

Cite: Flora, C., Karatsareas, P., Lytra, V. and Pepe G. (2025) “Beyond participants–researchers–research outsiders: food talk and the (co-)construction of knowledge in multi-sited participatory ethnography” in Aikhenvald, A. Y., Storch, A. and Velupillai, V. (eds) *Language in Strange and Familiar Places: Linguistic Research in Uncharted Territories*, 223-256. Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton.

Beyond participants–researchers–research outsiders: food talk and the (co-)construction of knowledge in multi-sited participatory ethnography

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ABSTRACT

In participatory ethnography, the boundaries between participants and researchers often become blurred, as both parties routinely shift roles throughout the knowledge construction process. This blurring contests and challenges the traditional power dynamics imposed by the research process. In this paper, we discuss how the design of a pilot project on the intersection of food, language and migration not only dismantled these barriers but also created opportunities for “research outsiders” to actively participate in the research. Conceived as a multi-sited ethnography with collaborative and sensory elements, the project brought together Italian-speaking migrants working in London’s hospitality sector and a team of researchers for a series of dinners. These dinners explored how migrants used food talk to position themselves within London’s food scene against the backdrop of Brexit and the COVID-19 pandemic. We analyse two key episodes to illustrate the complex ways in which research participants took ownership of the knowledge co-construction process. This included making bids for the conversational floor and actively supporting, shifting and extending the conversation’s agenda. Additionally, due to the public nature of the spaces where we conducted our research, non-participants with stakes in the research (a waiter and a chef) actively and knowingly contributed to the negotiation of research identities and the polyphonic narratives being co-shaped around the table. Participants and research outsiders performed various roles, interacting not only with one another but also with the research space and the sensory and physical elements around them. We consider how our research complicates the roles that participants, researchers and “research outsiders” assume in the construction of knowledge in ethnographic work and the methodological and ethical implications created by the dynamic, interconnected and shifting nature of these roles.

Keywords

Participatory ethnography, collaborative ethnography, food talk, Italian migration, hospitality industry, research identities

Introduction

Some traditional and more positivist paradigms view researchers as lone skilled investigators equipped with in-depth subject knowledge, specialised expertise, command of complex methodologies and awareness of ethical principles that collectively guide their scholarly enquiries. Research participants, on the other hand, are people who willingly engage with researchers, offering valuable insights, experiences and perspectives relevant to the investigation at hand. In ethnographic work, where researchers seek to capture the richness and complexity of human interaction and immerse themselves in particular sociocultural contexts, the lines that distinguish researchers and research participants often become blurred. In collaborative and participatory ethnography, in particular, researchers and research participants move routinely between positions during the knowledge (co-)construction process (Papen 2020). Often, the public nature of ethnographic research sites means that almost anyone present during the research can become a research participant, irrespective of their inclusion in the original research design. This is even more likely in what Wessendorf sees as semipublic spaces (for example, libraries, community centres, religious sites), that is, social infrastructures that function as “spaces where people make connections across differences” (2022: 154). In her recent ethnography among the Sylheti-speaking community of Tower Hamlets in London, Winstanley (2024), for example, found that people who overheard conversations she was having with core research participants often joined in of their own volition and offered insights, thus becoming “ad hoc” participants who contributed further ethnographic layers to the study. By ethnographic layers, we refer to the multiple and interconnected (historical, cultural, social, economic, political, spatial, temporal, personal, situational, interactional) dimensions that shape the contexts in which ethnographic work is done.

In this article, we ask what happens when perceived research outsiders (or “eavesdroppers”, in Winstanley’s [2024] terms) unexpectedly negotiate research participant positions; how these temporary positions are defended and justified; and who ratifies them, how and under what conditions. We understand ethnography as a qualitative methodological framework that allows sociolinguists and applied linguists (in the sense of Pennycook 2021) to explore language practices and the sociocultural contexts in which they occur, often integrating autoethnography to examine the researcher’s own experiences alongside those of the research participants (Ellis 2004, Rampton 2007). Similarly to other related fields, such as language documentation, which involves a researcher or a team working hand-in-hand with community members to collect linguistic data (Aikhenvald 2013, Dixon 2011), the ethnographic approach involves immersive fieldwork, whereby researchers engage in participant observation, interviews and analysis of naturalistic language use within specific communities and sociocultural contexts (Blommaert & Jie 2010). The goal is to uncover how language is embedded in social interactions and the functions it fulfils, focusing on meaning-making and issues such as identity, power dynamics and language ideologies. Ethnographic

and autoethnographic research in these fields emphasises “thick description” (Geertz 1973), detailed accounts of contextually situated language practices placed within broader social and cultural contexts. Researchers also engage in reflexivity, critically examining how their own linguistic backgrounds and experiences and their interactions with participants shape the data and its interpretation.

Our distinct focus is on London’s Italian foodscapes, the spaces where people acquire, prepare, experience and talk about food that is constructed and promoted as Italian (MacKendrick 2014). We draw on a multi-sited collaborative ethnographic project as part of which we hosted three dinners for people who had migrated from Italy to London and, at the time of the research, were working in the city’s hospitality industry. Each dinner was held at a different Italian restaurant, the type of semipublic space that, as Wessendorf notes, not only facilitates ethnographic participation but is also generative of negotiation across research actor positionings. Research actors are all the individuals, groups or institutional and other entities that are involved in, contribute to or are impacted by the research process, ranging from the researchers and research participants to various stakeholders such as ethics committees, funding bodies, policy makers, community leaders or organisations for which the research outcomes may be relevant. Here, we take a close look at how a waiter at the first restaurant we visited and a chef at the third restaurant knowingly became part of our ethnography and how they contributed to the knowledge (co-)production process of our project, which sought to investigate the nexus of food, language and migration in post-Brexit and post-COVID-19 London. Brexit and the pandemic have significantly impacted Italian hospitality in London through labour shortages, supply chain disruptions and operational changes. London’s diverse population, its status as an economic hub and its competitive hospitality sector further amplify these effects, making the city’s Italian hospitality scene uniquely challenging and dynamic. This context underscores the relevance and significance of our study.

In what follows, we illustrate how the research design of the project not only enabled the dismantling of the barriers between researchers and research participants but also created affordances for these two research outsiders to insert themselves into the research. We position our work within collaborative and participatory ethnography (Lassiter 2005, Budach 2020), an epistemological frame which values the integration of multiple voices and experiences and creates spaces for everyone involved in the research process to contribute meaningfully to collective meaning-making. Our aim is to contribute to work in this field by arguing for the need to expand our understanding of who counts as a research participant and to embrace the unexpected and fleeting elements of this kind of approach to knowledge co-construction. Blackledge and Creese note that ethnography has moved “away from the singular perspective of the academic researcher, to amplify instead the voices of research participants, researchers, collaborators and bystanders” (2023: 3). The mention of bystanders is highly pertinent to our study. Our close analysis of interactional episodes from two ethnographic sites serves as an argument in favour of being open to the potential that individuals who happen to be present in the spaces where the ethnography unfolds may contribute to the co-construction of knowledge alongside the researchers and the “legitimate”

research participants despite not having been part of the original research design. Rather than treating this possibility as a problem that may side-track researchers, we seek to celebrate it as part of the inherent uncertainty of ethnographic fieldwork that can – and often does – create opportunities for the unpredictable enrichment of meaning-making processes with local insights, adding further layers of nuance to the ethnographic accounts produced by researchers (see Winstanley 2024).

In what follows, we present the theoretical framework within which we conducted our project. We move on to present our methodology in detail, including the empirical context of Italian migration and hospitality in London, as well as relevant information on our “legitimate” research participants. We then analyse two episodes from our ethnography in which the invisible lines between researchers, research participants and research outsiders were crossed, leading to our reflection on knowledge (co-)production in collaborative ethnography.

An embodied perspective on doing collaborative ethnography in liminal research spaces

Liminal encounters in collaborative ethnography

Budach (2020) states that collaboration forms a fundamental part of all ethnographic work regardless of the research area or the theoretical framework guiding the work. The participation of people is always solicited in ethnographic projects, whether they are consultants offering insights into the sites and contexts at the centre of the ethnographic investigation, colleagues contributing as co-researchers, or “friendly listeners” (Budach 2020: 198) with whom researchers discuss their research and brainstorm interpretations of research findings and who, depending on research design, may be considered co-participants. Collaborative ethnography, in particular, embraces the polyphonicity of ethnographic research and the benefits that can be gained from integrating “different voices, different experiences, different funds of knowledge” (Gregory & Lytra 2012: 209) in ethnographic accounts. Creese and Blackledge (2012) argue that collaborative ethnography can help to address some of the challenges a non-collaborative ethnography – that is typically undertaken by lone researchers – may pose in reconstructing and recontextualising the lived experiences and everyday practices of researched others. Reflexivity is a key element in this process as researchers engage metapragmatically with the voices and relations between themselves as reporter-narrators and their interlocutors. This creates opportunities for ethnographers to articulate clearer understandings of the meaning-making processes that unfold in ethnographic sites, which can be complex, with representations constantly mediated and shaped by the histories, biographies and ideologies of the researchers themselves.

However, not all ethnographic frameworks explicitly foreground this collaborative and polyphonic dimension in their methodologies. At the same time, frameworks that do take a collaborative orientation may tend to focus on the collaboration between members of ethnographic research teams, critically reflecting on how knowledge is produced within the team. In both cases, power imbalances may be created. These can be between unequally

positioned members within research teams – an issue Creese and Blackledge (2012) address (see also the critique in Clerke & Hopwood 2014) – as well as between ethnographers and ethnographic research subjects who do not take part in the co-construction of knowledge (Alonso Bejarano et al. 2019). Another possibility is that researchers' interpretations are too academic and inaccessible, or are even deemed irrelevant by and for the ethnographic subjects and the communities they belong to more broadly (Alonso Bejarano et al. 2019).

Collaborative ethnography, in the sense of Lassiter (2005), responds to these issues by explicitly and deliberately creating spaces, opportunities, processes and affordances for research subjects to contribute agentively and meaningfully to the production of knowledge alongside the researchers. The distinct emphasis that it places on the collaboration between researchers and subjects runs through every stage of the research process, from the conceptualisation of the research project to the collection of the data and, finally, the writing of (at least some or some types of) research outputs. Collaborative ethnography thus strives for more equity and trust in the relations between everyone who becomes involved in the research, reflecting broader shifts in the social sciences towards inclusivity, reflexivity and increased attention to the researchers' moral and ethical responsibilities towards research subjects (Patiño-Santos 2020). This narrowing of the division between the researchers and the researched is evident, among other ways, in the terms used to refer to and describe research subjects. As Lassiter puts it, research subjects in collaborative ethnography are viewed as “consultants – who are engaged not as ‘informants,’ but as co-intellectuals and collaborators who help to shape our ethnographic understandings, our ethnographic texts, and our larger responsibility to others as researchers, citizens, and activists” (2005: 79).

In blurring the traditional boundaries between researchers and research subjects, this constructivist and interpretivist approach foregrounds the collective and cooperative formations of what Piazza refers to as “spontaneous and non-institutionalised *communitas*” (2019: 4). We consequently view collaborative ethnographic encounters as constituting liminal spaces (Turner 1967), that is, zones in which everyone present moves constantly in and out of their experiences, assuming different roles each time and working together with others to make meaning on an equitable basis. In liminal research encounters of this type, new knowledge emerges from the “ongoing movement between the emic and the etic, yielding a ‘both/and’ perspective” (Enosh & Ben-Ari 2016: 580), with reflexivity forming a fundamental part of the transformative processes that interactants engage in as they negotiate their identities within the research process to which they actively contribute. Indeed, the ethnographic encounters that we focus on in this article are examples of the processes that Piazza, Turner, and Enosh and Ben-Ari describe. Details of our research sites and methods are given below. Suffice it to mention here that, through the group dinners that we hosted, a temporary *communitas* was created where we as researchers, five research participants and several research outsiders came together, joined by a sense of shared interest in food, language and the migrant experience. Not one person who was part of our project had only one hat on throughout our multi-sited ethnography. We, the authors, temporarily transformed from being researchers to being passive observers and back; fleeting bystanders became research subjects; detached information providers became invested research partners.

Everyone around our dinner tables constantly negotiated different positions and took the knowledge (co-)construction process one step further each time with their contributions. Varying shared language abilities in Italian, Greek and English were vital in facilitating these interactions and fostering a deeper sense of connection and understanding among everyone present.

Embodiment

A basic tenet of our ethnographic approach is that the co-construction of knowledge that results from the collaboration between the “numerous others with whom the researcher worked during the course of a study and who made important contributions to his/her interpretation” (Wasser & Bresler 1996: 5) is not achieved solely based on linguistic means. In line with Rymes (2014), we view language as the prime but not the only semiotic resource that people have in their communicative repertoires and which they use to communicate. In every communicative encounter – including in the encounters between researchers, research subjects and research bystanders that occur in ethnography – meaning emerges holistically from the momentary and simultaneous assemblages of both human and non-human (or material) participants (Pennycook & Otsuji 2017). Kusters et al. draw attention to an extensive range of semiotic resources that can be deployed: “speech, eye gaze, the mutual orientation of the bodies of the interlocutors, the material structure of the surround, objects (such as products for sale, or materials with which people work), environmentally coupled gestures” (2017: 225). In this, and in our approach, objects (such as food) can become central elements in interaction as human interactants point to them, refer to them, name them and touch them, thus imbuing them with meaning and semiotic value. Such human and non-human assemblages are produced, perceived and socially interpreted through the human body as a source of knowledge and agency, including through the senses and embodied practices such as laughter. Bucholtz and Hall’s call for an embodied sociocultural linguistics, which conceptualises the body not as secondary to language but “as the sine qua non of language” (2016: 174), is relevant here. Such an embodied and material perspective can advance our understanding of how indexical meaning is produced through contextualised interactions that are both discursive and, at the same time, enabled and constrained by the physical possibilities of human bodies and other objects that are present in the spaces and places where interactions happen (see Pennycook 2017).

In our research, we observed how participants used hand movements to describe the preparation of food, while waiters serving our tables often acted as instructors, demonstrating the proper way to eat specific dishes using their hands. In other instances, gestures added meaning to the spoken words, indicating a shared understanding of the communicative act. The positioning of bodies within the research spaces we created played a crucial role in our analysis of how research identities were constructed and projected. Below, we analyse the case of a waiter who entered the research space without being granted access, contrasting it with the case of a chef who respected the participants’ spatial boundaries. Our positioning around the table, whether seated at round tables or rectangular ones, significantly influenced how conversations unfolded, often leading to the formation of small groups and the emergence of different themes. Our bodies also had to adapt to various environmental factors,

such as background noise, loud music or the silence of the setting. Finally, we observed how bodies became integral to the research process, sometimes acting as agents to include others in the research space. In some instances, participants would interact with research instruments like the recorder or engage with other research elements, such as the restaurant menus and the food.

The research context: Italian migration to London and the hospitality sector

London has historically been a significant destination for Italian migrants. Even though it never attracted as large numbers of people as other parts of the world, like the United States of America and Australia during the 19th and 20th centuries (Gabaccia 2013), it did draw smaller groups, which, especially in the 19th century, settled in central areas like Holborn and Clerkenwell, famously dubbed London's "Little Italy", and contributed to London's service industries such as the hospitality, catering and food handling sectors (Sponza 1988, 2005). From 1841 to 1891, 24% of all Italians living in Holborn worked as ice cream makers and dealers (Sponza 2002). The number of people migrating from Italy to London remained relatively low until the beginning of the 21st century, with occasional fluctuations linked to historical events such as the "return" to Italy of Italian "prisoners of war", Italians who were captured and detained by the British forces during the Second World War (Sponza 1993), and the increase in the number of Italian immigrants after the UK became a member of the European Union in 1973.

This state of affairs changed dramatically after the 2007–2008 global economic crisis (henceforth "the crisis"), which catalysed significant intra-European Union migration facilitated by EU freedom of movement rights (Pratsinakis et al. 2020). According to Eurostat (2024) data, 1,714,720 people left Italy between 2011 and 2021, with the highest number of emigrants (179,505) recorded in 2019. The UK, and London in particular, emerged as the preferred destination of this "new" movement of people, the magnitude of which was captured by the 2011 and 2021 censuses for England and Wales. In the period between the two counts, the number of UK residents who were born in Italy more than doubled, from 134,619 in 2011 to 276,670 (+105.5%), and the number of people who reported having Italian as their main language increased by 73.5%, from 92,241 in 2011 to 160,010 in 2021 (Office for National Statistics 2022, 2023). The most recent critical moment in this brief history is the exit of the UK from the European Union. Di Iasio and Wahba (2023) found that, even before Brexit came into effect, migration inflows from the EU (including Italy) to the UK had declined, the emigration of EU migrants had increased, and net migration flows from EU countries to the UK had fallen. Since 31 January 2020, Italian citizens have needed visas to relocate to the UK for work.

In the years following the crisis, the post-2008 cohort of migrants was largely portrayed in homogenising terms as part of an elite demographic of young and highly skilled graduates who used academic credentials to secure highly profitable jobs in Northern Europe, the USA and elsewhere (Conti 2012, Sanfilippo 2017, Scotto, 2015). Pepe (2021, 2022) has, however, argued that this brain-drain depiction is not only inaccurate but also deeply

ideological when promoted by Italian media and the Italian government, who seek to differentiate “new” Italian migrants both from “old” migrants – especially those who arrived or remained in the UK after WWII, the majority of whom came from socio-economically deprived parts of Italy and are widely stereotyped as low-skilled, uneducated workers (Gjergji 2015) – and from the broad range of people who have migrated to Italy in recent years (economic migrants, refugees, asylum seekers). Post-2008 Italian emigration to the UK incorporates a substantial proportion of people who found employment in medium- and low-income sectors in the UK, including in hospitality, a connection that, as mentioned above, dates back several decades. Indeed, for many Italians arriving in the country after 2008, the hospitality sector offered not just a source of income but a pathway that allowed them to enhance their skills in English, build and advance their professional careers and attain the socio-economic stability that many felt they lacked in Italy, due to the recession that followed the crisis, as well as to deeply rooted structural and societal inequalities such as nepotism, cronyism, gerontocracy and an overall lack of meritocracy.

The arrival of the post-2008 migrants had a noticeable impact on London’s Italian foodscapes. Many migrants found employment in businesses that sell Italian food products (restaurants, cafés, bakeries, food shops, street food markets). Others subsequently set up their businesses to cater for and profit from new consumer markets that emerged as a result of increased migration from Italy. London’s Italian foodscapes were thus diversified in ways that often both reflected and engendered divisions between post-WWII migrants and post-2008 migrants, centred around constructions and projections of Italianness, not least in foodways, that is, in the material and symbolic practices of producing and consuming food (Di Giovine & Brulotte 2014). Compared to other countries that became destinations for Italian migrants, London provided a particularly favourable environment for Italian hospitality businesses to thrive. Londoners have a long history of openness to diverse cuisines and ingredients, dating back to the Victorian era when London emerged as a centre of the global food scene due to British colonialism (Assael 2013, Panayi 2000). From 1973, when the UK became a member of the European Economic Community, London’s Italian foodscapes also benefitted from the freedom of movement and customs concessions within the EEC and later the EU. Until the exit of the UK from the EU, high-quality ingredients could be imported from Italy at low prices. At the same time, Italian chefs and other workers could move to London with ease, contributing their expertise and professionalism to the hospitality sector.

Post-2008 migrants often reproduce stereotypical representations about foodscapes established by post-WWII migrants, which were already in place when the post-2008 cohort arrived in London. Post-2008 migrants tend to view these foodscapes as outdated at best and inauthentic at worst. They believe these foodscapes serve dishes that are no longer found in Italy. Some dishes are considered never to have been part of Italian culinary heritage (although see Grandi 2022). Other dishes are thought to have been modified to cater to British tastes or in response to the scarcity of “authentic” ingredients. Responding to these perceived shortcomings, some post-2008 migrants who became involved in the Italian hospitality industry in London strove to produce and sell food that was prepared following

(what they claim are) more legitimately authentic contemporary Italian foodways, including by promoting Italy's regional cuisines and using localised ingredients.

Naccarato et al. stress that “any examination of the ‘meaning’ of Italian food in relation to Italian culture must take into account its shifting signification across the globe” (2017: 264). It is therefore important to keep in mind that these processes of creating and projecting competing images of Italy and its past take place in a macro-socioeconomic and political context that has been shaped by the neoliberal nature of the UK hospitality industry, which is characterised by reduced government intervention, competitive business practices and a focus on profitability and efficiency; broader trends in the consumption of food in the UK, such as the increase in out-of-home eating and online food ordering (d’Angelo et al. 2020); and challenges created by Brexit and the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic led to widespread closures of hospitality businesses, significantly impacting Italian workers, with many being compelled to leave the UK or pivot to different careers. The barriers to employment that Brexit created for EU migrants exacerbated staff shortages just as the hospitality industry was attempted to rebound, when COVID-19-related restrictions eased and gradually disappeared.

A participatory ethnography of Italian migrant foodways in present-day London

Against this empirical backdrop, and building on the theoretical premises laid out above, our project set out to investigate the perceptions post-2008 migrants have about Italian food, foodways and foodscapes as they relate to their own biographies, migration trajectories and lived experiences of working in hospitality in post-Brexit, post-pandemic London. We were interested in how post-2008 migrants used their expansive sets of semiotic resources to talk about these topics as they engaged in food talk, that is, talk over, about and around Italian food (Riley & Paugh 2019). Mindful of the fact that food can serve as the basis for marking out cultural identities and social differences – including in terms of class, race and ethnicity (Kershen 2002) – we wanted to explore the role that food played in the migration projects of post-2008 migrants, as well as in their constructing, projecting and claiming of new individual and community identities. Building on Pepe’s (2021, 2022) work, we were keen to delve deeper into how post-2008 migrants use food to differentiate themselves from post-WWII migrants (corresponding roughly to the people who migrated from Italy to the UK between 1945 and 2008), their foodways and their communicative practices.

The research participants

Five people accepted our invitation to participate in our project: one woman and four men. Several practical considerations influenced the selection of participants. Due to time constraints that were institutionally imposed and were therefore out of our control, we opted for convenience sampling. This allowed us to quickly and efficiently gather data from readily available participants who were willing to contribute to our research. While our primary aim was not to achieve a perfectly balanced representation of people (normally not a *sine qua non* in qualitative ethnographic research), we did strive to include participants from diverse

backgrounds in order to capture a broad spectrum of experiences within the Italian hospitality sector. Still, the convenience sampling approach resulted in an over-representation of men and a broadly uniform demographic profile in terms of age and education.

All participants had migrated from Italy to London since the crisis, and none spoke English when they first arrived in the British capital.

Daniela moved from Apulia to the UK in 2013. She relocated to London, where she first worked as a waiter in a Sicilian restaurant. She later changed roles to work in the kitchen, as she wanted to broaden her horizons. From there, she moved on to work for big hospitality companies and non-Italian restaurants. At the time of the research, she worked as a chef in a restaurant that served Japanese food cooked with Italian ingredients and following Italian foodways.

Alberto also came to London from Apulia, in 2012. He gained experience as a bartender and waiter in Italy and first found employment in Italian restaurants, where he worked until his English had sufficiently improved. In 2019, he opened his own bartending training school and consultancy company, utilising skills he had developed while working in the learning and development department of a well-known bar chain. At the time of the research, his entrepreneurial ventures were his primary source of income.

Davide was from Naples. He was the one who had arrived in the UK the earliest, in 2011. He moved to full-time employment in hospitality after initially working in retail and the real estate industry. He opened his own pizzeria, which enabled him to make a living when all activity in the real estate sector had ceased because of the pandemic. He was still making a living from the pizzeria when he participated in the project.

Another Apulian, Giovanni, migrated to the UK in 2015 after spending some time in Australia. He immediately found employment in the London branch of a global hotel chain and a group of private members' clubs, where he progressed to the supervisor level. At the time of the research, he was working as a floor manager in a restaurant that had changed its menu several times over the past years, transitioning from Italian to Italian/Californian and, more recently, to Japanese cuisine.

Nino migrated from the Marche, a central Italian region, in 2012 and had experience in luxury hospitality. When we conducted our research, he was a floor manager in a Michelin star restaurant. Having started as a runner, he progressed to being head waiter in one of London's most well-known hospitality venues, which serves afternoon tea, food and cocktails. He had also worked in a five-star hotel and at the same private members' club as Giovanni.

Giulia, the fourth co-author of this article, recruited all five participants, drawing on the networks she had developed as part of her previous studies of post-2008 migration from Italy (Pepe 2021, 2022). In fact, Alberto and Daniela had informally participated in those studies. Although they had not been official participants in her previous investigation, Alberto, Daniela and Davide were well-acquainted with Giulia's research interests. They were friends with her and had attended an event where she presented her PhD research findings on post-2008 Italian

migrants. In the course of their friendship, they engaged several times in reflections and debates about migrant identities, migratory and career trajectories and the impact of those on their languaging practices. When Giulia's research interests narrowed to focus on Italian migrants working in the hospitality sector, Alberto, Daniela and Davide immediately agreed to be involved in the project. They participated both as subjects and in helping to recruit additional participants. Recruiting participants through the friendship network of a research team member facilitated trust building. However, it also introduced preconceived notions about the research focus. Some participants within Giulia's close network had heard about the project before formally becoming part of the research, and had also talked to other potential participants about it. As part of these discussions, they had formed some expectations about the aims of the research. For example, some participants were keen to suggest that the research should move in a quantitative direction by creating and distributing surveys among Italian hospitality workers in London to capture their experiences in numerical terms. In this article, we reflect, among other issues, on how levels of familiarity, trust and participants' prior assumptions about researchers' expectations shape the dynamics of ethnographic research.

Research sites, methods and data

Our methodology had a strong collaborative and participatory element. We invited participants to attend three group dinners, where at least two of us were present as researchers. We aimed to create the social, sensory and affective conditions for everyone around the dinner table to engage in food talk and to share their views and experiences in focus-group-like encounters. We decided to hold each dinner in a different Italian restaurant, carefully selecting the three restaurants with the aim of providing various types of sensory and food-related stimuli each time – in relation to the history of Italian migration to the UK, the ties between different cohorts of Italian migrants in the UK diaspora and the links between those and Italian food and foodways. These stimuli included the distinct tastes and flavours of the dishes, the smell of the food and the way the food was plated and presented, as well as the mouthfeel and texture of the food. We held the first dinner at Luigi's (pseudonym), which was opened by post-WWII migrants. The second dinner was held at O Sole Mio (pseudonym), a small, high-quality pizzeria that opened after 2008. The third restaurant, Terra Nostra (pseudonym), was also a post-2008 addition to London's food scene but a higher-end one than O Sole Mio. It served southern Italian food, combining culinary traditions with contemporary cooking techniques. The locations of the restaurants were not incidental. They contribute to the broader narrative of Italian migration, the evolution of Italian cuisine in London and the varying social and cultural contexts in which our dining experiences were situated. Luigi's is located in a busy area of Central London that is popular with tourists and office workers. The restaurant therefore caters to a diverse and transient clientele whose perceptions and expectations of Italian cuisine are likely to differ from those of people born and raised in Italy. O Sole Mio is situated in a North London neighbourhood that has undergone significant gentrification in recent years. Its position on a main yet not overly busy street gives it the atmosphere of a neighbourhood eatery, a trusted local spot where residents seek high-quality comfort food. On the other hand, Terra Nostra is located in

a more affluent part of North London, providing the perfect setting for a high-end restaurant of this character. Its main patrons include well-off locals and theatre-goers, who come with high expectations of the food, drink and service quality.

In what follows, we present the analyses of the multilingual interactions that took place at Luigi's and Terra Nostra. We have selected excerpts that trouble the dyadic researcher–research participant relationship and that exemplify the unexpected insertion of two research outsiders into the research space, one waiter and one chef, as they negotiated research participant positions. Interactions were mainly facilitated by Giulia and were predominantly in Standard Italian, with occasional switches to the participants' Italo-Romance languages (for example, Neapolitan) and regional varieties of Italian. Christina, Petros and Vally used English to interact with the participants and Greek to converse among themselves. Participants also occasionally used English, in their otherwise Italian productions, to refer to aspects of London's hospitality industry and other facets of UK life. We used discourse analysis to analyse transcripts of the interactions around the dinner tables, which we recorded using voice recorders and one smartphone. We also provide stills from videos we recorded of the dinners using a different smartphone. All dinners took place on weekday evenings, during the regular opening hours of the three restaurants. We did not arrange private bookings. This meant that other tables and customers surrounded the tables where we sat. All three restaurants were busy when we visited them, which created some difficulties regarding where to place the tripod for the video-recording smartphone. The videos we recorded therefore capture one aspect of each dinner rather than a 360° view of the communicative event. For this reason, we have used the video data to supplement the analysis of the transcripts.

We conducted a multimodal analysis aimed at capturing various sensory, auditory, visual and emotional aspects that enriched communication during our data collection. Our holistic approach included a detailed conversation analysis of the recordings, intertwined with reflections on the locations where the dinners took place. We examined the participants' positioning and their reactions to various elements of the physical context, such as background noise and music, gestures and the behaviour of staff. Additionally, we studied sensory elements that influenced the participants' discourse, including the tastes, smells, colours and textures of the food served. We also considered visual elements that captured the attention of those around the dinner table, including the menus, the interior design of the restaurants (furniture, lighting, decorations) and table settings.

We selected two main episodes for our analysis. In the first episode, participants interacted with a waiter, while in the second episode, they engaged with the head chef of the restaurant. These interactions highlighted how the restaurant staff, initially not included as participants in our research design, became part of our research space. The two episodes represent the contrasting locations where we conducted our fieldwork. The first episode occurred during the dinner in Luigi's noisy, loud and relaxed environment. In contrast, the second episode happened during the Terra Nostra dinner, a formal, almost silent, low-key setting where refined contemporary Italian food was served. These differences were reflected, among other things, in how restaurant staff approached and served our tables, which in turn

shaped the communication and dynamics between everyone around the tables. It is important to note that participants were informed about our restaurant choices well before the actual dinners were held, with some even contributing to the selection of some of the three locations. Some participants mentioned that they had checked online reviews and the websites of the restaurants beforehand.

The fluidity of research identities: two emblematic episodes

The waiter at Luigi's

Luigi's is found in a busy part of Central London, in one of the areas where 19th and 20th century migrants found work as waiters and kitchen porters. It has a stereotypically Italian brand name, consisting of a man's proper name followed by the possessive -'s, and utilises an extensive range of strategies to foreground its Italianness. The restaurant name is written in red and green font, the colours of the Italian flag, while the tables in the external part of the restaurant, which are visible to anyone walking along the street, are laid with red and white chequered tablecloths. When we visited, the restaurant's soundscape was dominated by 1990s Italian pop music. There were television screens on every wall, projecting slide shows of photographs of famous people who had visited the restaurant.

The menu (Figure 1) included a large number of dishes, some of which were popular in Italy in the 1980s, such as *penne aurora* and *penne alla vodka*. Participants noted both these details and considered them problematic. They thought the extensive menu was an indication that the quality of the food would not be good, as no chef could possibly manage to prepare each dish to perfection. The inclusion of outdated dishes was judged as a sign that the menu was never updated and did not take into account seasonality and the quality and freshness of ingredients. The menu was bilingual in Italian and English, with occasional spelling mistakes in Italian; for example *penne alla arabiata* rather than *all'arrabbiata*. Participants commented on these mistakes, assessing Luigi's as a "British Italian" restaurant and, therefore, not an authentically Italian establishment.



	
PRE STARTERS	
Olives	£4.95
Bread Basket with Olive Oil and Balsamic Vinegar	£5.95
Garlic Pizza Bread	£7.25
Garlic Pizza Bread Tomato or Cheese	£9.25
Spicy Garlic Pizza Bread with Balsamic Glaze	£9.25
STARTERS	
Avocado All'agro Avocado Vinaigrette	£9.20
Avocado con Gamberetti Avocado with Prawns	£11.20
Insalata con Mozzarella Mozzarella Cheese Salad with Tomato	£10.75
Insalata di Mare Seafood Salad	£13.20
Insalata di Rucola e Parmigiano 	£9.50
Rocket Salad with Parmesan Shavings	£10.00
Coppa di Gamberetti Prawn Cocktail	£11.20
Antipasto di Salumi Misti Mixed Italian Salami	£10.75
Prosciutto e Melone Parma Ham and Melon	£12.20
Bresaola e Rucola Cured Beef, Rocket Salad with Parmesan	£16.70
King Prawns Rucola 	£16.70
Pan-fried King Prawns with Chilli and Garlic on a Bed of Rocket Salad	£11.20
Insalata Tricolore 	£14.20
Mozzarella Cheese, Tomato and Avocado Salad	£16.20
Calamari Fritti Deep Fried Squid	£13.20
Carpaccio Sliced Raw Fillet Steak with Parmesan and Rocket Salad	£13.20
Cozze Marinara Mussels in Marinara Sauce	£13.20
Capesante alla Sergio's Pan-fried King Scallops with Chilli and Garlic	£13.20
SOUPS	
Minestrone di Verdure Vegetable Soup	£7.45
Pasta e Fagioli Pasta with Beans	£7.45
Ravioli in Brodo Ravioli in Chicken Broth	£7.45
MAIN COURSES	
Pollo Sorpresa Chicken Kiev	£20.95
Pollo alla Valdostana Chicken Breast with Ham and Cheese	£20.95
Pollo Sergio Chicken with Cream, Tomato and Mushrooms	£20.95
Pollo Milanese Chicken in Breadcrumbs	£20.95
Pollo Principessa Chicken in Breadcrumbs, Asparagus and Tomato	£20.95
Bistecca alla Griglia Scotch Sirloin Steak	£28.95
Filetto alla Griglia Grilled Fillet Steak	10oz - £29.95 15oz - £36.95
Scaloppa alla Milanese Veal in Breadcrumbs	£23.95
Costolette di Agnello Grilled Lamb Cutlets	£26.50
Scaloppine al Limone Veal in Lemon Sauce	£23.95
Scaloppine alla Crema Veal in Cream and Mushroom Sauce	£23.95
Scaloppine al Marsala Veal in Marsala Wine Sauce	£23.95
Salmone Fresh Salmon with Lemon and Parsley	£22.95
Sergio's Cod Provençale 	£23.45
Tomato Sauce, White Wine, Oregano, Garlic	£23.45
Branzino Della Casa 	£24.95
Seabass with Prawns, Courgettes and Tomatoes	£25.95
Rana Pescatrice di Rospo Monkfish with Capers and White Wine	£20.95
Risotto ai Gamberoni King Prawn with Thyme & Brandy Sauce	£32.95
Gamberoni Grigliato con Vegetali Grilled King Prawn, Vegetables	
All main courses come with a selection of three vegetables including sautéed potatoes, or choose any pasta from the menu for £5.45	
EXTRA SIDE ORDERS	
Spinach £5.95 Mushrooms £5.70 Broccoli £5.70	
Cauliflower £5.70 Sauté Potatoes £5.70 French Fries £5.70	
Green Salad £6.20 Mixed Salad £6.20	
Peppercorn Sauce £5.70 Four Cheese Sauce £5.70	
PASTA all pastas contain	
Spaghetti Napoli with Tomato Sauce and Basil	£12.45
Spaghetti alla Bolognese with Minced Beef Sauce	£15.45
Tagliatelle alla Carbonara with Egg, Bacon and Cream	£15.00
Penne Aurora Penne in Cream, Tomato, Basil and Ricotta Cheese	£15.00
Tagliatelle alla Marinara with Seafood and Tomato Sauce	£18.45
Ravioli alla Principessa 	£16.45
Home-made Ravioli, Butter, Asparagus & Parmesan Cheese	£16.00
Lasagna Vegetariana Layered with vegetable, cheese & home made sauce	£18.45
Spaghetti alle Vongole with fresh Clams	£15.00
Tagliatelle ai Funghi with Cream and Mushroom Sauce	£15.45
Paglia e Fieno al Pesto with Basil and Garlic	£18.45
Bucatini al Tonno with Tuna Fish, Olives and Tomato Sauce	£15.95
Paglia e Fieno con Broccoli with Broccoli and Garlic	£15.00
Penne alla Amatriciana with Bacon, Onion and Tomato	£17.45
Penne alla Vodka Tomato, Prawns, Vodka and Cream	£15.00
Penne alla Arabiata with Tomato, Garlic and Chilli	£18.45
Tagliatelle al Salmone with Cream, Spring Onions & Smoked Salmon	£18.45
Gnocchi alla Bufala with Tomato Napoli & Buffalo Mozzarella Cheese	£19.45
Paccheri Calabresi Italian Sausage served with Paccheri Pasta	£21.95
with Tomato, Onion & White Wine Sauce	
Rigatoni Meatballs Rigatoni Pasta with Home-Made Meatballs	
All pastas contain dairy and gluten.	
Please ask your waiter about the gluten- or dairy-free options.	
PIZZA all pizzas contain	
Fiorentina Egg, Spinach, Tomato and Cheese	£15.45
Rucola Tomato, Cheese, Rocket and Cured Ham	£16.00
Hawaiian Ham, Cheese and Pineapple	£14.45
Margherita with Cheese and Tomato	£14.45
Napoli Cheese, Tomato, Anchovies, Olives and Capers	£16.00
Capricciosa 	£16.00
with Cheese, Tomato, Ham, Peppers, Anchovies, Egg and Olives	£15.45
Prosciutto with Cheese, Tomato and Parma Ham	£16.00
Funghi with Cheese, Tomato and Mushrooms	£16.00
Roma with Mushrooms, Bacon, Sweetcorn, Tomato and Cheese	£16.00
Regina with Cheese, Tomato, Ham and Mushrooms	£16.45
Americana with Cheese, Tomato, Sausage, Peppers and Chillies	£17.45
Quattro Stagioni 	£16.45
with Cheese, Tomato, Mushrooms, Sausage, Ham, Artichokes & Olives	£16.00
Quattro Formaggi Four Cheeses	£17.45
Vegetariana Vegetarian with Cheese, Tomato and Vegetables	£16.00
Salsiccia e Friggittelli with Broccoli, Mozzarella and Sausage	£17.45
Ripeno Aperto Ham, Mozzarella, Buffalo Ricotta and Wild Mushrooms	£18.00
Ruspante with Cheese, Tomato, Chicken, Chilli, Red Onions and Peppers	£16.45
Calzone Folded Pizza, filled with Ham, Sausage, Cheese and Tomato	£17.45
Sergio's Special with Cheese, Tomato, Parma Ham and Artichokes	
All extra toppings £2.00 each or chicken breast for £4.45	
All pizzas contain	
Allergen Advice - foods may contain	
	
A discretionary service charge of 12.5% will be added to your bill. Thank you for your custom	

Figure 1: The menu in Luigi's, reflecting a blend of traditional and popular Italian dishes (such as *prosciutto e melone* and *spaghetti alla Bolognese*) with some elements that have been adapted to cater to a broader audience (for example, *pollo sorpresa* 'chicken Kiev' or *Cod Provençale*).

Two members of our research team were present at Luigi's, Petros and Giulia. Both can understand and speak Italian, but only Giulia is Italian herself. When we sat down, we asked participants to sign consent forms. As they completed this task, participants began inquiring about the rules of the dinners and their roles in the project. They negotiated their power, that is, the extent to which they had the ability and authority to influence the direction of the research process, choose the language they used and select what topics to discuss during the

dinners. They questioned which language style was appropriate, whether they could use informal language and swear words, and whether they were entitled to comment on various aspects of the restaurant, such as the type of lights used for decoration. We assured them that they could freely steer the conversation toward any topics they deemed relevant, thereby promoting a researcher–participant relationship that was based on the participants’ acquisition of agency, their power to direct the research and co-produce knowledge as part of the whole process. In Piazza’s (2019) terms, we sought to create a spontaneous and non-institutionalised *communitas*.

At the same time, the waiter brought us the menus, and participants began to assess them. We start by exploring the waiter’s response to the comments participants made about the menu. Moving around the table, the waiter felt the need to help participants navigate the extensive menu and guide them in their choices.

Extract 1: “Don’t be boring”. Participants: Alberto, Daniela, Davide. Researcher: Giulia.

- | | | | | |
|----|----------|-----------------------------------|----------|------------------------------------|
| 01 | Waiter: | io non posso fare finta di non | Waiter: | I can’t pretend I am not |
| 02 | | sentire se vi posso dare un | | listening if I can suggest you |
| 03 | | suggerimento non siate noiosi | | something don’t be boring |
| 04 | Davide: | esplorate | Davide: | Explore |
| 05 | Waiter: | come dicevo a lui non mi | Waiter: | as I was telling him don’t ask |
| 06 | | chiedere la cotoletta alla | | me for the <i>cotoletta alla</i> |
| 07 | | milanese la roba frita si sa e’ | | <i>milanese</i> (fried veal) fried |
| 08 | | tutta buona vedete nel menu | | stuff you know is always |
| 09 | | qualcosa che a Londra non | | good in the menu look for |
| 10 | | potete trovare o che a casa non | | something you can’t find in |
| 11 | | riuscite a fare | | London or that you can’t |
| | | | | make at home |
| 12 | Davide: | hai ragione e’ vero grazie per il | Davide: | you are right it’s true thanks |
| 13 | | consiglio | | for the advice |
| 14 | Waiter: | e ricordatevi che qua il menu e’ | Waiter: | and remember that here the |
| 15 | | solo un’idea | | menu it’s just an idea |
| 16 | Giulia: | si puo’ fare tutto? | Giulia: | you can do everything? |
| 17 | Daniela: | tutto qualsiasi cosa | Daniela: | all everything |
| 18 | Waiter: | vi ripeto non siate noiosi non | Waiter: | I repeat to you don’t be |
| 19 | | fate quelli che vengono e | | boring don’t be like those |
| 20 | | prendono la carbonara perche’ | | who come and get the |
| 21 | | sono trent’anni che mangio | | carbonara because it’s thirty |
| 22 | | carbonara non mi chiedete le | | years I eat carbonara don’t |
| 23 | | cose banali | | ask me for banal things |
| 24 | Giulia: | ma se ci piacciono le cose banali | Giulia: | but if we like banal things |
| 25 | | che facciamo? | | what shall we do? |
| 26 | Waiter: | ma allora qual e’ il senso di | Waiter: | and so what’s the purpose of |
| 27 | | venire qua e non in un altro | | coming here instead of going |
| 28 | | ristorante? | | to another restaurant? |
| 29 | Alberto: | ora ci sono un sacco di cose da | Alberto: | now there are many things to |
| 30 | | considerare fattori il budget non | | consider factor the budget |
| 31 | | essere banali | | don’t be ordinary |

32	Waiter:	il piatto forte non e' nel menu	Waiter:	the specialty of the restaurant
33				is not on the menu
34	Giulia:	non e' nel menu?	Giulia:	it's not on the menu?
35	Waiter:	lo spaghetti con i gamberoni	Waiter:	spaghetti with king prawns
36		tomato sauce king prawns garlic		tomato sauce king prawns
37		chilli olive oil otherwise un altro		garlic chilli olive oil
38		suggerimento che vi do la vedete		otherwise one more
39		la tagliatella marinara?		suggestion that I give you can
40		Dimenticate come e' scritta ve la		you see the tagliatella
41		faccio con gli spaghetti in salsa		marinara? Forget how it's
42		di vino bianco come la facciamo		described there I can make it
43		in Sicilia		with wine sauce as we make
44				it in Sicily
45	Alberto:	va bene grazie esaustivo	Alberto:	alright thank you you were
46				thorough
47	Davide:	quindi la cotoletta e' saltata let's	Davide:	so the cotoletta fell through
48		explore		let's explore

The waiter enters the conversation by expressing his inability to stay out of the discussion about food choices. Despite not being invited, he openly shows his willingness to become part of the interaction. He aims to take the lead in the participants' decisions, asserting his role as a mediator between the kitchen and the floor and establishing his authority (lines 02-03). In response, the participants engage politely with the waiter, though they lack interest in continuing the interaction. They do not ask him more questions but make short statements intended to conclude his involvement in the conversation. This is evident in Davide and Alberto's turns (lines 12-13, 29-31, 45-46). Davide thanks the waiter for the suggestion, aiming to conclude the waiter's intrusion into their decision-making, while Alberto sarcastically notes that they need to consider not only the budget imposed by the research project funds, which was discussed at the beginning of the dinner, but also the waiter's proposal that they should order off-menu dishes to avoid being perceived as boring customers. The participants, all hospitality workers, understand the peculiarity of this suggestion, knowing that servers should not judge customers' choices (at least not openly), while the opposite seems to be happening here. This is reinforced by the sarcastic tone in Daniela's utterance (line 18). Giulia is the only one to actively engage with the waiter by asking a question (lines 25-27). Nevertheless, her question challenges the waiter's suggestion, ironically noting its unusual character.

The stills in Figure 2 complement the text in Extract 1 by illustrating how the waiter inserted himself into the conversation not only discursively but also physically.

2a.

2b.



Figure 2: The waiter at Luigi's inserting himself into the research space

In Figure 2a, the waiter rests his elbows on the chairs of two participants, staring at one of the researchers. In Figure 2b, he touches the menu of one participant by leaning on him and bending over the table. Participants assessed these moves negatively, commenting on their inappropriateness and the uncomfortable feeling this type of service can leave in customers' memories. These assessments were evident in the disconnect between participants' verbal reactions to the waiter's contributions, which, as shown in Extract 1, were polite but did not encourage further conversation, and their embodied responses to the waiter's physical insertion into the research space. The participants' facial expressions indicate discomfort and embarrassment in response to what they felt was intrusive, exaggerated and excessive behaviour on the part of the waiter.

As he was about to leave the table, the waiter imitated a donkey to illustrate his point about not being stubborn "like his grandfather's donkey". When he invited participants "not to be boring", he exaggeratedly moved his hand back and forth under his chin to emphasise his point. These gestures, being part of the Italian repertoire of hand movements, were understood by the participants. However, this shared understanding did not foster the bonding the waiter hoped to achieve. The participants again avoided following the waiter's lead in the conversation and continued reading and assessing the menu, ultimately ignoring the waiter's repeated suggestions to be creative. They all went on to order dishes that were on the menu. The waiter sought to develop a connection based on national identity and professional membership, yet he failed. The participants evaluated his behaviour as unprofessional and described him as "a weird character", mocking him and using this episode as an example of poor-quality interaction between customers and restaurant staff. Although he attempted to establish himself as a legitimate participant in the interaction, his claims were not acknowledged by the research participants, who did not view him as a legitimate actor in the research. By exemplifying what authentic Italian hospitality should not be, yet perhaps how it is often perceived in places outside of Italy, the waiter became an emblematic figure, prompting reflections on the standards of quality, authentic service and the food offerings in some Italian restaurants in London. His perceived lack of professionalism was not considered to represent the genuine and culturally appropriate form of hospitality and customer interaction that participants believed are expected in Italian restaurants.

In the second part of this episode, the waiter asked about the research. He knew this visit was part of a research project, as we had obtained permission from the restaurant

manager to conduct the project on the premises. The manager informed the waiter about our research, and the waiter subsequently assisted us in finding a suitable table in the basement of the restaurant. In Extract 2, the waiter directs his question to a participant, leading to a shift in identities as the “legitimate” research participants take the lead, act as researchers and assign to the waiter the role of an informant.

Extract 2: From “guinea pigs” to knowledge producers. Participants: Alberto, Daniela, Davide. Researcher: Giulia.

- | | | | | |
|----|----------|--------------------------------------|----------|--------------------------------|
| 01 | Waiter: | mi spiegate che cosa state | Waiter: | would you explain to me |
| 02 | | facendo? | | what you are doing? |
| 03 | Daniela: | no chiedi a loro noi facciamo | Daniela: | no ask them we are part of |
| 04 | | parte dell'esperimento | | the experiment |
| 05 | Davide: | noi siamo le cavie | Davide: | we are the guinea pigs |
| 06 | Waiter: | mangiate a sbafo | Waiter: | you eat for free |
| 07 | Daniela: | noi mangiamo e beviamo e | Daniela: | we eat and drink and discuss |
| 08 | | commentiamo | | |
| 09 | Davide: | da quanti anni siete aperti qua? | Davide: | how old is this restaurant? |
| 10 | Waiter: | questo? 35 anni | Waiter: | this one? 35 years |
| 11 | Davide: | quindi dagli anni '90 '80 | Davide: | so since the 90s 80s |
| 12 | Waiter: | questo prima era un ristorante | Waiter: | this was a Turkish restaurant |
| 13 | | turco quarant'anni fa | | before forty years ago |
| 14 | Alberto: | ah ora capisco l'accozzaglia il | Alberto: | ah now I get the jumble the |
| 15 | | divanetto | | small sofa |
| 16 | Waiter: | poi e' arrivato lo zio di questo | Waiter: | then the uncle of this man |
| 17 | | signore [indicates a person] | | arrived [indicates a person] |
| 18 | | Sergio ed era veneziano lui ha | | Sergio and he was Venetian |
| 19 | | comprato il ristorante e ha | | he bought the restaurant and |
| 20 | | iniziato a fare cucina italiana e il | | he started to do Italian |
| 21 | | padre di questo signore lavorava | | cuisine and the father of this |
| 22 | | in cucina lui lavora qui da quando | | guy used to work in the |
| 23 | | aveva dieci anni e' praticamente | | kitchen he has been working |
| 24 | | creciuto insieme alle mura poi | | here since he was 10 he |
| 25 | | nel 2007 il papa' di questo | | basically grew up together |
| 26 | | signore ha deciso di vendere tutta | | with the walls then in 2007 |
| 27 | | la compagnia all'attuale | | the father of this guy |
| 28 | | proprietario che e' americano che | | decided to sell all the |
| 29 | | e' bellissimo | | company to the current |
| 30 | | | | owner who is American |
| 31 | | | | which is amazing |
| 32 | All: | ah | All: | ah |
| 33 | Waiter: | tutto in busta paga abbiamo anche | Waiter: | everything on the payslip we |
| 34 | | i premi di produzione a natale sei | | even have the bonuses we |
| 35 | | chiuso [laughing] e chi cazzo mi | | are closed at Christmas |
| 36 | | muove piu' a me da qua | | [laughing] who the hell is |
| 37 | | | | gonna move me from here ? |
| 38 | All: | ah | All: | ah |
| 39 | Giulia: | e chi ti muove piu' | Giulia: | who is going to move you? |

- | | | | | |
|----|----------|--------------------------------------|----------|---------------------------------|
| 40 | Waiter: | io lo dico sempre a loro sono la | Waiter: | I always say this I am the |
| 41 | | quinta colonna portante pero' il | | fifth column but the owner |
| 42 | | proprietario ha visto lui e ha detto | | saw him and said since you |
| 43 | | siccome sei qua da quando avevi | | have been here since you |
| 44 | | le cauzette curte il napoletano | | were a child the Neapolitan |
| 45 | | credo che mi capisce gli ha detto | | guy I think will understand |
| 46 | | fai il general manager perche' lui | | me he told him work as a |
| 47 | | conosce tutta la clientela | | general manager because he |
| 48 | | | | knows the clientele |
| 49 | Daniela: | avete una clientela di local? | Daniela: | do you have a local |
| | | | | clientele? |
| 50 | Waiter: | questa e' una zona residenziale | Waiter: | this is a residential area |
| 51 | | c'e' gente che viene da ventisei | | there are people who have |
| 52 | | anni qua | | been coming here for 26 |
| 53 | | | | years |
| 54 | Giulia: | e questa clientela e' inglese? | Giulia: | and is this clientele English? |
| 55 | Waiter: | allora voi dovete capire una cosa | Waiter: | well you have to understand |
| 56 | | un ristorante italiano in un'altra | | one thing an Italian |
| 57 | | nazione non puo' vivere con gli | | restaurant in another nation |
| 58 | | italiani | | can't survive with Italians |
| 59 | | | | only |
| 60 | Alberto: | scusami se ti interrompo se | Alberto: | sorry if I interrupt you if you |
| 61 | | dovessi fare una percentuale tra | | had to give a percentage of |
| 62 | | italiani e inglesi? | | Italians and English people? |
| 63 | Waiter: | 95% inglesi un mix tra inglesi e | Waiter: | 95% English a mix between |
| 64 | | americani e sono felice cosi' per | | English and American |
| 65 | | un semplice motivo uno sono | | people and I am happy this |
| 66 | | clienti che rispettano non mi | | way for a simple reason first |
| 67 | | interessa che stai registrando io | | they are customers that |
| 68 | | odio gli italiani all'estero | | respect you I don't care that |
| 69 | | | | you are recording I hate |
| 70 | | | | Italians abroad |

Responding to the waiter's question, participants initially reclaim their participant identities, describing themselves as "guinea pigs" taking part in an "experiment" (lines 03-05). This suggests that participants have a traditional view of research as perceived by the general public. At the same time, Daniela and Davide's responses also assign authority to Giulia and Petros as researchers. This becomes clear in Davide's suggestion that the waiter should address his question to the two researchers present. However, the waiter diminishes the role of the participants in the research (line 06). Daniela does not directly challenge his comment about eating for free but asserts the importance of the participants' contribution to the project by reminding them that, in addition to eating and drinking, they are also participants (line 08). This exchange leads to a shift in Davide's identity. As shown in line 09, he adopts a researcher role and starts to ask questions that he believes are relevant to the research. Daniela and Alberto follow suit (lines 49, 60-62). By sharing his insights into the restaurant's history and a general evaluation of what it is like to work in it, the waiter participates in the *communitas* around the table and contributes to the co-production of knowledge about Italian

hospitality in London. Ironically, he positioned his body in front of the camera as he did so, thus becoming an obstacle to the collection of video data (Figure 3). While it might seem as though this was done intentionally, there is no indication that it was purposeful. His focus appeared to be on engaging with the participants rather than on the positioning of his body in relation to the camera.



Figure 3: The waiter at Luigi's blocking the camera.

The waiter's narration of the restaurant's history relies on both verbal and non-verbal features and is connected to the objects and people surrounding the table. His turns seem to be aimed at asserting his knowledge and importance in the running of the restaurant. Until that moment, the waiter appeared oblivious to the research process. However, he openly refers to the data collection when Daniela, Alberto and Giulia inquire about the typical customers of the restaurant. He reclaims his entitlement to express opinions that might be controversial or offensive. In his final turn (lines 63-70), the waiter claims that he hates Italians abroad. This opinion is not unusual among members of the Italian community in London (Pepe 2022). In the context of hospitality, the opinion becomes relevant, as Italian customers have (or are thought to have) high expectations surrounding the authenticity of the food served in Italian restaurants. As mentioned above, they are often critical of the changes Italian cuisine has undergone outside Italy. The model of authenticity is provided by the homeland. Here, authenticity is understood as the faithful adherence to the original recipes, ingredients and cooking methods rooted in Italian culinary traditions. For a dish to be considered authentically Italian, it must align closely with how it is traditionally prepared in Italy. This includes using high-quality ingredients that meet specific Italian standards and maintaining the traditional combinations of flavours and cooking techniques. Any modification to these traditional recipes is only acceptable if it still respects the core principles and quality of Italian cuisine. Therefore, in this model, authenticity is not just about the food being Italian in name but about it faithfully representing the culinary traditions of Italy, as judged by those who are familiar with and invested in those traditions – such as Italian customers abroad.

The chef at Terra Nostra

Terra Nostra is located in a historically affluent part of North London. Under corporate ownership, it cannot easily be described as an affordable option. When we visited, the restaurant exuded an air of simplicity and elegant authenticity, successfully encapsulated in

its menu, which featured traditional Italian dishes and ingredients like stuffed courgette flowers and 'nduja (Figure 5). Structured around typical Italian restaurant menu categories (*antipasti*, *primi*, *secondi*, pizza, *contorni*, and desserts), the menu was primarily in Italian. It lacked any visual symbolism referring to Italy or Italian culture; there were no colours, images or graphic representations – just a plain black font listing the dishes and their corresponding (high) prices. The dining area was dimly lit, quiet and dominated by white marble tables and grey stone structures. A leg of *prosciutto di Parma* hanging in the background was the only overt expression of Italianness in the otherwise subdued and quiet space.

Antipasti	Pinsa Bread - Garlic 690 kcal/nduja 717 kcal/olive oil 696 kcal	5	Pizza	Margherita (V) 1254 kcal	
	Nocellara Olives (V) 289 kcal	4.5		Vegana, mixed grill veg (no cheese-VG) 938 kcal	
	Burrata, torpedino tomato, olive oil 505 kcal	12		Tropeana, tuna and red onion (no tomato sauce) 1281 kcal	
	Capocollo, giardiniera 178 kcal	10		Troppo Forte, blue cheese, 'nduja, spinach, hazelnuts (no tomato sauce) 1576 kcal	
	Spicy tuna tartare, avocado, baby gem, Grana Padano 249 kcal	13.5		Capricciosa, ham, artichokes, mushroom and olives 1687 kcal	
	Buffalo mozzarella, orange and fennel (V) 434 kcal	9.5		Siciliana, aubergine and smoked ricotta (V) 1463 kcal	
	Spicy meatballs, 'nduja, grana padano 381 kcal	10.5		Calabrese, spicy salami and 'nduja, smoked ricotta, rocket 1518 kcal	
	Stuffed courgette flower, broad beans & peas 153 kcal	11.5		Pizza wild mushrooms and truffle (no tomato sauce-V) 1528 kcal	
				Pizza puttanesca, olives, capers, anchovies (no cheese) 998 kcal	
Primi	Tagliolini, beans, pancetta, 'nduja 802 kcal	13.5	Extra toppings	'nduja 166 kcal	
	Paccheri, lamb ragout & grana padano 1044 kcal	16.5		Burrata (V) 104 kcal	
	Fettuccine, sea food 592 kcal	19		Buffalo mozzarella (V) 355 kcal	
		Truffle tagliolini (V) 759 kcal	26	Contorni	Roast potatoes (V) 607 kcal
		Asparagus orecchiette (V) 639 kcal	16		Watercress, rocket, baby gem, grana padano, tropea onion (V) 141 kcal
		Spaghetti Franceschini, grana padano riserva...(V) 804 kcal	14		Garlic and chilli spinach (VG) 108 kcal
					Deep fried zucchini (V) 390 kcal
Secondi				Torpedino tomato, tropea onion (VG) 124 kcal	
	Aubergine parmigiana (V) 1038 kcal	14	Desserts	Fior di latte ice cream with chocolate sauce (V) 224 kcal	
	Porchetta, mash potatoes, spinach and salmoriglio 1373 kcal	18.75		Lemon sorbet (2 scoops) VG 224 kcal	
	Split-roast chicken (half or whole) with roasted potatoes 1840/2378 kcal	18.5/36.5		Marsala tiramisù (V) 603 kcal	
	Seabass Guazzetto (chili) 473 kcal	26.5		Panna cotta, mascarpone cream and strawberry 596 kcal	
	Charcoal beef, bone marrow, watercress and pistachio pesto 547 kcal	26.5		Cake of the day(V) 601 kcal	
Vegetarian (V) Vegan (VG)					
If you have any food allergies or intolerances, please speak to your waiter before ordering. Please be aware that traces of allergens used in our kitchen may be present. Adults need around 2000 kcal a day. All prices are inclusive of VAT. A discretionary service be added to your bill.					

Figure 4. The menu at Terra Nostra, offering dishes rooted in traditional Italian cuisine (such as tagliolini with beans and *guazzetto*), with some inventive combinations, particularly in the creative ingredient pairings and some of the pizza options (for example, blue cheese, spinach and hazelnut).

Unlike Luigi's, which gave a sense of wanting to eliminate the distance between the people who owned it, worked there and ate there, the staff at Terra Nostra did not share this goal. They made no effort to engage with our group, and the overall ambience felt rather impersonal. One element that struck participants as particularly relevant in that respect was the restaurant's language policy. Although both the people at our table and most of the staff were Italian speakers, all interactions between staff and diners were conducted in English. Daniela explained that using English served to reinforce the distance between the floor staff and the customers, thereby maintaining a high level of formality. Participants generally considered that using English rather than Italian created a barrier, preventing the camaraderie and intimacy typically associated with less sophisticated venues (Gumperz 1982).

We focus on an episode we came to refer to as “the tiramisù incident”. The relevant interactions were set in motion when we were served two portions of tiramisù that did not appear to have been properly prepared. Both participants and researchers immediately noted

this, and Daniela, who had also worked as a pastry chef in the past, explained to Petros and Christina what she believed had gone wrong in making the tiramisú. One issue was that the consistency was watery rather than firm. This prompted Daniela to suggest to Alberto that he ask for a straw, addressing him in English to include the non-Italian-speaking researchers in the joke. The disapproving comments on the tiramisú were loudly expressed and overheard by the waiting staff, who swiftly informed the chef that we were not pleased with what we had been served. At that point, the chef came out of the kitchen and went to the table to apologise, bringing two new – and properly prepared – portions of tiramisú. He addressed everyone in Italian as a mark of camaraderie, which contrasted starkly with the exclusive use of English previously, which had created a distance between the participants and the restaurant staff. Participants expressed their belief that the aim of using Italian was to eliminate distance, create informality and establish rapport, ultimately seeking forgiveness from us as customers who had been disappointed by the food quality. This approach seemed to work. Participants said that it exemplified appropriate behaviour in hospitality, but it also created a sense of greater empathy engendered by a feeling of linguistic belonging. This chef's insertion of himself into the research space led to an extended exchange of opinions between him and the participants.

Extract 3: From customers to peers. Participants: Alberto, Davide, Giovanni, Nino.

01	Chef:	scusate scusate c'e' stato uno	Chef:	sorry sorry there was a
02		sbaglio vi porto nuovi tiramisú		mistake I bring new tiramisú
03		perche' c'e' stato un errore vi		because there has been a
04		spiego e' buono ma il		mistake I'll explain it's
05		mascarpone oggi si e'		good but the mascarpone
06		smontato un po' quindi avevo		today went down a bit so I
07		detto allo staff di metterlo da		said to the staff put it aside
08		parte e di darlo allo staff		and we'll give it to the staff
09		perche' il sapore e' buono ma		because the taste is good but
10		l'altro chef si e' sbagliato e		the other chef made a
11		l'ha servito		mistake and served it
12	Alberto:	ma come vedi l'abbiamo	Alberto:	but as you see we ate it
13		mangiato lo stesso		anyway
14	Chef:	qualche volta succede	Chef:	it happens sometimes
15	Davide:	lavoriamo tutti nella	Davide:	we all work in hospitality
16		ristorazione		
17	Giovanni:	nessun problema	Giovanni:	no problem at all it happens
18		assolutamente succede		
19	Chef:	[moving towards the end of the	Chef:	[moving towards the end of
20		table, facing the video camera]		the table, facing the video
21		questo lo offriamo noi per il		camera] this is on us for the
22		resto com'e' andata?		rest how did it go?
23	Nino:	tutto perfetto era tutto molto	Nino:	all perfect everything was
24		buono		very good

25	Chef:	vi avevo mandato del pane	Chef:	I've sent you some bread
26		perche' avevamo un tavolo da		because we had a table for
27		15 persone		15 people
28	Giovanni:	il pane era proprio buono	Giovanni:	the bread was really good
29	Chef:	lo facciamo nel forno della	Chef:	we make it in the pizza oven
30		pizza		
31	Davide:	anche voi usate Spadoni per la	Davide:	do you also use Spadoni for
32		farina?		the flour?
33	Chef:	si in realta ti dico la verita' uso	Chef:	yes I'll tell you the truth I
34		Spadoni perche' la uso da anni		use Spadoni because I have
35		anche per fare la pasta fresca		been using it for many years
36		anche se e' un po' costosa e' la		and to make fresh pasta
37		migliore		even if it's a bit expensive
38				it's the best

In lines 01-11, the chef is not only apologetic but also guides the customers through what he claims happened in the kitchen to explain the mistake. Here, the dual positioning of the participants as both customers and hospitality workers emerges and creates an act of solidarity. Alberto and Giovanni's turns (lines 12-13, 1-18) serve to reassure the chef. Davide (lines 15-16) assigns the identity of hospitality workers to all the participants around the table. At this point, the shift from customers to peers, as people who work in the same (sub-)sector of Italian hospitality, creates affordances for knowledge co-production. In the last turns of this extract (lines 23-38), the chef acknowledges the participants as colleagues, producing a bond based on respect and mutual recognition of reliability and authority. In inserting himself into the research space, the chef stood at the top of the table, directly facing our video-recording device. He kept a distance from the participants, which participants took as a sign of respect for their physical space (Figure 5). His comments were offered in a low tone, which was deemed polite.



Figure 5. The chef at Terra Nostra at the top of the dinner table

Participants remained silent as the chef spoke, which may be interpreted as a sign of respect and acceptance. They did not make any attempts to end the conversation but rather sought to continue it by asking questions. In that, they accepted the chef as a co-producer of knowledge and employed research tools to interact with him in a researcher-participant dynamic. This

led to a 30-minute-long conversation on the eating habits and standards of Italian people, their passion for seasonality and their concerns about produce, foodstuff providers and delivery issues, as well as the difficulties that Brexit and the pandemic have caused in terms of recruiting staff and sourcing ingredients. Participants were interested in learning more about the chef's strategies for guaranteeing food authenticity while using ingredients produced in the UK, and about how he decided on which dishes to include in his menu. They also explored the links between the types of food served in Italian restaurants in London and the (presumed) ethnic and national backgrounds of the customers, implicitly drawing a line between Italian customers, who were constructed as holders of knowledge about authentic and good-quality food, and other customers, who were generally described as "British" and were said to require different types of treatment. They could either be educated about what good-quality food is or, if that was not possible, they could be pleased by adapting Italian dishes to local tastes. Realising the relevance of this conversation for our research, participants actively ensured that the chef's insights were included in the research record. See Extract 4.

Extract 4: The recorder. Participant: Alberto.

01	Chef:	il menu e' molto semplice	Chef:	the menu is very simple
02	Alberto:	{Alberto moves the recorder	Alberto:	{Alberto moves the recorder
03		towards the chef} faccio una		towards the chef} I ask a
04		domanda per la ricerca i piatti		question for the research are
05		sono creati per una clientela		these dishes created to please the
06		italiana o British?		British customers or Italian ones?
07	Chef:	tutti sia British che italiana	Chef:	everybody both British and
08				Italian
09	Alberto:	{Alberto turns to Giulia} una	Alberto:	{Alberto turns to Giulia} a good
10		buona domanda per la ricerca		question for the research

The brief interaction captured in this extract can be considered a successful attempt at cooperation. In response to the chef's comment that the menu offers simple dishes to please customers, Alberto reinforces the stereotype of non-Italian customers' inability to cook even simple food at home. In this instance, both the chef and the participants accept each other as experts, weaving an "us versus them" narrative. Alberto moves the audio recorder closer to the chef so that it clearly captures his speech (lines 02-06 and Figure 6), which signals the shift in identity and the acceptance of the chef as part of the research. This action signifies a shift in Alberto's identity from research participant to researcher. Asserting his authority as someone who is knowledgeable about the aims of the research, he recognises and accepts the chef as a legitimate participant in the research process. By positioning the recorder to better capture the chef's speech, Alberto is not only ensuring that the chef's contributions are recorded clearly, but he is also signalling that the chef's voice and perspective are valuable to the research. Alberto not only moves the recorder but also asks a question, seeking consent from one of the "legitimate" researchers (lines 09-10).



Figure 7: Alberto reaching for the audio recorder

Conclusions

In this article, we explored the dynamics that occur when individuals perceived as research outsiders unexpectedly assume the role of research participants in multi-sited, collaborative ethnography. By closely analysing how the waiter at Luigi's and the chef at Terra Nostra inserted themselves into the temporary research spaces we created in the two restaurants, we considered how these fleeting positionings were defended and justified by the two restaurant staff; we examined whether and how they were legitimised (or not) by the "legitimate" research participants that we had recruited for the project, and we looked into the conditions under which this validation took (or did not take) place. A stark contrast emerges from the analysis of the two episodes. The waiter's attempt to self-select as a research participant and take his turn to speak was unsuccessful. The "legitimate" research participants were reluctant to form a connection with him. They refused to assign him a participatory research identity, underscoring the risks associated with "breaking the walls" of research without formal acceptance. In contrast, the chef's attempt at engaging with the research *communitas* was successful, as he was universally accepted by the "legitimate" research participants and granted the opportunity of becoming a co-participant and offering lengthy insights. Our analysis foregrounded what was significant for the "legitimate" research participants in each case. In both interactions, they were keen to understand the type of customers in each restaurant and to draw connections between the food that was served and the clientele. Their assessments of the contributions made by the waiter and the chef were inextricably linked with their assessments of the two restaurants as (in)authentic Italian spaces in both classed and diasporic terms.

The work we have presented here was the result of the collaboration between the members of a diverse, multilingual and multicultural research team, with each of us having different trajectories and lived experiences of migration. One aspect of the study that we did not have space to go into in detail in this article is how our own backgrounds, linguistic repertoires and societal roles shaped our observations, interpretations and interactions during the conduct of our ethnographic research. Our next step, therefore, is to critically and reflexively consider, in a future publication, how each of us drew on our own and others' multilingual resources as we researched and sought to represent the views and experiences of the five post-2008 migrants from Italy. A key aim will be to account for the sociocultural and linguistic subjectivities that we brought into the research context and the power dynamics that

defined the relations between us as researchers, the relations between us, the research participants and those perceived as research outsiders, and the intercultural communications that transpired among all of us.

Another important aspect which we plan to investigate further is the multilingual practices of our participants, including instances of code-switching, translanguaging and other language-mixing phenomena present in our data. While we did consider the ways in which participants mobilised and combined their linguistic resources during the three dinners as we conducted our analysis – including instances of code-switching and mixing between English and Italian, as well as between Italian and various dialectal or regional varieties – this was not the primary focus of this article. However, we do address it in our analysis of the tiramisú incident, where we explore how the language of the restaurant environment shifted from English-only to Italian-only. Pepe (2021, 2022) has written extensively about multilingual practices among post-2008 Italian migrants in London, exemplified by *otherwise* and *let's explore* in Extract 1 (lines 37 and 47-48) and *un mix* in Extract 2 (line 63). She argues that multilingual practices such as these serve as markers of a group social identity, reflecting the migrants' transnational experiences and their sense of belonging to this particular "wave" of Italian migration, which is also the focus of our article. However, she also emphasises that (at least some of) these practices are not entirely new, as similar practices were observed among earlier migrants. For instance, codeswitching has been documented among post-war migrants (Guzzo 2014), highlighting that such multilingual practices represent migrants' transnational experiences more broadly. What distinguishes these practices today is their symbolic role in constructing varying forms of migrant identities in relation to differences in the sociohistorical circumstances under which different (groups of) migrants left Italy and their social-cultural-demographic profiles. For example, mixing Italian with English might indicate a lower level of education among the post-war group but might be viewed as a marker of professional status and accomplishment among the post-2008 group. Our future work will also examine how these multilingual practices contribute to the construction of identities that bring together Italianness, London and the hospitality sector.

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