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### Writing's Power in Preserving Culture

As I ran around my mother's room in our childhood home, my attention was drawn to a vibrant striped journal tucked away in the top drawer of her nightstand. Intrigued, I take the journal and go through the worn-out pages, discovering countless personal stories detailing my mother's upbringing and immigration story. Her writing supports the preservation of our family culture, community, and traditions. When stories are shared orally, they can be mistold, misinterpreted, and altered in a way that is no longer accurate. The act of writing plays a crucial role in preserving cultural knowledge over generations. Pieces of writing like my mother's journal are artifacts to be taken care of so future generations can cherish them and learn from their culture.

I've always been fascinated by reading people's journals, diary entries, or personal pieces of writing. It somehow feels wrong, like I am getting a glimpse into a life I shouldn't, and I can't help but continue to read it. When I found her journal, I could not help but read it in secrecy trying not to get caught in her room. My mother moved from Vietnam to the United States in the 80's because of the Sino-Vietnamese war. The American government was accepting refugees and my mother was fortunate enough to have been selected to immigrate. As she recalls, it was a fast and scary moment in her life, leaving her family and established life behind to stay alive. A large part of her journal included her experiences of navigating the journey between Vietnam and China by a small wooden boat, vividly portraying the challenges of scarcity and fear of not having enough food and clean water to drink. Her oldest brother had died in a sunken ship that sailed to China before hers, her entry included her worries that it would happen to her.

In “Splintered Literacies” by Amanda Hayes, Hayes shares her memories of how her mother’s stories preserve and value home literacy. Hayes highlights the importance of home literacy in the Appalachian region, emphasizing the value of storytelling, family history, and cultural knowledge passed down through generations. “Splintered Literacies” emphasizes the need to recognize and preserve home literacies, which are often undervalued in formal educational settings. The impact of one’s understanding of identity is deeply rooted in an understanding of their culture. Hayes sees her mother’s writing as a way to hold onto life even when they have passed away. My mother’s experiences and stories in a way have “passed away” but they live on within the pages of her journal.

The curiosity surrounding my mother’s journal entries led me to interview her about her unique experiences and detailed stories. During the interview, I let my mother know that I used to read her journal and vividly remember her entries surrounding pregnancy in the United States. She was shocked to find out that I even had an interest in reading her stories at such a young age. After telling her the stories I remember including her experience leaving China/Vietnam, ESL class, grocery shopping in the U.S., and missing her friends and family back home, she became emotional that I knew all this about her. In Cantonese, my mother replied, “My heart is full, I did not know you knew this about me. I never wanted to share too much about my experience coming to the U.S. and having you and your brother because it was a really hard journey.” There were numerous stories written about her experience being an immigrant and how scary it was for her to be pregnant in the United States. During the interview, my mother walked me through her entries about what it was like to carry me. It was heartbreaking to learn about her suffering as she visited the doctors multiple times a month worrying about her pain. Amidst the challenges, there were moments of humor, like this one story we shared a laugh about, “Today I eat a whole large

Supreme pizza from Pizza Hut. My baby and I are so hungry.” What’s amusing is that even now, her favorite pizza to this day is still a Supreme pizza and she still tells me she used to always eat them when she was pregnant but to see it written in her journal entry made it much more amusing. “Writing records and preserves what is valuable, but my mother's work of writing these stories and reading similar ones also created value for me, a child who would grow up fascinated by the very acts of literacy” (Hayes 226). I am grateful for my mother’s journal entries and my intrigue to read into the journal uncovered interest in reading personal narratives.

The “hiding” of my mother’s journal reminds me of when Hayes shares "The stories that get told, or not told, and where we're allowed to tell them, can shape the knowledge we value. And that value, or its lack, can hurt us" (Hayes 227). These stories weren’t explicitly told to me by my mother and they would have never been spoken about if it weren’t for the discovery of the journal. The stories and experiences have been knowledge that I value, they have shaped the way I see her and have made me more appreciative of her journey. I asked my mother if she could see the value in sharing these stories. “When I was still writing in the journal, I thought you were too young to understand or care about my experiences. I did not see the importance of making you sad because mommy had to struggle. I wanted you to be happy, not sad because I had to work hard with Dad to support you and your brother.” Her reply was heartening and made me feel a closer connection to her. Being vulnerable was never a side of hers I got because of typical Asian cultural norms surrounding emotions.

Her journal became a bridge between us, her valuable stories brought us together in a way that would not have been possible if it weren’t for her writing. Through her use of the journal to practice her English and keep memories, I was able to dive into her life that happened before I was born, uncovering years that would have remained hidden without her written words.

The discovery of these stories is important to me because, in East Asian culture, it is typical for emotions and hardships to be hidden or unspoken due to the stigma surrounding emotional vulnerability. The curiosity and intrigue I had for reading into her life uncovered empathy I never knew I wanted to express to her. The numerous stories written in her journal about the experience of being an immigrant and how scary the journey was to travel to the United States were just a glimpse into a life that happened before mine. My mother's stories have not only offered me a window into her life before I was born but have also inspired me to love reading personal narratives about life and experiences. My mother's journal was a form of home literacy and has proven to preserve family culture, community, and traditions.

Work Cited

Hayes, Amanda. "Splintered Literacies." *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 66, no. 2, 2014, pp. 225–27. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43490914>. Accessed 23 April 2024.