MIGRANT SEASONINGS: CONTEXTS, RELATIONS AND HISTORIES

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‘Migrant seasonings’ (the way migrants season their foods and lives, and the way they are ‘seasoned’ into new social relations in receiving societies), can be understood as contested sites of power negotiations, as strategic reclamation of ‘small measures of autonomy’, socio-political action, and historical visibility. I propose that migrants’ translocal food routes reveal the crucial role of food relations in the gendered production of community across ethnic and national boundaries.

Problematising ‘domestic’ food practices to reveal public and historical implications through the tracing of foodmaps can help us expand a critical analysis of ‘foodways’ to understand the articulation of Afro-diasporic local/global ethnohistories and structural violence born out of colonization, slavery and present neoliberal development conditions. Dominican migrant foodmaps, for example, respond to culturally and historically specific ‘roots’ and ‘routes’ shared with other Afro-diasporic populations in the Americas. Their food-place-memory experiences become thus a continuum between former geopolitical ‘seasonings’ in sending societies and new racializations in the US, as well as their own political positionings.

This paper offers theoretic discussion and methodological suggestions for studying migrant food practices as a valid subject in itself, and also as a lens to examine cultural and socio-political formations of immigrant communities across ‘ethnic’ boundaries. Grounding my proposals on recent fieldwork with Dominican communities in New York
City, I examine the politics and poetics of food, cultural memory and narratives of ‘home’ as these have implications for migrant place-making and socio-cultural formations. I offer as one useful tool for place-grounded food studies the framework of ‘foodmaps’; an ethnographic method and analytic framework that can be used to trace migrant experiences and translocal boundaries of ‘home’ through food relations. Through such means I gathered, for example, food-centered cultural histories of migrant individuals in the context of their families and communities from the gendered perspectives of the cooks in particular households.

APPETIZERS: TRACING DOMINICAN FOODMAPS NYC

“yes, we used to call it ‘the collective oatmeal’, I still make it here for breakfast, it reminds me of my mother...she made it stretch so it would feed more people, it was the cheapest stuff you could buy...she even served to the guards when they came looking for the political dissidents in our neighborhood, to distract the them while the men escaped...”

How are we to understand from the above narrative fragment, the significance of food as nourishment, as memory site and index of migrant home? ...This passage comes from Elsa -a first generation Dominican immigrant woman in her 50s who migrated to the US in the 1980s- one of my collaborators during 2006 fieldwork in New York City (henceforth NYC). The narrative arose in the context of her kitchen in her apartment in the Bronx, as we conversed while I documented her oatmeal cooking. Through a quick analysis of some layers of her foodmaps she will help us propose some answers. To decode the manifold meanings that foodmaps reveal we need to begin with some concrete primary sources, in this case a narrative passage, an image of a meal, and my remembered experience of documenting her food practices during a year of ‘observant-participation’.

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1 This term, was proposed by the Brazilian anthropologist Joao Costa Vargas -a reversal of the landmark ethnographic method of ‘participant-observation’- it implies a decolonizing alternative ethics and politics, not only a cosmetic change in wording.
Fig.1: Views of Elsa’s kitchen and of one of her ‘collective oatmeal’ versions, as prepared from the Bronx, NYC (all images by the author, unless otherwise specified).

Oatmeal is one of Elsa’s main food staples; a hot breakfast meal in Dominican food classification, made with milk, sugar, cinnamon and other spices, a bit of salt, and a small lime peel. She gets the oatmeal, milk, sugar and lime from a Dominican grocery story across the street from her apartment building in the North Bronx, even though available in NYC, she is mailed spices –such as nutmeg, cinnamon and allspice- from one of her sisters from Santiago, Dominican Republic (henceforth DR). Elsa is an experienced factory worker, part of a wave of immigrant women in NYC who became unemployed after the factories went overseas, and had to retrain herself into a new profession. She works now from her apartment as a certified child attendant, from where she earns the income to purchase the ingredients for the oatmeal, to support her family, to pay for shelter and to send remittances -plus actual boxes of food provisions several times a year- to her family in Santiago.
Elsa learned to cook oatmeal and other Dominican staples from her mother and grandmother, in a dark-skinned working class household of seven, as part of her gendered socialization in a semi-rural area of her province. The meal itself, besides nourishment is poetically and politically invested –as her narrative evidences- with historically specific private/public local histories; it marks through narrative memory, the political economy and socio-cultural conditions of a family negotiating survival during the dictatorship era of Leonidas Trujillo in the DR, as re-imagined from her present life conditions in NYC.

Such ‘roots’ become further routes as this oatmeal (not intrinsically Dominican or ‘ethnic’ but for the mode of preparation and the cultural history of the cook) is fed (together with daily servings of Dominican Spanish) to some of the children Elsa cares for; native, second and third generation immigrant offspring (African-Americans, some with parents that come from Togo (Africa), Nicaragua, Puerto Rico, and Mexico among others). Even though Elsa has recently become a US citizen her locations in the urban geography of NYC -restricted to low paying jobs and to inner city neighborhoods in the Bronx- remain marginal, and her place in mainstream hegemonic landscapes remains almost invisible. Yet the networks of survival formed through food exchanges are not bounded but intersected by personal, institutional, and other socio-cultural relations to her new regions of home. This tracing of some aspects of a migrant cultural history -through and around food- has many more layers, all pointing to contested translocal boundaries of ‘home’ marked by the politics of survival in both sending and receiving societies.

The individual experiences of my other fieldwork collaborators offer some useful contrasts. Josha, -also first generation immigrant, working class woman who migrated from the capital, Santo Domingo in the 1980s- only drinks a ‘regular’ (Americano) coffee with a blueberry muffin for breakfast, purchased from her next door Greek diner in
Brooklyn. This was initially a choice of convenience due to her job schedule as a porter in the building where she lives. With time it has become a routine social ritual, as the owners and employees of the restaurant—who have seen her children grow up in the neighborhood—are now part of her food survival network, offering her breakfast on credit when there is financial hardship, and sharing daily conversations about common social concerns and about their families.

Fig.3: Memory-work, Josha cooking kitchen feet from her kitchen in Brooklyn, NYC.

Josha still cooks some Dominican staples (such as chicken feet -a famine food in DR-simply boiled with garlic, pepper and salt, as her mother taught to cook it), and invests them as much as Elsa, with the poetics and politics of her migrant history and present localities. Flor, a younger Dominican woman, began cooking mangú (boiled and mashed plantains, a ‘traditional’ Dominican staple invested with clear gender, race and national significance), at the request of her Mexican immigrant husband. Her food practices are now blending these two ethnic roots as she is also learning to cook Mexican foods from Puebla.

Fig.4: Flor cooking mangú for her Mexican Husband from her kitchen in the Bronx, NYC.
Through their offspring’s intersecting locations as Dominico-Mexican-Americans, literal and symbolic consumption and seasonings—of foods, bodies and cultural histories—will continue nurturing and transforming the shifting boundaries of their translocal routes.

Food routes, as movements and moments in-place, thus become crucial, for the way first generation working class Dominican immigrant women claim value and a certain degree of autonomy for their life projects, for they way they re-imagine new senses of ‘home’, and for the way they re-inscribe through food-narratives their migrant history of struggles in the Dominican Republic and now in the US. Cooking practices are as well inseparable from the narrative memories that give them meaning, constituting complex memory-work strategies, communicative and expressive means.

Examining the politics and poetics of food relations (which include practices and narratives but also manifold socio-historical relations implicated in the way migrants negotiate their life projects) requires attention to place-making, to the spatiality of power and to the cultural memory processes in migrant community formations. Such a focus is necessary to understand migrant processes in general, and particularly the ongoing diasporas of Caribbean populations whose ethnohistorical emergence is already marked by displacement, struggle for such basic rights as food and shelter, recognition of their humanity, and present marginal citizenship status in both sending and receiving societies.

My research findings about Dominican food practices in NYC, revealed that paid-unpaid food labor is critical in negotiations of spatial and temporal organization of immigrant life cycles, and in the negotiation of place and social relations within households and in relation to the City and US state, and more generally how food-related paths become key mediations to learn how to navigate and orient themselves in new environments. For example, daily travel to work sites (a major route since from it comes the income to procure food), trips for food shopping, eating out, and Dominican food businesses become signposts for them to learn transportation routes and landmarks for internalizing perceptual maps of the City.

Through such food paths individuals and families learn how to navigate their urban places and create new cultural relations and networks of survival both within and outside ethnic enclaves. A whole translocal network of producers, suppliers and consumers are involved in the maintenance of ‘traditional’ ethnic foodways. Public Dominican food sites which give familiar images and flavors to local neighborhoods re-create a sense of place and cultural identifications with the Dominican Republic. Dominican public
foodscapes (such as restaurants, street food vendors and supermarkets) become also landmarks and labor sites for other immigrants and for an assortment of other NYC residents, making possible cultural exchanges and transforming local landscapes.

Main Dominican dishes such as *la bandera* (rice and beans), *sancocho* (meat and roots stew), and *mangú* (boiled and mashed green plantains) identified as markers of national belonging and ethnic difference, also function as sites of cooking and cultural transformations, and acquire new meanings in NYC. *Mangú*, for example, figures in Dominican national cuisine representations in DR only after *la bandera* and *sancocho*. This former slave staple and present working class fare is a good example of a Dominican food whose meaning and prestige is shifting through gender, class, race and generational experiences of Dominicans in NYC. In the new localities it is becoming one main index of Dominicaness chosen even to name Dominican neighborhoods such as ‘Plátano City’ and ‘Mangú Heights’ (Washington Heights in upper Manhattan).

These staples and other foods in the Dominican culinary repertoire have become in public spaces (such as restaurants, grocery stores, supermarkets, street food vendors) not only ‘ethnic’ boundary markers but also sites of cultural encounters with diverse local residents, and restaurants offer diverse clients one more version of a ‘Latino’ cooking while preserving some unique re-interpretations of Dominican staples which points to an ongoing standardization of a new Dominican-American cuisine. Nevertheless it is from contested domestic spaces, through preparation and meanings of such staples, through food -unpaid and paid- labor that one can best ascertain the role of food in cultural and community formation and in the production of local histories. It is through transforming cooking practices within specific kitchens as prepared by specific gendered hands (be they a mother in a household or a cook at a restaurant) that local food relations are culturally performed, used strategically and re-signified.

It is not productive to assume communities; it could be better to examine how they form. Examining the production of Dominican local histories through food reveals the diversity of Dominican communities through points of alliance and ruptures through food exchanges. For example, there are diverse forms of communities of practice; within each community there are even smaller networks also claiming a ‘Dominican’ difference that each individual or group perceives as ‘authentic’. As Ahmed (2000) has pointed out, it is in the new grounds ‘away from home’ that these migrants communities arise, alliances that otherwise might not have come together before migration. One of my
disagreements with Dominican and other Hispanic Caribbean migration studies concerns
the assertion that such groups represent one single ‘community’. I propose that there are
multiple communities, marked by waves of different migrations from DR, corresponding
to specific migrant seasonings but also according to individual life projects and
aspirations.

First and subsequent Dominican migrant generations go through the process of
performing boundaries of belonging to negotiate cultural politics. This process occurs in
households, within particular sectors of the Dominican population, within different
neighborhoods, and with other groups and public/state institutions in the city. In relation
to the production of a local sense of home, the most immediate networks of survival
appear to delimit which alliances are extended to form social networks and the way
shared ideological dispositions appear to have a clear effect on such alliances. I consider
food relations (and their underlying practices and narratives) as some of the most
concrete cultural resources and venues of network formation that Dominican working-
class migrant women and their families use to create such alliances, to navigate
domestic/public spaces, and to ‘suture’ (Hall 1996) -that is, to heal, to repair- their
shifting sense of selves, dwellings and identifications.

MAIN COURSE:
FOOD NARRATIVES, LOCATIONS OF ‘HOME’, AND THE WORK OF MEMORY

In spite of its clear connections to memory, food has not been directly utilized to
theorize memory processes (Holtzman, 2006). Cultural memory specifically in relation to
food remembrances has not received much theoretical attention in Anthropology,
memory or food studies, except in the works of Sutton (2001), Narayan (1995), and
indirectly through some indirect discussions, for example, in the works of Douglas (1997)
and Seremetakis (1994). Sutton in particular in his study of Kalymnian food practices,
has revealed the importance of food sensory memory in the ‘construction of worlds’,
referring to the way food evokes "worlds of home, family, community and cultural
definitions" (2001:82). Through a sort of ‘synesthesia’ (union of the senses and emotional
evocation) a "symbolic transfer" occurs, where embodied food memories bring to
presence past experiences of place, of social contact, and of who we were in the past.
Most important in relation to my approach is Sutton’s assertion that "food narratives become crucial elements in the construction of personal history" (2001:51).

There are some operations, discourses and tropes that intersect both sites of personal and collective memory, since these two are not mutually exclusive but rather are deeply entangled. For example, even though all cultural productions are generated from specific perspectives, experiences and social locations, remembrances and memorializations are narrative performances that produce their meanings with reference to certain available public discourses. Also both individual and collective memory exclude/include in a conscious and unconscious forgetting inherent to such practices, generating silences, gaps and exaggerations. Personal and collective memorializations occur within specific situated production of histories, as part of practical projects that, more than referencing the past, express and re-invent present and future aspirations (see Trouillot 1996). In this sense cultural memory is always place-specific and strategic, simultaneously personal and collective, public and private.

Selected aspects of the past and memory activities are launched from specific points or strategic locations in the present, linked to collective identity construction and projects for new imagined communities “to recognize themselves through time” (Halbwachs 1992:45). “Collective memory involves active memory work” according to Bardenstein (1999:156) as the imagination invests these sites with “commemorative vigilance”, which takes many forms in specific contexts and in particular social histories. Even though these authors still seem to be talking about collective memory as generators and receptors of memory processes, it is through individuals that memory recall is produced. I suggest that it is more productive for ethnographic food studies to foreground individual memory processes, since (like any part of a holographic image) each subject expresses and reveals many aspects of collective processes and histories, yet also contest and re-invent larger discursive formations.

Food practices and narratives as self and group representation could be seen as parallel versions of individual and collective memories, collaged, repackaged, circulated and consumed by specific audiences. Official cuisine and marginal food narratives -and the memory-history they encode- propose their own versions, silences, and gaps, but often leave traceable resonances to places, events and relations. Food memories need the concrete support of cooking, or at least consuming practices, and with a certain
frequency, since “it is precisely their ordinary status that makes ordinary narrative memories powerful sites in cultural processes” (Bal 1999: xi).

Bardenstein (1999), speaking of trees in contested Israeli-Palestinian cultural recall, and Spitzer’s (1999) discussion of memory processes in post-Allende Chile, ground these views on narrative memories by specifying how the performance of ‘memory-work’--or as Ahmed (2000) calls it, ‘acts of memory’--needs concrete sites such as objects, places, substances, or even representations (such as artworks) to invest with ‘commemorative vigilance’. Food practices and narratives become affectively invested in the most basic aspects of everyday survival, but also in the remembrance of past struggle and power negotiations within and outside households. Repetitive activities such as domestic routine (shopping for food, cooking, eating, cleaning, etc.), can have associations and investment with trauma. In the case of some working class migrants hunger and struggles for food, and the trauma of the conditions of departure are two examples, among many others. Food sites implicate nostalgic discourses that “structure relation to the past” (Bal 1999:45) and mix ordinary and traumatic memory, which becomes culturally productive in the performance of subjectivities and group belonging. Most importantly these discourses and memories are used as critical/creative strategies to restore internal/external boundaries, and for narrative re-inscription of embodied experiences into new landscapes and histories.

For many working class Dominican immigrant women in NYC, food has become such a strategic site. Spitzer (1999) suggests that specifically for migrants the "geographic distance of the object" is invested with narrative memory of the break (rupture) between people and the land. This distance is problematized for memory investments in food practices, since the physical foods are present, but they are still a proxy, not being the same foods. Migrants are forever complaining about how they need to increase seasonings of their foods since the produce in the new society seem to them to taste bland. This culturally produced taste of food seems to be learned not through the foods themselves but through contextual social events that marked emotionally and aesthetically such substances and commodities. Also the relation and meanings to certain staples get re-signified through gender role transformations and with class mobility, pointing to how narrative memories are updated according to present circumstances.

Because narrative memory and acts of remembrance occur through the confluence of nostalgic (affective), traumatic, and critical memory (Sturken 1999), we could use
food-narratives to re-think migrant food relations beyond bounded-traditional ‘ethnic
foodways’. This practical memory-work and concrete gendered labor constitute not only
a nostalgic exercise, but entail critical, traumatic and historical imagination with
important implications, particularly to examine Dominican and other Afro-Caribbean
cultural formations in the US. Food memories seem to be clear “embodiment of memory
in certain sites where a sense of historical continuity persists” (Spitzer 1999:92). Versions
of meals get fixed at “certain points of break with the past,” a rupture of people-land that,
regardless of past conflicts in the sending society, creates a mark of absence felt as a
wound sometimes, especially when there is also a break in language. Affective memory
"landmarks" such as foods become then key elements of mental maps of past and present
localities, embedded in political projects, and in re-foundational mythic narrative-making.

This key point of the inseparability of narrative from memory processes has been
addressed clearly by other scholars, although not in relation to food (Bal, Crewe &
Spitzer 1999). Mieke Bal asserts that ‘cultural recall from the present’ is something “we
perform not that happens to us,” and she defines “memory as active and situated in the
present.... as action of telling a story” (Bal 1999:45). Nostalgia and longing as routines
have a ‘narrative chain’ that goes from habitual memories to narrative memories, from
remembering to recall and remembrance. The ‘integrative effect’ of narrative memory
consists in the “restorative potential of speech acts and expressions” (Sturken 1999:238);
through present memory as the “object of narrative activity” gets evidenced the
importance of individual memory processes since such private acts reveal the “agency of
subjects that do the remembering”. I think that it is important to consider also the kinds
of artifacts and strategies employed in such acts, and especially their expressive
modalities, their poetics.

Where is ‘Home’ and how do we get ‘there’?

In order to understand narratives generated from migrants’ place-making and lived
experiences as expressed through food, we need to question and examine notions of
‘home’, its relation to shelter, place and to social relations. Places are produced by
multiple groups through time, creating layers of overlapping uses and cultural
transformations of space. I define place as a geographic, historical, social and culturally
specific location. Since places are experienced and perceived from culturally and
personally situated histories, one place (such as kitchen or a neighborhood) has many
possible definitions and representations, and encoding of past places is constantly re-imagined according to present conditions. A place is also not equal to itself through historical transformations in time; layers of multiple histories accumulate and overlap, many local marginal histories disappearing in the process of reconstruction of the built landscapes. Place, then becomes ‘activated’ as such by the kinds of practices and interactions performed in them as territories. An understanding of place as produced entails a definition of space as ‘social relations’ (Massey 2001, Fraser 1993) not only situated in place but in time. Such a definition seems to be the most productive in analyzing how cultural places from kitchens to streets are produced in the present through historically specific interactions among people, architectures, and artifacts within power relations.

A specific place in which the household is located is needed as a pre-condition for a sense of home; or is it? If we accept the definition of ‘home’ as relations to places, peoples, and meanings, as historical, political and poetic negotiations (Mohanty 2003, Ahmed 2000, Brah 1996) which frames individual or group’s daily survival in-place, then home is not a given but a project implicating as much states of imagination and practices as actual roofs, beds and kitchens. Households even if they don’t coincide with ‘home’ are places of daily reproduction of our humanity (even a street corner for a homeless person); they are also spaces we all have in common in spite of the staggering variations of inequality and of the cultural specific ways we produce our lives. This aspect of ‘home’ implicates a search for shelter; in the sense of domestic spheres, of the private spaces which in my view are where all the collective generalities are decided and sorted out. A shelter is a common ground of return to a place where we all need to go everyday to reproduce our daily lives, rest, eat, sleep, for hygiene, companionship, and communication.

Home is then, not quite a place nor a bounded shelter, but a space of experience and representation, a permeable dimension that extends in all historical, emotional and geographic directions we have lived. Such lived experiences deeply mark not only spaces of residence; but through traumatic, violent, dangerous and conflictive events, boundaries of home are re-drawn persisting as embodied memory years after the events. Like scattered pieces of our histories, multiple and partial senses of home are attached to local and translocal spaces, and to the narrative memories we have produced to make sense of our lives. Each of these kaleidoscopic pieces are however not preexisting but re-
imagined, re-invented from the present through our struggles and memorializations from present local homes.

Home as a refuge, in the sense of finding familiarity, affinities, networks of solidarity, of community, is though a constant unfinished aspiration, frequently fraught with conflicts and negotiations. This putative ‘safe space’ of home (never fully separate from home as nation) has been well critiqued by feminists of all persuasions and theoretical analysis focused on gender, race, class, place and sexuality (hooks 1982, Lorde 1984, Mohanty 2003, Duncan 1996, Fraser 1993). For example, many working-class women of color (and immigrants in particular) experience a double displacement tinted with diverse forms of concrete and symbolic violence within and outside households; theirs is a long and continuing journey to find a sense of place, to find a piece of ground from where to protect and justify their presence. For many migrant groups in the US this journey to find where home is takes generations into the future, until there remains no explicit desire for a memory of a homeland in a far away place or for a new dream home never attained in the new society.

Self’ and ‘community’, instead of polarities, constitute an extended continuum of space (this is, of social relations) that shapes our notions of ‘home’. ‘Home’ seems to include vast fabrics, territories, tangled memories and relations to food, commodities, environments, bodies, and consciousness as well as to extended nets of institutional locations. In this sense, home is a form of spatial embodiment that gets translated through our active imagination. Such complex webs of experiences and of inherited notions of home, could be mapped then not as a priori realities but as emergent historical and situational maps in a ‘matrix of power relations’ (Ortner, 2006).

Where home begins or ends is hard to delineate, as it is produced through specific experiences in-place, yet constantly shifting through our social locations and even with our changing personal aspirations. Mohanty’s (2003) definitions of gendered experiences of home and community as "relational contested and emergent grounds", “socio-historical relations” and as "strategic locations of specific people" help us pay attention to how individuals negotiate daily passages between individual and collective projects and struggles. Such definitions are particularly useful to addresses forms of citizenship, production of social agency, and testimonial practices and consciousness of "third world women" as they struggle to become subjects of their own histories. This way of defining
the shifting boundaries of home seems crucial to me also to understand the production of migrant communities and migrant subjectivity.

This dialectical, feminist and post-colonial approach to the material and cultural production of notions of home, self and community is helpful in conceptualizing the concrete relations that condition, for example, Dominican migrant homes and experiences in NYC. Migrant senses of home implicate internal and external trajectories through which multiple forms of displacements occur. In this sense movements towards or/and away from home become ‘boundary projects’ (Haraway 1989) in need of constant vigilance, careful repetition and performance in everyday life.

Another generative way of examining home grounded in-place is Dolores Hayden's (1997) usage of ‘place-memory’ and ‘body-memory’ to point to the ‘persistence of place’ in women narratives. Her research departs from a social history approach to the study of local histories by mapping out spatial and relational social layers of urban environments. Hayden explores how marginal subjects (especially African-American women) use situated memories and stories to narrate their participation in building communities, and to articulate personal histories in multicultural neighborhoods in Los Angeles. Her participatory methodology of cognitive mappings from ordinary residents’ points of view to trace local histories is very useful in researching and understanding, for example, how Dominican migrants perceive and navigate local spaces through their food routes as they inscribe new narrative memories to find spaces of home in specific neighborhoods in NYC (frequently through landmarks such as Dominican food businesses but sometimes also Korean Delis where they find affordable and fresh produce for their cooking).

We need also to take into consideration ecological systems even in urban landscapes, since these have implications for our daily practices; food production and distribution processes span large regions implicating not only human labor and lives but also the organism and plants we eat, land usage and water and air quality. Another layer of usage, environments are not only backgrounds but cultural landscapes for sociality (for example, some Dominican residents in Washington Heights participate in community gardens, and use public parks for family recreation which include picnics and cook-outs). These ecological relations (to urban landscapes, and to flora and fauna as scarce patches of ‘nature’ in the City) are rescued by bioregional literature, defining home as regional movements and relations to bioregions (see Aberley, 1993). It is from the specificity of our sense of ‘home’ -of the locations we perceive that we occupy on the planet- that we
become part of the flow of our bioregions, relating in specific ways even to the weather and to other organisms.

These conceptualizations of home I offered above seem useful to me because they resonate with how immigrants live and re-imagine their personal and cultural histories through consecutive ‘homes’, movements and routes through neighborhoods, cities, countries and interconnected bioregions. Through an ethnographic approach we can pay more careful attention to all these home layers, and through fieldwork engagement it may be possible to get a glimpse of which migrant re-imaginings, memory-work, and material productions of place are generated through food in their re clamations of cultural regions of home.

A sensation of a shifting home map is experienced when in a short period of time we need to change residence. Such sensations get magnified particularly through international migration and displacement\(^2\), as material-semiotic grounds (the way we support ourselves economically and the way we represent and make sense of our experiences) are renegotiated in a new society especially when confronting a new language and new social relations. Such re-drawing of boundaries ‘re-season’ all experiential aspects of migrant lives as individuals and their communities witness how they become different to themselves, and realize the impossibility of return to a place-time that is not \textit{there} anymore even if they were to go back. I propose that food mappings can help us trace and analyze some roles of food in such migrant ‘boundary projects’\(^3\).

\section*{Food-Place-Memory: Contexts, Relations and Histories}

These areas of concern discussed above, food, memory and home intersect at the point of migrant narrative practices and citizenship locations. To examine Dominican migrants’ food-narratives of home in NYC, I paid attention to the life projects of individuals within families, and to their responses to gender, class and racial maps that condition the kinds of food and shelters they can have access to in NYC urban spaces, considering that they do not fully fit in the ‘normative narratives of the US nation’ (Buff,

\footnote{\textsuperscript{2} Internal migration could be as or even more traumatic, as indigenous populations in the Americas, Africa and Australia have experienced through genocide and forced relocations for so many centuries.}

\footnote{\textsuperscript{3} ‘Boundary projects’ is Donna Haraway’s term (1989), one she uses to discuss scientific discourses in defining and representing human ‘nature’. The way I interpret and use it here means that socio-cultural boundaries do not pre-exist but are produced consciously and unconsciously by the life projects and aspirations of situated subjects, in daily interactions and negotiations within institutional and power regimes.}
2001). However, in interpreting migrant place-making experiences through food, such sites are already "inscribed and inscribing" (Abarca, 2006) by specific foods, narrative memories, former homes, and past disposable citizenship locations experienced in the sending society.

We don’t have direct access to others’ ‘sense’ of home -which refers abstractly to an emotional state- but through what people express about their lives. We experience such sense and communicate it to ourselves and others through narrative mediations, through what is expressed indirectly about place and space of relations and history-memories of where we have been and where we are, as we evaluate our personal and our community's survival. Our bodies are situated in specific places, topographically and spatio-temporally (this is, through social relations to other people, objects, environments and to self) and such relations are already untados (soiled) with cultural memory. Body-place-memory as performed through food relations is then a useful triad to ground analysis about such home relations.

Giving food-narratives historical depth, departing from present layers of food relations, one can trace how food is implicated in migrant trajectories and the work food is made to perform in the production of personal and collective histories. A focus on the poetics and politics of food as a tool for ‘social action’ (Bentley 1998) but also as ‘cultural-work’ (Williams-Forson 2006) helps us examine food-narratives bridging diverse theoretical contributions linking narrative performance to memory via social history and cultural studies (Sturken 1999, Hall 1984, Hayden 1997) by investigating "migrant acts of memory" (Ahmed 2000) beyond tradition/nostalgia, emphasizing instead critical and traumatic experiences that inscribe narrative memories as contested sites of re-invention of family histories in the gendered production of migrant food, place-making and notions of 'home'.

Claude Levi-Strauss' classic work on mythology (1970) proposed food as a model sign system within which to discover underlying structural categories and correspondences. His object of study was not food per se; however his approach is useful to think with myth about food, by reading food practices as cultural myth-making. This usefulness becomes clearer through Douglas’s tangential consideration of memory in the recall of previous meals (see Sutton 2001). Foregrounding narrative memories, we could propose that meals (almost as myths) are re-inscribed in the present in a narrative sense; each meal version pointing to past and future meals and to the social contexts in which
they are produced. In this way migrant food practices are re-invented semiotically and materially around such food-narrative transformations.

There is also another cultural coding of food at different levels of linguistic and non-verbal memory-socialization that rests on the qualities of food as visual and sensory consumption. These aspects seem to be important for the special power of food in linking remembrance to environments, food substances nourishing roles that grounds a sense of embodiment and self-image, as well as the foods themselves as ‘artifacts’ for social exchange and gift-giving. This force seems to reside also in the investment in time and energy that foods require for production and preparation, pointing to food-related ‘time as work’ (Mintz 1996). This power of food as value and as gift ‘obligates’ people into relations of reciprocity and solidarity (Mauss 1990 [1950]) even if not consciously intended. Yet, as Sutton (2001) has suggested, within some communities it is not an immediate reciprocity, or material exchange, or even prestige that is obtained, but what we could call ‘memory capital’; to be able to produce from present food exchanges future food-narrative memories and remembrances. Such capital is also part of the ongoing creation of social and survival networks through which I propose community formations are maintained and contested, and sites of historical imagination put in-place for re-inventing meanings of ‘home’.

Kitchens as ‘contradictory spaces’ (Lefebvre 1991) place in evidence the gendered spatiality of power that does not begin or end in a plate of food. Maria Elisa Christie (2003) through her study of three communities in Mexico proposes kitchenspaces as "gendered spaces of cultural reproduction", as sites of “situated knowledge, labs and archives” of cultural transmission, and as household sites from where women and their families negotiate relations to environments. Expanding on this insight we could conceive migrant cooking and food-narrative performance as sources and strategies for cultural and political action and for re-imaginings of cultural histories. Among working-class Dominican women immigrants such practices become also repositories of their histories that reveal traces of political struggles before and after migration. Memories of past food scarcity that threatened their very subsistence seem to become privileged in food narratives as cultural strategies to re-imagine their capacity for creative survival.
Experiences of body-place-memory\textsuperscript{4} are important for how we inhabit and claim spaces of home and action. In our search for grounding we leave traces of our specific and situated experiences of place; such incidental –and accidental- traces appear in explicit and implicit food practices and narratives. The entanglements of food, memory and home are shaped by particular socio-cultural and historical locations that condition the boundaries of our daily survival, but also by the experiential narrative maps we produce to make sense of our lives. By focusing on food-centered narratives as “coherent” proposals through which individuals and communities (and even nations) negotiate their histories and home experiences, we leave room to conceive of food practices as creative performance, forms of action and representation sites.

DESSERT:

FOOD MAPPINGS, CRITICAL ETHNOGRAPHY, AND POSITIONALITY

Food mapping is a way of tracing - local and translocal- boundaries of ‘home’ and experiences of place-memory through food relations, useful to research and analyze the role of food for the way migrants experience, re-imagine and narrate experiences of home, subjectivity and community formation. A foodmaps framework might be useful for reading food practices, cultural memory and narratives of home as ‘boundary

\textsuperscript{4} See Sutton for a discussion of food, memory and the senses, also Nadia Seremetakis’ book \textit{The Senses Still}. Sensory fields around food create a synergy involving all the senses, through these experiences we associate moments, places and the space our bodies occupy. For third world immigrants, place-body-memory relations are problematized even further, since their bodies are experienced as out of place, under the surveillance of the new state and its institutions. This marks deeply the way they are able to feel, or not feel, at ‘home’, and may have an effect on the way memory of former selves, former households and countries are constantly recalled and re-invented.
projects’ (Haraway 1989), and it can reveal how individual food narratives and agendas of ‘home’ become political, spatial, and cultural sites in need of daily and careful negotiations. I propose we could map experiential and perceptual boundaries of home through food relations. Working with small samplings and more in depth field research we can study food from the perspectives of specific people in relation to specific foods and places and in the context of their present and ethnohistorical emergence.

The primary sources that make up the layers of foodmaps are gathered during collaborative ethnographic encounters. The word *foodmap* could be assigned to any representational trace related to food: a plate of food, an actual map (hand drawn), a food narrative, or audio-visual documentation of food preparation, food shopping, etc. Each food-related trace gathered becomes part of the many layers of context of a person’s ongoing foodmaps of ‘home’, which extends as far back as their translocal relations take them (but concretely only if such relations figure prominently in their survival networks, by literal food exchanges or other support needed to procure food and shelter). Foodmaps thus reveal areas of an extended –and often conflictive- shifting map of the multiple locations migrants (but I think also anyone) need to navigate in order to feel at home. The depth and extend of the mapping and the ordering of layers –for data gathering- is not strict; it might be conditioned to the length of fieldwork and to the kinds of interactions we develop with our collaborators, as well as by the research questions we use to guide our projects.

Food mapping as a methodology pays attention to the way people relate to food through navigating place-memory (in domestic and public spheres), through domestic practices, food-related narratives and personal/collective histories. It is important to clarify that a food mapping approach is concerned with whatever foods people actually eat (be it cooked at home and/or consumed in public food establishments not only with ‘typical ethnic’ staples), how they procure them, where they are prepared or consumed –kitchens, neighborhoods, state, country- and what it means in their life trajectories. Food-narratives from individual perspectives are used as crucial mapping layers that help us contextualize the other aspects of food relations that we gather, it is in a way the what connects the plate of food, place-displacement, and the personal-collective histories implicated in how these particular food-people relations emerged in specific place-time.

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5 For a detailed explanation of food mapping, mapping the plate, and food-centered research on Dominican communities in NYC, see Marte 2006, 2007, 2008—full entry in references.
Although food mapping is primarily a methodological device (a way to organize the gathering of food related primary sources), I have found that it could also be used as a theoretical framing at the moment of analysis, by decoding expanding context of meanings through critical ethnographic readings to reveal the cultural poetics and politics\(^6\) of food among study participants. Ethnographic readings of foodmaps begin with a semiotic analysis of primary sources, situating each layer within culturally specific histories as representational strategies, contextualization within study participants’ life histories - through their intersecting social locations-, and finally identifying how such food practices and narratives establish a conversation between personal and collective projects and discourses (be it of gender, race, class, national cuisine, etc.). Taking present food-place-memory relations as departures I examine domestic and public spaces to understand how present practices and meanings emerged historically and how these are re-invented in the present in specific places.

In tracing the full extent of Elsa’s foodmaps (of which I only offered a brief version in the Appetizers) I examined, for example, which concrete plates of food were cooked or consumed as her main staples, to begin exploring the expanding context of relations, context and histories that gives such foods meaning in this person’s migrant trajectories. In my fieldwork the tracing begins from the smallest to the largest context: each food staple, the income (types of jobs), the ingredients and the places where they were procured, the labor-time and preparation, the intersecting social locations and subjectivity of who prepares and eats it, the implicated gendered socialization of such cooking knowledge, the history of how the meal came into this person’s life. This tracing includes also the wider Dominican food systems and national cuisine frame within which the meal exists, the migrant trajectory that brought this particular food, person and cultural history to its present locality, and which, if any translocal routes link this person and meal to the DR. Then, the tracing returns back to the present to explore how particular localities shape food routes and re-imaginings of ‘home’; such as neighborhood conditions in NYC, this person’s concrete apartment and kitchen spaces, the cooking and eating practices, and the narrative memories that arise around food related activities.

\(^6\) By poetics I mean the linguistically specific expressive resources as they appear in narratives primary sources, when taken as not only ‘data’ but also as self-representations and testimonies. The politics points to the inherent power relations in all human interactions and to the transformation of food within geopolitical histories implicating bodies, and places.
For example, I gathered foodmap layers in domestic and public spaces by traveling with study collaborators their daily, weekly and monthly food cycles, and gathering food-centered life histories of their families, each member changing relations to both Dominican and other food consumption, and finally the place context, the neighborhoods and US state/region where they live presently as well as the local hometown from where they migrated. These experiential narrative maps helped me understand how Dominicans (especially first generation immigrant women) ‘season’ their foods, their subjectivity, places they inhabit, as well how they are ‘seasoned’ in the process into new socio-cultural and racial locations within a new society. Foodmaps were instrumental in my being able to research, document and understand the migrant food, memory, and home seasonings of my fieldwork collaborators, and the effects that my own foodmaps have in my research approaches. Following these paths made it easier to identify how first generation Dominican women immigrants -who are usually the main cooks in their households-placed more emphasis on food sites as landmarks to navigate their local places, to re-imagine their sense of home, as narrative performance sites and communicative spaces, used often, for example, to suture linguistic and social ruptures because of the emerging cultural differences between themselves and their offspring.

Even though food mappings are concerned with localities, tracing those immediate relations reveals the global connections of personal histories, households and neighborhoods through the political economy that connects food, labor, commodities and geopolitics. I find that focusing on food relations we could more directly trace the effects of global forces and spatial regimes on the lives and movements of migrant families and individuals. These same forces made it possible, and in some cases necessary, for Dominican migrant women today to be in NYC cooking their staples. Tracing material and symbolic home choreographies through the production of foodmaps offers a perspective that emphasizes body-place-memory recognizing the ecological, cultural and historical predicaments of our relations to food and the cultural narratives –in many forms- that we generate as responses to such predicaments.

The use of foodmaps has implications and contributions to make primarily to ethnographic studies of Afro-Caribbean migration and other diasporic processes by foregrounding place-making, narrative memories, and historical consciousness as ongoing negotiations of ‘home’ from diverse citizenship locations. One important implication of foodmaps is the way it helps us ground research from specific narrative
points and marginal histories. Mapping literally and conceptually food’s spatiality of power in urban spaces may reveal small claims to autonomy, as well as self- and community-making practices which migrants –and other marginalized individuals and groups- have to negotiate in order to produce daily a sense of ‘home’.

Foodmaps as an experimental, partial and provisional framework, could be especially appealing to feminist and Afro-diasporic researchers, to ‘native’ or ‘insider’ ethnographers, and to other scholars and cultural workers who wish to preserve the emotional, political and poetic complexity that food has in our human experiences. As a feminist critical ethnographer, and an ‘insider’ to the communities I work with, I appreciate, in particular how the process and products of food mapping help me develop collaborative research, as well as to share with local communities the primary sources that they help me produce. This type of short term outcome of research –before we produce our academic narratives, many times written in a different language- can be made accessible through diverse venues and media, such as exhibitions, films, and websites, since these primary sources --as documents and artworks-- are not only ‘data’ for our studies but testimonies that belong to family and community archives. As I have experienced through my own auto-ethnographic explorations, the practice of food mapping may become in itself an act of transformation. It has helped me re-awaken to my food relations, to a sense of place and attention to daily textures and landscapes restoring certain grounding (yearned for in my own migrant history) in my local neighborhoods and in the personal/collective relations that shape my sense of home.

Some of the most intriguing and revealing aspects of food and eating are for me how food mediates categories that set discursive and material boundaries not only of cultural identities, but of food, bodies, events and environments, and how it helps us to problematize binary oppositions of private/public, us/them, here/there, memory/history, past/present. It is because of this capacity of food for placing in evidence the power and contradictions of boundaries, that we can use it for mapping migrant processes, particularly to understand transculturation as cultural projects in constant negotiation within contested community and subjectivity formations.

RE-TURNING THROUGH ANOTHER ROUTE: WHY ‘SEASONINGS’?
A struggle for food, memory, and home have been pivotal in the histories of Dominican and Afro-Caribbean populations, and in the historical "engenderings" and "seasonings" that have conditioned their survival, access to land and resources, and to political and cultural representation. Dominican ‘ethnic’ foodways when examined within Afro-diasporic social formations reveal the entanglements of food relations in local/global, past/present and public/private cartographies of power. The island of Hispaniola and the rest of the Caribbean were the experimental territories of the first colonial formations in the Americas where complex encounters of food systems, food practices and food meanings seasoned syncretic meals, peoples and places through colonization and slavery (Mintz 1996, Ortiz-Cuadra 2006). These food ecological and socio-political entanglements are what I refer to as *migrant seasonings*.

The word ‘seasoning’ refers to the forced enculturation and training of the first enslaved Africans in the Caribbean. It refers metaphorically not only to such violent practices but also to the creative contestation and agency of these Afro-Caribbean populations as they seasoned their foods, lives, and homes in relation to colonial and post-colonial situations. Plantains were introduced as a food plant and as a staple food for "pigs and slaves" (Vega 1986) during Hispaniola's colonization. Beans and manioc testify to how indigenous food subsistence practices and affective relations to certain crops became deeply entrenched in the mutual seasonings among the few Tainos left (mestizos and *amulatados* already), African slaves and their descendants, free or *cimarrón*, and Spaniards and creoles. These foods still figure prominently in present Dominican food practices in NYC neighborhoods.

My initial interest in what I call ‘seasoning selves’ was related to the way I conceive of the significance of Dominican foods and food practices in flavoring ways of...
knowing and performing Dominicanness. Sazón as flavoring of cultural understandings, refers also to present and historical practices of seasoning bodies and relations through multiple social categories of class, gender, race, sexuality and even age. It refers to the process of becoming ‘social food’ for some particular others, in certain particular ways, and the contested ways of ‘consuming such differences’. Playing with the polysemic implications of seasoning selves, as selves who season, and selves that are being seasoned, I want to point to a preparing of bodies (be it of plant, animal or human) for certain functions, for certain modes of consumption.

Taking these above definitions—and my discussion below—of ‘seasoning’ (of foods, of bodies, of speech) as departure points, I suggest there are some productive angles to re-conceptualize Dominican social formations as ‘migrant seasonings’. They can help us think about place-memory and struggles for a sense of home as revealed through food’s transits and negotiations across domestic/public seasonings. Using such definitions of seasonings as a provisional context I suggest three questions as angles of entry: how are metaphors of seasoning, (in terms of domesticating bodies, practices and expressions) relevant to food, memory and home practices? what is the relevance of this questioning for daily survival projects of healing/suturing ‘selves’ for Afro-Caribbean migrant subjects in the US? how could a focus on food reveal productive implications for the seasoning of self, community and citizenship experienced by Dominican immigrants in NYC?

Seasoning’s associated definitions of flavoring, softening systematically, transforming, ‘breaking’, molding, shaping, point directly to practices and knowledges of making-slaves in the Americas, but also to gendered processes of socialization and to past and present cultural ways of Afro-diasporic ‘self-making’ (Hall 1996, Allen 2007). The material and symbolic ways of consuming foods, people, environments, and discourses of ‘those others marked as forces of production’ (Lorde 1984) have exaggerated culmination in the African slave trade. This encompassing enterprise took place through particular regional modalities in relation to the environments, demographics and the everyday survival of slaves, masters and everyone else in between the bondage scale.

Alex Bontemps (2001) discusses how Africans and their descendants responded to the process of enslavement in the Americas. He proposes that a remarkable “creative

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7 A double meaning of consuming refers for me to ingesting but also extinguishing or being eaten away passion or by illness, both with associated bodily and symbolic pain and/or pleasure.
adaptation to survive in hostile environments” was generated by these individuals and groups to confront the “systematic assaults in their sense of self” created by the “middle passage,” the seasoning process, and the consequent silence and “erasure of black subjectivity” on the part of slave owning societies. This erasure of equal grounds to claim rights was inherent to racial supremacy (and to justify to planters’ consciousness) a violent but profitable enterprise was necessary to turn Africans into laborers; ‘outlandish negroes’ into ‘sensible negroes’. Bontemps draws the conclusion that if Africans survived the middle passage and the ‘seasoning,’ they had to accept this silence and learn the double consciousness game. But through revolts, runaway individuals and full gangs (including women with their children with and without male companions) according to Morgan (2004) were as much the norm as compliance. This ‘infra-politics’ (Scott 1990) led to eventual organized resistance. In a social mess of such proportions, slaves “built a life for themselves in the narrow margins between total submission and open defiance” (Bontemps 2002:133).

We could think about slavery as “a system of personal relationships” (Paterson through Bontemps, 2002); as multiple sites of diverse ‘seasonings’ that in particular places and through specific networks (of masters, slaves and ‘free’ persons) created hegemonic and counter-hegemonic struggles and aspirations with repercussions felt by many generations until the present. The first reported uses of the word *cimarrón* emerged in Hispaniola to name runaway *chivos* –goats- (see Price 2002). *Cimarronaje* (maroonage) is an important concept in relation to Morgan’s discussion --not necessarily as an explicit freedom-consciousness to create sovereign nationhood-- but in practical ways of formation of maroon networks as *ad hoc* communities of struggles and sheer survival. These contingent coalitions (of great relevance still in DR) have a long history of collective bargaining to re-group, creating spaces of solidarity in awareness of their partial alliances, partial shared political projects and always unfinished and contingent strategies of identification. Lets keep in mind this maroonage, to which I will return through another route.

Taken the above discussion on ‘seasonings’ and ‘middle passages’ I suggest thinking about today’s ‘diasporic spaces’ (Brah 1996) and Afro-diasporic contexts as *moments* and *movements* of experiences through technologies of seasoning, that from the miniature to the gigantic have conditioned, for example, the lives of Dominican populations in DR and now in the US. In the past and present such populations have
been ‘seasoned’ by the same hands and with similar ingredients. The particular geopolitics, demographic flows and cultural passages that made Dominicans possible have been deeply entwined with slavery seasonings of Hispaniola’s Dominican and Haitian populations. Mintz’s (1997) careful analysis of food and power and the way that global and local relations of production were deployed in the Caribbean are useful here to consider the historical contexts of Euro-American empires’ and local elites successive seasonings of social majorities in DR, especially through the control of land and food production creating a large disposable citizenship.

Since 1519 with the first sugar mills in Hispaniola, the extermination of most Tainos and the first carimbo markings of African flesh, in spite of multiple petite acts of sabotage and covert resistance, revolts, cimarronaje and outright revolutions, there was a massive conversion of former slaves into proletariat, ready-made transnational labor surplus hands, and for ‘development’ projects of the local quasi-bourgeoisie in DR (Bosch 1986). The U.S. trained, supported and later destroyed Leonidas Trujillo’s dictatorship that for 30 years murdered and “disappeared” thousands of individuals that challenged him and his group’s project of domination. Trujillo brought the first free trade zones to the country (as early as 1924!) and his army helped expropriate most of the lands from campesinos. Not only did he massacre Haitians in 1937; he also left as legacy an entrenched racist and anti-Haitian ideology which effects we are still experiencing today (see Cassá 1984). Political repression and the repeated failures of national projects for social justice have helped shape the extent of emigration to the US. Food and shelter in particular have been nodal points in confrontations to claim spatial and social mobility even if in doing so familiar grounds of home need to be abandoned. DR migration has been thus a contingent and long entrenched strategy in calculated ruling class and state tactics, but also in the political and economic survival projects of the marginal social majorities.

In the current ‘voluntary’ and cyclic middle passages of migration, individual decisions (negotiated among family and extended kin) to where, when, how, with whom and why to migrate are important, because it exposes what people do with official and sponsored opening and closings of borders. It also exposes how they learn to go around them. After the 1970’s the legal border containment strategies of visa and residencia entailed a long process of legal negotiation mostly by Dominican men to escape destitution and/or political repression. These legal portals were increasingly closed,
especially to poor women, yet these containments became detoured and marooned by Dominican women and men leaving illegally in yolas (makeshift boats) to Puerto Rico ending up years later in New York City.

The enslaved women that Morgan (2004) speaks of in her account of escaping bondage and taking their children with them, sometimes alone, sometimes in teams, tempts me to find echoes in working-class Dominican women and their families’ migration to the US (or to just about anywhere they can get to) and the generational waves of separations, encounters and displaced dwellings thus entailed. In both cases it seems to me they run in search of fields of survival more akin to their intentions and life projects. Could it be that some leave not only to avoid hunger and destitution but because there is no ‘home’ to lose when one is written out of national projects and where there is no longer any clear option for autonomous maroon communities?

The struggles and projects of home as ‘discontinuous moments of consciousness’ (Mohanty 2003) in global/local configurations, can be traced through food production in the Caribbean since 1492, these moment have not changed much in the ethnographic ‘present’ of the majority of Dominicans in DR, but have changed somewhat for Dominican immigrants in NYC (for example, most families don’t go hungry and have some form of shelter). Struggles for ‘home’ become grounds of poetic and political negotiations of everyday pasajes\(^8\) through cooking practices and “practices of remembering” (Ahmed 2000). Food politics and poetics are crucial in these ongoing seasonings in the new grounds of US society as the majority of first generation immigrant Dominican women and men (also a considerable sector of 2\(^{nd}\) and 3\(^{rd}\) generation) earn their plátano (to earn the income to buy the plantains) in low-paying jobs, still struggle for shelter, are racialized and marginally positioned in respect to mainstream American ‘white’ society and in relation to other ‘ethnic’ communities.

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\(^8\) The word pasaje = passage, has many connotations in Dominican Spanish; it can mean any kind of ticket for any sort of traveling, by any means of transportation, also means duration, transition, but it is especially associated since the 1970’s with migration to the US, ex. pasaje de ida, pasaje de la mona -Mona Canal- (which Dominicans use to migrated by boat illegally to Puerto Rico). For a theoretical discussion of other connotations of the word passage -as transitions that implicate power and affect-- see Brian Massumi (2002).
Yet, in the tradition of *cimarrón* strategies, Afro-Caribbean migrants find ways of reconstructing their lives. In this sense, what Robin D.G. Kelley calls (1994) *alternative* measures of autonomy and ‘spaces of pleasure’ are useful for thinking about food-memory-place and Dominican women’s network formations as they claim new spaces of autonomy and difference in NYC. “These daily acts have cumulative effects on power relations” (Kelley 1994:34) regardless of subjects’ overt political intentions. Such daily acts have effects at least in their ordinary and immediate spheres of action.

I find that the concept of ‘acculturation’ does not take us far in understanding these ‘migrant seasonings’. More useful is the Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz’ concept of ‘transculturation’ -developed in the 1940s- which suggests instead a two way directional process; a simultaneous destruction and creativity of unions. He insists that this concept is indispensable to understand Cuba “whose history...is an intense, complex, unbroken process of transculturation of human groups, all in states of transition... intermeshed transmigrations of people” (Ortiz 1995:103). In spite of the plentiful fluid and fuzzy concepts we have today within anthropological frameworks and through other critical approaches, the genesis of this ‘transculturation’ concept in the Caribbean --and the way Ortiz used it to analyze the poetics and politics of contrapuntal Caribbean social processes-- makes it still relevant to understand contemporary Caribbean populations and their diasporas in the US.

A rescue of this concept can be productive to understand migration processes, particularly if updated by ‘re-seasoning’ it with critical examinations of intersecting race, gender, and sexuality *contrapunteos*\(^9\) as experienced by particular communities in

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\(^9\) For example as Jafari S. Allen, Antonio Benitez-Rojo and others are so promisingly doing in their works.
specific place-time. I find this concept of ‘transculturation’ very similar in intention to my use of ‘seasonings’, as both point to a contrapuntal process of mutual seasonings that occur within all forms of cultural encounters, in trying to convert marginal groups and migrants into available -yet contained- human resources, and also processes by which such groups shape their multiple positionings, alliances and belongings, giving specific flavors to their cultural histories. Both concepts attempt to point out the limitations and the potential of binary oppositions we inherited from colonization and capitalism, and their consequent race/gender/class/ national formations, and the constraints of mestizaje and assimilation discourses. I don’t think Ortiz’ usage of sugar and tobacco were only ‘productive metaphors for relations of production’ (Coronil 2003). Rather, in placing loving emphasis in the life-cycles, production, consumption, and in the historical, social and cultural implications of such ‘food’ plants, he points to the material and imaginative food mediations through which Caribbean cultural processes are experienced by subjects, becoming simultaneously agents and objects of their histories.

This exploration of ‘seasonings’ attempted to engage definitions, locations and spatial practices to point to the shaping of local grounds through food relations. Seasonings of food, place-memory and home point also to material-semiotic choreographies and affective relations between people and environments (whether urban jungles like NYC or in the barrio ‘Quijá Quieta’ (quiet jaw) in Santo Domingo, DR. Visualizing conceptual filters through metaphoric means such as ‘migrant seasonings’ seems right now important for me, as a way to address the complex mess and beauty of daily passages --transitory yet deadly concrete-- in the politics and poetics of eating, speaking, remembering, and migrating.

GENEALOGIES: SITUATING MY STRATEGIC LOCATIONS

Even though questions of food, home, place-space-time and memory-history are at the heart of migration flows they have only recently been addressed in migration studies, are rarely addressed in regional studies, and –to my knowledge- are absent from Caribbean and Dominican studies. Theorization of such issues and methodological innovation to address migration as instances of diasporic processes is gaining more fresh perspectives (Lowe 1996, Brah 1996, Ahmed 2000), but again such perspectives are almost absent from Hispanic Caribbean studies. The great importance attributed to food and memory is obvious in migrant daily practices, in popular culture, literature and
media. Scholarly works need to pay attention to such emphasis and to the way such sites are strategically engaged and negotiated within historical and present cultural politics. Specifically, there is much ethnographic work to be done in relation to food, memory and migration as the clear link between food, place and memory seems to be at the heart of how people deal with displacement, how migrants re-signify their food, home and history to re-invent themselves in a new society, as well as to re-imagine their transnational relations to the land they departed from.

My approach to food research was informed initially through the classical works of two anthropologists; Sidney W. Mintz insights into the centrality of time and power in the local/global political economy of food, particularly in the cultural emergence of the Caribbean region, and Mary Douglas (1997), whose semiotic attention to the deciphering of meals in their domestic contexts sought a new level of structural analysis. I engage two points in particular, Mintz’s suggestion of historically “decoding the process of encoding” (Mintz 1997:96), questioning how certain foods acquired their present meanings in their global and local contexts, and from Douglas, stress on “decoding a meal” (1997:38) at the level of consumption in the present. My work attempts to bridge these tensions between ethnographic present and historical contextualization, representation and political economy by re-conceptualizing their perspectives as complementary angles of entry into the significance of food for understanding cultural processes of specific communities. Paying attention to semiotic aspects of foods is important to understand how food is produced culturally and discursively. Attention to the historical emergence, poetics and politics of food is necessary to research and analyze the significance of food for the constant human migration flows and their consequent cultural transformation, and especially for analyzing cultural, gender, class and racial formations of Afro-diasporic populations (Williams-Forson 2006).

Through this approach I wanted to question the apparent naturalness and innocence of food issues, to reveal the politics of its cultural production. In conceptualizing food practices I am not looking for a “grammar of food” as model for or of social relations (cf. Levi Strauss 1970, Douglas 1997, Weismantel 1989). Foregrounding instead the ‘indexical’ (Turino 1967, Stewart 1993), aspects of food signs as they acquire meaning through juxtapositions, is productive in examining how personal food-narratives are produced within larger political and discursive modalities in domestic and public spaces. Emphasizing food's semiotic, emotional and spatial qualities in everyday life, yet
recognizing its shifting meanings (and material mediation) permits inclusive consideration of the manifold sensorial, political and artistic choreographies that food implicates. A historical approach to the production of knowledge and narratives (Trouillot 1996, Mohanty 2003, Ahmed 2000) may reveal more nuanced ethnographic readings of specific food relations in the present, the way they came to be, and the narratives produced in response to such relations. This ‘view from somewhere’ (Haraway 1991) can also reveal the specific journeys and histories from which these families originated, and their interpretations of forced and voluntary migrations that made possible their relations with certain foods, people and places, including interpretations of their present marginal citizenship status in a new society.

My research joins also more recent approaches to food studies, on the one hand foregrounding food and place (Duruz 2005, Cook & Crang 1996), food and memory (Sutton 2001), and particularly those addressing food practices of Latino women through life histories (Abarca 2006, Lee-Perez p.c., Counihan 1999), and food-centered social history of African-American women (Williams-Forson 2006). The methodological contributions of these later works, such as ‘charlas culinarias’ (Abarca 2006), ‘kitchen table ethnography’ (Lee-Perez p.c.) and food as both empowerment tool and ‘cultural work’ (Williams-Forson 2006), have an investment in field engagement from a feminist perspective that recognizes the creative poetics and the politics of food in the daily practices of working class women.

Ethnic foodways are usually perceived as colorful remnants of migrant traditions, sites of continuity or change in assimilation patterns, or as landmarks of exotic ghetto-landscapes, and they are frequently seen in terms of conscious choices people make to bring and maintain their food traditions (together with other essentializing tropes such music, religiosity, family values, etc.). Through my research I attempt to problematize such perceptions, by examining the poetic and political relations woven by food in domestic and public spaces. I do this first by showing how labor and food practices are contested, critical and sometimes traumatic sites that permeate many aspect of daily survival for working-class first generation immigrants. Second, I bring forth the political implications of food-memory and narrative performances in place-making and in the production of migrant 'home' through individual and communal histories. Food narratives and visual documentation of meals are often collected in foodways studies; however they
are rarely read critically or examined to understand the poetic shapes they take, and the
cultural and political projects they convey in their contents.

Many food studies on immigrant working-class groups tend to focus on diet,
nutrition, and health. Working-class diets are usually represented as a problem in need of
intervention from experts, to teach immigrant and other minority families "proper healthy
ways to eat". Other studies focus on food as traditions that people bring with them until
the ‘traditions’ are diluted when they ‘assimilate’ to US society. Still others deal with
foodways as ethnic markers. I don’t deny the utility of such studies; however there is a
need for parallel studies that focus on place-making aspects in terms of identity politics
and gender/class and racial formations. A focus on food in spatial and historical
movements, and in the lived experiences of immigrants, helps us research the formation
of immigrant communities as they emerge within complex domestic/public negotiations
in the new society, not as pre-existing groups with bounded traditions. The contributions
of my proposed approaches to food-place-memory are focused more specifically on
Dominican immigrants in the US as well as on diaspora processes common to other
Hispanic Caribbean and Latin American immigrants, and especially to Afro-diasporic
populations, whose food, memory and home projects have been tangled in long historical
struggles, and have produced complex flavors and contributions.

My approach to Dominican migration processes situates particular waves of
migrant flows within wider context of ‘diaspora’ (Brah 1996, Mohanty 2003) as
processes of displacement that include, yet are not bounded by, nation-states and are
embedded in global formations. This approach enters into conversations with recent
interests in re-placing and politically re-situating Dominican cultural formations in the
US, foregrounding race, gender, class, sexuality, generation, and citizenship. A specific
Afro-diasporic and critical race focus (Gordon & Anderson 2000, Mintz & Price 1992,
Gilroy 1993, Omi & Winant 1986, Crenshaw 1994, Allen 2007) is necessary for
particular Afro-Caribbean communities that have been ‘seasoned’ in particular ways
through similar regimens in their ethnohistorical formations. Researching cultural
practices and discourses beyond acculturation or resistance to change allows us to
appreciate daily performative ‘infrapolitics’ and ‘alternative modalities’ of agency
helps us identify the mediations (such as food) that migrants use to some sense of
autonomy (Cohen 2004), pleasure and presence. This critical look at identity politics
beyond agency, and resistance/subordination dichotomies recognizes limits and potentials that frame how particular individuals self-make and survive. Theoretical insights from third world and black feminist ethnography, and from post-colonial feminist social theory (Mohanty 2003, Scott 1999, Ahmed 2000, Visweswaran 1997, Collins 1999, Crenshaw 1994, Lorde 1984) are also useful in this respect, as we examine the complex subjectivity of ordinary women and their food practices as forms of creative agency and political actions.

As a way of ‘re-centering the margins’ I have proposed the need to critically engage -theoretically and methodologically- the triad food-place-memory, specifically with attention to migrant community formation, subjectivity and notions and experiences of ‘home’ through intersecting axes of identity -such as race, class, gender/sexuality, generation and citizenship locations-. A focus on food-place-memory is particularly important for critical ethnographers and other scholars interested in tracing the cultural histories of marginalized sectors, re-inscribing their struggles, and celebrating their historical and political consciousness, within wider projects for social justice.

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