



# Introduction:

## ROOTS AND ROUTES

### Where Does Our Food Come From?

This book starts with that seemingly simple question. But the question itself raises many other questions.

To start with, why are we even asking the question now? A century ago, our great grandparents had little reason to wonder where their food came from; if

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they didn't grow their own, at least they usually knew the people who did. To ask the question today is to admit, in fact, a shared ignorance; very few of us have much sense at all of the processes that have brought food to our table, nor can we envision the many people who have moved it along the way. Our disconnection from both the earth and its fruits is not only physical and social but also mental and spiritual.

When we explore the disconnection, however, we open a Pandora's box. A whole array of other questions comes tumbling out: What soil and climate have nurtured the food we eat? Whose hands have planted, cultivated, picked, packed, processed, transported, inspected, sold, and cooked it? What production practices have transformed it from seed to fruit, from fresh to processed form? Who decides what is grown and how? What is the effect of those decisions on our health and the health of the planet? The questions are, indeed, endless.

### The Tomasita Project

As an educator, I am deeply interested in the ways we learn, how we come to understand more fully our own daily experiences and the broader forces shaping them. In 1994, I found a popular education tool, "A Whirlwind Tour of Economic Integration with Your Guide, Tomasito the Tomato,"<sup>1</sup> that addressed some of the aforementioned questions by tracing the journey of a tomato from Mexico to Canada. The tomato story helped demystify globalization, revealing the role of corporations in creating and maintaining a global food system dependent on genetically modified seeds, pesticide packages, expropriated Indigenous land, cheap peasant labor, and environmental racism.

The tomato seemed a perfect "entrée" to a process of cross-border research and popular education around the complex phenomenon and often confusing concept of globalization. "Entrée" is used in two senses: it could be the content, or main course, of an educational process, as well as an entry point into both the personal experience of eating and the globalized process of food production, as one slice of the globalization pie. That is, as an "intimate commodity,"<sup>2</sup> food (or the tomato) touches our bodies as well as our minds and hearts, finds its way into our stomachs as well as our stories; as a border-crossing market commodity, it leaves a trail that offers clues to broader economic, ecological, political, and cultural processes.

I briefly toyed with the idea of following a blouse instead of food or corn instead of a tomato. The fact that we imbibe food, and become what we eat, made it more compelling; food shapes us physically as well as emotionally and culturally. The tomato was ripe with many possibilities: though it originated in Mexico, it has become central to the diets of all three North American countries; it can be grown in all three, at least seasonally. As a fruit of the earth, the tomato needs the elements (land, water, air, sun) to grow; as a many-seeded fruit, it has been the object of diverse technological interventions, from hybridization to bio-

genetic engineering. Finally, it is a food that can stimulate our growing awareness about the impact of long-distance production: almost any northern consumer can tell you the difference in taste between an imported winter tomato and a local summer one!

In adapting the idea of the tomato's journey, I decided to focus on the dynamic relationship between the tomato and the women workers who are most involved in both its production and consumption; so *Tomasito* became *Tomasita*, representing both. The Spanish name, too, reminds us that, within the NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement) food system, the most marginalized workers are Mexican. Thus began a five-year collaborative adventure in research, education, and action called the Tomasita Project.

Little did I realize, however, that I was embarking on a journey that would send me along very twisty trails and into deep and complex histories. The path the tomato takes is certainly not a straight line, nor do the stories of women who pick and pack, scan and sell tomatoes fit a linear notion of history. The *roots* and *routes* of these women workers, as well as the tomatoes they bring us, are indeed tangled.

## Tangled Roots and Routes

My search for the roots of this tomato story took me to Mexico. There I also found trees that expose their gnarled roots, crawling along the ground, wrapped around each other. "Tangled roots and routes" seemed a perfect metaphor for the process of analysis framing this book. The stories of women workers and the tomatoes they move from field to table, from Mexico to Canada, are tenaciously intertwined, making it next to impossible to examine one alone, without considering how it is connected to, and often embedded in, another.

The exploration itself has challenged my deeper understandings of both roots and routes, of time and space, raising questions about the complex dialectical relations of production and consumption, work and technology, health and environment, biodiversity and cultural diversity. The routes of the tomato as well as the movements of women workers reflect broader social practices guided primarily by corporations, nation-states, and financial institutions. Each woman's experience is shaped by her own tangled roots, influenced by where (and when) she was born, her ethnic and/or racial identity, her economic situation and status, her age, and family status. Many of these factors are not only dynamically interrelated but also constantly shifting.

I realize that I run the risk of simplifying a multilayered and contextually shaped global food system by focusing on just one commodity (the tomato), in one context (North America), and highlighting one particular social group (women food workers). These are only concrete entry points for exploring broader processes that move beyond the particularity of the tomato. The metaphor of tangled roots and routes reminds us that these stories are neither simple nor one-dimensional but rather complex, messy, and very rich.

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## Recovering Personal Roots

Whenever I drive to visit my parents in Ohio, I pass by the small village where I lived as a child in the 1950s. As I approach the exit on the divided super-highway, I encounter a cluster of gas stations and fast-food restaurants, almost identical to any highway stop in North America. The town itself lies one mile south, its main intersection surrounded by the abandoned shells of what used to be the general store, the local tavern, and the sole gas station. I grew up playing with my friends on their families' farms, which provided not only their livelihood but also our sustenance. The farms, too, are now shells, and townspeople can be found among the travelers who stop for a quick fill-up of fuel and food by the highway.

Five years ago, I did not realize that one of the routes this project would take would be into my own history. As I dug into the roots of the continental food system, I reconnected with my own roots, revisiting my own more intimate experiences with food production in that rural community. In exchange for his duties as the minister of the local church, for example, my father was sometimes paid in produce; I have memories of bushels of vegetables dropped on the doorstep or half a frozen pig left on the table. We tended our own large garden, and my mother canned food for the winter. In the fall, townswomen gathered in the churchyard around a fire to stir an immense cauldron of apple butter, which was then distributed to each of their kitchens. There was little distance between production and consumption; we knew intimately how our food was grown and prepared.

As I was growing up in the 1950s and eating fresh tomatoes from our garden, the globalized food system was also in its formative years. My lifetime parallels major transformations in global agriculture, mostly originating in the nation of my birth. They were spurred on by post-World War II notions of economic growth and development, an increasing industrialization of agriculture, and other interrelated processes (chapter 1) reflected in the divided highway and roadside restaurants that turned my rural community into a ghost town by the 1990s.<sup>3</sup> Born in 1945 in the "belly of the beast"—or the country that was on the road to global hegemonic control of many economic, political, and cultural processes—I was profoundly shaped by this transformation of food.

For the past thirty years, however, I have lived in Canada and have spent more time in Mexico than in the United States. Moving outside my own country of origin and viewing it from the other side of both its northern and its southern borders have opened up the fertile space of the margins for rethinking the systems often created and propagated by U.S. initiatives. Canada's ambiguous historical identity as colonized and colonizer has helped me rethink my own ambivalent and mixed identity; most particularly, the multiculturalism of Toronto has offered me encounters with many diasporic histories that have fertilized my postmodern imagination. My regular forays, over the last twenty-five years, into Latin America, have exposed me to yet other cultural

forces shaping my political perspectives and educational work. Living and working in Peru in the 1970s, in Nicaragua in the 1980s, and in Mexico in the 1990s have helped me put the tomato story in a hemispheric perspective. It is that journey that I invite you to join now.

## Zooming Out/In/Out: Tracing the Trail of This Book

As a photographer, I think about the stories unfolding in this book like a camera lens, zooming out and zooming in. Chapters are organized into three sections.

In the first section, chapters 1 and 2, I zoom out, laying the broader ground for the women's stories and framing them conceptually. In chapter 1, "Across Space and through Time: Tomatl Meets the Corporate Tomato," I trace the tomato trail from the Mexican field to a Canadian fast-food restaurant. In two intertwining stories, we follow both "Tomatl," the Indigenous tomato that is rooted in traditional practices and today being re-created for local consumption, and the "Corporate Tomato," the tomato that has been commodified and chemicalized through industrial agriculture in Mexico and then exported, scanned, and sliced for northern consumption. The chapter offers a wide-angle view of the tomato story not only through space but also through time, as we excavate its roots in key scientific, industrial, chemical, and genetic moments. Chapter 2 introduces the theoretical frames and methodological approaches used in tracing the tomato journey and in gathering the stories of women workers along the trail. I introduce key frames (globalization from above and from below, interlocking analysis of power, and four key axes of investigation) as well as methodologies (popular education and methods, corporate and qualitative research, and photographic tools) applied.

To get to the heart of this story, we zoom in on specific food companies and women workers. Chapters 3, 4, 5, and 6 offer close-ups, or case studies, of key stops along the tomato trail, from a Mexican agribusiness to a Canadian supermarket and a U.S.-owned fast-food restaurant, with a pause along the highway to consider truckers and migrant workers. While the tomato story in chapter 1 follows Tomasita's movements from south to north, these chapters reverse the order, beginning with our consumption of tomatoes in the north and working our way back to the roots of tomato production in the south. Each chapter is framed by the globalization-from-above and globalization-from-below dynamic, so corporate stories are told as well as the daily work and home lives of the women workers. Woven into these stories and concluding each chapter are examples of "the other globalization," or resistance at both individual and collective levels.

In chapter 3, "Arch Deluxe with a Smile: Women Never Stop at McDonald's," we examine the meteoric rise and global dominance of McDonald's fast-food restaurants as a model for both economic restructuring as well as cultural hegemony. The stories feature primarily younger workers reflecting on their

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working conditions and how their own eating practices are affected by constantly changing shift work and quick, convenient food. As an example of the other globalization, an elementary school class undertakes participatory research on fast food, deconstructing ads and making their own images. We also examine the growing public consciousness about child obesity traced to fast food.

The Canadian retail giant, Loblaws supermarkets, owned by conglomerate George Weston Ltd., is featured in chapter 4, "You Can Count on Us: Scanning Cashiers at Loblaws Supermarkets." First we probe the secrets of their success as a company—particularly through corporate brand development, designer supermarkets, and labor restructuring. Their increasing vulnerability as Wal-Mart moves into Canada is also examined. Then we move to the stories of the women workers on the front line, the cashiers. They represent two major trends in global workplaces: the phenomenon of part-time "flexible" labor and the intensification of work through technology; in particular, the scanners symbolize the pressure on them to be both "fast and friendly," while also affecting their health and sense of themselves. The other globalization is represented by the growing debate around the labeling of genetically modified foods.

Chapter 5, "On the Move for Food: Truckers and Transnational Migrants," provides a brief interlude between consumption in the north and production in the south, by introducing two different kinds of workers who must migrate in order to feed themselves while serving the global food system. The story of Humberto, a truck driver for Mexican agribusinesses who moves the tomatoes across the Mexican–U.S. border, and of Jim, who brings them to Canada, reveals the centrality of transportation to this system. And a little-known story of Mexican migrant workers coming to Canada is told by Irena, who has spent four months every summer for the past thirteen years picking our summer tomatoes in Ontario. A budding movement for migrant worker rights is stimulating cross-sectoral actions.

Finally, we reach the roots of the corporate tomato story in chapter 6, "Picking and Packing for the North: Agricultural Workers at Empaque Santa Rosa." For northern consumers, I offer a rich and complex history of agriculture in Mexico; the current push for agroexport production is epitomized by the story of Empaque Santa Rosa, the second largest domestic producer of tomatoes with 85 percent now being exported. I peel away the layers of the stories of women workers in this agribusiness, from the poorest Indigenous women brought for the harvests to the more privileged mestizo packers offered higher wages and better working and living conditions. The other globalization is represented by recent mobilizations by human rights groups to expose the unjust treatment of Indigenous migrant workers housed in horrific camps on the edge of the fields.

In the third section (chapters 7 and 8), we zoom out again, comparing the stories of the women workers across borders and companies, and using an even wider lens to reflect on different forms of resistance in both Canada and Mexico, which I am calling the "other globalization."

Chapter 7, "Crossing Sectors and Borders: Weaving a Holistic Analysis," compares the experiences of women workers in the different sectors of the

tomato chain, following the key axes of the study. The analysis evolves around the corresponding concepts of *distancing* (production/consumption), *fragmentation and uniformity* (biodiversity/cultural diversity), *flexibility of labor* (work/technology), and *holistic health* (health/environment).

Chapter 8, "Cracks in the Corporate Tomato: Signs of Hope," leaves us with a sense of possibilities and alternatives to the global food system. I introduce a framework for examining "the other globalization" through four levels or forms of resistance: individual critical thoughts and actions, local/global education, collective action, and transnational coalitions. There are examples of each, four from the Mexican context and four from the Canadian context.

## Notes

1. Ecumenical Coalition for Economic Justice, "A Whirlwind Tour of Economic Integration with Your Guide, Tomasito the Tomato," *Economic Integration in the Americas Kit*, Toronto (1994).
2. Anthony Winson, *The Intimate Commodity: Food and the Development of the Agro-Industrial Complex in Canada* (Toronto: Garamond, 1993).
3. Alexander Wilson, *The Culture of Nature: North American Landscape from Disney to the Exxon Valdez* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1991).