Food Memoir Explication: Linking Feminist Rhetorical Practices, Identity Pathways, and Narrative Nonfiction Writing[1]

Overview

This chapter provides a textual analysis of Diana Abu-Jaber's 2005 food memoir, *The Language of Baklava* by arguing that food memoirs serve as a representation of popular literacy in the writing classroom. One of the reason that I chose a food memoir as the primary vehicle of inquiry in the ENG 217 classroom was because it is a text that invites students to engage, as most students can relate to food experiences in one way or another. And memoirs are a popular genre. They are texts that a person can pick up in an airport bookshop or watch discussed on daytime news channels. This chapter explores not only the nonfictional narrative that Abu-Jaber composed, but the way that I see the four feminist rhetorical tenets (Royster and Kirsch) and the autobiographical theories posited as identity pathways (Smith and Watson) are represented through the memoir. These rhetorical tenets and theoretical pathways are not explicitly discussed within the memoir, but by analyzing the text and the implications of the text, I draw conclusions about the ways that these components can be discussed in relationship to this food memoir. The conclusion of this chapter discusses the way that food memoirs, using Abu-Jaber's memoir as an example, ask students to engage with lived experiences and truths through the reading and writing of personal nonfiction texts. This analysis of the food memoir dramatizes a way of using a feminist rhetorical pedagogy that values situated embodiment without reducing discrete content learning. This chapter, as a whole, explicates the *vehicle* of learning, the food memoir, in the nonfiction narrative class. As is discussed in Chapter Two, this memoir served as the foundational text in the classroom for discussions of feminist rhetorical practices, identity pathways, and nonfiction narrative writing.

Textual Analysis

Diana Abu-Jaber is primarily known as a fiction author. Prior to writing and publishing her food memoir in 2005, she had published two novels. Since publishing her memoir, she has written and published two more novels, and then in 2016 she published her second food memoir titled *Life Without a Recipe.* Abu-Jaber teaches writing and literature at Portland State

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University, although she "divides her time between South Florida and Portland, Oregon" ("About"). As is detailed in her first food memoir, *The Language of Baklava*, Abu-Jaber grew up partly in New York and, for brief stints, in Jordan. Abu-Jaber's past experiences are still predominant force driving the narrative in the memoir. In the introduction to his edited collection *Popular Literacy*, John Trimbur discusses how texts "are meant to speak in the voice of experience, to give a popular account from people who have not been consulted by the policy makers-- some of whom are about to be driven from their familiar places, pleasures, and livelihoods" (3). Abu-Jaber's family was not driven from Jordan, her father chose to come to the United States, yet he brought the family back to Amman, Jordan several times before he finally "comes back from Jordan, announces to himself for the hundredth or thousandth or millionth time that he really and truly lives in this country, this Amerikee" (Abu-Jaber 324). Bud, Abu-Jaber's father, was one not consulted by policy makers and yet is given a voice of experience in Abu-Jaber's memoir. The struggle to identify with Jordan and America is paramount in this text, as it represents Abu-Jaber's own struggles to make sense of lived experiences as she develops identification patterns.

Abu-Jaber did not write an explicitly feminist text, but her valuing of past experience and identification patterns, identifying herself as "an in-between" (Avakian 289), corresponds with feminist ideologies. Arlene Avakian also discusses how "women's issues and vivid representations of strong women permeate Abu-Jaber's memoir, subverting the stereotype of Arab women as subservient to men" (285). This subversion happens both by including and focusing on strong women characters in the memoir, like her Aunt Aya, but it also happens through Abu-Jaber's agency over the food and cooking traditions that her family has engaged in for many generations. Throughout the text she begins to make *choices* about what she will eat, what she will cook, and who she will eat with. These discussions speak to the "ownership of cultural forms" (Abu-Jaber 286) of food, and show her taking ownership over those practices.

Abu-Jaber's memoir is divided into 24 different chapters. Though the chapters are arranged chronologically, each one focuses on one memory or specific period in her life. The first chapter is titled "Raising an Arab Father in America," and details her experiences as a six year old living in upstate New York with her family, including her Jordanian father who she

refers to throughout the text by his nickname, Bud. The reason for this nickname is that "he flags down men and women alike with the same greeting: 'Hey, bud!'" even though, Abu-Jaber points out, "my father's name is Ghassan Saleh Abu-Jaber" (4). This difference in naming is just one way that Abu-Jaber sees her family as "Arab at home and American in the streets" (5). The assimilation is not easy for her family, specifically her father. As more and more of Bud's family "comesover," Abu-Jaber begins to see the cultural differences more starkly, as her relatives pine for the country and life in Jordan that they left. She writes, "they'll be hungry because everyone who 'comesover' is hungry: for home, for family, for the old smells and touches and tastes" (6). Hunger is a metaphor used throughout Abu-Jaber's memoir, and, as is evidenced here, it often indicates a hunger other than just physical.

The final chapter of the memoir is called "The First Meal," and it describes Bud opening a restaurant--the realization of his lifelong dream. The restaurant does not feature Jordanian classics as he had once envisioned, but he serves "rows of burgers, sizzling French fries, blistering hot dogs, and grilled cheese sandwiches" (324). Bud realized his dream in America but in a very different way than he had once imagined. He now has a new name as well, used by his American grandchildren. They cry out, "*Jiddo! Jiddo!* Grandpa!" when they see him (326 emphasis original). There is still a sense of "the in-between, the borderlands" for both Bud and his family who "live their lives in the air" going back and forth from Jordan and America, and also for Abu-Jaber herself (326). She identifies herself as "a reluctant Bedouin-- I miss and I long for every place, every country, I have ever lived" (327). Abu-Jaber concludes her book with the sense that the "comingover" is never quite complete (6). She feels that she has pieces of herself left in all of the places where she has spent time. She identifies with two very different cultures and with cities all over the world.

These two chapters bookend her memoir, but the chapters in between cover a wide variety of subjects and memories. Abu-Jaber tells stories from both her childhood and adulthood in the United States and in Jordan. She talks about an abusive uncle, a strict but naive grandmother, a homesickness that leads to an eating disorder, failed marriages, and finding a man that she wants to take to her "amazing country" and show her "beautiful history" (323). These 24 chapters are interspersed with 43 different recipes. There are recipes for "Gram's Easy Roast

Beef" (109), "Lost Childhood Pita Bread" (136-7), and "Spinach-Stuffed *Fetayer* For Those In Search Of Home" (261-2). These recipes, though completely usable as recipes alone, correspond with the subjects of the chapters and offer the readers a chance to not only better see the work of the narratives, but, if they choose to actually make the recipes, offers a literal taste of the struggles or joys that Abu-Jaber is describing.

This seeing, tasting, and experiencing of Abu-Jaber's text in this way offers a new kind of literacy to students. I see Trimbur's conceptions of popular literacy offering a lens through which to view Abu-Jaber's text. Trimbur defines popular literacy as the way that authors "*make literacy popular* by using the available means of communication for their own purposes… to claim an interpretive space… to speak in the voice of experience" (3). Abu-Jaber's text does that through her coming of age stories and identity negotiation that happen around food. Trimbur outlines four notions of popular literacy that I believe will help me to articulate some of the rich nuances of identity construction and feminist representation happening in Abu-Jaber's memoir in relation to teaching this book in a college writing classroom.

The first notion of popular literacy that Trimbur articulates, that I quoted previously, is that authors "are meant to speak in the voice of experience, to give a popular account from people who have not been consulted by the policy makers-- some of whom are about to be driven from their familiar places, pleasures, and livelihoods" (3). Abu-Jaber's family was not driven from Jordan, her father chose to come to the United States, but some of Abu-Jaber's family did not come willingly. Her cousin, Sami, is forced by his father and uncles to the come to the United States--they say because he is a "poet," but they are actually trying to "cure" him of his homosexuality. Sami is not eating and is obviously miserable, so Abu-Jaber recounts: "I pluck a morsel [of lamb] from the plate and run to him while it burns my fingertips. To my mind, this is the best way to show love-- to offer food from your own hand" (8). Sami initially refuses the food, but then ultimately decides to take it: "he says quietly, 'it's good'" (9). Sami was one not consulted by policy makers or even his family, in his choice to come to America, yet through Abu-Jaber's food memoir and this food experience Sami is given a voice in this popular account of literacy that she has written. The struggle between Jordan and America, represented by a struggle to eat or not eat, evidences the different ways that individuals can hunger.

Abu-Jaber recounts another moment of "comingover" (6) as a little girl after her grandmother takes her to see the Japanese opera *Madama Butterfly* at the opera house, and then they go to eat Chinese food. Abu-Jaber's grandmother proudly tells the waiter that they had just seen "a won-der-ful performance, all about your people!" (99). The waiter is electrified by this claim, and he says: "yes, the Chinese opera very important, very ancient art form. Center of cultural life" (99). Abu-Jaber's enjoyment of the fantastic meal is ruined as she waits for the waiter to discover that they actually saw a Japanese opera, not a Chinese opera. Her grandmother is completely unconcerned with the difference between the cultures, countries, or traditions as she talks to the waiter. Abu-Jaber recalls: "our small connection seems to mean too much to Chen. We simply cannot disappoint him. And this is too much responsibility; I can't imagine getting away with it" (105). Chen talks about how "in the Cultural Revolution, opera is the only kind of art we are allowed. Chairman Mao says it is not bourgeois" (100) and how "the chef here… he was one of the cooks for the Chinese emperor" (102). Abu-Jaber recognizes the historical, cultural, and political traditions that this waiter embodies, even if her grandmother cannot. This waiter and the chef were not consulted as policy makers; they were forced to conform to policies made by others. In this text, though, they have a voice, and Abu-Jaber gives their perspective in this popular, published genre. Through her own perspective, she discusses the ways that culture and identity can be so easily represented-- or misrepresented-- in lived experiences.

A second aspect of popular literacy that Trimbur outlines in his introduction is that "the relationship of popular literacy to systems of valuing, however, cannot be understood simply as a categorical one of occupying the underesteemed and disparaged term in a familiar cultural hierarchy" (4). Systems and ways of valuing based on cultural hierarchy is also a dominant thread that runs through Abu-Jaber's narrative. She discusses the ways that she must adjust and then readjust to these systems of valuing every time they move or go back to Jordan or encounter new familial and friend groups. Abu-Jaber recalls the time that her father took her and her family to see the Bedouins in the desert where her uncle lived. Abu-Jaber writes, "the men and women eat separately… I cannot separate the eating from the food itself" (60). As her father prepares them to go on this trip, Abu-Jaber learns about her own family history and the stories, beliefs,

and dissention of values and debates over the best food in Bud's family as well. Trimbur's idea shows that popular literacy has a relationship to these types of values that stem from cultural heritage and hierarchy, which includes a gender hierarchy, and I think that Abu-Jaber evidences that really clearly through the discussion of her own deeply ingrained familial and cultural food values.

Food memoirs can sometimes be disparaged as texts that are not worth studying or are not serious enough to study in an academic context. Just because memoirs can be purchased in airport bookstores does not make them any less worth studying than texts that can only be found in prestigious libraries or through extensive research. Identification patterns can sometimes be understood *better* through more narrative texts than in depth scholarly texts, especially in college classrooms. Abu-Jaber writes about experiences that many students may be able to relate to, such as pressure from her parents, fears of failure, and she details an experience in college where she is "living on candy" (216). In college, she only really eats when she goes home and "Bud prepares big special meals… roasted chicken, shish kabobs, grape leaves," but then inevitably she ways up in the night "by molten nausea… it comes with a dreadful disorientation-- the sense that something is deeply wrong yet completely unidentifiable" (217). This continues throughout her first semester at college, and she realizes that though her "body is physically rejecting the food" it is also "a rejection of something more powerful than food" (227). It is not until she begins to find a balance between her identities as a student *and* daughter, an American *and* a Jordanian, a person who lives in the suburbs *and* the city, that the nausea stops and she sleeps "soundly and dreamlessly" (229). Abu-Jaber has to reconcile her own systems of valuing in this text, and I argue that memoir texts themselves should be reassessed to consider the value that they offer students in helping them find their own balance.

Another aspect of food memoirs that makes them stand out from other texts, even other memoirs, is the way that the text can be discussed on multiple levels- how the text itself is materially produced, and then how the material aspects within the text (food, specifically) are being produced. There is a third level too, that brings the reader in even more directly, because food memoirs provide recipes, so readers can actually "participate" in the story in a way by making and eating the food discussed and provided through recipes in the book. In his third

notion of popular literacy, Trimbur talks about how "people [who] make literacy popular put a particular emphasis on the *making*, and like recent cultural studies of literacy… pay special attention to what I call the productive arts of popular literacy- the poetics of making signs" (5). This idea of making is, again, multilayered in examining food memoirs like Abu-Jaber's. She writes about making pancakes in Amman: "we mix and stir, enduring all sorts of unsolicited opinions from the neighborhood spectators—who all seem frankly dubious about today's undertaking" (37). This is one of the countless examples of material making that happens in this text. This scene takes place in a Jordanian kitchen with Abu-Jaber's American mother attempting to make American pancakes. Popular literacy speaks to that kind of "productive art" as valuable to consider and study.

The making of pancakes in Amman, a distinctly American food made in Jordan, is contrasted with the making of Jordanian food in America. At sixteen years old, Abu-Jaber invites her friends over to her house, including her boyfriend Jay. Bud is initially intensely wary of Jay, but when Jay mentions hummus "Bud and Jay form an instant food connection" (209) and they "make dinner that evening. They make hummus, rice, olives with chili paste, and a lightly braised chicken with thyme and onions" (209). Jay is the first "non-family American boy" that Bud has ever invited to their dinner table, and Abu-Jaber realizes "with some regret" that because of this acceptance she "can never have anything to do with Jay Franklin again" (210). The multiple types of making in this story include emotional making-- love, distrust, acceptance, rejection-- but also the making of food and friendships. This popular literacy component of making is one that resonates with students.

Trimbur's last notion of popular literacy is that "instead of positing a direct correspondence between production (the message encoded) and consumption (the message decoded), cultural studies of literacy have created an opening for variable responses and social uses that resist or evade preferred readings" (6). Again, the notions of production and consumption are multi-layered when thinking about memoir texts that discuss food production in them. Abu-Jaber's text is produced for the popular genre of memoir, yet the ways that it can get taken up or "consumed" by the readers is multilayered and does not have a clear trajectory. Abu-Jaber remembers a conversation with her Aunt Aya focused on various meanings behind

production and consumption: Aunt Aya says, "'You ate some *baklawa*?' She curls her hand as if making a point so essential, it can be held only in the tips of the fingers. 'I looked. I tasted, I spoke kindly and truthfully. I invited'" (190). This consumption of baklava (or baklawa) is representative of being an assertive woman in America and not just conforming to a father or husband's desire or wishes. The correspondence between production and consumption that Trimbur addresses as a part of popular literacy is revelatory to examine in terms of this memoir.

Aunt Aya is the most explicit feminist in the memoir. Abu-Jaber's mother is strong; she's the "voice of sanity" in the family (237), but she serves as more of a quiet presence in Abu-Jaber's memoir, which indicates she may have been so in her life as well. Aunt Aya visits Abu-Jaber's family both in Jordan and in America and both times she is able to clearly and succinctly affect change through her actions and her words. She teaches Abu-Jaber to make baklawa, a food that Abu-Jaber previously hated, and more so, she teaches her how to affect change. When Bud is duped by his cousin into purchasing a run-down building in Amman to open a restaurant it is Aya who "drove him through the sueded hillsides of Amman to look at real estate-- building after building, each one brighter, larger, and cheaper than the one before, all of them nicer and less expensive than Frankie's building" (304). Aya tells Abu-Jaber, "well, I cured him, I cured him of the family" (305). In the namesake chapter of the memoir, "The Language of Baklava," Bud is threatening to send Abu-Jaber from New York to Jordan because, "in the end, the cause of the fight is always the same: the astonishing fact that I'm growing up" (182). This is when Aunt Aya steps in and tells Bud over dinner, "you know, eating is a form of listening, and I have something to tell you… if you ever say anything more about sending your daughter back to Jordan to live-- oh! I will honestly never speak to you again" (192). For Bud, and for Abu-Jaber, this "is a moment of recognition" (192) brought about by Aunt Aya. The encoded and decoded messages of these seemingly simple acts have significant revelatory impacts on both Bud and Abu-Jaber. Abu-Jaber looks up to her aunt, and she serves as a strong, feminist role model. This cultural literacy contributes to the understanding of the memoir through a popular literacy lens.

So, what does this mean as far as teaching this text, or actually using it in a writing classroom? I think one thing Abu-Jaber's memoir does concretely but not in an overbearing way is shows the ways that connections are made. Most of the time these connections are through

food, but sometimes they are through a shared interest in a scooter, or a look across a table, or a feeling of enchantment upon entering a restaurant. What Abu-Jaber does is tell her own story while inviting the reader to watches as bridges are built and borders are crossed and food is eaten. Literacy, at times, is viewed as a boundary that cannot be crossed, or as a border that not enough people are crossing. Abu-Jaber's text evidences the ways that borders *can* be crossed as long as all parties have access to the tools through which to do so. The tools that I offered to my students to better understand and apply the narrative tools gleaned from Abu-Jaber's text came from Royster and Kirsch's four feminist rhetorical practices, which I discuss in the next section.

Rhetorical Links

This coming of age food memoir may not be an obvious contender for the exemplification of Royster and Kirsch's four feminist rhetorical practices, but I argue that Abu-Jaber's narrative can be understood through these four practices and serves as a model of personal nonfiction writing that values identification patterns because it invites engagement. In the first section of their text, Royster and Kirsch write that their four feminist rhetorical practices of "*critical imagination, strategic contemplation, social circulation, and globalization"* (19 emphasis original) are "critical terms of engagement" because they "make the familiar strange and the strange familiar in order to call forward what we believe now constitutes a more clearly articulated vista of feminist rhetorical practices" (19). I argue that Abu-Jaber's memoir does some of this same work. Abu-Jaber takes growing up experiences and food experiences that many people may be able to relate to, and she places them in a new terrain-- a space that investigates identification patterns and familial relations.

I argue that each of the four terms of engagement are present in Abu-Jaber's work as well, which is why this text was appropriate to teach in a feminist writing pedagogy that uses the rhetorical practices as a model. In the overviews of each of the rhetorical practices that Royster and Kirsch outline, they ask a series of questions that "clarify the scope, nature, and principles of our work" (20). In this section, I will show examples of Abu-Jaber's narrative that answer some of the specific questions that Royster and Kirsch ask in relation to each of the four feminist practices. As I have discussed both the concepts behind the practices as well as the way that I used the four practices to frame my writing projects in the previous chapters, I feel comfortable

revisiting the four conceptions through the questions without explicitly discussing the definitions of each term.

The first of the four feminist rhetorical practices is critical imagination. In defining and clarifying this term, Royster and Kirsch, ask the following questions, among others: "When we study women of the past, especially those whose voices have rarely been heard or studied by rhetoricians, how do we render their work and lives meaningfully?" and "How do we make what was going on in their context relevant or illuminating for the contemporary context?" (20). I believe that Abu-Jaber does this work in at least one very specific instance. As the four notions of popular literacy point to, one way to do this work of illuminating context is through sharing narratives in popular formats. Abu-Jaber does this and works to make the women's lives of the past have significance and meaning to current audience by sharing her own experiences. In the chapter called "Native Foods," the Abu-Jaber family travels to visit the Bedouins in the place that Bud calls "the source of the winds, at the center of the valley. This is where our family started" (60). As they travel and stay in this place, Abu-Jaber senses, sees, tastes, and smells the history of her family. In a place where "the whiteness of the sky separates itself from the pale earth" and there are "baby goats and blatting lambs" hanging around the tents and open spaces (61), Abu-Jaber begins to understand her familial history. She focuses her recollections on one women named Munira. When the other Bedouin women ask where Abu-Jaber comes from, Munira says "She is mine!... She belongs to me" (62). They eat and dance in this place, and to Abu-Jaber it seems that "there is so much food that it seem limitless" (66). Munira asks Abu-Jaber "in the city Arabic" if she would like to stay with her forever (66) and she says yes. It is Abu-Jaber's mother who finally breaks the revelry and asks "you ready to go?... I think it's time" (67). Abu-Jaber represents her ancestors by painting beautiful pictures of their world with her words. By describing the endless sky, food, and laughter, she describes lives that, too, seem endless. Indeed, she says "if I had stayed by Munira's fire for one more moment, I might never have left at all" (68). Abu-Jaber critically imagines the life of a Bedouin, basing her reflection in a way that invites readers who have never experienced anything like this to understand and rest in her past experiences.

The questions asked of the second feminist rhetorical practice, strategic contemplation, connects with those asked of critical imagination, but considers the way that "new research questions emerge" from visits and research into the past. Royster and Kirsch ask, "What do we notice when we stand back and observe?" and "What can our own lived experience teach us?" (22). Abu-Jaber does this work of learning from lived experiences by establishing much of her narrative in the past. Some of the memoir is written in present tense, but there is a sense that all of this has already happened. She has already loved and lost and cooked and eaten food. This book, in a way, is an observation. An observation of her cultural and familial history, as well as an observation of her own identification patterns over the years. To answer the question of what lived experiences can teach us, I think there are elements of that included throughout her narrative. In the chapter "HTML" Abu-Jaber offers specific reflections and dives into the lessons that she has learned from the variety of her past experiences. This isn't necessarily an easy process, though. She writes, "I get lost. I am set loose in a wilderness. Jordan has torn me open, and inside this opening are pictures of light and dust-scrubbed air and flowering jasmine" (317). During this time of reflection, her first novel, *Arabian Jazz*, was published and she reads in a newspaper how the novel "is the first mainstream novel about the Arab American experience" (318). Abu-Jaber considers this might not be true, but she still feels "a great weight of responsibility" (318) as readers begin to tell her that her experience does not match with their own (318). The way to learn from our own lived experience is to realize that it is just that, simply our own. In this time, Abu-Jaber feels "impossibly alone" though she knows that she is not the first person "ever to be unmoored between countries" (318). This is a feeling that is ever more present in the United States and around the world, and strategic contemplation asks us to consider what that means for our research and our lives.

The third feminist rhetorical practice is social circulation. Of this practice, Royster and Kirsch ask: "Are affection and admiration possible with sentimentality?" and "How do we locate both writers and readers in relation to new textual forms?" (23-4). In Abu-Jaber's case, it may be impossible to separate her love from her family from her memories of them. As we consider social connections, though, I wonder if it is totally possible to separate sentimentality from admiration of subjects or individuals. Abu-Jaber seems to certainly describe her relatives and

memories in terms that may not always be the most flattering or sentimental, which adds a sense of authenticity. For example, she writes that her abusive uncle has a "glassy and amphibious" quality that "seems to surface from beneath his skin" (261). In terms of location of writers and readers, Abu-Jaber directly addresses her readers in the forward to her book. She writes, "my childhood was made up of stories… the stories were often in some way about food, and the food always turned out to be about something much larger: grace, difference, faith, love" (1). She writes of the struggle of the immigrant saying, "it's a sort of fantasy-- to have the chance to re-create yourself. But it's also a nightmare, because so much is lost" (1). In reconfiguring writer/reader relationships in new textual forms, those that popular literacy often speaks to, it may be much like the plight of the immigrant that Abu-Jaber identifies. Much is lost while much is gained.

The final of the four rhetorical practices is globalization. Royster and Kirsch don't ask specific questions about this term of engagement, but they do articulate how globalization is about "connecting the dots" of many components, including the "history of rhetoric for women's participation, contributions, and leadership," as well as "highlighting and magnifying connections and disconnections between the classical traditions of Greece and Rome" (24-5). Abu-Jaber's text, as is evidenced throughout this chapter, is all about connecting the dots. She connects the dots of her own familial history, including the women in her past, as well as highlighting connections between her own Arabic past and history. In relation to social circulation, Royster and Kirsch ask: "What makes the consideration of such questions *feminist*?" (24 emphasis original). I offer that that question needs to be asked of all the questions asked of the four terms, and I think that one way to begin to answer that question it is to consider the ways that connecting the dots *happens*. It happens through agentive action, as well as through consideration of the strong women of our past who have influenced us and given us life. Abu-Jaber discusses this work of connection of her own experiences and identification patterns in her final chapter as she writes, "*come back,* I want to say to my second self, *there is tea and mint here, there is sugar, there is dark bread and oil*. I must have these things near me: children, hometown, fresh bread, long conversations, animals; I must bring them very near" (327 emphasis original). The feminist work comes in choosing to bring those things together, as women who

have come before us have done. The next section will detail how I see Abu-Jaber's memoir through the lens of Smith and Watson's autobiographical theory. This theory is not a feminist theory, but I see it linking to Royster and Kirsch's feminist practices by providing a heuristic to analyze the data that I collected in response to the feminist pedagogy and memoir usage and providing a way to connect the dots.

Theoretical Implications

The implications of this theory speak to the way that autobiographical texts, including memoirs, are currently conceived and the work that they can do within the university. Smith and Watson write of their three autobiographical theoretical tenets, performativity, positionality, and relationality, that they are "enabling concepts of recent theory [that] energize and redefine the terms of life narrative by calling formerly established critical norms into question" (217-8). Like Royster and Kirsch's four feminist rhetorical practices, I see these three theoretical elements as asking researchers, teachers, and students alike to further *engage* with the material that they are writing and studying on a personal level. Indeed, Smith and Watson say, "as we consider the complex ways in which new genres and new subjects may energize one another, these concepts enable more flexible reading practices and more inclusive approaches to the field of life writing" (218). This quote exemplifies my reason for choosing to use Abu-Jaber's memoir in the classroom. I wanted to use a text that would ask students to engage in ways that allowed them to see their *own* stories as valuable.

The first of the three concepts of the autobiographical theory is performativity, which Smith and Watson discuss as the way that "autobiographical subjects" perform identities that are "provisional and unstable" (214). I don't think unstable is meant to have a derogative connotation here; I think that the use of the word unstable simply indicates the ways that identities are "not fixed or essentialized" (214) but are dynamic and ever evolving. Smith and Watson say that this notion counters the idea that autobiographical texts only produce a "prediscursive identity" (218). In relation to Abu-Jaber's text, I think that the notion of performativity is represented in complex ways. On one hand, this is a published text. In that sense, the experiences, memories, and identities that she performs on the page are set on the page forever. What Abu-Jaber does so well within her text, though, is evidences the way that her

identity performances changed based on her location, age, and desires. Again, this is not to say that she was unstable in a negative sense, but that her identification patterns shifted throughout her life, and thus, as readers we can assume that they continued to shift during and after the publication of the memoir. In the forward to the memoir, Abu-Jaber writes, "to me, the truth of the stories lies not in their factual precision, but in their emotional core" (1). Consistently throughout the text, she returns to this grounding of experience and identity in emotion.

The second notion of autobiographical theory is positionality. Smith and Watson write that positionality looks at the "effects of social relations whose power is distributed unevenly and asymmetrically across difference" (215). The awareness of power structure through difference is a very feminist notion, and Smith and Watson specifically say that "feminists [have] incorporated this psychosocial approach in analyzing life writing by women and men" (216). They also say that positionality is fundamentally tied to "geographics of identity" in terms of "de/colonization, immigration, displacement, and exile" (215) and that positionality speaks back to "the notion that there is a universal and transcendent autobiographical subject" (218). I discuss this briefly in the conclusion of this chapter and will do so in more depth in the conclusion of the dissertation, but I think that the awareness of the way that *each* individual's story differs from others is very important to maintaining the integrity and value of studying life writing. In Abu-Jaber's text, she works hard to speak only from her own experience. Even as she includes a variety of other people in her text, she consistently speaks from her own understanding and experience. Again, in the forward, she writes: "I offer my deepest gratitude to the friends and family I write about in these pages and give thanks to everyone who knows that each of us has a right to tell our stories, to be truthful to our own memories, no matter how flawed, private, embellished, idiosyncratic, or improved they may be" (1). Some people make take issue with this interpretation of life writing, but in terms of positionality and the ways that power is distributed (or withheld) across difference, this is a very important concept to understand.

Finally, Smith and Watson discuss relationality. They say that relationality "indicates how the subject is always in process and thus involved with others, not autonomous" (217). Relationality builds directly on the notions of performativity and positionality but recognizes that no person's experience occurs or develops in a vacuum. Even as each individual's story is their

own, the people, cultures, and histories around and before us directly impact who we are and the way that we experience the world. Relationality, then, speaks back to the concept that "self-narration is a monologic utterance of a solitary, introspective subject that is knowable to itself" (218). As is typical in the acknowledgements, Abu-Jaber discusses those who have helped her. She writes, "many people have helped me with this book, helped me to think about how to write it, how to feel about it, how to cook for it" (329). And, as I have said, throughout the memoir, Abu-Jaber weaves her own story with the stories of her family and those around her. She includes the stories of many who have "comeover" (6), including herself, in many different ways, but *always* through her own perspective and recollections. The final section of this chapter looks at the work food memoirs more generally because it is important to consider all narratives, including this one, within context.

Conclusion

This chapter has specifically examined Diana Abu-Jaber's food memoir, *The Language of Baklava*. I have offered an overview of the text through the lens of John Trimbur's conceptions of popular literacy, and then I have linked the memoir to the feminist rhetorical practices outlined by Royster and Kirsch and the three autobiographical tenets put forth by Smith and Watson. This chapter considers just *one* food memoir, though, out of the myriad of memoirs available. I detailed my reasons for choosing this memoir specifically in Chapter Two, but I do recognize the power in recognizing the different types of memoirs and experiences available to all readers. I will discuss this more in the conclusion chapter of the dissertation, but I want to mention here the work that I see memoirs doing more broadly. The genre of memoirs offer a space for careful consideration, crafting, and sharing of personal experience.

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, or women in the kitchen means that they take a subservient role. The way that food memoirs help readers, specifically students, 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.

I discuss my students' specific reactions and discussion of this food memoir, as well as to the feminist writing pedagogical model more generally, in the following chapter. I look first at the ways that I saw the students responding to the pedagogical model through the written work that they produced in my class by tracing the ways that positionality, performativity, and relationality appear in their work. In the second half of the chapter, I draw on the answers given by four different students in individual interviews reflecting on their experience in the class, the pedagogical model, and reading the memoir, as well as asking them about the ways that they saw (and currently see) positionality, performativity, and relationality working through their experiences with the subject matter of the course.

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