

Kneading to Receive Remembrance

Before I could read, I could bake. My favourite birthday present as a child was a bake-omatic, a toy oven. Based on how early my curiosity of baking started, it's not surprising that it is part of my research methods. From an intellectual mindset, the same place I started my inquiry process and in some ways where I write from now, making Filipino food in the kitchen was an unexpected entry point to a performed poetic inquiry. This paper begins to look at the connectedness between cooking food, poetic inquiry and research-based theatre, as I experienced it writing the poem *Pan de Sel(f)* (Valdez, 2017).

Food is central to most Filipinos' cultural identity both in the everyday happenings and at celebrated milestones with community. The recipe that spurred this inquiry - Pandasal, a breakfast bread bun originating in Portugal as Pan de Sel (bread of salt) and evolved into Pandesal (and now interchangeable with the spelling Pandasal) in the Philippines. During Spain's colonial occupation of the Philippines, the recipe for pandasal and the wheat used to make it was introduced and would become part of everyday in most households across the diverse cultural landscape. Each household develops its own style of using the bread with toppings and pairings. For this inquiry, I adapted it to reflect my current values and a history of migrant locations.

Ingredients:

Flour

Water

Sugar

Yeast

Eggs

Butter

Salt

Working with these seven ingredients became a sort of contemplative practice, allowing me to know differently my cultural heritage as a Filipino-Canadian. Using ingredients that are locally and ethically produced in British Columbia, I followed a recipe I found online (Joaquin & Daza) and ended up with a bread that smelled like the bread buns I know from my mom's kitchen and street vendors of Manila, but it tasted and felt like a hardened version of what could have been delicious.

Procedure:

Measure

Mix

Let sit, Time.

Knead

Separate

Pre-heat

Let sit, Time.

Bake

Cool

Despite feeling slightly disappointed with how the bread turned out, I offered it to a class of fellow arts-based researchers as an experiment to see how it would feel. Offering a dormant narrative of my identity in the form of food was a performed response to the internal barriers I was experiencing as a writer of my autobiographical play script. The bread became a symbolic object upon which to project my insecure self-perceptions. The affect in people who received the bread was varied from neutral to enthusiastic and grateful. The next day, I wrote 14 pages of poetry. The invisible barriers of critical self talk were gone. The practice of Grounded Theory informs my approach to arts-based research; I engage research activities before reading the literature. This approach privileges data analyses over influences that may come from theoretical frameworks. Grounded theory may have fallen out of favour with the recent rise of action research, lived experience and narrative (Corbin, 2017), but it still seems relevant to use grounded theory approach with a research-based theatre project when at “the heart of theorizing lies the interplay between researcher and data so that the final theory is a construction of both data and researcher” (Corbin, 2017).

The next realization speaks to concerns about the use of fiction narratives to present qualitative data. In grounded theory, and research-based theatre, data is analysis while being collected (Corbin; Belliveau & Lea); both rely on interpretation of data throughout the process, which is what I did during all phases of my inquiry, from baking to sharing the bread, and writing the poem. It was not the degree of authenticity or sincerity from my classmates who received the bread, so much as my belief that those sentiments were genuine, my interpretation

of what was said. The offering of homemade bread was a poem (in the form of food) performed like an amuse bouche of the text Pan de Sel(f). The gesture of offering it was a personal risk and an act of inquiry to explore a question, "What does it mean to receive?" The act of giving the bread was completing the act of receiving the recipe, of receiving a distant culture passed on through sharing food. In order to fully receive my culture, I must engage in sharing it with others. No one verified whether or not I actually ate this bread as a child or if my mother really baked it. The narrative that accompanied the moment of sharing the food, that I felt shame and reluctant to offer the bread because it was symbolizing my sense of self-worth, was based on my perception and no one else's. It was made up, a fiction spoken as if it was a truth. It was an interpretation of experience. Within dominant paradigms that value facts and numbers and privilege binary mental structures, this kind of research is high risk. And yet, I can not do it because to neglect the telling of my story in a method compelled by my body, heart and mind is to deny that I have been given a most precious gift - a question about where I come from. The data responding to this question was simultaneously generated and analysed by the creative acts of baking, poetry and performing ritual of sharing food in class.

I received cultural knowledge from and in my mother's kitchen. The gesture of giving what I had made of an inherited food, an appropriated recipe, brings with it memories and cultural history. What my body has known since toddler years, comes to know differently now as an adult. The inspiration to enter the inquiry through this recipe came from a visceral place in my body when two days earlier I was transported by the sweet smell of freshly baked pandesal. The scent of risen bread dough is like a life of memories resurrected from a stagnated past, one I

rarely look back to from a life based in Vancouver. This scent never fails to win me back to the ways of ancestral breakfast tables, from Aling Mary's on Main street to my mother's oven in Kitimat, BC, to the side street in Taytay, Rizal where we stay in the ancestral home of my maternal grandparents. The same house where I was brought home to from the hospital, born on a Saturday morning in 1976. We four slept on one big bed. There was no telephone in the house. From a colonial world view and a common North American standard, some might say we were poor by not having much. But I think it may have been the richest time of my life. Our family was happy, healthy, and whole; as complete as it was ever going to be, for the rest of my life.

When asked, my parents say they brought the family to Canada for a better life, “so you, you kids could have more opportunities than us,” my father would say. I suppose that's a true sentiment from two people who were bringing children into a society dictated by the infamous Ferdinand Marcos. I asked this question of my parents throughout childhood and my youth, sometimes in effort to build a less-than-sound argument that what they were disapproving of in my behaviour was a package deal with the “better life”. By that measure, I have been inquiring on the topic of what it means to receive (and live) a better life since the age of four. As I continue to on my journey of growing up I vacillate between receiving and generating the life that would be worthy. It's reasonable that one would begin to look elsewhere for different lifestyle options when oppressive government rules prevent civil freedoms and personal expressions. There were economic forces that were inspiring my parents to leave too. But as a five year old, what I heard my parents say was, they sacrificed the wholeness of our extended family to create a better future for us children. It followed, in my child's logic, that because of

my parents' willingness to go through hardship, I was a recipient of a better life than all the people in the Philippines. And their sacrifices were otherwise unnecessary if I had not been born. With that in mind, growing up with lush surroundings of the Skeena Valley in Northern British Columbia, I decided that I *owed* my parents and anyone who helped me, to live a good life, a better life. At the time and still now, a life "better and richer than" the kids in the Philippines was and is ill-defined; nevertheless, I spent much of my young adulthood trying to pay back my debt of gratitude without really know how. Bankruptcy comes swiftly with that kind of mindset; emotionally, financially and spiritually.

From this dark place, left with no recognizable social markers of a successful "better life", I began spinning questions into a cocoon. What does it mean to receive this better life? What do I have to do to make my parents' efforts worthwhile? What do I have to offer, to contribute? Is being me enough? Right about now, it may seem like this writing is a pseudo therapy for unfinished childhood angst. At the risk of seeming "unprofessional" I admit to perceiving my research as both healing and provoking, actions I believe are knowledge generating. Healing requires new perceptions, insights that allow for different, often expansive understandings from those previously held. Like a balm, cooking foods from my country of birth fills in fractures in my own personal identity and family histories. Receiving the rituals and products of food making from my mother and aunties is the dominant way by which I come to know and remember my Filipino heritage. Playing with Filipino recipes as an adult in the Filipino diaspora allows me to experience culture as I know it where I am, as opposed to where I came from. Performing the recipes for others bridges my family literacies to the present moment. The present moment, shared presence and attention with others, is essential to theatre and theatre

making. While the poem Pandasal was not part of a research-based theatre project, it is narrative that can be used for developing the play I am writing as part of my dissertation.

Research-based theatre is a member of the arts-based research family and close sibling to ethnotheatre and ethnodrama (Saldaña, 2008, 2011). Research-based theatre may be distinguished from ethnotheatre by the use of theatre throughout the research process, whereas ethnotheatre is primarily used for disseminating data gathered by traditional qualitative methods like action research, interviews, narratives and field notes (Belliveau & Lea, 2016, p.6). While there are a growing number of ways to use theatre for research aims, most have a similar outcome in common - a theatre production and/or script telling a story based on or informed by research data. Scholars using this methodology often come from a background in drama or theatre education and apply it to studies on education and pedagogy, health and social justice. I am no different in this regard. However, my auto-ethnographic lens is uniquely coloured Filipino-Canadian with a tint of feminine and held by an invisible frame of ancestors who read very different books but whose knowledge is coded in my blood. I aim to be a new voice in Canadian theatre by presenting a cultural, transnational, and generational play that gathers community among others who seek with similar questions. It will be for those who wish to connect to a diasporic identity within a dominant European culture, but also for those like me whose experience of belonging is not dependent upon by race, gender, ethnicity or location. My perspective as one within the lived experience to be represented affords insight that may not otherwise be accessed by gaze or instruments of an observing researcher. And in acknowledging

that self-study has its own risks and challenges, I found that inquiring through cooking became a useful passage into narrative and memory.

The emergent notion of cooking as inquiry would benefit from further exploration (Brady, 2011) but the cooking I did as part of this poetic/performed inquiry is a method, not my methodology. Cooking as a research method aligns well with the epistemologies of my methodological home in arts-based research, specifically performed research or research-based theatre, as it is an embodied epistemology and praxis. In the act of making food from my inherited culture, baking “makes accessible to inquiry the symbolic, social, historical, and cultural aspects of food as they are incorporated in embodied performances” (Brady, 2011). The making and sharing of food is both performative and poetic in nature, therefore cooking as inquiry may be considered a translation of poetic inquiry and research-based theatre; a 2-in-1. Poetry and theatre are both made things, implying that conceptually and practically, they are sisters of the etymological root of Poem, the Latin word poema, literally meaning “thing made or created”. Based on that translation of meaning alone, the making of food may not earn a seat at the family tables of poetic inquiry or research-based theatre. So let’s look at some qualities and ingredients required for making things among those of poetic inquiry and research-based theatre:

1. Poetic inquiry is capacious in its ability to give expression in multiple directions at once (James).
2. Research-based theatre is expansive in its ability to engage, in an embodied state, emergent knowledge in data and inquiry processes (.
3. Water is capacious and expansive.
4. Water is used in making food.

5. Baking bread expands and in many directions at once and holds many things in an economical form.
6. Poetic inquiry and Research-based theatre, require engagement of imagination, metaphors, clear observation, sensual perception and iterations as part of their respective making processes.
7. The making of a poem or piece of theatre generate and represent data in one process.
8. Poems are often written using words.
9. Words are signs for signalling information.
10. Poems use signs to communicate.
11. Foods contain information, biodynamic signs read by the human body systems when consumed and digested.
12. A plate (or bowl) of food is curated organic poetry that is read by the whole body at the cellular level.
13. Making food is a kind of poetic inquiry.
14. Making food is a performance of poetry making.
15. A service of food performs who we are, what we know, and what we value.
16. What we eat tells a story of Who We Are to all our body systems.
17. Molecules of food digested and integrated into the body change and nourish the body.
18. Food and the body perform an orchestra of communications, much like poetry and theatre do with audience/readers.
19. Including food making and eating in poetic inquiry and research-based theatre provides an embodied experience unlike other social science methods.
20. Automated computer programs can write a poem, but they can not make a soufflé.
21. Automated computer programs can write dialogue, but they do not portray the characters live on-stage.

22. Automated computer programs may detect what I have eaten but they can not digest the food for my body.
23. Telling stories is essential to being, and knowing what it means to be human (Gottschall, 2012).
24. Eating food and telling stories are essential to staying human.

The increasing popularity of television documentary series demonstrates our insatiable fascination with food and the cultures we make with and around it. More than ever before people are taking pictures of what we make and eat as food and sharing it on social media platforms for the whole world to see. When I was growing up in the 80's and 90's I saw this done only at Filipino family gatherings. Now, my media feeds on Instagram and Facebook receive food portraits almost hourly, and a quick search on Netflix generates over 30 titles of movies and documentary series on all matters of food and drinks.¹ The title of one documentary, *Theatre of Life*, about a famous Italian chef who sets out to feed gourmet meals in a soup kitchen, implies the ritual of breaking bread in community, feeding people and eating together, is a theatrical event, and an essential one to everyday life. But aside from the set stages of TV and movies, and the cooking lesson classrooms, making food is rarely included in the making of theatre. While the activities of a chef's kitchen are dramatic, cooking food is (wisely and conveniently) avoided by conventional theatre companies and playwrights who wish their plays to be produced (Margolies, 2003). Health and safety regulations can be prohibitive and extra staff time is required for nightly clean-ups and prepping of ingredients. But in research-based theatre

¹ search "food" at www.netflix.com

practices, where aims and constraints are different than those of conventional theatre, cooking as part of an arts-based inquiry process can activate memories that are specific to location, culture and time while generating images and narrative themes with universal appeal: belonging, family, language, loss, differences, appearances, food.

This paper was intended to explore how an impulse to bake bread became an embodied writing process that sparked new perspectives for my poetic inquiry and research-based theatre practices as I write an auto-ethnographic play. By stepping away from my usual writing tools and into the kitchen I discovered joy in writing autobiographical poetry. Before that moment I had concerns of my story being irrelevant, insignificant, and I had already failed in that state of mind. By taking a side step away from “how do I do this?” I stepped into doing it. If, from reading this essay, some new possibilities, insights or perspectives have not appeared in relation to poetic inquiry, research-based theatre, or your experience of Filipino-Canadians, I have not (yet) succeeded in my aims to convey some glimpse of what my research is moving towards. What would be left to do in that case is to return again. At least for now I have begun once this first time, making next time a new experience with different possibilities of receiving and creating knowledge, like the second rise of a pandesal bun.

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