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# **Eating Discourse: Food Practices as Cultural Negotiation in Diasporic Communities**

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## 1. Introduction

Food is far more than sustenance; it is a language through which identity, memory, and belonging are communicated and negotiated. For diasporic communities, food serves as both a connection to their cultural roots and a tool to approach the challenges of living in a different environment. This thesis aims to investigate the ways in which food practices act as a medium for cultural negotiation, examining how they preserve heritage, shape identity, and foster connections across cultures.

The first chapter lays the theoretical groundwork for the research, focusing on linguistic frameworks developed by de Saussure, Peirce, and Jakobson. These theories are applied to food as a system of meaning and representation. Central to this study are the semiotic and communicative dimensions of food, which, similarly to language, convey meaning through shared codes. Starting from this perspective, the chapter delves into how food practices serve to communicate cultural identities, collective memories, and social values.

The second chapter examines the cultural and social significance of food within diasporic contexts, focusing on concepts such as non-hereditary memory and taste as embodied knowledge. In these settings, food serves as a powerful symbol of home and identity, offering a tangible connection to the past through memories, values, and histories passed down across generations. At the same time, food evolves, adapting to the issues of displacement. The alternation between continuity and transformation highlights the malleable nature of food, which, much like language, responds to shifting social, cultural, and political contexts.

The third chapter outlines the research methodology, which employs food-focused semi-structured interviews analysed using the SPEAKING-and-FEEDING model. Originally developed by Hymes (1964), the SPEAKING model investigates communicative events through the following elements: setting, participants, ends, acts, key, instrumentalities, norms, and genre. Riley's (2019) FEEDING framework expands on this by addressing the specificities of food-related interactions, focusing on food items, activities, arrangements, tools, beliefs, and identity roles. Together, these models provide an understanding of how food practices construct meaning by connecting material, social, and symbolic dimensions.

This chapter also presents and analyses the interviews of Omar, a Palestinian restaurateur in Napoli, and Shien, a Sri Lankan chef in the same city, highlighting both similarities and differences in their approaches to food practices. Omar's story is a combination of nostalgia and adaptation as he recreates traditional Palestinian dishes relying on family recipes and diasporic networks to retrieve ingredients. Shien's experiences, on the other hand, emphasize the communal aspects of food

preparation and its significance in sustaining the sense of belonging to a community despite its displacement.

Lastly, it examines the broader implications of food practices in negotiating cultural identity, exposing their role as tools for memory, resistance, and community-building.

Ultimately, this thesis argues that food is a powerful cultural and communicative tool, capable of transcending its material function to foster identity, community, and understanding. By examining the semiotic and performative dimensions of food practices, this work contributes to broader discussions on migration, identity, and cultural exchange.

## 2. From Language to Culture

The use of human language consists of a series of messages produced by a source. They can be words, syntagms or even an attempt at producing a certain effect in the recipient, and they all coexist in most linguistic expressions. The aim of every communication system is to convey messages from an individual who produces the information – the maker – to an individual to whom the message is directed to – the receiver. The latter may or may not decipher the message in agreement with the maker's intention and the extent of their understanding depends on the context, on the receiver's previous experiences and on the maker's language design. In a discourse the maker has to tailor their language based on who the recipient is, to fit the situation or context in which the communication occurs. Concurrently, the way the maker expresses themselves creates that very situation or context. Historical and cultural factors allow the regular performance of this endeavour, therefore even if some situations and contexts may seem to exist far apart from language their frameworks are built by language itself. Nevertheless, its use is always and everywhere an active process since even the most conventionalized contexts built by these routines require a transformation from time to time. An "utterance" is meaningful when it conveys a socially-situated identity, enacted and recognized in different settings, and a socially-situated activity, whose construction is aided by the utterance itself. Therefore, the maker and the receiver must carry out a constant work of encoding and decoding the message, relying equivalently on their construal of the context. The latter is used in accordance with language to define the complete scope of the intended message. This mechanism is carried out in every social interaction, knowingly or unknowingly, since the elements which make up this system, the signs, can be of different nature. A sign results from the union of the signifier and the signified, which are inextricably connected to each other. For instance, the word *food* is formed by the signifier, the written word itself, and the signified, the concept in the mind.

The field of semiotics covers a wide diversity of signs, however, for the purpose of this thesis, I have taken in account de Saussure's dyadic structure and Peirce's triadic one. In these approaches, signs are categorized depending on the relationship between signifier and signified, in iconic, indexical and symbolic. A sign is iconic when the signifier is perceived as resembling or imitating the signified (i.e. onomatopoeia or Chupa Chups); it is indexical when the signifier is directly connected in a causal or physical way to the signified and this link can be observed or inferred (i.e. handwriting or non-synthetic flavours); it is symbolic when the signifier does not resemble the signified but it is purely conventional, therefore this association must be learnt (i.e. punctuation marks). As previously stated, Peirce included the symbol in his classification, defining it as a sign that refers to the object; his interpretation differs from that of de Saussure, who avoided talking about linguistic signs in terms

of symbols. In his *Course in General Linguistics* (1916) language is described as a system with a certain degree of rationality even though it is based on the principle of arbitrariness. This definition does not entail that the form of a word is utterly accidental, but that the sign is not determined extralinguistically it follows intralinguistic determination. This is evident in the case of signifiers which are made of combinations of sounds in accordance with patterns of a specific language. It is important to bear in mind that the ontological arbitrariness of the correlation between signifier and signified does not imply that this system is historically or socially arbitrary. Similarly to natural languages, this nature of the sign does not make it neutral: it might be arbitrary *a priori* but ceases to be arbitrary *a posteriori*. Their value depends on its correlation with the others in the system, therefore it is the difference between signs that signifies.

The process of communication follows a code, a system of rules which govern the transmutation of signs into meaning. Thus, the code is the verbal and non-verbal language used to express and convey the intended purpose.

According to Jakobson, the code covers a fundamental role in the communicative act, since every message is intrinsically encoded and requires a shared set of rules and signs to be decoded. The code enables the translation of a concept into language and, vice versa, the interpretation of a message. Furthermore, it is not innate but rather the result of social and cultural conventions, for this reason it is foreign to the biological individual: the child.

In this light, meaning is the outcome of an exchange. However, this concept may rightfully lead to a doubt: if signs are arbitrary and language is a code where is the key or where does it come from? The code is the sum of potentials and it is an abstract concept, while the message built of the units of the code, is a tangible act.

The sum of these signs helps the construction of patterns which, when interwoven, create meaning. They are embedded in one's mind and make up a culture with its full set of practices, symbols and beliefs. For this very reason, the power of these patterns lies in the everyday exposure to their circulation therefore they are so influential that someone may accept them without ever questioning the ideas that lie beneath them.

The beforementioned exchange is possible only if the people involved share the same set of codes, otherwise the perception ends up being as something other or different from us. For this very reason linguistic signs serve the purpose of conveying a meaning while posing a constant interrogative: are we different or are we the same?

Language has a key role in the manifestation of identity because it does not only replicate mimetically the experience of phenomena, but it is also a form of abstraction (or interpretation) and interaction between the subject and the object. The term *phenomenon* was used in Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*

(1781) to describe the connection between the object experienced and the subject who experiences it, implying that their perception is strongly influenced by their cognitive ability. It differs from the concept of *noumenon* which refers to the reality of things in themselves. The subject is thus able to frame phenomena through their specific point of view, based on previous experiences and associations between them.

Taking a time leap, the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis is loosely comparable to this approach, in terms of cultural perspectives or mindsets. This theory lies at the beginning of the principle of linguistic relativity, which implies that the specific language a person speaks affects not only their thoughts but their worldviews in general. However, this idea has been deemed controversial by modern linguistic studies because of its reductionist nature and the difficulty to be proven in terms of causality. Recent research has highlighted the necessity of a more nuanced connection between language and thought, resulting in the idea that language certainly has the power to condition and shape one's perception, without creating an impenetrable barrier.

The expression of an experience becomes a part of the experience itself, consequently, meaning is dialogue, and discursive practices have the power to create social rules while abiding to them. As explained earlier, all these practices rely on shared understandings and ideologies; therefore, the participants of a social group may have a meaningful exchange only if they share the same linguistic code, thus interactional contexts require the enactment of a constant dialogue. To quote Hall (1980, p. 167) "if no meaning is taken, there can be no consumption".

The creative part of the linguistic process can be described as a representational system. Before explaining how meaning and language are connected, it is necessary to define the term representation. This word is generally understood to indicate the depiction of objects or aspects of the real world, but it also refers to the process by means of which perceptions and opinions are reified in our mind. Representational systems are made of the sounds produced with our vocal cords, the plating chosen for a certain dish, or simply the associations of concepts which conjure up images in the mind. Therefore, the creation of meaning through representation occurs because of two interlinked systems. In a first instance the concepts are created by our mind, subdivided in meaningful categories, subsequently the concept needs a way to be expressed and thus become meaning, this is the role of language.

Languages use numerous elements to stand for or signal the object of the communication to other people, whether via sounds, written words, objects or food. Because of this, they are the instrument through which thoughts and feelings imbue culture. However, this process is not as intuitive or straightforward as it may seem. There are three different theories on the representational mechanism of language: reflective, intentional and constructionist. In the reflective approach language

mimetically mirrors the real meaning that is already there. The intentional theory states that language is used to express precisely what the speaker, writer or artist designed, with a meaning they personally aimed for. In the constructionist view, things lack meaning in themselves, the meaning is constructed and attributed to them by people, using representational systems, in and through language. In agreement with the needs of this study, I decided to focus my attention on the third one. According to this theory, the material world, made of all the concrete things that are tangible and visible, is different than the symbolic practices used in the process of representation. This is exemplified by the work of Barthes, in which the semiotic approach is used as a method to investigate the way visual representations convey meaning. In his *Rhetoric of the Image* (1964) he makes use of a pasta brand's advertisement to highlight the two diverse levels of content in a linguistic message: denotational and connotational. The image in question contains the name of the brand, Panzani, not only to advertise the product, on a connotative level, but also to evoke the myth of Italianicity, on a denotative level. Likewise, referring to an even more familiar example, a host simply consists of water and wheat flour mixed; nevertheless, in the context of Christian faith and Mass rituals, it symbolizes a broader meaning, around the body of Christ. Returning briefly to Barthes' point of view, he described the connotative levels of signifiers as "fragments of ideology" (1964, p. 91), for the very reason that they derive from knowledge and history, and through them their identity comes to life in the semantic system.

Representing things is an instinct humanity has had since its origin and it allows individuals to manifest, verbally or nonverbally, their inner worlds. Cultural subjects learn from the very early stages of life how to execute their knowledge and, while growing to be culturally competent, they develop social skills by interacting and engaging with each other. However, competence and execution are not the same thing, the first one is individual and resides in the individual's mind, while the latter, which can be associated to the concept of *langue* introduced by Saussure, has a social nature and transcends the individual.

Consequently, representation discloses the very constitution of things, and, through it, the constitutive process of culture occurs.

Foucault inquired into the dynamic relationship between knowledge and identity, coming to the conclusion that both elements are socially constructed and there is no connaturality in them. This examination has proven the constructed nature of identities, through the application of rules, laws and practices by way of discourses. For this exact reason, in the discourse-based approach, narrative is said to have a central function in the representation of identity, since it is crucial in the process of elaborating life. Therefore, people from different social backgrounds or classes may express their experiences in a different manner. This concept is central in the author's analysis, as it is the starting

point to demonstrate how misguided is the notion that power is solely wielded by a ruling class, who detains a cultural hegemony, and, instead, to focus on how power permeates through strategic positions. In this light, the exchange of knowledge is the foundation of the shaping process of identities and individuals within society and there is no exercise of power without a parallel construction of knowledge. As a consequence, power relations require the production of knowledge to function efficiently, and identities are built according to power relations. The latter evolve continuously, therefore human identities are fluid and malleable. In this analysis lies the demonstration that power and knowledge share an insoluble bond because they are mutually dependent in contemporary society and implicate each other. Foucault goes even further stating that the human body is subjected to practices and ways to control and regulate it, considering it not only from a biological perspective, but as an entity which is possible to manipulate and rule in different ways to alter the physiology and behaviour of individuals. Reality exists outside language, but it is constantly mediated by and through language, since knowledge and power are produced in and through discourse.

The word culture is rather nebulous, and its definition has evolved with time. Traditionally, culture has been used as a synonym of the best ideas and thoughts of a society; this approach however is rather limited because of its elitist and classist nature. In a more modern perspective, culture has come to be considered as the largely distributed intellectual products, such as music, literature and foods, appreciated by the majority of ordinary people. This however entails a distinction between a higher culture and a popular culture, the first one being intrinsically noble and the second one being inferior; another quite controversial statement. In recent years, the use of this term has shifted to a more anthropological definition, and it now refers to any typical way of life of a certain community. Moreover, culture is not so much considered from a materialistic standpoint, but rather as a set of practices. As stated by Hall in his *Reading of Marx's Introduction to the Grundrisse* (1973), any production is unconceivable outside society and languages could not exist without people living and talking to each other.

For these exact reasons, practices are not crystallized in time and space, on the contrary they are diatopical and diachronical, always shifting and mutating their shape. Therefore, meeting other people requires a constant process of interpretation, not only of the lexical choices they make, but what they wear and how they choose to feed themselves as well.

Interpretation is a behavior that implies a choice, just like the decision of what type of food to consume or serve to others; these actions transmit messages and details about our mindset and identity. A classic example may be the ritual of hospitality, reminiscent of the Greek *ξενία*, the sacred

obligation to welcome a stranger into one's home, protected by Zeus Xenios. In most cultures influenced by Ancient Greece the relics of this practice are currently enacted by offering coffee or tea as soon as a guest crosses the threshold. The expression "deciphering a meal", used by Mary Douglas (1971), perfectly encloses how the encoding and decoding process portrayed above can be applied to foodways, the way in which the elements of a meal can be interpreted as a form of language. In a comparable way, Barthes defined food items as "highly structured signs" (1961, p. 22) and the act of eating as finalized not only towards the nourishment of the body but also the satisfaction of a social component. The choices made around food, whether it is destined to be consumed by ourselves or other people, enclose and transmit details about identity, history and social status. Therefore, these signs, in the guise of food items, work as a part of a significant system, carrying messages in and through their polysemic nature.

The similarities between food and language have been under constant investigation from the perspective of human communication, since food is present and signifies in most social environments. This claim was guided by Riley and Paugh's work whereby the food and language model has been formulated and used to describe the similarities between these two and how discourses and foodways affect each other.

The first self-evident analogy between these two elements is the medium through which they move across: the mouth. For this reason, they can be loosely defined as oral obsessions owing to the fact that food and talk are the cornerstone of oral pleasure and conviviality, and they share the same prospect of pleasure: the appeal to indulge in it. It is hardly surprising to find both considered as sins, notably in the Catholic belief in which one prominent example is the original sin depicted in the Genesis. In the anecdotal consumption of the forbidden fruit, the crucial aspects are carried out by way of mouth: the persuasion conducted by the snake and the consumption of the fruit by Eve. The only considerable difference between these elements is that language is produced from within to be received by the outside, while food works the opposite way, being made someplace different to be consumed in the body. This notion leads to an important observation: it would be simplistic to consider both as an experience limited to the mouth sphere in general, because every part of it is involved and serves its role. As an example, let us consider the key function of the tongue in the phonation and tasting process. In the first case, the air flow necessary to produce sounds moves from the lungs to the oral cavity to be modified in different articulation points of the vocal apparatus, whether the lips, teeth, palate and the tongue itself. The latter vibrates and goes near the different parts of the palate to produce lateral, vibrant and palatal consonants and draws to the teeth to produce dental consonants. Therefore, the perception of a sound's texture is a synesthetic feeling because of the multisensorial mechanism that lies beneath it. Similarly, the act of introducing any food item into

the mouth involves different organs and captivates all the senses: from the first contact with the lips, to the chewing made by the teeth and also to the perception of flavours and textures through the tongue's tastebuds.

Having discussed how the physical aspect works, let us now turn to a pragmatic gaze. The expression *habitus*, used by Bourdieu (2012, p. 48), refers to the perceptual system acquired from social influence, which guides one's way of observing the world and attribute a meaning to it. This definition comprises the entire set of language and food habits which make up our inner world and they are transmitted through knowledge and practices, shared in social interactions. Therefore, they both depend on the social context and their use at a specific moment for their meaning. This is evident in any case of religious celebration, during which certain ritualistic phrases are pronounced in association with the consumption of highly specific and symbolic foods. As an example, during the first night of Pesach, the Jewish holiday which recalls the exodus from Egypt to the Promised Land, the dinner consists of unleavened bread and bitter vegetables, while reading passages from the Exodus. This symbolizes the food eaten during the escape into the desert and the sacrifices that must be endured by the soul to be considered pure.

Food and language analogously work as semiotic systems, because of the aptness of both to work as a medium of communication. Foodways constitute a meaningful set of symbols through which the expression of one's identity and their feelings about the world they live in is possible. Moreover, food can iconically look like and be decoded like a language while also being indexically associated to meanings in various social settings, cultural contexts and historical moments. This can be illustrated by analysing the preceptive nature of food sharing in Islamic tradition. In the Qur'ān food is depicted as a divine gift for humans, therefore it must be shared in a sympathetic way and this act is a blessing. They also work as conventionalized symbols in a variety of ways, such as myths and rituals. Similarly to language, food can be considered as a code and to understand the meaning lying beneath food practices it is necessary to have access to the system of signification they are a part of. Therefore, they constitute a "secret message", built of every ingredient, way of preparing a dish, way of arranging it and so on. This explains the reason why some foods can be extremely repelling or appealing: it all depends on the feeling of otherness someone may perceive in absence of the instrument to decode the conveyed message.

The evidence presented thus far supports the idea that food works similarly to language: it is structured like a grammar and a hypertext made of experiences; it works through a signification system to communicate messages and information about the people sharing it; it is a form of material culture, since it works through non-verbal texts, having the power to differentiate, unite and even bond communities.

### 3. Cross-cultural Investigation of Diasporic Identities and their Non-hereditary Memory

So far, this work has focused on the many functions language has and the key role of representation in the process of creating meaning. The following section will discuss how it can be used to perform social activities or to foster human connection within cultures, social groups, and institutions. Given that these functions are intricately linked, in one's speech and writing a certain perspective on the nature of the world is taken, thereby influencing notions such as what is *normal* versus *abnormal* and what is *acceptable* versus *unacceptable*.

This can be attributed to a "magical" property language has: for Gee (2001) its creative potential makes people able to craft their message according to the needs of the situation or context in which they are, while simultaneously creating them, in accordance with the way the message is conveyed. The underlying reason for this is this subtended creative power, which enables language and reality to build each other actively.

This can be illustrated with the following hypothetical situation: a person enters a room and takes a seat, suddenly everything they are able to see becomes the *front* of the room, therefore attributing meaning and form to a given aspect of the material world. Then, the subject situates and negotiates their identity by speaking and acting in a certain way while interacting with other people, depending on who they are referring to, the relationship between them and what type of message is being crafted. From other people's point of view, thanks to the "recognition work", that person is classifiable or labelled in a certain mental category.

However, the mechanism of "recognition and being recognized" does not always work at its best, it relies on the different social languages used to enact and recognize distinguishable identities in various settings. Making situated identities and socially-situated activities discernible and detectable implicates much more than language-in-use: *who* and *what* are always obtained through social and historical practices that reflect the values and interests of certain groups of people. Objects, spaces, symbols, beliefs, tools and values serve the purpose of establishing a particular identity that others can identify and a specific activity that is being carried out. If this twofold activity made of enactment and recognition occurs, then a Discourse has been pulled off. Every individual cannot be considered monolingual since they can potentially express themselves using different social languages, and get multiple Discourses recognized simultaneously.

Gee (2001) compared Discourses to a dance: the abstract choreography made of words, acts, values, beliefs, tools, objects, times and places is not always executed in an unchanged and corresponding performance. "It all comes down, often, to what the masters of the dance will allow to be recognized

or will be forced to recognize as a possible instantiation of the dance” (Gee, 2001, p. 19). Moreover, the Discourses performed already existed when each “dancer” came to be on scene and will exist long after, even though, paradoxically, people are often unknowing of the lasting history of the topics previously participating in different texts.

Thus, they are out in the semiosphere as an ensemble of all the elements that make them up, forming material realities, mental entities and social practices.

Every little piece of information and element contributes to creating the large mosaic of so-called “cultural models”. Even though their partiality is debatable, due to the fact that every person experiences different aspects of reality, according to how they are applied, the models can influence one’s worldviews. As a matter of fact, there are models which people consciously commit to, some which are used mainly to judge ourselves and other human beings and some others which guide people in the interactions with their surroundings. Thus, since humanity as a whole is influenced by them, via different texts, institutions and even media, they can be considered as storylines, interlinked images and theories shared among people belonging to a specific social group or community.

Discourse models are bonded to each other in many ways, contributing to the creation of a bigger picture, or bigger storyline, and helping in the consolidation of organized thinking and social practices of different groups.

Therefore food, like language, works as an index, highlighting and building identities while also bonding and regulating communities. In this regard, it is comparable to linguistic registers: just as a speaker uses language differently based on the circumstances, by modulating the choice of words, the tone of the voice and body language, the same can be noticed about food choice, which reflects the context, or even better, is carried out in accordance with it. Since we imbue them with personal emotions and social myths derived from our individual experiences, food registers carry significance for those who share the same codes while excluding those who do not and the resulting culinary rules are often rationalized, especially when strict ideologies, like religious ones, are involved. A useful example is the one of Tamil Brahmins in India: since the religious significance in this case is linked to the role of food as a medium of communication between humans and deities, the code embraced by this community is highly standardized and rigorous and imposes a hierarchy both in the kitchen and at the kitchen table, mostly based on factors such as gender, age, kinship and caste.

A significant aspect to bear in mind for the aims of this work is foodmaking’s categorization and the repercussions it has in the distribution of power dynamics.

The question under discussion is: should food making be contemplated as a *mental* or *manual* activity?

According to Dewey (1916) it can be defined as a “thoughtful practice”. Two aspects should be taken

into account when discussing the dichotomy theory-practice: first of all, *knowing* maintains the separation between inquirer and inquired, whilst *doing* infringes this division; moreover, *knowing* activities aim at producing timeless truths, sharing a deep bond with the concept of atemporality, *doing* activities are all about the perishable, the transitory. These distinctions are most evident while observing cooking activities: the objects of the manipulation and transformation are destined to rot or be transformed inside people's bodies; therefore, they are in a constant transitory state. Analysing this distinction may lead to reflect on the concern placed upon impermanent things, regardless of their necessity in everyday life. The emphasis on this aspect is supported by and supports a class, gender and race bias against those who engage in physical labour: while *knowing* activities and their products are accorded value, *doing* activities (such as cooking, farming and cleaning), which result in temporary products, are subjected to many social prejudices. Most time-bound jobs, especially those which require the reiteration of the same actions, are considered less valuable and assigned to the *subaltern* members of society, who end up being exploited by these systems, being retributed the least, if at all. This relates to food workers the most, since their jobs are mostly organized in a way that is subservient to the time necessary to carry out the different tasks required. On the other hand, the privileged members of a society can afford to keep themselves away from these transient activities, avoiding any involvement which could remind them of the temporality of food.

The importance placed upon atemporality by the theory-practice dichotomy is subverted by the "thoughtful practice" model, which suggests that the difference between knowing and doing is a matter of degree, not kind; thus, *theorizing* is a kind of *practice*, and practical activities permit the physical contact between acting subjects and the acted-upon objects. As an example, when kneading bread dough, there is a direct contact between subject and object necessary to carry out this activity. In this case the physical movement is not contingent to the bread-making theory applied, rather kneading is the essential part of this process. Consequently, the mind is not superior to the body and the latter is not just the source of sensory data on which reasoning capability can intervene to procreate objects of knowledge.

Practical activities are executed in a constantly changing world, where time produces unavoidable effects, mostly antagonizing the products of these activities. At the same time these processes must be repeated (almost) every day, never overcoming the "capriciousness of time". Thoughtful practice then can be defined as the embodiment of *theory* or *mind* related activities. Yet producing and cooking food is an interesting counterexample: the knowledge required to perform an apparently banal task such as baking a loaf of bread, resides not only in one's memory but in the hands, in the eyes and the nose as well. This is what Heldke (1992) defines as "bodily knowledge":

this is not a metaphor, what the author aims to is the factual acknowledgement of the role of the whole body in the *knowing* of things.

Having discussed the individual nature of the relationship between one's body, mind and course of action when it comes to the production of food, it is necessary to consider the satisfaction of social components related to this topic.

Foodways can be described as community activities in many ways: they can be crucial in defining membership – or exclusion – in a community, and their own existence might depend on a community in the sense that it is handed down from one generation of practitioners to the next. Grosvenor's anthropological inquiry shines a light on another type of perspective on this matter: the food-centred tension which may arise among different communities, when discussing and exposing the underlying racism evident in prejudices regarding Afro-American food traditions and their collision with other American food cultures.

Food often has a central role in social and political matters, sometimes as the source of a conflict, sometimes as a weapon used to accrue the conflict or even as an instrument of resolution during negotiations. Therefore, how can this knowledge and understanding be used in everyday life? How are one's activities connected to a larger political and economic gamut?

Understanding the implications of these questions is crucial to be aware of the reasons behind some forms of political activism that can be labelled as Food Activism. Some of the individuals involved in these activities work within institutions which regulate food systems while others do it out of passion or interest in the cause. In some cases, their identities are made up of different Discourses: someone could pull off being the owner of a restaurant, being a refugee and a food activist at the same time and be recognized as such. Food activists carry out and communicate their beliefs, as a form of semiotic mediation, in more or less institutional settings, in an individual or collective approach: from household gardens to street demonstrations or theatre festivals; this is actualized as a form of protection of endangered foodways, of food revitalization movements or fight for the democratic distribution of food resources.

In contexts of cross-cultural interaction and conflict, food frequently undergoes processes of translation and reframing, incorporation and rejection, and reinvention. Distinctive meanings associated with food can be deliberately created and marketed, but they can also emerge in less controlled ways: once detached from their iconic and indexical origins, and through decontextualization and recontextualization, new symbolic values are formed.

The subjective meanings which are assigned by people to food, practices and their consumption are deeply rooted in their interactions with others and the environmental elements they have contact with.

This is particularly evident in the case of someone who experiences physical disconnection from a community, family or just any group that helps define their identity, which produces a fracture in the sense of self. The latter may be reinstated by creating a sense of continuity in unfamiliar surroundings with the medium of foods which may evoke the type of Proustian nostalgia that is able to recreate that peacefulness and happiness experienced during a different time. This might be associated with the feeling of being cared for, if referencing a memory of somebody else preparing that particular dish, or that of sharing food with others along with particularly intimate interactions which often take place in the kitchen during cooking time. All these elements contribute to accrue the nostalgic longing linked to the consumption of specific foods which tap into one's identity and sense of community and culture. This is owed to the ability of food not only to label individuals as group members but also to transform and manipulate emotional states, feelings and (as obvious as it may seem) bodies. This transformative ability is noticeable both from a subjective and an inter-subjective perspective. Food preparation and consumption are some of the various ways people use to respond to social structures by creating personal meanings and narratives. As proven by Lupton (1996), there is a solid correlation between memory and the emotional aspects of food consumption, food choices and identities which share a deep connection, due to the fact that, as explained earlier, identities are built according to (among other elements) power relations and the way these are able to modify and control the body. Certainly, there must be a biological explanation behind this ability, which may depend on two key processes: either human beings are the ones seeking certain foods to alter mood and physical states, for example in the case of the evidence presented in Christensen's (1997) study that foods rich in carbohydrates, both glucose and starch, raise the availability of tryptophan, increasing levels of serotonin in the brain and improving one's mood; or rather it depends on the ability of foods that "taste good" to promote the release of endogenous opioids, as highlighted by Mercer and Holder's study (1997). These scientific explanations may be significant when retracing individual preferences in seeking comfort through foods, however, they are not sufficient to prove group food choices, which are guided by other social and cultural factors.

The emotional bond occurs not only between the individual and the food item but also between the individual and others whose memories are triggered via different foodways. Therefore, food serves as a crucial mediator for social relationships within the broader social context, while also partially alleviating the feeling of homesickness, for example when recreating a recipe that has been passed down through several generations. When experiencing sadness or detachment, because they are away from *homely* environments, whether to attend college or to seek asylum as a political refugee, individuals often resort to comfort foods to connect to that previous version of themselves while, at the same time, applying some necessary changes to the food items they are recreating. Moreover, the

sensorial intensity of this experience aids them in the retrieval and storage of those memories: the evocation of powerful bodily sensations and the consumption of metaphorically charged foods serve the facilitation of reminiscence.

On the other hand, when considering the way mobility affects social life and the negotiation of identities, it is imperative to bear in mind that every transnational migration phenomenon rarely involves only one culture of origin and one of destination. This is due to the fact that each person is a member of various cultural communities, participating in many Discourses during their life, and each identity includes discontinuities and development. Therefore, there are virtually infinite possibilities of declining and negotiating the different situated identities involved in these exchanges, in the cases of migrating and acculturating or enculturating phenomena. This leads to the idea that so-called “cultures” and identities are naturally hybrid, made up of an ongoing process of adaptation and dialogue, enactment and recognition. This is even more evident in the case of metropolises with a longstanding and entangled history of immigration, where spontaneous cross-cultural influences are observable on a daily basis.

Another interesting aspect, highlighted by Morasso’s work (2014), is the use of symbolic resources, such as material and semiotic productions, as specific cultural elements chosen by migrants, in terms of what they signify, and how they contribute to the negotiation and construction of their identity. As an example, the habit of having objects hung on the walls (i.e. flags or decorated ceramic plates) helps maintain that sense of self in those situations mentioned above which jeopardize and potentially fracture an identity. These material objects strengthen the sense of belonging to a certain community while also increasing the chance of being recognized by others as such members. As stated by Hall (1996) “Identities are therefore constituted within, not outside representation” and “Identities are thus points of temporary attachment to the subject positions which discursive practices construct for us”. This suggests that by recognizing the differences between ourselves and others we define and construct our own identities and through this process we establish a sense of who we are.

Material objects can also hold an ulterior meaning when they are intentionally included in someone’s life, for example, a recipe book’s main function is to transmit the practical knowledge contained in the semiotic codes of the language used. Nevertheless, the owner might attribute to it another meaning, such as the memory of the person they got it from; or it might signal the gastronomic codes they adopted (i.e. a vegetarian cookbook) connoting their values or ideas; or it may refer to gastronomic traditions of a specific country which they are planning to visit. The reasons may vary but the main aspect concerning this analysis is the ulterior and arbitrary meaning attributed to the object under discussion.

The primary difference between a material possession such as an object-book and the recipe contained in it is that, while the first is destined to be unchanged and institutionalized, the latter is, by its own nature, destined to be modified, since recipes are akin to any other oral transmitted narrative. Depending on how they interpret written texts, readers can be classified into the two categories defined by Lévi-Strauss: “bricoleurs” and “engineers”. Bricoleurs approach texts in a more intuitive and flexible manner, using whatever is at hand to construct meaning, often valuing creativity and improvisation. Engineers, on the other hand, approach texts in a more systematic and structured way, seeking to analyse and understand them through established methods and principles, prioritizing precision and logic. Consequently, in the dichotomy of non-malleable and malleable symbolic resources used by Morasso (2014), food can be considered as a part of the latter, “the difference being the degree of a person’s possible agency on the symbolic resource”, meaning that the way a person utilizes the object is what makes the difference and signifies.

Therefore, food is a malleable resource for migrants because ingredients may require to be adapted or changed if they are not easily available in the place they find themselves. In fact, the way a migrant cooks food often combines their past experiences with the knowledge acquired through various codes and symbols. There is a noticeable difference in how a person usually learns culinary traditions from their home country, primarily through experience, compared to how they learn recipes from the host country, which is often through symbolic resources such as books, videos, and other forms of grammars or codes. Thus, their culinary practices and food preparation are shaped by their intercultural experiences, learning both from direct know-how and symbolic resources. In addition, the globalization derived from the postmodern economy might translate to an easier access to food resources for people far from their country of origin. The role of small food shops and restaurants is crucial in this regard, since they can be centres of linguistic and cultural revitalization while also being places where various cultural exchanges occur.

For Lotman (1985) “culture is the non-hereditary memory of a community” and, from a semiotic perspective, if natural language is central to help members of a community in the scaffolding of their world, then culture is a code and the “generator of structuredness”. This applies to the topic of this work given that culinary traditions have a grammar and a code. The grammar is what gives people rules in terms of what is edible and what is not, what form is appropriate and what is not, when it gets to be consumed and when it does not. The code entails etiquette and ritualistic conventions, such as table manners or the (by now trite) binary distinction between *feminine* and *virile* foods. With any misunderstanding that may arise when people do not share the same culinary codes.

However, the sum of every personal text belonging to an individual constitutes the tradition of a community: each one of them safeguards the hypertext but the latter is safeguarded by the single

elements too. When distancing themselves from their known contexts, and such phenomenon is typical of experiences of transnational migration, it might be necessary for those given individuals to switch from the widespread codes of their home country to those dominant in another. Such process can be achieved either by resorting to some small daily negotiations or, in a way that may be more impactful for the individual, by subverting the whole cultural system. With echoes of Barthes (2008), food offers a gateway to a person's culture, history, and nationality. For this reason, food choice, preparation and consumption are crucial in the investigation of someone's identity and in the reconstruction of the culinary Discourses they are carrying on.

Having discussed the way culinary codes influence the structure of cultural systems in cross-cultural situations, the final section of this chapter will be focused on how this form of language contributes and challenges the experience of encountering *otherness*.

First of all, it is necessary to address two courses of action in this circumstance: perceiving it as the object of the experience or experiencing other subjects through it. Hooks argues (1992, p. 21): "The commodification of otherness has been so successful because it is offered as a new delight. Within commodity culture, ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream culture".

The intersection of culinary culture and one's relationship with what is perceived to be different is a complex and multifaceted topic. As explained by scholars like Connerton (1989) and Bourdieu (1984), the idea that taste is an embodied knowledge or incorporated skill, raises critical questions about how this knowledge is transmitted and deployed in daily practice, and how it influences the interactions with material objects and, by extension, with people from different cultures. Cultural food colonialism, for example, is perpetuated by food adventurers who seek out ethnic foods to satisfy their taste for the *exotic* other. This practice can be seen as a form of cultural consumption where the food of another culture is commodified and eaten for the pleasure and novelty it provides to those from a dominant culture, seeking to escape from the familiar for a few hours. An illustrative example of this phenomenon can be the visit to a Palestinian restaurant: in what moment of the dining experience is the disturbing realization of partaking in the culinary traditions of a people currently suffering from a politically and militarily induced famine supposed to emerge? I am using this hyperbolic and provocative example to address the ethical consequences involved in consuming the food of cultures experiencing hardship: by engaging in such practices, there is a risk of perpetuating a view of the other as existing to serve and please, thereby reiterating the perspective limited to the alluring escapism, rather than one recognizing and respecting the full humanity and complexity, not only of those culinary traditions, but also the dignity of the workers as human beings. Hooks' insights suggest that our only hope for becoming anti colonialist lies in "placing the colonizing

relationship squarely in the centre of the dining table”, by addressing the dynamics present in our cooking and eating practices to transform these activities into ones that resist exploitation and foster genuine curiosity and intercultural understanding and respect. When engaging with culinary culture, it is imperative to do it with a critical awareness of how tastes and practices are shaped also by histories of colonialism and cultural hegemony. Acknowledging that “eating ethnic” can no longer remain a simple pleasure, once framed the power dynamics at play, is crucial. If this understanding makes the experience of consuming certain foods less appealing, then it is an amusement worth sacrificing for the sake of ethical and respectful intercultural relationships.

Ultimately, culinary culture offers a powerful lens through which to examine and challenge the relationship with otherness. By recognizing the embodied knowledge involved in cooking and eating, and by critically reflecting on the implications of our culinary practices, it is possible to move towards a more respectful engagement with the diverse cultures that make up the melting pot of communities.

Having defined how otherness can influence the intersubjective relationships in cross-cultural communities, I will conclude by focusing on food taboos and etiquette, as an important part of a society’s symbolic culture, to examine broader sociocultural dynamics. It is important to bear in mind that transmitting customs from one generation to another might be considered as a way of transmitting and preserving memory. However, these customs might be perceived as strange or peculiar, even signifying a *savage* nature, compelling people to adapt and conceal them in order to blend into the social fabric.

This is due to the fact that the way we consider and practice table manners is deeply influenced by the different culinary codes across sociocultural contexts. French sociologist Bourdieu’s work provides a foundation for understanding the role of language and food as vehicles for socialization and cultural learning. In *Distinction* (1984), Bourdieu explored how tastes and table manners both mirrored and reinforced the class system in France. For the author, “aesthetic dispositions”, such as the *proper* ways of sitting, holding cutlery, serving food in courses, and speaking at the table can be translated into an individual’s symbolic capital. The latter is curated by the elite, transmitted to their offspring, and employed as a semiotic currency to distinguish and exclude commoners from the upper echelons of society. Thus, table manners are not merely about politeness but are deeply embedded in the social structures and hierarchies that define a society.

Lévi-Strauss adds another layer to this understanding by retracing the mythical origins of table manners, proving that food taboos, eating utensils, and table manners serve as mediators between the body and the surrounding world. These practices are not just social constructs but also cultural buffers that help individuals navigate and make sense of their environment. For instance, in European codes

of politeness, eating noisily is generally frowned upon, reflecting a broader cultural emphasis on restraint and control.

In the *Origin of table manners* (1968) he theorizes that an array of behaviours at the table are influenced by a desire to control and manipulate the body, reflecting an internalized moral code. At the same time, concerns about hygiene come into play to reflect a need to protect internal balance against external aggression, showcasing a dual focus on maintaining both internal and external order. Certainly, each nation has its own customs and etiquette related to eating, and these are often a reflection of deeper cultural values and norms. Any child is socialized to eat according to the customs of their country of origin, demonstrating how table manners are culturally specific and learned behaviours. This is evident looking at the history of how different societies have developed eating practices over time, adapting to changes while retaining core elements that reflect their cultural heritage. For example, in South Asia it is common to eat with hands, following specific etiquettes that prescribe different grips and methods generally based on Vedic science, which emphasizes the benefits of such practices. The term *mudrā* in this context is particularly interesting: the etymological origin has long been debated and seems to identify the hand posture as a “seal” or “sign”. In the Vedic tradition, *mudrās* are often associated with various deities, representing a conventional language of gestures executed with the hands.

In an article written by Uyangoda (2022), she shares her perspective as a person born in Sri Lanka who, therefore, learned first to eat with her hands, and then, when she moved to Italy, had to change her habits. In her experience, European table manners create a distance between the body and food, whilst eating without the mediation of food utensils not only gives space to creativity, making every morsel different, but also accrues the synesthetic feelings involved in this act, which are forbidden by the coldness of a fork’s prongs. Nevertheless, since she was being pointed out as *uncivil* by those who did not share the same code as hers, by quoting Mohammad Reza Shah, for whom eating with a fork is like making love through an interpreter, she describes how it was necessary to come to terms with the “interpreter”.

The reason underlying these prejudices derives from a deep-seated quest for control over the body and a willingness to tame its supposed savage nature. Those who do not conform to the widespread codes of conduct are perceived as other and impolite, but this perception is rather a matter of not being “in” the same Discourse. Ultimately, table manners, influenced by symbolic culture across different sociocultural contexts, significantly impact the way in which we navigate social hierarchies, cultural identities, and moral codes. They extend beyond mere etiquette, deeply intertwining with our perceptions and interactions with the world.

To conclude, a person's identity is fundamentally influenced by the creative property language has, and the process of enactment and recognition of Discourses is the key to the mechanism of making a situated identity discernible.

From an individual perspective the "thoughtful practice" and "bodily knowledge" models enlighten the equal roles of the body and mind in the performance of culinary practices; from a collective perspective, food can be considered as a powerful instrument to highlight the membership, or exclusion from a community and the safeguarding of its traditions.

When considering the way transnational migration phenomena influence the negotiation of one's traditions, Lotman's definition of culture as the "non-hereditary memory of a community" is particularly useful to emphasize the semiotic value of food in the transmission of knowledge from one generation to another.

Since food choice, preparation and consumption are crucial to investigate someone's identity and are helpful in the scaffolding of their sense of self, while long gone from their familiar environment, it is important to carefully approach these matters. Consequently, when facing otherness, it is of the utmost importance to keep in mind that different codes may be at play and the exploration of other people's inner worlds should be guided by curiosity, rather than mere escapism.

#### **4. Culinary Narratives: Food, Identity and Community**

As noted in the previous chapter, identity construction is deeply embedded in interactional dynamics. It is not a fixed or internalized characteristic but rather a fluid process: performed, negotiated, and enacted within social exchanges. Identity is contingent upon the immediate interactional circumstances in which it is constructed and displayed, emerging as the situated product of a rhetorical and interpretative process.

Furthermore, identity can also be understood as a constructed phenomenon that is expressed and naturalized through texts. It operates on both an individual and a collective level. The collective dimension relies on personal assimilation to be acknowledged and recognized, while the individual dimension is inherently intersubjective, depending on the sharing of memories with others. This intersubjectivity contributes to the scaffolding of personal identity, which emerges as the cumulative result of past experiences.

As Violi (2016) argues, memory is not statically embedded in texts. Rather, it resides both within the texts themselves and in the broader spectrum of interpretative practices, encompassing the processes of reading, re-reading, and translation. Memory, in this context, functions like a beam of light: it selectively illuminates certain aspects while leaving others in shadow. By doing so, it engages in a dialectical relationship with time, linking the past to the present through acts of recollection. These mechanisms, while preserving the past, actively shape future identities, drawing attention to how these latter evolve and change.

This following section outlines the methods used within this research: food-focused semi-structured interviews studied using the SPEAKING-and-FEEDING model.

In exploring the relationship between food and memory, food-focused interviews constitute a useful method to gather participants' reflections on their food practices, beliefs, associated memories and their relationship to their community in a cross-cultural context. Two case studies were conducted, providing a space for participants to articulate how they prepare food for others as well as the significance certain foods hold for them. In discussing their work, participants often revealed deeper insights into their personal histories, cultural ideologies, and the ways food functions as a medium for remembering. The act of discussing food in the presence of it helped awaken sensory memories, not only through taste, smell and sight, but also through non-verbal language. By eliciting food-related memories, I sought to understand how food operates as a cultural trigger, evoking past experiences and shaping perceptions of its meaning – both individually and as part of broader foodways. Additionally, I aimed to comprehend the role these elements play in the interviewees' personal and professional lives. Thus, the interviews became a means not only of documenting

migrants' food practices but of unearthing the interlinked web of feelings, cultural identity, and social values embedded within them.

To study these specific communicative events, the SPEAKING-and-FEEDING has been taken into account. The acronym SPEAKING was originally designed by Hymes (1964), and it focuses on eight aspects which can influence a communicative event: the setting, the participants, the ends, the acts (such as smaller discursive actions), the keys (moods or emotions), the instrumentalities (channels and codes), the norms (discursive rules and expectations) and the genres (the type of discourse genre used). Relying on Hyme's paradigm and the language socialization approach, Riley (2019) has introduced an additional framework, designed to complement the SPEAKING model, for studying food-related interactions: the acronym FEEDING. This approach shifts the researcher's focus to how food and talk coexist in meaningful, context-specific ways, by highlighting the key elements of food-focused events, including the food items present, the activities surrounding their acquisition, preparation, and consumption, as well as the cultural rules and etiquettes governing these practices. The model also considers the arrangement of food, the tools used in its preparation and consumption, the beliefs and notions about food that emerge, and the roles that identity plays in shaping these interactions.

This model is suitable for the purpose of this work because it enables a deep understanding of how food practices can undergo a similar analysis to communication, in terms of how they construct meaning, by focusing on interlinked patterns of representation. This is especially relevant when exploring topics such as memory transmission or the negotiation of cultural identities.

The focus of the work is on diasporic identities in cross-cultural contexts and their group representation through foodstuffs and foodways. The local context serves as a constitutive frame, therefore, the personal dynamics between interviewer and participant are overlooked in favour of phenomena that reveal recurring patterns across narratives, highlighting the importance of shared processes in the construction and representation of meaning.

The main purpose is to make comparisons between the two case studies in order to achieve four key objectives. First, to explore the role of food preparation for others at the crossroads of *bodily knowledge*, identity, and memory. Second, to examine the interaction between individual narratives and broader cultural foodways, focusing on recipes and teaching as vehicles to the transmission of culinary knowledge. Third, to assess the implications of cooking for others as a cross-cultural experience, particularly whether it fosters spaces for sharing, interaction, and cultural exchange. Lastly, to analyse how food contributes to strengthening bonds within a community.

Additionally, kitchen and dining environments were addressed in terms of their value as connotated spaces of preparation and consumption, and the different challenges of retrieving ingredients in diasporic cooking.

Over the years, a large number of useful methods were utilized to approach such an analysis, however I chose to conduct this research through semi-structured interviews held in the participants' working environment. The interviewees were informed that our conversations would be recorded in their entirety. This setting allowed the development of a character analysis of the interviewees and a sort of culinary biography as well, based on the method described by Sutton (2013): conducting the interviews inside the restaurants contributed to evoke memories connected to the foods present and the semi-formal context, consisting of a familiar environment for them, granted space for a broader discussion on topics correlated to the objectives of the research, such as international politics and migrant's identity negotiation.

In the next sections I present some preliminary findings based on two subjects. Firstly, Omar, a Palestinian man who was born in a village not far from the city of Nablus and then moved to Napoli to attend university. He is the owner of a café and a restaurant in the historic city centre. Secondly, Shien, a Sri Lankan man who was born and raised in the North Western Province and used to work in hotels and then settled in Napoli with his family when he began his career as a chef. These two men offer interesting points of comparison and contrast: they both migrated to Italy and work in the food industry, they share the same gender and relative income levels, however, their cultural backgrounds and educational experiences differ significantly.

Omar greeted me at a table outside his café, where the atmosphere was relaxed. He was wearing the distinctive Palestinian *keffiyeh*, a black and white patterned scarf, a symbol of solidarity and freedom. As soon as we sat down, he offered me some mint tea, as a gesture of hospitality: he waited for the leaves to be steeped in the blue ceramic teapot and then he poured the tea in the glass teacups. When I asked about a significant dish to his family and its connection to his past or cultural roots, Omar started by describing *Msakkan*, a significant food in Palestinian culture. It consists of roasted chicken cooked in olive oil and caramelized onions, heavily seasoned with sumac, traditionally served atop flatbread. Its syntax is complex: as Montanari (2002) observes, just as the rules of syntax dictate how morphemes come together to form sentences, ingredients, textures, and flavours must be thoughtfully assembled like pieces of a puzzle. The preparation process, time-consuming and meticulous, renders it a dish reserved for special occasions and important guests. He described its deep connection to seasonality and communal gatherings in rural areas: during the olive harvest, in

autumn, families of Nablus often share this dish to celebrate the season's first batch, since *Msakkan* was traditionally prepared using young extra-virgin olive oil.

However, he acknowledged that replicating the dish in its original form is challenging: the flatbread, which would conventionally be baked in an oven made of clay and hay, is now baked in an electric oven; as it is impossible to source pre-made flatbread locally, he remarked – “*I make my own*” – adopting a necessary compromise in an urban restaurant setting. Similarly, the olive oil is sourced locally from the Vesuvian area in Italy; “*it is Mediterranean oil nonetheless*” he noted – this signals a pragmatic negotiation between tradition and adaptation while establishing a connection between his homeland and the land he now lives in. Obtaining spices such as sumac, essential to *Msakkan*, presents its own obstacles: he explained that while he previously sourced them directly from Palestine, over time, shifting political and logistical barriers have made this impossible. Instead, he relies on community networks in France and Belgium to procure these ingredients; in the case at hand, it is evident how diasporic connections may sustain cultural practices despite displacement. Omar's reflections on the transmission of culinary knowledge displayed his personal journey shaped by memory, nostalgia, and adaptation. When he first moved to Italy to attend university, he could not cook a single traditional Palestinian dish. His learning process, as he described, was observational and experiential, rooted in the recollection of time spent alongside his mother and sister in the kitchen when he was younger. These moments, imbued with the smells, sights, and sounds of cooking in his household, resurfaced as a stimulating reminiscence during his student years abroad. Separated from his family and cultural landmarks, he turned to trial and error as a method of recreating what he had once observed, enlisting friends as test subjects in what he defined as “*culinary experiments*”. Omar explained that during this time access to online resources was limited due to the high cost of internet connection. Instead, he relied on handwritten recipes sent by his sister through letters, a tangible manifestation of his cultural heritage akin to a personal recipe book, allowing him to progress in his experiments and refine his know-how.

After completing university, his engagement with food evolved into a mission of cultural preservation and dissemination: he first opened a café and later a restaurant, both conceived as spaces to “*make known my culture, my homeland, and my origins*”. Through these ventures, he positioned food not only as sustenance but as a vehicle to share his culture with a wider audience. Located on a quiet street in the historical city centre, his restaurant eschews the overt visibility typical of tourist-centric establishments. This placement implies that its patrons are likely to arrive with prior knowledge or intention, enhancing the space's role as a site of cross-cultural communication. Omar referred to this phenomenon as a form of “*natural selection*”, wherein the political and cultural commitment embedded in both textual and paratextual elements subtly filters the clientele, attracting primarily

those who resonate with the place's ethos, appreciate its food and value its environment. The restaurant's glass doors create a visual permeability between the interior and exterior, inviting passersby to peek inside a setting distinct from the surrounding urban landscape, while the lighting, low and warm, contributes to a welcoming and relaxed atmosphere. Upon entering, the red walls decorated with verses of Mahmud Darwish's poetry, alongside a map of pre-1948 Palestine and a letter from a friend's child to Omar, immediately immerse visitors in a narrative space. The wooden tables, colourful yet functional, are carved with patterns and covered by glass surfaces, while the proximity of tables to one another fosters an environment where the sound of neighbouring conversations becomes part of the communal experience. The seating arrangement, with comfortable chairs and sofas, evokes the feeling of entering a *suk* rather than a typical Italian establishment, thus signalling a shift from the local context to a middle eastern one, which is amplified by the colourful ceramic plates and the tajines in which many dishes are served. The kitchen is placed at the back of the room and notably concealed from view, deliberately excluded from the dining area. By keeping a strict division between these spaces, the focus of the client's experience is directed entirely toward the curated environment of the restaurant and the symbolic narratives embedded in the food and décor, rather than the mechanics of preparation.

The names of the dishes in the menu and their ingredients remain mostly faithful to the crystalized version written in the letters, as they have not undergone any significant adaptation. However, they have been transliterated into the Latin alphabet for accessibility for non-Arabic speaking patrons. The only exception is a dish renamed *la delizia del sultano* ("The Sultan's Delight"), which corresponds to *Msaqqa*. Omar described it as being similar to Greek moussaka, consisting of aubergines, tomatoes, and beef, though notably served atop white rice rather than layered as in the Greek version. He chose this peculiar name after a friend, whom he had invited to dinner and served *Msaqqa*, humorously remarked, "*tu sei il sultano*" ("you are the sultan").

For Omar, food serves as a versatile communicative medium, exceeding its role as mere sustenance to include artistic and cultural expression, including theatrical representations. From 2010 to 2015, he organized a summer festival titled *Contaminazioni* ("Contaminations"), which brought together artists from southern Italy and the broader Mediterranean region. Each evening featured diverse events such as book presentations, film screenings, or theatre performances. Among these, the play *Mi Chiamo Omar* ("My Name is Omar") stood out, recounting the history of Omar's family before 1948, when the establishment of the state of Israel and the ensuing Nakba forced them to leave their home along the Palestinian coast. A unique feature of this performance was the preparation of his mother's couscous recipe on stage – a dish made simply with vegetables, reflecting the economic hardships of the time. At the end of the performance, the audience was invited to share in the meal,

symbolically connecting them to Omar’s familial and cultural past. By presenting the recipe unchanged, the dish became a “time capsule”, preserving a moment of history and transmitting it to the present through a shared sensory and communal experience.

Shien welcomed me in the kitchen of the restaurant he is currently working in; he had a western-European sense of style: he was wearing a plain grey t-shirt and blue jeans – a practical attire for the working environment. Ahead of our meeting, he had prepared a thermos of Ceylon tea infused with ginger and cardamom. As we talked, he was busy in the kitchen, which was bustling with activity as the restaurant was preparing for the Friday evening rush.

When questioned about a dish that holds significance for his family and its ties to his cultural heritage, he started by describing rice and curry with tilapia *mirisata*: explaining that this term loosely translates to “spicy curry”. This dish typically involves fresh fish sourced from inland lakes, which takes on the taste of the curry made with ingredients such as turmeric, chili powder, curry leaves, garlic, and onions. He recounted how this was the first dish he learned to prepare as a child, taught by his father – “*he was guiding my hands*”. Motivated by a desire to expand on the knowledge received at home, during his formative years he decided to attend culinary school, which eventually led him to work for the renowned Sri Lanka Taj Hotels Group: “*every day we prepared breakfast, lunch and dinner*”, frequently using the collective “we” to emphasize his experience working within a team. For Shien, cooking is inherently an interplay of roles and responsibilities. This perspective is evident in his approach to food preparation: he was cooking rice accompanied by an aromatic curry sauce, to be paired with spicy shrimp, a meal intended for both him and the rest of the kitchen staff. Notably, his approach to cooking remained unchanged since his migration. The gradual nature of Sri Lankan immigration to Napoli, through various migratory stages, over the last eighty years, and the long process of integration required for the ethnic group to assume its current configuration, have resulted in the presence of small food shops specializing in Sri Lankan products scattered throughout the historic city centre, a testament to the community’s enduring presence. Therefore, Shien does not face significant challenges in sourcing ingredients.

The restaurant’s design and communicative strategies reflect both its functional purpose and its alignment with the cultural and social dynamics of its clientele. Upon entering, the kitchen immediately captures attention, prominently framed by a glass partition that separates it from the restaurant’s entrance. Bright, cool lighting illuminates this compact but well-equipped workspace, where Shien’s efficient movements are in plain sight. This public display highlights the centrality of the culinary process and serves as an unspoken invitation to engage with the food preparation. The modern cooking equipment and steel cookware stand out in the neutral-toned kitchen, which

constitutes the background of this framed imagery. The only colourful detail is a Pope Francis picture, a symbol of the religious faith among the kitchen staff.

The menu, affixed to the glass partition, is a simple A4 sheet and it only includes the *carte du jour*. Interestingly, the names of the dishes remain unchanged and untranslated, neither transliterated into the Latin alphabet. The only concession to non-Sinhala speakers is the inclusion of the term “(fish)” handwritten in blue ink beside two items, subtly balancing the preservation of cultural identity with accessibility.

The dining area is located below street level: the space features long tables covered in white tablecloths and unadorned beige walls. The minimalist décor is deliberate, as Shein explains that the restaurant frequently hosts private events and celebrations. Therefore, the lack of permanent, distinctive design elements ensures the space remains flexible for various gatherings, emphasizing its role as a communal hub rather than a heavily themed venue. Situated near one of the largest squares in the historic centre and adjacent to a neighbourhood – Cavone – which is the home to a significant Sri Lankan community, the restaurant does not rely heavily on visual or decorative elements to signal its cultural identity, however the sign “Family Restaurant & Reception Hall”, posted on the entrance door, elucidates passersby on who is the designated recipient. Nevertheless, its location inherently attracts its target audience, enabling it to focus on functionality and adaptability rather than overt branding.

As De Fina (2003, p. 5) argued “language exchanges become theatrical performances of moments that are presented by narrators as important within particular episodes. The story worlds in which those interactions occur are the fabric for the construction of the narratives and the way interactions are constructed is the key to particular representations of experience”. Therefore, food and culinary spaces transcend their practical function, becoming theatrical performances: they are narrated and enacted through preparation, sharing, and consumption, and they have the power to transform the act of eating and speaking in a stage where personal and collective histories are shared and preserved. Foods, performing as non-human actants, become story worlds, encapsulating the heritage, memories, and cultural identity of their creators. The deliberate construction of these food-centred interactions, whether through the recreation of family recipes or the narration of the memories tied to their preparation, serves as a medium for representing and preserving cultural narratives.

Building upon the interviews and their insights, the following section of this work will present and discuss the observations derived from this study.

By examining Omar’s and Shien’s narratives many similarities in the way they present their identities emerge.

First, they both express a deep connection to their cultural roots through food, which acts as a

communicative tool through which their heritage is preserved and presented in a cross-cultural setting.

Second, the performative nature of culinary practices emerges from their narrative, highlighting how cooking, sharing, and consuming food become acts of storytelling and cultural expression. Omar's *Msakkan* and theatrical performances featuring food function as symbolic acts of cultural transmission, while Shien's approach to communal cooking reflects a shared identity and cultural solidarity within his community.

Third, perhaps the most relevant finding, they both demonstrate how memories about food can bridge individual and collective identities. On a personal level, Omar transitions from his journey of rediscovering his heritage through the recollection of familial cooking sessions and handwritten recipes from his sister, to creating communal spaces that embody Palestinian culture. Similarly, Shien's knowledge, received from his father, represents a formative bond that shaped his approach to cooking, while his role within the kitchen staff places him as a part of a collective dynamic, extending this sense of belonging to his local Sri Lankan community in Napoli. Moreover, both cases exemplify the "bodily knowledge" model as defined by Heldke. Their learning processes went beyond mere observation of cooking practices: in the first case, memory played a supportive role, requiring further hands-on experimentation to cultivate knowledge residing as much in the memory as in the physical practice; in the second case, the learning process was characterized by a direct approach to matter, fostering an understanding of the tangible aspects of food preparation.

As far as the spaces of consumption under analysis, both restaurants serve as more than simple venues for dining. Omar's restaurant, with its design and political symbolism, creates an immersive narrative experience tied to his heritage. The restaurant Shien works in, though minimalist, functions as a communal hub for celebrations as well as quotidian eating, reflecting a cultural dialogue within the local members of the community.

However, these two narratives, while sharing common themes of identity and cultural preservation through food, are different in a number of respects.

Firstly, the diverse backgrounds and provenance of these two men shape their perspective through which they approach food and identity. Omar's identity construction leans heavily on a Mediterranean perspective: this enhances a cultural and territorial proximity to the population of the region, fostering a deep connection to concepts like seasonality and the interplay between tradition and culture. In contrast, Shien's experiences stem from his South-Asian heritage and a professional trajectory that required him to travel far from home. This has directed his focus toward a communal perspective on the cooking experience and is reflected in the restaurant atmosphere, which is transformed in a "home

away from home”. This phenomenon of delocalization from his place of origin, followed by a process of relocalization, reinforces the collective dimension of his identity construction.

Their personal learning experiences reveal distinct approaches to identity construction through culinary practice, highlighting notable differences in gender roles and familial influences. Omar’s culinary education stemmed from observing the women in his family, particularly his mother and sister. This aligns with traditional gender norms, wherein domestic cooking is typically associated with women, while professional kitchens have been historically intended for men. In contrast, Shien’s introduction to cooking came through his father’s guidance. This divergence constitutes an interesting finding, and it could be hypothesized that these different influences underscore a different familial dynamic, though featuring the importance of the direct transmission of skills and how gendered family roles shape the transmission of culinary knowledge.

Omar’s narrative underlines his individual progression, marked by a transition from experimentation during his student years to the consolidation of his expertise as an adult. In the distinction made by Lévi-Strauss between the engineer and the bricoleur in the execution of recipes, as previously discussed, Omar positions closer to the figure of the bricoleur, due to the emphasis on adaptation in his approach to cooking. Moreover, his identity is portrayed as a dynamic blend of individual and collective dimensions, rooted in a commitment to preserving an “original” culinary model while pragmatically negotiating constraints. In contrast, Shien’s culinary identity is deeply embedded in a collective narrative, shaped through formal training and professional work in hotel kitchens. His competence is constructed through interactions with others – both his kitchen team and the appliances – reflecting a pragmatic, skills-oriented perspective that prioritizes teamwork and adaptability over individual experimentation.

The sourcing of ingredients and the negotiations involved highlight a key distinction in how Omar and Shien approach the relationship to adaptation in a cross-cultural setting in their culinary practices. Omar faces significant challenges in procuring ingredients such as sumac, requiring a reliance on diasporic networks and local substitutions. This finding frames his cooking as a site of negotiation between the preservation of tradition and adaptation to his geographical and professional context. In contrast, Shien’s experience is characterized by relative ease in sourcing ingredients since he benefits from an established network of Sri Lankan food shops in Napoli. This availability allows him to maintain a consistent connection to his culinary heritage without the need for significant adaptation. His cooking thus emphasizes continuity, rather than adaptation, as it reflects the unbroken transmission of cultural practices and flavours within a supportive diasporic scaffolding. Through the analysis of these consumption spaces and their menus, it is noticeable how cultural narratives are constructed and communicated through spatial design and textual choices. Indeed, the

bi-directional relationship between spaces and subjectivity emerges clearly, as each element imbues the other with reciprocal meaning, further shaped by the implicit prescriptions embedded within the texts. In Omar's restaurant, a strong sense of "wanting to be seen" drives the construction of identity, blending personal and collective dimensions. The space is steeped in symbolism of Palestinian cultural and political narratives, curated through intentional choices in décor and menu design, clearly showing the power material objects exert in preserving connections across geographical spaces. The verses of Mahmud Darwish and other symbolic elements enhance its storytelling role, creating an immersive experience for visitors. The menu, crafted with a near-pedagogical intent in its transliterating choices, invites the ideal recipient to engage with Palestinian foodways by enabling them to read the name of the dishes and to be aware of the subject matter through the food description provided below. Furthermore, the inclusion of a name not only translated to Italian but also presented with a playful wordplay fosters engagement and piques the reader's curiosity. The secluded location contributes to attract a clientele already inclined toward Palestinian culture, fostering a deliberate cultural dialogue.

As for the restaurant Shien works for, the main theme is the anticipation of the restaurant's cuisine: the framed kitchen visible from the street, due to the see-through effect of the glass partition, exhibits the staff intent on preparing food, explicitly clarifying that the main discourse carried on by the restaurant is genuine food. As regards the menu, in this case the recipient is expected to possess sufficient knowledge to interpret the code embedded in the dish names: not only their ingredients, but also the methods of preparation. The dining space prioritizes adaptability for community gatherings over cultural immersion, reflecting its role as a versatile venue for celebrations and social events. Unlike Omar's overt storytelling through design choices, in this case the restaurant serves as a gathering place, addressing mainly the other members of the ethnic community.

Lastly, the significance attributed to food in the narratives of Omar and Shien reveals contrasting perspectives on its role in communication and cultural identity. For Omar, food serves as a vehicle for cultural and political expression. Signature dishes like *Msakkan* encapsulate narratives of heritage and identity, while his culinary practices extend to theatrical performances, transforming cooking into a literal act of storytelling. This multifaceted communication strategy reinforces his restaurant's role as a space for cultural preservation and dissemination, enhancing its function as a space of dialogue and education. In contrast, Shien views food as a communal act, deeply tied to teamwork and the continuity of cultural traditions within his diaspora. His focus lies not in symbolic storytelling but in the practical and collective aspects of cooking and sharing meals. The restaurant functions as a gathering place for the Sri Lankan community, offering an environment where individuals can reconnect with their heritage through food that provides familiarity and comfort. Communication

strategies are primarily limited to the restaurant's services offered to client, thus appealing to patrons already familiar with the culture, who seek a familiar backdrop for their celebrations or everyday meals.

In conclusion, the narratives of Omar and Shien provide insights into the ways diasporic identities are shaped and expressed through food in cross-cultural contexts and the role of food as a medium for cultural negotiation. By focusing on shared patterns rather than individual dynamics, this study investigates how food serves as a bridge between personal and collective experiences. Both narratives illustrate how preparing food for others becomes a meaningful act, gathering skilled practice, memory, and identity. In this process, recipes and teaching emerge as powerful tools for preserving and transmitting culinary knowledge. Furthermore, cooking for others proves to be a space for cultural exchange and interaction. While Omar's work emphasized storytelling and the symbolic power of food, Shien's focus lies in fostering a sense of community and continuity. Despite these differences, both approaches underscore how food strengthens bonds and supports shared identities within their communities. This dynamic becomes even more evident when facing the challenges of sourcing ingredients, stressing the role diasporic cooking has in the negotiation between the preservation of traditions and the need to adapt to new contexts. Their kitchen and dining spaces further reveal the significance of physical environments – whether as immersive cultural narratives or versatile gathering places – in establishing a cultural dialogue in cross-cultural contexts.

## 5. Conclusions

Throughout this work, I have argued that food is both a universal and deeply personal aspect of human life: it goes beyond its biological functions to serve as a medium for expressing identity, preserving memory, and fostering a sense of belonging. For diasporic communities, food represents a tangible link to their cultural heritage and a powerful tool to address the challenges of living in new environments. Consequently, this thesis has examined the diverse ways in which food practices act as a medium for cultural negotiation in cross-cultural contexts.

Through a combination of theoretical exploration and case study analysis, this research has shown that food operates as a system of representation. In the constructionist approach things lack meaning in themselves and the meaning is constructed and attributed to them by people. However, in the mechanism of “recognition and being recognized”, food – just like language – determines inclusion or exclusion from a community. It affirms the significance of everyday practices in shaping who we are, where we come from, and how we relate to the world around us. Drawing on semiotic and sociological frameworks, I have demonstrated that food practices not only embody cultural values and traditions but also evolve to fit the conditions of displacement.

Concerning the adaptation of food practices in cross-cultural contexts, the narratives of Omar, a Palestinian restaurateur, and Shien, a Sri Lankan chef, illustrate the diversity of diasporic experiences. Omar’s recreation of traditional dishes, shaped by nostalgia and the practical constraints of his environment, highlights the negotiation required to sustain cultural practices in a new context. Shien’s experience, by contrast, is focused on communal cooking and is facilitated by established food shops networks in the city, which help sustain traditional foodways without significant compromise.

For Omar, food serves as a vehicle for cultural and political expression, with dishes like *Msakkan* embodying stories of heritage and resistance. His use of theatre as a medium of representation further connects food and performance in his mission. Shien, on the other hand, frames food as a communal act, focusing on teamwork and cultural strength of the Sri Lankan community in Napoli. His connection to the community allows him to reinforce his bond with his culture and his active role in the food industry fosters a sense of belonging and reinforces community bonds.

A key insight from this study is how food bridges individual and collective identities: its role in diasporic communities extends beyond individual identity to encompass collective memory and cultural transmission. This connection between continuity and transformation reflects the inherent malleability of food, which allows it to function as both a vessel of memory and a site of innovation.

As Lotman suggests, culture is the “non-hereditary memory of a community”, but at the same time, food is a “malleable” resource, for its ability to be reinterpreted and recontextualized. This dual function enables food to carry cultural narratives across generations, adapting to new environments without losing its essence.

In both participant’s learning experiences memory and skill converge. However, Omar’s journey of rediscovery, beginning with handwritten recipes and evolving into cultural dissemination through his restaurant, contrasts with Shien’s seamless integration of familial teachings into his professional and community roles. Nevertheless, both narratives highlight how food embodies the *bodily knowledge* model, as described by Heldke, where learning involves both memory and the physical act of cooking.

Another important finding of the research concerns the reciprocal relationship between spaces and subjects in the attribution of meaning. Omar’s restaurant offers an immersive narrative experience, blending cultural symbolism and political storytelling to foster dialogue and education. In contrast, Shien’s restaurant functions as a versatile community hub, prioritizing adaptability and communal gatherings over overt cultural immersion. These spaces reflect the diverse ways food practices mediate between personal expression and collective identity, reinforcing connections across geographical and cultural boundaries.

From a broader perspective, this research emphasizes the intersection of food, power, and social dynamics. The act of cooking and eating is embedded within social hierarchies, cultural codes, and historical narratives. As Bourdieu explains, food choices and manners reflect and reinforce societal structures, shaping perceptions of class, belonging and otherness. The commodification of ethnic cuisines and the “consumption of otherness” raise critical ethical questions, reminding us of the need for a respectful engagement with diverse culinary traditions. Furthermore, both case studies point to the conclusion that food mediates social relationships and facilitates the negotiation of otherness. Whether through the preparation of comfort foods that evoke a sense of home or the symbolic use of ingredients to exceed cultural differences, food allows individuals to foster belonging and alleviates disconnection offering a medium for community-building.

Ultimately, this thesis reaffirms that food is a powerful cultural and communicative tool, capable of transcending its material function to engage with the complexities of migration and identity construction. By examining food practices as systems of meaning, this research contributes to broader discussions on migration, identity, and intercultural dialogue.

This study may serve as a starting point for future interdisciplinary research into the broader implications of food practices in cross-cultural settings. This could also potentially bring light to the

commodification of ethnic cuisines and the role of culinary practices in resisting cultural erasure. Additionally, several interesting aspects may be explored further by examining how food, as both a material and a symbolic resource, intersects with issues such as gender, class, and power dynamics within diasporic contexts.

## 6. Appendices

### Omar's Interview

Q: Can you tell me about a dish that is significant to your family and how it connects with your past or cultural roots?

A: In particular, while it is not significant to me personally, there is a dish deeply meaningful to Palestinian culture called *Msakkan*. It's a dish of roasted chicken with large quantities of onions sautéed in oil, seasoned with sumac obtained from a tree. Everything is placed on layers of Palestinian bread baked in a sunken oven made of mud and straw. The bread is baked inside on stones. [the waiter brings us some mint tea]

A dish reserved for special occasions with important guests, but it's primarily a dish of the olive harvest season. During this season, the olive oil is special, as it has just been made. So, at this time of year, people eat it while harvesting olives... the Nablus area, where I'm from, but it is now widespread in all Palestinian cities... as well as Jordan and Lebanon.

Q: Is it connected to special occasions because of a specific meaning tied to the bread or the meat?

A: No, it's because it's a very labour-intensive dish, so it's prepared when there are important guests.

Q: So, its importance is connected to the preparation technique?

A: Yes, yes.

Q: From the perspective of a restaurateur, how do you adapt these techniques, which are difficult to replicate, and how do you source the ingredients? Have you had to modify the dishes?

A: When you're in challenging situations and it's impossible to make the dish like the original... creativity and invention. Instead of baking it [i.e. Palestinian bread] on stone, I make my own, I use an electric oven and to stay faithful to the original I source ingredients from farmers around Napoli, as it's Mediterranean oil nonetheless.

As for the spices, now you can find them, and when I can't find them, I have them shipped to me. For the past year, due to the... *macello* [i.e. slaughter/chaos translated from Italian] in Palestine, they can't arrive [i.e. the spices], so I have them sent by friends in France or Belgium, where there are Palestinian communities that can procure them.

Q: In this region, is there anyone nearby with whom you exchange resources or ideas?

A: In this region, we are the only ones doing this type of cuisine, so I have more exchanges with colleagues in other cities like Palermo or Brescia.

Q: How has your approach to cooking changed since moving? From a technical standpoint, are there any cooking methods that are particularly different from Italian traditions? Any utensils or appliances?

A: When I was a child, I remember my mother making bread with stones and wood, but now it's hard to replicate that technique, so it's done with gas ovens. The knowledge is entirely in the hands.

Q: How did you learn to cook?

A: In my life, I've always learned things by observing and watching. When I came to Italy, I didn't know how to cook, but I watched my mother and sister when they cooked, but that didn't teach me to cook. The nostalgia for my homeland, the smell of food, drove me to experiment and improvise until I started using my friends as guinea pigs for my cooking.

Back then, there was no internet, and internet was expensive, so my sister sent me recipes through letters, and I began experimenting. Then I finished my studies and I was looking for work, I got the opportunity to open first the *Caffè Arabo* so with the intention to work and to share my culture through this activity. In the café, I served small things like hummus and in those years I felt the need to do something more serious, and when I had the chance to open the restaurant, [I did it] always with the same spirit to share my culture and make known my culture, my homeland, and my origins.

Q: This is evident in the décor of the restaurant, in my opinion... I noticed a letter posted on the wall, may I ask who is it from?

A: That's a letter from the son of a friend who used to bring him to the restaurant as a child to try the food, and at ten years old, he had an assignment to write about a personal experience...

Q: Did you have to adapt or modify any dish name?

A: No, all the names remained as the original, and also the ingredients and the aromas. Only one dish, called *Msaqqa* in Arabic... similar to Greek *moussaka*, made of eggplant, tomatoes, beef on a bed of rice, I put it on the menu as "*La delizia del sultano*" [The sultan's delight translated from Italian] because, once, a friend jokingly... I prepared it for his birthday... told me "You are the Sultan", and I decided to name it that.

Q: You cook for people from a different culture, could you share your experience?

A: I think I've always had a particular clientele; there's been a natural selection. Having a cultural, political, and committed character, here [at the café] and at the restaurant, there is a natural selection. So the people who come to the restaurant are all people... I don't want to be classist... but they are people who either have been to Arab countries and have a love for Arab countries and want to deepen their knowledge or curious people who came to look around and that's it, because those who come to look around... like when they go to the Chinese restaurant... if they like it they come back or that's it. ... you can tell instantly that they are people who don't come back and that there is little love for the place [the restaurant], its environment, or the food in front of them. About sixty percent of the clients are regulars. Fortunately or unfortunately, I don't know, there are very few tourists, partly because I don't advertise for tourism and partly because we're in an isolated location.

Now, I'm distancing from it [the restaurant] because I have other interests, particularly theatre, and I've grown tired of this work. But when I was there, I was there all the way, I was spending Saturdays in the kitchen with all my energy and passion, and this people felt it. Because a work like this it's not just about putting a plate in front of someone [moves the plate under the tea pot and places it in front of me], you have to talk, explain, and transmit the passion you've put into the preparation. Who is there and is sitting there must feel it.

Unfortunately this... it's been three or four years that I haven't been directly involved in the restaurant, and you can tell by the work. Many people have told me they used to come because I was there to

welcome and explain things to them. Working in a restaurant is beautiful but hard. It's even more so if it's your own... you have to see suppliers, clients, staff, hospitality, everything, the kitchen and the quality. There were days when I started at eight in the morning and finished when the restaurant closed at night... but it gives great satisfaction.

Q: About your interest toward different communicative mediums, such as theatre and political activism in the city, how was this born and how does this connect to the restaurant work? [He pours the tea for me]

A: Many of the activities I organize, I organize them at my workplace here and at the restaurant. I often host evenings when it happens that there are Palestinian guests, such as directors or writers, to present books, films, or discuss Palestine.

Here [the café] it's different, I was born here, before opening it [the restaurant] we were involved with a Palestinian student association. Much of the work was done through the university, who called us.

From 2010 to 2015, I organized a summer event series called *Contaminazioni* [Contaminations translated from Italian] that I paid for. From June to September, I set up equipment in this space and invited people from southern Italy and the Mediterranean. Every evening, there was an event, presentations, films, or theatre. It became physically and financially a problem. This *piazza* is also difficult, with groups of young people interrupting the activities. I asked the mayor for a patrol, but it never happened.

Q: Do these side events help strengthen the network in Napoli and beyond?

A: Yes, absolutely.

Q: Was food always involved?

A: Originally, it was done in theatres, where I occupied the stage, and during the performance, the audience could snack on foods prepared by the actors during the show.

... When I perform monologues, after the show there is food. In *Mi Chiamo Omar* [My Name is Omar translated from Italian], on stage there is the preparation of food, and then it is offered to the audience. Dishes from childhood memories are prepared, as the play tells my family's story before 1948, when they lived on the Palestinian coast, until they were forced to move and take refuge inland.

So... telling my family's history and childhood memories, some dishes my mom used to prepare... like Palestinian couscous made by hand with larger grains. At the time, it was eaten only with vegetables [laughs] because they couldn't afford meat. In Palestine, couscous was eaten by hand, but on stage, it's served on plates.

... è una situazione di merda al momento, chi sta attuando il genocidio rischiano di diventare loro al potere in America... è fonte di armamenti e di soldi. Sul livello globale non lo so, può essere che questo [Donald Trump], nella sua follia, sia meglio di quell'altro... magari non è interessato alle guerre quanto agli interessi in casa sua.

Q: Non si sa... vedremo

A: Il problema principale lì... è un po' di tempo che sono convinto che Israele fa il lavoro sporco, non sono gli unici responsabili. Sono gli americani a fornire armi e soldi, sono gli inglesi e i francesi, gli italiani con i loro sistemi di spionaggio o altro... senza tutto questo Israele non sarebbe arrivata nel 2024.

Q: A livello ideologico Israele ma il sostegno economico è necessario... tu hai famiglia lì ancora?

A: Sì, i miei fratelli e dei parenti.

Q: In che zona si trovano?

A: Fortunatamente loro fisicamente stanno bene... però la situazione psicologica, materiale... non riescono più a lavorare o andare a raccogliere quattro olive che abbiamo... nel villaggio vicino Nablus dove stavamo. Ma io sono convinto che riusciremo a risollevarci, abbiamo radici molto forti.

### **Shien's Interview**

Q: Can you tell me about a dish that is significant to you or your family?

A: Yes, I can, I am living in Sri Lanka North Western province... beach side... we have lot of kind of seafood. We are making rice and curry with tilapia fish *mirisata*. *Mirisata* meaning spicy. It is important family dish of our family. Tilapia fish is born in lake.

Q: Does it evoke any specific memories?

A: Yes, this dish make for me in my father hand... In my childhood.

Q: Are there any symbolic or spiritual meanings tied to it?

A: No... No

Q: Are there any specific cooking methods or food practices that have been passed down to you?

A: Yes, I learn the basics from my father, but I want to make my cooking better and to get professional training. We have many cooking methods. Some fried, stews, batter items, baked items and curry.

Q: If so, how has your approach to cooking changed since moving?

A: No.

Q: Did you adapt your traditional recipes to local ingredients? How did that impact the final dish?

A: Yes, it's very tasty. I am find all ingredients I need. We have many shops here.

Q: How did you translate their name? Did you have to change it?

A: No... No.

Q: You cook for people from different backgrounds, does this affect the types of dishes you prepare or how you present the food?

A: Yes, I am cooking for party... weddings. I am present food like a menu. First welcome drinks and after some bites and third one main course and last one dessert.

Q: Can you describe an experience where cooking for someone outside your culture led to a meaningful exchange or connection?

A: Yes I have lot of experience in my last years. I am worked in Sri Lanka Taj hotels group. It is worldwide hotel group. Every day we are prepared breakfast, lunch and dinner for airlines crews. This is my experience.

Q: Do you participate in any community events where food plays an important role?

A: Yes of course.

Q: How does cooking for these events help you feel connected to the group?

A: Because I like to cook some kinds of foods... for the occasion. Special foods.

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