

THE SOUL FOOD MONOLOGUES

WED. MAY 19, 2021 || 7PM CST



OPEN LOT AT MOON PALACE BOOKS
LONGFELLOW MPLS

PRODUCED BY LADONNA REDMOND
ORGANIZED BY HISTORY FOR THE FUTURE

MARICELLA XIONG

The sweetest dreams come only when my subconscious feels safe enough to let me remember them. I dreamt once of taking communion with italian dunkers and marinara sauce with my best friends. For starters, I'm vegan and lactose intolerant! but in this dream, the cheese on this italian dunker was the best, most nostalgic warm & tasty white goo. I woke up with the image stained on my brain like the residue of marinara sauce on a white T. They say I can astral project, possibly then I could revisit the kitchen full of of sweet dreams - Or savory...

My family and I lived in places where sweet dreams awoke to sour realities. We shared pain on Payne Avenue in our second floor apartment. We tried our best to prosper with what we had in our two bedroom on Prosperity Ave. When we lived on Hope street, I

longed for a day of hope and rest in our one bathroom apartment.

After leaving my family, living on my own and healing through inner wounds, I started to hear my momma's sweet broken english in my mind. I was tending to the heart of my home and the heart of hearts, the sink when my mom's beautifully spoken words, said to me, "Sank Yous" Because her T's sound like S's. Her words cut as sharp as a tomato knife. I missed her with all my bones and my heart ached terribly. Tears began to flow as I thought of how empty it was on my own, without my family's crispy pork-belly & warm rice.

Emotions that are bound to memories with food, experiences that I've longed for in my adult life and searched for in Veganism. I miss the comfort of an invitation to the kitchen but I've only found that what is served no longer serves me. What is set does not sustain me. And instead of molding myself into who I think they want me to be, I'm trying to let my choices be okay... To bring dishes that are respectable in their eyes and edible in mine. But nevertheless, I am called to love regardless of what's on the table.

I never imagined I'd be on my own so soon, in my own house with my chosen-family. As I'm getting prepared now to stretch out to a beautiful garden that I can grow in. I hold unsprouted and hopeful seeds toward my soon-to-be-filled garden. I imagine my ancestors did the same to me. I will whisper to the seeds dreams of sunny days. Of how safe they will be in the embrace of the sun. Of how beautiful the oven roasted squash

will be, plated before my chosen family. My Spirit kin, people who support and inspire the depths of my passions, who share dreams of harvesting food and distributing resources.

Our work creates a space where we can be safe to roam and to eat. Our homes would be where all of our hearts reside. To awaken with the truths that remain as unapologetic as the sun. Beyond my subconscious dream of italian dunkers and marinara sauce, and beyond the amount of msg I have stored in my body, In my conscious dream, my intentional work, is that we all remember that we are filled with the hopes and wishes of medicine men and women who planted us long ago. The ancestors who still water us are the same ones who stick alongside us as we pain, prosper and hope.

DAVID LY

Eight years old, alone at a rice farm.
My dad was a servant to a family he
didn't know, a family that didn't want
to know him,

at eight years old.

Forty pounds.

Every week, my dad would carry his
self worth, forty pounds of rice,
through the jungle to feed his family.

His brothers and sisters were so
hungry they didn't have the energy to
greet him, to hug him when he came
home

Standing at the door, eight years old,
alone at home.

He wasn't on the farm that long, but
the farm stays with him. It followed
him to America, a new farm to harvest
his worth.

My earliest memories of dad were
at the helm of a busy kitchen. A
busy restaurant kitchen is hot,
dangerous, and fascinating for a
four year old who wanted only to
know his dad. I'd sneak in and
watch him reach into the oven, his
arms tattooed with burn marks, his
nails painted with oil, his heart
heavy from the forty pounds of rice
he carries every day.

But when you're in the kitchen,
you're there for a reason. Your
heart can't be heavy, and your head
can't be in the clouds, dreaming of
starting restaurants, or playing with
your son.

Eight years old, alone on the
phone.

I was eight years old when my dad
stopped answering my calls. I was
eight years old when my dad gave
me his weight, when he made me
carry my own forty pounds of rice.
The weight almost got heavier
when he finally my phone calls a
year later. I wasn't at the farm long,
but it stays with me.

And like my dad, I harvested my worth in the kitchen.

My first of many kitchen jobs was prep work, where your value is in your speed, your consistency. But my head would be in the clouds, daydreaming about a world where nothing weighed our hearts down.

I hated how my hands would smell like fish and onions for hours, sometimes days, after my short shifts. I hated that I wasn't good at prep work. I hated that I couldn't be as good as my dad wanted me to be. Your head is always in the clouds, just like your mom, he'd say.

Dad was right - my mom was a daydreamer

Her dream was a safe, stable future for me. She shared her dreams with me through her words, her actions.

My mom worked as a waitress since she was a teenager, working as many as three different jobs at once. I remember running to her when she'd come to pick me up from day care. She must have been in a hurry to see me, because she'd still be wearing her smelly apron. It smelled like cold air, and that distinct smell of burnt oil from a restaurant kitchen.

It smelled disgusting, but I loved it.

She made sure we got to play, sing and make believe before she would leave for her second waitress shift. She made sure to do her homework while I slept, dreaming of another trip to the ice cream store with my mom.

“Look over there!” She’d smile,
pointing to the sky, ice cream melting
onto my hands “Do you see the lion?
There’s a dragon, right over there!”

My mom taught me that dreams
should be nourished. Dreams
happen when you give yourself the
permission to dream, to stop and
admire them, and to commit to them.
For awhile, I was living my mom’s
dream - stable corporate living. The
past few years, I’ve permitted and
committed myself to chasing a dream
of equitable community wealth
building. I chased my dream at the
risk of my mom’s.

31 years old, together, with my mom,
my family, my community. What is my
dream? My dream is to help others
chase their sky dragons, to empower
those whose hearts carry heavier
bags of rice than my own.

Jenean M. Gilmer

I worked for a couple of years for a precolonial indigenous food business, catering events alongside Dakota, Oglala Lakota, Ojibwe, and Diné folks. I descend from people who settled on land freshly wrested from their ancestors hands and hearts. Together we prepared and served food that held stories of pain and violence, resilience and joy, food that connected people to history and contemporary indigenous culture. Along the way I got to know something about what it meant to be from a place but not of a place.

I moved around a lot as a kid, from town to county, country to town, from Minnesota to California and back again. I fled for what I thought was forever when I was 18 back to California. But the summer I turned 22 found me back in the rural midwest. I was, as I liked to say at the time, sick of living at the edge of the Western world. It felt like a rushing pressure at my back, pushing me forward when I wasn't sure at all what was behind it or where I was meant to go.

In Minnesota the sky felt big and the landscape small. The air was heavy with humidity and I breathed easier and harder being around my family again. I came back for a wedding, stayed because of my parent's poor health, my own failings and floundering. The summer was lonely, but those first days were filled with wedding prep in the kitchen with a capable crew of Midwestern women cutting watermelons into baskets and artfully stacking sliced ham.

Living as they did I imagine my life looked strange, maybe scary. Their lives happened in smaller circles, filled mostly with family, the intimacy of having known someone your whole life taken for granted. They lived believing that family were the only people you could really trust. It's easier to keep secrets when you don't have friends. Who would believe you anyway? How could anyone look at you the same way after knowing what had happened, what had been done to you, and what you had done? That shame was held close, tempered by tears and humor, booze and cigarettes—whatever you could get your hands on, whatever worked. At the end of the summer I left, this time to New Orleans. New Orleans was the most beautiful and the hardest place I ever lived. When I fled the city a couple of years later, I'd slipped away from myself, I was broken.

I like to think that there's an endless supply of second chances—they may not be the ones that you want or even get you what you need—but that there's a corner you'll turn where things will be the same but will look and feel a little different and you crack open a bit—it hurts, but through it some light shines. I was talking with my best friend a couple of days ago, reminiscing about our early friendship—activists, feverish with political fervor and the driving desires of youth. I was greedy when I thought I was giving, living and learning at a pace that felt both breakneck and glacial. I got so many second chances in those days and in the days since. I've learned—finally, but not fully—to slow down, to fail, and to love myself and others through those failures. Not broken, but cracked open. And the light that comes through—it burns. But it is so beautiful.

I wanted more of that light. With it, I saw that there was so much I did not know. I made my way through school. I started to call myself a historian. I learned a little bit about how we ended up where we are now—how hard people worked to keep things the same, and to make things different. There isn't one moment to go back to and change that would catapult us into some healed, beautiful, equitable present. Rather, it was hundreds, thousands, millions of small decisions, compromises, grievances that have gone into building this house we live in, or outside of, or clean, or dream of burning down. It is sturdy. I'm not sure we could burn it down even with the heat of a thousand suns. But we could walk away from it. We could choose to build a home that doesn't lock up secrets, but one that shelters sharp edges under a roof raised up by the best of our spirits.

I'm telling this story, because it's the story of how I learned to come home, to trust myself and thus become trustworthy. Because we're all part of the story of this land, but we don't all have the right to stake a claim. And if we're going to build home together, we need to know how our history got us where we are, made us who we are. I've made it my work to tell those stories. Because I've learned that the longer I sit with what hurts the easier it is to bear, to understand, and to take responsibility for. Because pain and violence, resilience and joy are wrapped up in all we do. I'm not going to get it right all the time, but I'm not going to stop trying.

PATRICIA O'LEARY

In the distance is my family. They are far away.
They spread across the continent in a strange
pattern. We leave our mark in our dishes. In the
distance, is my mother's cooking. I took it and flew
it with me to Minnesota. The food says I love you,
pain means I was careless, anything lacking salt is
a betrayal.

Our plates have memories. One of my favorite
stories happened before I was born. In Delicias,
Chihuahua, Mexico is the story of my
grandfather's Caldo de Pescado. My godmother
got pregnant before her wedding. She tried to
talk to him, but he wouldn't speak to her. They
didn't speak for weeks. Finally, he invited my
godmother over. She cried and asked for
forgiveness. He told her there was no need.

He told her that he wanted her baby to be strong.
"I made you Caldo de Pescado, (fish soup)
because I want your little girl to be strong like
you." My cousin Salma was born exactly one
month after me, and she is one of the strongest
people I know. It was the caldo, I swear it was the
caldo. I do not eat any other Caldo de Pescado,
that is reserved for his hands alone.

In southern California, I grew up seeing my mom cook, not at a normal time either. She was a single mom then. She had places to be. She'd wake up at 4 am to make a fresh batch of frijoles de la jolla. She'd make food early in the morning, so I had something to eat after school. Some days my feet sleepily found their way into the kitchen while she was cooking and she'd ask, "Are you hungry?" I nodded my head because I'm always hungry. She'd say, "Then help me cook!" I fell for it EVERY TIME. My sleepy hands then turned to a cheese grater and, in my book, that counted as an exercise for the day.

Some mornings, just down the street, I spent my time with my godmother. We spent mornings in the kitchen together. It was all ours. Everyone else was asleep, but we were awake. We'd get some groceries. I wanted to show her how strong I was based on how many bags of groceries I carried inside the house. In return for my help, she'd get me a treat; usually something sweet and something to share. She played music in Spanish on the radio while I flipped pancakes. Sometimes I'd hear her fist hit the counter and I'd look up in surprise. There she was staring at me in the eyes, and singing lyrics of love, of longing, of loss, of whatever captivated her heart in that moment. I smiled and flipped another pancake. By the time my cousins woke up, breakfast was served.

My godmother said, "Tell me what you want and I will tell you what you desire." I always got so sick and she'd the day, "your throat hurts because you have things to say, but you're holding them in."

In the kitchen, I sat at a table, and explained to both of them, that I am gay. I could smell tomato rice in the back, simmering on the stove. It added a strong onion and garlic smell to the air. My mom is not a single mom anymore, but even in that moment, there was no time to waste. She knew this conversation was coming. She made food afterwards and invited our family. It was her way of saying you are not alone, and you are loved. She learned that from her parents. Her and my godmother. In the kitchen is a bond and a healing.

I want to sit around the table with my family again. I want my mole to be the perfect balance of spicy and chocolatey, like my grandmother and my mother. I want my family to taste my food and tell me it's perfect. I want to be enough. I want to be fully myself, anything less is a betrayal.

ACOMA GAITHER

Food is fuel for the fight. The long haul struggle. Food organizes us and feeds us not just physically but also spiritually. Stories of food are found within the networks that were built to sustain the fight for justice. I remember my childhood memories of food and the significance of community within it. As I close my eyes I see before me plates of warm sliced pumpkin pie, crispy tofu, shrimp laced gumbo, savory greens, saltfish and ackee, stuffed squash, and colorful vegetables. Everything under the sun. My mothers red tablecloth highlights every dish and accents the pinecut table below. The steam rolls off the top of the sides. I see my grandmother and grandfather sitting to my right and my aunties to the left. My parents sit in front of me. We all sit close to each other admiring the grand feast laid before us. Remember to let the elders get the first bite! This moment is ever so sweet. Three generations of joy, pain, and love. The energy around us lasts lifetimes and fuels my next fight. As I open my eyes I remember that this food is the sustenance to keep me going when the road ahead seems troubled.

I've been living in Minneapolis, Minnesota for about seven years now. You know, the place known as the "Bread and Butter State" because of its numerous flour mills and butter-making plants. The state known where the water reflects the sky. The place where my grandfather lived as a Black man in the 1950s. He was the first African American to receive a PhD in American Studies at the University of Minnesota. His bravery inspired me to also come to the Twin Cities to pursue my education. However, Minnesota is also known for another reason, not so "nice". My grandfather was not allowed to live in on campus housing, as the Dean at the time still upheld segregationist views.

Why is it that Minnesota is so violent to Black bodies? I was here when brother Philando Castile was murdered. When Jamar Clark was shot down and killed. And when George Floyd was lynched. All in the hands of those with the badges that read “protect” and “serve”. After watching the killings over and over on my computer screen my body told me I had to move. I had to be outside. Surrounded by the community. To mourn. To express rage. To express pain. I marched every single time. One incident stands out vividly. The time we were on that highway. You know, the 35W bridge. There must have been thousands of people on that bridge that day. Fists held high and clenched against the wind. I knew that we all were a part of something larger than ourselves. Our calls were heard all over the world. However, once we knelt down on the hard cement on that highway all became silent. And the world was silent for a moment. A moment that was supposed to last 8 minutes and 46 seconds. But we never made it. I started to hear shouts and screams coming from ahead of me. People started running and falling on top of each other. Pushing and shoving as folks tried to run to safety. I crouched down on my bike and froze so as to not run over anyone. As I stood there I started to immediately think of the ancestors who were marching alongside Martin Luther King across highways from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama. The ones who were terrified that they would die while they were seeking justice. The emotions that they carried. Fleeing from the hot pavement, into safety. That's when I noticed a tanker

barreling down the highway into a crowd of protesters. Were my eyes deceiving me? I could not believe it.

This was when I realized that this was our civil rights movement. This was a turning point for me as I started to recall the cyclical cycle of struggle. People were trapped on both ends of the bridge with police squad cars parked as barricades. They doused me with pepper spray that made your eyes sting and hurt. Fear and pain ran through the chaos that day. But this was the moment that I knew I had dedicated not just my mind, but body and soul to the fight. This is what it meant to be an activist in the 21st century.

In the history books I read black women were constantly remaking space and as a result recategorizing the “human being” while at the same time being unacknowledged and invisible in the fight. The brave women who took on the position as conductors on the Underground Railroad who helped runaways rang through my ears that day on the bridge. They helped folks along the way by meeting their needs of shelter, healthcare, and food. This is the true act of resistance. To survive in a world not made for us.

Since the beginning of human history, people have worked together to ensure that their communities can survive. Especially those communities who've been marginalized. It's why some of us are alive today. In networks of mutual aid, community members taking on the responsibility to care for one another and this theme surrounds the year of 2020. I remember witnessing the building of these networks during this exact uprising, where Black women were the architects of radical futures. The future that could be a nourishing one.

As I sit around the family table where our home cooked meal is laid before us, I see those women who carry us through the fight seated down with me. Women like Rachel Nelson, like Lessa Kelly, LaDonna Redmond, Roxxanee O'Brien, Jeanelle Austin, and Marcia Howard. These women are protecting and serving their Twin Cities communities today. They have built networks of aid, and care to move the revolution forward. They have and continue to nourish our streets and and feed our fires.

Thank you.

THANK YOU



PERFORMERS

MARICELLA XIONG

DAVID LY

JENEAN GILMER

PATRICIA O'LEARY

ACOMA GAITHER

PHOTOGRAPHY

PAGE I - "SERVING UP THE SOUP." REILLY MILLER, 2020.

PAGE XVI - "A DINNER WITH FRIENDS." IANNA OATIS, 2020.

FUNDING & SUPPORT

THINKING FOOD: RADICALLY REIMAGINING FOOD STUDIES IN THE TWIN CITIES
CLIMATES OF INEQUALITY, A PROJECT OF THE HUMANITIES ACTION LAB
MINNESOTA TRANSFORM, A MELLON FOUNDATION HIGHER EDUCATION INITIATIVE
HERITAGE STUDIES AND PUBLIC HISTORY, UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

History for the Future is a Minneapolis based public history initiative co-directed by Acoma Gaither and Andrea Manolov. We ask how histories of mutual aid can help us build radical futures. www.historyforthefuture.org.