8-12-2016

Spirits in the Food: A Pedagogy for Cooking and Healing

Sumita Dutta

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SPIRITS IN THE FOOD: A PEDAGOGY FOR COOKING AND HEALING

by

SUMITA DUTTA

Under the Direction of Tiffany King, PhD

ABSTRACT

Cooking is mind, body, spirit work. What’s possible when we ‘drop in’ to our bodies when cooking? We begin noticing what we are energetically bringing to the food we make. This creative project practices a pedagogy that works with food to create healing space. Healing, as it is defined here, is not void of discomfort nor is it happiness all the time. Who haunts your domestic space? Who is at your back when you cook? This project finds information and sacred knowledge in the food we cook and eat; it reflects back to us deeply buried truths regarding our traumas, joys, and subjectivity. This pedagogy holds the potential for participants to bring “new meanings” to food, and thereby, be activated as cultural producers cooking up the next chapter in our peoples’ creation stories (Anzaldúa 103). This project is documented as an auto-ethnographic tale from the perspective of the practitioner, using erotic storytelling to keep fire in the pages and a methodology of refusal to “determine the length of the [academy’s] gaze” (Tuck and Ree 640).

INDEX WORDS: Decolonization, Healing, Pedagogy, Food Studies, Auto-ethnography
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SUMITA DUTTA

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2016
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by

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Georgia State University
August 2016
DEDICATION

For my mother and grandmothers

who wrote the chapters before me

and through which

I lead this afterlife.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful for the love, support, and guidance that saw me through this project. It was made possible by the following:

Dr. Tiffany King, thank you for advising this project in a way that aligned with my rhythms as a student, educator, and creative person. Your guidance made it possible for the many pieces of this project to come together organically. Thank you for classes and writing prompts that asked me to reach deep down into that wisdom which colonization tries to obliterate.

Dr. Amira Jarmakani, without you and Andy Reisinger’s support, there would have been nowhere to cook! Thank you both for helping me secure an amazing, demonstration kitchen on campus and bring this pedagogy to life for my students.

Dr. Jillian Ford, thank you for being ultra supportive of this work and getting excited with me about refusal. Thank you for practicing that radical form of self-acceptance in the classroom, which makes it possible for others to do the same.

Mel Medalle, Theron Wilkerson, Lucia Leandro Gimeno, Rebeca Escalona Rosas, and Sean Saifa Wall, thank you for coming over for dinner, sharing your recipes, and cooking your spirit into the food. Our gatherings were such good medicine. Thank you.

Noel Didla, thank you for the gift of radical, honest, and loving sisterhood. What you do in the kitchen is art and healing.
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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 About me

In our home in Durham, North Carolina there is a shrine to Hindu deities inside a closet in my parents’ bedroom. My mom would say Sumi come sit with me while I pray and I would say No. So I will not pretend to be holy and homely here because I was not about that life. Inside the closet shrine my mom mixed sandalwood paste to dot her forehead and she would find and interrupt me in order to place the mixture on my forehead too. It was a portal to the cool and wet.

Imagining the ancestors who did this before us, I wonder if this cool-wet felt good against the heat of being brown. My father says his mother in her later days would lounge with her breasts out to find relief from the heat. (When people ask where I get my breasts from, I say My Dad, who passed along these mangos from his ma.) My elders’ brown seems like bone and muscle covered with warm mud that sat each day in the sun, lifted dust, and set some free for me. My vitiligo marked me—my forever chandan—a reminder that I am both land and water.

This is one creation story that makes me “conscious of my debt to all people who make life possible” (Lorde i). A reminder that my life’s work is to make the meaning of my inheritances known.

1.2 What is healing?

In Beloved, Toni Morrison (1987) describes what I think is the labor of healing: “Freeing yourself was one thing; claiming ownership of that freed self was another” (111-112). I think a pathway to claiming the self is through creating meaning for ourselves. This project is rooted in meaning-making—of self, energy, legumes, green cardamom pods, and breasts like mangos, to name a few. Morrison is writing of formerly enslaved Black folks; freedom and Black subjectivity. In my project, I will practice the spiritual work of cultivating subjectivity. I
understand this labor—of cultivating subjectivity, or intimacy with the self and others—as reaching deep into the well within us and making the meaning(s) of our life experiences known. Through reaching for the spirits that walk with me—my ancestors, me as a girlchild, and my spirit friend/confidante—I learn to situate myself, what I have inherited, and what ‘set up’ I am working with. What are my lessons to learn and why are they distinctly mine? I am impacted as Sumi and I am also a being which energy moves through.

Healing can be understood as the practice of creating emotional safety and resource. How do we get there? I consider how we often deny ourselves access to the depth and information stored in our bodies. Fear, avoidance, and self-deception are often tools we use to protect ourselves in traumatic situations; however, they often become the standard by which we move through our world and our relationships. I appreciate the untitled painting below by Malayalam artist K.G. Babu from his series, *In Spirit with Nature* (2012).

![Figure 1 A spirit with a deep well. Art by K.G. Babu.](image-url)
The young girl’s eyes are painted wide, full, and embodying both land and water. Her gaze is the look of equanimity—the ability to “look over our experience without being caught by what we see” (Washam, “Equanimity, The Sweet Joy of the Way”; emphasis mine). What moves us towards being grounded in our experience—present—yet not clinging to it? I draw inspiration from such a gaze.

Healing has been posited as a curated pathway to personal change. It is also deemed as that which is worth doing because it may bring personal achievement and success—a framing that embeds it in the structures of capitalism and colonialism. In other words, one practices yoga or meditation to make a ‘better’ or more valuable self. Capitalistic models of wellness rob us of a healing that is wide, generative, and tied to the whole truth of the land that holds our bodies. These models are haunted by U.S. dominance and colonial patterns of ‘enlightenment’ and theft (or enlightenment through theft). Eve Tuck and C. Ree (2013) remind us that, “Haunting is the cost of subjugation. It is the price paid for violence, for genocide” (643). I connect being conscious of (our) trauma to interrupting ourselves in the “process of making-killable […] [which] transform[s] beings into masses that can be produced and destroyed […] always already objects ready for violence, genocide, and slavery” (Tuck and Ree 649). Knowing this, we can hold a context for ourselves as oppressed peoples, trying to get free and escape a larger scheme of disposability, as we navigate a haunted society. Settler colonialism’s regime presents a form of healing where folks are encouraged to “become enlightened entrepreneurs” (Lobell, “Authentic Business Success”). Healing for the sake of better navigating the free market pushes forth a neoliberal force; neoliberalism is not seen as anti-healing. Sites such as “Authentic Business Success” (“where passionate professionals become enlightened entrepreneurs”) promote the mindfulness practices of Eckhart Tolle, a white German cis man who is a popular
and financially successful spiritual author. Olivia Lobell (2011), curator of Authentic Business Success Ltd. invites people to watch a talk between Eckhart Tolle and Oprah Winfrey suggesting that folks “take [their] time, be present, listen consciously and start using the power of now to create the business and life you’ve always dreamed of” (“Authentic Business Success”). The practice of mindfulness in this context is being marketed to folks who desire to be more enlightened capitalists. Healing in this sense shows no threat to capitalistic and colonialist gains and works to “[manage] those who have been made killable” because it centers individuals’ ability to function better and more prosperously within capitalism (Tuck and Ree 642). This form of healing does not make connections between personal growth and radical social transformation. And as with colonized lands where white houses and white law books anxiously protect the American dream at the expense of those made-killable, this enlightenment healing holds an air that tastes of “looming but never arriving guilt” (Tuck and Ree 642).

Healing is not necessarily happiness all the time nor void of discomfort. When we allow energy to move through us, we begin living in our edges and hybridity. Making meaning of our lives is an ongoing conversation, not fixed, nor destiny. Our edges; we can understand them as bodily the place where our skin and the air meet, and emotionally the precipice where we meet, feel, and are impacted by the ‘outside’ and the other. Living in our edges can bring us closer to our breath, to feel air enter and leaving our bodies, and a reminder that our bodies can and do take in and release energy. Time, memory, and bodies (of people and water) fold into each other and move through us. Jacqui Alexander (2005) articulates the inheritance and traversing of grief across geography, and our edges are certainly a shore line where the sea foam of time, memory, and bodies lap. Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) speaks of the potential of these edges when she writes, “Soy un amasamiento, I am an act of kneading, of uniting and joining that not only has produced
both a creature of darkness and a creature of light, but also a creature that questions the definitions of light and dark and gives them new meanings” (103).

1.3 How do I create healing space?

I try to dissolve the shitty things within buildings, classrooms, and home spaces that make bodies and spirits feel contained, surveilled, shamed, and extracted from. Power structures control the ways in which conversations can be had. I read the emotionality of spaces. Creating “safe” space is difficult in university classrooms in the U.S. where Black peoples built the buildings under chattel slavery and students are encouraged to be ‘global citizens,’ meaning colonial shape shifters. When I moved to Atlanta, Georgia in 2014 I was introduced to the handful of queer and trans* people of color organizations in the city, which is to say that I attended many meetings. I found these meetings missed my desire to be spiritually fed and literally fed (rarely any love-filled food). I left knowing who could talk ‘good,’ who had crushes on whom, and disappointed with the lack of deep friendship and emotional connection. I told the good folks in these orgs, “I appreciate you and I gotta get out of here.”

In the university classroom, I predominantly use language and body movements to deconstruct this haunted space. I told my forty students, “Look I don’t believe in grades. But the regulation is that I have to grade you.” I’m not badass for this, just honest. On the first day of their introduction to women’s, gender, and sexuality studies class I mapped my feminist genealogy. I shared the ways in which my brown vitiligo girlchild body has been gazed at and how my feminist politics is a way to return the gaze. I told them that this class is titled “women” but really race, class, food, caste, nation, dis/ability, emotions, healing, freedom, desire, power
A student read a line in the syllabus and said aloud, “We’re gonna be cooking in here?”

“Yes.”

I believe cooking and eating together can create healing space. Cooking relies on our senses—when to stir, how much spice to pinch, layering flavors—so it allows both the culinary ‘product’ and us as the practitioner/cook to “[create] an identity as we go along” (Marcos date unknown). Cooking is a profound space for touching and feeling subjectivity as made and re-made. Evoking recipes, flavors, seasonal, and geographic foods is to also evoke desire through specificity, ancestral knowledge (such-and-such’s recipe), and orients us to our life force, through taste. Cooking is an art where the fruits of our labor are not anxiously protected nor preserved. It’s made with the knowledge that it can never be exactly re-created yet it wields our attention to the present. Food, because it tells a story of power, is also a place of struggle.

Much of the food my mom made for us in my girlhood tasted watery, well-spiced yet under salted. It was cooked fast with little depth. The kitchen in our home, the site of many traumas in my family, is haunted by what could pop off; the possibility of domestic violence mixed with CNN sounds in the air. Much of my mom’s food was cooked under obligation and patriarchal dominance. Recently when I visited Durham, NC (home) I asked her to teach me how to make goat curry. I’d eaten this dish many times, prepared by her. As we prepared the goat together, I cracked jokes and the energy was playful and warm between us. In hindsight, I see how we co-created and restored the dish from former trauma and obligation. The meat was tender and the gravy was layered with cumin, cinnamon stick, cardamom, clove, turmeric, and coriander. I prepared it beside her, in my edges as her queer, two-tone, young(est) girlchild-turned-woman. When I cook my mom’s recipes for my queer friends and lover, I wonder if there should all be in the title.
is some cultural alchemy which occurs. Without meaning to, I cook my edges into the food—it tastes different than when she makes it, yet it’s kindred to her dish. I give it “new meanings” (Anzaldúa 103). Being in my edges means I move with trust of “that power which rises from our deepest and nonrational knowledge” (Lorde 53). This project is born from that place. Inhabiting our edges is part of healing work, as we have come to distrust our creative life force; what Lorde (1978) describes as the “erotic […] resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female¹ and spiritual plane (53).

Cooking one’s embodiment into the food is a way of understanding how porous the body is; energy just moves with and through it. Right now, I’m in (romantic) love. The food I’ve been cooking is full of ghee (clarified butter) and has a real luscious texture. Recently I baked a blackberry & strawberry pie for my folks (chosen, not bio) and made a homemade, flaky crust for it. When combining the ingredients for the crust, you add small pieces of cold, unsalted butter over time and hand mix it into the flour. When it’s well mixed, you gradually add a ¼ cup of ice water, roll it into a ball, and leave it in the fridge for an hour. Then you take the ball of dough, and using a rolling pin, create the shape of your crust. The motions of kneading and pressing the dough, combining the flour, sugar, and butter as it turns from small crumbles to smooth dough, feels meditative. The food I make tastes best when I’m inspired to wield it into being. I experience the pleasure of cultivating something, something that I have a taste, smell, and touch for. Cooking is a methodology for cultivating intimacy with my friends and lover; to each I add small amounts of butter and knead with the warmth of my hands. Mind-separate from-body thinking, rooted in the Enlightenment era vis-à-vis colonialism, deprives us of the wet, soft, salty, smooth, heat-imbued elements through which our lives are made. I almost said ‘qualities’

¹ I interpret “female” here not to be fixed to biological sex but rather repression and devaluation of feminine energy.
of life, but what about water (to draw on the elements) can be broken into bits? Water moves in and through every hole and the body, again, is porous and predisposed to being impacted. Healing is knowing that we can be impacted.

Cooking with each other allows us to co-create space. It is mind/body/spirit work. My sister friend Noel Didla said of our South Asian sister circle, the Matti Collective, that we create a collective memory of each other through cooking and eating together. She offered the insight that sharing food as we get to know each other allows us to have an appetite for each other’s quirks. I cook with my students and friends to create a context for each other that engages multiple senses. In the classroom much of the muscle that students are asked to work is a cognitive one. Sight is used for texts and whiteboards. When I cooked spaghetti squash with my students it changed the status quo of what we were here ‘to do’ and how we were supposed to learn together. Their tools were olive oil, garam masala, salt, and a fork for scraping squash. The classroom held a smell of yellow fried squash patties. These were the ingredients for spatial alchemy; transforming a sterile classroom with mayonnaise-colored walls and co-creating a context for each other to exchange knowledge that tricked the codes of confinement, surveillance, and competition normally found/performed in the classroom.

Creating healing space through cooking is possible. I think back to the queer and trans* people of color organizations in Atlanta and the specific folks who have had me over in their homes to cook meals and vice versa. I should have known food was my ‘glue’ when my joy during the celebration of the end of ICE\(^2\) detainers in Fulton County came less from the speeches given and more from the aunties’ homemade tamales and Modelo. I think certain things in our

\(^2\) The Georgia #Not1More coalition of social justice-based organizations in the state won the fight to end Immigration and Customs Enforcement detainers where undocumented immigrants were being held in detention without probable cause.
body come ‘online’ through the process of cooking and eating together. Building off what my sis Noel said, the food we share are makers and guardians of our memory and time together. My project seeks to create healing spaces through cooking with specific queer and trans* people of color who are trying to get free. My project is a model for folks wanting to cultivate deep friendship and emotional connection in their circles, organizations, classrooms, and collectives. Trauma-conscious cooking can allow the preparation of meals to be a ceremony while the food creations form the altars; our winding spirits in the rice and stew.

1.4 Teaching Philosophy

I find myself ready to step into the role of teacher because I’ve learned some things worth imparting. I’ve witnessed myself change over time and this inspires me to be a practitioner. In my girlhood, I looked up to older teenage girls and middle-aged women as divalicious wells of knowledge and information. I listened as they had conversations on the phone, I came alive when they gave me advice, and I sat near them and asked questions whenever possible. My cousin, Joyati, was the main one whose room I would spend hours in, smelling her perfume and listening to her drama. She was loud, colored her hair, and lied her ass off to live the life she wanted, which meant she had much wisdom for me. I’ve come to understand that she was one of my teachers—sex education, Bengali patriarchy in our family, how to be dykey and femme 101—Joy showed me the ropes and I revered her. Our relationship cultivated the good sense I carry in my muscle memory which continues to lead me through this life. That perfection is not desirable. That getting along with folks, laughing from the gut, and being deliberate is an art form, aka the way I choose to create meaning.

I gave Joy the gift of being witnessed. And by being who she is, in all her quirks, she made space for me to widen my shape and embrace my weird. Teaching incorporates both, being
impacted and being impactful, being witnessed and living in my edges so that others have room to do the same. Living in our edges means we are bringing our creative life-force into our day to day. That we do not succumb to mediocrity and instead choose to “deep[ly] participate” in our life-making (Lorde 59). Ways of learning and creating knowledge which depend on rote memorization, emulating elitism (aka frontin), centering whiteness, colonialism & imperialism (extracting from colored peoples and the land), respectability, and cognitive > bodily understandings (mind over body hierarchies) are the dominant way. They mirror the U.S. law and other oppressive forces I struggle to bring down. Teaching allows for a transformative way; an experiment in new forms of being and conditions of possibility that reduce harm, both bodily and psychic.

Honestly what draws me to teaching in community is the creation of space for healing and getting free. Healing (for me) = cultivating intimacy with the energies which move through us and our lives. These energies are rooted in histories both personal and structural. Healing, I imagine, allows us to be still in a myriad of experiences. Furthermore, I imagine it allows for equanimity under conditions of chaos aka the unjust world we live in. In teaching, I encourage folks through a framework of remembering rather than learning anew. Remember childhood and garner information. Sit with the energies and engage multiple senses. If there is a haunting, attempt to write or name it with clarity. These are the teachings that move us to futurity because we reach into our bodies and give ourselves permission to witness and change.

My teaching philosophy is distinctly unmotivated by Western notions of objectivity, validity, and rigor. For me, a testament to the wellness of teaching is that we (as a community) find meaning and value in how well we groove together as a group, rather than individuals’ accomplishments and successes. My teaching centers emotional expansion because developing
our ‘smarts’ includes reading emotionality—of ourselves, others, and the structures within which we live. My teaching practices a re-centering of the day-to-day and for students to choose not to “look the other way from our experience” (Lorde 58).

In a learning community, I encourage folks to be in their bodies when making truth claims—a ‘living’ theory. In a political education seminar on debt and gender—part of a series of free community seminars organized by Project South in Atlanta, GA—I asked participants to write their own debt testimonios. I asked them to consider what feelings debt brings up for them. How does the word situate itself in their memory? How does it make their body feel and/or what sensations come up? Testimonio writings allow participants to interrupt dominant narratives about who they are and make space for subjectivity. The creative challenge is for folks to share their story in a way that is deeply layered, nuanced, and embodied.

My cousin Joy was a teacher to me because she was always coming alive, drawing me into the present moment. And learning from her was less about emulating her and more about being alongside a sister who was forging a path for herself. Teaching is generative when the relationship is symbiotic—folks are choosing me as their teacher and we are cultivating intimacy. And if the learning is not generative, I am contributing to their miseducation. As a friend once shared with me, perhaps we can only get free by being free. My experience teaching class inside a public university in Atlanta, GA has shown me that there are ways to leverage one’s power as professor (head of the room) and create space for collective decision making around readings and assignments. When I speak to my students in this space, I share with them that I am also a student in grad school and that I hope to create the type of classroom which I’ve longed for. Sharing my desires to feel free in the classroom creates clearing(s) where hearts and minds are engaged and power is transformed. I would like the folks I teach to witness that a
fierce brown woman with queer sensibilities was here, loving and lounging, and she made space for us to be(come) more of ourselves.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review processes the following: (a) written pedagogy which centers liberation and marginalized beings, (b) forms of spiritual labor that believe in the possibility of personal and collective, radical transformation, (c) testimonio writing that seeks to heal splits between the mind-body-spirit and garner knowledge and information from that healing, and (d) food studies texts on the possibility of queer desire in kitchen spaces and domestic sites which are often rendered hetero-patriarchal.

2.1 Liberation Pedagogy

The same sister friend mentioned above, Noel, handed me Brazilian educator Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) inside the Black-owned Community Book Center in New Orleans, LA in 2014. "You need to read this. You can do it in a day," she told me. Freire's text foregrounds the practice of written pedagogy [emphasis on written, as this teaching form is sure to have been practiced and embodied long before this text] that envisions liberation. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire (1970) describes the beauty of pedagogy that centers oppressed peoples who seek to undo the world as it is and "discover themselves as its permanent re-creators" (69). Freire (1970) gives language to this shifting of worldsense, calling it conscientizacao, critical consciousness, which "refers to learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions and to take actions against the oppressive elements of reality" (35).

The text highlights liberation as a mutual process between the oppressed and "those who fight beside them":

[...] the more radical the person is, the more fully he or she [sic] enters into reality so that, knowing it better, he or she can better transform it. This individual is not afraid to confront, to listen, to see the world unveiled. This person is not afraid to meet the people or to enter into dialogue with them. This person does not consider himself or herself the proprietor of history or of all people, or the liberator of the oppressed; but he or she does commit himself or herself, within history, to fight at their side (Freire 39).

bell hooks' pedagogical text, *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope* (2003) was impacted by Freire's work and adds to critical pedagogy within feminist thought through an intersectional analysis of race, gender, and class struggles in the U.S. hooks reminds us of the importance to create educational spaces where visions of the future we do want are given room to breathe. hooks (2003) warns that, "When we only name the problem, when we state complaint without a constructive focus on resolution, we take away hope. In this way critique can become merely an expression of profound cynicism, which then works to sustain dominator culture" (xiv). In *Teaching Community*, the classroom as the only designated space where learning can happen is refuted. For educators, the ability to “use the language that can speak to the heart of the matter” allows for a far more democratic educational practice which “[opens] up the space of learning […] and challenge ourselves constantly to strengthen our teaching skills” (hooks 43).

hooks is privy to the ways in which institutional structures designated for learning (colleges, classrooms, and I argue, even the physicality and associations with these buildings) reinforce hierarchy (45):

I have known many brilliant students who seek education, who dream of service in the cause of freedom, who despair or become fundamentally dismayed because colleges and universities are structured in ways that dehumanize, that lead them away from the spirit of community in which they long to live their lives (48).

hooks encourages educators to practice sharing “knowledge in a manner that does not reinforce existing structures of domination” (hooks 45). This includes reorienting students and learners to reclaim education as a realm of resistance, healing, and growth, more than a
‘requirement’ or obligation in order to make it (hooks 43). This reorientation is practiced by bucking the dominant authoritarianism in institutional spaces and reorienting students to “the ‘magic’ that is always present when individuals are active learners” (hooks 43).

My project centers social and political transformation though democratic education which hooks’ and Friere’s critical pedagogy texts lay the foundation for. However, the political education I seek to facilitate takes root in the body. My teaching philosophy considers the body to be the site of socio-political transformation. Without widening critical consciousness and change within the mind/body/spirit, I believe it is close to impossible for there to be transformation of structural oppressions. My pedagogy centers cooking as a mindful, meditative, and body-based pedagogical practice that is concerned with a student or participant’s present rather than “ascrib[ing] value to [their] potential” as radical thinkers (Cacho 162). This mind/body/spirit work of cooking and healing is interested in growth and change, however the entry point of that change is our own traumas. Since I have had that realization, I wonder how we expect change from the state if we are not willing to labor the transformation of domination within our ourselves, families, and communities.

2.2 Spiritual Labor and Teacher-as-Practitioner

In cultivating liberatory spaces, co-creating a standard of safety that is often not one we are met with in our day-to-day life seems key. For some, this will be very new and take adjustment. The purpose is not to create a “perfect” space as no space is ‘pure’ nor is that desirable. Participants and teachers alike do say problematic things, hurt each other, enact power and privilege dynamics. We can, however, utilize the classroom, kitchen, and workshop spaces to engage in a process of learning mindful communication skills. Containers for safety can be created through mindful and clear communication and the emotional safety found here has the
power to heal the experiences that live within us where respect for our humanity and self-
determination has not been shown. As an educator, one is a practitioner of sorts, taking in a
multitude of energy that traverses the learning space. Being the one that others look to and to
wield that energy is to give a lot of yourself.

In order to feel grounded in this act, I think, it is key to be hella connected to your core.
In *Pedagogies of Crossing* (2005), Jacqui Alexander tells us that the nature of this “spiritual
labor” is a cyclical process hence it is never completed nor ‘done’ (307). Alexander (2005)
writes on being conscious of “the spiritual energies with whom one is accompanied, and who
make it possible […] ‘to do the work we came here to do’” (303; quoting Lorde). What
Alexander refers to as “spiritual labor,” I think includes the labor of shaping one’s self-
confidence; that of both educators and participants. One of the things we can do to counter a
world that treats Black, poor, trans*, immigrants, and disabled folks as disposable is to create a
space which affirms that there is enough room for us all to be held. Alexander’s (2005) text
opens space up “for feminists to wrestle with the spiritual dimensions of experience and the
meaning of sacred subjectivity” (dukeupress.org).

How might one bring “sacred subjectivity” into the classrooms and other learning spaces?
I am curious to understand the possibility of “generative somatics” as a method in creating
liberatory pedagogy. The theory of generative or politicized somatics is written by the non-profit
organization, Generative Somatics: Somatic Transformation and Social Justice. This particular
somatics training centers the body as the central site of social and political transformation. In
their piece titled, “What is Somatics?” they describe the principles of somatics:

> To transform, to create sustainable change, we need to feel and perceive our individual
and collective “old shapes.” We need to increase our awareness of the default shapes we
have embodied. Then, we get to open or deconstruct these shapes, often healing and
developing a much more substantial capacity through the opening. This somatic opening allows for new ways of acting, feeling, relating and knowing. It is the pragmatic process of deep transformation, shedding to change. Somatics then moves us toward embodying new ways of being and action that align our values, longings and actions. Often our social conditions and our family and community experiences do not teach us the embodied skills we need. This focus on developing embodied skills, whether it’s centered accountability and liberatory use of power, building deeper trust through conflict, or the capacity to be with the unknown or love more deeply, is essential to sustainable change.

[...] we inadvertently embody societal norms we don’t believe in, and often don’t embody the values we do believe in. From a somatic vantage point, this is completely understandable and there is a lot we can do about it ("What is Somatics?").

Cooking is indeed a somatic, or body-based, practice. What information can be garnered by the ‘shapes’ our body takes when we are cooking? Like washing dishes, the repetitive motions in cooking are meditative places where openings and deep reflection can occur. Meditative spaces allow us to ‘remember’ knowledge—what’s stored in our bodies—and to oppose the notion that knowledge is predominantly learned from exterior sources (what we’re ‘taught’). The type of pedagogy I seek to practice is drawn from the mundane and quotidian; ‘every day’ (though not everybody cooks every day) practices that allow us be more intimate with our own emotional wells. As a practitioner, I can facilitate the process for folks to make meaning of what their bodies are communicating to them. ‘How do you feel in a kitchen space?’ ‘What are your memories of the kitchen?’ Taking a particular ingredient or recipe, I may ask folks to write its texture, what noise it makes when tapped, what color and consistency when cooked. ‘Describe with specificity the setting(s) where you have eaten this ingredient or food.’ ‘When caramelizing onions, what feelings arise in the body?’ ‘What spindly threads hold a charge?’ Feeling deeply is not an easy task. I think many are afraid, myself included, of what may come out if and when we reach into our bodies. Will we, let alone others, be able to hold it?
2.3 Testimonio Writing

Personal writing can be a process where we reach into our depths and choose not to shrink away from the multitudes within us. In *Teaching Critical Thinking: Practical Wisdom* (2010), bell hooks describes this work as “soul retrieval” (51). hooks writes, “by telling stories, I had entered a redemptive space. […] Slowly, I was taking the broken bits and pieces of my psyche and putting them together again, creating in the process new and different stories—liberating tales” (51).

In “Chicana/Latina *Testimonios*: Mapping the Methodological, Pedagogical, and Political” (2012), Latina educational scholars Delores Bernal, Rebeca Burciaga and Judith Carmona, explore *testimonios* as a genre which emerges from Chicana feminism that “transgresses traditional paradigms in academia” (363). The “*testimonio* challenges objectivity” and locates the narrator within a collective context “marked by marginalization, oppression, or resistance” (Bernal Burciaga Carmona 363). *Testimonios*, different from autobiographies, center “critical reflection of […] personal experience within particular sociopolitical realities” (Bernal Burciaga Carmona 364). The authors map *testimonio* genre by Chicana/Latina scholars (citing Gloria Anzaldúa, Cherríe Moraga, and others), remarking on the genre’s connection to existing cultural modes and “ways of knowing and learning in our communities” (Bernal Burciaga Carmona 364). *Testimonios* can’t be separated from “a strong *feminista* tradition of theorizing from the brown female body, breaking silences, and bearing witness to […] injustice and social change” (Bernal Burciaga Carmona 364; citing Anzaldúa, Crus, & Moraga). The authorship of the text itself is a collaboration that undermines academic capitalism that seeks to produce ‘experts’ and attribute ‘breakthrough’ theories to individuals. As a pedagogical tool, *testimonios*, as the authors write, dismantle mind-separate from-body thinking and affirm that knowledge
creation happens when we bring our whole selves to the classroom (Bernal Burciaga Carmona 366).

In “A Student-Teacher Testimonio: Reflexivity, Empathy, and Pedagogy” (2014) Judith F. Carmona and Aymee M. Luciano write on their experience teaching a course on Chicana/Latina testimonios at a predominantly white university (PWI). Their students reflected that this class was “the first time in their educational careers that they had ever taken a course that centered their epistemologies, and that drew from their pedagogies of the home” (Carmona and Luciano 75). The authors’ joint account of this teaching experience described testimonio pedagogy as intrinsically self-reflexive for both teachers and students. Testimonios engage us in a “feminista praxis of listening to stories of struggle, survival, resistance, and oppression” which “forces the student and teacher to come inside the classroom as ‘whole’--we do not shed our identities at the door” (Carmona and Luciano 77). Carmona and Luciano’s (2014) text suggest that testimonios can serve us as a pedagogical and therapeutic tool, as it “lends itself to healing and reconnecting people who have been fractured because of unethical relationships of power, and forces a reinvention and a radical reposition of learner and teacher” (77-78).

Introducing testimonio writing to students asks them to write theory based on their own lives. It asks them to take the socio-political currents that run through their life experiences and transform it into language that encompasses their day-to-day. For many, this is an exercise in excavating the buried information about ourselves that, despite being in hiding, is deeply familiar to us. Because testimonio writing is a way of theorizing, I am curious how we can make meaning—central to my definition of healing—of our life journeys in ways that hold our mind, body, and spirit. How can testimonio be a tool for writing the spirit world and creation stories that reckon with our embodiment and make meaning of who we are and how we came to be?
In this project I utilize cooking as an entry point for this type of bodily meaning-making. Different from Bernal, Burciaga, and Carmona’s (2012) testimonio practice inside the classroom which seeks to write different “sociopolitical realities,” my use of testimonio writing is paired with food, cooking, and healing, and asks participants to dive deep into what trauma their bodies are holding. Participants are asked to tune into the vibrational aspects of their experience which may allow them to become intimate with their subjectivity in a formerly un-accessed way—different from social-political markers of identity. I am taking my lead from Vertamae Smart-Grosvenor (1970) who says she “cooks by vibration [...] I can tell by the look and smell of it. Different strokes for different folks. Do your thing your way” (xxxvii). Our trauma—our “different strokes”—are of course not devoid of sociopolitical realities. However, speaking and writing our sociopolitical experience is different than sitting and feeling it in our bodies. In transformation, I hope for participants to sense what ‘haunts’ the body. How does colonization of the land and food ways haunt our bodies? What does that feel like? How might you cultivate equanimity in a haunted society?

2.4 Food Studies on Queer Desire and Bucking Hetero-patriarchy

In “Feeding Desire: Food, Domesticity, and Challenges to Hetero-Patriarchy” (2012), Anita Mannur looks at a handful of texts and explores “ways that food consumption and preparation in domestic spaces can challenge compulsory heterosexuality and the implicitly heteronormative logic of the home” (viii). Mannur takes issue with the notion that South Asian domestic sites (homes and kitchens) are sites of repression for queer desire and rather, argues using specific texts, that “it is through relationships with culinary practices and food that queer subjects produce anti-normative, anti-reproductive relations [...] a space that is typically configured to be hostile to queer desire” (237). Mannur’s analysis considers the “powerfully
affective potential of food” which does not “replace sex,” however she claims it is “an equally important vector of critical analysis in negotiating the gendered, sexualized, and classed bases of collective and individual identity” (237).

My project chooses to trouble the notion that cooking as a South Asian queer woman, would readily assign me as complicit in hetero-patriarchal spatiality and trope-ish images of the ‘spicy,’ Indian domestic. Mannur’s food studies text is invested in reframing South Asian domestic space and food as sites where queer possibility is in the air in desirous relations between men, and between women. I seek to look at how food is a portal for us to create, make, and re-make subjectivity, working with queer and trans* people of color who desire to get free. Different from Mannur’s project, I am interested in how cooking with one another activates the senses that contribute to sharing knowledge about how we can consciously heal our own traumas with the help of food. I will disappoint audiences searching for the Indian hostess in me, whose food transports her guests to [insert image of elephants, colorful saris, brown children smiling]. Cooking, South Asian foods or not, is part of my pedagogy because it gives folks information on what energy they bring to the space. Attempts to exoticize my brownness would fail horribly with my mother haunting my domestic realm. And my mom has defended colonization in India…so this is me saying, despite patterns of internalized white supremacy in my family, I am choosing to do something different; make “new meanings” of brownness that do not require commodification to be legible.
3  METHOD(OLIGIE)S

3.1 Cooking and Healing Course

For my creative research project, I designed a four-week cooking and healing course that took place in my home in Southwest Atlanta. The course had six participants who met one evening a week for two and half hours. We cooked meals together and engaged in a trauma-conscious practice that allowed us to garner information from the way we cook and the food we make together. The following is a description of the course from the syllabus:

Cooking food often draws us into the present moment—how much spice to pinch, when to stir, the smell of our labor—and we engage multiple senses. This course focuses on cooking as a healing art. How does our cooking give us a ‘temperature check’ on our mind/body/spirit? What openings occur? Cooking can be a daily practice that connects us to our lifeforce—or erotic power. By cooking together, we’ll see what arises when we choose to learn from what Audre Lorde describes as our, “deepest and nonrational knowledge.

Cooking and sharing food in a collective space adds vibrations and rich context to our relationships with each other, so we will also explore (over time) the ways in which food tells a story about our group dynamics. Cultivating intimacy with the ingredients we use, the meals we conjure, and then devour together, is central here as this cooking circle considers the ways in which our spirit is cooked into the food.

This course is for folks who want to:

- Start and/or develop their own cooking practice
- Learn recipes and build confidence in the kitchen
- Build connections, friendships, and community through cooking together
- Dig into personal and ancestral histories using food as an entry point
- ‘Drop in’ and learn from their bodies

For each session, my facilitation was different as we cooked together, moved along the course, and shared new information with each other. Cooking in pairs or small groups, folks shared tasks, witnessed each other in their cooking process, asked each other questions and asked their partners to describe this particular cooking process. After cooking, we discussed how they

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3 This excerpt is sourced from my cooking and healing syllabus.
made decisions in the kitchen. What is the emotionality they bring to their cooking process—habits, joys, frustrations, familial/ancestral patterns? This was a reciprocal process of being mindful for both parties. Participants were asked to bring one recipe which helped design the course menu. Folks were asked to name who and what haunts the domestic space for them, as well as what, if any, difficult memory they would like to ‘restore’ their dish from. Who is at their backs when they’re cooking?

3.1.1 Sanitation

We navigated our sanitation concerns as a group on the first night of the course. Our notions of sanitation return us to our early childhood experiences and home/family of origin. For example, notions of purity and pollution in my caste Hindu community pertain the logics of racism and casteism; who is deemed ‘clean’ and who is deemed ‘filthy’ and therefore inferior or ‘less’ human. The group agreed on two sanitation rules: washing our hands before touching ingredients and keeping our finger nails cut short.

3.1.2 Accessibility

Since dis/abilities such as chronic fatigue and/or illness keep folks from prepping, cooking, eating foods, or otherwise participating in particular aspects of the course, we discussed modifying and/or allocating different roles for different folks. For example, if repetitive motion felt taxing on a participant’s body, we negotiated as a group how to divide labor and tasks for each menu item. For the space to be accessible to those with fragrance allergies, I asked that folks wear unscented/fragrance free products. Making sure instructions are clear for folks to understand was my job as the facilitator; people might get overwhelmed by a lot of information all at once due to cognitive blockages and/or feeling mentally foggy. For folks with blindness or low vision, the letters/any written materials will be large and legible, as well as read aloud.
Unfortunately, the kitchen space (my home) was not wheelchair accessible. There is a fire escape with four flights of stairs that leads to the back door of my apartment and a front entrance to my apartment that has two smaller flights of stairs. Prior to the workshop and on our first evening meeting, we checked-in as a group around each participant’s accessibility needs, as well as kept the conversation around dis/ability alive throughout the workshops, as different needs arose.

3.1.3 Food Allergies

Before the series of cooking workshops begin, participants let me know if they have food allergies, foods they don’t eat, and foods they don’t desire to cook or touch for whatever reason. Aside from allergies, this did not mean those foods weren’t cooked in the space, however I worked to accommodate each participant’s dietary needs and wants.

3.2 Methodology of Healing

The cooking and healing course asked participants to engage in deep personal reflection—their traumas, anxieties, familial histories. As a student in the academy, I am sharpening my senses to the ways in which knowledge that comes out of struggle is beckoned into the academe’s “archive on pain” (Tuck and Yang 813). The methodology for this project realizes that the politics of being archived is linked to colonization, imperialism, and white supremacy. Participants’ stories of trauma and pain will be kept off the page; activating a stance which Audra Simpson (2007) terms “refusal” (76). Simpson describes the point in her ethnographic work where she hears “enough” in her participant’s response; she recognizes “when I reached the limit of my own return and our collective arrival. Can I do this and still come home; what am I revealing and why?” (78). Tuck and Yang (2014) elaborate on Simpson’s refusal, warning that “Indigenous and Native researchers, researchers of color, and/or queer
Researchers in academe are frequently pressured to mine their families, communities, and personal stories to become recast as academic data” (813). For instance, when a white gender studies professor suggests to my class that we be ‘provocative’ in our work, I hear a seduction for “personal artifacts, family heirlooms/stories, private moments” to be mined through (Tuck and Yang 813). While these “private moments” may be the magic that inform my teaching sensibilities, practicing refusal means keeping this ‘off paper’. Instead, I want to consider how refusal allows me to cast a spell that speaks back to the academic super structure, rooted in brown female desires of a ‘fuck shit up’ variety. Information on radical teaching practices that deconstruct hegemony, I think, can be garnered from studying the structures where learning is allocated (the university and the classroom) and assigning these structures, rather than the people within them, as my objects of study. Refusal offers my project a way to channel desire and return the gaze through informing the reader that:

I care about you understanding, but I care more about concealing parts of myself from you. I don’t trust you very much. You are not always aware of how you can be dangerous to me, and this makes me dangerous to you. I am using my arm to determine the length of the gaze (Tuck and Ree 640).

While in the course there was a great deal of personal sharing, I chose to not document the sacred bodily wisdom which emerged through this work, within an academic space. Activating refusal in social science research comes from having stakes in dispossessed communities to which one belongs and/or has intimate ties and not wanting to put them up ‘for sale’ (Tuck and Yang 814). It is a discernment in the way one “analyze[es] data within a matrix of commitments, histories, allegiances, and resonances that inform what can be known within settler colonial research frames, and what must be kept out of reach” (Tuck and Yang 811).
3.2.1 Writing Refusal

*How do we cook our spirit into the food?* In asking this, there is an underlying logic that we are made of the elements—the hot, wet, dry, cool. I desire for the documented portion of this project to ignite these elements in my readers. With refusal, I can go through my process, convey this journey with a fire in each step, but also determine the terms on which I share. My eyes are focused on reading the space, rather than reading participants. I take an auto-ethnographic approach to documenting my course and pedagogy; this project is not about human participants. Rather, I dig into how spaces shape the ways in which people feel like outsiders of their own experience. With refusal, there is also an exposure of myself as the speaker: I am here to bridge my own disconnect from my experience. While I refuse to share trauma of the participants, the food tells us a deeply buried truth. The trauma and pleasure is cooked into the food but the reader is kept from touching it there. To meet this writing on its terms requires the reader to reorder their understandings of truth, subjectivity, and research.

I am inspired by Tuck and Ree’s (2013) “A Glossary of Haunting” where they write in the composite, first person singular, and share knowledge without separating the “*particular and the general*, violating the terms of settler colonial knowledge which require the separation of the particular from the general, [...] the place from the larger narrative of nation” (640). I believe when we cook we, often unknowingly, call on ancestral memory. This is all part of the well of information that our bodies hold and by connecting with these memories we can mend our spirit and give way to healing. The process of un-lodging these sacred memories, and therefore sacred knowledges, is at the heart of this process. Authoring the ‘results’ from this project through a stance of refusal is my way of keeping sacred knowledge and marginalized peoples from becoming research material. By communicating through a composite, first-person voice which
combines human and nonhuman elements, I can curb the gaze of the academy where the “invasion imperative is often disguised in universalist terms of producing ‘objective knowledge’ for ‘the public’” (Tuck and Yang 813). The reader is made aware that I am keeping details from them and is instead invited to interpret the colonization of communities via the academy, and why it warrants sacred details to be tucked away from its reach. I choose to write with a refusal stance because I know sharing participants’ stories, traumas, and wisdom within an academic context will not benefit them. As a researcher of color, I know that academic exposure of my participants will only alienate me from my ability to rely on innate intuition and find purpose through healing.

How can one be erotic while practicing refusal? I take my cues from the scene in Zami (1982) where Lorde describes pounding spices in her mother’s mortar and pestle for souse:

As I continued to pound the spice, a vital connection seemed to establish itself between the muscles of my fingers curled tightly around the smooth pestle in its insistent downward motion, and the molten core of my body whose source emanated from a new ripe fullness just beneath the pit of my stomach. The invisible thread, taut and sensitive as a clitoris exposed stretch through my curled fingers up my round brown arm into the moist reality of my armpits, whose warm sharp odor with a strange new overlay mixed with the ripe garlic smells from the mortar and the general sweat-heavy aromas of high summer.

The thread ran over my ribs and along my spine, tingling and singing, into a basin that was poised between my hips, not pressed against the low kitchen counter before which I stood, pounding spice. And within that basin was a tiding ocean of blood beginning to be made real and available to me for strength and information (78).

This passage is a prototype for the artistic leaps I seek to make in writing refusal. It is only so fitting that Lorde takes us into the kitchen but throws us into a heat wave as she folds together food, “a clitoris exposed,” and menstrual blood; what she writes is the art of experience. In documenting cooking in the classroom and in the cooking course, I believe erotic writing can create a sacred text, and part of the sacred-ness is to keep participants’ personal and sacred
stories out of the academic realm. My labor energy in refusing to share “is not just a no, it is a performance of that no, and thus an artistic form” (Tuck and Yang 814).

4 RESULTS

4.1 Cooking Inside the University

In my introduction to women’s, gender, and sexuality studies course with 40 undergraduate students, with the support of my department, I was able to cook with my class. The students were broken into groups of five and each had a cooking station inside a nutrition kitchen on campus which was resourced with a stove top, oven, sink, utensils, measuring cups, dishwasher, and other cooking supplies. The cooking class came on the heels of our readings: Lorde’s “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power” (1984) and Anzaldúa’s “La Conciencia de la Mestiza: Towards a New Consciousness” (1987). I framed the activity by discussing how cooking is a somatic practice, meaning it allows us to ‘drop in’ to our bodies. It was important for me to highlight that the food we eat tells us a story about power, struggle, and desire in our lives. I asked students to reference the ways in which Anzaldúa and Lorde both use food and cooking to describe and theorize their embodiment. The purpose for me to cook with my students was in the interest of us “deeply participat[ing]” with one another and exploring what arises from our “deepest and nonrational knowledge” (Lorde 53). Before students began cooking the recipe, Curry Spaghetti Squash Cakes, I asked them to go around their small groups and listen to each other answer the following question: ‘Do you feel comfortable in the kitchen? If yes, why? If no, why?’

As they cooked, I spent time with each group and noticed their group dynamic. They would later share how they worked together, who in the group ‘took the reins’ and who felt less
secure touching the ingredients, and how they negotiated dividing the labor. It felt good to have a
taste of this kind of movement in the classroom. I felt like we were ‘tricking’ the campus; the
students were bumbling around the room and negotiating with each other, while I was not at the
front lecturing, but more so positioned as an encouraging visitor whose focus was multifold.
Because the room smelled of frying squash, it was another ‘trick’ that we were ‘in class’ but that
this classroom container was engaging our sense of smell and our appetites. The silence of our
typical classroom was bucked and students were more talkative than usual. After each group
finished cooking their squash cakes, we circled up again as a large group. I shared the story of
my mom and I cooking goat curry. “Do you think our food carries our spirit? How does it
communicate our subjectivity and ‘mood’ through taste?” This question seemed to resonate with
the class. They shared their own stories of cooking under obligation and patriarchal dominance.
Their writing assignment was to create a recipe testimonio. I explained the purpose of this
assignment to them in the context of our course:

The recipes we know can tell a story about our life and lived experience. Because eating food is so central to our day-to-day lives, I think our food memories can serve as guardians of our past and connections to our communities and ancestors. This testimonio exercise seeks to activate multiple senses and heal splits that occur between our minds and our bodies—specifically in the academy. The creative challenge here is for you to share your story in a way that is deeply layered, nuanced, and embodied. Testimonios interrupt dominant narratives about who we are and make space for subjectivity.

They were asked to write a recipe they know by heart and contextualize it. The recipe
could be anything, from how to boil a hot dog or making macaroni and cheese from the box, to
how to make flan or cook a steak. They were asked to describe the color, texture and smell of
their ingredients. I wanted them to engage multiple senses; dip their toes into feeling deeply.
Next they were asked to describe in detail the scene or setting where this recipe is made and with
whom they ate the food. I sought for them to draw connections to the classed, gendered, and racialized dynamics of their experience. The recipe was a ‘gateway’ or portal for this.

Doing this cooking activity during the half-point of our time together in the semester was a necessary opening for me and the students. We had met consistently for a handful of weeks and the timing proved right for folks to get to know each other better having already been warmed up and familiar with one another through sharing classroom space. Healing in this exercise was not necessarily a direct impact from the food nor cooking together, more so it was our ability to shift the vibrations of traditional classroom space and find a groove with each other. Because this activity did not lend itself to competition (though there was some shit talking regarding who would make the best squash cake) it was noticeable that the students spoke directly to each other for the purpose of making something together rather than the grid-like formation they performed from when we co-learned inside the classroom (each student sharing their individual ideas from their own chair). The ‘outcome’ of this activity depended on how well they could work together to form a culinary product whose worth could not be divided up.

4.2 Coconut-brown Bellies: A Cooking and Healing Course

4.2.1 Preface: How to Make Goat Curry

My mom told me that after you wash the goat meat, you must tear the clear, taut skin from each pink-ish brown piece and place it in the stainless steel bowl. We then coat the meat in yogurt by mixing it with our hands. This is where a brown girlchild receives her erotic education. Not from what you can learn to do to your lover, but from what you already do with your hands.

Recently I was being visited by waves of depression and loneliness. I was reminded by my therapist that inside myself lives a little girl me. She has shiny, thick, black hair which is uniformly chopped into a bowl cut. On her birthday she is joyful because she gets to wear a frock with illustrations of bananas, peaches, and apples on it. She goes around being very hehehe and wanting the companionship, love, and family safety only loyal dogs and other kind-spirited girl children can give. Soon her breasts formed into loose mangoes and the hair on her legs grew thick and course. The day her mom let her use her pink
disposable razor and dye her hair with henna felt like the middle school feminine come up. Letting her sensuality emanate soon felt like her demise as boy-cousins, other girl’s fathers and brothers, and her own, gave her flirtatious looks, touched her, and insinuated their want for her. She cut off the rope to her erotic well for the illusion of safety. I throw water on the spiced meat before I’m able to have a taste. This is my journey and I need time to live and thicken; return myself to myself.

~

From start to finish, this project was haunted by my mother. She was in the process of chemo treatments for breast cancer in North Carolina for the duration of the course. I talked to her very little, intentionally. It’s rare that we talk about the little baby who lives inside the academic student/professor/department chair. But in the academy, like any other space including activist orgs, the food service industry, families of origin, etc. we can find folks relating and responding to each other from that young child’s perspective. This isn’t new theory, but worth mentioning and owning up front as it permeates my project (Capacchione 1991).

4.2.2 Haunting in the Home Kitchen

Because of my experiences in classroom and organizational spaces, designated as ‘work’ spaces, I chose to use my home space for the cooking and healing course. I made this decision in an effort to have our experience as a group be more permeable to the energy that exists inside lived-in domestic spaces. In rooms that we assign work to—offices, campuses, conferences, trainings, business meetings—there are unspoken rules and limitations on how folks can relate to each other. This is not always a bad thing and provides a publicly understood boundary. However, I wanted folks to give themselves permission to relate differently to each other and dig into their personal and ancestral histories/energies without the pressure of formalities nor the pretense of ‘put togetherness’. I also wanted to dissolve competition and that shark-like quality which seeks to rank intelligence in the room—which I’ve experienced as well as participated in at the academic-activist level.
I rent a one-bedroom apartment inside a brick four-plex building which sits on Metropolitan Parkway Southwest in the Pittsburgh neighborhood of Atlanta, GA. The apartment was built in the 1940s and I have a very decent landlord who repairs things in a timely fashion and even sometimes before they break. Pittsburgh is historically and predominantly a Black working-class neighborhood—formerly considered/founded as a suburb of Atlanta. Pittsburgh is poor and the signs of disinvestment are blatant (Wikipedia describes it as “underdeveloped” which in itself is the language of violence because it invisibilizes white supremacy and capitalism in city planning). As a brown South Asian woman who’s a student and transplant to Atlanta, my presence in the neighborhood can be read as ‘Oh, maybe this is a safe neighborhood’ by liberal gentrifying forces on the other side of the street, a neighborhood called Adair Park, which folks are happily gentrifying and where I walk my dog. Inviting others to gather in my home weekly is to contend with how my brownness and privilege do participate in larger structures of displacement.

Figure 2 Front of my apartment building.
Figure 3 My living room where we ate dinner during the course.
Figure 4 The kitchen space in my home where prepping, cooking, and hauntings occurred.

The menu for the first night of cooking and healing course was as follows: goat curry, *masoor daal*, white basmati rice with peas, and mango chutney with dates and currants. Unlike the other nights of cooking, these recipes were of my choosing. Through the day as I prepared for the evening and formulated sentences for how I would introduce the course to the participants (none of which I actually said), I felt this hovering anxiety. I wore white and grey stretchy fabrics as a reminder to my body to be casual and relax—and possibly convey that to the participants, too.

There were seven folks who came to the first night of the course. After I had shared what brought me to this project, I assigned groups of two or three to each recipe. The day before and day of I had gone to a handful of stores of purchase the meat, yogurt, tomatoes, mint, cilantro, green onions, rice, and mangoes required for the meal. I set up areas in my kitchen and dining room with cutting boards, mixing bowls, measuring cups, and utensils for each recipe. After the second week of teaching the course, I called my mom for the first time in several weeks. I was inside a farmer’s market and purchasing more ingredients for the course. The labor of meal prep for this family-sized group of folks was a different form of labor for me, though familiar because I had seen my mom do it as an everyday practice—she shopped, cooked, cleaned in addition to
working as an underpaid accountant. I shared with her how this process of planning meals for a group had me in awe of her ability to do it daily when I lived at home. She would even cook different food for my brother and I as we would complain about eating the Indian and Bangladeshi staple foods she would cook. She and my father would eat their food after us, which my mother prepared to meet his dietary restrictions. On the phone, I asked her how she managed to do that. I spoke my awe, but what I felt was a vulnerability in sharing with my mother my appreciation for her taking care of our needs, as well as an unfairness I felt for her having to do it all alone.

Figure 5 Pictured left to right: goat curry, masoor daal, and mango chutney (rice not pictured).
The first night of the course, once we began cooking there was an eruption of chatter and laughter that carried throughout the duration of our kitchen time. I felt myself waiting for an incident to occur. My nervous system was heightened and not solely because of my excitement and nervousness to introduce the course. I feared that something would go wrong with all of these people in my house. The laughter and conversation from the participants was conflicting with this anxiety, and it helped to soften the fear.

The next day, after nothing had gone ‘wrong,’ it came to me that my mom was haunting my kitchen. It was her fears and anxiety of having people in our home, memories of her preparing to host a party in our home which felt more cumbersome than pleasurable, and typically involved one spectacle between my parents before guests arrived. I realize now that as a child, I received many mixed messages about the meaning of joy. This course may be a step in the way of rewriting what pleasure I can bring to my work and tasks, seeing as the project itself was born out of my desire to do something pleasurable, precious, and therefore different from what I’ve known about academic work and productivity. From my mom’s haunting it was clear that there had been transference of her anxiety to me. There is a line in Morrison’s Beloved (1987) where Sethe’s daughter Denver is describing her mother: “she is the laugh; I am the laughter” (251; semicolon mine). When I read it I paused to try and identify a laugh from it’s laughter. I opened my mouth slightly to help with remembering. Not laughter as in funny, but laugh as in energy slipping from one ledge to another. My mother’s laughter (which includes fear, anxiety, pain) lives an extended life through me. Not laughter as in funny. This laugh is both a birthmark and a burden. And I wonder if this is the first of many times I will be reminded that I have little choice in my reflection, yet am wholly responsible for it.
4.2.3 Gentle Facilitation

Some of the participants described my teaching style of the course as “gentle facilitation.” Many participants are facilitators themselves and all are familiar with social justice education and training spaces. Through the course, I grew to accept my teaching style. I started to wonder what motivates me to even ask if I did a “good job” or if something went well. What if it just went as it did (which it does). I think the participants’ characterization of my facilitation as gentle—they meant it as a compliment 😊—says more about masculinist notions of productivity, structure, and for lack of a better word, neurotic-ness which have come to be the respected structures for education. It is often the activist and academic training, workshop, conference, and classroom spaces where I find myself performing work but actually healing very little. This is not to say all spaces are anti-healing or don’t provide that and I imagine the spaces that do are mending the splits which occur when we privilege the mind over the body. I recall a people of color caucus during the Southeastern Women’s Studies Association (SEWSA) annual conference in 2012 where the presenters brought me into my heart space with what they shared.

In popular media, the kitchen table and the opening conversations that happen around it are being publicly understood as intimate—perhaps a branding and fetishizing of this intimacy is occurring, too (NPR.org). The course was held in my kitchen because I know the kitchen as a space where women in my family and community do exchange important information and co-create knowledge (therefore culture is being produced there). It is gendered feminine and construed as inherent to their bodies, and therefore undervalued as work. I am not going to try so much as to make a case for their labor and this cooking and healing course as ‘work’. Rather I draw inspiration from L.H. Stallings’ Funk the Erotic (2015) where she considers when former slaves and free black persons wrote “the use of their bodies as cultural capital instead of chattel,
they transitioned from sexual slaves and chattel into a different sex machine” (40). Stallings theorizes this as “[d]oing more than ‘writing one’s self into being’ human, this sex machine enacts funky erotixxx that undoes the material and capitalism ordering of its physical labor and ensures its survival as subject by producing itself” (40). The “antiwork and postwork imagination” which Stallings (2015) draws in to complicate understandings of sex work as only respectable and politically justifiable when intertwined in the discourse of work, is insightful for my project (16). In imagining this creative project of a cooking course which centers healing as I define it, I chose to do a project in which I could find leisure (including pleasure) while also completing my degree. My facilitation style was leisure-based and mostly concerned with the art of experience and giving myself permission to experiment.

I consider the first night of the course to be a ‘warm up’ for the participants and myself. There was an excitement for folks because none of us had come together to do this particular type of thing before. Some participants knew each other as acquaintances, some were dating, and some were good friends. After we cooked that night, I planned to pose a couple questions to the group. This question wasn’t planned but it struck me as we were convening during the ramping up of coverage for the presidential primary elections—everyone’s Facebook timelines were covered with Bernie, Hillary, and Trump. For me, these national elections are often accompanied by feelings of despair, which takes me to the roots of what radicalized me: this nation state needs genocide and slavery in order to exist. I asked the participants what these elections brought up for them. Folks began sharing their critical analysis and fears. Reflecting on it now, I appreciate that we could create a small pocket to question the violent invention of the United States.

Next I asked folks my planned question: How would you describe the type of community you are looking for in Atlanta? What do you have and what is wanting? The participants’
responses provided good context for each person’s daily sense of belonging in the city. It also
gave us information and a sense of whether someone’s desires resonated with ours. I wonder
now what would happen if I asked my undergraduate students this during the beginning of our
course. How would it bring them into their heart space to share honestly about their needs and
wants for connection? Would they be more invested in each others’ experience than in an
outcome (i.e. grades)? Why don’t we bother to ask them? As an educator I find myself returning
to the ways in which I have a tendency to look away from my experience when I operate under
the notion that I am somehow removed from building community in the classroom.

The third night of the course, I chose a theme of the sensual, erotic power, and the art of
experience. I learned that talking about being in our senses is different from, well, being in them.
As with the first night, I framed the evening before folks started cooking. I shared with them
Lorde’s (1982) advice that “our feelings are our most genuine paths to knowledge” (91). I
reminded the participants that as we cook, commune, and share space that things will get
activated inside us. I shared a Hopi creation story which I’d heard in a meditation talk (Washam,
“Love is the Answer”). It reminded us that all our wisdom is hidden inside us which is often
where we go looking for it last. We discussed ways of being sensual—some of which I had
googled before the convening. Thoughts, emotions, feelings are all simply visitors. Be auditory,
*Speak directly to each other, give full attention, and again don’t ‘look away’ from your
experience tonight. Give yourself permission to feel pleasure.* All wonderful reminders that are
truly praxes. When we ate the food this evening, I felt confusion and slight disappointment. I was
not tasting rich, erotic, life-giving flavor I imagined the food would have. I questioned my
facilitation. What information was this food giving me about my teaching style—was it too
gentle?
4.2.4 Taste Test and Temperature Check

*Arepas* with caramelized onions, scrambled eggs, tomatoes, and queso fresco. Rice and peas with fried plantains. Arugula salad with blood oranges and green garlicky dressing. Chocolate chip banana bread. This was the menu for the second night of the cooking and healing course. The energy in my home had a distant quality to it, despite folks laughing and talking over the food. When we ate the food there were several compliments given from one cook to another. This was the first night we were cooking recipes that other participants had brought to the course. I had pre-bought the ingredients for the evening and the persons whose recipes we were cooking were leading one or two others in preparing the dish. Folks were asked to bring dishes which they had some memory and connection to, including dishes they would like to ‘restore’ from difficult memories.

I can’t speak for the other participants. From what several said out loud, they really enjoyed the dishes. One said the salad tasted sexy. Blood oranges have a way of doing that. Another participant shared that the recipe still didn’t meet their desired outcome, like when such-and-such makes it. Another shared a relaxed and non-judgmental quality to the night as they instructed others’ in cooking the recipe they’d brought to the group. While at first disappointed by the outcome of the food, including the banana bread I made—I am not excused—I came to see the taste of the food as information. I asked folks to describe the spirit which was cooked into the food. I was, and am still, curious about the role of politeness in folks sharing what energy they tasted in the food. We were not a group of old friends and the nest of safety and trust was not there for us to perhaps speak honestly if we disliked the food others had made without it coming off as tearing someone down, judgmental, shaming, and creating a hierarchy of ‘best’ to ‘worse’ cook. As a facilitator, I was unsure about how to bring it up without causing harm or
distrust in my participants. What I tasted in the food was beyond ‘good’ and ‘bad’. Restaurant food can taste good even when the conditions in which it is created are full of peoples’ suffering. The taste I was experiencing was in the energy that was harnessed in the room that night. There was this distant quality to the food, as if there were degrees of separation between the food and its creators. This, too, is not a matter of ‘good’ or ‘bad’ energy. The intention of this course was for us to use the food as a ‘temperature check’ on our emotional states. It was easier to theorize facilitating this than to actually enact this tenet in the moment.

Figure 6 Pictured left to right: fried plantains, chocolate chip banana bread, arepas, and arugula salad with blood oranges and spicy garlicky dressing (rice and peas not pictured).
Learning from the second night of the course—that asking folks to get into their bodies without being eased in, is difficult for most—I began the third night with a food-based warm up. At first I was planning on asking one of the participants to show me how to lead a somatic centering exercise, however I reconsidered using a modality that was uncharacteristic of me, as the facilitator. I thought of the last chapter in *Zami* (1982) where Lorde is describing mashing up an avocado and making love to Afrekete with fruits (251). This was more so my style and entry point into the erotic. Once participants arrived, I had oranges and strawberries on the coffee table in my living room. I asked them to smell, taste, touch, and engage with the fruit in any other way that came to them. The minutes when they did this were quiet with the exception of giggling, slurping, and a sweet awkwardness. I then asked participants to share in words what imagery came up for them while they did this—whether about the fruit itself and/or what it reminded them of. Some folks mentioned how they had notice certain things about the fruit that they usually didn’t, like the sticky juice of the oranges spilling onto their hands and clothes when peeling it. This evening we were a small group, only four participants. There was a lightness to the evening and one participant noted that they felt like there was less energy to contend with in a smaller group.

After the fruit exercise, I wanted to have a conversation with the group about where they might find healing in this course, as I understand it. I asked folks to connect what they tasted in the food, the spirit of it, to their emotionality and what they were bringing with them today. I emphasized that I did not consider healing to be happiness all the time and that it can be experienced through discomfort and dis-ease, yet the healing comes from noticing these feelings over time and having bodily awareness without judgment. I believed that the benefits of healing work from this course would only be as deep as we allowed ourselves to go with ourselves. I
asked participants to do a body scan while they were cooking. Where is there tightness and where is there space, looseness, circulation? I shared with the participants the tightness I had been feeling in my chest during the past nights of the class. What came to mind was a tight thread connecting me to my mother and her anxieties.

The menu for this evening was Brazilian chicken curry, white basmati rice, and *biko*. The day of the course I was running around Atlanta looking for mochiko/sweet rice and flour as well as a banana leaf for the *biko*, a Filipino dessert I was unfamiliar with before one participant introduced it to us, through their grandmother’s recipe. This dessert dish involved creating a caramelized coconut milk topping which was spread over mochiko rice cooked in coconut milk, butter, and brown sugar. It was baked in the oven for approx. 20 minutes and cut into square bars when cooled. It was a delicious, milky-sweet treat. We ate it after sopping up the Brazilian chicken curry which had beautiful reds and yellows from the tomatoes, coconut milk, and tri-color bell peppers. There was something breezy about this third night of cooking.

![Figure 7 Pictured left to right: Brazilian chicken curry and biko dessert.](image)
Passing the half-way point in the course, I asked participants to describe the group dynamic they sensed between us. I asked that they tell us what imagery came to mind; to ‘storify’ our group dynamic through different senses and memories that came to them. I sought for us to describe the group dynamic in a way that was layered, nuanced, and rooted in our own truths; a story that wrecked objectivity and privileged the collaged, multi-folds of our experience. I shared one way I had seen this done before in a story circle led by cultural worker Wendi O’Neal in New Orleans, LA. We had watched The Eyes of the Rainbow (1997), a documentary with Assata Shakur, and Wendi facilitated a story circle afterward where we shared something with the group from our own life that connected to what we had just watched about the life of Assata. I shared the story I had been told about my paternal grandmother who was married at age twelve and brought into the home of her twenty-something year old husband (my grandfather) when she was fifteen. She had twelve children, the first of which died as a child. I shared my feelings of kinship with my grandmother who I’d never met in person, but who’s story told me of the long life of patriarchy, sexual violence, and abuse in our family. After everyone shared, other members in the group re-told the story, but with the imagery it evoked in them. Wendi re-told my story, describing the image of a South Asian man (my father), woman (my grandmother), and me, our faces along different branches of a tree, and water trickling and running through us like a stream.

After sharing this example, I asked folks what their bodies-trees-running water image was for our group dynamic tonight. There is a magical quality when folks are asked to share from this place. It seemed that folks could tap into their senses with these instructions. It took them into the heart of their imaginations and memories. I enjoyed one description of the group dynamic...
dynamics as a group preparing for a theatre performance back stage, as well as on stage, and the buzzing excitement that accompanies the show. The participant mentioned the tightness of energy, discomfort, heartening, and nervous quality that is part of that space, too. With fewer participants, I recognized that I was more at ease as a facilitator. I imagined us surrounded by warm, clear green and blue waters. Talking to each to each other through banana leaves. Folks on an island who were kind, slightly separated from each other, yet living cooperatively. This ‘island’ was of course a wave which moved in and out of the ‘real’ Georgia red clay a few stories down, which my brick apartment building rested on. The curry and the biko were portals to this musical, tropical fellowshipping. The air in my living room, whose walls are the color of turmeric, was the golden dirt and country dryness that threw light on the line between the erotic and exoticizing of our food experience.

4.2.5 Night Four

The fourth and last night of the cooking course suspended my living room in both the land and water of emotion. Dark now by the time we were eating dinner around the coffee table, I remember the room brimming with warmth (which can include fury) and the wet, replenishing wells that live inside each of the participants and myself. Some astrologists understand the planet Mars to represent iron, the warrior within, and that which drives us to action and anger in ways that are specific to us (Nicholas 2016). Mars is a “hot thing” (Morrison 248).

The story of this night from my perspective goes like this: the scorching planets, and watery ones too, hung outside my living room window while we sat and talked. We felt them burning in our bellies, the water being drawn from the wells inside, and also shut by the dam before it could leave us. As the night was ending, I shared with the participants that the course, the food, the hot thing we’d spent four weeks creating, was working itself out on me. I stopped
taking notes. I could rest because my body would remember what it needed to. Maybe this is the faith that comes from being haunted. *I’ll remember what I need to because it will always come back around.* I can reach in and pull it up when it’s time. It is a reminder for you, the reader, that this project was not born to capture brokenness. It is not to share and tell who is at our backs when we cook, who moves our hands, or why some of us grew up tasting less salt. I would rather share with you how these burning and oceanic planets hung outside my window and went to work on me. It says, contend with the force of my sentient experiences without seeing me, nor the participants, as new terrain that needs to be trapped or acquired. It is my boundary to prevent psychic violence from harming us here.

This night signified the closing of a container we had built layered by the food, movements, conversations, moments of intensity, and those of kindness over the last four weeks. I sought for us to meditate on the ways in which our food memories are our sacred memories. The familial recipes we’d made during each meeting were both physical recipes that contained our own quirks, as well as emotional recipes to which we layer our journey. I asked each participant to describe what the culture they sought to create through cooking and sharing food together. We were producing culture in my living room and how would we describe it? I invited folks to put words to this culture-making, with the option to do so through imagery and erotic storytelling (incorporating smells, sights, tastes, and nonhuman elements). This evening we made *khichidi*, a dish of rice, lentils, and vegetables, which I grew up calling *khichuri* (a Bengali rendition). I only recently learned that *khichuri*, or *khichidi*, or *kitchuri* as I’m seeing it spelled and pronounced on Western Ayurveda’ sites, has gained attention as a ‘detox’ food. Folks are doing *khichuri* cleanses! And this is certainly a different node of cultural production than the *khichuri* I was sopping up as a child. I remember one Bengali Hindu cultural event (filled with
children and adults performing dances and songs) in middle North Carolina, where my friend’s
dad made a big batch of *khichuri*. It was Big Bird yellow, stained by the turmeric and slightly
soupy from the daal. I was probably disappointed, considering that *khichuri* was the dish my
mom would make when I was feeling sick and would include a line about the benefits of
digestion; I didn’t know to pay attention nor value this discourse around my digestion and poop
at that point (but it was no shy topic). Celebration food was typically more rich, oily, and
catered. This was made by an uncle wearing a white tank top and bandana.

Again with age, I think I’ve come to value homestyle cooking and aunties and uncles
who know how to throw down in the kitchen, amazed at their abilities to cook for rooms full of
people with their gigantic stainless steel pots over a flame. I asked my sister friend Noel for her
rendition of *khichuri*, which she calls *khichidi*. She shared that her family typically eats the
*khichidi* with coconut chutney, which we also made on this last night of the workshop. Lastly,
we cooked mustard and turnip greens, a recipe from one of the participant’s step-mother in
Carthage, Mississippi. Considering my friend Noel, also making her home in Mississippi, the
food and intention of this evening was in many ways a love song for Mississippi and our
relationships to the south. Pork neck bones were slow cooked all day in the home of the
participant in preparation for the night’s greens.

I was helping prepare the *khichidi* with a couple other participants. Like other nights of
the workshop, we were all assembled in imaginary stations (wherever there was countertop
space) and sharing time on the gas stove. Our bodies were close, folks were walking out of the
kitchen to the dining and living rooms, and then returning, and responding to other ‘stations’
conversations was common at this point. Again my mother chose to visit me. I was sharing the
good news from a conversation I’d had with her about receiving a car from my aunt in New
Jersey. When discussing the details of driving the car back to Atlanta, my mother added, “bring a friend, but no male friends.” She said it would make it complicated. At 25 I am still not free from my mother’s brow. Her request of “no male friends” was enough to bring on that old, familiar feeling of being grabbed (or controlled) by my mother’s anxiety. Having long left the nest, for her words to make me feel a tight fury in my stomach makes me wonder how far back that taut thread of fury goes; how many girls and women in our family felt it through the denial and suppression of their erotic energy by elder women? (Is trauma in the body an ancient energy?) Two participants shed light on how my mother made this situation about her own fears of my sexuality which have nothing to do with me. For them to make the connection of this pattern of control in my relationship with my mom was right on time. What had been sitting under the surface since I’d spoken with my mom was quickly escaping my body through my cracking voice and wet eyes. Whatever notions of a ‘put-together’ facilitator performed by me and in the psyches of my participants was going to crack tonight, too. I was ready to let this pain move through me, maybe not cerebrally ready, but this was my body’s spiritual agreement to itself. Despite my food prep and facilitation outline, this opening was possibly the most important preparation I’d done for the course.
While we ate the *khichidi* with the coconut chutney and greens, I shared how my mom cooked this recipe for me when I was sick. A cream of wheat for us. The way we’d prepared it that night was different than how I’d ever had it previously. This dish tasted more like a *pulao*, rice cooked with ghee, spices, and mixed vegetables. Now cooking Noel’s recipe which she had written especially for me and this course, added another layer of love and meaning to this dish. Our friendship across caste, religion, age, and brownness was the sisterhood I longed for as a child but did not have. Her recipe included lines on how I would be prepared for the next step when the aroma of the spices and ghee had soaked through the rice. Deeply erotic, intuitive cooking that surpassed the boundaries of written recipes. Her writing it was an act of love and signified the importance of sistren in my life. It is a salve for the girlhood isolation living inside me; a gift of soaring love. This was how we were writing the next chapter in our peoples’ creation story. I asked the participants to share how they were writing theirs.

5 CONCLUSION

In the beginning, I shared my predisposition to being utterly disinterested in the ceremonies of my Hindu family of origin. That is still true today and is part of the complicated connections to home, Indianness, and girlhood which informs my experience. Yet what drives this project is my willingness and readiness to create healing space. By sharing this journey, this pedagogy, and the creation of a cooking and healing course that I can be proud of, I follow desires for my labor to be purposeful and sovereign. I am grateful for advisors, colleagues, and friends for encouraging me to research in a way that excites my senses and creates a dialogue around healing that is rooted in a decolonial feminist politic.
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