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Dear Eater

As you bite into the crisp, juicy flesh of a Braeburn apple and enjoy its sweet tart flavour, or nibble on the soft, smooth texture of a large maroon-coloured Bing cherry with its burst of delicious sweetness, do you wonder about the invisible stories and networks that bring these marvellous fruits to your table? I do. I often think about the origins of the food I eat, the country of its origin, how it was grown and the agricultural traditions that attend my daily sustenance.

I don't know about you, but my childhood home and the media culture that surrounded it offered little understanding of the food system. Admittedly my father did own two fast food restaurants so perhaps something was bred in the bone, or more aptly, the gut, of my digestive and social imaginary. Unfortunately, though, this formative exposure offered no real sustenance or provisions. Meanwhile I think about food a lot, I cogitate on the practices – old, new and emergent – that inform its cultivation. Of course this isn't just about food. An apple isn't just an apple or a cherry a cherry, but mythic, textual, technical, political icons ¹; they are signs and symbols of food (in)justice. Through a kind of worlding brought on by social media, gourmet and 'whole food' culture (never mind issues of food security) I find myself wondering about the often hidden forces that make up the ever-unfolding global food system. I use the word worlding as a verb to suggest something that is ongoing and hopefully generative, a mediation and exploration on world building that might reference multiple origins, boundaries, ethnicities, governance, and even consciousness itself. ² This constantly shifting and evolving worldview opens up thought-provoking conversations that inform consumer choices and reveal undisclosed realities, which in turn constitute every bite of the food we eat.

There is so much of the information I have gathered that I want to share: the dynamic hallucinatory musings inspired by the noonday sun and the marigold tea I have been drinking of late. I definitely feel some of their spectral effects; a sense that the apple sitting on the table in front of me, and the forces that gave it life, have travelled across space and through time.

In British Columbia I am blessed with a cornucopia of fresh produce from the Lower Mainland and the Okanagan, to name but two of the many nearby agricultural zones.

Canada is the fifth-largest agricultural exporter in the world, and the price of food has continually risen for fresh fruits and vegetables— forty per cent since 1980. The ‘costs’ for this include the ever-increasing profit margin, expensive industrial processes, ‘inexpensive’ labour and gas-guzzling networks of distribution across the country and further afield. But I wonder what is the real cost of food, not for our wallets, but for the lives and cultures of those who work the soil and harvest the produce?

The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which came into effect in 1994, had a profound impact on the Mexican economy and the lives of Mexican people. The value of Mexican-grown crops was diminished by imported and often subsidized Canadian and American produce, forcing millions of Mexican farmers off the land and away from their subsistence agricultural traditions. Not to mention the predatory practices engaged by companies like Monsanto in introducing genetically modified (GM) corn. As a result, Mexican farmers have had to make their livelihood elsewhere. Many went to the United States; others came further north to Canada through guest employment programs like the Seasonal Agricultural Worker’s Program (SAWP). And yet despite their reliable, skilled work and contribution to the BC economy they are compensated with low wages, often less than the legal minimum, no overtime, and limited access to the services that they pay into. And they are subjected to paycheck deductions for social benefits such as Employment Insurance and the Canadian Pension Plan that they can never receive because of their “temporary” status. 3

Consider the Okanagan Valley in Canada’s most western province as a case study – it is a hub of fruit growing and winemaking where the agricultural industry depends on the employment of temporary migrant workers, many of whom are from Mexico. Not a new phenomenon, racialized labour practices in the Okanagan Valley have been part of this industry since colonization by the British in the 1880s; farm labour has been performed by First Nations people after their own experiences of dislocation from their land, the Chinese, the Doukhobors, the Japanese, the Portuguese, French Canadians, and more recently Mexicans. NAFTA’s signed agreements among North American governments (those of Canada, Mexico, and the United States) have provided Canada with newer markets for exporting Canadian products, as well as greater ease importing agricultural workers on a seasonal basis. This is seldom a fair exchange when the workers were pushed off their land back home and must travel thousands of miles north for their livelihood. And here in Canada they often have to deal with workplace abuse, housing challenges, geographic and linguistic isolation, as well as the possibility that they could be dismissed and deported by their sponsor for virtually any reason and without recourse.

With all these hardships I keep coming back to two questions: why do Mexican migrant farmers continue to come to Canada when the conditions and profits are so low? And what keeps them connected to their country and the families that must stay behind? The answer to the first is quite simply a lack of other employment opportunities, a lack of options, a lack of choice. The second question is harder to answer. In part they are willing to endure the sacrifices they make because of loyalty and dedication to the loved ones left behind. I speculate that this is further sustained by the traditions and histories of a culture suffused with religious, spiritual and vernacular imagery, not to mention inspiring stories that connect people across space and time.



For many Mexicans, the figure of the Virgin of Guadalupe, or *Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe*, binds the nation like no other. Prayers to her for protection are made with the belief that she intercedes in the common welfare of her supplicants. Her provenance goes back to an Aztec farmer named Juan Diego, also known as Juan Diegotzil (1474–1548). Back in the early sixteenth century, he was walking through Tepayac hill country north of Mexico City, a sacred site of the Aztec moon goddess, where he encountered an apparition of a beautiful woman radiating light. She revealed herself as the Virgin Mary and stated, “I desire a church in this place where your people may experience my compassion. All those who sincerely ask my help in their work and in their sorrows will know my Mother’s Heart in this place. Here I will see their tears; I will console them and they will be at peace. So run now to Tenochtitlan and tell the Bishop all that you have seen and heard.”⁴ After much back and forth between Juan Diego and Bishop Fray Juan de Zumarraga, with three more visitations, a near death experience, a sign from the Virgin, and a mistranslation of the Aztec word *Coatlallope*⁵, the venerated icon of the Virgin of Guadalupe was born. Also known as Tonantzin, Our Sacred Mother in the Nahuatl language, she is the female Aztec deity symbolically connected to fertility and the earth. It is no wonder that migrant labourers have a special relationship to Guadalupe/Coatlallope/Tonantzin, not only for her protection and her indigenous connections, but also because it was a farmer who received her visitation. And of course there is this divine figure’s association with the solar cycle and with fertility.

The image of the Virgin of Guadalupe is recognized for its diverse and rich symbolism. The burst of the sun’s rays around her figure speaks to Huitzilopochtli, the highest god in the Aztec pantheon, the Christian divine, and, I envision, the sowing and reaping of the harvest. The sunburst encircling her form evokes the warmth of Middle America, the solar energy of which generates the photosynthesis that feeds the plants and produces abundant crops. Where the sun shines in such abundance, fecundity is not far behind. I

have even heard people suggest that the sun motif in this popular icon resembles the Labia Majora, and the virgin's robes, the darker folds of the Labia Minora, with her crowned head as the clitoris. This chimeric vision offers something of the fertile nature of Guadalupe/Coatlallope/Tonantzin, further linking her to agricultural productivity and bountiful labour. A vision of divine hallucination, the sun-kissed Virgin of Guadalupe is over-coded with meaning across time and Latino/a cultures, but its figuration is always connected to the earth and to female attributes.

Perhaps Cesar Chavez (1927-1993) and Dolores Huerta (born 1930) received their own inspired intercessions. Like Juan Diego, César Estrada Chávez was a farmer who had a vision. He was a Mexican American farm worker, who, with Dolores Huerta, co-founded the National Farm Workers Association (later the United Farm Workers Union). Throughout his career as a labour leader and civil rights activist, the work of Chavez brought significant improvements to farm workers and unionized labour. Like revolutionaries before him, for example Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata, Chavez employed the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe in rallying farm workers. ⁶ As an historical icon for the Latino/a community, Guadalupe has represented the rights of oppressed workers, moral commitment, and social justice. And Mexican-American Dolores Clara Fernández Huerta, in addition to her work as a labour leader and civil rights activist, has done much advocacy for the rights of worker, immigrants, and women. Facing criticism based on both gender and ethnic stereotypes, Huerta along with Chavez, represents liberation and action to many in the Latino/a community, and by proxy both are also figures of abundance.

As with the Virgin of Guadalupe, there are other symbols that reflect the longevity and solar energy of Mexican culture. Take the marigold flower, a wild plant, harvested and used in spiritual and political offerings such as in the Day of the Dead celebrations, and cultivated for medicinal uses in its calendula varietal. Cempoalxochitl is the Nahuatl (Aztec) name, while horticulturalists gave it the Latin name *Tagetes erecta*. Its more potent form is called *Tagetes lucida*. Since Pre-Columbian times this flower has possessed magical properties used for divination and ceremonial purposes. It has been smoked as a rite of passage in sexual shamanic rituals, most likely due to its aphrodisiac effects. And in combination with other sacred ingredients it is said to produce hallucinations and dream enhancement. ⁷ Its name in English, Mary's Gold, refers to the Virgin Mary.

Sunlight, agriculture, and the farming traditions that have evolved around the Marigold invoke a magical power, a prayer, a blessing. On a daily basis, I am reminded of the powerful energy of sunshine as I enjoy the endless bounty and fruits of farm labor everywhere. I began this letter referring to worlding as part of our social imaginary, employed to encourage an ongoing exploration of possible worlds, different worlds. Still

sitting here with a warm cup of Marigold tea, I find myself delving into many realms of experience – embodied and phantasmal – moving back-and-forth across time, but also between reality and representation. I believe that worlding and the possibilities it engenders are luminous. It is the world we inherit, the world we inhabit, and the world we eat. Whether an apple, a cherry, or the vast array of agricultural produce harvested near and far, these cultivated foods hold and absorb the traditions, histories and (in)justices of their manufacture, entangling the nascent affects of fertile imagery, common welfare, and an enduring solar energy.

Yours truly,
Randy Lee Cutler

Endnotes

1. I borrow these adjectives from Donna Haraway's essay, "The Promises of Monsters: A Regenerative Politics for Inappropriate/d Others," Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, Paula A. Treichler, eds., *Cultural Studies* (New York; Routledge, 1992), pp. 295-337.
2. Martin Heidegger popularized the neologism in his 1927 book *Being and Time* to mean "being-in-the-world." <http://worlding.org/what-in-the-world-2/>
3. <http://www.watershedsentinel.ca/content/seasonal-agricultural-workers-program-swap>
4. <http://www.catholic.org/about/guadalupe.php>
5. Coatlallope has been translated as one who treads on snakes.
6. Roger Bruns, *Encyclopedia of Cesar Chavez: The Farm Workers' Fight for Rights and Justice*, Westport: Greenwood, 2013, p. 260.
7. (Siegel et al. 1977) <http://entheology.com/plants/tagetes-lucida-marigolds/>