
Original Article

Tracing immigrant identity through the plate and the palate

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Abstract This article brings together scholarship on foodways and identity with discourses of sustainable and local food to illuminate the food practices of Latino/a immigrants living in Seattle, WA. Drawing upon 4 years of ethnographic research, this article argues that migration and placemaking impact the maintenance of culturally meaningful foodways and that reclaiming and reshaping one's foodways plays a central role in both longing for home and building new lives in the United States. Through describing how Latino/a foodways often parallel, yet remain marginal to, the values and priorities of the movements for sustainable and local food, I make the case for more inclusive food movement advocacy.

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We had a house that had a big patio, and we grew yucca, we had fruit, cherimoya, we had plums, guavas, orange, coconut, avocados, yes, it was a big patio with a lot of fruit. A lot of squash as well. But here, I haven't been able to. (Laura, age 51, from Cuba)

I think that, look, with all respect, I think that food in the US is very healthy, but I think that food in Mexico is fresher and more natural, and so it could be a little healthier in Mexico because of this. Because you can get things more in season, and you can eat more of them. (Julio, age 49, from Mexico)



Eating across Borders: An Exploration of Latino/a Foodways

Migration is inherently a process of dislocation. In the midst of dislocation, sustaining and re-creating the cultural and material practices connected to food are powerful ways to enact one's cultural identity and sustain connections with families and communities who remain on the other side of the border. Food is central to the longing for home and the often painful struggle to accommodate to new ways of being in the world; and preparing, eating and sharing meals that are resonant with one's foodways – the eating habits or food practices of a community, region or time period – is a vital piece of maintaining a sense of self in a new environment. Nevertheless, the disruptive process of migration necessarily entails profound changes in diet, social relationships and cultural identities, changes that are only exacerbated by inequalities related to race/ethnicity, class, gender and citizenship. Considering these inequalities and the needs and unique contributions of immigrant communities is vital to envisioning a more just and sustainable food system.

There is a rich tradition in the humanities and social sciences of exploring the connections between food and cultural identity, especially for racial and ethnic minorities living in the United States. Scholars including Abarca (2006), Counihan (2009), Marte (2007), Gaytán (2011), Peña (2005), Esteva (1994), Komarnisky (2009), Gabaccia (1998) and Salazar (2007) offer important insights into Latino/a foodways (both immigrant and US-born) as they negotiate transnational cultural influences and expectations, gendered constraints and opportunities, and changing political-economic conditions. Meanwhile, in the popular press there has been an explosion of books that decry the negative consequences of the industrial food system as they call for eaters to return to more localized consumption practices, or what some advocates call “slow food.” This mainstream promotion of sustainable, local food systems is best illustrated in the work of Pollan (2006, 2008, 2009), Nestle (2002, 2006), Berry (1996, 2009) and the mother–daughter team of Anna Lappé and Frances Moore Lappé (Lappé and Lappé, 2002; Lappé, 2010).

This article seeks to extend and link these discursive trajectories by investigating new configurations of cultural identity as they manifest in the everyday food practices of Latino/a immigrants living in the Seattle area. Through analyzing interviews with people whose relationships with places and foods transect the local and the global, I advance two interrelated arguments. First, transnational processes of migration and placemaking impact the foodways of Latino/a immigrants in complex ways that are shaped by one's economic class and livelihood, gender and family status, and experiences with and knowledge of localized food systems; and second, reclaiming and reshaping one's foodways plays a central role in both longing for home and building new lives in the United States. I begin this article by reviewing recent scholarship on Latino/a foodways and identity, highlighting the synergies between previous

studies and how my findings further this ripe area of research. I then turn to a description of the broader study from which this article draws, and outline key characteristics of both the field site and the interviewee sample. Next, I offer an analysis of a subset of the research sample in order to examine changing Latino/a foodways and the complex interplay of food and identity. The analysis both integrates important concepts from the existing literature on Latino/a foodways and highlights parallels between the experiences of my interviewees and the values of local and sustainable food advocates. Finally, I conclude by pointing to the ways that movements for sustainable and local food can be made more just and resilient through becoming more inclusive of the diverse lived experiences of immigrant communities, and by outlining potential directions for future research.

Latino/a Identities and Food: A Ripe Area of Research

Given the vast body of literature that explores the connections between cultural identity and food, in this article I draw primarily upon recent scholarship that specifically investigates the link between Latino/a foodways and identity. Within this area are two interrelated but discernable groupings: first, pieces that illuminate how efforts to sustain culturally meaningful food practices shape and are shaped by broader claims to place, space and community membership; and second, those that center and problematize the symbolic importance of food consumption and commodification in the formation and reshaping of cultural identities. Taken together, these pieces offer key theoretical and methodological insights, useful in analyzing the intricacies of Latino/a foodways. This article seeks to connect and extend these studies through integrating an examination of space and place with questions of cultural identity and consumption. In doing so, I elucidate the complex and diverse relationships that Latino/a immigrants have with local and global foodways, relationships that have remained largely peripheral in the mainstream discourses concerning sustainable and local food.

Building upon the work of Flores and Benmayor (1997), Carole Counihan (2009) grounds the notion of cultural citizenship in her analysis of food-centered life histories of 19 *Mexicanas* in Colorado's San Luis Valley. In this unique treatment of the connections between food and cultural citizenship, Counihan offers ethnographic insight into how women in the small town of Antonito exercise agency and make claims to physical space, natural resources and community membership through cooking and other food practices. She illuminates the diverse relationships these women have with food, and how these relationships "... reflect agency with regard to whether, when, what, and how to cook; how much effort to devote to it; and how much of it to delegate to husbands, children, paid workers, or female relatives" (2009, 114). As importantly, Counihan describes the broader changes in an "evolving



ranching-farming culture” and the ways that processed foods have gradually begun to replace many traditional, locally sourced foods.

In a recent article, Lidia Marte (2007) also advances an examination of gendered foodways as she describes the concept of “foodmapping” as a methodological tool, useful in exploring Latino/a immigrant foodways and gendered boundaries of home. Drawing upon qualitative research within Dominican communities in New York City, Marte argues that foodmapping allows researchers to “track the role of food in the way immigrants search for home in a new society,” given that “[f]ood serves to ground body-place-memory in the way immigrants live and re-imagine their cultural histories in consecutive ‘homes,’ manifesting their movements through neighborhoods, cities, and countries” (2007, 261–262). These spatial maps extend from the physical arrangement of food on the plate to the geography of the city including restaurants, *tiendas*, street vendors and other public spaces connected to shopping and eating.

The concept of foodmapping connects well with the idea of “autotopography,” a concept Devon Peña (2005) advances through his analysis of *acequia* farmers in Southern Colorado and the South Central Farmers in Los Angeles, CA. Peña defines autotopography as “the process of self-telling through place-shaping” and describes how Latinos/as deliberately shape their environments as they maintain culturally meaningful food practices in these very different spatial contexts (2005, 7). In subsequent co-authored work, Mares and Peña (2010, 2011) extend this concept through connecting their individual ethnographic studies with Latino/a urban gardeners in Seattle and Los Angeles to describe how physical landscapes are altered through efforts to cultivate culturally meaningful foods in urban environments.

Melissa L. Salazar also offers insight into the connections between space, food and identity. She unpacks the central role that the school cafeteria plays in the lives of Latino/a children in her analysis of personal accounts of four *Mexicano* adults gathered through oral histories. She argues that the school cafeteria was a place where, as children, these adults negotiated their bicultural identities against the expectations and rules of dominant society as they alternately embraced and rejected lunches brought from home and those provided by the school. Her findings reveal the complicated ways that school food is assigned social, cultural and class meaning as children interface with the social rules that govern the performance of eating in public spaces. Salazar’s analysis is significant as it reveals how the consumption patterns of immigrant children can change in different ways, and at a different pace, from those of their parents.

In *Voices in the Kitchen*, Meredith Abarca (2006) also explores the interplay between physical space and everyday food practices. Employing a qualitative methodology she terms *charlas culinarias* (culinary chats), Abarca describes how Mexican and Mexican-American women narrate their selves through their

use of *sazón*, defined as the “sensory logic of cooking” (2006, 11). Rejecting the assumption that the kitchen is merely a *place* of women’s oppression, she explores the constant interaction between the personal and the political as it manifests in her participants’ acts of agency and creative expression as they transform the kitchen into a women’s *space* and affirm their own identities. For Abarca, the *charlas culinarias* and the stories they contain “... are about ordinary working-class women doing an extraordinary thing: asserting themselves, not an easy task considering the circumstance in which some women were raised” (2006, 165).

Also key to the scholarship on Latino/a foodways are works that connect the practices of consumption with the processes of commodification to explore the symbolic importance of food within identity formation. Rather than focusing only on Latino/a foodways, Donna Gabaccia offers a wide-angled historical account of the ways that immigrants (both voluntary and forced) and “ethnic food” have shaped eating habits in the United States and how, in turn, “... the production, exchange, marketing, and consumption of food have generated new identities – for foods and eaters alike” (1998, 5). Most relevant to this article is her idea of culinary conservatism – or the various ways by which “humans cling tenaciously to familiar foods because they become associated with nearly every dimension of human social and cultural life” (1998, 8).

Arguing against the commodification of food, Gustavo Esteva (1994) uses the concept of *comida* to critique the disconnection between people, place and food associated with industrialized societies and mass consumerism. *Comida* is not directly translatable into English, but is a term that reinforces the importance of culture and place in recognizing the social context of food. He argues:

We must reserve the word *alimento* for professional or institutional use. To eat, to care for *comida*, to generate it, to cook it, to eat it, to assimilate it: all these are activities that belong to non-modern men and women and are, in general, gendered activities ... *Alimentarse*, in contrast, is to purchase and consume *alimentos* (edible objects), designed by professionals or experts, while being produced and distributed through institutions. (1994, 5)

Here, Esteva differentiates *comida* from *alimento* because of the connections that *comida* entails to place, relationships and social life, whereas *alimento* refers to food that merely fills the belly, or food devoid of these connections.

Marie Sarita Gaytán (2011) offers a related, yet alternate, view on commodification in her analysis of the complex meanings that Mexicans and Mexican-Americans associate with tequila. Based upon conversations with 41 Mexican-origin tequila drinkers, she describes how tequila has served as a symbol of Mexican identity, and how her interviewees narrated “what it means to *be* and *feel* Mexican from a comparative perspective” through conversations



about the beverage (2011, 68). Gaytán explores how drinking tequila in Mexico was often associated with national pride and moderation, whereas in the United States it was more commonly consumed with the aim of getting inebriated. These multiple interpretations reinforce her assertion that “we need a more nuanced approach to consumption – one that considers how, through consumption practices, individuals manage complex webs of relations that have social and political implications that are situated in the present, but always connected to the past” (2011, 83).

Finally, there is one piece of scholarship that uniquely integrates a focus on space and consumption, effectively intertwining the groupings that I have described here. Drawing upon multisited ethnographic work in Anchorage, Alaska and Acuitzio del Canje, Michoacan, Sara Komarnisky describes the practice of “eating transnationally,” which she defines as “... meals that connect places and the people in them or foods that depend on interconnectedness and mobility across space” (2009, 42). Through semi-structured interviews with Mexicans living and working in Alaska, she illustrates the common practice of bringing foods with deep culinary and cultural meaning from Mexico into the United States, a practice she terms “traveling foods.” The most common traveling foods, including breads, prepared and powdered *mole*, cheese, candies and chilies, make their way northwards in the suitcases of traveling workers and their families, though, as the author notes, this is a gendered practice, with women more likely to bring foods than men. While these foods travel north, she also notes that recipes, ideas about food, and new customs travel southwards as migrants live within and extend transnational circuits of migration.

Together, these studies provide an excellent grounding and point of departure for the findings I discuss below. Collectively, they highlight key dynamics about space, place, community, consumption and commodification and how these dynamics shape Latino/a foodways in a transnational context. All of these pieces offer important insight into the complex linkages between cultural identities and relationships to food. The pieces by Counihan, Esteva and Peña, in particular, make specific connections to the discourses of sustainable and local food, illuminating how understanding and relying upon local food systems are both central to the identities of many Latinos/as born in the United States and in Latin America. Nevertheless, even these pieces do not examine how Latino/a foodways articulate with the broader movements for local and sustainable food or how these movements might be hindered by not engaging with the experiences and knowledge of Latino/a immigrants. In the following discussion, I seek to examine these points of articulation as I draw upon this rich body of scholarship, especially the notions of *comida*, culinary conservatism and autotopography, to reveal how an appreciation of Latino/a foodways is vital to envisioning more just and resilient food systems.

Researching and Eating in Seattle, WA

The findings in this article draw upon a larger ethnographic study investigating the points of articulation between Latino/a immigrants and Seattle's food system. This larger study posed the following interrelated questions: (i) What networks, strategies and resources do Latino/a immigrant households utilize to define and act upon their food needs? (ii) How do state and civil society institutions respond to the food needs of Latino/a immigrants through their policies, practices and the discourses they articulate? (iii) What do these strategies, practices, and policies and their underlying motivations tell us about the symbolic importance of food and the meanings that people attach to their own sustenance and the broader food system in the greater Seattle area? (iv) How do the articulations between people and the food systems on which they depend complicate the dynamics of agency and social structure?

Given its distance from the US-Mexico border, the Seattle area has not been widely recognized as a principal center of Latino/a migration, and the majority of social science research on Latino/a migration and citizenship focuses on California, major cities in the Northeast and Midwest and the US-Mexico border. Most studies addressing the experiences of Latinos/as in the Pacific Northwest have centered on agricultural workers in the rural Yakima Valley and other regions east of the Cascade Mountains.¹ However, like most urban centers, the Seattle area has recently seen a significant increase in its Latino/a population. King County, where Seattle is located, saw an increase in the Hispanic population of 81 per cent between 2000 and 2010, compared to 71 per cent statewide. As of 2010, 6.6 per cent of Seattle residents reported being Hispanic or Latino of any race, with 4.1 per cent of the city's respondents claiming Mexican ancestry (U.S. Census, 2010). On the other hand, Seattle is recognized as a hub of the sustainable agriculture and local food movements and is home to dozens of community gardens, farmers' markets and Community-Supported Agriculture (CSA) projects (Mares, 2010). What became particularly apparent in my research is the large disconnect between the growing Latino/a population and the scope of these movements. Despite the impressive ways that the area is embracing issues of sustainability and localization, it became clear to me that the spaces where and processes by which local and sustainable foods are made available are not equally accessible to Latino/a immigrants.

To address my research questions in this complex urban environment, I utilized archival research, participant observation at various sites between 2005 and 2009 (including urban farms, gardening education classes, day labor centers and emergency food programs), and two sets of semi-structured interviews. In the first set, I spoke with representatives from 13 agencies around Seattle, including emergency food providers, organizations working in urban agriculture, and institutions doing food systems work from a standpoint of

1 See Howenstine (1989) and Miller (1991).



political advocacy and food policy. In the second set, I spoke with 46 first-generation immigrants over the age of 18, with an equal sampling of men and women. In this article, I draw primarily upon the findings from this second set of interviews.

Of the 46 interviewees, 35 were from Mexico, three were from Peru, two were from Honduras, two were from El Salvador, and one participant each came from Guatemala, Cuba, Nicaragua and Ecuador. My primary goal for these interviews was to better understand their lived experiences in addressing their food needs and desires in Seattle and how their experiences differ from those in their home countries. After a brief discussion of their favorite foods and the availability of ingredients in Seattle to prepare their preferred dishes, I asked for their opinions on what constitutes “healthy” or “good” foods versus “unhealthy” or “bad foods,” and the perceived availability of healthy food in the city. Given my interests in local and sustainable food movements, I also asked about their experiences growing food for personal consumption in both their home countries and in the United States. Although only four interviewees were tending home gardens, 37 had grown food before migrating to the United States. Despite their experiences with cultivating food, most interviewees were not growing their own foods as they worked in service sector jobs, as domestic workers, or as day laborers in construction and landscaping projects.

To recruit interviewees, I relied upon my connections to local organizations and the rapport I had built through prior fieldwork. I distributed recruitment flyers to several community organizations and also recruited interviewees at two large meetings run for and by members of the Latino/a community – one at a day labor center and one at a weekly family support group for Latina mothers. These two organizations proved to be good sites to connect with interviewees as both offered the use of their office space for interviewing. Working at these sites allowed me to reach a community of participants that interacted with a wide array of programs and services across the Seattle metropolitan region. I conducted all interviews in Spanish and with oral consent, recorded, transcribed and translated each interview. All interviewees were compensated for their time with a gift card to a grocery store of their choice. In analyzing both sets of interviews, I utilized open and closed coding techniques to draw together common themes and to identify outlying perspectives in addition to formulating tables for quantifiable data.

Changing Meals, Changing Maps: Narratives of Food and Home

Here, I offer a subset of data collected through my larger study, focusing on the narratives of four men and four women living and eating in the Seattle area. My analysis of these narratives builds upon and extends the scholarship previously

outlined, illuminating the intricacies of changing Latino/a foodways and the shifting interplay of food and identity. Through connecting the actual words of my interviewees with my own analysis and framing, I aim to preserve the coherence of their personal accounts while drawing attention to the commonalities and differences in their lived experiences. The findings lay the groundwork for my conclusion, where I consider the relevance of these lived experiences to the future directions of the movements for local and sustainable food.

Rebeca, a 31-year-old mother trained as an economist in Nicaragua, reflected upon the centrality of food in her life and how communing with family and loved ones through food was sacred and central to her identity as a Latina:

The thing is that, for Latinos, I think, we are made of our food! It's what it means to get together with your family, it's a sacred moment. To get together with your family and eat nothing more than rice and beans, not even the tamales that we make for parties, but to get together and eat and talk, all of this is divine.

Here, Rebeca invokes Esteva's concept of *comida*. Although she is living in the United States with her husband and small daughter, she is separated from familiar land, family members and many of the foods necessary to fully replicate her family's dishes – her *comida*, even as she does not want for *alimento*.

I then asked her if she knew how to prepare all of her family's dishes, to which she replied:

No, some no. Some yes. Generally, all recipes are only written down if they aren't from your family, the grandmother usually tells them to the mother, the mother teaches it to their children, and there you go. And yes, my mom cooked perfectly, I have yet to, but to cook with the limitations that one has here, it's a significant thing. The food in Nicaragua is usually cooked over a wood fire. I don't know about other parts, but that's how it is in my country.

The difference in cooking techniques and the limited availability of ingredients like spices and *chayote* (pear squash) prevents Rebeca from cooking all of the dishes she had enjoyed in Nicaragua. However, she also told me that her two aunts living in Seattle had constructed an outdoor oven to mimic the preparation of these traditional Nicaraguan dishes, which became especially important for family events, like the baptism of Rebeca's young daughter. This outdoor oven has thus become a hearth around which Rebeca and her family in the United States can share dishes that resemble those from Nicaragua, even if they are not exactly the same. These practices also illuminate a unique example of how culinary conservatism can intertwine with autotopography, as Rebeca



and her family deliberately reshape their physical landscapes to maintain their cultural relationships with traditional foods and forge a sense of place in a new urban environment.

Ernesto, age 56, also reflected upon the centrality of staples like rice and beans to his Latino identity, telling me, “As a Latino, my food is very basic, I never look for special things.” Growing up in a large family in central Mexico, he explained that food was often scarce in his household and he and his siblings were accustomed to depending upon these kinds of basic, unprocessed staples and not desiring “special” foods, other than the squash, cilantro and tomatoes that came from their home kitchen garden. Despite the scarcity that his family experienced, he emphasized the value of cooking with these ingredients, believing that this was a healthier way of eating compared to US foodways. When I asked him why he preferred the food in Mexico, he explained, “Because it’s fresher, the foods. We don’t eat as many things in cans, or fast foods like here. The culture is more about cooking ... You cook, you don’t go to X Restaurant, and eat fast food. There, the culture is to cook at home.” In these preferences, we see strong parallels to the claims that US proponents of sustainable food and agriculture make about the importance of seasonal, local eating and the avoidance of processed fast food.

Despite these preferences, Ernesto had not utilized the farmers’ markets or CSA programs that are common in the area, instead shopping at chain grocery stores and Mexican *tiendas* that are becoming increasingly widespread in areas of the city with large Latino/a populations. Although he was currently separated from his wife and family members, he actively sought out familiar foods at Mexican grocery stores in the suburbs south of Seattle and prepared them at his own apartment. There, he found corn tortillas, beans, cilantro, *epazote* and the spices that he needed to prepare the familiar basic dishes that reminded him of home. Ernesto’s effort to find and cook familiar foods counters the stereotype that Latino men do not cook and highlights how the choreographies of daily survival shift throughout the processes of migrating and making place. Like Marte’s interviewees, Ernesto is negotiating his own foodmap; and as a “culinary conservative,” this map and the foods he procures allowed him to maintain his identity in an unfamiliar place.

Laura, a 51-year old medical doctor, had moved to Seattle from Havana, Cuba to live with her son who is pursuing a graduate degree in astrophysics. In terms of her class standing before migrating, Laura was certainly the most well-off of all interviewees. Although she had migrated through official channels, she was still facing substantial financial difficulties in the United States. I asked Laura for her thoughts on the changes in Cuba after the fall of the Soviet Union, what has been called “the special period.” She explained that in actuality, the period was “especially bad,” but that it prompted a complete transformation in the cultivation and distribution of food, especially in urban areas. She told me

about the dramatic political and economic changes she had seen over her lifetime and the foods she had enjoyed, remembering:

Yes, in Cuba, more than anything, when my dad was alive, he liked to grow things. We had a house that had a big patio, and we grew yucca, we had fruit, cherimoya, we had plums, guavas, orange, coconut, avocados, yes, it was a big patio with a lot of fruit. A lot of squash as well. But here, I haven't been able to.

In this account, it becomes clear that a lack of access to physical space can dramatically alter one's foodmap if she is used to cultivating and enjoying food in productive urban spaces. Like Ernesto, Laura was living in an apartment and was not connected to the vibrant system of community gardens and farmers' markets that has made Seattle a center of the sustainable food movement.

The absence of key ingredients prevented Laura from preparing dishes that she had enjoyed in Cuba, specifically *ajiaco*, a meat and vegetable-based stew. She explained how she no longer prepares this dish owing to the unavailability of *malanga* (a tuber related to taro) and yucca, which she had previously obtained from Havana's vegetable markets. In addition to these staples, she also missed ingredients used for seasoning:

But there is something absent here that we use in my country, not to eat, but to season, that is called *naranja agria* [bitter orange] it's an orange, but it's more acidic. Here they don't have it, I haven't seen it and you use it a lot at the end of the year, with yucca, you use it with yucca and pork lard, garlic and onions, you fry it and add the *naranja agria* and add it to the inside of the yucca and it's very exquisite. I haven't seen this, it's from my country.

Laura's inability to find foods like *malanga*, *naranja agria* and yucca has significantly impacted her choices over the food she prepares and shares with her son. Yet, as a culinary conservative she fervently seeks to retain a connection to her *comida*, and often prepares black and red beans, garbanzos and rice, which are easier to find in the United States. This selective scarcity of foods is different from the rations that she experienced under Cuban rule, and entails a different set of material consequences and choreographies of daily survival. Although she continues to eat the beans and rice that are central to her version of Cuban cuisine, the "exquisite" dishes that she grew up eating are no longer part of her culinary repertoire.

Like these three individuals, José, age 36, reflected upon the centrality and value of cooking at home. After living in the United States for 13 years, he



remembered the special dish that his family shared on Christmas with a faint smile on his face:

For example, for Christmas, for a very beautiful Christmas, there is a very very beautiful typical Mexican dish, which is the number one dish that everybody makes for Christmas, which is *romeritos* [an herb resembling rosemary], *romeritos con mole*, all of this, potatoes, you can add shrimp, and this is a Christmas dish, but here there is no dish like this. I think because you can't find the herbs here.

He contrasted this elaborate meal with the everyday *guisados de verdolagas* (stews made with purslane), and the *sopa de verduras* (vegetable soup) that his mother regularly prepared using vegetables purchased from the local open-air market and *K'norr Suiza*, a packaged bouillon mix. When I asked José if he still ate either these elaborate or simple Mexican dishes, he replied that he instead usually ate "American food," especially during the time when he was living with his former wife, a US-born dietician. In his accounts, we see a telling example of how maintaining foodways becomes difficult as a result of migrating and forming new social relationships. His experiences also reveal a gendered dimension of culinary conservatism. As a man whose eating habits were shaped first by his mother and then by his wife, he might be more likely to abandon traditional foodways than women like Rebeca and Laura who were both culturally obligated and self-motivated to maintain a strong relationship to their *comida*. These points echo what both Counihan and Abarca illuminate in their research about the gendered expectations and division of labor that accompanies the maintenance of cultural foodways.

José also described his experiences with a crushing set of economic realities when he arrived in Seattle and was unemployed. Forced to live on the streets for several months, he was reliant upon emergency food providers to get by, especially hot meal providers. I asked what he thought about these providers, and he replied:

Well, my experience is that in the time that I needed help, they helped me. They gave me enough to maintain, but sometimes, like I told you, I wasn't sure about the food that was out in the open air. I like the private institutions, like the churches, the centers that are enclosed, because I think they're a little more hygienic than the food that is out in the open. It's horrible, but I ate it because in reality, I needed to eat in these places, to whet my full appetite, you understand, that's why I ate it. For me, it was necessary.

In describing these realities, José reveals his vulnerability to challenging economic conditions as a recently arrived immigrant without work or sufficient

cash reserves. These emergency programs became part of his foodmap as he struggled to survive in a city where even the most progressive efforts toward building sustainable food systems have not eliminated hunger in its most basic form.

Also from central Mexico, Marisol, age 62, moved to Seattle in the late 1970s and had enjoyed the same holiday dish that José described. During her 32 years of living in Seattle, she had seen a substantial increase in the number of stores carrying Mexican products, stating, “When I arrived here, there weren’t many things. But now, there are many, and a lot of variety from Mexico.” Like José, Marisol had not yet found *romeritos*, but was more successful in finding other items, including *verdolagas* (purslane), and the guavas, tamarinds and *tejocote* (Mexican hawthorn) that she needed to make punch during *posadas*, a 9-day celebration around Christmas. Obtaining ingredients like *tejocote* and guava allowed her to practice culinary conservatism and pass down the recipes and traditions to her children, all of whom were raised in the United States and are now leading their own adult lives.

With the recent opening of a farmers market near her home, Marisol also told me about finding other foods that she had long missed and introducing them to her family for the first time. These foods were all grown by a Mexican farmer from the state of Puebla:

I bought squash flowers and *huauzontles* [goosefoot]. It was so many years since I’ve had those, here I don’t eat them because I can’t find them. This year I made *huauzontles* for my whole family, and there’s twenty of us! And they were all fascinated with them, they were like, how do you eat these? And yes, I prepared them, all day I was cooking and then we ate them.

Marisol’s deliberate attempts to find, prepare and share culturally meaningful foods with her family reveals the agency she is exercising as a mother and grandmother over what is going into the bellies of her family members and their collective memory of the dinner table. Like Rebeca, she is carving out a space to express her cultural identity as a woman born and raised in Latin America and leaving her children with memories and lived experiences of this *comida* – restoring some semblance of her family’s sense of cultural continuity. Despite being in the United States for over three decades, Marisol continued to eat transnationally as she intertwines her food practices and memories from her homes here and there.

While the majority of interviewees viewed the foodways associated with home with fondness and a sense of loss, one woman instead viewed them primarily as a source of hard work and inconvenience. Juana, age 41, who had



grown up in the countryside of Michoacan, Mexico told me this about her experiences at home:

Well, I am now accustomed to being here because here you just throw the clothing in the washer and you buy the tortillas in the store, and there, no. There, you have to make them on a *comal* [griddle], and grow the corn. And then, you have to grind it, and I lived in a little town! Yes, here it's easier, everything. Because of this, when I think of a farm, I think, "Oh god, no! I want to go, but for vacation!"

Later on in our interview, I asked her if she would like to return to the community where she was raised, and she replied:

Like I said, for vacation. Nothing more than that because although there it's healthy and the food is better it's a lot more work there than here because here you just go the store and get tortillas and some steaks, and a lot of prepared food, and there, no. There, you have to get the wood and make a fire in an earthen oven to make food. All of the food. Everything that you need to cook.

These accounts reveal how, for Juana, the benefits of having "better" and "healthier" food in Mexico do not outweigh the gendered work that is required to prepare it. In her choice to abandon some of the cultural meaning and gendered responsibilities that are embedded within foods like homemade tortillas she distances herself from the *comida* that sustained (and physically drained) her while living in Mexico. This parallels some of the shifts from place-based foods to more processed foods that Counihan describes, though in Juana's case, this shift takes place across national borders.

Despite claiming a preference for her more "convenient" lifestyle in the United States, Juana also expressed her mixed feelings about the relative level of wealth between the two countries, specifically in terms of her control over the means of agricultural production. When I asked if she felt there was more hunger in Mexico, she responded:

This question is very hard to answer, because here, here people have for example, medical from the government, stamps, food banks, there are a lot of economic things, and work, and well, a lot of people from there come here supposedly to make money here. All of the people that come over the border, they come here because supposedly there is wealth. But also, there people also don't die from hunger, there, like I said, there we have everything. And it's good to have your own animals and your own land to grow, there people are not dying from hunger.

Her appreciation of owning animals and productive land – what she identifies as “everything” –complicates her perspectives on the difficulties of agricultural work and is revealing of the sometime contradictory relationships that immigrants have with places and spaces associated with home.

In our conversations, other interviewees repeatedly spoke of the importance of eating fresh produce, eating less meat or choosing meat from animals raised and slaughtered locally, eating foods free of chemicals and pesticides, and avoiding overly processed and fatty foods. For individuals like Julio, who had moved to Seattle from Mexico three years earlier at the age of 46, these values were tightly bound to their experiences as growers and eaters in place-based food systems in Latin America. I asked Julio if he felt that food was healthier in the United States or in Mexico, and he replied:

I think that, look, with all respect, I think that food in the US is very healthy, but I think that food in Mexico is fresher and more natural, and so it could be a little healthier in Mexico because of this. Because you can get things more in season, and you can eat more of them. For example, with oranges, here oranges are small and very hard, and in Mexico, the oranges are more natural. Meat here is always refrigerated and very processed and it has chemicals, and in Mexico chicken and meat is fresher.

Here, Julio describes the importance of eating seasonal and locally sourced foods, echoing some of the priorities of the local and sustainable food movements. Although he does not criticize the healthfulness of food in the United States, he makes it clear that less processing makes food in Mexico healthier and more preferable to him.

While Julio did not farm on a large scale in Mexico, he did grow food within the urban environment of Mexico City before moving to the United States and he also had ample access to open-air markets to find locally sourced foods that he did not grow himself. In our interview, I learned about his desire to replicate his patio garden where he cultivated *quintoniles* (lambsquarters) and *verdolagas* (purslane) in containers. I asked him why he did not continue to grow food in Seattle, and he responded, “I don’t have space because I live in an apartment. I live in West Seattle, and between 25th and 26th streets there is a community garden. But I haven’t found the opportunity to learn how to get involved in it.” After our interview, I shared with him the details of how to sign up for a garden plot and the contact information for a staff member I knew spoke Spanish. Importantly, Julio was not the only interviewee who had become interested in community gardening but did not know how to get involved and I regularly found myself printing out this same information for others. This common desire for productive space both reflects a yearning to define one’s own foodmap in ways that foster reconnections with *comida* and reveals the gaps that must be addressed



if the movements for sustainable food in Seattle are to address the diverse needs and life experiences of its residents.

A Honduran man with an infectious smile, Daniel was one of the few interviewees who did tend a small garden at his home in Seattle, extending the knowledge he had gained while farming in his home country. When I asked whether he thought there was more hunger in his home country or in the United States, he told me about the wealth of local food resources he had enjoyed in Honduras: “We have mangoes, coconuts, we have pineapple, a lot of fruit, a lot of different fruit, so I wasn’t someone who personally suffered much from hunger because almost everything was right around my house. If not one fruit, another one!” Daniel’s description of the access to local food he enjoyed in Honduras was repeated by several participants; however, he was one of the fortunate few to have a small yard in Seattle where he grows tomatoes, cucumbers and onions to supplement his food intake. His ability to garden in the United States, although on a much smaller scale, is reflective of his ability to practice autotopography and cultivate a foodmap that allows him to be at least somewhat self-sufficient.

Having migrated 8 years prior, Daniel explained in detail his preference for unprocessed, plant-based foods: “I think that cassava and mashed plantains are healthy because it’s natural. There aren’t chemicals. Flour and rice isn’t as good, but in Honduras we also eat a lot of green plantain, with meat or fish. These are the most natural.” I then asked if he thought that food was healthier in Honduras to which he replied: “The problem here is that there is a lot of processed food, and when it’s processed, they use a lot of chemicals to preserve it, because it has to keep for a long time. And I don’t think chemicals are very good for people, but people eat them because of modernity. The whole world is getting modern and they try to do things faster because they have to get out of the house quickly.” In describing how the processing and chemical contamination of food is a result of “modernity” and having to “do things faster,” Daniel narrates how the food practices that he was accustomed to in Honduras illustrate more traditional, slow foodways, echoing the delineation that Esteva makes between *comida* and *alimento*. These perspectives also parallel the critiques that local and slow food advocates launch against the industrialized food system and the many ways it compromises our health and well-being.

Through synthesizing the narratives of these eight men and women, I have described how preparing, sharing, abandoning and continually searching for culturally meaningful foods can be understood as efforts to develop new foodmaps and engage in autotopography, maintain cultural identity interconnected with foodways from home, and sustain connections with *comida* following the disruptive experience of migration. In Rebeca’s case, the re-creation of the outdoor oven allowed her family to enjoy a semblance of *comida* as they crafted dishes resembling those they enjoyed in Nicaragua. For Ernesto, continuing to cook basic, and indeed revered, ingredients at home

allowed him to resist the pressures associated with US fast food. Laura, José and Marisol had differing levels of success in re-creating the dishes they remembered with such longing, differences that were shaped, at least in part, by gendered expectations surrounding cooking practices. Juana, on the other hand, embraced the ways that US foodways altered her household labor and she made the switch from homemade to store-bought tortillas with relative ease. And finally, while both Julio and Daniel preferred foods grown by their own hands, their ability to enact these preferences in the United States was linked to their differential access to (or knowledge of how to access) productive urban land.

Despite a shared valuing of seasonal, locally sourced and unprocessed foods, these individuals were not able to take full advantage of the many opportunities that result from Seattle's sustainable and local food movements, including the countless community gardens, farmers' markets and community-supported agriculture projects that transverse the city. These inequalities in access resulted not only from perceived and actual economic barriers, but also from a lack of awareness of the resources that are indeed available. This disconnect not only impacts the household economies and foodways of Latino/a immigrants, but also renders the broader movements for food in the area less just and resilient given the diverse and meaningful sets of food-related knowledge that these individuals could contribute. Our society as a whole is in desperate need of re-connecting with *comida*, and it is clear that deeper bonds of solidarity are essential in building a food system that allows all eaters and growers to not only survive, but to thrive.

Collectively, these narratives also demonstrate the dramatic shifts in foodways that follow moving to a new country, yet it is crucial to underscore that these shifts are inseparable from the material and political realities of living in the United States as immigrants with complex transnational ties. For these individuals, memories of home intertwine with these new realities to shape their perceptions of how they are positioned in an unequal society where access to meaningful, or even adequate, food is not guaranteed. In this way, they remain in a liminal state – not fully here nor there, neither satiated nor starving. Indeed, these individuals are negotiating their own liminality through reinventing their relationships with food that push against the boundaries of the nation-state and redefine what it means to eat locally.²

2 For an extended discussion of the notion of "liminality," see Limón (1982), Peña (1997; esp. Chapter 7) and Turner (1969).

Conclusion: When the Local Is *Not Your Local*

This article has offered insight into the lived experiences of living out-of-place and the efforts employed by migrants from diverse regions of Latin America to maintain a semblance of self and community through food. These narratives are simultaneously deeply personal and universal, revealing the importance of



sustenance and the meanings derived from what ends up on the dinner plate. Alongside the cases of resistance and autonomy that were central to their desires to maintain culturally based food practices were the experiences of letting go of food-related desires and needs. Through anchoring my analysis in these lived realities, I have aimed to facilitate a shift from viewing the food-related claims of immigrants as a drain on or detriment to US society; to instead viewing immigrants as knowledge holders with the potential to transform US foodways and food systems through their productive work and unique perspectives on and relationships with food.

In Michael Pollan's 2009 book, *Food Rules: An Eater's Manual*, he outlines more than 60 rules the conscientious eater should follow, ranging from "Eat Animals that Have Themselves Eaten Well" to "Buy Your Snacks at the Farmer's Market" to "Don't Eat Anything that Your Great-Grandmother Wouldn't Recognize As Food." Besides the obvious (and problematic) assumptions of available financial and cultural capital that go along with many of these rules is the less obvious assumption of a certain *kind* of relationship between the eater and the local. For instance, what if your great-grandmother hails from central Mexico and would never recognize kale – a vegetable whose cult status among alternative eaters is now legendary – but would recognize *huauzontles*? What if the local system to which you are connected is downtown Havana where new projects in urban cultivation (a necessary practice following the fall of the Soviet Union) are light-years ahead of many urban centers in the United States? What if a call to devote more time to preparing locally sourced ingredients flies directly in the face of a new-found appreciation of more convenient cooking practices that do not require a woman to spend hours grinding her own corn? Whose rules do you follow then?

While food rules like these are increasingly gaining traction with thousands of Americans who are committed to going local organic or slow, they undoubtedly carry a different meaning for immigrants whose foodways, traditions and material realities are bound up with transnational flows and spaces. Even so, as evidenced by Marisol's connection with the *Poblano* farmer who grew her *huauzontles* just a few blocks from her house, and Julio's curiosity about how he could utilize community gardens to replicate his home kitchen garden, there are dynamic spaces where the movements for sustainable, local food in the United States have the potential to become more inclusive, culturally responsive, and indeed, resilient. What remains necessary is a broader and deeper cross-cultural understanding of the unique needs and contributions of immigrant communities, a small piece of which I have shared here.

Exploring the points of articulation between immigrant and refugee communities and the US food system is a promising area of study for scholars who are committed to pursuing relevant and applied research, given the multiple and complex ways that food is a site of cultural tension, adaptation and resilience. As food movements continue to spread and grow, understanding

the diverse ways that people feed themselves and their families is vital for rebuilding food systems that are socially, environmentally and economically sustainable. Community-based qualitative research methodologies are particularly well suited to this task, particularly if they couple an analysis of people's lived experiences with a demystification of broader social, political and economic structures that transect national borders and boundaries. Along these lines, future research in this area should explore the ways that the intersections of gender, class, race/ethnicity and citizenship influence differential levels of access to not only food, but the means to cultivate it. I contend, however, that research in this vein will be most useful if it is shared not only with other scholars of food and migration, but with the institutions and decision-makers with the power to shape the future directions of our food and immigration policies.³

3 For more information on my efforts to make this research applied and share my data with non-academic stakeholders, I encourage readers to contact me by email.

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