

The Culinary Construction of Identity: Negotiating Korean American Immigrant Subjectivity in Zauner's *Crying in H Mart*

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Article Info	Abstract
<i>Article History:</i> Received 21 June 2026 Approved 03 July 2026 Published 31 July 2026 Keywords: food; Korean American identity; memory; transnationalism	This study investigates the role of food as the representation of Korean American identity in the memoir <i>Crying in H Mart</i> by Michelle Zauner. The role of food as a cultural practice within a transnational context has been less studied than grief and emotional experience in the memoir. This study aims to examine how food serves as a means of sustaining and reconstructing cultural identity, memory, and a sense of belonging across different places. Employing a qualitative approach, the study focuses on analyzing the food narratives using the lens of close reading and interpreting them with the notion of transnationalism presented by Ulf Hannerz, specifically interconnectedness and mobility of meanings. The analysis suggests that the foods mentioned serve a purpose beyond simply sustaining life. Additionally, food was a means of preserving cultural heritage and remembering the past across multiple locations. Soy sauce, eggs, kimchi, sesame oil and cold radish soup are all dishes closely related to family tradition, intergenerational knowledge heritage and daily cultural activities. The study also reveals that H Mart functions as a transnational cultural space where individuals reconnect with cultural memories, identity, and a sense of belonging. Cultural meanings are constantly negotiated rather than established as a result of distance, loss, and attempts to maintain cultural links. The memoir demonstrates that Korean American identity is continuously shaped through everyday interactions with food, memory, and cultural practices. This study extends previous scholarship by showing that food functions as a transnational cultural practice that sustains identity across national boundaries.

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INTRODUCTION

The presence of Korean immigrants in the United States has been made more apparent, not only in terms of their population numbers but also in terms of cultural practices that they carry with them (Bankston, 2024). Many Koreans migrate to the United States for education, work, and better opportunities, but that does not indicate they completely lose touch with their culture (Jung & Caskey, 2016). They routinely use their culture daily, despite being in a new environment. One of

the most obvious expressions is food in the culture, which is also a crucial ritual act that is vital for their survival in daily activities and helps to build their cultural identity (Nancheva, 2026). The blend of food habits becomes an avenue of nourishment and a link to generations, enabling younger Korean Americans to be connected to their past. The tradition of family dining also enriches a sense of community by allowing the sharing and exchange of stories, traditions, and customs and by passing them on to future generations, all while helping to

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preserve a sense of community amidst assimilation (Abarca, 2021).

The Korean food scene has become an integral component of the Korean immigrants' lifestyle, this is evident by the number of Korean supermarkets, restaurants, and food products in the United States (Hong, 2021). These spaces serve as a representation of community and familiar tastes among immigrants. By observing how ubiquitous goods like kimchi and restaurants like H Mart exist and bind people together, other than as everyday items, one can see how food establishes a cultural connection. For instance, Korean supermarkets might offer immigrants a language, social interaction, and familiar cultural practices in an environment that is not available in the mainstream American environment (Erway, 2018). They are community spaces that allow people with similar backgrounds and experiences to meet and foster a sense of belonging. Furthermore, the discoverability of food products that are also well-known provides immigrants with an opportunity to maintain their cultural link. This implies that food-related environments are not just consumed spaces but also spaces where cultural meanings and identities are being negotiated in the migrant journey.

Previous studies have found that food plays a larger role in building cultural identity, often during migration, because it is more than just sustenance; food can be an important part of expressing heritage and preserving individuals' ties with those coming from their country or home when entering another environment (Hutabarat & Saragih, 2025). Food is therefore not only associated with nourishment but also with the maintenance of cultural continuity and the negotiation of belonging within a new social environment. It is also strongly connected to memory and emotion, since some foods might trigger some personal experience that can be remembered and is meaningful in the long term. Food often becomes an emotional concern during the migration process, as eating at regular feeding times can contribute to maintaining memories of home, family, and past culture, though both places may be far apart (Takita-ishii & Domingos, 2025).

Crying in H Mart is a memoir written from the experience of a Korean American woman who is struggling with the loss of her mother as she

recounts her cultural heritage. As a nonfiction book, the memoir emphasizes the author's actual experiences, especially her relationship with her mother, and how she recalls them through food. Food is a major theme of the memoir, often linking stories about the mother and the author's childhood. Therefore, instead of being viewed as a daily necessity, food in this memoir serves as a means to remember, reconnect, and understand the author's connection to her cultural identity. These experiences demonstrate the intrinsic connection among food, memory, and emotion, highlighting their significance to the main character. The memoir indicates that food is intricately woven into everyday household routines, enabling cultural identity to surface through tasks such as cooking, eating, and shopping.

Several studies on *Crying in H Mart* have emphasized the role of food in relation to identity and emotion (Seng et al., 2023). The memory and emotion of food allow the narrator to connect with her cultural past and slowly come to terms with her mixed heritage. Other research focuses on the emotional dimension of the memoir, particularly grief. A study by (Aziz & Gandana, 2024) shows that the narrator goes through different stages of grief after losing her mother, which shapes her experience of life and surroundings. Despite such studies that capture the emotional aspects of the memoir, food remains largely seen as a sign of loss or of identity reconstruction. Less consideration has been given to food as an everyday cultural system, one that continually reinforces Korean American identity in a transnational context (Minchilli & Ponzanesi, 2025). Furthermore, research on *Crying in H Mart* is generally centered on personal experiences and lacks connection to a broader theoretical framework, such as transnationalism. This also highlights the need for research on the continued experience of cultural identity across different spaces, especially the food space in the context of Korean American life. The experiences described in the memoir are not limited to a particular place, making a transnational perspective relevant for understanding how cultural identity continues across national boundaries.

According to Ulf Hannerz (1996), individuals may remain connected to multiple

cultural settings simultaneously despite geographical distance. This perspective provides an appropriate framework for examining how food functions not only as a marker of memory but also as an everyday cultural practice through which Korean American identity is maintained.

Based on this gap, this study seeks to investigate how Korean American immigrant identity in the United States is represented through food in *Crying in H Mart*. This paper employs the idea of transnationalism by Ulf Hannerz to comprehend how individuals can simultaneously connect with multiple cultural environments. The novelty of this study lies in its focus on food as an everyday cultural practice that reflects the continuity of identity across different places, specifically within a Korean American context and through a literary work. This study contributes to existing scholarship by extending previous discussions of *Crying in H Mart* beyond grief and identity reconstruction. It demonstrates that food functions as an everyday transnational cultural practice through which Korean American identity is continuously negotiated and maintained. Therefore, the research question of this paper is how the Korean American immigrant identity in the United States is represented through food in *Crying in H Mart*.

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative approach to analyze how Korean American identity is represented through food in Michelle Zauner's memoir *Crying in H Mart*. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the study focuses on interpreting cultural meanings, personal memories, and everyday practices as represented in a literary text. A qualitative approach is concerned with interpreting meanings, experiences, and cultural practices, rather than numerical data (Lim, 2025). This is a suitable method, as the research seeks to analyze the narrator's experience and interpretation of food as a cultural aspect of her life.

The primary data source of this study is Michelle Zauner's memoir *Crying in H Mart* (2021). In order to further clarify the direction of the study, the following question is used: How is Korean American identity in the United States represented

through food in *Crying in H Mart*? This question focuses the analysis on the centrality of food in the narrator's experience, especially in relation to her cultural identity and memory. The selected data is chosen for its appropriateness to the narrator's experiences with Korean cuisine. These experiences are connected to food, directly and indirectly, as they appear in the form of food-related activities and memories of her childhood and mother. Therefore, the chosen data reveal food as an experience of the narrator's life and as a social act.

Through close reading, it was evident that there were recurring themes of food in the memoir. These divisions emerged from frequent mentions of food, as something currently being cooked and consumed or as a memory from the past linked to family and cultural identity. Through close reading, recurring food-related themes were identified and grouped into analytical categories.

This study adopts Ulf Hannerz's concept of transnationalism to comprehend cultural identity across different places. Hannerz argues that culture is not confined to a single geographical location, as cultural meanings continue to circulate across places through social and cultural interactions (Hannerz, 1996). This perspective is particularly relevant to *Crying in H Mart* because the narrator experiences Korean culture while living in the United States, especially through food, memory, and everyday practices. Cultural spaces may serve as arenas where disarticulated relationships among identity, memory, and belonging are negotiated in various ways (Sumaryani & Anam, 2015).

Interconnectedness is considered to be a process of interaction between different cultural spaces, which is not restricted to geographical boundaries, in this analysis. It is evident in the narrator's relationship with Korean cuisine during her time in the United States, which demonstrates her culture beyond her place of origin. The concept of the mobility of meanings is adopted to demonstrate their movement and change across contexts within culture. Therefore, food becomes a cultural medium, as well as a series of associations, such as memory, emotions, and cultural identity. These concepts are used to analyze how food connects the narrator's personal experiences with broader processes of cultural identity formation across different cultural settings. In terms of

interconnectedness and mobility of meanings, the study looks into the nature of Korean food as a cultural product and how memories, cultural knowledge, and identity continue to move between Korea and the United States.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this section, food in *Crying in H Mart* is viewed not only as what the narrator consumes but also as a cultural medium that carries memories, meaning, and identity. This analysis is divided into two parts. The first part examines how food is used as a medium of memory and cultural continuity. The second part examines H Mart as a cultural space for the negotiation of identity and belonging.

Food as a Medium of Memory and Cultural Continuity

Several foods in the memoir serve as a reminder of past experiences, but it also brings them into the present. This phenomenon can be seen when the narrator recalls the specific taste of her mother's cooking.

“Instead, you’ll likely find me crying by the banchan refrigerators, remembering the taste of my mom’s soy-sauce eggs and cold radish soup. Or in the freezer section, holding a stack of dumpling skins, thinking of all the hours that Mom and I spent at the kitchen table folding minced pork and chives into the thin dough.” (Zauner, 2021, p. 7).

The memory described by the narrator is recalled through taste and through the physical act of preparing food. These memories are tied to ordinary moments in family life, where food becomes part of everyday routines. These are memories that are not only personal but also part of everyday cultural life. In the memoir, the dishes are prepared in a very specific way, including soy sauce eggs, radish soup, and kimchi. The narrator remembers these dishes because they are strongly associated with the flavors and feelings of daily living in Korea, in addition to the emotional connection they arouse. To maintain their historic importance, many Korean foods largely rely on particular ingredients and preparation techniques; fermentation is the process of concern here. Fermentation is an important part of Korean cuisine's flavor character, and soy sauce (ganjang)

is the product of this process (Park, 2026). Soy sauce eggs can be interpreted as part of an important cooking tradition because the narrator recalls the way the item is made. The cooking method, which reflects the cultural system, is equally important as the flavor. Besides eggs, there are also radishes, especially in cold radish soup, which is very closely related to home-cooked meals in Korea (M. K. Kim et al., 2018). This suggests that the narrator’s memory is not only based on the public aspects but also on personal and intimate ones at her home. Identity is preserved not only through visible cultural markers but also through routines we often don’t even notice outside the home. In America, these ingredients are hard to find. Generally, they’re only available at certain ethnic grocery stores, such as H Mart (Arnold, 2025). This may indicate that the narrator needs to reclaim that memory before she can cook this dish. Korean cuisine is not a part of regular life in America, so every step she takes in the kitchen becomes a conscious attempt to maintain her identity—a determined effort to make sure that the rhythms of life in a distant country do not swallow up her cultural heritage. The memory is therefore attached not only to the food itself but also to the cultural meanings embedded in everyday cooking practices. Through Hannerz's perspective, these meanings continue to circulate across national boundaries because they are carried by the narrator rather than remaining fixed in Korea.

According to Ulf Hannerz's ideas on transnationalism, the narrator's memories demonstrate that what travels across borders is not merely food itself but also the meanings attached to it. The dishes that left the deepest impression on the narrator during her time with her mother were soy sauce eggs and radish soup. The mother's cooking becomes one of the narrator's earliest experiences through which Korean cultural meanings are transmitted. Cultural meanings are not inextricably linked to their location of origin, as defined by Hannerz. Rather, these meanings permeate daily activities and continue to influence how people perceive themselves in diverse cultural contexts. The narrator's dependence on these dishes emphasizes that the continuity of culture is not something that is merely inherited in an intangible way but rather a practice of internalized memory. By mastering the distinctive flavors from

her mother's kitchen, the character employs a method to preserve the culture. Rather than simply reproducing recipes, the narrator reproduces cultural meanings that continue to shape her identity despite geographical separation. This process transforms the home environment into an arena of resistance, where the continuity of culture is actively maintained through cooking activities that are repeated and ritualistic in nature, effectively connecting the past with the present, as well as 'here' and 'elsewhere.'

"While she never actually taught me how to cook (Korean people tend to disavow measurements and supply only cryptic instructions along the lines of "add sesame oil until it tastes like Mom's"), she did raise me with a distinctly Korean appetite. This meant a reverence for good food and a predisposition to emotional eating." (Zauner, 2021, p. 7).

The transmission of cultural knowledge is based on everyday experiences, such as remembering ingredients and knowing the taste of a particular dish. It is difficult to measure accurately because it relies on time, the routine followed, relationships formed during the process of making the dish, and flavor passed down through generations. This information comes from observing Korean cooking in the past and studying food cultures. These cooking habits perpetuate the cultural meanings beyond their initial context. The recipe is not just a recipe but a certain memory, a certain tasting and understanding of food that the narrator carries with her. This demonstrates that what is transmitted is not merely culinary knowledge but a culturally shared understanding of taste, allowing meanings to remain mobile across places and generations. This accurately captures what Hannerz refers to as "the mobility of meaning," which is the notion that culture is ever-evolving and always present in our lives rather than being static and unchanging. The narrator is residing in the U.S. but has not been able to expel the impact of her mother's cooking, which has shaped her. She still tastes Korean food with the original taste she acquired. By incorporating the unique sesame oil into her kitchen, she is not just following a recipe book; she's also imparting some of her culture. Cultural significance is not confined

to a single location but can also evolve and be present in everyday activities, such as cooking.

This is even clearer in the description of her eating habits, which is the kind of perfectionism that gives priority to instant gratification and sensory precision over the ease of convenience of meal preparation today.

"We were particular about everything: kimchi had to be perfectly sour, samgyupsal perfectly crisped; stews had to be piping hot or they might as well have been inedible. The concept of prepping meals for the week was a ludicrous affront to our lifestyle." (Zauner, 2021, p. 8).

The emphasis on achieving a "perfectly sour" flavor suggests that taste is more than just innate. The narrator associates it with a standard learned through family experience, suggesting that cultural knowledge can be transferred through everyday eating practices. In Korea, fermentation is among the areas of knowledge and experience that have been passed down to generations (S. Kim & Hu, 2026). They remember not only the food they consume but also the methods they use to make it, prepare it for consumption, or evaluate it. Kimchi transmits intergenerational knowledge through taste, helping cultural practices remain meaningful through generations (Surya & Nugroho, 2023). The examples, when combined, demonstrate a pattern. The food the narrator remembers is not just from her daily routine but also from other cultures' cuisine. The narrator attempts to preserve the cultural relationship she once shared with her mother rather than simply recreate her childhood. The process involves food as a conduit for bringing traditional meanings into the present.

The examples above illustrate Hannerz's argument that cultural meanings can move across geographical boundaries while remaining meaningful in new contexts. While Korean foods have certain meanings in the United States, the narrator's food memories still influence her perceptions of her mother and her Korean heritage. Food is not the only thing moving from place to place, but its significance is. It is important to note that cultural meanings are preserved by the interpersonal relationships of the memoir. The narrator discovers what Korean food is supposed to taste like, how it's supposed to be prepared, and

why it's important in her interactions with her mother every day. Cultural continuity is therefore not just about the migration of food, but also about knowledge and practices being passed on from one person to another. Soy sauce is linked to a certain cooking technique; kimchi is linked to the knowledge passed on through generations. Radish is linked to home life. Rather than disappearing after migration, these meanings are continually reconstructed through everyday practices, allowing Korean American identity to remain meaningful across different cultural settings.

H Mart as a Transnational Cultural Space

H Mart functions as a transnational cultural space where cultural identities are continuously negotiated through everyday practices surrounding food. The store serves as a sanctuary where individuals strengthen their sense of belonging by seeking out specific products that connect them to their cultural roots. A shared sense of alienation, as well as a sense of loss, is palpable throughout the store:

“It’s a beautiful, holy place. A cafeteria full of people from all over the world who have been displaced in a foreign country, each with a different history. Where did they come from and how far did they travel? Why are they all here? To find the galangal no American supermarket stocks to make the Indonesian curry that their father loves? To buy the rice cakes to celebrate Jesa and honor the anniversary of their loved one’s passing? To satisfy a craving for tteokbokki on a rainy day, moved by a memory of some drunken, late-night snack under a pojangmacha tent in Myeong-dong?” (Zauner, 2021, p. 13).

This shows that many people share a similar immigrant experience. The cafeteria functions as a shared public space where people gather briefly before returning to their everyday lives. H Mart is not a fixed community but a space shaped by movement and circulation (Bae, 2021). The word “displaced” shows that these individuals are not fully rooted in the same culture but live in a condition between different cultural identities. The diversity of people described in the H Mart food court further reinforces this transnational character. The narrator observes Chinese students leaving the city to enjoy food that is familiar to them, three generations of Korean women eating

together, a white American family enjoying a Korean meal and a married couple sharing family recipes tied to their migration experiences throughout the scene. These people come from diverse cultural backgrounds, yet they share a common space and similar experiences in cultural practices related to Asia. Their appearance implies that H Mart is not exclusive to any ethnic group. Rather, it transitions into a site of intersection for other cultural histories, migration experiences, and living practices. This is a representation of Hannerz's concept of interconnectedness, where individuals from various regions and cultural backgrounds are connected through shared environments and interactions. Instead of seeing immigrants as culturally disconnected after migration, the memoir illustrates how everyday encounters in H Mart allow different cultural communities to remain connected through shared practices surrounding food. This reflects Hannerz's view that transnational cultural life is sustained through ongoing interactions rather than geographical proximity.

Zauner's reflection highlights how the act of consuming food becomes a means of navigating one's own sense of belonging. This condition becomes more revealing when the narrator adds that

“We’re all searching for a piece of home, or a piece of ourselves. We look for a taste of it in the food we order and the ingredients we buy. Then we separate.” (Zauner, 2021, p. 13).

The word “searching” refers to a sense of belonging that is not something that naturally exists but something that people should look for. The word “home” is no longer a fixed place but something incomplete that can be rebuilt. “A piece of ourselves” suggests that identity is not whole; It is broken into parts. Food is not what people are really looking for, but a way to feel stable, even if only for a short time. Food was used as a medium to help fill in the feeling of something being incomplete, even if it is just briefly in the moment. From Hannerz's perspective, the search for “a piece of home” should not be understood as a desire to return permanently to the homeland. Instead, it reflects the way migrants continuously reconstruct cultural belonging within their present environment. H Mart becomes one of the locations where this ongoing negotiation takes place through

ordinary activities such as buying ingredients and sharing familiar foods.

The narrator's description suggests that people visit H Mart for different reasons, yet many of them share a similar experience of living away from their place of origin. Although their backgrounds are different, the store provides a space where fragments of cultural memory can be encountered again through food and everyday interaction. Moreover, a visit to H Mart is also equivalent to searching for continuity in their fractured identities, which demonstrates the importance of place in their quest for constant self-discovery (Barua & Maheshwari, 2024). Zauner characterizes H Mart not merely as a grocery store but as a site of reclamation. As she writes,

“In the H Mart food court, I find myself again, searching for the first chapter of the story I want to tell about my mother.” (Zauner, 2021, p. 13).

This implies that H Mart is more than a shopping place. It becomes a place that can be revisited and reconnects memories, family experiences, and cultural identity. The importance of H Mart does not only come from the products sold there. The store is important because it provides access to cultural experiences that may not be as readily available in the lives of Americans. For immigrants, familiar food items, familiar language, and familiar backgrounds can help to create a temporary sense of connection to their culture of origin. Hence, visiting H Mart is not a mere shopping experience; it is a shopping experience integrated with their philosophy. It becomes a space where cultural memories are triggered by commonplace everyday things like shopping and eating. The narrator does not physically return to Korea. Instead, cultural continuity is recreated within the American setting through repeated encounters with Korean food and shared cultural practices.

Drawing on Ulf Hannerz's concept of mobility of meaning,¹ it is clear that what circulates inside *Crying in H Mart* is not just the food itself, but also the complex cultural meanings encoded in it. Within Hannerz's worldview, what crosses borders is not only the actual movement of Korean food, but also the cultural values associated with it. Although the narrator now

experiences these foods in the United States, they nonetheless trigger memories, familial relationships, and Korean cultural ideals from other places. The food acquires new meanings after migration while simultaneously preserving connections to its original cultural context. Food is more than something to be eaten through the experience of the narrator. It also has memories, feelings, and a linkage with Korean culture. On seeing these foods in H Mart, they evoke memories of family, childhood, and daily life in Korea. This makes the store more than just an ingredients shop. Many of the foods and experiences that remind her of Korea are difficult to find in her everyday life in the United States. H Mart becomes one of the few places where she can encounter them again. After the death of her mother, the narrator no longer has the person who played the most important role in introducing Korean culture into her everyday life. As a result, the search for Korean food becomes more than a practical activity. It is also an attempt to reconnect with a part of herself that feels increasingly distant after her mother's death.

The meaning attached to food does not remain exactly the same after it moves to a different place. Distance and new surroundings change the way the narrator experiences it. For the narrator, foods that were once part of ordinary family life become much more significant after her mother's death. Dishes that may have seemed routine in the past now carry memories of people, conversations, and experiences. Because these memories are no longer part of her everyday life, encountering the foods again in H Mart gives them a different emotional meaning. This suggests that cultural connection is more complicated than simply carrying traditions from one country to another. The memoir does not portray cultural interconnectedness as a stable condition in which identity naturally persists across borders. Instead, the link to culture is called into question and can only be sustained in everyday practices. The narrator's constant references to H Mart indicate that cultural continuity within the diaspora is not to be taken for granted but rather an active process as distance creates new cultural practices. Food, however, serves on more than just a symbolic level as a means by which the exiles continue to try to piece together the coherence of memory, identity, and belonging.

The narrator's experience of Korean food is very different after living in the United States and losing her mother, as seen in the memoir. Eating is imbued with more associations and becomes a part of normal family habits, but over time, these new associations become more significant. Shopping at H Mart is more than just a shopping experience. It's a chance to relive moments that may not be easy to remember in real life. In this regard, the integration of culture in the memoir does not seem to be taken for granted or inherently stable. Instead, it requires continuous effort through practices such as remembering, cooking, and returning to places that still provide access to those memories. Therefore, H Mart functions as a transnational cultural space not simply because Korean food is sold there but because it enables individuals to reconnect with memories, negotiate cultural identity, and maintain connections to a homeland that is no longer immediately accessible in everyday life. In this process, what moves across borders is not only food itself but also the meanings attached to it, including memory, belonging, and cultural identity.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that food in *Crying in H Mart* functions as a cultural medium through which memory, identity, and cultural continuity are maintained across different cultural contexts. The narrator's memories are consistently linked to foods, flavors, and methods of preparation. These memories reflect a culturally shaped way of life that is embedded in everyday practices. The use of soy sauce, sesame oil, kimchi, and cold radish soup takes on a new meaning for the narrator. These are not just because they are Korean foods, but they are also to build memories and culture while she is far away from her hometown. In the American context, where Korean ingredients are not always readily available, maintaining these food practices requires additional effort through searching for ingredients, preparing meals, and recreating familiar tastes.

Based on the concept of interconnectedness by Ulf Hannerz, this study discovered that cultural connections do not cease following immigration. Culture is maintained by activities of daily living that connect various cultural spaces. The concept

of mobility describes the movement of meaning from one place to another and how it transforms in the new context. Meanings continue to appear in the narrator's life in the United States through involvement, effort, and more awareness.

H Mart is not just a grocery store; it is a transnational cultural space of negotiation and reconstruction of fractured identities. They are all individuals who face experiences of cultural displacement, but also are seeking connection to one another through food, memory, and ritual cultural practices. This shows that identity in this memoir is dynamic and emergent and never solid or definitive, but continually created through the present struggle to re-enlist cultural significance that is somehow out of reach.

In conclusion, this study suggests that Korean American identity in the memoir is given the form of a lived transnational experience in the process of interaction with food in everyday life. Identity is not preserved through fixed cultural belonging, but continuously produced through ongoing processes of remembrance, reconstruction, and cultural negotiation across geographical and cultural boundaries.

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