

**Blessings on the Food, Blessings on the Workers:  
Arts-based Education for Migrant Worker Justice**

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# Blessings on the Food, Blessings on the Workers: Arts-based Education for Migrant Worker Justice

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## **Abstract**

*Migrant agricultural workers are not only on the margins of Canadian and global food systems; they are also on the margins of public consciousness about the labour behind the food we eat. Even local food movement groups who advocate for both social justice and sustainable food production have not made migrant labour a priority concern. Popular education, based on Freirean problem-posing methods and Gramscian notions of engaging contradictions, can use arts-based approaches to tap both minds and hearts in efforts to mobilize food activists to work for migrant worker justice. This essay examines the potential and limitations of an installation of Mexican-style altars, entitled “Local Food/Global Labour,” that aims to catalyze dialogue between food activists and labour activists around the issue of global migrant labour in local food production.*

## **Résumé**

*Les travailleurs agricoles migrants se trouvent non seulement en marge des systèmes alimentaires canadien et mondial, mais ils sont aussi en marge de la conscience populaire sur le travail derrière les aliments que nous consommons. Même les groupes et mouvements alimentaires régionaux, qui prônent la justice sociale et la production alimentaire durable, n'ont pas fait du travail migratoire une question prioritaire. L'éducation populaire, fondée sur les méthodes freiriennes pour poser un problème et les notions gramsciennes pour présenter une contradiction, peut avoir recours à des approches artistiques pour rejoindre tant les esprits que les cœurs en vue de mobiliser les activistes de l'alimentation en faveur de la justice pour les travailleurs migrants. L'article se penche sur le potentiel ainsi que les limites d'une installation d'autels à la mexicaine, qui a pour nom Local Food/Global Labour (« Aliments locaux/Travail mondial ») et qui vise à catalyser le dialogue entre les activistes de l'alimentation et les activistes du travail sur la question de la mondialisation du travail migratoire dans la production alimentaire locale.*

**Keywords:** migrant workers, food justice, arts-based education

## Introduction

It took a tragic highway accident in February, 2012 that killed 10 Peruvian migrant workers (Mackrael, Morrow, Freeze, & D'Aliesio, 2012) to awaken many Canadians to the reality that much of our local food is produced by temporary

global labour. This became an educable moment as progressive magazines posed the difficult question to environmentalists and local food activists: “In the quest for just and sustainable food practices, why is nobody talking about organic farming’s dependence on migrant labour?” (Crane, 2012, p. 18); a *Briarpatch* issue focusing on “Decolonizing Food” featured an article “Food for All! Food Justice Needs Migrant Justice” (Adrangi & Lepper, 2011), also challenging food activists to take up this complex issue.



York student at Feast of the Fields, Ontario, 2009

I had just returned from a California conference on Labour Across the Food System,<sup>1</sup> which brought together academics and activists working on issues of labour within both the industrial and alternative food systems. It was a rare gathering of people working in different sectors of the food chain, from farming and processing to restaurant and retail contexts. There I had shared some preliminary results of research, in collaboration with Environmental Studies graduate student Kirsten Cole, probing southern Ontario local food activists about how they were, or were not, addressing the migrant worker issue; we were finding that it was indeed a “difficult” conversation.

As a researcher of the global food system (Barndt, 2008) and as an activist/researcher in the local food movement,<sup>2</sup> I have experienced intimately the tension between labour activists and food activists, feeling that these two sectors



Tomato worker, Jalisco, Mexico

need to be in dialogue with each other and could be potential allies. But while the former focuses primarily on the rights of workers in a global context of increasing exploitation of a migratory and temporary racialized labour force, the latter emphasizes the creation of more sustainable food production countering the corporate industrialized agricultural system. I wanted to pose the more complex question to both groups: how do we create a food system built on *both* sustainable production and just labour?

Theoretically, these questions resonate with the growing field of environmental cultural studies, articulated by Noël Sturgeon (2009), and drawing from ecofeminism (and the notion of intersectionality), environmental justice (in particular food justice), and global environmentalism (offering an anti-colonial analysis). In proposing that we need analytical frameworks that “address environmental problems and social inequalities together” (p. 5), Sturgeon links political economy, cultural production, and ideological representation. While her work deconstructs popular culture that perpetuates hegemonic dualisms, I am

interested in alternative cultural production, which appropriates popular culture in critical and creative ways, to catalyze a dialogue between sectors that are sometimes positioned as in opposition to each other (perhaps reflecting these dualisms).

In this article, I build on Antonio Gramsci's analysis (Forgacs & Nowell-Smith, 1985) of contradictions as inevitable and generative; on the popular education process advocated by Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (1970) that articulates these tensions through "codes;" and on arts-based cultural productions, such as Amalia Mesa-Bain's (González, 2008) domestic altars that can engage a broader public in engaging these difficult issues with their hearts and minds and actions (see Barndt, 2012). Specifically, after elaborating the theories that inform this work, I reflect critically on the construction and use of altars to stimulate dialogue within and between food activists, labour activists, and other potential allies for migrant worker justice.

I was drawn to produce the altars based on my own three decades of work as an academic, artist, and academic. They build on my past research on migrant women and the global food system, and contribute to my ongoing work in popular education and community arts that often focus on local food issues. My own positionality as a white, middle-class feminist scholar/activist allows me to use my privilege strategically to speak to activists and academics, and to bring artistic interventions into the conversation.

## Theoretical and Methodological Frameworks

The altar project has been informed by three intersecting fields: theories of food justice, methodologies of popular education, and activist art.

### *Theories of Food Justice and Food Sovereignty*

In an ironic twist, in the fall of 2012 I found myself speaking about migrant farmworkers in a Development Studies class at St. Francis Xavier University at the very same time that former Prime Minister Brian Mulroney was speaking at the business school on the other side of campus. I reminded the students that he was responsible for Canada entering into the neoliberal trade regime through the first Mulroney Trade Deal in the late 1980s and its extension, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994. The increase in temporary migrant workers in our fields (and increasingly in all sectors) can be directly traced to the global economic restructuring through such neoliberal policies, which pushed countries like Mexico to produce more for export and less for domestic consumption. NAFTA also made it easier for foreign corporate agribusinesses to set up shop there while Indigenous peasants and small farmers lost access to their land, forcing them to head *al norte* (i.e., to the United States, and Canada) to survive. This deepening of centuries-long systemic inequities

between and within the three NAFTA countries meant that by the late 1990s, remittances from migrants working abroad accounted for the second source of foreign exchange in Mexico.<sup>3</sup>

Over the past two decades, just as environmental justice has evolved as a critical field within environmental studies, the concept of “food justice” has been adopted to frame the struggles for equity within local and transnational food movements. Eric Holt-Gimenez (2011), executive director of Food First, provides an overview of the discourses used by the corporate food regime: according to him, *food enterprise* is the neoliberal term, while *food security* has been coopted by reformist institutions. Holt-Gimenez then suggests that within food movements, the progressive notion of *food justice* (Gottlieb & Joshi, 2010) is superseded the more radical *food sovereignty* (Wittman, Desmarais, & Wiebe, 2010).

Semantics aside, both food justice and food sovereignty challenge systemic inequities but their origins, targets, and tactics differ. Food sovereignty has been developed primarily by activists in the Global South, who emphasize the importance of land and self-determination while challenging global bodies like the World Trade Organization to remove agriculture from the international trade regime. This perspective is epitomized by the vision and activities of Via Campesina (Desmarais, 2007), a transnational coalition of 150 local and national organizations in 70 countries that aims to dismantle corporate agri-food monopolies and democratize food systems.

In comparison, food justice discourse in North America has contributed to critical reflections on “the unbearable whiteness of alternative food” (Guthman, 2011, p. 263), and offers a critical equity lens on the reality of local food being produced in the Global North by racialized migrant labour from the Global South. As California-based Chicana Mesa-Bains (hooks & Mesa-Bains, 2006) poignantly suggests: “Mexicans are the human food chain. We plant it, we grow it, we harvest it, we truck it, we prepare it, we cook it, we serve it, and we clean it up after” (p. 71).

The debate about race and class privilege in the local food movement is alive in the Greater Toronto Area, where there are new efforts to integrate anti-racism into the discussion.<sup>4</sup> We are working in the context of the Canadian government privileging large industrial agribusiness production and not supporting small farmers or sustainable agriculture. But local food advocates can adopt a “reflexive localism” that “works within an awareness of the tension between different definitions of justice, environmental and bodily health, and good food, while admitting that localist strategies are imperfect and contradictory” (Dupuis, Lindsey, & Goodman, 2011, p. 297).

Reflexive localism emphasizes process rather than vision, accepts multiple notions of privilege and economy while acknowledging past inequalities, and does not favour any one scale of political practice nor insist on shared values. Embracing “imperfect politics,” it is thus open to various forms of dialogue and alliance building.

The more dialectical approach of reflexive localism resonates with Antonio Gramsci's notions of power and resistance (Hoare & Nowell-Smith, 1971). In articulating his theory of hegemony, he suggests that power is dynamic and fluid, and constantly negotiated, or as dian marino (1998) framed it, "a rainforest of movable relations" (p. 20). In *Gramsci: Prison Notebooks: Selections*, Gramsci also distinguishes between structural and conjunctural analysis of power, proposing that we must constantly assess the balance of conjunctural forces to see what possibilities for action exist in any moment to challenge deeper structural inequalities (Hoare & Nowell-Smith, 1971). Further, he posits that "a given socio-historical moment is never homogenous; on the contrary, it is rich in contradictions" (Hoare & Nowell-Smith, 1971, p. 93), and these contradictions are both inevitable and generative (Barndt, 2011). Gramsci highlights the importance of the cultural sphere, suggesting that "just as it (the working class) has thought to organize itself politically and economically, it must also think about organizing itself culturally" (Forgacs & Nowell-Smith, 1985, p. 41). This is where education and art are central tools in the development of political consciousness and collective action.

Like Gramsci, Brazilian educator Paulo Freire also emphasizes that we can only act within the "free space" of any moment, based on our analysis of present historical conditions. His problem-posing approach to education (Freire, 1970) and the development of critical consciousness aims to develop a collective analysis of those conditions and contradictions through dialogue, bringing the experience and knowledge of all actors to the table. In constructing opportunities for dialogue between local food activists and migrant worker activists, then, there must be space for many voices, including the workers themselves as well as advocates, and their different but potentially interlocking visions of sustainable production and just labour.

Freire proposed the use of "codes" (Barndt, 1998)—that could take the form of images, objects, dramas, or text—to re-present to a group of people specific contradictions of their lives. In a process of "decoding" through critical collective discussion, participants name not only their own personal connections to the codes or situations, but, in listening to each other, locate their different experiences within a broader historical and structural analysis. The altars to migrant workers aim to include elements that refer not only to historical forces shaping both food producers and consumers, but also objects that resonate at personal, cultural, social and political levels. Their critical decoding, then, offers those who engage with them a chance to connect with personal experiences as well as develop their analysis of the broader historical and structural forces shaping the present moment.



### *Altar-Installations as a Political Art Form*

In creating the altars, I adapted the Mexican practice of domestic altars or *ofrendas*. I was particularly inspired by Chicana artist Mesa-Bains, who has created a syncretic genre of what was historically a syncretic domestic practice (González, 2008). The tradition of Mexican domestic altars is rooted in the colonial history of the Americas, as Indigenous women combined their own spiritual practices with European Catholic icons to create *ofrendas* or offerings in their homes to honour their ancestors. Mesa-Bains distinguishes these more intimate and temporary memorial installations around the Day of the Dead festivities from more permanent and more public altars. In joining other Chicana artists (Yolanda Garfias Woo, Ralph Maradiaga, Carmen Lopez Garza) in reviving and revising the genre of “altar-installation” as an act of anti-colonial cultural reclamation in recent decades, she integrates the personal and the political as well as folk and fine art traditions, both recognized by and challenging the art world through feminist and anti-racist installations. Her work both reclaims women as the original altar artists and honours invisible women icons as the subject of the altars. Mesa-Bains suggests that such syncretic practices are built around two interrelated tropes, resistance and affirmation: resistance to colonial practices and white racism, and affirmation of forms and rituals that “have sustained our culture in hostile environments” (hooks & Mesa-Bains, 2006, p. 118), such as the home altar tradition.

I saw my altars to migrant workers as codes that could frame the contradictory nature of the migrant worker and northern consumer experiences in the context of the broader political economic contradictions. While referencing the political context that has brought mainly male workers to Canadian fields, they also make visible both women migrant workers in the program as well as the women left behind to care for their families, depending on the remittances from their husbands. More personal objects, like family photos and albums, are part of the larger political picture. Mesa-Bains (González, 2008) sees these reconfigured altars as reflective of a matriarchal and politicizing spirituality. This is not a totally private expression, but by remembering the ancestors and precolonial history as well as the current context, they become collective and public statements that can be used to historicize issues like migrant labour.

### **The Altars: Local Food, Global Labour**

While facilitating workshops in popular communications in revolutionary Nicaragua in the 1980s, I developed a theoretical framework for comparing hegemonic and counter-hegemonic cultural productions, based on four dimensions of art and media: content, form, production, and use (Barndt, 2000). In brief, the hegemonic media that dominated during the Somoza dictatorship prior to 1979 drew its *content* from the lives and values of the dominant elite,





Altar to Peruvian workers killed in accident, February 2012

reproduced the dominant *forms* of cultural imperial media, privileged individual and professional *production* processes, and were *used* mainly to promote a lifestyle that was accessible to few. In contrast, the revolutionary government was promoting counter-hegemonic media whose *content* was drawn from ordinary peoples' lives and struggles, whose *forms* were homegrown and experimental; whose *production* engaged grass-roots communities in collective and culturally grounded processes, and whose *use* was to educate and mobilize the population to participate fully in creating a new more democratic society. I will adapt these four dimensions of art and media as a framework for reflecting on the altars.

### *Content*

The tragic death of the Peruvians was the first impetus for creating altars, as a form of memorialization. Thus, the first altar is dedicated to those 10 men who died at a rural Ontario intersection on that wintry day. The massive media coverage of the tragedy not only provided images of those workers and their families in Peru, but also symbolized a visibilization or public recognition of their role in the Canadian economy. Certain objects, such as a toy van representing the vehicle they died in, as well as a plastic chicken for their work with poultry, ground

their story in this context. But I was interested in putting their bodies and their labour in the broader historical context. So, the altar was initially mounted within a Del Monte banana box, the epitome of the global food system, in which agro-export economies in the South (and banana republics) produce for consumers in the North. The side of the box was covered with photos of the also invisible infrastructures of packing and shipping that are central to that system. Inside the box, an Inca figurine and a ceramic flute reference pre-colonial history and ritual, and a beaded necklace with a cross recalls the colonial legacy. A small box of *palo santo* (holy sticks) on the other hand, offers some healing for the past and present losses, as they are burned to clear out negative energy. A sheaf of wheat reminds us of the historical introduction of wheat to Latin America in the post-war era, first as United States surplus dumped as food aid (Friedmann, 1990); a potato, on the other hand, remains a deeply rooted food staple and a representation of the struggle to protect the immense biodiversity of potatoes.

Towering over all these symbols of past and present struggles within the food system is the image of an Indigenous woman, her baby on her back, as she learns to read and write Spanish in a Lima literacy class; she epitomizes the internal migration from the rural mountains to the city accelerated by the industrialization of agriculture in the mid-to-late 20<sup>th</sup> century, bringing thousands of Indigenous peasants into the Hispanic urban world to eke out a survival (a process repeated the world over). She also represents the women left behind by their husbands who are forced to migrate not only to other parts of the country for salaried agricultural work, but to northern countries such as Canada to contribute to an increasingly globalized economy. Peruvian migrant workers are recent to Canada, as they are part of a new Temporary Foreign Worker Program (Government of Canada, 2014a), which brought 280,000 workers in 2012 from Asia and Latin America into all kinds of industries, and with even fewer rights than the farmworkers coming from Mexico and the Caribbean for the past 50 years under the Seasonal Agricultural Workers Program (Government of Canada, 2014b).

The intermingling of crops and workers in this cultural representation emphasizes the parallel commodification of food and labour that has characterized the corporate food system in the neoliberal era. It reinforces a food justice perspective that brings a human face to the marginalized bodies behind our food and illustrates an ecofeminist linking of the degradation of the environment with the exploitation of certain racialized, gendered, and classed populations within and between nations.

The second altar is both similar and different. Most significantly, it was initially constructed within a Good Food Box, one of the best examples of a local food program aimed at addressing social justice issues, too, by providing healthy food at affordable (and subsidized) prices for low-income communities.<sup>5</sup> Yet in stocking 4,000 boxes monthly, FoodShare contracts Ontario farmers who can supply large quantities, and some of those farmers cannot survive without



Altar to Irena González, Mexican migrant worker in  
Seasonal Agricultural Workers Program

migrant labour. Thus, this altar, juxtaposed with the Del Monte box, acknowledges that both local and global food production depend on global migrant workers.

While the Peruvian altar references the Temporary Foreign Worker Program, this second altar focuses on a woman migrant worker in the more established Seasonal Agricultural Workers Program, and honours the thousands of Mexican and Caribbean workers who have given their bodies to long days year after year; many have also died or been injured on the job, in which case, they are usually deported rather than treated in their temporary residence (United Food and Commercial Workers, 2008). A hanging skeleton, remnant of Day of the Dead festivities, reminds us of the precariousness of this work, especially when there are lax health and safety regulations or training. Workers cannot apply for residency status so are denied citizenship rights; even though they pay into Canadian Pension and Employment Insurance, they never can recover this “benefit,” and in December of 2012 lost even the right to recover parental benefits from Employment Insurance (Keung, 2012).

The backdrop of this altar features a photo of Irena, a migrant worker I have visited since the 1990s, in both her hometown in Mexico (most recently in February 2013) as well as at the Ontario farms where she has worked. While the majority of migrant farm workers are male, there is a little known and growing contingent of women accepted by the program,<sup>6</sup> as long as they meet

the criteria of being widowed and leaving children behind (ensuring that they will return home). Women have been favoured for certain tasks, based on gendered ideologies that they have “nimble fingers,” are reliable, and more compliant; rather, they have made the ultimate sacrifice of leaving their families behind in order to provide for their families, and they willingly work overtime to increase the remittances they send back home.<sup>7</sup> A silver-framed photo of Irena and her family includes some of the appliances she has been able to bring back. A small photo album holds images of both her homes, and documents her relationships in Canada with other workers, the farmers’ family, and we feminist researchers who interviewed her. Women, in fact, are the motors of the entire food system—both the corporate system (whether in agribusinesses, processing, supermarket sales, or restaurants) and alternatives, and both altars honour this prominent role.

Once again there are objects that locate Irena’s current experience in a deeply rooted history of domination and resistance. First, pre-colonial Indigenous civilizations and ways of knowing are represented in the circular ceramic reproduction of a Mayan calendar; a silver-plated heart *milagro*<sup>8</sup> hangs inside the altar as it might in the colonial Catholic tradition. But there are also signs of resistance: a doll representing a masked female Zapatista leader, reminding us of the January 1994 uprising of the *Frente Zapatista de Liberación Nacional* in protest of the implementation of NAFTA, and all it implied for Indigenous peasants’ loss of land and food sovereignty.

NAFTA’s impact is clear almost 20 years later and is best illustrated by what has happened with corn in Mexico. From being the cradle of maize land races, the country has gone from total corn self-sufficiency to importing over half of the corn it consumes; agricultural subsidies have given the United States a comparative advantage and made it cheaper for Mexicans to import corn than to grow it. A corn mask, framed in a small altar hanging inside the larger altar, communicates a deeper meaning of corn as well: the cultural significance it has played for centuries in Indigenous cultures of the Americas who consider themselves “children of corn.” An ecofeminist perspective acknowledges that the agency of other living entities like food has been denied in the commodification of food. While treating corn only as an agricultural product perpetuates a nature/culture dualism, the diverse faces on the mask represent corn as deeply connected to human spirit and culture.

Besides corn, there is also a tomato and a peach placed in this altar, both of which Irena has picked in Ontario. They are highly perishable and somewhat delicate crops, which favour women workers in the packing and sometimes picking. And interestingly, while tomatoes can be grown in all three NAFTA countries, Mexico still has the comparative advantage over Canada in terms of weather, access to land, and cheap labour.

While the two altars are laden with historical references, political economic significance, and cultural meaning, they require some interpretation. So between the two boxes sits a bowl with six prayer cards, another creative appropriation of a popular Catholic symbol often honouring a deceased person. These cards



provide the text for the exhibit and reference many of the groups and analyses I've already noted above. Proclaiming on one side, "Blessings for the Food, Blessings for the Workers," they are organized by the six foods featured in the altars and migrant workers' stories. The reverse side elaborates on the historical domination of United States agriculture and the current corporate neoliberal model, on the struggle around corn sovereignty and potato biodiversity, and on the two migrant worker programs that are represented in the two altars. Finally, at the bottom of each card is the website of one group that is organizing around the issues discussed, from those mobilizing workers (Justice for Migrant Workers and the United Food and Commercial Workers) to those researching and leading campaigns (*Sin Maiz No Hay Paiz* in Mexico and the Erosion, Technology, and Concentration group).



Prayer card photo

The prayer cards were originally laminated, which made them too expensive to mass produce. So I made multiple copies on card stock, and now encourage viewers to take one home with them. My concern is that viewers may pass quickly through the exhibit, never reading the text on the cards. To encourage more direct participation with the installation, I offer them a blank card as well, where they can draw their favourite fruit or vegetable, and write what they know about where and how it was produced, and by whom. The contents of a smaller bowl invite viewers not only to read and think more about the issues but to act upon them. It contains two guerilla stickers, one a photo of a Mexican migrant worker within Mexico working for export agriculture (with the title "Global Food, Global Labour"), the other the image of a Mexican migrant worker in Canada picking our local summer produce (under the mantra "Local Food,

Global Labour”). Viewers are invited to take one of each and surreptitiously put them on produce in their local supermarket, a form of education and action.

### *Form*

Using altars as a form to tell these stories is a deliberate attempt to speak to the deep religiosity of migrant workers coming from the Latin American postcolonial context. Domestic altars combine colonial Catholic rituals with Indigenous spiritual practices, and honour the ancestors and family members who have passed away. They can be filled with images and objects, but always include food, flowers, and light. I chose to frame the boxes with a string of white Christmas tree lights while also illuminating them with candles, both tea lights and larger votive candles. The altars sit on a Peruvian weaving, made from natural plant-based dyes. Flowers in small vases frame the altars and are strewn throughout. And two ceramic angels, playing the panpipe and the accordion, watch from above. Finally, two cushions sit on the floor below the altars, inviting viewers to kneel before them as they explore their contents and contemplate the issues raised.

The domestic altars that inspired these altars are clearly spiritual practices for Mexicans. From the appropriation of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* (the dark-skinned virgin associated with Indigenous rights and old goddess figures) to the integration of healing herbs such as sage in the altars, the practice is associated with Day of the Dead spiritual rituals that helps people “to transcend loss, grieving and fear of death” (hooks & Mesa-Bains, 2006, p. 124). Yet Mesa-Bains also wonders whether that spiritual tradition “can only exist in that geography” (hooks & Mesa-Bains, 2006, p. 101). What does it mean to transplant these forms and practices in mainstream Canadian cultural contexts? How does one create a spiritual space with this installation?

For one, it has become clear over time that the altars are much more effective if viewed in a smaller and darker space. They are least effective when serving only as a backdrop, set up in a corridor where they are merely glanced at while passing, or in a large space where they get lost. There is also the question of the openness of the viewers or the sponsoring group to any kind of spiritual expression; there is still a strong resistance among some political activists, for example, to any reference to religion or spirituality, even if the forms are being re-appropriated for pedagogical and political purposes. Individuals will also have their own personal and emotional (positive and/or negative) associations with altars and with the symbols that fill them.

The most poignant responses have come, not surprisingly, from Latin Americans for whom the altars are familiar and deeply layered in meaning. Mexican migrant farm workers viewing them at a vigil in July 2012 could connect easily, for example. But the altars most resonated with two Peruvian workers who survived the February accident, as they contemplated the images of their deceased co-workers and the van that became their grave.



Altar photo

### *Production*

The original installation was created in the context of my Cultural Production Workshop in the Faculty of Environmental Studies at York University in March 2012. It was informed both by our reading of Jennifer González's book on installations, *Subject to Display: Reframing Race in Contemporary Installation Art* (2008), as well as by our collective discussions; graduate students, in fact, suggested both the prayer cards and the guerilla stickers for the installation. When I started to put them together, my artist son who sculpts with found materials taught me to look around the house for what was at hand, rather than start with a preconceived plan of exactly what should be included. This approach resonates with Mesa-Bains' altar-installations (González, 2008), and represents a *rasquache* aesthetic, a practice what Tomás Ybarra-Frausto termed *rasquachismo*, or an underdog perspective: "Resilience and resourcefulness spring from making do with what is at hand. This utilization of available resources makes for syncretism, juxtaposition, and integration" (quoted in González, 2008, p. 131).

This way of working has been reproduced as the altars moved from one



site or context to another. Crops that are relevant to a certain area have been added, migrant workers in the region featured. In a Nova Scotia exhibition, for example, local collaborators supplied the boxes, cloths, produce, and flowers; we considered creating a new altar to the migrant workers we discovered in fast food restaurants in Antigonish. Thus, the production itself can involve local educators and organizers who might have their own interests and purposes to build into a unique localized production; this research and participatory production becomes integral to the popular education process and resonates more strongly with specific groups. The most exciting adaptation of the idea of altars honouring migrant workers has emerged in Saltillo, Mexico, after I visited the Belen Centre for Migrants, a kind of safe house for Latin Americans working their way to the United States border. A colleague there has initiated a project with the migrants to produce their own altars in suitcases, as a way to tell their stories and remember their histories.

### *Use*

This last point about adapting to the context is critical. The use of the altars must be clarified by those groups using them, and integrated into the proposed educational process. In the examples of the different constituencies and sites already noted, the objectives have varied. In its first showing as a part of the Eco Art and Media Festival in York University's Faculty of Environmental Studies, I wanted to offer the back story of the photograph of Irena, the Mexican migrant worker, whose image is one of the rotating photos on the Faculty of Environmental Studies website. I felt responsible for informing my community about the global economic restructuring that brought her to Canada and the difficult working conditions she faced, none of which are evident in the photo.

The second use was a virtual showing of the installation to food scholars at the 2012 conference of the Agriculture, Food, and Human Values Society. Because the panel was focused on food education, participants offered their own ideas about how to make the prayer cards more effective; one suggestion, for example, was to "drop lift" them (i.e., sneak them surreptitiously into spaces) around town, in books, cafes, and places where there might be an interest in the issues. I will take the altars themselves to the 2013 conference, which finally includes an exhibition space for arts-based food education.

In July 2012, the altars were installed in a community centre in Kitchener at an event following a vigil remembering the Peruvian workers killed in February. Many Latin American migrant workers interacted with the altars and the prayer cards. A mixture of organizers of migrant workers and injured workers, academics, and social justice activists expressed interest in using the installation for their own purposes. But then it became clear that they needed to be packaged in a travelable form.

Back in Toronto in August 2012, 500 participants in an Urban Agriculture Summit passed by the altars as they sat in a corridor, but they were not connected

with any educational event, and had to be animated by someone (usually me) who invited people to take a closer look.

The October 2012 showing was part of a Social Justice Conference at Ryerson University focusing on Decent Work, Decent Lives, and more particularly, was part of a day that I co-organized around “Local Food, Global Labour.” A two-hour public panel invited two key migrant worker organizers (Justice for Migrant Workers and United Food and Commercial Workers) and two prominent food movement leaders (Toronto Food Policy Council and Food Secure Canada) to address the questions: How can we have both sustainable food and just labour? What is our organization doing to address the issue of migrant justice? The highlight of that gathering, attended by 100 students and activists, was emotional testimony by two surviving Peruvian workers, their first public appearance since the February accident. The public panel was followed by an afternoon workshop, “Building Alliances for Sustainable Food and Just Labour,” explicitly bringing together 40 labour activists and food activists to explore points of tension and unity that would allow them to work together.



Original altars in boxes of the global imported food and local food program

In Nova Scotia, they had two completely different lives. First, they were installed at the entrance of the elegant auditorium of the new business school at StFX, in a darkened space where they greeted people coming to a public lecture on food justice. Later they were moved to a small room in the Coady International Institute, which became a private meditation room, for personal viewing by participants in a weekend workshop on food justice; they were in the dark, illuminated by candles and strings of lights. The most interesting adaptation here

was the blank prayer cards, which originally invited people to draw their own favourite food; we asked them to add “Blessings for the Food Justice Workers,” to the front “Blessings for the Food, Blessings for the Workers,” then on the back of the card to note the kind of action they would take as a result of our three-day workshop; the cards were offered in a closing circle in which each participant made public their commitment to move forward on food justice issues.

Moving the altars across the country has led us to recreate them within suitcases that can be shipped and opened already assembled. The suitcase itself is a symbol of migration and allows the altars to be used by groups independent of me as an installation artist or facilitator. A set of instructions on their use accompanies the suitcases.



Altars reconstructed in suitcases to represent the migration process

### Imperfect Politics, Imperfect Tools: Limitations and Challenges of the Altars

As is clear in the above descriptions of the use of the altars, context is critical; they will evoke different responses depending on the distinct sites, audiences, and purposes which they aim to serve. One interesting tension relates to their spiritual connotation; for migrant workers, altars may represent a popular religious practice in their home countries, even if this adaptation of them reflects more a theology of liberation perspective than a traditional Catholic conservatism. On the other hand, political activists in North America often shun any religious iconography, associating it precisely with repressive ecclesiastical powers. Though recent decades have witnessed an opening to multiple forms

of spirituality, influenced by the influx of diasporic populations who more easily integrate the spiritual and the political, this could still be an obstacle to using the altars for political pedagogical purposes. On the other hand, there are also faith-based allies of migrant workers, such as KAIROS, a national ecumenical organization of 11 churches and religious groups that works for ecological justice and human rights (KAIROS Canada, 2014); the altars could also be an entry point for potential support from congregations across the country, a significant social force.



Jamaican migrant worker viewing altars at event in Kitchener, Ontario, remembering the Peruvian workers killed

To be effective, the altars must also challenge the hegemonic notion that art and culture are mere decorations, entertainment, or backdrops for the more serious work of popular education and political organizing. In the Ryerson social justice event, for example, they offered a compelling visual background for the media covering the appearance of the Peruvian survivors, but were rarely unpacked. In a media-saturated, channel-surfing consumer culture, we need new ways to get audiences to engage with art; partially in response to this phenomenon, there are growing forms of participatory public art, and the make-your-own prayer card reflects this practice. But how can the various components of the altars be decoded by viewers to deepen their understanding of both the artist's intent, and any educational objective? This takes time and conscious engagement; besides offering prayer cards with text that can be taken home and read, or stickers that can be used actively in supermarkets, the altars



can be codes in a workshop using a decoding process aimed at the kind of *conscientization* that Freire (1970) advocated. They must also then be engaged collectively, and not only digested individually.

### *An Ongoing Process*

The notion of “reflexive localism” may be useful here, too, in acknowledging that viewers representing different positionalities will respond differently to the altars and that shared values are not assumed. In fact, these very differences, if honestly shared, can become the grist for a fruitful dialogue that considers potential short term alliances for specific struggles. Rather than aim for a utopian vision of a response to the issue of inequities in the food system, and in particular of migrant worker injustice, we can embrace a process which uses imperfect tools in imperfect contexts, opening up dialogue where it is possible, and creatively engaging what will always be a “messy politics.” Out of this dialogue could come a new vision of how a local economy could integrate both sustainable food and migrant worker justice.

*Blessings on the food and blessings on the workers.*

*Blessings on the artists, the food justice educators and the political organizers.*

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> To identify other scholars on this issue, see conference program: <http://ihr.ucsc.edu/laboracrossfoodsystem/program>
- <sup>2</sup> Since 2009, I have co-coordinated with Harriet Friedmann of the University of Toronto the FoodShed Project, exploring the network of local food initiatives in the southern Ontario foodshed. For digital stories produced by York Faculty of Environmental Studies students in collaboration with local food groups, see <http://sustainontario.com/category/growing-good-food-ideas/ggfi-stories>
- <sup>3</sup> Remittances are the second-largest source of foreign exchange, behind petroleum sales (Limits to Growth, 2012).
- <sup>4</sup> In 2011, a Toronto chapter, or LEG of Growing Food and Justice for All Initiative, was formed of various progressive food organizations to address systemic racism in the movement.
- <sup>5</sup> FoodShare Toronto is a non-profit community organization promoting “good healthy food for all”; the Good Food Box is just one of its many programs. See <http://www.foodshare.net/good-food-box>
- <sup>6</sup> See upcoming documentary, “Migrant Women,” by filmmaker Min Sook Lee and commissioned by TV Ontario. See [www.migrantdreams.ca](http://www.migrantdreams.ca)
- <sup>7</sup> For a full story of Irena and the migrant worker program she worked with, see Barndt (2008).
- <sup>8</sup> *Milagros* are religious charms often offered in Latin American churches and altars as part of a prayer to assist in healing.

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