

'Radical Culinary Love: Cooking as healing praxis in the time of COVID-19'

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Abstract

The kitchen is a space where taste, smells and flavours can heal. Mannur (2010) has argued that the realm of the culinary can be a site of nostalgia, longing and belonging. As we are in the middle of this unprecedented and fatal pandemic, more and more people are engaging in cooking their meals with their families and loved ones. The racial formations of Indigenous, queer, Black, and immigrant of color communities trouble the U.S. national body, which simultaneously includes and others us (Gopinath, 2018) (Neo Chen, 2019). The realm of the culinary is a site where communities of color are actively engaging in self and mutual healing through cooking, while also asserting resistance and personhood through this practice. This paper explores how the affective connections that exceed normative space/time are created and mobilised when we cook by drawing on our community and ancestral archives of cultural knowledges on cooking. This paper envisions the act of cooking and connecting with ancestral kin as a way of engaging in “radical culinary love,” which I offer as praxis for collective healing and survival during the COVID-19 pandemic. As a Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies scholar, and immigrant woman of color living and studying on Indigenous lands, I reflect on how the connections with my living and ancestral kin help me survive and nourish myself, making my scholarship in higher education possible during this challenging time.

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Right here in our bodies, in our defense of our right to experience joy, in the refusal to abandon the place where we have been the most completely invaded and colonized, in our determination to make the bombed and defoliated lands flower again and bear fruit, here where we have been most shamed is one of the most radical and sacred places from which to transform the world (Levins Morales, 1998, p.119).

My Brown immigrant body is kept suspended by the white supremacist, racist, capitalist, cis-heteropatriarchal, settler-colonial state, which neither accepts nor rejects me. As international people of color, we are under constant surveillance by the nation-state, which holds the power to define and enforce our state of being fixed or mobile. The COVID-19 pandemic has led to heightened restrictions on and surveillance of immigrant of color communities, as our racial formations trouble the U.S. national body, which simultaneously includes and others us (Gopinath, 2018) (Neo Chen, 2019). As a mother and a Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies scholar, I write this essay to reflect on the ways cooking in my domestic kitchen space enables the lives, memories, and knowledges of my mothers and grandmothers to come together, intersect, and heal the pain and longing created by the COVID-19 pandemic. Drawing on Andrew Jolivette's framework of "radical love" (Jolivette, 2016), I envision the ways in which practicing "radical culinary love" helps us resist the systems of oppression that we live within and are coming up against at this time.

I am sitting in my kitchen as I write these words, looking over at a pot of *rasam*. It is mid-July. We are in the throes of the COVID-19 pandemic. This red soupy dish boils on my stovetop, with pale yellow froth slowly forming on its surface. I stir the pot slightly, scooping up some of the soft, cooked tomato pieces, and yellow lentils. I bring it closer to my nose to take in some of the flavour with my eyes closed. My heart and mind immediately search for the earthy smell of the *rasam* powder that my mother prepared with freshly ground ingredients, leaving generous quantities to last me a year to heal my cravings, my missings, and my homesickness. The froth is growing and getting more rapid, and my mother's voice tells me to turn off the heat right away. "Don't let the *rasam* boil too much. It spoils the freshness of all the ingredients," she would say in Tamil. I turn off the stove, sprinkle chopped cilantro over the simmering dish and add a generous squeeze of lime. As a final step, I pour the flavour-defining *thalippu* or seasoning: mustard seeds, curry leaves, asafoetida, fried lightly in *nei* (*ghee*/clarified butter), over the *rasam*.

At the beginning of the pandemic with an increasing amount of time spent indoors, I cooked and continue to cook compulsively. There is not a single cooking session where I am not thinking about my maternal home, as I pound the cumin and peppercorns together; as I fry the dried red chilis with coriander seeds, lentils, and fresh coconut; as I soak a ball of tamarind in warm water and squeeze the juices out of it with ritualised dedication until only the seeds, white fibres, and drained pulpy parts remain. These seemingly small, insignificant steps are rooted in intergenerational culinary knowledges that are helping the healing of my homesick, unpalatable, "foreign" immigrant body, which is suspended in particular ways within the settler-nation-state.

“*Saaptiya?*” (Tamil for, “did you eat?”) is the first question that any phone call always starts off with whenever I call home. This question, a very common way of greeting somebody you meet in person back home, inquiring whether they ate, and want some water, is a simple, taken-for-granted expression, but has gained a deeper meaning for me since the pandemic/lockdown started. “*Saaptiya? Enna saapta?*” (“Have you eaten? What did you eat?”): the question then invariably leads to a conversation about what was cooked that day. My mother and I exchange notes about what we cooked, as I enquire about how her mother, and her mother-in-law made those very same dishes. As my mother and I exchange notes, I see us as collectively looking into our own pasts, invoking culturally-specific knowledges from culinary archives belonging to our families and communities, and the women situated within networks of heterosexual patriarchy. Trying to bridge physical spaces separating us, and the distances, with technology, I see this inquiry—“*saaptiya*”—as a gesture reflecting an ethic of care inextricably linked to the feminist genealogy of cooking and the passing down of traditional recipes between generations, which in itself is an act of community-based care work and radical culinary love.

The COVID-19 pandemic tightening its grip around the world has led to multiple travel restrictions being imposed internationally. Along with this, racist and xenophobic immigration policies continually being formulated threatened the deportation of international students living in the United States in mid-2020, under a rule that was later rescinded after being faced with multiple lawsuits. Amid all this, I lost the opportunity to visit home this summer to see my mother, brother, and extended family. In order to cope with not being able to visit home, and with the trauma of living in an environment filled with heightened racism and anti-immigrant rhetoric, I began to increasingly turn to my kitchen, situated on Indigenous lands, holding stories and overlapping

material histories of colonialism, migration, displacement, dispossession, indentureship, and erasure. I was inspired to write this paper on the theme, “Indigenous innovation in Higher Education during the Corona-Virus pandemic” as a reflection on these interconnected histories, the ways different racialized communities are positioned to serve the white supremacist, settler-colonial, capitalist state. I reflect on how radical culinary love facilitates healing and opens up possibilities for solidarity and alliance-building by recognising settler dispossession and complicities within colonial structures.

Six years ago, as I was preparing for my move to the United States, my mother restlessly packed my suitcase with dried herbs and spices, worried that I might not be able to access the most basic ingredients to prepare meals that I had grown up eating. This “food suitcase” (Mannur, 2010, p. 163), which is “the last vestige of olfactory otherness” (Mannur, 2010, p. 163), describes pretty much every piece of luggage that I was flying with. But this time I landed in a Texas international airport empty-handed as my food suitcases had been held by the immigration and customs department, a system that had become stricter each year about possible “agro-terrorism” post-9/11. My suitcases finally found their way back to me a week after I landed. I opened them frantically. The first items that I made sure had made it back safe were the kitchen items—food and steel utensils—that my mother had packed for me, items that eventually helped me create a semblance of home, as I moved away from home. Mannur (2010, p.20) writes:

...the desire to remember home by fondly re-creating culinary memories cannot be understood merely as a reflectively nostalgic gesture; rather such commemorative acts must be read as a commentary on what it means to inhabit different diasporic

locations while constantly battling the implications of routing memory and nostalgia through one's relationship to culinary practices.

In Mannur's argument, I see a reflection of radical culinary love and the ways in which it helps us mend our homesickness while also allowing space for ongoing healing from not being able to go or see home, while living in hostile, anti-immigrant, and xenophobic environments. Mannur suggests that the longing for home and the wish to recreate recipes from our home, childhood, and homelands is not just something we do to feed our longing for our home. She asks that we look at how routing these memories and longings through the realm of the culinary leads diasporic folx to also become part of a larger genealogies of race, class, and sexuality.

As we live through the challenging times of this pandemic, I increasingly reflect on the women in my matriline as knowledge creators, whose healing, love, and care is showing up in my kitchen through my family recipes, to help me survive these ongoing unprecedented and traumatic times, while resisting colonial pressures of assimilation. In *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens*, Walker (1972) reflects on her mothers and grandmothers as artists and creators. Walker is specifically referring to generations of enslaved Black women in her matriline, and how their creativity, artistic expressions, and spirituality continue to live in and through her work. She writes: "we must fearlessly pull out of ourselves and look at and identify with our lives the living creativity some of our great-grandmothers were not allowed to know" (Walker, Alice, 1994, p. 405). This framing helps me imagine the labour of mothering and cooking within the stifling and invisibilising confines of white supremacist, settler-colonial heteropatriarchy, and how the creativity of my

grandmothers and great-grandmothers has survived in and as the culinary arcades I draw from in this moment for my own survival.

I reflect on my own relationship with the culinary, and the ways in which it is created and shaped by the intergenerational affiliations and connections with the women I come from on my parental family lines. I think about the ways I recreate and perform my family's culinary repertoire within the diasporic spaces that I currently occupy, and craft a praxis of "radical culinary love," a strategy for resistance against the systems of power, kept in place by the white supremacist, racist, anti-immigrant, systems of oppression. Jolivet (2016) frames "radical love", that has been theorised in theology and queer studies, in the context of American Indian MLGBTQ2S (mixed-race, queer-identified, transgender, and/or Two-Spirit) communities. Radical love helps Indigenous communities to heal themselves and each other, by centering the physical, spiritual, and emotional health of individuals and their larger community. Jolivet (2016) writes: "socialization and stigmatization in the West create fractures and forces us to compartmentalize our lives, separating our health, our education, and our spirituality. Radical love seeks to bring all of these fragmented pieces back together" (p.4). My own framing of "radical culinary love" is inspired by Jolivet's, to help understand how, as a diasporic woman of colour, the simple everyday act of preparing and sharing food at this time, is helping me heal, while the white supremacist, racist, capitalist, cis-heteropatriarchal system I live within, enforces a violent, compartmentalisation of our lives as immigrants of colour.

As the *rasam* boils on my stovetop, I start to prepare the side. The delectable combination of "rasam saadam, *urulai kizangu fry*" (rasam rice with fried potatoes) was a childhood favorite that

has also now become a staple to feed my hungry, homesick soul. On the next burner, I take a wide pan and pour a little bit of oil, and as the oil heats up and starts to smoke, I instinctively reach out to the spice box or “*aindu arai petti*” (Tamil for the box with five compartments), a gift from my mother. The box holds cumin, whole black pepper, fenugreek seeds, coriander seeds, mustard seeds, split yellow lentils and white lentils—ingredients that go into almost every dish made daily. I scoop up some mustard seeds, and put them into the oil, and as soon as they start to splutter and split, I add cumin, curry leaves, and asafoetida.

Now, it is time add in the peeled and chopped potatoes, the starchy tuber that embodies deeply connected histories of imperialism across the Asia and the Americas. Although native to South America, potatoes were brought into the Indian subcontinent during British colonial rule. Colonial officials bribed Indian farmers to grow potatoes by abandoning the local crops that they were growing earlier, and they did so by promoting the vegetable using “Enlightenment theories on happiness” (Fine, 2019, para. 1). Local crops such as rice are more likely to fail and so the potato is essential to ensure food security for the natives, they argued (Fine, 2019), and thus it worked its way into countless recipes across several regions in the subcontinent, including mine. The women in my family, who created culinary archives from their locations within Tamil Brahmin heterosexual patriarchy, are communicating with and through recipes that embody these violent stories of colonialism, forced assimilation for survival, as well as complicity with colonial projects. Upadhyay (2019) suggests that the South Asian diasporas living on stolen Indigenous lands, “are already always caste-d, and are continually caste-ing” (pp. 161). Examining the connections between race, caste, and Indigeneity, Upadhyay (2019) writes that South Asian “model minority” communities are homogenised into narrow narratives of multiculturalism and diversity which

obscure dominant caste hegemonies and are “wittingly or unwittingly complicit” in ongoing projects of settler-colonialism (pp. 164). The decolonisation of Indigenous-South Asian relations and solidarities need to center the dismantling of antiblackness, Indigenous dispossession, and Brahminism (Upadhyay, 2019).

I suggest that radical culinary love enables us to reflect on these embodied, interconnected material histories of genocide, violence, dispossession, and erasure, and imagine radical solidarities within our kitchens. As I cook the potatoes, the colonial import brought to my own homelands, on my stove top, using the South Indian ingredients not native to the lands of the Tualatin Kalapuya peoples that I am living and cooking on, I think about my own positionality as an Asian Indian on Indigenous lands and how the pan in front of me is a manifestation of braided imperial histories (Lowe, 2015) of racialised Asian indentureship, the labour of stolen and enslaved Black bodies, and the ongoing settler-colonial project of Indigenous dispossession and erasure.

A few summers ago, at a new job, a white male co-worker asked me where I was from during an introductory conversation, offering to take a guess if that was alright with me. I had limited choices, especially considering he was a senior official in the organisation and I was the new employee, one of only two people of colour on the floor of the office building located in what would later be known for one of the most violent far-right rallies in the country. “You are from India, right?” he asks. “Yes,” I respond with a smile. And almost conditionally, he responds asking me a question I’d hoped I would never have to hear again. He said, “I love Indian food, especially chicken tikka masala is my favorite. We should get Indian food together sometime.” His confident guesses and assumptions of my ethnicity, and shallow deduction that I enjoy chicken tikka masala,

a dish that is not even known or made in the region I belong to, seemed irrelevant at that point. The otherness of my Brown body and “accented” English was palatable to my co-worker and those white surroundings only when talked about through its forced gastronomic connections. As Mannur (2010) writes, the “undisciplined excess” the immigrant of color stands for, and the stereotypical spiciness attributed to Indian food, are both too much for mainstream America, and “must be lessened or eliminated” for them to become “palatable” (pp. 206-207). For racialized migrants of colour, food is not only a source of wistful yearning for home, healing, and resistance, but also embodies the pains and pressures of quiet assimilation, labour extraction and commodification within colonial-capitalist projects.

By operating from a space within these braided histories and by connecting back with women from my feminist culinary genealogy, I see racialised migrants of colour as practicing resistance against the repressive, heteropatriarchal, racist, anti-immigrant, nation-state, which controls our bodies using its xenophobic policies, separating families and loved ones in the name of preserving the whiteness of the settler-nation-state. This practice of connecting with women in my family back home, and in my ancestry, and invoking them through my daily ritual of cooking pushes back against xenophobic and racist mechanisms of the nation-state which prevents us from uniting with our families. With tightening restrictions on immigration and added barriers to international travelling due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I am unable to meet my family, and engage in collective acts of remembering those who have passed. Through my practice of cooking, I communicate with my kin in a way that transcends physical barriers and space/time. Laura Harjo (2018) theorises the “kin-space-time” envelope for Mvskoke and Indigenous feminist futurity as: “a memory, but not solely in the sense of recalling a scene or a vignette; it also provides instruction for how to be in

the world, or it invokes a sense of responsibility in the person recalling the memory” (p. 28). Harjo suggests the ways in which Mvskoke communities consider the practices, memories, and stories of their ancestors to derive strength, resilience, and sustenance for their livelihood in the present (Harjo, 2018). Alongside Harjo’s theorising, I also think about Patti Duncan’s framing of “critical remembering” (Duncan, 1998, p.164), a process that slowly creates change through the small, simple acts from the everyday. And using my ritual cooking, I remember my mothers, aunts, grandmothers, and grand-aunts, and their stories, and how their lives have laid down the paths for my own learnings, journeys, resistance and survival that cut across spaces and temporalities.

In *Living a Feminist Life*, Sara Ahmed (2017) writes that her scholarly genealogy is formed by feminists of color who have continually challenged white patriarchy. She writes, “Citation is feminist memory” (Ahmed, 2017, p. 15). She also writes, “Citations can be feminist bricks: they are the materials through which, from which, we create our dwellings” (p.16). The women from my ancestral and familial kin I cite in and through my cooking, and the feminists of colour that enable my theorising of “radical culinary love” help me build a “feminist dwelling” (Ahmed, 2017, p. 2) within my kitchen. Collectively, they transform my kitchen from being not just a space where I cook and fondly remember home, but a space for love, self-reflection, resistance, healing, and survival during COVID-19. I engage in the daily ritual of recalling my mothers and grandmothers, the women who raised me, as creators and holders of cultural knowledge, (re)producing a living and growing archive from which I draw knowledge every day and practice it to nourish myself and my family as we engage in self and mutual healing from the devastating effects of this pandemic. My living and growing culinary archive is not only for healing, but is also offering resistance to the prevailing racism and xenophobia against immigrant communities of colour,

whose bodies and foods are seen as foreign, constituting physical and “olfactory excess” (Mannur, 2010, p. 186), and who are always “out of place and out of time” (Gopinath, 2018, p. 91). This archive is embodied love and resistance and draws on intergenerational cultural memories and knowledges that cannot be contained by or understood within dominant, normative space/time.

My kitchen space enables the coming together of a line-up of traditionally cooked, four-course meals. But beyond that, as I cook every day and as my mother and I talk over video chat about our lives and memories of my deceased father, with each recipe of hers that I recreate I am adding another story, another memory, to our shared archives. Engaging in cooking and these reflective conversations allows me to access familial archives and memories that inform, nourish and sustain my life and my scholarship as I pursue my doctoral studies as an international student-parent. By reframing the ways in which cooking is seen as just a mundane, invisible act from the everyday which literally fills our stomachs and nourishes us, I reflect on it as a radical, ceremonial act in which I remember and greet my ancestors into my kitchen every time I cook, and as we practice radical culinary love together. The braided material histories of the different ingredients I cook with, and the ways they coalesce, makes me imagine radical alliances and solidarities, as being on the lands of the Tualatin Kalapuya peoples makes my cooking and my scholarship possible. The separation between school/workplace and home no longer exists as we live and work in our home spaces in the middle of the pandemic. Our roles and responsibilities in our personal and scholarly lives are constantly converging and diverging every moment. Radical culinary love allows us to look inward into these spaces where we are living as spaces for love, healing, resistance, and survival.

I dole out a spoon of the brownish red *rasam*, pour it generously over the cooked white rice on my plate. The chopped tomatoes, curry leaves, cilantro, black mustard seeds and clumps of cooked yellow lentil create a dent on the mound of rice, while watery red liquid flows down and spreads all over the steel plate that my mother brought along with her on one of her visits to see me. I dig my fingers into the rice and mix the rice and *rasam* together, and scoop some of it and put it into my mouth. I can taste the acidic tartness of the tamarind, tomatoes, and lime, and the spice of crushed black pepper, as they slowly heal my sore throat and the tastes take me back to memories from my distant home.

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