

Article

‘Together We Prepare a Feast, Each Person Stirring Up Memory’

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Abstract: Our story starts in April 2020, in the early stages of the UK’s first national COVID-19 lockdown. A multidisciplinary team of researchers and artists began a collaboration with Migrateful, a charity that runs cookery classes led by refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants struggling to integrate and access employment. Teaching classes and sharing their cuisine and stories helps the chefs develop their confidence and sense of belonging, and food is central to the enterprise. The focus of the project was a series of interactive online cookery classes delivered by Migrateful chefs, with ongoing involvement from the researchers and artists. In this paper, we weave together the research team’s reflections on the project with commentary from the participants and artists. We outline our methods and our learning from the collaboration and explain how it inspired new ways of thinking about refugee representation, food and belonging, co-creative storytelling, and virtual engagement. We discuss the ways in which Migrateful’s model helps to support the production of counter-narratives that value, foreground, and amplify migrants’ perspectives and voices while acknowledging the tensions involved in adapting this model to the virtual space. We emphasise the power dynamics inherent in engaging and researching with marginalised people and their stories while considering whether artistic involvement and creation may help to navigate some of these challenges, and we address how the virtual environment affected the potential for collaborative storytelling, interaction, and engagement levels among participants. Together, these reflections form a ‘recipe’ for what we hope to be a more meaningful and ethical model of engagement activity that builds on this learning.

Keywords: migration; refugees; integration; food; belonging; power; virtual engagement; art; COVID-19; affective storytelling



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1. Cooking Up an Idea

In April 2020, during the early stages of the first national COVID-19 lockdown in the United Kingdom (UK), close friends Ammar and Ed were living together in London. In various respects they felt fortunate. They were within easy reach of large parks and well-stocked food shops. Yet, like so many people, they felt a sense of distress, uncertainty, and relative powerlessness in the face of the Coronavirus pandemic. They realised that what happened next with the pandemic was entirely out of their control, but how they responded was not.

Their sense of distress was most acute in their personal lives. Ed shared an experience all too common for many during the pandemic. One member of his family, a parent, was in hospital many miles away, with Ed unable to visit. He waited anxiously for the daily telephone updates about his parent’s serious and fluctuating condition. Ammar remained

forcibly displaced from his family and country of origin. The pandemic added another layer of complexity and disruption to his life. Ammar fled Syria in 2011 and has been unable to return. He knows more than most what it means to be separated from the people we love and from the support networks we cherish.

Perhaps it was those personal experiences that stirred in Ammar and Ed the desire to make a positive difference. They were eager to use whatever power they had to support communities and civil society organisations struggling with the pandemic's effects. They were not alone in this; volunteering levels in the UK reached new heights during the pandemic (Ricketts 2021). Like many others keen to make some form of difference, they wondered how they could channel their resources to best care for those around them. Where did their power lie? An answer emerged: through their professional positions.¹

Ed is an expert in community engagement and participatory research. At the time of the pandemic, he was Manager of the Arts & Humanities Research Institute (AHRI) at King's College London. King's is a resource-rich Russell Group university. Like many other universities in the UK, in recent years King's has re/discovered civic aspirations,² expressed as a desire to leverage knowledge to address social problems and to contribute towards building just and sustainable communities (Cuthill 2012). King's has developed a strategic aim of 'Service', articulated as a commitment to positive social impact locally, nationally, and internationally (KCL (King's College London) 2020). Within the context of 'Service', the AHRI had a specific remit to support creative and socially engaged research activities, including participatory activities that would develop deep and trusting partnerships with local communities and that were oriented towards social justice.

Ammar's research expertise is in architecture and urban studies. During the pandemic, he was working at Arup, an international corporation which provides engineering, architecture, design, planning, project management, and consulting services for all aspects of the built environment. Arup has a community engagement programme and was keen to support communities hit by the pandemic. The programme encourages Arup staff to partner with external organisations, and aims to produce a more sustainable world, focusing on food security, clean and renewable energy, water and sanitation, improved shelter, and social mobility. Ammar had already been involved in several projects through the community engagement programme, working with displaced communities and partnering with local charities, and was eager to make use of the programme for further good.

While Ammar and Ed had public-spirited motivations and solidaristic intentions, they understood the ethical challenges inherent in their plans given their positioning within organisations driven by market-oriented imperatives. UK universities increasingly operate as neoliberal institutions, preoccupied with competition, efficiency, and economic value. This has all sorts of consequences in higher education. For example, as Burawoy (2011, p. 29) contends, the focus is on making knowledge "more efficient, more productive and more accountable by more direct means." Hence, the rise of elaborate indices and measurements of output and impact across the sector—including the Research Excellence Framework, the Teaching Excellence Framework, the Knowledge Exchange Framework, and the Higher Education Business and Community Interaction Survey—that look to calculate the quality and efficiency of universities' research, education, and third-mission activities (the latter being contribution to societal and economic challenges) (Stevens 2020). Their re/discovery of civic aspirations might be read as just another way for universities to signal their socioeconomic worth and to leverage associated competitive advantage. The danger is that social justice-oriented community engagement work is approached instrumentally, as a means to the university's own (corporate) ends, rather than as a valuable end in itself (Tomlinson and Schwabenland 2010).

Pragmatically, Ammar and Ed recognised that they, and any project they developed, could not exist outside the conditions and locations of their host organisations. At the same time, they hoped it would be possible to manage the contradictions while pursuing their social justice-oriented goals (Muhammad et al. 2015). Indeed, Archer (2008, p. 282) found that a variety of academics in these corporate-style institutions commonly perform a

balancing act through a psychic splitting between “performances of self and the internalised sense of self.” In short, they can perform their role without *becoming* a neoliberal subject. Ammar and Ed hoped to perform just such a balancing act, retaining their social justice identities through affirming the possibility of real social change and through creating moments and spaces of resistance.

With that critically reflexive framework in mind, Ammar and Ed searched for the right project. Inspiration came quickly in the form of a Twitter post by Migrateful that struck a chord. Migrateful is a charity that was at the time in desperate need of funds due to the pandemic’s deleterious impact on their activities.³ Ed was already aware of the charity’s work through AHRI links with the Migration Museum, and Ammar was interested due to his own lived experience as a forcibly displaced person.

Migrateful runs cookery classes led by refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants struggling to integrate and access employment. At the time of writing, the charity has trained 66 chefs. Often, these chefs are struggling both to process the traumas they have experienced and to fit into UK society. Teaching classes and sharing their native cuisine, culture, and stories helps the chefs develop their confidence, self-esteem, and sense of belonging. Food is central to this enterprise. While we all need food for survival, food means so much more than that. It has an equally important social dimension (Bardenstein 2002; Raman 2011). There is a reason the kitchen is considered the heart of the home. Shopping for food, talking about it, preparing it, cooking, entertaining, sitting around a table, and breaking bread together are all key ingredients in how we share our lives and love with others. As everyone at Migrateful well appreciates, food forges understanding and connections, linking us to our past, to places, to people, to the present, and to ourselves. This is particularly important in contexts of displacement. Through recipes and cooking skills, we remember, celebrate, and pass on our distinctive traditions and knowledge.⁴ In the words of Migrateful chef Ahmed Sinno:

While delivering a cookery class, in a status of an asylum seeker, during these couple of hours. . . you feel yourself a part of the society. You feel yourself contributing in something within the society. Although it’s very small, but you’re doing something. You are joining your culture, your food, your sense of aroma, with others. And, to be honest, I never had this feeling in my entire life. . .

In our culture, when you share food with someone, it means you’re sharing life. When you deliver someone food and you teach them how to make a cuisine, you’ll be teaching him your own recipes, your own touch. And I believe when someone tries your food, he will feel the passion that you have for your own country. He will feel what you are feeling being so far away from your home. . . So when we cannot go back to home, food is actually taking us there, and it’s helping us take others with us to that place.⁵

Migrateful’s classes seek to enhance integration through challenging preconceptions about migration and fostering greater cross-communal understanding. Before the pandemic, classes were held in person. Ostensibly there to cook and learn about food, participants shared an intimate physical space, cooperating with each other to prepare the meal and then eating it together. The charity found that informal intimate settings encouraged the emergence of personal stories and positive interactions that challenged misconceptions (Migrateful 2021). However, with the arrival of lockdown, Migrateful had to cancel 60 in-person cookery classes, leaving them with a shortfall of GBP 40,000. Their Twitter plea was to raise funds through online cookery classes.

Ammar and Ed realised there was an opportunity here to make a meaningful contribution under the auspices of the ‘Service’ and community engagement ambitions of their respective workplaces. Their organisational positionings meant that market-driven imperatives could never be entirely erased (Tomlinson and Schwabenland 2010), however, a project with Migrateful offered the tantalising prospect of creating an oppositional space full of transformative potential. As a first step, Ammar and Ed assembled a team of migra-

tion researchers from the Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences across King's, with interests in public engagement and social impact: the then AHRI Director Amza Reading from the Department of Culture, Media & Creative Industries, Leonie Ansems de Vries from the Department of War Studies and Chair of the Migration Research Group and Sarah Fine, then of the Department of Philosophy). The team were very excited about the chance to work with Migrateful, and prepared plans for a pilot engagement project.

1.1. Pilot: *Breaking Bread*

The pilot project was named *Breaking Bread*. Through the AHRI, the team commissioned Migrateful to deliver online cookery classes for King's and Arup staff, with attendees invited to make an additional financial donation. While Migrateful would benefit from much needed funds via the classes, the hope was that Arup and King's colleagues would benefit with a cookery lesson, great food, a welcome distraction from the stresses of lockdown, and an opportunity to connect with others around the globe. It would be a learning experience for the researchers and participants.

In keeping with the creative remit of the AHRI and the work of the researchers involved, the team commissioned artists to participate in the classes with a view to their producing art pieces in response. The artists had migration backgrounds and lived experiences of themes of migration, identity, and belonging. We hoped the art might help to capture the spirit of the project, sharing the experience of those involved through diverse media and leaving a legacy. The artists created poetry, dance pieces, and visual and performance video art, enriching the engagement aspect of the project and encouraging deeper reflection on the experience.

Breaking Bread took place in May 2020 and consisted of four two-hour online cookery classes. The project raised over GBP 5000, and 68 participants learned to cook diverse cuisines from a variety of countries, from Pakistan and Syria to Lebanon and Sri Lanka.

While conceived as a community engagement activity to fundraise, it soon became clear that the impact of *Breaking Bread* extended well beyond that. Migrateful's cookery classes centered and amplified the voices of those who are commonly marginalised. In teaching their cuisine, chefs shared their stories and memories of home and of their migratory experiences. This was much appreciated by class participants. In the words of one attendee:

It was lovely to be taught recipes which are important to the Chef and to hear her stories of food and life in Syria, and in London, during the cooking class. It made it about more than just food but also about experiences, memories and building connection.

(Testimonial from *Breaking Bread* participant, 2020).⁶

Indeed, at a time of physical distancing, we were struck by the power of the online classes to help participants feel socially close and to share a universalising connection through food. There was something special and inspiring about making, smelling, and tasting the same dish, separately but together. While we were on Zoom, we were not facing each other as stationary postage stamp heads and shoulders. Family members and housemates joined in or just passed through. We moved around our kitchens, opened cupboards, chopped, stirred, and chatted. More than simply fundraising, the online classes offered an ethical model of participation that amplified the chefs' stories and fostered shared understanding across cultural divides. Chef Ahmed agreed:

Everyone was in different places, but all of us were on the same platform. All of us were at the same level, enjoying the same food, having almost the same aroma, which is taking us into the Middle East, taking us into Lebanon, taking us into the history of the Lebanese food, and that's the beauty about this.⁷

Migrateful's model for engagement mirrored the ethical dimensions of participatory research approaches. Such approaches are overtly political and democratic. They aim to re/frame whose and what knowledge 'counts', and result in co-produced knowledge

of mutual benefit to those involved (Checkoway 2015; Stehr 2010). They strive for social justice-oriented change. According to Banks and Manners (2012), participatory research approaches are underpinned by the following principles:

- Mutual respect
- Equality and inclusion
- Democratic participation
- Active learning
- Making a difference
- Collective action
- Personal integrity

As an institute, the AHRI was in the business of supporting and propagating participatory research projects though doing so with a critical eye on the potential for the co-optation of the participatory by the neoliberal. As Leal (2007) argues, there is a danger of counter-ideology becoming integrated as part of the dominant ideology. He notes that participatory approaches may be incorporated as technocratic approaches, with participation being depoliticised and “liberated from any meaningful form of social confrontation” (ibid: p. 544). The challenge is to avoid developing participatory research projects that simply perpetuate the current neoliberal hegemony.

Nonetheless, despite these challenges, Leal (2007) agrees that we would not want to miss out on the social transformation potential of participatory work. Participation may serve broader struggles and be re/articulated as radical political projects through the participation of marginalised groups. Considering that the Migrateful model centres people with marginalised identities and shares ethical similarities with participatory research, we saw potential for further critical socially transformative projects here. Therefore, drawing on our learning from *Breaking Bread*, we laid plans for an additional project.

1.2. Kneading Knowledge

The resultant project was *Kneading Knowledge*. It followed the pilot model of *Breaking Bread* but was larger in scale. The project involved eight interactive two-hour online cookery classes delivered by Migrateful chefs and hosted by Migrateful staff. Classes ran in October and November 2020, and this time open were to King’s and Arup staff and students. This happened to coincide with another national lockdown, and the classes fostered a sense of positivity and connection during a difficult and isolating time. To maintain continuity and build on our learning, the same four artists as in *Breaking Bread* were commissioned to produce artworks in response to the classes. However, this time their artistic responses provided material for the project, generating valuable research insights.

In contrast to *Breaking Bread*, *Kneading Knowledge* was learning-focused from the start. We were interested in how the online cookery classes offered an innovative and ethical model for community engagement activities that provided both informal and formal learning opportunities. The project aimed to explore the value of the virtual sharing of embodied knowledge of migration, both for mobilising affective storytelling and for promoting more inclusionary and nuanced ways to consider diverse refugee experiences, thereby effecting positive change for participants. In this way, *Kneading Knowledge* prompted us to consider the ethics and efficacy of virtual engagement activities, including how these activities might create spaces for participants to reflect on their experiences, articulate their memories, negotiate their feelings of isolation, and build a sense of virtual belonging and solidarity.⁸

What we are interested in when we speak about affective storytelling are the ways in which emotions are not just individual feelings, but also create subjectivities at interpersonal and collective levels. As Sara Ahmed (2004, p. 10) puts it:

It is through emotions, or how we respond to objects and others (emotionally), that surfaces and boundaries are made: the ‘I’ and the ‘we’ are shaped by, and even take the shape of, contact with others. . .the surfaces of bodies ‘surface’ as an effect of the impressions left by others.

These surfaces and boundaries include experiences of belonging, comfort, otherness, etc. Thus, we were interested in storytelling as a form of knowledge production that is attentive to processes of connecting and collaborating through research and to who we become in the process. This necessitates thinking and feeling beyond traditional forms of knowledge production and paying attention to affective, sensory, and somatic dimensions.

At this stage, postdoctoral researcher Anna Khlusova from the Department of Culture, Media & Creative Industries joined the research team. Anna led the research component of the engagement activity. The research process involved collecting ethnographic digital research data on the virtual cookery sessions and discussions during the classes, interviewing a selection of artists and participants, and analysing the artworks produced. All members of the research team took part in a selection of the cookery classes, thereby generating additional autoethnographic data.

This paper is an outcome of our collaborative efforts. Weaving together the research team's reflections on *Kneading Knowledge* with commentary from participants and artists and insights from the artworks, it considers the activity as a form of ethical practice that inspired new ways of thinking about refugee representation, co-creative storytelling, and virtual engagement. We discuss what we have learned from Migrateful's model to help support the production of counter-narratives that value, foreground, and amplify migrants' own perspectives and voices. We acknowledge the tensions involved in adapting this model to the virtual space. What are the power dynamics inherent to engaging and researching with marginalised people and their stories? How can artistic involvement and creation help navigate some of these challenges? How does the virtual environment shape the potential for collaborative storytelling, interaction and engagement levels among participants? Considerations outlined in our discussion form a 'recipe' for what we hope to be a more meaningful and ethical model of engagement activity that builds on virtual learning of embodied knowledge.

2. Food for Mind and Body

In this section, we explore in more detail our role as researchers in *Kneading Knowledge*. We reflect on some of the ethical dimensions of the project, and we elaborate on our observation that the Migrateful model for engagement resonates with participatory research approaches.

As a multi-disciplinary and multi-national research team, we came together as people who wanted to engage practically in supporting marginalised groups and as researchers with a shared interest in migration, social justice, and the ethics of conducting participatory research with people who experience forms of exclusion. We were mindful of the many and various challenges involved in a project of this sort. The Migrateful model spoke to us, as its focus on the creation of solidarity and belonging through embodied migrant-centred storytelling chimed with our conception of ethical research practices as outlined in Section 1.

It is important to emphasise that the research element of the project emerged from socially engaged practice rather than the other way around. We noted that the Migrateful model shared much with participatory research approaches and that it generated outcomes that complemented the research, educational, and 'Service' aspects of our organisations. What the model shared with participatory research was the effort to move away from extractive and hierarchical practices.⁹ We aimed for democratic engagement between all participants—chefs, artists, attendees, fellow researchers. Throughout the process we were inspired by a desire for mutual understanding, collaboration, and the co-production of knowledge.

Participatory research approaches are well-established among ethnographers, and are becoming more popular within the Humanities and Social Sciences more generally. They provide an alternative to 'traditional' social research approaches through their overtly political, democratic, and action orientation along with their valuing of both theoretical and experiential knowledge (Banks et al. 2019). Such approaches enable people to generate

new ways of knowing and acting in the world, with the active involvement of stakeholder communities in the research and in the afterlife of the research (Cuthill 2012; Hawkins 2015; Lather 2006). As such, participatory research creates spaces that are both transformed by and transformative of those involved (Stevens 2020). A range of practices comprise participatory research, among which creative methods such as photography, film, and theatre are common (e.g., *Migrant Voices in London* 2018; *Migration through Dance* 2020; Fine and Rubinstein 2020; Ng and O'Briain 2021). The use of culinary practices is less common (though see Pettinger et al. 2019). *Kneading Knowledge* was our first foray into observing the potential impact of cookery classes as an engagement method.

Participatory research approaches are reflexive, involving awareness of researcher positionalities as well as an acknowledgement that we cannot simply overcome or reverse power relations. While power may be pervasive and dynamic, in a continuous dance of cooperation, disruption, and co-optation with forms of resistance (Foucault 1991; Ansems de Vries 2016), they can become deeply entrenched and difficult to challenge.

Further, power is highly dynamic, its balance shifting over time between differently positioned subjects (Burke et al. 2017). Power hierarchies and forms of structural and epistemic violence may arise through engagement activities, as well as through participatory research. The goal may be “collaborative empowerment” (Huxham and Beech 2008, p. 562), in which both the capacity of the weaker partner to set priorities and control resources and that of the relatively powerful to challenge the status quo are transformed. Yet, in practice, power asymmetries may remain; as Smolovic-Jones and Jacklin-Jarvis (2016) argue, the aim should be to bring out the values of those voices commonly marginalised in everyday public life.

Here, the concept of “micro-power” (Huxham and Beech 2008) is important. Micro-power plays out in the minutiae of the day-to-day. For example, in a collaboration it can refer to who arranges access to participants, the time/location/format of meetings, the preferred forms of communication, and so on. Therefore, everyday interactions and conversations become sites where people can seize micro-power, shaping actions and influencing discourse (Stevens 2020). Thus, while power asymmetries may remain at the macro-level, moments of micro-power may prevail. We were interested in the question of which power dynamics were at play in *Kneading Knowledge* and how we might stir these up. For us, this was part of the ethics of affective storytelling.

Crucially, in line with participatory research approaches, we engaged in the project reflexively. We examined our own positions of power, with an awareness of the ways in which power relations permeate all social relationships (Foucault 1991) and with the intention to challenge ‘traditional’ frameworks of knowledge production, that is, ‘traditional’ social research that assumes a hierarchical distinction between those who do research and those being researched (Banks and Manners 2012). Such research is underpinned by an “objective consciousness” (Hawkins 2015, p. 468) in which the ‘detached’ academic gathers data on ‘human subjects’ through ‘value-free’ methods (Checkoway 2015). In this way, ‘traditional’ social research negates other ways of knowing, marginalising anyone who is not an academic. As researchers, we sought to liberate knowledge from such exclusively academic modes of production and to find release from our “personal and cultural biases that can develop through the achieved status of rigorous academic training” (Muhammad et al. 2015, p. 1058). Central to this liberation was the embrace of a “compassionate consciousness” (Hawkins 2015, p. 144) seeking empathy and an integration of different ways of knowing into knowledge production processes. In essence, our task was to “produce different knowledge and produce knowledge differently” (Lather 2006, p. 52). We did this in part through our involvement in the cookery classes, not (or not merely) as researchers but as active participants.

From the start and throughout the process, the team reflected on how *Kneading Knowledge* was discursively and materially framed and pursued. Discursively, this meant constantly challenging the idea of ‘giving voice’ to migrants, which presumes that without ‘we’ researchers ‘they’ would have no voice. Rather, our starting point was that migrants have

voices and have always been telling their own stories from their own perspectives; the issue is that they are often silenced, ignored, or sidelined. Ammar was pivotal in pushing us to attend to the ways the Migrateful model addressed this. The cookery classes fostered an environment in which the chefs' skills and experiences were central and the stories they shared were actively received and valued.

In this way, the Migrateful model stirs (up) knowledge production by centering marginalised voices and bringing to the fore the power of affective storytelling. The model provides a platform through which migrant chefs can exercise *their* micro-power, challenging structural and discursive limitations and creating possibilities for counter-hegemony. This is a matter of empowerment rather than the 'gifting' of power from 'powerful' to 'powerless' (Burke et al. 2017). By teaching us how to prepare food, both practically and through their stories of home and belonging, Migrateful chefs create a counter-narrative. Their stories of unsettlement—of forceful displacement from home and of being subject to continued violence in the UK's hostile environment—disrupted hegemonic narratives of migrants as either criminals or voiceless and vulnerable victims; there was the opportunity for positive interactions that challenged misconceptions about migration. As one participant commented:

It [*Kneading Knowledge*] was a really good way of learning and breaking down barriers between refugees and asylum seekers and non-refugees and non-asylum seekers by sharing a skill that's a great leveller—everyone has to cook, everyone has to eat, so I think that's a really great way to do it. I especially enjoyed hearing chef's stories about their life, and what certain meals, or certain sounds of cooking or smells of cooking . . . what those memories mean.

(Participant 8, December 2020)

Affective, sensory, and somatic dimensions were important in this context. Though they were 'virtual' (a context which is sometimes also described as 'remote', as in 'remote learning' and 'remote working'), the cookery classes facilitated creation of embodied connections that involved all senses—sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch. The food we prepared in our kitchens became an apparatus for engaging and sharing, a recipe for embodied storytelling and for reducing feelings of spatial and experiential distance between participants.

The food and its preparation served to stir things up for us all. As we chopped, kneaded, and mixed our way through the classes, new connections were made and new insights were gained. This was less a matter of acquiring knowledge in the traditional sense and more an awareness of something being disrupted:

(. . .) Food, the act of eating and act of cooking with the smells, tastes, and the textures of things kind of brings up memories, brings up ideas, brings up creations in your head. And that combined with the context of where we were—so we all sat at home, we listen to people who have way less provisions than we do, and we are learning these beautiful new recipes (. . .). I found that very enlightening and nurturing as a space.

(Participant 2, December 2020)

In the Albanian class I saw clearly the migrant atmosphere. Deshira was really open and she started talking about her life, where she came from, and then you are cooking and you are thinking about her life and being a migrant and suddenly the cooking becomes secondary really. . . I was imagining these things happening to her, her life and that was the most incredible thing.

(Participant 9, December 2020)

For all participants, this represented an alternative way of learning distinct from gaining knowledge through reading an academic book or conducting an interview. There was a sense of affective change in perspective, a feeling that we were not quite the same person as before, a perception of having been nourished in new ways. Working together

with food through the classes provided new ways of seeing, knowing, creating, and sharing knowledge. It stirred affect and an inward critical gaze in pursuit of an ethics of solidarity:

[I]t just made me realise my own privilege, which is something that this year kept telling us—the importance of having enough food and have safety and not be persecuted for any reason really.

(Participant 1, December 2020)

Food is a good leveller—it unites people, doesn't it? We know that for thousands of years food brings people together; with cooking stories come out naturally, it feels like a natural process. You're just connecting with someone as a human unlike some other . . . forced workshops, that might feel somewhat curriculummy. Instead, this felt very natural, like you would talk with your friend.

(Participant 1, December 2020)

While we had some idea of the research we wanted to do—thinking about displacement, belonging, embodied knowledge, and solidarity—we did not start the project with clear research questions or objectives. We wanted these to emerge through the process and in the doing. In part, this was because we were feeling our way through new methods, collaborations, and the blending of different disciplinary approaches. Furthermore, it was part of the very nature of project that the research was guided by a desire for democratic participation and outcomes. Thus, we did not want to impose our predetermined research 'goals' on the participants. What exactly the research was 'about' developed as we cooked, shared, and reflected.

For us, this approach was key to an affective research ethics, an ethics readily supported through the Migrateful model. In short, as researchers, we used the model to stir and to listen; we disrupted predominant approaches to engaging with and understanding migrants by learning from them and by valuing their skills and insights.

Considering the pervasiveness of power relations, both productive and violent, in social relations and research practices, we must reflect on what *Kneading Knowledge* stirred and what was left untouched, along with the impact that this had.

As a research team, we adopted and adapted the Migrateful model. We drew on the format that Migrateful used for their in-person classes. A member of staff from Migrateful hosted the two-hour cookery classes, facilitating discussion and monitoring questions that came through, while Migrateful chefs guided participants through one or two recipes.

Our modifications to the model were threefold. First, we introduced artist participation, as we discuss in Section 3. Sometimes, the artists took part in the classes and then drew on their experience to create pieces of art afterwards. On other occasions, the artists were creating during the class itself, as when Sivan Rubinstein danced in time to Chef Majeda's food-making and when Anna Virabyan sketched Chef Ahmed as he led the class. Art that emerged from the process has been used by some of us as teaching aids in arts and humanities degree courses.

Second, the cookery classes were held online rather than in person due to the pandemic, with the translation to the virtual providing both opportunities and challenges, as discussed in Section 4. Finally, as researchers, we hoped to mix additional questions and conversations around migration into the classes in order to learn about the experiences and perspectives of all participants. We had less success with this part, as explored in Section 5.

As previously identified, the Migrateful model empowered migrant chefs in *Kneading Knowledge*. In effect, the chefs were teachers, with all other participants—researchers, artists, and general attendees—being there to learn. The term 'class' reinforced the notion of *Kneading Knowledge* as a learning activity, with the chefs rather than the researchers positioned as experts. The chefs' micro-power was enhanced by the fact that they did most of the talking and by participants constantly checking in with them about their progress, seeking reassurance that they were doing the 'right' thing.

As Lather (1986, p. 74) notes, there may be a "gap between intent and practice" in participatory research, with subtle coercion by academics coming into play. As such, power

differentials can remain. We were conscious of these dynamics. First and foremost, the eight *Kneading Knowledge* classes were commissioned by the AHRI. King's funds paid for Migrateful's planning and delivery of the classes, for the artists' contributions, and for Anna's role as the research project coordinator. The AHRI therefore set the terms of engagement for the project. Migrateful effectively provided a service and, while we adopted their model, they had to agree to our desire to add both artists and a research angle to *Kneading Knowledge*. These requirements were stipulated at the outset rather than coproduced with Migrateful.

As Leal (2007) contends, those with power may condition it within the bounds of the existing order, determining how much of it they want to 'give' and thereby restricting its transformative potential. There was an element of such conditioning to *Kneading Knowledge*, as just discussed. That said, although the project was set within the bounds of the existing order, it did seek to disrupt neoliberal frameworks for research within King's itself. The institution was on a spending alert due to the financial challenges brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. A member of the senior management team in the faculty questioned why we were spending money on cookery classes. We explained our research plan, how we hoped to disrupt 'traditional' knowledge production processes, and that the project represented an opportunity to re/imagine academic research and higher education spaces as trans/formative and deeply connected to social justice. We discussed the significant wellbeing and learning benefits reported by participants. Nonetheless, some scepticism about the project's value remained.

While we researchers took part in classes as learners and not as 'experts', there were elements to the research angle of *Kneading Knowledge* that reinforced the power of the academics. For research ethics reasons, each class started with Anna outlining the research project and gaining explicit consent from the participants to be involved. Thus, there was an academic framing at the outset which may have set the tone for the discussion and in some sense undermined our democratic intentions. Furthermore, as researchers, we took part in some of the classes while taking turns to observe them. Anna herself was positioned more like the Migrateful host, as an observer and facilitator of discussion, rather than as a cooking participant. When observing, we performed more 'traditional' academic roles detached from those being observed.

We had hoped that the reflexive discussions about power dynamics that we had as a research team would limit power differentials, creating more equitable and inclusive practices where participants could express themselves freely and easily. However, there remained at least an informal divide between the research team and other participants (including the Migrateful representatives and artists). Moreover, we did not include the chefs and artists in our planning discussions or post-class discussions. Thus, we missed an important opportunity to learn more about their motivations and experiences, about the 'bigger picture', and to set up the classes in ways that were conducive to them achieving their own objectives (Banks et al. 2019). We recognise that we would have benefited from their input at earlier stages in the process. For example, the artists may have liked to take a more active role during the classes and in thinking through how best to showcase their artwork. Nevertheless, through our own participation in the classes our ideas and assumptions about the research element of *Kneading Knowledge* were disrupted. We learned as we went along, and we continue to learn through reflections on the project.

Overall, *Kneading Knowledge* simultaneously reproduced our privilege as researchers and enabled transformative and counter-hegemonic work through the centering of migrant voices, knowledge, skills, and experiences. We stirred up knowledge production in different ways by developing an ethics of storytelling based on collaborative and affective culinary practice. We hope this will inspire new ways of thinking about migrant representation, co-creative storytelling about unsettlement and belonging, and virtual engagement.

3. The Art of Cooking

Artistic involvement was central to *Kneading Knowledge* from the start. While the researchers shared a range of interests, we came from different disciplines, and it made sense for us to take a pluralist approach to media and methods. In addition, collaborations between artists and researchers meet a strategic need of the AHRI, as the Institute was keen to explore the potentially transformative effects of such collaborations.

The team had extensive experience of arts-based research and of working with artists and arts institutions on migration-related projects. We were eager to bring the benefits of that learning into both *Breaking Bread* and *Kneading Knowledge*. As researchers who have embraced creative research methodologies in the past, we believe that “art can induce emotion, challenge understanding and be disrupting and even disconcerting, serving to redefine how we make assumptions and potentially, catalysing transformative change” (Eaves 2014, p. 147). Within research, art disrupts the hegemony and linearity of written texts and helps to focus memories and unleash details (Harper 2002). It may evoke deeper elements of our consciousness, re/presenting experiential knowledge and unleashing inside perspectives through authentic expression (Wang 2016). Furthermore, we were in agreement that art can enable the acquisition of what is called ‘modal knowledge’, that is, ‘knowledge of or about possibility’ (Stokes 2006). This is particularly exciting for projects oriented towards social and political change, which often require us to be able to imagine the possibility of alternative realities in order to work towards their realisation.

More pragmatically, during the COVID-19 lockdowns, arts venues were closed, shows were cancelled, and arts funding and jobs were in jeopardy. *Kneading Knowledge* presented an important chance to commission artists for online work. It offered an informal opportunity to experiment artistically with formats—Zoom, homemade videos, working from our kitchens—that were increasingly part of our daily lives. We hoped that the artworks created through *Kneading Knowledge* would prove to be valuable and enduring artefacts of the collaboration and would be of use as teaching aids in degree classes. In addition, we wanted to engage with an alternative narrative about the connections between migration, displacement, and food, through artists and their work. We hoped that this would contribute to the creation of additional media for communicating the stories of displaced communities and the food they bring with them as they build new homes for themselves in the UK.

Through our prior experiences of research collaborations with artists, we thought about how to foster accessible and productive spaces for open conversations about difficult subjects. Traditional academic venues and fora, such as the lecture theatre and the journal article, are often not the best places to do that. Artist participation was another aspect of our attempt to disrupt traditional research hierarchies during the project. Through artists’ contributions, our outcomes would extend beyond the boundaries of individual academic disciplines and beyond written publications such as this one.

All four of the *Breaking Bread* classes and four of the eight *Kneading Knowledge* classes included artist involvement. The artists were Tolu Agbelusi, a Nigerian British poet, playwright, educator, lawyer, and the author of *Locating Strongwoman* (Jacaranda Books 2020); Sivan Rubinstein, a London-based choreographer and King’s Artist 2019–2020 in the Department of Philosophy at King’s, whose work includes *MAPS* and *Dance No 2°*; Xavier de Sousa, a performance maker and culture worker now based in Porto, who curates the digital research and live art commissioning platform performingborders and who is a co-founder of Migrants in Culture; and Anna Virabyan, an Armenian artist who has collaborated with the King’s Migration Research Group and King’s Student Action for Refugees. Tolu and Anna already had ongoing collaborations with Leonie, while Sivan and Xavier were engaged in arts and research projects with Sarah.

The artists participated, observed, listened, and reflected on the class experiences, producing artworks during the classes and in the weeks following. Through their work, they engaged with themes such as homeland, heritage, memory, embodied knowledge,

identity, displacement, loss, and solidarity. They acknowledged that their reflections were shaped by their own lived experiences of migration and displacement.

Tolu attended two classes. She paid attention to the details of cooking, to the ways the chefs used language and prepared the ingredients, and most importantly, to the process of cooking and its role in sustaining rituals and heritage. Tolu commented:

I am talking about food, not just being about eating. The process of cooking is also about ritual. It is also about mental release. Because the food is not just the end product, all those things—where you are working your hands through something, or when you are teaching yourself something, or throwing things together, all of that is also process in a way that you don't normally think about.

Tolu wrote two poems, *Lessons from Majeda's Kitchen* and *It Is Impossible to Lose Joy In Translation*, which she recorded herself performing. Our article takes its title from a line in *Lessons from Majeda's Kitchen*. Through her poems, Tolu takes us beyond the recipe. She brings us closer to the story behind the dishes, to the memories they evoke in the process of making. In *Lessons from Majeda's Kitchen*, she reflects on the cooking of Majeda, a Syrian activist and chef based in London and a former detainee in Syria. Tolu offers her own interpretation of the class, reminding us of the roots of displacement and exploring the ways in which people have reconstructed their homes through food in exile.

Lessons from Majeda's Kitchen

What we don't have
we substitute—250 g of tamarind
works best, but 2 lemons will do.
5 seconds for the bread to golden,
a tortilla will take one minute.
Watch it close. We watch her

how she lifts each ingredient
as though paying homage, how easily
vegetables yield under the knife
how her English dissolves
when she stirs the lentils, the food
communicates anyway

its own language. When all the houses
have been burnt beyond recognition
and those who can, have left, when
the women gather to rebuild
in a foreign country, they will not talk
about ashes. Instead, each week

in twos or twenties, they will lay a table
take turns reconstructing dishes from
a place held close—a bouquet of parsley
conjures an absent mother, the women
tell stories of the dough for Harak Osbao
even though here, pasta substitutes
for dough, a pomegranate seed spills its red
on the white counter and for a moment

an automated silence takes over.

I don't know if it has a name
we don't have this one in Syria. I prefer
iceberg lettuce she says, pointing
to the water lettuce. Her ignorance
is a small rebellion recalling levity
refusing to let go of home.

Together we prepare a feast, each person
stirring up memory as dishes take shape.
Is this not how we call ourselves back
to who we are when home seems too far?

(Tolu Agbelusi, 2020)

Anna Virabyan painted *Oriental Still Life* (Figure 1, watercolour) after attending Chef Ahmed's Lebanese cookery class and *Sarande* (watercolour) following her participation in Chef Deshira's class, where she learned to cook Albanian Jahni (meat stew) and Petulla me Kungulleshka (courgette pancake). As Anna reported:

I found some similarities with my Armenian traditional food. While cooking it was very touching to listen to Deshira's story and how she is overcoming such a challenging time by being an asylum seeker. A few years ago, I was going through the same process and understand how hard it is for her. . . I thought to create a piece of art that will remind Deshira of Home! During the process of creating a coastal town in Albania—Sarande, I connected with her by thinking of both, her home and mine, which I also missed so much. . .!

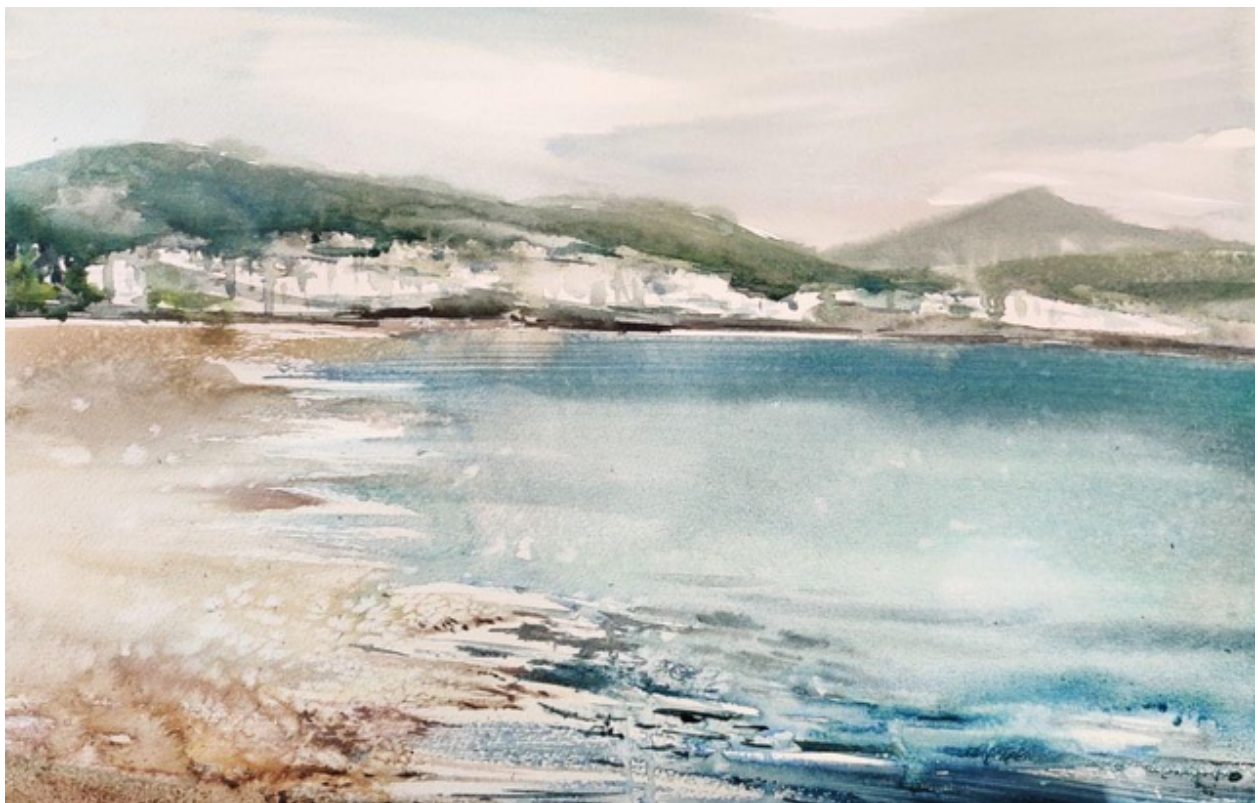


Figure 1. Sarande, by Anna Virabyan, 2020. 40 cm × 60 cm, watercolour medium on Arches paper.

Sivan Rubinstein devised *Reflection to Migrateful Online Cookery class with Chef Noor* <Available online: <https://youtu.be/stmQSidgft0>, accessed on 18 July 2023> following Noor's Pakistani cookery class, and *Dancing Food: A quarantine reflection video* <Available online: <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/research/kneading-knowledge>, accessed on 18 July 2023 and see image still, Figure 2> in response to Chef Majeda's class. Both pieces feature videos of Sivan moving, with creative use of staging and editing, set against audio snippets of the chefs teaching the class. The pieces capture something about the distinctive experiences of the classes, as all participants learned new communication and cooking techniques while building online community and solidarity.

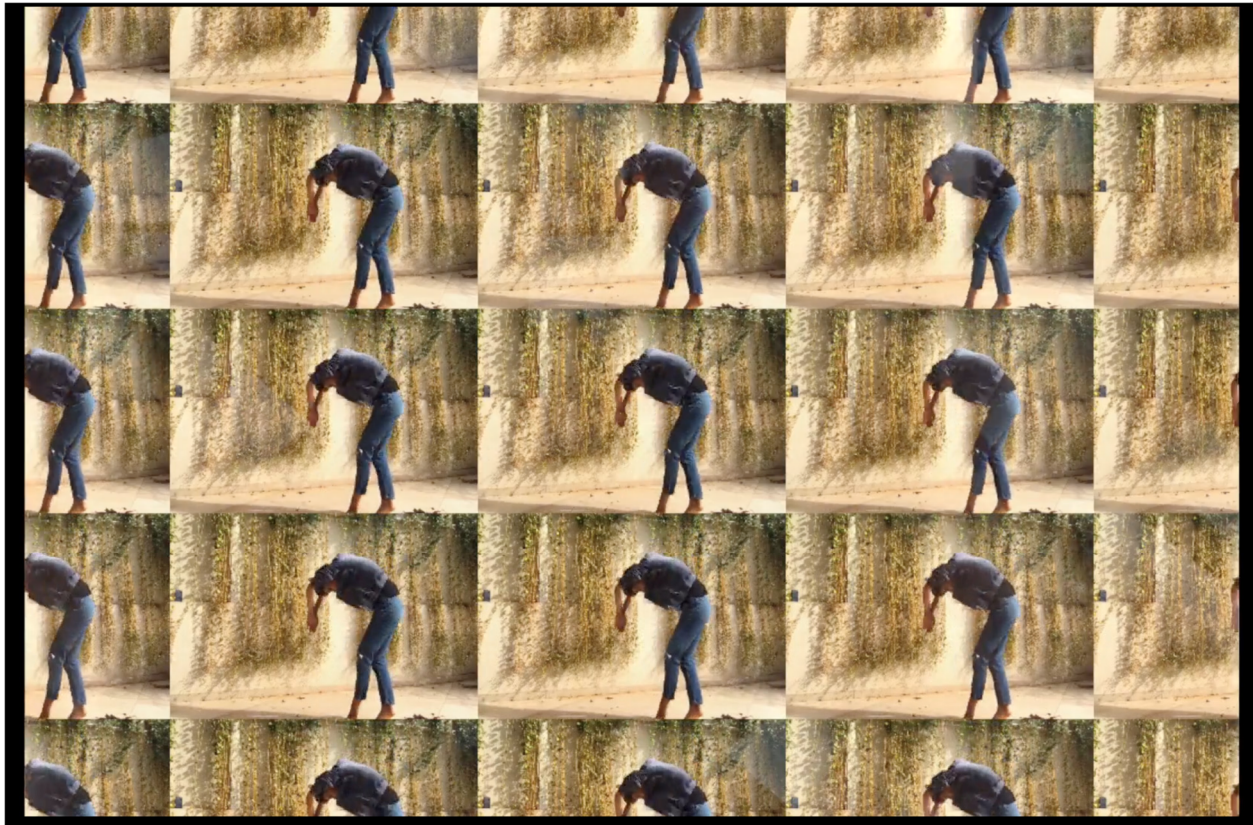


Figure 2. Still from Sivan Rubinstein's *Dancing Food*, 2020.

Xavier wrote and performed *FRAGMENTS: or Four Chapters For Possible Futures* <Available online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wMkfjxSgaCQ>, accessed on 18 July 2023 and see image still, Figure 3> (camera and editing by Rowan Briscoe, produced by Foreign Actions Productions) after a Sri Lankan cookery class with Chef Nafa, and *of rivers crossed and lessons learned* as part of their reflections on their own migration experiences and on participating in *Kneading Knowledge*. Of their motivation for joining the team, Xavier explained:

My shows, my theatre shows. . . revolve around the act of eating and making food live on stage and kind of bringing people together at the table . . . I thought this will be quite a nice way that we can create a sense of commonality without being—together—commonality around food, and food sharing, and experience sharing, and story sharing without having to be physically together . . . And . . . that could be a useful tool for me as well to kind of experiment with form . . .



Figure 3. Still from Xavier de Sousa’s *FRAGMENTS: or Four Chapters for Possible Futures*, 2020.

And discussing what they would be taking away from the project, Xavier said:
 ... I think the main thing was a sense of digital commonality through people working together to achieve a goal—even though that goal was quite individual for everyone. We all were there for a task, for very specific task. ... Food, the act of eating and act of cooking with the smells, tastes, and the textures of things ... bring up memories, bring up ideas, bring up all creations in your head. And that combined with the context of where we were ... and that we are learning these beautiful new recipes that we haven’t done before ... I found that very nurturing as a space.

(Xavier de Sousa interview with Anna Khlusova, 16 December 2020)

As Xavier responded to the Migrateful class in *FRAGMENTS*, ‘the house hasn’t felt so joyous since this all began, and for once I am thankful. Because it lingers, you know? The taste of proximity’.

Collaboration between academics and artists is no new trend; as [Pfoser and de Jong \(2020\)](#) note, some academics have always worked at the crossroads of the arts and academia, while for others the impact agenda has been a welcome nudge to develop exchanges with artists. With their multidisciplinary impacts, such collaborations bring a wide range of opportunities ([Pahl et al. 2017](#); [Rasool 2017](#)). For academics, involvement in the co/production of artwork can offer insights into a range of research and creative practices, networks, and spaces, opportunities to meet interlocutors and audiences beyond the academy, and modes of engaging with complex topics and ideas in alternative and sometimes more welcoming ways. For artists, these academic collaborations may offer access to knowledge, expertise, resources, networks, and audiences in academia. For displaced communities, these art–academic collaborations can be a platform for sharing stories of displacement through different media and methodologies.

In our project, the artworks were disseminated online via the King’s website and have been used in student classes. Future opportunities could include sharing these pieces more broadly in public-facing platforms, art exhibitions, and cultural festivals.

4. When Life Gives You Lemons

A fundamental feature of *Kneading Knowledge* is that it took place at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, which drove a dramatic shift in how participatory research and socially engaged activities connect with public audiences as a result of participation pivoting to online activities (Khlusova 2021; NCCPE 2021). At this time, physical spaces for participation and research were contracting and their virtual equivalents were expanding (Khlusova 2021). The pandemic challenged us to re-think our usual approaches and consider new creative ways of working, learning, and connecting with each other and with different communities. In this sense, while the adaptation of the Migrateful model to online environments was initially driven by the necessity of lockdown, it presented a unique opportunity to explore the efficacy of digital engagement activities. We became particularly interested in the question of how the digital environment shapes the potential for collaborative storytelling and for enhancing inclusivity, interactivity, and engagement with participants.

The advantages of digital engagement practices in reaching larger and more varied global audiences than face-to-face activities have been widely discussed in previous research (Ross 2012). The literature points to increased possibilities afforded by digital formats for expanding the participation and reach of engagement activities, including the possibility of connecting with new and more diverse demographics (Khlusova 2021; NCCPE 2021). This was certainly evident in *Kneading Knowledge*. Opportunities to participate were unconstrained by geography, physical access, or significant travel and its accompanying costs (though live classes remained constrained by the issue of international time differences). People joined *Kneading Knowledge* from across the globe, including UK, USA, Israel, and Europe.

Online classes presented an opportunity to engage with new demographics who had not previously heard of Migrateful. Several participants said that they would have found it too intimidating or challenging to attend in-person classes. In this way, *Kneading Knowledge's* virtual approach spoke to Migrateful's wider goals to do more than just "preach to the converted" (Migrateful 2021), that is, to super-serve the already engaged. As some participants commented:

I think it [the virtual format] opens up this whole new world for people who don't feel comfortable doing that [in-person classes] and go and meet people. I had my camera off most of the time, and it made me more comfortable. . . . If you're anxious, socially anxious, you can still participate, so you can feel like you have joined in, even if you've got your camera off and there is nothing in the real world that is like that.

(Participant 7, December 2020)

I embraced it because I probably wouldn't do as many [classes] otherwise, you know. I wouldn't go to an in-person cooking class so many times. . . . But now I've done three, because I've done them in my own space. I guess it's easier, I think. This is a really great idea, overall.

(Participant 1, December 2020)

Alongside the possibility for broadening access and reach, the digital format was recognised by some participants as fostering a more inclusive environment. It provided a safe space to join in the experience from the comfort of their own home, while the undemanding nature of the virtual helped to reduce anxieties associated with in-person interactions. This is an important ethical concern that we ought to take into consideration as we look to the future; in returning to face-to-face practices, we should not forget those people who found online forms of engagement more suited to their mental and physical needs.

As well as offering a safe space for engagement, *Kneading Knowledge's* virtual environment was described by participants as fostering a "warm", "nurturing", and "familiar" space, and as a "home away from home". Underpinning these notions was a strong sense

of the co-presence shared online, a sense of “digital commonality”, as Xavier de Sousa put it. Even though we were separated physically, located across the globe, through these digital affordances we were able to observe the chefs’ home environments and the ways in which they created their recipes while trying to recreate the experience in our own homes and sharing the process and outcomes with each other:

The fact that we’ve seen a little bit into chefs’ space, home space, there was something for me quite special about this. . . And you think “yeah, of course, these people are just like I am, living in a London flat, of course. They just had more of a struggle to get here, or to secure their place...” But seeing that, it made it more personal.

(Participant 1, December 2020)

(. . .) You’ve got to know a person that was doing this class in a personal way . . . It was like watching your mom cook. They might throw in something and . . . not necessarily telling you what they’re throwing in but they do it so naturally that it feels more homely and comforting (. . .) and then you can see others working on the same task and be like “we are in this together.”

(Participant 8, December 2020)

As these comments illustrate, the feeling of being invited, albeit virtually, into the chefs’ homes added to the affective dimensions of the overall experience, fostering a sense of virtual belonging and solidarity. Crucially, while we were able to see into the chefs’ homes, we were not intruding; the advantage of the digital format was that the chefs retained agency and control. Through adjusting video settings and camera placements, they were able to choose how much or how little of their homes to show and to share. Again, this was an enactment of their micro-power. The act of virtual sharing here was reciprocal; as participants, we all let others into our homes, showing our utensils and skills, revealing our culinary creations, and telling our stories.

5. The Proof Is in the Pudding

Despite its multiple benefits, the digital format presented its own challenges, not least for facilitating engagement and spontaneous interactions amongst participants. One of the main issues in translating the in-person Migrateful model into an effective online format was enabling storytelling to emerge naturally.

As the research team all noticed, it was difficult for conversations to flow organically for a variety of reasons. There were no opportunities for casual informal chats between participants in the online space of the cookery class, and the format did not allow for breakout rooms. The classes had to be carefully facilitated by Migrateful and their chefs, which kept them relatively ‘formal’, and we were running to a tight schedule, with most of the time being occupied by cooking and cooking-related questions. Moreover, we were operating with different levels of digital literacy and comfort with technology and, as is all too familiar to internet users, sometimes we experienced connectivity problems, technical glitches, audio issues, and delays. For example, some participants told us:

I would have liked a bit more chance to talk [to the chefs and other participants] or I think because the cooking is obviously the main thing it takes up a lot of time and then you want to eat obviously. . . It’s quite hard to get that conversation going.

(Participant 1, December 2020)

And:

The difficulties of doing things virtually is that you never know when to properly interject without interrupting.

(Participant 3, December 2020)

Some offered helpful suggestions for improving the online experience:

Maybe that is something to look into: supporting the chefs with the technology more.

(Participant 1, December 2020)

Meanwhile, the fact that both *Breaking Bread* and *Kneading Knowledge* ran during national lockdowns meant that they were accompanied by a complex range of additional challenges. We were aware that, in the context of global crisis, we were “asking more of our participants than ever before” when inviting them to take part (Pacheco and Zaimağaoğlu 2020). This was true for the artists, for Migrateful and the chefs, for the people participating in the classes, and of course for the researchers.

In the research team alone, members were caring for their children and other relatives, home-schooling, separated from family across borders, dealing with complex health issues, trying to manage their full-time jobs, experiencing the uncertainties of furlough and management restructurings, and living with the anxieties induced by the pandemic, all while coordinating the projects. We all benefited from the learning, camaraderie, creativity, and conversations that emerged. *Breaking Bread* and *Kneading Knowledge* were bright spots in an otherwise dark period (see Figure 4, an image taken from one of the classes).



Figure 4. Preparing for a Migrateful Class. Photograph by Sarah Fine.

Yet there is no denying that conducting collaborations during a global crisis is extremely difficult. It goes without saying that these were not the best circumstances for devising and carrying out socially engaged activities. The project was itself a product of its unique context. With these limitations in mind, we would like to reflect on the ingredients for a meaningful and ethical model of engagement activities.

6. A Recipe for Success?

To conclude, we draw on what we have learned to provide our own ‘recipe’ for cooking up an effective and affective online, socially engaged research activities:

1. Start with a base stock of money but ensure that it does not overpower other ingredients.
2. Add a liberal measure of a multi-disciplinary, democratic team of collaborators to the melting pot. This could include researchers, artists, practitioners, community stakeholders, and participants. Simmer to unleash diverse expertise and experiences.
3. Add a generous dollop of self-reflexivity about power dynamics and structural inequalities, and centre the participation of stakeholders who are commonly marginalised.
4. Throw in some digital spice and taste frequently, adjusting levels of digital literacy and technical requirements as required.
5. When all the ingredients have cohered, share widely so that others can have a taste and adapt to their own contexts.

Bon appétit!

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Notes

- ¹ For further discussion of the complex intersections of 'privileges and burdens', see (Nash 2008).
- ² See for example the work of the Civic University Network at <https://civicuniversitynetwork.co.uk/> (accessed on 18 July 2023).
- ³ For more information, please visit www.migrateful.org (accessed on 18 July 2023).
- ⁴ FOOD, a fascinating Forum for Philosophy discussion between Sarah Fine, C. Thi Nguyen, Or Rosenboim, and Ahmed Sinno about food's social dimension, is available online here: <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/theforum/food/> (accessed on 18 July 2023).
- ⁵ Ahmed Sinno's contribution to FOOD, here: <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/theforum/food/> (accessed on 18 July 2023).
- ⁶ See further feedback from participants on the project's webpage, here: <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/research/breaking-bread> (accessed on 18 July 2023).
- ⁷ See Note 5.
- ⁸ For an informative examination of the use of participatory research approaches during the COVID-19 pandemic, see (Hall et al. 2021).
- ⁹ On concerns about the possibility of extractive and exploitative practices in research drawing on testimony, see (Fine 2019).

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