Food, place, and memory: Bangladeshi fish stores on Devon Avenue, Chicago

Arijit Sen

To cite this article: Arijit Sen (2016) Food, place, and memory: Bangladeshi fish stores on Devon Avenue, Chicago, Food and Foodways, 24:1-2, 67-88, DOI: 10.1080/07409710.2016.1145026

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/07409710.2016.1145026

Published online: 12 May 2016.

Submit your article to this journal

View related articles

View Crossmark data
Food, place, and memory: Bangladeshi fish stores on Devon Avenue, Chicago

Arijit Sen
Department of Architecture, University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, USA

ABSTRACT
This article explores the importance of food in the production of immigrant identity and placemaking in Chicago. The Bangladeshi fish stores located on Devon Avenue, Chicago, serve the unique culinary needs of immigrants from Bangladesh and Bengali-speaking regions of India. Based on interviews with store owners and customers and architectural analyses of these stores, this research explores how everyday engagements with food, specifically fish harvested in the delta region of Bangladesh, trigger cultural memories and reproduce particular forms of shopping practices and place identitites among this relatively less-studied group of South Asian immigrants. This case study suggests that immigrant world-making is Janus-faced: simultaneously looking back and remembering the past while adapting to the present and reconstituting hybrid places in both societies of origin and settlement. An examination of this tension between past and present, near and far, local and global shows how diverse material contexts influence the way we interpret and invoke food memories. By tracing the trajectory of fish, this article demonstrates that food defines a variety of immigrant places—retail streets and grocery store aisles—as well as larger ecologies and spatial imaginaries, otherwise invisible in the studies of immigrant architecture.

Place is a local and tangible concept. Descriptions of place speak a language of anchored stability of location as well as meaning. However, when we examine the world of immigrants, the term “place” ceases to remain local, permanent, anchored or stable. Immigrants travel to and settle down in multiple locations, often separated by physical, cultural, and temporal distances. They carry place-based memories with them and place becomes a mnemonic device in the remaking of diasporic geographies. These mental and symbolic conceptions of place, or spatial imaginaries, are produced during everyday lived experiences, perceptions, and interactions. Spatial imaginaries are fundamental strategies of immigrant world-making and, as geographers Cook and Crang argue, “displaced materials and practices, inhabiting many times and spaces which, far from being neatly bounded, bleed into and mutually constitute each other.” Much has been written about immigrant geographies...
and place; thus, the goal of this article is not to focus on the anthropological and geographical aspects of place and place identities. Rather, this article explores the importance of food objects in the production of immigrant spatial imaginaries. The following narrative explores how these spatial imaginaries operate at different geographical scales—the micro space of the human body, the scale of buildings, geopolitical scale, and a macro environmental scale. Following Cook and Crang, I argue that immigrant world-making is Janus-faced: simultaneously looking back and remembering the past while adapting to the present and reconstituting hybrid places in both societies of origin and settlement. An examination of this tension between the past and present, near and far, local and global is at the core of this article.

Understanding the complex role of place-memory in reproducing immigrant culture and identity is difficult because immigrants travel across multiple locations and in doing so trace a globally dispersed landscape of mobility. Within this context of immigrant geographies, the complex connection between food, place, and memory provides a salient case study because food remains a central artifact in ethnic cultural practices. In today’s world, food products and comestibles circulate and trade across continents, leaving behind a trail of places where they are produced, traded, transported, stored, and consumed—a veritable network of food-related spaces that span national borders. In the case of immigrants in the United States, such food places include distant sites where exotic comestibles are harvested, canned, and produced and the many storage and distribution centers where ethnic food items are held before they reach consumers in grocery stores, restaurants, and residential dining rooms. David Sutton argues that food provides a compelling medium to explore memory because of its sensual nature. As a scholar of immigrant places, I find the study of food places fruitful because it serves to open up discussions of spaces of individual and collective memories within diasporic contexts.

Ethnic identity as well as sense of place, I argue, remain slippery terms because they activate multiple forms of belongings, practices, and memories. As a result, the scope of this analysis needs to be carefully defined. This article takes Devon Avenue, a South Asian retail street in the city of Chicago, as a case study to examine a complex “sense of place,” sustained by this thoroughfare. I focus on a small subgroup of Bangladeshi-owned grocery stores within a larger South Asian immigrant marketplace. The scope of this analysis is further limited by focusing on stores selling imported riverine fish that is unique to the Ganges delta along the Bay of Bengal. The frozen fish packages available in these stores are predominantly exported from Bangladesh, although occasionally merchandise from India and Burma ends up on the shelves. The narrow scope of this study is not intended to make it reductive. Rather, my focus on the spatiality of comestibles opens up the complexity surrounding ethnic foodscape and the relationships between food, memory, and place.

Not all ethnic grocery stores on Devon Avenue sell freshwater fish harvested in the Ganges delta. In 2014, there were three Bangladeshi-owned grocery stores on Devon Avenue that sold such fish, although their merchandise included other South Asian comestibles too. Despite their small numbers, these stores contribute
to the public image of Devon Avenue as an ethnic gastronomic destination where grocery stores and restaurants advertising South Asian ethnic food overwhelm your senses. Although the area is generically called Little India, the immigrant store owners of Devon Avenue come from diverse national, language, religious, and regional backgrounds. They trace their origins back to different South Asian countries as well as to global locations within the South Asian diaspora. Therefore, even though on first sight the street may seem to be a generic ethnic enclave, closer scrutiny may reveal a nuanced spatiality of its subcultures. By focusing on the Bangladeshi groceries I hope to render the world of a growing population of Bangladeshis in the Greater Chicago region.

Since the early 1990s, a wave of immigration from Bangladesh brought entrepreneurs to Chicago who set up grocery stores to cater to a burgeoning Bengali population. Even though their numbers are small compared to Indians and Pakistanis, there has been a 153% increase in the number of Bangladeshis in Illinois between the 2000 and 2010 census figures. Despite these growing numbers, there is a dearth of knowledge about Bangladeshis and their cultural impact on this neighborhood. Around the mid-1990s the number of Bangladeshis in the United States increased drastically. This growing number of Bangladeshis in the United States (plus the Indian Bengali population) created a sustained market for the sale of frozen Bangladeshi fish in urban American markets. These new stores face constant turnover because of their smaller customer base and the store owners’ lack of access to capital. Nevertheless, Bangladeshi grocery stores complement the already existing and larger grocery stores owned by Indian and Pakistani entrepreneurs. There are three types of ethnic grocery stores located on Devon Avenue. The larger ones include chains such as Patel Brothers, owned by Indian immigrants, or the mainstream Fresh Farms International, with three Chicago locations. The midsized stores include Par-Birdie Foods Inc., Farm City Meat, and Kamdar Plaza. Most Bengali-owned fish stores, such as Madni Mart USA, Devon Fish Corner, and Devon Fish House, are part of a third and smaller-sized group of stores. These stores occupy two or three storefronts with narrow entrances, cramped and crowded interiors, and a large back storage room. The Bangladeshi- and Pakistani-owned stores carry zabiha, or religiously sanctioned, meat, fish, and brand name food products from those countries. The brand name products generate a lot of nostalgia and draw in immigrants from Pakistan and Bangladesh, just as a lot of Indians may visit Indian stores to buy familiar brand-name products.

My focus on the use of ethnic grocery stores by South Asian immigrants continues Uma Narayan’s call for “thinking about ethnic foods from the point of view of immigrants to western contexts, rather than that of mainstream western citizens.” The number of Bangladeshi-owned grocery stores on this street remains dynamic, and new stores appear and disappear with alacrity. The customers include immigrants from Bangladesh and West Bengal, the state in India on the Ganges delta. Immigrants from the extended global South Asian diaspora who eat freshwater fish also shop in these stores. One may occasionally find Southeast Asians and African
immigrants who frequent Devon Avenue looking for ethnic food items that may not be found in mainstream American grocery stores.

The primary customers in these stores are Bengali-speaking (henceforth Bengali) immigrants who trace their origins to a multinational riverine ecology formed by the deltas of rivers Ganga and Brahmaputra in India and Bangladesh. The native language spoken by members of this group is commonly classified as Bengali-Assamese, a much debated and contested linguistic category in which the Bengali subcategory has many regional dialects and hybrid heteroglossic variations within it. For the purpose of this article, Bengali roughly defines a group of customers who share an ecological ancestry, a language, and a common culinary tradition. The existence of such a transnational identity complicates the history of South Asian immigration in Chicago because most current immigrant histories use the nation-state as the primary lens. As a result, immigration stories from India and Bangladesh appear as separate narratives, even though immigrants from the two nation states share a common history and culture.

Bengali immigrants are fish eaters and they share a taste for particular varieties of regional freshwater fish in their cuisine. Love for fish unites the residents of this riverine ecosystem, despite diverse nationalities and religions. This common food culture, sustained in embodied forms via food habits and culinary practices, is often referred to in literary and media accounts as an ancestral memory of peoplehood that predates colonial and postcolonial identities and histories. According to these accounts, despite a complex and bloody history of partition, stories of Bengalis united over their love for fish have gained mythical proportions. Within the twenty-first century context of immigration, these pre-national place-based culinary traditions help store owners mark out an ethnic niche economy on Devon Avenue.

Take, for instance, packaged ilish (Tenualosa ilisha) or hilsa, an anadromous fish that travels upstream in the Ganges delta in order to spawn. This migratory fish is found in the Bay of Bengal, where three major South Asian rivers terminate. Although a variety of this bony fish called shad (Alosa sapidissima) is available in coastal America and is popular among mainstream fishmongers, the popularity of South Asian hilsa has eclipsed the demand for local shad among Bengali immigrants in the United States. Due to new flash freezing technologies, fisheries in Bangladesh, India, and more recently Burma have started packaging fresh hilsa for imports. As a result, this variety, and many others, are exported from riparian ecologies along the Bay of Bengal to Chicago, located halfway across the world.

Between 2009 and 2014, as part of a larger research project, I conducted a series of in-depth interviews with Indian, Bangladeshi, and Pakistani grocery store owners and shoppers along Devon Avenue. This project follows my previous work on South Asian retail streets in Northern California Bay Area and Jackson Heights, New York. As a native Bengali speaker, I had easy access to the Bengali-speaking store owners and customers on Devon Avenue. Also by social network, I found additional Bengali residents in the Greater Chicago region.
Ecologists use the term “boundary objects” in order to study concepts, objects, or practices that are mobile and shared across social, linguistic, and environmental domains. According to Star and Griesemer, boundary objects are “both plastic enough to adapt to the local needs and constraints of the several parties employing them, yet robust enough to maintain a common identity across sites. They are weakly structured in common use, but become strongly structured when used at individual sites.”

Ethnic food, such as fish, serves as a boundary object because of its ability to mediate across geographies, environments, culinary traditions, and histories. As a boundary object, references to fish at a more general cultural level may not mean much. For instance, the slogan, “Bengalis love fish” may indeed describe an overall Bengali cultural preference for pescetarianism. Such knowledge might help us distinguish possible culinary preferences of some Bengali immigrants from other South Asians, but beyond this rather general statement the phrase doesn’t say much about Bengalis. Yet, as Star and Griesemer’s definition states, at an individual level food identity/memory may be so strongly defined as to become specialized and personalized. Thus, for individuals this “love for fish” could take the form of memories of personal and family dinners, taste memories from childhood, or home recipes and cooking practices or be a way to retain their heritage and traditions that they fear they would lose as a result of immigration.

Food stories point toward the importance of spatial and temporal scales in reading immigrant cultures. Everyday events and culinary practices around fish operate at the intimate bodily scale. The memories and experiences related to the architectural layout of fish stores work at a building scale. The memories of fish as a cultural artifact and culinary product from the delta region work at the geopolitical and environmental scale. Taken together, these spatial imaginaries show how immigrant identity is spatially constructed. In the words of Benedict Anderson, imagined “communities are to be distinguished not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined.”

Spatial imaginaries of shopping in a fish store

The experience of architecture is somatic. We experience architectural space as sound, smell, touch, proprioception, and vision. The Bangladeshi grocery stores in Chicago may be new, yet their role in immigrant world-making is significant. This is because the repeated experience of shopping in these stores create spatial memories and habitual practices that produce new forms of communal experiences for immigrants. Take the example of Riya Bannerjee of Des Plaines, Chicago. She moved from Kolkata, the capital of the Indian state of West Bengal, to Chicago a few years ago. Chicago was different and alien and she explained, “I grew up in Calcutta, in Belgharia. When I think of the home, I remember food my mom used to cook. We lived in a colony [a residential community] and had many friends. … Chicago was different and I faced lots of changes and compromises in everyday life. … When I got married and came here, I had to change a lot. Before I was married, I was not as
active. Here I have to do everything, cooking, groceries, everything.” Riya encountered a city that looked different and a new world where she didn’t have an extended social network. Yet visiting Devon Avenue helped her establish a new life, “After marriage, when I first went to Devon I was really overwhelmed. There was Bengali fish just like I used to have back home. I was overwhelmed.” Over the years she has developed a routine, “If we go to Devon we get to buy all things together. … I am a Bengali and we love fish. We get good fish and a variety of fish there [on Devon Avenue].”

Linda Coakley argues that food tends to generate “a sense of home as a distant absent becomes present bringing ‘the there here, the then now.’” While discussing Polish ethnic grocery stores in Ireland, she invokes Hetherington’s concept of prae-sentia, or a presencing of something that is not really there, in order to argue that the very sight or taste of ethnic food may remind immigrants of a place, time, and geography that they have left behind. This feeling of “presencing” is embodied and experiential in nature and it requires a creative remaking of place. Going to Devon is important to Riya Bannerjee because it produces prae-sentia, “We try to connect with our home place. Its food—what we used to have back home. My mother used to cook fish. So when we go to Devon and buy Bengali fish it really brings back memory.” Today, she has developed a habit of visiting Devon on a weekly basis, “We get American fish in any supermarket, but we don’t find rohu, galda chingri … in Dominick’s [a grocery chain in Chicago]. We are always looking for authentic Bengali fish [especially] if you invite some Bengali friends or someone from Bengal [is] coming over for lunch or dinner. We specifically go to Devon to buy fish.”

According to Bannerjee, the architectural layout and spatial character of Devon Avenue contributes to a sense of place reminding her of home: “Devon is a bustling place. We get the feeling of being in an Indian place. Full of crowd, traffic just like we have back home!” But the spatial characteristics that she reads as familiar are not always coded as Indian—rather they are a hybrid of Devon’s past and present histories. German and Irish immigrants built many of the buildings that host the South Asian stores on this street. Jewish families moved into the area after World War II. By the late 1980s newer immigrants from India and Pakistan moved in. Initially, few new stores were interspersed amid preexisting Jewish and other ethnic businesses, creating a checkered multicultural street fabric. In order to distinguish themselves from the neighboring stores, South Asian storeowners used bold signage, unique store names, and exotic storefront displays. Over time, this visual culture, made of hypervisible layers of images and texts on top of historic architectural façades, has produced an unique spatial syntax now associated with South Asians.

Yet another architectural feature, which predates the South Asian influx, helps reproduce the close-knit and seemingly crowded feel of this street. The street grid, a reminder of a historic settlement pattern, runs east to west, stretching from a ridge off the edge of Lake Michigan into the suburban hinterland of Greater Chicago. Our case study includes a fifteen-block stretch between Ridge Avenue and California Avenue close to the eastern end of the street. This urban retail strip developed in
the 1920s when the city of Chicago grew northward and new residential neighborhoods flourished. Rows of one- or two-story commercial buildings built around that time lined the street, recreating a pattern typical of historic American urban commercial strips.\textsuperscript{32} Urban planners use the term “fine urban grain” in order to refer to this high ratio of built area in comparison to open unbuilt space.\textsuperscript{33} Rows of multi-story, mixed-use buildings are so designed that upper stories may be rented out as residences, offices, and community services while the ground-level spaces are used for retail businesses. The long and thin lot sizes encourage narrow storefronts with an overabundance of visual information and details. This “fine urban grain” creates a crowded sense of place that, over time, becomes associated with, and even representative of the South Asian ethnic landscape. As Chicago journalist Victoria Lautman writes, many find the character of Devon Avenue “intimidating (which it isn’t) or overwhelming (which it can be) or just have no clue, with so many options, of where to find what.”\textsuperscript{34}

Within that dense setting there is a more nuanced geography of Bangladeshi stores that may remain invisible to outsiders. Newer Bangladeshi immigrants with limited capital find it useful to rent narrow storefront properties located on the side streets (see Devon Fish House, 6347 North Rockwell Street). When a business grows and prospers, the store owner (such as Devon Fish Corner & Meat, 6408 North Campbell Avenue) tends to take over the next-door space, spreading out horizontally in the process. Thus, most Bangladeshi fish stores are located on the side streets off of Devon Avenue. Being located on side streets may produce unique difficulties of reduced visibility. As a result, Bangladeshi business owners have reverted to excessive visual branding that includes advertisements and multiple signs in Bengali script mentioning fish. Ditimoni Baruah, an immigrant from Assam (a state on the Brahmaputra River) who also lived in West Bengal, India, explained, “we look for Bengali signs and fish signs when we are [on] Devon Avenue. They are usually on walls, mostly on the side streets. Like the Fish Corner sign.”\textsuperscript{35} She is referring to a large sign on the upper-story wall of a building on the northwest corner of Devon Avenue and Campbell Avenue. That sign says “Fish Corner” written in English, Bengali, Hindi, Urdu, and Gujarati, hinting toward four regional and linguistic subgroups. The sign claims this street corner via an intentional renaming and draws on distinct food memories of Bengali immigrants and other language groups. Details such as “best collection of imported freshwater fish” or the script on the storefront window “best collection of freshwater frozen fish” address Bengali customers who specifically look for river fish.

Store signs of Devon Fish House and Fish Corner written in Bengali script are not the only dead giveaways that draw Bengali customers in. The store interiors too play a part in recreating a familiar space. Entrance displays and doors that lead into the deep, cavernous interior of the stores evoke a feeling of threshold sharply separating the public domain from the space of private enterprise.\textsuperscript{36} Interior backspaces serve as storage and service areas. The orientation and interior layout of the stores reproduce certain culturally defined spatial categories such as public fronts and private backs, expressive facades, and functional back zones.
A plethora of signs in the front zones engage a range of customers, some Bengali, others not. For instance, the sidewalls of the front section of Devon Fish House have shelves stacked with packaged food, spices, and snacks. They include snack-sized packaged products from Bangladesh such as chips, peanuts, and *jhaalmuri*, a savory snack made of puffed rice, peanuts, and spiced lentils. Customers in Devon Fish House and Fish Corner alerted me that familiar branded packages, clipped onto display strips, are very popular among Bengali customers because they remind them of home. A sense of nostalgia invokes impulse buying among those I interviewed. To non-Bengali customers these snacks don’t evoke such memories and behaviors.

During my research I observed that friends and frequent clients collect and participate in small talk in back zones. In Fish Corner, the back zone is an interior room with freezers full of fish. Sayem Khondakar, or Babu, who owns Devon Fish House, had worked in Fish Corner before he opened his current store. He explained that frequent customers love to congregate in the back room of Fish Corner, where a row of white island-freezers or commercial refrigeration units hold a variety of frozen fish. Unlike Fish Corner, the interior of Devon Fish House is too small to afford a separate fish room. Instead, freezers neatly marked with fish names, sizes, and details are laid out in the middle of the store and friends and frequent customers congregate behind the counter, across the cleaning and work zone, and in a service courtyard in the back alley outside the store.

This front–back layout of Devon Avenue stores is uniquely contextual because it emerges from a creative adaptation of a preexisting North American urban morphology. The narrow property lot design along Devon Avenue is spatially different from the sociospatial character of shopping streets in South Asian countries. The latter is layered, and a shopper encounters multiple thresholds as she moves into stores. This is because of the presence of hawkers, peddlers, and street vendors on the sidewalks and the intense sociability of South Asian streets. In comparison, the American sidewalk is organized and ordered differently. Buying fish in South Asia is a different experience, as described by Malati Das who drives to Devon Avenue from Andersonville, about 2.8 miles away: “In South Asia, fishmongers set up on open plinths in a larger bazaar,” an open-to-sky or covered community marketplace, “and you are supposed to bargain … at best, deal with a crowd of potential customers impatiently waiting behind you.”

How then does this uniquely American experience of shopping along Devon Avenue become associated with Bengali space? Riya Bannerjee explains that it is the familiar interior layout of fish stores, “The rows of spices and the fish freezers are comforting. I know that I can get *hilsa* steaks for festivals and special occasions as soon as I walk in.” Over the years she has become used to the layout of the Devon Avenue fish stores and now she doesn’t miss the fish markets of Kolkata as much. Bannerjee visits these stores often, almost monthly, sometimes weekly too, if she has guests over or during festival seasons when she cooks and holds dinner parties. It is a relatively short drive from Des Plaines, 11 miles or 36 minutes, and so unlike some other customers from Wisconsin and Iowa, such as Ditimoni Baruah from Milwaukee, who plan their trip carefully, Greater Chicago Bengalis such as
Bannerjee make frequent rounds to Devon Avenue. Fish stores on Devon Avenue reproduce a unique sense of place for Bengali immigrants by becoming part of their everyday cultural landscape or “home range,” a term used by ecologists to describe an organism’s territorial map in the course of its everyday activities.\(^\text{42}\)

Repeated visits have produced unique bodily memories of fish shopping for customers, such as Bannerjee, Barua, and Das, so that these stores enter their lexicon as “Bengali places.” Anthropologist Purnima Mankekar, referring to a similar experience in Indian grocery stores, calls such stores sites of “India shopping” where the shopping becomes a cultural practice.\(^\text{43}\) Paul Connerton explains, “To ‘live’ an artefact is to appropriate it, to make it one’s own. This does not mean, of course, that it becomes one’s own possession, one’s property, but that one makes it one’s own by making it one with, ingredient in, one’s continuing life.”\(^\text{44}\) Just by the very act of shopping in Bengali fish stores on Devon Avenue, local Bengalis have reimagined the landscape of Devon as part of their cultural landscape. Ethnic stores produce what Savaš calls “taste diasporas” or, as Everts explains, “assemblages of memories; memories that refer not necessarily to lived experiences but an imagined past.”\(^\text{45}\) Practice and engagement within these spaces produce ethnicity—

Fish shopping and embodied practices

Culinary practices involve the human body. The smell of fish and the way the fish is cut and prepared become part of a habitual body memory that Edward Casey calls \textit{hexis}.\(^\text{46}\) Habitual practices, according to Casey, are ways by which memory is preserved among groups in “efficacious, orienting, and regular manner.”\(^\text{47}\) He argues that such practices are deeply orienting in nature because when enacted, these acts familiarize individuals with the surrounding world, even helping them settle down in new settings. In my previous work on embodied placemaking, I argue that our bodies’ everyday experience of place plays a salient role in producing such orienting memories via affective responses to the environment generated from internalized values, accepted maxims, and customs that are deeply cultural in nature.\(^\text{48}\) These individual and personal memories, shared by many others, become part of a shared collective memory of place among Chicago Bengalis. In this way, new spaces appear in the diaspora and the spatial grammar and syntax of such places become integral to the experience of \textit{habitus}, a term used by Bourdieu to refer to schemas and dispositions gathered via socially determined practices and behavior.\(^\text{49}\)

Boria Majumdar writes that the fish stores of Devon Avenue have entered the Bengali community’s collective memory, and Devon Avenue has become synonymous with Bengali fish stores (even though there are only three stores!). “Another Devon attraction is the availability of nearly all the varieties of fish we consume in Bengal. At Fish Corner, the Bangladeshi fish store on the side street from Fresh Farms, you get the best quality \textit{hilsha} and \textit{pabda}, two of the best-known and most popular
varieties of fish in East and West Bengal. I have seen people from Jersey drive up to Devon and fill the trunks of their cars with fish to last them for weeks! Imported mostly from Bangladesh, the fish is of impeccable quality and taste and is sold in kilograms or by the number of pieces. Neatly packed and labeled, the fish trade is a thriving business in Chicago’s bustling South Asian neighborhood.”

Cooking fish brings forth memories of home for many. Riya Bannerjee uses the term “Bengali taste” to explain a flavor that she keeps trying to recreate, “I try to bring back that taste of what I used to eat in Calcutta … Bengali taste,” and in order to do so she needs the right ingredients and fish varieties. She explains that although fish is cut as steaks in the United States, she requests *gadha-pithe* cuts common in the subcontinent. In this method, the fish is laid on its side and cut along the lateral line. The dorsal side and the pectoral sides are then cut into steaks. Buying *gadha-pithe* cuts allow customers to “recreate their mother’s dining table” or “get it right.” Babu, the owner of Devon Fish House, remembers to ask his customers their preferences before he cuts the frozen fish into smaller sizes with the bandsaw located in the back zone of this store. He explains that being aware of his customers’ cooking preferences is part of the “customer service” necessary to survive in this competitive ethnic niche market.

Using the correct nomenclature of fish is another important issue in the ritual of fish shopping in Chicago. Babu has memorized the names of fish he sells in his store and uses these names to create a mental map of the fish as laid out in his freezer. He carries more than forty varieties of fish from Bangladesh. He recites fish names based on their size. “Big fish” include fish such as *katla*, *koral-bhetki*, Indian mackerel, catfish, *aar*, *boyal*, *chitol*, *mrigel*, *pangass*, *shoal*, and tilapia. They come in four- to seven-pound packages. “Mid-sized” blocks weigh around two pounds and hold around six smaller fish such as *pabda*, *parse*, *tangra*, *koi*, *bacha*, *poua*, *baila*, *lotia* or Bombay duck, *sorpunti*, *bai*, *sing*, *magur*, and *charapona*. Finally, he stores “frozen blocks,” or one pound of tiny 200- to 300-count fish such as *mola*, *kajoli*, *batashi*, *deshi punti*, *chakila*, *kucho chingri*, *harina chingri*, *borro chingri*, *maney machh*, *ching*, *lucky*, and *rani*. He also carries *hilsa* and *rohu* eggs in frozen blocks.

Names of fish are powerful mnemonic devices. Culinary scholar Colleen Sen, who lives in the neighborhood, frequents the fish stores and other grocery stores. She reiterates the importance of fish names in Bengali culture that produces a complex web of categories and values. Fish names are also important because Bengali customers from India and Bangladesh sometimes use different names for the same fish. For instance, an Indian customer may not recognize the name *koral*, because it is called *bhetki* in West Bengal. An Sindhi from India, who lived in the United States for a while, explained that a variety of *hilsa* was available in her ancestral village in Sindh, Pakistan, but it was known as *pallo*. She learned to translate and ask for *hilsa* every time she craved her grandmother’s “deep fried *pallo machi*” recipe. If indeed fish stores operate as cultural contact zones, fish names and recipe titles create a lexicon of “vernacular expressions” that brings together the many customers who shop on Devon Avenue.
Spatial imaginaries at the global scale

If we were to simply read the Bangladeshi grocery stores as outposts of the immigrant foodways, we would get stories of hybrid architecture where the American material past and Bengali culinary memories reproduce a Bengali American present. But the study of foodways also allows us to follow the trajectory of food back to its origins in South Asia. When we consider the spatialities and temporalities of South Asia, we render processes and politics that otherwise remain invisible. Although the story of Bengali fish stores in Chicago points toward a transnational pan-Bengali identity that challenges a hierarchical story of a South Asian community sorted by their national origins, the social and spatial impact of diasporic food practices render a highly unequal and asymmetrical story from the ancestral land.54

Fish such as hilsa do not simply appear in the fish stores on Devon Avenue. Even as the traditional fishmonger in contemporary Bangladesh and West Bengal (India) has changed his practice, the Chicago store owners continue to recreate merchandise in ways that their Bengali customers expect. Riya Bannerjee referred to that when she reminds us that fish such as galda chingri and hilsa that she buys on Devon Avenue is not readily available in markets in her ancestral Calcutta because most of them are exported to Western and Asian markets. Babu agrees that new fishing practices and new fish trade in South Asia have reduced the availability of fish and transformed culinary practices in South Asia. Some fish he carries in his store in Chicago are no longer easily available in Bangladesh or India. Yet the expectations of customers in Chicago is to find the same choice of fish as was prevalent in South Asia a few decades ago. The Bengali diaspora, according to Babu, has preserved and in some ways transformed a food web that is no longer present in its original native environment. The following section describes how that food web made of ecological habitats, political systems, everyday practices, sense of place, time, and taste associated with fish has changed.

Seasonal fishing in South Asia reproduces a sense of time and space that may be transformed in the context of Devon Avenue. An anadromous species, like salmon, hilsa swims upstream during spawning season from the Bay of Bengal up the riverine systems in Eastern India, Bangladesh, and Burma. In Bangladesh it travels thirty to sixty miles upstream. Its migratory pattern has influenced fishing policies, fishing schedules, and economic strategies. Hilsa’s availability changes with the seasons due to its annual spawning cycles. As a result, in South Asia there are hilsa seasons when the fish is available (June to July, December to January) and months when hilsa doesn’t appear in the marketplace (October to early February). Eating hilsa during certain seasonal festivals and events therefore reproduces a sense of time and place that is missing in Chicago, where frozen hilsa is available all year round.

Second, hilsa can be called a transboundary organism “… distributed over, or migrating across, the maritime boundary between two or more national jurisdictions, or the maritime boundary of a national jurisdiction and the adjacent high seas, whose exploitation can only be managed effectively by cooperation between the States concerned.”55 As a transboundary species that cross national boundaries, hilsa
farming and trade often gets embroiled in the geopolitical tensions of the region. Those geopolitical issues may not be evident to a shopper in Chicago, but they nevertheless influence the availability and price of exported fish. In 1993, Bangladesh began trading hilsa with India. The availability of hilsa in the Bengali-speaking areas of the two countries has been inconsistent and spotty due to trade wars and political difficulties between these two neighboring countries. Yet, despite political upheavals, the availability of hilsa harvested in Bangladesh had an impact in India since it changed the taste and palate of Indian customers. “It’s amazing how fast people are learning to tell the difference between the Padma and Ganges (West Bengal) varieties,” remarks Ashim Das, a fishmonger at a south Calcutta market.

The unique taste of Bangladeshi hilsa entered what Cruz Miguel Ortiz Cuadrascalls, “palate’s memory,” or an embodied “bond that unites food and dishes with vital experiences and remembrances” of the terroir.

In Chicago, hilsa comes from Bangladesh and every Bengali immigrant, irrespective of where they are from, develops a taste for Bangladeshi hilsa. When I returned to Kolkata to conduct the South Asian part of my larger research project I was surprised by the difference in taste (and exorbitant cost) of the hilsa available in India. Immigrants in Chicago develop a taste for Bangladeshi hilsa that is not readily available in India and is very expensive in Bangladesh for most customers to afford. Instead, Burmese hilsa has entered the South Asian market. As a result, the “palate’s memory” in diaspora differs from that in South Asia: Ironically, the taste of hilsa in Chicago is closer to the “palate’s memory” from the original delta catch that exists today only in literature and nostalgia in the Ganges plains of South Asia.

Third, hilsa farming impacts the environment and ecology of neighboring countries, creating an alternate spatial geography that challenges national borders and human settlements. Woodward and Hildrewargue that riverine ecologies sustain a network of biological relations defining eating practices called food webs. But in addition to microhabitat, nutrition, and macroecology, the concept of the food web may be expanded further in order to include humans. Food webs are often negatively impacted by pollution and unsustainable practices. From 1987 to 2007, due to habitat destruction and ecological changes as well as an increase in mechanized boats and gears (necessary to sustain the burgeoning commercial industry), riverine fishing declined and fishing increased in the marine section of the hilsa habitat. As fewer and fewer hilsa traveled upstream due to declining water quality, a way of life among fishermen disappeared. This had direct impact on the economy of the country and the financial status of local, unorganized fishermen, called artisanal fishers, leading to their decline and a more general economic downturn. This economic downturn coincided with an upsurge in emigration. Commercial trade rose and hilsa reached markets in the Far and Middle East, the European Union, America, and Australia, just when immigration of Bangladeshis and the Bengali population into these locations increased. A growing number of Bangladeshis in the United States (plus the Indian Bengali population) created a sustained market for the sale of frozen hilsa in urban American markets. With burgeoning international markets, the hilsa trade in Bangladesh was further modernized and mechanized. New
fisheries in Khulna and Chittagong traded with local fishermen to buy fish. New York became the main entry point for fish from Bangladesh, India, and Burma into United States. The import and popularity of *hilsa* abroad has changed irreversibly the fishing practice and habitat of the fish in South Asia.

Fish stories allow us to see that place is neither neutral nor discrete, that it is neither local nor fixed. Rather, multiple, often intertwined and contested stories produced at multiple locations, times, and scales sustain many forms of geographies. We discover contingent forms of memory—from the ancestral and collective to personal and embodied, human to environmental, from written reminiscing and written recipes of culinary traditions to embodied remembering of names, tastes, smells, and events related to food. Food memories help us rediscover myriad forms of belonging and peoplehood and suggest a better way to understand place and geography as an interconnected system.

Why does food matter in the analysis of hybrid immigrant spaces in Chicago? The editors of this special issue state that, “Food is a powerful symbolic concept, but one inseparable from material reality.” This article demonstrates how diverse material contexts influence the way we interpret and invoke food memories. By tracing the trajectory of fish, this article shows how food stories delineate a variety of places—retail streets, grocery store aisles, freezers, and even ecologies and spatial imaginaries, otherwise impossible in studies of immigrant architecture.

**Notes**


2. Casey explains that place memory “is either of a place itself (e.g., of one’s childhood home) or of an event of person in a place,” that “places are congealed scenes for remembered contents […] and as such they serve to situate what we remember.” [emphasis mine]. Edward S. Casey, *Remembering, Second Edition: A Phenomenological Study* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2000), 183, 189.

3. Some scholars have used this term to refer to resistance and creative social action in everyday life. According to Gieseking et al., “Part of this remaking of the spaces and interactions of daily life involves new understandings and representations of our place in the world. We use the term spatial imagination to hint at these possibilities […] and broaden earlier work on ways in which the imagination is instrumental in shaping our lives,” Jen Jack Gieseking


13. I have used the term ”Bengali-speaking immigrants” or “Bengali” to describe individuals originating from Bangladesh and the Indian state of West Bengal. Although their dialects may vary, these groups speak the same language. The total number of Bengali speakers (from India and Bangladesh) in Chicago is not available, but Census data show that the population of Bangladeshis in the Greater Chicago region has increased since 1978. More Bangladeshis came in the 1980. According to the *Encyclopedia of Chicago*, the 2000 Federal Census reported 712 Bangladeshis residing in the Chicago Metropolitan area. Ajay K. Mehrotra, ”Bangladeshis,” *The Electronic Encyclopedia of Chicago* (Chicago, IL: Chicago Historical Society, 2005), [http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/107.html](http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/107.html).


15. Among other reasons was the implementation of a new diversity visa lottery, a government program that opened up U.S. borders to Asian countries that had been barred due to quota laws, scant immigration, and high visa fees. Between 1982 and 1992, the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service admitted 28,850 immigrants from Bangladesh, and between 1988 and 1993 6000 immigrants entered the United States using the visa lottery system. In the 2000 U.S. census, 57,412 people reported themselves as being of Bangladesh origin; Asian American Federation, “A Demographic Snapshot,” 1.

16. Zahiba is an Arabic term for the Islamic mode of slaughter. This term is used to certify halal, or religiously sanctioned food among practicing Muslims. As a result these stores are destinations for those who are looking to buy halal meat products. Many Indian-owned stores do not carry meat, or carry them in limited quantities, because the store owners and the predominant customers are vegetarians.


18. People from Arunachal Pradesh and Assam are also part of this region. However, I have not included the study of Assamese-speaking immigrants in this article. There are scholarly challenges to the Bengali-Assamese category because the Assamese language has a separate and independent history.

19. The state of Bengal was carved into two entities when India received independence from Britain in 1947. West Bengal became a Hindu-majority state within India and East Bengal, later renamed East Pakistan, became a state in the Muslim-majority Pakistan. In 1971, the latter gained independence and was renamed Bangladesh.


24. Most of the oral histories were sit-down interviews, one to two hours long, with multiple follow-up meetings. The interviews were informal and unstructured, and I used
professional recording equipment. Because this was a public history project, the interviewees were aware that these discussions would not be anonymous and some clips of the interviews are available at the publicly accessible website on Devon Avenue at http://intertwinedcultures.weebly.com. This was a funded project, and some interviewing, transcriptions, and indexing were done by graduate students: Salman Hussain, Niyati Naik, Holland Dvorak, and Ditimoni Baruah. Additional quick surveys and short on-the-spot interviews were done on site with customers and users in these stores. The audio of these interviews were not recorded.


31. In 1965, the passage of a new Immigration Act made it possible for highly skilled South Asians to enter the United States. Although the 1965 law lifted all geographical and racial quotas and let in only skilled immigrants, it was only in the 1980s that the family reunification clauses brought in less-skilled South Asian immigrants families to join their more educated and skilled compatriots. Urmila Minocha, “South Asian Immigrants: Trends and Impacts on the Sending and Receiving Societies,” Pacific Bridges: The New Immigration From Asia and the Pacific Islands, eds. J. T. Fawcett and B. V. Carino (Staten Island, NY: Center for Migration Studies, 1987), 347–74.


35. Interview with Ditimoni Baruah, Nov. 2014, Milwaukee, WI.


37. Informal interviews with nine customers at Devon Fish House and Fish Corner, Aug. 2013, Nov. 2014.

38. Babu came from Comilla, Bangladesh, in 2008. He worked at Fish Corner on Devon Avenue. When the owners of Fish Corner went to Bangladesh on vacation during summer, Babu ran their store and learned how to run a Bangladeshi store. Finally, in February 6, 2011, he opened his current business. Sayem Khondakar, Personal Interview, Devon Fish House, Chicago, 2013.

39. This is true for all other Bangladeshi-owned stores. There are six freezers in the Devon Fish Corner & Meat store (6408 North Campbell Avenue, Chicago, IL 60645), laid out in two parallel rows in a back room.

40. Interview with Malati Das, Aug. 2014, Chicago, IL.
41. Interview with Ditimoni Baruah, Nov. 2014, Milwaukee, WI.
50. Majumdar, *Cooking on the Run*, 1.
53. Interview with Kavita Punjabi, Kolkata, 2015.
56. After a few years of fish trade between Bangladesh and India, the *hilsa* trade stopped in 1994 as Bangladeshi exporters protested restrictions on trade and currency set by the Indian government. By 1997 trade had resumed since the Indian government eased restrictions. In June 2005, a report in India’s *Business Standard* newspaper warned of dire consequences to the availability of *hilsa* fish imports from Bangladesh to India and bemoaned its sluggish growth. In 2005 the Government of India’s Department of Animal Husbandry and Dairying issued a directive requiring a sanitary improvement permit; it threatened the availability of this fish in India. In 2007 Bangladesh hit back and *hilsa* export to India was banned. This led to the “fish wars” between the two nations. The ban was relaxed in 2008 and a minimum export price was implemented, yet in 2010, Indian fish exporters complained about governmental apathy. The “fish wars” produced unexpected results. *Hilsa* imports from Myanmar increasingly satisfied the rising demands in India and made Myanmar a growing distributor of this fish worldwide. Our Bureaux, “Bangladesh Hilsa Import Banned, Tables Likely to Go Empty,” *Business Standard*


60. In July 2013 journalist Devjyot Ghoshal wrote that the fish accounted for 11% of Bangladesh’s fish production and in 2006–2007 this business accounted for nearly 1% of the nation’s GDP. But unsustainable farming, changes in the water quality at the delta, and lowering of water levels due to damming and other water usage upstream (in India) negatively affected Bangladesh’s fish production. Massive changes in Indian agricultural practices created runoffs tainted with herbicides, insecticides, and pesticides that poisoned the downstream water. Hilsa trade and environmental politics had direct and real impact on Bangladeshis, especially on artisanal fishers. A countrywide survey in 2004 found that 464,000 fishermen engaged in hilsa farming and out of this number a majority (439,000) were artisanal fishers. Artisanal fishers are local fishermen who use traditional and labor-intensive fishing practices such as using nets. These fishermen are often not part of commercial farming companies and are among the poorest in the country. With a drop in riverine hilsa catch, the artisanal fishers lost their source of income. See Masud Ara Mome, “The Potential of the Artisanal Hilsa Fishery in Bangladesh: An Economically Efficient Fisheries Policy,” Final Project, The United Nations University, Fisheries Training Program (2007): 14, http://www.unuftp.is/static/fellows/document/masud07prf.pdf; Devjyot Ghoshal, “A Fish Scarcity Is Forcing India, Bangladesh, and Myanmar to Pick Bones With Each Other,” Quartz Digital News Outlet (2013), http://qz.com/101708/.

61. Around the early 1990s the number of Bangladeshis in the United States increased drastically. Between 1982 and 1992, the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service admitted 28,850 immigrants from Bangladesh, and between 1988 and 1993 6000 immigrants entered the United States using the visa lottery system. In the 2000 U.S. census, 57,412 people reported themselves as being of Bangladeshi origin. See Asian American Federation, “A Demographic Snapshot,” 1; Migration Policy Institute, “The Bangladeshi Diaspora.”

Acknowledgments

I thank Dr. Carole M. Counihan, Dr. Meredith E. Abarca, and Joshua Colby for their support, editorial help, suggestions, and comments on this chapter. My sincere gratitude to the anonymous
readers whose reviews helped me craft this paper and to Salman Hussain, Holland Dvorak, Niyati Naik, and Ditimoni Baruah, who helped me with research and analysis. Details from the larger project are available at http://intertwinedcultures.weebly.com.

**Funding**

This research was funded by the Research Grant Initiative, the Center for 21st Century Studies, and the Urban Studies Programs at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee.

**References**


