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Lauren Wynne

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Care and the self: theorizing the significance of food in rural Yucatán

In crafting my dissertation proposal, I hypothesized that despite some dramatic economic and social changes in the late 20th and early 21st centuries in rural Yucatán, Mexico, food retained its immense significance in everyday life here, that human relationships with food revealed the competing ideologies of contemporary life, and that these ideologies were made material in engagements with food and in human bodies themselves. I had some sense of these ideologies, some older and more distinctly indigenous—food, for example, as central to cosmogony—and others more recently adopted via biomedicine or consumerism. However, I had yet to really theorize how individuals in this community adopted and enacted these ideologies, and why they did so in particular ways.

During my first three months of dissertation fieldwork in a town I call Juubche', I experienced the symptoms of what developed into a rather severe bacterial infection. I spent a good deal of time resting in my hammock in the small three-room home my husband and I were sharing with our hosts, a Yucatec Maya-speaking couple in their late fifties. My interviews delayed, I instead took copious notes about my own health, the local commentary on it, and, most importantly, how my informants understood my experience.

I began to notice the frequency with which a certain verb, 'kanan' or 'kalan'—it takes both forms in Juubche'—was appearing in conversations about my health and wellbeing in general. Most linguists translate 'kanan' and 'kalan' as 'to care' or 'to guard' (Bastarracha Manzano and Canto Rosado 2003; Bricker 1998; Andrade 1955). In Juubche', these Yucatec Maya verbs never refer to thought alone, as when one 'cares about' something in English. Instead 'kanan' and 'kalan' are used in two ways: first, to categorize practices (e.g. 'These are the ways in which I care for myself'), and, second, to provide the logic behind a particular practice (e.g. 'I do it to care for myself'). 'You should care for her by making quesadillas or spaghetti,' a visitor would impress upon my hosts. 'Doña Lorena', my hostess told me, 'you should not drink so much cold water. You must care for yourself'.

The last decade has seen the emergence of rich ethnographic literature on care that expands beyond the traditional attention to caregiving in domestic, medical, and childcare settings. Mol, Moser, and Pols's edited volume (2010) *Care in Practice* was particularly useful as I worked to theorize how care operated in Juubche'. This volume's essays examine care in settings ranging from farms to veterinary clinics and, unlike much other work on the topic of care, they do not neglect non-human agents. Care is a form of tinkering and adapting that nurtures life in various forms. In Juubche', a farmer's care for his crops and for the deities that aid in their growth lead, in turn, to the nourishing care those crops are seen to provide for him and his family. Furthermore, the authors in *Care and Practice* do not automatically endow care with virtuousness. This resonated with my own findings as well: care reflects a multitude of motives and intentions.

Coming to understand care in this more complex way and recognizing, as my informants did, the agentive potential of humans and non-humans, I still struggled with the why. If, as became clear to me, care did not always reflect affection or altruism and, say, caring for one's crops was central to ensuring one's own survival, was care often an act of self-interest? Interpreting so much of the caring of my informants in this way struck me as both harsh and inadequate. I then

happened upon Fischer and Benson's analysis of everyday morality in a Highland Maya town in Guatemala, in which they point out that, in this town, the self and, consequently, self-interest must be understood in the context of 'communalistic moral orientations' (2006, 119). I had been stuck in a narrow understanding of self-interest despite my recognition of culturally specific notions of the self. Fischer and Benson's work helped me grasp the relationship between care and the relational nature of wellbeing that largely characterized rural Yucatec Maya communities prior to late capitalism. Caring for one's crops may be an act of self-interest from an individualistic perspective in that it improves one's chances of having food. In rural Yucatán, this form of care has also long been seen as part of humans' responsibility for maintaining the larger universe, from which the self is not distinct.

Food is both agent and object in multiple forms of caring because it has long played a critical role in the survival of Yucatec Maya communities, well beyond its universal importance as sustenance to, rather, a central force for social organization and cohesion. My dissertation argues that acts of care developed to pursue wellbeing under difficult historical conditions in rural Yucatán. Food was and still is an accessible means of experiencing pleasure while also maintaining the balance of individual bodies, social relationships, and the cosmos. As my informants embraced new definitions of wellbeing and new routes to achieve it—including novel food practices, among other forms of care—self-interest really became *self-interests*, reflecting this new diversity. This doesn't result in simply a proliferation of ideas and practices but also in gaps and incoherencies. Bodily experiences manifest discrepancies between ideologies and material conditions, often articulated by informants as the feeling that their bodies are not quite suited for these times. Ironically, care becomes all the more important, a time-tested strategy for pursuing wellbeing, despite its deployment in new and sometimes contradictory ways.

Ties between everyday labor and cosmology continue to weaken in rural Yucatán, evident in everything from the decline in agricultural ceremonies to a fading reverence toward foods once seen as sacred. Ideologies of consumerism and nationalism, among others, reshape ideas of the self and wellbeing. Despite all this, I still saw local forms of care as comprising an organized logic in which one may pursue the good life—often via food.

About the Author

Lauren Wynne, Ph.D., is an Assistant Professor of Anthropology at Utica College. She is preparing a book manuscript based on her dissertation research in rural Yucatán. Her publications include a chapter in *Food and Identity in the Caribbean* (2013) and an article in the journal *Food, Culture, and Society* (forthcoming). Dr. Wynne is also beginning a collaborative research project examining the reproductive health experiences of refugee women in the Mohawk Valley of Central New York.

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