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## **Eat The Artifact: Making cultural identity among Indo-Surinamese migrants in The Hague**

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# Eat The Artifact

Making cultural identity among Indo-Surinamese migrants in The Hague

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Emma Regeni



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To the objects and materials I've encountered along the way,

Thank you.

# Abstract

By considering food making as a way to reenact diasporic memories and cultural identity among Indo-Surinamese migrants in the Netherlands, this project elaborates on the mutually constitutive relationship between bodies and food, and on cooking as a performative way to generate and transmit knowledge. The research yielded a textual output, combining academic and creative writing, a short film, and a series of ceramics. While the text builds on the parallel between material culture theories and ethnographic fieldwork, the film explores the relationship between people and objects in a non-linear way. With the production of Surinamese traditional food in ceramic, furthermore, findings about embodied knowledge were transposed in physical form. The research points toward the potential allocated to materials to trigger the recollection of individual and collective histories, aligning with a non-anthropocentric, non-objectivist anthropological approach.

keywords: Material culture - Cultural identity - Embodied knowledge - Diasporic memory

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# Prologue

Hearing behind the partition the sound of chopsticks  
clicking.  
Hearing the noise that the handle of the rice wine jar  
makes as it falls back down.  
The faint noise of voices through a partition.

(Quignard 2016: 7)

Every thing. The word ‘thing’ can be used to talk about any thing. A table is a thing, the grass is a thing or are things. The way you feel about what some one said when you arrived some where yesterday morning is a thing. Your eyes are things, they are full of things. Every thing changes all the time. Things ‘happen’ and ‘are’, they make you feel certain ways, or do not. People do things.

(Adams, 2019: 19)

Have you eaten?

(My mum)

Have you eaten?

(My main participant, Miva)

Have you eaten?

(Me, speaking my love language)

# Meeting the object

I was around four or five years old, an age when remembering has to do with dreams as much as with memory. I was home, playing by myself; at the time, my family and I lived in the countryside of north-east Italy, just a few minutes drive to the border with Slovenia, a region covered by the mismatched combination of vineyards and industries born during the economic boom of the postwar period. While making my Barbie doll fly across the living room, with the naive clumsiness of a child, I somehow hit a jar of lentils that stood on a shelf. While the glass of the jar remained miraculously intact, tiny brownish pebbles covered the parquet. My older sister, alarmed by the noise, stormed the room. Our parents were not exceptionally severe, but we knew a good, old fashioned scolding was gonna come my way for my reckless daydreaming, and my sister's way for not checking on me more closely in the way firstborns are supposed to do. I do not recall us kids devising any plan of action, what I clearly remember is that we could see our own panic reflected in each other's eyes, and our tiny hands frantically scooping lentils off the floor. In a hysteric tone, which to think back on it now makes me laugh, my sister made it clear to me what trouble I had put myself into. Those were the lentils we would eat on New Years Eve as a side dish to Musetto, a fatty sausage consisting of pig's snout and other fatty parts of the animal mixed with spices. New Years Eve lentils bring good luck and money to the diners, and to have them spilled on the floor felt for us like basically casting poverty and misfortune on us all. We had never been a superstitious family, but superstitions are nothing but stories and children don't discriminate between stories, they are simply all true to them. Moved by desperation and guilt, I remember my poor dear self apologizing to the lentils, and while picking the last few ones between my thumb and my index, imploring them to continue to retain their power and to still bring us abundance even though they had been treated so inappropriately. I'm not sure whether my parents ever found out about the mischief; I can imagine my mother fishing out some lentils while cleaning under the library, shrugging her shoulders and forgetting about it. But I won't forget the power of those lentils, a power that made it reasonable for me to verbally negotiate wealth with a dried legume.

Twenty years later, for my master thesis project, I once again looked for answers in food. The naivety that led me to revere a legume as a child has been difficult to reproduce faithfully after two decades, but the circumstances under which my project was carried out have helped. When I first encountered my participants, my research project focused on the re-enactments of cultural identity as seen in windows of the area, and I was therefore oblivious to the role that food would have acquired along the way. I had moved to the Netherlands just a few months earlier and never encountered Surinamese food before; I was aware of the colonial link between Suriname and the Netherlands, and I was curious about how the long term integration of migrants would be reflected taste-wise in a Wester

European country. Although, my relocation occurred right in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic which meant, alongside its more serious implications, that all restaurants and cafès were closed or only conditionally open, making it rather impossible to enjoy a meal outside of home. I had been cycling past the many Surinamese food locations in The Hague, wondering when I would finally be able to sample some Caribbean delicacies. My unfamiliarity with Surinamese culinary tradition and the unpreparedness to engage anthropologically with food made me especially impressionable to the wonders of an unknown kitchen, which ultimately made the re-creation of naivety toward the experiencing of food and drinks (see Mann 2015) the result of a genuine need for adjustment to a foreign context rather than an artificial procedure.

The use of materials as hermeneutic means to access culture is complex and multifold; as Seremetakis writes, there is a multiplicity of ways in which people transcribe the self into substance (Seremetakis 1993: 4). Considering lentils as an hypothetical starting point, one could delve into the historical background behind the Italian tradition to consume lentils for good fortune (it is said to originate from an ancient Roman custom, where the small rounded shape of the lentils reminded the Romans of coins). If it's true that "food and eating, in both a metaphoric and real sense, offer a way of understanding more about embodied multicultural connections in and to place" (Johnston & Longhurst 2012: 325), to know about an object's story is to make sense of its present and its context at large. As food is intricately woven into the politics of place (Snooks, Boon 2017: 219), one could consider lentils as circulating goods and draw inductive conclusions about local cultural landscapes in relation to wider international connections. Or one, as my four-year-old self did, could let go of assumptions regarding the vitality of objects and engage in an earnest conversation with a lentil itself. In this sort of exchange, one would follow the lentil's lead and, by intentionally being receptive to the stimuli it offers, find out whether a non-human voice is able to carry information about humans and their lifeworld. An object-focused attitude of this kind does not exclude people's perspective; on the opposite, material worlds "are not some separate superstructure to social worlds" (Miller 1998: 3), which makes the placement of materials in the middle an alternative to anthropocentric approaches rather than an exclusionary practice.

As Romeo Bodei writes about human relationship with objects:

"We intellectually and affectively charge objects, we give them sentimental sense and quality, we hold them dear in treasure chests of desire or cover them in repulsive wrappings, we frame them in systems of relationships, we insert them in stories which we are able to reconstruct and which deal with ourselves and with others" (Bodei 2015: 23, translated by author).

This is especially true for edible objects, which hold particular affective and sensorial capacities and are ultimately active, dynamic players in the lifeworlds of people. Food doesn't only affect the human body in terms of size and volume, but it affects moods and cognitive dispositions (Bennet 2010: 40), and growing, preparing and eating foods are thoughtful practices (Heldke 1992: 216) which go far beyond their survival purpose. Taking into examination cooking as a both manual and emotional labour (Bailey 2017), I will look at the transformation of ingredients into edible objects as a way to explore belonging, both to the homeland and to the new home, and as an instance of how everyday experience can become a performative politics of ethnic identity (Law 2001: 280). My thesis aims at finding out how culinary practices among Indo-Surinamese migrants in the Netherlands reproduce cultural identity on performative and material levels. The use of the expression 'making of edible objects' rather than 'cooking' is motivated by an intended insistence on the material quality of food, and on the relevance of making as a process of growth and of actively going along (Ingold 2013). The project is an attempt to steer away from the objectivist approach according to which a clear distinction can be drawn between subject/observer/maker and object/observed/made, rather than viewing the relationship as one of mutual construction. Theory and context not only inform each other, but cohabit the same space; doing embodied research on materials means sourcing from the one and the other at once (refer to section 'Cooking as inquiry').

The histories and meanings of objects are weaved with those of the people who made use of them (Bodei 2015), or as in the case of this research, who cooked and ate them. The agency retained by food, which can be seen in its physiologic and affective influence on humans' bodies (Bennet 2010), served as a premise for further investigation on the overlaps of material culture with cultural identity: How do objects and people shape each other, and how are people's bodies shaped by making? Being a densely sensorially engaging activity, food making intrinsically stimulates the recollection of personal and collective memories and legacies. Given the specific migratory background of my participants, whose cultural identity is closely linked to the displacement inherent in every diasporic community, the affective quality of food has acquired in my research a particularly significant fold. What arose in the bodies and imagination of my participants from eating homely food was not only about the past, but about a fragmented, geographically distant one. Blurring the lines between competing ideas of home, the diasporic context adds complexity to the act of remembering through the senses. For this reason, I looked specifically into food making and eating as performative re-elaborations of diasporic memories.

# Home away from home away from home - Hindustani diasporic identity

My research project was conducted between January and May 2021 by a community center in The Hague, run by a Surinamese retired nurse who migrated to the Netherlands in her fifties and who I will regard in my thesis as Miva. As mentioned above, I initially hung out at the community center with ambitions that were unrelated to food making. One of my flatmates, knowing I was looking for people to talk with about windows and cultural identity, vaguely told me over breakfast about some friends of his from an art collective, who had their studios in a building nearby and shared the space with a certain Surinamese lady and her social initiative. He figured the woman might be up to having a conversation with me, and eventually help find access to a few homes. He did not know much about her, except for her reputation as a spirited individual and dedicated worker. On the day of our first meeting, I went over to Miva's office, where we discussed our agendas over a cup of hot water and chocolate-covered raisins. I presented to her my research, my aims and the methods I would be employing. She listened attentively and while wiggling her head left and right, she assured me I was welcomed to hang out with her and carry out my research in all freedom. She then explained to me the terms of her work, and what was expected of me.

The association is primarily concerned with the preparation and distribution of food in the neighborhood, and relies on a system of volunteers, all first or second generation migrants from Suriname, which rotate depending on availability and without a clear schedule. My participants, in addition to Miva, have been about fifteen others who revolve around the center either as volunteers or as habitual friendly visitors, some of which I have met on a daily basis and others just for a couple of meals. Most of them have family ties, even though very indirect ones, with Miva. Aside from the great cultural relevance given to food, my participants shared with my own background a comprehensive way to perceive family. Most of the newcomers to the community center were introduced to me by Miva as cousins, aunts or uncles, but after a few targeted questions, it was apparent that these titles were used rather casually to exhibit affection and respect rather than blood ties (see section 'Becoming a daughter').

All my participants identify as Indo-Surinamese, locally known as 'Hindustanis', which make up the largest ethnic group in Suriname (*Algemeen Bureau voor de Statistiek in Suriname 2012*). The term 'Hindustani' indicates nationals of Suriname whose ancestors were Indian indentured workers brought to the Dutch caribbean colonies during the 19th and 20th century (see Choenni 2014 and 2020, Lal 2013, Hassankhan et alii 2016). The twofold character of the Hindustani diaspora - from India to Suriname and from Suriname to Europe - makes belonging a delicate matter, where ideas about the

homeland are mixed with imagination and derivational memories - or 'prosthetic memories' (Landsberg 2004). My participants have often emphasized the compositeness of Surinamese culture which, according to Miva, is what makes Surinamese people exceptionally strong: "we are the best of both worlds", she once exclaimed in a spurt of national pride. Caribbean cultural legacies that result from the geographical contextualization of Suriname are therefore intertwined with Indian traditions and Hindu religious practices, and form the circumstantial premise for the formation of Hindustani cultural identity.

While I have cooked exclusively with adult women, I have engaged in other practices focused around edible objects with men and children as well, gaining a comprehensive perspective on how Indo-Surinamese foodscapes are experienced by whole families. I have contributed as a volunteer along the whole fieldwork mainly by cooking with my participants, and occasionally by tagging along the errands to the market. Things like conversations about food, small tasting sessions before actual meals or collective dishwashing are often forgotten when thinking about cooking, which sounds like a self-contained activity but instead comprises many other forms of communication, all contributing in defining the experience of food making.

The community center is located in the neighborhood of Moerwijk, in the south-west side of The Hague. Moerwijk has been known for years as one of the poorest neighbourhoods in the Netherlands, or as succinctly but not incorrectly put by AD article, "Life in poverty-stricken Moerwijk is very tough" (translated by the author from: de Groet 2018). As the city is currently sustaining its quick expansion, and since the sea creates a natural barrier on the north-wester side, the south-easter part of the city is now undergoing a process of gentrification: once a rather disregarded and multi-ethnic area, the residents are now witnessing more and more young dutch families and international students move in, with consequent shifts in the relationships among the original occupants and in the atmosphere altogether. Since doing social work means being directly involved with the community, the changes in the urban context and the transformations that come with it were experienced rather directly by my participants. Residents who used to get fed from Miva and her collaborators on a regular basis, are gradually being replaced by new dwellers who don't request her contribution. Therefore, Miva has been looking more and more toward other parts of the city, and started to bring her carefully packaged meals outside of Moerwijk. Her social work is slowly abandoning its neighborhood-oriented origins, seeking to cover a larger area of demand and therefore allowing her food to encounter a more varied 'audience'.

## Memory and sensoriality through audiovisual methods

Filming as a research method has been a way to creatively engage with the field, and to try alternative ways to explore the relationship between me, my participants and edible objects. Although text provides a necessary framework for the theoretical elaboration of my topic, through images I attempted to mediate between the parts involved in a more material manner, by giving form to both the objects and the interactions enacted through them. This is because the intentional, selective appreciation of the manifestation of an object is a *sine qua non* of any intellectual analysis performed on it. Filming as a method has allowed me to *look* at what is there to see, to sensorially acknowledge objects and record their performativity through a non-discursive, non-translated approach. In this regard, I was inspired by the notion of humanization of the camera of which Willerslev and Suhr refer to: by mimicking the way in which the human eye experiences reality, we are able to partly reproduce the ‘texture’ of what an embodied outlook on the world looks like (Willerslev and Suhr, 2012). This translated for me in the use of framing to reproduce the way the eye explores space by lingering on different features, shifting focus between one point to the other. This was achieved by exaggerating the inevitable subtle vacillation visible in the footage when hand-holding the camera, to emphasize the presence of a human observer behind those fickle shots.

Furthermore, filming as a method has been useful to explore the topic of agency. “We cannot know the experience or bodily sense of another person completely because we cannot be the other person. However, it is possible to gain proximity to others, and through this closeness or distance we can develop an understanding of how they feel” (Lawrence 2020: 7). By filming people experiencing touch, smell and taste, I sought to understand how embodied experience could be transposed in a visual form and what it could evoke for an observer. I have tried to examine the concept of agency not only in relation to me and my participants but to my participants and their objects as well. By sharing the screen in a non-hierarchical way, the makers - my human participants - and the made - the food as a participant - were given similar, if not equal space. I have found inspiration on how to visually tackle materiality not only from ethnographic films, but from artistic projects, advertisement and even food labelling. Olga Shurygina’s “Mirage on the Bed of the Aral Sea”, a project inspired by the artist’s trip to Uzbekistan, where she headed off with a plan to lay three thousand ceramic plates out on the floor of the dried Aral Sea, struck me as a successful attempt to connect people and materials in a way that enhance the intimacy and beauty that lay in between. Shurygina chooses plates for their recognizability as Uzbek cultural symbols. In her own words, “Uzbek ceramics can hardly be confused with any other - it is an ornament, a form, and a texture inherent in the local culture and craft traditions.” (<https://easteast.world/en/posts/297>) In an analogous way, I look at typical Surinamese

dishes for their ability to act as mirrors of Indo-Surinamese migrants' individual and collective histories.

Since the very start of my filming in the field, I have been instinctively drawn toward recording long takes of my participants' hands and their movement around materials. I did not indulge in this fascination without seeking theoretical legitimacy from experienced ethnographic filmmakers: Andy Lawrence suggests that footage of hands operating tools or manipulating materials, combined with facial expressions or verbal sounds, is an effective way to show how the person thinks in relation to the action they are performing (Lawrence 2020: 8). Furthermore, "human movements, gestures and interactions are interrelated, so recording these without interruptions enables us to examine this relationship and present it to others with integrity." (ibid: 148). My initially unexplainable and stubborn fascination with filming hands has helped me to really explore the meaning of physical manipulation of objects. The dough is created from scratch and then molded at will, truly becoming a mirror of the maker. At the same time, hands are smeared with material and muscles get impressed with the rhythmic movement of the act of kneading the dough, creating embodied knowledge which is visible, again, in the material outcome of the activity that is the edible object. Filming the repetition of a certain movement, which I have initially focused on without really understanding its meaning, has created the opportunity to fixate my attention on the object instead of letting it fluctuate.

Recording the interaction between hands and dough, furthermore, allowed me to visually exemplify the affective quality of objects. Affect theory, dealing with a pre-theoretical conception of the world, (Frykman & Povrzanovic Frykman 2016:11), places affects as "intensity owned and recognised" (Massumi 1995:88), a middle ground between an emotional and physiological response, preceding culture and conscious knowing. When applied to the experiencing of objects, affect theory aligns with my interest in direct engagement with the material context and in the culturalized responses to it. As put by Ahmed: "to experience an object as being affective or sensational is to be directed not only toward an object, but to 'whatever' is around that object, which includes what is behind the object, the conditions of its arrival" (Ahmed 2010: 33). Affection, for its own nature, is about the moment and therefore cannot successfully be transferred to another moment without losing something in the way; I found in the visual engagement with hands a paradoxical yet compelling expression of the impossibility to mediate the affective quality of materials.



Not wanting my enthusiasm with the filmic approach of “staying with the object” to make me lose touch with people, and to avoid portraying my participants as “(...) a rather ghostly backdrop to the culinary action” (Raman 2011), I relied on vocal narration. I have been inspired not so much in aesthetic terms but in conceptual ones from Mara Lin Visser’s thesis film “Dress-scapes of Accra”, where the director dives into the eclectic fashion world of the Ghanaian capital. Her work has the capacity to give depth to the meaning of the material dimension without stripping her participants of their agency, but rather shedding light on the interaction between the two. Finally, after just a few weeks in the field, I knew that the recollection of memories would feature at the center of my findings, and that in the representation of it I would want to keep the fragmentary and nonlinear tone that characterizes the process. Films like Alyssa Grossman’s “Memory objects, memory dialogues” or JP King’s “Solid Waste”, with their highly sensorial and contemplative portray of material contexts, inspired me to picture memory not so much by explaining it in a didascalical way, but rather by poetically evoking it through the juxtaposition of images and personal reflections.

## Food diaries

Keeping a journal of my time in the field began as a way to simply keep a record of it, but I gradually came to appreciate it as a method to tackle other more interesting layers of the research. After a whole day of exposure to the lifeworld of my participants, and too often overwhelmed by the amount of data I found interesting but could not record through film, journaling has been the way to disentangle and then absorb what felt like a mass of disconnected, confused details. While in the beginning my journal reads as a factual record of the happenings, the entries increasingly get messier and richer, as my experience of the field did. It has been interesting to me to witness through my field notes the shift from a somewhat detached participation in the field to a truly immersive one. I find the stylistic contamination that gradually creeps into my notes rather amusing, not only because it shows my personal involvement gaining a role in the project, but because it gives it an entertaining tone which I think is constructive and generative for my final output. By the end of the research, journaling became not only a crucial step in the collection of data, but I perceived it as necessary to make sense of my experience in the field as a whole.

My participants did not take their work nonchalantly: the schedule was always tight and Miva had some task for me to do as soon as she saw my eyes wander around the room without a clear purpose. The typical day of fieldwork started right before lunchtime, around 12 o’clock, and continued until dinnertime when the curfew introduced by the anti-COVID governmental measures was still in force. As soon as the measures were lifted, it was not uncommon for us to hang out at the center until late at night. Although I was allowed to film whenever I wanted to, since it was made clear that my presence in the field was motivated by audio-visual research, it immediately became apparent that there was not

really any time when I could retreat from the activities and get into the mental and physical space needed to record my thoughts. Those rare moments of rest enjoyed while waiting for the rice to cook or for the *roti* to be ready to be flipped were simply too short, and they often slipped away through a joke or by wiping tables. The time after a meal, sort of the “quiet after the storm”, was perceived by me and my participants as a precious moment to cherish together. Seeking isolation would have not only spoiled the sympathetic atmosphere, but would have even looked suspicious and ultimately resulted as counterproductive for my research: it is thanks to those moments of genuine enjoyment of food and each other’s company that the relationship between me and my participant, on which my project is built, was made possible (see section ‘Commensality’).

## Cooking as inquiry

I have engaged with cooking not only as a topic to tackle, but as a research method of its own. Getting involved in culinary practices with my participants has meant a continuous process of observation of and adjustment to their ground. Initially, the fact that the community center makes the distribution of food its main reason to be, helping out when cooking felt like a necessary contribution on my behalf. I had been helping out women who are far more experienced than me in the kitchen my whole life, to the extent that I completely identified with that role for each Christmas and major celebration since I could remember. While I initially took the cooking tasks rather for granted, the addition of an investigative lens made me reconsider the process almost immediately. Just a few days into helping out my participants in the kitchen, I was aware that the collaborative making of edible objects was a physically absorbing and reflexive process, what Sandelowski calls doing full-bodied qualitative research (Sandelowski 2002). My journal was already filled with reflections on the generative role of cooking when I encountered Jennifer Brady’s concept of “cooking as inquiry”, which backed my intuitions with theoretical support. Cooking as inquiry “(...)invites researcher-participants to actually make food as the means of exploring the processes by which identity is performed, or ‘done’ through the body.” (Brady 2011: 324). The idea is that of overcoming “(...) the dissociative, dispassionate, and disembodied orthodoxy of social science writing” (ibid.). Brady insists on the differentiation of cooking as inquiry, which sees the body as a very site where knowledge is created, from participant observation, where the sensorial aspect is not necessarily elaborated on and where the analysis tends to maintain a clear separation between the research and the researcher's presence (ibid.).

My enthusiasm with cooking as a method received the most significant thrust by Tim Ingold’s “Making: Anthropology, archaeology, art and architecture” (Ingold 2013). The emphasis on food making as a research method as opposed to doing ‘traditional’ participant observation brought forward by Brady is not distant from the premise from which Ingold starts off: anthropology and

ethnography are placed in antithetical terms, anthropology being a transformative process while ethnography suffering from the limits of a fundamentally documentaristic approach. Ingold follows by advocating for ‘making’ as a radical rejection of the objectivist tendencies of ethnography. Having tested first handedly on the field the multilayered and generative potential of the active manipulation of food, and wanting to avoid doing detached ethnography as much as possible, I have attempted to make of ‘making’ my key methodological tool. Furthermore, cooking as inquiry has allowed me and my participants to address the language gap that stood in between us (see section ‘The language of matter’). In fact, when in the situation of staring in each other’s eyes in puzzlement, thinking about how to communicate the need for this or that ingredient from the pantry, food ultimately came to the rescue. No word is as unambiguous as a “mmh!” that comes when tasting a sauce from a pan; the presence of food in between of us often replaced the terms we were missing and acted as a placeholder of what we did not have in common.



Video still from “Eat the Artifact” © 2021

I have found cooking as a method to be especially meaningful when combined with autoethnography, as it opened up possibilities to a “circular” way of doing ethnography, in which knowledge was not perceived as result of my situated ideas about the field and my participants, but rather as a negotiation

which did not seek a resolution as much as dwelled on the the active pursuit of a compromise. I have experienced such compromise to exist not only in the tension between the “we” represented by me as researcher and my participants, but in the “I” of myself alone, which I will elaborate in detail in the next section.

## Transnational encounters & doing autoethnography

As an Italian doing fieldwork in a kitchen, the physical location of my research has been intimately connected to my own life history and cultural heritage, which resulted in an autoethnographic perspective figuring as a necessary outcome rather than a pondered choice. I was aware that being Italian comes with a certain inflexibility toward food making. In Italy, the tendency is to follow recipes religiously, perpetuating a perception of food that relies on highly uncompromising guidelines and rigid notions of “good” and “bad”, or more accurately “Italian” - and therefore unfailing - and “non-Italian”, untrustworthy, improper. Instagram and Reddit are filled with memes about Italians being indignant about the bastardization of indigenous dishes, such as pineapple pizza or pasta with ketchup. Although I was raised by food-wise open-minded parents, at least for Italian standards, I still detected a certain rigor within myself. Doing autoethnography has allowed me to dig out the roots of such rigor, tracing it back to my upbringing and connecting the self and my participants to disembodied constructs of culture and belonging.

## Becoming a daughter. Domestic role-playing in the kitchen

As a way of doing research that engages multiple layers of consciousness by connecting the personal to the cultural (Ellis 2004: 739), autoethnography has proved to be rather emotionally taxing to me. Researching the self in relation to the context and vice versa inevitably comes with introspection and with questioning of one’s perception and experiences. Making food is as much about materials as it is about emotions: because of seemingly “socially neutral” activities, such as peeling potatoes or cleaning garlic cloves, I gradually slipped into a specific character, which came with its perks and side effects and ultimately determined a lot of my experience in the field as a whole.

Since cooking is perceived in Surinamese domestic tradition, as in many other contexts, to be mainly a task performed by women, my presence in the kitchen was immediately welcomed as natural and undisputed. As a young foreign woman, however, the help I provided was always highly supervised by my participants, who clearly did not deem me experienced enough to take on most cooking tasks of my own initiative. Even though by the end of fieldwork me and my participants would jokingly agree about the fact that I had learnt a great deal about Surinamese food, and that I would be able to reproduce most of the basic and not-so-basic dishes I had eaten with them, my contribution in the kitchen remained that of an assistant. My surprise came from the fact that I caught myself being

instinctively comfortable with such an arrangement. I did not perceive my coadjutant role as limiting, and the preclusion from carrying out more substantial tasks, even after I had proven myself to be trustworthy and skilled enough, never frustrated me. I soon realized that the layout that me and my participants were reproducing was a match of my upbringing back home in Italy, where I had learnt how to cook by being a diligent sidekick to the women of my family. The fact that I was somehow back home, even while far from home, became obvious as my main participant started presenting me to everyone as her daughter.

Once conscious that food making is quite literally family making, doing fieldwork at the community center became a re-elaboration of childhood memories and domestic dynamics, which caused me an emotional strain that added depth not only to my research but to my personal growth as well. Although emotional intensity contributed significantly in assembling material that reflect the personal dimension of food making, autoethnography as a method impacted my research to a much further extent. Autoethnography brings the autobiographical self into conversation with theory (Snooks, Boon 2017: 220), placing lived experience and abstract thinking in a dialogue that dramatically enriches both. This was especially true given my interest in sensoriality, which expressively called for a direct and unmediated hands-on approach. By not only thinking of what it means to “be there”, but by actually “being there”, I have performed what Sandelowski calls full-bodied qualitative research (Sandelowski 2002), challenging all my senses in the attempt to make sense of the field as a sensorial being rather than as a disembodied theoretician. To consciously invest in the fieldwork those senses that are less trained to be integrated in a formal research context was not a completely light-hearted choice; if to interpret what my eyes saw felt like going down a well-known track, to unfold what the hands experienced when wrist-deep in the dough took a different set of skills and a certain level of comfortability with a sincere determination to disclose the self to the experience. If the only way to know is through a process of self-discovery (see Ingold 2013), autoethnography presents itself as the ideal approach toward embodied knowledge that transcends theoretical pretenses.

## A one-ingredient recipe - Doing clay work



Video still from “Eat the Artifact” © 2021

The investigation of the entangled relationship between edible objects and people has found an experimental application with clay work. By co-creating \*number to be defined\* ceramic *rotis*, me and my participants have considered food in its material qualities of shape and texture through a method that is playful and contemplative at once. The reasoning behind the choice of doing clay work is rooted in the desire to give dignity to the object that is ‘the *roti*’. *Rotis* have struck me for the density of cultural meaning they are endowed with, the perfection of their design - they are complex, layered and produced by highly skilled hands, yet extremely simple and functional- and their aesthetic beauty.

Heldke writes that kneading is an essential part of the theoretical-and-practical process of making bread, a part in which subjects’ and objects’ boundaries necessarily meet, touch and overlap” (Heldke 1992: 206). As one of my participants once said, firmly correcting me when I inferred that *rotis* are a sort of bread, “*roti* is not bread, *roti* is *roti*!”. Nonetheless, the blurring of the boundaries of the maker and the made fostered by the act of kneading bread is just as applicable to *roti* making. By substituting water and flour with clay, the *roti* stopped being food and started being “just” an object. Its mundane function was put aside and its qualities enhanced, and by cooking the clay-made-object in a kiln and transforming it into ceramic, the *rotis* were made permanent

-relatively- and given a different status. In this way I hoped to challenge the temporality of edible substances, and to make clear that to reproduce an object is to elaborate the emotions and affects carried by it as a vessel. The aim has been to explore a collaborative way of hanging out with objects, viewing them as participants, equally engaging hands, nails, intuitions and emotions in the interactions, to really grasp the vitality of material. Vitality as “the capacity of things - edibles, commodities, storms, metals - not only to impede and block the will and designs of humans but also to act as quasi-agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own”. (Bennet 2010: viii). Clay making is then viewed as a performative attempt to concretize the concept of “agential matter” (Barad 2016: 111), a “dynamic flow of the organic into the inorganic” (Malafouris 2015: ). In the process, muscle memory and its implications are explored and seen both in the movement performed by the participants and in the result of it: a pile of objects that look identical, yet each of them is unique.

## Physiology of food making

### sneezing & sweating

Since my first days in the field, I had been curious about the massive, noisy ventilator standing beside the stoves. The community center had windows on two sides of the room, and the space did not seem to lack circulation of fresh air. When I finally addressed the question to my key participant Miva, she laconically answered that it was “for the pepper”. Black pepper, one of the main ingredients of Indo-Surinamese cuisine, contains piperine, a substance that when in contact with the mucous membrane of the nose, triggers a sneeze with the purpose of getting rid of the irritant as fast as possible (Ravindran 2000).

On a day when the ventilator was jammed and the weather was too rough to keep the windows open, the whole kitchen was filled with the sound of sneezing. Kira and Anika had been cooking chicken thighs which were destined for some elderly people of the area, and as all the sneezing meant the meat was gonna be too spicy for the Dutch sensitive mouths who were gonna eat it, Miva got quite upset. Her reaction was contradictory: while she had once said that the spicier, the better, this time she complained about the chicken being done too much ‘the Surinamese way’.

The meals I have had with my participant have been more often than not come with bodily reactions to the spiciness. When at the kitchen table my cheeks got rosy, I started to sweat and pull my tongue out, Miva, Kira and Anika all clapped their hands and grinned. In Suriname, good food is spicy food,

and if someone at the table exhibits signs of overwhelm, that means that the cooking was done right. Pepper is a stimulant, it inflames the body and ignites the sense of belonging to a place where that fire feels at home. “The awakening of the senses is awakening the capacity for memory, of tangible memory; and to be awake is to remember, and one remembers through the senses, via substance” (Seremetakis 1993: 4). Or again: “As a person is tasting food or drinks, according to these views, a *physiological response* takes place in the person’s body. At the same time, the person multi-sensorially *experiences* qualities of the object that is tasted. (...) The outcome of this process is that a person *knows* about the object that has been tasted and through it has made sense of the world he or she lives in.” (Mann 2015: 23) At times, my participants had to integrate Dutch ideas about food in their process for the product of their cooking to work in a European context. When they cook for themselves, instead, they can rely on bodies which are physiologically adapted to homely cooking, and can be certain that the use of certain ingredients will warm up their hearts rather than merely burning their lips.

## Sleeping is caring - food-induced lethargy and collective celebration

Edible objects build connection not only by awakening of the senses, but by numbing them as well. During celebrations, Dutch or Hindustani indiscriminately, me and my participants would meet a few hours before lunchtime and engage in especially sophisticated cooking sessions. One of these sessions happened on the occasion of Holi, the religious indian festivity celebrating god Vishnu and his devotee Prahlada, but better internationally known as the festival of colors. Holi is largely celebrated by Indo-Surinamese groups across the globe and, and my participants were looking forward to it for weeks. I was solemnly told by Miva that we and a couple of her friends would be making Samosas, a typical indian dish which found its way to the rest of South Asia, Western Asia, Southeast Asia, the Mediterranean, and Africa through different names and forms. I could recall eating the italian version of it, the so-called “panzerotto”, on many occasions, while sitting on warm sidewalks after going clubbing with friends. So, on Holi, we gathered on the kitchen table a large pot filled with cooked string beans mixed with spices, a bowl of water mixed with flour which we would use to “glue” the edges of our samosas, and countless tiny balls of dough. A few hours later, we had lined up on the counter about fifty triangular dumplings. While most of them were neatly shaped, a few of them bore my signature: string beans spilling from the corners and a weirdly lumpy surface. Frying the samosas took as much effort as shaping them, and by the end of it, the sound of the dough sizzling in oil felt more familiar to me than my own voice. When we finally crushed on our chairs and devoured them with apple chutney, we appreciated the combination of the crunchy shell and its warm, spicy filling. While me and the other two cooks were sliding down on our chairs, Miva unfolded the large sofa bed between the window and the stoves. A few seconds after and without much explanation needed, all four of us found ourselves laying down in silence, watching a seventies Bollywood movie through

barely open eyes. We dozed off for about an hour; I gained my energies back before everyone else, and quietly stood up to make a large pot of jasmine green tea. Miva, feeling responsible for every movement happening at the center, immediately rubbed her eyes and stumbingly got up from the sofa to assist me. While sipping tea from our steamy cups, I felt a familiar nostalgia crawling onto me. I got reminded of the many Christmases, Easters and birthdays back home in Italy, where every feast ended with a collective nap. I recounted this memory with Miva, who laughed and immediately empathized: she confirmed that collective lethargy is the happy ending to every successful celebration.

I was curious about the hidden layers of physiological reactions to food, so I asked her to elaborate more on the idea. She explained that being sleepy after a meal means that the food was heavy and plenty; when everyone lays horizontally after eating, it's the best compliment for a chef. She recalled when, as a child in Suriname, her family would sometimes celebrate festivities by cooking chicken on the barbecue in the backyard, and everyone would be curling up right on the spot, still licking fingers and sucking the marrow from the last bones, and all sleep for the rest of the afternoon. Those were the times! Jane Bennet brings the capacity of food to make human bodies create new tissue as a blatant example of non-human agency at work (Bennet 2010: 41). Getting to their emotions by physiologically impacting their bodies, this episode shows another just as explicit case in which edible materials 'make' people.

## In Our Image and Likeness - The maker reflected in the made

A *leitmotif* that reoccurred along my fieldwork has been the culinary competitiveness of my collaborators, always eager to prove their skills to each other and often debating the right way to execute a recipe. Miva has often complained about having to adjust Kira's dishes by adding a little bit of this and a little bit of that, implying that there is indeed an exactness in food making that she had mastered while her friend was falling short. The next two excerpts from an interview with Miva exemplify the perceived difference with Kira in their attitude to cooking:

M - not everybody is the same like me, you know? There's different ways, eh... I say "Today, I want to cook *Aloo* (English: potatoes)": I put out my potato, I put out my water, I put out a pan, I put out a spoon, I put out maybe little bit salt, I put them here... and then I will make the gas on, I put the water in, put the *Aloo* in, I wait (...) I take it out, do this and this, and finish! but everyone is *niet so!* (English: not like this!) She puts the *Aloo*, then she runs for where the salt is, then she comes again, oh I have to put more water, oh I have not a spoon... but I am not so. I put everything for her here! spoon, knife, *kom* (English: bowl)... everything is here - but *doch* (English: nonetheless, yet), she (does) like (that)!

E - yeah... because one thing I learnt, for example, from Kira, making roti, is that in the beginning I was putting too little oil, because I was thinking it's more healthy. But then the roti was burning, not good... but then I put...

M - no, no no, no ...

E - ...too much oil...

M - no, no! is not that! The *dinges* (English: thing) is how you cook the roti! the pan must be warm, she must be finished making the roti, and then she says to you, now you put it in the pan. You go to the pan, you open the pan, put a little bit oil in the pan, *toh?* The pan is wet. Then you put your roti on, and you stop. You *halt* (English: stop), do this, stop, halt... finish! but if you are (gestures to clumsy movements), and look every time, and open and do, open... that is not good. Then what he (the roti) will do, if on the other side it's not good, and you do this, he will break! When I cook roti (...) I put the oil. I do so (gestures to pouring oil)... every place there is oil. I take the roti, I put inside (...) the roti will come up...

E - yeah...

M - then you go (gestures flipping)...

E - flip it...

M - flip! finished! (...)

E - so you know that you have to flip it when the roti makes a bubble?

M - yeah! don't go (gestures again to clumsy movements), leave (it)!

E - (...) She (Kira) told me instead that you have to move it!

M - *nee!* She is not good.

E- (laughs)

In the interview, Miva uses differences between her and Kira's approaches to food making as a metaphor to their divergences on more important matters. First of all, Miva blames Kira for running back and forth between the stove and the pantry while cooking, which results in confusion and uncleanness of the process. Secondly, Kira's tendency to pick on the *roti* while it's frying, instead of letting it cook undisturbed, allegedly causes the *roti* to break apart. I knew the matter went far beyond aesthetics; during meals, spoonfuls of *nasi* and *dahl* were unceremoniously unloaded before me, often dirtying the edges of the plates and spilling over the table, showing that the presentation of food was not necessarily a priority. When it came to roti, nonetheless, a neat roundness was expected, and when taught how to make them, most of my training went into learning how to shape them properly to prevent them from breaking rather than on ingredients ratios or the appropriate leavening times. When asked why shape is important, my participants scratched their heads; why is the right way indeed the right way?

This reminded me of something many Italians go through, that is learning how to make *gnocchi* with one's mother or grandmother. Sure, good food is food that tastes good, but a significant part of the appeal of *gnocchi* is about the process of giving form to them, and the amazement that comes from seeing how confident mom's hands look when rolling the dough and cutting it into identical tiny

bricks . A *gnocco* is only worth being called so if it looks like one; if it does not exhibit the signs of having gone through the correct process, it's just an unidentified clump of dough. When cooking for an international gathering, my Italian-ness is appreciated through the admiration for how regularly shaped my *gnocchi* look: the recognizable material quality of the *gnocco* as an object is proof that I am indeed an Italian, and not an impostor. The same is valid for my participants and *roti*, which if shaped in a certain way, make the belonging of the maker quite literally a tangible matter. The capability to create a perfect object equals to a perfected integration to a cultural background; in other words, a perfect object is the reflection to a perfect belonging. In this sense, the object one makes is perceived as a mirror of one's capabilities, integrity and an acknowledgment of cultural heritage. Objects become material extensions of a bond, bridging over the home where one finds herself now to the one that was left behind: "food items intimately linked with one's past may repair fractures by maintaining a continuity of the self in unfamiliar surroundings" (Snooks and Boon 2017: 229).



Miva holding a piece of fruit. Picture by the author.

Although many of my participants identifying as males were skilled cooks, culinary tasks are gender-stratified (Beoku-Betts 2002: 537) and some recipes are traditionally expressively passed on from mother to daughter, as in the case of *roti*. One of my oldest participants once told me about Sheila, her younger relative who moved to the Netherlands when fourteen years old to work, that she had not spent enough time around her mother to properly learn how to make *roti*. The direct link between the *roti* and the maternal figure exemplifies the resemblance of the metaphorical voice of the

maker with the “food voice”(see Deutsch 2004). What the woman expressed, not without a hint of cruelty, is the reciprocity existing between objects and human biographies, and the ability of the former to evoke mementos from the latter. Because it is ingrained in lived life, embodied knowledge cannot simply be reproduced without putting in the practice needed; it cannot be faked, as it requires actual experience. I have witnessed the unforgiving quality of embodied knowledge by observing how my goodwill could not make up for my unskilled hands. During my first session learning how to fry *roti*, Kira noticed I was breaking every doughy disc I made. She then showed me how to do it right, then handed the wooden spoon back to me and smiled with encouragement. I smiled back at her, filled with inspiration, then proceeded to awkwardly flip the *roti*, once again incorrectly.

Although I had witnessed the not always effective way of Kira to organize ingredients and tools while cooking, her *roti* are always delicious, no matter how crumbly or picked-on. The profused compliments on Kira’s *rotis* from guests usually caused for Miva equal amount of pride and resentment: if on the one hand she is glad the food she provides is appreciated by the community, the most praised bits are always put together by Kira’s hands.

I have noticed that different participants made remarks about how Kira is “more Surinamese” than Miva; her dutch has a thick Caribbean accent and she tends to slip into Hindi more often than not, she is a passionate and talented dancer and singer of traditional Surinamese music known as *kasako*, and last but not least, her *roti* are perfectly rounded.

# How to act when the chef is bleeding - On the importance of purity and cleanliness

"the dietary laws intricately model the body and the altar upon one another" (Mary Douglas 2002: xvi)

The concepts of cleanliness and purity have been at the center of anthropological debate since the establishment of the discipline. Acquired knowledge about cleanness, which is seemingly regulated by practical thinking, comes instead out of situated ideas and commonsensicality, and hygiene is much less of an innate human component than it is an imparted set of context-specific rules.

Cleanness and cooking go hand in hand in most culinary traditions (Douglas 1966). My mother says that cooking is half actually making food, and the other half is cleaning after oneself. What it means to keep a kitchen clean is not only highly contingent, but it reaches out to religious and cultural legacies that seem to transcend the experiencing of food, and instead are to be considered the main, *sine qua non* ingredients of every dish.

A blatant manifestation of such a connection between food and tradition came on a particularly tiresome day of february, which I only fully grasped a few months later thanks to an interview. I came to the community center after having had lectures at the University since nine in the morning; due to the busy schedule, I had not put a great deal of effort in my appearance, and the stress of commuting in a crowded train during COVID times had not helped. My hair was flat from wearing my beanie, and my energy levels were below my heels. As soon as I arrived at the center, I poured some hot water for myself, and handed two more glasses to Miva and Anika, who were busy slicing string beans. The women kindly encouraged me to sit down and enjoy my water, and told me I was not required to help cooking for that day. I found it a bit odd, since I saw how swamped they were with cooking tasks, but I reckoned they saw the dark circles around my eyes and decided to get me off the hook. Months later, during an interview, the episode found a new and much different explanation. Miva was telling me about hindu religious customs that she lives by, and mentioned as one of them the fact that when some of her younger collaborators are on their period, she avoids them to help out in the kitchen and touch any of her food. According to traditional hindu beliefs, menstruating women are polluted and therefore forbidden to share common spaces and carry out housework (Dunnavant 2012). I immediately recalled the episode back in winter, and realized she had precluded me from cooking activities because she assumed from my sluggish looks that I was menstruating. In her own words:

“I don’t ask you, if you are ill or so... but I can see it on your face! I know that, because I am a nurse, and I know when you are there and what you are doing (...) but I don't say you! I don't say anyone. But I know!”  
(Miva, 13.02.2021)

My participants’ high regard for cleanliness in the kitchen taps into the Hindustani religious and cultural heritage, and the adherence to Hindustani standards goes parallel to the compliance with European hygienic parameters. The edible objects produced, therefore, are subjected to regulations according to two different and sometimes competing guidelines, the Dutch one and the Surinamese one.

## Precious Flavours

In chapter ‘how to act when the chef is bleeding’, I have shown how the reinforcement of cleaning habits acquired in the homeland helps in the maintenance of a sense of belonging to the original country. As I have mentioned in my introduction regarding the rigid culinary education I have received in Italy, the very existence of the dichotomic division between ‘home food’ and ‘outside/other food’ suggests the exclusionary effects of food practices (Bailey 2017). The performance of food making, from grocery shopping to dishwashing, does reinforce ideas about belonging and identity.

In this chapter, I focus on how certain materials perform exceptionally in the process of furthering links with the homeland. These are the rare ingredients that are difficult to have access to in the Hague and which, because of this scarcity, become fantastically precious bits of home. The sensorial experience of smells, textures and flavours which were perceived as given, even routinely, before migrating, eventually convert into a treat reserved to special occasions and become powerful triggers of nostalgia and yearning.

While most of the staples of Surinamese cuisine which don’t grow in the Netherlands, such as plantain and cassava, are readily available in any exotic shop and even in some supermarkets, some other ingredients are virtually nonexistent in the country. This is the case for *sataura*, an indian spice mix also known as Batrisu Powder in English, or Katlu powder in Hindi. Sataura is a mix of 32 spices, highly recommended for lactating women and packed with vitamins and nutrients. According to my participants, sataura is impossible to buy in Europe, even in Amsterdam or London where the established diasporic communities integrated their culinary customs to an extent that makes every ingredient more or less easily accessible. Even Amazon, the no-brainer solution for any material need, offers merely a diluted version which has nothing to do with the nourishing authentic version.

My participants were able to get their hands on a jar of sataura out of a fortuitous accident. Kira's sister, who moved to The Hague from Paramaribo when she was seventeen and is now in her eighties, invited us to pick up some ingredients she had brought back from a recent trip to Suriname. Me and Kira thanked the woman for the plastic bag filled with glass bottles and wrapped goods, headed back to the community center and started cooking potatoes with curry masala and *roti*. Kira, after suspiciously smelling from the jar that was supposed to contain curry masala, excitedly shouted something in Hindi to Miva, and the two women clapped their hands. Miva explained me that the sister had mistaken a jar of precious sataura for curry masala. They did not intend to go back and swap it for the intended product; on the contrary, they decided to prepare it right on the spot and eat it with *roti*. Kira carefully mixed a few teaspoons from the jar with some water and sugar and boiled the concoction. We consumed the treat by scooping it from our plates with plain *rotis*, doing what in Italy we called "scarpetta", that is, bread-dipping. I took a few seconds to register my sensorial response to the sauce, which I could not compare to anything I had tasted before. The taste was rounded and rich, almost velvety, producing a warm, tingly feeling in my body. Miva and Kira nodded at each other and produced some ecstatic sounds after every few bites. They each gave birth two times in Suriname, and reminisced the unique flavour of sataura being an integral part of nursing times; it is common for lactating women to consume sataura within *laddoos*, a sphere-shaped usually containing grated coconut and dried fruit. We all felt warmed up by the food, and in their case, by the tender memories that the blend of spices was able to evoke. According to Miva, a single serving of sataura provides "vitamins for a year". Judging from the amounts I just had, I answered, I will have enough vitamins for the next fifty years. We all laughed and started piling up our plates.

About a month after, me, Miva, Kira and Anika were sitting at the table snacking on *bakabana*, a typical Surinamese street food consisting of fried bananas, recalling our favourite dishes from the cooking sessions we had had recently. I thought back of the simple yet exquisite combination of sataura and *roti*, and wished out loud that we could replicate the experience. Anika's eyes lit up, and I felt her utmost attention turning to me. Miva and Kira looked askance at me, and I immediately knew I had said a word too many. Later, Miva explained to me that the rarity of sataura makes it a coveted ingredient, and if not treasured with jealousy, guests will nonchalantly appear from everywhere to claim a taste.

While it is true that familiar food can "anchor individuals within their new culture" (Snooks, Boon 2017: 231), it works simultaneously the other way around, sensorially carrying the individual back to memories of the homeland. For this reason, the scarcity of a familiar food considerably increases its connective virtue: as Lisa Law writes, the absence of familiar material culture, and its subtle

evocations of home, is surely one of the most profound dislocations of transnational migration (Law 2001: 277).

## Commensality



Oven baked chicken, string beans with garlic, ananas, chickpea stew with cumin, pepper and tomatoes, wine and chili sauce. Picture by the author.

When growing up, the kitchen table was the catalyst center of our family. Everything was discussed over meals, from the routinely happenings of the day to the most delicate subjects. I remember a banner on the wall of my kindergarten canteen, reciting the Italian proverb “*chi non mangia in compagnia è un ladro o una spia*”, that is, whoever doesn't enjoy meals in the company of others is either a thief or a spy. The social implication of commensality has been strongly impressed onto me, as well as a sort of officiality that comes with it. Getting our lunch interrupted by the phone ringing or the doorbell chiming always got my father raving about what sort of erratic behavior could ever lead someone to bother during meals. For Italians, eating is something you do sitting down all together at a table, without any distraction or need for entertainment, taking away from the acknowledgment of the moment of bonding. I was interested in how the migratory background of my participants interacted

with the elevation of the kitchen table to a status of social shrine, and the relation of commensality to materiality altogether.

In his study of food and eating practices among Indian migrants in The Netherlands, Ajay Bailey shows how “practices such as fasting, food avoidance and ceremonial consumption of foods in the transnational family space or in the communal space with co-ethnic migrants creates a sense of belonging to the country or even to specific regions” (Bailey 2017). Sharing a sensorial pleasure for edible materials as a research method has allowed me and my participants to get attuned to each other - or sometimes disconnect - through either synchronized or unsynchronized reactions to flavours.

Miva’s desserts tend to be rather consistent in their composition; she mixes eggs, sugar and flour with whatever scrap ingredient she has stored in the fridge, be it sweet potato or cherries, and after about half an hour in the oven, one of her cakes comes out. She always uses the same oval, glass casserole. One day she had made a raisin cake, and after one of our usual lunches together, she placed it in the middle of the table, readily cut in irregular squares. Six hands reached for one of the smooth-textured, sugary cubes, but one pair of hands remained interlaced under the table. On that day, we had another non-Surinamese guest at the table aside from me; one of the members of the art collective that shares the building with Miva had joined for lunch. All heads turned toward the owner of the lingering hands, interrogating him about the rejection. With a kind shake of head, he said he was already quite full and did not enjoy candied fruit anyway, and encouraged us to enjoy the cake on his behalf as well. The five women at the table said “ooh”, while suspiciously keeping their eyes on him while Leila, the oldest of the group, glanced at me and joked that the newcomer was not quite as Surinamese yet as I had become. Miva placed her jeweled hand on my shoulder in a motherly way, visibly proud.

It was not the flawless execution of a dish or textbook knowledge on Surinamese customs that made me feel like I had been truly integrated and accepted by my participants, but the simple enjoyment of a meal right until its end. To fully dive in the experience, going along the process and keeping up with an unspoken but punctual communal tempo; through conscious eating with my participants, I have investigated when something “tastes good” as moment of value (see Mann 2015), and experienced the communal appreciation of edible objects as an embodied technique to build trust and familiarity.

Doing fieldwork has challenged all my previous assumptions on commensality, including the idea of connection over food as limited in time to breakfast, lunch and dinner and in space to the kitchen table. I have had as meaningful connections with my participants over cassava chips in the car as during “sitting down and wishing each other bon appetit” kind of meals. Connection over edible objects cannot be situationally confined as these do not exhaust their meaning when transferred to a different context, but rather acquire different connotative nuances. To peel layers of meaning off

objects (Bodei 2015) is to insert them in different contexts, so as to observe their fluid performativity and to grasp the breadth of their capacity to convey meaning. Anna Tsing, talking about the cross-cultural fascination toward the matsutake mushroom, eloquently says that “it wasn’t the smell or the taste, but the ability of the mushroom to build personal ties that made it so powerful” (Tsing: 125). Food is indeed “not only substance but *shared substance*” (Seremetakis 1993: 4), it is a connotated matter which not only facilitates but also participates in interpersonal exchange, seamlessly adapting its tone to the circumstances.

## The language of matter

To appreciate commensality by focussing on the material exchange rather than on the verbal communication has propelled me to reconsider the magnitude of the concept of ‘sharing’. While I could discuss things verbally in English with most of my participants, with others - more significantly Kira, with whom I have cooked on a daily basis - I have been confronted with a language barrier. The spoken communication between me and Kira has been minimal; after getting acquainted with each other, we established a common ground of shared words which allowed our cooking routine to function. “*Proeff!*” (Try!), she would whisper after dropping small pieces of *roti* on a tiny plate next to me, or in the case of liquid foods like chutney or dahl, by simply placing her open hand smeared with food in front of me. I would intently taste and exclaim “mmh!”, or “*lekker!*” (delicious!), but she would have already turned her back away from me to stir the pot, smiling. The lack of verbal fluency, which I initially cursed as an obstacle to my inquiries, became a possibility for attempting alternative forms of material-based communication. I attempted to “use the gap between words and the worlds they carry” (Mann 2015) in my advantage; when words could not bring us together, the use of materials became a necessity in order to communicate, therefore creating a spontaneous non-verbal articulation of our thoughts.

Willing to share a little of my own with whom had shared so much with me, I once cooked *pasta al pomodoro e acciughe*, pasta with tomato sauce and anchovies, for seven of my participants. Remembering all the times my participants had praised a food for being “sweet and spicy”, I reckoned that the fruitiness of the tomatoes combined with the tangy kick of the anchovies would be appreciated. I was right, and all around the table people took second and third servings of my pasta. Kira had previously only seen me cook under strict supervision; I was not to be fully trusted, a foreigner who gets perplexed before the most banal of tasks and gets fascinated by fruit my participants had been eating since they were toddlers. This time, she had witnessed me self-sufficiently cooking for the first time, exhibiting the kind of embodied confidence around ingredients that can only be trusted. As she grabbed a generous amount of pasta with her hands and

mixed it with a spoonful of fruit salad and greens, in a way that would utterly confuse any Italian, I knew my cooking had passed the test. From that day onwards, Kira gave me more responsibilities in the kitchen and paid more attention to my reactions when trying her dishes, a sign that my own food had told her on my behalf that I was entitled to have a say in the matter. In this way, food has acted as a substitute for the language me and Kira did not have in common. Through sharing food, we engaged in a material conversation in which edible objects, mute yet eloquent, inert yet in the constant process of channeling our needs, came with values and weights, just like words do.



Kira cooking *nasi*. Pictures by the author.



Cutting and tasting ananas. Pictures by the author.



Making *phulauri*. Pictures by the author.

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