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FROM THE SERIES: Embodied Ecologies

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By Emily Yates-Doerr
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Carla's kitchen is a small room at a corner of her house. Her mother used to cook for a large, extended family in a busy, open-air courtyard. But Carla cooks for just her husband and their two daughters—and, sometimes, the anthropologist.

Over the course of more than a decade, I would stay with Carla dozens of times. But the conversation I will write about here happened during the first week of my first visit, before I was an ingredient in the family’s mix. I had come to Carla’s home because she had been given a diagnosis of diabetes, and I wanted to learn about how she cared for the needs of her family while also caring for the aching in her bones.

That day, in her kitchen, Carla was showing me how to roll out corn for the tamalitos for which her city was famous across Guatemala.

“Tell me more about the corn,” I asked.
She told me that her K’iche’ ancestors theorized that humans are made of corn—corn being human body, corn being life.

“Tell me more about this human body,” I prompted her.

“What exactly do you want to know about it?” she asked in return.

This is a difficult question for a research method driven by not knowing exactly which questions to ask. I tried for an honest and open-ended reply: “I want to better understand the relations people have with food.”

I was surprised when Carla started to laugh, setting down the food she was preparing; tears eventually streamed down her face. She repeated what I had said, incredulous. “¿Tener relaciones con comida?” Then she became silent and serious. “To have relations with food is something very pathological,” she explained. “Only anorexics or others with Western illnesses have relations with food.”

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In 1550, approximately thirty years after Spanish colonizers ordered Maya peoples to build Mesoamerica’s first Catholic church in the province where Carla lives today, members of K’iche’ ruling families wrote down a collection of oral histories about the beginning of time. They had learned to write from missionaries, who destroyed their codices and forced Christian prayer upon them. They were told to translate Christian gospel into K’iche’, but, as Dennis Tedlock (1996) tells the story, they used the skill of writing for another end. A century and a half later, a Spanish friar read (or, more likely, stole) their secret manuscript and copied it, adding a Spanish translation. It is his writings that have lasted to the present day.
As more is learned about the region’s history and as the languages we use change, translations of this document are rewritten. Every few years the phrasings of body, ecology, environment, and flesh are transformed.

* * *

In *Tell Me the Story of How I Conquered You*, José Rabasa (2011, 175) cites a letter from Christopher Columbus, writing home about plants: “In order to report to the sovereigns the things they were seeing, a thousand tongues would not suffice to tell it or his hand to write it; for it seemed that it was enchanted.”

The history of ethnobotany, argues Rabasa, begins with Columbus’s linguistic gaps and ends with the transformation of the bacteria in *pozol*—whose benefits have been known by Maya people for thousands of years—into patent data. This is a story of appropriating knowledge, a history of mistranslations by stratified institutional power.

Also relevant is Alexander von Humboldt, often referred to as the father of ecology, who helped reinvent the Americas as a site for ongoing European conquest in the early 1800s.
His three-volume *Relation Historique* was not the detached taxonomic cataloging undertaken decades earlier by Linnaeus, but instead imbued the landscape with soul through representations of planetary consciousness and harmonious connection.

Mary Louise Pratt (1992, 140, 141) points to the tremendous possibilities present in Latin America at the time, as countries that were multiracial, nonwhite, unevenly Christian, without monarchies, and built from slavery and plantations liberated themselves from Spain. Then von Humboldt’s holistic natural ecologies intervened, becoming instrumental in the colonial project of white supremacy. His totalizing representations cast nature as a place to be inhabited by Europeans, all but erasing the languages and peoples already there. This erasure is especially insidious as his writings set the stage for postcolonialism. Here lies a lesson often lost on anthropologists who would inherit his methods: ecological narratives easily become a mirror masquerading for a window.
Carla and I remain in frequent contact via chat messages relayed by her daughters. She is dying.

Sick for years, diabetes has worn her body down.

Or another narrative: for years, her doctors have prescribed diabetes medicine off-label, poisoning her liver. Now, she has late-stage cirrhosis.

Or another narrative: policies actively designed to destroy food and health-care systems in order to crush Indigenous peoples have left her with harmful care.

The language I use matters, shaping what I am able to think and how I am able to act upon these thoughts. Still, there are limits. I want to be able to remake knowledge ecologies with my research, but for some people English is itself a language of pathology. Likewise, ecology may be a feminist science in its concerns for relations rather than units, but it is also a science with a history of fraught encounters of mapping, charting, and erasure in the name of discovery.

What does it do to take Carla seriously by considering that sometimes there are no relations?

It is surely useful to know that in the Spanish spoken in Carla’s kitchen, tener relaciones can be a euphemism for sex, and that knowledges of bodies and relations cannot be asked about so directly. Indeed, in the months that followed I learned to try to think outside—or, better put, beside—my own languages, and to talk less as well.

But there is something else to be learned by taking Carla at her word. The possibility that there may not be relations between humans and their food pushes for the recognition that English is not an unmarked language; indeed, when human is corn, there is no necessary relation. That everything might not, after all, be relational everywhere demands that we listen carefully to the still-colonial histories that adhere in the terms of anthropology. This recognition, in turn, opens up the Anglophone anthropologist’s principal ontological claim—
everything is relational—with a continued insistence on the situatedness of the empirical. Where? When? For whom?

Note

1. Also, the distinction between relation (an anthropological theory) and relationship (an intimacy between things) may not withstand the translation to the Spanish relación (see Strathern 2018). Note that in English, having a relationship with food can also be read as pathological.

References


