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Does the Voice of Migrant Food Exist?

Migration begins with the search for food.[1] It is not the foundation of human existence: it is a response to the need to survive, to feed ourselves. Food in cities as we know them—with all the foods we might fancy available twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week—seems completely normal to us, but historically is anything but normal, since "for millions of years our forebears were in direct contact with the food they consumed, gathering wild plants and hunting wild animals, moving from place to place at nature's pace, following the seasons and animal migrations."[2] As a result, migration was inextricably linked to our diet; it is a cornerstone of the human-food relationship.

There are still communities, not westernized, that move following changes in landscape and territory in search of food, like the Fula people of Nigeria, but in the West, and especially in cities, most inward and outward migrations take their inhabitants very far from nature, from the sources of food, to find the resource that, paradoxically, comes from it. Thus, the search for food, albeit in distinct forms, remains one of the leading causes of migration and shapes the way we feed ourselves.

Nevertheless, when we speak of migration in search of food, in most cases we ignore the journey and focus on those who make it almost exclusively in their destination. We problematize and reflect on migrants' impact at their destination and vice versa, but that is merely a stage of what food means to these people.

It is true that there are very interesting cases involving the effects of such migratory phenomena at the point of arrival, like the emblematic example of *tikka masala* and the migratory relationship between India and the United Kingdom. Consequently, the importance of understanding everything the process entails at the destination, but also

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at the place of origin, is evident. Thus, from the outset we want to approach the topic by understanding both points (origin and destination), as well as migratory movement.

On the other hand, when we embrace the premise of *food as voice*, we inevitably think of the relationship between food and language, and the possibility or reality that food is a means of communicating in migratory settings, by proposing food as a language. This is because both food and words are produced and processed, stored and traded, consumed and digested in diverse social settings within specific communities, with distinctive meanings and to particular ends, as these forms of diet and language are socialized, promulgated, and transmitted in different ways across generations.[3] We can understand food as a system of symbols that functions as a language in migratory processes, which, as countless experiences confirm, has the power to negotiate and to create spaces for social interaction, to mention only some of its multiple potentialities.

When we consider food as language and as voice, we hear echoes of the words of Venezuelan poet Gabriela Rosas: "After the voice comes the word." It is true that the voice is part of our identity; it is the individual, audible manifestation of who we are and as such is a vehicle for memory, culture, and emotion. Language is made up by acts of speaking, by messages, but the human character also has a voice. It is here that we confront these fundamental questions: Is our voice, the voice of our family, of our attachments, of our individual history, of our collective history, that which resides in our food? Do we deposit our voice in our food? Do we expect to hear it in another's food? Is the first voice of migrant food silence?

Silence in the Place of Origin

Grandmother's kitchen is the space one's original family moves through, where one voice and another are heard, each at its own pace, with its own tone. When food appears there, we recognize the sounds and multiple voices: the voice of bread, that of cheese, that of the forgotten vegetable, that of beer to accompany gatherings, that of comfort food served once a month, that of one that comes from further away. All foods harmonized by the cadence of the inimitable voice of the person who brings/prepares/purchases them to set them out on the table. Food, at our place of origin, has voices.

But, in the context of migration, these foods gradually fall silent before their time, because sooner or later our grandparents' homes are left with empty pots and in silence, but why, when there are so many voices that sound so strong?

Migration dwells in silence in the kitchen at the point of departure. Food remains, but it has lost its voice and now has the migrant voice, like those wheat *arepas*, which anyone can buy and take home but have been silenced because their voice was that of the uncles, aunts, and cousins who visited every December. The food remains the same, although now there is no voice echoing or ears to hear giving it its full meaning, just a lump of matter that allows us to survive but not to live. Because the voice is that: the element of humanity manifesting in the act of speaking, strictly communicative.

I found the clearest way to understand how a voice can be *heard* in food in a scene from the film *La cocina* (The Kitchen) (2024).[4] The protagonist is Pedro, an undocumented Mexican migrant working as a cook at The Grill, a New York restaurant with multiple dining rooms and an extensive menu with options ranging from pizza to lobster. One day, a girl from Pedro's village comes in looking for work and brings him something his mother has sent. Wrapped in a cloth napkin, a perfect roll made from *hoja santa* (Mexican pepperleaf) and an envelope with photographs from his childhood and a letter containing only the words "God bless you. Your mother."

In this image it was clear that everything Pedro's mother wanted to say went far beyond the phrase written on the sheet of paper, even when she was free to write whatever she might have wanted. We might think it wasn't in the *hoja santa* either but it was a message laden with memories, whose identity is intimately linked to the sender-recipient relationship, which breaks the bounds of the semantic and has a voice: that of his mother. Whatever the message was, the voice is what gives the *hoja santa* its unique property.

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The diversity of the migrant experience demands other examples to understand and remember that not necessarily all migrants have experienced a family bond or have a mother or grandmother who cooked for them, but even so, they still have a voice. The foods in our lives have voices that may come from a bond that is not so intimate or familiar, but may even come from an employee at the store where we shopped for cheese that we left behind in our hometown. For the migrant who has shopped at the same corner store for years and now buys it in the big city, even if the cheese is the same, it no longer has that voice, that identity associated with the store they've left behind, or that of the seller. The voices intrinsic to the identity of food are those of the entire territory one leaves behind.

From the Collective Voice in Food to the Individual Narrative

I think that in a way this silence leads migrants to find a new collective voice that can comfort them and help them feel like part of a new story and a new place. This feeling is depicted perfectly by Peruvian writer Claudia Salazar Jimenez in *Migrar y otras artes* (Migrating and Other Arts).[5] In her work, Peruvian restaurants serve as a simulacrum of home, and her characters refer to "amnesia" regarding the flavors of their homes as a "personal negotiation," in response to the need to forget certain voices to hear those we have around us, the migrants' collective voice.

And it is unquestionably a necessary voice; the collective voice in these foods is fundamental to express ourselves, to find ourselves with the other, who is a fellow migrant. They gather to prepare a national dish or eat something that brings them together based on their condition, be it mate tea, sunflower seeds, or cold toddy (a chocolate beverage). These foods are repositories of the migrant voice, where everyone hears part of their story, their past, their territory, and it is a shared story. It is also important to bear in mind that these migrant foods with a nationality ("… food") start to be standardized and homogenized, a tendency that increases as a country's immigrant population grows. Thus, in this process, the collective voice deposited in food may gradually lose its individuality, meaning the quality associated with home cooked food, and certain ingredients, things that not even globalization can bring to the metropolis.

Home cooking helps migrants maintain the individual voice in their food and preserve an identity beyond that of "migrants." Every time one of them prepares a recipe at home that other members of their community have never tried in a restaurant or that people from other regions within their own country may be unfamiliar with, there we find that voice of the individual, of the *I*, of our stories from home, of our attachments, of family.

Beef tacos at a restaurant don't have the same voice as those made from "my aunt's recipe." Both fulfil their role of messaging, of an encounter with a flavor that people can call "ours," in the case of Mexicans, but without that voice that captures the individual side; it is, again, the "simulacrum" of being at home to which Claudia Salazar referred: that message emitted voicelessly.

On the other hand, it is true that the voice of our food also evolves, and now a beloved dish may incorporate something from the destination territory. That individual voice is transected by migration and transforms our voice, our food, and our human experience. My grandmother's plantain bread, never again to be made with typical Venezuelan hard cheese, continues to tell a story, except now it speaks with my voice, colored by my migrant experience.

Conclusions

In closing, I feel it is important to emphasize one last relationship between food-voice and migration: that in which the voice is linked to food from somewhere else, from absence, from the place of hunger.

Thus, as we have explored the voice in the places of origin and destination, any analysis, reflection, or dissertation on food and migration must account for the fact that the migrant experience, so diverse and homogeneous, can be divided broadly in two: between those who experience

hunger and those who do not. In the first case, we cannot speak of food that does or does not have a voice, because it is absent and as a result the voice is adrift, but where?

Some years ago, in a talk on migration, food, and identity, we panelists discussed food's tremendous power as an element for negotiation, as a point of encounter with the community that receives us, the catalyst for a limitless variety of meanings and enriching experiences, where food becomes the system of non-verbal and multimedia symbols that facilitate understanding among people with different cultural backgrounds and languages. Thus do we reaffirm food as language; however, the most valuable moment in the encounter was an intervention that came from the audience: a journalist who remarked on the status of migrants in shelters and their relationship with food.

In these spaces there are translators, and migrants can communicate, but there is one thing that irrevocably silences their voice: hunger. The migrant voice is silenced regarding food because, when hunger takes hold, desire and freedom are not allowed, only the primary act of asking for food. A hungry person has no right to miss familiar food, to think of food they understand, from their voice.

I remember the time when the journalist described an encounter with certain migrants who had never before had canned food, which made eating it truly challenging for some of them. Faced with the image, I understood that when we are migrants we have the right to ask for food, but not to feel longing for food with a voice, which is where our voice can be heard.

Migrants not only leave food voiceless in their places of origin, but no longer hear their own voices in the receiving territory because, one way or another, they renounce identity. They do not completely renounce their language or speech, but they do renounce their voice, that of their desires, of their attachments. The voice of those who experience hunger cannot be heard except as an act of speaking for survival, stripped of its humanity. Does food in a shelter have a voice? In such a place, where there is no way to express oneself through food and people look for that voice elsewhere, the silence the migrant experiences speaks with that of food representing only biological and nutritional sustenance.

Thus, we understand that any dissertation on the voice we deposit in food at certain times may be irremediably lost in the history of migration between the point of departure and the destination. A shelter is not a destination; it is a temporary refuge where our voice has no place, nor can we hear the voices of our fellow travelers through food. In relation to the language that is food, migrants continue our never-ending search for food with a voice. VM

Notes

1 For information on Conuco Librería Especializada en Cultura Gastronómica, consult their social media: Facebook, https://www.facebook.com/p/Conuco-Librer%C3%ADa-especializada-en-Cultura-Gastron%C3%B3mica-Consciente-100090480489624/ and Instagram, https://www.instagram.com/conuco_mx/ [Editor's Note.]
2 Ezequiel Arrieta, *La invención de la comida* (Buenos Aires: El Gato y la Caja, 2023), p. 28.
3 Illian R. Cavanaugh, "What Words Bring to the Table: The Linguistic Anthropological Toolkit as Applied to the Study of Food," *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology*, vol. 24, no. 1 (2014), p. 84.
4 *La cocina*, dir. Alonso Ruizpalacios (Mexico-U.S., 2024).
5 Claudia Salazar Jiménez, *Migrar y otras artes. Escritos fuera de lugar* (New York/Barcelona: Smol Books, 2024).