

Maria Melendez, "Mujeres de Maiz"

THE COLORS OF NATURE

Culture, Identity, and the Natural World

Edited by
Alison H. Deming and
Lauret E. Savoy


milkweed
editions

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To the voices that remember and those as yet unheard

Superfund site, where houses sit atop a polluted landfill. South Memphis's highly toxic Defense Depot, suspected of causing a cancer cluster among the African American residents. But there are stories that garner even more news coverage, because the dream isn't half buried, a slow kill.

In *Dispatch*, Shirley Ayers writes:

When a city's fire chief is the very first casualty of a hazardous materials explosion, you can be pretty sure that it is going to be a bad day. Such was the scenario in Bogalusa, Louisiana, last fall when a railroad tank car holding nitrogen tetroxide (rocket fuel) exploded at the Gaylord chemical plant, releasing a mushroom cloud of poisonous gas that sent thousands of people, including the Bogalusa Fire Chief, to an area hospital.¹⁸

When people from across the country called me and asked, "How's your family down in Bogalusa?" I said that I had my fingers crossed. I didn't say that my fingers have been crossed since the late 1960s, since the civil rights movement, and since the 1970s, when I became aware that I had grown up across from a millpond filled with chemicals that "seasoned" logs.

I have never been sentimental about nature. I have accepted it in the same way as these lines by Emily Dickinson:

A Bird came down the Walk—
He did not know I saw—
He bit an Angleworm in halves
And ate the fellow, raw,

And then he drank a Dew
From a convenient Grass—
And then hopped sidewise to the Wall
To let a Beetle pass—¹⁹

Nature teaches us how to see ourselves within its greater domain. We see our own reflections in every ritual, and we cannot wound Mother Nature without wounding ourselves. She isn't a pushover.

MUJERES DE MAÍZ

Women, Corn, and Free Trade in the Americas

Maria Melendez

I grew up in the era of Save-the-Blank conservation. As a teenage member of the Sierra Club, I was routinely sent mailings exhorting me to Save the Whales, Save Our Coastlines, Save the Rain Forest, Save the Redwoods. By contrast, the task of opposing the North American Free Trade Agreement during the early nineties, the years of its signing and ratification, must have seemed a sloganeer's nightmare: save us from a rich-getting-richer-and-poor-getting-poorer-world-of-greed-and-destruction was the "liberal" message that reached me, if only dimly, through the political noise being made against NAFTA here and there. But the whole thing just seemed confusing to me. I was suckered by the use of the word *free*. I was raised to think that *free* is, always and everywhere, equal to *good*. Even more confusing, I knew my early twenties self to be a staunch liberal, politically speaking, but proponents of NAFTA were said to support "liberalized trade," and soon their "neoliberal agenda" was being criticized in what I'd call "liberal" publications. So which was it: liberal equals good or liberal equals bad? And besides, you couldn't

hug an ideal of economic justice, like you could a tree. In November 1993, when NAFTA was ratified by the United States Congress, my reflections on the matter could be summed up by the dismissive phrase that is the hallmark of political apathy: What! Ever!

A decade and a half later, I'm still dismissive of many things I probably can't afford to ignore, but thanks to ecofeminism and, oddly enough, corn, talk of "free trade" in the Americas is finally firmly in my view.

The most beautiful corn I've ever seen grows behind the home of Adelina Santiago, a shopkeeper in the Sierra de Juárez of Oaxaca, Mexico. In a rectangular plot about one hectare in size, her corn thrives, greener than the brightest suburban lawn, taller than any man, with bone-colored tassels that splay out from the tops like sparklers. I traveled to Oaxaca in June 2004 to learn more about the relationships between women and corn. I'd recently lived across the street from an industrially farmed cornfield that was off-limits, No Trespassing, untouchable. Because I have always loved touching plants—as a girl, I trolled the aisles of Navlet's Nursery for hours, stroking pansy petals, running my hands through the feathery needles of Norfolk pines—this field filled me with a tactile sense for the loneliness of industrial corn. In Oaxaca, I stepped into the rows between señora Santiago's corn plants, felt the fine maroon hairs on the stalks, rubbed the shiny leaves bigger than a boot print. Drunk on the mountain sunlight, beside the alive and breathing cornstalks, I felt like I was greeting a long-lost sister.

(Such instances of personal fulfillment occurred repeatedly during my travels in Oaxaca. It's embarrassing to note that through my sense of fulfillment, I enacted a familiar neocolonial tourist gesture, in which the wounds of sensory deprivation suffered by inhabitants of an industrialized country are balmed and soothed by contact with the perceived sensuality and sensory stimulation located in a "less-developed" country. The fact that the goal of this essay extends beyond an account of personal eco-fulfillment to an effort at understanding larger global processes may or may not compensate for my problematic position, depending on what response it elicits to the matters at hand.)

Both the state of Oaxaca and the species *Zea mays* (corn or maize) are hot-button issues for conservation biology in the Americas these days. Although the stories science tells about the origins of maize are varied and

contested, the most credible theory, at present, posits that seven to twelve thousand years ago, maize developed (through selection by Mesoamerican people) from a wild teosinte grass. Recent genetic evidence suggests this domestication process took place in the highlands of what are today Mexico's southwestern states, including Oaxaca, and archaeologists have found the oldest-known remains of early maize ears in a cave in the Oaxaca Valley. Today, the mountains and valleys of the state of Oaxaca bear the world's greatest maize diversity.

In 2001, the world's first instance of transgenic contamination of a native race of corn was discovered by University of California–Berkeley researchers Ignacio Chapela and David Quist . . . in Oaxaca. They found "transgenes," meaning genes from another species (a cauliflower bacteria, in this case), introgressed into the DNA of native corn. Though a smear campaign brought their methodology into question, the researchers' data indicating the presence of transgenes in native varieties of corn was not disputed. Further studies by American and Mexican researchers have verified additional instances of transgenic contamination in native Mexican maize. In a sense, NAFTA can be seen as the cause for this contamination, because corn is wind-pollinated, and the native species in question "caught" pollen from transgenic U.S. corn imported under the agreement.

Because the Oaxaca region could be considered the evolutionary birthplace of corn, and because the state itself has been "ground zero" for transgenic contamination issues, I wanted to do some poetic research on the implications, for women's lives, of transgenic contamination in maize. As a Chicana poet, I'd been reading contemporary Chicana poetry with an eye toward shared themes, and had noticed the recurrence of powerful images of corn in poetry by Chicanas from all over the United States. It seemed logical to me that rural Mexican women's connection to corn might represent the historical and psychological roots of contemporary urban and suburban Chicana poets' connections to corn. When I sat down with the head of an organic market in the capital city of Oaxaca and said, "I'm here to learn more about the relationships between women and corn," he said "Oh, you mean tortillas, in which this relationship lives!" Yes! In my abstract, academic fixation on the concept of "relationships," I had been sorely in need of someone to point me in just this direction: toward the "things" that embody ideas—in this case, tortillas.

In rural Mexico, the tortilla is a communicative body, a treatise, a *testimonio* proclaiming a woman's expertise and skill, care for her family and community, and, yes, her relationship to corn. It speaks in the subtle dialects of flavor and nourishment.

During my travels in Oaxaca, I visited nine rural households for *platicas* (chats) with women about tortillas and maize. Most women generously showed me how they made tortillas and where their family grew its corn, and most visits ended with a delicious snack of tortillas with cheese or meat. The North American Free Trade Agreement, and its ongoing effects, hung around the edges of all of the conversations.

As I entered the tortilla-making hut (a small wooden building common to rural households in Oaxaca) of María Antonieta Gigón in the Sierra de Juárez mountains, she asked to see my passport. The request was startling and vaguely alarming to me; as a mixed-race Chicana, I'm very experienced with intercultural encounters in the United States, but in the rural pueblos of Oaxaca I was *gringa* as *gringa* could be, and the Lonely Planet guide had warned travelers to relinquish their passports only if absolutely necessary. I thought about it for a minute, taking in my surroundings and noting how un-threatening my hostess seemed—a mother, probably in her early forties, wearing a modest navy-blue circle skirt, intent on baking her tortillas—and offered to show señora Gigón my passport in exchange for her allowing me to try and bake a tortilla or two.

As we laughed together at my attempts to move the sticky, delicate tortilla dough from the *prensa*, a metal press which converts a mound of masa into a flat circle, to the *comál*, a pre-Columbian wood-heated hot plate where tortillas are baked, she told me more about why the passport fascinated her. She wanted to learn what they looked like and how to obtain one because she wanted to visit her eldest son, who had been working in San Diego for the last several years. The way she looked past me as she told about her desire to see him, and the urgency in her voice when she asked how much a passport cost, pointed to an unspeakable sense of loss. This same sense of loss came through again and again as women spoke of their sons or brothers, uncles or spouses in the United States. By flooding the Mexican market with grossly over-subsidized U.S. corn, NAFTA's "liberalized trade" has displaced millions of commercial corn growers in Mexico, causing increased male immigration to the United States and a tandem increase in women's poverty, as

the women left behind must act as de facto single heads of household. Today, impoverished Mexican and Central American women make the dangerous journey north "across the line" in increasing numbers, in the hopes that the money they'll send home will make up for the economic hardship suffered in the absence of husbands, fathers, brothers. These women carry memories of wrenching good-byes with their children and loved ones. The domino effect of their poverty falls hardest, perhaps, on their children, as demonstrated by a new generation of child immigrants who ride the tops of trains through Mexico and risk their lives crossing into the United States to find their mothers.

Although I never probed deeply enough to determine if NAFTA could have been at the root of the emigration accounts from the particular women I spoke with, the knowledge that an agreement pushed along by the United States has led to dramatic increases in family fragmentation and women's poverty should weigh heavily on further considerations of the expansion of trade liberalization in the Americas.

Real power to address poor and/or rural women's priorities is entirely absent from the history of NAFTA's creation and implementation. Here one of the most basic ecofeminist lines of logic can easily be drawn, a line connecting the treatment of women to the treatment of the environment. NAFTA accords the same disempowered status to the environment as it does to rural women. The only international NAFTA-related body that has sought any input from rural women is the Commission for Environmental Cooperation, a NAFTA board that can only provide "encouragements" and "suggestions," rather than fines and enforcement, on matters of environmental concern attendant with the implementation of the agreement. While it is written into NAFTA that a corporation can take legal action against a state in which environmental regulations hamper that corporation's business, NAFTA limits the Commission for Environmental Cooperation's official realm to that of toothless "cooperation." Thus the CEC becomes the environmental equivalent of the angel in the house for NAFTA; a beneficent body whose role is to provide gentle guidance on eco-right and -wrong, while wielding none of the economic power of a head of household, a roll in this case played by the few wealthy men of the signatory nations whose stock investments have swelled as a result of NAFTA.

The reverse of the old ecofeminist equation, in which the trampling of women's rights is contemporaneous with the trampling of environmental

rights, remains to be explored: if the architects of international trade agreements kept rural women's needs more centrally in view, would wiser environmental stewardship and greater biodiversity ensue? In the case of maize, the answer may well be yes.

The contamination of native races of maize in Mexico with transgenes (human-engineered genes containing genetic material from another species) is considered a threat to Oaxaca's celebrated maize diversity, in that there is a possibility that maize with transgenes, created to be extra pest- and fungus-resistant, could dilute the genetic vigor of local maize races, cultivated over multiple millennia. Some varieties of Oaxacan maize have been so carefully bred as to now be considered evolutionary "specialists" for an *individual hillside*. What's wrong with fungus-resistant corn, you ask? In some rural Mexican areas, a certain species of corn fungus is considered a culinary delicacy! What's wrong with pest-resistant corn? Some women I spoke with reported that they believed transgenic corn to have smaller ears, with kernels that didn't dry well for masa-making. The larger point: scientists engineered transgenic corn to serve the interest and convenience of big agribusiness, but rural Oaxacans bred indigenous varieties of corn over countless generations to serve localized tastes, customs, preferences, and climates.

Where do women fit in to all of this? As head cooks in their households, rural Latin American women retain significant knowledge about desirable qualities in their food items, and their experienced selectivity influences seed saving and swapping practices. Some suggest this has been true even from the invention of the *Zea mays* species: that it was women who patiently bred corn from wild grasses those thousands of years ago. With this in mind, we can see the ancient sisterhood, still alive and evolving today, between women and corn. Corn is a key part of a rural Mexican woman's sustenance from birth to the world beyond death: nursing mothers are often given a corn and cocoa drink to increase their milk, and corpses buried in traditional Zapotec ceremonies are sent to the afterlife with handfuls of cornmeal to nourish them on their souls' long journeys. Conversely, women as "maize processors" and seed savers play a key role in the sustenance of local maize races. The transgenic pollen now loosed onto Mexican winds enters these women's cornfields without their consent, and it modifies the biodiversity and physical characteristics of their corn in unpredictable ways. Given rural Mexican women's

exceptional level of intimacy and expertise with maize, I'm betting that if they had been included in the initial discussions, conceptions, drafting, and implementation of NAFTA, they would never have allowed the one to two million tons of transgenic maize to enter their country, *unlabelled*, as the fathers of NAFTA have allowed each year since the agreement's ratification.

I don't wish to paint rural Mexican women as mere poster children for the rape of the global south by the north; they are, after all, whole people with whole lives and complex concerns, many of which have nothing to do with the United States. These women do not pass their time huddled in corners discussing, in trembling voices, the latest oppressive policy to come across the border. No, they have better things to do: tortillas to make, daughters to raise, mothers to bury, seeds to sort. I simply wish to highlight aspects of liberalized trade, as practiced post-NAFTA, that were invisible to my younger, more dismissive self. The Central American Free Trade Agreement, basically a version of NAFTA applied to Central America and the Dominican Republic, barely squeaked by its July 2005 ratification in the United States House of Representatives, passing by just two votes. This points to a growing American unease with a brand of liberalized trade that benefits a few and harms many.

In order to work for justice, both environmental and feminist, American activists cannot keep a narrow focus on domestic issues while proponents of "neoliberal trade" continue to work toward a Free Trade Area of the Americas. Some activists have dubbed the FTAA "NAFTA on steroids," since it applies most of NAFTA's provisions to all the products, people, and biomes from Canada to the tip of Chile. The über-male connotation of this "on steroids" claim is right in step with George W. Bush's own stock phrases for promoting his trade agenda in the Americas. When he spoke of "knocking down" trade barriers and "opening" new markets, he sounded eerily like a teenage boy making cherry-busting brags.

I call on American thinkers, writers, and activists to put on ecofeminist goggles and give the two paeans to greed—NAFTA and CAFTA—a thorough read. (The government has posted the full texts of both agreements online.) Then together, in front of our lawmakers' offices, in streets, in magazines, with our dollars and our sense, let's practice sisterhood and fellowship with all residents of the Americas, particularly those residents, human and otherwise, that big-business-favoring transnational agreements attempt to ignore.