Making and Breaking: An Embodied Ethnography of Eating

abstract | The first moments of dining with strangers are often uncomfortable. What happens over the course of a meal that turns strangers into friends? In this paper, I carry out an experiment inspired by autoethnographic technique and collective biography, embodied methods of research that aid in discovering the different ways four women feel friendships form over the course of four meals shared together. Through examining the ways those feelings are manifested in the language of the body, I aim to answer the question: How does commensal eating lead to the sharing of selves, facilitating friendships and relationships around the table? Using Pierre Bourdieu’s concepts of habitus and bodily hexis and Georg Simmel’s theory of the sociable meal, I explore how the sharing of spatial knowledge while cooking and eating together contributes to flow of power which eases physical comfort and in turn encourages the formation of relationships.

keywords | commensality, autoethnography, embodied research, space, ritual

"I don’t know where you’re from, but I know your middle name and how you fell in love.”
—Daniel, a dinner party guest at my home.

INTRODUCTION | Upon moving into our apartment, my roommates and I began hosting small, monthly dinners in order to bring together each other’s friends and to expand our own communities in the city. After our first meal, the group lauded the success of the dinner in forging friendships among men and women who otherwise would never have met. We continued to host regular dinners in order to bring together groups of people we felt would make good friends. The meals rarely began comfortably: guests would shift in their seats, straining to think of additional conversation topics so as to prevent awkward silences. Over time, however, a transition occurred when guests would begin to recline in their chairs and words would flow more freely. These transitions manifested themselves through signals made with the body—from jittery stomachs and tense muscles, cracking voices and coughs to natural laughter, relaxed postures, and the sharing of personal stories.

What occurs in the process of eating together that motivates this transition from stranger to friend? How does the process of breaking bread together facilitate relationships in which men and women share intimate stories before other details of life? What encouraged the guests at my first dinner party to share stories of how they fell in love or how they received their middle name before exchanging information as simple as the city they were from? How did they find comfort among dinner guests they did not really know?

In this paper, I seek to answer these questions by employing the embodied research trends emerging in the social sciences. Building off existing social theories of eating, I aim to understand the ways people feel the process of getting to know one another while eating together. Through a series of four meals shared between three other women and myself, I explore how friendships form through eating.

I begin by outlining leading social theories of eating and commensality. Next, I explore the epistemological theories informing embodied methods of research as well as the embodied research projects that inspired the creation of my own experiment. Third, I outline the design of my project and share the group’s collective findings of this project. Finally, I analyze our findings in light of the existing social theories, examining the insights they might provide for future understanding of commensal eating.

COMMENSALITY: THE SOCIAL ACT OF EATING | Of the existing research on commensality, relatively little focuses on the everyday acts of eating together. Rather it focuses on the religious, ritualistic, and sacrificial aspects of dining. Anthropologist Claude Fischler attributes this to the prevalent belief that eating is nothing more than a basic, biological, and selfish action.¹

Sociologist Georg Simmel was one of the first social scientists to encourage the study of everyday eating habits under the premise that the process of sharing a meal with other dining companions elevates the action of eating through the act of sharing. He argues that the exclusive act of eating becomes “a habit of being gathered together
such as is seldom attainable on occasions of a higher and intellectual order. Persons who in no way share any special interest can gather together at the common meal.\textsuperscript{2} He argues that this commensality is possible because eating is the most basic need shared by all people.

In order for communal meals to succeed in this bonding, Simmel claims that those who take part must avoid the temptation towards individualism and attent themselves to the needs of the group, both in conversation and table manners. This means that in a good, sociable meal, all individuals must agree to behave and converse according to the group’s common expectations. Because the basic process of eating is always a beginning point of connection, a communal meal can serve to bond any group so long as all agree on the necessity of gracious table behavior.\textsuperscript{3}

Fischler, inspired by the work of Simmel, synthesizes Simmel’s theories along with those of economist Albert Hirschman, social-psychologist Jean-Claude Sagne, and anthropologist Mary Douglas to look at the ways commensality influences and is influenced by social bonding, physical and social spaces, the private versus public spheres, and manners. He starts with the words of three early scholars in the sociology of food who theorized that “It is a commonplace of discussions of food and society to speak of the social importance of commensality.”\textsuperscript{4} He then remarks that over two decades after those words were written, very little subsequent research has been conducted to understand why this is so.\textsuperscript{5} While his synthesis is a valuable next step in furthering the study of commensality, he does not examine the ways that individual people feel the process of commensality and how that affects their interactions.

The pertinent work of anthropologist Pierre Bourdieu fills this gap, as he views food and eating as a platform through which people live out their identities according to their upbringing. He argues that taste is an embodiment of class culture where a physical representation of class difference is acted out through individual preference. Every person’s thinking, experiences, actions, and tastes are shaped by their historical and class context.\textsuperscript{6} This perspective suggests that commensality deepens relationships among those of similar social backgrounds because of the bonding of shared taste. Bourdieu’s theory of habitus posits that through participation in class distinctions, people continue shaping their own actions in the future as well. This habitus is acted out physically through what Bourdieu calls “bodily hexis,” or what philosopher Lisa Heldke calls “bodily knowledge.”\textsuperscript{7} Bodily hexis, or bodily knowledge, suggests there is knowledge of how to behave embedded in our physical beings that goes beyond what we might be able to articulate into words.\textsuperscript{8}

In this research, I explore the ways that my research participants create a meal according to Simmel’s sociability based on their own bodily knowledge of how to behave during a meal, and how this in turn drives the co-creation of a habitus in which friendships develop.

**THEORY AND METHODOLOGY** Jennifer Brady’s method of embodied epistemology, detailed in “Cooking as Inquiry,” inspired this project.\textsuperscript{9} Her approach follows Lisa Heldke’s “Coresponsible Option,” an attempt to “develop epistemological frameworks or attitudes that avoid the dichotomies of realism/antirealism and foundationalism/relativism.”\textsuperscript{10} In “Cooking as Inquiry,” Brady suggests that “a methodological approach that makes foodmaking the means of garnering understanding about food, identity, and the body,” works against the traditional binary, Cartesian divide of academic thought that codes reason and theory as masculine and dismisses food as feminine, the “trivial quotidian matters of domesticity not befitting meaningful scholarship.”\textsuperscript{11} Brady employs autoethnography and collective biography—two forms of research that ground knowledge in the bodies and stories of researcher and participants. Her epistemology looks at the ways the embodied self performs the dynamics of identity and power through the process of making food and in turn allows the bodies of researchers and participants to become primary sites of acquiring knowledge.\textsuperscript{12}

In “Recipes for Theory Making,” Heldke urges for a method of feminist inquiry that at once respects and illuminates differences while maintaining the freedom to critique it—a middle road between absolutism and relativism.\textsuperscript{13} She uses recipes as a metaphor to explain how this feminist approach to theory can be understood, suggesting that inquiry be considered a communal activity. Brady’s research method applies this epistemological framework to research by conducting communal cooking experiments during which participants write and discuss the ways they perform various dynamics of identity and power. Brady’s approach is less concerned with aligning the findings of this embodied research with larger, universal theories; instead it allows the knowledge acquired to be situated within the particular dynamics of gender, race, and age that affect the individual experience. For her experiment, Brady uses both autoethnography and collective biography in order to simultaneously describe and analyze her personal experience while also elevating the experiences articulated by participants as significant
components of research. Inspired by Brady’s methods of research and inquiry, I designed a similar experiment that examines a different aspect of food use. While Brady’s group examined the ways in which identity is understood through the process of making food, I look to the ways diners experience sharing their own identity through the process of communal eating.

The methods used in my project were also inspired by researchers at the University of Waikato who position their bodies as the primary means of acquiring knowledge while sharing a lunch with new migrant women in New Zealand. Through applying scholarship on bodies and spatiality to their research methods, they allow primary aspects of body-space relations, such as “smells, tastes, gestures, reactions, clothing, glances, and touches,” to inform their analysis of social interactions. Following Mike Crang, they interrogate the limits of the construction of knowledge by moving away from analysis of qualitative data in academic language towards a research approach that focuses on “processes of learning through our bodies’ responses and situations.” Crang identifies that, though researchers are beginning to recognize the positioning of the body as socially meaningful, use of the body as a valuable research tool and respectable source of knowledge is still lacking. He is concerned by the marginal presence of researching bodies in the formulation of “truth claims” as well as the grounding of “truth claims” in the body of the researcher alone. In this research, I seek to remedy these concerns by looking not only at the experience of my own body, but by including my participants’ analyses of their bodily experiences as well.

To understand how to conduct a collective biographical ethnography in order to include participant analyses, I look to Mann, Mol, Sataker, Savirani, Selim, Sur, and Yates-Deorr, a group of anthropologists at the University of Amsterdam who performed a communal research project wherein six researchers shared a meal together and co-analyzed their embodied experiences while eating. By sharing the roles of researcher and informant among all participants, their research maintains a level of egalitarianism not present in most research situations. The bodies of all participants serve as informative sites of knowledge, a method which aids each participant in understanding the positioning of his or her own body. While their egalitarian approach eliminated hierarchical power dynamics, their communal process of writing was difficult to follow.

In order to design a project that leveled power dynamics and incorporated the bodily experience of participants while also giving the researcher room to analyze her own findings, I engage Allison Hayes-Conroy’s work. Hayes-Conroy studied the Slow Food movement to examine the visceral experience of the community, looking at the ways the “arousal of feelings, moods, and sensations” were felt in the bodies of activists and opponents. In order to gain a full understanding of how feelings were manifested in her research participants, Hayes-Conroy allowed her participants to create their own research encounters, giving them a chance to communicate both verbally and non-verbally in ways that diminished the typical power relations present in “rational” academic question and answer formats. I wanted to give my participants room to share their visceral experiences with me while also co-analyzing what all of our experiences meant.

**PROJECT DESIGN** Mann et al.’s project benefited from the design of lab experiments, particularly “the suggestion that if you carefully organize an event, reality may be afforded to act (speak, smell, taste) in novel ways.” Unlike a traditional lab experiment, they chose not to fix many variables, but rather to attune their selves to what emerged, allowing themselves to be changed by their findings. Acknowledging that within this experiment the very research topic, the process of getting to know one another, would be affected by the fact that it was research, I aimed to harness the idea that a carefully organized event allows a performance of reality in a new way. I chose three participants who did not know each other at the start of the experiment, so that we could together examine how the process of sharing a meal shaped the ways they got to know one another.

I limited the group’s size for several reasons, including how many people could fit around my dining room table. I believed that our interactions and conversations would differ significantly if we did not all sit around the same table and participate in the same conversation. I also knew that our findings would be difficult to analyze with a larger group. Additionally, I wanted to ensure that the entire group could attend every meal, which would be difficult to schedule with a group larger than four.

My participants were all college-educated women in their twenties. All four of us were born in the United States and spoke English as our first language. Three of us are white women with little knowledge of our own ancestry, and one is of South Asian descent. Lira, my coworker at a local bakery, graduated from a small liberal arts college in Arkansas with a bachelor’s degree in music. She researches ethnomusicology in her free time and, while working, we continually engage in conversations about food and social theory. Heather and I were classmates during our...
undergraduate anthropology studies. In that time, we completed a project on consumption patterns together, which instigated my foray into food studies. Lucy is the owner of a local café, as well as a student in my current program. We have taken multiple courses together, but prior to this project we did not know each other outside of the context of school. I chose these women based on their ability to serve as collective researchers. I knew that they would thoughtfully analyze their personal experiences and honestly articulate the emotions they felt, which was vital to the success of this project.

While Simmel’s theory of sociability suggests that the meal could bond dining companions from a diverse range of ages and cultural backgrounds, I chose to limit the variables of difference in order to maintain a small sample size. I also believed that these participants would enjoy each other’s company, creating the possibility for the formation of lasting friendships through this process.

In order to accommodate all of our schedules, every meal occurred on a Tuesday night. While I did not originally intend to focus solely on the weeknight dinner, this consistency eliminated the variables that would naturally occur at differing mealtimes. I limited my research to four meals, aiming to focus on the transformation over the course of one month. However, I also hoped that the participants would want to continue sharing meals after the project’s end, indicating that the process had indeed forged friendships.

I chose particular goals and methods for each meal in an attempt to balance the natural process of getting to know one another while positioning each participant as a researcher. After every meal, I altered my goals for the following meals based on the results of that meeting. Prior to the first meal, I simply informed participants that I was conducting an experiment to examine how the meal serves to foster community. I used the first meal to introduce the group to each other and to expand on the inspiration behind the project. For the second meal, I asked the group to provide recipes so that we could cook together, sticking closely to Brady’s method of “cooking as inquiry.” After the second meal, I provided each participant with my own literature review and methodological framework in order to increase her ability to position herself as a researcher. During the third meal, we discussed the literature review as well as our own thoughts about how we each fit into the project. For the final meal, we met at a small plates style restaurant, celebrating the end of the project by eating together in a new space.

Each participant took notes throughout the research, writing down her experience and feelings after every meal. Between the third and fourth meals, I met with each participant individually. Each shared with me their notes from the previous three meals and we co-analyzed these experiences. I wrote down my participants comments during each of these meetings.

COLLECTIVE RESEARCH FINDINGS In order to reflect the variety of the physical experiences of each member of the group, I share the reflections of each participant dinner by dinner. Each participant provided her own written notes so that I might avoid, as much as possible, grounding an analysis solely in my own interpretation of events. The commentary below incorporates these written notes, as well as my participants’ verbal reflections, which they shared during our individual meetings. To situate myself as a participant in each meal, I have included my own reflections alongside my participants’ reflections. Additionally, I have changed any references my participants’ make to me into the third person (as Kendall). In so doing, I aim to incorporate my own experience as a collaborative member of the project while maintaining reflexivity as the primary researcher.

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March 31: I devoted the first meeting to introductions. Nervous about how the project would unfold, I spent a full day cooking for my guests. In this first meal, I opted not to create any method for facilitating conversation; I hoped instead to see how conversation would flow on its own.

Kendall: Lucy arrived first; she is the one of the group I have spent the least amount of time with—and we have never spent any time together one on one. I realized upon her arrival how intimate it is to have someone into your home.

“So what does your life look like outside of school,” she asked while browsing through my kitchen. “I don’t really know you all that well.” I offered wine within a few minutes of her arrival, and somehow the act of holding the cup changed the comfort level within the space of the kitchen.

Heather arrived second. I introduced the two of them as I finished cooking dinner, and conversation flowed fairly freely. Music played softly in the background, which helped to soften the conversation, as there was less fear of silence. Lira arrived last and we headed into the dining room to
Coming into the first meal, every participant was committed to doing her own part to facilitate community within the group. Surinder Phull, Wendy Wills, and Angela Dickinson, sociologists who base their research of commensality in the Mediterranean on Simmel’s work, take his definition of sociability to mean that the success of a sociable meal relies on “those present to be motivated by a collective desire for amicability and cordiality.” The acknowledgement from all four dinner companions that this project presented a sense of the unknown and the potential for awkwardness or discomfort suggests that an enjoyable meal was not a given; nonetheless, if every person committed to getting to know the others, conviviality was an attainable possibility.

Phull et al. also argue that, in Simmel’s definition of sociability, no single personality can dominate. However, during this first meal, my own attempts to step back in conversation prolonged the awkwardness. Because I served as the host, I held an assumed position of leadership in the group. It was only when I fulfilled the leadership expectations by giving cues to eat or prompts for conversation that the tension dissipated.

April 14: For our second meal, I asked the women to provide me with a few of their favorite recipes in order to compile a menu that we could cook together. Over the weekend, Heather admitted her nervousness for the upcoming meal: “You guys are all professional food people, and I just cook for fun. I’m not sure I’m comfortable cooking with all of you!” she said. With this concern in mind, I turned back to Brady’s method in which she used the cooking process to identify the manifestation of dynamics of power. I knew that my own tendency would be to take charge, and it could be easy to miss out on the ability of communal cooking to bring our group together. For this reason, I did not include any recipes of my own; instead I asked the provider of each recipe to take charge and direct the group.

Kendall: As we cooked together, we recounted the ups and downs of our previous two weeks. With all hands occupied—chopping, sautéing, peeling, and drinking—and faces turned away from the group and towards the countertops, everyone seemed comfortable. By not having forced eye contact, the moments of silence felt natural as well.

The women each took charge of teaching their own recipes; we prepared multiple recipes at once, which
allowed Lira to direct Lucy, while Heather directed Lira. I’d given a brief tour of my cabinets early on in the process; thus everyone felt free to retrieve the ingredients and tools she needed.

The meal came together quickly, and we transitioned to the back patio to eat. The sun had set at this point, so we dined under the soft hanging lights spread across the portico. Whether due to the informal furniture or our previous activities, we all sank, relaxed, into our chairs. When faced with once again sitting in a circle, the few moments of silence were more pronounced than in the kitchen, but I did not feel the need to interject as I had during our first dinner.

Lira: There was a marked difference facilitated by cooking together. When we were working on each other’s recipes, there was a courtship of teaching; everyone put on their best face because they were putting out their best recipe. Each of us was in our own corner of the kitchen, each girl doing her own thing. It felt like we got to know Kendall better through the process of getting to know her kitchen. She cares about that space and what is within it.

Heather: By the end of the second meal, I felt more comfortable voicing my own opinions. Cooking together definitely helped us all be more comfortable. It facilitated the conversation while also taking away the pressure to talk. But I think what actually really helped was going outside.

Sitting on the porch is so much more comfortable than the dining table. Everyone holds their drink in hand and relaxes into their chair. The formal dining area changes the way people interact; there is a greater expectation of formality in that setting.

Lucy: We ate outside with the porch lights, and it was very dim. It felt much more natural to me. I don’t know why dimness in eating is so comfortable. There is something about ambiguity—not necessarily privacy—but dimness is more casual, which is funny because it’s also associated with romance.

When we were cooking the recipes we’d brought, I realized what I’d given was very low-key. It’s something I make a lot, but doesn’t express my food knowledge or how good of a cook I am. When I realized the recipes everyone else had given, I felt intimidated, like I’d missed something. When we were actually cooking, it felt good to help Heather with her own recipe. She had a great recipe, and I could help with some of the techniques since she doesn’t have a kitchen background. I felt like I could lend something. I could share some of the food knowledge that is a part of me. Then, when I went to help Lira, I suddenly remembered “I’m not a pastry person!” and I was nervous I’d mess it up.

In this second meal, I did make a point to step back from my own tendency to dominate in the cooking of the meal, fulfilling Phull et al.’s expectation that no personality should dominate. In this case, I was not stepping back from the assumed role of hostess, rather stepping back from the domineering tendencies of my own personality. I did fulfill the role of hostess to the extent that I directed the participants in my own kitchen, but I also assumed the position of student as I learned the others’ recipes.

Simmel argues that bonding over low appearances or trivial areas serves as the ground for higher values to develop.25 While cooking dinner together, each of us possessed a unique knowledge—whether a professional culinary education or a personal knowledge of the recipe. By taking on the role of both student and teacher, we took turns stepping back from our own ability to lead in order to learn. Entering the lower position of student laid the ground for us to develop relationships that would not have been possible if we had each attempted to take the position of expert.

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April 21: The third meal was the least organized of the evenings. My afternoon had not gone as planned, and I did not have time to clean my apartment or prepare dinner before the group arrived. I had asked everyone to bring vegetables to contribute to a paella, and I intended to provide the rice. I entered the evening flustered, but my lack of preparation revealed several important dynamics about this process.

Kendall: I returned home right as Lucy arrived, dishes still piled in my sink. Lira arrived soon after, and they both helped to put away clean dishes before we transitioned into chopping vegetables for dinner. We began to cook down the vegetables, and I went to ladle out some of the vegetable broth I’d started in the slow cooker that morning, only to realize that I had never turned it on. None of the other ladies minded my flustered state, and we
Another area of the sociable meal that Simmel considers vital to social bonding is a relaxed aesthetic. While the setting for the meal should remind diners that it is about more than just the carnal act of eating, he says, it should not go so far as to forget its humble origins. A formal aesthetic maintains an air of untouchability that hinders the enjoyment of the food and of conversation. But a relaxed environment invites participation.

The entire evening—from the clutter of my apartment to the lack of table setting—invited participation and disruption. Because the previous week’s cooking had acquainted every participant with my kitchen, we could all work together to build the aesthetic for the evening. Everyone was equipped with the ability to participate and in turn could take ownership of the space.

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April 28: For our final dinner, we met at a small-plates style restaurant, the sister restaurant to the bakery where Lira and I work.

Kendall: I walked over with Lucy from her café, and we met Lira and Heather in line while waiting for the doors to open. Everyone hugged upon arrival; there seemed to be a residual comfort that carried over from last week.

Once we sat down, it felt a bit more awkward. I wondered if this would happen—we’d grown so accustomed to gathering in my kitchen, the ritual of gathering in the same space brought comfort for how we were to act together. But when we were in a new space, we had to re-orient ourselves to how to interact.

As we began to eat, we reflected on the project. Rather than analyzing social dynamics, we shared the ways that the project had been meaningful to each of us.

Everyone agreed that the project had been not only fun but became a mid-week ritual that they looked forward to. Even if the awkwardness had not completely disappeared, there was a great comfort in the liturgical sharing of a meal with strangers.

This meal, in some ways, represented a return to the first meal—every participant came motivated by a desire for conviviality, aware of the potential for awkwardness, and...
committed to doing her own part in working through that discomfort. In other ways, it felt like a progression of the previous dinners. Moving our relationship into a new space signaled a step into a new level of relationship. The process of dining together continued to serve as an important space for the development of friendships, but the lack of shared knowledge and ownership of the space in which we dined made it more difficult to participate in a relaxed manner.

**COLLECTIVE ANALYSIS** Between the third and fourth dinners, I met with each participant individually in order to hear their reflections on the project as a whole and to understand what they viewed as the overarching themes within the research project. I drew from Hayes-Conroy’s fieldwork method in which she allowed her participants to create their own research encounters, avoiding oversimplification by limiting her own questioning in order to encourage her participants to communicate their reflections both verbally and non-verbally. Each woman chose when and where we met and they each directed the conversation. When requested, I provided reflection prompts, but most of the discussions were self-directed.

Every member of the group articulated two primary themes: 1) the power of space to inform behavior and 2) the comfort found in ritual. The consistency of holding the dinners at my home was as important to the process of building friendships as the dynamics of the group. While getting to know one another, our group became acquainted with a specific space. Knowing my home provided insight into knowing me, and knowing the space eased the tensions amongst the group. “Before the first meal, I jotted down some thoughts,” said Lucy, reading to me from her journal, “I’m excited to see Kendall’s home. I’m always excited to get into the homes of others. It’s so interesting how the space really affects the ways that we interact.”

Everyone spoke to the comfort afforded by eating out on the patio. Heather commented on the ways our bodies naturally react to the informality of the patio by relaxing. Lucy felt that this comfort came not only from the furniture on the patio, but also from the dim lighting. In contrast to the casual atmosphere of the patio, Heather and Lira both noted that the formality of the dining table setting affected the way that we ate together. Heather felt that the co-creation of the table setting in the third week allowed for more comfortable interactions, “We set the table, we created the space. It wasn’t all set before us so it didn’t tell us how to behave.” Lira believed that this was aided by the familiarity the group had with my home: “I think it was fortuitous that everything wasn’t prepared beforehand. We knew your kitchen, we felt comfortable just coming in and working in it.”

Along with the consistency of space, the ritual process of coming together for a weekly meal aided in our growing comfort as a group. Lira and Lucy both reported their comfort in the repeated actions of traveling to my house. This journey brought familiarity and routine to the meals and thus provided familiarity to the group of women. Heather found comfort in the consistency of Tuesday dinners: “The ritualized process of coming together every Tuesday prepared us for how we were supposed to be together.” Lucy noted that this ritual process brought a level of seriousness to the project: “We agreed to a four dinner contract, which made it feel very different from just hanging out for dinner. I’d made a commitment, so I had to be there.”

The importance of these themes of space and ritual were confirmed during our final dinner at the restaurant. My home had become a familiar space in which we acted and thus provided familiarity to the group of women. This journey brought familiarity and routine to the meals and thus provided familiarity to the group of women. When our ritual was interrupted by a change of space, the level of comfort we felt together was disrupted as well.

The experiences described by Lira, Lucy, and Heather strongly reflect the ideas of Bourdieu’s habitus and bodily hexis. Our actions were simultaneously shaped by our previous experience of my home and of our time together, while shaping the behaviors we would expect together in the future. Our ritual practices embedded knowledge in our “gut”—a visceral rather than cerebral knowledge that oriented our actions. Once our bodies knew what to do within the space, we felt comfortable.

Despite each growing up with different social, financial, and racial experiences, we all share a similar educational background and are currently in similar phases of life. These shared experiences meant that we began this project with a shared social understanding of how to behave in a dinner party setting. While Simmel expects that any group of diners can bond over the shared need for food, we began with more groundwork than a group without these similarities. We also shared a commitment to get to know one another, the primary ingredient for a sociable meal, according to Simmel.

Because of the collaborative nature of our research methods, we were able to observe together what it meant to share this commitment and to create a setting where relationships could flourish. In so doing, we named and questioned the dynamics of power at work among us, dynamics of power that are merely assumed to exist and control behavior in Simmel’s work. As we cooked and ate...
together, engaging in the vulnerable and intimate sharing of ourselves, we co-created a habitus by orienting our bodies to this space. We built expectations of how to behave based upon the ways that we had behaved in the past and our growing knowledge of each other in relation to the space that we were in.

This bodily knowledge was grounded in the skills and spatial knowledge that we possessed within my kitchen and was, over time, easily distributed amongst our group. Growing knowledge of my home contributed to growing knowledge of how to behave in my home. As everyone’s bodies were oriented to my home, this was manifested in feelings of comfort and relaxation. Until we had built a shared knowledge, or habitus, of how to interact with one another, different dynamics of power created tension.

During the first dinner, I held power through my position as hostess: the knowledge of my home, of our food, of each guest, of my expectations for this project. As a result, the actions of the group followed my behavior. For example, when we sat down to eat together, I was in the process of telling a story. Although I had picked up my fork and had gestured to others to eat, no one began eating until after I finished my story and took a bite. As long as I attempted to shirk the power socially allotted to me as hostess, the evening progressed tensely. Once we began clearing the table together, however, everyone relaxed a bit more. In putting all of our bodies to use, I began to share my knowledge of the space with the others, and their bodies became further acquainted with my home.

We were all our most comfortable after teaching our recipes. In helping one another to cook and sharing our unique knowledge of food, we each took on a position of vulnerability in learning. Additionally, the others had a chance to lead, relieving me of the social expectations as hostess. When we shared the same knowledge—the knowledge of my kitchen and the knowledge of the food that we were eating—no one person held the power of bodily or culinary knowledge over the others, which in turn eased our ability to share an intimate knowledge of one another.

We also all expressed that we felt more comfortable when dining under the dim lighting of the patio or while working in the kitchen, turned towards the counter, away from one another. In these moments, we did not face the intimacy of watching one another. Simmel suggests that this informal environment is necessary to highlight the origins of commensality in the organic matter of life. However, I would also argue that the dim lighting and the informality of cooking together also lessened our expectations of one another, lessening the power that any one person could hold over another or the vulnerability one person might feel in front of the others. The influence of different types of power affected our behavior according to the situation, but the tension within my home dissipated almost completely after we taught one another our recipes, after our bodies became further acquainted with the space, the ritual, and one another.

The dissipation of power that promoted comfort between us was wrapped up in our co-creation of a habitus through the ritual of meeting in the same place. Our social expectations of one another were grounded in our knowledge of how to behave with one another in my home. Once we changed the ritual by moving locations, a level of the safety that we had previously shared was uprooted. While the commitment to getting to know one another through a sociable meal remained, we returned in some ways to the power differentials of the first meal. As Lucy noted after the third dinner, there was a comfort and enjoyment in the process, even if awkwardness remained. Though we might not have known each other in the sense of being comfortable together in all situations, we shared a knowledge of each other in a specific habitus that we had together committed to creating through the process of commensality.

**CONCLUSION** By attuning ourselves to our bodies throughout this project, we affirmed that our bodies matter as a site of knowledge production. We all acknowledged that our interpretations of this experience would have differed significantly if our group varied in gender, sexuality, race, religion, and age. This became particularly evident to us as we began to note the weight of shared social capital in easing the tensions of our meetings. Had we not shared similar educational backgrounds and current life experiences, we likely would not have been able to quickly and easily develop the same level of intimacy with one another. In addition, our interactions were affected by the very fact that these meals occurred for the sake of research. Thus we strove to remain continually aware of the ways these factors colored our interpretation of this experience.

The feminist epistemological paradigm that I used to create this project elevates the methods and physical experience of research as academically important; thus my end goal is not to use this very individualized, intentionally designed experience and expand it to a larger, universal theory about the meal. To do so would, I believe, diminish the importance of the specificity of this project. Rather, my goal is to examine how an ethnography that pays attention...
to physical experience can provide unique insight into the
dynamics at work during commensal eating.

Through this research, we affirmed that an intentional
meal can indeed foster community through shared
embodied experiences. When cooking and eating together,
we used our bodies in very intimate, sensual, vulnerable
ways—sharing knowledge, balancing power, and in turn
transitioning from strangers to friends. As Lucy noted, we
do not know each other well—we do not possess in-depth
knowledge of each other’s lives—but we know each other
intimately. We have shared a sensual experience that
couraged us to reveal private details about ourselves
before pertinent details of our daily lives. Even without
cognitively knowing one another well, we found comfort in
an embodied relationship; facilitated by the bonds forged
through commensality.

ENDNOTES
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27. Because my individual meetings with each participant
   occurred between the third and fourth dinners, we used
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