

# **Kitchen Counter Narratives**

By

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**A Major Project Report**

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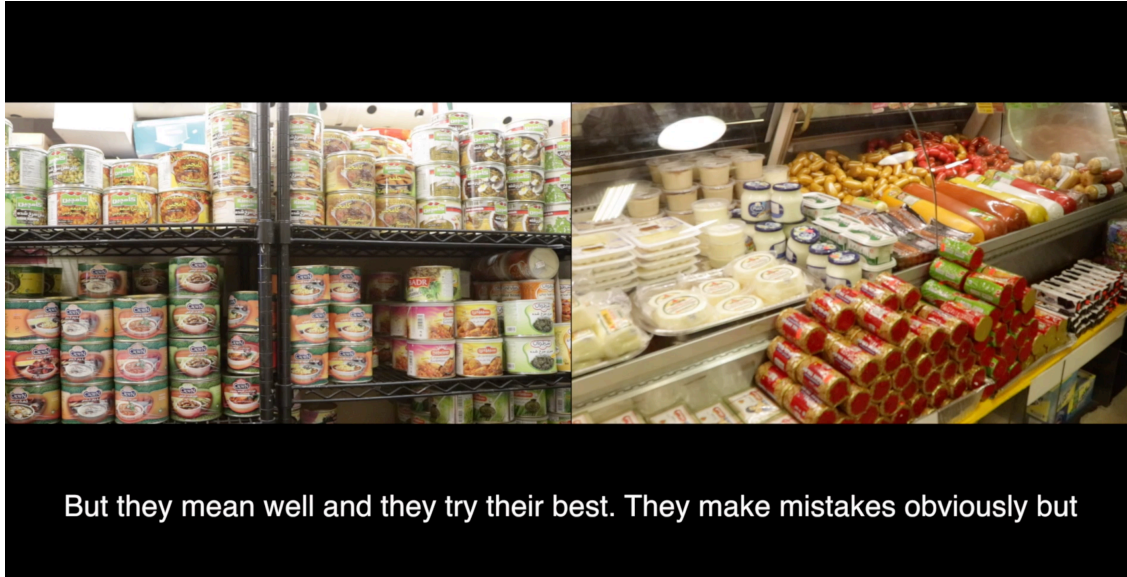
Figure 1: *Okra Prepwork*. 2017, still image from Kitchen Counter Narratives.

## Abstract

This major research report is the written reflection accompanying Kitchen Counter Narratives (2017), a 35-minute documentary film on stories shared by immigrants in the act of cooking and sharing food. Amidst Canada150 celebrations, the intention of the film resists the project of multiculturalism through the every day kitchen counter narratives of immigrants. While the film holds the audio-visual documentation of the stories, this report responds back to the edited footage and process through reflecting upon the filmmaker's implication in and relationship to the project. Guided by critical pedagogy and expanded by critical food pedagogy, challenges around these frameworks in the process are identified and explored to offer a reflexive descriptive account of care taken and work put into creating the project by those involved. These challenges include building relationships within a research framework, authenticity and performativity, highlighting the “mundane”, and unpacking stories.

**Note:** It is recommended to watch Kitchen Counter Narratives (2017) prior to reading this report. The film is viewable on the USB flash drive provided with a copy of the report.





But they mean well and they try their best. They make mistakes obviously but

Figure 2: *Variety*. 2017, still image from Kitchen Counter Narratives.

## Acknowledgements

I begin with acknowledging the stolen land of the Haudenosaunee, the Métis, and most recently, the territory of the Mississaugas of the New Credit First Nation, that this research project was designed and workshopped on. I recognize my privilege on this land to be able to meet and interact with others to develop and complete my work.

A friend once said to me, “At one point, we are all strangers even within our family.” I acknowledge the openness and honesty my family has extended towards me to be part of the project. Thank you for wanting only what is best for me even though I don’t always agree. Thank you for trying to understand me even if it feels like I don’t understand you.

As I write this report in companion to the film project, I am continually and consistently reminded that this would not have happened without my “participants”:

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I acknowledge the academic, artistic, and personal work done by other people of colour especially those from the black community whose theories, lived realities, and lessons have paved the road for critical thought. Thank you for giving me strength to validate my own experiences, self-reflect and unlearn, and build knowledge practices on my own terms.

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Figure 3: *Butter*. 2017, still image from Kitchen Counter Narratives.

## Foreword

*One of my fondest food memories is eating Hong Kong-style western breakfast. There is no single personal memory about these breakfast meals but many that are often repetitive and habitual since my parents make sure to get their Hong Kong 奶茶 [nai cha / milk tea] every Saturday. My go-to order is 火腿通粉 [fo tuy tong fun / ham macaroni and soup]. The dish is comprised of elbow pasta in a salty chicken broth with shreds of ham or luncheon meat (sometimes spam) on top. Depending where you go, you might also have a medley of peas and carrots (the ones found in frozen veggies) in the soup. If I feel like having something extra, I'll add a 太陽蛋 [tai yang dan / sunny-side up fried egg] but usually I don't because the place I go also gives two pieces of thinly sliced toast with butter and condensed milk. There is something about this simple dish that satisfies my palate of home and warms my body. It is my comfort food and that of my father's. It makes me wonder about the idea of comfort food. How does food comfort and what does it comfort? Is the place of discomfort to be soothed by a nostalgia of belonging? Is it a sensory history that traces beyond my memories? What exactly is the role of nostalgia?*

In my Food, Land, and Culture course, directed by Lisa Myers, we were given a recipe analysis assignment. Lisa pushed us to look beyond and inquire into a recipe to uncover or name the political and historical connections it could hold. I wrote about Hong Kong-style western breakfast. Looking back at that

paper, I realized I had never reflected upon the dualism of a rose-coloured liberal westernization and ambivalent Chinese nationalism that exists in Hong Kong beyond the context of culture. I now realize how much I missed out and did not even have a vocabulary to express. I had not yet consciously made the distinction between culture and identity, which is something I am now redirecting myself to learn and unlearn. This is not just the case with Hong Kong-style western cuisine; rather, food represents social, economic, and environmental situations, decisions, and actions on both global and personal scales.

When I was thinking through what I wanted to work on for my major research project, I was reminded of the impact of this recipe assignment and the pedagogical method of food stories on my learning and self-connection. Reflecting on my own experiences as a 2<sup>nd</sup> generation immigrant woman, I realize how the stories I hold are buried underneath guilt, confusion, and internalized blame. Grounding myself in this reflection, I wanted to look beyond essentializing and connecting migrants to their culture through food in a validated kitchen space. I was curious to give space and time to the kitchen counters, and wonder what stories and connections they'll reveal. What would it mean to visit the private and intimate kitchens of migrants and share a meal? What would it mean to take time to build relationships around the everyday intimacies of the kitchen space? What would it look like to take space to respectfully present these intimacies? How does this talk back to concepts of identity, home, and arts-based research methods?

In order to explore the above questions as well as the process, this report acts as a companion piece to the film, *Kitchen Counter Narratives* (2017). In connection to my plan of study, this project speaks back to my three components of identity, food, and film through engaging with the act of storytelling in the process of making and sharing of food. How, what, who, and why do we eat? And, what does this tell us about each other, the world, and ourselves? This project as a whole stems from the intersections of my learning process academically and personally. Both food and film were methods for embodied and transdisciplinary inquiry into doing research grounded in practice. In engaging my body as a medium of building knowledge, I've been able to feel my way through navigating and uncovering my lived experiences, and extend such practices to the relationships I build with others – the human and nonhuman.



## I/ INTRODUCTION



Figure 4: *Cheers*. 2017, still image from Kitchen Counter Narratives



## Entering the Kitchen

*In middle school, I was really excited to share my presentation since I had planned something special for the class. Luckily, this class was the one right before the end of the school day and my mom could come earlier to bring the surprise she had made - mix fruit smoothies! I'm not sure exactly how smoothies came into my family's kitchen. Cold drinks were never encouraged because in Chinese medicine to achieve a balanced body temperature you should only digest room temperature or warm foods. Better to be healthy than enjoying a refreshing cold drink. Smoothies somehow existed outside the health restrictions of Chinese medicine. It was a quick, easy and healthy snack that could be simply prepared for a group. At the end of my presentation, I poured smoothies and handed it out to my classmates. The responses were: "What kind of smoothie is this?" "This isn't a smoothie." "This looks gross." Since my mother had prepared the smoothies beforehand, the colour of the drink had changed to an unappetizing brown during my presentation. This experience reminded me that the kitchen in which my mom put in her time and care was not enough to make authentic "smoothies". It's interesting how memory works. I had forgotten this happened until a recent school reunion at a restaurant where one of our classmates was the head chef for the week with a special four-course Italian menu. One of the attendees randomly mentioned noticing my tears from that day without remembering why I was upset. He was curious and wanted me to remind him why. I quickly dismissed it and changed the topic.*

Language is often the first thing someone thinks of when thinking about communication and making connections. In my family, food is the most consistent connection. I was raised with Cantonese as my mother tongue. Sometimes I'm hesitant to let people know I speak any Chinese because my vocabulary is very limited and my accent so very Canadian. Food was a different story. Through food, my parents fed us stories of our family, culture, and history. The saying ***you are what you eat*** was said often in our household. Yet as mentioned in the above story and in unpacking the saying, it is clear that food is an ambivalent site of performance I engage with daily. It is the way I directly connect to my heritage; however, it is also a direct cultural marker of difference. I do not and cannot disconnect food from its political history and context. Food as a visceral and relational experience is the literal and symbolic materialization

of relationships between bodies, land, and histories. These relationships are politicized in the ways bodies, land, and histories are constantly dispossessed for exploitation, production, and ownership. Food scholar Elspeth Probyn writes in *Carnal Appetities* (2003) that “Now, beyond a model of inside or out, we are alimentary assemblages, bodies that eat with vigorous class, ethnic and gendered appetites, mouth machines that ingest and regurgitate, articulating what we are, what we eat and what eats us” (Probyn 2003, 33-34). What is the role of food in how home and identity is prepared and consumed? How is food that is related to home consumed differently in relation to class, gender, and race? Indeed, other scholars have been thinking and writing through these questions. Food anthropologist Elizabeth Finnis writes that “One approach to answering these questions involves considering *who* is attempting to make or reinforce strategic food-identity-locality links” (Finnis 2012, 7). Or formed as a question by food scholars Meredith Abaraca & Joshua Colby: “How do our current food systems (industrial, global, local, organic), all shaped by economically driven politics, construct the ways home is remembered?” (Abaraca & Colby 2016, 2). Taking from Finnis’ perspective and Abaraca and Colby’s question, I alter my question: how does the constructed narrative of Canada’s multiculturalism shape home and identity, specifically the way we are in the kitchen?

The kitchen is a site where identity is reproduced and maintained beyond just cultural practices. How does the kitchen change when questions beyond culture are asked? It becomes clear that both food and the kitchen are subjects

to capitalism, globalization, and colonialism. Food and the kitchen space are constantly reproduced as cultural sites that are performed in very gendered conventions. Contextualized within geopolitics, the kitchen is a site of representation and reproduction of selfhood, community, and placemaking. What do other people's kitchens look like and represent to them? What stories do they have of the kitchen and belonging? What are the ways one's kitchen is highlighted and represented in the public? What do kitchens share about the process of placemaking? The kitchen has been a place where I've participated in and observed the emotional and physical labour of love and care. It is also a site where I continue to notice changes and adaptations in connection to food, others, and myself.

Beyond existing as sites of subjugation, food and the kitchen are agential through their own networks of relativity. How does food play a role in building critical consciousness? Critical food pedagogy resonates with this in various ways (Flowers & Swan 2016). We all have experiences with food, whether positive or negative, that is reflective of our networks and encounters. At an individual level, food is a multisensory experience, an embodied experience. Beyond making sense of our sensorial experiences with food, what I am interested in are the reciprocal pathways of how food creates subjects and subjects create food through memory. How does food simultaneously become subjectified but also hold agency to create subjects (Massey 1994, 118)?

## **Locating Myself in the Kitchen**

As a second-generation immigrant with a middle-class upbringing, I acknowledge the privileges I have been given through performing model minority. I complicate my placemaking in acknowledging the history of Canada as a settler-colony that continues to displace Aboriginal peoples from their land, culture, and history. This year marks Canada's 150th year of confederation. There is no better time to create space within this narrative of celebration to acknowledge the true history of Canada. My project resists the celebration of what Canada has overcome through validating the "minor" feelings, emotions, and experiences of racism that occur every day under the guise of tolerance (Kim 2016, 43-44). As such, my project addresses the ongoing imagination of Canada's nation-building project as a diverse and equality-centred place of opportunity, growth, and settlement.

I begin with my own settlement story in Canada. My Father had planned to leave Hong Kong right after marriage for Canada in pursuit of a "better" life. A "better" life meant more opportunities for the family in terms of education, health, exposure, and space. My Mother was given the choice to marry and leave her family for a better life. What is the price of this decision? Both of my parents sacrificed something important in order to raise our family in a comfortable upbringing. My Mother decided (or did not have the choice but) to be a stay-at-home mom to fully commit to nurturing and working towards "the best family practices," a hybridization of traditional Chinese and modern Western family standards. My Father developed (subconsciously and

consciously) the connections between money and love such that deciding-power in the family is determined by how much one earns for the family. The topic of “sacrifice” is taboo in our family. We do not know how to talk about it without competing who has sacrificed more. What was the intention of these sacrifices? My Parents understood the expectation of these sacrifices is to work hard, succeed and fit into Canadian society in order to achieve a successful life. My Mother would tell me how her new co-workers didn’t like her because she was so “hardworking”. She told me she had culture shock at the laziness of her coworkers. Besides recognizing the privilege I hold, I also see how this imaginary tolerance of acceptance contextualized in the multiculturalism narrative does not pay attention to the everyday “banal” intimate existence of migrants in Canada or their kitchens (Kim 2016, 44).

My academic process comes from my own experiences as a Chinese-Canadian woman through vaguely wondering what “home” is. How do I start to unpack my memories of unbelonging, such as from the story shared above? What does it mean to take up space in academia to critically analyze these lived experiences? In “Teaching Critical Thinking”, critical theorist and cultural critic bell hooks speaks to the transformativity of personal storytelling as a process of healing (hooks 2010, 50-51). Sharing personal stories is an act of vulnerability; a personal risk that can also create a vulnerable space to share and be open. This reflection paper is intended to open space within the academic institution where objectification, isolation, and abstraction is standardized to include personal

narratives of self, family, and friends to allow for a process of healing and transformation.

## **The Project**

During my first draft of this report with my supervisor, Sarah Flicker, noticed I used “The Project” instead of “My Project”. She was curious to wonder why I made that decision and whether it was intentional. Consciously, I did not intentionally type it; however, reflecting on the title allowed me to realize how it might have been an unconscious intentional choice. When working with community for community, I understand research to be community-oriented (Brown & Strega 2005; Tuck 2009). Ownership is a collective ownership. My role is more of a facilitator and “contextualizer”, to ensure that the community’s knowledges are mindfully highlighted and represented such that what they know and share are reflect how they see and understand themselves. I continue to use “the project” instead of “my project” as a reminder that these are stories experienced and lived on a daily basis.

The film consists of personal narratives and sessions I held with my “participants”. In total, the project involved seven “participants”. I use “participants” in quotation marks to remind myself to be consistently mindful and aware of the connotations of categorizing relationships that allow for power imbalance especially within research and academic institutions. Outside of the research project, I would refer to my “participants” as friends and/or family. This

brought an interesting layer in questioning the fluidity of how relationships change, perform, and develop within a research framework.

I met with each “participant” for at least two sessions in person, via phone and/or Skype. All sessions were recorded either as video footage or audio, each session ranging from one hour to six hours in length. In total, I have over 30 hours of video and audio footage. The audio recordings were transcribed to help edit and construct the narratives in the film. In engaging with the recordings through transcription, I made sure to take time to actively listen and self-reflect on what was documented. The narration script in the introduction and conclusion comes from my reflexive response to the stories, lessons and experiences shared by those who participated in the video. It shares my intention and accountability to the project as well as provides a narrative structure to the retelling. The video footage was then edited to create five distinctive steps to build an overarching “recipe” or film.

A private screening was held on July 3, 2017, in part to share the project and to thank the “participants” for their involvement. The screening is an important part of the process besides the filming. Its purpose was two-fold: first, it was a check-in session with “participants”; and secondly, it was a method to witness the process to continue conversations around the themes of the film. *Kitchen Counter Narratives* (2017) premiered in my family’s home. I chose to host in my home to play with the notion of how private spaces can be transformed and made public. This decision opened space to acknowledge certain personal risks as I’ve listed here. First, I wanted to set an environment for

discussions around complicating diaspora studies, my own settlement story, with Canada's settler-colonial history. The event began with a land acknowledgement to recognize the ways immigrants can be and are complicit in the continual displacement of Aboriginal peoples and communities. Secondly, I wanted to address the intersectional experiences of migrants. While I identify my family and our experiences to be part of the model minority narrative, our family is still very much susceptible to the nuclear family model, as well as dynamics of capitalism, racism, and globalization that occur daily. The project also acknowledges the relevance of racialized narratives that speak back to the model minority narrative. In terms of the cast of *Kitchen Counter Narratives* (2017), under certain standards they have "made it", however, their narratives are still at stake on a daily basis so it is important to continue a critical discussion around diaspora.

### **Expectations and Intentions**

The intention of the film is to provide a counter-narrative to the kitchen stories that are validated and shared in the construct of a multicultural narrative of celebration. These celebrations are often seen through food, which works to encapsulate and enclose culture and tradition to be essential to discussions around identity (Naraghi & Kingsbury 2013, 177). Here, culture and tradition are watched and defined in contrast to modernization and Westernization to be temporally and spatially restricted in order to represent "naturalized" origin stories. This constructed narrative of multiculturalism in Canada has shaped the



public sphere as much as it is part of the building blocks of home in the private life. Presently, Canada is consistently praised as a sanctuary of equality for migrants in comparison to the United States of America under President Donald Trump (and even beyond that historically), there is no room to feel comfortable without self-reflection and accountability when thinking through Canada's history and (continual) construction as a nation-state. That is not to say my film does not prepare and share traditional food, or show the ways culture and identity are intertwined. What this film does differently is to show the everyday narrative of migrants that includes feelings, thoughts, places, and private conversations. The film suddenly seems that it is no longer about food because it simultaneously places food in the foreground and in the background.

When I think about my own process of becoming aware of my social location, I realize that a lot of that work and experience was around others who are becoming or are already aware of their own locations. What does it mean to "shatter the ice" for someone else such as a friend or family member? How does this relate to building critical consciousness? How can these topics be something to be shared around the kitchen table? How do friendships and relationships change when conversations do involve critical and often self-reflexive topics? What does it mean to share with my parents my research project and what I have been learning in my program? Besides a converging of private and public space, my film is intended to push how we begin to hold these conversations between family and friends in "intimate" spaces about "intimate" experiences. Michelle Billies shares her research process through

focusing on the concept of critical consciousness from Paulo Freire to describe “a way of identifying and analyzing social and systemic dimensions of lived experience” (Billies 2010, 356). Billies argues that cultivating critical consciousness should be central to Participatory Action Research (PAR) through the formulation of questions and participation in a self-reflexive dialogue (Billies 2010, 367-368). It is keeping mindful that these are somebody’s everyday realities and giving that validation instead of emphasizing theory. Self-reflexive dialogue is an ongoing practice that I, as a researcher and community member, am developing to consistently situate myself critically in my experience. This report hopes to reflect upon and stay true to this intention; critical consciousness is indeed a continual process for everyone - even for myself (Billies 2010, 371).

## II/ MESSY PROCESS – MESSY METHODS

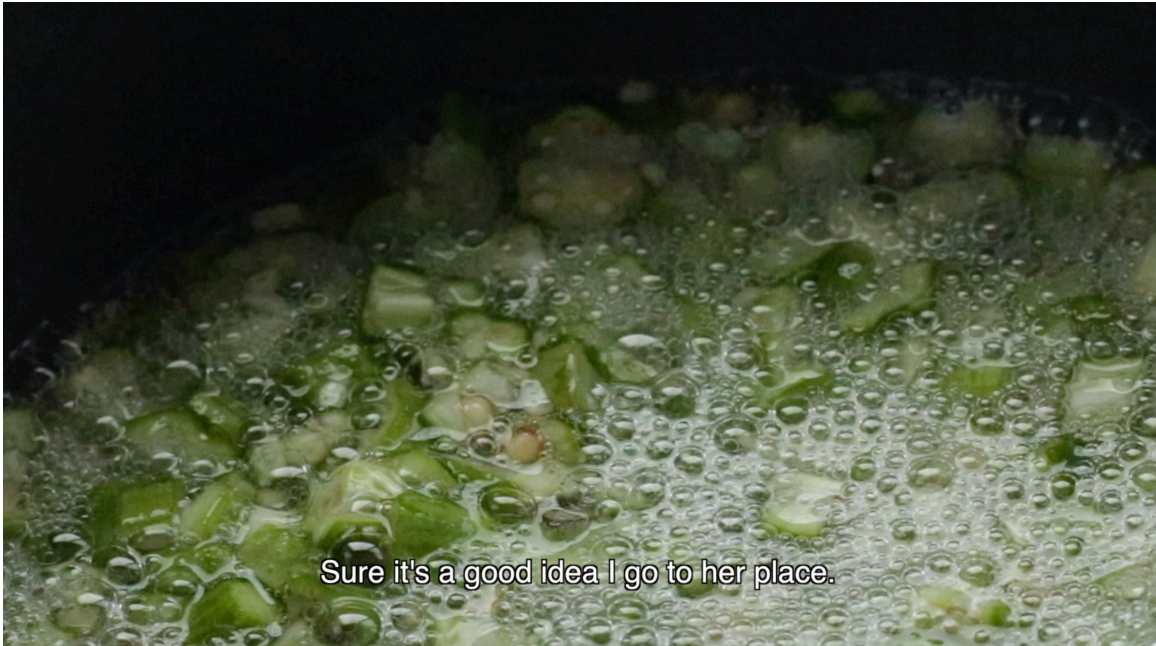


Figure 5: *Washing*. 2017, still image from Kitchen Counter Narratives

## **Including Film into the Process**

My connection to film begins through my journey into photography as a means of archiving relationships. At home, we don't keep photos or objects of the past life prior to settling in Toronto. We hold onto memorabilia of settlement progress in Toronto: family portraits, childhood artwork, ribbons from various sports competitions, Chinese school awards, and school projects. My Father prides himself in mounting our childhood artwork as unique pieces to decorate the home. Why own a copy of an original artwork when your own family can create one-of-a-kind pieces? Our heritage is what we achieve here in Canada. Despite growing up as a proud Canadian (to the point that I did not see or understand myself as a person of colour), there was a strong disconnection and emptiness I didn't know how to explain. It was a longing for something that I couldn't feel, reach, or connect to. I remember mindfully seeing my paternal grandfather's photo that wasn't his tombstone photo for the first time two years ago. I had never met him. Stories about him weren't told often, you had to prove your maturity first whether that was quantified by age or emotional maturity. These stories weaved the imaginary with the real. For x amount of years, the Chinese government had detained him. No one really knew how it happened and what went on during that solitude. The only thing certain is the moral of the story: don't let yourself do something risky because you could get caught at the wrong time, wrong place like Grandfather. Sometimes, my Little Aunt would tell me how my Grandfather chopped trees during his time in China. Each tree earned him a cent. Can you imagine how many trees he would have to axe to

earn decent money? There was this one large tree that was sure to bring him more money than the others. It was situated close to a cliff. His risk and bravery was motivated by the thought of earning more money for whenever the family would be reunited once again. He risked his life just for a few more cents. The story would end with teary eyes. My tigress Little Aunt is always sensitive about my Grandfather, her father. She was the only one who welcomed him home after he returned. She was the one who showed me his photo after his return from China alongside a family portrait of when my Father was just a baby. Fact-checking the above story to my own understanding of the time-line, I realize the spaces left in the story might never be filled or corrected. What does exist are the photos and my feelings in holding and looking at the photos. The visceral experience of holding, feeling, and seeing these photos were pivotal as a self-realization about how photos encapsulate relationships, even those that were lost to time and place. bell hooks eloquently writes about this connection of remembrance to photography in “In Our Glory” (1995):

The word remember (re-member) evokes the coming together of severed parts, fragments becoming a whole. Photography has been, and is, central to that aspect of decolonization that calls us back to the past and offers a way to reclaim and renew life-affirming bonds. Using images, we connect ourselves to a recuperative, redemptive memory that enables us to construct radical identities, images of ourselves that transcend the limits of the colonizing eye (hooks 1995, 64).

Through photographs and the act of photography, images recall stories of relationships human/non-human in a very material way that moves beyond time and spatial constraints. This affective element of images powerfully connects to

memory. Not just passive memory but also memory capable of action, transformation, and transcendence.

The transition from photography to videography felt intuitional. I wanted to explore and develop further the possibilities of how stories are a sensorial experience beyond text and past images. Beyond the visual, how could sound, taste, and feeling also be centred? I saw possibility to access embodied storytelling through videography. During my development in videography, I realized how my storytelling began to shift in comparison to photography. I noticed how storytelling through videography could fall under the influence of institutionalization to be efficient and effective through linear single-stories – stories that are consistently validated, reproduced, and packaged in one efficient and effective format. One kind of recipe with the following ingredients: a clear introduction, a dramatic climax resulting in a conclusion – all told through a charismatic character. In categorizing and formulating stories so neatly, other forms of stories are pushed aside, lost, and forgotten. Stories have no clean beginning or end; what can be certain is the frame of context that situates the specific story in that moment of time and space. Ultimately, our capacity to receive stories is trained for a certain standard and form that allows for disconnection, consumption, and production.

How storytelling has been conventionalized and moulded into a singular consumable model influences how we tell stories and engage with their content. I actively and mindfully choose to focus on stories that might not be conventionally considered cinematic or compelling. My choice to label these

narratives under the categories “minor”, “mundane”, and “every day” expresses this point. Our capacity of holding and listening to such stories are almost nonexistent, such that their naming of “mundane” self-prescribes its existence. In terms of Canada, what narratives around multiculturalism by immigrants are usually shared? Naraghi and Kingsbury, who write about Iranian New Year rituals in Vancouver, set up the context:

While research on multiculturalism in Canada (officially adopted as policy in 1971) regularly acknowledges that it is a phenomenon replete with aesthetic articles such as food, music, and clothes, as well as a range of emotions such as compassion, loneliness, hope, and anger, we know very little about how, why, and where aesthetics and emotions actually work in people’s everyday experiences of multiculturalism (Naraghi and Kingsbury 2013, 177).

I connect this to Canadian Asian Studies scholar Christine Kim’s “Minor Intimacies of Race” (2016), in which she explores how culture has been constructed and used to mask racism specifically in Asian Canadian publics. Kim argues that the minor intimate narratives of Asian Canadian publics reveal their desires more truthfully than what major publics assume it to be and validates. Addressing this lack of social intimacy, Kim writes: “racialized bodies are also implicitly encouraged to keep the intimate details of their existences to themselves when the dominant public seems uninterested” (Kim 2016, 44). Thinking about my own process, I am influenced by Kim and agree with her that mundane, repetitive, everyday minor narrative is as significant or more so than major storytelling in revealing the everyday repetition and dullness of oppression.

Despite arguing for the “dullness” of everyday life, what does this mean when it comes to filming? What does it look like to present “mundane” stories that emphasize a counter-narrative and method to storytelling? And what if the audience will be limited and possibly unable to understand what is going on? How does one balance the intention of a project with its potential reception? Visual storytelling is one of the film methods I use to address this conflict (Pink 2010). Through focusing on the visuals and its poetics, the narrative delineates from how we absorb verbal stories to centre on imagery that can be more multidisciplinary in holding and expressing story. As I outline in other sections of this paper, verbal communication is only one part of storytelling. Through visual storytelling, editing focused on close-up shots, and the kitchen soundscape, my filmic intention is an immersive experience into the gestures of work, care, and feeling in the kitchen (Khan 2016).

### **How did I do it?**

I always situate myself first as someone who had academic training prior to arts practice. It’s interesting I label myself as an academic due to my time in academia even though I don’t identify to be one. I don’t label myself as an artist because that was something I did in my spare time and continue to work towards developing. This distinction leads to the layers of barriers in finding validity within my arts practice. Where do I find space and growth beyond academia and the “alternative” art world? How do I come to terms with the labels I identify as and those I’m placed into by others? Both bell hooks’ “On



Creative Process: Women & Art” (1995) and Trinh T. Minh-Ha’s “Woman, Native, Other” (1988) have been monumental pieces that have helped me think through how identity and my work inform each other. hooks shares her experiences of being a black artist as a woman in a society that does not include or validate black artists. From this experience, she argues how art is political through building community and creating spaces in which specifically women artists of colour hold each other accountable in support:

As women artists expressing solidarity across differences, we must forge ahead, creating spaces where our work can be seen and evaluated according to standards that reflect our sense of artistic merit. As we strive to enter the mainstream art world, we must feel empowered to vigilantly guard the representation of the woman as artists so that it is never again devalued. Fundamentally, we must create the space for feminist intervention without surrendering our primary concern, which is a devotion to making art, a devotion intense and rewarding enough that it is the path leading to our freedom and fulfillment (hooks 1995, 132).

I resonate with hooks’ understanding of the necessity for an art process that also opens possibilities of art for others. Art is a meaningful process for building self-hood and so it becomes a political and collective effort to ensure that truthful representation is given space and continues to allow self-representations. This relates to how I see art as an effective tool of archival especially for community. I connect this to Trinh T. Minh-ha’s writing (1989) on storytelling as a means of sensorial and affective documentation:

The world’s earliest archives or libraries were the memories of women. Patiently transmitted from mouth to ear, body to body, hand to hand. In the process of storytelling, speaking and listening refer to realities that do not involve just the imagination. The speech is seen, heard, smelled, tasted, and touched. It destroys, brings into life, nurtures (Minh-ha 1989, 121).

Minh-ha's emphasis on storytelling is exactly what I need to hear. Through stories we are able to document and share memories. And, in turn, these memories are capable of impacting life. In Minh-ha's words, "Story-writing becomes history-writing, and history quickly sets itself apart, consigning story to the realm of tale, legend, myth, fiction, literature. Then, since fictional and factual have come to a point where they mutually exclude each other, fiction, not infrequently, means lies, and fact, truth" (Minh-ha 1989, 120). This quote by Minh-ha sets up the binary of truth and fiction, story and history. It is a reminder that these binaries are constructed for a reason and a purpose – so that certain stories are no longer heard. I understand my own arts practice and knowledge-building practices to be embodied and relational counter storytelling. It is a messy process and specifically an ongoing reflexive process. I acknowledge all the learning I have done through witnessing and speaking with others. This following section outlines in detail my methods for this project:

***(1) Who did I interview?***

I found casting to be a difficult method to develop. Casting is considered one of the most important parts of the filming process. It is a balance of who is comfortable on screen and who is also a good storyteller. When writing the research proposal and thinking through the relationships within research projects, I made the decision to only include "participants" whom I already have a connection with. How I came to "cast" my "participants" started with whom I already knew and had already asked about my project with interest. One individual even approached my parents to ask why I hadn't reached out to them

to be part of my project yet. I did face rejection a couple of times. I approached each candidate in person asking if they would be open to the idea of taking part in the project. If they agreed, I would send them an email outlining the project with what the commitment entails as well as the consent form. I ended up working with seven individuals, friends, and family members. Below, I share a brief introduction to each of them:

- My parents, Beatrix and Hung Fui immigrated to Canada shortly after being wed in Hong Kong in the late 1980s. Leaving all of their family and friends behind, my parents came to Toronto in hopes of providing opportunity to their own potential family. Each parent faced personal risks in making the decision to migrate, and those consequences still ripple through their everyday lives. During our session together, they prepared pizza.
- Sam and Neda<sup>1</sup> are in their 30s. This summer marks two years since their emigration to Canada. Sam is a colleague of my Father and they often play ping-pong together. For their meal, the footage coincidentally occurred during Nowruz (Persian New Year) so they prepared a huge meal.
- Sayo is one of my oldest friends, and I have kept in contact with her since middle school. She is currently getting her second degree, in nursing at York University. She prepared a red pepper stew and poundin' the yam.
- Omar was my roommate when we both went on exchange in France through York University. He is the only one besides my parents with whom

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<sup>1</sup> These are cover names as both Sam and Neda do not want to be identifiable. They also requested that I do not video their faces.

I've shared a kitchen prior to this project. Omar is currently job searching. He made an orange ginger juice which is part of the daily roster of fresh-made juices his family makes.

- Gaurav is a friend I made through my best friend. He is currently completing medical school. He made upma or cream of wheat, which is a recipe he learned from one of his aunts.

I met each or grouped “participant(s)” at a minimum of two sessions, which were a combination of in person or phone and Skype calls. Each session ranged from one to six hours long. The session lengths depended on our activity: grocery shopping, cooking, eating food, extended conversation, and check-ins. Depending on the time commitment of the individual, a session could include all the above within the permitted time frame. A session would begin with a brief check-in to share how each person was feeling and catching up over the time we hadn't seen each other. During this time, I would go over the suggested schedule with the “participant” and we would collectively decide what the session plan would be. Following the plan as best as we could, I would let them know I had started recording audio and/or film with my camera.

## ***(2) How did I do the Interviewing?***

What was challenging during this process was finding a balance between the frameworks I was using to work with the process of the project and expectations of what I thought I'd find. It makes sense that when it comes to using social justice and a critical lens that the outcome should be that standard of social justice and activism. In this case, following the chase for mundane

narratives, the outcome of the action can be seen as “mundane” and “everyday” in comparison to the extraordinary. I wondered what strategies I could use to identify and reframe these “dull” encounters and stories in their significance. I found hooks’ “Teaching Critical Thinking” (2010) to be a foundational starting point on what practicing mindful and critical pedagogy could look like. What stood out to me in terms of the intention of the project was the chapter on conversation. hooks writes: “Learning and talking together, we break with the notion that our experience of gaining knowledge is private, individualistic, and competitive. By choosing and fostering dialogue, we engage mutually in a learning partnership.” (hooks 2010, 43) How could this understanding of conversation as an active tool of critical thinking and learning be brought into my methods of interviewing?

To begin the conversations, I had prepared some guided questions to start talking about the themes I had outlined. Formulating questions sets up how researchers can help frame or guide the participants to identify the oppressive elements of their experiences as well as the brilliance in their personal testimonies (Billies 2010, 367-368). As much as I knew I needed to provide some guidance, I wanted to make sure they also had the agency to lead the conversation. These guided questions included any combination of the following:

- *What are you making today?*
- *Why did you choose this dish?*
- *Who taught you how to make this dish?*

- *What does this dish remind you of?*
- *What does the kitchen space feel like to you?*

Once I felt that the “participant” was noticeably more comfortable with the recording equipment, I tried my best to guide their responses into fuller conversations based on what they wanted to share. Often, I would have to interject to remind them that it would be okay for them to ask me questions too. I wanted them to feel they are in a reciprocal open and honest dialogue in which I am also held accountable to share. In retrospect, it’s interesting how my “participants” in their respective ways took leadership in doing so whether through dialogue or suggestions for footage. For instance, Sam and Neda took initiative to invite me to grocery shop with them. During our time together, they made sure to point out what might be interesting to film and their connection to it such as finding nostalgic and old-school home hardware in one of the supermarkets. At a certain point, I was worried I was taking up too much of their time. Sam and Neda reassured me that they took the trip as a way to step out of their weekly chores while still doing them.

At the end of each session, there would be a check-in to see how each person felt afterwards. Most of the “participants” commented in some way or form that it felt like the first time we’ve ever made space to have critical discussions around multiculturalism and migration. A few echoed how refreshing the change was. Omar mentioned he was initially hesitant to speak about the kitchen because he didn’t feel like he had the knowledge to do so. Through our discussion, he began to feel more comfortable to share his thoughts once he

saw how food connected with politics and his other personal interests. This feedback from Omar and others revealing their vulnerabilities in taking part in the project opened space for me to also share my insecurities with them. Taking on this film, I had told myself to pretend I knew what I was doing even though I felt lost and inadequate through most of it. The sharing of our respective challenges built trust through open and honest communication. In reflection of the footage, it illustrates how my interactions with these individuals outside of the project only shows certain aspects of their lives and what they choose to show and perform in my presence (and the camera's).

### *(3) Filming and Recording*

My method of filming involved documenting the process of gathering, preparing, cooking, and sharing food. Regarding audio, I used a handheld recorder to record all the audio from the start time of the video documentation session until the end. Since I had only one camera, I alternated between setting the camera up at one location on a tri-pod to capture the scene for an extended period of time, to moving with the camera to document close-up shots at varying angles. Many of the shots I took are not focused on faces but rather on the movements through hands, bodies, food, and kitchen items. At first the intention to proceed in this way was due to Sam and Neda requesting their faces to not be visible in the video. After filming my first sessions with them in such manner, it developed into a strategy for me to get closer to the sensorial and affective experience of food – thus decentring the concept of charisma through capturing people's facial expressions (as noticed with human eyes)

(Rabiger 2015, 453). I had expected to feel progressively more comfortable with each filming session, however I realized that each session was its own unique experience. As straightforward as a recipe seems in its instruction, it often doesn't unfold in the process of making as neatly measured, linear, or efficient. Cooking is indeed a messy process.

#### ***(4) Building Relationships***

In all the sessions, each “participant” shared some experience, story, or memory of the necessity of friendship. As Sam mentioned, “friendship” takes on another meaning in the process of migration and settlement. It’s no longer just a “fun” relationship but one that mutually benefits and supports each other through times of difficulty. When I think about what such friendship means, I connect it to “chosen family”. I’ve already mentioned briefly in other sections the intention of incorporating and building relationships in the process of this project. I hold different relationships with each individual, depending on the dynamics of the needs and wants of the relationship. In bringing these relationships into a research framework, I noticed the ways each of the relationships developed or remained closed depending on context of vulnerability. Mindful of being open and honest with my “participants”, I had to be very clear when I was filming and/or recording. For example, at certain points conversations would change to more private subjects and the “participant” would suddenly pull back and wonder out loud if I was still recording. In distinguishing the layers of private and public conversations, it is still clear that recording equipment plays an impactful role in how the “participants” and I self-



regulated our conversations and actions. For instance, I made conscious decisions to not raise, question, or push further certain topics in order to protect them according to what I thought needed protection. Despite receiving formal written consent from my “participants”, the consent form feels distant from the everyday conversations. This just shows how necessary it is to earn and maintain trust and build a mutual relationship with individuals who take a part in the project process, a strategy, which requires constant effort. Even though I’ve grown up my entire life close to my Parents, bringing our relationship in front of a camera opened moments of strangeness and distance. In some instances, I became a spectator looking into our interactions – I was no longer their Daughter but the filmmaker. In these situations, I became consciously aware of the varied repetitions of their stories and actions. I am reminded there is still so much that I don’t know about them as individuals.

What about relationships with the non-human? What of food and building a relationship with food? What is the role of the kitchen space in facilitating relationships? It was interesting how my “participants” often tried to fill up the in-between spaces with dialogue as they were also aware of silence taking time and space. I had to constantly remind them that silences are part of the film such that the sounds of the kitchen were just as important as dialogue. Do these kitchen food sounds become more significant as part of a soundscape? When it comes to connections and relationships, how are the micro-narratives of the nonhuman included and contextualized? Agro-ecology filmmaker and scholar Sabiha Khan argues this it is possible to build food sovereignty through film and

exemplifies it in her film, *Remembering How to Eat* (Khan 2016). Khan argues: “The notion of food as an active medium rather than a passive representation is significant when reimagining the role that food and plants can play in reshaping the narrative about our place in the land and the land’s place in us” (Khan 2016, 95). When we think about the migration of people, this notion connects as well with the migration of food and food practices. The settlement environment becomes a learning ground of trial and error that opens room for adaptation and changes in food and food practices. How do these adaptations or changes reveal its own narrative around making “home” and subjects of home? This adaptation or change was noticeable in each “participants’” stories. In the case of Sayo’s family, she spoke upon the transition to using a blender:

So we had to adapt to using a blender. Like we broke some blenders...some blenders kinda break cuz like some..there’s a dish that needs to blend beans...sorry not beans, black eyed peas, we call it beans that’s why I always refer them to it. Black-eye peas but you had to get the right consistency so you don’t break the blender but you also grind the beans at the same time. So yea, it’s easier with the stone grinder.

In this excerpt, I see the blender as a symbolization of western modernity, efficiency, and civilization; whereas, the stone grinder embodies tradition in the context of culture and history. Which tool is more relevant and effective? Similarly, during our grocery shopping experience, Sam and Neda explained how eggplant is a crucial – but time-consuming – ingredient in Iranian cuisine. At the grocery store, they showed me the variety of pre-roasted and mashed eggplant in jars that are bought as an alternative to save time and labour. I

wonder how our relationship to the ready-made jarred eggplant differs from the process of preparing the eggplant.

#### ***(5) Post-Footage: Editing & Transcription***

After filming, it took me a while to start and finish transcriptions. I felt anxious about how to begin framing the complex and nuanced narratives I listened to. Once I began transcribing, this became my favourite part of the methodology process (as laborious as it is). I had the ability to re-listen and re-engage with the conversations and sounds of people and food. To be more specific, I had the opportunity to re-visit the experiences I shared with people I care about and delicious food. Once transcription was finished, I highlighted certain sections that I found could fit into the narrative of the film and made reflexive notes about what I transcribed. These notes inform how I engage with my “participants” beyond the lived moments of sharing time together.

The editing of the footage was even more frustrating to work through. Where do I begin to cut 30 hours of footage down to a 30-minute video? How do I begin to represent complex and nuanced lives in the kitchen? I tend to hold on to as much detail as I possibly can, so, it was a tough process to narrow down which details to include. The visual storytelling became an overwhelming task, with its steps to trim, cut, overlay and tile in order to meet the standard of a succinct story. Minh-ha addresses this process: “There is no catching, no pushing, no directing, no breaking through, no need for a linear progression which gives the comforting illusion that one knows where one goes. Time and space are not something entirely exterior to oneself, something that one has,

keeps, saves, wastes, or loses” (Minh-ha 1989, 1-2). What eventually became apparent to me was the repetition of actions, scenes, and images. This represents how memory shapes action. Abaraca and Colby write:

Food memories are also linked to habitual memories shaped through repetition. Habitual memories are at play in the act of dicing, kneading, baking, serving, offering, and sharing foods in repeated quotidian or ritual settings (Connerton Loc 1561). This is a performative memory in which past knowledge is remembered in the active process of re-enacting. The physical manipulation of a knife on a cutting board or dough rolled out on marble is a learned skill, and the memory of learning that skill is recalled in the process of performing these actions (Abaraca & Colby 2016, 6).

To evoke and further express these realizations, I use editing techniques to play with tiling, double exposures, and replay speed to create collage-like moving images to represent and highlight the role of time in the process.

When I first envisioned the film, I did not think that I would narrate the video. I saw five short stories transitioned by similar bridging shots to tie each story together. I am reminded of Minh-ha’s writing on narrative: “the structure is therefore not something given, entirely external to the person who structures, but a projection of that person’s way of handling realities, here narratives” (Minh-ha 1989, 141). What is my responsibility in “handling realities” that I’ve witnessed in the kitchen? In listening to the footage, I realized that I needed to take an active role in contextualizing the content shared. Writing the narration became a way for me to also speak back to the knowledge shared through the video and re-frame the lessons and stories shared.

### ***Kitchen Counter Narratives, a Finished Film Still in Process***

At the end of my methods, I come to the first iteration of *Kitchen Counter Narratives* (2017). The 35-minute film is sectioned into five steps: (1) grocery shopping, (2) preparing food, (3) cooking food, (4) sharing food, and (5) cleaning up. Each step contains shots taken solely with one or the paired “participants” in their process of completing that step. This represents the differences and similarities in the process of creating “one” full recipe (the film). Each step represents its own range of motions, repetitions, affects, stories, and experiences. The film is seemingly a complete documentary with an introduction, conclusion and clear steps, yet the experience of watching it departs from completion, as it is a fragmentation of images, audio, and connections. To highlight the fragmentation, the audio is not synced with the visual footage to also disrupt our notion of time, reality, and subject. Instead, the audio itself becomes a collage of stories with no apparent beginning nor end. The voices weave into each other that sometimes connect with each other or with the visuals and its respective step. There are no facial or final food shots except in the introduction of the film leading into the title credits. The rationale behind this choice was to step away from specifying a story or experience to an individual or to a certain dish. There is also no clear indication of the back story of each storyteller besides the details that are dropped here or there in conversation. The intention behind this editing choice was to give the spectator some sense of decision-making in how much they’d like to engage with the film depending on how actively they listen and observe. However, that ability to

decide is illusory because of the non-linearity, disembodiment, and fragmentation of audio and visual with no context of what the bigger story could be.

This iteration of the film was created with an intention that the audience watches it like a conventional screening. This first iteration, in its entirety, is like a “black box theatre,” which means this version is a process of trial-and-error to be workshopped to include further interpretations and development. The screening event was in part a part of my gratitude to those who take part in any process of the film. It’s meant to transform space and take time to validate the narratives of the “participants’” everyday lives and experiences. I hope that the film sparks conversation and continues dialogue of how critical consciousness can be built in the kitchen through cooking and sharing food.

### **Challenges and Limitations**

During the process of this research, I wore different hats at different points of time and place. Sometimes I would be wearing more than just one hat. These hats included: researcher, facilitator, director, editor, storyteller, story keeper, filmmaker, family member, and friend. Through this constant hat-shifting process, self-reflection was necessary to be mindful and critical about what decisions I made and how I chose to do so. This reflexive method gave room and space to constantly locate myself though often it could lead to major insecurity and self-doubt. In the process, it became clear what my strengths and weaknesses are, and helpful to make sense of how my role-swapping impacted

the process. Recognizing these gaps and challenges is a humbling and pragmatic reflexive process that reveals the very “personal” and “intimate” experiences of embarking on this research project. It reveals the ongoing challenges that remain as well as those that were overcome often with the support of others. It is a reminder that research about community requires community care. It is a collective effort that acknowledges mutual relationships and focuses on the complexity of each “participant”, human and nonhuman. Below, I outline four main challenges and limitations that I continue to face throughout the process: (1) temporal constraints, (2) being the director, (3) working solo, and (4) expectations.

The shortest filming session I had with a “participant” was two hours long. Even within that time frame or longer, to capture as much footage and audio as I possible could was difficult. Time is not easily controlled when it comes to processes in the kitchen. The first session I had with Sayo, we had set five hours to cook and film. As we came to the end of the five hours, we realized that we did not have enough time to finish the dish. Thankfully, we could set up a second session a week later. Sayo prepared the dish up to the point we had left off so that we could continue filming from there. With Sam and Neda, I was unable to document them cooking food. Neda has an eye condition that requires her to take her time to slowly cook. To prepare the meal shared with my family, she spread the cooking of the dishes over the week leading up to the lunch. Omar and Gaurav were the “participants” I filmed in the latter half of my recording process. At that point, I was more aware of how much time it would

take. Since both of them could only offer two hours per time slot, we settled on preparing dishes that were simpler. This challenge talks back to how I mindfully ensure I respect and appreciate the time I can spend with the “participants”. People take time. Food takes time. Relationships take time.

Throughout the process and even now, I struggle to express what my project is about and its intention in a neat and concise summary. Part of this challenge is realizing and accepting how messy the process is, which translated to how I engaged with my “participants”. I noticed that directing them was a challenge, as I tried to validate what they were offering while trying to address my own insecurities around the project. Part of this challenge also comes from how I wanted to capture the footage (unplanned and as organic as possible). This self-placed expectation of what should be told and capture became a vicious cycle of realizing I wasn’t getting what I was looking for because I wasn’t doing it properly. These thoughts are moments of unlearning because as I sat through editing and transcriptions, I realized how much information I was receiving in ways I would never have anticipated them to arrive. In another regard, it was an interesting experience to have my “participants” be the ones who took more of a directive role to reign in the conversation or to shift it back to the what they thought to be the intention of the film. This showed me how my “participants” also felt ownership to take lead on sharing what they thought should be the direction of the film.

One of the biggest challenges throughout the process was working independently. As mentioned earlier, I had to juggle many hats at a time, which



impacted my process of decision-making and what the outcome could look like. I found it challenging to also ask for help and support during the process of “research” through filming and recording. I had felt too insecure and vulnerable about my arts process to open it up with anybody. I soon realized that it was increasingly getting harder to work on my project, especially when I would feel stuck in a rut. Luckily, I had a few classmates who mentioned the possibility of sharing space and working together and pushed for it. These individuals, whom I met in a group or individually at weekly, biweekly, or monthly intervals, opened space that nurtured and supported my process. These experiences reminded me of the importance of having a caring community that provided compassionate critique and advice. Community is a mutual relationship, so it is just as important to also extend care and support in return.

Through the process of locating myself in all aspects socially and skill-wise, I found myself constantly feeling stopped by my insecurities. Questions and concerns included: “Is my project significant and am I contributing to greater knowledge?” “Am I respectfully representing my “participants”?” “Is this visually appealing?” “Do I know what I’m doing?” “Am I doing enough?” “Is this good enough?” “I’m way behind.” These thoughts and all other variations of the same sentiment are the toughest challenge that I’m still continuing to work through as part of this project. I want to take room in this academic report to share with others the realities of dealing with imposter syndrome and the vulnerabilities of creating meaningful art. Though this will continue to be a

struggle, I want to share three strategies that I found useful in addressing these issues:

- Surround yourself with people who validate your significance and can affirm your contributions. If you feel comfortable and it is mutual, set up editing deadlines with each other to get feedback.
- Find other performances and/or artworks around the topics of your research interests. Go alone or with friends. I found that when I was with friends, there would be no doubt that the event would generate very thoughtful, observant, and reflexive conversations.
- Take time to find a ritual of reflection and rest. This was a combination of taking ten minutes at a time dedicated to creative writing (stream of consciousness, doodling, mind mapping) and practising yoga (i.e. YouTube videos or a studio that you feel comfortable in).

### III/ WHAT WAS FOUND IN THE KITCHEN?

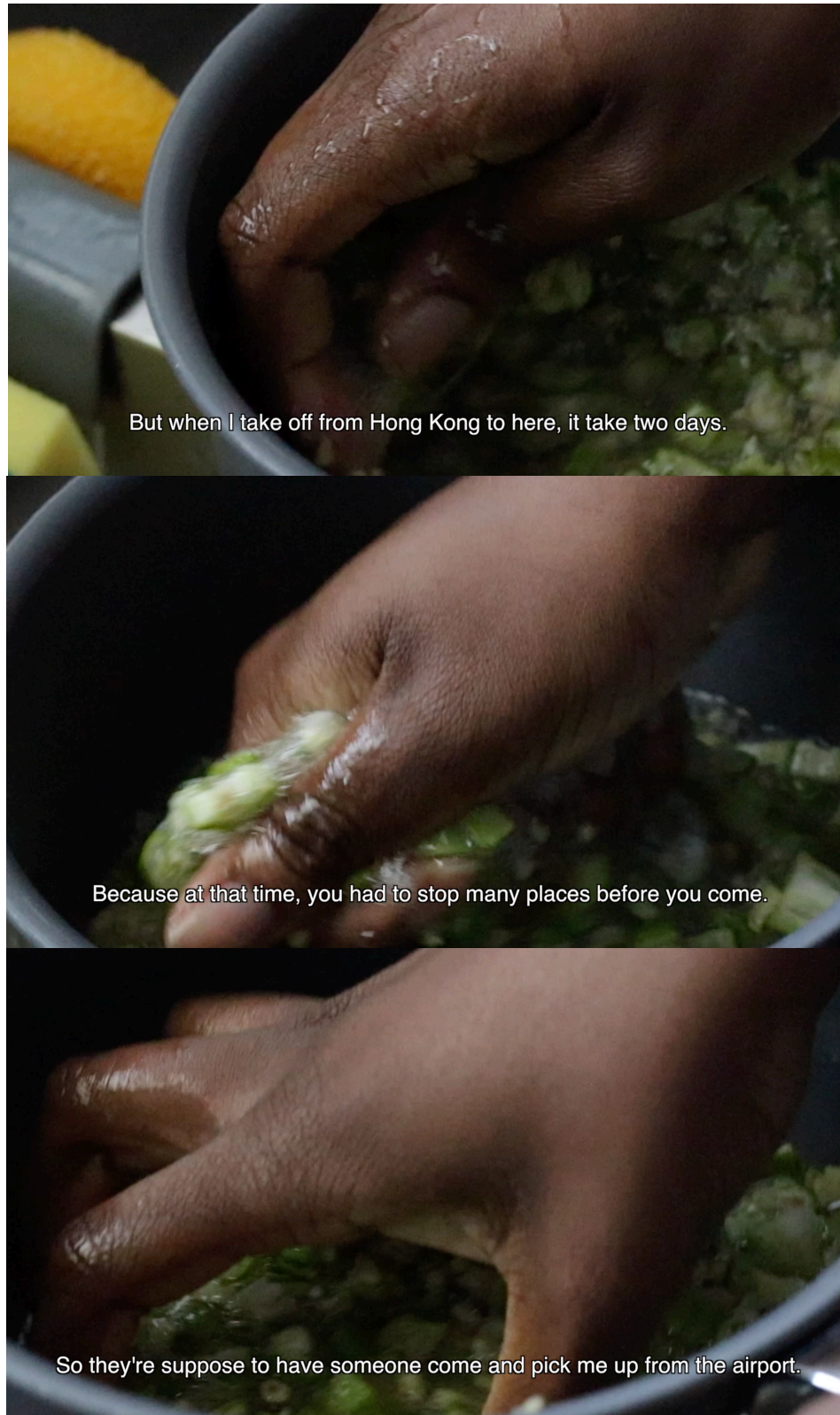


Figure 6: *Mashing*. 2017, still image from Kitchen Counter Narratives

## **Food as Method, Cooking as Inquiry**

Food has always been a focal point in my life, yet I never realized the lack of critical experiences around food with the people I care about. Intentionally and consciously placing food at the center, the process was time-consuming. In other words, the camera was my tool for audiovisual documentation, but food was ultimately the most important site in creating time and space for performance and narratives. In my proposal, I outlined how I use the camera but I do not list specifically what shots I plan to take as done in conventional film treatments. What I filmed reflects what I observed through my senses and how I built my relationships in those sessions. The raw footage captured was abundant, shaky, close-up, and repetitive. The intention of taking time and space for the process, in turn also created time and space through preparing and sharing food with these individuals. What is shared on film is a representation of the connections I make from what I experienced with my “participants”. Performance studies scholar Diana Taylor writes in *The Archive and the Repertoire* (2003): “Sensory, cognitive, habitual, and performative memory, as defined above, come together to form what can be understood as a group’s cultural memory when these mnemonic processes are shared through different narrative forms among individuals” (Taylor 2003, 82). The more I listened to the footage and read the transcripts, I realized how much I still don’t know and how much deeper these stories are rooted and layered. Experiencing firsthand in the moment is very different from analyzing with pause, play and rewind/zoom in and zoom out options (Martens & Scott 2017). As mentioned in

my reflection on methodology, the learning process continues beyond the conversation and filming stage. Most of the learning was done through re-listening and re-reading what the individuals shared. Throughout editing, I couldn't help but feel disappointment that I wasn't more mindful and critical in the conversations held with my "participants". Why didn't I develop further this point that were sharing? I can continue to complain about my lack of conversation skills to delve deeper but the learning takeaway I want to share is how much work it takes to unpack lived experience. It takes time, effort, and practice to continue working on how to actively listen, re-frame conversations respectfully, and mindfully hold space. This section shares the reflections of what I learned in my own process of continual interaction with what was recorded, observed, and remembered.

### **Food Memory**

When I set my first session up with Omar, we held a discussion over Skype. During the post-discussion check-in, he mentioned he wasn't exactly sure how to speak about food. When thinking about this conversation, I reflect upon the challenges of embracing embodied and relational experiences within systems of capitalism, colonialism, and western institutionalism. What does it mean to give further significance to the ways we feel and sense? What does it mean to critically think about our connections to food? What can be learned? Food is not solely a means of nourishing the body but a site of performance, repetition, and spirituality that holds embodied stories whether spoken or

unspoken. Social and cultural anthropologist Efrat Ben-Ze'ev writes: "Taste and smell are vehicles of remembrance both in practice – during visits to the village site or in the commensality of shared eating – and in the creation of discourse and image" (Ben-Ze'ev 2004, 156). This understanding of food as a sensory capsule of memory represents its potential as place for practicing embodied knowledge building and critical consciousness. I connect this to a quote by bell hooks, which I hold dear:

We are born and have our being in a place of memory. We chart our lives by everything we remember from the mundane moment to the majestic. We know ourselves through the art and act of remembering. Memories offer us a world where there is no death, where we are sustained by rituals of regard and recollection (hooks 2009, 5).

I wonder what does it mean and take to be critical of ourselves "through the art and act of remembering?" How do we reconnect to memory? And, how do we make sense of that memory?

When I look back to the food shared in the film, I realize all the dishes, besides the pizza dough, were prepared by memory and corrected by sensory judgements. I'm reminded of Sayo's words: "I'm just gonna watch it and... since I've made this before, I can just look at it and just know when it's done but I guess it just needs to be done a couple of times and then watch someone else do it and then you'll know what to look for." This reminds me of how food is a visceral method of embodied knowledge: "*food memory*...provides a polytemporal consciousness that (re)defines home and longing for home, the root of one's identity, as an embodied experience, and that finds expression through various narrative forms: oral, written, digital, and performative" (Abaraca

& Colby 2016, 4). The act of cooking itself becomes a narrative form of expressing food memory.

Food memories reveal personal, historical, and academic knowledges in different mediums that allows for a collage of knowledges beyond the individual. When speaking to each “participant”, their food memories revealed much more than a personal and intimate experience. In the case of my father’s story of arriving in Toronto, his food memory revealed a map of Toronto back in the ‘80s with landmarks that specifically interested an immigrant Hong Kong male youth. One such landmark was the YMCA, which was located at College and Bay. It is currently the Toronto Metropolitan Police Head Quarters, a politicized landmark that I recognize today. Abaraca and Colby mention this and describe: “Memories about food simultaneously place us in the past and the present and often can create situations for recollections in the future, which David Sutton calls “prospective memory,” a process that that takes place “in the present to remember food events in the future” (*Remembrance* 19) by which a “form [of] historical consciousness” is created (*Remembrance* 26)” (Abaraca & Colby 2016, 2). In engaging with food, memories are no longer contextualized in a singular time frame, rather it encompasses non-linearly the past, present, and future.

### **Unpacking Connections to Food With Family**

Coming to terms with my studies and interests during this program, I often wondered what it meant to look at my family as research. Being trained in

international studies and philosophy for my undergraduate degree, it has been drilled into my soul to think globally and to centre the abstract. It's not surprising that I felt empty and lost in navigating "objectivity" and abstract-centred arguments. When I realized my entry point to food studies was undeniably directly connected to family studies, I was conflicted with the notion of family methodologies as not academically rigorous and simultaneously, a method for potential harm and extraction. Thanks to a lot of unlearning through engaging with academics and theories around critical pedagogy and research, I recognize that family methodologies are a humbling site of recognition and validation of how stories are held, shared, and received. Besides my own connections to food and family, each person had something to share about their family in connection to food, belonging, and home. How could I, as the researcher, disconnect, or discount these stories?

I share one of these experiences of unpacking both a family and food story:

*During my first session, which was held between my parents and Sam and Neda, I really took a step back as they shared stories with each other about their experiences of migrating to Toronto. In taking more of an observatory role, I listened to this sharing of stories around migration that interwove stories of childhood with memories of settlement in Toronto. In particular, I realized there were many gaps in the stories I knew of my father's upbringing and experience in Toronto. During this meal, I heard for the first time my Father's eventful journey from Hong Kong to Toronto, in which the flight company went bankrupt just before his connecting flight. Though this was a new story to me, I also noticed stories my Father did not share about his process of migration. One of these stories included his mother taking out a loan since her job as a live-in nanny did not earn enough to sponsor his studies abroad. Besides revealing the sacrifice of maternal love, this story also reveals the complication of gender roles. My father was the youngest of four children. All of his elder siblings were girls. The sister birthed just before my Father was given away at birth. We are told that she is probably living a comfortable lifestyle in Vancouver. There have been no efforts to keep in contact nor has she ever pursued reconnecting with*



*her family. Despite living in rural poverty, my Father was raised as the cherished youngest child, the boy of the family. My Mother often tells me how his sisters would rather give my Father the whole apple to enjoy instead of splitting it amongst three.*

These fragmented background stories are pieces of what I know of each of my “participants”, some more deeply than others. As a semi-omniscient role in the process, I take responsibility to mindfully contextualize their narratives and stories shared. This report also represents that experience of listening to their stories such as my Father’s shared above. This story of memories and stories that interweave the real, unreal, imagined, and the felt ultimately speaks back to the works within food and family studies. It is not whole. It is fragmented. It is contextualized within a certain temporal and spatial framework that makes sense of these stories.

### **Food Identity/ies**

I came into this program heavily interested in identity and figuring out what it meant from my experiences. Through this process of learning, I realized that I had been looking to grasp identity in all the wrong places. One key moment in this realization was attending Asian identity and geopolitics scholar Allen Chun’s seminar on his newest book *Forget Chineseness: On the Geopolitics of Cultural Identification* (2017). Chun argued that though culture is an aspect of identity there needs to be push towards a critical framework to analyze identity to prioritize its connections to colonialism, capitalism, and globalization. Such that when it comes to “Chineseness”, it’s not just about the

origins and continuations of Chinese identity but rather how the cultural identity of “Chineseness” is used to make certain decisions and actions. Though I have yet to read his book, I come to analyze identity as a reflection of power dynamics that informs decisions. I connect this understanding to the ambivalent phrase: ***you are what you eat***, which I reflect upon in a literal, metaphorical and theoretical sense. This reflection is the base to how I frame my entry point into the film. When drafting my introduction for the film, I used stream of consciousness as a strategy to recall stories and feelings forgotten. The following excerpt comes from that exercise:

*In my family, the most important classroom is food. It teaches us about culture, morals, and most importantly how to be an “acceptable” human being.*

*My parents always say: “You are what you eat.”*

*So you better be eating homemade food, homemade Chinese food.*

*From my childhood Chinese classes, it became clear that Chinese philosophy & tradition is the epitome of eons & eons of complex history that is very respectable.*

*So Chinese food is a reflection of such complexity.*

*I still struggle to connect that to General Tsao’s chicken, deep fried chicken balls, or Hainan steamed chicken and rice.*

*What does food tell me about my experience as a 2nd generation immigrant in Canada?*

*It reminds me of all the elementary school lunches I ungratefully dumped in the toilet. I didn’t like my packed lunches...the leftovers of last night’s dinner...proof that I come from somewhere different: a home with deep traditional and conservative views; strict parents, strict curfews; and, all the extracurricular activities.*

*Eat rice with everything. Eat rice everyday.*

*Growing up, I was use to having my brothers’ friends over for playdates. Even though I was cool with it, birthday parties were a special occasion to only have my friends over. On the day of my 9th birthday, only 2 friends showed up. I can remember I had a good time but I can also remember thinking and worrying that my home wasn’t fun. No cable, just a lot of*

*imagination, and a VCD collection of '80s Hong Kong films and pirated Chinese dramas. One thing is for certain, you would never leave our home on an empty stomach.*

*In our kitchen, you'd find x, y, and z. You can use your imagination to fill in the blanks.*

*I remember when I was in 3rd grade, I was chosen to perform at the school's annual talent show. My performance was a baking lesson. Your very own 8-year old Chinese Martha Stewart instructing how to make a sponge cake with fresh cream and fruits...actually I was more like a Julia Child and making a mess. My mom's recipe is the best and it's still my favourite cake in the whole world. Haha. Somehow I feel like that message didn't got across to the audience.*

*As much as I love the kitchen, it holds a lot of my insecurities. It reveals what and how you eat.*

*What will happen when my parents are gone? Who will be able to cook our usual dishes? What's the difference between these soya sauces? Which Chinese vegetable tastes better with cooking wine? How do I buy what I need...which brand is the trustworthy one?*

*Who will I become?*

*The one dish I know I can handle confidently is cooking rice. My mother taught me how to know when you've put enough water. Just put your pinky into the pot and if the water level is up to the first crease line of your finger, that's just enough water.*

*And then I realize, this only works if I use this pot. What happens if my future pot is a different pot?*

*Who will I become?*

Reflecting upon the ways I access my own memories, food helps me navigate to and recognize these stories through remembrance and analysis. Indeed, food reveals what and how I make sense of my identity.

It's important to remember that identity formation is beyond that solely of culture. Culture plays a role but it is not the most significant force. When we look away from culture, we begin to see how culture is repurposed and coopted as a

benevolent lens to categorize and determine one's identity. In one of my conversations with Sayo, she shared the following story:

Even another time, I was sitting in the subway just by myself like on my way to a celebration and I was just like wearing regular clothes, right? And then some guy was mentioning, Oh back then like people who were African didn't wear anything that had bells dangling in places...and I'm just like..why are you talking randomly to me...but like even other occasions where it's just like people feel authority to yell out whatever they want to make you feel out of place. And that's one of the things that makes me feel...it makes me feel disconnected from Canada. Like I know I am Canadian...it's almost as if a switch turns off and all of a sudden I'm like disposable...like I can be...my Canadian title can be taken away from me and like I have...like I have no rights to the land. Like you're not on solid ground. You can be blown away easily. And that brings like a certain kind of anxiety too right? And also, if I were to go back to Nigeria like I have family members and stuff back there but I will still be different. Like my accent is different...the way I behave is different so I will still stick out as the...as someone who doesn't like fully fit in.

This story of unbelonging reveals that once you leave “home” equated to culture, there is no home to go back to and no place to call home.

However on a personal level, “[i]ndependently, food, memory, and narrative are quintessential to everyday practices as well as ceremonial/ritual events. Together, they provide a tool by which individuals give significance to their personal and collective subjectivities” (Abaraca & Colby 2016, 4). I come to food as a sensorial experience we all have connection to in some way or form, which influence and reflect actions of our identities. Gaurav shares his curiosity in Indian cuisine and the notion of what is authentic. While making upma and adding tomato, Gaurav wonders out loud why he is adding tomatoes. Tomatoes were introduced to India due to British colonization, yet are prevalent in many Indian dishes, so what constitutes as authentic Indian cuisine? All his cooking

learnt from his mother is “authentic” Indian cuisine post-colonization. What does it mean to accept or know postcolonial food as what is authentic?

### **Health & Hygiene in the Kitchen: Markers of Knowledge and Acceptance**

Food and the kitchen are not always a place for fond memories or stories. I often find the kitchen to be a place of insecurity for myself. It's as if the kitchen would be one place an outsider would come across the dirtiness and hidden secrets of its inhabitants. Besides being the most familiar with my parents' kitchen, I had many new encounters with the participants' private kitchen space. I found myself feeling a bit more self-conscious about how I acted in these spaces. This was their space – where each person has their systems and standards of organization, equipment, stock, cleaning, etc. Having previously shared a living space with Omar for a year, I remembered he preferred to cook in the kitchen alone with the blinds closed shut. During our first Skype session, he re-shared his anxiety around being in the kitchen space:

For me personally, it's not something I really enjoy unless I can do it in peace. I guess it stands on the fact that if either my mother or my father were there, I know that they'll be critiquing everything that I'm doing. I get their intention obviously but you know, it's kinda...you don't want to have these other voices bothering me, judging me as I'm trying to do something. Especially if I know I'm not good at something, then at best it's something redundant and at worse, it just gets sort of irritating and discouraging. And the kitchen is usually a... I mean the kitchen is right next to our living room and my parents are always in the living room so most of the time when I'm in the kitchen. I just want to get in and get out. I don't actually want to stay there...if I had this chance to experiment with my stuff like where I can actually make mistakes and like not embarrass myself, then I think I'd do it a lot more. We live in apartment so there's not a lot of space here. It doesn't happen too often.

This became clear during the process of filming Omar. He continued to make various comments that wondered what people would think if they watched this film about him and his methods. He often used the adjective “useless” to describe his actions. I also know Omar identifies “useless” to be the most demeaning term someone could say to him. When I reflect upon his comment, I make a connection to the value of his parents’ lived experiences of developing a work ethic that cannot make room for anything but “useful”.

Despite not having any research interest in health, it seems as if food cannot be separated from it. When thinking of food and health practices in my family, I am reminded of the soups my mother makes daily. These traditional soups are not just recipes of culture or heritage rather their purpose is nutritional and health-based. Assortment of dried nuts, bark, mushrooms, grains, cured meats, unidentifiable things...names of ingredients I don’t know in Cantonese and English. I often think of these soups as my mother’s potions – Mrs. Lui’s *soupcraft*. In terms of *Kitchen Counter Narratives* (2017), each “participant” had his or her own standards of health and health knowledge. A common thread within all the stories shared held elements of health whether through survival or spiritual healing, an interconnection of health with class. Each person desires to live a healthy and balanced meal plan within the socio-economic standards that they can afford. During my time with Gaurav, he asked me: “Kelly, do you want to know my secret to grocery shopping? I just buy whatever is on sale...and looks fresh. Then I decide what I make.” While we went through the grocery market midtown, Gaurav would provide commentary on comparing prices in

that store to those around his neighbourhood downtown. His memory was very sharp when it comes to remembering prices. When we got back to his kitchen to make breakfast, he explained why he bought the bag of assorted diced frozen veggies. With so many mouths to feed in the family, Gaurav's mother had to find cheap and efficient groceries. This bag of frozen vegetables becomes more than just a nostalgic longing of consistent comfort food, it also speaks upon the dynamics of class and health.

### **The Kitchen Counter: Authenticity & Performance of Multiculturalism in the Kitchen**

In one of my conversations with Sayo, she shared how the concept of authenticity and performance is part of her daily public interactions. She said:

But there's a pressure...like even for me too if let's say one day I decided to be an average person. Like that's not allowed. Like I can't be an average person or I can't go anywhere. Like I have to be 120% all the time but that's exhausting right? So that's something I've faced as...the only black person that enters a space...I feel that pressure like okay try not to act in any way that's like stereotypical or you'll be labeled as this kind of person but just versus like being myself. So, yea it's interesting. I can't be fully myself from the beginning. Like I have to be aware of certain things until I can judge how the people in the room that I'm interacting with are like.

When I reflect upon Sayo's experience, I am reminded of the lived and embodied context by which this project is guided. Even though I had pre-existing relationships with my "participants" prior to the research, I often faced challenges in the discussions I had with them concerning what was "authentic". Authenticity is something I wanted to challenge as part of the project's intention. It became something more challenging in ways that I did not anticipate such

that I had troubles unpacking it at a personal level. Who was I to tell someone not to make a traditional dish since that would play into the “authenticity” narrative? Who was I to direct someone what they should make or not? I was worried my “participants” had the underlying pressure to be authentic because the essence of the project could be simply understood as “immigrants in the kitchen sharing food”. One such example was the filming experience with Gaurav and the process of figuring out what we were going to film.

*We were trying to decide what dish we should make together considering that he had less time to share for the project. I mentioned it could be something that is part of his everyday food process. It was then decided that we'd just make a breakfast burrito, which consists of eggs and tortillas. On the day of filming, I met with him two hours prior to filming at an Indian visa agency since he needed to get one for his upcoming research trip in Calcutta. Afterwards, we went to a grocery mart close by to purchase some ingredients for breakfast. When we finally got to his place to make the dish, Gaurav decided last minute to make upma, a south Indian breakfast meal he learned from his aunt. As much as he decided to make this dish, he continually poked fun at how his decision would better fit the project instead of making a breakfast burrito. Meanwhile as Gaurav was making upma and I, intently, filming him, he wonders out loud why he is making the decision to put tomatoes into the pan.*

Recalling this story of seemingly innocent and playful contradictions reveals the agency and fluidity of individuals to choose what and how to perform. Food and the kitchen space become a liminal place to transition through the imagined, imposed, real, and unreal.

This ongoing process of unpacking authenticity and performativity in the recipes and the act of making and sharing food as expressed by the “participants” is reflected in the choices I made when editing the film. The nonlinearity and absences of audio-visual places the viewer in a position to question their ability to imagine the connections and missing scenes. This



speaks to the standardized conditions set in place to determine when stories are told and how they are revealed. It is a connected disconnection, which represents the messy process of food pedagogy with the intention of building relationships through cooking and sharing food. Film became not only a method but also a strategy for me to talk back to the theories, articles, and books I had read in preparation. Film was a medium capable to encompass stories beyond the extraordinary and into the ordinary to open up space for the daily domestic experiences of migrants.

#### IV/ CONCLUDING BACK TO THE BEGINNING

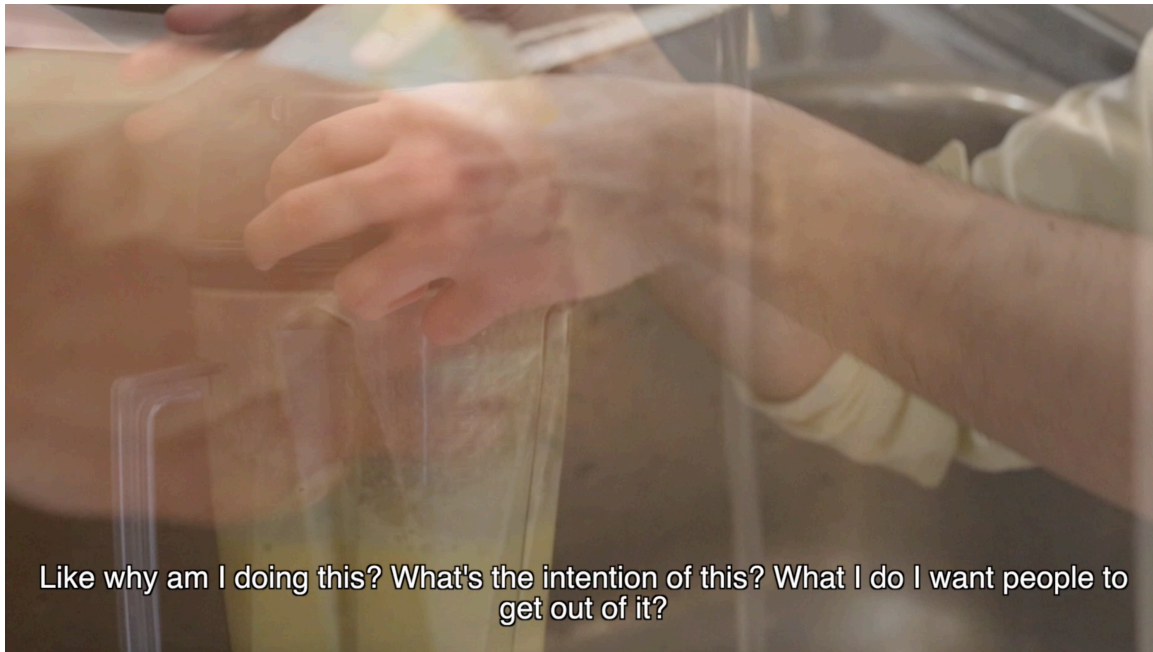


Figure 7: **Orange**. 2017, still image from Kitchen Counter Narratives.

*In the summer of 2016, with the encouragement of my supervisor, I decided to experiment with filming food and the kitchen. I was curious to create a representation of the relationship I have with my Mother through food as a method to analyze emotional care, gender, and culture. I always spend time with my Mother in the vicinity of our kitchen. She'll occasionally break the silence or conversation with comments such as: "see how I added a little bit of soya sauce here? Now you'll know how to make this later." Her recipes never come as a complete typed-up document; they arrive in fragments that can only be anticipated. Learning to cook after marriage, she has already spent 28 years in the kitchen. Working on the short video, My Mother's Kitchen (2016), with a direct interest in food and the kitchen opened my conscious experience of these flows of knowledge, history, and sensory experiences. One such moment was when my Mother was prepping the meat she had just bought from the market, as she does every few days. When I see my Mother in the kitchen, I categorize her as a seasoned un-phased professional who was about to make steamed chicken. When it comes to Chinese cuisine, the entire chicken is used. I never noticed my Mother's technique in preparing the chicken until my Older Brother asked what she was trying to do. My Mother – who was looking away from the chicken on the cooking board with the cleaver in her right hand and her left hand on the body – replied with: "I'm cutting off its head." My Older Brother, a passionate amateur chef, mentioned how part of the breast meat would be chopped off along with the neck. He swooped in to show her how to properly do it. "Have you've always done it that way?" "Yea, I don't like looking at it." It was at that moment we had forgotten our mother is terrified of birds.*

When preparing the soya-sauce chicken for the screening, my Mother asked me to help her with cutting the chicken. She told me what to do step-by-step while looking away from the cutting board and the chicken itself. I am not afraid of birds or preparing raw meat. Yet, in that moment I felt my Mother's fear and hesitation. I thought to myself, "*So this is what it must feel like...*" I acknowledge the every day notions of in/authenticity my Mother navigates to be a mother, wife, woman of colour, immigrant, and cook. I recognize my Mother's capacity for service through the ways she raised us, her children, fiercely with care. I never questioned my Mother's nurture and maternal love. If anything, I was worried that we were given too much such that I can see how she might internally blame herself to be the reason for our misgivings and errors. Up to a

certain point, I had only seen my Mother as my mother. Besides raising a family, who was she? What were and are her dreams and desires? Engaging with this project is a reminder of how food can be a vehicle and also a pathway, a method and strategy, a medium for building embodied and empathetic relationships beyond categorization centred on self-representation and determinacy.

### **Screening and Reception**

The screening was the first time I had shown anyone the entirety of the film. The vulnerability of screening the film reminds and humbles me of the accountability I hold in the decisions I made throughout the process. Despite the anxiety, it was a designated time to bring together everyone who took part in supporting the project whether they are a “participant”, “supervisor”, “friend”, or “family” through sharing food. I found screening the film at my family’s home brought another dimension of interaction into the film. The attendees are not just unknown spectators but guests with intention to give space for the film implicating the dynamic between viewer and witness. The space itself is not a commercial or conventional theatre but a private home whose inhabitants and objects hold visceral meanings and stories. During this event, I received feedback specific to my editing decisions, the process, and intent behind the film. I was also able to share what my thought process was going into the project. Audience feedback was helpful and necessary because it allowed distance for me to look at my film with fresh perspective. To a certain extent, I

was surprised at the amount and variety of feedback given. Recognizing that I wouldn't enact each and every suggestion, I was able to workshop through my challenges on remaining consistency and clarity in how I expressed my editing choices.

## **Moving Forward**

Trinh T. Minh-ha eloquently wrote: "The story never stops beginning or ending. It appears headless and bottomless for it is built on differences. Its (in)finity subverts any notion of completeness and its frame remains a non-totalizable one" (Minh-ha 1989, 2). The first iteration of my project has come to an end. This is not to say it is complete or finished; the feedback and development of my own ideas will continue to shape the context in which these stories are held, shared and expressed. Sometimes seeking answers only leads to more questions. In looking forward, I conclude this report by sharing the following questions that continue to push my academic and personal development in terms of this project and beyond:

- *What does it mean to label and further engage my academic work as family methodologies?*
- *How can film push the boundaries in representing evolutions of stories, experiences and conversations centred around the "mundane" with the intention of transformation and engaging change?*
- *What are concrete methods (if any) for a self-understanding and realization of "decolonization"? And what are some concrete methods in terms of*

*“decolonization” within community? What are the tensions that exist within these methods of “decolonization”?*

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