

*Eating Nafta: A Review*¹

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To understand the book *Eating NAFTA: Trade, Food Policies, and the Destruction of Mexico* by Alyshia Galvez it is essential to diagram and explain each section of the text as it is presented in the preface and introduction as well as its contents and final conclusions. Through diagramming and explaining the significance of the information and arguments presented in this piece, it can be understood how Galvez's text works with the sources and information she has found to paint a picture of destructive foreign policy by the United States and its effects on Mexico. Throughout the preface and introduction, Galvez introduces the reader to several different topics including rural farmworkers, U.S. foreign policy in Latin America, and Mexico's changing economy all relating to the growing and consumption of corn. Galvez highlights one specific theme, the growing difficulty of Mexican rural farmworkers (at times called "campesinos") to rely on their harvests for subsistence as they had in the past. Galvez details in both introductory sections how U.S. foreign policy has previously been used in Latin America to control and subjugate countries to the will of the American government and corporations; often to make a profit off their economies and resulting in destabilization. Further, Galvez argues that the inability of rural farmworkers in Mexico to live off their traditional diets centered around corn and other fruits and vegetables is but another result of U.S. foreign policy in Latin America driven by profit motives.

The policy Galvez chooses to focus on in this book is the North American Free Trade Act of 1994 (NAFTA), more specifically its consequences to the Mexican public which she claims have been overlooked and not properly addressed. The book is written to address two separate discussions, the first is how NAFTA has negatively impacted the lives of Mexicans by making it increasingly difficult for corn growers to live off their own harvests, creating food policy which

effects the health and food choice of Mexicans, and the ignorance towards NAFTA's health consequences which has enabled the myth of personal responsibility for health to fester in public and professional opinion. The second discussion involves the industrialization of Mexico's economy because of NAFTA as Galvez attempts to disprove myths that place the blame on Mexico's "inefficient" agriculture sector because of unfulfilled economic prosperity.

Throughout the book, Galvez presents anecdotes of Mexican corn farmers and their struggles in a modernizing world where NAFTA, as well as other food related foreign policy, is pushing them to abandon their traditional diets and lifestyles in favor of a "modern" diet consisting of imported processed foods. Further, Galvez highlights the theme of personal responsibility for health, as she works to unravel myths that place blame on the individual for non-communicable chronic diseases such as diabetes and obesity instead of focusing on food policy which she argues is the true culprit. The main concern for Galvez is how Mexican citizens' lives have been affected by NAFTA, and how the act has contributed to the diabetes epidemic alongside the destruction of the rural agriculture sector in Mexico.

In the "Study Methods" section of the introduction, Galvez explains how she examined the causes of recent growing trends of what she labels "noncommunicable chronic diseases" in Mexicans and Mexican Americans. Specifically, she attempts to examine how NAFTA has contributed to these trends through the forceful adoption of U.S. or "modern" diets. This is done by speaking with both ordinary people affected by foreign policy as well as government officials. Through field research and conversations, Galvez looks to examine previously overlooked connections between food policy, immigration, and diseases in Mexico and the United States from the time frame of 1994 (the passing of NAFTA) to 2018 (publishing of the book).

Galvez also details the trouble she encountered when deciding where to base her study in Mexico, citing that the generality of the food policies effects meant that she could have based her study any and everywhere. Another problem was the specific methodology that she was going to use in this study, as she could have done a grand overview of the food policies effects on the public, studied an individual city or state, or examine and discuss food policy and its consequences. In the end, Galvez decided to incorporate all these factors into her research by examining both generalized and specific data to uncover how food policy, specifically NAFTA, affects food choice, diet, immigration, and public opinion.

Galvez briefly explains the structure of the book and its significance to the arguments she presents within the text. Galvez explains that the text is organized into seven chapters which explain how NAFTA has become an excellent lens for examining economic, social, and food changes in Mexico. The book is organized into these specific chapters to establish the effects of NAFTA on Mexico by exploring the people it has affected socially, economically, and physically. This coupled with the health problems it has caused and the public and professional opinions that have developed as a result.

Lastly, it is important to acknowledge the perspective Galvez takes in this text and the arguments she makes. Galvez argues against the two prominent beliefs that have become commonplace since the passing of NAFTA, which hold that the rural agricultural sector of Mexico is economically “inefficient” and that the Mexican public holds personal responsibility for the growing epidemic of noncommunicable chronic diseases. As she later explains in the conclusion, the false beliefs of the Mexican government and other industrialized nations that the rural agricultural sector of the Mexico is “inefficient” and should be outsourced to the more “capable” nations work to destroy traditional corn-based diets in Mexico.

The destruction of traditional Mexican diets through food policy and the encouragement to adopt one like those in industrialized nations like the United States. Those of which consist of ultra processed foods, having become one of the overlooked causes of the noncommunicable chronic disease epidemic in Mexico. Furthermore, Galvez argues that instead of addressing how food policy has contributed to this epidemic, politicians and corporations choose to instead place the blame on the individual rather than the systems they are subject to which influence their dietary choices.

The first chapter of the book, titled “People of the Corn” explores the relationship of traditional Mexican food that has been elevated by those who Galvez labels “foodies,” often middle- and upper-class people, obsessed with food as a form of entertainment and status. The recurring and essential theme of this chapter highlights how although traditional Mexican food and methods of preparation have achieved exclusive and elite status in the culinary world, it has become less accessible to the people who traditionally lived off this diet. Through the anecdote of the elite chef Rene Redzepi and his “discovery” of the traditional milpa-based diet, Galvez reveals how the conditions that have enabled what she calls the “Mexican moment” in the culinary world requires an absence of the diet in the community that had traditionally adopted it.

Furthermore, Galvez argues how the elevation of the traditional-milpa based diet does not benefit those who have historically followed this diet. In this case rural Mexican farmers, as Redzepi and other elite chefs through their romanticization have stripped the traditional diet of its historical and cultural significance. These arguments relate back to the author’s stated argument for the text as she explains how inaccessible the traditional milpa-based diets have become for rural Mexican farmers. Additionally, the overarching system of industrialization through NAFTA has created this inaccessibility instead of personal choice.

Throughout the first chapter, Galvez introduces a second theme which complements the central focus of this chapter on the ironic, elevated status of the milpa-based diet. The secondary concept centers on what Galvez refers to as storytelling in food. This concept is borrowed from Rene Redzepi who insists that traditional Mexican food has “not had its story properly told.” Galvez argues that through this assertion made not only explicitly by Redzepi but implicitly by other elite chefs, “foodie” culture disregards the significance of the foods they have decided to elevate, and as a result they paint the picture that the traditional milpa-based diet is ancient and lost to time. The reality of the situation is that this diet is not ancient nor lost to time but becoming increasingly inaccessible to rural Mexican farmers who had initially benefited from it because of rapid industrialization caused by pressure from the United States.

This pressure, Galvez explains, is how the United States, through the ideology of comparative advantage which proposes that countries should only produce what they have industrialized and rely on imports for non-industrialized sectors has caused Mexico to perceive their agricultural sector as “inefficient.” Thus, attempting to dismantle the traditional milpa-based diet through industrialization. These arguments relate to the central focus of this book as Galvez elaborates on the inaccessibility of the milpa-based diet due to industrialization, and how through the Mexican government’s false perception of their agricultural sector as “inefficient” they place rural farmers at a disadvantage, unable to sustain themselves with the milpa-based diet as they had before.

The second chapter of this book titled “Laying the Groundwork for NAFTA” explores the historical, political, and social contexts in Mexico that lead to the passing of NAFTA. Throughout the chapter, Galvez’s thematic center lies on the ideology held by the Mexican government that the agricultural sector of the nation is both “inefficient” and requires modernization. Galvez

effectively combats this ideology held by the Mexican government through the story of Bertoldo Juan Palacios Castillo, a rural farmer who herds goats that require little upkeep or management and continue to produce enough for his family to live off. Despite this, government officials have attempted to convince him to buy what they claim to be new and improved goats who would yield much more meat. Castillo explains how taking on these new goats would require incredibly intense upkeep whether it be new soil, feed, medicine, and more.

Through this anecdote, Galvez exposes the flawed ideology of the Mexican government who believe that the countryside is wrong, backwards, and “inefficient” when in fact, those who live by their traditional diets and farming methods adequately provide for themselves, even being able to sell off excess product from their harvests. Galvez reveals how the Mexican government’s obsession with efficiency and modernization throughout the nation combined with their historic disdain for the agricultural sector created the perfect storm to which NAFTA could be introduced and implemented.

In the third chapter titled “NAFTA: Free Trade in the Body,” Galvez explores how NAFTA has changed the landscape of Mexico through new economic and ideological models. Throughout the chapter, Galvez’s central theme maintains that through a new economic model dependent on consumption and expansion it has become increasingly inaccessible to maintain traditional milpa-based diets in turn causing a steady rise in noncommunicable chronic diseases. Galvez argues her perspective through the examination of local tiendas (shops) present in rural towns.

These tiendas provide basics like fresh milk, eggs, and bread while also including house specials like specific jams and fruits at affordable prices for residents who are long distances from larger markets and city centers. The local shops, however, have slowly become unsustainable, as

multinational corporations such as Walmart dominate the markets with lower prices and wider availability of products. Additionally, convenience stores like OXXO and 7/11 have spread throughout the country, forcing tiendas to begin carrying products like Coca-Cola along with other candies and snacks just to remain afloat.

Galvez argues through this examination that the line between local tiendas which had previously provided communities with healthy, affordable foods and convenience stores which offer ultra-processed and unhealthy products has become blurred. This has further minimized the ability of Mexicans to make healthier choices in the food that they eat. Additionally, Galvez recognizes how the forceful expansion of multinational corporations into rural parts of Mexico have created a lack of diversification in choices of foods, and how this lack of choice which is often absence of healthy options contributes to poor individual health. The author confronts one of the central arguments of the book, arguing that the false narrative placing blame on the individual does not acknowledge systemic change, which plays a more significant role in individual health.

In the fourth chapter titled “Deflecting the Blame: Poverty and Personal Responsibility,” Galvez explores how NAFTA has not only changed the way people eat but also their relationships with the government. Primarily, Galvez focuses on public health campaigns by the Mexican government, which target the rising epidemic of non-communicable chronic diseases, as well as how the response by the government perpetuates the idea that health is the responsibility of the individual and not the systems they live under. Galvez’s central theme throughout the chapter examines the illogical stance taken by public health officials. They attempt to explain away the recent epidemic of non-communicable chronic disease through excessive consumption and unhealthy food choices by citizens.

Galvez uses an incredible example from a peer-reviewed journal called *The Lancet* to explain how the government has deflected blame from their systemic changes to the individual in the matter of health. Galvez includes an infographic from the journal that attempts to explain viable solutions to healthier food choices and a reduction in negative health outcomes. However, the infographic directs blame away from corporations, institutions, and governments instead centering (as well as visually placing) responsibility on individuals and their consumption choices. This strengthens Galvez's central argument of the text that politicians and corporations refuse to take responsibility for public health and instead place it on the individual.

Throughout the chapter, Galvez also examines the steps taken by the government to mitigate the health crisis in Mexico and how these steps are praised for their progressiveness, even though they continue to place blame on the individual. However, what Galvez focuses on throughout the chapter is the assumptions consistently made by the government about health and nutrition. She details how these assumptions are not only harmful but further the interests of corporations who profit from these flawed assumptions. Galvez explains how there is a common belief in government responses that rural citizens do not have the "correct" diet and must be educated on how to choose, prepare, and eat food.

Ironically, the traditional milpa-based diet had historically provided rural Mexicans with the right amounts of nutrients and energy and that the framing of the diet as "inefficient" or "incorrect" was just another attempt to discredit the countryside. Through this explanation, Galvez reinforces one of the central arguments of the book by exposing how the government continues to frame their rural citizens as "backwards." They must be educated and modernized to achieve prosperity, even though this modernization would only introduce its citizens to further health problems as they are forced to consume ultra-processed foods and give up their traditional diets.

In the fifth chapter titled “Diabetes: The Disease of the Migrant?” Galvez offers an incredibly personal perspective to the public health crisis through accounts of immigrants and their struggles with diabetes. Throughout the chapter, Galvez focuses on how stress and trauma play a role in individual health and how the transition immigrants face from one country's food to another often has damaging effects. Galvez explains how through migration families lose the social support they had at home which provided mental and dietary stability, and how this loss of stability can impact health. Through interviews with Mexican mothers who immigrated to New York City, Galvez reveals how especially in the city, immigrants find it next to impossible to cook when they work multiple jobs and have irregular eating schedules.

The lack of dietary and social stability in immigrant's lives, Galvez argues, means immigrants are often pushed toward easily accessible but deeply unhealthy, processed foods which are especially present in the United States. Through this examination of instability brought about by immigration in this chapter, Galvez reinforces her central argument of the book by exploring how systemic change brought about by conditions like poverty, hunger, and violence which cause people to immigrate and change their food behaviors cannot be simply attributed to individual choices but must place responsibility on the systems which dictate food choices.

In the concluding chapter titled “Nostalgia, Prestige, and a Party Every Day,” Galvez explores the concept of food nostalgia through an examination of corporate marketing and individual beliefs. While Galvez offers many examples of food nostalgia in this chapter, one in specific captures her argument exceptionally well. Galvez explores tamales, a Mexican staple enjoyed around the holidays and often associated with fond memories of family, tradition, and love which is likewise appropriated by multinational corporations looking to exploit the nostalgia associated with them. Galvez's central theme in this chapter revolves around how we make

connections with food and how it is more than just something we eat, but as a form of self and cultural expression that is actively exploited by corporations for profit incentives.

Galvez presents the specific example of Williams-Sonoma, a Houston based company which attempted to capitalize off the popularity of tamales by charging excessive prices for their substandard products while marketing it as a more modern, and professional option. Tamales are associated with labor intensive preparation and holiday celebrations that many Mexicans hold dear and have fond memories of, but through marketing their tamales as a “modern” alternative, Galvez argues, Williams-Sonoma seeks to replace the traditional, often affordable, tamales in pursuit of profit.

Galvez connects this to one of her central arguments of the text by explaining how multinational corporations, which heavily influence food policies and regulations, portray traditional customs as needing to be “updated” in the pursuit of modernity. The pursuit of modernity, Galvez argues, is the method by which corporations and politicians effectively expand their markets and profits by removing traditional ways of eating through industrialization and expansion of franchises. This reduces the accessibility of traditional diets by structuring cities, towns, and villages around their products, making it close to impossible to eat any other way.

In the book's conclusion, Galvez reiterates the arguments she made throughout the text and summarizes the work. Galvez firmly asserts in her conclusion that through neoliberal policies which have facilitated globalization by multinational corporations it has become increasingly difficult to maintain traditional, healthier diets. As a result of NAFTA, she argues, corporations have been able to completely transform the Mexican landscape into the ideal industrialized and modern country the Mexican government has strived to create. Galvez argues that by limiting the food choices of low-income families through industrialization and market expansion, corporations

ensure that their ultra-processed, unhealthy, and cheap food products will dominate Mexican markets.

Additionally, Galvez asserts that governments and corporations refuse to take responsibility for the role they play in individual health, instead placing the blame on the individual who should instead “consume smarter” by following vague dietary guidelines such as the energy balance theory which do not properly account for the unhealthy, processed food consumed. Furthermore, Galvez argues that governments and corporations continue to view the countryside and its citizens as “backwards,” requiring education and guidance to be prosperous and live in the modern world. Galvez concludes that through the destruction of the Mexican landscape and industrialization of agricultural lands which followed NAFTA, corporations have created for themselves near perfect market conditions in which traditional diets have become inaccessible and the only food options left is those provided by them.

In overview, the individual chapters of the story work exceptionally well in understanding how NAFTA has impacted food choice, culture, and life in Mexico. The structure provided excellently tackles the central arguments being posed which question how NAFTA has affected traditional diets, explore the governmental and corporate perspectives on the rural countryside as “inefficient,” and the examination of the deflection of blame for the rise of chronic disease by governments and corporations. Through taking the order of the individuals effected, then the political-economic-cultural context of the act, the exploration of how NAFTA effects food choice, the examination of the “personal responsibility” myth, a personal perspective on diseases worsened by migration, and finally how nostalgia is exploited, Galvez creates an effective structure which begins at the ground floor of the effects of NAFTA and walks all the way to the top to examine the massive corporations at fault.

Given the purpose, focus, and perspective, as well as understanding how the subject matter was presented, the conclusions made by Galvez throughout the text are warranted. Galvez expertly examines the major claims she makes in the introduction of the text throughout, and by providing anecdotes, comparative research, and explaining related concepts, proves the arguments she poses. Through exploring how NAFTA has systemically affected how people choose, prepare, and eat food as well as the health effects associated with the corporate-imposed diet, Galvez effectively argues that NAFTA has facilitated the industrialization and subsequent destruction of rural Mexico along with traditional milpa-based diets which had served countryside residents for generations. Galvez's final conclusions that the responsibility of fixing the damage NAFTA has done would require change on a systemic level are warranted, and that while it is difficult, individual citizens should strive to prioritize diets not based on ultra processed and unhealthy foods.

The work successfully incorporates themes of globalization, immigration, neoliberalism, and the racialization process throughout to explain how multinational corporations and governments use the racialization process to economically marginalize, educationally deprive, politically disenfranchise, and socially/racially discriminate against Mexicans and Latin Americans. Through exploring how NAFTA has destroyed the rural Mexican landscape and created a corporate paradise where traditional, healthy diets are inaccessible, Galvez reveals how multinational corporations through globalization and neoliberal policies expanded their vast markets into foreign nations (in this case Mexico) to capitalize off the lack of regulation, abundance of cheap labor, and untapped "market potential."

There are several positives and negatives of reading *Eating NAFTA* however overall, this is an amazing book which strategically tackles NAFTA and its consequences. Galvez accurately and succinctly covers what she proposes in the introduction, which is an exploration of how

NAFTA has affected not only the way people eat but how they interact with the world around them including socially, politically, and economically. Galvez consistently cites relevant research in related fields and through examining not just complex food policy, but the actual people affected by it, she illustrates the consequences of NAFTA and what it means to the millions of Mexicans residing in the countryside, immigrating to America, and more.

The sole flaw of this book is that at times it can become incredibly dense in subject matter when discussing complex food policy laws or political concepts which may be off-putting for readers. There is certainly an entry level knowledge requirement for this book which demands understanding complex political, social, and economic concepts and ideologies before reading the first page. Despite this, Galvez is incredibly resourceful and succinct in her analysis of NAFTA and creates a compelling argument for the idea that food is more than just the things we eat but the way we express ourselves and wish to be seen by others.

¹ Alyshia Gálvez, *Eating Nafta: Trade, Food Policies, and the Destruction of Mexico* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2018).