

**More than Recipes: a Complicated Portrayal of Wifehood & Marriage**  
**in Lorine Niedecker's *The Cooking Book***

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Seeing Lorine Niedecker's *Cooking Book* featured as the archive item on the Friends of Lorine Niedecker website, I couldn't help but explore the autograph book's handwritten pages depicting scenes between poetess wife and lumberjack husband as they cooked their way through the first year of marriage. Somewhat of a newlywed myself and the kind of wife who makes grilled cheese sandwiches instead of lasagna, I could relate to the discernment of marital identity in the kitchen. After all, it was my husband who taught me how to dunk a piece of bread into egg mixture and fry it in the pan to make French toast. The versions of LN and Al Millen that appear in the book seem to have just as much fun in the kitchen—if not more so—than my husband and me.

In 1963, poet Lorine Niedecker met and married Al Millen and proceeded to follow him into the kitchen to conduct husband-wife experiments with bacon bits, pork shanks, cabbage, and more. The same year, 1963, Betty Friedan published *The Feminine Mystique*, exposing the “problem that has no name,” the way American housewives struggled with their lack of identity and purpose. That first year of marriage, though, LN and Al Millen were partners in life and in the kitchen—cooking their way through bacon grease experiments, recipes for cherries jubilee, and whiskey cake. In 1964, after the excitement of her first year of marriage and the first year of tinkering in the kitchen with her husband, Lorine Niedecker created *The Cooking Book*, a handwritten compilation of dialogue between poet wife and lumberjack husband. The book was a

Christmas gift to Niedecker's cousin Maude Hartel; it bears the signatures of both Niedecker and Al Millen.

While *The Cooking Book*, basically a collection of recipes and corresponding narratives, seems like a housewifely enterprise, it is decidedly not so in this case. The Niedecker wife character that appears in the book does not fancy herself a housewife passing recipes from one homemaker to another. Rather, the cooking book is construed as a work of imaginative writing meant to assert her autonomy as a poet and experimental chef. Niedecker's take, after all, is less apprentice hausfrau than mad scientist. In it, Niedecker gleefully cooks her way through frugal recipes and remedies with the approach of a poet savoring a new word or new word meaning. Thus, the characters in the *The Cooking Book* create a model of marriage where the woman is not a subservient nothing but rather a collaborator, a co-sous chef.

Of course, Niedecker poems like "I rose from marsh mud" and "I married" offer a critique of consumerism and the female subservience required of marriage. Rather than analyzing the marriage between Lorine Niedecker and Al Millen (in real life and portrayed in poems like "I married"), I am interested in reading the marriage and the Al and Lorine characters portrayed in this handwritten book. The *Cooking Book*, after all, offers a differently complicated portrayal of the institution of marriage. Niedecker creates kitchen scenes that show a newly-married non-cook and her Paul Bunyan-esque husband bumbling around with bacon and sauerbraten. Indeed, the book offers a portrait of an experimenting non-cook and her less-cultured but literate husband who "grew up in the north woods near Paul Bunyan and ate close to the soil." Read in the context of *The Feminine Mystique*, this book offers an interesting counterpoint to the "problem that has no name." In fact, the book uses dialogue between husband and wife, recipes, ruminations on cooking, and even research to offer an alternate script of

marriage where wives are equal kitchen-mates to husbands, where wives have their own preferences and tastes, and where wives can make bacon but still remain themselves.

The book begins with the following inscription: “The fact that I don’t know much about the subject of cooking should entitle me to write a book about it. –Lorine.” The remark serves as an epigraph or an author’s note; it frames the speaker as a non-housewife, an author instead of a subservient wife. After all, turning herself and Millen into characters is an act of control. This non-housewife person is further asserted when Niedecker comments, “Away from the table, I eat books.” Thus, she is set up as a poetess; only a non-housewife would admit to “devouring” books. The act of signing her name to such a brash assertion is important; she owns the assertion. Through the signature, we see that she construes herself as an author—as a poet. She is also set up as Al Millen’s opposite. One of the first pages, a study of bacon sets up the personae of experimenting poetess and no-frills Paul Bunyan:

First, Bacon!

At once the cool, crisp core of  
 cookery  
 and the fatty fruit of life—

Without it, one does not even get up in the morning.

Says Al

I see the first part of this page as being Lorine’s voice. As she does in her poetry, she is having much fun with sounds here: “the cool, crisp core of/cookery.” This use of alliteration seems to establish a writerly, poet persona. Al is more practical--more set in his tastes and preferences. He is focused on the bacon as energy and fuel—something to help one get up in the morning.

Although Niedecker sets up the husband character as the expert on cooking, she resists exalting him as the wise, all-powerful husband. She teasingly acknowledges his cooking prowess—or perhaps assumed cooking prowess—early on in the book: “But Al seems to know about cooking—he grew up in the north woods near Paul Bunyan and ate close to the soil. He reads while he eats.” Instead of continuing to focus on Al’s expertise, though, Niedecker shifts back to a mode of wry, confident self-affirmation. There is no “Father knows best” or “Let me ask my husband.” Niedecker returns to herself on the same page after a quick line break: “Away from the table, I eat books.” This confident admission of a ravenous appetite for books is Niedecker’s way of establishing her character as a writer and scholar—or at least a reader.

This poet persona is strikingly different from the women interviewed and studied in Friedan’s project. In fact, throughout the introductory chapters of Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique*, the words “poet” and “poetry” are used abundantly to create a contrast between the people American women had hoped to be and the housewives they had become. *Poet* and *poetry* are consistently used to refer to someone who has a higher goal. Being a poet, in the first few chapters of Friedan’s book, is equated with being a politician, a doctor, or a person of importance. Perhaps it is worth noting that this isn’t only Friedan’s own use of the term “poet,” but includes the media’s use of the term. Friedan cites a commencement address by Adlai Stevenson that was published in the *Women’s Home Companion* in 1955. This address encourages society to see women’s role as wives and mothers as important; it is a role, says Stevenson, that is wrongly complicated through too much education:

...Once they wrote poetry. Now it’s the laundry list. Once they discussed art and philosophy until the late in the night. Now they are so tired they fall asleep as soon as the dishes are finished.

Later, in 1960, *The New York Times* would use the term *poetess* to compare the housewife to her pre-marital dreams: "...No one, it seems, is appreciative, least of all herself, of the kind of person she becomes in the process of turning from poetess into shrew" (qtd. in Friedan 23). Unlike the early-marrying housewives of her time, the Niedecker portrayed in *The Cooking Book* resists this process. She remains a poetess—or, rather, a poet—who maintains her own identity. This is apparent in LN's characterization of her wife-character in *The Cooking Book*.

Even when Niedecker is dispensing helpful cooking tidbits, she does so in a writerly way. She is more interested in discovery, in playfulness, in learning about oneself and the world. She is less interested in pleasing her husband and fulfilling a wifely role. After Niedecker and Al Millen explore the many uses of bacon, Niedecker shares the following:

I used bacon grease in baking powder biscuits one night for supper when I'd run out of lard or Crisco. To me, they didn't taste just right, somehow!

I don't know if I should tell the world: I make baking powder biscuits with whipping cream! Or I should say, I did before I got married!

Niedecker's liberal use of the exclamation point seems brash and bold. She is aware of the improper nature of her non-housewifery in the wider world; yet, she makes a point of celebrating this: "I don't know if I should tell the world: ..." This little secret, the whipping cream in baking powder biscuits shows that she is less concerned with cooking in a proper way. Perhaps she would rather spend her time writing poetry. That last exclamatory remark, "Or I should say, I did before I got married!," complicates this portrayal of poetess in the kitchen. Did marriage reform her? Is she trying to cook in a proper, acceptable way now? Is she perfecting these biscuits to please Al, her loved one?

The women in Betty Friedan's study have few of Niedecker's liberties. Instead of becoming poets in the kitchen or cooking writers, the women give up their identities for the sake

of obtaining a husband. In the process of interviewing high school girls who stopped their education, Friedan reports the “problem of feminine conformity”:

Earlier interested in geology or poetry, they now were only interested in being popular; to get boys to like them, they had concluded, it was better to be like all the other girls. (Friedan 72-73).

A 17-year-old girl told Friedan the following:

I used to write poetry. The guidance office says I have this creative ability and I should be at the top of the class. I have a great future. But things like that aren't what you need to be popular. The important thing for a girl is to be popular. (qtd in Friedan 73)

Niedecker is clearly uninterested in popularity. Unlike the girls in Friedan's study, Niedecker is a sixty-year-old woman at the time of writing *The Cooking Book*. Because she resisted marriage (aside from her short, earlier marriage to Frank Hartwig) until a later age, Niedecker is able to maintain her individuality. While Friedan asserts that “our culture does not permit women to accept or gratify their basic need to grow and fulfill their potential as human beings...” (77), Niedecker does accept and gratify this basic need. In the same way, Friedan writes of the way women awake from years of housewifery and ask, “Where am I?...What am I doing here?” (79). Again, these are questions that Niedecker, unlike her cultural counterparts, has already answered. In fact, she has known these answers for years; just a few short years later, Niedecker would assert the answers to such questions of self-identity and purpose in her masterpiece “Paeon to Place”: “I was the solitary plover/ a pencil/ for a wing-bone.” Such acute self-awareness is present even in the nonchalant musings of cabbage in *The Cooking Book*:

Cabbage, Yes!

A1: Pork shanks and cabbage, these are the finer things of life!

I: Cabbage, on the other hand, like spinach, has never vibrated on the same frequency I do.

Neither one has ever called to my inner tensions—except unfavorably.

These “inner tensions” and “vibrations” seem to echo Niedecker’s self-affirmation in “Paeon to Place”: “From the secret notes/ I must tilt/ upon the pressure/ execute and adjust/ In us sea-air rhythm.” Here is a woman who has tastes and preferences and is not afraid of asserting them. She knows where she is and what she is doing. Niedecker chose to stay on Blackhawk Island. She chose to write poetry. In this teasing, playful exchange about cabbage, Niedecker demonstrates that she has her own frequency and inner tensions. She knows who she is: poet, solitary plover, cabbage and spinach detester.

While Niedecker as newly married wife seems to resist the “problem with no name,” the marriage portrayed in *The Cooking Book* isn’t quite as simple as the opposite of the marriages chronicled in *The Feminine Mystique*. The wife character in the book is not completely uninfluenced by the same larger culture of the women Friedan studies in *The Feminine Mystique*. At times, Niedecker seems quite open to trying her hand at frying bacon and cooking meat and potatoes for her new husband. In fact, the marriage portrayed in this handwritten album buys into the cult of Togetherness that was promoted by the mass media of the 1950’s and 1960’s. Friedan notes that the concept of “togetherness” was coined by *McCall’s* in 1954 (48). Friedan writes that this idea of the family vacuuming together, grocery shopping together, grilling hot dogs together was “elevated into virtually a national purpose” (48). The husband and wife portrayed in *The Cooking Book* could conceivably be part of this cult of togetherness. Niedecker writes, “Al asked me if I’d never heard of raisin-syrup for pancakes. I told him: Yes, I’ve never heard of it!” There’s a little bit of Al leading the way, but Niedecker never quite succumbs to his perceived (or perhaps, assumed) power. Sometimes, Al may seem to have the last word for the time being. The following excerpt shows another example of Al spouting his foodie wisdom:

Al: You (looking at me) should eat cooked marrow.

I: What's marrow?

Al: Beef marrow in the bones—there is no delicacy in the world like this.

However, rather than being the important man in charge, Al takes part in a sharing of passion, a teaching and teasing. When Niedecker does refer to Al as “the man of the house” it is in a joking manner. The *Cooking Book*'s epilogue notes that catfish with bacon fat was “served up before the man of the house. Too rich... The Fall, one could almost say, of the House of Bacon.” The tone here is teasing, playful. There is no *Sorry honey, let me make you something else*. Yet, there is also no *Cook your own damn dinner*. Rather than completely resisting the role of housewife and cook in order to assert her personhood and independence, Niedecker's character shows readers how to dally in the kitchen without losing oneself. Like the third wave feminists who would later blog about pretty aprons and recipes for buttercream cupcakes, the Niedecker character in *The Cooking Book* has found a way to be a wife and also a poet, a writer and also someone who experiments with bacon. I would even go as far as to say that the entries in *The Cooking Book* resemble items pinned on users' virtual boards on Pinterest, a website that allows third wavers and others to share recipes, inspirational posters, and wedding invitation designs, among other things.

As previously mentioned, I do not consider myself a cook. I am more likely to cut up bell peppers and cucumbers, to assemble turkey reuben sandwiches and toast them in the oven. However, early this summer—just after the semester ended at the college where I teach—I set out to make lime cupcakes. I craved lime cupcakes—something I had only tasted once. It was a Sunday and no bakeries were open. In fact, I am almost certain that no bakeries within a hundred



mile radius of Manitowoc, WI even carry lime cupcakes. I went to the supermarket and purchased special flour for making cakes. I selected fresh limes. I Googled the lime zest that the recipe called for and found out that I would need to shave small curls from the skin of the limes with my cheese grater. Fresh lime filled my kitchen. My ice blue Kitchenaid mixer was down from the shelf and sitting atop my counter—actually plugged in. The light frosting made with heavy whipping cream failed. I beat it just too long so that it turned into a curdy, butter-like mess. In the end, I had to retrieve a can of pre-made frosting from the convenience store down the road. I was able to stir in some lime zest, though, and I even photographed the plate of finished cupcakes—a Facebook-worthy documentation of my attempt at being a cook, my attempt at housewifery. Without Facebook, without Pinterest, Niedecker chose to make a *Cooking Book* and share it with Maude Hartel. It also serves as a guide to a marriage in which women retain their sense of self and therefor resist the “feminine mystique.”

Works Cited

Friedan, Betty. *The Feminine Mystique*. New York: Norton, 1963. 2001. Print.

Niedecker, Lorine. *The Cooking Book*. 1964.