
Commentary

Food is love: And so, what then?

Elizabeth F. S. Roberts

University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan.

E-mail: lfsrob@umich.edu

BioSocieties (2015) **10**, 247–252. doi:10.1057/biosoc.2015.18

Greetings from Mexico City – which, as of 2013, became the capital of the United Nations’ designated, ‘world’s fattest industrial country’. City, state and federal officials in Mexico are concerned about this ‘fact’. It’s more than a ‘matter of concern’. Public health campaigns abound, exhorting you as an individual, female, *ama de casa*, (housewife) to stop heedlessly providing soda and junk food to your child. Of course, there is no discussion of revisiting, reversing or dissolving NAFTA, which has made corporate sugar, in all its forms, so cheap and plentiful while also destroying small-scale Mexican agriculture. That would be akin to refusing the drug war, like NAFTA, another gift from the North.

I am living in a working-class neighborhood, ‘Moctezuma’, where there is little uncertainty about the fact that many people are fat. Most people are chubby and some are very fat. In Moctezuma, I am thin. When I visit friends and colleagues in Condesa, a ritzy neighborhood nearby, I become chubby too. When I head to Condesa there is always *agua natural/agua simple* (plain water) in clear glass pitchers on the table for meals. At meals and parties in Moctezuma I sometimes go thirsty because there is no *agua simple* for sharing and I avoid soda as the corporate devil’s drink. I’m strange for wanting *agua natural*. After all, it costs money. It doesn’t come out of the tap. You have to buy it and it tastes like nothing. It’s too simple, and soda costs not much more.

In Moctezuma, Alma and Mar, mother and 5-year-old daughter, cheerfully collude to break school rules. For the last 2 years – parents, who here, means mothers, are only allowed to send *agua natural* to school with their child. But Mar doesn’t like *agua natural*. She won’t drink it. She wants more than *agua simple*. She wants the corporeal joy that added flavor and sugar provide. Alma wants Mar to have more. So she buys a new kind of clear, flavored water with sugar, and pours it into a clear, plastic water bottle, to fool Mar’s teachers into thinking that Mar is drinking healthful, pure, *agua simple*.

The environmental health project I’m simultaneously studying and collaborating with, here in Mexico City, has worked for years to create awareness about the damaging effects of lead in the pottery dishes (*trastes de barro*) women use to cook beans and moles. Project staff work with potters to make *trastes* without lead more widely available and have gotten some women to switch their *trastes* for metal pots. They are having some success getting the lead out. I reflect at yet another soda-saturated, candy-coated Moctezuma birthday party that it is going to be much harder to get the soda out. What’s there to replace it with? *Agua simple*? That’s not love.

And food is love. Food is love. Food is love! Yes, it’s a cliché and everyone knows it is true. That is certain. But what is love? And who is everyone? By editing this special issue on

alimentary uncertainty, Sanabria and Yates-Doerr provide me with profound ways to reflect on food, love and un/certainty in Mexico City. What's certain is that in Moctezuma sharing soda, liquid-food, filled with sugar, is love. It's not certain that soda makes your loved ones sick. What is certain for public health officials in Mexico City is that *Chilangos* are way too fat. But they don't seem to know that food is love. That's not certain for them. So, OK, maybe not everyone knows that food is love. Sanabria and Yates-Doerr want us to embrace uncertainty, stay with the trouble, keep the doubt alive, and I am going to. That's my first task, reflecting on the uncertainty of those who don't know that food is love and the uncertainty of those who don't know that soda is bad for your loved ones. But then, I'm going to wonder about uncertainty too, how we, a certain kind of we, maybe only want certain kinds of uncertainty.

The contrast I am making between those who are certain that food is love and those who are not, and those who are certain that fatness must be vanquished and those who are not, is linkable to distinctions provided by almost all the authors in this volume, distinctions that for both the authors and their subjects seem to center around relational worlds filled with uncertainty and object-stable worlds that are uncertain about relations. These worlds are not mutually exclusive. They exist in gradients. Speaking to food adulteration in India, Solomon lays out distinct but co-existing forms of elemental and patterned thinking. Food regulators think in terms of single elements (chalk, powdered brick or water), which could be extirpated one by one. In contrast, patterned thinking assumes a set of relations that might or might not make food reliable. Where food is not certain, complex patterns are. Cousins also calls for patterned thinking in describing how hunger cannot be understood outside of the historic relations of HIV in South Africa. Weiner and Will's piece on functional foods in the United Kingdom contrasts regulators and social scientists worried about categorizing these consumables as food or medicine, and those who use them by fitting them into pre-existing relations of care. In analyzing sentinel devices in Hong Kong, Keck offers us a distinction between the logic of bio-security which "draws binary oppositions" stabilizing objects in the world and Annemarie Mol's delineation of the logic of care, which bears attention to the singularity of situations and practices. Ulijaszek argues that even when the British government tries to harness complexity to combat obesity it deploys the romance of a collection of individuals making a larger-order whole, instead of examining the byzantine complexity of located relations at multiple scales. Together, these authors point to how contemporary living, including among themselves, involves making distinctions between individual, stable objects and uncertain, shifting relations, and then living within both kinds of realities to varying degrees. No us/them claims about radical alterity here. What might matter most then in our analysis is location and resource, allowing us to ask about certainties and uncertainties in different locations at different times. How are they maintained? And who and what they are good for?

In work I did in Ecuador in the early 2000s I found that the practice of assisted reproduction didn't trouble people much. Beyond mommy and daddy, God and family members and all kinds of other supports had always assisted in making a baby. There was little sense that assisted reproduction deviated from a nature that served as idealized template for practice (Roberts, 2013). On the other hand, there *was* a visceral sense – a certainty – that entities were only made through relations. This also held true in realms like infant feeding. There was no existential breast versus bottle battle as in the United States. Why not both? Breastfeeding is usually convenient and formula entailed more relations; more people, more expense, more

assistance. In Ecuador, breast and bottle were not of different domains to be purified of each other. While assistance was essential, in an uncertain world, purification was anathema to existence.

My work in Ecuador started me thinking more about assistance in general; how there are people who experience their existence as assisted and those who don't, and much of that difference has to do with where certainty is found in specific locales. That food is love is certain for most people in the world who live within their dependence on relations. But this truism seems to be uncertain for experts who live in worlds where objects are stable. And it seems uncertain for middle class parents in the United States, who have the assistance to make individuated children, and who are told by experts not to equate food with love. Love can and should be shown in other ways, like by modeling a nutritious approach to food, as a stable object. There are those who are certain you can get the soda out with public service announcements and those who know that food is love. Alimentary experts might call this kind of love, felt through the corporeal pleasure of feeding each other fat and sugar, an addiction. But to accept that term, we would have to turn it on its head, arguing it's an addiction to the relations necessary for living, assisted existence, a certainty in an world where objects do not hold.

While experts aren't certain that food is love, it seems like corporations are, since now, in the United States, corporations are people too. These corporate people are happy to help you share the love with all of your relations, spreading pleasure and fatness. In an recent essay in *The New Inquiry*, Willi Osterweil excoriates the never been proved truism/moralism that fat is indeed bad for your health, and demonstrates how NAFTA has served as a "spatial fix", opening up new food markets by depositing surplus sugar in the bodies of the Mexican working class (Osterweil, 2014). He then argues that fat shame in Mexico is a done deal, describing how US corporations export both fatness and anti-fatness, a simultaneous, multibillion dollar sugar sale and multibillion dollar diet industry. But I'm not so sure. While fat shaming suffuses the city on TV and in neighborhoods like Condesa, I don't find much of it deeply incorporated into Moctezuma living.

When I am in Condesa, thin men are commonplace. When I am in Moctezuma they are rare. A thin man has few women in his life to feed him. A thin man is probably addicted to *activo* (pipe glue) and hard to talk to. He might be shadow boxing the air, in between inhaling. Thin women are unusual as well. After zumba class ends, all of us sweaty ladies weigh ourselves as part of a weight loss contest that no one plans to win. We cackle at the prospect of all the food we will bring and eat at an upcoming party. Zumba can be an ecstatic, collective experience but it's not for making thinner women. Thin is beautiful, just like whiteness. But both are attributes of people who can live as *if* their lives are not assisted. Thinness is not necessarily to be strived for where food is love and fat is a sure sign of existence, a similar reality to what Yates-Doerr describes for Berta, where the folds in her hupil fabric around her belly attest to her existence after years of war-induced hunger in Guatemala (this issue).

Thinness has little purchase when more is more, when more assistance equals more existence. You might be thinking, like some Northern, skinny, Michael Pollan pundit, that fatness might be combated in Moctezuma if people just (i) ate more fruits and vegetables and (ii) made more home cooked meals – which together are somehow going to 'solve' obesity in the United States. But, you would be living in a world of stable objects, of fruits and vegetables and measurable calories, instead of a relational world where food is love and more food is more love and more existence. I have never eaten so many fruits and vegetables or so many

home cooked meals as I have in Moctezuma. Gorgeous, ripe produce is cheap, and plentiful, just like sugar. This is no food desert. Most women have lives structured for time to cook and they do, with wonderful produce and a vast array of meats and grease and an abundance of cheap American processed foods, like canned tuna, mayonnaise and Jell-O.

TV food ads these days, no matter what the ‘food’, are all required to carry a line at the bottom that says, *Come bien* – Eat well. But the reality of eating well all depends of course. In Condesa it might involve counting calories to prevent children from becoming excessive, from becoming fat, and that of course is also love. In Moctezuma it involves preparing your kids a hot cooked meal everyday for after school. It also involves stopping at any of the abundant sale/love/pleasure points as you walk them home from school, where you buy them, at their request, candy; or better yet, food prepared before your eyes, like wheat-based churritos slathered in chili, fresh fruit salad drowned in whipped cream, biscuits and caramel sauce, or ‘healthy’ Danone yogurt, frozen in their small individual packets and then yanked out and smothered to order with melted chocolate, sprinkles and cookie crumbs. All of this love is prepared by women you know, maybe a comadre, or a cousin, to whom you also sell Tupperware or Avon. More relations is more love. Come bien.

My point is not new – any anthropologist with a cursory knowledge of exchange theory can tell you this. So can any anthropologist of food and kinship working in resource-poor settings. Both literatures attest that for much of the world, individual units don’t exchange to make a larger order entity of society as distinct from nature. Instead existence is only achieved relationally through a multitude of kinds of others (Munn, 1986; Weismantel, 1988; Schepers-Hughes, 1992). Why then do experts focus on individual elements and not relations? To help us think about why we might examine *nature* as a stable object, as it is lived by many alimentation experts.

Nature appears very little in these articles and that’s all for the best. These authors are beyond nature/culture analytics. But *where* nature does emerge, is notable: England and France. For the French proponents of a sensorial approach to weight loss the Pleistocene stands in for nature, “enfolded in our molecule make-up” (Sanabria, this issue). The regulators and social scientists trying to categorize functional foods in Britain are concerned about how natural they are, given the industrial processes that produced them (Weiner and Will, this issue). In Western Europe, and also North America, nature became a means to stabilize the world and things in it as separate from relations. It provided certainty, if only its essence could be understood properly. Nature continues to provide a model for how to live as bounded, unexcessive individuals, allowing for a romantic class politics that chastises those who don’t seek its purity. Taste for the natural, disdain for the ‘artificial’ (for example, artificially processed and colored soda), serves to denigrate those whose bodies are excessive and who slather on more, whether it’s ice cream sprinkles, heavy make-up and big hair, multiple saints, or baby formula, all forms of relational assistance, in an uncertain world. This purified stable nature came about through a never before seen level of abundance provided through colonial resource extraction. That abundance helped make infrastructures that could black-box objects like nature and individuals and eventually, germs, genes, nutrients and neurons that could be separated from those individuals. Most of these papers however, concern places where the stabilization of nature and individuals has never been achieved, places from where those resources were extracted. The certainty of these places is that relations are the only certainty. Nature isn’t as useful in Guatemala, South Africa, India or

Hong Kong. In these places, even the experts seem to be following the looping of organisms, technologies and politics as they manage problems of alimentation, disease and health where there are few black boxes.

As fellow participants in various strands of the social sciences of medicine, science and rationality, *we* have all received the directive to steel our analytics against the stability of objects through the method of entanglement. We trace the relations. This is easier now with a cease-fire in the nature/culture war. With epigenetics and evolutionary development biology, even the life scientists aren't fighting for nature as a stable object anymore. But why now, are *we*, this kind of entangling academic, so able to be so uncertain? And where does it get us?

In the end of the *Body Multiple* Mol (2002) calls for uncertainty, as she describes the ability of practitioners in the Netherlands to move back and forth between certainty and uncertainty. While they can be uncertain at times, the abundant resources they live with often allow these practitioners to ignore the relations that produce stable objects, since the relations that enact these objects are not likely to fall apart. As we can see across all these articles though, the ability to inhabit this kind of certainty is not shared, for instance neither ordinary people nor regulators are worried about food adulteration in Britain, as they are in India. Food is more stable in the United Kingdom. That might be changing though. The gutting of social welfare in resource rich settings, as well as the disastrous effects of the first world certainty that objects are separable, especially nature (for example, antibiotic resistance, Landecker, 2015), has created new states of existential precarity. When *we* are forced to live relations, in the way most people the world over always have, "uncertainty, it seems, is the new certainty from which we must build our lives" (Altman, 2014). Where once resource poor settings served as the key resource for understanding uncertainty, as we watched how people improvised and made do, now formerly stable places can aid us as well in tracing the relations that comprise formerly stable objects.

So what do *we*, as in progressive social scientists mostly based in the still relatively well-provisioned North, want? What is our sense of the good? My sense is that even as we espouse the virtues of entangled uncertainty as an analytic mode, we want uncertainty and entanglement to remain voluntary analytics not a constantly lived experience. For instance, while we are pretty certain getting the lead out of catalytic convertors was for the good, there is now uncertainty about one of the crowning public health achievements of the twentieth century, fluoridating the water supply in many industrialized nations. Now bodies might have too much. We want stable resources to be allocated to find out how much is actually too much, which will allow us to "cut complexities down to manageable size" (Sanabria and Yates-Doerr, this issue). We want the certainty and the separations that resources make possible, that allow for jurisdiction and responsibility towards specialized realms. The stability that black boxes provide can be very relaxing. They let us get things done. We would like public health officials who have the resources to do their jobs, who can call out NAFTA, and who don't have to work for NGOs or Microsoft on the side. We want resources for clean water to be in place through recognizable, certain and stable means. We want bio-power. We want food to be made of both love and calories, not only love.

Despite our professions of an uncertain and entangled faith, we very well might want the people we care about, who live in unstable, relational places, to have some certainty, to live amongst some black boxes. Despite my certainty that alimentation is relational I would like to get soda out. The goal wouldn't be thinness, or more nature, but for lives less beholden to

corporate personhood, given my certainty that corporations seek profit, and that the certainty ‘food is love’, works for corporate gain. I am pretty certain you see, that even though existence should be assisted, abundant and even fat, overly sugared relations are often diabetic. While “open endings do not imply immobilization” (Mol, 2002, p. 184), the uncertainty of open endings in poorly resourced realities, which are never immobile, always malleable, always assisted, always love-filled, might not get us nearer towards what we want either. And what I think we want, is to live in a world highly attentive to relations, where at the same time everyone can share in the stability of more objects, like in clean and reliable tap water, so that soda isn’t the only way to live in love.

About the Author

Elizabeth F.S. Roberts is an ethnographer of science, medicine and technology who teaches anthropology at the University of Michigan. Her comparative research on environmental health, epigenetics, assisted reproduction, reproductive governance and nature in Latin America and the United States, traces how bio-scientific practice shapes bodies and relatedness. She is the author of *God’s Laboratory: Assisted Reproduction in the Andes* (University of California Press, 2012).

References

- Altman, R. (2014) When the raspberries come *Brain Child*, <http://www.brainchildmag.com/2014/08/when-the-raspberries-come/>, accessed 3 March 2015.
- Landecker, H. (2015) Antibiotic resistance and the biology of history. *Body & Society*, 1–34.
- Mol, A. (2002) *The Body Multiple: Ontology in Medical Practice*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Munn, N.D. (1986) *The Fame of Gawa: A Symbolic Study of Value Transformation in a Massim (Papua New Guinea) Society*. Cambridge, Cambridgeshire; New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Osterweil, W. (2014) Weight gains. *The New Inquiry*, <http://thenewinquiry.com/essays/weight-gains/>, accessed 17 December 2014.
- Roberts, E.F.S. (2013) Assisted existence: An ethnography of being in Ecuador. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 19(3): 562–580.
- Scheper-Hughes, N. (1992) *Death Without Weeping: The Violence of Everyday Life in Brazil*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Weismantel, M.J. (1988) *Food, Gender and Poverty in the Ecuadorian Andes*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.