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Coming of Age at the End of Nature: A Generation Faces Living on a Changed Planet

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<CT>Tamale Traditions</>

<CST>Cultivating an Understanding of Humans and Non-Human Nature through Food</>

<CA>Amy Coplen</>

<NI>Clouds of corn flour rise as electric mixers whir the yellow masa. I brave the storm, leaning in to pour beef broth and red chile into the dough, and emerge covered in a fresh dusting of corn flour. No time to brush it off—I need to keep up with my mom and my grandma, who are quickly spreading finished masa onto corn husks, plopping down spoonfuls of shredded pork marinated in red chile, then wrapping and folding the husks around the mixture to form little steam jackets. My ten-year-old cousin giggles as I dodge the wet ingredients that are now sloshing around in and out of the mixing bowls. Her task is to tie up the tamales so they stay snugly wrapped while my auntie steams them in one of the three pots whistling on the stove. The kitchen cacophony drowns out the holiday music humming from the stereo, but no one seems to mind. I glance over my shoulder to take note of how quickly the masa is being used up and notice smears of yellow corn paste on my mom’s nose and forehead. I grab a clean towel and wipe masa from her face and we burst into laughter. We’ve made an enormous mess! When the hysterics subside, we get back to work. It’s half past four and we need to keep moving. Our goal is twenty-seven²⁷ dozen tamales, one more than last year, and we won’t settle for less.

I was born in the desert Southwest, where rich food traditions, including the communal preparation and consumption of tamales, chile rellenos, posole, and more are passed from one generation to the next in kitchens just like mine. These kitchen customs are sustained by parallel traditions that thrive on the region’s farmlands, some of which have been cultivated for more than ~~over~~ four hundred years. Farmers preserve countless heirloom varieties, including spicy and

acidic Chimayo chiles, nutty blue corn posole, and deep red and white speckled Anasazi beans. They grow these crops in landscapes shaped by centuries of careful stewarding, with water flowing through common property ditches, or acequias, dug by their ancestors more than four hundred~~over 400~~ years ago. Water serves as the lifeblood of acequia farmers and those who are sustained by the culturally significant foods they produce. This includes me, but as a child, I had no idea.

I was born in Belen, New Mexico, and so was my father. He grew up in a subdivision called Mariposa Park. ~~The~~Its houses were built in the early 1950s for returning World War II veterans, which included my grandfather, Papa Frank. Curiously, a handful of acequias wound their way through the subdivision. Relics of a farming past, the acequias reminded Mariposa Park residents that the landscape was changing. Old farmland was making way for new development.

One acequia happened to sit just beyond my father's back fence. In the sweltering summers, he, his brothers and sister, and a band of neighborhood kids would seek relief, splashing around in the cool waters of the acequia. Each spring, they picked wild asparagus on its banks. Rumor had it that the Gerardi family imported asparagus seeds from Italy and that they had somehow been set loose, washing downstream and sowing themselves along the banks of the acequias. After the kids gathered the crisp green spears, my grandmother would sauté the harvest with a little butter and lemon juice. My father claims he hasn't tasted better asparagus since.

My childhood home was six miles and thirty years from his in the subdivision of Rio Communities, but the name isn't quite indicative of the experience. Asphalt and yellowish lawns served as the playground for the kids in my neighborhood.

After high school, I left for greener pastures to attend the University of New Mexico, an hour north in Albuquerque. There I learned the disturbing details of society's destruction of the environment and how climate change was threatening the lives and livelihoods of many communities, including my birthplace. While the Rio Grande valley where I grew up peers into a future of insufferable drought, [g](#)Gulf cities downstream face impending inundation by rising coastal waters. Poor nations, who have relatively little to do with causing global warming, will suffer its most severe consequences. And as we walk this fine line between unsettling weather anomalies and climate disaster, deniers mount misinformation campaigns against the scientific data pointing irrefutably to anthropogenic global warming. In the [S](#)southwestern [U](#)nited [S](#)tates, and regions worldwide, farmer livelihoods, local food security, and community health are integrally linked to precious and limited water resources, and development and climate change threaten these relationships.

During college, when I drove south to visit my family and friends I couldn't help but see the irony of those sickly lawns contrasted by the desert landscape that stretches just beyond the border of Rio Communities. Six miles away, my father's childhood home went up for sale. He and his brothers and sister were overwhelmed [with](#)by curiosity. How had it changed? What state was it in? What memories might a visit stir? My uncle, a newly licensed real estate agent, suggested a tour. My dad invited me to come along, and I gladly joined. As a kid, I hadn't been interested in his old asparagus and acequia stories, but as an adult with a budding understanding of human—nature relationships, I paid closer attention. I had the opportunity to see the landscape of my father's birthplace.

We opened the creaky door and were met by a musty smell. Quiet voices echoed with a certain hesitance at first, but soon inquiries of “remember when?” and roars of “take a look at

this!” grew louder as old memories were revisited. I tried to be patient, but at first chance I made a beeline for the back door. I wanted to lay my eyes on that acequia.

My father followed me outside and we headed toward the back fence. We peered over to find that my father’s childhood acequia had been filled in. In fact, there was no trace of the neighborhood’s former network of irrigation canals. Over time, development had transformed an ancient agricultural landscape into an aging subdivision with parched dirt and yellow lawns. This was not the setting of my father’s childhood, but one that more closely resembled my own. I mourned the transformation of a landscape that I knew only through stories. Never had humans and nature stood so diametrically opposed in my mind. Not only are we disconnected from the natural world, I thought, we are actively destroying it.

Since this visit to my father’s childhood home, I’ve spent much time reflecting on my antagonistic view of humans and nature. In particular, I’ve come to understand the ways in which it limited me from examining the root causes of environmental degradation.

The human/nature dichotomy pervades our culture and mediates our daily lives. We are distant from the capitalist production practices that transform nature to meet our needs. We turn a knob and our homes are cooled or heated, while CO_2 carbon dioxide warms our climate, causing desertification and inundation simultaneously in different parts of the world. We choose from a uniform selection of glossy tomatoes in the dead of winter, yet migrant farm workers toil in slave-like conditions in Mexico and even in Florida. We text friends with our new smartphones, yet few of us are aware of the bloody conflict over mining of the electronic component coltan in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Our physical distance from production processes enables us to ignore the social, political, and economic causes of environmental degradation. But, like it or not, these production practices constitute our relationship with nature and with one another.

Nature is not a wilderness “out there.” Nature is embedded in everything we do. Nature is us, and we are nature.

In his essay “The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature,” insightful environmental historian William Cronon argues that the concept of wilderness—a cultural construction defined by the absence of humans—“reproduce[s] the dualism that sets humanity and nature at opposite poles” (1996, p. 81). Rather than work to repair the damage we’ve done to this earth, rather than to rebuild a relationship between the human and nonhuman world, this dichotomy reinforces an idea of separateness, and a naïve notion that if we “leave it alone” nature will flourish.

But what about those who make their living by working the land? What about acequia farmers who understand the intricacies of nature better than any backpacker who might venture into the “wilderness” of a national forest? What about those who respectfully labor on the land to provide for us, both bodily and culturally? Using wilderness as a measure of our sustainability ignores our dependency on the land. It ignores the fact that high-density cities and the wilderness they make possible rely on resources extracted from the hinterlands, including farmlands that now extend globally. The human/nature dichotomy disregards the four-hundred~~400~~-year legacy of ecologically beneficial acequia agriculture in the Southwest. It ignores the relationship between the farmer, the water, the land, and the gift of this corn masa forming in my mixing bowls—the corn masa that nourishes the body, the family, and cultural traditions.

When I head back to Oregon in a few days I will bring a piece of New Mexico with me via three dozen carefully assembled tamales, each one touched by the hands of my grandmother, my auntie, my cousin, and my mom. I’ve zigzagged the country over the past three years

working to educate myself and to develop a better understanding of humanity's place, and my own place, in this world.

I put down roots in New Haven, Connecticut, using community gardens as a gateway to connect with and become a part of my new community. I captured the compelling stories of community gardeners who work the soil in a postindustrial landscape that has been classified as a food desert. Amidst a dearth of supermarkets, rising unemployment, and increasing income disparity, these gardeners create a kind of shared community wealth; they contribute to food security, a vibrant urban ecology, and a strengthened sense of place. They taught me that no matter where we roam, as long as we can connect with food, we can connect with place, and we can connect with one another.

I moved back to New Mexico last summer to help teach a “foodshed field school” at my alma mater. We toured the farms and fields of New Mexico, interviewing farmers who provide us with our beans, green chile, and corn. We spent time cooking and eating together, learning traditional New Mexican recipes so that we might teach a new generation to make posole, rellenos and—you guessed it—tamales.

Having settled in Portland, Oregon, a few months ago, a beautiful city well known for its access to pristine “wilderness,” and 1,358 miles away from my family and my birthplace, I'm reminded of our inherent need for community. By community, I mean a sense of place, a bond with people, and a connection to nature. I believe we cannot have one without the other, for we make up our place. We are nature.

I'm building a new home here in the Northwest. I'm hiking in the eCascades, joining a nearby community garden, and appreciating the wet climate after spending most of my life in the desert. I've learned that the Yakama Indians consider salmon sacred and have been harvesting

huckleberries in the region for millennia. With each bite of these important cultural foods I am connected to the waters of the White Salmon River and to the soil of Mount Adams. These experiences will help me cultivate a new sense of place here in the Northwest, where, like many places, food traditions prove that without nature there are no humans and without humans there is no nature.

Wherever my pursuit of knowledge takes me, I promise to return to the Southwest every December to continue my family's tamale tradition. We surpassed our goal of twenty-seven²⁷ dozen, in case you were wondering. Including the three dozen that we ate that day, we made forty-two⁴² dozen tamales. One day I hope to add more hands to the tamale-making. When I bring my own children into this world, they will learn the food traditions that are so important to my family, and in doing so, they will not see themselves as separate from nature. They will learn at a young age that there is no distinction between a community of people and the earth that feeds them. And this understanding will empower them to be good stewards of the environment.