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CULTURAL WORK

## Sopa de Frijoles, *Milpa* and Memory: A Memoir

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### Abstract

This memoir reflects on the roles that *milpa* has played in my life, both as a child of the Salvadoran diaspora and as a solidarity activist for Central America. I use my lived experience as a site to explore how *milpa*, the tradition of maize, beans, and squashes and vegetables, are embedded with 'sticky' memories and emotions. It imparts lessons of family, love, difficulty, trauma, resistance and resilience, across generations.

### Keywords

**Food; Memory; Family; Emotion; *Milpa*; Central America**

Si, nos quitan el pan  
Nos veremos en la obligación  
De sobrevivir, como lo hicieron nuestros abuelos  
Con el maíz fermentado  
En la sangre, de los héroes

Con el maíz, sembrado, desde siempre  
Desde antes que ensangrentaran, nuestra tierra  
Los cuervos, los piratas, la cruz  
La espada y el capital

Somos hijos del maíz  
Constructores de surcos y de sueños  
Y aunque somos un país pequeño  
Ya contamos con más de mil inviernos

Un millón de manos floreciendo  
 En la tarea interminable de sembrar  
 De abril a mayo, labrando, sembrando  
 Tapizcando, desgranando  
 Almacenando, para la guerra, y la paz

[If, they take away our bread  
 We find ourselves (obligated),  
 Surviving, like our grandparents  
 With fermented maize  
 And with the blood of our heroes.

With the maize, sown, since always  
 Since before they bloodstained our lands  
 The crows, the pirates, the cross  
 The sword, and capital.

We are children of maize  
 Builders of trenches and dreams  
 Even though this country is small  
 We lived through more than a thousand winters.

A million hands blooming  
 In the endless task of sowing  
 From April to May, tilling, sowing  
 Peeling, de-shelling,  
 Storing, for war and peace].

[[Mejia Godoy 1981](#), author's translation]

## La Milpa (Maize, Beans and Squashes)

Nicaraguan singer and songwriter Luis Enrique Mejia Godoy's revolutionary ballad, *Somos Hijos de Maiz*, underscores an important element of Central American cuisine: the longevity, resilience and resistance, of our *milpa* system, the indigenous food base of maize, beans and squashes, that have fed peoples across the isthmus over time and generations. Milpa has been the base nourishment for Central Americans, being a staple crop for farmers and the most affordable food source at local markets. Boiling beans with salt, garlic, green pepper and tomatoes, and hand patting tortillas over a stove or fire, have kept our bellies fed, our souls warm, and enlivened our nightly dinner huddles.

[Sara Ahmed \(2014: 8\)](#), in theorizing the 'stickiness' of emotions, writes that objects, concepts, or artifacts, shapes and are shaped by emotions; various experiences and histories impress their emotions upon an object, and this entity in turn impressing emotions and memories upon us. Artifacts can become 'sticky' with memory, inheriting emotions, like happiness, laughter, sadness, melancholy. We also place our emotional weight on these objects, re-interpreting these objects and moulding them with our emotions.

In thinking of the stickiness of emotions, *milpa* could be seen not just a food source, but a repository of cultural memory, resistance and resilience. Beans and maize from food storage have relieved the hunger of millions of Central Americans; during times of economic hardship and war, the *milpa* has been fondly

remembered and desired. *Milpa* has been sown and harvested by millions of farmers, and millions of caregivers have boiled and stirred beans as an act of love, act of flourishing, act of survival, of social reproduction, as a means of care. *Milpa* is a language with which millions converse with the land and care for their loved ones.

In this memoir, I consider my own experiences with the *milpa* as a site of memory and resistance. In thinking through my memories, I see how practices with milpa, whether in cherishing food, or in lamenting its absence, are spaces where emotions are repeated and re-enacted. Sara Ahmed's 'sticky memories' helps us understand how the food practices of Central Americans—in our homeland and in our diasporas—act to pass on memory, nostalgia, trauma, and resistances, providing emotional sustenance that accompanies our physical nourishment.

## Sopa de Frijoles (Red Bean Soup)

One of my favourite memories is eating my mom's *sopa de frijoles*, Salvadorian red bean soup at supper time on a cold, Canadian winter night. My mother, cooking red bean soup, replicating what warmth feels like on a cool night in December in San Salvador. My mom and dad migrated from El Salvador to the United States in 1990, and to Canada in 1991. They left El Salvador as refugees after the 'Final Offensive' of 1989, moving to Atlanta, sponsored by the church sanctuary movement, and later to Toronto. Our bean soup—shared between my mom, my dad, my sister, and me—were my classic memories of nurture. My sister and father bantering, my mother sharing her anecdotes, and my own daydreams, as I slurped my soup.

As Salvadorian poet [Roque Dalton \(1974: 208\)](#) writes, '*los que lloran borrachos por el himno nacional bajo el ciclón del Pacífico o la nieves del norte*' [those (Salvadorians) who cry drunkenly for the national anthem, under cyclones in the Pacific and under the snow of the north]. Maybe my mom was crying silently for her national anthem as she made us bean soup. Salvadorian cuisine, like the Salvadorian diaspora, has a way of navigating across borders, often in the cries, melancholy, nostalgia, as we cook our precious soups, our *pupusas*, our *pastelitos*.

Years later, as I started caring for my son, I reflected on the *milpa*, and the act of eating a traditional food that has been passed over generations. I remember sitting at my wife's mother's table in Managua, Nicaragua, as she cooked the Nicaraguan version of *sopa de frijoles*. My wife, Veronica, is Nicaraguan, and I had been living in Nicaragua for a few years. It was the early days of 2018. She placed the bowl on the table. We smell the beans boiled with egg and pork rinds. She touches her belly; our son was seven months in her womb. We were alone; her mother, brother, and sister, had moved to Spain years ago, as migrant labourers, and her younger brother was out playing soccer. My parents and sister were in Toronto.

*Sopa de frijoles* for me was embedded with the memory of my mother's love. Eating my partner's soup was an important moment for me, sipping the love and warmth of someone with whom I have decided to build a family with. I remember touching my wife's hand, and knowing she was processing a lot. Being a first-time mother, her family across an ocean, building a relationship with this person in front of her; this is a lot for anyone to process. Now that I come to think of it, I can imagine how my own mother processed her own memories, emotions, and worries as she watched over boiling soup. The panics of migration, memories from the civil war, intergenerational trauma.

Santiago, our son, was eight months old when he ate his first plate of *sopa de frijoles* and bits of tortilla. We sat at Veronica's mother's table, carefully slipping bits of soup in his mouth. My computer was on the side of the table, my master's Major Research Paper floating around in my head as I tickled his feet. Trying dearly to keep my mind on this time and space, anchored by his laughter, her hands, and the aroma of *sopa*. As a new father, I admit, there was a lot on my mind, and the political situation in Nicaragua did not help.

This was Nicaragua in 2019. Santiago was born a month after the Nicaraguan April 2018 protests began. Tens of thousands of Nicaraguans marched on the street and erected barricades and occupied universities to protest austerity measures, government corruption and police brutality. Five months of police repression and civilian violence left over 300 Nicaraguans dead.

The news was on in the background. After the initial mass repression, a tense political climate ensued. A failed national dialogue, arbitrary detentions of activists and opposition members, closures of news outlets and NGOs, US sanctions on politicians, mass migration, polarization. The words from the TV screen fell on us like shell shock. Staring at the news, listening to the radio, whispering to your neighbours, trembling, awaiting the terror of conflict, holding dearly to your *sopa de frijoles*, trying to keep your cool in front of your children. Sadly, this is a Central American tradition, replicated across time and space. Sentiments one feels when surrounded by mass violence; our *sopa* and *milpa* accompanying us.

I tried to block out the news from my mind, as I tickled and kissed my son's feet, convincing him to have another sip of soup, ignoring my Major Research Paper a little while longer, trying not to think of the funding application I still had to write. Life's challenges weighed heavily on my mind. But the soup, the rice, beans, and tortilla, warmed me and kept me centred. Our hands, our laughter, aroma of *sopa*.

My partner read a quote to me recently; *cuidar humaniza*, caring for others humanizes us. *Milpa* has cared for us over generations. *Milpa* has been humane and generous to us.

## Labrando, Sembrando (Tilling, Sowing)

It was 2014, and it was my first few weeks living and working in Nicaragua with a small development organization. My co-worker and I visited a village in El Crucero, a mountain just south of Managua. El Crucero is lush, moist and chilly. The organization was supporting a women's cooperative, which grows organic coffee and supports community members in agroecology. The cooperative members had fought for the land titles of the village, occupying the land in the 1990s. Their initial land titles, which they received during the 1980s revolution, came under threat of being repatriated to its former owners by the post-revolutionary, neoliberal government. These lands remain in the hands of cooperatives today, where farmers grow the *milpa*; beans, maize, plantains, squashes, vegetables, coffee.

The visit was emotionally intense. The region was in midst of an El Niño phenomenon, bringing hot dry weather and delaying the rain season. With little rain, families in the village were not able to sow their *milpa* and were left with little food to sell or consume. The cooperative organized a community meeting, where residents expressed the urgency for food aid. Many families were making plant-and-vegetable-based soups to fill their bellies, skipping meals, and desperately seeking a means to recover from their crop losses with other forms of work. The NGO began regularly delivering food aid, and I would come back to my apartment and cry silently after these visits.

Years later, in 2023, I was conducting field work in El Salvador, in the departments of San Vicente, Usulután and San Miguel. The research project was on climate insurance, climate vulnerability, adaptation and food security in the dry corridor with smallholder farmers. I had spent about a year collecting phone interviews and coding transcripts, and this time, I was meeting farmers in-person.

*La milpa*; maize, beans, squash and vegetables, represents both a variety of crops and the main cornerstone of rural diets. Smallholder farmers engage in a constant cycle of sowing, growing, collecting and storing harvests, selling and investing in next year's production. When a climate impact occurs, farmers lose their harvests, and resort to selling their storages, eating up their savings, selling their valuable cattle, borrowing from banks and loan sharks on high interest, working various jobs, and in many instances, migrating, as a means of getting by.

Chatting with farmers has been one of the greatest pleasures I've had as a doctoral student. In many instances, a farmer would talk to me about their time as a guerrilla combatant during the Civil War, or how they had been part of the repopulation of abandoned villages that had been left deserted when residents fled massacres carried out by the military's scorched earth operations. Farmers would also share with me their stories of working with civil society organizations, of going to marches in San Salvador, or travelling on weekends to the main cities to attend their university programs. Farmers would share these stories and beam proudly over their *milpa*, narrating their hard efforts at protecting their crops despite the weight of economic crisis and climate change. As we talk, farmers would share mangos with me that had fallen from their trees.

*Milpa* contain memories of nourishment, care, struggle and resistances. Often the struggle for everyday nourishment and wellbeing is accompanied by struggles for human dignity, human rights and social justice. Generations of *campesino* peasant farmers vocalizing their rights, engaging in an intimate relationship with their food source, and defending land.

## Hogar (Home)

In 2020, I facilitated a photovoice project with young Salvadorian Canadian adults in Toronto to reflect on their experiences growing up in Canada as children of migrants. Our collective met over a workshop and took a two-week period to create our art-pieces. Each of us were second generation, or one-point-five generation, having been born in El Salvador and grown up in Canada.

It was powerful to see how our collective captured the *milpa* system in some way in our art pieces. Each of us took photos of our foods; our *pupusas*, *sopa de frijoles*, our family's gardens, our moments at the kitchen and dinner tables. We all talked about the difficulties that our families went through as migrants. How our families had fled the civil war and arrived in Canada as refugees, creating new lives in a white settler context hostile to newcomers.

There it was. The *milpa*, on a cold Canadian winter day.

It was every powerful to hear one of our participants say that 'our community needs to heal,' with nods of agreement from almost everyone in our collective. We laughed and reminisced in our group discussions. We made a WhatsApp group of folks who participated in these workshops. I invited them over to my apartment on a cold day in March 2023 to eat *pupusas*.

A few days ago, in September 2023, my mom and dad visited my family and me in our apartment. There was no *sopa de frijoles* this time. We treated ourselves to Chinese hand-pulled noodle beef soup on Wellesley in Toronto. We chatted to my parents about our family's latest visit to El Salvador during my doctoral field work. After two months of planning meetings with community partners, my wife organized a *pupusa* and game night with some colleagues of mine. In a nutshell, my thesis explores how young adults in the department of Chalatenango are impacted by the mass migration of young people from this region, and how young adults who stay form their life trajectories and participate in community organizations, shaping rural cultural spaces in the face of youth migration. Chalatenango experienced significant violence during the 1980s civil war, being the site of massacres during military raids before transforming into a guerilla stronghold.

My wife and I laughed to ourselves as we recollected how we initially wanted to have a hand in the kitchen in making the *pupusas*. We were taken aback by the efficiency and finesse of our colleagues as they lined up to roll maize balls, stuff these balls with pork, cheese and beans, flatten the balls on a grill, and flip these flat *pupusas* into perfection. Our friends had over 100 *pupusas* ready in less than a half an hour. My son, Santiago, played with the niece and nephews of a friend of ours. His niece had grown up in this community, called *Guancora*. The other two lived in the US, visiting their family for the summer.

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My mom chuckled, ‘that finesse is the legacy of the community organizing, coming from many gatherings, festivities, church events and commemorations.’ My dad had visited Chalatenango when he was part of the Liberation Theology church movement during the war. As he slurped his soup, he recollected how he transported recorded interviews and testimonies out of the conflict zone, a crime at that time that would have resulted in his imprisonment or disappearance. He passed by military checkpoints in a pickup with solidarity activists and with the recordings in the back. Luckily, the military let him through and didn’t check his vehicle.

My mother worked for a cooperative in the 80s, and warmly remembers co-workers who had disappeared. Throughout my childhood, they would share with me stories of surviving through the final offensive, of listening to guerilla radios, of whispering quietly about the Salvadorian revolution after a church meeting, of falling in love in times of crisis. I heard these stories many times over a bowl of *sopa de frijoles*.

My parents, my little family, and I walked down the streets of Toronto, and later part ways and say goodnight. As Santiago, Veronica and I get to our apartment and get ready for bed, we decide that we will make *sopa de frijoles* soon, on one of these crisp autumn nights.

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