

“She did *what?!?*”: Married Women’s Renegotiation of Kitchen Mistakes through Narrative¹

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Abstract: The act of preparing food the “right” way can be a source of tension between spouses. In interviews conducted with heterosexual married couples in rural Kentucky and rural and urban Pennsylvania, stories of stressful or disastrous cooking mistakes are reimagined by wives as being about times when they successfully “got away” with something or pulled one over on their husbands. In these reimaginings, the events in question are presented as humorous examples of the women’s resourcefulness. This paper explores these kinds of narratives and their ability to serve as opportunities for women to reclaim and reshape these experiences of kitchen mishaps and mistakes.

Keywords: practical jokes; personal experience narratives; gender; cooking mistakes; kitchen fails; foodways

In *Baking as Biography: A Life Story in Recipes*, Diane Tye explores the role that foodways played in the life of her mother, Laurene. Tye recounts an incident in which her mother accidentally used tea leaves instead of brewed tea while baking, noting: “And, as my father is still fond of telling, it was a neighbouring woman who gently told my mother after an early unsuccessful attempt at baking that recipes calling for tea required brewed tea, not tea leaves” (2010:11). After reading this passage, I called my mother and read it to her. While I expected her to share in my amusement, I was unprepared for her to reply with two similar stories of her own, one of which involved her attempt to make a coffee cake with coffee grounds rather than brewed coffee.

This conversation got me thinking about the stories people tell about the mistakes they make in the kitchen: when and with whom do they share them, and what forms do their stories take? To answer some of these questions, I conducted group and individual interviews with men and women of various ages and backgrounds about their cooking mistake stories over a period of three months in the fall of 2016, work which eventually became my master’s thesis. After a process of trial and error I came to think of these narratives as “kitchen nightmare stories,” in which the events being recounted were stressful or unfortunate, but also potentially funny or silly.

At the beginning of this project, I struggled to find a way to articulate what I was looking for to the people I spoke with. The term kitchen “mistake” felt too negative, while kitchen “mishap” felt too mild, and seemed more likely to elicit anecdotes about dropping a utensil while cooking than a full-blown narrative. “Kitchen fail” was effective at conveying both the scale and tone of what I was looking for to younger interviewees, but a lot of older people I interviewed had a harder time connecting to this term. In my first few interviews I went with the term “disaster.” This worked for my interviewees, who seemed to relish its potential to be used hyperbolically for the sake of humor. But in

discussing my project with other folklorists I was reminded that the term "disaster" has most commonly been used in the serious context of the study of the role of personal narrative in helping individuals and communities to make sense of and heal from serious traumatic events (Lindahl 2012 and Horigan 2010, among others).

I ultimately settled on the term "kitchen nightmares" because I felt that it allowed space for both the humor and the unfortunate aspects of the events being related to come through in the narratives without the more serious connotations of a word like "disaster." It is also worth noting that many times the interviewees supplied their own terms for their stories that they felt were a better fit. Some of these terms were "fiasco," "catastrophe," "calamity," "shitshow," and in a few cases, "disaster."

I attempted to speak with people who prepare food together in a variety of contexts, including several family groups, roommates, co-workers, and neighbors. I also spoke with a few people individually. Ultimately I recorded 13 interviews with 25 people altogether (10 men and 15 women) ranging in age from 19 to 70 years old.

Because kitchen nightmare stories can be told by anyone, this project was not focused on a specific place or group of people. Instead I focused my research in western Kentucky, where I was finishing my master's degree, and in my home area of central, southeastern, and western Pennsylvania, where I have family. I relied on friends, family, co-workers and professors for connections to prospective interviewees. Many of the people I spoke with early on in this project recommended I reach out to their own friends, family, and co-workers. This strategy made it possible to compare kitchen nightmare stories from two different regions of the United States, as well as those from rural areas with urban settings like Philadelphia and Pittsburgh.

This paper explores a specific type of kitchen nightmare story that emerged regularly in interviews with women 50 or older throughout the rural and urban areas of Kentucky and Pennsylvania that I investigated. All were married to men or in long-term relationships with them. They recount a time when the woman successfully hid a kitchen mistake from her male partner, only to reveal it to him later on. One of the interesting features of several of these narratives was a motif in which the women would explain the "food rules" of their husbands: the list of allowed food pairings as well as the cooking taboos that must not be violated during the creation of a meal. In the narratives discussed in the present work, the complicating action was the narrator's violation of her partner's food rules. During interviews, the women would explain how the rules had been broken, and then describe the actions they took to hide these violations, effectively "pulling one over" on the partner.

In retelling these stories in the interview context, the women typically reconfigured the events of the narratives in more positive ways, transforming stressful experiences into both humorous memories and examples of their resourcefulness and ability to remain cool under pressure. These narratives thus took on elements of a practical joke, with the men playing roles of hapless dupes. This strategy of reconfiguring kitchen nightmares through narrative provided the storytellers with ways to resist traditional ideas about gender and domesticity.

After briefly exploring the gendered dynamics of the interviewees' food experiences, this paper presents a few examples of this "violation of partner's food rules" motif to show how the women employed it strategically to resist these gendered dynamics. I conclude with some complicating factors and suggested areas for further research.

Because of its constant presence in day-to-day life, and its central status in many important ritual occasions and holidays, food carries great significance and emotional weight for many people. As Michael Owen Jones points out, food can be useful as a tool that helps people think about themselves and perform their identities for others (2007). It is not surprising, then, that food often plays a major part in gender role stereotypes.

In European and North American culture, the social world has traditionally been divided into two distinct spheres, the public and the private (Habermas 1989), which have been understood to be segregated by gender. The public sphere, the realm of business and politics, is the world of men, while the private or domestic sphere is the primary domain of women (Berkovitch 1999, Elshtain 1981, Gavison 1992, Matthews 1987, Nicholson 1984, Okin 1979).²

As the male and female genders have been understood to have their own mutually exclusive spheres of influence and expertise, the skillful performance of tasks associated with either sphere became inextricably linked to gender performance as well. The procurement and preparation of food is intertwined with these notions of masculinity and femininity at a basic level: it is the man's responsibility to provide the food, and the woman's responsibility to prepare it well and serve it in a timely manner. This worldview solidified in the United States in the 1800s (cf. Hattery 2009: 97-104),³ and arguably reached its actual and ideological apex in American society in the 1950s (Inness 2001). While ideas about the appropriate roles for men and women have changed over time, these "traditional" nineteenth- and twentieth-century ideas about gender still hold significant sway in American society. Because of the cultural weight placed on providing and preparing food in the context of the performance of gender, the kitchen sometimes becomes a space of tension and negotiation for power between women and men in heterosexual partnerships.

Folklorists have studied how women have developed strategies to cope with the pressure to be talented and cheerful providers of domestic equilibrium. Susan S. Lanser argues that women can sometimes escape from the expectations of their male partners and society at large by claiming incompetence in the kitchen. In the 1993 essay "Burning Dinners: Feminist Subversions of Domesticity," she claims that, for some women, doing the cooking badly is not an actual lack of talent, but a subversive rejection of socially expected domestic responsibilities. Rather than a simple statement of fact, claiming to be a "bad cook" can be seen as a coded refusal of the traditionally feminine role of homemaker:

Women claim incompetence when they assert that they cannot cook, bake, knit, sew, or keep a clean house Women demonstrate incompetence when they do one of these tasks poorly—leave it incomplete, neglect it, or spoil it in some way. Our hypothesis is that such performances may function as coded rejections not only of the task in question but also of a culturally constructed female role. Like

all coded phenomena, strategic displays of incompetence are inevitably double-voiced and double-edged, but precisely for this reason they allow a woman to say "I can't" when she means but cannot say "I won't." (1993: 42).

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

I also found that there were other, more resistant strategies that women could use in order to cope with the pressures of domesticity—although these more aggressive techniques did not tend to offer the same long-term respite from food work as the coding strategies Lanser identifies. By reframing accounts of their disagreements with their partners over some aspect of cooking or serving food, or retelling a story of a time when they were able to "get away" with some cooking mistake, these women were able to relive the events in their narratives from a place of greater agency by presenting them as funny, even if there was nothing humorous about what happened at the time of the events they described.

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

Rhoda⁴: I was fixing that [coq au vin]. We lived at the lake at the time. And Ben [her husband], ah, on the weekend he would be out on the boat a lot, and he would be drinking beer with his buddies. And he would come in all sunburned and not in great shape sometimes. But, I had spent all day making this. I even had Julia Child's cookbook and everything. And I was really, really on the ball and I spent all day. Made this, he came in, and he sat down, and I set his plate before him, and he looked, "Mm, nuh uh, there's no way I'm gonna eat that purple chicken." It was good. I didn't try it because I was so mad at him [laughs]. But, the people down the street really enjoyed it. [Laughs] I just took it down, I said "Here, you can have Ben's purple chicken."

Many of these narratives about power imbalances dwell on the subject of what men will and will not eat, based on the set of food rules each man expects his wife to adhere to. A lot of these food rules have to do with what foods can be eaten as

accompaniments with other foods, the order in which foods will be eaten, and the desired standard of cleanliness in food preparation and serving. Occasionally the food rules were described to me by the men themselves, or collaboratively with their wives or girlfriends, as in the following example from Matt and Polly, a married couple from rural Pennsylvania:

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

Matt: That's the way you ate it.

Polly: —kind of ridiculous sometimes.

Matt: That's the way you ate it.

Matt was unperturbed by Polly's characterization of his food rules as "kind of ridiculous," insisting twice, "that's the way you ate it." He went on to recite a long list of his other food rules, which included only eating one specific brand of potato chips with a tuna sandwich and another with a ham sandwich, having to eat salad as a dessert course after a specific pasta dish, and drinking chocolate milkshakes at only the perfect "medium thick" consistency to counteract an upset stomach. He also insisted on having a spotless kitchen. On the surface these rules seem a little silly, as Polly suggested, but many of the kitchen nightmare stories this couple shared included the violation of one or more of these rules. One specific incidence of this violation is more thoroughly explored later in this essay.

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

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

Sharon: And another, another little secret when you're doing your batter? This cake, I've made a cake today, got up this morning and made it, 'cause I wanted you to have some. And, but anyway, I always use a measuring cup

and fill them about the same amount. It's a little over two cups in each pan that I cook. But then after you get it poured in your pan, to get it level? [pounds hands on table] Jar it before you put it in the oven. Just keep jarring it. And get all the bubbles?

Sarah: Yeah.

Sharon: Air out of the batter?

Sarah: Yeah.

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

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

[Laughter]

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

Walter: Yeah.

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

I am not sure to what extent Sharon and Walter consider their relationship to be in line with stereotypical gender roles as described above, but they are religious Christians, and Sharon assumes many traditionally feminine tasks, spending a great deal of time in the kitchen cooking and baking for her husband, children, grandchildren, and friends. The act of jarring the cake pans could be read as a coded moment of protest against a social system which allows for men to sleep in while women are expected to get up early to prepare for anticipated guests. Furthermore, Sharon used a humorous one-liner in the retelling of what happened earlier in the day explicitly to criticize Walter's sleeping in. He first brought up the fact that jarring the cake pans sometimes disturbed his sleep, jokingly suggesting that before I tried this trick, I should make sure that there wasn't anyone sleeping in my house. Sharon responded to this remark with, "Well, it's time for you to get up anyway." In the moment during the interview, this statement implied that her husband had stayed in bed too long, and called attention to the fact that she was up working to prepare for company while he was still sleeping.

In effect, Sharon had turned the tables on him. Both the act of banging the pans and her joking that it was time for him to get up were moments where Sharon seemed to push back against her husband's expectation that she would cheerfully take care of the domestic responsibilities in the home. In reframing the experience to be about his

apparent laziness rather than about her disruption of his sleep in front of an outsider, she put him on the spot in much the same way that the dupe of a practical joke is exposed. It became his responsibility to laugh along, to prove that he was a good sport and could take the joke (Marsh 2015). But Walter did not laugh along with Sharon. Instead, there was a brief silence before she changed the subject. His silence possibly indicated that he had refused to accept her reframing of the experience. At any rate, his reaction and Sharon's subsequent subject change signaled that the two had reached an impasse.

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

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

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

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

Sarah: Which brand is it?

Todd: Turner's milk.

Sarah: Turner's.

Ann: I *never* buy Turner's milk. [Laughs]

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

[Laughter]

Todd: And you [Katie] and Ann would just sit there and laugh. They thought it was the funniest thing.

At this point in the conversation, we had been discussing Todd's food rules, and his aversion to warm milk, for roughly five minutes. When he mentioned his preferred brand of milk, Ann wasted no time in pointing out that she never buys it, provoking laughter from everyone in the room. This statement served to disrupt the direction the conversation had been taking, and Todd began to describe the warm milk-related pranks his wife and daughter play on him, and his own irritated reaction. The subject of conversation changed from the things Ann had to do to make sure the milk was acceptable to her husband to a brief, appreciative summing up of all the ways she tests or breaks this particular food rule on a regular basis. In this case, refusing to buy the correct brand of milk or to put it back in the refrigerator in a timely manner can be viewed as good-natured jesting, or (perhaps and) as a coded critique of established ideas about the domestic responsibilities of women. As mentioned above, the acts being described also share some similarities with practical jokes.

In the 2015 book *Practically Joking*, Moira Marsh points out the difficulty of defining just one form of practical joke or prank, and instead puts forth a few different types. Despite the difficulty in defining the practical joke, Marsh does provide this general guideline:

All these activities are playful performances involving the interaction of two parties—trickster and dupe—who have mutually incompatible ideas about what is going on. The involvement of dupes seems to be an essential characteristic of the genre. The role of the dupe is relatively passive: the trickster acts and initiates while the dupe is acted upon. (8)

Marsh also notes the potential for cruelty and aggression in the form of practical joking or pranking, pointing out that: "Any play activity that designates one of its major protagonists as a victim must contain a heavy dose of aggression, at the very least. A practical joke is always at someone's expense, at least for a brief time" (3-4).

In the stories I documented which dealt with the covering up of a kitchen mistake, this subversive exercise of power in the act of cooking and/or serving a meal also contained descriptions of womanly ingenuity and complicity. The majority of narratives embedding this theme dealt with a mistake taking place during the cooking or serving of a meal that the man of the house would have found unacceptable had he been aware of it. In the following narrative, Ann from Pittsburgh recalled what happened when her dog got up on the table and started eating from a bowl of spaghetti just before it was time to serve a large meal:

Ann: And one time—my mom would make like a huge bowl of spaghetti for dinner . . . So we had the table all set, spaghetti was on the table. And just her and I were upstairs, everyone else was kind of scattered. And we went to finish something to get it on and I turned around and my little terrier-mix dog was sitting on the table with her butt in the plate. With her head in the giant bowl of spaghetti eating away. [Laughs] So my mom and

I looked at each other, and we scraped off the first layers of spaghetti, and we never told anyone. I told my dad that story like, like five years ago. He's like "She did *what?!?*" [Laughs] But, Snoid [the dog] was *very* happy. She had like found herself quite a feast. [Laughs] That was quite a sight. [Laughs]

The "dad" that Ann was referring to here was a man who really liked to keep things clean. To illustrate to me how important this was for him, Ann shared that he had once famously dropped a donut on the kitchen floor. He picked it up, but instead of dusting it off or throwing it away, he walked over to the sink, rinsed it under the faucet and then sat down to eat it. The dog contaminated both the bowl of spaghetti—by eating out of it—and one of the plates—by sitting on it—so this scenario would have been deeply disturbing for Ann's father. She and her mother worked together to rectify the situation quickly by disposing of the contaminated spaghetti, and gathered the rest of the family for dinner without mentioning the incident. As Ann mentioned, they never told anyone about it. Years later, after her mother died, she finally told her father the story. Later still, she told it to me, and this time her father's horrified reaction to his wife's behavior ("She did *what?!?*") served as a kind of punch line for the narrative. What happened was an accident, except on the part of the dog, but years later the discomfiture of the father transformed the mishap into a funny narrative in which Ann and her mother were able to pull one over on him.

In a few cases, I documented similar stories while the men who had acted as the dupes were actually present. In these instances, the man usually laughed along at his own expense, as in this example told by Matt and Polly:

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

Matt: I noticed there was some—

Polly: He spotted a dot on the ceiling—

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

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

Both Matt and Polly found this story deeply funny. Matt's status as a "neat freak" was accepted without critique, as was the attempt by Polly and Beth to cover up what had happened. The exploding pot of pasta fagioli was an accident, and the dramatic reveal of the event when Matt noticed a spot on the ceiling a few days later was unplanned. But this accident took on new life as a narrative that showcased the ingenuity of Polly and her daughter, and implicitly poked fun at Matt's need to have a spotless home. As he sat unknowingly in the next room, *his* kitchen nightmare scenario played out and was quickly and successfully dealt with. He did not find any evidence of it until a few days later, at which point the mess had been cleaned up, and he was free to laugh along with his wife and daughter without having to deal with the aftermath of the spilled sauce firsthand.

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

In the 1993 book *Mythical Trickster Figures: Contours, Contexts, and Criticisms*, William J. Hynes provides a rough typology of characteristics that occur in trickster tales cross-culturally (34):

At the heart of this cluster of manifest trickster traits is (1) the fundamentally ambiguous and anomalous personality of the trickster. Flowing from this are such other features as (2) deceiver/trick-player, (3) shapeshifter, (4) situation-inverter, (5) messenger/imitator of the gods, and (6) sacred/lewd bricoleur.

In regards to his fourth point, Hynes notes that tricksters serve to highlight the most valued beliefs of a society, and often invert a situation just to return things to normal in

the end, whether intentionally or not. There is a corollary here between Hynes's thoughts on tricksters and inversion and the kinds of narratives I documented about women breaking a food rule or violating a taboo in the kitchen. Although the kitchen nightmare scenarios described in these stories were not purposeful or intentionally mischievous or malicious, they do represent moments in which the normal order was disrupted. Whether they acknowledged them as silly or not, these men expected their food rules to be followed. And, as far as they knew during the events recounted by their wives, the rules were being followed. The revelation that the women deliberately hid these transgressions, or cut corners in fixing the problem, contorts the image of the cheerful, efficient wife who strives to create domestic bliss for her family. Instead, these wives get tired and fed up. They are willing to hide things from their husbands to save themselves some trouble and time, and their stories about covering up these mistakes often reveal a number of stresses embedded in their attempts to live up to domestic expectations. The fact that they recast these events as funny stories in which the listener is invited to laugh at the husband as a clueless victim, rather than at the wife for failing to follow the rules successfully, makes the situation even more disorienting.

The men present for the telling of these narratives were chiefly good sports, cheerfully laughing along and sometimes adding self-deprecating comments themselves. But these particular kitchen nightmare narratives have the potential to be threatening and disruptive in a society that continues to place so much importance on the successful performances of masculinity and femininity. As Ricki Stefani Tannen points out in *The Female Trickster: The Mask That Reveals* (2007: 159):

Women's humor tends to attack through subversion the deliberate choices of the powerful; their hypocrisies, affectations and the mindless following of the acquisitive and consumption oriented social status quo. The way that women's humor challenges authority—its subversive method—is by refusing to take it seriously. This is why the female Trickster is more dangerous than the traditional Trickster, who may serve a cathartic purpose in letting steam off from the symbolic order. The traditional Trickster, although testing boundaries, leaves the basic configuration, the existence of the social order, very much untouched. Women using humor become dangerous because they do not want or intend to stop at the steam venting stage Think of the laughter of Bertha as she burns down the house in *Jane Eyre*.

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

The women telling the stories all seemed very aware of the rules for food preparation, and described themselves as rushing to try to cover up the violation of these rules before

the men found out what happened. Ann introduced the story about Snoid and the spaghetti by saying, "Not, well, that's so funny. Because my dad would never approve of this." Polly described the attempt to clean up the errant pasta fagioli as going into "panic mode," and ended the story with the observation, "Looked like somebody got shot in there," which is both wonderfully descriptive and shockingly violent, considering the narrative is about a dropped pot of sauce. Most importantly, all of these stories were told in the context of sharing kitchen nightmare narratives. At first it seemed unusual to me that these stories, which were about the successful cover-up of a mistake, would be told along with accounts of dropping pans of lasagna into a hot oven or slicing open a finger. But the narrators considered these incidents "nightmares" because of the stress that occurred when the food rules were violated. The fact that they were successfully able to cover up what went wrong appears to be of secondary importance.

All of the stories I documented that shared this theme were lighthearted. They were presented as humorous recountings of the foibles of both partners, and while it seemed clear that a discovery that the food rules had been compromised might have caused an argument in the moment, it did not appear that there had been any long-term negative consequences for the woman partner as a result of the kitchen mishap being described. But the kitchen can be a heavily contested space, where power struggles of varying degrees of seriousness are played out on a daily basis. With that in mind, I should note that it did not seem that there was any relaxing of the food rules by the husbands as a result of the humorous treatment of their expectations in these women's narratives. Reframing these incidents as funny stories that both the dupes and outsiders are invited to laugh at seems to provide women with the opportunity to exert a potentially disruptive influence, but only briefly.

Conclusion

I have explored the ways that acts of food preparation and storytelling about "pulling one over" on masculine authority figures can serve as opportunities for women to resist gendered expectations—that they will take full and near-constant responsibility for providing meals for the family in accordance with the food rules of the man of the house. Both of these acts allow women to express a kind of veiled aggression towards the husband and his food rules, and provide the wives with opportunities to resist the status quo, albeit temporarily.

These kinds of narratives and anecdotes were only told by older, straight, women, married to men or in long-term partnerships with them. Younger women and women in different kinds of relationships may also have and share these kinds of stories, but I suggest there could be a generational difference in the kinds of kitchen nightmare stories that women tell at various stages of their lives. In contrast, younger women in committed heterosexual relationships most often told kitchen nightmare narratives about attempting to put together an elaborate meal for their boyfriends only to have things fall apart spectacularly. These stories seem to be about the embarrassment of failing at performing femininity through cooking, and often include an evaluation either about how nice and understanding their boyfriends were about the situation, or how funny they found it.

Men also told stories about transgressing a food or cooking-related boundary of their wives or girlfriends, as in the following example from Todd:

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

Ann: That's exactly what I was going to say. Yep.

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

Sarah: Oh no.

Ann: "When's it gonna get thick," or something, "like my mom's?"

Todd: You know, like my mother's. I think you said, "You can go to your mother's and get it," or something like that.

[Laughter]

Interestingly, Ann still appeared to get the upper hand here, as the "punch line" of the narrative was her suggesting that Todd should return home to his mother if he was unsatisfied with how she made potato soup. But the humor of the story was also based on stereotypical and potentially misogynistic ideas about how mothers-in-law and new wives will struggle for control over the domestic environment of a man, and it depicted the woman cooking as being deeply concerned with her ability to cook potato soup correctly. Rather than resisting, the humor here seemed to be maintaining the status quo.

The sample size for this project is much too small to draw any definite conclusions about the power or limits of these "pulling one over" tales to resist dominant cultural expectations for women's domestic competence. However my research does suggest that individual women in heterosexual relationships can use these transformed kitchen nightmare narratives as tools. Using them, they can re-imagine moments of potential conflict with their partners as instances where they successfully seized control of the situation. These narratives thus play an important role in the wider negotiation of gender and identity that takes place in the kitchen.

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Notes

¹ This paper is adapted from Chapter 2 of my master's thesis (Shultz 2017).

² For a comprehensive overview of these concepts, see the entries on "Domestic" and "Public" in the 2017 anthology *Keywords for American Cultural Studies*.

³ A lot of work has been done by scholars in various fields on the creation and maintenance of the public and private spheres in American culture. Hattery's work (2009) offers a succinct history of the idea as it applies to issues of gender specifically.

⁴ All names used are pseudonyms.