

# No Strings Attached

## Textile Tales of Labour, Gender, and Mess

Von: L. Sasha Gora

Cooking, you could say, is part of my job. As a cultural historian who studies food, I cook not only to eat. Sure, my hunger is often what pushes me to the stove, but I also use the kitchen as a place to think about how food connects to the world at large, to the flora and fauna different cultures code as edible and to the knowledge and forms of energy they rely on to turn them into dinner.

I cook a lot and yet I almost never don an apron. A blue one striped with white hangs in my kitchen, but I only call on it when I am cooking elsewhere. At a workshop, for example, my apron might become my public uniform, but when I cook in private I embrace the risks of simmering tomatoes while dressed in white, the mess of kneading bread dough in black jeans. This is rather typical. Aprons in the home have largely fallen out of fashion. Every once in a while they reappear as a retro accessory, but since the 1960s the convenience of washing machines combined with cheaper clothes have rendered their services less and less in demand.

As a clothing item, an apron is particular.<sup>1</sup> This overgarment – a fabric shield worn for hygienic or safety reasons, but also as decoration – shares the same linguistic root as napkin (from the French *nappe*). Unlike its cousin the laboratory coat, the apron leads both a private and a public life. It is a professional uniform for some and a fashion statement for others. Aprons range from innocent and childlike – Dorothy’s pinafore in *The Wizard of Oz* – or cinch-waisted and low-cut – the *Dirndl* at Oktoberfest and “French maid” costumes at Halloween parties. They narrate histories of labour and class, as exemplified by the *Kittelschürze* – the apron dress – in Germany, as well as race – such as the now-retired Aunt Jemima label and its reliance on the racist mammy stereotype.<sup>2</sup> Butchers and chefs wear aprons, fish mongers too, as well as gardeners and cobblers. From lace to linen, there are souvenir and novelty aprons, ironic and costume aprons, aprons donned as capes of masculinity in the company of barbecues, and uniforms of hospitality and care work. Some cover only the waist, and other, like the tabard, which bakers often sport, cloak the body’s front and back.

An apron, in short, can signify and perform status and occupation and gender and more.<sup>3</sup> Showcasing its range and its rich cultural history, in the United States Joyce Cheney started her traveling exhibition *Apron Strings: Ties to the Past* in 1996. Its most recent stop was the McFaddin-Ward House Museum in Beaumont, Texas, in 2022. In

2019 the Chickasaw Cultural Center exhibited *Aprons: Tying Together Chickasaw Kitchens* and here in Germany the Stadtmuseum Kaufbeuren hosted the 2021–2022 *Angebändelt: Ein Date mit der Schürze*.<sup>4</sup>



Figure 1: "Various styles of women's aprons, 1870s." The Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs: Picture Collection, The New York Public Library. New York Public Library Digital Collections. <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47e0-f199-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99> (Last Access: 26.03.2023).

But apron strings have held women hostage. In *Small Fires: An Epic in the Kitchen*, writer and literary scholar Rebecca May Johnson borrows from *The Odyssey* to reflect on what happens when she makes the same red sauce again and again. As Johnson argues, cooking is thinking. It is a way of knowing. And it is no accident that a fiery red apron decorates her book's cover. Its surface looks marbled. Is the apron a collage of red tones or a collection of the red sauce's squirts and splatters? Either way, Johnson's epic begins with "Apron Strings." Close to her body, her tightly-wrapped apron resists the movement of her chest as it expands with her breath. While she cooks her apron's strings remind her of her body, of how she is thinking with it.<sup>5</sup> But she confesses: "Long ago, tying an apron felt like tying myself up (and not in a way I would have chosen).

Aprons are still threaded through with the image of ‘natural’ feminine destiny, the kind that makes me uncomfortable, that makes me feel like running away. *Cut your apron strings!*”<sup>6</sup>

Unlike a bathrobe, which allows you to be whoever you want to be, an apron requires you to play a specific role, to perform particular labour.<sup>7</sup> A bathrobe is about leisure whereas an apron is about work. Both literal and figurative. To make dinner. To perform a role – one that might leave behind a rash.

In 1975 the Austrian artist Birgit Jürgenssen posed in an apron that transformed her body into a stove in her photography series *Hausfrauen-Küchenschürze*. The apron’s bib falls down her chest, expanding her stomach into a kitchen appliance with control switches. Hands at her waist, her eyes look straight at yours. A woman’s body visualized as an extension of the stove, with bread in the oven. A portrait of a time when artists were untying gender roles.



Figure 2: Birgit Jürgenssen, “Hausfrauen-Küchenschürze,” 1975, Estate Birgit Jürgenssen, Galerie Hubert Winter, Vienna, Austria.

British artist Helen Chadwick also used her own body posed in front of a camera as a medium in her 1977 series *In the Kitchen*. Like Jürgenssen, she wears a stove, but one with more dramatic proportions. Her face peaks out above the burners and below the dials, her bare legs stretch across the oven. In both photo series an apron transforms the female body into the heart of the kitchen, which is to say the heart of the home, critically challenging where a woman’s place is. Three decades earlier French-American artist Louise Bourgeois painted nude female bodies branching into houses rather than heads: her series *Femme Maison* (1946–1947) translates the French word “housewife”

as “woman house.” Architecture, in these paintings, becomes a trap. And if the home is a trap, then the kitchen is its holding bar. American artist Martha Rosler spelled out the kitchen as a site of confinement in her 1975 *Semiotics of the Kitchen*. Dressed in a black turtleneck, the artist begins her filmed performance by picking up an apron, pulling it over her shoulders, and fastening it behind her neck. “Apron,” is the first word she recites, while tying its strings behind her back. The fabric cocoons her torso. Once fastened, she moves on to the next letter in the alphabet: “bowl.” Her hands pretend to hold a spoon, jerking it to stimulate mixing an imaginary batter and, thereby, performing the vocabulary of gendered – and often unpaid – kitchen labour.<sup>8</sup>

With or without an apron, cooking is messy. And it is work. An apron might protect cooks from some mess, but expose them to others. At a workshop I attended on women and energy transitions, the historian Petra Dolata presented the *Kittelschürze* as a material example of switching from one energy regime to another. She studies the energy history of her native Ruhr region, which is where I have been thinking about food and mess and aprons and labour as a KWI fellow. “Women living in the Ruhr area after 1945, most of whom were miner’s wives working at home, constantly had to deal with the effects of air pollution,” she writes. “For some, the constant cleaning was an attempt to challenge the image of the Ruhr area as dirty, but others were adamant that this was a silent protest against the air pollution.”<sup>9</sup> To wear a spotless and freshly washed garment contrasted with the contamination they were in the thick of, the black dust that would trespass across the washing left outside to dry.

Perhaps it is because of the apron’s history that I find it enticing to cook without one, to embrace the mess that comes from turning plants and animals into food. Or maybe I just rather avoid having something else to clean. And yet, as I already admitted, if I am professionally performing the role of a food cultural historian I might just tie an apron around my neck and let it do its job – no strings attached.

## References

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3. See, for example, Harris, Tina (2012): From Loom to Machine: Tibetan Aprons and the Configuration of Place, in: *Environment and Planning D: Society & Space*, vol. 30, no. 5, pp. 877-895. <https://doi.org/10.1068/d11210>.
4. For a review of the latter, see: Kratzer, Hans (2021): Das Schürztl war die Blue Jeans der Bäuerinnen, in: *Süddeutsche Zeitung* [<https://www.sueddeutsche.de/bayern/kaufbeuren-kleidung-schuerze-frauen-1.5490545>], 26/12/2021 (Last Access: 25.06.2023).
5. Johnson, Rebecca May (2022): *Small Fires: An Epic in the Kitchen*, London: Pushkin Press, p. 16.
6. Ibid.
7. Gora, L. Sasha (2021): States of Undress, in: *Compound Butter*, vol. 14, pp. 102-103.
8. Johnson also details this seminal artwork before concluding: "The choice is not between burning down the kitchen or revisiting in a nostalgic dream-state; that is a false binary. It is bad faith to burn your grandmother's archive because she wasn't as free as you" (Johnson 2022, p. 33).
9. Dolata, Petra (2020): Women and Energy in the Ruhr Area of West Germany, 1950s–1980s, in: *RCC Perspectives: Transformations in Environment and Society*, no. 1, pp. 51-55, p. 51. <https://doi.org/10.5282/rcc/9049>.

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