Learning to Dwell with Micro-Organisms

Corporeality, Relationality, Temporality

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ABSTRACT: In this article, I enquire in which ways the corona-induced lockdown in Austria has reshaped intimacy in our household by scrutinising my husband's sourdough bread-making journey. As physical distancing has thrown us back onto ourselves, my field of research is equivalent to that which is immediately available – our everyday life within the confines of domestic space, at times expanded via digital technologies. My elaborations are based on my (research) diary in which I usually conflate personal and research-related aspects of my everyday life. As, during lockdown, (entries on) bread-making and caring for sourdoughs came to play an important role, I became inspired to unfold issues of corporeality, relationality and temporality with regard to newly developing intimacies, interdependencies and modes of knowing.

KEYWORDS: body techniques, domestic space, coronavirus pandemic, intimacy, sensory ethnography, skilled practice, sourdough bread-making

'Look, how much she has grown!' – 'Wow, it's amazing how she is thriving!' – 'Look at this beauty!' – No, we do not own a pet. My husband Mau might, however, have got caught up in a relationship that resembles one between a pet and its owner. Having bought our first (rye) sourdough starter from a bakery that quickly realised home-baking was growing exponentially a couple of weeks into corona lockdown in Austria, now there was this thing in our household demanding attention and the creation of handling knowledge.

Mau takes the rye and wheat sourdough starters out of the fridge and smells their softly acid aroma. It's been two days since their last feeding, and he decides it's time to feed them again (adding a certain ratio of flour and water) to maintain the micro-organisms active. He feeds each of them in a clean glass container, puts them onto our coffee machine, now serving as incubator, marks their height with a rubber band and makes a mental note of the exact time in order to know within which time frame they double.

In this article, I carve out three aspects of (our) corona bread-making and enquire in which ways it fosters new forms of intimacy. The context of the materials discussed is the context that lockdown has thrown us into – back onto ourselves, our corporeality, our familial relationships (as a couple with two daughters aged three and eight), our domestic space: it has thrown us into constantly negotiating intimacies of different scales. Documenting and reflecting everyday life in lockdown, my diary holds a place for all kinds of seemingly banal things and doings, and as my husband had had no prior craft-hobby experience, I also started gathering his and our moments of learning, enthusiasm, joy and frustration.¹

He examines the size of the sourdoughs and the activity of the micro-organisms by inspecting the texture of the sourdoughs. Can he already spot air bubbles?

Before I continue, I want to clarify that I am not an expert, neither in fermentation nor in bread-making, neither in doing nor in talking about it (academi-

cally). I was merely struck by the emerging intimate relationship with the micro-organisms and the novel source of visceral joy through making and tasting bread sneaking into our lives. The guest editors' call sparked an anthropological curiosity to think through bread-making in order to understand (our) everyday life and the intimacies engendered under pandemic lockdown a bit better.

Mau studies the surface of the sourdoughs. As soon as the micro-organisms have created bubbles on the top and the sourdoughs have doubled in size, they are ready to be further processed.

Corporeality

Starting to make sourdough bread entails developing a novel relationship to one's corporeality. And, while bread-tasting can (unsurprisingly) be considered a multisensory experience and pleasure, the making of bread is an equally sensory undertaking, calling for the refinement of perceptual skills and the practised interpretation of sensory cues. Bread-making requires an 'attunement of the senses' (Grasseni 2004: 53). Arguing against the critique of visualism, Cristina Grasseni holds that 'skilled vision implies an active search for information from the environment, and is only obtained through apprenticeship and an education of attention' (2004: 53). *Skilled vision* in bread-making refers to understanding the micro-organisms' activity by interpreting the bubbly texture of the dough or discerning the dough's elasticity in order to verify the formation of the gluten network. Actively *smelling* (in order to know whether the sourdough has not gone too sour) and tenderly *feeling-moving* (when kneading, folding, moulding, stitching and scoring the dough) are equally crucial sensory experiences requiring interpretational skills. As Maya Hey argues in the general context of fermentation: 'Since fermented foods are constantly in a state of becoming and transformation, bodies must become attuned to biochemical changes to know when/how to eat [or continue processing] a ferment' (2017: 85).

The sourdoughs are fully activated. He slowly blends flour, water and salt into mingled portions of the activated sourdoughs (with the help of our kneading machine or by hand) and lets the dough prove for a while. The rest of the sourdoughs are put to sleep in the fridge.

A few weeks into bread-making, we had to discard our first and unnamed rye sourdough starter be-

cause it had gone sour due to our inadequate feeding conditions and intervals. Luckily, we had already received a home-grown wheat sourdough from a bread-maker friend. Having learnt about the fact that the ambient temperature makes a huge difference when feeding a sourdough, we started activating the gifted starter, which we named *Tamagochi*, on our coffee machine incubator. The machine came to play a central role in the increasing *meshwork* (Ingold 2011) of the humans', micro-organisms' and things' doings and workings.

He comes back in order to see whether the dough has leavened.

Roughly a month after having started to make our own bread, the same friend gave a bread-making Bible spelling out all kinds of technical details (and exact numbers) to my husband (see diary entry number [85] from 17 May 2020).² He had been struggling with a recipe available on a blog she had indicated to him. The bread made according to this recipe had turned out too dense, heavy and damp ([86] 18 May 2020). The frustration was huge and inevitable, as the blogger does not indicate exact kneading or proving times. She addresses experienced bread-makers, throwing them onto their corporeality, making my husband rely on his rudimentarily available experiential body knowledge to find out whether the dough is ready to be baked ([87] 19 May 2020).

Mau starts the folding process, which helps the micro-organisms establish the gluten network. In the next couple of hours, he gently coil-folds the dough every 15–30 minutes or he asks me to assume a few of these foldings if he is trapped in virtual meetings.

Three weeks and numerous breads after this frustration, he had transformed a series of individual bread-making steps into one whole smoothly working technique of the body (Mauss 1935). My software planner husband, a man of numbers, lists and detailed recipes had come to develop a new sense of corporeal self and sensorial knowing, playfully adapting recipes, varying wheat and rye flour proportions and modifying folding techniques ([97] 8 June 2020). Feeding by feeding, bread by bread he is bringing about and together the *effective* and the *traditional* that Marcel Mauss (1935) speaks of in his text on body techniques.

Following coil-folding, Mau turns the glass bowl containing the dough upside down and helps the dough glide

towards the floured kitchen countertop in order not to destroy the hard work of the micro-organisms. He employs the *bâtard* folding technique (learnt by watching the Food-geek channel on YouTube), gently extending the dough into a triangle, folding the side edges in and rolling the tip towards the opposite edge. He finalises the moulding by doing the so-called 'stitching', which helps tighten the surface of the loaf-to-be. He transfers the dough into the *banneton*, which he has already covered with a floured, textured kitchen cloth, making for an elaborate pattern on the baked bread. While the oven preheats at 250 °C, he allows the dough to prove once more before being baked. If he is still in a meeting, he asks me upfront to assume these steps too, carefully instructing me what to do when.

Relationality

Four weeks into bread-making, the urge to grow his own rye sourdough starter surfaced, which is why my husband ordered 'really good, protein-rich, organic flours' to be able to grow 'the best micro-organisms' ([76] 4 May 2020). As flour (as well as yeast) was out of stock in many places, it took them three weeks to arrive. In the meantime, he watched videos on growing sourdough in order to gain confidence.

He tenderly presses his right-hand index finger into the dough in order to check whether and how fast it pushes back. When the surface barely returns to its original state and the finger slightly sticks to it, the micro-organisms have worked well enough for the bread to be baked. At this stage, he always calls me to do the scoring. We transfer the dough from the banneton onto a pizza peel and I make one long, deep cut on the right-hand side (absorbing the force of the so-called 'oven spring') and a few short, shallow ones on the other side, creating a decorative design of wheat stalks. He instructs me to make the deep cut swiftly and to make only a few decorative cuts (instructions I like to ignore, and so I make more). I still hesitate when trying to skilfully 'mutilate' the dough and need to learn to disregard the work of husband and micro-organisms. We move the loaf onto the preheated bakestone, throw a dash of water onto the oven floor for steam development, close the oven door and decrease the temperature to 200 °C.

'He takes such good care of his sourdough-pets. *Tamagochi* is thriving anyway. *Fedozinha* [Portuguese for 'the small smelly one', the rye sourdough being grown] has already grown strong after four days of affecting nourishing, cherishing and feeding. . . . It is amazing how fast a sourdough can be cultured' ([95]

1 June 2020). My husband became all sentimental when making the first 'proper' bread with *Fedozinha* and told me that his sourdoughs feel 'like an extension. If I die, *Fedozinha* is going to persist' ([97] 8 June 2020). The intimacy, the responsibility for the micro-organisms and the experienced and cultivated interdependence had become intense, bringing with them this sourdough-oriented temporal reorganisation. Taking care of *Tamagochi* and *Fedozinha* and baking bread are not only shaped by our family's desire for bread but by their own development and needs. Getting to know (the workings of) micro-organisms also implied realising that we have entered a mutual relationship of giving and taking.

For the next 20 minutes, we are practically stuck to the oven, watching the bread grow and the scoring develop, being in awe and filled with astonishment, sharing pride in each other and at times also slight anger at each other (e.g. when I made too deep or too many cuts or when the dough did not seem to rise as much as expected, indicating that something must have gone wrong along the way).

This dynamic relationship puts the human merely at one end of the line, decentralising them or their agency within this meshwork of 'entangled lines of life, growth and movement' (Ingold 2011: 63). Micro-organisms cannot be controlled. One needs to 'work with' instead of 'on' them (Hey 2017: 88; original emphasis). Bread-making therefore involves a vibrant entanglement of the human providing ideal conditions for the micro-organisms to thrive; the micro-organisms processing the flour and producing the air bubbles which make for the air pockets of baked bread (Hey 2017); the incubator affording the perfect ambient temperature for the micro-organisms to do their work; the human providing the flour, water, salt (added at a later stage of bread-making), and the oven (heat). Not to forget the eager tasters and demanders of fresh and crunchy bread. My husband does not make bread solely for his own pleasure. 'Making bread gives me pleasure, and I see that eating this bread gives pleasure to you and our daughters, making it an even more pleasurable endeavour', he told me a couple of weeks back, suggesting a kind of double principle of pleasure. Hobby bread-making, as well as crafts such as knitting (Arantes 2020), is a relational practice. Making as well as its result are aimed at a recipient with whom an affectionate relationship exists or is intended, rendering these relations concrete. Relationality in the case of bread-making encompasses the intimate and mutual relationship between the micro-organisms and the human as well as stresses

the role of the recipients and eager demanders of crispy fresh bread.

Both of us come back regularly in order to check the development of the bread.

Temporality

In lockdown week number four, the first sourdough bread ever made in this household was ready to be tasted. We were both amazed that we did it. 'Turns out, making bread is quite a tedious process, and if you don't add up all the individual steps and the waiting [= proving] time upfront to get a feeling for how long it takes until the bread is finished, it is only done at midnight and sufficiently cooled at 1:00 am, like in our case' ([59] 13 April 2020).

The smell dispersing homeliness in the whole apartment becomes inescapable.

Learning to make sourdough bread involved continuously learning to temporally and ritually integrate making sourdough bread into our newly acquired lockdown everyday life. Bread went into the oven long after our daughters had gone to bed, leaving pleasant surprises for them when they woke up. It was baked in the (earlier-than-usual) morning hours after the dough had proven overnight, or in the late afternoon, providing us with warm bread for breakfast or dinner. At times, my husband would additionally make (mostly non-sourdough based) breads late at night, which helped him to take his mind off work for the day. Nocturnal bread-making functioned as rite of passage, facilitating the shift from work to leisure, a role previously assumed by the half-hour train commute ([82] 14 May 2020).

Baking time is almost over, and we decide to tap on the loaf's underside. The centre does not sound fully baked yet as the sound is a bit too muffled. We return the loaf to the oven.

We now know, a sourdough bread can easily take between four and twelve hours of proving, 'forcing' us to make bread by drawing on a flexibilised division of labour at times ([68] 25 April 2020). The juxtaposed narrative (resulting from condensed diary entries) depicts and evokes the sometimes irritating but mostly welcome interruptions due to the intervallic process of bread-making. The illustrated ideal-typical process results from around 10 weeks

of trial-and-error learning and temporally accommodating intervallic sourdough bread-making which gradually came to assume the role of chatting with colleagues over a cup of coffee in the office kitchenette. The home office makes one particularly prone to working long stretches because these at times unplanned interruptions stemming from the co-presence of colleagues are missing. Bread-making (in addition to our daughters) adopted the function of an (external) force causing a temporary change of context and structuring our workflow, with this back-and-forth between the (improvised) office and our kitchen perfectly simulating the oscillations between company office and office kitchen.

We return and check the sound of the bread again. It is hollow – the bread is ready. The loaf feels light, the crumb must have turned out well. We turn off the oven and transfer the bread onto the grid for it to cool. The girls are already eager to taste it.

Epilogue

In this article, I have disentangled three interwoven aspects of my husband's bread-making journey in and enabled by pandemic lockdown. Under full-time office working conditions, this intense acquisition of bread-making knowledge and the fostering of these various intimate relationships would probably not have been possible.

After impatiently waiting for half an hour, we make the first cut. Only fresh bread manages to create such a lively, powerful sound when being sawed. We inspect the crumb, scrutinize the scoring and are (usually) delighted. It is full of well-sized air pockets. Our daughters and us are amazed and literally devour this wonderful ratio of crispy crust and soft, slightly moist crumb, merely spreading a bit of soft butter onto it. Bread is not only a source of nutrients or a means to satisfy hunger anymore. It has turned into a multisensory and communal spectacle evoking and unfolding our corporeality and sensoriality anew each time.

In times of disruptions of familiar routines which usually shape the rhythms of our daily lives, it is maybe not surprising that we allow micro-organisms to recreate a kind of externally determined rhythmicity and to restore a sense of an organised and structured everyday life. Moreover, home bread-making furnishes a feeling of agency within the intimate scope of domestic space, making a small part of everyday life in unstable and insecure times a little more controllable

and manageable. It enables a celebration of creativity and agency within the limited realm of possibility ([60] 14 April 2020). The only questions remaining are: How will we manage to insert this bread-making routine into post-corona, back-to-normal everyday life ([68] 25 April 2020), and who will take care of *Tamagochi* and *Fedozinha* when we travel to attend my brother's wedding next week?

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Notes

1. As the making process came to be rather smoothly distributed among both of us, I unsystematically vary between talking about *us* and *him*. It is, however, safe to say that the relationship between the micro-organisms and him is stronger than between me and them, as it was he who intensely immersed himself into this process of rapid knowledge acquisition and the relational dynamics that it entailed.
2. All subsequent diary entries are referred to using a short citation system of entry number and date of entry. Translations are by the author.

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