SEEDS OF MEMORY, MEMORY OF SEEDS

Raul **Basilio**¹

In the Fall 2018, I had the pleasure of meeting Dr. Cornelia Eckert and Dr. Ana Luiza Rocha as they were visiting scholars at University of Georgia, Athens. During their stay, a remarkable connection was made with Dr. Virginia Nazarea, Professor of Anthropology. In my first semester as a PhD student I was taught History of Anthropological Theory by Dr. Nazarea. She allowed me and the other students to learn by engaging in casual discussions, with food, and memorable experiences.

From time to time, a delicious smell takes over the halls of Baldwin Hall, and I know exactly where that is coming from. Dr. Nazarea explores human-environment relationships through the connections of landscapes, food, and memory. Originally from the Philippines, she has conducted research in her motherland as well as throughout the Americas. On May 29th, I had the honor to interview Dr. Nazarea as special request from Dr. Eckert and Dr. Rocha. She welcomed me in her home, where we had a dinner followed by a joyful conversation that let me learn about her research, and now share it with you. The interview took about 70 minutes but could have gone on and on. Dr. Nazarea is one of the most charismatic and knowledgeable individuals I ever met, and her studies are truly inspiring to think outside of the box. I hope you guys enjoy it!

¹ University of Georgia, Estados Unidos. Email: rlpbasilio@gmail.com
ORCID id: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3107-1026>

Fig 1. Connections built among student of anthropology/interviewer Raul Basilio, Dr. Eckert, Dr. Rocha and Dr. Nazarea. Photo Credit: Raul Basilio

Raul: Here I am today with Dr. Virginia Nazarea from University of Georgia, Athens (UGA). I will be asking some question for the magazine *Illuminuras* for the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul as a special request from our friends, Ana Luiza and Chica.

First, I want to ask you some questions about your trajectory of becoming an anthropologist and professor here at UGA. Tell me about your journey, where you come from... how did you get where you are today?

Dr. Nazarea: I started with a bachelor's degree in Biology from the University of the Philippines which was in my hometown of Los Banos, Laguna. Upon graduation, I was hired as an Instructor in the College of Life Sciences. I taught Comparative Anatomy, Ecology, and some introductory courses. I got very interested in Ecology, but my interest increasingly focused on the human dimension, thus leading me to Anthropology. My other

consuming interest was literature; outside of the natural sciences, I have always been interested in the humanities. In a way, I found my major a bit constraining because in Biology you dealt with facts, right? I mean, you don't really explore ideas all that much, and I guess because of my interest in Literature and the Humanities and my background in Biology, my teaching experience in Ecology, and all that, it was just natural for me to pursue Anthropology.

Now, how I got started was kind of serendipitous because I had an older sister who went to Purdue first and pursued Anthropology and then she said, "I think you going to like this!" (laugh). So, that's how I started because, if you were to pursue a graduate degree in Biology you get to know more and more about 'something'---an area of expertise, like the mandible of grasshoppers--- but as you get deeper and deeper your field of vision also got narrower and narrower. I craved connection and critical thinking, so much so that during my first year, my adviser cautioned me against "kicking a dead horse". As far as I was concerned, the horse was alive and galloping.

Fig 2. Dr. Tomás Ibarra, assistant professor at the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, member of the Centre for Local Development (CEDEL) and Centre for Intercultural and Indigenous Research (CIIR) visiting the Ethnoecology/Biodiversity lab exploring the possibility of collaboration with Dr. Nazarea. Photo Credit: Dr. José Tomás Ibarra

Raul: Now, can you tell me about your research?

Dr. Nazarea: Like the title of the lab says: Ethnoecology/Biodiversity Lab....I would say that theoretically my direction has been with Ethnoecology, which is say that I try to understand the perception of the environment---the cognition of human beings--- how this is shaped by factors like age, gender, and class and how it in turn shapes their behavior in the environment. With time, my interests grew together with my students' interests, I transitioned from ethnoecology narrowly defined in terms of cognitive patterns, decision making, and behavior to more of an appreciation of landscapes and sense of place. My focus shifted from the strictly cognitive to the more effective and emotional, the kind of attachment, for example, that old-timey farmers in the American South have for black-eyed peas and collard greens and the kind of memory-laden network of seed procurement and exchange that Vietnamese immigrants have. I haven't abandoned ethnoscience, but I've infused it with memory, place, identity, and affect in terms of the way that humans relate to the environment.

Now biodiversity, you might say, is where I direct my attention and apply my efforts. I've been interested in biodiversity for a very long time, beginning with rice because I found in my dissertation that there has been a significant loss of the traditional rice varieties with the Green Revolution. The farmers I interviewed recalled the old rice varieties---those that were fragrant and delicious, those that were slippery, or sticky, and those that did not require much weeding and chemical input. They didn't know where to find the seeds anymore, they thought of it as a done and gone past, whereas the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) gene bank was not more than five miles away from their farms; they were practically at the backyard of the institution and a huge rice germplasm collection! The farmers I interviewed still recalled the old varieties and how to grow and prepare them but when that generation passes on, there will be little knowledge and memory left.

This is why from the very beginning, I have promoted memory banking or documenting the local knowledge in regards to the seeds in fields and gene banks. I wanted to do this with rice because it is the staple crop in the Philippines, but rice is such a big deal, and IRRI

is established and hard to break through. It just so happened, the International Potato Center (CIP), works on both potatoes and sweet potatoes so when I got a Postdoctoral Research Fellowship at CIP and at the same time became the Assistant Director of Users' Perspective with Agricultural Research and Development (UWARD), I initiated memory banking research on sweet potato, a mostly subsistence crop. It's like I said, an area of application, or the broader significance of my research. The theoretical departure point was still Ethnoecology, because I was looking at knowledge and how it's organized, how it's passed on or eroded.

Fig 3. Emily Ramsey and Melanie Narciso, current PhD students working in the Ethnoecology/Biodiversity lab with Dr. Nazarea. Photo Credit: Emily Ramsey

Raul: So, were you trying to bring back some types of sweet potatoes to people?

Dr. Nazarea: Yes, as an anthropologist, my first concern was the conservation of knowledge and practices associated with traditional varieties. But, in tandem, the project also involved *in situ* gene banking with the local people in community gardens, like schoolyard gardens, and in their homegardens. For example, we worked with a group of market women and a group of traditional chieftains in finding and planting traditional varieties of root crops in Southern Philippines. What I found was that knowledge still existed, but that it is in danger of disappearing, probably at a faster rate than the varieties themselves. Now, conservation of germplasm must go hand-in-hand with the conservation of knowledge because the physical sensations of touching, cooking, and tasting reinforce connection and memory. It is in what Ernest Bloch calls “concrete utopias” where material and sensory reminders abound, that conservation is most enduring. This kind of conservation is not in cold storage as in gene banks; it is conservation in the warm shere of kitchens and homegardens or conservation through use.

Raul: And when you moved to Georgia?

Dr. Nazarea: Yes, here in Georgia, Robert Rhoades and I started the Southern Seed Legacy (SSL) project. We worked with small-scale gardeners, mostly heirloom seedsavers, and with our students ---- “memory bankers” who helped us facilitate the conservation and circulation of both old-timey seeds and stories, including remedies and recipes. Both Bob and I had worked in international settings and we wanted to do something local. We immediately sensed that even if there were some seed saver organizations in existence, they usually were more focused on saving and exchanging seeds and didn't systematically document the knowledge of the farmers and gardeners who passed on, nurtured, even bred, these plants. So we decided to make memory banking our centerpiece to make sure that their practices, knowledge, and memories were conserved along with the seeds, complementing it with annual seed swaps and a pass-along initiative for more face-to-face conversation and camaraderie. We insisted that we do life histories with seedsavers like you are doing now with me (laugh). People are presently more conscious about the importance of documenting seed-related stories and this makes me very happy. Seeds without context lose their meaning easily and we fail to acknowledge their source. I think it's less than honest to attribute the conservation of seeds primarily to advocates and

scientists, since these seeds have been selected and kept by the gardeners and seedsavers. As a scientist or activist, you can come and help, but really the conservation is on the ground and in their hands, where it has always been

Raul: And how do the seeds get lost?

Dr. Nazarea: Well, let's take the case of rice. The Green Revolution undertook the breeding of dwarf, modern varieties of rice. They call them "high-yielding varieties", but they are more accurately input-sensitive, or input-dependent, varieties. The modern dwarf varieties did not bend over or lodge when you pumped it with fertilizer, and therefore translated inputs into grains, or increased yield. I had a neo-classical economist-lawyer friend who said, "look, there is the invisible hand of the market, if they adopted the Green Revolution varieties, that means they were superior...the market is a free hand, so superior and preferred varieties always win out. But that's not quite true because with the Green Revolution the farmers' credit worthiness was predicated on adoption of the new varieties. It was based on a land grant model so agricultural extension, the credit infrastructure...they all pushed for the modern varieties.

Of course, farmers were also convinced of the higher yield, plus there were compounding factors at play. As one of the farmers observed, "well, I really like the fragrant varieties but if you alone planted them, all the birds and the rats will congregate on your field, because they prefer the fragrant varieties, too". So, the hand of the market is neither invisible nor free. If you alone would plant the more aromatic and flavorful but tall and photoperiod-sensitive old varieties, you would suffer twice: you would have less production compared to other farmers who adopted Green Revolution technology, and you have to sell it cheaper because the greater production from other farmers would depress the market price.

Raul: Aside from Southern Seed Legacy, what other involvements did you have?

The National Center for Plant Genetic Resources Conservation in Fort Collins, Colorado asked us to document Vietnamese seeds sown in the US. In the project, Introduced Germplasm from Vietnam, we worked with Vietnamese American students at Georgia State University, and at the University of Georgia. They talked to their moms, dads,

grandparents, and other relatives and documented their stories centered on seeds and gardening as well as cooking. We made an inventory of gardens, markets, and recipes around the Southeast, so that was a lot of fun! Like in Southern Seed Legacy, our concern was multispecies and multigenerational except this involved transported or immigrant gardens. We had garden maps that researchers made, but we also had cognitive maps which were rendered by the gardeners themselves. Oh, and at the same time we were doing similar work with the Quichua in Ecuador, where we collaborated with parents in establishing the “Garden of Ancestral Futures”. We worked with *becarios*, young memory banking scholars, and we helped them out with their studies because public education is free, but they still had to have money for transportation and other expenses. So the agreement was the kids will talk to their parents about their experiences and wisdom regarding traditional crops, and also the parents would bring their seeds and plant the communal garden. Both projects utilized the memory banking approach but also drew upon a unique initiative that started in Georgia: Foxfire. Are you aware of this?

Raul: No, tell me about it

Dr. Nazarea: Georgia is home to a project called, FoxFire. It's a long-running project, and has become nationally recognized model for pedagogy and cultural journalism. It was started by an English teacher in Rabun County who wanted to engage students in his English course, and what he thought of was to let the students document Appalachian traditions by interviewing elders in the surrounding communities. Foxfire is a small mountain flower that emits light and the title of the magazine, and eventually books, that they published. So, in a way ours was also based on this Foxfire model which Georgia is well known for.

We trained the Vietnamese American students here and the memory banking scholars in Ecuador in memory banking, just as we trained our students who worked with us in the Southern Seed Legacy. They would conduct and write down interviews, collect seed samples, and display their findings. In Ecuador, the students put up a lot of exhibits in their schools and communities. They creatively displayed their plants, seeds and dried

specimens, as well as people's recollections and their gardens; it was a good project that involved parents, kids, and teachers.

Raul: And, presently, what are you working on?

The most recent one is still a work in progress. It started with visit of Alejandro Argumedo, Co-founder and Co-director of Association for Nature and Sustainable Development (ANDES), to our lab. He made a presentation in a state-of-the-art conference that I organized, and he talked about the repatriation of potatoes from the CIP gene bank in Lima back to the Quechua farmers at the Potato Park in Cusco. The idea of returning potatoes that were collected for conservation in the gene bank to their original custodians in six interlocking communities comprising the Park really fired my imagination. That took me in this other direction of going to Peru, Lima, Cusco, following the practices and conversations around these native potatoes. The scientific narrative was relatively straight: okay, we collected them, we conserved them, you say they are yours, therefore we are giving them back. But how the people talk about missing varieties and how they conceive those potatoes coming back was a more complicated narrative of loss and return. People are aware of climate change and say that the land, too, is no longer the same, that there are different pests. Also, it's very different from the gene bank perspective where varieties are numbered accessions to be kept in storage for breeding purposes. For the *paperos* (potato growers) these are animate, their *wawas* (infants) that they swaddle in blankets and sing to at harvest time, and children that scold if they disappear before they take them back. I found the encounter of these two paradigms in the repatriation project powerful and intriguing.

Raul: Tell me a bit about the classes you teach. You have a kitchen in your lab, tell me a bit about that.

Dr. Nazarea: That kitchen! Maybe we should start with that. That kitchen is a later addition, my lab used be more a proper Ethnoecology/Biodiversity Lab with an herbarium for botanical specimes, a map cabinet for GIS maps and cognitive maps, a geological storage unit for stones and such; it was only logical with my natural science background to

concentrate the interaction between the biophysical and the cultural, right? But then some of my students got more and more interested in this sensory/affective part, and I got interested along with them. So, I said, okay, it's not always the conservation of biodiversity for the conservation for environment; that is mostly in the ecologist's mind. Among the local folks, they nurture a crop, a variety, because they like its appearance or taste, because it is part of their life, because they can't complete some of their rituals without it.

And so then we decided to pursue this other direction, although we did not abandon our earlier focus. Erv Garrison, our previous Department Head, was so supportive. When I said, "Erv, can you give me a kitchen?"...you know, not many people will be able to recognize the value of that... "what would you do with a kitchen?", they would ask...but Erv recognized the promise immediately and said yes. So, I got my kitchen in the lab with a shiny black stove and sleek steel refrigerator to fit the space. Then of course I had to formulate a course that would allow us to cook and gather to discuss the readings and partake of the food, and it just would not fit in the regular class format. So I was able to convince Ted Gragson, who took the reins after Erv, to allow me to offer a three-hour undergraduate class which is not usual. This is how Anthropology of Roots and Rooting came to be. Like I always tell my students, "It is not about food, it is about identity, place, and memory!" (laugh) "and you're not going to learn how to cook, although there is that... you're going to learn to remember, that is the point of the course, we cook to remember."

Fig 4. Students in the Roots and Rooting class preparing for the commensal table. Photo Credit: Dr. Nazarea

Raul: In what ways do they remember?

Dr. Nazarea: For example, the course is set up so that with different weeks, have different kinds of food as themes. There will, for example, be “food in place”, meaning local food, “food out of place” like immigrant food, “ritual food” for marking transitions and celebrating victories large and small. Then there’s “comfort food” and “hidden food”. I used to have “Google food”, too, comprised of “Google recipes” for those who are learning on their own, without the benefit of apprenticeship, making memories as they go along. We have the readings from David Sutton, Krishnendu Ray, and other authors that go with these themes. And so, remembering takes the form of recalling the comfort food you grew up with, perhaps something served to soothe you when you were not feeling well, or a “hidden food” that makes you feel good having, but is never served when there’s company. This concept is kind of hard to explain but some people associate it with times of when they were poor and not “eating well”, or a treat that was not allowed but gave them pleasure consuming in secret. I have discovered other subtle dimensions through time; for example, somebody volunteers “mac n’ cheese” as hidden food, and I ask, “why is that hidden food?”, I mean everybody eats mac n’ cheese, and the student says, “my mom was a single parent and even she knew at the time that that was not the healthiest of food, yet she would serve it to us often since it was convenient and cheap”. We have added a new component to the course just this semester called the commensal table. Each student invites a guest, someone who may have a different perspective on food, and prepares a dish to share. So, we have this long table and we sit across from each other and share a potluck meal and an lively, open conversation.

Raul: I would love that, to be part of a commensal table. I mean, for me I would really appreciate it, I don’t like eating alone.

Dr. Nazarea: A commensal table, yes, just a long table with food shared by a group. Then, I was thinking, we could extend this someday beyond the classroom. We would employ immigrants and refugees to prepare meals, every night, a different spread, a different crowd. One thing that this commensality might do is to remove the notion of “alien” notion that people are so strange and different; that we need to be fearful and guarded all the time.

I mean, if only people would realize the commonality of what everybody's heart and needs; we all enjoy tasty food and good company, don't we? Perhaps if you know there is a place which is secure, a safe and tolerant place, then you are more apt learn about other people's food and culture.

Yes, on the commensal table, you don't dine by yourself, you dine with others, you eat whatever is served family-style, you don't order off a menu or something. What about older people who live by themselves? Maybe, a commensal table they could participate in even once a week will mitigate the sense of isolation and the fear of this new world. I realized something that surprised me from teaching the Anthropology of Roots and Rooting class. I thought students in the university were hanging out all the time, and so had no problem with alienation. But apparently it's not true, even for the undergraduates; everyone has their own schedule which makes coordinating difficult and they really appreciate eating together. I said, "I thought you were always bound up with each other" and they said, "No, mostly we eat alone" so, wouldn't it be nice to create more opportunities for commensality. It's a dream and a plan!

Fig 5. The commensal table in the Sustainable Human Ecosystems Lab in the department of Anthropology. Photo Credit: Dr. Nazarea

Raul: In what ways do you think your research and the changes in your career have shaped you?

Dr. Nazarea: Yes, in very fundamental ways. You know how anthropologists are supposed to see difference? Our goal is explain patterns of human variation through time and space, and that is our strength. But, from the beginning, starting with my dissertation, all I could see was a fundamental sameness. For example, when I did my fieldwork, I was a young mother, and all I could see were similarities between my situation and that of all mothers in my site. I would talk to landless laborer's, people who didn't know where they would get a next meal, or where they would take their children, should they get sick. But I would see how the mothers play with their children, and worry about them, in much the same way did. I have also noticed how people are able to handle challenges with joy. Poverty does not occlude joy; just because a person is poor does not mean that that person's life is without joy. People are able to handle a lot of things that come at them, because they have this joy. Notice the jokes and the laughter.

Food is not exempt; food is joy, too. Food is not to just keep your body and soul together; in solitude or in communion, there is joy in it. I also think of excess and abundance in that way; for example, why would you need twenty different varieties of rice or peas or potatoes? You only need one kind, right? But why is there always this flourish and variety? It is because people like different things at different times, it is not rational or purposive. It is not just to make you healthy. You have to think of the joy that people derive from these varieties, deep inside. I believe that it is hard to keep down, hard to squash; regardless of the challenges people go through, there is still abundance, flourish, food, and getting together. This is how drained bodies and spirits are revived. I guess that's how it affected me, seeing the basic sameness in people regardless of our differences. Also, not everything has to have a reason; excess is a fundamental thing that keeps going. It also is a reserve; like biodiversity is a delight and an insurance; granted this is not very academic, but more of a personal insight.

Raul: Broadly, what would you like to say to the people in Brazil?

Dr. Nazarea: Diversity is important, especially at this time, when all we can think is fear of difference. Nevertheless, it's important to understand the diversity but also the underlying sameness, and this also applies to the conservation of biodiversity. My first interest in biodiversity was in relation to bolstering ecological resilience and agricultural sustainability because I knew that the more diverse the flora and fauna are, the more the environment can handle the different stresses. My first entry to diversity was thinking of it as a handmaiden to stability, but the more I studied, the more I came to realize that biodiversity is not just important to the ecosystems' resilience, it is actually just as critical for cultural resilience. Its presence is needed for people to live out their lives with some meaning, some flavor, if you will...some joy and a sense of simple abundance. It is virtually impossible to complete life stages without the diversity of lifeforms and the lifeworlds they enable us to imagine and congeal. I believe this is the reason immigrants make homegardens from seeds of the past. It is important so they can have the ingredients they want for their food, but that's not only motivation. In the case of Vietnamese immigrants, for example, most were professional people from urban places. There was a lot of "re-education" at the time and the first political refugees from Vietnam were not farmers. So you wonder, "why did they garden with such a passion when they came here?", especially since their "ingredients" are accessible in Asian stores common in cities like Atlanta. But there is another reason: they wanted to surround themselves with familiar and comforting plants, to re-construct for the senses a place called home. These are transportable ways by which a displaced population is able to somehow root. I also think, it's a way for people to author place, not only to domesticate a place. To author place means you have some sovereignty, some consequence; you have some control in shaping not only the place but also your life. Perhaps this is relevant, and hopeful, in our world today, characterized as it is by rupture and dislocation.

Raul: Thank you so much!

Interviewer's Notes: If you are interested to follow more of Dr. Nazarea's work, here are some suggestions for further reading:

- Nazarea, Virginia D. 2017. Landscapes of Loss and Remembrance in Agrobiodiversity Conservation. *In* D. Hunter, L. Guacinos, C. Synillane, P. McKeown, eds. Routledge Handbook of Agricultural Diversity. Pp. 604-611. New York: Routledge.
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