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# A Taste of Brown: Alimentary Anthropology Between Michoacan and Washington

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# A Taste of Brown: Alimentary Anthropology Between Michoacan and Washington

## **Abstract**

Growing demands for alternative diets are filtered from the perspective of nation- building and agro-food employees in Washington State. Refusing food as the antithesis of death, brownness emerges as a conceptual frame that foregrounds multiple bodies and actors (human animals, nonhuman animals, and matter) simultaneously as it holds onto ways of being-in-common within scarcity and disavowal. “Sensing Inhumanity” inhabits the limits of nationalist political mobilization for brown bodies by exploring labor embodiment (pesticides, pharmaceuticals, and the sun) and the criminalization of food and color itself (illegalized food trucks and police brutality). Multimedia (video, images, and geographic information systems) and ethnographic writing invite a collective witnessing to our own obligations to the violence constitutive of food production in the U.S. today. Ultimately, how would it feel to embrace a synaesthetic politics of brown alimentary obligation?

## **Disciplines**

Agricultural and Resource Economics | Social and Cultural Anthropology

## **Comments**

This paper was part of the 2014-2015 Penn Humanities Forum on Color. Find out more at <http://www.phf.upenn.edu/annual-topics/color>.

A TASTE OF BROWN:  
ALIMENTARY ANTHROPOLOGY BETWEEN MICHOACAN AND WASHINGTON

By

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Senior Thesis

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Alternative food movements in this country (veganism, local eating, organic, etc.) have often had to frame their demands around the idea that food is both medicine and life, often ignoring the migrant bodies picking these crops. “A Taste of Brown” filters this issue from the perspective of nationalism and capitalist development. It thinks with the experiences of primarily Mexican farm workers in Washington and their distant families and communities of origin in Michoacán, Mexico. Interviewing over twenty people in both locations, it works intergenerationally and transnationally in order to effectively explore how labor affects kinship and expand the discourse around the genesis of immigration. Audio and video equipment helped refuse the structural abstraction of some food commodity analysis by honing in on the crucial non-textual and visceral elements of food that make taste different across varying social contexts. The primary focus is on how alimentary processes are embodied in my informant’s everyday lives in order to attend to how racial and sexual histories are coded in the tastes of different foods. Close attention is paid to culinary memory and labor experience as it relates to agro-labor policy, border militarization, and nation-building at large. Methodologically the thesis mobilizes brownness as a more-than-human conceptual frame for racial difference. That is to say, brownness brings attention to the soil, sweat, and other nonhuman objects such as pesticides that shape the experience of Mexican migrants and agro-food employees in and across the Americas. Ultimately, “A Taste of Brown” gestures towards the dynamic processes by which brown bodies inhabit and find sustenance at the limits of normative forms of political mobilization.

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This thesis is a research project where the personal is political in at least two ways: my own reliance on food often derived from exploited labor and my intimate connections as a brown body to the various people who have shared their lives with me. I did not want to write a paper that said ‘brown food is’ or ‘exploitation is’ because such definitive sovereign answers are exactly how so much of the violence I track originated (Moten 2014). My move to think through alimentation rather than food or consumption studies is precisely because I am interested in how all objects are forms of sustenance, whether or not they are recognizable as food (“consider the rocks thrown by Antonio I discuss in “Sensing Inhumanity”) and regardless of their oral consumption (consider the flying can I discuss in “Fugitive Recipes”). Alimentary analysis requires encountering the possibility that people don’t share your objects of analysis (Berlant 2011), and thus experience different “economies of abandonment” (Povinelli 2011b) in the process of attending to, composing, and detaching from attachments. Thus, this project does not presume objectivity, but attempts to work with my complicity in the hope that such differences in attachment can unsettle violence’s sustenance.

### Alimentary Origins

There is a vast anthropological literature on cooking, eating, and food of which Sutton (2010), Phillips (2006), and Mintz and Du Bois (2002) have been key conceptual resources. Sutton is particularly instructive pointing to how the interest in the sensual aspects of food resonates with anthropology’s long standing investment in “everyday life and the multiple contexts in which the culturally shaped sensory properties and sensory experiences of food are

invested with meaning, emotion, memory, and value” (2010: 220). The framework advanced here takes seriously Rachel Slocum and Arun Saldanha’s joint claim that “no body is left unracialized, because the expansion of capitalism, through mining, shipping, tourism, global warming, etc., now captures all bodies in one giant machine, assigning them nutrients, sanitation, pharmaceuticals, poisons, eating habits, sensations, and life expectancy in highly uneven ways – racializing them through food” (Slocum and Saldanha 2013, 9). Consider Mike Davis’ (2001) claim that the differential allocation of food *is* the gross injustice of European hegemony. An emerging encounter between postcolonial theory and food studies (Roy 2010, Tompkins 2012) proves this hegemony seeps through to the imagination. Psyche Williams-Forsson (2006), for example, tracks the racialized motives in perpetuating the image of African Americans eating fried chicken or watermelons. More broadly, Roy’s (2010) “psychopharmacopoeia of empire” demonstrates “colonialism was in important respects a reconfiguration of the fantasmatic landscapes and the sensorium of colonizer and colonized, generating new experiences of desire, taste, disgust, and appetite and new technologies of the embodied self” (7). Similar ‘technologies’ are also the elemental core of Rebecca Earle’s analysis of “the body of the conquistador” (2012). Earle points to an anxiety over how “the ability of Old World plants to flourish in the New World closely mirrored the ability of Old World people to flourish there. Of Course, Spaniards needed to eat nourishing Old World foods if they were to retain their health and their Spanish complexion” (2010, 701). Crossing disciplines, spaces, and times, alimentary attention unsettles both every day and broader societal processes.

Important work within food and eating studies has attempted to bypass binary approaches to bring attention to what Megan E. Edwards has termed the “intersection of the creolizing local

and homogenizing global in global foodways” (Edwards 2011, 69). Edwards ends her analysis with the claim that Virginia’s elite’s desires “to regain a sense of ethnic identification with their distant British homeland through acts of emulative consumption” had effaced the “creole (as in culturally mixed) origins of Virginia’s ham” (ibid). I want to consider this claim filtered through Elizabeth Povinelli’s claim that engaging in “practices of self-elaboration or self-maintenance a social group may spy on those who join them, assume that they are being spied on, and camouflage themselves in the cloak of authorized identities” (2011, 100). From this perspective, Edward’s insertion of the “culturally mixed” origins of Virginia’s ham into the narrative of “Virginia Ham” re-inscribes the initial colonial violence in at least two ways: by translocating a kind of ‘New World’ indigeneity onto “Virginia Ham” at the site of exception where indigenous peoples across the Americas, and the African indigeneities that gave rise to the forced diasporas themselves, are rendered fossils and disavowed (on claims to Caliban, Creolization and Indigeneity see chapter two of Byrd 2011 and chapter two of Jackson 2012); and, similarly, as Lewis R. Gordon and Jane A. Gordon might say, these foods were “not only the master’s tools” (Gordon and Gordon 2005). Both critiques link “Virginia Ham” to the eschatological demands of life optimization by honing in on food as a mechanism through which one can get chained to imperial temporality – forced to have a future, a life, as though capitalism were both beginning and end to the story – what Eric Cazdyn has termed “the already dead” (Cazdyn 2012). Therefore, it is not just that any life food potentially gives is always a particular kind of life, but also that debility undergirds capacitation (Puar 2009): that food is life, death, and their beyond.

I want to extend Thomas’ (2013) crucial intervention concerning race in the Americas and argue here that the eschatological relation between food of/as life is because food in the



Americas “has been theorized largely in relation to models of societal integration (or the purported lack thereof), and therefore to nation-building” (519). This link between nation-building and food has produced both the various models of culinary fusion throughout the region (various kinds of South, East, and South-East Asian fusion restaurants, California cuisine, Tex-Mex, Pacific rim cuisine, etc.) and liberal projects of gastronomic vindication. Cook et al. (2008), Phillips (2006), Molz (2007), and Padoongpatt (2011) review several monographs covering both trajectories. However, this has marginalized the more radical project of using food’s situatedness (see Strathern 2005 on “partial connections” and Haraway 1988 on “situated knowledges”) and viscosity (see Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy 2010a, 2010b on “visceral geographies” and Goodman 2010 on “visceral entanglements”) to challenge inhuman white supremacy on a global scale (see Slocum and Cadieux 2015; consider Haraway 2012).

Richard Wilk’s article “Real Belizean Food” teaches us that “foreign goods create local identity on a global stage” (1999, 253). Analyzing the locally wrought production of school lunch in the Ewa-Waipahu school district in Hawai’i, Christine Yano and Wanda Adams argue that the food the “cafeteria ladies” served “created citizens through taste rather than through didacticism” (Yano and Adams 2013, 45). Anne Allison has similarly analyzed the preparation of bentos (boxed lunch) to explicate how statist ideologies of proper citizenship are performed along an axis of “properly made bento” and “ill-planned bento” (Allison 1991). According to Perera and Pugliese, “[t]he culinary, with its economy of enrichment and incorporation, signifies the palatable and always aestheticized element of multiculturalism precisely because it still effectively reproduces an assimilationist economy of cultural containment and control” (Perera and Pugliese 1996, 110). Hierarchies of taste and value articulating with class, race and nation

shape food systems, global and local, past and present (Wilk 2006). In this sense, food forms part of what Tsing (2000) refers to as the politics of scale-making. As these scales align with neoliberal self-determination, food becomes a key site through which aspirations of belonging are performed.

Reading across the archive on race and labor in the United States reveals taste hurts. Consider Sarah Lochlain Jain's (2006) argument in *Injury: The Politics of Product Design and Safety Law in the United States* where, despite statistically precise predictions of accidents derived from product design and injuries built into the production process itself, the neo-liberal consumer subject of health assumes the right not to be injured in the usage of products. Specifically tackling food production, Seth Holmes' (2013) moving ethnography *Fresh Fruit, Broken Bodies* exposes the social injustices that are constitutive of agriculture's capacity to provide, increasingly desirable (among other reason, because of discourse from the food movement equating the taste of food with their morality), fresh fruit and vegetables. Camille Begin suggests that "Southern foods overstepped and complicated the color line with social, spatial, and sensory differences. Yet this very quality also established the taste of southern foods as a practical means and a sensory practice that facilitated the emergence of the modern meaning of race. Southern cuisine was on the forefront of the reshaping of U.S. racial and ethnic taxonomy and methods of establishing racial difference" (Begin 2011, 145). Furthermore, the landscape itself is strongly coded with gendered differences such that it is conceived by the Cartesian subject as virginal, awaiting the white man to penetrate, survey, and subdue it (see Anderson 2003, Dwyer and Jones 2000, Little and Leyshon 2003, Lloyd 2000, Trauger 2004).

Quickly reducing connections through food to another expression of racism imperialism or colonialism can, however, miss the ambivalence of encounter and the fragility of identity (Duruz 2005). Breeze Harper's (2010) call to decolonize the diet writes against whiteness' enclosure of veganism to invite discussion about the marginalized food ways that the 'capitalist kitchen' has effaced. Unlike the "Virginia Ham" narrative with Edwards above, Breeze Harper does not seek to reinsert these histories into the 'food movement' but consider their ongoing culinary livelihood among communities of color. This points to the problematic within the political economy of hunger discussed above and to issues with thinking of food as "crossing over" from one dominated to another dominating culture, anchoring stories in Western epistemologies (Cook and Harrison 2003, 310). For Ian Cook, there may be no "automatic, powerful, taken-for-granted, Other-eating white personality that needs to be dismantled and reconstructed . . . because . . . people's heterogeneous biographies and everyday lives are often both food colonialist and anti-colonialist" (Cook et al. 2008). This is something beyond what words like vegetarian and vegan tend to capture and toward something attuned to the multiple layers through which we cook substances in our dwellings (see Heldke 2012). The question is not "what should I eat," but "what am I making others endure as the price of my good life?" Or simply put, "how am I eating?"

### Migration

Every year, the United States employs more than three million seasonal farm laborers, approximately 72% of whom are migrants (National Center for Farmworker Health Fact Sheet 2012). Holmes (2013) exposes the naturalization of social suffering that undergirds the agro-food system in the United States. In his definitive text on the Bracero era, *They Saved the Crops*, Don

Mitchell (2012) unravels the imperialist landscape in which California growers created competition amongst Bracero workers, domestic farm workers, and undocumented workers to keep wages as well as resources (i.e., tools, housing, etc.) below even bare minimum levels. Together the work of these scholars centralizes the study of food to discussions of the production of a global imaginary insofar as global imaginaries (and nations) are grown with and through the bodies of people pursuing varying promises. Thus, global imaginaries are realized, and challenged, as people act and move. For the subjects of Holmes' and Mitchell's works, this movement is invariably linked to transnational capital expectations about what kinds of bodies are supposed to do this kind of back-breaking labor.

While the passage of the North American Free trade Agreement (NAFTA) is certainly not the first instance of the interpenetration of US and Mexican capital destroying local economies, particularly agriculture, it established an unprecedented exchange of goods between Mexico and the US that was structured around receiving the cheapest labor possible (see Bacon 2012). Much earlier, cultural and economic repercussion of the Mexican-American war had already made Mexican residents in the conquered land "foreigners in their native land" (Weber 2003) as the provisions of *The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo* were largely ignored. David Bacon notes with NAFTA that even as remittances to Mexico increased, in spite of the 'crisis in global capital', totaling 3% percent of Mexico's GDP, Mexico's debt payments to US banks consume the same percentage of the GDP as remittances. He states, "those remittances, therefore, support families and provide services that were formerly the obligation of the Mexican government. This alone gives the government a vested interest in the continuing labor flow" (Bacon 2012).

For Fred Moten (2013), “one of the fundamental and constitutive contradictions of capitalism is that it establishes conditions for its own critique (which anticipates a collapse whose increasing imminence increasingly seems to take the form of endless deferral)” (237). Mitchell’s aforementioned work has shown how these enclosures of crisis operated to simultaneously increase policing of the US-Mexico border even as it increasingly degraded and impoverished both Mexican nationals and domestic American farm workers. In his polemic *Spaces of Hope* David Harvey (2000) defines sickness under capitalism as the inability to work. From this perspective, liberal cultural recognition recognizes only that which it finds easily palatable. My point is that differences internal to life- as-such bring illegality into existence in ways that chain life to work by presupposing those differences as fatal flaws in need of governance. Thus, even those brown bodies who are legal citizens are perceived as being unauthorized and subject to substantive curtailment of rights and entitlements, consistently questioning whether they are purportedly worthy or authentic enough. In the context of migrant farm workers and their families, race elaborated as a ‘problem’ exists primarily in relation to claims of injury (where deviations from what is ‘racially acceptable’ result in a deferral or denial of economic or institutional support), while the foundational debt of New World settlement and exploitation (and thus the origins of Atlantic modernity) is erased (see Thomas 2013).

With this in mind, I mobilize the experiences of primarily Mexican Eastern Washington state farm workers and their distant families and communities of origin. I focus on how alimentary processes are embodied in their everyday lives and labor experiences in order to attend to how racial and sexual processes are sensorially coded in food and eating. I conducted fieldwork in Eastern Washington State and two communities in Michoacán, Mexico. In both

locations I interviewed twenty people. My primary interlocutors were woman, but across the interviews I try to retain a sense of the cross-gender implications. I choose to work intergenerationally and transnationally in order to effectively explore how labor affects kinship and expand the discourse around the genesis of immigration. Audio and video equipment helped me refuse the structural abstraction of some food commodity analysis by honing in on the crucial non-textual and visceral elements of food that make taste different across varying social contexts. Ultimately, this thesis is less interested in food circulation or access per se than in interrogating alimentation from the perspective of responsibility and attachment (DuPuis, Harrison, and Goodman 2011).

“Esta en el paladar” (Is in the palate) – Pimienta, Field Notes, 8/16/2015

Comino and his companions sucked the water out of clumps of mud after three days without water in the broiling desert between Arizona, United States and Sonora, Mexico. This was his fifth time enduring the trek. Two four liter bottles and a couple bags of Sabritas, ingredients for his fugitivity, had run out after three days in a four day journey that became a seven day one. Communal and familial poverty braids across Comino’s migrations, but on this particular journey it was his aging daughters in his splintered family that would be his primary magnet. Having returned twice to Mexico from the U.S. of his own accord, he often critiqued the “sin vergüenzas por los dos lados” (“shameful individuals on both sides”) who took advantage of others.

From this perspective, kinship for brown bodies, and here I am primarily referring to people otherwise classified as Mexican, has often been shaped by the displacements from colonization (Garcia 2010), the local saturation of organized crime fused with government corruption (see Romero 2001, 2011 for the U.S.; see Müller 2009 and Pansters 2012 for Mexico), and transnational labor exportation (Abrego 2014 and Rosas 2014). Manuel Barajas (2012, Endnote [1]) has cogently critiqued the universalizing tendencies of “Latino” and “Mexican” in order to more forcefully articulate the relationship between capital and racial subjugation. For example, the growing thousands of children attempting to cross the border into the U.S. each year are often fueled by the search for family members forced to abandon them for work (Park 2014, Nazario 2007, and Martinez 2014). Thus, making the risky trek across the

border was not an unusually, as in historically exceptional, violent demand for Comino (Zavella 2011). Yet, on his sixth day in the desert, he fell to the ground ready for his body to be found by border patrol agents. These are border patrol agents who always seem to be hauntingly close yet too late to help at the border their presence has made increasingly dangerous (Michalowski 2007, Miller 2014, and Maril 2012).

As Barajas has cogently argued, “a combination of structural and push-pull perspectives [may explain] the European experience but fails in explaining Mexican migrations” because of the racism and sexism that underpin their exploitation (Barajas 2012, 265). Thus, although Comino is a skilled artist, his employment opportunities in the U.S. were often restricted to seasonal agricultural labor. Moreover, Cindy Hahamovitch’s analysis of “the global trend toward immigration restriction suggests that international migration bolstered nationalism rather than undermining it” (74). For Comino, this meant multiple years of contributing to the US by paying income, sales, property, county, state, and federal taxes without the benefits of government assistance or entry into the political sphere (Santa 2014). Furthermore, as I mentioned in the introduction, Bacon (2012) notes the Mexican government’s historically vested interest in the flow of illegalized bodies to the US because of the centrality of remittances to the Mexican economy. Ultimately, Mexican migration as solely labor competition subordinates the wellbeing and self-determination of brown bodies to models of national economic development both in the US and in Mexico (Gonzalez 2013).

Contrary to models of labor competition, two of Comino’s companions carried him for a full day. Exhausted, they stumbled upon the aforementioned mud-hole. Unable to wait there for fear of border patrol discovery, his companions urged themselves and each other on. They were



eventually found by their over-due coyote who drove them to a pristine two-story house somewhere in Arizona. Stepping inside, Comino quickly and simultaneously noticed the aromas dripping from the kitchen, and the internally boarded up windows. The feast consisted of KFC chicken, commercial salsa and tortillas, and seemingly endless Coca Cola. It was to be his first and last meal in the U.S. unless, as the various coyotes in the house demanded, his family paid the second installment to complete the trip. Either the coyotes would drive him to his final location in the US or drive back into the desert and leave him there to wander in the roasting heat. His family paid, but he recalls that there was already “un monton de personas en la casa cuando yo llegue y yo siento como que muchos no podían pagar por que tenían las caras hambrientas” (“a lot of people in the house when I arrived, and I feel like many could not pay because their faces were hungry”). Here hunger references both a corporeal nutritional hunger as well as a socio-historical desire from within conditions of persecution or confinement. Thus, Comino’s mobilization of hunger intimately links captivity in the coyote ‘safe-house’ to the socio-political context of how the provisions for life itself are mediated and negotiated in the “Trans-Americas” (Saldivar 2011).

Cooking hones in on the relationship between hunger and the available provisions for the nourishment of life. From this perspective, “Fugitive Recipes” ethnographically explore cooking knowledge and practices in two communities in Michoacán, a southwestern state in Mexico eight hours southwest of Mexico City. It focuses on the ways that cooking is transmitted, reproduced, and transformed among varying generations of community members. However, the cooking here takes seriously Comino’s trek by refusing science’s hegemonic breakdown of nutrition that assumes a universal neoliberal subject in favor of a more embodied notion of cooking (Hayes-

Conroy and Hayes-Conroy 2013). Rarely does a kitchen have the privilege of containing every possible ingredient or tool, especially when that kitchen is the desert between the United States and Mexico. Thus, while molecular gastronomy has purported to perfectly reconstruct taste using nutrition science, taste here is fleetingly emplaced (Sutton 2014 and Solomon 2014). In the case of Comino, cooking viscerally describes finding sustenance with those clumps of mud. At the same time, cooking hones in on that first meal from the coyotes. The abstraction of taste from the varying social worlds of its emergence is “part of a western tradition that specifically devalues taste (and smell) as a lower sense that promotes animal appetites rather than reasoned judgment and that blurs the basic western philosophic distinction between “subjective” and “objective”” (Sutton 2010, 211). Moreover, John E. Finn has provocatively argued that following a recipe perfectly, as in molecular gastronomic practice, is intimately linked to the construction of a democratic citizenship wedded to docility and deference (Finn 2011). Following Heldke (1988, 1990), Antoniou (2004), and Brady (2011), I consider recipes less as an inscription for authoritarian re-production and more as tracings to an approach that are meant to activate movement itself via the communal and embodied elements of cooking, rather than particular food end-products. Put differently, recipes do not only influence the construction of alimentary matter, but activate socio-historical relationships. Here, the preservation of fidelity, the drive to stay in sync with another, beats out the pursuit to follow a recipe perfectly.

In that coyote ‘safe-house’ food was mobilized as threat and consumption purportedly marked a successful journey and/or inclusion into the U.S. Beginning with an engagement with the viscosity of the ‘gift’ of food from the coyotes, I read the genre of the recipe through anthropological gift economies and critiques of culinary nationalism. Moving through varying

scenes of culinary memory I explore the intergenerational gender and racial dynamics affecting kinship, migration, and alimentation writ large.

### Tasting the Gift

After being led to the source of the greasy aroma, Coca Cola burned its way into Comino and his companions' dry mouths. Thin leathery tortillas from the microwave and a watery tomato and onion ruse tried to moisten the KFC chicken's travel down into their trembling stomachs. This 'gift' of sustenance has been fertilized by borderland militarization knotting together migrants, smugglers, and security in capital circuits between the U.S. and Mexico (Rosas 2012). Put differently, the meal from the coyotes articulated a world in which commodities bloodstained from globalization become metonyms for inclusion in American society (Tompkins 2012). Eating and its repression are a replacement for (and thus, logically, analogous to) political power. From behind the windows boarded up on the inside, these migrant faces and mouths signal both the presence and persistence of nonwhite bodies and the importance of their indebtedness to transnational economy.

Perhaps because of anthropology's origins in the colonial project for surveying the potential productivity of 'the other' in what Michel-Rolph Trouillot referred to as the trilogy of "order-utopia-savagery," the discipline has maintained a strong interest in credit and debt relations (Trouillot 1991, 40; see Peebles 2010 on credit/debit). In particular, analyses of gift economies figure centrally in this disciplinary history. Gifts threaten, but they also beckon; they are not necessarily alive, yet enliven indebtedness and fear of hoarding. The anthropology of the gift (Malinowski, Mauss, and Levi-Strauss) teaches us that circulation accumulates social obligations (Povinelli 2011). However my attention to food and the senses resists the masculinity

of their structural abstraction by understanding my presence as complicit and immersed in the social. Many of my visits to different homes in Michoacán were often met with “una tortillita caliente con frijolitos y queso fresco” (“a warm tortilla with beans and fresh cheese”). However, these gifts are as much about local patterns of dietary production, the more structuralist reading, as they are about their particular taste and texture. It is precisely the viscosity of warm tortillas, carefully crafted and rushed to my hands, which links my privileged position as a cis-gendered able-bodied man receiving food from the women I learned from to the limits of structural abstraction (Sutton 2010, 210-213). My translation three sentences prior reflects this as the modifiers at the end of the Spanish words imbue the food items with a personalized emotional register that is lost in English. Thus, tortillas are not solely interesting as an effect of a communicative entanglement between myself and the giver, but as a sensory generator of racial and sexual complicity through how I personally process the tortillas. That is, savoring warm tortillas can become a way to slow down the pallet long enough to disrupt easy ingestion of gendered labor. From this perspective, my ethnographic attention to alimentary life in Mexico seeks to surrender analytic determinism in favor of this kind of sensual conviviality.

The two primary communities I worked in Michoacán in are Caleta de Campos, located about an hour and a half west of Lázaro Cárdenas, and a community off the governmental maps known as “Windo,” approximately three hours North by North-East of Caleta via dirt road. I arrived to Caleta first and spent my first few days surveying the local food economy. The three primary businesses were seafood restaurants, “ferreterías” (hardware stores), and family owned bodegas (small grocery stores). While cellphones have grown increasingly popular among young-adults in the area, two-way radios remained the most used and reliable means of

communication for families living outside of the central part of Caleta. Two-way radios are particularly popular amongst community patrols in the area. Indeed, it was via two-way radio that my arrival was circulated through Caleta and into the mountains where Windo is located. Although travel between Caleta and Windo usually happens once daily, many of these trips are by younger men travelling from Windo to work elsewhere in Michoacán. These odd jobs do not have regular schedules and so the promise of groceries or other supplies is often not certain or delayed. Thus, transportation to Windo, essentially any local with a car or truck willing to make the journey, often includes delivery of supplies. It also means that many of the women in Windo have had to learn pragmatic ways of mobilizing their surrounding vegetation and livestock to spice up dishes when supplies are low. As I prepared to travel to the community, I collected rice, corn, beans, chilies, propane, and over the counter medicine that had been requested by different families in the area. Trips in either direction between Windo and Caleta usually happen in the early morning or later in the evening to avoid the sun's blazing rays. My trip began around 5:30 AM which meant that the children from families living on the side of the road would not be up in time to rush for tips for opening the various cattle doors that pock the road. The road itself gets partially re-done each year depending on the heaviness of the rainy season and surrounding competition for one of the two steamrollers the government rents out to individual communities.

While in Windo I stayed with an elderly husband and wife who were some of the first to move into that particular area of the mountains in the 1940s. They lived alone, but their youngest son and his family lived two minutes downhill from their house. During the week I spent in their house I observed how herbal recipes, religion, and storytelling were mobilized by women when men would leave to go socialize at the only store in the area known as Las Sigueras. Many of

my conversations took place during such a context. Families would visit and the men would leave together. I cooked with the woman as they were preparing meals for that evening or conversed with them as they shared with one another. Cheese production was a particularly popular topic as methods for producing the most savory or best textures were compared. The production of cheese is also linked to the social economy of the kitchen as the exchange of cheese fuses women's culinary expertise from cooking for their families with the possibility of income or favors from customers who look for the best cheese. In this way, alimentary practices are both a vector of communal mobilization and everyday instantiations of marginalization and inequality.

### Cutting into Family

If we take seriously the claim that there is a single national Mexican cuisine, who is doing the cooking? In mobilizing visual methods I am inspired by David Sutton's (2014) work in Greek kitchens. Rather than privilege the visual over the tactile, video allowed for the verbal elements of my field notes to be situated within a larger "kitchen choreography": "the use of tools in the kitchen, kitchen organization and bodily movements and postures as cooks interact with noncooks or fellow cooks"(10). This is made particularly acute in Figure 1 where the intergenerational dynamics of the kitchen as a space for the transference of knowledge are emphasized by the mother who is handing different ingredients and tools to her eldest daughter in the middle to prepare as the youngest daughter observes from the right. As Jeffrey Pilcher (1998) has argued, Mexican culinary nationalism has often attempted to abstract recipes away from the scenes in which they emerged. In this figure we see that potato preparation is as much about what ingredients are used as it is about how they are brought together and with whom as

the food is prepared. The kitchen as an educational space is not meant to essentialize cooking onto the bodies of these women, but to foreground how women do not passively embody the pressure of having to feed a family when ingredients are never secure.

In Figure 2, the affective and material dimensions of culinary labor coalesce as the woman prepares chicken “albondigas” (“meatballs”) for supper for her extended family. Earlier she had confidently dipped her hand into boiling water to pluck the chicken, emphasizing that cooking is far from a haphazard or senseless affair. In the captured scene she describes which family members enjoy which organs as she cuts into the chicken and by extension her family as well. Kinship bleeds from these images even as it entangles these women and me within the webs of culinary nationalism. Rather than representations, both images are opportunities for reflection as women mobilize a set of embodied and material tools to generate a space within the gendered dynamics of the kitchen place (Abarca 2006).

### Border Pains

Borders are gendered spaces (Perales 2013). Indeed, in January 2014 the final Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2014 indicates that the Department of Homeland Security “shall maintain a level of not less than 34,000 detention beds” (National Immigration Detention Center 2014). The need to keep DHS’ border activities productive reflects a larger colonial history that has consistently marginalized the experiences of women in favor of spatial restructuring. Two women from communities surrounding Windo demonstrate how transnational migration particularly weighs on motherhood, and that motherhood itself is a concept in process, often contingent upon the vicissitudes of political-economy. Betabel had recently been reunited with her son after two years apart when he was deported from the U.S. They had been bickering

lately because he yearned to return to the U.S. but she feared that the next time, immigration police would not let her see him again. While his remittances to her had been useful for combatting the poverty in the region, Betabel unequivocally states that “prefiero ser pobre que con mi hijo en la cárcel por el resto de su vida” (“I’d rather be poor than with my son in jail for the rest of his life”). Indeed, she had moved to a smaller house and began sewing clothes to generate an income so that her son would feel like he did not have to leave her for work. Canela had been unable to sleep for days as she had not heard back from her son who had been attempting to cross into the U.S. She shared a recipe she was using that was specifically for mothers with nervous attacks because of children at the border: catch and dice an iguana, very slightly fry it, bury it in a jar of alcohol for a week, strain the remaining bits of iguana and then add a few drops from the liquid to your daily drinks. She had learned this recipe from a family friend and reflected that it helped her move along her days: “Me ayuda moverme a lo largo de mis días” (“It helped me move along my days.”). In this way, the recipe coalesces the communal elements of alimentary practice through its sharing and the movements that are activated in the process of mobilizing it. Both woman foreground the gendered dimensions of transnational migration as they have to generate new forms of intimacy locally and for far away family members.

In a different context, a Caleta seamstress described how “las noticias le suben el volumen a todo” (“the news ups the volume on everything”). She was referring to how local and international news had often turned Michoacán into a spectacle, as a particularly crime ridden place. Not only had her business dramatically declined the last couple of years, but internal relations between Mexicans were also strained. A visit to a beachside restaurant in the



neighboring state of Colima quickly turned sour when the owner asked her and her companions to leave just because she had mentioned that they were from Michoacán. A historically popular destination for seafood and surfing, border wars had impacted internal mobility within Mexico and local ideas around identity and relationship to nation.

### Racial Indigestion

For David Findlay, food is appealing “because its use in non-gustatory ways signals the innovative spontaneity of desire, as well as abundance, excess” (Tompkins 2015, 8). Thus, indigestion or the refusal of consumption can reveal how “there is enough food, enough water, enough land, enough love, enough recognition and sexual attention to go around” if we critique the distributive mechanisms that shape such excess (ibid). This is a lesson I learned quickly as the open can of soda launched from Pimienta’s hands sprayed past me and directly into the face of the reporter who had stopped at the entrance to Caleta in order to capture images of the ‘local rebels’. After years of paying tariffs to regional cartels, community members were fed up from this exploitation and rose up in arms to drive out the collectors from Caleta. The national government often tried to dispel these purported “vigilantes,” leading to ongoing, and sometimes bloody, battles between the community and the corrupt government who is often working together with the cartels. Pimienta herself was the matron of the community self-defense group and achieved this position in part through her ability to cook and nourish the defense force. I opened this essay with a popular epithet in Michoacán from one of my informants on the palate as a space for tasting difference and sensing pleasure. Thus, Pimienta’s visceral refusal to allow

Caleta to be easily digested by the reporter is both a marker of a particularly local set of tastes that distinguish Caleta from narrow culinary incorporation into Mexico or caricatures of rebelliousness, as well as a response to the larger transnational power dynamics that would keep such tastes illegal. In this way, “Fugitive Recipes” indexes the dispossessive conditions (i.e., inhuman white nationalist supremacy, Slocum and Saldanha 2013; c.f., Haraway 2012) that often shape cooking and the tastes and flavors that nourish escape.

“Esto no es vida.” (This is not life) – Verde, Field Notes, 1/9/2015

On February 10<sup>th</sup>, 2015 Antonio Zambrano-Montes was murdered by police in Pasco Washington. While YouTube videos recorded by witnesses would garner national circulation (see Figure 3), media outlets would soon come to fetishize attention to Antonio’s employment as an agricultural laborer and mental health history as a purported testament to his criminality. The language of crisis saturated varying sides of this debate. Antonio’s death was conscripted into narratively becoming the “Latino Ferguson Moment,” as described by the New York Times (Turkewitz and Oppel 2015), while also feeding the entrenched fears of brown “invasion” of US civil society Leo Chavez (2008) has so usefully delineated. Despite the New York Times’ and right wing media’s attempts to isolate Antonio’s murder as an exceptional event, brown communities in the US are not in need of a Ferguson “moment,” in the singular. Indeed, the rocks Antonio threw connect this violent scene to the socio-historical everyday experiences of racial subordination at the hands of US legality. To wit, a little under four years ago the ACLU began sustained investigation of recurring disproportionate use of force along the US-Mexico border after a US Border Patrol agent shot and killed a “suspected” border crosser on the Mexican side of the border who was throwing rocks at the agents. At the time, this was only the latest incident after a series of cases spanning at least six years prior (Gaubeca 2014). The fact that the victim in 2011 was not even on US soil proper suggests the transnational scope of brown subjugation.

The form of brownness that I pursue here riffs off of Jose Munoz's seminal work articulating brownness as a more than human affective register for racial difference. For Munoz, brownness is not a replacement for identity, but rather reshapes Gayatri Spivak's crucial question, "can the subaltern speak" to ask "how does the subaltern feel" or "how might subalterns feel each other" (Munoz 2006). This emphasis on relationality is crucial because ammunition neither begins nor ends at the bullet. There is a corporeal-legal pedagogy both to a loaded gun able to be shot from trigger ready fingers and to its support in cases of debate (Nelson 2001). Black and brown overrepresentation in prison populations, homicide, and, in this case, police shootings undermines Antonio's death as accidental or exceptional in a political sphere structured around criminalizing color itself (Williams 2004, Alexander 2012). Thus, an attention to brownness and the inhuman de-individualizes Antonio's murderers in order to consider the larger political sphere by which brown bodies are incorporatively excluded within the US. Such attention undermines the growing popularity of the figure of the "climate refugee" and refuses the notion of death due to "environmental causes," that the DHS has been keen to use as a label, by considering how the inhumanism of border politics is remobilized into narratives of liberal humanism and posthumanism (Squire 2015). Thus, we have the rise of the good immigrant (the "dreamer") and bad immigrant ("low skilled" laborer") that feeds Obama's audacity claiming that border politics has been working because overall numbers of crossing have gone down, even as casualties have soared, in particular for women and children (Obama 2014). In this way, brown death represent the success of the current US immigrant policy.

Sweating Sweetness

Fear of deportation indexes to a certain extent the privilege of protest participation. It can keep people from being able to mobilize on our streets, but also dramatically shape the mechanisms by which violence is naturalized in the agricultural fields. Of the over twenty individuals I spoke with, only one made an explicit reference to the role of, often white, farm owners in the everyday logistics of agricultural labor. Juxtaposing these narratives with popular critiques of the sun opens up a space for thinking resistance through the environment. In a context where critiques of your employer could result in job-loss, even as that same employer is a huge reason for the amount of exposure to the sun, sweating links the everyday experience of agricultural labor to the larger political economy of the farm. Indeed, the seasonal and embodied nature of agricultural labor makes farmworkers acutely vulnerable to environmental change even though they contribute less to the industrial forces generating environmental problems (Flatt 2015).

The viscosity of sweat also links migration and climate change to the political economy of alternative food movements in the US. Alison Alkon and Julian Agyeman's (2010) useful edited volume *Cultivating Food Justice*, delineates how sustainability, which I find to be the most unsustainable discourse there is, in the US has been dominated by a white liberal middle class perspective. Indeed, growing demands for local, vegetarian, vegan, raw, or even all fruit diets have taken seriously the equation of food as life or medicine. To wit, James Colquhoun and Laurentine ten Bosch's increasingly popular *Food Matters* (2008) documentary is organized around the dictum itself, all the while the work of Eric Marcus (2005, 2006) and John Robbins (1987, 2001) equally attempt to conceive of a diet that can "help save your life and our world" (Robbins 2001). Here, what the foodie philosopher Lisa Heldke (2010) summarizes as "paper or

plastic” thinking (do (eat) this OR do (eat) that), Julie Guthman (2011) terms “the unbearable whiteness of alternative food.” That is, food justice becomes equated with explaining to black and brown bodies why their food choices are simply wrong. Thus, the alternative food movement has been able to mobilize the purported ‘rawness’ of food as an excuse from engaging with its complicity in perpetuating farm laborer attenuation even as these fresh products are least available to the bodies picking them (Minkoff-Zern 2014). In this way, “sweating sweetness” gestures towards how alternative food movements must stop considering crops raw products because they are cooked with the exploited labor of farm workers and their communities (Gray 2013).

#### Prehensive Pesticides

Cultural critic Jasbir Puar has been tracking a move from responsive to pre-emptive to “prehensive” securitization. For Puar, the prehensive considers the disciplining of some as a warning to all and the recruitment of the general populace in the task of watching (i.e., the “If You See Something, Say Something” campaign). However, the prehensive goes further than this by “making the present look exactly the way it needs to in order to guarantee a very specific and singular outcome in the future” (Puar and West 2014). For the brown bodies I work with in Washington State, this has meant both the punitive contraction of access to public services as well as the biological re-shaping of the migrant body via pesticide exposure and reliance on pharmaceuticals to address acute bodily wear and tear.

As I spoke with crop-sprayers in Washington State I learned how many brown bodies have been refusing to get the various pesticide certifications necessary for higher wages because the certifications would make them, and not the company, liable in case of any accident. The

volatility and temporality of pesticide affliction and expression make claims to legal redress difficult to say the least, especially in a context where many of the workers are undocumented or do not speak the jargon of law or medicine. Thus, this push for certification is a corporate move that privatizes responsibility onto the already pathologized body of the migrant worker. Here we see very forcefully how brown bodies have to find ways of enduring outside the normative political realm as such because, the political, in this case, is a just a way of removing blame from unjust corporations.

### Brown Food

At the limits of public health law, I have been speaking to owners of illegalized food trucks in my research area. Local businesses have been conscripted into reporting these locations to police for tickets resulting in frequent re-negotiations of space. When I began to interview owners of different food trucks I learned that many of them have been remixing the names of certain dishes or salsas in response to policing while still proudly staying as true as possible to historical ingredients. I have also been participating in a digital humanities project that seeks to undermine the omission of brown bodies in the environmental humanities by asking how participants feel the “Earth Is” (see Figure 4). Both the fugitive recipes and the “Earth Is” project create an insurgent multiplicity that defies definition. They generate the possibility of undermining the kinds of fetishized narratives that spectacularized Antonio’s employment as an agricultural worker without fully critiquing the everyday brutality of the police system.

I opened this chapter with a quote from Verde mobilizing “life” as a reference for the (im)possibilities of redressing brown injury from racialized categories such as law, justice, and humanity. I am interested in how Verde’s claim articulates both a critique of the inhumanity of

industrial food production, but also a claim for presence. Can the refusal of a certain definition of life also be a defense of an already occupied life? In between bites of tamales sold by the fugitive food truck in the field we were in that day, Verde's use of "life" foregrounds the inhuman forces that contribute to violence on the farm even as it references the matter by which brown bodies are able to find sustenance. Ultimately, I hope to have at least gestured to the importance of para-political forms of organizing when politics is constituted explicitly through the incorporative exclusion of brown bodies. By bearing witness to how the environment and environmental change is linked to food production and immigration, we can begin to taste more sensitive and capacious ways of inhabiting our ecological present. Returning to another scene where the differences between celebration and critique are blurred, and where vulnerability fuses with resistance, we may do well to reckon with Destiny Child's wise words, "I don't think you're ready for this jelly/My body's too bootylicious for you."



“the soundwaves from this blackhole carry flavorful pictures to touch...” – Fred Moten and Stefano Harney (2011)

Following anthropologist Wim Van Daele’s (2013) generative re-theorization of assemblages as a form of cooking, I want to explicitly extend his work into the realm of the ethnographic form itself. Van Daele states, “By the process of spilling over and the enmeshing of food and people, extending event to the world and cosmogony, food becomes ritually all encompassing. As such, food is an extremely powerful collaborating and exchanging assemblage in the regeneration of the world. The heating of fire catalyzes these transformation in the concoction of the world as relational” (58). To describe ethnography itself as a form of cooking is to understand Van Daele’s fire as born from what Pierre Bourdieu would in the late 20th century (by way of Marcel Mauss [“les techniques du corps”: 1934] by way of Thomas Aquinas [“Summa Theologica”] by way of Aristotle [“hexis”]) explicate as the ‘transformations in the habitus’ (Bourdieu 1994). While these transformations were used to argue that dwelling-in was the condition for speaking-of, I seek to retain a kind of pressure on that transformed habitus’ clarity on the conditions of its own transformations’ emergences (see Clifford and Marcus 1986, Talal Asad 1988). That is to say, “routes figure space – they create worlds – and are figured by figured space, by the worlds through which they move” (Povinelli 2011a). Thus, ethnography as cooking invites an end to the search for ‘better’ objects, and the beginning of an ethnographic practice that interleaves the irreducible debt to the ‘other’ and the ever present ‘other others’ any transformation inevitably accumulates. That is to say, ethnography is always already an execution of taking another’s subjectivity in as the condition of possibility for your own

proceeding in the world, attuned to the responsibilities or not. This might not sound like politics to everybody, but it indexes why focusing on the next experimental step rather than the big utopian picture isn't really settling for less or more: it's about being right where you are more intensely (see Massumi 2003). For this project this has meant cooking with my informants and interrupting the conscripting of environment and media against brown bodies within and across Michoacán and Washington State.

#### Veganism without Food: "Results"

In "Fugitive Recipes" I began with Comino's alimentary mobilization of mud and ended with Pimienta's visceral refusal of the digestive gaze of the reporter to undermine culinary fetishism. Indeed, the title "fugitive recipes," is meant to suggest recipes made on the run, but also recipes that are themselves fugitive from narrow incorporation into nationalistic models of social organization. So the lesson here may be as Mark Padoongpatt suggests, "that food is not the best way to learn about another's culture," in the narrow sense of the term. Instead, alimentary analysis can tune us into the changing nature of racial and gendered violence in and across the Americas. While patriarchy was the context for much of the food production I witnessed, refusal of food would have been another insult. Thus, "fugitive recipes" aims to critique the notion of waiting until one is complicit-free to act because people are more than what anyone is complicit in.

In "Sensing Inhumanity" I continue my interest in alimentary processes beyond normative conceptions of food by tracking the nonhuman and inhuman objects constitutive of the agro-food system itself. My goal has been to gesture towards the need for a broader ethics of care that includes the human, but recognizes that we must address the nonhuman objects that make

human flourishing possible, or not. For many of the individuals I learned from, illegality presented visceral challenges in their everyday life that hindered the possibility of appealing to liberal forms of justice and freedom. Indeed, if they were to follow such methods they would usually wind up exacerbating the violence they were suffering. For example, I focus on sweat as a critique because if they were to launch formal critiques they would most likely lose their jobs. Furthermore, if they were to get the certifications necessary for higher wages they then shoulder the long-term biological costs of working with pesticides. Thus, “sensing inhumanity” refuses dependency on normative political forms of mobilization by taking seriously Angela Garcia’s provocation that “Perhaps *we* are the patient, and the clinic-intended as a space for healing-is all around us” (Garcia 2010, 68, emphasis original).

By calling this section “Veganism without Food” I hope to gesture towards my larger sociopolitical intervention against narrowly market based forms of mobilization. Rather than continue the “paper or plastic thinking” that I mention in the introduction, veganism without food tries to conceptualize veganism as a practice rather than an end. If veganism is to address its own complicity in perpetuating suffering, then it must unsettle the privileged logics by which certain people are seen as backward for consuming particular items. This is especially true in the context of farmworker food insecurity: even as they endure the attenuating effects of daily twelve hour shifts and limited access to water to pick fresh fruit and vegetables, they are least able to purchase these products themselves precisely because alternative food moments have increased the market value of produce (Minkoff-Zern 2014). Ultimately, the challenge here may be as much about how we choose to engage with others whose experiments have fallen short or been overwhelmed, as it is about how we make decisions about our own strategic interventions.

## Sustainability without “Sustainability”: Openings

While sustainability has become a growing buzzword in middle class contexts in the United States, Girasol shared her own environmental relationship in ways that upset the ease which sustainability is taken as a given good. Girasol has been cultivating her personal garden for over two decades. Every morning she tends to her flowers and picks some and takes them to her altar to “la Virgen Maria” so that the deity will protect her kin who have crossed the border or are currently attempting to. Here at the limits of the hegemonic narrative of sustainability in the West, border politics has fed into a local environmental ethics. With this in mind, if there is anything I have learned over the course of this project it is that there is a crucial difference between saying “I need you to save me,” and “I need you to stop killing me.” The former presumes the incapacity of the speaker while the latter re-directs the focus on the complicity of the addressee. This lesson cuts across “fugitive recipes” and “sensing inhumanity.” While UNESCO has recently declared Mexico’s cuisine a global treasure, “fugitive recipes” indexes how the very privileging of certain food objects misses the complexity of how brown bodies are able to derive sustenance. In “sensing inhumanity,” rather than suggest that the people I work with need to conform to established political protocols, the chapter argues that the more effective move would be in interrupting and unsettling the political structure itself such that ongoing survival tactics from illegalized brown bodies can be nourished. Returning to Girasol’s gardening, she provides a lesson in conceptual humility because it reveals how people are often already engaged in dynamics forms of negotiating the worlds around them. In *Economies of Abandonment* Elizabeth Povinelli ends by stating, “these are tracings that will then be traced. All of these tracings are the prehistory of a new positive form of life even as they are the conditions

for “not this” and “not that.” All of them set the table for guests who will shout that the food is tasteless, the wine weak, the conversation stifling; or find that they finally feel full” (Povinelli 2011, 192). Thus the power of an ethnographic analysis informed by alimentation is that difference is not seen as a crisis or threat, but as a resource to question your own position in the world. Following Chen (2012), I do not see the reparative project of ethnography as one intended to sanitize an event of violence, but rather to ‘intoxify’ new relations to scenes of violence political realms would have us close the book on. For Girasol, those flowers are born through varying scenes of her dispossession, but actively work against them by generating an everyday sense of possibility. Only by staying with the violence can we surrender the possibility of knowledge and certainty in order to release the free radicals which can unsettle the conditions of that violence’s genesis.



Figure 1 (Above): Mother oversees eldest daughter preparing potatoes as youngest watches/learns. Photo by author.



Figure 2: Cutting into chicken for 'meatball' preparation as she recounts family members' favorite parts. Photo by author.



Figure 3 (Above): Antonio with his bare hands up seconds before the Police murder him. Image from: <http://rollingout.com/news/police-kill-man-who-surrendered-with-hands-up/>



Figure 4 (Left): Womyn responding to "Earth Is" prompt with "Vida" ("Life"). Photo by Author.





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