"Recipes Like Floating Islands:" Recipe, Autobiography, and Memory in The Alice B. Toklas Cook Book

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Abstract/Artist’s Statement
My project is an exploration of various dimensions of *The Alice B. Toklas Cook Book*. The cookbook is a cookbook, but it is also a collection and an autobiography. The recipes in the book originated in Alice’s physical recipe collection box which began when she was a child and continued throughout her life. The autobiographical narrative develops out of the memories that are attached to each of the recipes in the collection, Alice writes her life story through her recipes. Each recipe represents a person, place, and specific time in her life. As she uncovers and reads her recipes, her memories are catalyzed and thus her life writing act proceeds as well. Julia Child, MFK Fisher, Brillat-Savarin, and Proust are a few food minded writers who help shed light on both the cookbook function and memoir aspect of *The ABT Cook Book* in my paper. All of the stories in the book come out of the recipes but memory is the driving force that arises out of those recipes. The recipes appear as one critic said, “like floating islands,” which is to say, seemingly haphazard. But the haphazardness of the recipes is a manifestation of the way Alice remembers her life – the recipes lead her narrative.

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Recommended Citation

For the evening, Alice B. Toklas was Daniel Isengart, 48, a former cabaret singer and a personal chef. He lives out his peculiar romantic culinary fantasy daily in the attic apartment he shares with his partner, Filip Noterdaeme, a conceptual artist. His book provides a blueprint for kindling this love flame of dough-mysticity in your own home. It includes recipes adapted from Ms. Toklas, as well as dozens of his own honed while singing for supper-club audiences while working as a caterer for demanding socialites in Manhattan and the Hamptons. "Catering is a seductive loop of working in temporary festive setups that give one the illusion of participating in a glamorous lifestyle," Mr. Isengart writes. Looking at *The Alice B. Toklas Cook Book* for its own merits and in comparison with Stein's *Tender Buttons*, one recognizes several complications of the anxiety of influence. Particularly noteworthy are three features of the development of Modernism as a literary genre: the privileging of the physical over the intellectual, the increased treatment of female experience, and questions of voice and perspective. Focusing on Toklas is intended to demonstrate her capabilities as a writer and to suggest that Toklas played a more significant role in the development of Modernism than has been previo
century, Toklas, as narrator of the work, says she was born into an affluent family in San Francisco. However, she did not like writing it for that particular reason and it was the first of her writings to be published in the Atlantic Monthly, much to her joy.