

## The Quest for Method

When I tell people that I'm a food scholar, they think I just eat food and talk about it. I mean, I do do that, and it is very enjoyable. But everyone eats and in today's society laden with food.porn that saturates various screens run amok by herds of foodies who like to spread the gospel of good eats, my work goes a little bit beyond that. Food is such a banal part of our life but its utilization as a tool of scholarly inquiry is largely overlooked. While there is significant body of literature on food – especially from renowned geographers and anthropologists – most of this scholarship has centered on the consumption of food and, to a smaller extent, the production and distribution of it. Food to me, however, is a living archive. I believe it is our most powerful tool for making sense of the world around us. That's to say I don't see food as some ancillary part of mere human existence nor an object of material culture as many scholars have typically regard it. Instead, I see it as a tool that can be utilized in the same way that a biologist might use a microscope to make sense of a culture under different pretense. In this case to understand how to use a tool, it's important to be methodological in its application. How.does.one.then.use.food.as.a.method?.

To answer this question, I traveled to Veracruz and Cartagena over the summer to understand how food can be used to make sense of place, society, culture. While I am fascinated by nearly anything and everything related to food, my work in particular seeks to make sense of foodscapes – the space in which food is produced, distributed, and consumed – and how African agricultural practices and ecological knowledge have been shaped them. More specifically, I am interested what some scholars have called the circum-Caribbean – coastal places along the mainland that have a longstanding history with the Caribbean islands. As someone from the Texas gulf with substantial Louisiana heritage who has lived in Colombia and Mexico, the circum-Caribbean has been a space that I've used to make sense of my identity and heritage in the Atlantic world. Veracruz and Cartagena were in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, two of world's busiest ports. They are particularly interesting to me because they also housed some of the largest slave markets and were home to large African-descending populations, with a large amount of them being free, both places had many long-standing historic and social ties to communities across the United States Gulf Coast.

I was interested in understanding a few things in my pursuit of method. The first was determining how Caribbean these places were and what makes them different from Caribbean islands and secondly, how did afro-descendent people think about these

spaces and their relationships to them. I would, of course, use food to answer these questions.

I spent about 3 weeks in Mexico in June and about 2 weeks in Cartagena in August. In both historically significant port cities, I found myself in between kitchens, both commercial and private, archives, churches, and streets. In Mexico, as I ate my way through arroz a la tumbada and encacahuatado, and drinking toritos it became so much clearer how these dishes told stories of migrations, African influences, adaptation, and resistance. Several conversations with cooks, community leaders, and locals revealed how so many of these traditions are shifting or being challenged by industrialization, politics, and environmental issues. For example, in much of the region known as Yanga, named after a cimarron who led a rebellion for freedom and autonomy, Mexican sugarcane companies have managed to destroy unions, buy out locals, and take over the land leading to a monoculture that has polluted rivers, reduced biodiversity and impacted the subsistence way of life that many locals have. Comments about how they don't eat as much seafood anymore or see as many plantain trees were repeated like a broken record much like the constant grievances elders about younger folks being influenced by globalizing trends, leaving old practices behind, and abandoning these places all together behind as they search for new opportunities as the only work available is cutting sugar cane much like their enslaved ancestors did.

Similar sentiments were commonplace in Jamapa, which historically was a ranching town. It has some of the most fertile land in the country. While it has been slow undergoing some of the major industrialization like Yanga due to its location being off the beaten path, far away from major routes, locals still worry that it will soon be a target of a country that is desperate to increase agricultural production and exports. In many of these towns, locals squat in ruins of haciendas and fincas that date back to the early modern era but there are no commemorative plaques or anyone working to preserve the heritage and memory of these Afro-descendent places that were impacted and continue to be impacted by blanqueamiento, industrialization, and imperial ghosting. This is much in line with the archives I found myself running into, where I handled documents that were crumbling apart from the heat and humidity. Some of them seemed promising by their catalog descriptions referring to food supply chain issues, bakery licenses, negros, and riots at markets, but alas – I was told some of those documents were no longer accessible to the public. I had even been told I'd been the last person ever to probably rummage the contents of one folder. And, even where you would think you'd find something about the enslaved people, like at San Juan de Ulua, where enslaved Africans were held captive for days at time, the fort and

castle serve nothing more as a tribute to Mexico's naval history with a brief mention to its usage as a prison. In the backdrop of constant forgetting and erasure of black people in Mexico's national history, food and subsistence agriculture were a critical tool to recuperating untold stories and highlighting the dangers of industrialization, capitalism, and neoliberal politics.

After having some baseline understanding of how food can be used to ask some of these in Mexico, heading to Cartagena became a site for praxis. I began to look for similar patterns, which, might seem unlikely to many given that Cartagena has become synonymous with its Afro-Colombian heritage. Between the iconic image of a black woman in her patriotic wear carrying a bowl of fruits on her head, fried fish and patacon, Afro-descendent street performers constantly going viral, and tourists taking day trips to Palenque to learn about the self-proclaimed first free town of the Americas, many might be hard pressed to see how the same stories of erasure and forgetting can exist much like in the case of Mexico. But upon conversations with friends and the many locals they introduced me to, so much of the centro historico, where most of the tourism lies once looked like ruins I found across Veracruz, with locals squatting, alley ways full of wooden homes, and people that mostly lived off of petty trading and an extremely localized economy connected to several small towns whose ways of lives are being threatened by a city that has become swallowed up by tourism and hellbent on displacing the much of the people it uses in its image and exploit to carry out its aims to be the world's top tourist destination.

While in Cartagena, I had the opportunity and honor to spend time in La Boquilla, a fishing village fighting to maintain its rural heritage and way of life as the city continues to encroach upon its beaches. Locals share about how the increased urbanization of Cartagena has reached the town and how markets, the arrival of shipping, and environmental changes have led to a reduction of fishing and fishing processing and how many are now turning to tourism to continue to live. And much like Mexico, many young people too aren't interested in maintaining the traditional ways of life, although many community leaders continue to do things to maintain a sense of pride and identity against it, like the organization Batambara that takes advantage of the tourism to fund and teach locals traditional drumming and educate them on the importance of preserving their heritage. Because in the face of oppression, there too are always acts of resistance.

In the end, time spent in Cartagena and Veracruz has made it clear that food is something more than mere sustenance and that a simple interrogation of local diets reveals much more than we realize. The simple act of sharing meals ultimately was a way for me to understand history, political issues, geography, environmental challenges, systemic

racism, misogyny, cultural differences and so much more that I would have expected. And much like the journey from a farm to a table, mine across the two places highlights that we are not only what we eat, but also a product of all that becomes before it.