

# My Cypriot Cookbook: Re-imagining My Ethnicity

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This article is written in the form of a cookbook. It contains recipes for four Cypriot dishes, along with my taped and then transcribed commentaries on preparing them. I locate food making and eating as auto/biographical practices and, particularly, as methods for examining personal and social identities. I use the cookbook to explore my Cypriot ethnicity and to understand the problematic ways it interacts with my lesbian sexuality. At the start of the article, I discuss how, until now, I have marginalised my Cypriotness in order to claim a lesbian identity. But whilst cooking Cypriot food, I begin to re-imagine my ethnicity and to re-story myself as both Cypriot and lesbian. Throughout the article, I explore memories, reflect upon my relationship to racial and ethnic categories, and examine personal geographies and notions of 'home'.

## Menu

Fish with lemon and garlic  
Baked butter beans  
Green beans with tomato and onion  
Olive bread

(All recipes serve two people)

### **Fish with lemon and garlic**

2 small, whole fish, or 2 fish fillets  
salt and pepper  
juice of 1 lemon  
1 clove garlic, chopped  
50 ml olive oil  
handful chopped parsley

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Wash fish. Put in bowl and season. Pour lemon juice over and leave to marinate for one hour. Put fish in shallow saucepan with lemon juice. Add garlic and oil. Cover and simmer gently until tender. Scatter parsley over. Serve.

## COMMENTARY

I'm unpacking my shopping bags. I'm looking for the fish. I purposefully ordered fish so that I could make this recipe. I already have the other ingredients. Cypriot store cupboard basics: lemon, olive oil, garlic, parsley. The taste of my ethnicity? I imagine that my genes are marinated in this mixture. I suspect my body fluids carry a lemon, olive oil, garlic, parsley trace. I'm gathering my ingredients together. Assembling my equipment: bowl, saucepan, knife, fish slice. I'm clearing a space for myself. Wiping kitchen surfaces. I'm taping this. Recording my thoughts while I cook. A tape recorder is a writing tool. Useful when I'm doing something else. When I have my hands full and can't use them to write. I can tape my ideas and later transcribe them. 'You might be working on the hem of a dress and you begin to think about how it was with your ex-husband and you want to write about it. Your hands are busy sewing; you can talk about it into a recorder' (Goldberg, 1986: 7). A notebook would get wet in the kitchen. I'd have to stop my cooking to write. The food would take forever to prepare. Or the food would burn.

But a tape recorder is *more* than a practical tool. I'm using the tape because I'm having trouble writing this article. I can't express my thoughts straight onto the page. I want to write about my ethnicity. *My Cypriotness*. How do I define and experience Cypriotness as my ethnic identity? How do I relate Cypriotness to my sense of body and self? What are the implications, more widely, for theorizing the relationships between my body, self and identity? Between my identity, place and 'home'?

These are difficult questions. Questions I have so far avoided. Although I superficially label myself Cypriot, my Cypriot self remains unexplored. In everyday life, I marginalize my ethnicity. I repress it. I ram my experiences of Cypriotness far down into my body. And bury them beneath thoughts and feelings about other facets of my identity. But silence is unhealthy. Silence breeds disease (Bays, 1999). And my Cypriotness has become a festering wound. Now stabbing my stomach. Now tightening my chest. A pain that I try to ignore. Now too painful to write. Attempting to write my Cypriotness straight onto the page is like stabbing at the wound. Gouging deeper into already butchered flesh. Because writing is too

harsh handed. Severe. Writing jabs relentlessly at my experiences. Rips off scabs I grow for self-protection. Delves beneath my skin. And hauls out what I hide there. I push myself to dig deep with my writing. Because I am a writer. Because digging makes for good text. But writing my Cypriotness – writing straight onto the page – is too much, too soon.

Using the tape recorder allows me to begin this article gently. I do not apply the same pressures to my speech that I do to my writing. I rarely return to my spoken words, to poke and prod them. To polish and perfect. Also, making a tape makes me feel less exposed. When I'm writing, I speak to an audience outside myself. I envisage my words ending up in a journal. In libraries, offices, homes. In people's *possession*. As I write, I become public, visible, vulnerable. But no one except me will listen to this tape. I can decide what to transcribe or not to transcribe. *How* to transcribe. What to let my readers see and know of me.

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I'm rolling a lemon between my palms. I've seen television cooks do this. They say it releases the juice. But I just like the sensation. Hard ball of fruit pressed along the flats of my hands. I'm rolling the lemon up my arm. Across the bump of my collar bone. Onto my neck. Rubbing citrus scent over my skin. But now I've become self-conscious, standing in my kitchen, rolling a lemon over my body. Can you see me, reader? Perhaps this tape is not as private and safe as I imagined? I'm picking up a knife. Slicing into yellow skin. Juice bleeds over my fingers. Flesh exposed.

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So why is my Cypriotness so problematic for me? Why is it so emotionally painful? The fact is that I'm a lesbian. And Cypriotness—like most other categories of ethnicity – is sexed. It is heterosexed (see contributors to Reinfelder, 1996). In dominant terms, lesbians don't fit into Cypriotness. We don't even exist within it. The possibility of our presence is totally unimagined. Within the space of my family, my ethnic 'community', my 'home', I'm forced to make a 'choice': Cypriot or lesbian. It's impossible to be both. I'm not alone in these experiences. Black and ethnically Other lesbians are frequently 'pressurised into making a hierarchy of oppressions'. And 'the language and metaphors...[we use are] sometimes warlike: choosing sides, betraying one's culture' (Morris *et al.*, 1995: 39). Dominant dis-

courses divide. Compartmentalize. We have to be either/or. Dominant discourses often lead us (if we are not from 'dominant' groups) into confusion about our identities. Into choosing/denying one or other part of ourselves (Fuentes, 1997).

I made my choice early in life. By the age of seven or eight. When I began to desire women. When I began to turn away from the notion of the heterosexualized, submissive 'Cypriot woman'. The language was the first to go: I refused to speak Greek (although the reasons for this refusal are more complex and are, in part, due to the effects of racism). Next, I started to 'disrespect' my Dad. To badmouth other 'Cypriot macho' male relatives. I laughed at their orders, their attempts at domination. My rebellion was initially treated with humour: I was a spirited child, my behaviour would improve when I became a woman, found a man. But as I got older, my rebellion intensified. And I was more and more despised. The warnings/threats began: 'If you carry on like this, no man will want you.' The verbal assaults started: 'What do you think you look like in those ['men's'] clothes?' The start of isolation, low self-esteem, depression, a rejection of all things Cypriot. But, thankfully, access to lesbian books, lesbian images, lesbians. Growing confidence in my sexuality. Myself.

I have run/been pushed from my family. Extricated myself/been excluded from the mainstream British Cypriot 'community'. But, by the time I 'came out' to my family, it seemed there was no choice to make. Silence was not an option. There was no chance I'd remain closeted about my sexuality. Bow to family/social pressures. Be coerced into a (heterosexual) marriage. No possibility I'd take my place in the 'long line of dutiful wives' (Smith, 1987). I believed that 'coming out' as a lesbian, living an 'out' lesbian life, meant losing my family, forfeiting my cultural identification, giving up my claim to Cypriotness. And I retain this belief. I live it out in my self-perceptions. In my everyday life. I have little contact with my family, or with other Cypriot people. Including Cypriot lesbians. I rarely speak Greek. I see myself as not-really-Cypriot, not-properly-Cypriot, barely Cypriot. As far as my Cypriotness goes, I don't even stand in the borderlands (Anzaldúa, 1987). I long ago fled the country. I now live thousands of miles away. (But where?) And I rarely look back.

But this is a lie. A wishful thought. A way of making it easier (harder) for myself. Rejecting my Cypriotness doesn't make it disappear. I'm always Cypriot *and* lesbian. In the face of racism, I'm undeniably Cypriot. I'm able to speak and write about my experiences of racism. Because this involves turning outwards. I talk about 'them',

not ‘me’. I don’t look beyond my anger. Stay, like the racists do, on the surface. But mostly my Cypriotness sits quietly. Festers. My Cypriotness is a blister. A sore. Caused by the rubbing, chafing of incompatible materials. The harshness of lesbophobia (and racism). Against the fragility of my skin. My Cypriotness is a blister. Bulging with anger, pain, confusion. And now I must prick the blister. There’s an urgent need to release the pressure. To prevent explosion.

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I’m putting a pan on the hob. I’m using a wok. Because it’s big enough for the fish to fit into. I’m putting the fish in the wok. I’m pouring over the oil. The lemon. Chopping garlic. Chucking it in.

\* \* \*

I’m ‘writing’ this article in the kitchen because here I have distractions. I can use the food, utensils, and my body’s activity as barriers to my emotions. I don’t have to directly confront difficult feelings. I can swat my attention back and forth between my cooking and my text. I often wander into the kitchen when I’m having trouble writing. Especially when writing about emotionally difficult topics. When I find myself ‘blocked’, I start to cook. At first, I feel guilty I’m not writing. I see cooking as avoidance. But then – as I peel, chop, stir – the knots begin working loose. And if I touch on a thought or feeling that’s too painful, I can switch my focus to squeezing lemons, washing fish. Cooking is like gauze over my wounds. A protective barrier. A screen which I can think through. Cooking is a way of ‘taking away the painful realities of oppression, and introducing some pleasures in life’ (Hughes, 1997 [1980]: 279).

Cooking is also ‘a form of enquiry’ (Heldke, 1992b: 251). A challenge to traditional academic modes of knowing/doing. Cooking is rooted in, and celebrates, ‘embodied, concrete and practical experience’ (Curtin and Heldke, 1992: iv). Examining our cooking (and eating) practices gives us a sense of our materiality, a ‘sense of ourselves as bodily creatures’ (Curtin, 1992: 9). Cooking helps me to grasp and articulate my experiential complexity. Writing often traps me in my head. But cooking acknowledges the holism of my body. Recognizes my body as agent. Western, masculinist philosophical thought largely ignores cooking (Heldke, 1992a). Because cooking is perceived as too embodied. Too animalistic. Cooking involves smell, taste and touch. The most ‘intimate senses’. The ‘lower senses’. The least cognitive, least masculine, most feminine senses

(Korsmeyer, 1999). Writing this article as a cookbook challenges the mind/body binary. And redefines cooking as ‘mentally-manual’, ‘theoretically practical’, a ‘thoughtful practice’ (Heldke, 1992a: 203). As both ‘hand work’ and ‘mind work’.

But mostly, I’m writing this article in the kitchen because food feeds more than our physical bodies. Food feeds our souls. It is *soul food* (Hughes, 1997 [1980]). ‘Food is more than sustenance; it is history’ (Allison, 1988: 155). Food is identity, memory, autobiography (Zafar, 1999). Food is ‘home’. Often replacing the ‘home’ we’ve run or been pushed from. Food is ‘one of the most symbolic tools’ that black and ethnically Other people use in ‘our search for roots’ (Hughes, 1997 [1980]: 272). Because food is the remaining signifier of my Cypriotness. Because I imagine and perform my Cypriotness largely through food.

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I’m washing up. Comforted by the warmth of the water. The rhythmic movement of my body. I listen to the sounds of washing up: rattling cutlery, clanking pans. I’m looking out of the window. At our scrubby patch of garden. At our neighbour’s scabby cat.

\* \* \*

I’m starting to see that silencing my Cypriotness is counterproductive. For a long time, this strategy did work. It allowed me to assert my sexuality, to live a life more true to my lesbian self. But I no longer feel threatened by my family. I no longer have to alienate myself from my ethnicity, deny myself the potential of belonging to a Cypriot community. Cypriotness belongs to *me* too. It is *my* Cypriotness. I’ve colluded in my own exclusion. Allowed dominant stories of Cypriotness to write me out (Fuentes, 1997). By insisting upon the incompatibility of Cypriot and lesbian, I’ve denied the complexities of my identity (Battacharyya, 1997). By asserting my difference *within* Cypriotness, I inscribe a lesbian presence into this ethnic category. I *queer* Cypriotness. I stand as proof that ‘Cypriot’ is not a homogenous ethnic identity.

‘It is possible to create an identity with new layers of meanings, to have multiple subjectivities, without separating the self into different speaking subjects: to be one with many parts’ (Mirza, 1997: 17).

\* \* \*

I'm prodding the fish with a fork. It flakes apart. Done.

\* \* \*

### **Baked butter beans**

1 large tin cooked butter beans  
50 ml olive oil  
1 onion, sliced  
handful chopped parsley  
1 tin chopped tomatoes  
salt and pepper  
pinch of ground cinnamon

Heat some of oil in pan, add onions and fry until golden. Add parsley, cinnamon and tomatoes. Season and cook for a few minutes. Put beans in oiled oven-proof dish. Pour tomato sauce over, add remaining olive oil and a little water. Bake in moderate oven until onions are soft and top browned.

### **COMMENTARY**

I'm opening the beans. Doing the same with the tomatoes. I'm not following this recipe properly. I'm throwing everything into one dish. And into the oven. It saves on washing up. This is half-hearted cooking. My Mum would shake her head. Tut. See evidence of my disobedience. Stubbornness. Failure (to be a 'Cypriot woman').

\* \* \*

How to begin? How to re-imagine Cypriotness? I lack a theoretical framework. I lack a vocabulary. Without my Cypriot family, community, or other everyday context in which to imagine my Cypriotness, I'm worried that I don't have the tools. I have no ready established space (outside myself) in which to imagine my Cypriotness. I consider possible sources of help. I go to my bookcase. A title catches my eye: Heidi Safia Mirza's *Black British feminism* (1997). Does black British feminism, as articulated by Mirza, constitute the space in which I can re-imagine Cypriotness? I flick through the book. There are articles by lesbian writers. A promising start. I begin to read Mirza's Introduction. I am drawn by what I read as her open, invitational definition of black British feminism: black British feminism as an interrogation and critique of the 'hegemonic patriarchal discourse' of 'whiteness' (Mirza, 1997: 3); black British feminism as

a space for women who live with an imposed 'ethnic minority' status, who define themselves (ourselves?) as 'people of the postcolonial diaspora' (1997: 3); black British feminism as a move 'to invoke some measure of critical race/gender reflexivity into mainstream academic thinking' (1997: 4); black British feminism as 'a place called home'. A 'meaningful act of identification' (1997: 4).

But am I not seeing something? Am I erasing the 'Blackness' from Mirza's writing? What is the 'Black' in her Black British feminism? And am I that? I feel a desperate longing to belong. I read again: '... to be black (not white), female and "over here", in Scotland, England or Wales, is to disrupt all the safe closed categories of what it means to be British: that is white and British' (Mirza, 1997: 3); 'we ... stand out, we are visibly different and that is what makes us "black"' (1997:3); 'being "black" in Britain is about a state of "becoming" (racialized); a process of consciousness ... a self-consciously constructed space where identity is not inscribed by natural identification but a political kinship. ... Now living submerged in whiteness, physical difference becomes a defining issue, a signifier, a mark of whether or not you belong. Thus to be black in Britain is to share a common structural location; a racial location' (1997: 3); 'black' is a political identity, the naming of 'a shared space of marginalization ... shaped by the shared experience of racialization and its consequences' by 'postcolonial migrants of different languages, religions, cultures and classes' (1997: 4); but "'black" remains a contested space' (1997: 4). There is continual disagreement over who can/not be named as 'black'.

I'm confused. Am I black? Could I possibly be black? A voice in my head says: don't be stupid! Look at your white/not-black skin! But another voice says: You *may* be black ... You *are* 'visibly different'. You *do* share many of the experiences of racialization that Mirza describes. And you *are* often forced into, welcomed into, or choose to enter that 'shared space of marginalization' she talks about.

\* \* \*

I'm back in the kitchen, sitting on a deck chair – our kitchen is small, a deck chair folds up out of the way. The kitchen is filled with cooking smells. Sweetness of cinnamon. Sharpness of onion. This blend draws me in, asks again: am I black or white? It provokes some messy thoughts towards an answer:

1. My Cypriotness locates me as a postcolonial person. My parents migrated to Britain in 1960. The year Cyprus gained independence



from British rule. Mum and Dad arrived (separately) in East London. Lived amongst im/migrants from other postcolonial places – India, the Caribbean, African countries. With whom they shared many similar characteristics and experiences. Not least, that they too were ‘invited’ here by the British government to meet the labour shortage. They arrived not knowing how to speak English. Lived in ramshackle housing. Laboured on the railways, the buses, in factories. They stood solid and blank faced against racism. But I am keen not to gloss over the differences between postcolonial im/migrants. Some im/migrants are more im/migrant than others. Im/migrants are subject to different racial/racist discourses. Im/migrants have different levels of racial/ethnic, class, gender, sexual privilege. My family are (I am) mostly defined in British society as ‘white’. Aren’t we? We have white privileges, don’t we? See ourselves as white? Yes ... No ... It’s complicated. By geography, history. As well as the colour/s of our skins.

2. My Cypriotness locates me in racial terms as both black and white: Cyprus is an island in the eastern Mediterranean. South-east Europe. The Middle East. The Near East. (Of course geography is imagined. Places are labelled and boundaries (re)drawn according to political interests (Anderson, 1991; Gould and White, 1996; Women and Geography Study Group, 1997)). Cyprus’s nearest neighbours are Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Egypt. Further away is Greece. The dominant history of Cyprus (Dubin, 1993) informs me that the first Cypriots, around 7000 BC, were of ‘uncertain origin’. Then, from 4000 BC, there is evidence of west Aegean-style fertility cults. And from 2500 BC, indication of Asian-influenced spiritual/cultural symbols. In the Bronze Age, the beginnings of trade, predominantly with Egypt. And the arrival of the Greeks (Minoans and then Mycenaeans). Phoenicians from the Middle East brought the goddess Astarte to replace the Hellenic Aphrodite. Next Assyrian domination, around 700 BC. Egyptian rule. Persian. Athenian. Alexander the Great and the Hellenistic empire – the foundation of contemporary Greek Cypriot religious and cultural life. Roman rule. Cyprus as part of the Byzantium empire – centred in Constantinople. In 1191, Richard the Lionheart arrived from England, invaded, took on more than he could handle, sold the island to Guy de Lusignan – French nobility. Then Venetians. Ottoman rule. In 1878, Cyprus sold to Britain. 1960 independence. This story overwhelms me. How do I locate myself within it? Did my ancestors live through all these phases? Or did they enter Cyprus at one (or more) of

these historical points? If so, which one/s? And where from? I can only guess at the possible cross-fertilizations, the blend of my blood.

3. My Dad's family are (within living memory) Greek Cypriot. They came from Northern Cyprus. Now Turkish-occupied territory. Many of them are brown skinned. With black hair, dark brown eyes. At first glance, could be 'Asian', 'Middle Eastern', 'North African'. My sister inherited my Dad's skin colour. At school, she was often racially abused. Called 'Paki'. My Mum's family are lighter skinned. White/r. Some with green eyes. I inherited their white skin. Burns in the sun. Cheeks redden easily. Prone to freckles. But it's not the blotchy pinky whiteness of white British people's skin. Instead, a beige white. Golden white. Cheap olive oil white. In the right light, my eyes are hazel, there's a streak of bronze in my hair. (Look now at how I'm romanticizing/playing up (my) whiteness, playing down (my) blackness . . . A pang of guilt. Shame. I grew up receiving praise from my family for my light/er skin, eyes, hair. And my sister. . .?). My Mum's family live/d on the south of the island. They identify – culturally and politically – as Greek. European. Both sides of my family speak a Cypriot Greek, spliced with Turkish and Arabic words. A lower class, rural dialect. The language they brought with them in 1960.

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My belly's rumbling. I'm getting the beans out of the oven. Putting some on a plate. Cutting salad. I'm sitting in my deckchair. My feet on an open cupboard door. I'm eating. Talking through mouthfuls of food.

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I'm yearning for a 'home'. A place where my body belongs. A base. Stable. Fixed. Forever. Homesickness characterizes the experiences of many im/migrant people (George, 1996; Manalansan, 1993; Paul, 1999). The experiences of many who are socially marginalized, whose opportunities for 'belonging' are restricted by oppressive discourses. We are sick of constantly moving – between places, between identities. We long for a place to dig in our roots. A place of comfort. Safety.

But it's not fashionable to admit to this desire. 'Fixing' body/identity to a particular place – a town, a country, a continent – is now seen as an essentialist practice. Not conducive to postcolonial politics (Rutherford, 1990). We're now supposed to think of our

ethnicities as ‘deterritorialized, multiplex and anti-national’ (Gilroy, 1996). We must see ethnic identities as diasporic. But wait. Look back 20 years. To the late 1970s. The 1980s. And discover that many of the theorists who now encourage us to live in postmodernist flux – in this ‘nothingnowhere’ space – were themselves exploring their ‘roots’, defining their ‘essence’, engaging in a ‘quest for ancestral cultures and genetic origins’ (Hughes, 1997 [1980]: 272). And they were claiming this practice as self-empowering, socially transformative. They knew then that examining our origins is a crucial first step to developing self-awareness, self-worth and a critical cultural politics. But theory ‘moved on’. And these theorists ‘moved on’. But I am only just starting to examine my ethnic origins, to look at my Cypriotness. And I find comfort in the idea of locating myself in categories of belonging. And defining them as ‘home’.

But ‘is home a place? What if the sense of safety does not refer to a place at all but to a collection of objects, feelings, bodies?’ (Bordo *et al.*, 1998: 76). And what if ‘home’ only exists in stories? Stories I tell myself about Cyprus, about Cypriotness, about Cypriot food? What if I’ll never be able to grasp onto/hold onto/own my Cypriotness? What if my Cypriotness is always fleeting/elusive? Like the steam in this kitchen. Which escapes when I open the door. At this moment, this is how my Cypriotness feels to me.

#### 4. I’m often seen by others as part of that space called ‘black’:

I am sitting in an A-level Sociology class. The lecturer has yet to arrive. Two young black men pop their heads around the door, see that the class is without a teacher and joke that they will take the lesson. They start to talk about the historical oppression of black people, the black power movement. And, during their talk, they become increasingly insulting about white people. I am the only white person in the room. And, although I personally identify with much of what they say about racism, I start to feel uncomfortable. Are they directing this ‘lesson’ to me? Do they *intend* to make me feel uncomfortable? Or have they not seen me sitting here? Is this a ‘lesson’ meant only for black people’s ears? Do they see me as black? I need to find out. ‘Excuse me’, I say, ‘I’m white.’ They stop talking. They look at me. Then shout in unison, ‘No! ... No! You’re not white!’ And one of them continues, ‘No! You’re one of us! You’re ... erm ... Italian or something!’ Then the lecturer walks in. The young men leave. I’m left with questions boiling in my blood. So, Italian is black? And I am black? ‘Or something’?

I am chatting to a woman I've recently met. She asks me what my ethnic origin is, where I'm 'from': 'Cypriot', I say. 'My parents are from Cyprus.' 'Oh!' she exclaims, 'I might be Cypriot too. I never knew my Dad. My [white, English] Mum didn't know much about him either. She told me he was black. But not *black* black. He was black from Cyprus...or the Middle East ... black from somewhere like that.' She's excited at meeting me. A chance for her to make an ethnic identification. I see the vulnerability in her eyes. The pain of not-knowing. Of wanting to know. I don't question her vocabulary. Don't ask her to explain 'black'. Don't wonder aloud about her Mum's possible racism. But am left with her words echoing through my chest. And I wonder if *I* am 'black. But not *black* black. Black from Cyprus ... or the Middle East ... black from somewhere like that'?

Do I have any stories that locate me as white? Yes. There are probably plenty. But they don't come easily to mind. Because whiteness doesn't have to be conscious of itself (Frankenberg, 1997). Whiteness 'never speaks its presence' (Mirza, 1997: 3). In many everyday situations, I know I'm seen as white. I know that I blend into the whiteness of this English suburb. This English city. I know because other white people often expect me to collude with their racism. But in their next breath, the racism turns against me. Then they don't see me as white. Not *white* white. And I don't feel white. Not *white* white. I feel my not-whiteness acutely in a white, English society. I feel my ethnic Otherness. My not belongingness. My often despisedness. The shiver in my bones when I hear white, English people raging against asylum seekers. The 'shrinking of my scalp' (Mo, 1987: 30) when the television news reports that someone has been stabbed for 'looking Bosnian/Croatian/Kurdish'. For 'looking like an asylum seeker'. That could have been me. Any of my family. And I feel my not-whiteness in the 'unspoken complicity' (Mo, 1987: 30) with which I interact with other not-white people. The shared understandings. Asking the same questions. Wanting the same answers. I grew up in an area that was largely not-white/black. My friends until I moved away to university were mostly not-white/black. I felt comfortable in that space. I felt, despite my sexuality, that I 'belonged'. Physically. Emotionally. Politically. It was for me 'a place called home'.

What is white? I fear that Mirza defines whiteness in homogenized terms. A 'brite' white. Brilliant white. Dazzling, blinding white. Thus maintaining its hegemony. She defines a white that excludes me. A black that excludes me. What happens when you are white but not white? Black but not black? When your ethnicity is painted/lived in

shades of grey? Where do you align yourself? Socially? Politically? Many British Turkish Cypriots define themselves as black (e.g., 'Havva', quoted in Ainley, 1995). But few Greek Cypriots do. And yet our skin colours are similar. Our not-too-distant ancestors lived together, worked together, probably fucked together. Is it religion which makes the difference? Islam = black, Christianity = white? Is it the effects of (imperialist) history?

Black British feminism is a useful framework within which to begin re-imagining my Cypriotness. But it doesn't give me all the answers. My reading of Mirza's text traps me into binary thinking: black/white. I see this binary as absolute and try, hopelessly, to locate myself within it. On one side, then the other. I discover that I don't fit. That the binary doesn't work (for me). But is there any other option?

\* \* \*

Putting my plate in the sink. Turning off the tape.

\* \* \*

### **Green beans with tomato and onion**

500 g frozen green beans  
olive oil  
1 onion, sliced  
1 tin of chopped tomatoes  
handful chopped parsley  
salt and pepper  
water

Heat oil, add onion and fry until golden. Add tomatoes, parsley, salt and pepper. Cook gently for a few minutes. Add beans and stir. Add some water. Cover and simmer until soft.

### **COMMENTARY**

I'm wondering if all this cooking is worth it. So far: lots of questions, few answers. Should I just return to my computer? Start again? Write this article the easy way – devour countless texts on identity theory and ethnicity, regurgitate, mix up, sprinkle on a little autobiographical narrative, serve it up as a perfectly edible academic dish? No. That's not me. And if I did, *I* couldn't eat it. It wouldn't be palatable to me. Too dry. Flavourless.

So, here I am again. Getting the beans out of the freezer. Slicing the end off an onion. Asking again: what is (my) Cypriotness?

I'm looking around my kitchen. Does anything here say Cypriot to me? There are none of the accoutrements of a British Cypriot kitchen. No catering-size saucepans, used to prepare food for the events celebrating heterosexuality – engagement parties, weddings, christenings; no calendar from a Greek Orthodox church; no tourist trinkets to remind me of 'home' – no Cyprus-shaped ashtrays, nor ornamental plates splashed with primary-coloured Cypriot dancers.

What is (my) Cypriotness? This time I hear desperation in my voice. I feel a strong need to find something Cypriot. To hold something tangible. I'm searching. Ransacking the kitchen cupboards. The fridge. I've found: jar of tahini, tub of black olives, bulb of garlic, cinnamon sticks, extra virgin olive oil. I'm grouping them together on the worktop. My arms around them. Hugging them close to my body. I'm standing here staring at this still life entitled 'my Cypriotness' that I've created.

But how does this help me? What do I do with these foods? Stand here and look at them? Cook them up and eat them? Stuff them into my mouth? Gorge on them. To fill the hole in my belly. In my identity. To satisfy my hunger for a sense of my ethnicity. Will stuffing myself with these foods fill me up with Cypriotness? Will taking these 'Cypriot' foods into my body make me properly Cypriot?

Perhaps. After all, isn't this why I'm constructing this article as a cookbook? Why I'm standing here chopping onions, opening the bag of beans? Because food is all I have left of my Cypriotness? Because my Cypriot self is experienced through food? Most of the Greek words I remember relate to food. My Cypriot cookbook is also my dictionary: Ψάρι με σκόρδο. Φασόλια στο φούρνο. My Greek is not public Greek. I learnt most of my Greek – and my Cypriotness – in 'the wordshop of the kitchen' (Marshall, 1987: 178). With my Mum, grandmothers, aunts. As we sorted dried beans and lentils, taking out the sticks, grit, bad bits; as we stuffed vine leaves or rolled meatballs. In the kitchen I listened as Cypriot women swapped recipes, compared the effects of their washing powders, boasted over bargains, complained about their husbands. I learnt what 'Cypriot' is, what 'Cypriot woman' is. And I knew I was different. The kitchen may be 'where crucial aspects of culture and ethnicity are [learnt and] maintained' (Bordo *et al.*, 1998: 77). But is also where these aspects are *refused*. The kitchens of my childhood are where my refusal of Cypriotness began.

\* \* \*

I'm putting beans into the tomato sauce. I'm putting the lid on the pan. I'm getting a glass of water. Gulping it down. Filling the glass again. I'm thirsty. Hot. I can feel the dampness under my arms. On my back. Steam from my cooking beads on my skin.

\* \* \*

I'm noticing how I'm standing. How I'm moving. When I cook, my mannerisms change. My sense of my body changes. In the kitchen, I become 'Cypriot woman'. I unconsciously mimic the body behaviours of my Mum, aunts, grandmothers. I stand, legs apart, elbows out. Arms reaching, grabbing, pulling. Dominating space. I'm not like this outside my kitchen. In the rest of my life, my body performs 'Western woman': pull my knees together, tuck my elbows in, apologize for taking up space. Sorry. Sorry.

Cooking is a performative act. And, as I'm cooking, I'm realizing that ethnic identity is also performative. I'm performing my Cypriotness through food. My Cypriotness is little more than a series of embodied practices. My Cypriotness only exists in my enactment of it. And it is therefore easily re-imagined. Through cooking – and other embodied activities – can I redefine and reclaim my Cypriotness? I'm realizing that my Cypriotness is many things. Found in many places. Experienced in many ways. There's a freedom in this realization. There's possibility.

\* \* \*

I'm taking the lid off the pan. Lifting a bean out with my fork. Touching the bean to the tip of my tongue. Biting into it gingerly. Still crunchy. Replace the lid.

\* \* \*

### **Olive bread**

750g bread flour  
1 sachet quick-rise yeast  
Warm water  
250g black olives  
1 onion, finely chopped  
2 tsp dried mint

Make up bread dough, adding mint to the dry ingredients. Knead for 10 minutes and leave in warm place until double the size. Knead olives

and onion into dough. Place in a greased bread tin. Bake in hot oven for 30–40 minutes. Remove from oven. Remove bread from tin and cool.

## COMMENTARY

I've been to the shop. To buy some flour. Making a cup of tea. Setting out the ingredients for olive bread. Putting on the oven.

\* \* \*

Olive bread is my favourite food. I love it hot from the oven. Slathered with butter. Steam rising. Olive bread is my comfort food. I love the heavy stone it forms in my stomach. Reassuring me of my fullness. My not-emptiness. Affirming my body's existence.

My Γιαγιά (grandmother) taught me to make olive bread. We'd make it together whenever I spent the night at her house. Early mornings in her shoebox kitchen. The yellow-grey light of the hanging bulb catching ragged corners of lino. The cracks in the Formica table top. Shadows under our eyes because, with my granddad on nightshift, I'd sleep in Γιαγιά's bed and I'd natter all night, beg her for stories. Γιαγιά tips flour into a bowl. Crumbles in fresh yeast. Adds water. Mixes with her hands. Plops stiff dough onto a floured board. For me to knead. I struggle with it. My child's arms aching. Γιαγιά laughs affectionately. At my physical weakness. And, as I grow older, at my 'laziness'. My reluctance to work hard for my food. I'm an 'English girl'. Who's used to bread coming plastic wrapped. (And plastic tasting.)

I'm worried that, in writing this article, I'm negating this experience: my grandmother, her body, and everything it's taught me. I've bad-mouthed my family. Bad-mouthed Cypriots. I'm worried that I'm presenting a picture of Cypriotness as reactionary, conservative. To non-Cypriot readers who may assume that this is 'the truth'. That Cypriotness is grim. Oppressive. Especially to women. Readers may feel relieved they are not Cypriot. May pity me. Or want to rescue me. But I don't need saving. I'm speaking *my* 'truth', *my* Cypriotness. Speaking/writing this article is an act of empowerment, not a victim's plea. As I stand here, sprinkling quick-rise yeast onto flour, thinking about my grandmother, my Cypriotness is no longer hard and cold and exclusionary. It is a warm space, a safe space. Full of love, comfort, nurturing. It feels like 'home'.

\* \* \*



I'm pouring water into the flour, mixing a sticky dough. Dusting the worktop with flour. Turning dough onto it. Pressing and pushing and folding and pummelling.

\* \* \*

Γιαγιά taught me to cook. But not by instruction. I learnt by watching her cook. And by eating her food. Noting the effects of a pinch of this, a squeeze of that on my tongue. Like her, I cook by intuition. 'I cook by vibration. I can tell by the look and the smell of it' (Smart-Grosvenor, 1992 [1970]: 294). So, the precise recipes I offer in this article are deceptive. Not reflective of my own, more haphazard cooking practice. I write for an audience I perceive as ξένους. Strangers. Non-Cypriots. Who don't have an embodied knowledge of these foods. Who don't know, without tasting, how much is 'too much'. Or 'not enough'. Who may be surprised when the amount of garlic they've added waters their eyes. Or when that extra squeeze of lemon spikes their tongues. Writers of 'ethnic' cookbooks typically address an audience of readers who are assumed not belong to that ethnic group. 'And you, a stranger, a passerby through their land must appreciate and respect their culture which in many ways is totally different from yours' (der Haroutunian, 1987: 12).

But I also provide precise recipes because I want my readers to produce the foods that I produce. To taste what I taste. I have prepared my menu with care: a main fish dish, a vegetarian option, a vegetable accompaniment, bread. A complete meal. Or a *mezze* selection. I want my readers to feast with me. To take my experiences into their bodies via the food. To roll them around in their mouths. Chew on them. Digest them. Does this sound needy? I don't feel needy. Rather, I write to make connections. To reach out to other bodies. A cookbook is the ideal medium. Eating the foods of o/Others, taking them into our bodies, makes the o/Other a part of us. The boundaries between 'them' and 'us' blur. Eating is a form of 'world-travelling' (Lugones, 1992). A way we can attempt to – even if we can never ultimately achieve it – experience another's reality. Although, in saying this, I don't want to ignore the problematic nature of 'eating the Other', the oppressive connotations of this act.

\* \* \*

I'm kneading the dough again. This time pressing the onion into it. And the olives. The olives break up. Stain my fingers purple.

\* \* \*

I'm worried I'm objectifying Cypriotness. And Cypriot food. Uma Narayan (1997) talks about the ways foods are used – in racist discourse – to symbolise a culture. She focuses particularly on how British colonial discourse represents India and Indianness through 'curry' – a dish that does not exist in Indian cuisine/s, but is a product of this colonialist discourse. In a British context, the kebab typically represents Cypriotness. As does the kebab shop. And the kebab shop owner. In the late 1980s, Cypriotness was signified on British television by Harry Enfield's 'Stavros' character. Stavros was a kebab shop owner. He was dirty. Greasy. He spoke 'Pidgin English' – and his mispronunciation signalled his stupidity. I laughed at Stavros. I laughed with recognition. But was Harry Enfield/the non-Cypriot audience laughing *at* me, not *with* me? In this article, I've purposefully avoided using recipes that are stereotypically Greek/Cypriot.

But is any food really 'Cypriot'? Kebabs are also 'Middle Eastern', 'North African', 'South Asian'. There is no monolithic category called 'Cypriot food'. The boundaries between 'Cypriot' food and many other national cuisines are blurred. I have found recipes that I recognize as 'Cypriot' in Greek, Turkish, Italian, Spanish, Syrian, Egyptian, Indian, and other cookbooks. Cypriot food (like Cypriotness? Like me?) is characterized by its hybridity. I'm starting to see a power in this in-betweenness. A freedom. I can slip out of restrictive social categories. Out of the boxes built by others – built by dominant groups. And create my own ethnic space. My own Cypriotness. Which is more fluid. More malleable. More reflective of the multiple ways I experience my ethnicity.

'I remain uncertain how to name or identify myself, but take that uncertainty as empowering rather than simply risky' (Ahmed, 1997: 155).

\* \* \*

Opening the oven. Face blasted by the heat. Putting in the olive bread, now in a tin.

\* \* \*

I want to leave room in this article for other stories of Cypriotness. Stories which are more marginalized, more difficult to tell than mine. I am aware of the 'representational privilege' (Somerville, 1999: 5) that an education, a computer, literacy affords me. I'm concerned that my story may 'displace' other stories. I'm particularly

worried that my stories might overwrite the stories of the rest of my family. Stories which (as far as I know) are not written. Margaret Somerville (1999) says that there *are* ways of making room for multiple stories (of identity, of place). She says the potential for multiplicity lies in the concept of ‘the liminal’, the ‘inbetween’. The idea of ‘unfinished’ space. By acknowledging the liminality of stories I see that my own voice is one of many, that there’s always something left to say. For Somerville, ‘the liminal’ is not just a metaphor. It is characteristic of her third generation im/migrant experience (from Scotland to Australia). Similarly, I’m beginning to see now that liminality characterizes my everyday life. My embodied experiences. The relationship between my sexuality, ethnicity and all other aspects of my identity. I don’t occupy social categories. I move through them. Continually re-imagining and re-inventing.

My Cypriotness is not tangible, graspable, easily explicable. I know my Cypriotness as a jumble of images, sounds, smells, tastes, feelings, experiences. I know my Cypriotness through the foods I eat, the words I speak, the thoughts I have, the movements of my body. I know *my* Cypriotness. I’m beginning to re-imagine. To reclaim.

\* \* \*

The bread’s done. The article’s done. I’m turning off the tape.

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#### NOTE ON CONTRIBUTOR

I am Cypriot, lesbian and from an East London, working-class background. Living with this ‘Otherness’ is a daily challenge – especially in academia – but it also provides intellectual and creative stimulus. I have a Ph.D. from the Women’s Studies Centre, University of Manchester and currently work part-time as a researcher at the University of Brighton. My research interests cohere around the personal construction and experience of social identities, and ways of articulating these through writing and other art forms.