Community cookbooks: Sponsors of literacy and community identity.

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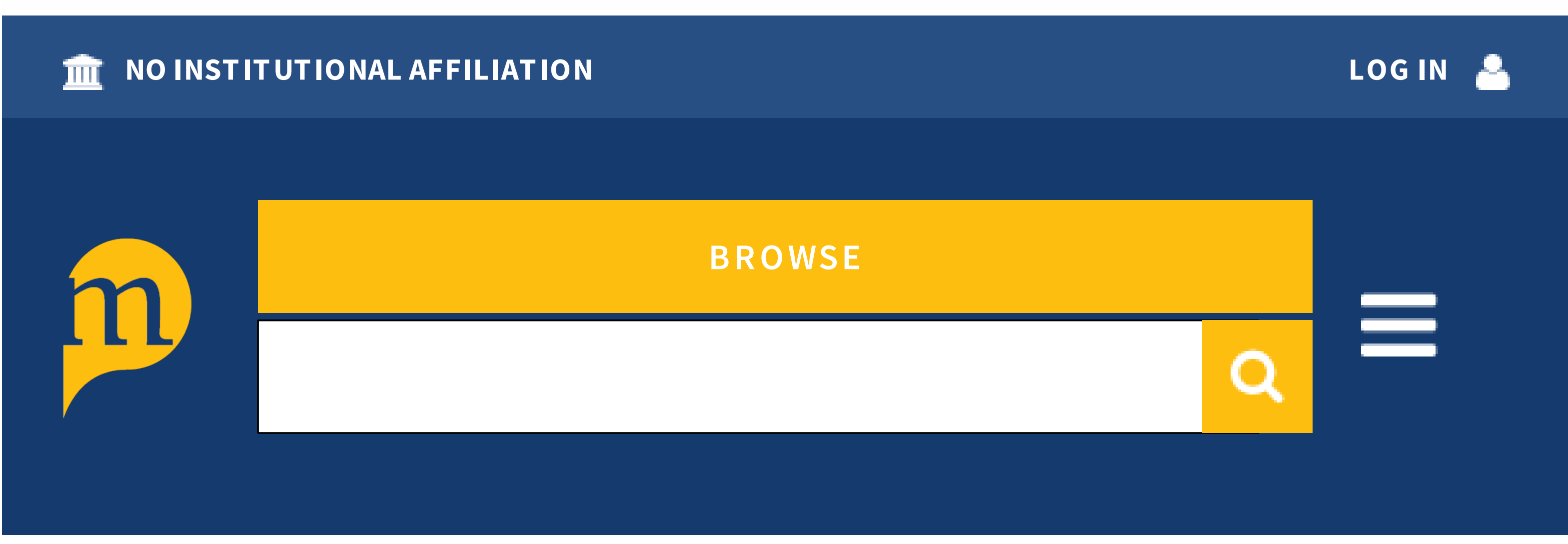

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Abstract

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"[Recipes] take the ingredients of history, class, region, theology, identity, and family and from them fashion new and continuing systems of community" (Ferguson 713).

Last summer, as part of a decision to organize my kitchen, I sorted my cookbooks. Much to my surprise, I realized that I was in possession of multiple community cookbooks from various communities that at some point had been a part of my life—cookbooks produced by certain groups of people who were understood to share common characteristics or interests. As Marion Nestle notes in her introduction to *Books that Cook*, cookbooks and recipes tell stories, both about food and about the locations where and conditions under which they were produced. "They convey myths. They are replete with drama, symbolic meaning, and psychological insight. Furthermore, they offer plenty to talk about: culture, religion, ethics, personal identity, and anything else it means to be human" (xvi). This is even truer of community cookbooks, which often reveal nuances about those communities and their self-representations.

What started as a general interest in reading my own past and experiences quickly led me to see the value of these cookbooks as rhetorical artifacts that reveal much about their communities. These cookbooks function as literate practices of a community, sponsored by the community members who were themselves cooks, contributors, readers, organizers and editors. As Deborah Brandt notes in "Sponsors of Literacy," such sponsors are "any agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enable, support, teach, model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold literacy—and gain advantage by it in some way" (166). Those who produce these cookbooks, then, gain advantage by the sale of the cookbooks themselves, but also offer outside readers context clues for understanding their communities. As such, the cookbooks function as "alternative public spaces," where "ordinary people develop public voices, letting us characterize the distinctive features of these discursive spaces, [and] the discourses they circulate" (Higgins, Long, and Flower 10). Indeed, through their publication they create a snapshot of their communities, a picture and reflection of who they are and

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