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Chupar frutas in Salvador da Bahia: a case of practice-specific alterities

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In this article we interfere with the naturalization of 'eating' by comparing two modes of engaging with fruits in Salvador da Bahia, Brazil. One of these is *comer*, which translates as 'to eat'. The other is *chupar*, 'to suck'. In *comer*, a piece of fruit crosses distinct bodily boundaries and gets swallowed; in *chupar*, juices spill over hands, while stones or fibres that have made it into a mouth are taken out again. Some fruits, like apples, compel a person to *comer*; others, like mangoes, invite *chupar*. But fruits do not decide by themselves how they will be handled: at a dinner table, in public, or in places that need to stay clean, *comer* is advisable; *chupar* fits backyards and more intimate company. And then there are gratifications: *comer* may come with the pride of being educated; *chupar* offers such pleasures as overflowing juices and childhood memories. All in all, our comparison reveals that 'eating' is not a given precedent, but that *comer* and *chupar* evoke different worlds, populated by different entities (bodies, fruits), and coloured by different pleasures. One might say that the *ontologies* involved are different, but that is not quite strong enough, as the relevant alterities also include *activities* and *normativities*, while the boundaries between the worlds of *comer* and *chupar* are markedly fluid and shot through with partial connections.

In this text we will talk about words as well as bodily practices. To do so, we will explore how a small number of people (their names follow below) engage with locally available fruits in the courtyards and on the verandas of the city of Salvador da Bahia, Brazil. These were not spontaneous events, but what, with an apparent oxymoron, we venture to call 'ethnographic experiments'. The volunteers involved acted as *performers*: they gave a demonstration in front of a camera of how, with gusto, they enjoyed their fruits. They were also *informants*: once they had licked their lips, they talked about what had just been going on. In our writing we will, as anthropologists do, translate their talk from lively, spoken, Brazilian Portuguese into conventional, written English. However, we will make a few exceptions. More particularly, we will attend to the word *chupar* and contrast it with another word, *comer*, while laying out the different realities, activities, and pleasures that accompany these words. Overall we are not in the business of using theory to explain materials, but rather in that of using materials to enrich our collective theoretical repertoires. This is not to say that these materials speak for themselves: we ask the questions, we write. This text participates in a series of anthropological conversations.

To begin with, we build on ethnographic inquiries into bodily practices, like walking, playing capoeira, dancing, or balancing a large weight on one's head. In such practices, bodies may stroll or stride over a rough path or one that is smooth, going up or down, in rain or sunshine, gradually learning to negotiate local terrains and weather worlds. They may mimic their capoeira instructor; observe their ballet movements in a mirror; or train their sense of balancing additional loads as soon as they can walk.¹ Thus, or so we learn, bodies gradually acquire the ability to move about in markedly different ways. But what about other bodily abilities? Take eating. This is not just done in surroundings, but involves taking surroundings in – or at least bits and pieces thereof. At one moment an apple still hangs on a tree, at the next moment some 'eater' has incorporated it. Bite, chew, swallow, gone. Or maybe you first peel and slice your apple and put it in a pie? Human bodies eat in many different ways.² At the same time, eating is a prerequisite for all other bodily abilities: it is by eating that human beings stay alive. *Or do they?* We suggest that it is worthwhile to stop short at this point and take some time for reflection. For 'eating' is not just an activity in which eaters may engage, but also an English word. Hence, it is not a *natural fact* that bodies stay alive by 'eating', but a *material-semiotic* one. Other languages allow for other facts. The Brazilian Portuguese word *chupar*, for instance, speaks of, and facilitates, engagements between people and fruits that are quite unlike those evoked by the contrasting word *comer*, which translates into English as 'eating'.

Exploring this alterity, we also build on literatures in anthropology that forgo the nature/culture distinction and other *a priori* assumptions as to what is given in reality and what is not. Rather than studying the natural figure 'Man' in all his cultural variants, these literatures radicalize alterity. They move from a multiculturalism that presumes there to be one nature and many cultures, and open up to the possibility of there being many natures. They practise multinaturalism, or, stronger still, forgo using the terms 'nature' and 'culture' altogether and multiply 'ontologies'.³ Our case fits with this tradition, since we are not about to claim that the words *chupar frutas* give a 'culturally specific' interpretation of a 'naturally given phenomenon' that speakers of English would call 'eating fruit'. Instead, or so we will show below, in Brazilian Portuguese there are two words, *chupar* and *comer*, for how one may engage with (fresh, uncooked, un-squeezed) fruits, and these conjure quite different activities. We hope to use the small but telling difference between *chupar* and *comer* to derail the generalization of the English word 'eating'. In this way we seek to interfere with 'eating's' naturalization – to then also derail the alleged naturalness of 'bodies' and 'fruit'. For we will argue that a 'body' engaged in *chupar* is simply not the same *thing* as a 'body' engaged in *comer*, as it acts in a less compartmentalized way and has more fluid boundaries. And so it goes for the 'fruit': while in *comer* this is divided into chunks, in *chupar* it is less clear cut, and rather gooey.

The point, then, is not that *chupar* and *comer* refer to different parts or aspects of reality, but that they facilitate different realities. To express the radical character of the alterities implied, the term 'ontology' has been put to good use. However, the case of *chupar frutas* suggests it might be time to move on and explore other terms. For in the Western philosophical tradition the term 'ontology' marks a preoccupation with the real as it *is*; with *being*. 'An ontology' is the sum-total of the objects and the subjects that populate a world. In the monotheist doxa on which the sciences have been built, this was *the* world, in the singular, and this makes the suggestion that there might be *more than one world* seriously heretical.⁴ The creative possibilities unleashed by exploring

'reality multiple' are impressive, and yet we would not want to get stuck in the term 'ontology'.

For a start, as *chupar* and *comer* are verbs, they help to articulate not only the irreducible manifoldness of what objects and subjects *are*, but also the plethora of activities they engage in, the *doings* that in old Greek and modern English grammars are evoked not by nouns but by verbs. 'To be' is just one verb, one kind of activity, 'to eat' is another, and so, too, are *chupar* and *comer*. Why hold on to 'being' as the *primus inter pares* of the activities relevant to reality? Comparing *chupar* and *comer* makes it possible to explore activities of a more transformative kind.

Second, if 'ontological pluralism' gets wedded to structuralist schemes, there is a risk that 'ontologies' come to seem encompassing, mutually exclusive systems. This makes it unduly difficult to explore mixtures, ambivalences, and fractal patterns where difference may pop up at every level and patches of 'otherness' may be involved in every 'self'.⁵ What is more, if 'ontologies' are taken to differ between 'people', there is a further risk that we all get enclosed in 'our own culture'. Hence, instead of 'culturally specific ontologies' (an unfortunate conjunction), we venture to explore 'practice-specific alterities'. In line with this, in this article we will not compare the English 'eating' with a contrasting activity elsewhere. Instead, we foreground the alterity between *chupar frutas* and its intimately proximate *comer* alternative in Bahia.⁶

Third, we care about the normativities that the Western philosophical tradition has so painstakingly tried to wash out of what it called 'ontology'. It is not invariably pertinent to make a separation between *what is* and its subsequent qualification as either *good* or *bad*. In many pragmatic settings, 'ontologies' take the shape of 'ontonorms' in which different versions of reality are tied to different evaluations. Such 'pragmata' hold together *what is* and *what is good to do*.⁷ At least in the sites and situations that we will come to talk about, *chupar* and *comer frutas* are not neutral either. These activities give pleasure. There is a lot to learn once we start exploring alterities that have to do with pleasure – or, for that matter, less cheerful valuations.

These, then, are the theoretical quests that infuse our case study of *chupar frutas* in Salvador da Bahia. One of us, Mattijs, has been doing fieldwork in Bahia for many years.⁸ Along the way he had learned about the possibility of *chupar frutas*, but when he sought to study this practice, it proved to be elusive. People rarely engage in *chupar* with strangers around: it is an intimate thing to do. Thus Mattijs invited his local friends to demonstrate in front of a camera how they would select, prepare, and savour their favourite fruit. The email invitation included the term '*chupar frutas*', and this had provoked a lot of kkkk's and rrsrs's (the Brazilian Internet codes for laughing and chuckling), because the verbs *chupar* (which the dictionary translates as: to suck) and *comer* (according to the dictionary: to eat) have erotic connotations. They summon up 'to perform fellatio' and 'to penetrate', respectively (but this is not mentioned in the dictionary). Despite these connotations, most of those invited accepted the invitation – for the fun of it. If their *gringo* friend was interested in something as mundane as *chupar frutas*, they would use their skills (and in some cases their experiences as theatre performers) to make a show of it. They prepared themselves with make-up, freshly painted their fingernails, put on special jewellery, or even adapted the colour of their clothes to the colour of their fruit. The fruits that they volunteered to *chupar* in front of the camera were not the imported kiwis, apples, strawberries, and peaches that these days flood Bahian supermarkets. Instead, our performers/informants all went for the locally grown tropical fruits that are sold at street corners and open-air markets. Maybe

these are simply their favourites; maybe they best fit with their childhood memories of *chupar frutas*; or maybe they best allowed for a demonstration of their fruit skills. Whatever the case may be, it is clear that our method does not reveal 'the way things are' in the 'exotic everyday'. Instead, it makes sense to call it an 'ethnographic experiment', in that experiments help to *stage* the realities they investigate.⁹ In laboratories such staging is done in a controlled manner, so as to catch the causal force of separate variables one by one. In the breaching experiments of ethnomethodology, which sought to explore social rules by rudely transgressing them, things used to get out of control. Our more playful staging, avoiding both these extremes, rather resembled experimental improvisation theatre, where a few props and frames invite surprises.¹⁰ And indeed, even our performers/informants were surprised. Never before, they told Mattijs afterwards, had they been so acutely aware of their relations with their favourite fruit.¹¹

If the demonstrations allowed us to get *chupar frutas* into view, the talking afterwards helped us to articulate it. Using excerpts from his footage, Mattijs made a short film.¹² Writing this article took a lot longer, as our materials fuelled spirited discussions between us about language, bodies, and alterity, stretching over almost three years. But here is what we have to offer. First, we will show that in Salvador da Bahia the question whether a person is likely to *chupar* or, instead, to *comer* a certain fruit depends for a start on how this fruit invites the person to engage with it. Second, we will reveal that the question whether *chupar* or *comer* is in order does not just depend on the fruit, but also on the situation. Third, we will suggest that fruit, situation, and body jointly allow for the pleasures that may result from their encounter. In our conclusion we will come back to the lessons our analysis holds for the theoretical repertoires of anthropology – shaking up Western philosophy in the process.

What fruit and body do

We took our clue from something Xandra said. After she ate her favourite fruit, a *manga espada*, in front of the camera, she explained: '*Pra mim é confortável chupar manga. Ela aceita minha boca, aceita a minha mordida. É bem melado, é bem suave. Ela não faz resistência*'. How to translate that? Here is our suggestion: 'For me, sucking mango is pleasant. She accepts my mouth, accepts my bite. She is very sweet and gooey, she is very soft. She doesn't resist'. There are a few traces of Portuguese left in that translation. For a start, we translate *chupar*, in line with the dictionary, as *sucking*, even though in English mangoes are eaten and not *sucked*. However, as the consequences of the linguistic possibility to suck one's fruits form the starting-point of this article, this should not be hidden in translation. Second, we refer to the mango as *she*, not *it*. That *it* tends to neuter things, such as mangoes, may well help to make it more difficult to appreciate in English than in Portuguese (or French, or many other languages) that things may act.¹³ And this deserves to be appreciated, for the mango at hand is not just *being sucked*, but also engages in activity: *she accepts my mouth*. Hence, in their encounter it is not just Xandra who is active, so, too, is the mango. The experimental performance for the camera is their joint achievement.

Xandra had washed the mangoes brought in from the market in her kitchen sink, and then taken them out into the yard in a dishcloth. Sitting on a little iron garden chair with all the mangoes in her lap, she evaluated them one by one. She squeezed them gently, sometimes between her fingers, sometimes between her two hands. She smelled their tops, inspected their skins. Soft mangoes that would give in

too easily to the pressure of her fingers were only good for juice. The hard ones were put aside for further ripening. Brown spots, indicative of bruises caused by the falling of the fruit, were pointed out as 'bad'. Little black spots were an indication of the mango being 'exactly right'. Having decided on the most promising mango, Xandra bit a hole in the peel near the top of the fruit, quickly sniffed the smell that came from the opening, and then used her fingers to tear strips of the green skin from the fruit. Before being thrown on the floor, each strip was scraped clean between her teeth. She went on until the mango had become an utterly naked, dripping, slippery bright yellow fruit, requiring the use of both her hands to keep it from falling.

Chupar the *manga espada* meant, first, sinking her teeth into the soft yellow flesh. And then, after most fleshy parts of the fruit were gone, a kind of scraping followed, so as to disentangle the flesh from the many hairy fibres that this particular mango contains. As Xandra said afterwards: 'An hour after you have sucked a *manga espada*, you are still picking out the fibres that got stuck between your teeth'. She explained that this is as much a quality of the fruit as it is a nuisance: it makes the *manga espada* a *manga espada*. 'This one is not like those mangoes that are produced for *gringos*, which have no fibres left in them'. The scraping continued until all the flesh and juice were gone, and all that remained were the stone and the cleaned fibres attached to it. She held it out to the camera. It looked like a yellow, fluffy hairy animal. In the meanwhile, Xandra herself showed the traces of the feast. Even though she had repeatedly licked the juices that kept running down her chin, hands, and arms, these were all moist and sticky. This was in line with how, in a full-blown theatrical demonstration of *chupar*, a *manga espada* was to be enjoyed.

Smell, softness, colour, juiciness, fibres, and stone: they all matter to how a mango may be consumed. This implies that a mango is not just *being* consumed, but plays an active role in the endeavour. It invites a person to *chupar* as it is juicy and leaves its fibres between biting teeth. But the mango does not act alone. If it had been left in the bag in which it was carried from the market, it would not have had an alluring texture and its fluids would not have run over anybody's hands and arms. Instead it would have acted in a different way and started to smell bad and rot. Juiciness and a great taste may be characteristics of a mango, but only if she (let's continue to hold on to the Portuguese gendering) is being sucked. For a mango to be good, there must be an inquisitive nose, a biting mouth, a licking tongue, teeth. If Xandra takes pleasure from her mango, this is thanks to the activity of *chupar manga*. This activity deserves to be attended to.

In the Brazilian Portuguese spoken in Bahia, a mango is not something to *comer*, to eat, but something to *chupar*, to suck. To understand this difference, it is relevant to know that fluid things (water, juice) are drunk, *beber*; solid things (like rice and beans) are eaten, *comer*; whereas 'wet solids' or 'solid liquids' (such as ice creams) are sucked, *chupar*. The question as to whether *comer* or *chupar* is in order only arises in relation to fruits. In line with the fluid/solid concern, a novice might expect the amount of juice that a fruit contains to be crucial. But this, while relevant, is not decisive. When Mattijs had asked his informants before the start of the experiment which fruits one would *comer* and which fruits one might *chupar*, they did not just readily list fruits, but also provided explanations. 'Comer goes like this', said Marcelo, while miming how one eats an apple: 'You bite off a chunk. You chew it. And you swallow it'. His diction, expressing a resolute three-step action, sought to convey that *comer* is rather straightforward – bite, chew, swallow. Hence, *comer* fits apples, bananas, guavas, *jenipapo* (which, as Bahians say, are very *carnudo*, 'beefy', and, like the guava, contain little juice), and *jambo* (a crisp, ruby-coloured, egg-shaped fruit, which is snow white inside). These are all bitten, chewed, and swallowed. This type of practice is very different from the more engrossing way in which Xandra engages with her mango and that exemplifies *chupar*: slurping, making noise, negotiating stickiness, plucking fibres from her mouth, licking, and so on.

As practice counts for most, there are fruits that, while fairly solid, still call for the verb *chupar*. A case in point is the tamarind. When green or ‘*de vez*’ (between green and ripe), a tamarind is hard, requiring a ‘gnawing’ technique to consume its flesh (Marcelo used the verb *roer*, to gnaw). Once ripened and dried, a tamarind is sticky and toffee-like. No juices here, nor dripping or spilling, but consuming a tamarind does imply that one uses one’s fingers or an elaborate inner-mouth technique to separate the stones from their sticky covering to then work them out of one’s mouth. This fits with *chupar*. Eating a papaya, by contrast, is *comer*. A ripe papaya is at least as juicy as a *pinha* (sugar apple) or a fig, which one would suck, *chupar*. Moreover, papayas tend to have a soft texture and need no chewing whatsoever. As Eliana said appreciatively, ‘she melts on the tongue’. That despite all this papaya is still a fruit to *comer* has, once again, to do with how people in Salvador tend to engage with it. Papaya is eaten with a knife (to cut it in half) and a spoon (to empty out the mass of shiny black seeds, and scoop out the soft flesh). Using utensils to mediate between body and fruit introduces the straightness that fits with the word *comer*.

Comer and *chupar* are two ways of engaging with fruits. This is not a fact tied to Portuguese, the language – in Portugal, engaging with fruit is invariably a matter of *comer*.¹⁴ Instead, this fact pertains to the yards and the verandas of Salvador da Bahia. In *comer* the boundary between a body’s outside and inside is readily crossed. A piece of food is bitten or cut off, inserted into the mouth, chewed, and swallowed. In *chupar*, by contrast, the boundary work is more elaborate. A stone that has just made it into the oral cavity may be spat out again; fibres that have got stuck between the teeth are tugged at by fiddling fingers; juices drip from the corners of a mouth over a hand and are then captured again by a licking tongue. Hence between these two ways of incorporating, the reality of ‘the body’ is not the same. In *comer* a body puts bits of its surroundings into its mouth; in *chupar* a body is, rather, accepted by, or engulfed by, its surroundings, and in its turn selectively merges with these, welcoming juices but not stones.¹⁵ The relevant ‘fruits’ are different as well: tamed and obedient in one case; messy and exuberant in the other. But neither the bodies nor the fruits involved in *comer frutas* are ‘naturally’ tamed and circumscribed; and neither the bodies nor the fruits involved in *chupar frutas* are ‘naturally’ sticky, messy, or fluidly bounded. The participants in these practices are only afforded to be straight or overflowing thanks to the activities of *comer* and *chupar*, respectively. Here, then, what fruits and bodies *are* depends on what they *afford each other to be*.¹⁶ It comes to be shaped in activities that the words *comer* and *chupar* do not ‘catch’ so much as help to separate out, allow for, and contrast with each other.

What fruit and situation do

Fruits may invite a person to *chupar* them, but whether or not the person accepts this invitation depends on the situation. For instance, during meals *comer* is in order. *Chupar frutas* is an activity that belongs to the rest of the day. This division helps to explain why Victor, when asked what verb tomatoes call for, promptly answered *comer*. Brushing away the suggestion that tomatoes are exactly like *kakis* (persimmon, which he would *chupar*), he stated that ‘tomatoes are not fruits but *legumes*’. He added that ‘no one ever eats a tomato just like that’, but that they are always ‘part of a salad or some other dish’. He produced a similar argument about olives, which one would also *comer* because they are not fruit. Their similarity to little fruits with a stone in the middle, such as *ceriguela* and *jamelão* (the latter, having a deep purple colour bordering on black, even looks like a black olive), ‘has nothing to do with it’, as Victor put it. Tomatoes

and olives are eaten at mealtimes, and hence they are ‘*comida*’, food. Fruit may be consumed all day long, in between meals, at no fixed hours. And although one may seek recourse to fruits to fill one’s stomach if there is nothing else to be had, in Bahia they do not carry the weight of that serious task of helping the eater make it through the laborious day. Instead fruits are playful.¹⁷

Earlier it appeared that there are two kinds of fruits, some to *comer* and others to *chupar*. Now another cut is being made. During meals there is *comida*, food, to *comer*. It is only in between meals that fruits, *frutas*, may (or may not) invite *chupar*. This suggests that if papaya is something to *comer*, this may be due to the fact it is eaten with utensils, but it may also be due to the fact that it is eaten as part of a meal: papaya is typically part of the *café-de-manha*, breakfast. So, too, is breadfruit, which is sliced and baked in butter, and, despite its name, *fruta pão*, is food to be eaten at breakfast, not fruit to be sucked as a treat.¹⁸ But if the moment may decide between the pertinence of *chupar* and *comer*, so, too, may the place. *Chupar* is not something you do in sites where you would not want sticky fluids to drip onto the floor; nor in situations where inquisitive others might be watching you. As Xandra put it: ‘For me, mango is backyard food. There is an intimacy to sucking mango. I do not like to suck mango in other people’s homes, because my technique [*and she laughs about using that word*] to suck it is like this, with my hands, with my mouth, without a knife or fork.’¹⁹ Hence, in situations where messiness is undesirable (indoors, among strangers, in situations that call for the performance of ‘class’, modernity, or education), it may be more proper to *comer* fruits, even mango. On the Internet there are instructions that lay out how to do so:

Mango. These fruits are served peeled and cut in cubes. When served in a single piece, each one should be stuck on a corkscrew. Take the fruit using this utensil, and cut the flesh from four sides of the kernel. Leave the rest of the pulp on the stone. One can only eat what has been left on the stone when among one’s intimates (*os de casa*). Eat the pieces, cutting them with a knife and fork to a size that is adequate to get them into one’s mouth.²⁰

To mediate between the situation that calls for *comer* and the mango to be eaten, a person may use instruments: corkscrew, knife, fork, and (it isn’t even mentioned) plate. For each fruit, such mediations have been invented, fine-tuned, and adapted.

Cashew fruit. Big cashew fruits need to be held with a fork, then to be cut with a knife, after which the cut pieces are brought to the mouth with a fork, without peeling the fruit. The pieces that are brought to the mouth have to be small. Small cashew fruits can be eaten with the hand, as they can be secured by holding the nut. What is left over should be put back on the plate, with the help of the palm of the hand.²¹

Against this background it is no wonder that some informants hesitated when they were sitting in front of the camera. How to eat *here*? What kind of situation was this? Gilberto, for instance, had been encouraged by his wife to use a knife and fork to eat mango in front of the camera. The camera! That is a public place, who knows what kinds of strangers will end up watching you? But Gilberto visibly hesitated. When Mattijs asked him whether he would prefer to *chupar*, he looked relieved. ‘Could I?’, he asked. ‘Nothing better than sucking a fruit right from the tree. And when I am in my *sítio* [my plot], I don’t have a knife and fork with me. *Eu chupo assim* [I suck it like this]!’. However, in the staged situation of our experiment, others ended up engaging

with their fruit in an intermediate way. Without utensils, but also without slurping, spilling juice, or ostentatiously getting fibres out of their mouth with their fingers.

Lucas had immediately opted for the *pinha*, also known as *fruta do conde* – which the dictionary calls ‘sugar apple’. It is a strange-looking green fruit, the size of a small apple, with a thick scale, that is full of shiny black stones, each one covered by a layer of soft, snow-white pulp – the edible part of the fruit. It is a luxury fruit (‘for consumer categories A and B’) and Lucas said that he loved it for its ‘creamy sweetness’. He checked the *pinhas* by turning them round with the tops of his long, fine fingers, brought them to his nose to catch their smell, and hesitantly squeezed them to figure out whether they were hard or soft. Until recently Lucas lived with his parents, and he admitted that his mother would pick out ripe fruits for him. In the end he opted for one and, breaking the fruit in two halves, started eating its loose, white segments, one at a time, carefully chewing to separate the pulp from the stone, calmly moving the stone from his mouth and putting it neatly on a plate, carefully licking his fingers clean before he went for the next segment. His performance showed restraint, modesty, and good manners. When other Bahians got to see Lucas on film they commented that they thought he was missing out on half of the fun, as to them *chupar pinha* would imply biting a big chunk from the fruit to have ‘that full sensation of the taste’ and only then working to get all the stones out of the mouth.

So it is not just the fruit that compels people to either *comer* or *chupar*. Such engagements are also prompted by the situation. The different classificatory logics are neither clear cut, nor exclusive. While in a yard a mango invites *chupar*, in a living room it amends itself to *comer*. While Victor ensured that olives are food to *comer*, Andrea suggested that when you ‘gnaw’ the kernel of the olive this is *chupar*. And Lucas, while willing to demonstrate *chupar frutas* in front of a camera, did not want to give the impression of being some *caipira* (country bumpkin), so he was not going to show ‘the worst of it.’²² This, in turn, made others doubt if his *chupar* was the real thing.²³ What stands out amidst these ambivalences and fluidities, and the various qualifications of public/private, foods/fruit, and educated/bumpkin at stake, is that *chupar* and *comer* are not just different words for the same activity – the activity called ‘eating’ in English. The two terms refer to, but also inspire and evoke, different activities. When glossing these activities in English, it won’t do to call them ‘variants of eating’, as if ‘eating’, if not the shared precedent, were the overarching category. There is, after all, no overarching category for *comer* and *chupar* in Bahia.²⁴ Hence if we are writing a text like the present one, as and when we need a translation, it makes more sense to use *eating* only for *comer* and translate *chupar* as *sucking* because this allows us to interfere with the possibilities of what may be said, written, and imagined in English.

What fruit, situation, and body do

In the moments of *comer*, *chupar*, and the mixtures between them that we describe here, there is no single element that forms the ground on which the others rest; no raw material on which culture might impose its form; no unmediated flesh that eludes language. Instead, words, bodies, fruits, and settings variously materialize in the events, co-constituting each other. And while realities variously take shape in them, such events are far from neutral. For fruits, whether eaten or sucked, get shredded into pieces, munched into a mash, and mostly swallowed. They disappear from the scene. The eaters, meanwhile, take pleasure. In *comer* this may be the pleasure of doing it right, of showing *educação*, of mastering the skill to cut large chunks into amenable pieces, of enjoying a rich fruity taste without getting all messy. In *chupar* the pleasures are different again, and as our experiment singled these out, we will dwell on them a bit longer.

Hoping to pick an appropriate specimen, our performers/informants pick up their fruits and look at them, squeeze and smell them. The looking, squeezing, and smelling may be ways of gathering knowledge about ripeness, but they are also pleasurable in their own right. As the *chupar* truly starts, knowledge is sidelined even more. For fruits being sucked are not interesting for what they *are* so much as for what they *offer*. And what they offer does not simply follow from characteristics (flavours, textures) that a fruit-object *has* and that the sucking subject *perceives*. Instead it only emerges thanks to the activity of *chupar*. It is in the lively encounter of nose, lips, tongue, and teeth with juices, flesh, stones, and fibres that pleasure may emerge. This is not to say that the pleasures of *chupar* are confined to short moments.²⁵ Instead, they are part of longer histories of fruit-body encounters. Many of our performers/informants relate that *chupar frutas* brings back (*remeter*) childhood memories. 'After milk the first thing we put in our mouth is fruit', says Gil. He adds that when he was a child, a crucial part of enjoying a *ceriguela* was gnawing the stone until nothing, nothing whatsoever, remained of the flesh. Those were the times, he adds, when we did not have these busy days. Xandra fondly remembers the mango tree in the backyard of the house where she grew up. Early in the morning she and her siblings would go there and 'stop to enjoy the fruit' that had fallen during the night. Silverino's childhood pleasures had to do with the possibility that fruit, however playful, allowed him to still his hunger. Sugar cane he remembers best, and it is *chupar cana* that he wants to demonstrate in front of the camera. (For those who might want to object that sugar cane is not a fruit, well, it is, for it is something that clearly invites *chupar* as a mode of engaging with it.)

Silverino installed himself on a wide veranda, on a wooden chair, his legs wide open. It was an extremely hot day. He was wearing a spotless white t-shirt and Bermuda shorts with an intricate white and black pattern. After having calmly untied a bushel of sugar canes, bought at the only market in Salvador where they are available in their full, up to two-meter glory rather than cut into small pieces, he inspected the canes and ran his hands along the green poles, to then pick at the remainder of the leaves that had hindered the smoothness of the stroking of his hands. Eventually he settled for the shortest cane and demonstrated two techniques of cutting and sucking it. The first depended on completely removing the peel, and then cutting the softer, wet and pale-yellow inside of the cane ('a hard sponge full of liquid' is how he described it afterwards) into manageable parts some fifteen centimetres long, which he split along their length in quarters to leave little sticks to chew and suck on. The second technique was to take a bigger piece of the cane and peel only half of it, leaving an unpeeled 'handle' and a 'suckable' upper part. Because of the sizeable diameter of the pole, the chewing and sucking of the cane now had to start at the side. Silverino bit off slivers, which he chewed and sucked to get the juices out. The remnants he spat directly onto the floor if they were small, and into his hand if they were large. As soon as the size of the pole allowed for it, he opened his mouth, and used the full strength of his jaw and his teeth to crush the cane, followed by full-mouthed chewing and forceful sucking to get out large quantities of juice. Not all of the liquid could be held in his mouth, and some came dripping out, rolling down his chin. Again, the dry remainders of the cane were spat out and landed on the floor.

The second technique was clearly the more enjoyable. While chewing and sucking, Silverino's eyeballs rolled all the way up, leaving visible only the whites of his eyes, as if he were in ecstasy. At one point, when breaking off a large piece of cane with his teeth, he spontaneously burst into laughter. When Mattijs asked what was so funny, he responded: 'I don't know, the sheer joy of having teeth to chew the cane'. He also said: 'I live in an *apartamento*, so at home I don't eat in this way. But since you want to learn about *chupar* I am glad to show you how to do it outdoors – *com mais vontade*, with more pleasure'. With a touch of pride Silverino said that 'some people' prefer to drink *sopa de cana* from a machine (these aren't flimsy kitchen utensils, but sturdy, heavy iron machines, noisily working hard to tackle the cane!). However, people who are from the fields, like himself, use a knife or their teeth to reach the juicy inside of the cane. 'You'll never die of hunger in the sugar fields if you have your teeth to suck cana'.

Many pleasures emerge here. Those of the flowing sugary fluids, those of the skill of preparing and then sucking cane, and the sheer pleasure of being alive. The request to perform *chupar* in front of a *gringo* and the imagined audience of his film form a pretext for these pleasures, but also add to them. Most other performers likewise enjoy being demonstrative. They throw sultry looks at the camera, utter aahs and ooohs and other appreciative sounds. Sometimes they sigh deeply. But how to talk about fruit pleasures? Here analogies with sexual pleasure get in the way. When asked what he liked best, Marcelo laughingly commented: ‘*Chupar* or *comer*? Hmmm. Can’t we do both at times, *chupar* and *comer*?’ And in response to the question, ‘What about the banana, is it sucked or eaten?’, Xandra thought for a second and then said, ‘Well, that depends on the banana. The banana *fruit* is eaten! The other ... [*hilarious laughter, followed by*] No, you idiot! Are you recording all this?’ Thus the fact that at some point the terms *comer* and *chupar* made it easier to talk about sex as they provided a food/fruit analogy now made it difficult to talk about the particular pleasures of enjoying fruits without sex interfering. But this is not to say that fruit pleasures elude language, if only because language helps to shape them. The very possibility of differentiating between *comer* and *chupar* helps to distinguish between these activities that provide such different pleasures.

For while it may be among the pleasures of *comer* that it is an achievement to consume *properly*, *chupar* in all its messiness offers a contrasting pleasure, that of transgressing the rules of *educação*. Once she is done with her sucking, Xandra joyfully opens the ripest of all the *mangas espadas* to show how the pulp has gone almost liquid. She washes her hands with the deep yellow mush and jokes that she is inventing a new body product. And as Raquel gets covered in the watermelon that she delves into, she says, ‘This is how I always eat it’ and uses the verbs *babar* (to slaver) and *melar* (to smear). Such joys, however, expose the person who indulges in them. After her performance, while he was still filming, Mattijs jokingly told Raquel, ‘I have never seen anyone eating a watermelon like this’, and ‘This movie will reproduce every single stereotype about Brazilians’.²⁶ Later he regretted this as it rudely pushed her into the realm of embarrassment. She laughed with him, but then immediately defended her actions: you always get dirty when eating a *melancia*. For all its lack of social grace, the moment was enlightening as it showed the vulnerability of people when they take pleasure from something as messy as *chupar frutas*.

Conclusion

Human bodies do not just dwell in their surroundings. They also engulf their surroundings – at least selected parts thereof. This is not ‘eating’, a natural affair, but something that comes in different socio-material variants. Here, thanks to our performers/informants from Salvador da Bahia, we were able to present two such variants with local salience. In *comer* a piece of fruit, or a bite of food, are bitten, chewed, and swallowed, while in *chupar* bits of fruit (juice, fibres, kernels) may enter the mouth first and then come out again, while others are slurped up and ingested. It is possible to cast these differences aside as irrelevant details, mere idiosyncrasies that should not stand in the way of our common quest to understand ‘the body’, a figure out of which anthropological tales can be made. However, taking them seriously makes it possible to tell other anthropological tales that are more open to radical differences.

Whether a specific fruit-body encounter calls for the term and the activity of *comer* or *chupar* does not depend on a single ‘explanatory variable’. Instead, it is complex. The

fruit at hand may invite either *comer* (if it calls for a straightforward mode of eating) or *chupar* (if it is juicy, sticky, has fibres, or a kernel that can be gnawed). But the situation is relevant as well: during meals it is the time to *comer*, while *chupar* is something for in-between treats; indoors it is best to *comer*, whereas *chupar* is something one does in a yard or a field; among strangers it is best to *comer* as *chupar* is rather too intimate. Hence unless your local ethnographer kindly asks you to give a demonstration, *chupar* is something you tend to hide. All in all, then, bodies, fruits, and situations jointly give rise to one activity – *comer* – or the other – *chupar*. The words do not come before the acts (as a rule), but neither do they come after them (as a factual description). Instead, the words have been differentiated to mark a difference between practices, while the practices have become fleshed out in different ways as they have got marked with different words. In daily life settings, however – despite the alterity that we invest in here – one kind of activity may flow over into, or mix with, the other.

The objects and subjects relevant to the practices of *comer* and *chupar* differ. Some ‘things’ fit only one kind of practice: a papaya tends to be eaten, not sucked. Other ‘things’, by contrast, may fit both practices but change identities between them while keeping their name. Take ‘a mango’. When, indoors or among strangers, a mango is eaten, it *is* amenable to being cut into pieces that a fork lifts to a mouth. When, by contrast, outdoors and among intimates, a mango is sucked, it *is* pulp from which the juice is more or less easy to slurp up; which has fibres that end up between teeth; and a stone one may try to scrape clean. Hence what a ‘mango’ *is* changes between practices. And so it is with ‘the body’. In *comer* a body is clearly bounded, biting off neat pieces or using utensils to incorporate what it eats; in *chupar*, by contrast, a body has fluid boundaries, as it is slurping, licking, and handling fibres and stones with teeth, tongue, and hands. Hence, reality does not precede the practices of *comer* and *chupar*. Instead, different *realities* (in the plural) are enacted as part of these practices.

So *comer* and *chupar* come with different ontologies, but the pertinent alterity here is not restricted to what *is*. For *comer* and *chupar* are also different kinds of activity, different modes of ordering, different things to *do*. The first involves cutting or biting, chewing and then swallowing. The second typically includes spilling, gnawing, disentangling fibres, sighing with pleasure, and licking. And while attending to ‘what is’ stabilizes the world relevant to any single site, attending to all these varied verbs foregrounds the transformations that bodies and fruits initiate and undergo as they relate. The pleasures involved – at least for the human participant in the encounter – differ as well. It is hard to name these, and exploring mundane pleasures clearly requires a lot more work. However, even now the pleasures of *comer* and *chupar* already hold compelling lessons about what ‘normative engagement’ might entail. In Western philosophy, normativity has all too easily been equated with making judgements, ideally from a distance.²⁷ ‘Tasting’, all too proximate, was held in contempt.²⁸ But *comer* and *chupar frutas* do not lead to making judgements based on the perceptions of flavours. Instead, they involve far more encompassing appreciations. These have to do with flavours and textures, but also with skills and messiness, memories and transgressions, pride and/or the pleasure of being alive. In *comer* and *chupar*, fruits are not judged for what they are, but welcomed for what they offer and, in interestingly different ways, appreciated.

The alterity is radical: *comer* and *chupar* involve different entities, relating in different ways, conjuring up different appreciations. At the same time we are not talking of mutually exclusive structures or systems. In the single town of Salvador da Bahia it is

possible to *comer* during mealtimes and *chupar* earlier or later. A single person may master both techniques and readily shift between them. Hence, the relevant alterity does not differentiate between groups of people, but between styles of engaging with fruit. Words, here *comer* and *chupar*, help to articulate these styles. And while *comer* and *chupar* have no neat equivalents in English, it is not particularly demanding to explain or import these terms – as we have in the present text. To some extent, the concomitant practices may travel too. Maybe, whichever language you speak, you enjoy slurping fruit already. But if, while reading this text, you have come to realize that so far you have mostly restricted yourself to what in Bahia is called *comer*, the examples set by our performers/informants may yet inspire you to experiment with *chupar* your *frutas*. Maybe this will be easy – you live in Sri Lanka or Ghana and have a garden with a mango tree. Maybe it will be difficult – your Chicago supermarket only sells ready-cut fruit in boxes; or you live in Paris and it is hard to find a secluded place where juices may freely drip on the floor. However, with some luck and imagination you may yet set up your own experiment and give it a try. It will not be the same: you do not share Xandra's childhood memories or Gil's nostalgia and maybe your teeth are not as strong as Silverino's. But it is possible, on this particular occasion at least, to play with alterities; reach across differences; learn from others; connect. Interesting things may yet emerge from mixing practices.²⁹

NOTES

We would like to thank first and foremost Djalma, Eliana, Gil, Gilberto, Isabella, Ivana, Lucas, Marcelo, Rebeca, Rosy, Silverino, and Xandra, our performers/informants. These are their real names, which fits with their willingness to appear in a film posted on the Internet; but only their first names, so that our stories about their *chupar* do not readily turn up when Internet searches of their names are made for other purposes. Annemarie wants to recognize that her work on this article was made possible by the European Research Council Advanced Grant AdGo9 No. 249397 that allows her to study 'The Eating Body in Western Practice and Theory' with a team. Thanks to the team: Sebastian Abrahamsson, Filippo Bertoni, Cristobal Bonelli, Carolina Dominguez, Anna Mann, Rebeca Ibañez Martin, Else Vogel, and Emily Yares-Doerr. Thanks as well to the Editor and three inspiring anonymous reviewers of this journal and to Maria Paula Adinolfi, Mieke Aerts, Peter Geschiere, Anita Hardon, Casper Bruun Jensen, John Law, Atsuro Morita, and Vincent de Rooij for comments and/or encouragement.

¹ For walking and weather, see Ingold (2011); for capoeira, Downey (2010); for ballet, Mueller (2013); for balance, Geurts (2003).

² For the trans-substantiation involved in eating apples, see Mol (2008); for a related study that takes up eating (by human beings and worms) to do theory, see Abrahamsson & Bertoni (2014). There are many studies of ways of human eating: see, among those attending to taste, for example, Holtzman (2009); Janeja (2010); Mintz (1996).

³ See for a start Strathern (1980; 1992). Viveiros de Castro (1998) argued that while 'the West' is multiculturalist, the Amerindians he had studied were multinaturalist. For a further inspiring exploration, see Viveiros de Castro (2014 [2009]). Recently the term 'multinaturalism' has been taken up to talk about how 'we theorists' might work (see, e.g., Blok 2011). For related ambitions, see Henare, Holbraad & Wastell (2007), Jensen (2012), and the contributions to Jensen & Rødje (2009).

⁴ One of us, Annemarie, has spent years on this heresy. She differentiated between contrasting 'ontologies' within Western medical practices (e.g. Mol 2002). Rather than 'pluralizing' ontology, the idea was to show how reality-in-practice may be 'more than one and less than many' (see for this notion, Strathern 2004).

⁵ See, for such images, Serres (1979) and Strathern (2004). For internal divisions, see also Yates-Doerr & Mol (2012), which differentiates between four 'Western' versions of meat; Law & Lien (2013), which multiplies salmon; and Bertoni (2012), which explores contrasting worms.

⁶ English *eating* deserves a study in its own right, as it both contains and is played off against such activities as gobbling up, champing, nibbling, and so on. Analogous, if different, things go for Dutch eating, Italian eating, and so on. The case of *chupar* and *comer* in Bahia is particularly illuminating in that there are these two terms that help to differentiate between the relevant practices. For the argument that in brain research,

rather than respecting 'enculturation', it is better to start out from 'practice-specific alterities' (there called 'patterned practices'), see Roestorff, Niewöhner & Beck (2010).

⁷ For the term 'ontonom', see Mol (2013). For a pragmatist exploration of a 'good road', see Thévenot (2002). For the valuation of 'good tomatoes', see Heuts & Mol (2013). And for an exploration of the appreciations intertwined with the Dutch word *lekker*, see Mol (2014).

⁸ This research started out as a study of Candomblé (see, e.g., van de Port 2011), but increasingly moved towards a study of boundary work in Bahia. Within this context, the fruit project was meant to explore how Bahians seek to extract information about the inside of the fruit by examining its outside. However, the relations between human beings and fruits appeared to raise all kinds of other intriguing questions, including those discussed in the present article. In anthropological literatures, human-fruit relations have been understudied, but see Seremetakis (1996); and for Brazil, Santos (2010), and Yung Chang's recent documentary film *The fruit hunters* (2012).

⁹ Mattijs' staging was 'in conversation' with an ethnographic experiment that Annemarie had been involved in a few weeks earlier, where six people (experts and novices) engaged in the art of tasting rice and dal with their fingers (see Mann *et al.* 2011).

¹⁰ For a classic explanation of the way natural-science experiments deal with control, see Hacking (1983). The ethnomethodologist Garfinkel asked his students to do such things as refusing to pay in a restaurant, or slurping their food at dinner parties. This often provoked strong reactions (see Woolgar 2005). The theatrical method of experimenting fits very well with Bahia understandings of 'the real' as something 'made up' (for this, see van de Port 2012).

¹¹ It is among the limits of the experimental method that wider fruit realities in Bahia remain beyond our scope. As we literally zoom in on individuals tackling fruits, we have very little to say about class, modernity, and/or the nation. One of our anonymous reviewers urged us to explore how it is that in poor neighbourhoods the *mangas espadas* that we write about so cheerfully here rot on the ground, while people spend their meagre incomes on strawberry-flavoured soft drinks. A pertinent question indeed, but it demands other methods and deserves its own article.

¹² For the resulting film, *Saborear frutas Brasileiras*, see <http://vimeo.com/33100008>. Mattijs has not just put the film on the Net, but also showed and then discussed it in a variety of places. Here we carefully refrain from opening up the topic of the differences between filming/viewing and writing/reading.

¹³ This has to do with the way in which, in European languages, it is a crucial feature of human beings that they are gendered. This itself is obviously not universal (see, e.g., Oyèwùmí 1997).

¹⁴ In Portugal, or so we learned through emails from our Portuguese friends, *chupar* is only good for ice cream, not for fruit. However, the Portuguese friend who partly grew up in Southern Africa declared that the word and the practice of *chupar* were relevant there in relation to *tropical fruits* – or at least some of them. Thanks to Maria José d'Abreu, Ana Jaleco, and Tiago Moreira. In the Spanish of Spain, again, *chupar* may not be used in relation to fruits, while Carolina Dominguez, who studies mango growing in Peru, says that *there* it is a venerated pleasure to *chupar mango*.

¹⁵ Bodily boundaries may be precarious in other practices in Bahia as well. For menstruating bodies, see Sanabria (2011). For boundary work in the spirit possession cult Candomblé, see van de Port (2011).

¹⁶ For the phrase that entities may 'afford' each other to 'be' one thing or another, see Despret (2004) and Gibson (1977).

¹⁷ In Mattijs's Brazilian cookbook, the section 'fruits' opens by saying: 'Fruits do not in the first place count as food, but as a treat that helps the digestion' (Augel 1985: 134). At the same time, digestion is not frivolous in Brazilian, but meticulously cared for – a topic in its own right that we leave out here but for the remark that a part of this care is formed by the papaya eaten at breakfast.

¹⁸ Note that this is different from the nutrition science/social science division, where (natural) 'nutrients' have an additional (cultural) 'meaning'. Here, instead, there are two different 'naturecultures' as 'serious food' is being supplemented with 'fun fruits' as an extra. Or, alternatively, the frivolous fruits may interfere with the serious eating. One of our reviewers recalled the expression *chupei manga*: you can't do something because of something you did before, related to the idea that one cannot eat after sucking mango.

¹⁹ The way in which Xandra uses the term 'technique' here, as well as our exploration of fruit-eating skills, fits well with Mauss's notion of 'body technique' (Mauss 1973 [1935]). That in Bahia *chupar* is respected as a skill surfaces in the expression '*chupar essa manga!*', which implies that an activity is very difficult.

²⁰ <http://www.bbel.com.br/comportamento/post/frutas-como-se-servir.aspx> (last accessed 11 November 2014).

²¹ As note 20.

²² *Chupar* and *comer* may also index a difference between people: backward people who suck their fruit in backyards and educated people who eat their fruit from a plate. As in our experiment all participants were invited to demonstrate *chupar frutas*, this difference between people, which anthropologists might otherwise like to foreground, is underplayed here.

²³ We may see mixtures and ambivalences, but most of our informants assumed that *their* way of *chupar frutas* was 'the' way. When confronted with fellow townspeople *chupando* differently, they expressed surprise, and even indignation.

²⁴ Our informants enjoyed the idea that other languages do not differentiate between 'comer' and 'chupar'. Their facial expressions when trying out loud impossible phrases such as 'comer uva (grapes)' or 'chupar goiaba (guava)' revealed the awkwardness of thus messing with linguistic repertoires.

²⁵ For the move beyond 'perceptions' and for the argument that tasting is actively done and moreover informed by earlier training, see Hennion (2001; 2007).

²⁶ These stereotypes have a long and thick history. The fluidities and messiness of the fruits that allow for *chupar* come close to indexing Euro-American imaginaries of 'tropical nature' (see Stepan 2001). For Brazil, what comes to mind here is the example of Carmen Miranda, 'the lady with the tutti-frutti hat', who in the 1950s became the Hollywood icon for Brazil (Roberts 1993). Such histories make it difficult to write this text in such a way that, while doing justice to *chupar*, it does not re-voke such stereotypes.

²⁷ With their economies of worth, Boltanski and Thévenot (2006) made a great inroad into the empirical study of normativities, but they were concerned with justifications, not appreciations. For the latter, see Pols (2005). For the topic of doing suffering and pain, see Struhkamp (2005).

²⁸ This has been deployed in and countered by the anthropology of the senses (see, e.g., Howes 1991; Korsmeyer 1999; Stoller 1989).

²⁹ Compare Helen Verran's analysis of English and Yoruba counting, which may be contrasting systems of thought, but still get mixed together at markets and in classrooms (Verran 2001). Such mixing may give rise to disconcertments. For their potential productivity, see Law & Lin (2010); for a tragic example of bad mixing, see Bonelli (2012).

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***Chupar frutas* à Salvador da Bahia : un cas d'altérités pratico-spécifiques**

Résumé

Dans le présent article, nous nous penchons sur la naturalisation de « manger » en comparant deux manières de manipuler les fruits à Salvador da Bahia, au Brésil. L'une de ces manières est *comer*, que l'on peut traduire par « manger » ; l'autre est *chupar*, « sucer ». Dans *comer*, un morceau de fruit franchit des limites corporelles distinctes pour être avalé ; dans *chupar*, le jus coule sur les mains, les noyaux ou les fibres qui sont entrés dans la bouche en sont extraits. Certains fruits, comme les pommes, appellent à *comer*, d'autres à *chupar*, par exemple les mangues. Mais ce n'est pas le type de fruit qui décide de son traitement : à table, en public ou dans les lieux qui doivent rester propres, il est de bon ton de *comer*, tandis que *chupar* se pratique à l'abri des regards et dans l'intimité. Et puis, il y a les gratifications : avec *comer* la fierté d'être bien élevé, avec *chupar* le plaisir du jus qui coule et des souvenirs d'enfance. Bref, notre comparaison révèle que « manger » n'est pas un précédent tout fait mais que *comer* et *chupar* évoquent des univers différents, peuplés d'entités (corps, fruits) différentes et colorés par des plaisirs différents. On pourrait dire que les *ontologies* impliquées sont différentes, mais cela ne serait pas tout à fait assez fort car ces altérités incluent aussi des *activités* et des *normativités*, tandis que les limites entre les mondes de *comer* et de *chupar* sont nettement fluides et partiellement connectés.

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