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Threads of Memory: Reproducing the Cypress Tree through Sensual Consumption

Megan Warin & Simone Dennis

This paper is concerned with the ways in which a group of Persian women, who have all fled Iran in the last two decades, give meaning to place and memory through the everyday practices of cooking and embroidery. While there are many different localised arts of patterning and flavour, we focus here on the recurring pattern of bota (the Cypress tree). In particular, we examine how the bota motif links both the making of domestic sweets and cloths, and is central in recalling and remaking a sense of place. The Cypress tree symbolises life: the continuation of life in place, and the continuation of place in life. In creating and consuming the bota motif, through eating, laying tablecloths, wrapping towels, sitting on cushions and drawing curtains, embodied experiences of landscape and relationships are reproduced. The embroidery items entail and occasion sensual engagement in and of themselves, and also serve as backgrounds for specific sensual engagements, including, for example, as tablecloths upon which food will be served. Engagement with the bota pattern cannot be characterised along strictly divided sensual dimensions. Rather, we argue that the senses are intertwined in a synaesthetic knot in which memory is embodied and reproduced.

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Introduction

As Langfield and Maclean have argued, the senses are ‘the strongest vessels of memory’, particularly in those who have emigrated (84). Drawing on ethnographic material gathered from a group of Persian women who have emigrated from Iran to Australia, we focus on the ways in which everyday practices of cooking and embroidery give meaning to place and home, and to the processes of remembering, forgetting, and the making and remaking of memory. We argue that the process of remembering involves recreating patterns; a process that has embedded within it the potential for continuing, and reworking patterns into the present and future. This is a process that also engages with the materials of memory, those things that have meaning and affect embedded in their historicity. We also argue that the process of forgetting is not strictly limited to ceasing to recreate patterns and discontinuing engagements with the materials of memory, but instead involves engaging material memories in a creative process of making patterns of forgetfulness. Forgetting itself may not simply be the reverse of remembering, but might be characterised by the way in which forgetting in this ethnographic circumstance involves the engagement of memory to rework, re-remember or erase specific affect and meaning. It is the process of re-remembering (which may include forgetting) and recreating in which meaning exists. Remembering, forgetting and re-remembering can provide multiple ways of being engaged with the past, present and future. The memories with which these processes engage may be continually recycled to throw light on the present and may point to both continuities and discontinuities of memory.

Our analysis of the processes of remembering, forgetting, and the making and remaking of memory, does not specifically address the broad social and historical conditions of diasporic displacement and the trauma attendant to many emigrations, including those of the women we engaged with, who fled Iran under dangerous and difficult circumstances. We focus here on the specific domestic and corporeal conditions and processes in which remembering and forgetting occur, which speak to and engage with broader social and political histories.

Jackson, in his key paper ‘Thinking Through the Body: An Essay on Understanding Metaphor’ (1983), makes this direct link between corporeality and environments when he argues that the body of the person correlates with the body of the world through a series of ethnographic, poetic and everyday metaphors. Drawing on diverse examples he demonstrates how specific elements of landscape correspond with particular bodily parts and or actions.

From his own fieldwork amongst the Kuranko of Sierra Leone, Jackson draws our attention to the ways in which the word *kile* (path or road) is a metaphor for the well-being of individuals and the quality of social relationships. Grass along the edges of the path bends one way as villagers go along a path through it, and then bends the other way as they return. Jackson argues that this toing and froing movement is used as a metaphor for the movement and reciprocity of people and of goods and services within the community (135). The paths interconnect Kuranko spaces, weaving into

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houses, courtyards, gardens, lanes and cooking yards, imposing a pattern of movement for villagers. This circulation of people and goods and services along paths in the village is linked to the movement of blood, heat and breath in the body. When the vital paths of the body have been blocked, illness ensues.

Through these examples, Jackson highlights the fundamental relationship between metaphor and embodiment, arguing that metaphor is not simply a reflection of the landscape, of a dualistic relationship between tenor and vehicle, but a much more complex process in which there is movement, dialectical unity and 'true interdependency' (132). It is through metaphor that the world of things is merged with the world of Being, and as a consequence 'things' like stones, hillsides and whales assume the status of 'signs' whose decipherment mediates understanding and action in the human world (130). In the Songhai view the metaphor of pathways presupposes continuity between language, knowledge and bodily practice, and thus mediates relationships between conceptual and physical domains of the habitus (137).

Unlike Douglas' static interpretation of natural symbols (which lack habitus and bodily praxis), it is this understanding of metaphor that we borrow from Jackson, of the interconnected movement between elements of landscape and bodily disposition. While Jackson does examine how pathways enter the house and reinforce bodily dispositions of space and gender, his primary focus (and that of other metaphorical analyses) centres on geographical landscapes outside of the domestic house. Our analysis differs, for it closely examines how geographical patterning is extended across time and space, and the ways in which forgetting and remembering entwine through the sensual consumption of domestic landscape in everyday lives.

The Study

The ethnography on which this paper is based draws primarily from one main informant, Safieh, her family, and the women she meets each week for cooking classes in the small kitchen at the local migrant resource centre. Safieh and her husband migrated to Australia 10 years ago from Iran and were reunited with their three children, whom they hadn't seen for 14 years. The Islamic Revolution of 1979 brought profound changes to all Iranians, some more so than others. Under the stricter regime and religious policy of Khomeini, the Baha'i faith, which originated in Iran during the nineteenth century, became a target of official persecution. As a result, Safieh and her family suffered greatly. They had enjoyed a life of education, employment, relative wealth and religious tolerance, yet the Islamic revolutionaries overturned what they saw as the secularisation of the country, and instituted the Shia Islamic teachings under the new Islamic Republic of Iran.

Safieh's brother, along with thousands of other minority Iranians, was executed, and her children fled the country, eventually settling in Australia. Safieh was no longer allowed to work as a teacher. Dropping her head, Safieh spoke quietly about this time, 'I remember 24 years ago when my brother died. My eldest son was expelled

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from university and my second son expelled from school . . . I was very sick for 3 months'. Her sickness is akin to Good's description of the heart distress, an illness which is caused by sadness, grieving or a specific sense of loss of death, and 'resonates deeply in Iranian culture' (45). Safieh visited a friend who was a specialist and, after many tests, he told her the best thing was to keep busy. Safieh embarked almost immediately on a large embroidery work, and she explained to us that as she made stitches upon the fabric, she sewed forgetfulness into the material, engaging with the painful memories, then stitching them tightly to the fabric. 'I started to sew', she said, 'with every stitch you forget the sadness'. It is through the process of sewing that Safieh both remembers and forgets the trauma associated with this time. And it is through the intimate associations of hand sewing and cooking with her sensuous body that Safieh incorporates and mends these fractured social relations of kin and political histories.

Safieh is well known in the local community for her culinary and embroidery skills, and she continues her passion through the teaching of weekly cooking, needlework and language classes to migrant women from Persia, Afghanistan and Iraq. It was the ways in which food engendered social relations amongst these women that initially drew us to this group, our ethnographic 'antennae' attuned to the social connectedness that is well documented around food and commensality (cf. Mennel 1991; Counihan and Van Esterik 1997; Counihan 1999; Germov and Williams 2004). In this ongoing fieldwork (which began in April 2004) we attended these classes, preparing and eating food with the women in the cramped community kitchen, as well as accompanying families to the local Persian food shop, participating in a Persian sweet making workshop for children run by Safieh and her daughter-in-law, and attending an embroidery exhibition at the Migration Museum, in which Safieh's work features. In these sites we conducted participant observation, open-ended interviews and documented material cultures through photography. Despite Safieh's constant stated embarrassment at her proficiency in the English language, she only occasionally called upon her daughters to translate difficult Farsi expressions for her. The meanings of specific practices and words were checked on repeated visits and with other family members, an ethnographic technique that allowed us to engage with further levels of meaning.

At Safieh's home we tasted, sipped and smelt the flavours of Persian foods and sweets, and traced our fingers over the embroidery that she rolled out on the diningroom table for us to see. It was in these contexts, that the importance of cooking and sewing (and the symbolic patterning of the *bota* pattern), came to prominence in the forgetting and remembering of past experiences.

The Processes of Forgetting and Remembering

Rather than using a dichotomous notion of forgetting and remembering, such as that used by Ricoeur (2004) to fruitfully explore experiences of trauma and post trauma in entire ethnic groups, we examine those immediately experienced habitual processes

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of forgetting and remembering in and of homescapes, cityscapes and localised landscapes. Kravva (141) has noted that:

. . . food discussions were used by Thessalonikan Jews, who were either survivors or children of survivors, as a vehicle to remember the painful past and evaluate the effects of that tragic ordeal upon their lives.

Where Ricoeur argues for a notion of forgetting that precedes and contextualises the historical conditions for remembering, Kravva's work provides grounds for exploring processes of forgetting and remembering as fluid, intertwined and inseparable processes.

It is difficult to theorise the purposeful forgetting of memory. As Lindsay and Read (1995) have argued, the experience of remembering is not reducible to a process of locating and reading off an encapsulated record of past experience. Rather, it involves 'partially recreating a prior pattern of activation across an entire network' (1). For Safieh, the experience of remembering is an embodied experience, which involves multisensual engagement with those places, objects, persons and experiences that are imbued with meaning and affect. In Terdiman's language, these are material memories; they have embedded in them the meaningful past in the present (20).

Qureshi (2000) has extended the notion of 'material' to include the heard and impermanent. This makes room for the idea that those senses that remain relatively unprivileged in Western philosophies, such as sound, smell, touch and taste, can be primary in the process of remembering. Also arguing against a Western model of linearity, Langfield and Maclean have argued that those traces of past experiences that have been embedded in the senses cannot be ordered chronologically, and are best understood as 'bundles of meaning' (93).

We add to the concept of material memory the idea that people, places, experiences and things, those materials in which memories are lodged, cannot be considered simply as receptacles. Rather than assuming that memory is the constant material with which the process of remembering engages, we argue instead that the materials of memory are also engaged in processes of flux and change, and that the process of remembering actively engages with flexible, fluctuating and inconsistent material memories in process; we here engage with the social life of things. This view of memory may be similar to the view that Victor Turner (c.1988) lent to works of art; these, he argued, are not finished products, but continue to have an active life in process, as people engage with them in inconsistent and multiply meaningful ways. It is with these ideas in mind that we begin to make sense of the processes of remembering and forgetting, and the engagement with fluid material memories through which these processes ensue.

Recreating Prior Patterns

In this ethnographic context the process of remembering involves, literally, recreating prior patterns of activation across social networks, which entails embodied and

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sensual engagement with domestic items and food that serve as material memories. Safieh has engaged in the practices of sewing, embroidery and cooking since her girlhood, and was taught these practices by her mother and other older female relatives. She describes cooking and embroidery as arts and crafts that are crucial to the female role: ‘cooking is very important in my city* very important* it is part of life for women . . . To make new sweets is to be very clever and a good wife’. As Harbottle notes in her analysis of ethnic and gender identities in British Iranian communities, food-related activities are, for most women, considered to comprise the most important activities and serves as one of the principal means of self-definition for Iranian women (108). Challenging universalist assumptions about the status of domestic labour, Iranian women (across all ethnic divisions of Muslim, Shiite, Sunni and Baha’i) derive considerable power and influence from their skills in food preparation (14).

When Safieh recreates these practices in Australia, she recreates particular prior patterns not only of recipe and stitch, but also of the social networks in which she was embedded as she made sweets and embroidery items in Iran. These networks include patterns of everyday gendered hierarchies, in which a woman’s capacity to make fine sweets for visitors would place her in an informal social hierarchy among her women friends, patterns of practice, in which groups of friends practised sewing or other craft work together, patterns of distribution, circulation and events, in which embroidered items and cooked food might be especially made for weddings, births and holidays, and patterns of family relatedness and participation, in which items might be produced and consumed by and for particular family members. Taken together, these patterns yield a broad pattern of social life and social network that Safieh continues to recreate in Australia though continuing practices of sewing and cooking.

Safieh embroiders items that will be pressed into service in the home, including cushions, wall hangings, curtains, tablecloths and the like. This involves recreating prior patterns, which are reproduced by knowing fingers. Producing sweets for consumption in the home also involves reproducing patterns, both in the sense that recipes provide the pattern for the finished food, and in the sense that many of the sweets were impressed with specific and meaningful patterns, including the *bota* pattern. The process of engaging in cooking and embroidery involves the activation of prior patterns of remembering and forgetting.

In our attention to domestic practices we were drawn to the leitmotif of the *bota* pattern, a familiar design that appeared in the patterning of sweets and in the patterning of cloths. On our first meeting with Safieh in her suburban home she immediately connected the crafts of cooking and embroidery via the *bota* pattern, explaining that this important ‘traditional pattern’ represents the Cypress tree or Cypress pine, which in turn is a metaphorical symbol for life. Safieh explained, ‘the *bota* represents life as every season it is always green, always alive, while the others die and lose their leaves’. In *The Social Life of Trees* Bloch suggests that trees are ubiquitous symbols of life (26), representing longevity, tradition and connection.

Safieh showed us a picture of a bulbous and bending 4000-year-old *bota* tree in Iran, Y:/Taylor & Francis/cjis/articles/Cjis107419/CJIS107419.3d[x] Friday, 4th March 2005 17:40:56

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and contrasted it with the much younger and thinner tree in her front garden. Connecting domestic and religious life, the *bota* pattern is seen in ritual practices; embroidered into wedding and funeral blankets and coverings for the Koran. Like Jackson's metaphorical pathways and Connerton's (1989) notion of incorporated ritual memory, the *bota* serves to connect people, places and memories through rites of passage and in everyday, domestic experience. The *bota* characterises the recreating of patterns, bringing memory as past into memory as present and future, and the idea of continuity.

Habitual Memories of the Fingers: Touching Material Memories

As Langfield and Maclean note, memory 'manifests itself physically and within a gendered framework' (85), to create 'body memories', a term that denotes traces of the past embedded in the physical senses (93). The process of recreating prior patterns entails and occasions the use of a body that has embedded in it knowledge of patterns past produced. Meaningful patterns, depicting key symbols such as the *bota*, are made with fingers that hold within them the memories of material terrain past traversed, and memories of stitches made for a lifetime of habitual engagement. Stitches made and the patterns they form together include not only memories of times, places, people and social relationships, and the potentiality for new memories to be made in time, place and social networks, they also call upon the embodied memories of knowing fingers. These 'habits of hand' (Mars and Mars 157) of which Safieh is habitually aware as she sits to sew or proceeds to make sweets, call upon embodied memories of how to make the stitches, and how to handle and combine ingredients.

These memories of embodied habitual practice come together with her 'new' and present stitching or cooking to make a continuous, but not necessarily chronological history, creating a lived time of the body in which what is habitually known, past learned, sits easily with the present making of new items. For this reason alone, it is clear that the experience of remembering, of which embodiment is a central part, does not reduce to locating and reading off an encapsulated record of a past experience, but rather involves recreating anew a prior pattern that is already habitually known. Here, knowledge of prior engagement with material is drawn upon in a habitual manner to create those items in which memory is and will be embedded. While this involves all of the senses, taste and touch emerge from this ethnographic context as primary, and we pull these from the larger sensuous knot of home experience to look closely at engagements with material in the practice of embroidery, and the taste of sugar in the consumption of sweet tea and sugary powders.

Recreating Patterns of Homescapes: The Domestic Life of Cushions and Sweets

The items that Safieh makes are soft furnishings, tablecloths, curtains and cushions, that furnish her home in Australia, and sweets that she has made or that have been

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sent from Iran by relatives that lay on her table when visitors come. These material memories taken together form a pattern of domestic organisation of the home place that characterised the organisation of her home in Iran, and continues to organise her home place in Australia. By including in her home in Australia the items that she has continually, habitually, corporeally and multisensually engaged with in her experience of home in Iran, Safieh recreates a prior pattern of home place. Home furnishings and home foods have already embedded in them memories of habitual, multisensual and corporeal activities of sitting down in the lounge room, opening the curtains in the morning, serving sweets when visitors come, preparing to take a shower, setting the table with an embroidered cloth, sitting down to sew, and so on. As Langfield and Maclean have noted in their analysis of the ways in which Jewish women emigrants remember, home is 'an extension of one's personal environment, filled with the familiar', that collection of objects furniture and furnishings that are carried from place to place. These possessions have 'a certain ambience of familiarity in a new place' (100), and can be considered material memories. The material memories are memorable because they call upon relationships of habitual engagement in the home place. These habitual engagements with material memories not only stretch back to Safieh's father's home in Iran, where she remembers the **bota** pattern being embedded in the windows of the home in which she grew up, but also to her present domestic space where the **bota** tree is framed in the view from her front door.

Lodged in many of these material memories of food is a particular sweetness, a taste that has connections with understandings of humoral medicine, and as Mintz (1986) notes in his history of sugar, is laced with social relationships. On one visit to Safieh's house, she offered us a sweet powder consisting of sugar with subtle hints of 10 other flavours, including cardamom, coffee and saffron. This powder, Safieh explained, was taken by upending a teaspoon directly onto the back of the tongue, where it dissolved. The powder is commonly given to pregnant women to increase energy, and is also used for celebrating birth. Safieh's daughter, who is pregnant, partook of the powder during our visit. In addition to medicinal use, sugar also provides a key component to tea drinking, 'a habit elaborated in a specific way and thus one means by which Iranian identities are clearly marked and reinforced' (Harbottle 1995: 27). Tea drinking is part of the **ta'arof**, a code of ritual courtesy (2000: 118), in which guests are served tea, bowls of fruit, sweets, nuts and biscuits. On each occasion we met Safieh she extended this level of hospitality, or 'sweetening of relations', which was vital to maintaining Safieh and her family's reputation as fine hosts.

Theoreticians of the senses, such as Seremataki (1994), Classen (1993), Stoller (1989) and Borthwick (127), have argued that taste blurs the separability of subject body and object food, through the process of dissolvability. Sugar, as well as being itself dissolvable into hot tea and into individual bodies, also has the capacity to dissolve boundaries between persons, past and present, and between distant geographies. Sharing hot tea and sugary powder in the home provides a means by

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which personal subjects maintain social links that they shared together or with others in Iran, and provides a means by which new persons become enfolded in these social networks. Safieh often spoke of the times, places and people that were woven together with sugar, as we ourselves partook of hot tea or sugary powder. Here, embodied habitual memories, practices and objects in which sugar is involved stretch across time, people and space in a continuing thread of sweetness. Erdinc has noted that sharing food with important cultural significance such as bread involves the entry of home food into other's taste memories, where home is the locus of a sense of belonging that begins with smells and tastes (98). A thread of sociality and home continues through the material memory of sugar because the body itself continues its engagement with sugar and the places and networks in which it is key. As it tastes, smells, touches, sees and hears hot, fragrant tea sucked through lumps of Persian sugar, the thread of memory stretches to connect otherwise distant sites of home, sociality, past and present.

Such synaesthetic experiences of home, in which each sense may be involved in lodging memories of home in the experiencing body may, as Sutton suggests, work to construct 'whole' experiences of home to which we add the notion of continuity. The experience of wholeness here allows for experiences across distinct spaces and times to come together in specific moments of everyday habitual activity, rather than compartmentalising home experiences (Sutton 101).

Food constructs sociability, and 'has the power to evoke memories concerning past family relations and sentiments of belonging to a city' (Kravva 140). Safieh's home city of Kerman has a reputation for its fine cooking (particularly of sweets) and embroideries (such as *patteh*, hand embroidered tapestries). Food and embroidery, and the construction of memory and identities, are strongly interconnected. In particular, food and cloth are often the locus of recollections and memories of a family or community past. Safieh, for example, gives presents of foods and embroidery to her children and other family members when they leave (such as 100-year-old wall hangings), and when she returns from Iran. Additionally, family members from Iran send Safieh those ingredients that are perceived to have key symbolic value and are of inferior quality in Australia, such as Persian saffron, dates and nougat (cf. Harbottle 48). These items serve as material memories that connect Safieh and her family with one another, and with home places of Australia and Iran. Goddard (213) has argued that:

Food could be seen as the sensory point of entry into a web of sentiments, memories and fantasies, which largely constitute a sense of identity.

Sugar and embroidery materials are key threads in this web.

When Safieh includes these cushions, curtains, tablecloths, towel wraps and sweets in her home in Australia, the items are more than domestic banalities because they have been so habitually embedded in Safieh's experience of domestic home place.

King (2000) has argued that the physical sites of one's 'original' home constitute the

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most authentic sites of memory. Nora has attempted to define a difference between *milieu de memoire* and *lieu de memoire*. The sites of memory are the 'milieux', the real environments of memory, but today, with our lack of memory, we have to be content with *lieux de memoire*, places which remind us of the past of a (broken) memory' (cited in Morley and Robbins 87). Drawing on a Heideggerian notion of being in the world, we argue instead that to be in the world is, as Guignon puts it, is 'like being engaged in or involved in something' (232). Safieh is continually involved in creating and engaging with the material memories of home, and it is this habitual engagement that suspends her in patterns of sentiments that she herself has made that span distant times and geographies. Cushions and other soft furnishings and sweets included in the Australian home place may constitute a significantly stronger thread than Nora's formulation allows, because they occasion a habitual, corporeally, experienced continuity. This is not to say that such threads are not stretched, taut or frayed, rather that they provide a means by which 'original' home place and 'new' home place are linked; via the continuing life of the habitual body that has and continues to experience home objects.

The habits of hand and body may take on subtly or very evidently different forms in specific sites of 'home'; substituting ingredients, threads, cooking equipment, or going through the different processes of acquiring these things in different places may, as Mars and Mars (2001) suggest, have impact on both the experiences of practice and the products of practice. These things may strain the thread of continuing engagement with objects and practices of 'real' home, but as ingredients and threads are substituted and as systems of exchange are negotiated, habitual practices may come to intertwine with newly acquired practices to yield a continuously reworked understanding and practice of home making, that is not strictly bounded by old or new frameworks. As Brockmeier (15) has argued, 'remembering the self' depends not on restoring an original identity, but on remembering', on putting past and present selves together, moment by moment, in a process of provisional reconstruction'.

Conclusion

According to Mars and Mars 'a thread of continuous knowledge underpins standards of traditional production, preparation and consumption' (157). A thread of embodied memory stitches different places, ingredients, homes and people together to yield a continuity characterised by the extension of embodied memory into the future. These threads are woven together by particular material memories and practices that are engaged with the processes of forgetting and remembering, including the recreation of patterns and tastes across foods and cloths. The metaphor of the *bota*, which is represented in many of these material memories, is a metaphor of continuance for Safieh's broader experiences and practices of being-at-home.

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Some questions have arisen during the preparation of your manuscript for typesetting. Please consider each of the following points below and make any corrections required in the proofs.

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AQ1 Please supply Keywords

AQ2 Counihan and Van Esterik 1997* Van Esterik or van Esterik?

AQ3 Victor Turner (c.1988)* c.1988 or 1988?

AQ4 As Harbottle notes in her analysis of ethnic and gender identities in British Iranian communities, food-related activities are, for most women, considered to comprise the most important activities and serves as one of

the principal means of self-definition for Iranian women (108)* 1995 or 2000?

AQ5 Harbottle 48* 1995 or 2000?

AQ6 The sites of memory are the 'milieux', the real environments of memory, but today, with our lack of memory, we have to be content with lieux de memoire, places which remind us of the past of a (broken) memory' (cited in Morley and Robbins 87)* opening quotation mark missing?

AQ7 As Brockmeier (15) has argued, 'remembering the self' depends not on restoring an original identity, but on re-membering', on putting past and present selves together, moment by moment, in a process of provisional reconstruction'* please check quotation marks

AQ8 Kwint, Breward and Aynsley (1999)* not cited in the text?