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'You want to feed your family, don't you?' Exploring the consequences of economic crisis for everyday food practices in immigrant communities

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This article examines some of the consequences of recent economic recession for everyday food practices in immigrant communities in the United States. Immigrant communities already struggle with scarcity and cope with numerous threats to maintaining basic livelihoods. Examining these social dynamics through the lens of food scarcity and gendered relations around migrant household food practices, I demonstrate how economic crises compound the effects of differential access to essential resources and place increased strain on women in particular. The data I draw upon stem from ethnographic fieldwork with Mexican and Central American women in the United States. I allude to the broader consequences of social and economic policies in the context of economic crisis, especially as these articulate with patterns of immigration and access to resources. I conclude by arguing for broader attention to food practices into the relatively nascent body of ethnographic literature on women's migration from Mexico and Central America to the United States, and to struggles with food scarcity in studies of migration more generally.

Keywords

Food scarcity, immigration, economic crisis, Latin American women, United States

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Introduction

At a gathering of food and labour activists in early 2012 in Santa Cruz, California, I spoke with an attorney from a prominent legal research centre following her presentation on the injustices endured by Latina immigrant workers in the United States, specifically in the food processing industry. Noting to her my particular interests in the food practices of immigrant households, she commenced to tell me about sexual abuse of female workers and how supervisors used the prospect of withholding pay – and ultimately food from women’s families – to elicit compliance from these workers. Among the several dozen women with whom this attorney had conducted in-depth interviews, she recalled the experience of one particular woman who had been sexually assaulted by her male supervisor. The supervisor soon afterward warned the woman against filing a formal complaint. ‘You want to feed your family, don’t you?’ he asked, insinuating that any retribution on her end would likely result in the termination of her employment, and her subsequent failure as a mother. Of course, this is not to say anything of her undocumented status which, if exposed, could have led to her deportation.

I present this woman’s story as it was dictated to me by an immigrant rights attorney for the reason that it highlights the extreme forms of exploitation that many women encounter in coming from Mexico and Central America to work in the United States. The desperation that informs women’s decisions to migrate as well as these forms of exploitation have only become more pronounced with the onset of economic crisis. Without formal documentation verifying one’s immigration status, many migrant women lack the means to challenge these forms of exploitation and to advocate for a decent wage, safe work conditions, benefits, and protection from sexual harassment and assault. Workplace vulnerabilities experienced by migrant women often rollover into the home, especially in the form of intense resource struggles that constrain the process of social reproduction, and consequently limit life chances.

As a result of the increased feminization of labour and poverty accompanying global economic crises of recent years, rural and poor households have endured a severe reduction in purchasing power, with effects particularly tangible in the realm of food procurement (Carney 2011; Katz 2008). As many within these households – namely children – depend on the labour of women to oversee and manage household nutrition (Narotzky 1997), women have absorbed additional burdens linked to economic crisis as their own survival is also tethered to this shifting economic terrain (Wamala and Kawachi 2007).

Feminist scholars have increasingly called for more nuanced research on gendered migration, noting substantial increases in the number of women migrating

throughout the world (Agustín 2003; Zavella and Segura 2007), following policies of structural adjustment and free trade. Most of this migration is by women who are seeking wage-labour in the global North and often without formal authorization (i.e., documentation) (Agustín 2003). Recent estimates suggest that about half of documented migrants and one-third of undocumented migrants arriving to the United States are women, many of whom defer to economic rationales for migrating (Nicholson 2006; Zavella 2011; Segura and Zavella 2007). Nonetheless, women have been largely ignored and ‘underrepresented’ in the migration literature, with a few exceptions (Segura and Zavella 2007:3).

One of these exceptions is the ubiquity of victim narratives that has dominated much of the research on women’s migration, particularly through the discursive lens of ‘global trafficking’. While undoubtedly a global issue, trafficking likely accounts for only a small fraction of women’s migration. However, the persistence of the ‘victim’ trope tends to foreclose other possible explanations and interpretations of women’s migration. As identified by Rhacel Salazar Parreñas (2011), for instance, there is tremendous variation and nuance in migrant women’s experiences; rather than passive subjects, women also engage as active agents in the process of migration. This article seeks to expand on the existing body of ethnographic research that calls attention to the ways that women utilize migration as a path toward autonomy, ascribe their own meanings to the work they do, and subvert different attempts to exploit them, even if in limited ways (Lee 2010). Specifically, I underscore the practice of feeding the family as a site of resistance and autonomy in the everyday lives of Mexican and Central American women.

Since the beginning of the financial crisis, many nongovernmental organizations and research institutes have predicted a rise in food insecurity in the United States. (Young 2008; Harrison et al. 2007; CHIS 2005), food insecurity being defined as lack of enough food to meet basic needs and sometimes characterized by household food depletion, disrupted eating patterns, and the repetitive pattern of reduced food intake (Blumberg et al. 1999). Rising unemployment, inflation of food prices, plummeting wages, and burgeoning costs of fuel and housing have contributed to the increased prevalence of food insecurity, as food expenditures are often relegated to the most flexible item in the household budget (Harrison et al. 2007). This article aims to broaden representation of contemporary migration of women from Mexico and Central America to the United States, and to account for some of the nuances of gendered migration, by highlighting the everyday challenges to household food practices further aggravated by economic recession, particularly as these impact women from immigrant communities. My data are drawn from research that I conducted in Santa Barbara County, California, from 2008 to 2011. First, I discuss some findings from a survey that I conducted with 150 households at the height of the economic recession from 2008 to 2009 (see Carney 2011 for a more complete discussion of these findings). Then I focus more closely on qualitative findings from interactions with key informants that occurred during an intensive phase of ethnographic fieldwork conducted from 2010 to 2011.

US immigration policy and effects of the global economic downturn

In the United States, immigration policy has fluctuated with economic conditions, so that welcoming policies emerge during economic expansion and restrictive policies during economic recession (Ortiz 1995; Menjívar 2012; Menjívar and Kanstroom 2013). Since the onset of the most recent economic recession in the United States, there has been more intense investment by the US Department of Homeland Security into the militarization of the US–Mexico border, resulting in record numbers of people being detained and deported, and a proliferation of punitive actions and surveillance programmes being carried out by local law enforcement (Menjívar 2013).

Patterns of immigration to the United States have subsequently shifted as a result of these policy changes. As a result of the most recent economic recession, migration from Mexico to the United States has tapered off dramatically in the past few years (Passel, Cohn, and Gonzalez-Barrera 2012). A study conducted by the Pew Hispanic Center found zero-net migration from Mexico as fewer people crossed the border into the United States and more people returned to home countries (Passel, et al. 2012). Only 100,000 unauthorized migrants were estimated to cross the US border with Mexico in 2009, down from over 500,000 annually in 2005 (Passel and Cohn 2011). Durand and Massey (2010) have noted that Latin American intraregional (within Latin America) and transoceanic (to Asia or Europe) migration is likely to intensify if the US economy slips into further decline. As one of the most socioeconomically marginalized populations in the United States, immigrants are beginning to realize the futility of pursuing something known as the American Dream as those in the working class witness the erosion of this prospect (Ehrenreich 2005). In addition, conservative politicians have also popularized nativist sentiments that frame immigrants as ‘threats to the nation’ in the way of ‘stealing jobs’ from US-born Americans, thereby blaming them for mass unemployment (Zavella 2011).

Methodology

The data presented in this article stem from two separate phases of research that I conducted between 2008 and 2011 on the lived experience of food insecurity among immigrant communities in the United States, especially as this experience surfaced in the context of economic crisis. The preliminary phase of research consisted of a survey with 150 households from three distinct neighbourhoods (Santa Barbara, Goleta, and Carpinteria) of Santa Barbara County. Survey sites were selected using US census data regarding population density of Latinos and levels of income (Bernard 2006). Data collection during this phase lasted from October 2008 until May 2009, coinciding with what has been deemed the worst moment of the economic recession (NBER (National Bureau of Economic Research) 2008) and following what many have since come to regard as the peak of the world food crisis (FAO 2009). With support from three research assistants, I administered a survey that included 20 questions, the majority addressing household food procurement, preparation, and consumption. We explained the purpose and nature of the survey to all potential participants prior to obtaining informed consent and administering questions. More than two-thirds of survey interactions were recorded using a digital audio recorder to ensure complete data collection. The remaining one-third of study participants requested not to be recorded. Approximately two-thirds of survey interactions were administered in Spanish; all

others were administered in English. The age range of participants was 18 to 65, 62 per cent women, 38 per cent men, 74 per cent self-identified as Hispanic or Latino, and 23 per cent unemployed. Surveys were conducted on weekdays during the early evening and midday on some Saturdays to maximize the number of household heads that would have returned home from work. Still, many household heads were not in residence during these survey times due to their working schedules. Study participants were not asked about income, thus it was assumed that most households qualified as low-income unless indicated otherwise through conversation. The purpose of the survey was to examine the entire spectrum of experience with food insecurity, specifically how households grapple with chronic food insecurity on a daily basis.

For the second phase of research, I conducted intensive ethnographic fieldwork, which entailed recruiting 25 Mexican and Central American women to serve as key informants. I publicized the study and connected with potential participants through community organizations in Santa Barbara County. These included distribution sites of the regional food bank, and Head Start preschools that offered monthly meetings for parents. To be eligible to participate in this research, women must have migrated from Mexico or Central America and have utilized some form of food assistance while living in the United States thus indicating that they had experienced problems with food access. Women ranged in age from 24 to 60 years (mean age of 38) and originated from Mexico, Honduras, and Guatemala, although the majority of women came from common migrant-sending states in Mexico. A few women had obtained legal status in the United States, including a Guatemalan woman who had been granted asylum, but most were '*sin papeles*,' that is, undocumented. Women's length of residency in the United States spanned from as short as three months to as long as 30 years. With the exception of one woman who was in the process of adopting a child through relatives in Mexico, all of the women in my research were mothers. Of the 25 women, 11 had full- or part-time employment, while the remaining 14 were unemployed, supported by a spouse, or were on disability allowance. In terms of marital status, 16 of the women were married or living with a spouse, four had never been married and five were divorced.

I implemented a mixed-methods approach to ethnographic fieldwork, combining semi-structured interviews (including life histories), dietary surveys, focus groups, and participant observation. Each woman received a modest stipend for participating in three individual interviews and three focus groups. Although anthropology as a field has historically scrutinized payments to research participants, preferring instead to identify other means of reciprocity, the especially high cost of living in Santa Barbara posed severe financial constraints for low-income households. Thus, participation in this research occupied women's time during which they would have likely been earning a wage. Women and I arranged interview times and locations over the phone. Most frequently, women invited me to their homes or to join them at parks with their children. Focus groups were facilitated by an experienced moderator at community centres located within close proximity to women's homes.

Feminist theory, in many ways, informed my overall research design in the second phase of fieldwork. Whereas research falling under the Western tradition has oftentimes been criticized for ignoring (or even exploiting) uneven power relations

between investigators and ‘subjects,’ the burgeoning field of feminist ethnography emphasizes a democratization of knowledge production and shared authority in the research process (Behar and Gordon 1995). While the women in my research did not engage in the process of ethnographic writing *per se*, I sought to balance the contributions of key informants with my own during both the research process and in the presentation of research results. For instance, I sought to frame interviews as collaborative with participants (Yow 2005:2) by asking them to provide input on interview questions, particularly in terms of the legitimacy of certain questions and possible gaps. I also invited participants in the context of our focus groups to produce miniature autoethnographies via the use of disposable cameras. Some of the images from these autoethnographies appear elsewhere with women’s explicit permission, comprising an important contribution of the research itself (Carney forthcoming).

Compounding effects of economic crisis and food insecurity: the lived experience in Santa Barbara County

Santa Barbara County (the site of my fieldwork) has a long history of labour migration from Latin America, as it was also a major stronghold of Chicano culture following California’s annexation from Mexico in 1848. Today, Latinos account for more than 40 per cent of the local population (out of a total of 423,895), and many households identify Spanish as a first language (US Census 2010). Santa Barbara County is a coastal region located approximately 100 miles northwest of the city of Los Angeles. Tourism, agriculture, and construction rank among the region’s principal economic activities that employ several thousand migrants annually for work as hotel housekeepers, janitors, cooks, gardeners, farmworkers, and construction workers. During the time of my fieldwork, the local poverty rate was 18.0 per cent, or about one in five households (up from 11.9 per cent in 2007). Latino households accounted for 69 per cent of total households in poverty (Bureau of Population Statistics 2010).

Santa Barbara County’s principal economic activities (tourism, construction, agriculture) suffered setbacks following the 2008 recession with repercussions likely to have been especially severe for immigrant households. The hospitality and construction industries have employed fewer workers since 2008, although the hospitality industry has since recovered some of its pre-recession workforce (see figures 1 and 2). While data on agricultural employment from California’s Employment Development Department did not reveal any significant changes in employee numbers over the past ten years, data on employment in this sector are more difficult to obtain as farm labour often goes unreported. In responding to survey questions regarding employment, many study participants complained about job insecurity, ‘people have a job today, but not tomorrow’, and irregular work schedules, ‘my partner is off Monday, Monday through Friday, I don’t know what days, but then she works on the weekends. And I don’t have a stable work schedule.’

**Figure 1. Employees in construction in Santa Barbara County
2001–2011 (in thousands)**

(Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2011)¹

**Figure 2. Employees in leisure and hospitality in Santa Barbara County
2001–2011 (in thousands)**

(Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2011)²

The Housing Authority of Santa Barbara County had set the local poverty level at \$53,700 for a four-person household, representing over a two-fold increase from the federal figure of \$22,050 (Housing Authority of Santa Barbara County 2011). Property

¹ Data retrieved from <http://www.bls.gov/ces/data.htm>

² Ibid.

values in Santa Barbara are particularly high compared with other areas of California and local determinants of poverty far surpass the federal poverty line; less than one-fifth of county residents are homeowners. The average occupancy of rental property units increased by six per cent between 2000 and 2010, partially resulting from a lack of affordable housing and partially from the economic recession (US Census 2010). Almost half of county renters spend more than 30 per cent of their income on housing, a percentage deemed unaffordable by the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (US Census 2010; Children Now 2007). As of June 2012, there had been more than 2,189 foreclosures since the recession and 503 homes were in active foreclosure as of February 2012.³ These housing conditions, combined with chronic under- and unemployment translate to regular displacement and homelessness.

As a way of controlling for the cost of housing, low-income families often live in overcrowded households (households with 1.5 persons per room, including kitchens and living rooms) (Zavella 2011). More than 7 per cent of Santa Barbara County's population lives in overcrowded housing (Children Now 2007).

In regards to food prices, households participating in the survey perceived mild to severe volatility since the economic recession; 44 per cent of residents from Santa Barbara, 24 per cent of residents from Goleta, and 50 per cent of residents from Carpinteria reported a noticeable increase in the price of food within recent months. Responses varied from 'I can say it's tough right now', to 'It's more expensive now', to even some who thought food in the United States was at least cheaper than abroad, 'food isn't as expensive here as it is in Mexico.' The rate of inflation in the United States at the time of the survey was the highest in 17 years (Young 2008; BLS 2009), especially for protein-rich foods. Many participants lamented a lack of protein in diets: 'milk, anything dairy, it's just going through the roof'; 'some foods are expensive, like meat'; 'sometimes we want meat but we don't have the money to buy it'; 'it's gotten really expensive in the last year. Milk and cheese is really expensive. It's already expensive to live here. It's like you have to pay to eat too?' Some households admitted to purchasing and consuming less food since the onset of the economic recession, providing statements such as 'we are trying to not eat as much,' and 'I don't buy as much as I used to'.

Searching for bargains and cooking at home were commonly reported coping strategies by survey respondents: 'well, it depends on [where I can find discounts]'; 'I'm cooking a lot more than I used to'; 'now I prepare all my meals at home'; 'I'm trying to cook more often'; 'I used to [eat out] every day. I'm trying to change my eating habits. So over the last two or three months, I go once a week maybe.' Meals prepared at home, however, did not necessarily translate to improved nutrition and food security in households, as explained by several participants: 'we might be having rice and top ramen for the fourth day in a row, but it's something'; 'well, we just eat [refried] beans [frequently]'; 'I just had some Rice Krispies and a banana. Is that a meal? I hate to cook. I hate it.'

³ Accessed on February 16 2012 from www.realtytrac.com.

Women's experiences with economic crisis: findings from ethnographic fieldwork

In my in-depth interviews with Mexican and Central American women, they reflected on the myriad ways in which they had been affected by recent economic crises, both in their home countries and since coming to the United States. Women's perspectives on employment and the state of the economy varied with length of residency in the United States. Those with longer residencies in the United States (i.e., more than five years) recalled better times, whereas more recent residents were surprised by the lack of employment opportunities. The latter group expressed much disappointment in finding an unfortunate economic situation, something quite the opposite to what they heard about through social networks in Mexico and Central America.

Tina (age 49, from Sinaloa) for instance, remembered vast employment opportunities when she arrived with her mother and two sisters in California over thirty years ago. She worked in a series of clerical and factory jobs prior to going on disability status. She alluded to the ways that the economy had changed.

Before I think there was much more work and it was better than today. Today there are many people who are unemployed or there is no work and the economy has worsened. But before, employment was better. It could be because the economy fell. Others say it is very difficult to find work. Like, I have a son who has been without work for four months. It's difficult because many businesses are not accepting [applications] – well, they are accepting – but they aren't offering anything because there is no place for work.

Juliana (age 38, from Guerrero), living in the United States for 12 years, reported observations similar to those of Tina.

Right now the economy is poor and it's difficult to buy food. We have to pay \$500 in rent, and although we have to pay it, we also have to eat. So before there was more work. It was easier to find work in those times, when the economy was still good. Now it is difficult. Many people cannot find work. I stopped working when I was pregnant. But after my pregnancy, to earn something, I had to...I started to babysit and that was going well. Babysitting for people I knew, but now there aren't even babysitting jobs. Sometimes I watch this girl, once in a while, but today for instance the woman was called off from work [so she didn't need me]. There isn't much work now in comparison with before.

Juliana, among others, interpreted declines in demand for domestic and hospitality services as a result of the market becoming increasingly saturated with competition. Natalia lamented reductions in her work schedule for reasons that, '[t]here is a lot of competition in house cleaning. Many women want to clean houses. And there isn't a lot of work [for them].' Celina (age 36, from Veracruz), working as a hotel housekeeper, reported a reduction of hours in her work schedule: 'before, I was given 80 hours [per every two weeks] and now I only have 70 and this is less money for me. There are people who only work two days a week and this adds up to very few hours every two weeks [when one is paid].'

Women with husbands noted the ebb and flow of demand for labourers in construction: ‘my husband works [in construction] but doesn’t work very often. There are times when there is a lot of work and times when there is no work’ (Celeste, age 25, from Guerrero). Dora (age 35, from Honduras) worried about her husband’s temporary contracts with different construction companies, and unanticipated interruptions to these contracts: ‘when the rain came we worried [because they don’t work when it’s raining].’

Despite the struggle to *make* a living, migrant women did not perceive any changes in the *cost* of living: ‘many families complain that the money doesn’t accumulate, especially now that work has dropped and meanwhile the rent and other bills do not drop. My husband works but he is only able to save for the rent’ (Celina, age 36, from Veracruz). Celina also believed that the high cost of living related to Santa Barbara’s tourism-centric economy: ‘right now we are in a situation, a crisis, of no work. Santa Barbara is a beautiful city, but as a tourist destination, it is very expensive to live here. I’d like to live alone here, but I can’t because the rent is too expensive.’

Effects of economic crisis on migration patterns

As much of my fieldwork overlapped with some of the worst years of economic recession in the United States, migrant women relayed to me their own plans for return to countries of origin, or shared stories about others who had done so already. Parents who were living estranged from children perceived diminishing economic benefits around them in the United States. Yolanda, for instance, migrated to the United States to assist her husband who needed help earning money to send home as remittances to their two daughters in Acapulco. During the six years that Yolanda had been living in the United States, she had had two more children with her husband. With children on both sides of the border, Yolanda agonized over her family’s current living situation: ‘I have two [children] here and it’s difficult because I want to see my other daughters [in Mexico]. I tell them “soon”, but I don’t really know. We’re going to see what happens with the economy and decide whether it is better for me to stay or to return.’

Serena (age 23, from Guerrero), recalled the reasons listed to her by different acquaintances for heading back to Mexico: ‘they say that they don’t have money, they complain that there is always rent, the bills, and no work – the crisis – for this reason many have been left without work. The people have returned to their country, and many for their family. For the reason that there is no work, they go to Mexico.’

While returning to one’s country of origin to reunite with family members on *el otro lado* (‘the other side’, as in the other side of the US border) was sometimes preferable to holding out for economic conditions to improve, this option was not available to everyone. Many women in my research had migrated as a means of fleeing violent social and political circumstances, and had since abandoned ties with those left behind in the process. Place of birth and upbringing were thus often distant memories for these women, representing a painful past that did not offer prospects for the future.

Coping strategies in the realm of household nutrition

In responding to my question of whether or not they perceived diet to have improved since coming to the United States, many women in my research answered along the lines of Betanía (age 62, from Guerrero): ‘a little better. Or not. I think sometimes yes, sometimes no.’ Such ambivalence about improvements to diet prevailed throughout women’s accounts of struggles with feeding and eating, and reflected the diverse array of economic, social, political, and temporal constraints that confronted migrant women on a daily basis.

The recession of 2008 coincided with a global food crisis characterized by high food prices that caused food riots and rebellions around the world (Holt-Giménez and Patel 2009). Rising prices of staple grains in recent years have been linked to growing demand for animal products (and thus livestock feed) in countries such as India and China, competition for use of crops as biofuels, record oil prices, and market speculation on commodity crops (Holt-Giménez and Patel 2009; Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations 2009). In the United States, the consumer price index for food is higher than for all other items except for energy, a trend that has continued since immediately prior to the 2008 recession (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2012). The index for food in 2011 increased by 4.7 per cent, compared to a 1.5 per cent increase in 2010 (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2012). Moreover, US Midwest farmland – the nation’s largest source of commodity crops – hit a 35-year record value in 2011, translating to temporary gains for farmers but higher food prices for consumers (Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago 2012).

As price was the ultimate determinant in purchasing decisions, women in my research expressed a particular sensitivity to food prices: ‘price comes first, you always go for the items on special’ (Maya, age 26, from Guerrero). Consistent with unprecedented increases in global food prices during recent years (Egal, Thiam, and Cohen 2009; Baker 2008; Katz 2008; Mittal 2009), Olivia recalled a moment when rice, a central staple for her household, was unobtainable: ‘people are worried when prices go up. Because when food prices increase, like rice when it is scarce, and they see the prices increase by four or five dollars, this represents a real problem.’ She speculated that, ‘people begin to eat less’ in the midst of these price increases.

Food procurement in the context of economic crisis could require many hours of investment, as women sought *las especiales* (‘bargains’) through visiting multiple stores. Juliana (age 38, from Guerrero), for instance, preferred to plan her meals spontaneously around the best deals she could find. Every day, after dropping her children off at school, she would begin her walk around town to survey prices at the stores within closest proximity to her home. She was always looking to *aprovechar las especiales* (‘take advantage of specials’). Sometimes prior to her mid-morning walkabout, she would leaf through coupon books that arrive in the mail. Knowing about the specials in advance could save her some time, as without access to a car or someone to drive her, the journey between stores to compare prices was very time consuming.

Only a handful of the women in my research were able to engage in this type of price surveillance, as others were usually putting in the hours at wage-based sites of work. During one of my visits to Juliana's home, she was preparing chicken with rice, a smile beamed on her face from having found chicken legs on sale that morning. Displayed on the table were some tomatoes, a package of asparagus, onions, and avocados, all of it bounty from the day's shopping excursion. She alluded to the package of asparagus on the table noting that she planned to serve it later that night. She always would insist that her children try something even if they thought that they would not like it. In needing to *economizar* (a verb translating as 'to balance' or 'to economize') and make the most of her purchases, Juliana found many opportunities to introduce unfamiliar foods to her family, claiming that this practice had encouraged her children to develop a broad palate. Rather than representing herself as limited by the foods that she must procure on sale, Juliana highlighted her own cleverness in overseeing her family's diet. She compared herself to working mothers, whom she viewed as compromised in overseeing matters of personal and family health: 'women don't have time [to cook], for the reason that they work. So they go buying something quick, because they are working. Eating this way, in large part, is what does them harm, makes them fat.'

Charitable forms of food assistance, such as those administered by local food banks and pantries, were also popular among all of the women with whom I spoke. Despite women's occasional complaints about the disorderly process of distributions, or unfairness around how items were distributed among clients, they appreciated these sites for distributing staple items, and especially fresh produce. Moreover, women explained that they preferred these programmes first and foremost for permitting them some degree of anonymity from the state, as well as for offering a social outlet or opportunities to connect with other local forms of social support.

Since the recession, however, demand for private food assistance in Santa Barbara County increased at an annual rate of 35 per cent from 2008 to 2011 even amidst declining donations from government and corporate retailers (Young 2008; Foodbank of Santa Barbara County 2012). At the time of this research, more than one-quarter of Santa Barbara County residents relied on private food assistance through the network of member agencies and programmes stemming from the Foodbank of Santa Barbara County. Other non-profit organizations providing social services to migrants and low-income households throughout California also witnessed a halt in major streams of funding from major donors and governmental sources during the recession, thus compromising their ability to meet existing and growing need (personal communication with grants officer at the California Wellness Foundation 11/1/10, and chairwoman of Partners for Fit Youth 5/2/11).

Women in my research often discussed the *comidas limitadas* ('limited foods', such as meats, fruits, and some vegetables), whose scarcity impeded efforts toward *comida saludable* ('healthy meals'). As it was explained to me, *limitada* referred to the quality, rather than quantity, of food sources. Women were not concerned so much with quantity: 'we eat enough, but of basic things [*básicos*]; 'there is a lot of food even though it may not be nutritious. Like, there are many potatoes and this we use in many

ways, in tacos, in tortillas, you can do a lot with these, so there is never a shortage of food.’ Procuring and rationing of *comida limitadas*, however, proved more of a challenge (for examples of such research, see discussion of the gendered cost of food in Carney 2011).

Limitadas enhanced the nutritional value of *básicos* (‘basic foods’). Brenda (age 56, from Cuernavaca) explained that *básicos* comprised the foundation of a healthy diet but needed to be combined with *limitadas* for optimal nutrition: ‘I think that tortilla, *chile*, and the bean are at the foundation of our ways of eating...and an egg or a piece of meat when things are going well.’ Conversely, many women perceived a persistent reliance on rice and beans, and in some cases, tortillas, bread, and milk, as inadequate for maintaining proper health.

Limitadas not only referred to the difficulties associated with accessing particular foods, but also to the need to carefully ration foods falling under this category. For instance, Brenda perpetually worried that food would not last between pay cheques, thus compelling her to ration foods with extra scrutiny: ‘it gives me much shame to be without food. One is always thinking of how to get what one needs for tomorrow. For example, if I buy a chicken, I always divide it in half, half for one day, half for the next day. So yes, one is worried that food will run out.’

During a time of economic recession, women were especially nostalgic for the generous helpings of food shared at festive holiday meals, birthday barbeques, and other communal gatherings that had now become more austere and infrequent in practice. A reliance on *básicos* connoted feelings of shame and signified for many women that they had not achieved the level of material security that they had originally hoped for.

Aside from issues of access to specific foods, a lack of time posed constraints for *comida saludable* as women described other productive and reproductive labours (i.e., formal and informal work, cleaning, childcare, laundry, and shopping) as infringing on time to prepare meals and on the availability of family and extended social networks to convene around meals.

Despite gaining access to a wider variety of foods and realizing certain material improvements since migrating from Mexico 20 years ago, Carolina (age 46, from Guerrero) described consuming fewer and smaller meals:

In Mexico we had three meals per day. In Mexico you had a little milk with tortillas that could be for breakfast or lunch. In the afternoon, [you had] your *comida*, and in the evening, [you had] your dinner. Here no more than one meal and no more than bread and milk in the morning...I think it is because of how busy people are, because one is always out and not at home. In Mexico it’s nice because even if you are poor you eat well [with others] and with three meals.

In Mexico and much of Central America, the *comida* is the main meal of the day, marked as a time for both nourishing oneself and socializing with others. Carolina distinguished between the everyday *comida* and other instances of eating that did not

necessarily comprise a 'meal', the latter indicating a more common practice among recent immigrants in the United States.

Negotiating gendered roles in crisis: some additional challenges to household nutrition

As poignantly described by Marjorie L. DeVault (1991), women may find themselves in manipulative, or even violent relationships when trying to appease the appetites of others in the household, especially the appetite of a primary breadwinner. Luisa (age 38, from Michoacán) for instance, migrated to improve her economic status and to reunite with her husband in the United States, yet unfavourable economic conditions had impeded her from finding steady employment. She was only able to earn a meagre income through various odd jobs. She insinuated that increased financial stress at home had strained relations with her husband. He had siphoned away money toward his drinking habit that she had originally earmarked for food purchases. She wanted to leave with her children, but she feared lacking the means to feed them. During a focus group, Luisa informed us all that she was on a waiting list for family counselling services.

A few other women in my research expressed feeling trapped in their marital relationships for reasons that they depended on their spouses for financial support. Juliana (age 38, from Guerrero) lived with her husband and three children. She had migrated to the United States on two separate occasions: the first time she was fleeing an abusive, alcoholic father, the second an abusive, alcoholic husband. She stated '*las leyes son diferentes allá*' ('the laws are different' [in Mexico]), conveying that in Mexico, women were not protected from domestic violence. Juliana's husband followed her to the United States, pleaded for her forgiveness, and vowed to change his behaviour. Juliana regretted that he had not since upheld this promise. Heavy drinking led him to abuse Juliana verbally, and sometimes escalated to physical violence. During an interview, Juliana recalled the difficult decision to register at a local women's shelter, having tired of her husband's abuse. She worried about the impact of this decision, and of other conflicts in her marriage, on her children: 'how I want to move on, I say, "I'm going to move on..." I want to form a family where my children have a father, a mother, and at times this costs me.' She expressed ambivalence in wanting to preserve the family unit for the sake of her children while also being aware of her own unhappiness in her marriage and the possibility that her children were already suffering much in the same way that she had as a child. Due to a work-related injury, Juliana was not able to seek employment and she feared being unable to provide for her children's wellbeing. Moreover, lacking formal authorization in the United States, she feared not having rights to seek alimony or child support from the courts if she decided to leave her husband.

Conclusion

As national borders become increasingly permeable for the purposes of free trade, and as asymmetrical economic relationships exacerbate the effects of economic crisis, questions of inequitable resource distribution are of pressing importance. Studies of migration have been uncritical thus far of the extent to which the migration experience

is shaped by constraints on eating and feeding (Crush 2013). Future research would ideally situate questions of resource access and governance in the context of global economic collapse at multiple borderlands sites to include both sending and receiving communities in data collection and analysis. While such studies may promise to enrich our knowledge of the complexity of experiences, representations, and identities behind 'multiple sites of gendered control and contestation' (Zavella and Segura 2008:543), more importantly, perhaps, is the political potential of such knowledge to alter the social dynamics and institutional arrangements that perpetuate uneven life chances.

Current debates about food insecurity in the United States have failed to hold accountable neoliberal economic policies as these reinforce and attempt to legitimize uneven resource distribution. Instead, the mainstream public health response to food insecurity (and many associated 'dietary diseases', for instance) has been focused on concerns with changing individual health behaviours. This begs the question of whether or not reforming decision-making at the level of individuals should dominate the premise and promise of our investigations. When probing into the consequences of uneven resource distribution, or of asymmetrical economic relationships (as the United States has with many migrant-sending countries), it seems that the more obvious objective of such research should be examining how and from where power exerts its disciplining influence.

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Résumé

Cet article examine quelques-unes des conséquences de la récente récession économique dans les communautés immigrées aux Etats-Unis. Ces communautés vivent déjà dans la précarité et font face à des nombreuses difficultés pour maintenir un niveau de vie décent. En examinant ces dynamiques sociales au travers des prismes de la précarité alimentaire et des relations de genre dans les habitudes alimentaires des immigrés, je démontre comment une crise économique entraîne un accès inégal aux denrées essentielles et met une pression accrue sur les femmes en particulier. Je m'appuie sur des données recueillies lors d'une étude ethnographique de terrain auprès de femmes mexicaines et centraméricaines vivant aux Etats-Unis. Je fais allusion aux graves conséquences des politiques sociales et économiques dans un contexte de crise, en mettant en relation immigration et accès aux ressources. Je conclus en argumentant en faveur d'une plus grande attention portée aux pratiques alimentaires dans le corps de relativement naissant de la littérature ethnographique sur les migrations féminines depuis le Mexique et l'Amérique Centrale vers les Etats-Unis, et plus généralement aux luttes contre la précarité alimentaire dans les études sur l'immigration.

Resumen

Este artículo examina algunas de las consecuencias de la reciente recesión económica en las prácticas de alimentación cotidianas de comunidades inmigrantes en los Estados Unidos de América. Las comunidades inmigrantes afrontan condiciones precarias y se enfrentan a diferentes amenazas para mantener mínimos estándares de vida. Examinando dinámicas sociales a través de la luz de la precariedad alimenticia, este artículo demuestra como la crisis económica empeora los efectos del acceso diferenciado

a recursos esenciales, lo cual tiene un peso particular en las mujeres. Los datos de donde este artículo se basa, provienen de trabajo etnográfico con mujeres de México y Centro América que viven en los Estados Unidos de América. Aludo a las consecuencias más amplias de las políticas económicas y sociales en el contexto de crisis económica, especialmente desde que éstas se articulan con patrones de inmigración y acceso a los recursos. Concluyo argumentando sobre la necesidad de una atención más integral a las practicas alimenticias en la relativamente incipiente literatura etnográfica sobre mujeres inmigrantes de México y Centro América a los Estados Unidos de América, y más generalmente, a los padecimientos ante la precariedad de alimentos en los estudios de migración.