

Story Soup:
Creating Contexts for Transformative Dialogue Across Borders

By
Leslie Soble

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
Degree of Master of Arts in Cultural Sustainability
Goucher College, Baltimore, Maryland

June 9, 2017

CAPSTONE COMMITTEE
Susan Eleuterio, Advisor
Rory Turner, Reader
Thomas Walker, Reader

Table of Contents

Introduction	3
A Recipe for Story Soup	5
Begin with Food	6
Add Story	13
Mix in the Seder	17
Let Food, Story, and Performance simmer	21
... and Story Soup is made.	24
Recipes for Dialogue: Five Project Profiles/Case Studies	26
Roadside Theater	26
Narrative 4	32
Learning Curve	36
Conflict Kitchen	39
Savoring Androscoggin County	44
Five Projects, Five Lessons	48
A Reflection on the Process	50
Conclusion	57
The Story Soup Methodology	61
Objectives and Purpose	61
The Process	63
The Role of the Artist-Facilitator	63
Funding	64
Story Soup Workshop Template	66
Story Soup Performative Meal Design Menu	82
In Gratitude	83
Bibliography	84

“And there is another possibility. The Traveling Jewish Theater gave me this one. They say, ‘Make soup out of it.’ And this is the recipe. ‘You take a dream or a story or a memory, it’s the same, you take the sweet times, the salty ones, the bitter ones, and the leftover ones. And you mix them together with hot water. If you don’t have hot water, you use cold. And you drink it. And it sticks in the places between what you believe and what you see.”

Barbara Myerhoff, Stories as Equipment for Living

“The townspeople looked on with interest as the stranger stirred the stone in the large pot of boiling water, now filled with the potatoes, carrots, onions, cabbage, beans, salt, and other ingredients they had each contributed. This must truly be a magic stone, to make such a delicious-smelling soup!”

Stone Soup, a traditional tale

Introduction

My story begins with my parents, who, when they were first married in the late 1970s, did not have enough money to buy curtains for the windows, but always set aside enough to cook excellent meals. While curtains hung in the windows by the time I came around in 1982, I grew up hearing this story over and over. I was raised amongst sugar-dusted countertops and pans sizzling with olive oil and garlic, my hands coated with flour, shirts stained with streaks of melted chocolate or unidentified splashes of sauce. Early on, I absorbed my parents’ implicit lessons: Cooking should be messy and food should be beautifully presented. Always buy the best ingredients you can afford. Taste as you go along. Meals are meant to be shared with the people you love. Food is a great adventure, both a window both onto other worlds and into the deepest part of the soul.

Food became the lens through which I understood the world. It taught me about the ecology of where I grew up in Clearwater, Florida; we ate fried grouper sandwiches at beachfront dives and inhaled the citrus-scented air on the way to my preschool, located just past an orange grove and juice-squeezing warehouse. It sketched out my first map of the country: We ate Old Bay-infused crab cakes and Berger cookies¹ with my Nonnie in Baltimore, then drove out to the Ocean City boardwalk to burn our tongues on fresh-from-the-fryer Thrasher’s fries

¹ A local Baltimore treat, Berger cookies feature a soft shortbread layer topped with dense

with my aunt, uncle, and cousin who lived on the Eastern Shore. In Chicago, we gathered around the table in my Grandma Deci's high-rise apartment and helped ourselves from a myriad of white takeout boxes overflowing with treats like lo mein and shrimp in black bean sauce, delivered from the Far East Chinese restaurant on Diversey Parkway. We would wake the next morning still stuffed, hunger slowly reemerging as we made our way to the suburbs to meet cousins at Walker Brothers Pancake House, where I invariably tried to make my way through an apple pancake the size of my head (and habitually failed).

I grew to understand food not just as symbolic of place, but also as representative of people. My friend Jill's family was passionate and intense, much like the concentrated sweetness of her New Orleans-born mother's homemade pralines. Though I loved the pralines dearly, they were best consumed in small bites – just as I adored Jill but could only take her loud, argumentative household for a few hours at a time. Lauren's mother was cold and distant; after school, we were only permitted to snack on carrot sticks, each crunch echoing her crisp reminders to Lauren to watch what she ate or she would end up fat. Sleepovers at Jessica's house featured frozen chicken nuggets and mashed potatoes from a box. The food was warm and comforting while somehow tasting tired – much like Jessica's mother, a single parent raising her two daughters while working full time.

Food also provided a tangible connection to my family's Jewish history and culture. Each year, my mother and I grated mountains of potatoes and fried dozens of latkes for Chanukah, the smell of cooking oil wafting through kitchen windows open to the fresh Florida-winter air; one bite of a fresh latke and I felt as though I understood the joy of a holiday miracle. Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, was marked by impatiently growling stomachs as we waited for sunset to release us from fasting and send us across town to the Gurtmans' packed open house, where the younger crowd piled *kugel* and *tsimmes* onto plates and tried to avoid getting our cheeks pinched by the older generation as we wove through the throng to the dessert table. Passover, my favorite holiday, brought tiny cups of too-sweet Manischewitz wine knocked over onto white tablecloths, fluffy matzoh balls soaking up soup rich with carrots and sweet potato, and a week of peanut butter and jelly on matzoh² in my lunchbox.

My personal timeline is marked by food. I impressed a wide-eyed waitress by downing a bowl of spicy New Orleans gumbo at the age of four and fell in love with tamarind-spiked pad

² Unleavened flatbread eaten during Passover.

Thai when I was nine. Here is where I made the decision to stop eating meat; there is when I learned not to fear the razor-sharp edge of the chef's knife. Summer camp s'mores, late-night college falafel and cheap red wine, the varied flavors of relationships and travels – these tastes still linger on my tongue, and so I live subject to a strange synesthesia, in which people and places and events, sounds and sights and colors, memories and emotions and sensations, all have both literal and metaphorical flavors. I construct my sense of self, my personal narrative, through food, and for many years, I watched my middle school students, most of whom were from immigrant families, use food to negotiate connection to their cultures of heritage and navigate their way through American adolescence. I began to wonder how the stories we share through food and about food could be used to talk about issues of cultural sustainability, to address conflict, to connect. And so, with an intense love for the alchemy of the kitchen, a deep reverence for the rituals of the meal, and an unwavering belief in the power of food to nourish human connection, Story Soup was conceived.

A Recipe for Story Soup

Initially inspired by conversations with my former students, monthly live storytelling shows at Story District in DC, and several decades of Passover seders, the Story Soup methodology is now rooted in the space where the folkloristic study of food, narrative theory, and social practice art overlap. As I delved deeply into the literature of these three spheres of research, I also examined five organizations and projects that employ food and/or story to create contexts for meaningful dialogue across borders in order to gain an understanding of the intricacies, logistics, and ethics of engaging in such work. Once the initial workshop template was complete, I facilitated a pilot workshop and performative meal with a group of my former students (now seniors in high school and university freshmen). Based on their feedback, I revised the template to create the version shared here.

Story Soup is an interdisciplinary educational and artistic practice which creates meaningful contexts for dialogue across cultural and generational borders through foodways-themed storytelling workshops culminating in a performative meal, a community-based, multi-sensory, symbolically rich food and narrative experience. Such merging of food and story allows

for new possibilities in understanding the relationship between self and other and generates potential for the (re)creation of community. The sharing of foodways-themed stories alongside food itself is designed as a nonthreatening initiation to dialogue focused on the social, political, economic, and environmental facets of cultural democracy and cultural equity.

I have devised a structured yet adaptable methodology able to be tailored to any group of participants with the intention to amplify voices that are often silenced and to uncover stories that might otherwise go untold. As I begin to take Story Soup out into the world, I plan to partner with schools, arts organizations, cultural organizations, and faith-based groups to foster such dialogue wherever it is requested. My role will be that of artist-facilitator, to serve as an architect invited to help communities through the process of designing performative meals that are aesthetically intriguing and culturally meaningful to their members. This unique blend of food and story woven together with a community-centric, arts-based format is designed to cultivate deep listening among community members and by wider audiences, including community organizers, policy makers, researchers, and cultural workers.

Story Soup can be put to use with groups as diverse as immigrant high school students in an ESL program, university students in a semester-long cultural studies course, residents of a gentrifying neighborhood preparing a presentation for developers and policy makers, or a faith-based group interested in connecting youth and elders to create a meaningful holiday event. Other participants could include members of a support group grieving the loss of loved ones, a community coming together in the wake of environmental tragedy, or citizens seeking a meaningful way to address the tension of the growing political divide.

Begin with Food . . .

Food naturally brings people together across geographic, temporal, linguistic, and cultural borders by engaging the senses, activating memory, and communicating identity. Food and foodways decode patterns of migration and diaspora, uncover cultural conceptions of the body, and reveal constructs of social categories such as gender, ethnicity, and class. Food and its accompanying rituals forge a rich language whose intricacies and symbolism express subtle meanings in a uniquely multisensory, embodied way.

Eating is a universal human experience; we are all biologically required to eat to live. However, food undeniably demands not just our physiological but also our psychological attention, intertwining our bodies and minds in a unique and extraordinary way. Hunger leaves our bodies weak and our minds unable to focus. Thoughts of favorite foods make the mouth water and the gastric juices flow, while food scents recall vivid memories that might have been long since forgotten.³ When we eat food that appeals to all our senses – when it is visually pleasing, as well as delightful to the nose and on the palate – we become healthier in body and soul, increasing our chances of survival as individuals and as cultural groups. We experience the preparation and consumption of food with our whole selves, blurring the boundaries between biology and culture, between need and desire.

While the human relationship to food can be studied through a number of lenses, including nutrition, biochemistry, ecology, and economics, a folkloristic approach enriches our understanding of any of these disciplines through exploration of foodways, which, as defined by folklorist Don Yoder, “refers to the network of behaviors, traditions, and beliefs concerning food, and involves all the activities surrounding a food item and its consumption, including the procurement, preservation, preparation, presentation, and performance of that food.”⁴ The field of folklore explores the way people create meaning in their lives through informal communication, everyday artifacts, and local knowledge. Steve Zeitlin explains the unique viewpoint of the folklorist as one who uses “an arts perspective to look at life itself and to see the present in a slightly more vivid and interesting and compelling way by looking at the artistic impulse in everyday life. Folklorists distinguish themselves from historians and from cultural anthropologists because of the attention they pay to the aesthetic dimensions of history and culture.”⁵ Folklorist and foodways scholar Lucy Long argues that “food is an aesthetic domain . . . evaluated in terms of beauty, engagement of the senses, or satisfying arrangement of components . . . the ways in which individuals organize their pantry, plan their garden rows, arrange their food on plates, or even put away clean dishes.”⁶

³ Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “Playing to the Senses: Food as a Performance Medium,” *Performance Research* 4, no. 1 (1999), 3-7.

⁴ Lucy M. Long, ed., *Culinary Tourism* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2004), 8.

⁵ Steven J. Zeitlin, Adina Beck, and Sally Charnow, “The Folklorist as ‘Cultural Activist’: An Interview with Steve Zeitlin,” *Radical History Review* 84, no. 1 (2002), 128.

⁶ Lucy M. Long, ed., *The Food and Folklore Reader* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015), 15.

Foodways provide us with an extensive library of evocative cultural texts, the medium of which is common to all humans, but the content of which is unique to any given context. The story of every culture – struggle and celebration, continuity and change – is told through its foodways. Foodways interpret relationships between people and environments, illustrate power dynamics embedded within and between cultural groups, and document intercultural exchange. The stories recounted through foodways can be sweet or bitter; they can recall contentment or oppression, prosperity or deprivation, pride or shame. For an audience ranging from the young child to the erudite scholar, foodways can be employed to “teach larger lessons about cultural knowledge, such as worldview, geography, history, chemistry, natural resources, language, herbal lore and folk medicine, economics, astronomy, religion, agronomy, climatology, and creativity, as well as information about tradition and change.”⁷ In today’s moveable and migratory world, foodways carry place-based imprints and memorialize the idea of home. As a powerful tool for remembrance and nostalgia, food is often the last site of assimilation for the immigrant. Donna Gabaccia explains, “Psychologists tell us that food and language are the cultural traits humans learn first, and the ones that they change with the greatest reluctance. Humans cannot easily lose their accents when they learn new languages after the age of about twelve; similarly, the food they ate as children forever defines familiarity and comfort.”⁸ We are what we eat, and we eat what represents who we already are.

In any culture, shared frames of reference imbue food with meaningfulness. Some food symbols are so widely depicted in literature and media that one not even need experience them firsthand to have a sense of what they represent, while others are unknown to those outside the culture. For those familiar with a given frame of reference, food thus comes to define activities (such as eating popcorn while watching a movie, making s’mores at a campfire, tearing open a tiny foil packet of peanuts on an airplane), events (peanut butter and jelly sandwiches from a brown paper bag on the first day of school, roast turkey and pumpkin pie at Thanksgiving dinner, cotton candy at the carnival), seasons (popsicles melting down the wrist in summer, crisp apples and freshly pressed cider in fall, steaming hot chocolate in winter) and places (maple syrup in Vermont, green chile and fresh corn tortillas in New Mexico, oyster po’boys and beignets in

⁷ Millie Rahn, “Laying a Place at the Table: Creating Public Foodways Models from Scratch,” *Journal of American Folklore* 119, no. 471 (2004), 34.

⁸ Donna Gabaccia, *We Are What We Eat: Ethnic Food and the Making of Americans* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 6.

New Orleans). These common contexts among a group of people make it meaningful to celebrate with food (birthday cakes alight with candles, New Year's Day black-eyed peas in the South, Chanukah *latkes* and *sufganiyot*) or offer food to comfort and heal (homemade casseroles for funerals, chicken soup for colds and flu, pints of ice cream to be devoured in one's pajamas for breakups). Multiple and intersecting identities create new frames of reference, infusing foods with deep, nuanced, and often playful significance. As they journey across national and community borders, traditional foods are adapted to include new ingredients and modified to appeal to new palates. Foods take on new identities as diaspora communities emerge and merge. Most "Arabic" cuisine in the United States, for example, was for a long time based on Lebanese recipes, as the Lebanese have a reputation throughout the Middle East for excellent food, while "Chinese" food in the United States is often based on regional Cantonese cuisine, considered to be one of the most refined and delicious in China.⁹ Additionally, we experience fusion (Korean tacos), food removed from its original context (street food served in sit-down restaurants, once-seasonal foods available year-round), and pure cultural invention (General Tso's chicken and fortune cookies, generally considered "Chinese," were both born in America¹⁰).

It is not just what we eat, but also *how* we eat that is also weighted with meaning. On an individual level, many factors influence what Michael Owen Jones refers to as our "personal food system," including "gender, age, family, occupation, class, body types, personality traits, recreational activities, and state of health – any or all of which may take precedence over ethnic or regional associations. In addition, while some identities (along with meanings given to food) persist, others change over one's 'life course.'"¹¹ As aspects of identity evolve and intersect, so can one's participation in larger cultural eating systems. The Western nutritional framework of balancing proteins, fats, and carbohydrates, for example, and the traditional Chinese conception

⁹ William G. Lockwood and Yvonne R. Lockwood, "Continuity and Adaptation in Arab American Foodways," in *The Food and Folklore Reader*, ed. Lucy M. Long (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015), 78.

¹⁰ Jennifer 8. Lee, *The Fortune Cookie Chronicles: Adventures in the World of Chinese Food* (New York: Twelve, 2009).

¹¹ Michael Owen Jones, "Food Choice, Symbolism, and Identity: Bread and Butter Issues for Folkloristics and Nutrition Studies," *Journal of American Folklore* 120, no. 476 (2007), 131.

of foods as either heating or cooling are not mutually exclusive¹²; a Chinese-American family could identify with both.

Most cultures organize their food consumption into meals, a defined eating experience that “incorporates a number of contrasts, hot and cold, bland and spiced, liquid and semi-liquid, and various textures.”¹³ The content, preparation, and structure of the meal are not only determined by the occasion (daily breakfast versus a holiday feast, for example), but also by the cultures and subcultures of a given meal’s participants. A number of factors are open to cultural interpretation, including the number of meals eaten each day, the times those meals are generally consumed, multiple courses versus dishes served all at once, the order in which foods are served, which foods are appropriate for particular times of day, whether certain foods are intended for children or adults, whether meals are eaten in the home or in public space, portion size, and the difference between a meal and a snack. Many cultures consider a meal to be incomplete without the presence of a certain food, such as rice in most East and Southeast Asian cultures, or tortillas in many Latin American cultures.

Of course, not all the stories our meals carry have positive associations. Some foodways are the result of poverty, deprivation, and illness. What and how we eat can also be deliberately manipulated to humiliate, punish, and control – and not just parents threatening to send misbehaving children to bed without dinner. At various junctures of history, Jewish people have been forced into eating pork – often considered the “least kosher” of all foods – at the hands of anti-Semitic oppressors. Progressive-era reformers campaigned against the “ethnic” food of immigrants as dangerous to the health and modernization of the American nation.¹⁴ As thousands of unaccompanied Central American children poured across the southern United States border in 2014 to escape the violence plaguing their home countries, the Federal Emergency Management Agency was widely criticized for spending money on corn tortillas after learning the children were unaccustomed to the flour tortillas already purchased; many Americans resented their tax dollars going toward what was deemed a “luxury” for undocumented youth. Inmates in the United States prison system are faced with food that might meet basic nutrition requirements, but is unappealing to the senses and insufficient to fill the

¹² Eve Jochnowitz, “Foodscapes: The Culinary Landscapes of Russian-Jewish New York,” in *The Food and Folklore Reader*, ed. Lucy M. Long (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015), 308.

¹³ Douglas, “Deciphering a Meal,” *Daedalus* 101, no. 1 (1972), 66.

¹⁴ Gabbacia, *We Are What We Eat*, 131.

stomach while being served at times (such as the “evening” meal at four o’clock in the afternoon) that disrupt most usual eating patterns.¹⁵ Patrons of food pantries are sometimes faced with a choice of either going hungry or accepting donations that are cheap, unhealthy, and not of their own choosing, marking those who need assistance as unworthy of food that nourishes their bodies and souls.

Food can, in turn, be used as a tool of resistance to such prejudice and punishment. Dishes that also serve as reminders of painful histories, such as African-American soul food and Native American fry bread, have been reclaimed in some communities as symbols of identity and pride.¹⁶ Many food pantries have made the switch to a grocery store-inspired model, where patrons are invited to “shop” the shelves and select their own food. Michael Owen Jones describes the redesign of a medium-security prison outfitted with a self-catering area in each wing (grills, ovens, gas rings, sinks, storage cupboards), finding that “the preparation and sharing of food had a salubrious effect on race and ethnic relations, validated cultural identities, provided ‘welcome relief from the sterile anomie of prison life in the novel *bonhomie*,’ and helped individuals ‘transcend the dehumanizing and mortifying conditions of their incarceration.’”¹⁷

Although we might or might not tell them explicitly, stories of family and daily life, migration, modernization, cultural interaction, connection to the natural environment, oppression, and resistance are encoded in food. Because our own relationships to food are so deeply ingrained, food becomes

a powerful medium through which to enter another culture. Through food we can communicate identity, relationships, ideologies, and emotions, as well as fulfill basic physical needs. Food offers us an aesthetic experience, and like other aesthetic realms – music, dance, art – it draws us into its own universe of meaning. The materiality of food allows an individual to experience an other on a sensory level, not just an intellectual one . . . The act of eating offers a way to share our basic humanity, while also acknowledging and negotiating our differential identities.¹⁸

¹⁵ Michael Owen Jones, “Eating Behind Bars: On Punishment, Resistance, Policy, and Applied Folkloristics,” *Journal of American Folklore* 130, no. 515 (2017).

¹⁶ Jen Miller, “Frybread,” *Smithsonian Magazine*, July 2008, <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/frybread-79191/>. For more on the history of soul food, see the writings of Psyche Williams-Forsen.

¹⁷ Jones, “Eating Behind Bars,” 89.

¹⁸ Long, *Culinary Tourism*, 45.

Humans have engaged in commensality, this act of eating together at a shared table, throughout our known history. Archaeologist Martin Jones offers evidence of commensality from ancient sites, explaining, “It leaves a lot of material traces, from the arrangement of space around the hearth or table, to the equipment used to prepare and consume the food, and the remnants of the meal itself.”¹⁹ The shared meal reinforces relationships between and within families, communities, and larger cultural groups in a ritualized and aesthetically captivating way. Implicit and explicit rules and norms govern both the content and structure of the meal; social hierarchy and role are signified by conventions of seating location, serving order, and distribution of the choicest morsels of food. Participants are expected to conform to protocols of etiquette, which are also highly dependent upon cultural context. (Eating all the food on one’s plate, for example, could be considered polite or gluttonous and offensive, while eating with one’s hands could be seen as normal or as crude and unclean.) The shared meal creates obligations to offer and accept food and hospitality, to recognize the relationships between self and other. The refusal to share food, even for reasons of health, religious belief, or personal ethics, can put up instant walls, while accepting food can acknowledge and affirm relationships. Accepting food from another, especially an *other*, can be a deeply symbolic act that resonates across cultures because “edibles that are classified as food in a particular cultural context have a way of threatening the borders of an autonomous self . . . The classification of something as food means it is understood as something made to become part of who we are.”²⁰

In many urban areas, food is currently enjoying a moment as both trendy social cause and hip solution to society’s ills. Incubator kitchens for food entrepreneurs, food truck festivals, and a number of organizations that serve as the Airbnb equivalent for finding meals hosted by talented home cooks proliferate in major cities. Urban farms, schoolyard gardens, and mobile produce units bring fresh fruits and vegetables into underserved neighborhoods, while “gastrodiplomacy” and interfaith meals promise steps toward a more peaceable world. Organizations like Drive Change, a food truck that employs formerly incarcerated youth, and Hot Bread Kitchen, a bakery that empowers immigrant women through job opportunities and

¹⁹ Martin Jones, *Feast: Why Humans Share Food* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 12.

²⁰ Deane Curtin and Lisa Heldke, ed., *Cooking, Eating, Thinking: Transformative Philosophies of Food* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 9.

education, are highly praised.²¹ Food justice activists speak of organics and access, locally-grown and sustainably-produced, health and community. While excellent work is being done around food justice issues and using food as an impetus for gathering, something has been generally overlooked. That missing ingredient is the explicit use of story.

Add Story . . .

As humans, our lives are inseparable from story. Stories, in the broadest sense, “can be conceived as simply after-the-fact representations of the experiences they recount, as cultural scripts that supply guidelines for understanding and action, or as performances that create as well as comment on prior experiences.”²²

Of all the potentially transformative art forms available for sparking dialogue in the context of community, why choose storytelling? Stories are a universal medium of communication accessible to all, and they may move us in ways statistics, politics, and ideologies do not. Stories have the capacity to build powerful emotional bridges between the teller and the audience; “with their personal immediacy and symbolically evocative renderings of experience, stories can stimulate strong emotional responses in hearers – such as sympathy, which can heighten common identity, and anger, which can spur or increase the motivation to work for change.”²³ Stories traditionally have shaped our moral imagination and our ethics, guiding us through experiences we personally might not have lived. Through stories, we appeal to one another’s humanity and establish connections across cultural and generational lines, increasing our capacity to empathize and to understand multiple perspectives of complex social issues. Educator Lee Anne Bell explains, “Because stories operate on both individual and collective levels, they can bridge the sociological, abstract with the psychological, personal contours of daily experience. They help us connect individual experiences with systemic

²¹ Drive Change, <http://drivechangenyc.org>, and Hot Bread Kitchen, <https://hotbreadkitchen.org>.

²² Joseph E. Davis, “Narrative and Social Movements: The Power of Stories,” in *Stories of Change: Narrative and Social Movements*, ed. Joseph E. Davis (Albany: SUNY Press, 2002), 11.

²³ Davis, “Narrative and Social Movements,” 24.

analysis allowing us to unpack in ways that are perhaps more accessible than abstract analysis alone.”²⁴

Storytelling is not only potentially cathartic and empowering for the teller, but is also inherently transactional, a product of collaboration shaped by the experiences and truths of both teller and audience. We listen to and tell stories not just as individuals, but also as members of a number of social identity groups, such as race, class, gender identity, ethnicity, nationality, sexual orientation, and political affiliation.²⁵ Literary theorist Mary Louise Pratt explains that in the act of storytelling, the teller “is not only reporting but also verbally *displaying* a state of affairs, inviting his addressee(s) to join him in contemplating it, evaluating it, and responding to it . . . He invites them to share his wonder, amusement, terror, or admiration of the event.”²⁶ A story does not become such until it is told, and upon its telling, it becomes a potential site for communion, dialogue, and change. Boundaries between individual and collective, between self and other, are – even if only momentarily - broken. As sociologist Joseph Davis points out, “through identification and ‘cocreation’ of a story, the storyteller and reader/listener create a ‘we’ involving some degree of affective bond and a sense of solidarity; told and retold, ‘my story’ becomes ‘our story.’”²⁷ It is through “our” stories that we not only transmit critical cultural knowledge, but also construct culture itself.

Like food, story is woven into our lives as both biological need and something more. Myerhoff explains, “If selection pressures in human evolution were for communication, we could expect something faster and more efficient than language for transmitting important pieces of information . . . Neurobiologists and linguists are beginning to suggest that language is more important for telling stories than it is for directing action. In other words, we must tell stories; it can be said we are designed biologically to do so.”²⁸ Just as the aesthetic dimensions of food nourish us beyond mere calories for survival, so too does the aesthetic complexity of narrative – the structure, language, tone – sustain us on a psycho-cultural level. Story allows us to thrive, and so – as with food – we cultivate it, tend it carefully. Stories become their own living entities,

²⁴ Lee Anne Bell, *Storytelling for Social Justice: Connecting Narrative and the Arts in Antiracist Teaching* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 16.

²⁵ Bell, *Storytelling for Social Justice*, 93.

²⁶ Davis, “Narrative and Social Movements,” 17.

²⁷ Davis, “Narrative and Social Movements,” 19.

²⁸ Barbara Myerhoff, *Stories as Equipment for Living: Last Talks and Tales of Barbara Myerhoff* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007), 40.

“both as carriers of culture and as unique, mysterious, individual organisms. Stories have lineages, they have histories and futures, they carry culture, they bestow meaning, and they construct the world. At the same time, every story carries its own mystery and is always unfolding through an innate, yet indeterminate, process of development.”²⁹

While an infinite number of unique stories exist and continue to develop every day, narratives fall into patterns that bridge cultures. Writer Barbara Kingsolver notes, “All stories, they say, begin in one of two ways: ‘A stranger came to town,’ or else, ‘I set out upon a journey.’ The rest is all just metaphor and simile.”³⁰ Our familiarity with certain universal narrative tropes (the quest, the fight against evil, etc.) provides a framework through which we internalize, construct, and reproduce our personal stories as well as recognize and understand the stories of others. Writer and theorist Jonathan Gottschall reminds us, “The idea that stories slavishly obey deep structural patterns seems at first vaguely depressing. But it shouldn’t be. Think of the human face. The fact that all faces are very much alike doesn’t make the face boring or mean that particular faces can’t startle us with their beauty or distinctiveness.”³¹ Other theorists suggest alternative lenses for understanding patterns of story, such as Bell, who describes four narrative types as seen through a social justice lens: stock stories (which are “passed on through historical and literary documents, and celebrated through public rituals, law, the arts, education, and the media”), concealed stories (which are “shared in church basements, bars, street corners and front porches,” and provide a counter-perspective to the mainstream), resistance stories (which challenge the status quo), and emerging/transforming stories (which are “deliberately constructed to challenge the stock stories, build on and amplify concealed and resistance stories, and create new stories to interrupt the status quo and energize change”).³² Though untraditional, these patterns also traverse cultural borders, offering another way to frame and understand the stories that define us.

A storytelling-based workshop provides a facilitated context for constructing and sharing narrative while participants stretch their cerebral and emotional muscles, exercise empathy and

²⁹ Thomas Cole, Introduction to *Stories as Equipment for Living: Last Talks and Tales of Barbara Myerhoff* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007), 8.

³⁰ Barbara Kingsolver, *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2007), 335.

³¹ Jonathan Gottschall, *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human* (Boston: Mariner Books, 2012), 53.

³² Bell, *Storytelling for Social Justice*, 25.

compassion toward self and other, and increase capacity for reflexivity. While some workshops exist solely to refine and polish stories in order to share them with an audience, others use storytelling as a means to a greater social end, such as community dialogue. Lee Anne Bell, for example, uses personal story to challenge the dominant narratives that hold racist structures in place. She explains, “The placing of diverse stories side by side as worthy of critical inspection enables us to see that the mainstream story is not normative but one among many, and thus contestable.”³³ One popular format for such workshops is the story circle, in which participants are invited in turn to share a personal story related to a prompt or theme. Participants are required to make themselves vulnerable, to engage in deep listening, and to reexamine their relationships to others. The process of engaging with story inherently makes this possible: community organizer Rosemary Cubas comments, “People tend to hear themselves more fully when telling a story out loud,”³⁴ while on the other hand, “listening to others’ stories allows us to experience the transformative power of reciprocity, which will lead us to greater levels of social commitment.”³⁵ Another powerful format is story exchange, during which participants share personal stories in pairs and then retell their partners’ stories in the first person in front of the larger group. Not only does this place the participant in the framework of another’s story, but “it’s our own lives that we ultimately need to hear told back to us in ways that provide us with increased understanding.”³⁶

Like food, storytelling is also currently feted as hip and trendy in many urban areas, and stories as celebrations of individual voice have become ubiquitous. The average citizen can share a personal story on stage at shows and slams produced by organizations like The Moth (in New York and nationwide), Story District (DC), Stoop Stories (Baltimore), Fireside Storytelling (San Francisco), Lip Service (Miami), Story Lab (Chicago), and The Narrators (Denver and San Diego). Social media, including YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, and Vine, places a public microphone in the hands of anyone with access to a smartphone. Story Corps records, archives, and broadcasts the personal stories of people across the United States.

³³ Bell, *Storytelling for Social Justice*, 26.

³⁴ Debora Kodish, “Envisioning Folklore Activism,” *Journal of American Folklore* 124, no. 491 (2011), 49.

³⁵ Helga Lenart-Cheng and Darija Walker, “Recent Trends in Using Life Stories for Social and Political Activism,” *Biography* 34, no. 1 (2011), 147.

³⁶ Steve Zeitlin, *The Poetry of Everyday Life: Storytelling and the Art of Awareness* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2016), 9.

Corporate “storytelling” trainings abound and company leaders are encouraged to share the “story” of their brand. Kay Turner, current president of the American Folklore Society, wrote in a March 2016 letter to members,

A random sampling of my inbox tells me “How Stories Drive the Stock Market,” that Carrie Underwood’s new album is called *The Storyteller*, that Obama has been re-titled “the story teller-in-chief,” that an art auction house will hold a themed sale called “Art and Storytelling: Photographs and Photo Books,” that a new kind of video game aims at telling personal stories, and that I need to remember that “storytelling is what makes us human” . . . Everyone’s a storyteller; it makes the *Anthropocene* seem so cozy, doesn’t it?³⁷

While popular interest in telling and listening to stories makes evident our desire for connection, we must question whether this deluge demanding our attention through screens and in meetings waters down our experience with story. How is genuine connection limited when story is mediated by a stage or screen? How do we reframe the individual within the context of culture and community, rather than hear only an isolated voice? How do we reclaim storytelling from being coopted for corporate gain, and instead use it to ensure people have the tools to become active narrators of their own lives and communities? We can begin to answer these questions at points where story and food collide.

Mix in the Seder . . .

My fascination with the sparks ignited by the convergence of food and story is rooted in a beloved cultural tradition. “In Judaism, food is both communication and communion,” declares Marcie Cohen Ferris, a scholar of Southern Jewish foodways.³⁸ Judaism places a significant emphasis on food to comment upon identity, belonging, season, place, and nostalgia, both in the form of rules and restrictions (the laws of *kashrut*, initially set forth in the Old Testament and refined through rabbinical debate over the millennia) and in the customary symbolic use of food in celebration, such as dipping apples in honey at Rosh Hashanah to bring sweetness to a new year or dining on seasonal fruits and vegetables in the *sukkah*, an open-air structure built each

³⁷ Kay Turner, “A Message to AFS Members from President Kay Turner,” email message, March 17, 2016.

³⁸ Marcie Cohen Ferris, “Feeding the Jewish Soul in the Delta Diaspora,” *Southern Cultures* 10, no. 3 (2004), 56.

year to celebrate the harvest festival of Sukkot. However, while both family and cultural rituals incorporating Jewish foodways abound, there is perhaps no occasion on the Jewish calendar on which food is as charged with meaning as Passover, our original performative meal.

Passover, or *Pesach*, is the annual celebration of the Jewish exodus out of slavery in ancient Egypt. The *seder*, which translates as “order,” is the participatory gathering at which a prescribed ritual is followed to commemorate the journey from slavery to freedom. The purpose of the seder is the explicit transmission of culture through the retelling of a story, with food acting as both symbolic and tangible connection to the narrative. As Barbara Myerhoff summarizes,

Passover is the occasion when the children are assembled once a year in Jewish tradition and told, “Listen, this is what happened to your ancestors, but this happened to you as well, this is your story.” And this ritual event, which Jews are admonished to engage in every year, is not merely told, it is also performed, so that the children have the experience of receiving and, to some degree, living through the story of their ancestors as if it happened to them. Only the “as if” is blurred, and it does happen to them when it succeeds.³⁹

Passover establishes a liminal space between past and present, suspending us in a temporary reality. Because the seder takes place in the home rather than the synagogue, ordinary space becomes sacred, and for the duration of the event, the sacred beckons to us as ordinary life. In this space, we have the freedom to manipulate tradition at the same time that we are bound to it. Passover celebrates the paradox of ritual: “they all tell us that what has happened has always happened and is always true and will always be true, yet we have just had the experience of it happening to us in a unique and immediate way that makes it special and not always true.”⁴⁰

The ritual of seder follows an authoritative script called the *haggadah*. While every haggadah contains the same basic instructions for consuming symbolic foods in an immutable order, thousands of unique *haggadot* exist. These small booklets are published for different denominations (Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionist), ethnic subgroups (Ashkenazim, Sephardim, Mizrahim, etc.), and speakers of many languages, as well as produced specifically for communities who might wish to hold a seder with a feminist, LGBTQ-centric, interfaith, or ecologically-themed lens. These texts evolve over time in the context of large-scale cultural shift, and are also modified from year to year at the family table based on who is (or is

³⁹ Myerhoff, *Stories as Equipment for Living*, 60.

⁴⁰ Myerhoff, *Stories as Equipment for Living*, 62.

not) present, or even how impatient participants are to get to the main meal. Through haggadot, the anthropological “Great Tradition” (the “official” cultural story) and each community and individual household’s tradition not only converge, but also become intertwined.⁴¹ Each nourishes the other, sustaining culture in a perpetual cycle, defining and redefining what it means to belong to this collective narrative.

The seder is inherently participatory. While there is usually a designated leader of the ritual, opportunities to read from the haggadah circle in turn around the table. The text is written in the first person plural throughout, requiring that each participant take on the role of “we.” Children take their turn in the spotlight, reciting the Four Questions in a singsong tune and hiding the *afikomen*, a special piece of matzoh earmarked for sharing at the end of the meal, when the adults feign surprise at its disappearance and must haggle with the children for its prompt return. (In our house, we debated the hiding place for weeks beforehand, and each child received a shiny new silver dollar as ransom for the afikomen.) Throughout the event, hands are ritually washed, foods are dipped or combined in particular ways, and wine is both drunk and purposely spilled. The seder becomes not a mere event, but a co-creative process. Each participant must agree to suspend reality for the space to be properly transformed. Even when following the same script around the same table, a seder never unfolds in the exact same way twice; new participants, growing children, moods, side comments, weather, current events, haggadah revisions and additions, or even debate over the quality of that year’s matzoh balls affect the re-creation of the traditional seder.

Within the structure of the seder, we are commanded to eat, drink, question, and sustain a tradition that connects us to ourselves, to our collective past, and to a community separated by diaspora in an irrefutably tangible way. The profoundness of this phenomenon strikes me every time. During the ritual of *karpas*, the dipping of fresh greens (often parsley) in salt water, we are reminded by the haggadah of the tears of our enslaved ancestors, even as we welcome the rebirth of spring. This bodily experience goes beyond the script, however, and each time I taste the herbal crispness of parsley dripping with salt water, I experience three things on a visceral level: First, I am pulled back to my own childhood at my family’s seder table. I can feel the starched white tablecloth grazing my knees, smell my mother’s matzoh ball soup in the air, hear the sound of my father’s voice reading aloud from the haggadah. Second, I taste an echo of those that

⁴¹ Myerhoff, *Stories as Equipment for Living*, 64.

came before me. The truths of my family history may be concealed by endless boat journeys across the Atlantic and hidden in Eastern European villages whose names I may never know, but my great-grandmother and her great-grandmother before her surely knew the same Passover taste of saltwater clinging to greens. Third, I am momentarily connected with Jewish people across the globe, each taking a moment to dip greens in salt water on that very evening, the flavor of a shared history on our tongues.

The themes and structure of Passover offer plenty of space to find personal meaning within the rituals, even outside the seder itself. A friend once told me about his practice of baking homemade matzoh on the first day of Passover. For reasons of complex Jewish law, it is nearly impossible to make matzoh while keeping one's kitchen kosher for Passover once the holiday has begun. However, my friend explained,

The thing is, there's something that's incredibly in keeping with the idea of leaving Egypt in a hurry, about needing to cook your bread in an 18-minute turnaround. I love baking. I just feel like being able to turn wheat into bread was sort of the cornerstone in the evolution of cities and modern civilization, and it's this amazing thing that you can mix flour and water, and if you leave it out for the right amount of time and then expose it to heat, it goes from being a disgusting, sloppy slurry to this amazing, delicious thing. It's hugely profound, and important, and miraculous that that's what happens. So I got super into it, and then the idea of trying to figure out how to bake bread but in a super rushed, critical, urgent way was really interesting, and I think really hits home the idea that we're operating with a sense of profound urgency that's about the Passover exodus experience. So I found it really thematic to do this thing which is highly non-traditional.⁴²

The seder allows us a defined context in which to explore our collectively-constructed narrative, an opportunity to “move between text and interpretation, between reading to [our]selves about who [we] are and talking about who [we] want to be and how to understand who [we] are.”⁴³ This performance is a poignant reminder of oppression and liberation, a call to generosity and kindness as children are sent to open the front door to welcome the spirit of the Prophet Elijah and the table proclaims altogether, “Let all who are hungry come and eat.” The seder demands that we remember both joy and suffering, that we walk away from the table with a commitment to continuing our ancestors' journey to freedom, whatever that might mean in the context of our own personal stories.

⁴² Leslie Soble, “In the Kitchen, Around the Table: An Exploration of Interpretive Kashrut Practice and Jewish Identity” (course paper, Goucher College, 2014), 17-18.

⁴³ Myerhoff, *Stories as Equipment for Living*, 61.

Let Food, Story, and Performance simmer . . .

“Performance” describes not only an event framed by a literal or suggestive stage, but also the animation of embodied knowledge in everyday life. Barbara Myerhoff explains, “Being is a social and psychological construct; it is something that is made, not given. Thus it is erroneous to think of performances as optional, arbitrary, or merely decorative embellishments as we in Western societies are inclined to do. In this sense, arenas for appearing are essential, and culture serves as both stage and mirror, providing opportunities for self- and collective proclamations of being.”⁴⁴ We perform both individual and cultural identities through our expressions, words, gestures, and actions, signifying to others who we are and how we desire to be perceived. Performativity is this construction of identities; “an identity, concept, belief becomes reality through being performed.”⁴⁵ This is an aesthetic process of the body and the senses, a process in which we may engage deliberately or subconsciously, waiting for others to interpret our meaning through actions that may, on the surface, seem routine. Myerhoff points out that “cultural performances are reflective in the sense of showing ourselves to ourselves. They are also capable of being reflexive, arousing consciousness of ourselves as we see ourselves.”⁴⁶

Story is inseparable from performance. The common introduction “Let me tell you a story” is

in other words, *performative* in that it does what it says it is doing. It performs the storytelling that it announces. “Let me tell you a story” also establishes a story, the “something that happened” that the storyteller reenacts, recites, or represents. The telling of the story is a *performance*. As a human communication practice, performing narrative combines the performative “doing” of storytelling with what is “done” in the performance of a story.⁴⁷

Story serves as the cultural stage and mirror mentioned by Myerhoff, allowing us to construct identity, community, place, and time through the act of performing narrative,

⁴⁴ Myerhoff, *Stories as Equipment for Living*, 31.

⁴⁵ Long, *The Food and Folklore Reader*, 285.

⁴⁶ Myerhoff, *Stories as Equipment for Living*, 32.

⁴⁷ Kristin M. Langellier and Eric E. Peterson, *Storytelling in Daily Life: Performing Narrative* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011), 2.

which includes “any act of doing storytelling, not just to a heightened act of communication, aesthetically marked, framed in a special way, and put on display for an audience.”⁴⁸

Our interactions with food are also richly performative; “food, like performance, is alive, fugitive, and sensory.”⁴⁹ Guided by cultural indicators like recipes, cooking techniques, etiquette, manners, and traditions, we perform the procurement, preparation, presentation, and consumption of food, in the sense that such food-related processes become culturally inscribed practices interconnected with identity, as well as in the sense of performing explicitly to elicit reactions from others. Lucy Long states, “Many of our food choices are made without intentionally performing aspects of our identity, but they are expressions of it just the same.”⁵⁰ We constantly traverse the foodscape, described by Eve Jochowitz as “not just the foods alone; it also includes the traditions of display and performance associated with the food. It includes deliberately and intentionally created aesthetic productions as well as incidental culinary ‘noise.’”⁵¹ The way we engage with food illustrates our personal and cultural identities like nothing else. It is the substance and processes with which we are most intimately and instinctively familiar. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett states, “The materiality of food, its dynamic and unstable character, its precarious position between sustenance and garbage, its relationship to the mouth and the rest of the body, particularly the female body, and its importance to community, make food a powerful performance medium.”⁵²

Many artists have embraced the power of food in performance events, believing it has a tremendous impact on the way an audience experiences an artistic work. These works, sometimes referred to as performative meals, have taken many forms ranging from spontaneous public spectacle to meticulously planned production, but all encourage multisensory participation from the audience. Barbara Smith, who created a medical-themed performative meal called *Ritual Meal* in 1969, commented, “It was about ingesting the art work and being affected internally by it,” because it violated “the rules governing the way an art object is viewed. Most art happens outside the body of the viewer, which remains separate from the object that is being

⁴⁸ Langellier and Peterson, *Storytelling in Daily Life*, 3.

⁴⁹ Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “Playing to the Senses,” 1.

⁵⁰ Long, *The Food and Folklore Reader*, 54.

⁵¹ Jochowitz, “Foodscapes,” 306.

⁵² Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “Playing to the Senses,” 13.

viewed.”⁵³ Smith brought her audience into the art, breaking the usual boundaries between self and artistic piece.

Some social practice artists have gone beyond simply bridging the gap between audience and art to create performative meals that illuminate community culture. Writer and multi-disciplinary artist Annie Lanzilotto produced *The Arthur Avenue Retail Market Project* from 1995 to 1997 in the central marketplace of a once-thriving Italian neighborhood in the Bronx. Seeking “to make an opera in the market, and highlight the opera that is already there, daily,” Lanzilotto immersed herself in the community of merchants and shoppers, learning the rhythms of the space and the stories of the people. She viewed the market as a living museum, where dialect and food preparations remained frozen in time, as if from a series snapshots dating back to the previous century. Working as “part curator, part community festival organizer, and part ‘interaction practitioner,’” Lanzilotto collaborated with merchants, shoppers, and artists to generate both choreographed and improvised encounters that called attention to the beauty and vibrancy of the “everyday life performances, the spontaneous arias, the disquisitions and demonstrations, the stories and the banter, the *mentalités* distinctive to this scene.”⁵⁴ The community welcomed Lanzilotto’s interpretation of the market as theater and countertop as stage, which brought a new aesthetic appreciation for the market as a cultural site.

In May of 2014, artist Pablo Perezarate and The Drawing Shed, a contemporary arts organization, created *LiveLunch*, a social practice art piece on the lawn area of London’s Atlee Estate in Walthamstow, an ethnically diverse neighborhood home to many low-income and immigrant families. *LiveLunch* began with artists and local residents bringing dishes that represented their culture to a public place, drawing passers-by to the event. While the food acted as a natural conversation-starter, chatter quickly turned to deep discussions of identity, immigration, and connection to place. At one point, Perezarate asked a group seated around a table to help him prepare Mexican food as he told the story of his family’s journey from Mexico to the United Kingdom. Perezarate saw this meal as “a collaborative performance – his act of storytelling and of instructing the food preparation and the spontaneous talk amongst the group - that enabled people to tell their own stories, recalling memories and talking about the social,

⁵³ Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “Playing to the Senses,” 11.

⁵⁴ Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “Playing to the Senses,” 21-23.

cultural, economic and political lifeworld of the estate, and the wider global politics of identity, immigration and place.”⁵⁵

Kirshenblatt-Gimblett writes, “The form of food lends itself to performance because, not only are those forms well known but also they are easily staged – or perhaps it would be more accurate to say restaged.”⁵⁶ Both Lanzilotto and Perezzarate played on the performativity of everyday food practices to (re)stage explicit performance, highlighting cultural elements and local narratives to start conversations about social realities like immigration and community relationships. As Perezzarate found, “Seeing the everyday – *the meal* – with unexpected actors – *the community and artists* – and in an unexpected place – *the housing estate public lawns* – was active in creating a space for residents’ critical discourse.”⁵⁷ These food-based artistic works created unique contexts for meaningful community dialogue that might not otherwise have occurred.

. . . and Story Soup is made.

A Story Soup workshop will be, in essence, an unconventional re-creation of the kitchen: a space where raw ingredients (in this case, food and narrative) undergo physical and cultural transformation into food, where, as folklorist Millie Rahn writes, “the everyday and the ceremonial meet and overlap . . . This is where knowledge is passed on, from traditional ways of preparing and using various ingredients, implements, tools, and techniques to legends, stories, anecdotes, and cultural exchanges that have become part of familial and regional folklife.”⁵⁸ Story Soup intentionally seeks to recreate the kitchen – an everyday, intimate, participatory, messy space in which we prepare and consume most of the food that nourishes us – rather than the more removed space of the restaurant, where cooks and diners are formally divided, access is limited by economic status, and we might eat differently than we do at home. The food of the kitchen may be imperfect: the sauce boils over, oil spatters across the stove, the toast gets burnt. We forget to add salt or we mess up a new recipe just as our company is walking through the

⁵⁵ Cara Courage, “The Performative Meal: *LiveLunch* and the Meal as Social Practice” (2017), 2.

⁵⁶ Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “Playing to the Senses,” 28.

⁵⁷ Courage, “The Performative Meal,” 4.

⁵⁸ Rahn, “Laying a Place at the Table,” 34.

door. The food of the kitchen might also seem boring or repetitive or bland; perhaps we have eaten rice and beans for weeks on end or find nothing in the refrigerator that excites us. In a Story Soup workshop, such challenges are expected. One participant's story might offend another, or someone might believe there are no stories worth telling about their own experiences. Some might struggle with telling a story coherently, while others hesitate to get their hands dirty and make themselves vulnerable. Story Soup seeks to hold space for these imperfect and incomplete stories, for the unconfident and unlikely tellers. The art of Story Soup lies not in the product of a perfectly crafted narrative, but rather in the process of guiding participants to the realization that there is a story to be told.

The reasons for Story Soup turning to the meal as an ideal culminating format in which to (re)introduce communities to each other and to themselves is threefold. First, it is a recognizable form; we all understand the concept of participating in a meal even if the structure and etiquette are different from our own customs. Next, we all carry food stories with us, and those stories are the keys to unlocking insights about who we are in the world and how we got to where we are. Finally, participating in the act of sharing food calls attention to what constitutes our physical bodies and our cultural selves. When one literally takes in the food of the other, interacts with a part of the other's experience on such an intimate level, the distinct boundary between self and stranger may begin to crumble. Even if one refuses the food of the other, participation in Story Soup demands that one examine the thinking behind this decision. Story Soup embraces the notion that rituals are "repetitive and rhythmic in a distinctive physiological way, go around the critical functions of the brain, right into the deeper levels where emotional experiences take place, and so the doing is the believing."⁵⁹ The performative meal plays on the traditional rituals of eating to draw participants and audience in, creating a space where doing is believing, and where self can be lost in the story of the other.

Story Soup operates where the personal collides with the cultural and collective, where stories go beyond a single voice to reconnect individuals with larger narratives that endure through time, that persist through movement and separation and adaptation, that stretch wide and infuse deep. It is a form of performed ethnography that invites an audience into another's experience on a profound level. As Gottschall explains, "Many scientists now believe we have neural networks that activate when we perform an action or experience an emotion, and also

⁵⁹ Myerhoff, *Stories as Equipment for Living*, 62.

when we observe someone else performing an action or experiencing an emotion . . . Mirror neurons may also be the basis of our ability to run powerful fictional simulations in our heads.”⁶⁰ Story Soup activates the human capacity for empathy through this multisensory encounter with food and story.

Story Soup is designed for the slow simmering of conversation, for the wild creativity of combining cultural flavors, for the deliberate rituals and embodied knowledge and return to human connection unmediated or undivided by electronic screens. It is unique in its portability and adaptability to any demographic and setting. Story Soup creates a context for transformative dialogue around the edges and at the crossroads – the places most ripe with meaning and abundant with the possibility for change.

Recipes for Dialogue: Five Project Profiles/Case Studies

There are a myriad of arts-based organizations and projects that aim to inspire and expand dialogue across borders through the use of food, story, or both. As I created the initial template for Story Soup, I conducted interviews with leaders of five projects to discuss their purposes, objectives, and approaches to starting important cultural conversations, as well as examined websites and read numerous articles about each project or program. Each of these projects, like Story Soup, offers an explicitly framed context in which stories are elicited and re-presented to a community. Amy Brooks of Roadside Theater, Lee Keylock of Narrative Four, Jennine Willett of *Learning Curve*, Dawn Weleski of Conflict Kitchen, and Myron Beasley of “Savoring Androscoggin County” all offered valuable insights into their work as facilitators of critical yet creatively-structured dialogue.

Roadside Theater

“We are really big proponents of the power of first voice,” states Amy Brooks, Program Director and Dramaturg of Roadside Theater, which uses community story circles to generate

⁶⁰ Gottschall, *The Storytelling Animal*, 60.

material for its original plays. “We believe in people forming the generative base for solving the problems that affect them . . . That’s our theory of change. We think that if the people themselves aren’t lending their voices to the conversation, and using their stories told in their own words to create the plays, then it can’t create lasting change.”⁶¹

Established in 1975, Roadside Theater leverages the power of the arts “to document, disseminate, and revitalize the lasting traditions and contemporary creativity of Appalachia; to tell stories the commercial cultural industries don’t tell, challenging stereotypes with Appalachian voices and visions; to support communities’ efforts to achieve justice and equity and solve their own problems in their own ways; to celebrate cultural diversity as a positive social value; and to participate in regional, national, and global dialogue toward these ends.”⁶² Dudley Cocke, Roadside’s founder, is a former conscientious objector and VISTA worker who, influenced by the grassroots organizing traditions of the Highlander Center and the work of the Free Southern Theater, recognized a need for a politically activist theater in this culturally rich but economically poor region.⁶³

Roadside Theater is a project of Appalshop, a nonprofit media laboratory founded in 1969 during President Lyndon B. Johnson’s War on Poverty. As support was offered to address challenges in America’s inner cities, Appalshop was formed as the sole effort to reach out to struggling rural communities. Amy explains with a laugh, “They came here and gave these kids in Whitesburg, Kentucky, film equipment and taught them how to use it, with this idea they’d go out and get jobs in the film and TV industry. And they said, ‘Nahh, we’re going to stay here, and tell stories in our own way and create the films that we want to tell about our own communities.’”⁶⁴ Appalshop has evolved into a multi-media production center that uses film, radio, photography, audio recording, and print to document and project the voices of Appalachians as they both celebrate their strong cultural traditions and speak out against the exploitation of land and people by the coal industry. While the rest of Appalshop’s projects stick closer to home, however, Roadside Theater has primarily engaged in touring performances and community residences across 43 states and several European countries.

⁶¹ Amy Brooks, interview by the author, December 22, 2016.

⁶² “Mission,” Roadside Theater, accessed February 9, 2017, <https://roadside.org/about>.

⁶³ Jan Cohen-Cruz, *Local Acts: Community-Based Performance in the United States* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 51-55.

⁶⁴ Brooks, interview.

Roadside Theater’s methodology evolved over years of trial and error; the early performers found that without reaching out to diverse audiences or involving community members sufficiently in the play creation process, their shows did not inspire lasting social change. The ensemble learned to take a community-centric, iterative approach to play creation. Each residency begins with a series of facilitated story circles to elicit narratives from a diverse group of community members so the play creation team can get a sense of local histories, events, and identities. The ideal circle consists of ten to 20 people and usually begins with a prompt, such as “Tell us about a time your community came together,” or “Tell us about a time something funny happened at a serious event like a funeral.” Amy states, “We find that when we ask for stories rather than opinions, there’s a greater diversity of experience represented and those multiple perspectives find their way into the plays that we create.”⁶⁵ The facilitators do not use timers, generally allowing participants to take the time they need to recount their tales. Each participant is given an opportunity to speak in turn; if someone is not ready to talk, she or he can pass and will be offered another chance once the circle has gone around. Crosstalk and feedback are not permitted during the initial circle; as Amy explains, “If you disagree with what you heard in someone else’s story or you didn’t like it, rather than telling them you disagree or challenging them, you might just offer a story that offers a counter-perspective, without framing it as confrontational in any way . . . There’s something about it that tends to head that conflict off at the pass, because you’re liberating people from the pressure of defending their experience.”⁶⁶ Roadside facilitators also encourage participants to listen actively to others’ stories rather than focus on what they will share when their turn comes around. Some of the most powerful circles flow organically as stories become responses to the narratives previously shared. While some participants might hesitate due to anxiety over public speaking or a history of tension with others in the room, most decide to add their stories to the mix. The facilitators take as long as necessary to gather enough stories to ensure that multiple viewpoints are represented. For example, in their play *Thousand Kites*, which explores the effects of the prison system in Appalachia, Roadside’s team included the perspectives of inmates and their families, corrections officers and their families, and the communities surrounding the prisons.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Brooks, interview.

⁶⁶ Brooks, interview.

⁶⁷ Brooks, interview.

In addition to story circles, the play creation team might also engage in informal social research through casual conversation with community members around town or over meals, and occasionally through more formal research using historical documents. Once sufficient stories have been collected, Roadside Theater's play creation team begins to craft a show that illuminates the culture(s) of the community. The playwright sifts through the narratives, choosing which details to change, dramatize, or combine for the sake of the play. Still, community members see themselves in the finished product. Amy shares that people will often walk up to Roadside staff after a show and exclaim, "'You used my story! I was so excited to hear it!' and it wasn't their story at all. Maybe it was someone else's, but there was so much resemblance to their own story that they recognized it as theirs."⁶⁸

Even amidst such initial enthusiasm, Roadside Theater takes the play creation process a step further. After the first performance, another story circle is held for audience members to talk about their experience and share more stories related to the play's theme. These stories might alter or adjust the way the show is next performed.⁶⁹ This iterative process allows Roadside to present theater as an echo of the community's own heartbeat.

Because Roadside Theater is fiercely dedicated to creating lasting social change, a tremendous amount of work happens before the story circles, during the story collection process, and after the play performances. Roadside makes a point of only conducting residencies where invited to do so. When community leaders first contact Roadside, they are provided with online materials to study and determine whether this methodology seems to be the right approach for their local residents. While Roadside is prepared to create a framework in which the community can organize itself, community leaders must agree to a contract stating they will make every effort to do extensive outreach and make the story circle process as accessible and inclusive as possible. Roadside takes this agreement very seriously, and has actually walked away when a community doesn't seem to be conducive to their methodology or when the community doesn't agree that Roadside's approach is the appropriate response to their issues.⁷⁰ During the entire production process, Roadside's play creation team engages with the community as much as possible, attending church services, eating at local establishments, talking with the schools, and

⁶⁸ Brooks, interview.

⁶⁹ Brooks, interview.

⁷⁰ Brooks, interview.

generally activating enthusiasm for the show’s development. Some residencies include community members on the play creation team and on the stage itself. If a community is particularly segregated, Roadside’s team will devise a creative means reaching across borders of race and class. While creating *Junebug/Jack*, for example, the play creation team broke through longtime Southern racial barriers by capitalizing on the rich musical traditions in both the black and white churches. An ecumenical choir, comprised of singers from multiple churches, was requested for the performance. Through singing together, choir members got to know each other, and each church brought a sizeable audience to support friends and family in the production, resulting in a roomful of people who had never before sat altogether – a first step toward much-needed dialogue.⁷¹ Finally, before ending a residency, Roadside guides the community in establishing an infrastructure for continued inclusive art and dialogue, as well as connects local leaders to a larger network of theater groups committed to social change.⁷²

In addition to their traditional residency format, Roadside Theater has employed the story circle-to-performance method to create a youth-led musical in Letcher County, Kentucky, and to collaborate with other community-based performing arts groups committed to social change, including Junebug Productions (an African-American theater in New Orleans), Teatro Pregones (a Puerto Rican ensemble based in the Bronx), and Idiwanan An Chawe (a New Mexico-based Zuni language theater company). When looking for production partners, Roadside tends toward long-term collaborations with communities that also struggle with economic issues and face the intersection of race and class. Amy finds these intercultural partnerships to be especially meaningful, commenting, “It’s really stunning – to see Zuni performers in their native dress onstage singing their music in duet with Appalachian performers in their own clothes singing folk songs that are part of their heritage together is incredibly powerful.”⁷³

Amy herself is a fifth-generation West Virginian with a deep connection to the Appalachian landscape and identity. Raised in Morgantown, home to West Virginia University, she grew up with a sense of Appalachia’s diversity and learned not to see the region and its people as a homogenous entity. Unlike most of Roadside’s ensemble members, Amy has trained

⁷¹ Cocke, “Roadside Theater,” in *An Ideal Theater: Founding Visions for a New American Art*, ed. Todd London (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2013), 66-74.

⁷² “Community Residency Methodology,” Roadside Theater, accessed February 9, 2017, <https://roadside.org/asset/community-residency-methodology>.

⁷³ Brooks, interview.

professionally in the theater arts – she studied acting at West Virginia University and went on to earn a graduate degree in dramaturgy from the University of Massachusetts Amherst. As she prepared for a job in the commercial theater world, however, Amy realized she wasn't enthusiastic about the work. She began exploring options for socially engaged theater and fell in love with Double Edge Theatre, a small ensemble company in Ashfield, Massachusetts, whose members live, work, and perform on a sustainable farm while engaging mindfully with the local community. As she completed her thesis, however, Amy still felt far away from the communities that most mattered to her. While she found New Englanders to be very progressive, she explained, "They have no more working knowledge of how people live here [in Appalachia] or the long-term economic problems than people here [in Appalachia] have an idea of what's happening in Amherst, Massachusetts." As she perused other theater companies in search of fulfilling work, Amy stumbled upon Appalshop and Roadside Theater, which turned out to be a perfect fit.⁷⁴

Roadside Theater's current major challenge is funding. Residencies and tours are expensive: the ensemble needs to be paid, and target communities are usually not in a position to fund Roadside's work without assistance. All Appalshop's projects have historically relied on grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, which has been impacted by ongoing budget shifts since the Clinton era and is currently in danger of being unfunded altogether by the Trump administration. Though the NEA and large foundations such as the Mellon Foundation have provided support for Roadside Theater and recognize the importance of rural arts initiatives in theory, Amy points out that rural communities in general continue to be underfunded. She is also concerned that growing media prejudice against Appalachia in light of the 2016 election could potentially impact forming empathetic bonds with diverse communities outside the region. As right-wing populist fervor has swept across the nation, she admits, "It's hard to make an argument for the kind of democratic populism Roadside is based on . . . We have the suffix to Roadside Theater 'Art in Democracy,' and we're espousing a populist grassroots forum for cultural reform in the kind of theater that we do."⁷⁵ In spite of a growing atmosphere of bias and fear, however, Roadside will continue traveling on, bringing ordinary people's stories to shine on the stage and sparking dialogue within and between communities.

⁷⁴ Brooks, interview.

⁷⁵ Brooks, interview.

Narrative 4

“It’s the greatest democracy, I think, on the planet – our stories. And we all have them, there’s many of them, and they’re free. You just really need a space, and for us it’s about getting a space that’s uninterrupted and bringing people together to do a story exchange,” says Lee Keylock, Director of Programs at Narrative 4.

Narrative 4 “builds a community of empathic global citizens who improve the world through the exchange of personal narratives . . . Our program is designed to build a mutual trust that strips away the typical narratives of cynicism and despair. By bringing people together through storytelling, we will build a new narrative for immigration, for the environment, for peace.”⁷⁶ Narrative 4 has conducted story exchanges across the United States, as well as in Ireland, South Africa, Israel, Haiti, Rwanda, and Mexico. The organization’s methodology requires sharing a story about something that defines you with a partner, then retelling that partner’s story in the first person in front of a larger group. “I think taking on the first person changes everything,” Lee explains. “I think that’s the radical part – empathy is not this ethereal, fluffy thing. It requires a lot of strength, and a lot of vulnerability, and I think people have this false impression about when you tell a story or whatever, it’s just this Kumbaya moment and everyone’s just going to sit and hug, when really, what you’re asking people to do, especially when taking on the first person of somebody else, is a real act of courage.”⁷⁷

Narrative 4’s diverse team of facilitators works in collaboration with local teachers or community organizers to plan each experience, which brings together people from two different schools, geographic locations, cultural communities, or political ideologies. The staff makes it clear that while they have expertise in a particular methodology, they are not necessarily familiar with a given community or environment, and participants are the authorities on their own experiences.

Narrative 4’s staff aims for 12 to 20 participants in each exchange. Pairs are usually matched randomly across group lines, but intentional partner selections are occasionally made when the stories focus on a particularly sensitive topic. Facilitators also take the age of their

⁷⁶ “Mission and Vision,” Narrative 4, accessed March 9, 2017, <http://narrative4.com/mission-vision/>.

⁷⁷ Lee Keylock, interview by the author, January 4, 2017.

participants into account when planning the activities and timing for an exchange. Lee clarifies that adults generally take six or seven minutes to tell their stories, while youth stories tend to be much shorter: about four minutes for a high school student or three minutes for a middle school-aged kid. (Lee once worked with second graders who told their stories in under a minute.)

Each story exchange centers around an open-ended but meaningful prompt, such as, “If you could tell one story that would reveal the essence of your life to put in a time capsule that will be opened in a hundred years, what would you share?” With younger participants, more defined prompts might be offered, such as “Tell a story about a time you witnessed or participated in an act of compassion,” or “Tell a story about the first time you realized that race mattered.” Lee points out that youth tend to tell lighthearted and funny stories while adults dive into their darker sides fairly quickly, but ultimately, he says, “we want eclectic stories, we want them to be as funny and as sad and as happy and embarrassing as they want to tell.”⁷⁸

Facilitators are responsible for creating a space in which all participants feel safe in their vulnerability. Narrative 4’s story exchanges are not one-day events; they are carefully planned with introductory and debriefing activities on either side of the multi-session exchange. Time is allotted up front for informal social gatherings so participants can become comfortable with each other and build trust with their facilitators. When the exchange takes place in a single geographic community, these gatherings might take the shape of providing food and inviting people to hang out in a local space every couple weeks for a few months. In the case of international youth exchanges, participants might make short introductory videos on their phones. Lee describes the videos for a recent exchange between young people in Chicago and in Limerick, Ireland: “They showed what their environment was like, so they walked around their house, their bedroom, their street; what they were into – maybe they were into ballet or soccer, or whatever, and they show snippets of that, of themselves in their world . . . You want them to have, especially if it’s international, a cultural exchange as well – you want them to sort of walk in that world a little bit.”⁷⁹ Once an environment of trust has been established, facilitators guide participants through choosing the story they want to tell, how to articulate that story, and how to take on and tell someone else’s story.

⁷⁸ Keylock, interview.

⁷⁹ Keylock, interview.

The exchange itself has two parts. The first is a private interaction between two people. Each pair goes off to a quiet spot to share stories in turn. The listener may take notes, but may not interrupt the teller. Lee explains, “They just have to accept the story as a gift. We tell them you don’t add commentary, you don’t add anything, you don’t have to try to help the person – we’re not therapists, we’re not therapy-driven, we are about absorbing the story in the way you most authentically hear it.” After the initial telling, the listener may ask questions, but it’s more about capturing the essence of the story than being able to remember every tiny detail.

The day after the paired exchange, the group reconvenes in a circle. Each person in turn shares her or his partner’s story in the first person without interruption, after which the group takes the time to reflect together on the experience of both listening to their own story told by another and having another’s story entrusted to them. Often, the facilitators incorporate various forms of art or media (such as making storyboards or audio recordings) to help participants process their thoughts and emotions. The debrief can be one of the most impactful parts of the process, as Lee points out:

I think the hardest thing is when a person feels their story hasn’t been told the way they always thought about their story, and a lot of the time, it’s because they didn’t realize their story also embodied this or that other themes. I’ve seen people on both sides, positive and negative – there was one story exchange [between a teacher and a student], and the teacher told a story about occasionally bullying someone when they were in high school. And it wasn’t a very flattering story for the person to actually tell about themselves. But the student . . . kind of protected the guy in that story, protected the teacher by not telling every fact because she had this compulsion to keep him safe. Even to me, that is an act of compassion . . . for her to do that, even though the guy was like, “Well, she didn’t quite tell the whole story,” but her gesture was one of this, “You’re a nice guy; I don’t want to present you fully as this whatever.” A lot of this deep connection and care people have for each other comes out in the reflection.”⁸⁰

Narrative 4 takes the trust built amongst participants and with facilitators in the circle very seriously. If a participant becomes emotional while recounting a partner’s narrative, the person whose story is being told will often support and hug the one doing the retelling, and facilitators are trained to step in if necessary. Facilitators sometimes introduce mindfulness techniques to help participants let difficult stories go rather than internalize them, and for groups that might be at risk for post-traumatic stress, Narrative 4 ensures there are school counselors or trauma specialists on hand. Story exchanges are not open to the public; participants are asked

⁸⁰ Keylock, interview.

not to share any of the stories they heard without the permission of the teller. (Upon the agreement of participants, a few exchanges have been highlighted by the media: An exchange between students at the public University Heights High School and the elite, private, Ethical Culture Fieldston School, both in the Bronx, appeared as an interactive feature in *The New York Times* in 2014. Another exchange was organized in 2016 by *New York Magazine* to bring together Americans whose lives had been in some way defined by gun violence or a commitment to Second Amendment rights. This exchange included police officers and policy makers, high school students from the South Side of Chicago and recreational hunters, and people like Todd Underwood, a Kansas City gun enthusiast who auctioned off the gun that shot Trayvon Martin, and his exchange partner Carolyn Tuft, who survived the 2007 Trolley Square mass shooting in Salt Lake City that killed her teenage daughter Kirsten.⁸¹)

After the reflection process, facilitators walk participants through a program component called Empathy into Action, which incorporates dialogue on the stories' themes (poverty, gun violence, immigration, etc.) into discussions on actions that can be taken to address these issues in the community, as well as to maintain the relationships that have started to form during the Narrative 4 experience. The idea is to create a foundation for lasting empathy and social change.

Though Narrative 4 is a relatively new organization (it was conceived in 2012 by a group of world-renowned writers on a retreat to discuss stories and social justice, and launched the following year by Irish author Colum McCann and several of his associates), it has already been celebrated both nationally and internationally. The numeral in its name is meant to capture the idea of a new narrative *for peace, for change, for everyone*.⁸² As Lee concludes, "So that's what we do – we bring people together, they have maybe these fixed ideas about one another or the other, but when you put them in the room together and they tell stories from the human heart, it changes everything. It unlocks things that are very tangible."⁸³

⁸¹ Lisa Miller, "An Experiment in Empathy," *New York Magazine*, December 26, 2016, accessed March 9, 2017, <http://nymag.com/daily/intelligencer/2016/12/gun-violence-radical-empathy.html>.

⁸² Melissa Swantkowski, "Colum McCann in Conversation with Melissa Swantkowski," *Bodega*, September 13, 2013, accessed March 9, 2017, <http://www.bodegamag.com/articles/81-interview-with-colum-mccann>.

⁸³ Keylock, interview.

Learning Curve

A teenage girl struggles with thoughts on body image while staring at her own reflection in the mirror of the school restroom. A boy nervously asks his crush to prom in the stairwell. A girl climbs through the shelves of a library, surrounded by dozens of floating books.

This was *Learning Curve*, a creative critique on public education in Chicago, presented in 2016 as the product of a two-year collaboration between Chicago's Albany Park Theater Project and Third Rail Projects, an experiential theater company based in New York. The immersive piece invited audience members into a day at Ellen Gates Starr High School, a fictional institution set in the physical building of a former Catholic school. As they moved through the performance, audience members sat through classes (where a teacher might ask them a question), found themselves herded down classic musty school hallways, and chatted with a recruiter in the JROTC office. These typical teenage experiences were infused with commentary on the local school system, standardized testing, bullying, the American Dream, body image, school safety, and other issues impacting high school youth and their communities today.⁸⁴

The Albany Park Theater Project, a multiethnic youth theater ensemble established in 1997 in one of the three most ethnically diverse neighborhoods in the United States, creates original performances “based on the life experiences of people whose stories might otherwise go untold: urban teens, immigrants, and working-class Americans” as it strives to “cultivate a community where teens engage critically and creatively with the world as artists, thereby embarking on purposeful lives as adventurous dreamers and accomplished achievers.”⁸⁵ The Albany Park Theater Project not only addresses issues of social justice through performance, but also demonstrates this commitment in practice by supporting its participants with mentoring, tutoring, and college preparation programs. The ensemble's productions serve to inspire both performers and audiences to engage in challenging dialogue and to take an active role in working toward social change in their communities and throughout Chicago.

Third Rail Projects crafts “site-specific, immersive and experiential dance and theater . . . Collaboration is integral to all of Third Rail Projects' endeavors, both in the creative process as

⁸⁴ Aimee Levitt, “The School that Became a Theater that Became a School,” *Chicago Reader*, July 28, 2016, accessed March 7, 2017, . <https://www.chicagoreader.com/chicago/albany-park-theater-project-learning-curve/Content?oid=22988132>.

⁸⁵ “Our Mission,” Albany Park Theater Project, accessed March 7, 2017, <http://aptpchicago.org/our-mission/>.

well as the intersection with each new site, community, and cultural landscape in which they work.”⁸⁶ The critically acclaimed company has produced a number of award-winning shows, including *Then She Fell*, an immersive performance that interweaves Lewis Carroll’s tales of *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass* with musings on the character of Carroll himself and the setting of a mental hospital. David Feiner, co-founder and Producing Artistic Director of the Albany Park Theater Project, reached out to Jennine Willett, one of Third Rail Projects’ co-founders and Artistic Directors, about a potential collaboration after an enthralling experience attending *Then She Fell*.⁸⁷

Learning Curve, the Albany Park Theater Project’s first long-running show, featured 31 performers, ages 13-19, in rotating roles. Due to the nature of the performance, audience members under the age of 14 were not admitted. The youth ensemble was involved in the show’s development from the beginning. They conducted interviews with peers, principals, new and veteran teachers, parents, and each other, which provided them with the tools to sketch a multifaceted picture of their city’s public schools. Through theater games and writing prompts, the ensemble used the patterns and themes in these collected stories to sculpt the scenes in *Learning Curve* under the guidance of their directors. As scenes took shape, students also explored their relationship to the physical space of the building, jumping on and off furniture and experimenting with movement to see what might be possible. Jennine reveals that the actors were encouraged to take creative license with the performance’s stories and the ways these were relayed to the audience, elaborating, “Sometimes [the stories] were born from an idea or a situation that’s really real, but trying to convey that verbatim just doesn’t work – it isn’t very poetic. We had to figure out which stories are told best through movement, through text, through ephemera.”⁸⁸

Eight seasoned adult directors worked alongside the student performers and had final say over decisions made about the performance; for both practical and artistic reasons, it was necessary to have adults take the lead. The performers were all full-time students juggling school

⁸⁶ “About the Company,” Third Rail Projects, accessed March 7, 2017, <http://www.thirdrailprojects.com/about#aboutthecompany>.

⁸⁷ Morgan Greene, “‘Learning Curve’ puts you smack in the middle of a Chicago School Day,” *Chicago Tribune*, July 29, 2016, accessed March 7, 2017, <http://www.chicagotribune.com/entertainment/theater/ct-learning-curve-preview-ae-0731-20160728-story.html>.

⁸⁸ Jennine Willett, interview by the author, March 27, 2017.

and other responsibilities alongside the show, and the directors simply had more experience in deciding what worked logistically and aesthetically, and what did not. “At the end of the day, the director shapes and molds and works out the script and does the fine tuning to bring it home,” Jennine says, explaining that such leadership is important for a performance to get off the ground. There was very little friction, however, between the young people and the adult directors; Jennine remembers the atmosphere as one of great mutual respect, with the directors holding the students in high esteem and the youth tremendously appreciative of the opportunity to learn from a group of outstanding professionals.

One potential difficulty in the creation of an immersive piece like *Learning Curve* is coaching performers to allow a story to unfold around a different audience each time, rather than simply memorizing a script to recite in front of a seated group. Performers had to learn to interact naturally with an audience whose reactions to the show’s action were always an unknown variable. Jennine encouraged performers to “Know what the dialogue is and what the questions are, and then you just wing it. Know the wireframe ideally of what happens, in the beginning and in the end – there’s flexibility in the middle.” She adds that extensive practice during which the group discussed potential iterations of scenes also helped put the performers at ease. As they rehearsed a bullying scene, for example, actors brainstormed different ways the scene could play out and how to respond to possible reactions from audience members. The cast of *Learning Curve* quickly found that because the audience was immersed in the setting and captivated by the various stories, they generally responded to tough scenes with sensitivity and sincerity, allowing the actors to proceed confidently through the show.

Due to the structure of the performance, not every audience member viewed every scene. Unlike some immersive pieces, however, *Learning Curve* was completely curated so that the audience, even while moving throughout the building, could not miss a major scene, nor would they unintentionally wander into a scene that was already in progress.⁸⁹ (The regular ringing of the bell assisted with this.) This was another challenge for the team of directors: designing the logistics of the show so that each member of the 40-person audience could have a rich and satisfying experience.⁹⁰

⁸⁹ Willett, interview.

⁹⁰ Willett, interview.

Learning Curve provided its audiences with an intense encounter designed to trigger personal memories of adolescence and provoke thoughtful dialogue on the struggles of teenagers and teachers today. Two avenues were provided for post-performance reflection: After the show, the audience had the opportunity to engage with performers and ask questions about the show and its creation process, and a survey was also sent out to audience members who wished to share their responses with the ensemble. The experience proved to be so powerful that the Albany Park Theater Project established StarrHouse, a (non-fictional) community education center housed within *Learning Curve*'s former set.⁹¹

As a guest director, Jennine found the biggest challenge was the limited time she had to work directly with the Albany Park Theater Project's youth. She traveled back and forth between New York and Chicago during the production process, and each time felt like she was fighting against the clock. Still, she found the experience to be exceptionally meaningful, not just for the youth ensemble and their audiences, but also for her own sense of what theater makes possible. "Watching those kids grow and seeing how they developed as people as the result of performing in this kind of work was really fascinating and rewarding. How they engaged with people, how they were present . . . I just feel like they captivate you," Jennine says.

Conflict Kitchen

Conflict Kitchen was conceived in 2010 when Jon Rubin and Dawn Weleski, both interdisciplinary artists and professors at Carnegie Mellon University's School of Art, were working with students on a project called The Waffle Shop, a functioning restaurant in the East Liberty neighborhood of Pittsburgh that produced a live-streaming talk show with its customers. Jon believed the business aspect of the shop might be able to sustain the art project, and he asked Dawn, who had over twenty years of experience in the restaurant industry alongside her artistic practice, to join The Waffle Shop's team. She recalls,

[People] might be sitting right next to each other eating the same waffles and bacon and eggs, but when you get people up onto a stage – albeit a very small stage – they sort of perform the ultimate versions of themselves, and that talk show acted as this ongoing documentary of the area. And seeing that food was a way to bring people together, a way

⁹¹ "StarrHouse," Albany Park Theater Project, accessed March 8, 2017, <http://starrhighschool.org/starr-house>.

to create a level of security and comfort, and under the auspice of the restaurant which is a context that most people understand and dramaturgy that people understand, right? You walk in, there's a server, you order . . . You're eating the food, and food being something that we're creative with every day, even the choice of what to eat, what to put in our bodies, is a creative act. And so we decided to extend the restaurant concept.⁹²

Dawn, a Pittsburgh native, and Jon, a relative newcomer to the city, both wanted to delve into a conversation about diversity and segregation in their city. They wanted to offer a microphone to cultural groups that existed in Pittsburgh but didn't have restaurants to share their culture with outsiders through cuisine. Dawn and Jon began listing the cuisines missing from the local dining scene, starting with Iranian, Afghan, Venezuelan, and Cuban, and realized those were all countries with which the United States government is in conflict. Thus, Conflict Kitchen (now serving takeout food from a rotating roster of countries from noon to 7pm daily) was born.

Located in a small parklet not far from Carnegie Mellon University, the University of Pittsburgh, and the Carnegie Library, Conflict Kitchen is easily stumbled upon by visitors to the city. Dawn explains, "That's how we like to exist: that we're catching people within the stream of their daily lives, that we're an unexpected thing that they happen upon, and that they're receiving an experience that certainly is out of the ordinary, and is challenging them to come to a greater level of curiosity than they typically would have."⁹³ The restaurant provides a uniquely effective space for public dialogue on challenging social and political issues. Jon believes "food creates that space of comfort; we find that we attract people who might not ordinarily come to a political march, read leaflets or even go to a community meeting around the specific issue, but who would come out for food."⁹⁴

Jon and Dawn serve as co-directors, but they have up to 25 staff members at any given time involved various aspects of Conflict Kitchen's production, including food preparation for the take-out restaurant itself, graphic design, photography, transcription, translation and interpretation, and education and outreach. Though the project is highly interdisciplinary and

⁹² Dawn Weleski, interview by the author, March 13, 2017.

⁹³ Weleski, interview.

⁹⁴ Lynne Rossetto Kasper, "Conflict Kitchen serves cuisine, conversation from U.S. foes," podcast audio, *The Splendid Table* (April 12, 2013), accessed March 19, 2017, <https://www.splendidtable.org/story/conflict-kitchen-serves-cuisine-conversation-from-us-foes>.

Dawn takes care of administrative, organizing, and kitchen-based tasks, she sees her role primarily as an artist trying to spark intercultural curiosity through an artistic framework.⁹⁵ As co-directors, Jon and Dawn select the cultures to be highlighted by the project, sometimes in consultation with culinary director Robert Sayre, sometimes at the request of local resident who would like to have her or his community represented. It generally takes around two years to create each iteration of the restaurant, most of which is spent researching and building relationships with members of the cultural community.

Conflict Kitchen roots each version of the project deeply in the experiences of people from the featured community. The co-directors collaborate with people still living in the highlighted country and those who have immigrated to Pittsburgh. They conduct extensive interviews with both groups (travelling to the actual country if possible), and attempt to gather a diverse set of narratives from across the culture's internal borders of class, race, gender, urban/rural divide, and other facets of identity. When there are language barriers, the Conflict Kitchen team works with interpreters, but they often find themselves interacting with community members who already have a grasp of the English language. While this theoretically makes the research process easier, Dawn explains that it is problematic for two reasons: "If we're working with people speaking English as a second, third, fourth, fifth language, then there's a little bit of a mistranslation, but even more problematic than that . . . We're working with people who have a level of privilege that you're not going to find throughout the entire country. So it always makes me wonder, are we really getting a good diversity of opinions?"⁹⁶

As the vision for a new iteration takes shape, the culinary director works with community members to formulate a menu, aiming to challenge the average Pittsburgher's palate but not their wallet. Brett Yasko, the graphic designer, works to incorporate a set of visual cues the community has described as meaningful to their culture into the façade of the building through a series of posters placed in the windows. A paper takeout wrapper created to accompany the food is printed with thoughtful quotes from interviews with people both in the featured country and in the diaspora. Each version of the restaurant is titled with an appropriate translation of "Conflict Kitchen" as interpreted by community members. During the course of the iteration, traditional public programs such as film screenings and guest speakers are offered alongside a series of

⁹⁵ Weleski, interview.

⁹⁶ Weleski, interview.

more creative activities, such as a Conflict Kitchen favorite called “The Foreigner,” during which customers are invited to engage with someone from the highlighted cultural community still living in the country of origin as a way of deconstructing notions of “foreignness” and addressing bias and feelings of fear. The customer is able to speak directly to the person through a telephone line, while the person’s responses are channeled through a headphones-wearing human avatar sitting across the table. Dawn comments, “It’s that one-person conversation that allows people to perhaps ask questions and to make statements that they would be a bit more fearful to typically admit . . . We had one woman who was speaking with Sohrab [in Tehran] and she said, ‘You know, I’m afraid of you.’ And I think if Sohrab had been right in front of her, she would not have been able to say that.”⁹⁷

Each menu is generally comprised of about four large plates/entrees, a few side dishes, one or two sweets, and one or two beverages. Vegetarian items are always included. Some dishes are heartier; others would be considered street food in their countries of origin. The restaurant earns enough revenue to fund 95 percent of Conflict Kitchen’s budget.⁹⁸

In seven years of daily operations, Conflict Kitchen has served millions of meals to people of incredibly diverse backgrounds from across the United States and other countries. The staff conducts extensive outreach throughout Pittsburgh to encourage multiple communities to engage with their neighbors through Conflict Kitchen, as well as tries to bridge some of the glaring cultural gaps in the city through food and dialogue. Two years ago, for example, a local Muslim taxi driver was shot, and Conflict Kitchen went to the Islamic Center and asked if they could collaborate on a potluck meal that featured cuisine from the various cultural groups that attend the mosque. Over 250 people arrived to eat food from seven different countries and listen to stories about what it means to be Muslim in Pittsburgh.⁹⁹ The project has also expanded to fulfill the many requests for educational programming in local schools, though Dawn acknowledges the limitations of one-off workshops in creating lasting community change.

Conflict Kitchen has become a powerful symbol of diversity and social change in Pittsburgh – so powerful that those operating under bias and fear are threatened by the project. During the restaurant’s 2014 Palestinian iteration, a death threat was sent to Conflict Kitchen’s

⁹⁷ Weleski, interview.

⁹⁸ Weleski, interview.

⁹⁹ Weleski, interview.

directors and repeated to both Carnegie Mellon University and the local police. Though no one was harmed, the restaurant had to close for several days while law enforcement officers looked into the incident. Some protestors used the opportunity to speak out against Conflict Kitchen's work; a staff member from the Jewish Federation of Greater Pittsburgh called to complain that the United States is not "in conflict" with the Palestinian territories, and the president of the Heinz Endowments (which provides financial support to Conflict Kitchen) argued that the food wrapper quotations showcased anti-Israel attitudes.¹⁰⁰ Not only was that not the case, Dawn recalls, but also the Heinz executive had not actually read the quotes in question. Some called for Conflict Kitchen to present an Israeli perspective alongside the Palestinian one, but she argues, "We feature one country at a time, and we present the perspective that is typically not given a microphone piece in the United States. And obviously in that situation, that is the Palestinian perspective. But we had a great deal of support from Jews and even Zionists around the world emailing us and saying, no, we really feel that it's important that you're presenting a Palestinian perspective and we support what you do." This prevailing viewpoint was even more evident as hundreds of Pittsburgh residents came to stand in front of the closed restaurant in solidarity, posting notes of support on the windows. When Conflict Kitchen reopened, the staff celebrated alongside supporters with a Palestinian solidarity potluck and a hummus cook-off.¹⁰¹

Conflict Kitchen currently features cuisine from the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) Confederacy, the six indigenous nations located geographically closest to Pittsburgh. Alongside dishes made with ingredients from the Iroquois White Corn Project in upstate New York, this iteration serves up dialogue on the indigenous struggle for sovereignty and a chance for other Pittsburghers to listen deeply to stories of living inside this centuries-old political, cultural, and environmental conflict. A Syrian iteration is also in the works, and the Conflict Kitchen team is currently working on a side project to pair local Syrian immigrants and refugees with Pittsburgh chefs to add a Syrian-inspired dish to their menus. Each restaurant's dish will be served with the story of that immigrant's journey to Pittsburgh and their experience settling in the city.

¹⁰⁰ Jessica Contrera, "Pittsburgh's tiny Conflict Kitchen wades into the sprawling Israeli-Palestinian debate," *Washington Post*, November 14, 2014, accessed March 8, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/how-a-tiny-restaurant-in-pittsburgh-waded-in-to-the-israeli-palestinian-conflict/2014/11/14/7b905072-6b4e-11e4-b053-65cea7903f2e_story.html?utm_term=.1210559ed626.

¹⁰¹ Weleski, interview.

Conflict Kitchen provides, in Dawn's words, not just an artistic platform for underrepresented communities to share their cultures and experiences with others, but also "an opportunity for people to locate their own personal narratives and the stories of how they're human on a daily basis. And things they don't necessarily think are important about their own lives, say, here in Pittsburgh - they locate some of those moments in their lives and maybe realize that there's a greater significance to them . . . because they're confronted with someone else talking about that in such a direct manner and through the food."¹⁰²

Savoring Androscoggin County

The students were enthusiastic but slightly confused when Dr. Myron Beasley described the concept of turning their fieldwork data into a performative meal to be held in an old mill building. They listened with interest, then asked, "But who's going to do the performance?" Myron laughed, and replied, "You are!"

Myron Beasley teaches in the cultural studies, African American studies, and women and gender studies departments at Bates College, a small liberal arts school in Lewiston, Maine. An ethnographer who studies art and culture, Myron had recently arrived at Bates when he first offered the interdisciplinary Food, Performance, and Community course during the college's Short Term, a five-week session when students select one course on which to focus intensely. He was inspired by his previous research on food and performance, including a workshop with Richard Gough at the Centre for Performance Research in Wales during which they spent several weeks creating performative art with food, and by the "What America Eats" project, a 1930s WPA initiative that sent writers across the United States to chronicle the foodways of the nation's people. Myron decided to combine the two concepts, providing an opportunity for students to engage with the city in a meaningful way, and for them to explore the multidimensional politics of food using a creative process. He invited Gough to Lewiston to help craft the performative meal.

Taking a "What America Eats" approach to the course not only allowed Myron to get to know his new city, but also introduced many of the students to their surroundings for the first

¹⁰² Weleski, interview.

time. A traditional town-and-gown dynamic exists between Bates and the rest of Lewiston, a mostly white, working-class, former textile mill town in the heart of Androscoggin County, which has a higher-than-average poverty rate compared to the state as a whole.¹⁰³ Lewiston has seen an influx of resettled Somali refugees over the past decade, and long-term residents continue to debate the place of these newcomers (have they contributed to an increase in crime? Are they reviving the local economy?).¹⁰⁴ Bates has encouraged its students to reach out to the refugee community through volunteer opportunities at the college's Harward Center for Community Partnerships, but Myron is skeptical about the idea, puzzling, "As a person of color, and my own social positioning and critical theory as a critical ethnographer, I'm like, what do you mean? . . . I'm very leery about 'community engagement' generally but I'm very interested in my students engaging with people and community in ways that would sort of humanize each other and for my students to contemplate these power dynamics."¹⁰⁵

In 2008, the year the class created "Savoring Androscoggin County," there were about 25 students in the course. During the first two weeks, the students dove into theory (cultural studies, food theory, performance theory) and had a crash course in ethnographic skills (interview techniques, ethical issues). The students were then assigned to groups that dispersed around Androscoggin County to conduct ethnographic research with farmers, chefs, social workers, people involved in the justice system, and the local museum. For a week and a half, students collected stories from their community partners. One group decided to go to a big park downtown at a certain time each day with a video camera to walk around and simply ask people, "What did you eat for breakfast?" The students brought the narratives from their fieldwork back to the classroom to turn their data into something they could share with the local community.

The students presented their fieldwork and shared some initial thoughts on how the collected narratives could be exhibited through the performative meal. Myron and Richard Gough then sat up all night devising an outline for the performance, meshing the various stories together and fleshing out the students' ideas to create a cohesive and purposeful experience.

¹⁰³ Myron Beasley, interview by the author, January 23, 2017.

¹⁰⁴ Bates College, "Resources for students & faculty about Somali communities in Maine," accessed April 3, 2017, <http://www.bates.edu/harward/files/2016/10/Somalis-in-Maine-A-Bibliography.pdf>.

¹⁰⁵ Beasley, interview.

The event itself was unique and memorable. Upon arrival, guests were led into a room decorated with Moxie¹⁰⁶ memorabilia and were offered glasses of Moxie during this ersatz cocktail hour. The audience was then led upstairs into a cavernous room filled with old wooden shoe forms left over from the original factories, a handful of students posed throughout as echoes of the workers who had once occupied the space. Appetizers were set out along the back wall, and the audience moved silently through the space. (Myron remembers, “It was just hushed. Not that we asked them to be hushed, but it just evoked that.”) Guests next entered a big room where they were divided into groups, each of which followed a student guide on a path through the rest of the exhibition areas. One room was filled with old spools of cotton, and the audience sat in front of students dancing slowly through the cotton, extending small balls of locally made goat cheese toward the guests and then holding them out of reach. The scene was a statement about experiencing hunger in a place where food is visible but not affordable: “We may see it; a lot of people see it but they may not have access to it. And it’s so funny because the [Bates] chaplain said it felt so harsh when they wouldn’t let him take . . . He got it in a way that I never anticipated,” Myron recalled. Another space featured students at a table having a formal dinner together, reminiscing about the course as if they had graduated and were reflecting upon what they had learned. There was space designed to look like a soup kitchen, based on the narrative of one of the community partners who had told the students about how, during a period of homelessness, he walked into a soup kitchen on a very cold day and was given a small bowl of hot soup, which was one of the best meals he ever had. Guests were offered small cups of soup in memory of this individual’s story. Another space had walls made of old weaving cards, and guests could peek through the holes in the cards to observe scenes of students engaged in various food-related actions, such as baking, making wine, and farming. At one point, guests were seated across from each other at a long, narrow table, a single Red Snapper hot dog (a beloved regional food) placed in between each pair of diners. They were instructed to share the hot dog and a food memory with their partner. The tour culminated in guests being led to what seemed like an endless roll of paper hung across the room. This was torn using toothpicks to reveal two long, formally set tables facing each other, where the audience was seated for the finale. As the

¹⁰⁶ One of the first bottled soft drinks produced in the United States, Moxie is a slightly bitter carbonated beverage created by a Maine native. It enjoys popularity throughout the state and is Maine’s official state soft drink.

students performed movement-based vignettes in the open space between the tables, locally significant foods, such as *tortieres* (Franco-American pies), Somali samosas, and Moxie-flavored cheesecake were served.¹⁰⁷

Most of the students had not previously participated in performance art, and they were nervous. Myron recalls talking with the students who were in charge of serving the food during the show: “We just walked through it once. I said, ‘Performance is not theater, it’s – we can’t sort of rehearse, I can guide you and I’ll tell you, this is what I’m expecting you to do.’ And then they went back and they were so creative – they’d go back and get the food and huddle up and say, ‘This time we’ll go out like this!’ . . . I said, ‘I want you to think about an homage to the people who worked in this space, think about some of the people you worked with, and just flow.’ It was beautiful.”

The audience for “Savoring Androscoggin County” was limited to one hundred people. After the class invited the community partners with whom they had worked during the previous weeks, only about 30 spaces remained. Although the event had been widely publicized around town and people on and off campus expressed a great deal of interest, those spaces were simply filled by the first 30 people to call in and add their names to the guest list. The food itself was prepared by the dining services at Bates. Myron was impressed with the chefs themselves and with the campus policies (a sustainability program, a Maine First protocol for sourcing ingredients), and he felt confident they would successfully help bring the meal to life.

About a week after the meal, the students held a debrief session for the community partners to share their thoughts about the performance over snacks and coffee. Myron recalls, “They were totally blown away because they’d not seen anything like it. It was sort of heartfelt, and even today, they’re like, ‘When are you going to do that again?’ Because it marked this really interesting space that brought together a lot of people. And it was with Bates students for sure, but it wasn’t Bates doing this thing. And it created this space for conversation.” He notes that the community response was extremely positive throughout the process, from the organic farm where one student group stayed and worked alongside the farmers during the fieldwork portion of the course, to random people in the park who were recorded talking about what they

¹⁰⁷ Myron Beasley, “Savoring Androscoggin County: Food, Performance, and Community,” *Museums and Social Issues* 7, no. 1 (2012). A video showing pieces of “Savoring Androscoggin County” is available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5mVXEyUmY_s.

had for breakfast. Myron believes that the larger community was quite receptive once they saw the sincere interest and curiosity of the students.

One of the biggest challenges for Myron, and the regular obstacle for repeated iterations of this project, is funding. While he received a significant amount of grant money for “Savoring Androscoggin County,” the event had quite a list of expenses: bringing Richard Gough to Maine, providing the food for the meal, obtaining technical equipment (such as lighting) for the performance, and having a filmmaker document the event.¹⁰⁸

Still, the creation and performance of “Savoring Androscoggin County” was a thought-provoking experience for both the students and their guests. Myron continues to believe in the potential of this course to push students and community members to think and converse about local issues of place, immigration, poverty, and the environment. There is a certain power, he says, “when the food is both the subject and the object of the happening, and the food represents this highly political and cultural thing. . . . It’s challenging to communicate to the students what this is supposed to be because it’s never the same thing. That’s the nature of performance.”

Five Projects, Five Lessons

While each of these exceptional projects offers inspiring suggestions for technique and practice, five common themes arose:

- **One: A project intended to sustain a community must be rooted in the community.** Each project leader emphasized the importance of working with local community leaders every step along the way, from deciding whether to enter the community in the first place to the project design to the post-project debrief. Amy, Lee, Jennine, Dawn, and Myron all approach their work with an attitude of humility; while each brings a strong grounding in a given methodology and a deep dedication to a practice, none professes to be an expert on the identities or struggles of a community not their own. Participants are respected as authorities on their own experiences, and community cultures drive the direction and aesthetics of the projects. These projects are transformative because communities are reflected back to themselves and hear their own voices amplified and

¹⁰⁸ Beasley, interview.

validated. Communities should speak for themselves through the project – artists and project leaders serve as facilitators to make this happen.

- **Two: The work takes time.** Each facilitator stressed that these projects were not created overnight. Extensive research and outreach must be conducted by the project leaders before direct work with participants even begins. Relationship building, both with local community leaders and with participants, is key to eliciting personal stories and community narratives in an honest, meaningful way. As Lee Keylock mentioned, empathy requires strength, vulnerability, and courage – all of which must be developed and practiced over time. For this type of work to be effective, there needs to be the careful creation of space in which genuine empathy can be forged through a slow, honest, and challenging process. Facilitators themselves must be willing to reach across boundaries of age, race, class, gender, politics, and other aspects of identity before they can expect participants and audiences to do the same, and they must constantly reexamine their own biases and expectations that might affect their work with a community. As the project comes to an end, it is imperative that a debrief takes place for participants and audiences, as well as the creation of a plan for further dialogue and action within the community.
- **Three: Carefully consider your resources.** All five project facilitators mentioned funding and/or time as the greatest obstacles to their work. In addition to money and time, important resources also include space, supplies, food, and community participation. Amy helpfully explained Roadside Theater’s approach of turning a project proposal into a contract that clearly outlines the roles and responsibilities of both Roadside and local community leaders. Jennine and Myron both offered guidance on how to adapt a project to a particular space and a reminder to consider what might be able to be borrowed, shared by community members, or donated in-kind, while being prepared for limitations on what might be logistically possible. Several conversations brought out important suggestions such as when working with low-income communities, budget up front for assistance with things like transportation, meals, and child care that might make a project a possibility for anyone who would like to participate.
- **Four: The work requires the leadership of a visionary director.** Third Rail Projects refers to the lead director of each performance piece as the “vision keeper.” This is apt

terminology for an artistic project with a social purpose. Without strong leadership, I heard from several interviewees, a project might never get off the ground. The director of the project must be flexible and adaptable, yet also be culturally competent, committed to the project, and able to coordinate logistics of people and events. S/he must be willing to wear many hats, including artistic director, facilitator of dialogue, and community organizer.

- **Five: It's about the process, not just the product.** The purpose of the project is to create context for meaningful dialogue and exchange. One project is not a panacea; intercultural and intergenerational barriers will never be broken in one go. It is unlikely, as Dawn Weleski stated, that a one-time program or workshop will lead to lasting change. To create lasting change in a community takes relentless, constant work. Sometimes it is enough to start a small spark of change in attitudes and actions; it is important to recognize that the work might be a seed for change that will grow later on, that the project's facilitator may never see. As artist and activist Ruth Little states, "Communities need to see successful models of arts practice, with positive outcomes for participants, but those outcomes don't only lie in performance, in the moment of release. They're in the nature of the connections established throughout the process and beyond – the sometimes hard narrative of participation."¹⁰⁹ As with any other project or program, Story Soup is designed to be a chapter in the story of a community: much has happened before, and much is yet to come – but perhaps this brief interlude will in some way affect the future narrative for the better.

A Reflection on the Process

Just as a Story Soup workshop and performative meal are meant to leave participants with more questions than answers, so too did the process of developing Story Soup leave me

¹⁰⁹ Ruth Little, "Stewardship, Connections, and Ecology: Contexts for the Development of Talent," presentation at Arts Council England and Festivals Edinburgh Talent Symposium, 2011, accessed September 19, 2013, <http://www.amplified10.com/2011/08/ruth-little-stewardship-connections-and-ecology-contexts-for-the-development-of-talent/>.

with more points of further inquiry than with a sense of completion. Extensive research on food and foodways, narrative theory, and social practice art already exists and continues to emerge. I found myself reading and re-reading large quantities of material to inform my work, constantly searching for connections within the three areas. There will always be more to explore in these areas, and I am eager to pursue further research as I tailor the Story Soup template to fit various populations and community contexts.

I was fortunate to have chosen Roadside Theater, Narrative 4, Conflict Kitchen, and “Savoring Androscoggin County” as projects to examine in my research. Amy Brooks, Lee Keylock, Dawn Weleski, and Myron Beasley were all responsive to my inquiries and generous in sharing their time and expertise. Amy went above and beyond to connect me with two other folks who are currently exploring food in the context of community in case they might serve as potential collaborators in the future, and Myron took the time to scan and send several articles he recommended that I wasn’t able to access otherwise.

Though I had initially selected another project to explore as a fifth case study, my capstone advisor Sue Eleuterio told me about a thought-provoking performance called *Learning Curve* that she had seen in Chicago, and I was immediately intrigued. I decided to feature *Learning Curve* as a fifth project, and as I researched its origination, I was pointed to Jennine Willett of Third Rail Projects, one of the show’s directors. Jennine not only agreed to speak with me about the project, but also allowed me to participate in a weeklong intensive, held at Gibney Dance in Manhattan, that focused on creating site-specific and immersive performances. As the only participant who was not a professional actor or dancer, I felt inexperienced and clunky as Jennine led us through various exercises and activities, but the workshop gave me a deeper understanding of performance that will better allow me to push the creative boundaries of a performative meal. I took frantic notes at every break as Jennine taught the group about using movement and expression to elicit emotional and active responses from an audience and how to employ various techniques for creating focal points, closing and expanding distance, and using mirrors and windows to let audience members “peek into” a scene. We learned about using the full architecture of a space and thinking of the audience as a shifting landscape through which to navigate, as well as about giving the audience a balance of guidance and choice in their engagement with the performance. We practiced being responsive rather than reactive to a dynamic audience, and honoring the choices made by the audience and fellow performers to

allow the performance to become a sort of dialogue. Jennine also explained that a good director is a “facilitator of collaborative minds,” and that a director has to practice balancing directives with allowing performers’ creativity to flow outside the box. These lessons can all be applied to the practice of Story Soup, whether the performative meal is simple and minimally structured or intricately designed for an outside audience.

It was fascinating to see how the case studies served as practical applications of both folkloristic foodways theory and narrative theory. Conflict Kitchen and “Savoring Androscoggin County” both use food to symbolize identity of people and place, communicate information both within a community and to others across cultural borders, and decode patterns of migration and intercultural relationships. Roadside Theater, Narrative 4, and *Learning Curve* all employ the co-creative process of storytelling to forge empathy across cultural and generational barriers. In addition to confirming the power of food and story to create contexts for deepening human connection and building empathy, conversations with project leaders offered insights into the logistics of doing this work. The three phases of a Story Soup project – groundwork, workshop/performance, and closure – are modeled on some of the practices that leaders of the case study projects described. For example, each leader emphasized the importance of conducting pre-research in and with a target community in order to build relationships and to best tailor the project to the community in question. Other techniques, such as Roadside Theater’s story circle guidelines, helped shape the way similar activities could be structured within the Story Soup process. The role of Story Soup’s artist-facilitator was also inspired by the ways in which the leaders of these projects frame their work and interact with participant communities over the course of the experience.

On a cool mid-May evening, I excitedly opened the door of my apartment to five of my former students: Jemila, Josh, Kelly, and Salina, who were all just over a month away from graduating high school and experiencing a severe bout of senioritis, and I.B., who had just completed the final exam of her first year of college. For the pilot edition of Story Soup, I knew I wanted to run through the workshop with a handful of my former middle school students to engage in dialogue on their experiences as American teenagers from immigrant families; this would be a setting that allowed me to test the workshop template with minimal resources and a very short time period. I had reached out to several of them by text, and they all enthusiastically agreed to act as guinea pigs, especially if it meant they got to talk about and eat food. The group

who attended the workshop represented a variety of cultures of heritage (I.B. moved from Bangladesh to the United States at the beginning of elementary school, Jemila's family is Ethiopian, Josh's family is from Syria, Kelly's family is Chinese, and Salina's family is Eritrean), and all were students with whom I had always had a good rapport. I was eager to hear their stories and to get their feedback about the workshop template.

As the younger set caught up with I.B., asking about college and reporting on mutual friends still in high school, I set out pita chips and assorted dips on the coffee table and asked everyone to take a seat in the circle of couch and mismatched chairs. We began with the simple roll-of-the-dice activity to get everyone focused on food, then created a list of expectations for each other within the space of the workshop. Salina took notes on a flip chart while the others chimed in with suggestions of respect and non-judgment, confidentiality, no interrupting, and making an effort to participate. This activity was completed quickly and efficiently; these students have completed such an exercise before, both with me and in other settings. (The workshop template outlines a more extensive process for building initial trust and setting expectations that support a safe yet challenging workshop space.)

I then went over the template section on what makes a good story and how to tell a story effectively. The students listened politely and took turns reading bullet points aloud and answering questions to confirm they understood what a story is and is not.

We then moved on to the story harvest. In one-minute intervals, the students scribbled rapid lists attempting to cover everyone with whom they had ever shared a meal, all the foods they love, everything that was currently in the family refrigerator, every place they have ever eaten, every food they have ever had for breakfast, every food they don't like, and every food that reminds them of their family. They kept these lists nearby as we moved through discussion, occasionally pausing to scan for a reminder of a story.

As we began to engage in prompted dialogue, I offered the students the option of talking in small groups or keeping the circle whole; they opted to remain as a whole group in order to hear everyone's stories. They also asked if I would participate in the activities with stories as well. After a moment's pause, I agreed. (While I generally share my own stories sparingly while teaching or facilitating so as to balance vulnerability with keeping the focus on participants, it seemed appropriate to share in this context of a small group whom I already know well and who were engaging in dialogue out of interest and enjoyment rather than in response to

a community problem.) We went through four prompts: “Share a story about your favorite holiday food,” “Share a story about a food you wished to eat but for whatever reason were not able or allowed to have,” “Share a story about the weirdest thing you’ve ever eaten,” and “Share a story about a food that connects you to a geographic place.” Each student chimed in with memories in turn (I permitted each student to speak at least once before I shared for each prompt), and they nodded appreciatively at each other as Kelly spoke dreamily of the melon-flavored soft serve ice cream at McDonald’s in China and I.B. recalled her recent squeamishness at eating lobster for the first time.

I then introduced some of the “Food for Thought” questions, and the dialogue suddenly took off. “What does it mean for food to be authentic?” I posed first. Josh declared that food is only authentic if it is made in its place of origin, and that food taken out of its original context is never truly authentic, while the others jumped in to debate a less stringent definition of authenticity. “What makes food good?” was the next question. Salina and I.B. explained that people generally think food is good if it’s something familiar, that they’re used to eating. Josh and Jemila both argued that “good” meant the quality of the food: how it is cooked and seasoned, whether it was skillfully prepared. As the others went back and forth, Kelly finally pointed out that everything is “good” to someone, and that taste is subjective.

At this point, I served dinner (pasta with homemade marinara sauce, greens sautéed with olive oil and garlic, and a fresh salad), and asked the students to reflect on the workshop this far. “You guys seemed eager to say more and talked more naturally in response to the open-ended questions,” I pointed out, adding, “Did the prompts in the first section seem hard to answer?” They were quiet for a moment, thinking and chewing. Then Josh spoke up: “I like the topics of the prompts, but I don’t like the story part. I feel like I’m not doing it right.” I asked him to elaborate, and he replied, “I have answers to the prompts, but I don’t like the expectation that it has to have a narrative arc. Sometimes it’s just a memory, or what you described up there as an anecdote. I don’t know how to make it into a real story.” The others agreed, and Salina added, “It feels like a lot of pressure to make the story good, and with the open questions, we could just talk to each other.” I immediately understood the mistake I had made in the initial template: it wasn’t necessary for the workshop’s conversations to include formally composed stories. This brought me back to my discussion with Narrative 4’s Lee Keylock, who had explained that not everyone took naturally to the development of a lyrical, cohesive story, and that even simple

anecdotes told haltingly in a handful of sentences could be powerful tools in building empathy and deepening connection. While stories that had been well thought-out would make the performative meal a richer experience, the workshop was simply meant to spark dialogue about similarities and differences in experience, to help participants identify patterns and themes in their narratives. I made a note to move the discussion of story and the process of composing more structured narratives to the end of the workshop as part of the preparation for the performative meal, then told my students, “For the next section, rather than ‘Share a story,’ we’ll start the prompts with ‘Tell us about.’”

As we picked up with a story circle, we talked about a time we used food to show someone we cared or a time someone else used food to show us that they cared, the food that best defined the age of ten for each of us, a time we tried a new food or cuisine, and stereotypes about the food cultures of different groups. Rather than hold the students to the circle format, I let them respond to each other and allowed the conversation to flow. The last prompt in particular sparked a lively discussion. Josh brought up the gender stereotypes that often surround food, such as men being allowed to eat as much as they would like while women are expected to eat small amounts of dainty foods like salad. I.B. talked about the assumption that white people eat bland food because they can’t handle spice. Jemila and Salina embarked on an extensive explanation of the stereotype that “Ethiopians smell like onions,” adding that most of the girls in their cultural community will lean in and ask another to sniff them as they head out, concerned the scents of onion and strong spices might cling to their clothes and hair. This topic led into a discussion of whether they felt comfortable not only sharing the food of their cultures of heritage with friends of other backgrounds, but also whether they felt comfortable in their own skins. I.B. recalled a time many years ago that a white friend was visiting while her mother made Bengali food for the family’s dinner; I.B. was nervous that her friend would make judgmental comments about the smell and was surprised when the friend was simply curious and respectful. Jemila closed out the discussion by explaining that when she was younger, she was embarrassed by her culture’s food, but that she was now proud of her cuisine and to be Ethiopian. She thoughtfully added that it seemed like a larger social change had taken place in the city as she had grown up, that it was more acceptable to be different and to be open about one’s culture of heritage in general.

As I set out ice cream, sorbet, and a pile of bowls and spoons, we talked about the concept of the performative meal and how to structure the meal we would be holding a few days later. The group asked me to describe some of the possibilities that would be feasible for a workshop held over an extended time period. While listening thoughtfully, the students offered insightful comments about different aspects of a performative meal: Kelly stated that she thought sitting at a table would be the best format because it would allow people to establish a rapport with the people around them, and people would feel comfortable more quickly than if they were asked to change seats or move around. Josh commented that the food should always be served to the audience, rather than on a buffet or asking people to help themselves from a shared dish: “I’m much more likely to try something new if someone directly hands it to me than if I have to take it myself,” he declared. The students agreed that we would keep our meal casual in the context of “hanging out” – each student would bring a dish that best represented who they are in the context of their culture of heritage and we would take turns to tell informal stories about the dish, with time to ask questions in between speakers. If the weather was nice, we would hold the meal picnic-style at a park in the students’ neighborhood.

As the students headed out, Josh gave me a hug and said, “Thank you. That was a fun way to spend a Friday night.” I checked his expression, and asked, “Serious or sarcastic?” “Serious,” he replied. “I liked talking about food.”

Three evenings later, we gathered around a picnic table under a cloudless sky. I passed around paper plates and pulled forks out of my tote bag while Kelly, Josh, and I.B. removed containers from plastic bags. (Salina and Jemila were unable to join us at the last minute.) As the sun made its way toward the horizon, Josh passed around his father’s homemade hummus (a family favorite), bread from the Arabic bakery near his house, and a Syrian flatbread topped with ground beef and zaatar while sharing memories of eating meals with a beloved uncle, who passed away a few years ago. Kelly heaped lo mein onto our plates, explaining that she had asked her mother, who cooks at a Chinese restaurant, to make something “authentic” for our meal; her mother had handed her the noodles along with a comment that non-Chinese people would want either fried rice or lo mein. Kelly sighed, but used the opportunity to talk about the differences between Chinese food and American Chinese food that has been adjusted to local ingredients and local palates. I.B. spooned out portions of thin egg noodles cooked with egg and Bengali spices, explaining that this was a dish often served as a precursor to the main meal and

intended to stave off initial hunger, much like bread on the table in an American restaurant. She laughed as she explained that the noodles also served as a personal reminder of her own (infamous) impatience, and that she groaned every time it appeared because it meant her favorite dishes were delayed. I shared a sweet cinnamon-dusted noodle kugel to round out the meal, talking about how the dish, which I had once hated, reconnected me to my own cultural cuisine. While the stories offered insights into each of our lives, the most interesting part of the meal was the dialogue that spontaneously arose as these teenagers, who had known each other most of their lives, finally felt comfortable asking questions they never would have before, from “What do people in your culture eat for breakfast?” to “Why aren’t you allowed to eat pork?” Talking “through” food had given them a framework in which they could not only feel comfortable enough to inquire honestly and fumblingly about difference, but also sparked their curiosity as they learned to see there were stories embedded in one of the most quotidian items (food) and actions (eating) they encounter every day. As the conversation naturally rose and fell around language and religion, family and the cost of certain ingredients, notions of home and what it means to be an American teenager, the food allowed us to cross borders and share in each others’ life experiences, one bite at a time.

Conclusion

“Culture” might best be defined as “unique answers to a fundamental question: what does it mean to be human and alive?”¹¹⁰ This thing we call culture is at once mundane and esoteric, intimately familiar and unapologetically omnipresent. Culture defines us as we, in turn, redefine it; it is a dynamic and dialectical process that calls us into continuous discourse across the boundaries of time and place, of self and other. Ethnographer and anthropologist Barbara Myerhoff suggests that we consider culture not as a relay race with elders passing the baton to youth, but as an ongoing dialogue to forge a way of life that is both recognizable by one

¹¹⁰ Wade Davis, *The Wayfinders: Why Ancient Wisdom Matters in the Modern World* (Toronto: House of Anasazi Press, 2009), 19.

generation and relevant to the next.¹¹¹ The act of engaging mindfully in this dialogue is cultural sustainability.

Although I have spent the last several years engaged in the study of cultural sustainability, I still find a simple definition – like that of “culture” – to be elusive. It is not the taking of snapshots in an attempt to preserve what might otherwise fade away, nor is it a cry for return to a romanticized past. Cultural sustainability is a practice, as in an artistic practice – a way to go about work and life. It is the practice of cultivating collective memory instead of collective forgetting, the muscle memory of kneading bread and stirring soup, the refusal to bow to ethos of disposability. It is critical resistance to dominant narratives, a commitment to retelling stories that are both relevant and recognizable. Cultural sustainability is also a practice in that sense of the word we first learn as children: to repeat an action over and over again with the hope of improving it each time. We practice these actions because they provide us with meaning and purpose, because we believe through doing so, we can improve the world in which we live as a tribute to those who came before us and as an inheritance for those who will come after. As a practice, cultural sustainability is messy and beautiful. It is the work of those who feel charged with the solemn and joyous task of keeping the vast cultural landscape alive.

Why does cultural sustainability matter? Anthropologist Wade Davis replies, “If someone needs to ask that question, can he or she possibly be expected to understand the answer?”¹¹² There is an intrinsic value to a world rich in diverse cultures. Davis writes,

Does it matter to the people of Quebec if the Tuareg of the Sahara lose their culture? Probably not. No more than the loss of Quebec would matter to the Tuareg. But I would argue that the loss of either way of life does matter to humanity as a whole. On the one hand it is a basic issue of human rights. Who is to say that the Canadian perspective on reality matters more than that of the Tuareg? And at a more fundamental level we have to ask ourselves: What kind of world do we want to live in? Most Canadians will never encounter a camel caravan of blue-robed Tuareg moving slowly across an ocean of white sand. For that matter most of us will never see a painting by Monet, or hear a Mozart symphony. But does this mean that the world would not be a lesser place without these artists and cultures and their unique interpretations of reality?¹¹³

Cultural sustainability work demands that we not only call attention to these unique interpretations of reality, but that we also make an effort to create intentional spaces in which to

¹¹¹ Myerhoff, *Stories as Equipment for Living*, 72.

¹¹² Davis, *The Wayfinders*, 165.

¹¹³ Davis, *The Wayfinders*, 165.

carry on the dialogue between relevance and recognition within cultures and in which to explore the ways singular narratives open into the kaleidoscopic patterns that make up the ever-shifting topography of the cultural landscape.

Story Soup establishes a facilitated space for such dialogue across cultural and generational borders, a space in which to practice cultural sustainability. It goes beyond cultural documentation and archiving to make way for the participatory, dynamic, co-creative act of fostering culture. The sharing of food and story is at once an aesthetic and a therapeutic process, and it offers scholars, artists, activists, and communities a starting point as we navigate our way through difficult conversations about how to move forward in a complex world. Intentional explorations of foodways not only contribute to the sustainability of food-related traditions themselves, but also provide a platform for sharing the stories of critical cultural elements like languages, art forms, environmental practices, and local knowledge, that are inextricably linked to foodways. If we begin to discuss issues of cultural sustainability through the lens of food, it is likely that other essential dialogue will naturally follow.

Story Soup is designed to amplify and illuminate the stories that are hidden or hushed, softly whispered or almost forgotten. It demands that all storytellers be given authority over their own narratives, that all stories be considered in relation to each other as valid parts of a larger whole. Within the Story Soup experience, there lies great potential for forging genuine empathy, for creating the kind of connections that inspire us to step outside ourselves and truly hear the other. Such empathy and understanding is an essential step toward a more equitable and peaceable world. By generating contexts for transformative dialogue, Story Soup offers participants a creative way to build capacity for social action and civic engagement, to strengthen the bonds between generations, to work on healing deep rifts within and between communities, and to nourish cultural health.

Thomas Leitch, a scholar of narrative theory, explains, “stories do not necessarily promise (although they may) that conflicts will be definitively resolved or the truth manifested once and for all; they promise only that something further will happen, or that there is something else to learn.”¹¹⁴ In Story Soup, participants can taste the weight of that promise. The workshop process and performative meal experience are designed to send participants back out into the world with new eyes as they become primed to notice the stories being told around them in the

¹¹⁴ Davis, “Narrative and Social Movements,” 13.

grocery store and the school cafeteria, through the ice cream truck and the local diner, at church suppers and neighborhood cookouts, in the kitchen and around the table.

As we encounter cultural disruption on a daily basis, from the constant barrage of information bombarding us from screens to the realities of globalization, climate change, and war, we are required to desensitize ourselves, at least to some extent, in order to survive. Story Soup asks that we engage aesthetically, not anesthetically, that we remember our capacity to participate in the (re)creation of culture with our bodies, minds, and hearts. Through the use of food and narrative, Story Stoup creates meaningful contexts for the dialogue that sustains the world, that allows us to sustain each other.

Story Soup is ready to be served. Please, help yourself.

What follows are the methodology and workshop template I have developed based on research, the examination of case studies, and my own practice.

The Story Soup Methodology

Objectives and Purpose

Story Soup aims:

- To amplify voices that are often silenced and to uncover personal and cultural stories that might otherwise go unheard
- To cultivate deep listening among community members and by wider audiences
- To forge empathy and understanding within and between communities
- To provide communities with an aesthetically intriguing and culturally meaningful context for reflection and dialogue

Participants in Story Soup will leave with:

- An understanding of the way we express identity and culture through food
- Expanded storytelling skills
- A recognition of others' humanity, and a validation of their own life experience
- An increased capacity to engage thoughtfully in dialogue across cultural borders

Individual projects will each have their own pedagogical, political, cultural, and/or artistic objectives, such as teaching oral history skills to high school students, helping policy makers better understand the experiences and perspectives of their constituents, making a tradition relevant to a new generation, or enlivening an unexpected community space.

The Process

After a potential community partner expresses interest and invites a Story Soup artist-facilitator to work with the community, the project progresses through three phases: groundwork, workshop/performance, and closure.

During the groundwork phase, the artist-facilitator first consults with the community partner's leadership to discuss intended objectives, expected participants and potential audiences, the research process, suggested workshop activities, aspirations for the performative meal,

possible ethical issues¹¹⁵, an anticipated schedule and timeline, an expected budget, and designated roles and responsibilities. These agreements are written up as a contract and signed by both parties to encourage mutual accountability.

The artist-facilitator continues the groundwork phase by engaging with the intended participants (ideally six to twenty people) and their communities in order to build trust and learn more about their lives, identities, hopes, and struggles. These interactions might be casual conversations, informal events such as a coffee break or after-school snack session, or more formal scheduled interviews one-on-one or in small groups. Other research will include visiting significant local places, attending community events, exploring relevant food cultures, studying the history of the community, and investigating cultural aesthetics. The artist-facilitator will then apply the insights gleaned from this research to the task of tailoring a foodways-themed storytelling workshop to participants' realities and to the objectives set out by the community partner(s).

In the workshop/performance phase, the artist-facilitator implements the workshop with the participants. The workshop might take place over the course of a week or over many months, depending upon the objectives of the community partners, the funding and other resources available, and the urgency of the dialogue. As participants progress through the workshop, the artist-facilitator will help them identify themes and patterns to be illuminated during the performative meal. As the workshop draws to a close, time will be dedicated to planning the performative meal itself, starting with making stylistic selections from the Story Soup performative meal design menu. This phase culminates with the production and presentation of the performative meal itself.

Any Story Soup project necessitates proper closure. During this phase, the artist-facilitator debriefs the experience with participants and, in conjunction with community partner leaders, helps the group assemble a plan for continued dialogue. The artist-facilitator also assesses the influence of the project through qualitative evaluation meant to gauge aspects of participants' capacity to engage in dialogue across borders, including their understanding of self

¹¹⁵ Ethical issues will vary depending upon intended participants. Will the group include minors, undocumented people, or survivors of traumatic experience? If multiple communities are involved, does one have a history of being exploited or oppressed by another? The artist-facilitator and community partner leadership will set a protocol to support all participants' safety and well-being.

and other, willingness to listen to and empathize with conflicting viewpoints, genuine curiosity about others' experiences, and commitment to continuing such dialogue beyond the Story Soup experience.

Evaluation procedures will vary depending on the project, but should be designed in conjunction with community partners and possibly with participants themselves. Evaluative tools might include a round of story circles to share personal experiences with the project, post-performance meal interviews one-on-one or in small groups, journals kept throughout the workshop and shared with the artist-facilitator (and community-based leaders, if appropriate), and reflective letters written to the group or to one's self. If participants and community leaders wish to evaluate the experiences of the performative meal's audience, other tools such as post-performance talkbacks with participants and surveys (online or written) might be put to use.

At the very end of the project, the artist-facilitator will ask participants to consider the story of their Story Soup experience itself. The group will work together to capture this story in a concise yet creative form, such as a series of photographs, a short video, or a text. These stories will be archived by the artist-facilitator as a means of documenting the larger narrative of Story Soup as the practice grows and evolves.¹¹⁶

The Role of the Artist-Facilitator

The artist-facilitator is the visionary and logistical director of a Story Soup project, serving as an architect invited to help communities construct performative meals that are aesthetically intriguing and culturally meaningful to their members.

The artist-facilitator is responsible for orchestrating the entire Story Soup experience, from initial contact with a community partner through the evaluation process. The role requires cultural sensitivity, creativity, and a willingness to constantly redefine one's praxis. It demands constant awareness of how one's own positionality, biases, and epistemologies might impact the work. While excellent facilitation skills and strong event management skills are crucial, Story Soup is a community-based artistic practice and an astute sense of the aesthetic aspects of the performative meal is essential to creating a context for transformative dialogue. The artist-facilitator is charged with the tasks of curating stories and identifying the important stories that

¹¹⁶ I have purchased the domain storysoup.org; project stories will eventually be housed on this site (with appropriate permission from participants).

need to be told, rather than relying on the “good stories” to carry the workshop and the performative meal. This requires an ability to elicit stories that often go unspoken, a willingness to coach those who are not natural storytellers in the craft of structuring and sharing a narrative, a belief in the power of imperfect and imperfectly-told stories, and a commitment to ensuring meaningful roles for those who are not willing to tell stories during the performative meal event. The artist-facilitator must also determine how to best represent a community’s aesthetics throughout the performative meal, and if more than one culture or subgroup of a community are featured, how to incorporate multiple aesthetics in a cohesive way.

Funding

Whether a small event in someone’s home or a large public performance, a Story Soup project requires a source of funding. The artist-facilitator is responsible for creating a project budget in conjunction with the leadership of the community partner based on a shared vision. The budget should allow for the following expenses:

- Informal events during the groundwork phase
- Any supplies needed for the workshop
- Food during the workshop
- Food for the performative meal
- Preparation of food (if done by professionals or if volunteers are paid for their time)
- Any fees for space used during the project
- Any tables, chairs, tableware, utensils, décor, etc. rented or purchased
- Technological equipment for light, sound, projections, etc.
- Assistance with transportation and/or childcare for participants (if applicable)
- Fees for the artist-facilitator and any other designated project staff

Just as the methodology is adaptable to any group of participants, Story Soup projects can also be tailored to accommodate budgets of different sizes. The performative meal can be as simple or as intricate as resources allow.

A Story Soup project can be funded in a number of ways, including any combination of the following:

- By partner organizations directly, if they are able

- Through grants
- Through crowdfunding
- By donations (monetary and in-kind)
- By charging admission to the performative meal

At the inception of the project, the artist-facilitator and community partner leadership will discuss appropriate funding options and fundraising responsibilities.

Story Soup Workshop Template

Aperitif: Welcome and Introductions

Each Story Soup workshop begins with the artist-facilitator welcoming the group¹¹⁷ with a personal food story (the selection of which is at her/his discretion – it might be related to the setting of the workshop, the time of year, the intended objectives/themes of the workshop, or anything that might capture the interest of the participants) and a taste of an accompanying dish.

Participants will then be asked to introduce themselves with their names and any basic facts relevant to the mix of people (grade in school, number of years in the neighborhood, country of origin, etc.). Each participant will also share one personal food fact, based on the roll of a dice. A list of the prompts corresponding with each of the six sides of the dice should be posted in the room. Examples of prompts might be:

- One – What are two of your favorite flavors?
- Two – What is the grossest thing you've ever eaten?
- Three – If you could eat anything for dinner tonight, what would it be?
- Four – What is your favorite summer food treat?
- Five – What is one of your favorite food scents?
- Six – What food treat did you eat on your last birthday?

Setting Expectations

The artist-facilitator will ask each participant to write down an apprehension or doubt about the workshop on an index card. S/he will then collect cards and redistribute them randomly to the group. Each participant will read aloud the received card so the group is made aware of each other's concerns (and shown that many people are likely apprehensive about the same things, like speaking in front of a large group, sharing an embarrassing story, or being a picky eater).

The artist-facilitator, assisted by a volunteer participant-scribe taking notes on a flipchart, will then guide the group through setting expectations for each other to establish a respectful and

¹¹⁷ The artist-facilitator should also remind participants to turn off all technology and place it in bags or in a designated "parking lot." Participants will have a chance to check their messages during breaks, which will be held between activities at the artist-facilitator's discretion.

trusting environment. Participants will be invited to share potential ground rules, and the artist-facilitator can chime in with suggestions. Important expectations should include:

- Each person should be offered an equal opportunity to speak – share air time.
- Refrain from interrupting when someone is sharing a story.
- Speak from the “I” perspective; avoid generalizations about others.
- Each person is the authority on her/his own experience – refrain from challenging the accuracy of someone else’s story.
- Difficult content is acceptable, AND stories do not always have to be profoundly serious. Challenge yourself, AND share what you are comfortable sharing.
- The workshop is a confidential space; stories should only be shared outside the workshop with the explicit permission of the original teller.

The group may add others as desired.

Appetizer: A Brief Introduction to Storytelling

The artist-facilitator will begin by explaining what a story is in the context of this workshop¹¹⁸:

- A narrative rooted in the teller’s personal experience
- A reflection on an event, person, memory, or dream
- A window into the teller’s life

It is important to mention that the way we tell a given story often evolves over time as we expand our experience of self and world.

The artist-facilitator will also address the idea of deep listening, or suspending one’s own judgment and defenses to truly hear another’s story. It is critical that participants understand that deep listening involves paying attention to the speaker, rather than to one’s phone or to an internal rebuttal, as well as practicing an open mind and receptive posture. Deep listening does *not* call for interruptions, verbal response, or advice from the listener. (If the artist-facilitator notices participants struggling with this practice at any point, s/he might remind the group of the principles of deep listening, and might lead the group in a moment of silence and a few deep breaths to help participants refocus.)

¹¹⁸ Adapted from Roadside Theater’s story circle methodology.

Story Harvest

In order to get participants thinking about their personal food stories, the artist-facilitator will lead the group in a “story harvest,” a silent brainstorm meant to spark memory. Each participant should have pen and paper. The artist-facilitator will instruct the group that a category will be called out, and participants will have one minute to write down as many items as they can. The artist-facilitator might call out five or more categories, such as:

- All your favorite foods
- All the foods that remind you of your family
- All the places you’ve ever eaten (homes, school cafeteria, restaurants, events, on the go, traveling, etc.)
- All the foods you associate with holidays or celebrations
- All the people with whom you’ve ever shared a meal
- Everything you’ve ever eaten for breakfast [or lunch/dinner/dessert/snacks]
- Everything you usually have in your refrigerator and pantry

Participants may place these lists aside or may refer to them throughout the workshop.

Coffee Break¹¹⁹

This portion of the workshop sparks conversation between participants and helps the group become comfortable sharing personal experiences. Depending on the size of the group, this segment can be done in pairs or in small groups of three or four participants. Small “café” areas should be set up throughout the space, with a beverage and small snack, such as coffee and cookies, provided. (The artist-facilitator should choose an appropriate drink and snack based on the demographics of the group – these should be appealing items with which participants are familiar.) Participants may be divided into pairs or small groups randomly or intentionally at the discretion of the artist-facilitator. The artist-facilitator then selects a number of prompts and, allowing about two to three minutes per participant per prompt, manages the timing of the

¹¹⁹ From this point forward, the template can be condensed or stretched to fit the timeline of a given project. A shorter project might proceed through the exercises in a linear fashion, while a long-term project over many months might feature a Coffee Break and Food for Thought activity at the start of each weekly session as a means of focusing the group.

conversations by reading the first prompt aloud, letting the group know when to switch tellers, and moving on to next prompt in succession. Prompts might include:

- Share a story about a meal that took place outdoors.
- Share a story about a meal that did not take place at a table.
- Talk about a wrapped or stuffed food (such as dumplings, empanadas, ravioli, etc.) that holds meaning for you.
- Tell us about your favorite dessert.
- Tell us about a frozen treat you love.
- Tell us about your breakfast preferences (both everyday and special occasions). What is your history with these foods?
- Talk about a food you wished to eat but weren't able or allowed to have, for whatever reason.
- Talk about a food scent that evokes a strong memory for you.
- Share your thoughts on leftovers.
- Talk about bread. Do you eat it? If so, what varieties? How do you eat it?
- Tell us about a food you refused to eat as a child.
- Tell us about a non-edible foodways-related item that you value (a particular utensil, kitchen item, tablecloth, cookbook, etc.).
- Do you "eat to live" or "live to eat"? What has influenced your food philosophy?
- Talk about a comfort food you often turn to in times of distress.
- Fill in the blanks: My [mother, friend, grandmother, etc.] makes the best _____.
- Tell us about your favorite holiday food.
- Tell us about a food that connects you with [season.]
- Share a story about the first meal you remember eating away from home.
- Talk about a food that connects you to a geographic place.
- Tell us about your favorite [root, leaf, fruit, etc.] to eat.
- Tell us about an experience with a food meant to influence your state of being (energizing, calming, arousing, etc.).
- Tell us about the weirdest food you've ever eaten.

At the end of each prompt, or at the end of the exercise, the artist-facilitator might ask for a few volunteers to share one of their own responses or (with permission) an interesting response they heard from a partner.

Food for Thought

Based on the group and workshop objectives, the artist-facilitator might choose to include other activities and small/large group discussions to address various social, cultural, and political dimensions of foodways. One example is a foodways-centric version of a “Privilege Line” exercise, during which participants step away from a center line according to a series of statements, such as:

- If you ate dinner with your family most evenings when you were growing up, take two steps forward.
- If you have ever had to reach out to a food pantry to supplement your meals, take one step back.
- If the foods you eat on your cultural celebrations are readily available at appropriate times of year, take one step forward.
- If the ingredients to make the foods that are most meaningful to you are not accessible and affordable in your community, take two steps back.
- If your family introduced you to food from cultures other than your own when you were growing up, take one step forward.
- If you have access to a garden in which to grow food, take two steps forward.
- If the people you work or go to school with are familiar with your culture’s food, take one step forward.
- If someone in your family has struggled with an eating disorder, take one step back.

The artist-facilitator should generate a series of statements that is sensitive to the group’s demographics; statements that call attention to potentially difficult topics like food insecurity or eating disorders should be used carefully with the intention to highlight a common experience among participants or to offer an opening for dialogue around these issues, rather than to shame individuals. After a list of statements has been read, the artist-facilitator will ask participants to look around the room at where other members of the group are on the scale of food-related

privilege, then ask participants to share their thoughts on if/how where they are standing represents their social experience and what constitutes their ideas of “privilege” regarding food.

Another possible exercise includes asking participants to stand up and arrange themselves on a spectrum of “True for me” to “Not true for me” in response to a series of statements, such as:

- I enjoy eating.
- I enjoy cooking.
- I feel connected to a particular geographic place or natural landscape that produces food (farmland, sea, forest, etc.)
- I express gratitude through prayer or other explicit acknowledgement before eating.
- I consider myself an adventurous eater.
- I enjoy the foods of my culture or heritage.
- I enjoy the foods of the region where I live.

After a statement is read and participants have placed themselves along the spectrum, the artist-facilitator will ask a few volunteers to share why they are standing where they are, then move on to the next statement.

Other questions for discussion, in pairs, small groups, or Socratic circles might include:

- Why might people not want to eat a particular food? (Responses might include health, religious restrictions, cultural norms/taboo, personal and cultural preferences regarding flavor or texture, etc.)
- Foodways, like culture, are not static, but rather a dynamic invention and reinvention of eating practices as humans interact with each other. What are some examples of ingredient combinations, preparations, eating styles, etc., that have formed at cultural crossroads?
- What does it mean for a food or food experience to be “authentic”?
- What makes a food “good”?
- What can you change about a particular food before it is no longer considered to be the traditional dish, genre, etc.?
- How do different levels of formality affect the atmosphere and meaningfulness of a meal?

- Should small-scale food businesses (such as street vendors or cottage industry producers) be regulated? If so, what policies should be put in place?
- How does food hold both meaning and meaningfulness in culture?

These questions encourage participants to think outside their own immediate experiences to examine larger social concepts of food, helping the group to identify patterns and themes later in the workshop.

The Main Course: Story Circles/Exchanges

Depending upon the participant group, the objectives of the particular project, and the time allotted to the workshop, this segment might consist of a single story circle or exchange based on a relevant prompt, or a series of circles and exchanges addressing different prompts over several sessions. The artist-facilitator will use her or his discretion regarding whether or not time limitations will shape how long each participant may speak in the circle; the way the artist-facilitator will signal a participant to begin wrapping up a story will be stated in advance. Participants may pass if they are not yet ready to share; they will be offered an opportunity to speak as the circle comes back around to them. Participants should be reminded to consider the purpose and meaning of the story in the greater context of their lives. Potential prompts might include:

- Tell us about a food that connects you to your family.
- Share a story of a misunderstanding that took place regarding food (what it was, who was supposed to eat it, how it was supposed to be prepared, etc.).
- Tell us about a food fad (a product, a way of eating, etc.) that you either gave into or were baffled by.
- Share a belief about food that relates to health. Why should this food be eaten or not be eaten? What has been your personal experience with this food?
- Talk about a food that holds religious or spiritual meaning.
- What food best defines age ___ for you?
- Share a story about a negative experience with food.
- Share a favorite recipe step by step. What is your personal history with this food?
- Share a story about trying a new food, dish, or cuisine.

- Share a story about feeding your children.
- Share a story about a time you gave food to show someone you cared, or a time when someone gave you food to show they cared.
- Talk about a time you used food to try to make an impression on someone, or a time when someone used food to try to make an impression on you.
- Share a story about an experience with food as a rite of passage (a first cup of coffee, first time enjoying spicy food, first sip of alcohol, ordering from the regular menu rather than the children's menu, etc.).
- Tell us about a food that connects you with your culture of heritage.
- Share a favorite folktale or fairytale that incorporates food (Hansel and Gretel's bread crumbs and the witch's gingerbread house, Snow White's poison apple, Three Bears' porridge, etc.). Where did you learn this tale?
- Share a story about being taught to cook something or teaching someone else to cook something.
- Share a story about a time food got you into trouble.
- Tell us about the first food you learned how to cook or prepare.
- Talk about a time you participated in eating a food in order to fit in, or when eating a food prevented you from fitting in.
- Tell us about a time you turned to food for comfort.
- Share a memory of a conversation about food that you had with a family member, friend, or stranger.
- Share your memories of school lunch. Did you bring or buy your food? What was the experience like for you?
- Share a story about a memorable feast.
- Tell us about a time you changed the way a food was traditionally made due to lack of knowledge, lack of an ingredient, dietary restrictions, personal preferences, etc.
- Talk about a meal or food item you remember from a book or movie. Why does this stand out for you?
- Share a story about a time you tried to plan a special meal for someone, or a time someone tried to plan a special meal for you.

- How has your identity as [insert identity marker such as gender, profession, religion, class, etc.] influenced the way you experience food?
- Share a story about a time that food became part of a competition for you.
- Share a story about a [insert holiday or occasion, such as Thanksgiving] meal.
- Share a story about playing with food.
- Talk about a food that reminds you of home.
- Share a stereotype (positive or negative) of another group's foodways. Share a time when such a stereotype has been assumed of you.
- What food best represents who you are?

When the circle has been completed, the artist-facilitator will thank everyone for sharing. After an appropriate break (such as a lunch hour or overnight) to give participants time to process the experience, the group will reconvene to debrief the experience. The artist-facilitator will pose questions such as:

- What surprised you about the stories you heard?
- What assumptions you had about an individual or a group were challenged?
- What did you hear that made you uncomfortable?
- What was it like to share this story with our group?
- What was it like to share your partner's story with the group (if an exchange)?
- What was it like to hear your story told by your partner (if an exchange)?
- How have these stories changed the way you understand yourself? The way you understand others?
- What questions have these stories sparked for you?

When sharing responses to others' stories, it might be helpful to request that participants use the formula, "Your story resonated with me because _____."

The artist-facilitator should be prepared for the dialogue to elicit strong emotions from participants, particularly if the stories address a sensitive topic. If appropriate, designated community supports (such as a school counselor or a community leader) might be present to assist any participants who might experience significant distress.

The debrief conversation will be closed with a thoughtful exercise that might include activities like silent reflection time and journaling or going around the circle to share a one-word

answer to “How are you feeling after this experience?” as well as an expression of gratitude for everyone’s participation from the artist-facilitator.

Recipes for Long-Term Creative Projects

For Story Soup projects with a longer timeline, the workshop might include one or more creative projects to bring participants more deeply into the experience and elicit more profound dialogue. These projects might be accomplished by individual participants or by working collectively; each lends itself to a multimedia approach to practice other artistic, technological, educational, and/or ethnographic skills. The products of these projects can be used as story circle prompts as well as exhibited in the community in the time leading up to the performative meal, or they may be featured as part of the performative meal itself. Projects might include:

- Creating a food map of the community, city, etc.
- Creating a calendar of a participant’s year in food
- Creating a food-based autobiography
- Conducting food-themed oral history interviews
- Tracing a recipe or ingredient over time and place
- Documenting food interactions (one’s own, or a community’s) through photography and/or video
- Researching an iconic food that represents a place or culture
- Tell a story from the perspective of a food or foodways-related item.
- Creating a food altar to memorialize a person, place, time, or event
- Learning to prepare a dish that is personally or culturally meaningful, or a dish whose cultural transmission has been interrupted
- Creating an “edible memory” to share with the group
- Make a food-themed pop-up museum

Offering Gratitude

Many communities of faith and cultures around the world ask that participants in a meal pause before and/or after eating to say grace, bless the food, or otherwise offer gratitude for the

meal. Such acknowledgements might be directed to a divine being, to those who participated in the production and preparation of the food, or to those present at the meal.

Before the group begins the planning phase for the performative meal, the artist-facilitator will provide participants with an opportunity to offer gratitude for the stories shared and for the experience as a whole. This should be framed in a context that is meaningful for the participants and might follow the form of relevant traditional prayer(s) or take place in a simple circle. Each participant may speak in turn, or participants might speak as they feel moved to do so. The artist-facilitator is encouraged to provide other opportunities for expressing gratitude at key points, such as at the end of a story circle or exchange, after a particularly challenging conversation for the group, or during a debrief session at the end of the Story Soup process. These opportunities offer participants a context in which to recognize and honor each other in a genuine and thoughtful way.

In the Kitchen: Cooking Up the Performative Meal

To commence the planning of the performative meal, participants will come together in a large circle. A participant-scribe will take notes on a flipchart as the group responds to two questions posed by the artist-facilitator:

- What patterns and themes have emerged from the stories we've heard?
- Which of those themes would be meaningful to share through the performative meal?

Once the themes have been identified and selected, the artist-facilitator will introduce the performative meal design menu to participants. This menu is a skeleton for the basic format of the event. The artist-facilitator will review the options in each category with participants, deciding together on the initial structure and then discussing the details. The design menu asks the group to determine the following elements:

- *Telling style* – Will participants tell their own stories (as in a story circle), fellow participants' stories in the first person (as in a story exchange), interviewees' stories in the first person, or a mixture of these?¹²⁰

¹²⁰ Traditional tales or cultural stories may be added, but the focus should be on personal narrative as explored in the workshop.

- *Audience* – Will the performative meal be for the participants only as a special culminating experience? Will participants invite select family, friends, and community members? Will it be open to all members of a specific community (such as a school, neighborhood, or faith-based group)? Or will the event be open to the general public?
- *Food* – Will the preparation of the food be part of the performative meal itself? Will participants prepare the food together as a final activity before the performance? Will participants prepare the food individually and bring it to the performance, potluck-style? Or will the food be prepared by non-participants, such as a restaurant, caterer, or group of community volunteers?
- *Performance* – Will the performance be dinner-party style, an organically-unfolding, unscripted event? Will it be seder-style, where a particular order of ritual is agreed upon in advance, but audience participation drives the course of the event? Will it be in the style of The Moth’s storytelling events, where stories are rehearsed and the audience follows the direction of the participants?
- *Decision-making* – How much of the vision for the performative meal will be decided upon by the artist-facilitator, and how much by the participants? While the aesthetics of the event should always be driven by the community, some participant groups might have less time to focus on the event or less experience with performance-based endeavors, requiring a greater reliance on the artist-facilitator’s suggestions. Some groups might only need a minimal amount of direction. Others will fall in between, resulting in a more equally co-creative production.

As an outline for the event is laid out, the artist-facilitator will ask participants to brainstorm (individually, in pairs/small groups, or altogether) potential ways to present their stories during the performative meal, including through narrative, movement, text, ephemera, interaction, and, of course, food. The artist-facilitator may make suggestions, as well as share ideas from other performative meals to encourage participants to consider possibilities outside the box. The artist-facilitator will then work with the group to determine the finer details and organize the particulars of the event.

The artistic director must carefully consider the following elements of the performative meal:

- Should the event take place during a particular season or time of year? What time of day is most appropriate?
- Where will the event take place? Is the performance intended to highlight a particular setting, or will it be adapted for a community space, a theater, a restaurant, a school, someone's home? Should it be held indoors or outdoors? Will the performance be in a single space or move through multiple spaces?
- Where will ingredients be sourced? Are specific varieties of fresh ingredients or particular brands of processed ingredients needed? What substitutions can be made for ingredients that might not be available?
- What languages will be used in the performance? If speakers of multiple languages are present, what interpretation will be needed?
- What will be included in the soundscape of the event? Will live or recorded music and sounds be featured? What ambient or natural sounds might be incorporated? How will the audience add to the soundscape?
- What light (natural and/or artificial) will be required?
- What décor will enhance the setting?
- What tableware will be used? What utensils? If people are to eat with their hands at any point, will options for washing be provided before and after?
- How will seating be arranged? Will there be tables and chairs, or seating on the floor? What accommodations might need to be made to make the seating accessible for all? Will seating be pre-assigned? Who will sit with whom?
- How will the food be served: on a buffet, family style, individually plated, or a mix of the above?
- Who will serve the food? Who will clean up?
- How can the event uphold standards of environmental sustainability (regarding food waste, reusable v. disposable items, ingredient sourcing)?
- To what extent will the audience interact with the performers? To what extent will the audience interact with each other?
- Who, and how many, will be present at the meal? Who will speak, and who will be asked to listen?

- In what style(s) will stories be told? Are there cultural or community traditions regarding storytelling that should be taken into account?
- What foods (if any) should be modified to be accessible to eaters with certain dietary needs (vegetarian/vegan, kosher/halal requirements, gluten-free, allergies)?
- What foods and stories (if any) should be modified so as to be made more “palatable” for certain audiences?
- Which cultural norms regarding social hierarchy, gender roles, religious prayers, etc., should be adhered to? Which should be disrupted for the sake of the event and its aim to spark dialogue about particular issues?
- Should the performative meal be documented in any way, and if so, how (photographs, audio recordings, video)? What are the intentions for documentation (for example, to share with a community in another geographic location, or to keep for community record)? If the performance is to be documented, what sort of releases might be required for both participants and audience members?

While such questions should be discussed explicitly with participants, the artist-facilitator makes the final decisions regarding these topics based on what is logistically practical or artistically possible.

The artist-facilitator will manage the curation of stories that will be presented during the performative meal. Participants will work with the artist-facilitator and each other to select, revise, and polish the stories they will tell. The artist-facilitator will review the basic outline of a good story¹²¹:

- Context – When and where does the story take place? Who are the characters? Use all five senses to describe.
- Narrative arc – The story should include exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution.
- Action – What happens in the story? Include dialogue and internal thought where appropriate.
- Tension and change (conflict) – This can be major or minor, internal or external, but this is what makes a story interesting and adds depth.

¹²¹ Adapted from Story District’s Storytelling 101 teaching tool “Basic Structure of a Story Arc.”

- Meaning – What is this story really about? What does it mean in the greater context of my life? Why am I telling this story right now?
- Closure – How does the story end, or what will you leave the audience wondering? The artist-facilitator might choose to tell a personal story and ask participants to identify these elements in the story to check for understanding. S/he will also address what personal narrative storytelling is *not*¹²²:
- Lecture – Story is told from a vulnerable, personal position and is shared primarily to connect, rather than primarily to impart knowledge
- Anecdote – Story is told with a purpose to provide insight into the larger context of one’s life, rather than to convey an incident
- Stand-up comedy – Story comes from personal experience, follows a narrative arc, and might intentionally evoke sadness, anger, joy, or fear rather than (or in addition to) eliciting laughs
- Musing – Story is based on a narrative arc that the teller has already considered, rather than on spontaneous thoughts that arise in the moment

The artist-facilitator will next introduce the concept of genre as it relates to personal narrative, including the following examples:

- Comedy (meant to entertain)
- Tragedy (meant to evoke empathy)
- Mystery (meant to intrigue)
- Horror (meant to frighten)
- Romance (meant to enchant)

Participants may be asked to give examples of folktales, books, movies, etc. that represent each genre in order to check for understanding. It is essential to point out that most stories – especially personal narratives – contain elements of multiple genres, and that the same story can be told with a different emphasis to evoke an intentional response in the audience.

In addition to genre, the artist-facilitator might consider introducing Lee Anne Bell’s four story types¹²³:

¹²² Adapted from Story District’s Storytelling 101 teaching tool “The Scoop on Story: What It Is and What It Ain’t.”

¹²³ Bell, *Storytelling for Social Justice*, 25.

- Stock stories, which are “passed on through historical and literary documents, and celebrated through public rituals, law, the arts, education, and the media”
- Concealed stories, which are “shared in church basements, bars, street corners and front porches,” and provide a counter-perspective to the mainstream
- Resistance stories, which challenge the status quo,
- Emerging/transforming stories, which are “deliberately constructed to challenge the stock stories, build on and amplify concealed and resistance stories, and create new stories to interrupt the status quo and energize change”

The artist-facilitator should ask participants for examples of such stories that surfaced during the course of the workshop, and the group should consider how each category of story might be used to communicate various ideas during the performative meal.

Participants should consider the meaning and purpose of each story they plan to tell, as well as the intention of the style in which it is being told. As participants workshop their stories, the artist-facilitator should emphasize that the stories do not need to be memorized word-for-word, but should rather capture the essence of the narrative. The artist-facilitator should ensure that all participants have a voice in the performative meal, and that the “good story” is not privileged over the “important story.” Each participant should have a meaningful role in the execution of the performative meal even if not all participants actively tell stories during the event.

The Performative Meal

The Story Soup performative meal is a context that merges the critical and the creative to showcase the themes and patterns uncovered in the workshop and to provoke further dialogue on these subjects. It might be as simple as stories told around a meal at a large dinner table, or as complex as a journey through a multi-room space where movement and interactive encounters enhance the audience’s experience of the food and stories. Possibilities are limited only by the resources allotted to the particular project.

Story Soup Performative Meal Design Menu

Telling Style

Story Circle
(telling own stories)

Story Exchange
(telling partner's story)

Story Collection
(telling interviewee's story)

Audience

Participants only

Family, friends, direct invitees

Specific community

Open to the public

Food

Preparation as part of performance

Participants prepare together before performance

Participants prepare individually and bring to performance

Preparation done by professionals (restaurant, caterer, etc.)

Performance

Dinner party-style; natural, unscripted

Seder-style; order/ritual but driven by audience participation

Moth-style; stories rehearsed

Decision-Making

Artist-driven production

Co-creative

Participants as artists

In Gratitude

I truly appreciate Amy Brooks, Lee Keylock, Jennine Willett, Dawn Weleski, and Myron Beasley taking the time to talk with me about their creative cultural work.

Many thanks to I.B., Jemila, Josh, Kelly, and Salina for their participation in the Story Soup pilot project. Their enthusiasm, insights, and thoughtful feedback were extremely helpful in revising the workshop template. I am honored that you all wanted to share your stories with me.

The faculty and students of Goucher's Master of Arts in Cultural Sustainability (MACS) program have been wonderful mentors, colleagues, and friends to have alongside me during this journey. I especially thank Heather Gerhart, who let me think out loud, asked all the right questions, and stayed up too late laughing and talking; I could not ask for a better co-conspirator in all things cultural sustainability. I am indebted to Amy Skillman for her kindness, wisdom, and confidence that I could turn my tangled thinking into something concrete. I am so very grateful for my capstone committee: Tom Walker with his contemplative musings and thoughtful suggestions, Rory Turner with his expansive thinking and brilliant questions, and Sue Eleuterio, a true force of nature, all of whom offered immeasurable guidance and encouragement throughout the research and writing processes.

I offer infinite gratitude to my family: To my partner, Nalani Cates, for her love, support, and willingness to indulge my insatiable craving for food adventures. And finally, to my parents, for the amazing meals, for all the stories, and for everything: thank you.

Bibliography

- Adams, Don and Arlene Goldbard. "Cultural Democracy: A Brief Introduction." *Webster's World of Cultural Democracy*. Seattle: Institute for Cultural Democracy, 1995.
<http://www.wwed.org/cd.html>.
- Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. "The Danger of a Single Story." TED Talk, 2009.
https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story/transcript?language=en.
- Albany Park Theater Project. "Our Mission." Accessed March 7, 2017.
<http://aptchicago.org/our-mission/>.
- . "StarrHouse." Accessed March 8, 2017. <http://starrhighschool.org/starr-house/>.
- Appadurai, Arjun. "Gastro-politics in Hindu South Asia." *American Ethnologist* 8 (3) (1981): 494-511.
- Atlas, Caron, R. Lena Richardson, and Jason Bulluck. *Bridge Conversations*. Arts & Democracy Project, 2011.
- Bates College. "Resources for students & faculty about Somali communities in Maine." Accessed April 3, 2017. <http://www.bates.edu/harward/files/2016/10/Somalis-in-Maine-A-Bibliography.pdf>.
- Beasley, Myron M. "Savoring Androscoggin County: Food, Performance and Community." *Museums and Social Issues* 7 (1) (2012): 95-100.
- . Associate Professor, Bates College. Interview by the author. January 23, 2017.
- Bell, Lee Anne. *Storytelling for Social Justice: Connecting Narrative and the Arts in Antiracist Teaching*. New York: Routledge, 2010.
- Boal, Augusto. *Theatre of the Oppressed*. Translated by Charles A. and Maria-Odilia Leal McBride. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1979.
- Brooks, Amy. Program Director and Dramaturg, Roadside Theater. Interview by the author. December 22, 2016.
- Brown, Alan S. and Jennifer L. Novak-Leonard. "Getting In On the Act: How Arts Groups are Creating Opportunities for Active Participation." Los Angeles and San Francisco: The James Irvine Foundation, 2011.
- Brown, Linda Keller and Kay Mussell, ed. *Ethnic Regional Foodways in the United States: The Performance of Group Identity*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1984.

- Brulotte, Ronda L. and Michael A. Di Giovine. *Edible Identities: Food as Cultural Heritage*. New York: Routledge, 2016.
- Cleveland, William. *Art and Upheaval: Artists on the World's Frontlines*. New York: New Village Press, 2008.
- Cocke, Dudley. "Roadside Theater," in *An Ideal Theater: Founding Visions for a New American Art*, edited by Todd London, 66-74. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2013.
- Cohen-Cruz, Jan. *Local Acts: Community-Based Performance in the United States*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005.
- Cole, Thomas. Introduction to *Stories as Equipment for Living: Last Talks and Tales of Barbara Myerhoff*, by Barbara Myerhoff. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007.
- Contrera, Jessica. "Pittsburgh's tiny Conflict Kitchen wades into the sprawling Israeli-Palestinian debate." *Washington Post*, November 14, 2014. Accessed March 8, 2017. https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/how-a-tiny-restaurant-in-pittsburgh-waded-in-to-the-israeli-palestinian-conflict/2014/11/14/7b905072-6b4e-11e4-b053-65cea7903f2e_story.html?utm_term=.1210559ed626.
- Counihan, Carole and Penny Van Esterik, ed. *Food and Culture: A Reader (3rd Edition)*. New York: Routledge, 2013.
- Courage, Cara. "The Performative Meal: *LiveLunch* and the Meal as Social Practice." 2017. http://www.academia.edu/31529973/The_Performative_Meal_LiveLunch_and_the_meal_as_social_practice.
- Curtin, Deane and Lisa Heldke, ed. *Cooking, Eating, Thinking: Transformative Philosophies of Food*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992.
- Davis, Joseph E. "Narrative and Social Movements: The Power of Stories," in *Stories of Change: Narrative and Social Movements*, edited by Joseph E. Davis, 3-30. Albany: SUNY Press, 2002.
- Davis, Wade. *The Wayfinders: Why Ancient Wisdom Matters in the Modern World*. Toronto: House of Anasazi Press, 2009.
- Douglas, Mary. "Deciphering a Meal." *Daedalus* 101 (1) (1972): 61-81.
- Ferris, Marcie Cohen. "Feeding the Jewish Soul in the Delta Diaspora." *Southern Cultures* 10 (3) (2004): 52-85.
- Gabaccia, Donna. *We Are What We Eat: Ethnic Food and the Making of Americans*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000.

- Ganz, Marshall. "Why Stories Matter: The Art and Craft of Social Change." *Sojourners* (March 2009). Accessed August 14, 2013. <https://sojo.net/magazine/march-2009/why-stories-matter>.
- Gottschall, Jonathan. *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human*. Boston: Mariner Books, 2012.
- Greene, Morgan. "'Learning Curve' puts you smack in the middle of a Chicago School Day," *Chicago Tribune*, July 29, 2016. Accessed March 7, 2017. <http://www.chicagotribune.com/entertainment/theater/ct-learning-curve-preview-ae-0731-20160728-story.html>.
- Hufford, Mary. "Tending the Commons: Rampsuppers, Biodiversity, and the Integrity of the Mountains." *Folklife Center News* 20 (4) (1998): 3-11.
- . "Working in the Cracks: Public Space, Ecological Crisis, and the Folklorist." *Journal of Folklore Research* 36 (2/3) (1999): 157-167.
- Jochowitz, Eve. "Foodscapes: The Culinary Landscapes of Russian-Jewish New York," in *The Food and Folklore Reader*, ed. Lucy M. Long, pp. 306-316. New York: Bloomsbury. (Originally published in *Jewish Topographies: Visions of Space, Traditions of Place*, ed. Julia Brauch, Anna Lipphardt, and Alexandra Nocke, pp. 294-308. Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2008.)
- Jones, Martin. *Feast: Why Humans Share Food*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.
- Jones, Michael Owen. "Eating Behind Bars: On Punishment, Resistance, Policy, and Applied Folkloristics." *Journal of American Folklore* 130 (515) (2017): 72-108.
- . "Food Choice, Symbolism, and Identity: Bread and Butter Issues for Folkloristics and Nutrition Studies" (American Folklore Society Presidential Address, October 2005). *Journal of American Folklore* 120 (476) (2007): 129-77.
- Kasper, Lynne Rossetto. "Conflict Kitchen serves cuisine, conversation from U.S. foes." Podcast audio. *The Splendid Table* (April 12, 2013). Accessed March 19, 2017. <https://www.splendidtable.org/story/conflict-kitchen-serves-cuisine-conversation-from-us-foes>.
- Kent, Rosann. "Heirloom Seed Keepers and Their Stories: Growing Community and Sustainability Through Arts-Based Research." Paper presented at the Cultural Sustainability Symposium, Craftsbury, Vermont, August 15-18, 2013.
- Kerner, Susanne, Cynthia Chou, and Morten Warmind, ed. *Commensality: From Everyday Food to Feast*. London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015.
- Keylock, Lee. Director of Programs, Narrative 4. Interview by the author. January 4, 2017.

- Kingsolver, Barbara. *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*. New York: Harper Perennial, 2007.
- Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Barbara. "Performance Studies." *Culture and Creativity*. Rockefeller Foundation, 1999. Accessed September 22, 2016. www.nyu.edu/classes/bkg/issues/rock2.htm.
- . "Playing to the Senses: Food as a Performance Medium." *Performance Research* 4 (1) (1999): 1-30.
- Knight, Keith and Mat Schwarzman. *Beginner's Guide to Community-Based Arts*. Oakland and New York: New Village Press, 2015.
- Kodish, Debora. "Envisioning Folklore Activism." *Journal of American Folklore* 124 (491) (2011): 31-60.
- Ku, Robert Ji-Song, Martin F. Manalansan, and Anita Mannur, ed. *Eating Asian America: A Food Studies Reader*. New York: NYU Press, 2013.
- Langellier, Kristin M. and Eric E. Peterson. *Storytelling in Daily Life: Performing Narrative*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011.
- Lee, Jennifer 8. *The Fortune Cookie Chronicles: Adventures in the World of Chinese Food*. New York: Twelve, 2009.
- Lénárt-Cheng, Helga and Darija Walker. "Recent Trends in Using Life Stories for Social and Political Activism." *Biography* 34 (1) (2011): 141-79.
- Leonard, Robert and Ann Kilkelly. *Performing Communities: Grassroots Ensemble Theaters Deeply Rooted in Eight US Communities*. Oakland: New Village Press, 2006.
- Levitt, Aimee. "The School that Became a Theater that Became a School," *Chicago Reader*, July 28, 2016. Accessed March 7, 2017. <https://www.chicagoreader.com/chicago/albany-park-theater-project-learning-curve/Content?oid=22988132>.
- Little, Ruth. "Stewardship, Connections, and Ecology: Contexts for the Development of Talent." Presentation at Arts Council England and Festivals Edinburgh Talent Symposium, 2011. Accessed September 19, 2013. <http://www.amplified10.com/2011/08/ruth-little-stewardship-connections-and-ecology-contexts-for-the-development-of-talent/>.
- Lockwood, William G. and Yvonne R. Lockwood. "Continuity and Adaptation in Arab American Foodways." In *The Food and Folklore Reader*, ed. Lucy M. Long, pp. 72-90. New York: Bloomsbury, 2015. (Originally published in *Arab Detroit: From Margin to Mainstream*, ed. Nabeel Abraham and Andrew Shyrock, pp. 515-549. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2000.)
- Lomax, Alan. "An Appeal for Cultural Equity," in the Program of the Festival of American Folklife, edited by Thomas Vennum, Jr. Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 1985.

- Accessed September 3, 2013. http://www.culturalequity.org/ace/ce_ace_appeal.php. (Originally published in *World of Music* 14 (2) (1972).)
- Long, Lucy M., ed. *Culinary Tourism*. Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2004.
- . "Every Bite You Take: How Our Personal Food Choices Connect Us to the Contemporary Food System and Sustainability." Paper presented at the Cultural Sustainability Symposium, Craftsbury, Vermont, August 15-18, 2013.
- . "Green Bean Casserole and Midwestern Identity: A Regional Foodways Aesthetic and Ethos," in *The Food and Folklore Reader*, ed. Lucy M. Long, pp. 191-204. New York: Bloomsbury, 2015. (Originally published in *Midwestern Folklore* 33 (1) (2007), 29-44.)
- , ed. *The Food and Folklore Reader*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2015.
- Miller, Jeff and Jonathan Deutsch. *Food Studies: An Introduction to Research Methods*. Oxford and New York: Berg, 2009.
- Miller, Jen. "Frybread." *Smithsonian Magazine*, July 2008. Accessed June 8, 2017. <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/frybread-79191/>.
- Miller, Lisa. "An Experiment in Empathy," *New York Magazine*, December 26, 2016. Accessed March 9, 2017. <http://nymag.com/daily/intelligencer/2016/12/gun-violence-radical-empathy.html>.
- Myerhoff, Barbara. *Stories as Equipment for Living: Last Talks and Tales of Barbara Myerhoff*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007.
- Narrative 4. "Mission and Vision." Accessed March 9, 2017. <http://narrative4.com/mission-vision/>.
- Rahn, Millie. "Laying a Place at the Table: Creating Public Foodways Models from Scratch." *Journal of American Folklore* 119 (471) (2006): 30-46.
- Roadside Theater. "Community Residency Methodology." Accessed February 9, 2017. <https://roadside.org/asset/community-residency-methodology>.
- . "Mission." Accessed February 9, 2017. <https://roadside.org/about>.
- Rockower, Paul. "Recipes for Gastrodiplomacy." *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy* 8 (3) (2012): 235-246.
- Saldana, Johnny and Jose Casas, ed. *Ethnodrama: An Anthology of Reality Theatre*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira, 2005.
- Soble, Leslie. "In the Kitchen, Around the Table: An Exploration of Interpretive Kashrut Practice and Jewish Identity." Course paper, Goucher College, 2014.

- Story District. "Basic Structure of a Story Arc." Teaching tool, Storytelling 101, 2011.
- . "The Scoop on Story: What It Is and What It Ain't." Teaching tool, Storytelling 101, 2011.
- Swantkowski, Melissa. "Colum McCann in Conversation with Melissa Swantkowski." *Bodega*, September 13, 2013. Accessed March 9, 2017. <http://www.bodegamag.com/articles/81-interview-with-colum-mccann>.
- Taylor, Philip. *Applied Theatre: Creating Transformative Encounters in the Community*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann Drama, 2003.
- Third Rail Projects. "About the Company." Accessed March 7, 2017. <http://www.thirdrailprojects.com/about#aboutthecompany>.
- Turner, Kay. "A Message to AFS Members from President Kay Turner." Email message, March 17, 2016.
- Weleski, Dawn. Co-Director, Conflict Kitchen. Interview by the author. March 13, 2017.
- Westerman, William. "Wild Grasses and New Arks: Transformative Potential in Applied and Public Folklore." *Journal of American Folklore* 119 (471) (2006): 111-128.
- Wiegelmann, Gunter. "Innovations in Food and Meals." In *The Food and Folklore Reader*, ed. Lucy M. Long, pp. 39-47. New York: Bloomsbury, 2015. (Originally published in *Folk Life* 12 (1974), 20-30.)
- Willett, Jennine. Co-Founder and Artistic Director, Third Rail Projects. Interview by the author. March 27, 2017.
- Wilson, Bee. *First Bite: How We Learn to Eat*. New York: Basic Books, 2015.
- Yoder, Don. "Folk Cookery." In *The Food and Folklore Reader*, ed. Lucy M. Long, pp. 21-38. New York: Bloomsbury, 2015. (Originally published in *Folklore and Folklife: An Introduction*, ed. Richard M. Dorson, pp. 325-350. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1972.)
- Zeitlin, Steve. *The Poetry of Everyday Life: Storytelling and the Art of Awareness*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2016.
- Zeitlin, Steven J., Adina Back, and Sally Charnow. "The Folklorist as 'Cultural Activist': An Interview with Steve Zeitlin." *Radical History Review* 84 (1) (2002): 125-36.