Narratives of Storytelling across Cultures

The Complexities of Intercultural Communication

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Chapter Fourteen

Roti and Ritual

Reimagining the Guyanese and Indian Diasporas through Food Culture

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INTRODUCTION

Bring a Dish from Home

These were the instructions to our class from the late media theorist Michael Gurevitch. Our professor was known for developing a theory on media uses and gratifications, and renowned for his work understanding the link between television and politics. He and his wife Pat invited us to their home in Washington, DC, for an end-of-the-semester potluck to celebrate our first year in the doctoral program.

"Home" can be complicated. No one knew this better than Professor Gurevitch, who according to legend, took up arms to fight in the Six-Day War in Israel. He was born in Poland, grew up in the Middle East, studied at MIT, and taught in London before landing at our university in College Park, Maryland (Bernstein, 2013).

Our class was a cosmopolitan bunch. There was Svetlana from Russia. Indira from Springfield, Illinois. Priyanka from India. Natalie was born in Canada. The lone white American male in our cohort hailed from the Pacific Coast of the U.S., and named, completely on-brand, Norm.

Curiously, three different sets of roti and curry were laid out on the table. Three of us, born in three different countries, brought the exact same dish. One of us was an Indian national who came to the United States to study. Another of us had parents born in Guyana, South America. The last roti-bringer's parents were from India. To all three, this was "home."

The dishes varied slightly in color, texture, and seasoning, but they were essentially the same dish. Flouting geography, the same claim to "home" originated on three different continents. For two of us, it was the beginning

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of a journey toward understanding our intersecting histories and cultures, thrown together through a global history of capitalism and colonialism that converged into one delicious chewy crust.

This narrative is about culture and identity. It is about migration and race. It is about labor, class, and religion. And, it is about how food complicates what Walter Lippman (2012/1922) called the "pictures in our heads" about who we, and others, really are.

This essay will now describe an analytic framework to understand both authors' global migrations and issues of acculturation and the role food plays therein. Then, the authors will take turns telling their own stories of food in their respective diasporas, both their personal stories and the larger historical, political, and cultural contexts. Finally, the essay will close with some analysis of what these narratives say about storytelling across cultures.

Deciphering a Meal

An important intervention in the social sciences happened with the 1972 publication of "Deciphering a Meal," by Mary Douglas. In the essay, the anthropologist Douglas puts her own family table under the microscope, and in the process, she opens up a treasure trove of symbolic meaning and social commentary. She writes:

> If food is treated as a code, the messages it encodes will be found in the pattern of social relations being expressed. The message is about different degrees of hierarchy, inclusion and exclusion, boundaries and transactions across the boundaries. Like sex, the taking of food has a social component, as well as a biological one. Food categories therefore encode social events. (Douglas, 1972, p. 249)

By social events, Douglas means the "life cycle feasts," birthdays, weddings, religious holidays, and the like. She applied Barthes and Levi-Strauss's poststructuralist semiotic analysis to these gatherings to unearth a grammar for hidden meanings in society. This analysis applied to her own kitchen, to families in Europe, India, and in Jewish traditions. Some of her writings about Indian food and caste are oversimplified, but generations of food writers are indebted to her for creating a theoretical language to talk about food, which is essential to decoding the human experience.

Informal professional social gatherings such as potlucks make otherwise hidden concepts such as assimilation, acculturation, and ethnic identity come to life. From childhood, we learn cultural habits that become as natural as breathing that relate to critical functions such as eating, sleeping, speaking, and personal hygiene (Herskovits, 1955). Kim (2001) notes that individuals are programmed by culture from the day they are born and are largely unaware

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of how it shapes their mind-sets and behavioral patterns. When we become adults, the process becomes more deliberate as individuals adapt to what behaviors are acceptable to society. That is how culture is passed down and evolves. When cultures interact, strangers are compelled to learn a new cultural system; this process of new learning is called *acculturation* (Kim, 2005).

Food is an important dimension of ethnic identity, which is formed and expressed cognitively, behaviorally, and affectively. As Matsaganis, Katz, and Ball-Rokeach (2011, p. 71) noted, cognitive dimension "develops from lessons taught by older members of the ethnic group." The behavioral dimension is expressed when an individual conforms to the norms around them. The affective dimension emerges when individuals feel as if they belong to a particular ethnic group and identify with its history and its current concerns (Matsaganis et al., 2011).

In the example of roti, the history and current concerns span across the globe. In the following two sections the two authors provide first-person accounts of how this plays out.

Indira: Roti in Springfield

As Katona-Apte (1975) notes, eating is an essential way of life for Indian people. She writes:

> Often, it is the only pleasurable occasion in the struggle for survival. A person may hungrily await a meal and feel satisfied afterwards, even though the meal may be insufficient both in quantity and quality. Psychologically, the concept of a meal is all-encompassing and important to the average Indian, irrespective of its substantive value. Thus, a feast of many courses or a meal of just the staple and a single side dish are considered equally important by him. (Katona-Apte, 1975, p. 316)

I (Indira) grew up in Springfield, Illinois, where my Indian life was at home and my American life was outside of my home. My mom always came home from her job as a social worker at about 5 p.m. and cooked fresh food. My dad was a professor at the medical school. He was very traditional[1] and always wanted food freshly cooked. We rarely had leftovers.

Sometimes when I came home from school, my mom would ask me to make the *atta*, that means the dough from fine whole wheat flour to make the *phulka* rotis (not to be confused with *paratha* rotis). My mom did not grow up eating rotis. She was from the eastern part of India, Calcutta (now called Kolkata), which means she's Bengali. She typically grew up eating "fish and rice two times a day" as she has told me. However, in 1961 and 1962, there was a rice shortage in Calcutta. That was when Bengalis learned to eat rotis. The state government of West Bengal, India, introduced the ration system

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and therefore rice was restricted to each family and *atta* was substituted in place of rice. The ration of rice went on for several years and that was when Bengalis learned to eat roti. Gradually both roti and rice became staple items in the Bengali meals. But my dad always had rotis and *subzi* (a vegetable dish) with his lunch and dinner. He also had rice and dal (lentils), but rotis and *subzi* were always part of the main course.

He grew up in a strict vegetarian home as he was Marwardi. In India, the cow is considered a sacred animal because it gives milk, which is a primary source of nutrition for children. For non-vegetarians, mainly in North India, beef was not served in the homes, it was mainly chicken, lamb, goat meat, or fish. Pork was not served either as it was considered "unsanitary." My dad's side believed that meat was impure. My dad's family was not vegan. They had dairy, like milk products, but never had eggs and cooked many foods with *ghee*, clarified butter. When he first came to the U.S. in 1961, he told me he ate Rice Krispies, milk, and bananas three times a day, until he could obtain the ingredients to cook for himself. During that time, the spices used to cook Indian food were also not available as there were no Indian grocery stores.

Sometimes I couldn't make the *atta*, because I may have had an afterschool activity. But we had a home child-care provider, Mrs. Coyne, who was white and Catholic. She was elderly and in her 70s when she started working for us. Mrs. Coyne eventually learned how to make the *atta*, by observing my maternal grandmother, who stayed with us for three months. Mrs. Coyne made sure the dough was ready when Mom came home from work. Unlike India, we did not have servants to help or do the cooking. Mom always felt lucky Mrs. Coyne came along when she did in 1976.

When mom came home from work, she rarely changed her clothes. She immediately started cooking. She would make sure the *atta* was ready, meaning the right consistency. Once that was confirmed, she would use some of the *atta* flour and sprinkle it on the countertop.

Then she would take out small lumps and roll it into balls. She used a hand roller to press the dough balls into flat, large, thin pancake-style circles. The roti would then be placed on a pan—cast iron from India. She would flip the roti two times. Once it was cooked, she removed the pan and used tongs to lay the cooked roti on top of the burner.

She waited for it to pop up into a balloon. Then she placed the roti on aluminum foil, and slowly spread *ghee* on top. If *ghee* was not available, Mom used regular butter. In the 1970s there were no Indian grocery stores in Springfield. If you needed *ghee*, you needed to try and make it yourself at home. We drove to Chicago, which was 200 miles away, every three months to do our shopping at the Indian grocery stores there. Although rotis were not something Mom had until her young adult years, she knew it was something

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my dad grew up eating and that he wanted rotis with each of his meals. She managed the day-to-day meals.

Mom's recipe for 10 rotis (similarly described by Furstenau, 2013) included:

> 2 cups fine whole wheat flour (atta or "chapati flour" only found in Indian grocery stores)
> ½ cup water (add until the dough is the right consistency)
> 1 tbsp of ghee
> 1 flat cast iron pan
> 1 pair of tongs

We always had fresh roti with our meals. In India there is always someone in the kitchen making the rotis and serving them to you immediately from the burner. But in the U.S., Mom naturally wanted to eat with her family. After she made the rotis and applied the *ghee*, she wrapped them in aluminum foil so they would stay hot and bring them to the dining table. We all ate as a family.

My mom was non-vegetarian, and my dad was vegetarian, which means we always had a variety of things to eat. Some meals had meat, like chicken, lamb, or fish cooked in some type of curry style. I grew up eating all meats, including beef and pork. While we regularly had Indian food for dinner during the weekdays, we would sometimes go out for dinner on Friday nights for Chinese food or pizza. It was years before a Thai restaurant came to Springfield. But on the weekends, my parents usually had a social event on Saturday night, so Mom would treat us by trying to learn to make American food, like steak or meatloaf.

Natalie: Roti in Edmonton

Food and identity are very complicated for Guyanese, whose cultural hybridity is shaped by the convergence of people from four continents. The anthropologist Gillian Richards-Greeves (2012) explains:

> The term "Guyanese food" encompasses a large body of cuisines that are directly influenced by the diverse racial heritages of the Guyanese people, the conditions surrounding their migration, their subsequent interactions with racial and ethnic "Others" in the New World, and sociohistorical developments in Guyana such as the African Guyanese mass exodus from sugar plantations and the ban on certain food products instituted by President Burnham in the 1980s. (p. 75)

I (Natalie) was well into my 20s with small children of my own when I went to that potluck at Dr. Gurevitch's house. Until that moment looking at

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my classmates' dishes, I had no inkling that roti and curry came from anywhere other than Guyana, the place my parents were born, and I visited as a child. (Well, that night, the roti and curry came from Teddy's Roti Shop, a Trinidadian restaurant on Georgia Avenue, but that is another story.)[2]

One of my favorite memories of my paternal grandmother was when my parents went out of town—at the time we lived in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, where my three siblings and I were born. Grandma Gert was a roti boss. She spent a whole afternoon on the project of kneading dough, rolling it up, flattening them out on a rolling pan, and rolling back up again. She kept dipping it in a kind of oil mixture. She cooked them on a gigantic black cast iron pot. Once they were almost done, she threw them in the air and slapped her hands together with the roti between them to make them the perfect consistency: Flexible and crusty with brown spots where they were charred by the roti pan. This is the roti known in Guyana as *paratha* or "buss up shut."

As she cooked, Grandma Gert's habit was to sip Heineken beers, which she gave us to drink because she insisted it "killed de worms." She had the gentlest voice and the clearest sing-song British Guiana diction. She had fair skin, being of African, Scottish, and Portuguese descent. She married my grandfather who was a police officer and they raised my dad and his five siblings in Georgetown, the capital dominated by Afro-Guyanese. I have no idea how she learned it.

Roti was not something we ate every day. We ate rice just about every day, often with what my parents called dal (split peas). Cook-up rice, which is a cousin of New Orleans jambalaya, another claim for Guyana's national dish, was another everyday meal. We ate quite a bit of Chinese fried rice, chow mein, and stir fry, because when my mother attended a private school in Georgetown, Guyana, for a time, she boarded with a Chinese family headed by the matriarch Mrs. Hing. In Canada my dad worked as a computer consultant and my mom worked as an accountant for an oil company. My maternal grandmother helped out a lot, and at times we also had live-in help. Most of our nannies were white women, but I recall one Chinese exchange student and one nanny from Barbados. My mom let them cook whatever they wanted, so it was a hodgepodge.

Christmas mornings we woke up to traditional Guyanese meals: The smell of Portuguese style "garlic pork" for breakfast, and pepperpot, which was a sweet/spicy sauce in a beef-with-cassava bread, two indigenous Amerindian dishes. When he had the time and was in a good mood, my dad made Guyanese pastries—cheese rolls, pine tarts, and beef patties, a local take on British treats. Another Guyanese meal was an elaborate soup with a coconut oil base, provisions, and plantains and dumplings called *metemgee*, a West African dish.

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Roti and curry were for special occasions, when family was getting together, or over the holidays. So, when my maternal grandmother came to visit us when we had moved to Indiana for my dad's work, where there were no ethnic grocery stores in sight, she would absolutely thrill us by cooking a full feast of roti and curry. It always tasted even better when there was a sort of struggle for them. She was like a magician and all of our good feelings and good memories about being around our extended family would rush back. From her home outside Toronto Grandma Tina also used to cook Guyanese black cake at Christmas and mail it to us in Indiana.

We were the only of our extended family living in Indiana, which had very few immigrants of any kind. It was pretty lonely trying to navigate the local culture that was American black and American white, two cultures that were completely alien to us. Yet, because we spoke North American English, Indiana people assumed that we knew more than we did about how American society expected us to behave. People were constantly telling us what accents, music, and even what neighborhood we were supposed to live in. This classical "Third Culture" dilemma was described by Pollock, Reken, and Pollock (2017): being not inside and not exactly outside but a third space. Thankfully, for most of my childhood, I was blissfully unaware of what society thought black girls like me were supposed to think, drink, and eat.

It wasn't until at least 30 years later when I started researching Guyanese history for a book project (Hopkinson, 2018), that I realized that all of these foods I grew up eating reflected Guyana's colonial legacy, a mixture of the original First Peoples and the various people shipped to South America to build the British Empire and work fields of cotton, sugar, bauxite, and gold.

Guyana (formerly British Guiana) means "land of many waters" and hails itself as the Land of Six Peoples, all reflecting the different races that have inhabited the place since the Europeans began carving up the region on the northern tip of South America called the Guiana Shield into five different Guianas: French Guiane, Suriname (Dutch), Venezuela (Spanish), and Brazil (Portuguese). The Dutch, French, Spanish, and Portuguese jousted over control until the British claimed it after the War of 1812. They continued the Dutch practice of importing West African slaves to work the land and grow cotton and sugar (Williams, 1991; Cambridge 2015; Seecharan 2005).

When slavery was abolished in 1834, powerful plantation owners in the United Kingdom negotiated for the crown to send boats to replace these workers from another part of the Empire. Indian indentured workers were the answer to the labor crisis (Bahadur, 2013). It spoke to the power of those British "planters" that so many Indian indentured workers were brought to Guyana, more than 200,000, the largest number in all of the Empire (Draper, 2010). There were also large numbers of indentured workers from Portugal

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and China, but never more than 10 percent of the population, but enough to shape Guyanese cuisine through dishes such as garlic pork and chow mein.

Guyana is now a majority East Indian country, comprising around 50 percent of the population. My parents are among the 30 percent of the population that identifies as black or Afro-Guyanese (although they have ancestors among all Guyana's Six Peoples). The difference between being enslaved versus indentured was immediately apparent in the culture. While the European colonizers violently suppressed many African cultural practices, they had a still-exploitive, but slightly different relationship with their indentured workers who had the right to move back to India after the five-year contract was up. As a result, Indian culture was ostentatiously potent and bright. Also, as a result, there were fierce tensions and rivalry between the descendants of slaves and the descendants of indentured workers who were treated differently and perceived as different by the social and power structures (Williams, 1991; Bahadur, 2013).

Indian workers kept their names, religions, and cultural practices. When my parents grew up in the 1950s and 1960s, the Indian community was just a few generations from India. As a result, they held a powerful sway over the culture to the point that they determined one of Guyana's national dishes: roti and curry, which was a gift to us all.

We took these gifts with us when my family settled in the United States for good starting in the late 1980s, when my dad accepted a computer consulting contract in Indianapolis.

Melting Pot or Erasure?

Although America was founded as a nation of immigrants, it has had an uneasy relationship with global migration. For example, the challenges of the Great Depression greatly tested America's tolerance. As many Americans migrated and starved, they feared and scapegoated immigrants as a threat to U.S. workers and society. As a public policy matter, more needed to be known about how these newcomers shaped or were shaping American culture. In 1936 the Social Science Research Council appointed a subcommittee on acculturation. The subcommittee included three anthropologists, Robert Redfield, Ralph Linton, and Melville Herskovits, who were asked to explain this "phenomena . . . when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact, with subsequent changes in the original cultural patterns of either or both groups" (Redfield, Linton, & Herskovits, 1936, p. 149).

This created a new area of study and inspired other scholars to pursue this research. Shibutani, Kwan, and Billigmeier (1965) explained that the pro-

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cess of learning a new cultural system in the host country is riven with inner conflicts. Marden and Meyer (1968) noted that in the acculturation process individuals whose primary learning has been in one culture "take over traits from another culture" (p. 36). Kim (2005) described individuals who entered and resettled in a new cultural or subcultural environment as "strangers." The term *stranger* also referred to immigrants, refugees, and sojourners, who were people "who resettle for various lengths of time, as well as members of ethnic groups, who cross sub-cultural boundaries within a society" (pp. 380–381).

Assimilation happens when strangers acquire elements of the new cultural system, but also lose some of their original cultural habits. For some individuals, complete assimilation is a lifetime process because to change the internalized core values and beliefs would be a slow and difficult procedure (Kim, 2001). Others resisted assimilation by clinging to their home cultures.

The case of Indian immigrants' food is a particularly rich site in which to examine acculturation (or lack thereof). Ganguly (2001) explained that among immigrant Indian circles food is a "communal fetish" that expresses the collective meaning of being Indian (p. 123). In Hindu iconography, Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth, is rich with coin, but also grain and other precious food items. In Indian culture, meals are "emblems of a shared knowledge" about how to prepare and consume food, that creates a collective identity (p. 122). Ganguly (2001) writes: "The Indian example is all but unique, because, depending on place and time, any number of different items or dishes—distinguished in terms of provenance and preparation—can spark that epic relationship with the motherland" (p. 125).

The concept of the "Motherland" meant two very different things for Indira and Natalie, the daughters of well-educated immigrants living in largely white America. As explained in the following two sections, each had different relationships to food as they traveled and eventually left their parents' nests.

Indira Converts

In the summer of 1987, I had a revelation about food. I had spent a summer in India, mostly staying with my dad's side of the family, who are all strict vegetarians. I was a teenager struggling to understand my identity in the U.S. Springfield did not have many Indian families, and I did not have much in common with the other Indian-American girls my age. They seemed too Americanized. There was no temple, Indian restaurant, or any other way to appreciate my culture outside of my home.

Going to India that summer, when I was having my so-called "identity crisis," helped me understand who I am. I started to understand more Hindi, which helped me understand the culture. I also learned how to practice *pujas*

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(daily religious worship after bathing in the morning) using a *mala* (prayer beads) and proper chanting for meditation. Furthermore, it helped me understand that Hinduism is a way of life, and how the meal is a big part of the Indian culture. "Indians live to eat" (Ganguly, 2001, p. 128), because food is so much a part of who we are.

My dad's side always had rotis with the main meals (lunch and dinner), and I was used to eating rotis at home as well. I never missed eating meat when I was staying with them. When I visited my mom's side that summer in Calcutta, I was not even interested in eating meat. My dad's side also believes that being vegetarian is better for the digestive system. By staying with them I maintained healthy rituals that I brought back to the U.S. and still practice to this day.

That summer in India, I typically had rice, dal, roti, and *subzi*. My stomach felt filled, and when I returned to the U.S. I became a vegetarian.

My parents were not thrilled with me becoming a vegetarian. They knew how much my dad struggled to find vegetarian food if he was going out to eat or attending professional conferences. During the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, it was difficult to find vegetarian meals at restaurants. Even though "salad" was on the menus, my dad always said that was "rabbit food," and therefore it was not a meal. My parents did not want me to struggle as my dad struggled. But I wanted to remain a vegetarian. In college I started eating fish as a way to get more protein, because there were limited food choices, which made it hard to be a vegetarian in college.

My mom cooked the day-to-day meals, but on Sunday mornings my dad would make *poha* (flattened rice, usually made with onions, potatoes, and seasoning like chilies, lemon, and curry) or *upma* (cream of wheat made with spices and vegetables). Sometimes we ate out for breakfast and went to the local pancake house. But as I got older dad started to come home for lunch and would cook his own lunch. Springfield, Illinois, is a small town and getting home hardly took 15 minutes. He would always make *paratha*, which is a type of roti, except that it was in the shape of a triangle and almost slightly sautéed in butter on the pan.

Mom would make sure the dough was already made in the fridge before she left for work. Dad would use the rolling pan to roll his own *parathas* and eat those for lunch at home before he returned to work in the afternoon. Once his department invested in a microwave, dad would sometimes bring his lunch to eat, which usually included rotis. But he preferred to eat fresh food, even if he had to prepare it himself. He always taught me that good food for the stomach is good for the mind.

Growing up, eating a proper meal was important in our family. When we would take vacations, we couldn't afford to stay at a fancy hotel, but my dad

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always made sure we ate at the best restaurants. We never picked up fast food on road trips. Instead, we would pack rotis and *subzi*. I missed the foods from home terribly during college, which was also in a small Midwest town that also did not have an Indian restaurant. The dorms were not equipped with full kitchens. When I came home to visit my parents, they would send Indian food for me to take back to college to eat.

Natalie: Guyana's Roti Ban

In 1984, my parents took us out of our Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, school for a month so that we could spend an extended time visiting family in Guyana. We stayed with the family matriarch, my Aunty Lynette, at her home in Georgetown. We ate bakes (a fried dough dish known in other parts of the Caribbean as Johnnie Cakes) and roti and other dishes we had come to know came from Guyana.

I had no idea the whole time that we were breaking the law and could be jailed.

Let me explain: After the British granted Independence to Guyana in 1966, they put an Afro-Guyanese leader named Forbes Burnham in charge. In subsequent decades his government rigged the elections to maintain control of Guyana, over the strenuous objections of the Indo-Guyanese majority. By the early 1980s, Guyana was experiencing a severe economic crisis. Burnham's administration decided to use the economic crisis as an opportunity to reboot the economic and cultural life of Guyana. In the new paradigm, Guyana would stop importing items such as flour, apples, and sardines from abroad. Instead, Guyanese would eat only what they grow. So out was wheat flour. In was rice flour made on Indian owned farms and cassava bread that was made in Amerindian villages. If you did not have to import anything, that would serve to help local producers and make sure Guyanese money circulated in Guyana.

So, as a result, roti was essentially banned[3] (Richards-Greaves 2012; Kloß 2016).

In theory, this was an early attempt at sustainable living, exactly the kind of dramatic policy intervention that is becoming increasingly critical to save the planet. In practice, though, it criminalized being Hindu and vegetarians, who relied on roti to sustain them. Since both of my grandmothers have now passed, the closest thing to the family matriarch is my Aunty Lynette, who now at age 72 still lives in the same house we stayed in nearly four decades ago. She has lived in the region and speaks all of the region's five languages. When I spoke to her in January 2019, she explained the impact of the ban.

"We had rice and ground provisions, but we had to get our flour. The customs and the police were on our backs. But every house had flour. A lot of

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people get rich. The East Indian people from Berbice and the Pomeroon get rich too."[4]

A lot of Guyanese of all races were jailed, and bags of flour intercepted in customs. But low-paid police were easily bribed, and some of them even got into the flour smuggling business. And because Guyana was "land of many waters" it was nearly impossible to enforce the ban. People smuggled flour on boats from Venezuela, Suriname, Brazil, on the Pomeroon River; the village filled with African and Amerindians where my mother's family hailed. In Berbice especially Indian families were known to dig holes in the ground and line them with boards and plastic to stash the flour. "Bags upon bags. That was something else," Aunty Lynette said. In the cover of darkness, people came from Georgetown to meet them. "Used to make good money," Aunty Lynette recalled. "Guyanese would pay any money to get a pack of flour." She herself made some extra money on the side selling the contraband.

Burnham died in 1985 during surgery. His successor immediately eliminated the ban. My maternal grandmother once told me the story that when Burnham died, people threw loaves of bread at his coffin. It was likely a myth, but one that reflected the absurdity of the situation and passions that arose out of the ban.

Speaking to Aunty Lynette in an interview in late 2018, I learned that the roti feasts my grandmother (her mother) prepared for us in Indiana were subpar. "Mummy used to make some *hard* roti!" Growing up on the Pomeroon River, they were surrounded by a community of mostly African and Indigenous families with a few Portuguese sprinkled in. They would not have had the same opportunity to learn from Indian neighbors. "That roti is not the roti I learned to make," she said.

Aunty Lynette, who speaks all five languages of the Guyanas, has a crisp memory. After she married as a teenager, she moved to a part of the Essequibo Coast, where she was neighbors with a woman, Zhora Amin. She called her "Aunty Zhora." She taught her to make the different types of roti: *paratha*, *dhal puri* (with the peas inside). She told me that roti were essential meals for Indo-Guyanese. She said each day that they prepared it in the morning before going to breakfast to go and cut sugar cane. Often it would be eaten with vegetables, greens, callaloo, or pumpkin in a kind of stew. Sometimes chicken curry. As she says, "you eat a piece of roti, it can keep the whole day, and the warmer you could eat it from the pan, delicious."

She explained how to make the *paratha* roti, which was my favorite:

A pound of flour. A level teaspoon of baking powder. Some people put a little salt.

And you have a quarter pint of water. Put dry ingredients together. Put the water in.

Usually they have something they called ghee. Ghee is what the East Indian people use. It is like a butter made from the cream of the cow's milk. But you

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can buy it like butter. It makes the dough soft and nice. Some people use a little margarine to make the roti soft and nice. You have cooking oil.

You put a little ghee in the flour to make the dough soft. You knead it and then you knead it. It becomes dough. Then you let it rest—a half an hour. It depends on how urgent. The longer you knead it, the softer it becomes. Rubbery. And you leave it to rest.

After that now, you take the dough and you divide it into small balls. You use flour to dust the board and all of that. You use flour so it doesn't stick on your hand. You have this rolling pin, you roll it out and it becomes like round. There is an art in it, to get it very round. Round and nice.

Good. Then you pour some cooking oil in a little container, a little bowl. You put a little ghee inside again. After rolling it and it becomes a ball. You can take the spoon. Or there used to be a soft piece of cotton, a clean piece of cotton. You dip it in the oil with the ghee. With the mixture and then you rub it on the dough.

You cut the ball. You cut it like a half. Not right through. Then you fold it, you fold it, you fold it, and you fold it. Keep folding it. After your rub it on the surface. Take the knife and cut it in half. You fold and you fold, and you go around until you meet the other end. You place it on the board again and you leave it to rest.

You could leave it, 20 minutes to a half hour. Then, Indian people call it a tawa or a roti pan, an iron round pan. Put on the stove. Moderate fire. Low. Get the pan to warm. Now, you going to begin again with the dough. You take the dough, put it on the board, and you start rolling it on the roti pin. Now it is time to bake it.

Lift it up, put it on the pan. And as soon as you see it is baking. You will turn it over. Take a spatula and turn it over. The mixture of oil you have in the bowl with the ghee, you rub it on the surface. Then you turn it again. Rub oil on the other side.

Take it off the pan and you clap it with your two hands. By then it is hot. When you clap it, it becomes fluffy and flaky! You have a towel that your wrap it in a towel. The warmer you eat it, the sweeter it is. So that is the finished product of the paratha roti.

CONCLUSION

Natalie's Aunty Lynette's *paratha* roti is not identical to how Indira's mom's *phulka* roti is made, but they have similar methods of preparation. And that to us is a great metaphor for culture. The deeper you go into our collective histories, the more likely you are to find cultural parallels in unlikely places.

By following Douglas in treating food as a code, we were able to unravel layers upon layers of colonial history. More than a century before our rotis crossed paths in Dr. Gurevitch's dining room, British domination of India, Guyana, and West Africa eventually forced these two disparate cultures located in remote parts of the world to meet.

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Growing up in Middle America in the 1980s, both Indira and Natalie felt the pressure to assimilate into American culture and its strict hierarchy that places European culture at the highest caste. As children longing to belong, taking our whole cultural selves, including our food traditions, into schools at times felt strange. However, as we both became adults, the process of acculturation became more deliberate. We both staged small rebellions, acts of cultural resistance and self-affirmation by consuming and preserving the food traditions we learned from our families. These traditions are part of the core of who we are, and we cherish them.

We must give the late Dr. Gurevich credit for seeing this rainbow PhD cohort not as a problem to be solved, as the 1930s Social Science Research Council might, but an opportunity to learn, share, and communicate meaning.

More than a decade after that graduate school potluck, Indira and Natalie reunited as colleagues on the campus of Howard University. We have both sought a happy balance between acculturating and being open to new culinary experiences, and proudly embracing the identity of "the stranger."

Indira prepares her food at home and brings her vegetarian meals every day and heats them in the microwave in her office. She knows how to make rotis, but prefers to buy them ready-made from her local Indian grocery store, Patel Brothers, which sells spices, fresh vegetables, a variety of dals (lentils). Indira sometimes watches YouTube videos to learn how to make some of the Indian foods she likes to eat and cooks a few times per month.

Indira also cooks different kinds of pasta and Mexican foods. But the roti and *subzi* combination continue to be the food pair where Indira feels filled after she's eaten the healthy diet of whole wheat and vegetables. It gives her energy and sustains her the whole day, as Natalie's Aunty Lynette explained. It also keeps her connected to who she is.

Natalie is far more promiscuous in her culinary tastes on a day-to-day basis. Of all the Guyana, "Land of Six Peoples" influences, she feels most competent cooking Chinese stir-fry and fried rice. (Jerk chicken, learned from her husband's Jamaican family, is another favorite.) Natalie is trying to eat healthier and has also followed Indira's lead in cooking more vegetarian meals at home and warming food up in her office.

Researching the history of Guyanese foods has given Natalie insights into the struggle of the Guyanese diaspora, pushed and pulled by all these strong flavors. To go to Guyanese functions is to witness these often-clashing aromas on the same plate: Amerindian, African, Chinese, Indian, Portuguese, British. What may seem strange to others is a perfect kind of sensory logic for Guyanese. This harmony does not always extend to political or economic matters (Guyana continues to be notorious for its Asian-African tensions). But to see this ethnic truce at the dinner plates shows the possibilities.

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This kind of peace extends to Indira's and Natalie's adjoining offices on the historically black campus, a melting pot of the African Diaspora, and to a lesser but growing extent, the Asian Diaspora. We both maintain a strong connection to our ethnic identity through our parents, extended families, and the cultures in which we were raised. Although we were both born in North America, we have strong emotional ties to foods such as roti that signal our ethnic roots.

Food is culturally defined, these ethnographic stories are meant to illustrate the complexity that exists in a diverse, but global society. Food, while unique in its preparatory methods, is an invitation for communities to come together. It is in this coming together that we share narratives about our homelands and culture. It is in this coming together that we share meanings we have been taught and pass on in our interaction. We must be intentional for this to happen.

The one common denominator across cultures is food. With this universal language we cross over into other cultures. Food is an anchor for an individual in a foreign land and a medium to launch conversations that lead to more storytelling and shared experiences.

NOTES

1. As Ganguly (2001) notes, "the ways that meals, food, and the culinary in general signify for Indian communities themselves as emblems of a shared knowledge (about the cooking no less than the consuming) and thereby, a communal identity" (p. 124).

2. As Richards-Greaves (2012) points out, preparation of food is highly gendered in Guyanese culture. It is tied to expectations of a proper woman and suitable wife. Natalie's Guyana-born mother rebelled against these expectations her whole life, as a girl born on the Pomeroon River and later as a working mother in Canada and the United States. As a result, the little that Natalie learned about Guyanese food preparation practices came from her late grandmothers or aunts, to whom this essay will return later. For the graduate school potluck, Natalie was happy to outsource this task to a local Caribbean restaurant.

3. In Kloß's (2016) ethnography, an Indo-Guyanese informant explains the impact of prohibition of items such as aloo, potatoes, flour, dal: "they were items very much necessary in Hindu functions. So much so that if they were absent, it was . . . I saw, you would be prevented from performing puja adequately. . . . So, the dictatorship during that time affected Hindu culture and religions significantly. People were scared to, because if they were caught with these items, they were jailed, imprisoned and they were heavily fined."

4. News reports at the time confirm that smuggling, police corruption, and a thriving black market (Hamilton, 1985; Campbell, 1985).

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