

## **Review: *Cooking in Other Women's Kitchens***

*Sarah Cappeliez, University of Toronto*

Rebecca Sharpless. *Cooking in Other Women's Kitchens: Domestic Workers in the South, 1865-1960*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2010. 273 pp. ISBN: 978-0-8078-3432-9.

*Cooking in Other Women's Kitchens: Domestic Workers in the South 1865-1960* documents the state of African American domestic workers, and of cooks in particular, in the American South in the period between the abolition of slavery and the emergence of Civil Rights Movement in the United States. Rebecca Sharpless looks at the variety of situations faced by African American women in the kitchens of white families, from downright exploitation to being like “part of the family”, and everything in between. Sharpless shows that these women's situations of powerlessness were more nuanced than a simple dichotomy of power versus non-power. White households clearly depended on African American cooks for important tasks connected with feeding their families, but, as Sharpless shows, this power had its limits as well.

Sharpless' main goal is to examine how African American women used domestic work, and cooking in particular, as a transition from slavery to free society. She also aims to describe cooks as agents who managed situations where they were paid very low wages for often difficult work and long hours, while also navigating a context rife with complex and contradictory racial politics. As Sharpless shows, these women developed a number of coping strategies. For example, cooks often had to learn how to act like two different people: an obedient servant in their workplace and a capable mother in their own families (see Chapters 4 and 5). Sharpless is also able to break down some of the stereotypes about African American cooks, such as the clichés of the mammy who takes care of the white family. What were these women really like behind these images as contented employees in a racialized society? Sharpless presents this latter aspect as an unintended outcome of her book, but it actually constitutes one of the most compelling parts of her work. By showing examples of how these women managed their workplace and work relationships, Sharpless is able to claim that cooks were far more instrumental about their jobs and their relationships with their employers than is often portrayed. She also makes the argument that these images of the “happy cooks” were in fact a strategy to keep the women subservient, while obscuring the real conditions of their work. To examine these questions, Sharpless uses both written archives (for example, letters to New Deal agencies in the 1930s discussing wages, working conditions, etc) and oral interviews that were conducted for the Federal Writers' Project. To

these sources, Sharpless adds some information gleaned from cookbooks written by African American women. Because African American authored cookbooks were quite rare until the 1960s, Sharpless also uses cookbooks written by white authors which allows her to examine the way African American women were depicted by white women.

The book is divided in chapters that deal with different aspects of the African American cooks' experiences working in white households, such as the food (how choices were made, how this affected work, etc), the cooks' own family lives and their often complex relationships with their employers. Sharpless begins by discussing cooking as a specific category of work, saying that it was largely invisible and considered low status, even though it was a crucial element of most Southern households (Chapter 1). Sharpless tells us that cooking was in high demand in the period after the abolition of slavery, and it became a way for many African American women to transition from slavery to free society. Cooking involved more skill and commanded higher wages than cleaning or child care (15). Still, the wages were low enough that even lower income white households could afford to hire cooking help during this period. It was largely assumed that African American women were cooks almost by nature, and little training was offered to cooks by their employers. Thus, these women had to learn their skills on the job. As Sharpless' data shows, expectations were in reality quite varied and idiosyncratic to each family, making it difficult for African American women to anticipate what each cooking position might entail.

Food, and the choices relating to its sourcing, preparation and serving time, were sites of power struggles between cooks and their employers (Chapter 2). In many cases, women had to adapt to a variety of work spaces and equipment, as well as to different qualities of food and ingredients. Variability was also the norm when it came to wages (Chapter 3). Cooks worked long hours for relatively low wages. Sharpless includes a table of wages in the Appendix of her book that shows the inconsistencies in wages for cooks across several decades and employers (185-187). Economic conditions during the Great Depression can account for some of this variance, but it is quite clear that cooks could not expect any standardization when it came to wages. Sharpless also shows that payment in kind, that is, payment of food (called "toting"), old clothes or furniture, was very common (74).

Sharpless also spends time looking at the cooks' lives outside the workplace (Chapters 4 and 5), and the often complex relationships these women developed with their employers (Chapter 6). Cooks were seen simply as workers by their employers, and their family lives were barely acknowledged. Yet the women saw themselves as more than this and made attempts to balance their roles as cooks with their lives in their communities and families. White families often romanticized their relationships with their African American cooks, viewing them

as emotionally involved with the household. The reality was much different, as many women actually viewed their work as means to an end, but understood enough to play the role of the devoted cook. The testimonies of several children of cooks are particularly poignant in this respect as they tell the story of absentee mothers who had to transfer the care of their children to “kin” while taking care of other people’s children and families. It is therefore not surprising in Sharpless’ concluding chapter that cooks left white kitchens *en masse* as other opportunities emerged.

At the centre of Sharpless’ study is the argument that cooks held a unique position in the sphere of domestic work. While Sharpless does show that skilled cooks were sought after and held in high esteem by white families, it is not always apparent why she considers cooking apart from other forms of domestic work, like nanny or cleaning work when discussing aspects of these women’s experiences. For example, Sharpless indicates that cooks became skilled at shopping within a tight budget when buying food for their own families. Was this a specific attribute of cooks, or could it apply to all African American women struggling with little money at the time? One can speculate that cooks might have been better acquainted with the price of food, but at the same time, all African American women struggling with money might have learnt to budget carefully as well. Sharpless does not elaborate on whether such a comment might be generalized to all categories of domestic work, or even to other types of work, rather than just to cooks. Perhaps some short and pointed comparisons with other types of jobs might have truly distinguished the cook from other domestic roles in the post-slavery South. Nevertheless, Sharpless offers an in-depth and complete portrait of African American cooks and the nature of their work and lives in this period. The cooks’ voices are very compelling, and Sharpless does a good job of letting them largely speak for themselves. The resulting book offers a complex picture of a category of work that served as a major source of income for African American women and their families during a particular moment in Southern history (xi).