

Full Circle Tomatoes: Returning Stories to their Source

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A decade ago, we made our way through rows of tomato plants in the fields surrounding the small town of Sayula in Jalisco, Mexico. In search of women tomato workers, Lauren and I met Teresa, a 68-year-old forewoman who welcomed us warmly, while others eyed us suspiciously. It had taken us almost a year to get this far – to identify one of the largest tomato producers in Mexico, now poised in the post-NAFTA era for export and global competition, and it took even more luck and conniving to get permission from an owner to enter the fields and speak with the women workers. They were key to our proposed research on the twisty journey of the tomato from Mexican field to Canadian table, the most exploited and most invisible actors in the continental food chain. Teresa invited us to her house, an hour from the plantation, and in subsequent years, I made several visits to her family in Gomez Farias. She became the featured protagonist in my book, *Tangled Routes: Women, Work and Globalization on the Tomato Trail*,* her life story as a campesina woman juxtaposed with other women in the gendered, racialized and class hierarchy of migrant farmworkers: the Indigenous migrant women brought by truck from southern Mexico lived in more precarious conditions, victims of a deeply entrenched racism; the ‘company girls’ brought by the agribusiness to sort and pack the tomatoes, on the other hand, were much more privileged than Teresa, paid more and treated better.



Ten years had passed and we were now heading for Gomez Farias in the 15-person van of the Mexican Institute for Community Development (IMDEC), the best known popular education centre in Mexico and co-publisher (with the Metropolitan Autonomous University- Xochimilco) of the Spanish edition of *Tangled Routes*. We picked up Teresa and her husband Pedro, their granddaughter Erica and her husband Tony – to bring them as guests of honour to the book launch in Sayula. Returning the stories to their source.

As we walked into the parish hall next to the main Catholic Church, Teresa – on my arm – exclaimed: “Nobody ever appreciates us, but you appreciate us.” A photo exhibit that synthesizes the book was mounted at one end of the hall, featuring Teresa at one end of the NAFTA food chain and Marissa, a Loblaws cashier, at the other end. More than 50 people were seated around a rectangle of tables. IMDEC’s Pato



Esquivel offered a summary of the book, emphasizing how it revealed not only gender but also racial and class dimensions of tomato work, and praising especially the inclusion of many forms of resistance and alternatives to the global food system the book exposes, many of which were initiated by townspeople in the hall.

A young man offered an interlude of romantic songs while the elder of the town presented me with red roses. It was my turn to honour (with photos and beewax candles) both the workers represented by Teresa and the activists, represented by Leonardo Lamas, the major force behind the efforts to improve the conditions of the Indigenous seasonal workers and co-founder of both Friends of the Earth and the Popular Health Group. Leonardo noted the perfect timing of the book – arriving a few months before the return of the tomato companies who fled the region four years ago when the land was wasted by a white fly plague and the refusal of the agribusinesses to let the soil lie fallow. Town activists would be better educated and organized now, he suggested, than they were ten years ago and the book could help prepare them to confront the environmental and labour practices of these export-oriented producers. He evoked the words of Brazilian theologian Leonardo Boff, promoting “an ecological culture that respects plants, animals, soil, and humans – all living things that are part of the fabric of life...in solidarity with future generations.” The new regional training in environmental education Leonardo is championing will be one of the sites for nurturing this culture. I presented Friends of the Earth with another cheque from the royalties of an earlier anthology, *Women Working the NAFTA Chain*, to use toward the costs of construction (previous donations have paid for child care for migrant workers, workshops for fumigators, and recycling programs).



Then the residents spoke up, responding to the ideas in the book that Pato had highlighted. One man decried how they themselves, Mexican mestizos, were guilty of racism against the Indigenous peoples, original inhabitants of this land; another woman recalled how much she had learned from working and living with “ellos” (“them”) – and witnessing their suffering as groups of residents over

the years tried to redress the inhuman conditions of the migrant labour camps surrounding the town. How far they have to go, I thought, as I listened to the paternalistic descriptions, yet how far they have come in a country that is so deeply divided between mestizos and Indigenous peoples. Others recommitted themselves to educating and

organizing fellow citizens, especially youth. A group of young activists, strong ecologists associated with the Zapatistas, revealed the generational divide. Certainly I couldn't hope to understand all the internal politics rumbling in the room, but it was pointed out to me that the town chronicler, who had greeted us officially, had also been behind the establishment at the town entrance of an Aurrera Supermarket, owned by Wal-Mart.



This is only one of the big shifts evident in the ten years since I started chasing tomatoes. As signs of deepening economic integration and technological development, the surrounding fields are now dotted with greenhouses, the increasingly dominant form of production, all owned by foreign (mainly US) companies. All of the inputs and management practices are imported and all of the cherry tomatoes are

exported; Mexico offers only the sun, land, and labour. Teresa and Pedro, now 78 and 83, still work in one of these greenhouses, Morning Glory, along with 2,000 other Mexicans who feel they have hit the jackpot: greenhouse work is permanent and year-round compared to the seasonal harvest of field work, they only work six days a week instead of seven. Teresa and Pedro are picked up at 5 AM from their door and driven by bus to the greenhouse three hours away, and returned home by 6 PM. They still take their lunches, despite the fact that they're encouraged to buy food from the company cafeteria, but Teresa no longer rises at 3 AM to make tortillas from scratch, she buys them ready-made.

They are finding the rising price of tortillas almost prohibitive, however, as U.S. corn producers are converting to biofuel production; still folks are aware that in a few weeks, the ominous January 2008 means that the border will be completely open to corn imports – and the battle against the contamination by GM corn of the land race maize in central Mexico will accelerate as growing networks of food activists join forces to protect biodiversity, Indigenous knowledges, and food sovereignty.

Ten years ago, when I began this study, I had simplistically framed the Mexicans as the southern producers – whose tomatoes were destined for northern supermarkets and fast food restaurants. Now Wal-Mart, the world's largest food retailer, is the major supermarket power in Mexico, while McDonald's, Burger King, and Pizza Pizza proliferate throughout the country. Pato's kids whine for Happy Meal toys and other Mexican friends begin to show signs of the obesity epidemic spreading southward.



More hopeful, however, is the growing public consciousness, questioning pesticides and GMOs, promoting organics and urban agriculture, creating coalitions around maize and water. IMDEC, my hesitant partner in this project ten years ago, which formerly focused on urban issues and citizenship, is now working in rural municipalities, on alternative production projects, and joining state coalitions around water, national coalitions against transgenic maize, and for Indigenous autonomy.

Pato Esquivel acknowledged that IMDEC's work had begun to reflect the tangled roots/routes of food systems, to recognize the global within the local. And he joked that my work had indeed "entangled" them; we are now working in the same struggle for sustainable agriculture, labour justice, for gender and racial equity. Their analysis has shifted since the 1980s, when class was the dominant construct to incorporate gender and race analysis, linking to both environmental and Indigenous movements.



Deborah with Teresa Sintero and family as well as IMDEC popular education staff in Gomez Farias, Jalisco, Mexico

These things take time – my initial relationship with IMDEC began in 1984; the tomato project began 12 years ago. The political context has changed since then, with both deeper penetration of foreign interests and growing public consciousness around the losses of land and livelihood, and the struggle for food sovereignty and food security. The seeds of resistance once planted in fertile soil, nurtured by deepening relationships of collaborative research, harvested for popular education, community organization, and coalition-building are slowly bearing fruit and are evoking hope.

Academic epilogue

An interesting contrast to the community launch of *Rutas Enmarañadas (Tangled Routes)* was an academic launch held two days earlier in Guadalajara as part of the International

Book Fair and organized by CIESAS, the Centre for Research and Higher Education in Social Anthropology. A panel of four offered commentaries on the project. Antonieta Barrón, feminist economist from UNAM (National Autonomous University of Mexico) spoke about our first contact over ten years ago, when I found her as one of few academics who had studied women tomato workers; she recounted how my approach to the subject, reaching beyond the disciplinary bounds of economics and venturing into methods that included both photographs and life stories, had seemed very strange indeed compared to her process which involved massive surveys, tables, and analysis of numbers; as we collaborated over the years, however, we learned to appreciate each other's complementary methods. Gabriel Torres, Director of CIESAS and an early collaborator with a book on Jalisco tomato workers, also noted how my personal, popular education and interdisciplinary approach to our study had at first challenged his notion of social science research, but again over time he came to see the value of work that was aimed beyond an academic audience. The translator of the book, Martha Gonzalez, had flown in from Argentina to celebrate the work and to honour both the form and intent of the project, which had moved her team of translators to feel they were contributing to something that would have use beyond the library shelf.

I detected a theme in the comments, and realized that working in a Faculty of Environmental Studies that advocates both interdisciplinary and praxis-oriented research is still a rare privilege. The tomato journey that we spent a decade tracing opens up a myriad of issues that are intimately interconnected: the relationship between production and



consumption, biodiversity and cultural diversity, work and technology, health and environment. One of the obstacles to both educating around and acting on environmental issues lies in narrow disciplinary approaches to the subject which neither reveal the connections between the processes underlying corporate globalization nor help people to get a handle on them. As the launch with the workers and activists in Sayula had proven, our research can contribute to community-based education and organization, helping to form ordinary people as agents for change who can challenge and transform agricultural practices to be more environmentally sustainable and socially equitable. My Latin American colleagues had jokingly confessed that this tomato study had seemed a bit “crazy” to them at first. Rosy Zuniga, the IMDEC staff person who pushed for the co-publication (with UAM) in Spanish rose to toast “locura”, or craziness, which she suggested is needed to think and act in new ways in response to the serious challenges of our times.

* *Tangled Routes: Women, Work and Globalization on the Tomato Trail, Second Edition* (2007), can be ordered from Rowman & Littlefield Publishers (www.rowmanlittlefield.com)

Rutas Enmarañadas: Mujeres, Trabajo, y Globalización en la Senda del Tomate can be purchased from IMDEC (www.imdec.net) or Deborah Barndt (dbarndt@yorku.ca).

