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In Search of Lost Identity: (Re)discovering Self and Community through Culinary Memoirs

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While, as A. J. Liebling suggests, Proust's madeleine led him from taste through triggered memory to book (TMB), the culinary memoirs of the diaspora take the opposite route leading us from the book to a memory that describes a taste (BMT)¹ that is sensorially accessible through a recipe. That taste as we will discover is both a catalyst for remembering and for forgetting.

A hybrid fruit of the food-writing industry, the culinary memoir is essentially a recent literary phenomenon, with a few early precursors, offering a framework for memory retrieval, healing and reconstruction to displaced people in search of a lost identity. Within diasporic consciousness is the underlying trauma of alienation and loss, driving the need to rediscover social and cultural integrity.² Food and culinary traditions embody 'terroir', customs and identity. While memoirs indulge in reminiscence, culinary memoirs are practical manuals in which memories can be played out in order to make them serve the narrator, who, often mistreated by history and lacking spiritual direction, seeks wholeness. The act of remembering becomes a means of connecting to, as well as disconnecting from the past in order to create something new. In culinary memoirs, food takes us on a quest for identity and inversely, the search for identity takes us to food.³

Evoking culinary traditions gives the diasporic writer access to archaic memories through sensory experience, shared with the reader in the form of recipes, as vestiges salvaged from a former time and given new life. Recipes invite the reader to share in the intimacy of the narrator's family table. Thus appropriating and participating in the memory recall, the reader suppresses criticism, and suspends doubt as to the authenticity of the memory reconstructions.⁴

The recent genre has already adopted literary conventions. A narrative sets forth personal recollections that evoke, in nostalgic tones, an authentic world of strong personal and cultural significance. At the heart of these evocations are food and culinary traditions as recurring themes, woven into narratives of fictional dimensions, interspersed with recipes. The narrator has lost partial or total access to this world, left either forcibly or voluntarily but invariably in the ultimate pursuit of a more secure and prosperous existence. The "gesture that aims to restore the (past) whole through partaking of a (present) fragment [...] seems to heal and remove the previous tensions of displacement, or of being 'of two worlds.'" ⁵

Whereas reminiscence can denote fossilization, culinary memoirs reveal themselves to be a dynamic medium in which acts of remembering through food preparation and associated rituals paradoxically lead to disconnecting or 'forgetting', offering intimate spaces⁶ for creating new identities. Firstly, culinary memoirs recount family stories of loss, which in the act of telling allow new stories to emerge. We will explore the multiple facets and forces of recipes as both disruptive fragments and binding sensorial threads that lead to preservation and restoration. These are culturally bounded by culinary rituals that will be investigated for

their power to both respect and resist nostalgia. Analysing representations of identity in culinary memoirs allows their meaning to emerge as well as a new form of cultural awareness. We will finally look at ambivalent emotions and how their response to diasporic situations provokes an oscillation between states and places, a movement that inspires the creative pursuit of identity.

We will focus on two diasporic culinary memoirs by first generation Americans: *Miriam's Kitchen*, rooted in a forced exile with the need to remember tainted with trauma and guilt, by Elizabeth Ehrlich, of Polish parentage, and *The Language of Baklava*, where the exile is voluntary, and an oscillation between homeland and 'hostland'⁷ create ambivalence in the search for identity, by Diana Abu-Jaber of Jordanian parentage. The authors maintain a critical distance from originary nostalgia, sustaining a multi-layered portrayal of the moral obligations by recounting the tales of generations, particular personalities and the narrator's own emotional and spiritual journey. Authenticity has several layers of resonance: in the recollection of family memories, in the reconstruction of culinary rituals and traditions and in the pursuit of identity.

Both writers are driven to explore their roots because questions of origin could simply no longer be ignored. There is urgency to look into their culinary traditions, the food stories that are at the centre of their families' identities. Diana Abu-Jaber transmits this urgency in the opening pages of *The Language of Baklava* with her "Eat It Now"⁸ Shish Kabob" recipe. For Elizabeth Ehrlich in *Miriam's Kitchen*, she writes "the cadence is evolving for me now as I seek to bring tradition home."⁹ Grandmothers are evoked, as is the pressing need to look back in order to look forward, but both memoirs go beyond serving up simple matriarchal culinary tradition. Ehrlich's two-fold tale focuses on her mother-in-law Miriam's story, as well as the narrator's quest to build a solid spiritual foundation under her children. Abu-Jaber's equally dual narrative tells the story of her father Bud who plays the traditionally matriarchal role of custodian and transmitter of culinary traditions, as well as her personal pursuit of 'home'. These memoirs take us beyond unquestioned learnings, the "practical, mystical teachings [...] once dished out with their soups (MK xi)" at their grandmothers' stoves.

Both authors take far-reaching family stories as their starting points, provoked by tension surrounding their adopted identity in America. Ehrlich writes: "I remembered and unwrapped a bundle of family tales, many located in or near the kitchen." As she starts to appropriate traditional rituals for herself, "I turn over the old stories in my mind and collect new ones. I choose my own history [...]" Abu-Jaber writes: "My childhood was made up of stories [...] often in some way about food, and the food always turned out to be something much larger: grace, difference, faith, love"¹⁰, expressing what she calls its emotional core. They describe a loss that is spiritual rather than material or societal. "The immigrant compresses time or space [...] (LB Preface)" writing a new story as she tells her mythical family tale recounting discovery as well as loss wherein "la nourriture a ce pouvoir de defier le temps comme l'espace."¹¹

Cooking the homeland is an imaginative way of dealing with loss.¹² The narrators' parents are in a dynamic of preservation. The recipes and their associated rituals are vessels containing a precious substance. For this reason Miriam's recipe for egg salad cannot

deviate from its remembered formula: “The taste is not of invention but of a moment lost, a moment recovered, a moment in time.” Her mother spoke of the Sabbath cholent “as of lost wealth, a piece of the glistening past (MK 26).” Miriam’s unspoken duty, her means of survival, is to recreate the world that was lost. For Ehrlich the act of remembering is achieved through the preparation of food in a ritualistic communion with her mother-in-law. Cooking is an act of redemption, saving traditions and generations.

Culinary memoirs go beyond the act of symbolic commemoration in order to explore and preserve the authentic anamnesis of lost people and places and, by cultural extension, their collective identity. The story telling is an iterative process of finding not a lost, but an undiscovered identity. Through compelling narratives of food preparation and sharing, each writer defines a new story the authenticity of which lies in its fidelity not to memories of the past but to the author’s hopes for the future. With this reinvention of culinary traditions comes the construction of hybrid identities that comprise fragments gleaned from the past with elements constructed in the present.

Recipes, central to this creative act of self-discovery, preserve, retrieve, anchor and restore. Although mere fragments in the narrative flow, they play a catalytic role in culinary memoirs; they operate on two levels, as spiritual crutches and for physical and emotional healing, the two functions operating together give access to a new identity wherein lies the validity of the memory recall. On a structural level, recipes both disrupt the narrative and offer a refrain and a common thread. They are ultimately the allegorical grains of creativity that allow the narrator to build something new while retaining symbolic ties with the past. Cooking saves the older generation, the people of the diaspora, from loss of hope, salvaging pride and dignity and tying them to a living family and a present community; the act of writing down recipes extracts the rituals from the grips of nostalgia, introducing logical and cultural codification. It is only at their reception that the reader invests recipes with an imaginary dimension. In this sphere the reader is active in helping the author to appropriate and preserve memories.

Recipes also reclaim lost forms of expression: a literal and metaphorical language and ritual. For Levi-Strauss, ‘cuisine’ is a language articulating a lost identity¹³, which can only now be ‘expressed’ through the senses. Recipes make the language audible, salvaging fragments from a destitute past. In *The Language of Baklava*, Abu-Jaber’s father is described as a poet of culinary tradition, capturing lost language in flavours and smells.¹⁴ This homeland language can also be an obstacle to authentic memory recall. Ehrlich tries “to fathom life in the wrong language” (MK 50) which requires more than linguistic skills: she must also learn to interpret the past, in an act of remembering, connecting and selective disconnecting, and even forgetting.

While recipes can be ephemeral, poetic, comforting, they also anchor the narrative in the safe and nurturing sensuality of the present instant, allowing the narrator to return to revisit the past from a safe vantage point, establishing a secure and tangible link with an elusive tradition. Armed with new knowledge and experiences, the narrator is then free to begin a process of renewal, at the same time retaining contact with her roots. Memories pass via the senses and not language¹⁵: language can be an inhibitor, while sensorial experimentation becomes a facilitator. One must taste in order to understand.¹⁶ The recipes

of culinary traditions therefore give the diasporic writer unique access to archaic memories. Culinary memoirs endorse the primacy of sensory experience and treat the senses as instruments of discernment and pleasure. Undiluted by language or rationalization, memories trigger unedited emotions and images stored in long-term memory.¹⁷ “Cooking is by guesswork, heart’s leap, memory”, writes Ehrlich, “honouring that invisible bond with ancestors (MK 59).”

The incongruous adjectives given with irony and affection to the recipes in *The Language of Baklava* denote the dishes’ power to nourish the soul, as well as the body, and tie them intimately to the narrative stream: *Nostalgic Chicken Livers*, *Forget-Me-Not Sambusik Cookies*, *Lost childhood Pita Bread*, *Poetic Baklava*¹⁸. Frequent, even insistent, recipes are relentless reminders of where the book is anchored. Traditional recipes are re-appropriated and made pertinent to the story, serving the emotional needs of the narrator and also perhaps the reader.

This restorative quality of cooking is central to the pursuit of a new identity, embodying balance, flavour and integrity¹⁹, recalling Levi-Strauss who, in opposing the raw and the cooked, sets nature against culture in European myths.²⁰ Abu-Jaber’s Aunt Aya offers a baking session in order to heal her niece’s adolescent angst, mixing instruction in womanhood with directions for baking. Together they express anger, rebellion and wisdom. Aya is unorthodox, claiming to hate Arabic food, yet the dishes, rooted in the Judeo-Arabic Middle-Eastern tradition, are imbued with symbolic wisdom. Ehrlich has an analogous cooking session with Miriam, this time painful Holocaust memories peppering the dishes. Miriam bakes to assuage the pervasive pain of loss and abomination finding practical comfort and a channel for fulfilling duty as immense as the tragedy. “Miriam’s cakes work, form, swell and subside and the universe is good to us: another cake already on horizon’s rim (MK 155).”

Recipes are the tempting fragmented morsels of culinary rituals, which provide a space within the story for remembering and recreating. Constructing her narrative around the cyclic rituals of the Jewish year, Ehrlich prefaces each month with reflections about her spiritual call to stricter religious observance. “Drawn to ritual, I may perhaps draw nearer to meaning. (MK 351).” Ehrlich describes her mother-in-law as: “A keeper of rituals and recipes and of stories, she cooks to recreate a lost world, and to prove that unimaginable loss is not the end of everything. She is motivated by duty [...] and an impossible wish to make the world whole (MK xii)” and thus consequently find her own healing and wholeness too.

The chapter “How to keep a kosher kitchen” is a fatalistic, seemingly impossible litany. The kosher kitchen embodies a desire to tie the present to the past in a deliberate if charged bonding with age-old ritual. Ehrlich wants to shape a new spirituality for herself in order to channel to her children what is important from the past. “I can relinquish perhaps the physical things of the past, if I believe that their essence continues through time (MK 351).”

This perpetuation of ethnic and religious rituals expands culinary memoirs into a mythical dimension evoking tales of origins and identity. Ritualized food preparation is imbued with the godly notions of wholesomeness and wholeness, wherein cooking is as sacrament of “monolithic and mythological proportions.”²¹ The sacrament embraces the partaking as

well as the preparation. For Abu-Jaber, “[h]ospitality to the Jordanians is more than a virtue; it’s a sacrament and exaltation (LB 246).” Memories are fixed for future generations in eucharistically symbolic meals, the frequently repeated gestures of commemoration necessary to hold fast the fragile memories.²²

Paradoxically what appears in culinary ritual to be ostensibly an act of remembering becomes unintentionally a gradual process of forgetting. The very act of cooking to satisfy immediate hunger coupled with the difficulties of creating a truly authentic dish from substitute ingredients, detaches one from the past and the object of recollection, and opens the potential for something new. A new kind of authenticity - that of immediate experience - suffuses freshly prepared dishes and ephemeral moments of conviviality, preserving personal integrity in the face of tradition. Abu-Jaber’s father, in remembering is subconsciously forgetting his loss. Her aunt claims: “He is eating the shadow of a memory. He cooks to remember but the more he eats, the more he forgets (LB 190).” Tied to the present, the food they prepare is a “woefully compromised fragment”²³, displacement eliminating all hopes of culinary authenticity. Neither food nor ritual can be satisfactorily transplanted and maintain authenticity, neither the forlorn American-style scorched pancakes that Abu-Jaber’s mother shares with the curious Jordanian neighbours, nor the disastrous front yard grill to welcome the American neighbours where they are taken for gypsies.

The failure of Abu-Jaber’s father and brothers to slaughter the cosseted lamb for a family feast is a sign of their dysfunctional collective identity – the ritual is contaminated by partial assimilation which prohibits them from operating under the same moral codes as in Jordan; the context has shifted even as they endeavor to adapt with symbolic food rituals, the original authenticity of which has become inaccessible.

Miriam stores memories dutifully for her parents, her children and grandchildren, yet express the paradox herself: “Serious cooking is an essentially optimistic act. It reaches into the future, vanishes into memory... (MK xii).” Even she experiences moments of forgetting: “Miriam pours oil straight from the jar. It is a luxurious gesture. For a moment we are in a land of peace and plenty. Time stops as we watch the oil flow. (MK 43)” The rituals create an illusion of permanence but the fragility of her ritual is ever present.

Ehrlich must resist the nostalgia inherent in ritual to find meaning in her heritage and create a new identity: “I want to infuse the minutiae of everyday life with something more – meaning or history or awe – and to experience it without too much sentimentality, or irony (MK 291).” Nostalgia fogs awareness and resists momentum. When her six year old responds that kosher law motivates his food choice, Ehrlich rejoices, “That’s the thing, the awareness, carried out into tomorrows when my body is gone (MK 299).” Her sacrifice of observance focuses her obligation, strips away the nostalgia and clarifies her intention. She is coming close to achieving what she wanted and we, the readers are witness to her stumbling honesty “the wellspring must be authentic, or else it is just a museum [...] It is my turn now (MK 327).” Abu-Jaber expresses the same urgency, describing the American identity as “a melting ice cube to the vibrating heat of the identity we are forging” as she repossesses and recreates her own personal identity.

For Ehrlich, observance builds the foundation on which her family's hybrid identity can stand, tied to her ancestors and receptive to the identity she is creating: "A basic floor that would hold them as they grew and went their way (MK 127)." As a child she and her siblings sought that anchor for which her atheist father and her uncommitted mother were unable to make adequate provision. The children wanted the kosher kitchen an "arsenal to objectify our leanings, to tether us to a solid post (MK 183)." For her children, Passover is no longer a 'mausoleum' (MK 215)." She appropriates memories and reinvests them with her personal experiences. Both authors succeed in constructing identities that contain strengths from their ancestors coupled with elements from their own forged experience.

Culinary memoirs provide a space for exploring the complex panorama of ambivalent emotions involved in voluntary remembering, including duty, guilt, responsibility and obligation; they are the vectors of authenticity inherent in the pursuit of identity. There is a choice between accepting the call or failure to thrive, condemned to a perpetual identificational no-man's land. Choice marks a degree of commitment. "With freedom and opportunity came new un-dreamed of choices – to believe in your grandparents' religion, or to believe in nothing (MK 179)." Ehrlich blames her vagueness and lack of commitment for her tasteless chicken soup. While her commitment is at first faltering, kosher ritual gives her awareness that "equilibrium is dynamic. (MK 259)."

Omniscient guilt needs to pay reparations and inevitably influences intent. Ehrlich's grandmother makes endless trays of baked apples as an expression of love for her son, that are perfumed with the burden of ancestral guilt. Eating non-kosher food should make her children feel "a slight frisson, a moment of discomfort, that would link them to pious ancestors who suffered for their faith." It was the least way she could honour the grandmothers (MK 127)." Guilt for the narrator's generation complicates the conflict between loyalty to homeland memories and the desire to integrate in the host country. The return to traditions is an acknowledgment of the price that was paid by ancestors to keep their identity alive and the guilt at its thoughtless rejection.²⁴

Memories carry a burden of responsibility that must be weighed and assumed. Miriam's culinary obligations are "awesome responsibilities, and Miriam's life is lived in reference to what must be done to meet them (MK 126)." It was this "absolute, unchanging priority of duty to calendar, kitchen, home" that Ehrlich shirks but doesn't flee. Identity is complicated by exile but as *Miriam's Kitchen* reveals there are also generational and societal evolutions, choices and changes that are disassociated from exile.

Dealing with negative diasporic situations of displacement and loss generates conflicting responses. Opposing assimilation and loyalty to homeland and the perpetuation of memories creates a state of fluctuation within the narrative and in the authors' perception of their identity. This oscillation becomes part of the creative act, enhancing the legitimacy of the quest with the desire to simultaneously embrace what is left of a past from which one is spatially and temporally distanced, and the recognition that nostalgia can distort those memories with the intrusive emotional needs of the present²⁵. Both Ehrlich and Abu-Jaber resist the temptation to transform nostalgia for the unattainable into an idealization of the past as they move between two worlds inevitably comparing and creating but never idealizing 'imaginary homelands'²⁶. "Seeing the past through the shards of a mirror

inevitably distorts the idealized memory one has of a "homeland"²⁷: owing to the exigencies of displacement and dislocation certain memories are remembered, while others, literally, are recreated.

Abu-Jaber's father's longing for Jordan determines the family's errant existence as they oscillate between Jordan and America, threatened never to find peace until they accept their immigrant loss. His frenetic search stops when he opens his restaurant serving - with Jordanian hospitality - the archetypal American hamburger and fries that nourished him on his arrival in America. "It's cooking and feeding people and watching them eat, keeping them alive in the desert of the world – that is all he really cares about (LB 325)."

Thus, while preserving memories implies inertia, culinary memoirs incarnate movement. Both Abu-Jaber and Ehrlich waver between homes, countries and even identities. Identity is defined as much by movement as by location. Oscillating, both a metaphor and a medium for displacement, allows rebuilding to take place. The narrators test and taste: Abu-Jaber moving between homelands, Miriam between the houses of her family's matriarchs. Distance, whether physical or emotional, measures commitment: "Miriam my mother-in-law has started to cook. I am not there. I am fifteen miles away in my bed (MK 5)." Abu-Jaber conjectures: "I half wonder if Jordan would exist if Bud weren't there (LB 218)."

Fluctuating locations are the stage where memory and identity creation are played out. Deprived of access to home-land-scapes, the diaspora create their own landscapes within domestic interiors. Rituals become spaces to be inhabited; the kitchen is an energizing and securing sphere, everything that the 'museums' or 'mausoleums of ritual that Ehrlich fears, are not. Miriam's kitchen gives off a "steady, reliable light (MK 234)"; her grandmother's kitchen was her own small domain amidst a "wind-tossed life (MK 147)". They are also places in which choices of affiliation and cultural loyalty must be made. The anachronistic Polish village in the country is an atemporal oasis. "It is work and vacation, reality and idyll. It is the apotheosis of valuable Jewish things in my past as I knew them (MK 307)." Their meals were "the mythical food of vanished Polish summers (MK 311)." Landscapes are permeated with the sensorial memories of individual and collective history, emotional impulses and corporeal affiliation. Bachelard reminds us: "[...] les espaces qu'on aime ne veulent pas toujours être enfermés."²⁸ Culinary memoirs extend the lost territory or homeland, the imaginary extensions built on recipes and food rituals.

Ehrlich does not become a modern Miriam but a present-day practicing Jew juggling family, work and contemporary ideas about womanhood and spirituality. She reinvents herself not only with each visit to Miriam's kitchen but equally with each questioning journey between her home and that of Miriam, her mother, the ritual baths, each place where her identity is put to the test. Abu-Jaber concludes by accepting her rootlessness; as a "reluctant Bedouin" making the decision not to choose one camp: "Why must there be only one home! (LB 328)" The recipes and the traditions that she learns remain nonetheless the anchor, their magnetism pulling her back time and again to the source. In the final chapter entitled "The First Meal' symbolic in fact of a Last Supper she seems finally to have honed down those elements that are essential to her identity: "I must have these things near me: children, downtown, fresh bread, long conversations [...]" (LB 327)"

Microcosms of a dispersed people, these family tales also become, through tacit bonds of loyalty, collective memoirs where cultural and historical veracity remains subservient to the sensorial authenticity of family memories. In culinary memoirs, diasporic people have a creative space in which to address physical and emotional needs.²⁹ Preparing a meal for others is to prepare a beloved story that sustains her guests against what M. F. K. Fisher describes as the hungers of the world.³⁰ Such is Miriam's intention when she prepares a meal for her family; poignant emotions are contained in the painstakingly precise preparation of dishes from a past time of which they are keepers. "Everyone who 'comes over' is hungry: for home, for family, for the old smells and touches and tastes (LB 4 & 6)." hunger embodying a two directional ambivalence of identity: immigrants are hungry for home, but also hungry for America.

Culinary memoirs appease emotional and spiritual hunger with food and rituals, and create spaces for personal and collective reinvention, a process where reminiscence and re-appropriation honour the past while making way for the future, where the process of disconnecting and forgetting allows the possibility of letting go of anachronistic memories, accepted as part of the diasporic journey and thus purged of guilt, but also of creating new ones forged in sincerity. In remembering is forgetting and a new creation, what Ehrlich describes as she learns Miriam's recipes as "a voyage of discontinuity and connection (MK xii)." The cooking pot is the crucible in which a new identity is created.

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¹ Liebling, A. J. *In Between Meals: An Appetite for Paris*. New York: North Point Press, 1962. (3)

² Vertovec, S. "Three meanings of 'diaspora', exemplified among South Asian religions", *Diaspora*, 1997.

³ Chatelet, Noelle. "Manger, c'est vivre." *Forum Diderot. Manger pour vivre?* Paris: Press Universitaires de France, 2002. (56)

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⁶ Chatelet, 2002 (58) "On se 'retrouve' dans les aliments comme dans un pays intime."

⁷ Bardenstein, 2010.

⁸ Author's italics.

⁹ Ehrlich, Elizabeth. *Miriam's Kitchen*. New York: Penguin, 1997. (xii) [MK]

¹⁰ Abu-Jaber, Diana. *The Language of Baklava*. New York: Pantheon Books, 2005. (Preface) [LB]

¹¹ Chatelet, 2002. (56) "food has the power to defy time as well as space."

¹² Hua, Anh, "Diaspora and Cultural Memory" in *Diaspora, Memory and Identity: A Search for Home*, edited by Vijay Agnew, University of Toronto Press, 2005.

¹³ Levi-Strauss, Claude. "Le Cru et le Cuit", *Mythologies I*, Paris, Plon, 1964.

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¹⁶ Serre, 1985. (167)

¹⁷ Ackerman, Diane. *A Natural History of the Senses*. New York : Random House Inc., 1990. (7)

¹⁸ Author's italics.

¹⁹ Serre, 1985. (248)

²⁰ Levi-Strauss, 1964. (341)

²¹ Mannur, Anita. "Culinary Nostalgia: Authenticity, Nationalism, and Diaspora". *MELUS*. Winter 2007, Vol. 32 Issue 4.

²² Serre, 1985. (191) "[...] si fragile et oubliable qu'il faille refaire ensemble souvent les gestes de commémoration pour en retrouver la mémoire."

²³ Bardenstein, 2002. (354)

²⁴ Bardenstein, 2002.

²⁵ Samuel, Raphael. *Theatres of Memory, Vol. 1 Past and Present in Contemporary Culture*. London: Verso, 1994. (356)

²⁶ Rushdie, Salman. *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991*. London: Granta Books, 1991. (12) "The shards of memory acquired greater status, greater resonance, because they were remains; fragmentation made trivial things seem like symbols, and the mundane acquired numinous qualities."

²⁷ Mannur, 2007, Vol. 32 Issue 4. (11-31)

²⁸ Bachelard, Gaston. *La Poétique de l'Espace*. Paris, PUF, Editions Quadrige, 1957. (63) "[...] the spaces that we love cannot always be enclosed."

²⁹ Markos, Melina Cope. "The Tastes of a Nation: M.F.K. Fisher and the Genre of Culinary Literature". Colby College. Maine : Undergraduate Research Symposium, Paper 29 : 2006. <http://digitalcommons.colby.edu/ugrs/29>

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