is to say, after reading D.W. Winnicott's illuminating writing on play, I am *shocked and appalled* to find he is among the people who are fond of declaring 'I hate recipes!' *Shocked and appalled* to find his disaffection to be such that he chooses to make cooking from recipes the antithesis of living a playful, creative life. This is not a Good Enough analysis for me. I am compelled to engage with Winnicott on the matter.

1870 D.W. Winnicott

In the paper 'Living Creatively', published in 1970, Winnicott describes cooking from a recipe as the antithesis of creativity. Like theorists before and after him Winnicott alights upon cookery as an ideal tool to develop a theory about something else. He takes for granted that a hypothetical recipe-follower (she) may be invoked for his theorizing purposes with no contradiction –

We can look at the generality or at the details of which creative living is composed... I know that

live with the creative cook, even if sometimes there is a disaster or the taste is funny and one suspects the worst'. It is fanciful and alien to the mind of a cook responsible for feeding people with any kind of regularity to dismiss the importance of food being edible. If food is not edible there might be a jovial response; there could also be anger or anxiety or stomach pain at night from hunger. And if those eating give no response at all to delicious and surprising food then apparently, the cook will feel nothing about it – 'We shall not mind if those who consume the sausages fail to notice the surprising thing that was in the cooking of them, or if they do not show gustatory appreciation.' *Who are the people sitting at Winnicott's table with no appetites and no emotions? In Winnicott's theory I cannot find evidence of the cook, the recipe, the sausages or those who eat, only his unscorched hands, clean shirt and a method for knowledge production about what it means to cook that has been engineered outside of the kitchen.*

experiment

As there is no identifiable case study in Winnicott's theory, only the straw men of 'the slavish one' and the 'the original one', I make myself the patient. I experiment on myself to test Winnicott's theory of creative living. I find the recipe for frying sausages in *Mrs Beeton's Book of Household Management* to see if I get 'nothing from the experience except an increase in the feeling of dependence on authority', as Winnicott prophesies. I go shopping to buy sausages after a morning of work, and then I make them for lunch. As I cook, I scrawl down a few small details

on the back of an envelope so that I don't forget them. After eating, I leave the kitchen and write an account of following the recipe by hand in a notebook. That text is transcribed here (I write in a large scrawl, and it is a small notebook, hence the short lines.) –

I made Mrs Beeton's recipe for frying sausages for the first time. I found the recipe on Google Books, it is a 19th century version, I am not sure which edition. I looked to the sausages to relieve me from a feeling of abstraction that arose from tying myself in knots writing. It is like a mist descends, I felt distant from the world, bodies, things. I went especially to buy the sausages at a nearby butcher. I am not a particular fan of the butcher – I have had strange experiences there in the past. But one of their sausages is

quite nice. I bought 12 sausages, 6 for today 6 for another time. At home I washed the pan I felt would be the best host for the sausages. Mrs Beeton does not specify, apart from 'a frying-pan'. I chose a pan not too snug, as I did not want them to semi-steam and not so large that they would scorch + lose their moisture. Cast iron. I put the radio on, it is 1980s day on the radio station when I turn it on, lots to dance to, the soaring desire-anguish-filled male falsetto voice of the 80s and rap and pop with samples. I take the sausages out of the bag and separate them with a small knife. They are gorgeously fat and I can see flecks of pepper and herbs.

points, as if to cook were to progress from point A to B on a two-dimensional line –

FRIED SAUSAGES

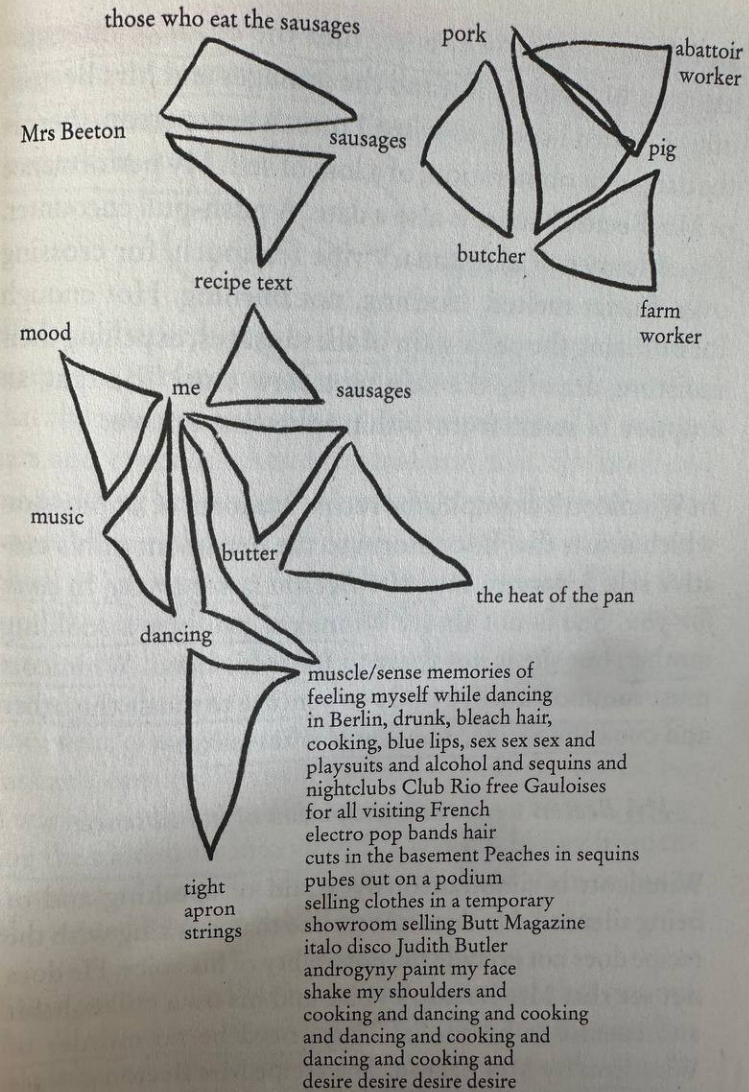
838. INGREDIENTS. — Sausages; a small piece of butter.

Mode. — Prick the sausages with a fork (this prevents them from bursting), and put them into a frying-pan with a small piece of butter. Keep moving the pan about, and turn the sausages 3 or 4 times. In from 10 to 12 minutes they will be sufficiently cooked, unless they are *very large*, when a little more time should be allowed for them. Dish them with or without a piece of toast under them and serve very hot.

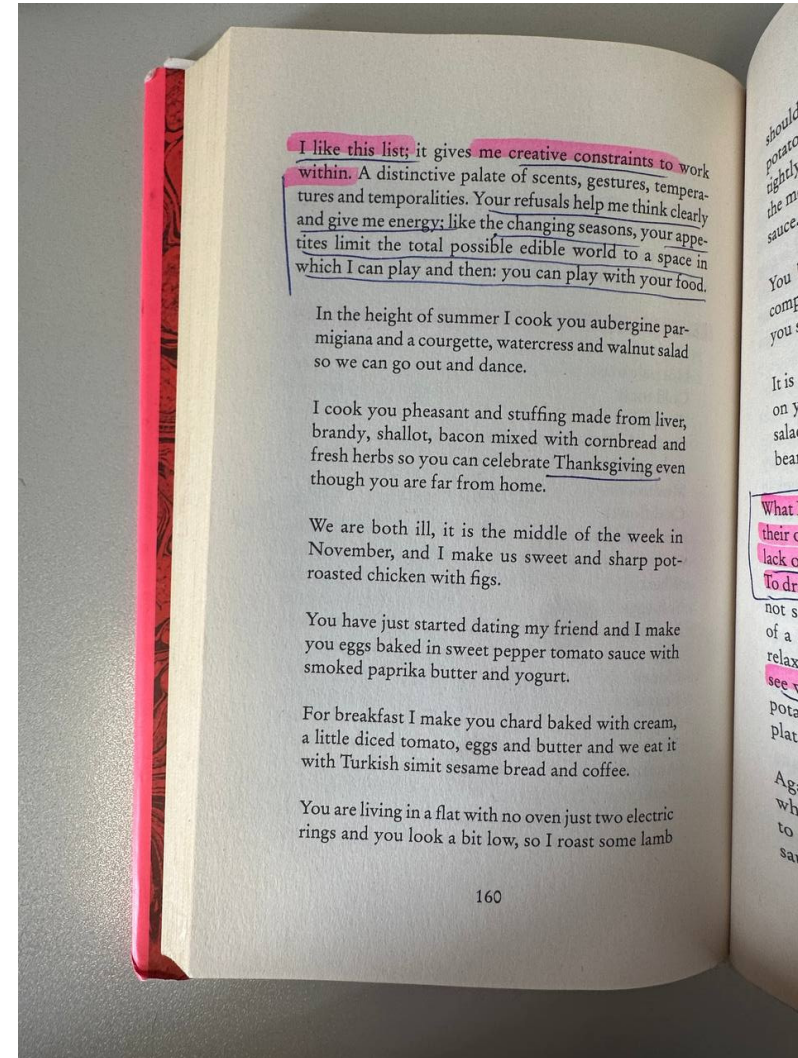
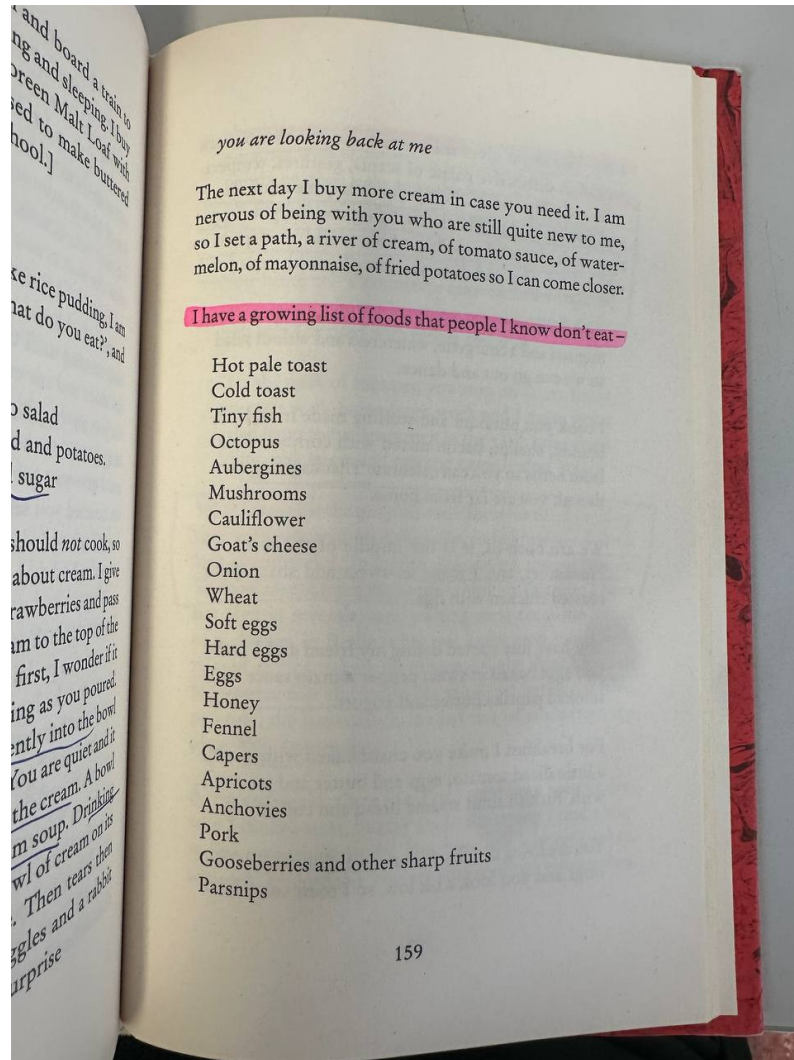
[An extract of the instructions, not including the illustration or the note about Saxon swineherds, nor the note on how warm weather affects sausages pre-refrigeration, nor the average cost and season.]

Mrs Beeton's austere imperatives constrain the explosive potential wreckage of cooking, of bodies that cook. They offer support. The minimalism of the recipe text is in a dialectical relationship with the total possible edible world and everything I might do with my body. Cooking takes place in at least three dimensions. An intense and whirling experience of time emerges as I cook, it's a wild ride. It is the beginning of spring after a winter trapped inside and I am in need of release. My experience of cooking Mrs Beeton's sausages is that of time as change, not the clock-time minutes on a timer. But her recipe makes cooking the sausages navigable and not spiralling, formless chaos, despite my mood. The text assembles the elements, suggests movements and sets the essential boundaries through which form can emerge.

And what form!



A Growing List of Foods that People I Know Don't Eat



Conclusion

- "bio bites" autobiographical writings: crucial affect-laden linguistic vehicles for remembering and narrating lives
 - "And each time I return to the recipe I meet myself again, differently. Performing the recipe reveals an 'I' that cooks in order to speak." (110)
 - "In between the recipe text and the finished translation, the dish, there is also *me*" (110).
 - "To follow the recipe is to enter the chaos of intersubjectivity, of relation" (138).
- social change & transformation: from scattered cooks to resistant collective culinary subjectivities
 - "Who cares if the cook makes the most delicious food if the conditions in which they work are exploitative?" (26)



Dr. Elisabeth Lechner
University of Vienna

Mail: elisabeth.lechner@univie.ac.at
Social Media: @femsista
Third Mission: linktr.ee/femsista

Thank you so much for your attention!

