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CONSUMING FOOD MEMOIRS: IDENTITY, EXPERIENCE, AND  
LEGITIMIZATION AS RHETORICAL  
SUSTENANCE

Kayla A. Bruce

82 Pages

May 2014

This thesis is a rhetorical analysis of nonfiction food texts as representative of a facet of life writing texts, and as they are currently viewed and used by readers both within and outside of the academy. The examination of food texts focuses around Kate Christensen's 2013 food memoir *Blue Plate Special: An Autobiography of My Appetites* and her food blog, *Don't Let It Bring You Down* that preceded and followed the publication of the food memoir. Likewise, author Molly Wizenberg's food blog *Orangette* preceded the publication of her 2009 food memoir *A Homemade Life: Stories and Recipes From My Kitchen Table*, and followed the print publication with more food experiences and recipes. I examine the individual constructions of the food memoir texts, the seeming purpose of the author's intent in writing food texts, and the effects of the writing on their readers. I also look at the way that the blogs differ from the food texts, and yet reinforce many of the same ideas represented in the texts. Finally, I examine the way that these texts can be used as serious academic sources and should be valued for their unique revelatory aspects. Within the thesis I ask and analyze overarching questions

such as what is at stake for food writers and food readers? What purpose and effect do food texts have that differs from other types of life writing? The analysis has been revealing, rewarding, and really quite tasty!

CONSUMING FOOD MEMOIRS: IDENTITY, EXPERIENCE, AND  
LEGITIMIZATION AS RHETORICAL SUSTENANCE

KAYLA A. BRUCE

A Thesis Submitted in Partial  
Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Department of English

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2014

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CONSUMING FOOD MEMOIRS: IDENTITY, EXPERIENCE, AND  
LEGITIMIZATION AS RHETORICAL SUSTENANCE

KAYLA A. BRUCE

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K.A.B.

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CHAPTER I  
LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

**Statement of Argument**

Life writing is nothing new. In fact, I'm sure that if we explored the histories of any literate culture (or from the time any culture became literate) we would find traces or examples of the genre that we now call life writing. But something has shifted in the recent literary field, and life writing is now coming into academic textual discussions in new and fresh ways. In an August 9, 2013 review of Michael Paterniti's book *The Telling Room* in the *Chicago Tribune* reviewer Martha Bayne makes the assertion that "food fanatics and idle eaters alike would be hard-pressed to ignore the past decade's apparently limitless explosion of interest in stories about food and its cast of characters- its growers, its makers, its foragers, its cooks. It's an explosion that has in turn led to a correspondingly limitless explosion of food memoirs." Bayne begins her article this way and then discusses the way that the general public is probably "skeptical" or experiencing "dread" in response to this "explosion" of food writing and food memoirs, but I would approach this trend in a completely different way. I think that this explosion in food memoir is saying and doing something significant in our current cultural and societal climate. I believe that the work that food memoirs are doing in the field of life writing is significant in three ways. The first is the way that writing about food can help the author

and the reader, process experiences and memories by giving them a tangible object on which to focus thoughts and emotions. The second is that they legitimize these everyday personal and communal experiences, and reveal that the truths of those situations are worth being communicated to a larger audience. The third is that they challenge different cultural scripts than other texts such as: pleasurable experiences are not valuable experiences to study, or experiences of food do not significantly impact our constructions of self and the world. The way that food memoirs help “consumers” process, legitimize, and challenge their own experiences and identities is significant because few texts allow this kind of exploration in such a seemingly familiar space that readers can relate to.

### **Literature Review on Recent Work in Food Writing**

M.F.K. Fisher was a well-known food writer who was born just after the turn of the twentieth century. She is often hailed as the “first food memoirist” to gain notoriety and popularity. She had a vast array of books published within her lifetime, and a few published posthumously. She traveled a great deal and included those travels in her food and life experiences, often basing books on specific places that she had traveled. Food memoirs often coincide with travel memoirs in modern publications, and Fisher seems to be a forerunner in those textual productions as well as food memoirs themselves.

Although M.F.K Fisher is hailed as “the first” of famous food writers, I would argue that there is no food writer more famous than Julia Child. Child was born just four years after Fisher, and she died in 2004. Not only are her recipes well known, but her appearance and her personality are also extremely recognizable due to the teaching she did on television. Her most famous work is probably her cookbook *Mastering the Art of French Cooking* which was the first text she ever published after she learned to cook as

an adult. The text that I would label as her food memoir, though, was actually published in 2006, two years after her death. This text is entitled *My Life in France* and traces her life during the time that she and her husband Paul lived in France. Her nephew actually wrote the text for her, but she sat and described every story that she wanted included in her text.

The publication of Julie Powell's 2005 food memoir *Julie & Julia* and subsequent 2009 movie by the same name has renewed interest not only in Child's work, but in food writing and productions as well. Luke Barr's 2013 text *Provence, 1970: M.F.K. Fisher, Julia Child, James Beard, and the Reinvention of American Taste*, traces the linkages between and time that Child and Fisher (and others) spent in France together in 1970. When discussing the various interactions between these writers and cooks, Barr writes, "French food was a revelation, and they were going to bring it home [to the States]. Which is exactly what they did, each in his or her own way" ("The First French Meals"). This fascination with "bringing French food home" inspired these cooks to write about their experiences with food, and shows a commitment to using food to bridge cultural boundaries because they believed the food was just *that* good and saw the value in sharing it with a new audience.

In rhetoric and composition studies, one of the first robust treatments of food writing was published as a special focus in the journal *College English* in March 2008. This special focus edition of the journal contains five articles dealing with the rhetoric of food in various venues. The significant element of this journal publication is the way that food is addressed in an academic, analytical way, and yet the subjects of the articles are so varied. I can see obvious connections with food memoirs and analysis in three of the

articles included in the collection, but the other two articles are focused not on the analysis of food in texts, but on food systems and trends. David and Rebecca Nowacek's article "The Organic Food Systems: Its Discursive Achievements and Prospects" analyzes the emergence and popularity of organic farming. While they discuss activity systems as central to the sustainability and continuation of this kind of farming (406), their careful weighing of the pros and cons of the organic food system show a more scientific approach to writing about the rhetoric of food. Likewise, Stephen Schneider's article "Good, Clean, Fair: The Rhetoric of the Slow Food Movement" focuses on the move away from industrialized food products to the homegrown, organic products and the effects that has on the rhetoric of buying and eating food. He takes a historical and sociological approach in examining this movement and its implications in our current culture. These articles are similar to the writing done on food in technical communication journals, which I will discuss below.

The other three articles in this *College English* edition address food writing in memoir as it can be applied to teaching in classrooms, specifically literature classrooms. Cognard-Black and Goldthwaite's article "Books that Cook: Teaching Food and Food Literature in the English Classroom" contains insights and careful analysis of not only *how* to teach food literature in classrooms, but *why* to teach it. They write, "to teach food as a written art form is to teach a part of what it means to be human" (422). They go on to discuss the nuances of this instruction and what the analysis can and does do for students. This article covers a great breadth of subjects including cultural and gender constructions, transformations of the self through interaction (physical and mental) with the text, and the way that memory affects analysis.

Cognard-Black and Goldthwaite's article addresses the teaching of food memoirs in a more general sense, while both Barbara Waxman's article "Food Memoirs: What They Are, Why They are Popular, and Why They Belong in the Literature Classroom" and Lynn Bloom's article "Consuming Prose: The Delectable Rhetoric of Food Writing" offer several reasons why non-fiction food memoirs are valuable in classrooms. Bloom highlights several reasons why food writing needs to be analyzed in an academic sphere. She discusses the contexts in which food is made and eaten and why these make such a difference in our perception of food itself (353). She discusses "the pleasure and the humanity of the experience" (358) of thinking, reading, and writing about food. She advocates teaching these texts because she believes that food writing is "a genre well within the grasp of teachers and students" (347). The accessibility of the texts is something that she champions throughout her article, and is one of the driving reasons that she advocates using food memoirs in the classroom.

Waxman focuses more specifically on the pedagogy of food memoirs in literature classrooms, but she also discusses some of the "whys" about food memoirs and the analysis and teaching of them. She links the popularity of food memoirs to the basic "olfactory system" and the "links among smells, tastes, strong emotions, and keen memories" (363), which is a specific way to try to get at why these texts are currently so popular. She does work in defining, contextually theorizing, and then thematically discussing food memoirs, which shows them to be texts that stand up under careful examination and analysis.

This collection of articles in *College English* constitutes the most concentrated, specific work on food and food memoirs that I have found in academic sourcing in the

field of rhetoric and composition, but that's not to say that there aren't other academic texts analyzing food and rhetoric. There is also work being done in other academic journals, specifically *Senses and Society*, but also *Auto/Biography Studies*, *Food, Culture, and Society*, and others. This work reveals that food writing is not practiced in only one discipline, but has an interdisciplinary nature naturally through its subject matter. Food can be studied in many different venues, as is demonstrated by the variety of subjects and focuses seen in food writing academic journal publications.

As mentioned previously, there are a few technical communication journals that have many publications on food and food systems, although none that I have seen that focuses on food texts. Both *Technical Communication Quarterly* and *Technical Communication* have published many articles focusing on food production, food distribution, and choices about attitudes toward the purchasing of food. The articles "Attitudes and Food Choice Behaviour" by Thompson et.al., "Time, Food Shopping and Food Preparation: Some Attitudinal Linkages" by Davies and Madran and "Adverse Reactions to Food" by Fraser, Sumar, and Sumar were all published in *Technical Communication*. These are just a sample of the multiplicity of work on food being published in technical communication journals, but I feel that they are representative because of the focuses that they have and the way they are argued. Each journal article looks at both personal and communal attitudes towards food as well as scientific, physical, involuntary reactions to food. Davies and Madran's article does a case study "to provide a wider qualitative understanding of food shopping and meal preparation" (82). This study, conducted in the UK, revealed strong linkages between the time it takes to purchase and prepare food and the attitudes towards those activities (86).

In a similar vein as Davies and Madran's article, Thompson et. al.'s article "Attitudes and Food Choice Behavior" addresses attitudes towards olive oil in the UK in 1994. Again, a study was done, this time focusing on the "volitional choice" (10) of consumption and use of olive oil. The researchers concluded that the British people are using olive oil in larger amounts than ever, but the health benefits come secondary to the fact that people like the "flavour-enhancing attributes" (12). Fraser, Sumar, and Sumar's article entitled "Adverse Reactions to Foods," focuses not on attitude and choice in food consumption, but on allergy and physical reactions to certain kinds of foods. This article analyzes specific food antigens and provides conclusions about not only the reactions to foods, but about the increase of these kinds of reactions due to certain cultural and environmental factors (241). The two articles I examined from *Technical Communications Quarterly* follow the same lines of discussion as Fraser et. al.'s article in that they examine both scientific properties of foods, as well as historical linkages to those understandings, but these articles deviate from that trend in that they actually analyze texts produced about food, not just food itself. Bellowoat's 2012 article "Everyday Matters: Reception and Use as Productive Design of Health-Related Texts" examines the production of knowledge and "design in [patient's] choices" based on the cultural-historical activity theory (325). She conducts this CHAT analysis to better understand patient decisions about their own bodies through health texts as they relate to food choice and other medical procedures.

Elizabeth Tebeaux's article "English Agriculture and Estate Management Instructions, 1200-1700: From Orality to Textuality to Modern Instructions" focuses on very specific kinds of texts in relation to food and agriculture, but this seems to be



representative of the genre of food writing in technical communication. Tebeaux traces the trajectories of instruction texts in agriculture and highlights specific developments and contributors. She concludes with the idea that these kinds of texts are abundant in many fields and have worthwhile implications for modern readers if studied thoroughly (374). These texts are a small sample of the work that is being done on food and “food writing” in the field of technical communication. There seems to be more published on the subject of food in technical communication journals than any other field of academic publication within the humanities. The work done in this field is investigatory and scientific in nature, rather than analyzed through a rhetorical lens as seen in the *College English* publications on food writing.

The work done in *Senses and Society* that focuses on food is more rhetorically based, but also, not surprisingly, primarily focused on sensual experiences with food. Titles that focus on smell like Curtis’s “I Can Tell By the Way You Smell: Dietetics, Smell, Social Theory” and Waskul’s et.al. “The Aroma of Recollection: Olfaction, Nostalgia, and the Shaping of the Sensuous Self” as well as taste in Vitullo’s “Taste and Temptation in Early Modern Italy” point to this direct link between the senses and the writing on food. Vitullo’s article is a historically based analysis on preference of different tastes and what it meant for not only citizenship, but also being qualified as a “good person” in early modern Italy. Curtis takes a more philosophical approach to smell than the others published in *Sense and Society* by arguing that smell aids us by not only telling us what is good or bad to eat, but by giving us information about the world around us (17).

The two journal articles published in *Senses and Society* that I want to focus on

deal not just with food and the senses, but the way in which our interactions with food construct *and* challenge our identities. Waskul et.al.'s article "The Aroma of Recollection: Olfaction, Nostalgia, and the Shaping of the Sensuous Self," starts by saying: "self is necessarily a somatic accomplishment" (6). Based on this assertion, the writers then examine somatic work in relation to the self, memory, and nostalgia. Holtzman's article "Remembering Bad Cooks: Sensuality, Memory, and Personhood" details an aspect of food "self construction" in a unique way. He focuses on the constructions of self through bad food experiences rather than good, because, as he argues: "food is a vital arena for memory" (236). He says, though, that often we remember bad food experiences sometimes more distinctly than we remember good food experiences. His work in "the multilayered ways in which memory is structured through food" intricately links food experiences to discussions of identity making and selfhood (240).

The texts mentioned above each address food in very specific ways. There is work published in other academic journals that addresses food in similar veins, but with varied focuses. Helen Vallianatos and Kim Raine's article "Consuming Food and Constructing Identities Among Arabic and South Asian Immigrant Women" published in 2008 in *Food, Culture, and Society* examines purchasing and cooking food for two very specific groups who have immigrated to Canada. One article published in *Auto/Biography Studies*, Jopi Nyman's 2009 article "Cultural Contact and the Contemporary Culinary Memoir: Home, Memory, and Identity in Madhur Jaffrey and Diana Abu-Jaber," looks at constructions of food and identity from the viewpoint of two specific authors. And Kathryn Linder's 2011 article "The Fat Memoir as Autopathography: Self-

Representations of Embodied Fatness” looks at cultural conceptions of fatness and identity construction through food.

Academic publications, however, are not the only works being done on food. In fact, I would say that they are by far in the minority of texts on not only food, but on food blogs and memoirs themselves. There are abundant lists found through a simple Google search on travel and food memoirs such as “50 Best Food memoirs” and even NPR articles such as “Moments of Truth” or “5 Food Memoirs.” The number of food blogs and recipes being shared online by the general public is also a major source of understanding and discussion about food and food memoirs. As mentioned previously, memoirs like *Julie and Julia*, or others like *Yes, Chef* by Marcus Samuelsson, have brought food writing into the forefront of popular nonfiction texts. I want to mention these sources because they provide a less critical approach than the articles above, but are probably far more read, and thus more influential, in shaping the general public’s understanding of food writing.

### **Theoretical Framework of Rhetorical Analysis**

In addition to the writing about food memoirs in the field of life writing, there are also theorists and theoretical concepts through which to understand and analyze food writing. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson’s text *Reading Autobiography* must be considered when rhetorically analyzing food memoirs. Even as their text is titled as “reading autobiography,” Smith and Watson challenge the confines of this term. They write, “implicit in this canonization [of autobiography], however, is the assumption that many other kinds of life writings produced... have lesser value” (3). Smith and Watson work to focus on attention on the “shift in genre discourse” (3) and discuss ways that the

many different forms of life writing are valuable. The edited collection *Teaching Life Writing Texts* also contributes to the work being done to legitimize various types of life writing by publishing essays on how to teach many different kinds of life writing texts. The editors of the collection, Fuchs and Howes, write, “as the texts featured in many of the courses in this volume suggest, these tensions between canonical and emergent texts... are making the study of biography [and life writing] a far more nuanced and wide-ranging activity” (3). This process of legitimization for all kinds of life writing texts is valuable to the argument that food writing should be rhetorically analyzed because it constructs and challenges identity formations.

Kenneth Burke’s work in identity formation and rhetorical activity through community and language lends itself well to the analysis of food memoirs. Burke discusses the ways that humans make and use symbols to understand reality (*Language* 18). In *A Rhetoric of Motives*, Burke talks specifically about identity formation and says, “identifications in the order of love are also characteristic of rhetorical expression” (20). This can be applied to food memoirs by analyzing the ways that authors represent their expressions of love for food, people, and places as parts of their identities.

The main theoretical work that is often attached to food studies is Pierre Bourdieu’s 1984 text, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. This text on taste and social critique focuses on class and the ways that food and taste are class bound and class perpetuating in nature. This work is fundamental in analysis of food and class representation. These ideas can be extended to food memoirs by analyzing both the authors and readers class and societally based assumptions about good food and taste.

## Argument Rationale

As evidenced in this literature review, there *is* work being done on food and food writing in the academy. There is work that focuses on scientific and production aspects of food, as seen in the technical communication journals, but there is also work on the effects that food has on those who consume it, write about it, and read about it. The articles published in the special focus of *College English*, as well as the articles published in different *Senses and Society* issues look not just at food as a sustaining entity, but as a medium that influences and challenges communal and individual identity formations. What we have not seen, though, is sustained rhetorical inquiry into food memoirs in rhetoric and composition. This inquiry is essential in understanding why authors write food memoirs, what these food memoirs do for those who “consume” them, and what they do for the field of life writing in general.

I believe that a rhetorical analysis of two specific food memoirs and their accompanying blogs can begin to address the inquiry posed above. These two food memoirs hail from the tradition of food writing that Fisher and Child popularized in the twentieth century. The first text, *Blue Plate Special: An Autobiography of My Appetites*, is written by Kate Christensen and begins at Christensen’s first memories of her family and ends with a redemption story of love as an adult. Christensen also writes a blog entitled *Don’t Let It Bring You Down* in which she continues to talk about her love life, her travels, her book tours, her dog, and most importantly, food. Molly Wizenberg authored a text entitled *A Homemade Life: Stories and Recipes From My Kitchen Table*, which again begins at very early childhood and moves to her finding her husband and stability in her life as an adult. Wizenberg authors a blog entitled *Orangette*, which again

follows her current life, love, and food recipes. Both authors began writing their blogs previous to publishing their memoirs, yet these blogs also “carry on” the stories and work done in the memoirs because the authors continue to update them regularly. The two memoir texts uphold the traditions started by Fisher and Child in writing about travels and food and life experiences along the way, but they do so in a fresh way that does not end with the completion of the memoirs, but lives on in the blogs that they continue to write.

I am analyzing these food memoirs because people are talking about food and food memoirs, but they aren't talking about them in the rhetorically analytical way that I want to. There is something about food writing and life writing that has attracted and held people's interests, specifically over the last decade, and I want to explore what that is. I believe that discussion of the way that food sustains not only our physical bodies, but our identities and our cultural commonplaces is fascinating, and we must ask the questions: how do these memoirs critique cultural scripts about food? What is it about food writing that provides a way for writers to talk back or to figure something out? Why organize life stories and experiences around food rather than other explicit themes such as memory, trauma, grief, love, coming of age, confessional, quest, or travel? What is the exigency of these texts, and why are these authors representative (or not) of the genres of food memoirs and blogging? What do these texts do rhetorically that others do not?

I can begin to answer these questions by looking at the authors of both texts. Both authors are white females, both between the ages of thirty and sixty. They were both born in the United States, but both had the feeling that where they lived wasn't quite “home.” Christensen moved around quite a bit as a child, and Wizenberg lived with her parents

until she was eighteen, but “I was raised to know that I would leave, and that, in fact, I was *supposed* to. It never occurred to me to stay” (161). Both authors had a bit of a wandering spirit, but both found love for food and cooking in Paris. These authors both experience the loss of a father: Christensen’s father abandoned her, her mother, and her two sisters when she was quite young, and Wizenberg’s father died just after she had started graduate school in Seattle.

These authors have much in common, and thus I feel that their texts are comparable to one another. Christensen’s text was published in July of 2013, and Wizenberg’s text was published in 2009; both authors begin the memoirs at their childhood and tell their stories until their current age and situation. There is also the embodied connection that these two women know each other. On her blog post on July 23, 2013 entitled “Send out for scotch, boil me a crab, cut me a rose, make my tea with the petals” Christensen writes,

Molly Wizenberg... came by in her car to my hotel and picked me up and whisked me off to lunch. We sat at the counter of the Whale Wins and drank rosé and shared several small plates—freshly made headcheese, roasted cauliflower salad, plump grilled sardines, carrot and fennel salad. It was all so good, I swooned over every bite, even though it was hard to stop talking long enough to eat (*Don’t Let It Bring You Down*).

These two authors have shared experiences, and as we see from Christensen’s blog, have shared a meal.

The description of Wizenberg and Christensen’s meal together is exactly why I think that food memoir texts and their accompanying blogs should be studied in today’s

academic discourse of life writing, and narratives in general. Wizenberg started her blog, *Orangette* in July of 2004. Because of the blog, she met her husband, Brandon, and had a food memoir published by 2009, and has another book, *Delancy*, scheduled for release in the spring of 2014. Christensen published her book in 2013. She started her blog in December of 2011, and now travels and writes with her partner, Brendan, and is coauthoring another food memoir. I think what is relevant about these texts is the way that the story goes on. I don't mean that in a metaphorical or narrative way, but these lives that are described in the food memoirs and blogs literally *go on*. Everyday Kate Christensen gets up and walks her dog Dingo and eats food. Molly Wizenberg runs a restaurant with her husband, and she too gets up every morning and eats. In fact, she says that she gets up just so she can eat breakfast.

But these stories didn't end on the last pages of the food memoirs that each author wrote, as most stories don't, because the authors keep living, writing, and changing. But what the food memoir blogs provide is that insight into the continued stories because of the blogs the stories don't end *for the reader*. Through these connections the reader legitimizes the author's lived experience, while also continuing to value their identity and story constructions. We can continue to read about these women's lives, and we can continue to experience what they experience and eat the food that they have described in recipes and know how their lives continue to change and evolve, just like ours. This is the beauty of food memoirs and blogging: continued relationship between author, reader, and text. Even as the authors have revealed parts of their experiences and identities through these genres, the reader can continue to connect their own experiences to these authors.

These writers in particular are looking at the grief of losing their fathers versus the



ecstasy of finding love and how they love *because* of food, not just showing a love of food. The authors are telling a redemptive story, but they are telling it through stories about food and recipes. They are exploring their identities not only as writers, but as daughters, women dealing with grief, loss, and desire and discussing the way that food meets those desires. Food is described as much more than sustenance, but as a way to transcend. The following chapters explore the “how” and the “why” of the writing, reading, and reception of food memoirs and blogs, and ask questions about authorship, reader response, and the social, cultural, and academic implications of these kinds of texts.

Chapter two examines Kate Christensen’s food memoir *Blue Plate Special: An Autobiography of My Appetites* by taking a close look at several stories that are tied to food within the memoir. The chapter also explores the purpose of writing such a text and how the text construction impacts readers. I look at Christensen’s use of food as a marker of experience, such as when her father left, and the successes and failures of her relationships with men and her family. I also examine her stated purpose in writing and ask questions about how she seems to rhetorically achieve that purpose.

Chapter three analyzes Molly Wizenberg’s food memoir *A Homemade Life: Stories and Recipes From My Kitchen Table*, following a similar pattern to chapter two. Wizenberg’s life, as represented by food in her memoir, is examined by looking at specific stories and anecdotes. The second half of the chapter focuses on Wizenberg’s purpose in writing and asks, how does her intended purpose seem to work to convey her message? Wizenberg also uses food as a focal point for her experiences, and like Christensen, recalls a breakfast of eggs and toast to mark her father’s last days with her.

Wizenberg's focus on the people she interacts with and the food that she eats rather than specifically on her own thoughts and emotions is called into question as I look at her rhetorical purpose for writing.

Chapter four examines Kate Christensen's blog *Don't Let It Bring You Down* and Molly Wizenberg's blog *Orangette*. I will examine how these texts function as distinctive entities by creating a sense of rhetorically knowing the author through their ongoing publication in a way that print memoirs do not. This chapter asks questions about what is at stake in the writing of blogs, which are much less mediated than print texts. Like in their memoirs, Christensen's blog focuses on her own experiences, thoughts, and emotions, and she only sporadically includes recipes with her blog posts. Wizenberg's blog focuses almost completely on the food and recipes with very little inclusion of herself and her family. She also uses photographs in addition to her food texts, bringing the reader in and helping them to witness the text visually. The differences of writing styles and focuses between these two blogs calls into question the idea of "knowing" an author, and I look at what that knowing means and can do for the author and the reader in these two blogs.

Chapter five, the final chapter, analyzes the pedagogical and theoretical applications of these texts. In looking at these various purposes that these authors present, I ask questions about what this study could mean for the broader academic field. We must consider what food memoirs stand to contribute to life writing and pedagogy. Chapter five will synthesize the arguments from the previous chapters and show the exigency for this work. I want to know how this work can continue on and grow in the academy, and so I argue for the value of food texts both in college classrooms and in academic

research. I think that food texts are unique in the way they create a dichotomy for both the author and the reader as producers and consumers. I argue that for this reason, and many others, there is value in this work of rhetorically analyzing food texts.

## CHAPTER II

### ANALYSIS OF KATE CHRISTENSEN'S FOOD MEMOIR *BLUE PLATE SPECIAL: AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF MY APPETITES*

#### **Introduction to Text**

Kate Christensen's 2013 text *Blue Plate Special* is marketed as a food memoir, yet I would argue that it occupies a curious space within this category. Christensen certainly does talk about food, her love of food, and relates many of her memories to food experiences, yet her memoir is not centered on food. Her memoir is centered on herself. Since food memoir is a broad category within life writing, this qualifies as a food memoir, yet on the continuum of food memoirs that focus on food, hers is much closer to the memoir side than the food side. This may stem from the fact that Christensen was a successful author of novels prior to writing her first memoir. Parts of her six novels were semi-autobiographical, but this memoir was the first time that she told her own story as such. One reviewer describes *Blue Plate Special* as "sprinkled with recipes and memoirs of meals... [it's] a toothsome blend of personal and social history" (Meisel). Another reviewer, Jen Doll, titles her article "Kate Christensen's *Blue Plate Special*; Or, 'Another Fucking Food Book.'" This sentiment echoes the explosion of food memoirs discussed in the previous chapter, but Doll goes on to discuss the way that Christensen's text "is a story of life told through food in the venerable tradition of M.F.K. Fisher, Laura Colwin, and Ruth Reichl, and its scope is much greater than what's on the plate" (Doll). Food

writing, as evidenced in Christensen's text, can help the author, and the reader, process experiences and memories by giving them a tangible object on which to focus thoughts and emotions. Christensen relates food to several specific periods in her life and explores her personal experiences through her food experiences. In this chapter I will examine specific aspects of Christensen's text that evidence the way that ties her personal, lived experiences to food, and food to her experiences. I will also analyze the construction of the food included in her text, both through personal stories and recipes and the way that those constructions influence our understanding as readers of her as an author and person.

### **Experience Exploration Through Food**

One of Christensen's most vividly horrific memories of her father was when he beat her mother in front of her and her two siblings at the breakfast table. The fact that this scene happened while they were eating seems to have stuck out to Christensen. The scene was imprinted in Christensen's mind, and it is one that she refers back to often throughout her text. She writes, "whatever the case may be, this particular wrecked breakfast is imprinted on my soul like a big boot mark... in that moment, I split in half. As part of me stared at the eggshells, the toast crumbs, the empty yellow-streaked bowls, that other part allied itself with my father, the person with the strength and force and power" (10). In this particular instance from Christensen's childhood we understand the way that the leftover breakfast food was the only tangible objects which she remembers from this experience, but she also remembers the split within her own identity. Part of her identified with the homily, the familiar, the filling food, and part of her identified with her father's power over her mother and her family.

In his article “Remembering Bad Cooks: Sensuality, Memory, and Personhood” author Jon Holtzman theorizes about the effect that bad food experiences, or “wrecked” experiences, as Christensen characterizes that breakfast, have on our memories and our conceptions of ourselves in that moment, and stemming from it. Holtzman writes, “food [experiences are] sometimes perceived to be bad, which has a bearing on memory in general, and on the particular ways in which memories are formed regarding the person who has prepared the food—how the identity of the cook is encoded and recalled over time” (237). This is represented in a complicated way in Christensen’s text, because in that moment of recall Christensen remembers her mother as the weak, powerless victim. Even as she was the one who provided sustenance for her children, she was the one who had no power over the situation or even what happened to her or her children. Holtzman uses his analysis of bad food experiences to highlight the gendered expectations that are often included in food experiences (i.e. the cook as the sensual, helpless woman). He writes:

I have aimed this article to suggest certain ways of looking at cooking which treat it as a complex process that shapes how personhood is created and how it is remembered through a sensuous experience connecting the cooks to those who eat their food. Yet to understand this process we must not simply focus on those commonplace forms of sensuality that dominate scholarly accounts of food—ones which largely highlight its positive aspects (241).

We can discern a conflation of these understandings in Christensen’s recounting of this wrecked breakfast. We see the bad experience as a memorable moment, an identity marker, and an event that begins to shape her understanding of gender and power

relations. Much is represented in this experience, and the fact that Christensen chooses to use the objects of the yolk-streaked bowls and toast crumbs to represent her crumbling identity and gender conceptions is telling because it shows that she remembered the one tangible object in that moment; the familiar nourishing food, that tasted horrible after watching her father's violence towards her mother.

Christensen goes through major life changes after her father abandoned her, her mother, and her two sisters. Soon after her father left, Christensen's mother moved the family to Arizona. It was an unfamiliar place for Christensen and her family, but it was safe and "summer lasted year-round" (39). It is through food that Christensen describes this first summer and her experiences with her family. She wonders how "hamburgers with melted cheese on toasted sesame buns with pickles and ketchup, potato salad, potato chips, Coke and ice cream" could "taste even better through the chlorine clouds [from the pool] on my tongue" (39). It is in this homey atmosphere in Arizona that Christensen begins to understand her mother as "a cook of the plain, simple, homey variety which was perfect for our underdeveloped palates" (41). This marking of her simple family meals shows Christensen's mindset at the time, and that of her family: "just us four girls, living in a wild, strange place, making a home for ourselves" (43). This time in Arizona is one of the few times that Christensen remembers the four of them living together, and she often reminisces about those times later on in her text. Autobiography scholars Smith and Watson write, "the ability to recover memories, in fact, depends upon the material body. There must be a body that perceives and internalizes the images, sensations, and experiences of the external world" (37). Christensen's memories of her family recovering from her father's abuse and abandonment are deeply embodied and rely heavily on food

experiences and food descriptions. Through reading about these experiences, and many others in Wizenberg and Christensen's texts, readers can begin to understand "the combination of the autobiographical pact and direct experience" (Karpinski 291). These authors write about their private memories with their fathers and then their losses of those fathers through embodied experiences and descriptions of food and the way that food represented not just eating to be full, but eating to be alive, to remember, and to construct an understanding of what was happening in them and around them.

When Christensen was eighteen, her grandmother found her a job as "the *fille au pair* for two immensely kind, warmhearted teachers" (151). This job was "located in the dead geographical center of France" (152). Christensen struggled at the beginning of this trip, as she didn't know the language, the culture, or any people besides the family she worked for. The experience was new, difficult, and challenging for Christensen to adapt to. She writes that in order to learn to fit in she "listened to them jibber-jabber away and tried to imitate the way they ate, which they seemed to do better, being French, than anyone I had ever observed at a table before" (157). This careful observation and imitation helped Christensen feel more like a part of the community and helped to "alleviate [her] isolation" (157). Not surprisingly, though, this experience in France was a turning point for Christensen, in that it was the place where she began to truly appreciate food, and this appreciation began to help her legitimize her time there. She writes, "that zucchini woke me up to the idea that food had possibilities and qualities that I had not suspected. After that supper, I began to pay closer attention to what I ate; I began to see it not as a substance to assuage hunger or homesickness but as something to savor when it was good, like a well-written book or piece of music" (159). This awakening to the



possibilities of food, and then her subsequent study and writing about it, began to change Christensen and give her purpose in her life in France.

Lynn Bloom understands this experience as she writes, “[there] is a social orientation to food writing, nurturing, enveloping, providing—as is common—sustenance for the spirit as well as the body” (354). Christensen began to see food that way, and that realization began to change her whole experience in France. She writes, “the longer I lived there, the more I learned about food” (163). Christensen lived in France for one year, and marks her experiences and interactions with people in relation to the food that they ate. She writes of her last night in France: “we lay on big pillows on the rug in his bedroom with a bottle of wine. Francois fed me pieces of warm tart and we drank wine while we listened to *Rites of Spring* until the sun rose” (181). The revelation of food as something to be savored, not just consumed, awakened Christensen and legitimized her experiences as an American in France because it gave her something to focus on, something to be good at, and something to help her differentiate between the two cultures. Also, by writing about the experience, she legitimizes her appreciation of food and the reason why she feels compelled to write about it. Bloom says that that discussion of the appreciation of food reveals “a number of important principles concerning the relations between reader and food writer” (354). In this case, we can see Christensen is exploring that relationship by legitimizing her experiences through writing about food.

Christensen had a history with many men, some French, some American as she moved around the country with her family and on her own. She married and divorced a man named Jon who taught her a lot, such as [how] to eat in restaurants, how to enjoy food without “guilt or remorse or puritanism” (255). Christensen relates the period of her

life after her divorce as very dark, but then she met a younger man named Brendan. On their first date, Christensen writes, “I wanted to commandeer our menus, certain that this man in his twenties had no idea how to order anything, let alone tapas, but he took over and ordered for both of us with grace and ease” (332). The two soon fell in love, and are still together (as is evidenced in Christensen’s blog). This marking of his competence with food is not particularly striking or powerful, but it was significant to Christensen. She felt at ease with him, safe, and cared for. Her relationship with Brendan is marked by food experiences, and the memoir ends with the line, “we slept deeply together in the absolute quiet and dark, woke to the morning light on the mountains, coffee with half-and-half and honey, and warm soft-boiled eggs with buttered toast” (348). In this telling there is a peace in the prose that Christensen seems to be lacking throughout much of her text. This final line is redemptive in a way, also, harkening back to the ruined breakfast of eggs and toast when her father beat her mother, and that impacted Christensen’s relationship with men from that day on. The beauty in the prose is that it reveals an understanding of the way that food experiences shape reality, and the way that reality shapes food experiences, both good and bad.

### **The Food of the Text**

Christensen’s text is made up of stories about food, but it is also made up of recipes about the food that she and those around her consumed. This depiction is unique to food memoirs in printed publications because unlike cookbooks, which simply present recipes, these recipes are woven into the text as if they are another story or experience themselves. Christensen is especially adept at this weaving as she includes recipes on the same page as experiential text. There is a small divider and a slight change in font

between the story text and the recipe text, but there is very little differentiation between the two. This is notable because it seems to represent the way that Christensen views the role of food in her life, and many of her life experiences themselves. She does not categorize her life into experiences and food, but she weaves them together to present a more cohesive image<sup>1</sup>. This is another area where her text can be viewed as “mostly” a memoir, because the recipes are scattered and well integrated into the text itself. This integration brings about questions about the position that Christensen occupies as a woman author, and the tastes that she had been raised to value and to reject. Reviewer Heller McAlpin writes, “if the old saw that you are what you eat is true, then... Christensen is made up of equal parts home-cooked comfort foods, red pepper flakes, and wine. Her down-to-earth memoir... which chronicles her life and loves against a backdrop of the foods she lustily consumed along the way, reflects an unpretentious sincerity and a craving for stimulation and spice” (“*Blue Plate Special*”). But, as a reader, I began to ask myself why Christensen was highlighting certain aspects of her life, and why she was choose to do so through the lens of food.

I believe that the organization of the text and the information that she chooses to include reveals certain insights about her purpose in writing this text and her expectations of herself as an author and of her readers. In Ben Highmore’s 2010 text *Ordinary Lives: Studies in the Everyday* he writes, “the self stretches out into the world so as to become a self. The emphasis on food for a writer... it is an emphasis on process... the eater is not a

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<sup>1</sup> This is written with the understanding that publishers do play a significant role in deciding how individual texts should be formatted to reach the largest market possible, but Christensen’s writing seems to highlight lived experiences and the food experiences seem to come second, as represented by the textual format.

fully constituted subject, but a subject constantly becoming constituted through their orientations towards things like food. Food, then, always has the potential to join in the act of reconstituting the subject” (151). While this notion may wash over some of the challenges of self-construction, I believe that this idea sums up Christensen’s purpose in writing and ambition as an author to help “constitute” both herself and her readers. Memoirs are often said to legitimize experiences of both authors and readers, as explored above. I believe though that beyond legitimizing experience, giving it importance through public sharing and expression, food texts work to “constitute people.” What I mean by that, and what I believe Highmore is referring to, is that there is an understanding that authors and readers are made up of multiple experiences, multiple perspectives, and multiple meals. With this understanding we seem to automatically assume that there should be room for more. There should be room in our schedule for a new experience, should be room in our minds for new perspectives, and room in our stomachs for more food.

What texts like Christensen’s aim to do is perhaps open up her experiences, perspectives, and meals for readers to not only “witness” but to let become part of themselves as well. As readers when we love a book or recommend it to a friend we say, “it changed me! I felt like she was talking directly to me!” That kind of connection is what each author and reader seems to strive for in any given text. Christensen understands this as an eater, a reader, and a writer. She writes, “eating a good meal, like reading a satisfying novel, has returned me to myself” (*Blue Plate* 3). Food texts seem to aim to accomplish this transubstantiality through the text. As Christensen shares her experiences she also shares recipes, almost as if they blend in with the experiences

themselves. I see this organization of the text as intentional, as if Christensen is almost saying: be a part of my text through both my own experiences and the recipes I share. In a way, by following her recipes, readers can experience on a very visceral, sensually based level the same site, taste, touch, and smell experience that Christensen did. There are some food experiences such as scrambled eggs or toast with jam that might not need recipes in order for the reader to be able to identify with the author. If the reader is from a similar cultural and ethnic background as the author then descriptions of eggs and toast might be enough for the reader to feel as if they can identify with the author's experience. There are many other recipes that are much more complex, however, and in order for the reader to be able to experience something close to what Christensen experienced, a recipe would need to be provided. By opening up both her recipes and her experiences to readers and blending the two together, this invitation for the reader to become a part of both the life and food experiences seems very open.

In her article "The Consolation of Critique: Food, Culture, and Civilization in Ernest Hemingway" Hilary Justice writes, "food is [a] dialogue" (17). She goes on to say that a hunger for food is "both literal and metaphorical... [it is as] symbolic as it is culinary" (20). This understanding of hunger is both a revelation as well as seeming somewhat obvious. When we hunger for something, we sometimes want that literal food item, but we sometimes want something we connect to that food item: friendship, warmth, happiness. Roland Barthes writes, "for what is food? It is not only a collection of products that can be used for statistical or nutritional studies. It is also, and at the same time, a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations, and behaviors" (29). One of the overarching questions of this study is: what do food texts do

that other life writing texts do not, or cannot, do? I believe one of the answers to that question, as evidenced by Christensen's text, is that food texts establish a dialogue or system of communication that other texts cannot. In this way, the very words contained in the text are meant to "reconstitute" both the author and the reader.

M.F.K. Fisher is a revered food writer, and as mentioned in the first chapter, is often credited as being the first true food writer. Her multiple texts have set a standard for what food texts are supposed to look like, but more importantly, what food texts are supposed to do. In the forward to her book *The Gastronomical Me*, Fisher writes the following:

People ask me: why do you write about food and eating and drinking? Why don't you write about the struggle for power and security, and about love, the way others do? They ask it accusingly, as if I were somehow gross, unfaithful to the honor of my craft. The easiest answer is to say that, like most other humans, I am hungry. But there is more than that. It seems to me that our three basic needs, for food and security and love, are so mixed and mingled and entwined that we cannot straightly think of one with the others. So it happens that when I write of hunger, I am really writing about love and the hunger for it, and warmth and the love of it and the hunger for it... and then the warmth and richness of fine reality of hunger satisfied... and all is one (x).

This description of food writing mixed with the understanding of food as a dialogue or system of communication that reconstitutes the reader and the writer is evidenced clearly in Christensen's text and helps us to understand her purpose in writing.

In the prologue to *Blue Plate* Christensen writes about her own motivation and drive in writing a memoir. Christensen writes,

Often, whenever I come up against anything painful or difficult, my mind escapes to food. I am sure I am far from alone in this. Even if I'm too upset to eat, just the thought of a grilled cheese sandwich and a bowl of tomato soup is warm and cozy and savoring and comforting. Unlike memories, emotions, experiences, food is an irrefutable fact, a bit of physical nourishment, and when it's gone, it's gone (1).

The fact that food is a disposable and quickly disappearing commodity makes it almost as transient as some experiences or emotions, but Christensen sees it as more solid and concrete. As discussed above, I believe this is a major reason why she anchors so many of her own personal experiences to food, or memories of food. Christensen goes on to discuss why she chose to write this food memoir specifically. Christensen writes, "In recent years, my life has started to intrude on my writing. It first announced itself as a subject quietly but insistently, as subjects will if you let them, the way a cat might sit on a book you're trying to read" (4). This insistence of her life creeping into her writing begins to explain her departure from novels that, though slightly autobiographical, focused on the lives and emotions of fictional characters.

This move to memoir caused Christensen to be vulnerable in a way that she had never been in her writing before, yet it seems that as an author she didn't really have a choice. She writes, "as my fiftieth birthday approached, I gave in, put aside the novel I was working on, and out of nowhere for the first time started to write short essays about my life—ostensibly centered on food as a lifelong passion and favorite pastime but, in a deeper way, addressing my own experiences and memories" (4). Writing about food,

especially in food memoirs, is never just about the food. Molly O'Neill, food writer and editor of *American Food Writing: An Anthology with Classic Recipes*, expounds on this sentiment as she writes, "a good piece of food writing is never just about the food; it is, among other things, about place and time, desire and satiety, the longing for home and the lure of the wider world" (xxii). Christensen shows these characteristics very clearly in her text as many of stories are about the very aspects that O'Neill lists. Christensen says, "the coincidence of food and language is as excellent and reassuring a combination as any other I've ever found" (5). This reassurance shows that there is much in this text beyond food experiences. This text, for Christensen, is about "an offering of thanks" (4) for both the experiences and the food (good and bad) that have constituted her as a person and an author.

In this discussion of Christensen's purpose, though, we must look at the implications of her work in order to fully analyze this text rhetorically, not just trust her expressed motivation in writing. So, the question becomes not whether or not we can understand Christensen's purpose in writing here, but *how* we can understand that. Memoirs are unique in the vantage point that they offer readers in regards to "knowing" authors and their purpose. In one sense, readers begin to feel as if they know the authors because they know the names of their friends and families, the places they've lived, the things they like to do, and in the case of food memoirs, the things they like to eat and cook. Yet, can we as readers say that the author's purpose is for readers to feel as if we know them, or is that just a byproduct of them sharing their story? I would argue that one way that readers should begin to think about these texts is to ask, what is at stake for this author? Is their privacy at stake? Their pride? Their grandmother's secret family recipes?



As we begin to ask questions about what is at stake for authors, we can also begin to question what is at stake for us, as readers. What is at stake is the sense that we have truly witnessed an experience or a life, when in fact we have only read a mediated text portraying certain details of a life, and of course, leaving some out. As we look at Christensen's description of her purpose in writing, we must keep these questions in mind as we try to understand how and why she wrote this text.

In the prologue to her memoir Christensen addresses not only her motivation as an author to write this food memoir, but she also says that her motivation was directly tied to the response from readers and her hope that her texts could be a source of nourishment for them as well. Christensen writes:

The [food] essays emerged naturally, almost as if I were transcribing them rather than writing them... I posted them online, one by one, as a blog, in order to connect with readers, even if they were just my mother and a few friends. To my happy surprise, more and more people began reading these essays, until I became aware of a growing readership and understood from their responses that I was offering comfort, somehow, simply by revealing truths about my own life (4).

This offering of comfort inspired Christensen to continue to write and eventually moved the platform of her essays from the online blog to a "chronology, a sort of autobiography" (4) that was published in print in July 2013. Though as the platform moves, so do the reader responses, and Christensen continues to have success both in print publications and online essay publications on her blog, which will be discussed in chapter four. The important aspect to note about this text, though, is how it is written as a compulsion from Christensen as an author, but also an offering of comfort and nourishment to readers.

So, how do the recipes interwoven with the texts evidence this kind of work? If we examine one specific example, we can see the significance of this kind of organization in her memoir text. In her chapter entitled “The Boy Next Door” Christensen writes about meeting her first husband, Jon. About Jon she writes, “I felt completely safe with him. He felt so familiar to me, as if we had known each other since we were kids, as if we’d grown up next door to each other” (256). Christensen writes about the way that Jon inspired her and encouraged her to get in contact with her estranged mother and sister. This four and a half page chapter ends with Christensen revealing how she found out that her mother had uterine cancer and her sister Emily “was now in Australia, and she had recently contacted our mother after a long period of silence. She was back now, too. After I hung up, I sat alone in my apartment, weeping” (257). This emotional scene is immediately followed by a recipe for minestrone. This food item is never mentioned in the chapter; in fact, the only food mentioned in the chapter is in restaurants, and one fancy meal that Jon cooked. In the chapter Christensen describes “steak frites, artichokes, frisee salads with lardons and poached egg, steak tartare, raw oysters, asparagus” (255). So why doesn’t Christensen include the recipe for any of these foods at the end of her chapter? Why the recipe for minestrone that she ends by saying, “feel free to add a handful of macaroni if you like” (257)? I believe that this choice is a conscious decision made for the reader.

This chapter was not about food, per say. This chapter was about finding love, finding peace, and finding reconciliation. This chapter contains elements of foreboding as Christensen writes, “I thought, out of nowhere, ‘I must never betray this trust.’ Then I felt a little chill, a premonition of sorts” (256). Yet after establishing this trust with Jon and

finding reconciliation with her family, Christensen provides the reader with a simple, filling, comforting dish. Even as her experiences might fill the reader with both joy and sadness, the recipe she provides on the very same page as her emotional conversation could literally fill the eater until they are full and are satisfied for the moment, even if that feeling doesn't last forever. Christensen artfully weaves these elements of experience and purpose in authorship and for her readers into this three hundred and fifty three page memoir that truly does fill the reader, at least for the moment.

## CHAPTER III

### ANALYSIS OF MOLLY WIZENBERG'S FOOD MEMOIR *A HOMEMADE LIFE: STORIES AND RECIPES FROM MY KITCHEN TABLE*

#### **Introduction to Text**

Molly Wizenberg's 2009 food memoir *A Homemade Life: Stories and Recipes From My Kitchen Table* follows a similar pattern as Christensen's *Blue Plate Special* in that Wizenberg relates specific personal experiences to food experiences, and then provides the recipe for the reader. Her text differs from Christensen's, though, in its focus upon and following of the genre conventions of food memoirs. As discussed previously, Christensen's text is an autobiography that includes food. Wizenberg's text, I would argue, is a memoir focused on food that includes autobiographical elements. This difference is notable because the texts seem to accomplish different purposes due to their varying conceptions and constructions. Wizenberg's text follows a predictable format. She writes stories typically between three to five pages, and then always follows each story with a recipe or two or three specifically related to the story she told. The recipes are about one to two pages, and while they usually start with a personal anecdote, they are detailed and comprehensive in the instructions. This pattern is repeated throughout the text. There are forty-six stories in the text, and fifty-one recipes. Based just on these numbers we can see that there is almost equal attention paid to the autobiographical telling and the recipes. As almost every story revolves around food, recipes, and cooking

one could argue that there is a stronger focus on food itself, rather than Wizenberg's own life. That is not to say that this book is closer to a cookbook or collection of recipes; it is most definitely a memoir chronicling parts of her childhood, her father's death, and her recovery from that loss through food, France, and love, but her life and her stories are very much centered on food, making this text almost the quintessential food memoir.

### **Finding Purpose Through Food**

One of Wizenberg's most pivotal and traumatic moments in her life is the physical and conceptual loss of her father. She details this experience with sadness and grief, but most poignantly through food experiences. Her father, a doctor, was diagnosed with cancer when Wizenberg was twenty-four years old. She had been living away from home, but she went back to be with her father in his last days as he was confined to his home. She helped to care for him as he lay in the living room, and though he wasn't always aware of her presence, or his own condition, she valued that time with him. One day when she brought him "some scrambled eggs with goat cheese and a slice of buttered toast" he looked at the food and "eyeing the plate in my hands, he asked if the picnic was ready. I nodded. Between bites he murmured dazedly. We were in Italy, he said, and we were sitting on a blanket, and the grass around us was green and cool" (139). Wizenberg said she never knew if "he'd dreamed it... or really believed that we'd really been to Italy" but she said, "maybe it didn't matter" (139). Wizenberg's loss of her father caused her to try to reassess her life, her goals, and her work, but in that moment, all she remembers is the eggs. Her father's imagining of them in Italy stuck with her not as a hallucination, but as "his way of escaping the body that had carried him for seventy-three years and dropped him without warning" (139). Wizenberg describes that scene in eggs,

similarly to Christensen's last breakfast with her father, not in medical terms, or in literal descriptions of her trauma. Through eggs, she remembers and honors her father. At the end of the chapter she includes a recipe for "Italian Grotto Eggs" (140). This remembering of one of her last conversations with her father is marked here, in this text, in a peaceful breakfast, the opposite of Christensen's depiction of breakfast with her father.

Lynn Bloom, author of the article "Consuming Prose: The Delectable Rhetoric of Food Writing" writes that, "most food writing establishes an intimate social context of family and friends, the quick and the dead; fellow or rival cooks at home or in restaurants; activities, from the sensual to the sacred; and occasions made happier by the presence of food—not only feasts, fairs, and festivals, holidays and holy days, but times hard, historic, or simply ordinary" (353). Wizenberg's experience in her parents' living room is a sacred moment to her, and one that shows not only her closeness with her father, but her respect for his memories and his travels. Life writing theorists and authors of the text *Reading Autobiography*, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson write that "this apparently simple act [of people writing about their own lives] is anything but simple, for the writer becomes, in the act of writing, both the observing subject and the object of investigation, remembrance, and contemplation" (1). Even as Kate Christensen's identity was challenged and split in the breakfast altercation between her mother and father detailed in *Blue Plate Special*, Wizenberg also becomes an observer in this intimate moment with her father. She becomes the observer that then must make an assessment about the situation in question, even as she experiences it. She writes that this kind of observation "could have frightened me" but instead of viewing her experiences with her

father as frightening, she realized that she “was grateful for whatever relief he found” and that all she wanted was “to help him find it” (139). In those marked moments of observation there is so much to process, and so much at stake that perhaps one of the only ways to truly relate these memorable and formative experiences is through descriptions of eggs. Wizenberg uses the description of the meal to help her process what was happening to her father. It is not easy to accept death, so for Wizenberg this description of food might have been the only way that she could relate her father’s death in a text.

After the death of her father, Wizenberg had to figure out who she was without him, and what she needed to do to not only survive but to begin to thrive. She writes that “the time is a blur” as she remembers her grieving group, and that on “Saturday mornings, I would get up early and bake” (155). She took the advice of those around her who told her: “*don’t make any big decisions for the first year and a half. Don’t change anything. Just get through it*” (162) (emphasis original). She followed that advice by staying in Seattle for the first year and a half, but “a year and a half after Burg [her father] died, I went to Paris” (162). It was in Paris that Wizenberg realized that what she really wanted to do was “to do something with food” (166). Wizenberg writes about this period in her life as one of the most confusing but most rewarding. It was just after she left Paris that she began her blog, *Orangette*, that she still writes today. Again, this transitory period is marked by her food experiences. She writes about “the finest fried chickpea balls” (164), “spectacular soppressata” (164), and her “favorite chocolate-dipped orange peels” (167). Smith and Watson say that “acts of remembering take place at particular sites and in particular circumstances” (18). Wizenberg’s remembering happens in relation to the food she ate trying to get over her father’s death.

Molly Wizenberg's first experience in France was when her parents took her "to Paris for the first time when [she] was ten" (59). This first trip to France is memorable for her because of the food that she ate, and the way that her father "loved that city" (59). On this first trip, Wizenberg remembers eating pastries with her parents: "we sat down, watching ourselves in the mirror, and ate our pastries: the *croissants* for him and my mother, the *pain au chocolat* for me. It crackled when I bit into it, but underneath the shatter crust, it tore into dozens of stretchy layers and strands... I was sold" (62). An even more formative time in Paris was spent when Wizenberg was in college and she "applied to [her] university's Paris program, writing a breathless essay about *le Quartier Latin* and that visit when I was ten" (97). From this visit, Wizenberg remembers her host's making "bouchons" and her recollection that "they tasted like what I imagined France itself would taste like, if it were small enough to fit in my mouth" (99). Wizenberg's third experience in Paris was after she graduated college, when she moved there on her own. It was there that she realized the way that food sustained her not just physically, but emotionally and mentally as well. She learned that that sustenance was enough as she "learned that [she] loved to cook for one" (120). In this place of finding herself, and finding what she loved, she learned that she didn't need other people to validate her experiences, but found that "eating alone is also an affirmation. It's a way of enjoying me" (121). Similarly to Christensen, these experiences in France were marked by food experiences, and often the food was the only "witness" to their experiences. Even as Christensen snuck bites of stew, and Wizenberg bites of bouchons, these women's experiences wouldn't have been known to others if they hadn't told them, or written them down. Philippa Keaney, author of "Soulfood: The Roles of Food, Faith, Family and Arts



in *Self and Communal Identity*” writes about the literal and figurative border crossing of immigrants lives and food practices. She writes, “the adaptability around food procurement and preparation is one of the ways in which borders can be crossed” (Keaney 113). Christensen and Wizenberg cross literal borders by going from the United States to France, but they also cross figurative borders as, through food, they begin to realize truths about themselves and what they love.

After she returned from Paris, Wizenberg fell in love and relates those experiences through food, and relates food to those experiences. She had a history with French and American men, which she describes in the memoir, but her husband Brandon found her through her food blog, *Orangette*. He sent her an email that said “if you were in NYC, I would like nothing more than to take you out to Balthazar for some French martinis and a Balthazar Salad” (*A Homemade Life* 197). This was the beginning of their relationship, which began through emails and long phone calls, became officially long distance through monthly visits, and then eventually Brandon moved to Seattle with her. She describes their favorite meal of the summer that he moved in with her as “a few zucchini sliced into long strips on a mandolin, sautéed and then tossed with hot spaghetti and pesto. We called it ‘zucchini noodles,’ for the way the long slivers of squash mimicked the shape of the spaghetti” (269). Wizenberg explains many other meals that she and Brandon ate together, and goes into detail about the food that they chose and prepared for their wedding. Her conclusion about all of this, though, is a saying that her friend coined: “this is the bread and butter! This is what it’s all about” (311). She is obviously referring to more than just food here, but her expression of truly finding happiness and contentment with Brandon is expressed in this way: through food.

Wizenberg chronicles both trauma and joy through food experiences, showing the progression of her emotional, physical, and mental states.

### **The Heart and Mind of the Text**

Wizenberg's text does weigh heavily on the food side of the category of food memoir, but her text has some surprising elements that keep it fresh even within this category that has exploded. One reviewer describes his experience after reading this memoir as having a "sugar hangover" ("Review: *A Homemade Life*"). This reviewer goes on to say, "[Wizenberg] has a real talent for sharing food lust and love with a reader. Even something as un-special as stewed prunes becomes enticing in her hands with deft touches of citrus and cinnamon" ("Review: *A Homemade Life*"). As Wizenberg's text was clearly segmented into sections of food writing and sections of life writing, the two have to be examined as almost two separate entities. Both are written with thought and feeling, but they are definitely separate parts of the book. This reviewer sums up this segmentation well by categorizing Wizenberg's text as evidencing "the desire to stay behind the camera rather than be in front of it" ("Review: *A Homemade Life*"). This idea sums up Wizenberg's style both as a cook and as an author. This is significant to note because in the field of life writing, the person doing the writing is usually considered the center of the text.

Wizenberg of course writes about herself in her memoir, but I would argue that she is not the *focus* of the text. In fact, the life-writing portion of her text can almost be segmented into two separate subjects. The first half of the text focuses on Wizenberg's father, Burg, his life and his death, and her many experiences with him. The second half of the book, following Burg's death, focuses on Brandon, Wizenberg's husband, and how

she met and fell in love with him. This penchant to be behind the camera instead of in front of it is evidenced in Wizenberg's blog as well, as is discussed in the next chapter. So, while one cannot assume to know why Wizenberg would choose to be somewhat secondary in her own memoir text, we can see that this does different work for the readers than a text like Christensen's does. Christensen exposes herself in many ways to her readers, letting them into her heartbreak, weight struggles, and infidelity. Wizenberg does offer personal and meaningful anecdotes about her life, but she does not open herself up to the reader in the same way that Christensen does. The reader leaves the text with a sweet sentiment and a collection of wonderful recipes, but I would argue that they do not leave the text challenged or changed. In a review published on May 24<sup>th</sup>, 2011 the reviewer asserts: "this is what Wizenberg is really after: good food... indulgence, passion, comfort, and transcendence" ("Review- Molly Wizenberg's). After reading Wizenberg's text no one could argue that her text is not truly focused on good food. One reviewer praises this attribute saying "she manages to make us feel included without being too voyeuristic" (Velden), but I think that perhaps something is lost in inclusion when you don't leave the text feeling as if you witnessed something. There is almost the sense that Wizenberg is trying to hide herself behind her descriptions of her food, and as a reader, perhaps we leave the text having tasted, but not truly satisfied by Wizenberg's story.

In the introduction to her edited collection *American Food Writing*, author Molly O'Neill discusses the work of food memoirists and how the purpose differs from author to author. O'Neill writes, "the contemporary food writer uses taste and sensation to discover and explain what makes her human" (xxi). This idea seems to represent

Wizenberg's style and goal in writing her food memoir. She *uses* the food not to explain her situations, but to help her actually understand the experiences that have happened to her. We can see this through her description of the night that she and Brandon got engaged. She says, "it caught me by surprise. I didn't put it all together until well afterward" (244). He proposed on a bench in Brooklyn Heights, and Wizenberg writes, "I looked at him, and then behind him, at the water, and up and down and all around, and giggling, out of breath, said yes" (244). There is really no mention of food in this chapter. The chapter focuses solely on the proposal, and Brandon's use of the earrings that Wizenberg received from her father. This chapter is entitled "The Diamonds," and the following recipe is entitled "Sliced Spring Salad with Avocado and Feta." Since there is no mention of food within the chapter, Wizenberg sets up the recipe with at least a half of page of explanation. Wizenberg writes:

When I got back to Seattle a few days later, I ate this salad for two weeks straight. My binge of sorts had nothing to do with wanting to fit into a wedding dress (we weren't getting married for almost a year and a half, anyway) or with any nervous lack of appetite. I was just overwhelmed. I couldn't do anything else. So I made salad, and then I made more salad. I ate it straight from the serving bowl while sitting on the floor, my back against the couch, watching *Jeopardy!* and shouting answers at the screen (246).

Wizenberg follows this explanation with discussion about the salad itself, the ingredients, and the directions to toss it together. This one example seems to evidence O'Neill's assertion that food memoirists are using taste and sensation to process feelings and discover humanness, in a way. This salad was not something they ate on the night of the

engagement, or even really connected to their engagement in any way. This salad was simply the means through which Wizenberg processed this new, exciting development in her life. She made and ate this salad because she “couldn’t do anything else” (246). This understanding of food not as an element of experience, but as an experience in and of itself is something that seems to ring true throughout almost all of Wizenberg’s text. For her, food is an event. Food is something to experience on its own and *also* through which to understand other experiences.

O’Neill continues in her discussion of various memoirists and their purpose in writing as she says, “food keeps one in the present. The physical sensation of a flavor in the mouth is an antidote to the flavorlessness of our increasingly abstract... world” (xxi). Wizenberg embodies this idea as well as her texts are very much grounded and focused in purpose and meaning. One reviewer writes, “[Wizenberg is] the kind of person I want to invite to sit in the backyard on a warm May afternoon and drink iced tea in the sunshine; I imagine that if I asked her to teach me to pronounce the French phrases in her book, she’d laugh with joy and start with her favorites: *chocolat au pain* and *boucons au thon*” (“Review- Molly Wizenberg’s”). I think that this review highlights a couple aspects of Wizenberg’s writing. As discussed, I believe that this assertion that she wants to sit with Wizenberg on a warm afternoon encapsulates the idea that Wizenberg lets the reader into her life through various stories and personal memories, but there is still more to know. After reading her memoir, as a reader, I don’t feel that I “know” Wizenberg or that I would understand her as a person. Of course, the knowing of an author is a rhetorical effect of the writing, and some authors are more effective than others in convincing us that we “know” them after reading their memoir. In spite of that, walking away from a

text, the reader wants to feel as if they have witnessed an honest part of the author's life, and Wizenberg does that, but as a reader it becomes apparent that there is a lot that she is *not* sharing. There is the element of wanting to know more; she is inviting, and yet leaves details of her life up to the reader's imagination. The second idea that this reviewer seems to highlight echoes O'Neill's assertions that food memoir writers write to stay in the present. The notion of Wizenberg coming over for tea is very much an idea that the discussion would not be something that would last forever or be ongoing, but something that would satisfy for now. The focus on the present day, the meeting in the moment seems to match well with Wizenberg's style that what she offers is for right now, not necessarily ongoing sustenance.

This idea of food keeping one in the present and as an "antidote" against an abstract world is reflected well in Wizenberg's description of her and Brandon's wedding plans. In the chapter entitled "Pickling Plant" Wizenberg writes, "when Brandon and I started planning our wedding, it was pretty obvious that there would be pickles involved" (289). She goes on to write, "our caterer offered to provide them, but we decided to do it ourselves. People thought we were out of our minds to want to do it, to take on yet *another* project in the midst of the wedding planning" (289). After multiple people tried to dissuade them from doing this work and letting someone else do it, Wizenberg says, "I'm glad we didn't listen. For all the heart and guts wrapped up in a wedding, planning it is essentially a cerebral exercise. Brining carrots and grapes and onions, on the other hand, is wholly, *heavenly* tangible. It's slow. It's messy. It's slippery and sticky. It made me feel like a real human being, which felt a lot better than being a capital-B Bride" (289). This act of pickling pickles was what made Wizenberg feel "real." It grounded her

in the moment, and though it was a taste experience, it was the understanding that she was creating something for this wedding, something that she and Brandon enjoyed. The food grounded her and let her actually enjoy her wedding planning.

Wizenberg goes on to describe their wedding, specifically the food that they ate and that they and their guests enjoyed. She writes, “when you care about food, and when you’re marrying someone who cares about food, and when you met this someone because of food, there is quite a bit of pressure to feed people well at your wedding. We gave it our best shot, and I think we did all right” (302). On top of Wizenberg and her husband making the pickles, she also chose to make her own wedding cakes. This chocolate cake recipe is the last recipe in the book and it is entitled “The Winning Hearts and Minds Cake Or, Our Wedding Cake” and it follows the final chapter of the text entitled “Winning Hearts and Minds.” The cake and the chapter are so titled because Wizenberg says that this cake truly wins the hearts and minds of any person to whom it is served. She writes, “it’s not something you want to serve to someone you feel so-so about. It’s what you serve when you want his undivided attention” (310). So, when Brandon suggested that they serve this cake at their wedding, Wizenberg jumped on the idea. She writes, “I made twenty of them. It wasn’t nearly as bad as it sounds. It was actually sort of therapeutic” (310). Again, in this instance we see the food of the text bringing the author into the present as she writes that all she had to do was “stir, bake, wrap, and freeze; stir, bake, wrap, and freeze; stir, bake, wrap, and freeze” (310). This repeated motion was worthwhile to Wizenberg because not only did she care deeply about the food that she wanted to serve at her wedding, but because she cared deeply about her wedding.

To Wizenberg, this time was crazy and overwhelming, but the act of making the cake and the pickles brought her into the present and caused her to actually take a look around her and enjoy what was happening. She closes her chapter with this assertion:

It's going to sound silly, I know, but I think that what it all comes down to is winning hearts and minds. Underneath everything else, all the plans and goals and hopes, that's why we get up in the morning, why we believe, why we try, why we bake chocolate cakes. That's the best we can every hope to do: to win hearts and minds, to love and be loved (311).

I said earlier that I didn't think we, as readers, could know Wizenberg's motivation in writing her text and including as much or as little of herself in it as she does. In a way, we can't know that from any author's text, even memoirs where authors sometimes say why they wrote the text. The idea of "winning hearts and minds" is all about persuasion. The question remains, what is she trying to win from the readers? I think perhaps she is trying to win allegiance, interest, and camaraderie from her readers; but again, all of this is simply a rhetorical understanding. I don't think that Wizenberg actually wants people to come to her kitchen because they are so interested in her work. She wants people to like her perhaps, and like her food, but that is where this element of "knowing" ends. I don't know if she wants to remain "behind the camera" or not, but I do think that Wizenberg, as an author, wants to win over readers, family, friends, strangers with her recipes, to a degree. She believes in the food she makes, and she tries to persuade the reader that the reason she gets up in the morning is to share these food experiences. Perhaps, for her, the food experiences *are* the personal revelation. While she is not as open or vulnerable as Christensen, her particular "brand" of food memoir is made up of the food, and this may



be her offering of sustenance to her reader. This “winning,” then, is rhetorical in light of both the details she includes in her text, and her explicit statement of what she wants her food to do for herself and for readers.

CHAPTER IV  
ANALYSIS OF CHRISTENSEN AND WIZENBERG'S FOOD BLOGS

**Introduction to Food Blogging**

Bloggng authorship is a relatively new form of authorship. The first blogs, or weblogs as Jorn Barger, a well-known American blogger, coined them, were published in early 1997 (Blood). The blog community soon expanded and almost immediately the convenience of publishing work online was very popular to writers of all subjects. The subject of food did not take long to catch on in the weblog world. The first food weblog was published by authors Jim Leff and Bob Okumura, who founded the food forum *Chowhound* in July of 1997 (Suthivarakom). Others soon followed, and like the more general weblogs, they grew in popularity very quickly. Blog authorship soon became a medium through which authors got recognized and their work was published in print form. Two examples of this movement from blog authorship to print authorship are Kate Christensen's food memoir *Blue Plate Special: An Autobiography of My Appetites* from the blog *Don't Let it Bring You Down* and Molly Wizenberg's food memoir *A Homemade Life: Stories and Recipes From My Kitchen Table* from her blog *Orangette*.

When considering the similarities and differences between print memoirs and blogs there are several factors to weigh on each side. Memoirs and blogs are similar in the ways that the author present a part of their story to their readers, readers tend to feel a

sense of connection to authors through the stories, and in the case of food texts, food experiences and recipes are shared frequently. Memoirs and blogs differ in three fundamental ways, however, and these differences make the distinction between the two texts significant. The first distinction is that the mediation between two texts is entirely different, and thus affects the way that each text is viewed. The second difference is more rhetorical in nature, but it is the perception of readers feeling as if they “know” the authors continually. The third is that while food memoirs do counter cultural scripts such as pleasurable experiences are not worth discussing, blogs initiate that discussion by providing a platform for those experiences to first be presented, thus showing their value and leading to print platforms. These three distinctions separate the worlds of memoirs and blogs, even when the texts are closely related, as Christensen and Wizenberg’s memoirs and blogs are.

### **Constructions of Mediation**

Blogs are mediated differently than print texts, so I believe that the different kinds of mediation affect our understanding of the relationship between author and person. Readers seem to feel connected to these authors because we can see the continuation of their lives through their past and future online publications in a way that we cannot through print texts. In relation to these various ideas, I want to rhetorically examine blog authors and the way their work is mediated differently than print authorship in terms of publication and truth value, and how blog authorship does different work than print texts to the purpose and “knowing” of the authors and their experiences than print texts.

As stated in the introductory paragraph, blogging is a relatively new, but explosive field of publication. Many blogs are autobiographically based, but not all of

them. In the article “Life Writing at Cross Purposes: Documentary Forgery and the Reconstruction of Identity” Ron Fortune and Amy Robillard touch on the impetus behind autobiographical writing when they write, “autobiography and its generic variations offer a ready outlet for writers looking to negotiate a transition from how they are seen to how they would like to be seen” (8). This seems to be part of the appeal of autobiographical blogging in that you can present yourself and your ideas in any way that you would like, and there is much less stringent mediation and “fact checking” about what you write. This assumes that traditional publication ensures such fact checking, which may depend on individual projects unlike blogs who are often only seen by the author. This idea of less stringent mediation, of course, has its limits, as there are often lively conversations continuing after the blog post from interested or outraged readers. The blogs themselves, though, are not necessarily checked for truth-value by an outside reader prior to publication. Richard Davis, author of the book *Typing Politics: The Role of Blogs in American Politics* discusses the way that blogs do not necessarily have to be autobiographically based, but can simply be used as a medium through which to present information, such as political statistics or a recipe. Davis writes that at times “bloggers provide very little of their own commentary” (66). He sees this choice of including autobiographical elements or not as one of the hallmarks of the genre as he says: “blogs follow their own agenda” (178). This freedom in publication and lack of outside editing gives blogs some of their most obvious appeal and draw.

Despite the draw of blogging through less mediation, this has also created problems specifically for food blogs in the legal sphere. The article “Edible Plagiarism: Reconsidering Recipe Copyright in the Digital Age” by Meredith Lawrence touches on

the unregulated use of recipes in food blogs and on websites. She writes, “when a blogger publishes a recipe without attribution, the food publisher has little legal recourse. Because recipes have not received the same copyright protection as other literary works, food publishers are unable to protect their rights under copyright law or to profit from sharing their recipes” (190). This lack of mediation is hurting some businesses who feel that they are the “original owners” of the recipe, but the food bloggers have little in terms of law or obligation to stop them from publishing these recipes on their websites. So, while blogs, and food blogs specifically, are not very old, they already have established ways of publishing and mediating the content of the blogs, which have very strong pros and cons. Despite these issues in mediation, blogs are still doing important work in defining authorship and reader expectations because, I would argue, they are mediated differently.

In the discussion of blog versus food memoirs, though, blogs are viewed as the lesser or more colloquial kind of publication. I think that this ties directly back to issues of mediation and the processes of getting published. One can publish a blog within thirty minutes of having an idea if they want to, but of course we know it takes months upon months and many more people to publish a print text. Blogs are now a well-known platform for individual publication, but because of the almost non-existent mediation, they are often viewed as less legitimate than print texts. I don't think it would be too far of a stretch to then argue that readers could view the experiences expressed in a blog as less legitimate than those expressed in a text. The response could be something like, yes, that is a good story, but if it was *really* worth telling it would have been published. I would argue that blog texts can be just as powerful, if not more so in some instances, than print texts, despite the much less stringent types of mediation. This idea is evidenced in

the publishing world through a common understanding of blogs as a gateway, or a precursor to actually getting published. In the article “Julie Powell’s revelations in *Cleaving* cut to the bone,” the author writes that Powell’s “blog begat *Julie & Julia*, the best-selling 2005 memoir” (Memmott). Since then, Powell has published a second memoir, *Cleaving: A Story of Marriage, Meat, and Obsession*, and reveals that now that she has two publications under her belt she wants to write a novel. In the article she says, “fiction is what I always wanted to write” (“Julie Powell’s revelations”). The blog is not discounted as worthless here; however, it is discussed only as a gateway, something that brought about publications and the true dream of fiction writing.

### **Perception of Knowing the Author**

One of the most unique features of blogs, and this goes back to ideas of mediation, is the control that the author has over the text the entire time it is being written, edited, and published. The marking of time and place is a major element for readers having a sense of knowing the author and their experiences, and something that Greg Myers, author of *Discourse of Blogs and Wikis*, sees as one of the most fascinating features of blog publications and expectations. He writes, “blogs, set in a blogosphere of other blogs, are placeless by default; the [authors] have to do something to signal place or we don’t think about it” (48). This is illustrated in Christensen’s blog as she often marks her exact locations. Not for herself, probably, as she knew where she was, but to give her readers a sense of her in space. Christensen continually marks the place of events as they tour a city, ending her entry with the sentence: “took the Megabus to Chicago... [and] arrived near Union Station at 2:30” (“Oh, how we danced”) and then “we bumbled back to Iowa City on the Megabus, and a new working week began” (“Oh, how we danced”). In

this entry we see the marking of place, but also that of time as well. While Myers sees the marking of place as completely voluntary on the part of the author, he does assert that time is a bit different in the way that the blogosphere is constructed. He writes, “a defining feature of blogs is that the entries come in reverse chronological order; that implies readers are generally interested in the most recent entry first” (20). So, while he notes that “bloggers have the technical means to say where they are all the time, but they don’t” (62), he highlights the fact that they do not often adjust the default settings on the blog to “hide” the time and date of their publications. I believe he is correct in saying that readers look for the most recent entries, and I think that this is indicative of the way that readers want to be kept up to date on where the author is and when. Christensen updates her blog somewhat sporadically. For example, she updated her blog on October 31<sup>st</sup>, 2013 with an entry beginning: “today was my day off. It was also cold and stormy and dark” (“Oh, how we danced”). Christensen did not publish another blog entry until November 26<sup>th</sup>, 2013, almost a month later. In terms of active, “influential” (Davis 39) blogs, this is a relatively long period to not have published a blog entry. This break is not indicative of any major shift in the blog publication, but it is notable as Christensen posted four entries in the month of October, took almost a month break, and then published only one entry in the month of November. Even the fact that the literal number of publications in a specific time and space is notable or discernable is indicative of the way that blogs work to mark the lived experiences of the author and make the reader feel as if they know the author and their movements.

In contrast to Christensen posting four blog entries in October and one in November, Molly Wizenberg, for example, posted two in October and two in November.

Their rate of posting seems to line up fairly well, so we can draw some of the same assumptions about readers being able to “witness” their experiences sporadically and as they become available, but not entirely consistently. Wizenberg’s blogs are often (but not always) focused on an individual recipe, and then she writes about her experience with this recipe. In her last November entry, posted on November 22<sup>nd</sup> 2013, entitled “Please consider,” she begins the entry by writing, “how bored will you be if we talk about soup again? Ham Bone, Greens, and Bean Soup? I didn’t set out to write about this one—I made it mostly as a vehicle for a ham bone that I put in our freezer last April.” The entry then discusses Wizenberg’s experience with this specific soup in relation to the time of year, the book where she got the recipe, and her feelings on bacon. As discussed in the chapter focusing on her memoir, Wizenberg’s blog is almost always solely based on her own experiences, and those experiences almost always center on food. She mentions her husband Brandon throughout the entries, but her entries aren’t about him. For the reader, then we seem to get more of the whole picture of what’s going on, because we hear from the one person whom this seems to affect. In an October entry, Wizenberg writes, “I had forgotten a recipe for brown sugar clafoutis with pears... I made the clafoutis last week, and again yesterday, and then I hustled over here to tell you about it with an oddly colored iPhone photo of my leftovers” (“It made an impression”). She expresses strong feelings in this post, but all of those feelings are directed at food.

Wizenberg goes beyond just writing about the food, though; she provides personal photographs of the food that she makes. Her December 5<sup>th</sup>, 2013 entry begins with the exclamation: “RING THE BELLS! I HAVE A NEW CAMERA! Here at Wizenberg-Pettit World Headquarters, we are excited. And grabby” (“Approximately a soup”).



Wizenberg doesn't mention the camera again in the post, but she does include three different images, each detailing a different step in making two different cabbage dishes, which she provides recipes for at the end of the entry. The first image focuses on a cabbage head, but out of focus in the bottom right corner of the image is Wizenberg's one-year-old daughter, June, reaching up towards the cabbage. The second image is of the same cabbage head from a different angle, and the daughter is not present in the photo. The third image is of a bowl of soup, presumably cabbage, with a glass of water and a cloth napkin rumpled next to it ("Approximately a soup"). The actual text of the entry, aside from the first statement about the camera, focuses solely on the cabbage soup. Wizenberg describes how she "first learned the recipe about six years ago" and how "you can't really tell it's a soup there under that small mountain of grated Parmesan, but that's for the best" ("Approximately a soup"). She describes the soup in great detail, but does not venture away from it to describe her family eating it, or anything else going on in her life during that day or moment. So, while the text is strongly food based, the images and the recipes provided allow the reader to "see" and experience this soup-making process in a very visceral way. Wizenberg never mentions her daughter in this entry, but we can see that she is there, engaging with this food.

I have yet to see an entry on Wizenberg's blog that does not include images. In fact, in her December 7<sup>th</sup>, 2013 entry, "Their good work," Wizenberg includes "some ancient photos that have nothing at all to do with this post!" This entry is the most autobiographical post that I have seen on Wizenberg's blog, and actually does not include any recipe whatsoever, but does reveal several "holiday surprises" ("Their good work"). Wizenberg opens the post by admitting that she is writing it to avoid doing her "real

work, which is to read the final proofs of *Delancy* before it goes to print, and that is a terrifying prospect” (“Their good work”). This post seems to be a respite from other work, and even from food blogging. Wizenberg allows readers to see into her world through several bullet points highlighting her holiday season, and nine artfully taken photos in several different locations at different times. As readers, we may feel that we can truly know Wizenberg in a way that we cannot know Christensen because we can literally see into her life, even as she does not, or perhaps *because* she does not, often write about her life. Photographs seem to have a different kind of truth value that help the reader to witness the event or the food in a way they would not be able to otherwise. Wizenberg opens up her world, to a certain extent, and this continual publishing and sharing of recipes, stories, and photographs causes some readers to invest not only in her recipes, but her as a person.

In the past, though, there have been dissatisfied readers who have not liked her recipes. In fact, in July 2009, there was an article published in the online food forum *Chowhound* entitled “Beware of Molly Wizenberg recipes.” The author of this article writes, “don’t you hate it when recipes don’t work out?” The author goes on to address two of Wizenberg’s recipes that she had published in her food memoir, and says “seems some of her recipes have a tendency not to work. Just because it’s printed doesn’t mean it works” (“Beware”). There are then thirty-six replies to this post, most of them agreeing with the author and citing other recipes of Wizenberg’s both from the book and the blog that have not worked. The last response was posted on January 8<sup>th</sup>, 2012. Wizenberg herself replies to the original posting on September 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2010 and says, “Hi, all, I just found this thread today and wish I weren’t so late in joining the discussion!” (“Beware’

Reply”). She goes on to apologize for the trouble, and then explains that one particular issue with Coffee Crunch Bars published in the magazine *Bon Appetit* for which she writes a regular column “was altered without [her] permission by the magazine’s text kitchen, and it was published in its altered form” (“‘Beware’ Reply”). She then gives the recipe that she had intended to publish in the column. The original author who posted the complaint never replies to Wizenberg or any of the other commenters.

The various accounts of “knowing” in this discussion are so rich and revealing. The original complaint was for a recipe in Wizenberg’s published book, but then the author wrote about his or her own experience on a blog, to which Wizenberg responded by pointing out discrepancies in a magazine publication. The interplay between various means of publication show that there is depth and personal emotions at stake when discussing the legitimacy of a recipe, or a food experience. Readers may feel as if they know Wizenberg through her blogs and her recipes, so when one or two recipes don’t end up tasting good, the readers begin to question not only the recipe, but Wizenberg herself *and* the legitimacy of her positive experiences with her recipes in the first place. What we see here is a fascinating interplay between authors, texts, and readers, and what really seems to be at stake is the legitimacy of the *experience* with these recipes, and thus Wizenberg’s legitimacy as a trust-worthy author.

An article entitled *The Virtual Roundtable: Food Blogging as Citizen Journalism* addresses this interplay between readers and the author through Internet resources. The author writes:

Likewise, reader comments can make letters to the editor look like calligraphy on parchment—partly but not only because of the immediacy with which they can

generate dialogue. Though the online editions of many magazines and newspapers also enable comments, the latter remain a matter of formally speaking truth to power—of banging on the reputed gates of fact—while the comments on blogs, like the blogs themselves, are often personal and conversational, potentially making all the difference between what is merely public and what is truly communal (45).

The split between the communal and the public is where, I believe, we begin to see this investment in rhetorically witnessing the author's experiences. By the authors making their experiences (in any form) public to the readers, the authors seem to be producing a feeling (as is common in food blogs) that the texts are communal, the readers feel the need and the right to then verify (or not) the author's experiences by identifying with aspects of the entries, trying the recipes, or even going where the authors went. The feeling and process of knowing is multifaceted here, and really revelatory in the way that the public perceives online texts, specifically blogs. A final element of this feeling of knowing the author ties back to the marking of time and place. Print memoirs are published on a specific date at a specific time, and though readers often leave those texts with a feeling of knowing the author, blogs are a continual publication, and thus readers often get the sense of knowing an author continually, or more intimately because it spans a much longer period of time. Do these readers actually know these authors? No, not really. Most readers will never meet or interact with the authors of the blogs that they follow, but there is still the rhetorical sense of "knowing" these authors through reading their blogs and testing their recipes. This often makes readers feel personally invested and connected to the text in a way that I think is truly unique to food blogs.

## Challenging Cultural Scripts

Food blogs influence both authors and readers in the way that they challenge cultural scripts such as: enjoyable experiences, or food experiences at all, are not influential and worthy of serious consideration. As evidenced above by the nuances of and reactions to these authors' texts, readers feel that there is something at stake if they choose to engage with authors in their blog entries, or even their published non-fiction work. Discussions of the expectations of authors who include autobiography in their work are significant, as are ideas of cultural capital in terms of who gets to write about and read these kinds of texts. The challenge of cultural scripts and the cultural and material aspects of the texts themselves must be taken into account in order to begin to understand what these blogs are doing.

Kavita Hayton, author of the article "New Expressions of the Self: Autobiographical Opportunities on the Internet," writes about the cultural expectations that give context to food writing. She writes, "the blog can exist in relative freedom, albeit contextualized by multiple discourses" (204). What Hayton is detailing is the way that blogs are relatively unregulated, but the cultural and material expectations that are attached to food blogs do mediate the texts in intriguing ways. Theorist Pierre Bourdieu writes about the complexities of the idea of taste in his text *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. He writes, "consumption is, in this case, a stage in a process of communication, that is, an act of deciphering, decoding, which presupposes practical or explicit mastery of a cipher or code" (2). He goes on to say "knowledge by experience... feels and deplores the essential inadequacy of words and concepts to express the reality 'tasted' in mystical union, rejects as unworthy the intellectual love of art, the knowledge

which identifies experience of the work with an intellectual operation of deciphering” (68). This art of consumption and “knowledge by experience” are exactly what Christensen and Wizenberg are expressing in their respective texts.

In the article “Tastes, Temperatures, and Pains” A.D. Smith discusses taste and the way that taste shapes our understanding of what and how we are supposed to eat by helping us to “perceive” pleasure or pain (343). Bourdieu also discusses the way that taste helps us to decide what is good and bad. He writes, “the science of taste and cultural consumption begins with... [the ability] to discover the intelligible relations which unite apparently incommensurable ‘choices,’ such as preference in music and food” (6). These discussions are scientific and critical in approach to taste, but we begin to understand food writing is representative of taste, and thus value decisions, in ways that no other texts are. In the article “Making the Self in a Material World: Food and Mortalities of Consumption” author Isabelle De Solier expands on Bourdieu’s notions of cultural capital, and specifically those of taste. She writes, “Food, then, is a material thing with a culturalist status, and this is one of the reasons for its popularity as a site of self-making today, particularly among the educated middle class. It allows them to retain a sense of moral property, a sense of themselves as culturalists, and a sense that they are not ‘real’ materialist consumers” (16). This analysis of different modes of consumption affects the identities that consumers create and perpetuate through the pleasurable aspects of eating and discussing any given food experience. As Bourdieu highlights, food choices are viewed as reflective of the values, ideals, and morals of the consumer, and thus food choices and food experiences are often viewed as representative of the person themselves.

Though both Wizenberg and Christensen have acquired significant cultural capital through their blogs and the publication of the print texts, both do at times downplay the affinity that they have for food, or specifically food preparation, in terms of their health or their busy lives. In her November 1<sup>st</sup>, 2013 post “But the soup,” Wizenberg discusses not only the ingredients of the soup and the ways to personalize it, she also discusses the ease of making the soup. She writes, “of course, the best part—at least in this particular stage of my life—is that I can prep it quickly, bang it all in a pot, cover it, and let it ride alone for half an hour” (“But the soup”). This ease of making the soup, and being able to reheat it and eat the leftovers is what Wizenberg labels as “the best part.” Likewise, Christensen writes in her September 26<sup>th</sup>, 2013 blog entry “Welcome to the working week” about a meal that Brendan made for her of “pasta with pea sauce and a simple salad.” She describes this pasta and sauce not only as just simple, but as “divine comfort food” that “is nothing but a sofrito—onions, carrots, and celery, minced small—sautéed in olive oil. Then you add a bag of frozen peas and vegetable broth, then most of a box of Pomi chopped tomatoes with a dab of tomato paste and lots of crushed red pepper” (“Welcome”). The fascinating thing about these assertions from the respective bloggers is that these meals are not “throw together” meals as I define them, but involve chopping, combining, simmering, and planning. The cultural and material understandings of what is “easy” or “comfort food” in these settings is very different than what I believe the majority of readers would identify as such. It is for this very reason that these food blogs should be analyzed, and their assertions called into question. Just because the entries were explanations of how to cook a soup and a pasta respectively does not mean that they do not contain persuasive and revelatory meaning in regards to cultural and material

consumption. These entries reflect an obviously western cultural bias, as soup and pasta are some of the staples of American and European diets. There is also an obvious class ideology here as the entries reflect material consumption. There are many people even within the western world who would see these types of soup and pasta as gourmet dishes, or far too expensive because of the many ingredients needed to make them. The authors are assuming that their readers understand their cultural and material consumption habits, but I believe that the fact that these entries reflect those practices very clearly is telling of the types of culturally based economic and cultural capital that these authors assume that their readers will possess. Food writing is not geared towards the working class, but towards those who have the capital through which to view food as an art form, not just a means of sustenance.

Food blogs and texts also challenge cultural scripts through the way that the authors present their stories online, and then publish those texts in print form. Life-writing theorists Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson write, “in autobiographical narratives, imaginative acts of remembering always intersect with such rhetorical acts as assertion, justification, judgment, conviction, and interrogation. That is, life narrators address readers whom they want to persuade of their version of experience” (6). They go on to say “when life narrators write to chronicle an event... they are making ‘history’ in a sense. But they are also performing several rhetorical acts: justifying their own perceptions, upholding their reputations, disputing the accounts of others, settling scores, conveying cultural information, and inventing desirable futures among others” (10). This understanding of the work that these life narrators are doing through food is fascinating just in the online publication forum, but it becomes even more complex and does even



further work to challenge scripts such as food writing is not important, when the online texts are then converted to print texts. The shift from one publication to another is not easy because “content in these instances is evolving from one media platform to another, and, in the process, is being filtered and interpreted by countless users” (McGaughy 73). This filtering between publishers does a lot to the message of the text, and so the common public misconception that printed texts are as unmediated as blog texts is faulty. Kavita Hayton addresses this intersection of texts as she writes; “the academic may retain their skepticism when confronted with both the printed life-text and the personal blog and point to the mainly contemporary critiques of autobiography” (201). It is exactly this kind of skepticism that I want to counter with discussions of the rich nuances and cultural understandings presented in food writing texts. Hayton writes, “for the professional writer a blog can commodify their writing in two main ways—as writing practice and as a platform for self-expression (as it is with non-professional writers)—but the life-text is commodified in a different way for print” (209). What we see here is not difference in monetary or truth value (although, I would argue that that exists) between blogs and books, but a difference between commodification, and I would argue, a difference in consumption. Readers are willing to pay for a book, but not a blog, so their investment is different, which I believe causes them to expect more from books than blogs. Readers are also much more willing to invest significant time into reading a book than reading a blog as blog entries are meant to be short and direct, while books are expected to be much longer and detailed. What readers expect to “consume” from blogs is different than what they expect of books, even though, or maybe because, books are the more mediated of the two texts. Blogs can lead the way in challenging these scripts and revealing intricacies of

cultural capital that might not initially be welcome in print publications, but can be accepted after seeing the success of the texts in blog format.

When discussing food texts, specifically those published online, there are so many intricacies that can, and should, be explored in terms of mediation, knowing the author, and challenging of cultural scripts. These two authors have different backgrounds and different life stories, yet their online and print texts are doing similar work as they gain profit and notoriety from the publications, but also they share their experiences with their readers. The discussion of blog authorship and its value are relatively new in the field of rhetoric and composition, but should be explored for the reasons described above, and many more.

CHAPTER V  
IMPLICATIONS FOR PEDAGOGY AND RESEARCH

**Rhetorical Exigency**

There are many intriguing questions to be asked in terms of what food writing is doing in the current academic landscape, and I want to ask what these two memoirs and the blogs are doing as specific examples of food life writing. These texts deal with trauma, loss, grief, and redemption. But why are these texts not about those specific themes? Why are they food memoirs? What does writing about food do to address these issues through the common medium of food? Why and how do these texts matter in the current pedagogical and research academic environment? I argue that food memoirs accomplish substantial rhetorical work, specifically in the way that they allow authors and readers to be both producers and consumers. I want to examine their pedagogical and research usage, but I believe that the notions of production and consumption truly set these texts apart.

As an instructor, student, and researcher of food texts I have found great value in analyzing these texts as I found them to reveal intricacies and richness of value within individual texts, but also within lived experiences. After reading, writing, discussing, and teaching more food texts than I can count, I have found the study of the whys and hows of individual food experience influencing my everyday life, conversations, and meals. As

a Master's student I identified my interest in food texts fairly early and have thus focused almost all of my major papers and work in my Master's degree around this theme. This final semester of my Master's degree I am auditing a class entitled "Literature and the Related Arts" which focuses on food texts, specifically those ranging from the onset of World War I to the present, and focusing on the variations between American and French perceptions of foods. Through discussions of the texts of Julia Child, Gertrude Stein, Alice Toklas, Molly O'Neill, Ernest Hemingway, Barbra Kingsolver, Suzanne Collins, Michael Ruhlman, Amy Trubek, Massimo Montanari, and Joanne Harris, we have begun to uncover some of the ways that food both separates and ties together communities, time periods, cultures, and families.

In the first-year English course that I teach at Illinois State University entitled "Composition as Critical Inquiry: Composing Taste" I have found interest and excitement from students when reading, writing, and discussing food texts. When introducing these texts, some students commented that they had not previously been introduced to food texts as a genre, but soon realized that they were an excellent way to tell a story because the food makes the text not only personal, but also very relatable. I think this hits on some fundamental tenets of the importance of food texts such as recognizing that the author is a person with vulnerabilities as well as an exploration of the everyday. The students' first project was to write a nonfiction personal narrative focused on a food experience, and the response and end products were rich and revealing in their intricacies, emotions, and students' willingness to be vulnerable as authors. The second project focused on food texts as they are used in professional settings such as menus online or in restaurants, print or online reviews, NPR interviews, or texts produced by

chefs/cooks/farmers/factory workers/artisans/restaurateurs. The idea that in middle-class America food is really all around us and offers us a part in the consumption and production seems, to me, to be a convincing argument about why we should study food writing, because in beginning to see food in texts and our everyday lives we begin to understand a very obviously present but often undervalued part of our own lived experience.

### **Food Texts in the Classroom**

As we think about teaching these texts, these questions become ever more numerous. In regards to pedagogy, I want to ask questions about why and how food memoirs can encourage students to engage with life writing texts in different ways than other texts focused on trauma or more historical texts. And what can reading, writing, and responding to food memoir texts teach and reveal about class, culture, gender, and race differences? What do these texts in particular do for the understanding of life writing as a whole? In teaching these texts I believe that all of these questions are ones that can be raised in order to help students not only begin to examine these texts, but begin to question their individual and communal identity formations in relation to food and the food experiences in their lives. I think that this genre is unique in the way that it invites people of different ethnic backgrounds to express their experiences through a medium that all people can relate to in some way: food.

In her article “Food Memoirs: What They Are, Why They Are Popular, and Why They Belong in the Literature Classroom” Barbara Frey Waxman describes the value of the communication of these visceral experiences in teaching food memoirs and food texts to students. Waxman writes, “food memoirists understand that they are writing about

everyone's strongest basic instincts as they tell their own life stories. Food memoirs increasingly command our respect as we respond to their depictions of intense emotions, pleasurable recollections of communal and private food experiences, messages of familial wisdom, and insights into cultures" (364). We see this truth evident in both Christensen and Wizenberg's stories of the moments just before losing their fathers. Both refer often to their fathers throughout the memoirs, and often these references are in relation to food. It is through food that the authors can communicate these private moments that no outsider would have known about if they had not written about them in their texts. Smith and Watson say:

The life narrator confronts not one life, but two. One is the self that others see—the social, historical person, with achievements, personal appearance, social relationships. These are the 'real' attributes of a person living in the world. But there is also the self experienced only by that person, the self felt from the inside that the writer can never get 'outside of' (5).

Both Christensen and Wizenberg exemplify the struggle of the inner self (the desires, the identity formations, the comfort or fear) as opposed to the outer self (the observer, the helpless daughter in the moments of trouble).

In their article "Books that Cook: Teaching Food and Food Literature in the English Classroom" Jennifer Cognard-Black and Melissa A. Goldthwaite ask, "why teach the literature of food in the first place?" (422). They go on to answer this question by saying, "to teach food as a written form is to teach a part of what it means to be human" (366). As food texts help authors to express their lived experiences, they can also help students relate their own personal experiences to those of scholarship and study. Tom

Herweck and Kyle Bladow, authors of “The Hungry Text: Toward a Sustainable Literary Food Pedagogy,” write, “the rewards of literary food pedagogy... are great for both the students as well as for the teacher... they appeal to the basic sense of the world that students already know by tapping into an area of intuitive expertise they have developed over a lifetime of eating” (73). By reading about an author’s experiences with food, the students are able to relate to the authors and the texts, or be put off by them through descriptions of foreign or gross food. This relation can prove to be rich as students engage with the texts in ways they might not have otherwise, and the repulsion can show students that while they do not identify with the experiences, they might still recognize value in them. Disgust is a complicated issue that is often class and racially based, and so the instructor must be willing to guide the class to understand that misidentification is not always negative. Cognard-Black and Goldthwaite saw a shift in their classroom. They explain that their students “are more invested in experimenting in their writing as well as more willing to try to match form with function than any other students I teach” (430). This ability to relate or find value in the text is possible because these authors are able to represent their experiences through food. This is powerful for student readers to recognize.

I saw this ability to relate to the texts in my own freshman composition classroom. I assigned the students various articles and readings related to food such as “My Life in Vegetables” by Sparrow, “Strong Loyalties: On Australian Biscuits” by James Guida, and excerpts from Nigel Slater’s food memoir *Toast*, such as “Crumpets,” “The Day the Gardener Came,” “Mince Pies 1,” and “The Night Before Christmas.” In response to these readings students often commented on not being able to necessarily

identify with the experiences, but being able to identify the experiences as worthwhile. When discussing the article “My Life in Vegetables” the students were saying they appreciated the way that Sparrow connected his life to food and even expands on his lived experience through food descriptions. They began to understand that even if they couldn’t directly identify with a specific author’s lived experience, they could see value in the very sharing of lived experience with an audience and relating that experience to food as a way to expand on details and make the text more relatable.

Ann Victoria Dean, author of “Teaching and Writing ‘As If [My] Life Depended On It,’” discusses the way that writing and teaching autobiographical texts has empowered her as a woman and a teacher. She writes, “I have learned, by helping students explore their lives through writing and at the same time writing about my own life, that the only legitimate place from which to teach is from a deep sense of self-authority” (131). This sense of power comes from the writing of personal experiences, and through that, writing (that agentive experience) offers validation of lived experiences from others. Barbara Waxman recognizes the value of using these texts in a classroom to help students understand that recognition of the lived experiences of the authors as she writes:

Many culinary memoirists have taken the measure of their powers in the kitchen and the writing desk, learned what passions energize them, experienced the fruits of those passions, and found their place in the world—as food professionals...

And many of these authors in telling their life stories give readers a little psychology on how to interact with others—even across cultures—and how to get to know themselves (365).



The writing about experiences through food validates the author experiences. As students learn to recognize this process, they will begin to understand the field of life writing in a much deeper way. It shows that these experiences are not just valuable for the writer, but for the reader as well in a unique way by presenting scenarios that students can relate to or comprehend clearly. As students recognize the power of this autobiographical kind of writing, they, like Dean, can begin to see the ways that the “autobiographical experience of personal remembrance enables [you] to bridge the gap between the past and the present so they become dialectically intertwined” (127). Revealing past experiences not only recognizes the value in those experiences, but also helps the reader and the writer recognize value in present experiences that are tied to or understood through the past. This dialectical aspect of life writing is an important understanding for students to grasp in their study of food memoirs. This sense of giving power to students and helping them find value in their everyday lived experience is something I am very passionate about as an instructor. As a class we discussed the way that food writing helps students to create their own style when writing because no one has experienced that food experience in the exact same way. I think that this lesson is a valuable one to learn. Being able to tell your own story in your own way is an important skill to have in a writing classroom and in life.

Christensen and Wizenberg both fall in love, and as they describe these experiences, they describe wonderful tastes that they associate with these budding relationships. These tastes helped them to construct the reality of these relationships, and thus construct themselves in relation to the food and the men. The teaching of food memoirs as resistant to cultural scripts helps students to understand truths about life

writing, as well, as many life writers often try to challenge the way that certain activities, people groups, traditions, and abilities are understood. Food memoirs fit right into this schema as Lynn Bloom articulates: “the literature on the subject [of food] is gargantuan—international, multi-ethnic, cutting across gender, class, religion, age, education, and background. Everybody has to eat” (348). Food memoirs and texts can do some of this challenging of cultural scripts in ways that other texts can’t because of this very idea that everyone has to eat, and most people enjoy the physical and emotional fullness that comes after a good meal. Students can think back to their Thanksgiving or Christmas traditions and realize that there is individual and communal value in the articulation of these experiences. In my own classroom, many students did this very thing as they wrote their own food narratives. Many chose to write stories about Thanksgiving Day or other holidays because they felt it was a food experience that a lot of people could relate to. Relatable stories keep the students interested as they are writing, and make them feel invested in the text. In examining these truths, Herweck and Bladow ask, “in this way, what more far-reaching and important work could one ask for?” (74). Philippa Keaney would probably agree that there is not much more important work than studying food memoirs for the good of our students, and ourselves. She writes, “like practices around food, there is potential for us to engage—not only cross-culturally but cross-generationally—in dialogue about how we can draw together and satisfy hunger for family connection that is increasingly evident” (116). Keaney reflects on the idea that we all have a hunger for community and understanding, and that food memoirs challenge the understanding that that is not a valid, worthwhile aspect of life to study.

Food writing is such a rich area of life writing, and one that students can truly glean so much from about the texts, the world around them, and themselves. Waxman believes that the students “will learn through food memoirs about a variety of... communities abroad that will encourage reflection about their own cultural practices and communities at home” (381). Students can begin to see the value in examining not only what is included in autobiographies and memoirs, but what is left out, or included only in the online blogs. Smith and Watson say “cultural identities... are models of identity culturally available to life narrators at any particular historical moment that influences what is included and what is excluded from an autobiographical narrative” (34). As argued above, what Christensen and Wizenberg choose to include is valuable in many ways, but perhaps students can also examine what they choose to exclude as an integral aspect of the text. Joanne Karpinski has seen the power of teaching food texts and writes that discussions of food “lead the students from the sensory, descriptive dimension of the writing with which they felt comfortable and competent to discuss across the frontiers of economic and semiotic analysis” (287). Karpinski sees the food texts as a “way in” to more socially and economically based discussions that begin with the students feeling comfortable and competent talking about the texts that they are reading. Cognard-Black and Goldthwaite feel a passion for helping “students connect their writing and learning to the multiplicities of their own personal food literacies” (422). The value of teaching food memoirs like Christensen and Wizenberg’s becomes quite clear as we begin to understand the power that students can feel from and through the texts to begin to analyze their own understandings, traditions, and methods of consumption. I have seen the power of these kinds of texts in my own classroom and have greatly enjoyed the student

response and the lessons students have gleaned about writing and about themselves from interacting with these texts.

### **Food Texts in the Academy**

We need to understand that “*Food is an intrinsically significant subject, whose ramifications extend far beyond its nutritional value*” (Bloom 350) (emphasis original). And that “*food writing emphasizes its human contexts. The most succulent food writing puts the subject in a social setting*” (Bloom 353) (emphasis original). Food writing is so rich because while it can help us to understand trauma and grief and coming of age in really diverse ways, it can also be an outlet for a writer to simply talk about a happy experience, a good memory, or a wonderful taste. Theorist Pierre Bourdieu writes about the complexities of the idea of taste in his text *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. He writes, “consumption is, in this case, a stage in a process of communication, that is, an act of deciphering, decoding, which presupposes practical or explicit mastery of a cipher or code” (2). He goes on to say that “knowledge by experience... feels and deplores the essential inadequacy of words and concepts to express the reality ‘tasted’ in mystical union, rejects as unworthy the intellectual love of art, the knowledge which identifies experience of the work with an intellectual operation of deciphering” (68). This art of consumption and “knowledge by experience” are exactly what Christensen and Wizenberg are expressing in their respective texts. Bourdieu discusses the way that taste helps us to decide what is good and bad. This approach is critical in regards to taste, but the fact that food writing is representative of taste in ways that no other texts are is important. Bourdieu’s concept of taste is represented in many ways and in many texts, but food writing makes this concept more literal and more

visible. Contrary to the cultural scripts that individual pleasurable experiences are not meaningful enough to examine, we must understand that these pleasurable experiences, as evidenced through taste, are worth exploring because they mean something to the author and they represent individual constructions of reality that should be exposed and honored as valuable.

In relation to Bourdieu's notion of taste as "cultural consumption" the links between physical taste and taste preference seem to tie in nicely with the metaphorical understanding of both taste and hunger. In Christensen's and Wizenberg's food memoirs the notions of something tasting good or bad, or a person being hungry or not hungry are often discussed, but I would argue that ideas of metaphorical hunger or taste are represented just as often, although perhaps not as obviously. This is one of the driving reasons why I believe that food memoirs and food narratives need to be studied in an academic environment. It is one thing to read a food memoir in an airport lounge waiting for the daily flight to Denver, but it is another thing to begin to examine these texts and ask not only what cultural scripts do these texts challenge, but what cultural scripts do they uphold through discussions of taste and hunger in all of their dimensions. In Amy Trubek's critical food text, *A Taste of Place: A Cultural Journey into Terroir*" she writes, "taste is the difference between food as mere sustenance and food as part of life's rich pageant... taste evaluations must occur through language, through a shared dialogue with others" (7). I think that this quote sums up both what Bourdieu is arguing in terms of taste as a culturally classified kind of consumption, and the idea that in order to truly understand tastes and types of hunger, we must talk about them. We need to discuss these texts in the current political, academic, and rhetorical landscapes. In order to actually

delve into the nuances, these texts require more than just a cursory plane ride read. As discussed throughout this thesis, there is value to be gleaned from the stories and recipes, but time and effort must be put into the texts in order to pull those attributes out of them. As we discussed in my “Literature and the Related Arts” course, even food scholars write very personally, and this personal element can almost discourage critical examination because it is too opinion or experienced based. But we must draw upon opinion or experience to begin to challenge cultural scripts in texts such as these. There is something about food writing that invites the personal and this should be liberating. The personal is liberating in the way that the author can draw from experience. They must be willing to be vulnerable and open, but this ability is often refreshing for individuals who want to share their experiences.

As with any rhetorical analysis we must ask the question, what’s at stake? What’s at stake in studying these texts, and what’s at stake in not studying these texts? I would argue that missing all of the value and richness of the texts is what is at stake if these types of memoirs and food texts are not critically examined. Yes, we may be able to glean truths about trauma and grief and love and loss from a variety of life writing texts, but the understanding of these experiences *through* food and more lighthearted tellings is valuable. I believe what is at stake when studying the texts is more of an understanding of authors and readers as both producers and consumers. That dichotomy is something that becomes very apparent through food texts in many ways. We begin to understand the authors as both consumers and producers of food and of texts. They consume food throughout their memoirs as they eat and share food with others, but as is obvious in both Christensen and Wizenberg’s memoirs, there is a strong emphasis on the production of

food as well as the consumption. In the texts and blogs we see these authors, and other food writers, as both producers of texts and consumers of them as well. The blogs and memoirs often mention outside influences, recipes passed down from family members, and French cookbooks. Both the consumption and production of food and texts are experiences that are then related to readers. In this way, then, readers become both producers and consumers as well. We are asked to consume the knowledge, experiences, and truths related in the texts, whether or not we can relate to the experiences. The unique aspect about food texts, though, is that the reader is not confined to being only the consumer of the texts. Because of the recipes and food instructions included in the texts, readers are invited to then also become producers. If they go on to publish their experience in an online or print form, then the cycle continues. Not every author or reader always want to be both a consumer and a producer, and much of that desire depends on past experiences, understandings of individual identity, the cultural scripts that we subscribe to, and the types of consumption that we find permissible. Whether or not we choose to consume, produce, or both, the options are open, and for that reason I think that food texts provide rhetorical sustenance in a way that no other texts do.

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