

## Complex Carbohydrates: On the relevance of ethnography in nutrition education

2011-04-17 15:32:00

By Emily Yates-Doerr

*This post was contributed by Emily Yates-Doerr (University of Amsterdam)*

*I thank Somatosphere for inviting me to submit to their blog. I am in the process of completing my book manuscript: *The Weight of the Body: Changing Ideals of Fatness, Nourishment and Health in Guatemala*. My entry for this blog does not come directly from material included in the book, but it does address central problems that I encountered in my research on nutrition education and in the translation between fieldwork and analysis.*



Vendor selling holiday breads.

Twelve months into fieldwork—with four still remaining—I returned to New York for the week of Christmas.<sup>1</sup> Before my departure I made an offer to a friend whose younger brother had several years earlier traveled from their K'iche' community in Guatemala to the United States in search of work, where he found unpredictable construction jobs in Manhattan: if my friend wanted to give his brother a gift, I would deliver it. It was no trouble. My trip would take me less than a day, and my own bags were empty.

On the day I was to leave I had heard nothing from my friend and assumed he had dismissed my offer. But that night, just before departing for the bus that would descend from Guatemala's verdant highlands to the international airport in the capital, he arrived at my home with what he told me was the "perfect gift." I opened the bundle he handed to me to find 10 loaves of *pan dulce* (sweet bread)—each carefully stored in its own plastic wrapping—baked by his mother that afternoon.

Shortly after landing in New York, I met the brother beneath skyscraper scaffolding in midtown Manhattan. He greeted me shyly, but when I handed him the package an eager smile spread across his face. He seemed to be no longer aware of me as he tore through the plastic, split open the crust of one of the loaves and, transfixed, buried his face against the soft texture of the bread, eyes closed, inhaling deeply. Some moments later, he glanced up: "It has been years since I have tasted this—not just bread from my town, but *fresh* bread from my town, bread that has been formed by my mother's hands. This is the best gift I could have received."

\*\*\*

At the time, I was studying a process which scientists call "the nutrition transition"—referring to a growth in rates of dietary-related chronic diseases in regions long dominated by infectious illnesses and underweight malnutrition. Given increasing concern for obesity, bread was a main topic of conversation in the clinics and classes where I carried out fieldwork. Countless doctors advised their patients to avoid the kind of bread my friend's mother had baked. This bread was too sweet; when ingested these sweets would transform into fats, where they would be stored by a body that would become too large if this was done too often. They explained that this bread was made of a substance called carbohydrates, which were "our source of energy" until they made us overweight. They advised their patients that sweet breads should be substituted with whole wheat bread, which had fiber that would slow the rate of sugar absorption, create satiety, and help with weight loss. "Yes, this is more expensive," doctors would acknowledge. (Whereas bread—a Catholic staple—had augmented the regional mainstay of tortillas for centuries, and family-run *panaderias* selling bread cheaply could be found on nearly every city block, whole wheat bread was sold in supermarkets or chain bakeries that produced it off-site and sold it at a premium.) "But," their council would continue, "the price you pay now will be offset by how much you will save in the future." Just as they treated body-weight as a function of energetic credit and debt—one bowl of cornflakes offset by half an hour on a treadmill—so did they expect their patients to balance the costs of immediate appetites against the benefits of future savings. Built into their counseling was the presumption that eating was commensurate

with moving, each reducible to the unit of the calorie, akin to the way in which the value of present or future health could be converted into price. The bread they spoke of was abstracted into nutrient parts—*carbohydrates, fibers, fats*—that would have a measurable and predictable impact upon the body. There was no space in their discussions for the bread held by my friend's brother—bread that was, for him, inextricable from kinship and community, bread that he smelled, felt, and tasted, bread that he related to a form of nourishment that had nothing to do with nutrients.

A multitude of reasons exist for why diverse meanings become compressed into numerical units—why *what counts* in social life becomes a factor of what we can concretely measure.<sup>2</sup> Public health infrastructure in Guatemala is dwarfed by need; the global health programs that provide information to locally implemented metabolic-illness treatment plans do not have resources to respond to nuanced frameworks of health and nourishment; and reductive nutritional advice makes it easier for food companies to package and sell their “diet/health” products. Yet while in some situations standards *can* create accountability, many of the educators I worked with were exhausted with standards. The widespread failure of metric-based diet programs—failure determined by persistent illness and weight gain, as well as by mounting frustration with treatment strategies and patients' subsequent disappearances from clinics—made some nutrition educators skeptical about the value of these measures. Whereas the mathematical underpinnings of caloric formulas abstracted bodies from place and time (as well as from familial engagements of eating), they sought treatment that emplaced bodies in their surroundings, recognizing the myriad ways in which commensality—the socio-material practice of eating together—defied the calorie's pretense of commensurability.

By the time I began my fieldwork, I had spent 7 summers in Guatemala. On the basis of my preliminary research and the steady stream of global health reports and evaluations I was reading, I expected to see a field dominated and overwhelmed by metrics. But although metrics were everywhere, I began to see while living and working with people who were grappling with what had only recently become a problem of “too-much” weight, how often these metrics were ignored. Weight—a word whose meaning might seem inextricable from the abstraction of numbers—was in practice situational, context-based, at once in and beyond an individual body. While nutritional protocol and guidelines focused on the *Indice Masa Corporal* (the Body Mass Index), the *masa* of concern around me was the soft corn dough of tortillas, which mattered in ways that quantitative representations of weight did not. As the field of global health that I was studying was seeking to make clearer standards, many of the people I lived among were advocating, often in quiet ways, the importance of

complexities—of staying with them, rather than trying to reduce them away.



Nutritional advice focused upon weight and nutrients, overlooks much of what happens during practices of eating. Photograph taken in Xela, Guatemala.

I began this post with the story of a gift to highlight the significance of that which cannot be precisely measured, even in the midst of a caloric system that appears to operate within the clean balance of numbers (also to my point: I delivered the bread in December 2008, and though the power of financial calculations loomed large in the Manhattan skyline where my friend's brother and I stood, this system of monetary credit and debt was collapsing around us). It was encounters like this that helped me to understand, when I turned to write my fieldwork into a book, what was needed from my own analysis. To tell the story about nourishment and fatness in Guatemala that I wanted to tell—a story that would honor the experiences of those around me—I would need to stay close to those occurrences of social life which could not easily be spoken, let alone fixed into formulas. I would need to point toward the pleasures of eating in a way that would not explain these pleasures away. I would need to not just make room for what many might call the “excess” of the tastes and sentiments of social life, but to illustrate that these supposed excesses were everywhere. It was not that I would need to highlight the moral economies of eating and dieting, but that I would have to show that the calculative logic implicit in the idea of economy might hide more than reveal. Indeed, even when it came to something as apparently quantitative as weight, to speak of economies might not make any sense at all.

It is fitting, given the field of anthropology's historic reliance upon the experiences of those with whom we do fieldwork, that people around me were adept at valuing knowledges that defied reduction and

generalization. My friend's decision to send his brother a suitcase filled with bread indicated that he was well aware of the importance of tastes and pleasures that would never be stabilized into standards and indicators. In the field of global public health, where wellbeing is dominated by the numerical alchemy of measurement, the work of describing that which eludes measurement remains a challenge for ethnography.<sup>3</sup> This challenge of representing aspects of life that will never be fixed is not small, but the value of complexity makes a case not only for the importance of ethnographic knowledge but for its importance well beyond the field of anthropology.

Emily Yates-Doerr is a recent graduate from *New York University's Department of Anthropology*. She is currently a postdoctoral researcher on *Annemarie Mol's Eating Bodies* project, (<http://eatingbodiesfluidnetwork.wordpress.com/people/>) where she is studying global health and agricultural debates surrounding meat consumption while revising her book manuscript, *The Weight of the Body: Changing Ideals of Fatness, Nourishment, and Health in Guatemala. Selections from the manuscript – the Opacity of Reduction and The Weight of the Self – won graduate student prizes from the Society for Medical Anthropology and the Critical Anthropology for Global Health Caucus.*

## Notes

<sup>up1</sup>My research in Guatemala has been supported by grants from Wenner-Gren and Fulbright Hays, the SSRC/Ford Foundation and the Tinker Foundation, as well as the Doris M. Ohlsen award and a Dean's Dissertation writing award from New York University. Emily Martin as well as Rayna Rapp, Sally Merry, Tom Abercrombie, and Renato Rosaldo gave me endless support in crafting this project. I thank the members of the Eating Bodies team for their ongoing collaboration.

<sup>up2</sup>For further reading see especially Nelson (2010), Maurer (2002), Dunn (2005), and Garfinkel (1967).

<sup>up3</sup>For further reading see especially Merry (2011), Martin (1998), and Poovey (1998).

## References

Dunn, Elizabeth. 2005 [Standards and Person-Making in East Central](#)

[Europe](#). In *Global assemblages: technology, politics, and ethics as anthropological problems*. A. Ong and S.J. Collier, eds. Pp. xiii, 494. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.

Garfinkel, Harold. 1967 [Studies in ethnomethodology](#). Englewood Cliffs, N.J.,: Prentice-Hall.

Martin, Emily. 1998 [Anthropology and the Cultural Study of Science](#). *Science, Technology & Human Values* 23(1):24-44.

Maurer, Bill. 2002 [Anthropological and accounting knowledge in Islamic banking and finance: rethinking critical accounts](#). *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 8(4):645-667.

Merry, Sally Engle. 2011 [Measuring the World: Indicators, Human Rights, and Global Governance](#). *Current Anthropology* S. 3(April).

Nelson, Diane M. 2010 [Reckoning the after/math of war in Guatemala](#). *Anthropological Theory* 10(1-2):87-95.

Poovey, Mary. 1998 [A history of the modern fact : problems of knowledge in the sciences of wealth and society](#). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

#### **AMA citation**

Yates-Doerr E. Complex Carbohydrates: On the relevance of ethnography in nutrition education. *Somatosphere*. . Available at: . Accessed November 3, 2011.

#### **APA citation**

Yates-Doerr, Emily. (). *Complex Carbohydrates: On the relevance of ethnography in nutrition education*. Retrieved November 3, 2011, from Somatosphere Web site:

#### **Chicago citation**

Yates-Doerr, Emily. . Complex Carbohydrates: On the relevance of ethnography in nutrition education. *Somatosphere*. (accessed November 3, 2011).

#### **Harvard citation**

Yates-Doerr, E , *Complex Carbohydrates: On the relevance of ethnography in nutrition education*, Somatosphere. Retrieved November 3, 2011, from <>

#### **MLA citation**

Yates-Doerr, Emily. "Complex Carbohydrates: On the relevance of

ethnography in nutrition education." . Somatosphere. Accessed 3 Nov. 2011.<>