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**Foods, Roots and Routes:
Gendering Memory in the Age of Displacement**

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Discourse about intangible cultural heritage is anchored on the question of memory, which has become a topic of great interest today not only within academia but also in popular culture. America's newfound taste for cupcakes and macaroni and cheese, for instance, is not so much about the gastronomic appeal of these foods as it is about society's craving for history and the comfort of things past. In essence, it is about restorative nostalgia and the memories that these foods evoke and make possible through the imaginary. Our preoccupation with memory and remembering, in large part, is driven by our recognition of the fragility of memory, a fragility that is underscored by this age of mass displacement in which we live. As the Iranian American writer Roya Hakakian notes in her recent memoir, "When you have been a refugee, abandoned all your loves and belongings, your memories become your belongings." In a world where over 70 million people are currently forcibly displaced, amounting to one person being forcibly dislodged from his or her home and lifeways approximately every two seconds, dislocation, uprooting, and rupture are as much a facet of our lived experience as are connectivity and interdependence. Exilic condition is an unfortunate but undeniable feature of modernity.

Even within living memory, Asia has had her share of tumultuous histories. Colonization, conflict, war, and other calamities have engendered mass dispersal. Over 2 million

Vietnamese, Cambodians and Laotians fled their homeland in the aftermath of war and revolution, and many more Southeast Asians continue to be displaced in varied contexts and conditions as we speak. The genocide in Cambodia has left deep wounds and ravaging impact on the cultural memories of the nation that is now bifurcated between Asia and the diaspora. Even without the trauma of war and mass atrocities, globalization, modernization, and urbanization have progressively divested traditional knowledge of their merits, and peripheralized certain memories into oblivion.

As the body moves, where does memory live? Food has always signified home and heritage, two things that people on the move carry with them, often only in their imaginary, but at times also in actuality- the seeds of that particular kind of chili pepper that can make a break a certain dish, tugged away in the band of a *sarong*, the memory of home in blended smell and taste that travels into the diaspora, the spices from distant colonies that made their way to the tables of the *métropole*. Food, thus, is a site where social memories are enshrined, and through which they are transmitted, for food is a signifier of “home” in its fullness-not just of place and belonging but of all elements of sociality that transform space into place, and place into home. Where these memories are absent in textbooks and other narratives, food-centered practices and rituals are the remaining containers of cultural memory, hence important sites for excavation, preservation, and transmission. For the younger generations, it is often through these quotidian experiences that they find their way not only to their own cultural identities but also their connections to others of shared traditions.

In 2016, UNESCO- Bangkok launched an important project on Southeast Asian Shared Histories leading to the development of curricular materials for secondary schools that have since been adopted by a number of Southeast Asian countries as part of their national curricula.

The unit on rice and spice was also turned into two children's books that were just published. In looking at rice and spice, we were not only looking at food as a cultural archive but as a thread that connects multiple places and domains, namely the various countries of South East Asia, Southeast Asia and the world, the micro experiences of the everyday and global political, economic and social forces and processes. As such, we not only viewed rice and spice in terms of Southeast Asian countries' shared culinary traditions and experiences, but also as lenses for understanding migration, spirituality, sociality and cultural practices that connect the peoples of Southeast Asia, and the region with the rest of the world. Commonly known dishes such as *curry* reveal not only the particularities of each country's culinary traditions but also their creative adaptive evolution and a different and richly illuminating cartography of the region's histories of movement and encounter. The *mi kola* that was a pre-war culinary specialty of Cambodia's northwest, for instance, is a cultural register of the presence of the ethnic Shan community from Burma in the gem mining provinces of Cambodia. Whereas bread is a legacy of French colonialism in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, the iconic *banh mi* that is now a common feature on the menu of New York and San Francisco's eateries is a reminder of the importance of situating the post-1975 Southeast Asian diaspora within the *longue durée* and complexity of militarism and empire. When we trace the genealogy of the egg desserts so popular in Thailand and Cambodia, we not only can chart the circuitous and militarized routes through which memories travel- in this case through Portugal, Southeast Asia and Brazil- but also put into sharper relief the humanistic ties that are often buried and obscured by the more visible legacies of war and conquest.

In highlighting regional and global connections in our study of rice and spice, we also underscored the multi-directionality of cultural flows by highlighting the flow of traditional

knowledge, particularly as it relates to the science and philosophy of healing, from Southeast Asia into other parts of the world. In addition to trade and exportation of culinary influence, Southeast Asian food cultures also represent the wisdom and scientific knowledge acquired and transmitted through generations, some of which have traveled to the West and shaped notions of health and wellbeing as well as informed research and development in the fields of medicine and nutrition. Understanding of the origins of these knowledge and traditions allows for a deeper appreciation of the global flows of ideas and influences from Asia.

ORAL HER/STORY AND GENDERED MEMORY

The Rice and Spice project opens up new ways for looking at quotidian practices as archives of cultural heritage, and suggests even wider possibilities. Despite the tendency to look at it as a monolith, memory is not undifferentiated but is inflected by class, gender, and generations among other factors, hence must be considered in its plurality. Yet in research, writing or other forms of documentation, memory is often flattened. Because of the assumption that all memories are the same, women's stories, experiences, and perspectives are rarely documented. This is especially significant given that women are often the keepers of memory, entrusted with critical tasks such as preparing and performing important rituals. For commemorations and festivities, it is women who shoulder the tasks of food preparation. In fact, many food-centered activities—from cooking for the family to preparing temple offerings—are conducted by women. In Southeast Asian families like mine, “food heritage” is the feminine gift from mother to daughter. What is transmitted in those almost exclusively female spaces, however, is not just the art of cooking. Growing up, much of what I and other female members of my family learn about what it means to be Cambodian, and a Cambodian woman, were

bequeathed to us organically through instructions, admonitions, stories that are always laced with life lessons, and banter among elders that we were permitted to “eavesdrop” upon, all amidst the warmth and nurturing chaos of the kitchen.

While Rice and Spice was an important and successful initiative, I also want to use this discussion of food as a platform for thinking more broadly about gendered memory and about the importance of capturing them through stories, narratives and artifacts of the everyday. In addition to foodways, there are many traditions and practices that are transmitted to women by women. These are memories that often lie below the threshold of visibility, in gendered spaces already on the margin. What, for instance, do we still remember of the rituals, meanings and customs of “entering the shadow” (*choal maloob*) that marks a Khmer woman’s rite of passage into maidenhood, or the various beliefs, taboos and practices associated with pregnancy, childbirth and postpartum care? These are knowledge and memories that are rapidly disappearing. The importance of gathering and preserving these and other gendered memories is particularly acute in communities that have been fractured and dislocated and where memories, already marginalized and relegated to the intimate confines of families and homes, are further threatened by dispersal, by the precarity of life in displacement and, in many instances, linguistic loss.

Critical intervention can and needs to come from different places, including educational institutions. One initiative led by students in our community health program at Berkeley was a compilation of postpartum recipes from different parts of the world, most of which were collected through interviews with elders. Such projects create opportunities for the younger generations to engage in the constructions of their own cultural histories, and pave the way for a more sustained intergenerational communication. For public universities such as ours, they

provide opportunities to engage the larger community in the production of knowledge that is meaningful to them. By moving preservation efforts beyond certain domains such as museums and integrating them into school curricula, we shift cultural preservation from being the privileged task of certain institutions to being a more widely shared undertaking and, in the process, make learning more meaningful by anchoring it in lived experiences. Through critical inquiries, students acquire the foundational knowledge, tools, and skills to better understand both the past and the present world in which they live, and their connectedness with their environments and with other peoples and communities. These knowledge, skill sets, and insights will help prepare them to be critically engaged citizens not only of the region but also of the world in the 21st century.