Habit, Home, Threshold

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This essay is an experiment that attends to the habit of tea as both subject and object. A coalescence of habit as threshold as home. In an assemblage of encounters, I hear, I sense, I smell, I taste, and I show how my habit (of tea) is a trestle—both a transport and a transaction in which I arrive and depart multiple times, every day. Consider these words a kind of searching (and finding), a cartographic tracing, a constellation—of habit, of home, of threshold—a plotting to find and arrive home.

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The habit of tea is both subject and object. A coalescence of habit as threshold as home. I hear, I smell, I see, I sense, I taste—to understand how my habit (of tea) is a trestle—both a transport and transaction into which I arrive and depart multiple times, every day. Almost there, but not quite. A bridge? A membrane? A precipice? Or simply, a threshold.

Why create this subject/object? Listening is an attunement, both in the attention it demands and the memories it generates. Three years of listening-in to the material, discursive, poetic, and imaginary spaces of home along with refugees, paying attention to the ways they center home in their oral histories of the British partitioning of India in 1947, has brought me here. In puzzling over the terrains of their imaginations and longings for the old country, I find that I—the subject/object, ethnographer/participant, exile/expatriate who has chosen to leave home to live in North America—must reckon with where home resides for me.
I might call this arrangement of words an assemblage of encounters—events, sensations, soundings, memories, repetitions—the stuff of habit. Or I might think of it as a gathering of “ordinary affects,” what Kathleen Stewart explores as “an animate circuit that conducts force and maps connections, routes, and disjunctures” (3). The significance of ordinary affects, says Stewart, lies not in the meanings we assign, but in the “intensities they bring and in what thoughts and feelings they make possible” (3). Consider these words a kind of searching (and finding), a cartographic tracing, a constellation—of habit, of home, of threshold—a plotting to find and arrive home.

The Water Boils

... in a one-quart steel pan, one of two reserved exclusively for boiling water for tea in my kitchen here in Athens, Ohio, the small college town where I live and work. I never use a kettle; I do not think they clean well. Or, Amma, my mother, told me they do not clean well. I watch the first bubbles appear on the base and stop for a fleeting second, as if listening. Amma’s voice, from three decades ago, whispers a caution, “It’s not done yet; this is only the first stage of boiling.”

Maybe I was eight years old then, or maybe nine. It seemed to take forever. As if we were always waiting and watching—for the bubbles to appear, for the water to boil, and finally for the chai (tea) to be served. The preparation was pregnant with corrections and pauses and waiting. I memorized the process.

I anticipate the stages of boiling with a sort of muscle memory. Or it is that Amma’s time-traveling whispers are my muscle memory? First, the bubbles are conceived at the base like tiny silver beads and can be seen slowly swimming to the top layer; the second is the middling stage of bubbles in a restrained battle with the colder top layer of liquid; the final stage is the battle won—the riotous bubbles compete with each other in a boisterous rush to tumble out of the pan. In this case, into a teapot.

Stages of Boiling

... water. When the muse for this assemblage arrives, I draw out the classic *The Book of Tea* by Okakura Kakuzō from a hidden bookshelf in the attic. I do not remember buying it. It came as a gift. I do remember
flipping through the pages and admiring its minimalist aesthetic. Replete with pictures in black, white, and shades of greenish-golden grey (gradations of tea color, perhaps), the book is the Japanese story of tea and the tea ceremony—something about which I do not know much.

Maybe the book and I have both waited, anticipating this moment. Serendipity is a sort of magic. Or a sort of middle space between chance and magic. Something undefined. Something like a threshold that arranges itself into some meaning when you least expect it. Maybe Amma too has heard of him, but in a quick phone call she dispels my tentative (magical) thinking. Still, echoing her whispers from decades long gone, Kakuzō writes:

There are three stages of boiling: the first boil is when the little bubbles like the eye of fishes swim on the surface; the second boil is when the bubbles are like crystal beads rolling in a fountain; the third boil is when the billows surge wildly in the kettle. (62–63)

The stages, the habit of counting the stages, the habit of watching, the habit of waiting—a repetition I commit by habit.

A habit, if traced, can take you home. A habit is repetitive. It can arrive at the same time every day in the same place, or it can emerge in other places as a re-grounding. Flexible in its capacity to be taken anywhere, it is also unbending in its resistance to stay present, solid in the midst of change. A habit as an interstitial space. And here, both—the waiting and the repetition—feel like some sort of thresholds that place me somewhere. Maybe home?

**Tea Leaves, Arrivals**

I alight the aircraft with a green backpack, which I insisted on buying because in those days, mid-1997 and me at the age of twenty-three, I saw myself as a free-spirited traveler. To look like one seemed necessary. It is August and I am entering the United States on an F1 student visa. Measuring less than five feet, carrying an almost four-foot-long stuffed backpack, I must look comical. I walk to customs with a sure gait; even when my shoulder blades seem to be on the verge of snapping. Of course, I also have two oversized bags checked in, for which I eventually pay $100 in excess baggage fees. As I write this, it interests me to take note of what I remember. I am here, at O'Hare
Airport in Chicago, at the end of a 25-hour transatlantic journey, to start graduate school in America.

The border security man asks me to empty the backpack. This is not an ordinary school backpack—it is a real hiking, walking, “backpacking” backpack, so it takes time to empty it of its contents. It holds, among other things, the few books I love that I must carry on my person, clothes for a few days, a pound each of loose leaf Lipton Green Label Darjeeling and Brooke Bond Red Label Orange Pekoe tea, and a one-quart steel pan. I could have put the teas in my checked bags, but was too afraid to arrive without them. When the border security man looks at both the teas and pan questioningly, I shrug, “It’s the Indian tea I like, I don’t know where I will get it here.”

“There are many different types of tea in America,” he tells me, with a hint of condescension, I think.

“Well, then these here will tide me over until I discover the others,” I smile.

“The pan?” he asks.

“It’s good steel, makes the water taste good when you boil it,” I reply.

He smiles, puzzled, and hands it back to me, more than just a little curious.

Habits are quirky. They are also ordinary. And it is true that the ordinary “can be like medicine” (Alexie 119).

Border-Crossings, Seventeen Years (1997–2014)

There are numerous stories about kinds of condiments, foods, and other delicacies immigrants carry in their luggage. Stories also about things that spill, those that give out odors, and some that are simply confiscated by the authorities. There are also grim tales of dogs sniffing out luggage for foodstuffs, of immigrants being asked to empty out containers of chutneys, pickles, and sauces that have been carefully packed for them by their families. Israeli friends talk of carrying the right kind of canned garbanzo beans for hummus, Pakistani friends say they carry a special spice mix for the rice and meat dish called biryani, Jamaican expatriates always seem to carry the Jamaican steak rub, and all the Indians I know carry “better quality” spices from “back home.” Sounds and smells and pieces and objects of home that—exiles, expatriates, refugees, travelers—are willingly or unwillingly leaving behind. And objects, notes Elizabeth
V. Spelman, are “a scaffold for memory, in the sense that they provide a kind of platform through which memories are reached for, a guiding structure through which a past is recalled” (11). Objects as belonging.

In the early years, I carry back many vestiges of home. An easy roller-bag replaces the backpack and the pan is already a permanent fixture in every American home I inhabit. After the first five years, the black eyeliner I use to apply to my eyes, the Indian one I swore I would never live without, has been replaced by an American version. My herbal shampoo, too, is exchanged for an American kind; I cannot even remember its name. I no longer buy the biscuits (cookies, as they are called here in America) for tea—Parle G, Nice, Marie, Good Day—at the Asian stores in the towns where I have lived. Periodically, I return with some linen—cotton bedspreads, napkins, sheets, cushion covers—mostly to preserve an aesthetic. Some saris, some salwar kameezes, some silk scarves, and sometimes some savory snacks find a corner in my luggage. Perhaps this material relinquishing parallels the flux in my immigrant status—from student, to worker, to permanent resident, to naturalized citizen. Perhaps it does not, and the parallel is a stretch. The two teas remain constant in all the shifting and moving.

When the constant slips, I despair. As I do in that first month in 2008 in Bangkok, where I am a visiting professor at a local university for one semester. For the first time in years, I do not carry the teas with me, assuming—wrongly—that Thailand’s Asian location means these teas will be readily available. How will I survive the next four months? I search out every Indian market in an unfamiliar city, taking the Skytrain and metro to locations to which even the locals are unwilling to travel. Asok, Thong Lo, Phra Ram, Nana—different stations and neighborhoods along the train lines. No success. Irritated and defeated, I call home, requesting Amma to mail me our habit. No one at home is surprised at my request. It takes two weeks for the teas to arrive at the university where I am teaching, and the office staff is curious at my delight in receiving the package. “It’s like fish sauce in Thai food,” I explain, “hard to be without it.” With them, I finally settle in, for the four-month-long stay.

**Tea Leaves, Departures**

Every year, sometimes twice a year, the last few days before my flight from New Delhi to the United States are always a flurry of activity.
Phone calls from uncles, aunts, cousins, friends either asking to see me one last time or to say goodbye. Amma makes rushed trips and phone calls to the neighborhood grocer requesting the delivery of boxes of Darjeeling and Orange Pekoe. Arguments ensue. “I only want to take a few boxes,” I insist, “You know I can get them there.”

“Yes, yes, but it does not smell the same,” Amma chides.

“It does, it’s the same brand, tea, and packaging,” I retort.

As it is every year, Amma convinces me that the ones from home are better. I concede, owing simply to the vulnerability that accompanies the last moments of departing home. Seizing the moment, Amma thrusts other accessories that aid our habit into my suitcase—new steel teaspoons, a few more cups (the thin kind that, according to Amma, make tea taste better), a steel strainer, and yet another tea cozy. Before I know it, four or five pounds of weight has been added to my luggage. Ready for another crossing.

A Genealogy . . . of Rituals

So what is it about these teas? They are not special varieties. They would probably not pass any tea grading tests with notably high points. The Darjeeling is not the coveted first or second flush. And the Orange Pekoe, or OP as they call it in the British tea grading system, is a higher grade of tea, but the one we buy looks like Orange Pekoe dust—a lower quality. Both are quite readily available in Indian shops in the United States, so they are certainly not exclusive.

What is special is the way that Chawlas have, for generations (at least three), brewed the two types of leaves together. A coupling that I have not noticed in other households. A lack of this coupling disappoints us wherever we drink tea. So much so that we have to drink the “ghar ki chai (homemade tea),” as Amma calls it, as soon as we return. One-half teaspoon of Darjeeling and one teaspoon of Orange Pekoe are measured for each cup of tea. “Too much of the Darjeeling will leave a bitter after-taste,” my mother still cautions. A simple enough blending that can make all the difference. Other directions accompany this formula. A list that is, by now, second nature to me:

- Store the teas in airtight containers.
- Do not keep them for too long, they lose their flavor.
- Measure them out carefully.
• Do not brew them longer than four or five minutes.
• Use a little bit of the boiling water to warm the teapot before pouring in the water over the leaves.
• Do the same for the cups.
• Make sure the milk has been warmed for the tea (alongside the brewing); time it.
• Make sure the tea cozy is close by; the teapot must always be covered with it when brewing.

Simple directions that have become, just like the boiling, muscle memory—habit. If I do not follow these simple directions here, in North America, I feel a sense of incompleteness, even ennui, as if the day has not gone right. As if a threshold has not been crossed.

In the ritual is a habit that I experience as a threshold to home. Thresholds are crossed, walked, carried over, passed. Permanent in their impermanence. As habits, they are placeless, arranging themselves wherever or whenever needed or desired. A way in and a way out, but always a “way.”

A Genealogy . . . of Aesthetics

And wherever we are, here in Ohio or there in New Delhi or in a third space, preparing to drink tea involves many aesthetic choices. We discuss the teapot we will use, we fuss over what cups seem to match the moment, which tea cozy is to be used with what teapot, whether or not to use the cozy handles for the milk jug, and if we should use the steel or silver strainer for when we pour the tea into the cups. Even the space where the tea might be served is discussed. Will it be one of our bedrooms, the dining table, the porch, or the terrace? Yes, I think the English have given us these customs, and we could trace that genealogy back to the British monarchy and to the British colonials who also felt displaced from “home” in the Raj and “tea-time” was a continuity in their link to the mother country. But now, these customs are also just simply ours. Just simply Indian.

“Come and have a cup of tea with us,” is a phrase that I hear all through my childhood, a phrase I will get used to repeating, and making my own. And when I use it here, in the United States, it produces both a real and imagined world. Most Americans are unused to the
peculiarities of drinking loose-leaf black tea in teapots with warm milk and a touch of sugar. This is, as Amma observes, a tea-bag culture. They think it quite British, they sense a touch of snobbery in the way it is served, and find it extraordinary, even exotic. They envision “high tea,” the kind with scones, finger sandwiches, jam tarts, and strawberry shortcakes.

Tea, at home, is not the segmented and timed tea-drinking of the British. It exists as a routine because it persists daily. For us, the routine is simply the presence of the habit. But it is evoked and drunk at any time of the day. “Let’s drink some chai-shai,” we say to each other wherever we find ourselves. The “shai” is an indefinable addendum to tea, a word that has no meaning, but is a feeling or a conversation or homeliness without which tea would no longer be tea. A feeling that gets suddenly evoked after breakfast, much before lunch, on cold winter mornings, when my husband impulsively suggests, “Let’s drink some chai-shai.” Shai, another threshold that evokes a sense of a surrounding, a kind of homing. Edward W. Said remarks on this nature of habits and exiles:

For an exile, habits of life, expression, or activity in the new environment occur against the memory of these things in another environment. Thus both the new and old environments are vivid, actual, occurring together contrapuntally. There is a unique pleasure in this sort of apprehension, especially if the exile is conscious of other contrapuntal juxtapositions that diminish orthodox judgment and elevate appreciative sympathy. There is also a particular sense of achievement in acting as if one were at home wherever one happens to be. (186)

The habit of tea occasions a sort of “everyday aesthetic performance” that is a kind of contrapuntal blending addressed here by Said—the merging of past and present rhythms in everyday living.

As I wait for the water to boil, I place a green-on-cream paisley printed cotton tray cover on a wooden tray. A doily goes in one corner, next to which I put a thin white cup and saucer, a small pot of warm milk takes another corner, and finally I place a white teapot on the doily. I pour a little bit of the boiling water into the pot, quickly close the lid, and cover it with a tea cozy. I pour a little water into the teacup. In a few minutes, I empty both the teapot and cup, testing to make sure they are warm, and wipe them down. I measure enough tea for two cups into the teapot and pour the boiling water. When the weather is warm, I carry the tray to the porch and wait the four minutes for the brewing.
“The sugar is always poured in first,” Amma’s voice whispers. After that, the tea is stirred, left aside for another minute, and poured into the cup through a delicate steel strainer. This is followed by a trickle of warm milk, and then a light stirring of all the ingredients, preferably with no accompanying sound. As I stir, I can hear a scolding whisper from when I was twelve and made the teaspoon clink inside the cup when I helped Amma pour tea for guests. “Making that noise was rude, you need to watch me when we have tea every day,” Amma admonishes after the guests have departed. Now, twenty-seven years later, we joke about the incident, but the habit has settled. Even alone, on the porch, I am careful, performing the ritual–habit with studied precision. You can hear a pin drop.

Some carry home on their backs; I carry this habit. Do I resurrect it to relive home? Does a habit portend a perpetual homesickness? And if so, am I perpetually performing homesickness? Do I perform the ritual, so that the doing itself becomes, in its repetition, a perpetual re-homing? Is the task—doing and done—itself a threshold for the homing self?

Habit—Self—Threshold

During the conception and creation of this assemblage, I am at a café with a student, ordering a coffee for myself. Coffee is my “outside” drink, the one I am indiscriminate about, while tea belongs to the interior space of home. The accompanying student orders tea. She wants something minty for her congested sinuses. I recommend the masala chai or some green mint tea. “Not the Darjeeling?” she asks.

I glance at the tea-bag Darjeeling and shake my head, “No, you don’t want that.”

The barista, who has been observing us, remarks, “You probably know a bit about tea.”

Smiling, I reply, “Yes, a little.”

Loudly, she declares, with refreshing honesty, “Did I just totally racially profile you?”

I laugh aloud and reply, “That’s a funny way of putting it, but this is the good kind, so go for it!” All in the queue behind us laugh.

An Indian woman racially profiled for her tea habit. Not British, not Scottish, Indian. This is a significant border crossing. As if a historical threshold has rearranged itself. Habit—self—threshold.
Notes

1. A longer version of this essay, which engages habits of movement, mind, and nourishment as homing habits and re-groundings, will appear in a forthcoming anthology on home as a chapter entitled “Tracing Home’s Habits.”

2. Darjeeling is classified as black tea that is grown in the Darjeeling district of the northeastern state of West Bengal in India. The first flush refers to leaves that are harvested in mid-March. This type of tea has a gentle aroma, is light colored, and only mildly astringent. The second flush is the June harvest; it is a full-bodied, amber colored, muscatel-flavored tea. The autumnal flush is the tea harvested in autumn. It is fuller-bodied, the darkest in color, and has less spicy tones. There are two more tea harvests: the first is called the “in-between,” since it is harvested between the first and second flush; the second is the monsoon harvest, which occurs during the monsoon season between the second and autumnal flush.

Works Cited


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