Travellin’ Mama

Mothers, Mothering, and Travel

edited by Charlotte Beyer, Janet MacLennan, Dorsía Smith Silva, and Marjorie Tesser
This book is dedicated to Holly Anderson, one of the book’s contributors, who passed away due to illnesses caused by her volunteer service at the 9/11 Ground Zero World Trade Center site.
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A Taste of the Good Life: Expatriate Mothers on Food and Identity

Lynn Mastelotto

Introduction

For expatriates, travel fulfills the axiomatic imperative of broadening the mind with which it is conventionally associated since the experience of “dwelling-in-traveling” (Clifford 108) enables the development of an expanded sense of the world through the experience of building a new life in a new land. The seemingly oppositional notions of routes and roots converge in the expatriate experience, revealing that travel can contain both an impulse to move (flux) and an impulse to stay put (fixity). Although some expatriates are short-stay travellers who move mainly within compatriot enclaves, never seeking integration in their host country, this chapter addresses transnational writers who engage deeply with locals and local culture in their adopted homelands through long-term foreign residency. Peter Hulme refers to this practice as “deep immersion.” He notes that as travel writers immerse themselves in foreign cultures for extended periods, they acquire “the sort of intimate knowledge which gives them access to people and places unknown to short-stay travellers, let alone tourists” (97).

Identity reformation emerges as a central theme in narratives of travel and resettlement; it is especially resonant in the case of female
travellers who become mothers while living abroad and who detail this identity transformation in memoirs about their mothering experiences. For these travelling mamas, the experience of displacement is multi-layered and complex as they navigate a new mothering role within a broader journey that takes them far from home and from the certainties of their home cultures. The sense of dislocation they feel is immediate in relation to food and eating practices as they confront foreign foodways in an effort to feed themselves and their families upon resettling abroad.

Beyond the biological significance of eating as necessary for survival, sociologists point to the highly symbolic function of food as a formative activity in the definition of self-identity, as well as an imprinting of family, class and ethnic status. As Sarah Sceats notes, eating is the first thing we do as humans; it is “our primary source of pleasure and frustration, the arena of our earliest education and enculturation” (1). In Western culture, the identification of the mother as fulfilling a primary role in feeding children and socializing them into a food culture means that eating is a highly gendered domain of human activity. According to Sceats, women are ascribed a dual role as “feeders” through their biological capacity to manufacture food for infants and as “nurturers” through their socially assigned function in nourishing and caring for others, “with all that this implies of power and service” (2).

The relation between food and mothering is further problematized for expatriate mothers who enact this feeding and nurturing role within new cultural contexts according to unfamiliar rules and customs. Reminding us that “encoded in appetite, taste, ritual and ingestive etiquettes are unwritten rules and meanings, through which people communicate and are categorized within particular cultural contexts” (1), Sceats signals how food acts as both a material and metaphorical object of consumption. For the expat mother, foreign food offers a direct taste of cultural difference and functions as a portal into deeper understanding of the layered cultural contexts and subtexts of placed-based practices. Examining the practices centred on feeding and caring for children, Pamela Druckerman and Jeannie Marshall depict how their experiences as expat mothers form a unique kind of deep immersion in foreign place. This immersion is at once “disorienting and orienting,” to borrow Justin Edwards and Rune Grauland’s phrase describing the fundamental double-sidedness of
travel (3), as it displaces old affiliations and yields a multilayered sense of self and other through the emergence of dialogical identities.

In *Bringing Up Bébé* (2014), Pamela Druckerman, an American journalist in Paris, learns about French food habits and Parisian table manners while raising three children according to parenting precepts in her adopted France. In *The Lost Art of Feeding Kids: What Italy Taught Me About Why Children Need Real Food* (2013), Jeannie Marshall, a Canadian writer in Rome, learns from local mothers, grandmothers, and market vendors the importance of fresh food in raising healthy and happy kids. Both transplanted North Americans develop an intercultural competence by learning to shop, cook, and enjoy food according to local traditions. As mothers who play a central role in feeding their families, the new food cultures they encounter through relocation present opportunities to rethink nutrition and the social identities related to food habits. Their memoirs present the centrality of food in the overall process of cultural accommodation, which unfolds according to three general phases of acculturation: first, a confrontation with place that focuses on cultural difference and novelty; second, a negotiation with place that juxtaposes contrasting cultural paradigms; and third, an accommodation with place that involves deep and sustained engagement in local community over time. Becoming cultural insiders takes on an urgency for Druckerman and Marshall, as they seek to decode the symbolic associations of food in their adopted homes in order for their children to participate fully in its food culture: their journey towards fitting in begins with learning to eat like locals.

**French Manners**

Pamela Druckerman moved to Paris with her British husband in 2002. She had a daughter then twin boys in quick succession and wrote about the experience of raising a young family in a transnational context in her bestselling book *Bringing up Bébé*. The subtitle to the American edition—*One American Mother Discovers the Wisdom of French Parenting*—suggests a whole-hearted embrace of French parenting practices. In fact, Druckerman has been criticized, especially in the American press, for her perceived uncritical acceptance of French manners. However, a close reading of her text reveals that she juxtaposes
competing cultural paradigms and uses her journalistic skill to probe their respective sources and contexts. Druckerman sums up French parenting as a combination of unyielding expectations and an insouciant approach, explaining how a cadre, or frame, sets firm limits for French children on such matters as food and sleep, but “within those limits, the kids have a lot of freedom” (70). This is a difficult mix to achieve, especially for a foreigner who cannot rely on any instinctive understanding of the balance of rights and restrictions underpinning such complex cultural practices.

At the outset of her deep immersion in the Parisian every day, Druckerman observes with incredulity and awe the French approach to food and mealtimes, which she claims act as an “invisible, civilizing force at their tables” (4). She notes that French children, unlike American children, are not presented with a special “kid’s menu” or permitted “mono-diets” based on a narrow range of their food preferences, but they instead eat whatever their parents are eating, including fish and vegetables (5). While observing French families eating calmly and convivially in restaurants, she notes that French children seem to sit contentedly waiting for their food to arrive and then eat everything without a fuss. In contrast, she recounts her own experience of dining out while on holiday with her eighteen-month-old daughter as a special “circle of hell.” Imploring the waiter to bring them everything—appetizers and main courses—at once, she and her husband rush through their meal, eating separately in order to take turns chasing their toddler who will not remain seated. Meanwhile, on the other side of the cultural divide, “there’s no shrieking or whining. Everyone is having one course at a time. And there’s no debris around their tables” (4). Druckerman observes that “quietly and en masse, French parents are achieving outcomes that create a whole different atmosphere for family life” (5), and she sets out to uncover the recipe for their success. This difference in French parenting and in child behaviour related to food habits is indicative of different social norms, which as an American mother abroad she is eager to understand and assimilate.

Isaebele De Solier and Jean Duruz note that “the material culture of food, and its associated practices and taste formations, have long played a key role in the creation and maintenance of social identities based on ethnicity, nation, gender and class” (4). It is especially revealing to see
how food culture plays a central role in the identity reformation of expatriate mothers. The domestic consumption of food is a means of producing and regulating family life and relationships within the family. The differences in the way Druckerman’s own family eats compared to the French families she observes are indicative of different relationships within the family and different expectations regarding the socializing influences of food. Druckerman’s daughter is allowed to get down from the table and run around as soon as she has finished eating; consequently, the parents must rush through their meals to keep her company. By contrast, the French children she observes learn from a very young age to eat meals in courses, generally with a starter, a main course, and a dessert; this applies to whether they are eating with their families or at school (67). Besides helping them appreciate a variety of food served in healthy portions, this approach teaches patience, and it teaches that meals are not to be rushed through, since they are times for socializing with others. She notes that daily rituals around mealtimes in France act as “an ongoing apprenticeship in how to delay gratification” (67).

Citing UNICEF data, Druckerman explains that 90 percent of French fifteen-year-olds eat the main meal of the day with their parents several times per week, compared with only 67 percent in the USA and the UK (67), so they are learning to eat well and convivially at the table. Moreover, from time spent in the homes of French friends, she observes that children take part in the preparation of meals and, especially, in the weekend ritual of baking. They generally start by learning to make a simple cake like gâteau au yaourt by measuring all the ingredients, mixing, and pouring—in short, “they actually make the whole cake themselves” (65). Druckerman claims this baking ritual teaches self-control—with “its orderly measuring and sequencing of ingredients, baking is a perfect lesson in patience. So is the fact that French families don’t devour the cake as soon as it comes out of the oven, as I would. They typically bake in the morning or early afternoon, then wait and eat the cake or muffins as a goûter” (66). She observes that it is mainly French mothers who impart these early lessons in restraint, shaping the way children eat and avoid over-eating.

Druckerman seems to applaud the role of French mothers in imparting limits to how food is consumed (how much, when, and with
whom) and in regulating appetite by modelling socially learned body boundaries in relation to food and eating (or not eating). Her use above of the self-deprecating phrase “as I would” suggests that she has to unlearn one set of cultural assumptions in order to learn a new one. Her willing adherence to a new cultural norm also extends to snacking, as she notes that outside “the official and only snack time” of four o’clock at the end of the school day—a ritual that is “universally observed”—French children do not snack (66). Learning to eat and sleep according to a fixed schedule, learning to be self-reliant and to control emotions, and learning to wait are all important aspects of a child’s life in France. French mothers invest time imparting a set of strict rules, le cadre, so that childrearing does not become an all-consuming activity leading to maternal stress and depression.

Druckerman embraces the new food practices even while admitting these represent for her a paradigm shift: “It’s hard for me to imagine a world in which moms don’t walk around with baggies of Goldfish and Cheerios in their purses to patch over the inevitable moments of angst” (66). French mothers do not treat food as a way to distract or pacify children and there is no culture of food on demand; instead, French children eat only during the official goûter and, consequently, they are hungry at mealtimes. Druckerman reflects that this regulated form of snacking teaches them the importance of waiting, since the after-school goûter may be baked at home the day before or bought in a shop that morning, but children have to wait until the appropriate time to consume it. This difference in parenting approach emerges from a different view of the nurturing role of the mother: more permissive on the one hand and more regulating on the other. Although Druckerman tends to indulge her children and give in immediately to their whims, she observes French mothers being less yielding and more inclined to impose restrictions in an effort to impart self-control and autonomy.

Learning to be on their own and to cope with frustration is regarded as a core life skill for French children: besides self-soothing in the night, French babies are taught to wait “long stretches from one feed to the next” (59), and when they are older, they wait until the four o’clock goûter for sweets and cakes (66). In fact, children get used to waiting until their mothers finish their coffees, their conversations, and other activities that should not be interrupted by their impulses and desires; instant gratification is not the French way, Druckerman notes (63).
French mothers are nurturers but are also individuals with separate lives, and children are taught to respect this. Learning to wait, Druckerman observes, “is a first, crucial lesson in self-reliance and how to enjoy one’s own company” (55). To believe in it, you need to also believe that a baby is capable of learning and is able to cope with frustration, which is an attitude that comes down from Rousseau to Françoise Dolto, a paediatrician and psychoanalyst, regarded as the modern “Titan of French parenting” (89). Druckerman notes that in the 1970s, Dolto helped change the traditional, authoritarian notion that French children should be “sage comme une image”—should be seen but not heard—by encouraging parents to educate children to be well-behaved and self-controlled as well as able to express themselves (88). According to Dolto, speaking to them is important: “children are rational beings capable of understanding the world and respecting limits when these are carefully explained by a caring adult” (95). From this perspective, parenting is about boundary setting and social training for self-control, a core life skill.

Whereas parents in America at this time were being told by Dr. Spock to rely on their own instincts and to treat children with flexibility and permissiveness, Druckerman reflects that Dr. Dolto in France was advocating a more systematic approach based on the belief that parents should trust in their children’s ability to behave rationally, and, consequently, they should impart a system of expected behaviours. This cultural parenting gap is highlighted during an episode Druckerman recounts in which her ten-month-old daughter pulls down all the books on a shelf. The pattern of misbehaviour is regularly repeated until one day, a visiting French friend kneels down and calmly but firmly explains to the child “we don’t do that” and then shows her how to replace the books “doucement,” which she does (96-97). As a result of believing the child could understand language and could learn to control herself and do things with care, the little girl changed her actions. Druckerman had previously thought good behaviour was not so much a learned social skill as a matter of temperament and luck, but she changes her parenting precepts upon observing how French mothers model expected social manners and teach these to the children from a tender age. Druckerman observes a different notion of maternal nurturing at play, one not based on satisfying immediate needs but on imparting responsibility—the
responsibility of eating at prescribed times, of coping with frustration, and of behaving in a polite manner. French mothers model restraint rather than indulging children’s whims; this notion of nurturing implies forming a child's behaviour, not satisfying needs on demand.

These cultural differences in parenting are not merely incidental but instead are formative experiences for Druckerman who is invested in learning from her new environment how to be a good mother. In becoming a mother abroad, far from her own family, Druckerman cannot rely on a network of familiar child-oriented services or practices. Instead, she plunges into a new culture of childcare—new services, new assumptions, new practices—which is both disorienting and, at the same time, instructive. That Druckerman must unlearn American parenting precepts to learn new French ones illustrates the extent to which the mothering role is socially constructed. As Nancy Chodorow argues, gender roles are not natural or intrinsic manifestations but are social constructs rooted in place and time. By thinking one way of mothering seems natural (i.e., the American style) and another way foreign, Druckerman signals the social embeddedness of particular patterns and their imprinting on individuals. Although she admires many aspects of French parenting, Druckerman thinks these norms and values still feel foreign, and she cannot fully condition her American instincts. Learning to be a mother abroad involves her juxtaposing two different socially constructed roles and seeing how these can become her own with time.

All around Paris, at playgrounds and parks, Druckerman notices how readily her French peers detach from their kids, leaving them to play on their own. “I’ve never seen a French mother climb a jungle gym, go down a slide with her child, or sit on a seesaw—all regular sights back in the United States and among Americans in France” (131), she writes. One French mother describes how she mentally disconnects for half an hour while her young sons enjoy going round the old-fashioned merry-go-round by the Eiffel Tower: “I spend thirty minutes in pure relaxation”; in contrast, Druckerman spends the half-hour there “waiting to wave at Bean each time she comes around” (146). Drawing on Sharon Hays’s analysis of “intensive mothering,” this child-centered and time-consuming parenting approach is part of a contemporary American ideology that presents the good mother as all-giving and all-present. The good mother puts her child first,
sacrificing her own interests and pleasures to attend to those of her child. The good mother expends an abundance of energy, time, and resources for the child, often acting as the single caretaker. This ideology of intensive mothering conflicts with that of the workplace, and it presents mothering as an all-consuming vocation. Hays notes that, consequently, many educated, middle-class white women in America opt out of paid employment to stay home and care for their children.

Druckerman self-consciously weighs these two models. She notes her instinctive tendency to over-parent and envies French mothers who sit at the edge of the playground chatting calmly with friends while their toddlers play independently. She remarks on her own tendency to hover, a pattern of behaviour that is culturally inscribed. Jean-Anne Sutherland argues that the cult of “new momism” in the U.S. expects women to “approach motherhood joyfully and completely) i.e., physically, intellectually, emotionally and psychologically), while sacrificing themselves to the demands of motherhood” (314). Comparing herself to her French peers, Druckerman acknowledges her own inability to unplug from her mothering role and enjoy a half-hour relaxing and socializing with other mums in the park; instead, she sacrifices her own needs to satisfy what she perceives as her daughter’s need for her presence, since this is what a good mother does. Dawn Marie Dow contends that hegemonic mothering ideologies like that of the “good mother” permeate American society and act as a regulating gaze in women’s lives. Mothers consequently judge themselves according to this perceived social standard and feel guilty when they fail to measure up in their own estimation. Dow emphasizes that mothering practices, in fact, vary according to race, ethnicity, and social class structures, which undermines the notion that a single standard exists. However, approaches to mothering are conditioned by the regulating gaze of the social groups to which one belongs.

Druckerman displays growing ambivalence towards the way the American mothering role is constructed. Unlike some American mothers that she observes narrating a play-by-play account of their toddler’s actions in the park, she does not engage in such monologues she finds foolish (140). Her ability to set the American and French approaches side by side and examine their different norms and values is an intercultural competence acquired over time as she grows into her
mothering role abroad. Dislocation enables Druckerman to experience French mothering practices as constructs, not as automatic or instinctual patterns given her different cultural background; this recognition, in turn, enables her to see the constructed nature of the American mothering approach and question her own cultural certainties. She begins to see parenting through a dual lens: on the one hand, she is thrilled that Bean is “growing up bilingual,” but on the other hand, she is “ambivalent about Bean growing up French” and worries that her daughter may be “internalizing the rules a bit too much” (161).

Druckerman, too, seems, at times, to internalize the French rules too readily, arguably in an effort to fit in in her adopted home. Yet she finds the process of acculturation frustrating, since no matter how well she adapts, she will never reach full integration; she notes, “Though Paris is one of the most cosmopolitan cities on earth, I feel like I’m off the grid. In French I don’t understand name-dropping, school histories, and other little hints that, to a French person, signal someone’s social rank and importance. And since I’m a foreigner, they don’t know my status either” (23). This statement clearly expresses the dilemma of Druckerman and other expats like her who aspire to an insider status they can never fully achieve because of a cultural gap. As an expatriate mother, she is distant from the cultural certainties she grew up with concerning parenting practices as well as from the conventions of her new home; thus, she occupies a liminal position that does not fully belong to either but takes in both perspectives.

Although she lacks the cultural literacy of a native-born Parisian, Druckerman achieves an intercultural competence through her experience of long-term accommodation to French life. In particular, she acquires a knowledge of place, develops attitudes that value local practices, compares French manners regarding childrearing to U.S. ones, and engages in bilingual and cross-cultural interactions demonstrating an evolving intercultural awareness. By explicitly foregrounding her experiences as a displaced mother raising children on foreign terrain, her memoir destabilizes a monological, Anglo-expat reading of the French as cultural others; her story, instead, offers a complex reading recognizing socially constructed mothering roles across cultures. Druckerman’s mothering memoir is one of her own identity reformation in France and is written from a dialogical
perspective that sees cultural differences as bidirectional and multifaceted. She becomes aware of motherhood as a socially and culturally constructed role by becoming a mother abroad.

**Italian Taste**

A freelance writer from Toronto, Jeannie Marshall left Canada for Rome in 2002 and had a son there three years later. Raising him within a traditional Italian food culture, she learns about the pleasures of fresh, seasonal food while exploring Roman street markets and gathering local ingredients and recipes from farmers, butchers, and grandmothers. She discovers that the cultivation of taste starts early in Italy—when babies are still in the womb—but she also learns that even a food tradition as established as Italy’s is threatened by a processed-food and marketing industry that is changing children’s diets by reforming their tastes. Marshall’s book *The Lost Art of Feeding Kids* is a celebration of the *cucina povera*, the simple, wholesome food she finds in Rome and in Italian regional cuisine generally—a food culture based on readily available, seasonal ingredients linked to a peasant past of abundant fresh produce and meat scarcity—as well as a celebration of the sensual and convivial pleasures of food. Her account is steeped in nostalgia for the past (or soon to be past) of package-free food and unhurried meals, aspects of Italy’s food culture that are changing with modernization. Her mothering memoir recounts how the personal becomes political for her in her role as a new mother abroad. In trying to find the best way to feed her own child, she uncovers how parents and communities play a vital role in creating a food culture that places children’s health and nutrition above the interests of the modern food industry.

Marshall’s apprenticeship to local, traditional food culture begins on a Roman holiday that stretches into a prolonged period of foreign residency when her husband is offered a job with the International Fund for Agricultural Development, a UN agency based in Rome. She notes that from the outset, the idyllic image of Italy “was attractive to two Canadians who grew up in modern cities without a clearly defined cultural food heritage” (3). Beyond this surface attraction, she comes to understand that “food in Italy is more than just something to eat. It is embedded in life here. It’s a simple pleasure on the surface, but one
that is in reality a complex web of history, place, religion, family, health, and community. It is a cohesive food culture, which is much greater than the individual cooks and eaters who live within it. And we wanted to be part of it” (3). A first step in her process of acculturation involves understanding that learning to live like an Italian begins with learning to eat like one, and the role of taste formation is primarily the responsibility of mothers. The gendered role of women-as-mothers-as-feeders-and-nurturers defines a maternal archetype in Italy, in which the giving of food and love are inseparable and are inseparably bound to women.

When Marshall’s son is born, she is taught that breastfeeding her baby is best—not only for the well-documented health benefits of mother’s milk but also for the role it plays “in shaping children’s food preferences” and the way it “influences what they eat later and how that consequently affects their health” (26). Breastfeeding is a way to pass on food flavours at the earliest stage of life and to help babies cultivate a taste for healthy foods. This is so obvious to Italian mothers that everyone assumes Marshall already knows that taste formation begins while the baby is still in the womb and continues afterwards through breastfeeding. Whereas during her pregnancy Marshall thinks of what she eats mostly in terms of the developing baby’s nutrition, she learns from her Roman midwife that a fetus begins to swallow around six months in utero and tastes the amniotic fluid and, through this, the flavours of the food the mother has been eating. Consequently, eating “the freshest foods possible and taking advantage of what each season had to offer” is the “first step in teaching the baby to like the foods of its culture” (24). Embracing this feeding and nurturing responsibility whole-heartedly, she is careful throughout her pregnancy to eat a range of fresh, seasonal foods that are local and regional.

Marshall does not seem to question the conflation of biology with a socially constructed parenting role. Scéats notes that in the Western tradition the mother is, as a rule, “the most important figure in an infant’s world, able to give or withhold everything that sustains, nourishes, fulfils, completes” (11). In this role, a mother shapes or socializes a child’s appetite and expectations of the world “by feeding on demand or adhering to a rigid schedule, by the cultivation of table manners, through the provision of fish fingers or porridge, raw fish or
Along with nutrition, a mother “feeds her child love, resentment, encouragement, or fear” thus representing “a figure of limitless, irresistible authority ... Yet the maternal role in Western society is ambiguous, if not ambivalent: mothers are overwhelmingly powerful but at the same time are socially and domestically disempowered by their nurturing, serving role” (II).

Overlooking the gender politics of the mothering role, Marshall, like Druckerman, is keen to learn how to be a good mother and perform this role well in accordance with local norms and expectations. Marshall’s journey into Italian food habits leads her to observe that tradition and nutrition are two different ways of approaching food: the first focuses on the pleasures of tasting and sharing food convivially; the second focuses on the nutritional value of various foods. Although her Canadian instincts lean towards modern food science concepts of nutrition, her immersion in the Roman ritual of shopping for and cooking fresh food every day teaches her the value of traditional Italian food culture. Describing a simple lunch consisting of spaghetti with fresh San Marzano tomatoes chopped and lightly cooked in a skillet with hot olive oil, a pinch of salt, and fresh basil thrown in at the end, with the dish then topped with salted ricotta cheese, Marshall muses: “none of us thought about the flavonoid content of the tomatoes or about the protein, calcium, or vitamin A in our meal,” but instead they about the pleasure of eating good, simple food with friends (51). In the Italian context, a good mother imparts the pleasures of eating good food in good company.

Marshall notes that Italian parents tend to think more about what tastes good and what their children will enjoy rather than what is “good for them”; this emphasis on taste and pleasure “rather than on an abstract notion of nutrition or fear of allergies is really about passing on culture.” Marshall continues, “Italian parents think about nutrition in a broad sense and try to ensure that their children eat a wide range of foods, but they also assume that the foods of their culture are healthy” (40). Marshall admits that she has been thinking primarily about nutrition—“about getting vegetables into the baby like a dose of medicine”— whereas she sees Italian mothers training their babies’ tastes and knows that this will “lead them to the foods that [are] good for them” (38). Initiating children into a food culture involves helping them discover the flavours of fresh food grown locally as well as the
daily food rhythms at home and school. She sees Roman children learning to love pasta with lentils on Wednesday, gnocchi on Thursday, and fish on Friday. These predictable rhythms punctuate the week and give a sense of participation in a food culture that is larger than the individual, one that connects eaters in a community through a shared tradition.

Given the emphasis on early taste development, Marshall is heartbroken when her son Nico has problems latching on and cannot immediately be breastfed. She notes that it is “painfully ironic” that after all the healthy and fresh food she ate during her pregnancy and after enduring natural childbirth with no pain medication so that her son “would start his life without any foreign substances in his system” (29), she is unable to feed her baby with her own mother’s milk. Instead, Marshall has to resort to buying a box of infant formula to feed her son during the first week of his life; she disparagingly calls it “paediatric fast food” and acknowledges that it is “the first industrially produced food for children that begins to interfere with the food culture” (29). She observes that milk from Nestlé or Similac tastes exactly the same every day, whereas a breastfed baby tastes different foods at each meal: “that baby is tasting garlic, rosemary, basil, sage, olive, lemon, tomato, eggplant, bitter greens, melon, squash, prosciutto crudo, cod, turbot, anchovies, octopus, and so on.” These are varied flavours which “make him more inclined to eat the foods that are found in plenty in his environment”; moreover, since “traditional diets from long-established food cultures tend to be healthy, the child is likely to grow up healthy” (30). Collective wisdom recognizes that tastes are formed in the earliest stages of life and, consequently, there is considerable pressure on mothers given the indispensable role they play in the transmission of food culture. By internalizing this responsibility, Marshall experiences feelings of inadequacy when she cannot live up to social expectations regarding breastfeeding.

Erin Taylor and Nora Wallace provide a framework for understanding infant-feeding-related maternal guilt and shame in the context of feminist theoretical and psychological accounts of the emotions of self-assessment. They argue that whereas breastfeeding advocacy has been critiqued for its perceived role in inducing maternal guilt, the emotion women often feel surrounding infant feeding may be better conceptualized as shame in its tendency to involve negative self-
assessment—a failure to achieve an idealized notion of good motherhood. Whereas maternal guilt arises from a perceived inadequacy related to a private act of parenting, maternal shame is social, as it is linked to a mother’s perceived failure to measure up to a societal paradigm of idealized motherhood. Taylor and Wallace further note that mothers often feel shame because “they hold themselves up to a certain standard of motherhood and judge themselves as falling short, as failing” (37).

One of the widespread tenets of good mothering is that breastfeeding is the best way to feed babies and to impart to them a food culture. Marshall agrees but falls short of being an ideal mother when she cannot easily breastfeed her baby; however, she overcomes this setback and redoubles her efforts to introduce her weaned son to healthy foods that are grown locally and seasonally. Like Druckerman in France, Marshall also notices the absence of packaged snacks and fortified processed foods for small children. Instead, she observes Italian toddlers developing “their fine motor control while eating cooked chickpeas and cannellini beans at their designated snack time” (45). The after-school merenda usually consists of fruit or yogurt rather than a packaged snack. She reflects that children in Italy are not seen as separate marketing demographics (babies, toddlers, and young children) with each requiring its own special foods, since children typically eat whatever the family is eating. For babies, the ingredients of the family meal are mixed together with some homemade broth and a drizzle of olive oil with some grated Parmesan cheese added in for flavour. They do not need fortified foods or food supplements, since their meals are based on fresh, seasonal ingredients that naturally contain all the vitamins and nutrients to meet their health needs.

As her son grows, however, Marshall begins to notice that this traditional food culture is under threat as more processed foods become available and are marketed to children. The daily rituals of shopping for and cooking fresh food at home as a way of educating her son’s palate and cultivating pleasure in eating take on a missionary zeal as Marshall puts her journalistic training towards investigating the food industry and uncovers its unsavoury aspects. She observes the emergent monopoly Nestlé has in places especially designed for children’s entertainment—water parks, amusement parks, and seaside resorts—where Western kid’s menu items like hamburgers, French
fries, hotdogs, soft drinks, and packaged ice creams replace traditional Italian foods. She notes that the food landscape is slow to change in Italy and that processed food products still co-exist alongside more traditional, wholesome, family meals, but she wonders for how much longer. She worries that the “Western diet” is being exported worldwide (along with its attendant health problems, like child obesity) and could become normalized even in a place like Italy. She sees the consequences of shifting children’s tastes away from fresh foods in the direction of processed foods as “tragic” (83).

Marshall is also critical of the way so-called healthy packaged foods with added nutrients are marketed to Italian parents who put their trust in experts and their faith in product labels. She notes that by encouraging parents to get their children “to take supplements and eat fortified foods,” the food industry is causing them to mistrust their own collective memory and cumulative knowledge passed on through generations—“our sense of smell, taste, and texture, to ignore the visual delight of multicoloured fruit and vegetables”—and instead is using science to promote its products and training “children to think this method is not only normal but superior” (63). Instead, she advocates for shunning all convenience food that comes in packages because the process of industrial packaging is itself unhealthy and ecologically unsustainable. By becoming an outspoken advocate for “slow food,” Marshall assumes a responsibility not only for feeding her own son and educating his tastes but more broadly for preserving the national food heritage of her adopted Italy. In this sense, she appears as a kind of Ur-mother who embraces her role as feeder and nurturer very seriously and performs it in both the domestic and public spheres of life.

The way Marshall becomes politicized through food in Italy and the zeal with which she embraces her mothering-as-nurturing role are commendable. Yet she does not seem to question why mothers have the primary responsibility for the preparation of family meals and the transmission of food culture. The gender politics of mothering remain unexamined in her text, as they do in Druckerman’s memoir, likely for the same reason: both transnationals embrace local food orthodoxies in an effort to fit in. They do not question local food practices, or transgress the socially prescribed mothering role that actively supports these, since they are seeking a cultural accommodation in their adopted homes. Druckerman’s and Marshall’s food forays act as a
structuring device for their process of identity reformation as they accommodate to new selves and new lives abroad. It is clear that food and food habits—what one eats, how and why one eats, and how and why one prepares food in a certain way—are personal and cultural expressions that embody deep meaning in their journeys of self-transformation. As mothers learning how to care for their children in foreign contexts, food is a primary point of entry into new cultural norms and social acceptance.

Food, Mothering, and Identity

The culinary knowledge one acquires by travelling abroad and eating foreign foods is a form of social distinction through which one displays the mastery of new lifestyle habits. Germann Molz suggests that “food figures prominently in the ongoing symbolic struggle to distinguish oneself as a ‘traveller’ rather than a ‘tourist,’ with the former searching out the most exotic (to them) new tastes, whereas the latter searches out bland and familiar (to them) foods abroad” (87). Building on John Urry’s notion of the tourist gaze, Jennie Germann Molz suggests that culinary tourism often becomes a form of “gazing with the tongue,” which involves a cursory engagement with foreign foods as symbols of diversity, ways of tasting foreignness without engaging deeply with it or being transformed by it (88). However, in pursuing a sustained engagement with the food cultures of France and Italy, Druckerman and Marshall distinguish themselves as something more than travellers or tourists in search of novel tastes; they are, in fact, transnationals who gradually acquire insider knowledge by apprenticing themselves over time to local food culture through their role as mothers.

Druckerman’s and Marshall’s gastronomic forays are both a form of sustained physical engagement with another culture’s foodways and through the narrative reconstruction of these adventures, a way of displaying local culinary connoisseurship for global readers. The way food is generally mobilized according to Germann Molz in order to create belonging or estrangement—eating to feel at home (eating familiar foods to feel connected to home while away) or eating to feel displaced (trying strange or unfamiliar foods to feel exotic while at home)—is rendered more complexly in these expatriate accounts. Marshall, for example, consumes authentic Roman food (grows,
cooks, and eats it) as a way of increasing her sense of belonging there while feeding and nurturing a family; she then reconstructs these food experiences to enable her Anglophone readers to enjoy a vicarious taste of Italian authenticity. Germann Molz maintains that “food materializes a cosmopolitan sensibility toward the world. Indeed, we might think of foods as cosmopolitan objects that travel” (90).

This travelling of material culture involves a process of transculturation in which Marshall and Druckerman act as interpreters for readers who lack their intercultural insight. That these observations derive from their own experiences as transnational mothers grounds their accounts in the everyday—rituals of shopping, cooking, snacking, and family meals—making these accessible to readers who may lack first-hand knowledge of what it means to raise children abroad. The conceptions and constructs of foreign authenticity that gather around Druckerman’s and Marshall’s tables raise some important questions regarding cultural difference. The defining experience of international relocation and the long-term process of identity reformation shape a strong ethical discourse running through their narratives, which pivot around the same ontological question: “How should I live?” This question takes on a more layered significance when posed by two expatriate mothers seeking a happy and healthy lifestyle for themselves and their families through a negotiation of local and global practices—a process which is, in the first instance, mediated by food and food culture as they resettle their lives in new locales.

In becoming mothers abroad, Druckerman and Marshall negotiate their role as feeders and nurturers in accordance with new cultural paradigms while not losing sight of older familiar conventions. The uncertainty involved in parenting decisions is, in their case, amplified, since they are performing the mothering role in foreign contexts while seeking integration within social groups where new norms apply. The pressure to conform to expected behaviours, actions, or beliefs is an inescapable part of contemporary motherhood, according to Jane Swigart, since mothers operate continually under the gaze of society and its construction of the good mother, with tremendous weight given to each decision and each outcome concerning the lives of their children; consequently, the guilt many mothers feel “is endless and tyrannical” (66).
Judith Warner describes the stress-laden demands of contemporary mothering, which can lead mothers to experience guilt and shame in different social contexts; these stress factors are perhaps even greater for transnational mothers trying to “do motherhood” in foreign contexts where they are subjected to unfamiliar conventions regarding expected behaviours and beliefs. Both Druckerman and Marshall want to perform as good mothers under the gaze of society and, thus, gain acceptance and belonging. This necessitates their first learning to challenge some home certainties in order to understand the precepts that define the mothering role in their respective cultural contexts. As travelling mamas, they must learn to decode cultural mandates in their adopted homes to perform their role as mothers abroad; the intercultural competence they develop is central to the identity reformation they undergo, a transformative process which their mothering memoirs explore and detail.

**Conclusion**

Defining cosmopolitanism as “an intellectual and aesthetic openness to divergent cultural experiences” in which a “willingness to engage with the Other” is demonstrated through a “search for contrasts rather than uniformity,” Ulf Hannerz signals openness and engagement with diversity as core values in a cosmopolitan orientation (239). In addressing parenting practices in France and Italy, specifically in relation to food and food habits, Druckerman and Marshall display a cosmopolitan engagement with cultural difference. Bronislaw Szerszynski and John Urry similarly claim that cosmopolitan predispositions involve “a willingness to take risks by virtue of encountering the Other” (470). In Druckerman’s and Marshall’s relocation experiences, foreign food culture is the gateway through which the authors engage with diverse cultural norms as transnational mothers. Arguably, Druckerman’s interactions take fewer risks; she remains insulated within a class bubble in which multiplicity and complexity are more attenuated. Hers is a more modest form of cosmopolitanism, and her engagement with cultural difference seems more strategic in Michael Skey’s sense of furthering her own instrumental goals (fitting in and belonging in Parisian society) rather than any progressive aims or values (241). Marshall, meanwhile, is deeply engaged in a progressive
agenda to preserve the integrity of real food, to ensure it is produced in clean, sustainable ways and in fair conditions for growers, and to guarantee accessible prices for consumers. Her encounters with cultural differences in Italy spur her to become politically mobilized at local and global levels by embracing the culture of slow food. In Marshall’s case, what begins as a maternal concern for feeding and nurturing her own family with healthy, local, seasonal food expands into a political commitment to safeguard traditional food practices through alignment with a social movement.

The cross-cultural confrontation with food culture afforded by transnational relocation presents Druckerman and Marshall with opportunities to rethink their role as nurturers in relation to local food habits in family life abroad. This in turn elicits a broader reflection on the social construction of motherhood as they examine precepts and practices that define the mothering role and childrearing practices in their respective contexts. Their engagement with the ideological constructions of good mothers in France and Italy is central to the identity reformation they undergo through the experience of transnational relocation. Identity reformation, a main theme in contemporary women’s travel texts, recognizes that the process of identity making involves continual self-transformation in which alterity plays a pivotal role. Their immersion in everyday life abroad is at once “disorienting and orienting” as old affiliations are displaced and new ones take root, contributing to a multilayered sense of self through the emergence of dialogical identities. By becoming mothers abroad, Druckerman and Marshall develop a cosmopolitan outlook—an openness to difference and greater intercultural awareness.

Endnotes

1 I am drawing here on Edward C. Knox’s use of the term “literature of accommodation” in his study of twentieth-century nonfiction by American writers in France who tell the story of their quest to prove themselves worthy or suitable in their new cultural contexts. Knox uses the term “accommodation” instead of adaptation or integration to draw attention to the “nuances of congruence and reconciliation, of allowances made and recognition of a new norm to which to adhere” (95).

3 Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels similarly describe a contemporary culture of “new momism,” in which women are pressured to conform to a motherhood paradigm that presents women with a model of near impossible standards based on three tenets: first, motherhood completes a woman; second, mothers are the best caretakers for children; and third, mothers must devote themselves fully to their children. Consequently, women feel guilty for their ongoing perceived failures to measure up to this idealized model.

4 Pierre Bourdieu’s work on class and food consumption suggests that everyday food practices do not simply express a class identity but also produce and reproduce class identities. Bourdieu describes a “class habitus” as an embodied class-culture in which lifestyle emerges as the result of particular material circumstances and class dispositions. Lifestyle choices, including food habits, are a way of cultivating “distinction”—a social process in which people distinguish themselves from others through the exercise of particular tastes.

5 According to Edward Said, identities are dialogically constructed through difference: one defines oneself based on the recognition of what one is not in relation to others: “the Other” acts as “a source and resource for a better, more critical understanding of the Self” (xi).

**Works Cited**


Notes on the Contributors

Holly Anderson (1955-2017) was a poet, artist, lyricist, Minnesota native, and frequent collaborator in a variety of creative disciplines. An active participant in downtown New York City experimental scenes starting in the early 80s, Anderson created interdisciplinary works with many other artists: she wrote texts for choreographers Bebe Miller, Kinematic and Wally Cardona, theater companies Dear Knows and Music Theater Group, and her lyrics were recorded by musicians including post-rock pioneers Mission of Burma and Consonant.

She also shared her creative practice as an Artist-in-Residence at Smith College, Colorado College, Bates College, the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, the Catskill Center’s Platte Clove Preserve, and NYU’s Steinhardt School.

Anderson’s limited edition books Lily Lou (Purgatory Pie Press) and Sheherezade (Pyramid Atlantic) are in library collections including MOMA, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Victoria & Albert Museum, The Brooklyn Museum, The Bennett Avant Writing Collection at Ohio State University, The Harry Ransom Center at UT, Austin and The Downtown Collection at Fales Library, NYU.

Her work has been anthologized in numerous publications, including Up is Up, But So Is Down: New York’s Downtown Literary Scene (NYU Press), Wreckage of Reason II (Spuyten(Duyvil), The Unbearables (Autonomedia), and First Person Intense (Bandana Press).

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