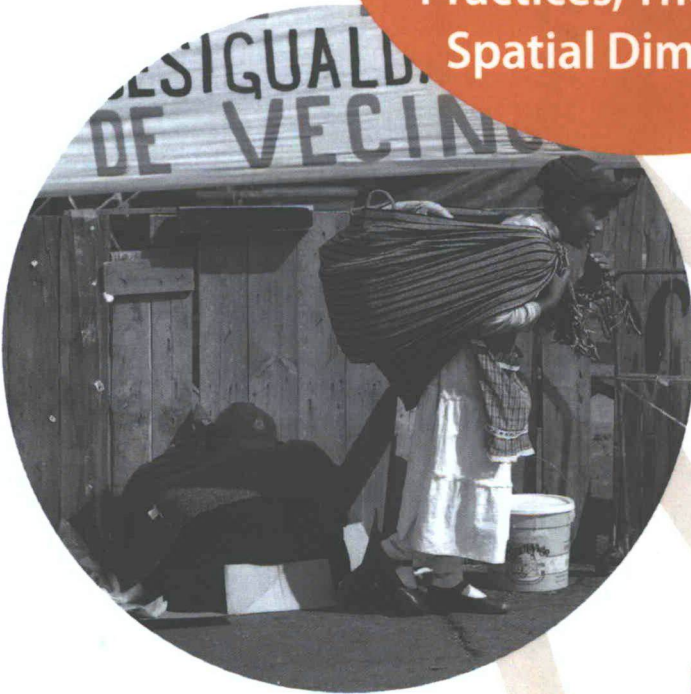


**Etnicidad, ciudadanía
y pertenencia :
prácticas, teoría y
dimensiones espaciales**

**Ethnicity, Citizenship
and Belonging :
Practices, Theory and
Spatial Dimensions**



Sarah Albiez,
Nelly Castro,
Lara Jüssen,
Eva Youkhana (eds.)

Sarah Albiez/Nelly Castro/
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Series/Colección

“Ethnicity, Citizenship and Belonging in Latin America”

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Esta colección busca promover el diálogo científico e internacional sobre las implicaciones sociales, políticas y culturales de los tres conceptos *etnicidad*, *ciudadanía* y *pertenencia* que constituyen para la Red de Investigación sobre América Latina instrumentos conceptuales para investigar de manera interdisciplinaria tanto dinámicas sociales como procesos de inclusión y exclusión en sociedades pasadas y presentes de América Latina y en otras latitudes del mundo.

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NOSTALGIA, FOOD AND BELONGING: ECUADORIANS IN NEW YORK CITY

Maria Amelia Viteri

ABSTRACT

Nostalgia is part of a migrant's everyday life: although lived, imagined, invented and re-invented in dramatically different ways. In this article, I use an interdisciplinary approach and base my analysis upon two components of research: 1) Firstly, data collected at the Queens Museum of Art in Queens, New York City, through the multimedia installation Al Locro Lado, whereby, my voice and that of my Ecuadorian anthropology colleague, were brought together with those of the audience while exploring material elements related to food, nostalgia, identities, symbols, nationhood and migration. 2) And secondly, data collected between 2009 and 2010 within the Ecuadorian community mostly in Queens, New York. I use these findings to re-think notions of space and the continuum of transnational identities in relation to food and citizenship.

INTRODUCTION AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

According to Stewart (1988, 227) nostalgia is “not a given content as its forms, meanings, and effects shift with the context – it depends on where the speaker stands in the landscape of the present”. The impossibility of a return to one’s homeland – whether actual or imagined – permeates the lives of immigrants across the globe. From the re-enactment of rituals and re-creation of spaces that resemble the homeland to the circulation of “nostalgia food products”, an estimated 350,000 Ecuadorian¹ immigrants in Queens and Brooklyn are actively defining alternative ways of belonging to their homeland as well as to the new land, ways that are never complete nor linear. According to Yuval-Davis (2007) neither citizenship nor identity can encap-

¹ Ecuador has been officially declared as a multi-ethnic and plurinational State. According to the last survey conducted by INEC (Institute for National Surveys) in 2006, *mestizos* represent 79.8%; followed by 7% that self-identify as indigenous. Needless to say, statistics from different sources vary greatly as these figures are politically loaded.

sulate the notion of belonging (as contradictory definitions are called into question). This author defines belonging as being where “the sociology of emotions interfaces with the sociology of power, where identification and participation collude”. Yuval-Davis analyses how, like other hegemonic constructions, belonging tends to become “naturalised”, becoming invisible in hegemonic formations. In the author’s words: “it is only when one’s safe and stable connection to the collectivity, the homeland, the state, becomes threatened, that it becomes articulated and reflexive rather than just performative.”

In accordance with Holtzman (2006, 373) we need to consider the ubiquity of food in maintaining historically constituted identities, as it owes not only to the properties of the food itself but also to the social and cultural conditions that allow or encourage this to be a space for resilient identities where other arenas are far more stigmatised. Taking a closer look at the way nostalgia in relation to food manifests itself in a multiplicity of national identities – ranging from Ecuadorian to Latino to American – it could offer a potential window into forms of memory that are more heteroglossic, ambivalent, layered, and textured (Holtzman 2006, 373).²

Food as nostalgia has been primarily conceptualised as a nostalgic enactment of identity, as a celebration of a diasporic community’s resilience and as an opportunity to bring history and memory together under difficult circumstances. One of the questions guiding my current research is how readily available Ecuadorian food in Queens, New York City (NYC) (labelled by business and marketing people as “nostalgia food products”) acts as a signifier in the way Ecuadorians re-define their own national identity within the diaspora as it overlaps with other pre-discursive ethnic, racial and gender identities. What we homonymically label as “memory” often refers to an array of very different processes which not only have a totally different dynamic, but that we also aim to understand for very different reasons too – ranging from monumental public architecture to the nostalgia evoked by a tea-soaked biscuit (Holtzman 2006, 361). A useful concept used by Appadurai (2003, 339) is the term “translocalities” to talk about the complex conditions for the production of ties of marriage, work, business and leisure that are connected to the homeland. According to Anthias (2009, 6), a key ques-

² Similarly, authors like Valentine (1999) illustrate the complex ways in which identity is produced, articulated and contested through food consumption and the spatial dynamics of cooking and eating at the specific cultural location of “the home”.

tion is how to think of belonging and identity within a transnational and “translocational” frame which recognises that people have multiple locations, positions and belongings, in a situated and contextual way, but which does not end up as a thorough reification or deconstruction of difference.

Similar to Pribilsky (2007), my initial research findings also identify how Latino immigrants – in this particular case Ecuadorians – go from stable identities as villagers, fathers, sons and brothers to ambiguous subject positions of “illegal”³ aliens and second-class citizens. As we continue to further problematise the interdependence between these state categories and those of others including race, ethnicity, gender and sexuality, the positions of such ambiguous subjects become even more unstable. For instance, if we are to combine the totality of escalating anti-immigrant discourse in the U.S. with the strong presence of Latinos in cities such as New York then cases will appear such as that of Marcelo Lucero, who was stabbed to death by a young group of teenagers who called him *Mexican* in November 2008.

As I include a self-reflexive and auto-ethnographic approach to this research study, I combine my own understandings and negotiations of being an Ecuadorian in the U.S. with those of first-generation immigrants Roberto, Franklin and Ricardo and a selection of the hundreds of nostalgic voices imprinted in the colourful post-it notes that were part of the *Al Locro Lado* multimedia installation. *Locro*, a typical Andean Ecuadorian dish made from potatoes represents the symbolic object around which my colleague María Fernanda Moscoso and I extracted ingredients to re-enact our experiences of different places and memories: our neighbourhoods, friends, cities, families and countries. *Al Locro Lado* was a multimedia installation project composed of objects, video, photographs, sounds and words (Fig. 1 and 2). The project was a subjective, theoretical, political, and artistic reflection, by which the voices of ourselves – two Ecuadorian PhD anthropologists (residing in the United States and Germany at the time) – were brought together with those of the audience while exploring material elements related to nostalgia, identities, symbols, nationhood and migration.

³ I fully concur with De Genova (2002) in that there is “nothing matter-of-fact about the ‘illegality’ of undocumented migrants” and that the term and concept itself needs to be reformulated. In a similar way, Kyle’s (2000) research in Andean Ecuador invites us to re-consider basic distinctions between legal and illegal, labour and entrepreneurial, economic and political, temporary and permanent migrations.



FIGURE 1

Writing out Loud/Escribiendo en Voz Alta. Photograph taken by the author.

I draw upon Mata Codesal's (2010, 24) NYC research study "where Ecuadorian migrants can easily get into an 'already-present home away from home' creating and sustaining a transnational food sphere". The author illustrates how migration is then also experienced through the body and how food can be used to fight off the sense of fragmentation or discontinuity brought into people's lives by migration. Other authors such as Fischler (1988) discuss the relationship between identity formation and food too, highlighting the centrality of food to our sense of identity, as it asserts diversity, hierarchy and organisation.

The Ecuadorian diaspora⁴ is a particularly interesting setting to begin exploring these conflations considering the important campaign initiated by the current president, Rafael Correa, to build a sense of "Ecuadorianness" through certain idealised images of traditional foods found throughout

⁴ For a more thorough and updated discussion on Ecuadorian migration cf. Herrera (2005).

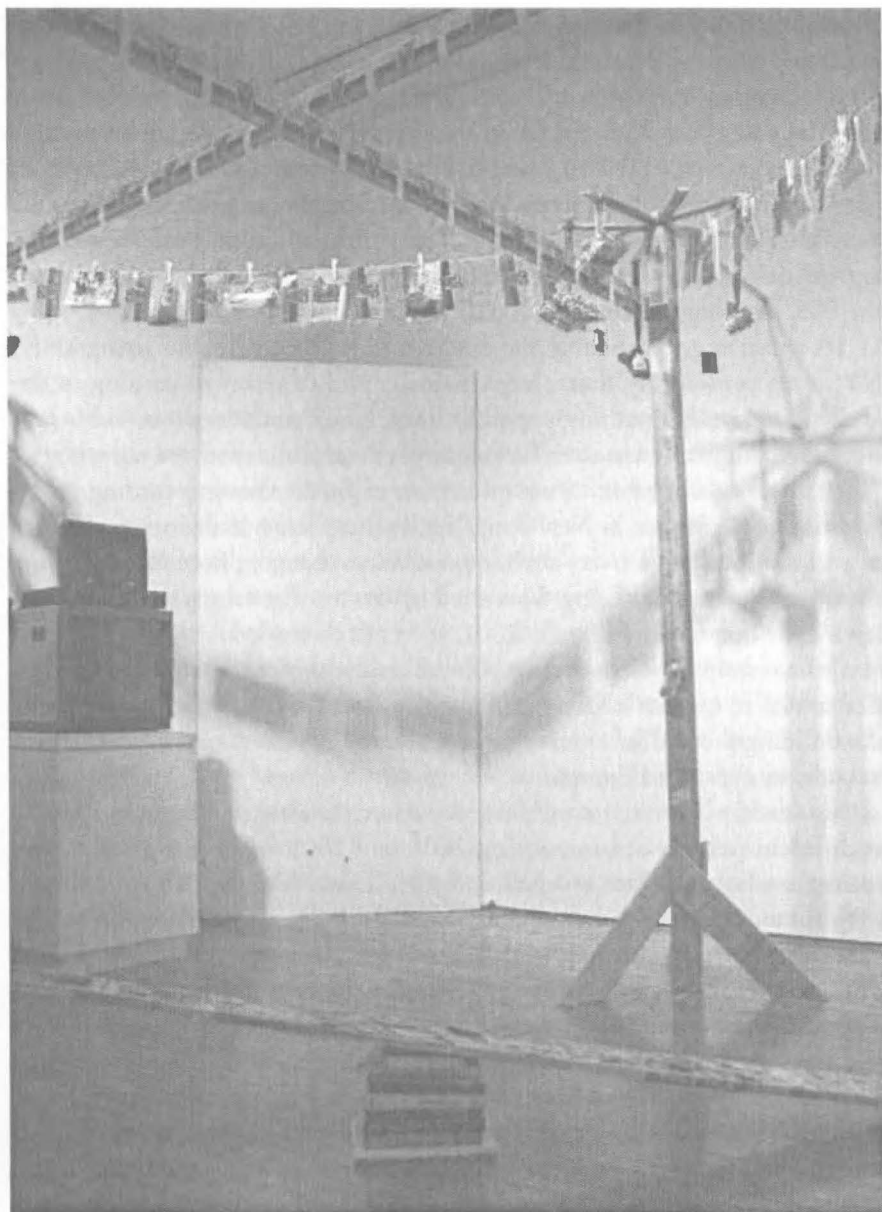


FIGURE 2

Installation *Al Locro Lado*. Photograph taken by the author.

Ecuador. Parallel to this campaign, President Correa's current policies favour local investment, production and consumption by applying elevated taxes on foreign imports in an attempt to create a sense of pride and "Ecuadorian-ness" for traditional local foods. In the words of my colleague Barbara Grünenfelder-Elliker (2001, 13) "the massive exodus of Ecuadorians, Azuayos in particular, (...) obeys the forces of a global finance economy as much as it does 'choice' at the individual level". The author addresses both the general and gendered shift in the geopolitical orientation of Ecuadorian emigrants to the U.S. and more recently, to Spain.⁵

It's a challenge to quantify the exact number of Ecuadorians living in the NYC area considering that a large majority had to resort to coming to the United States either without papers or using false documentation, – this particularly being the case after President Mahuad dollarised the currency in 1999, a few weeks before he was overthrown. Furthermore, according to the Ecuadorian Consulate in New York City, the respective Ecuadorian community in this location is a very mobile population changing home at least every three months to avoid being discovered by the immigration authorities. Following Grünenfelder-Elliker's (2001, 9) research work in Azuay, Ecuador's loss of sovereignty over currency coincides with the expansion of "Plan Colombia" to include a foreign military base on the country's Pacific Coast, the building project for a new trans-Andean oil pipeline, and a mass exodus now directed towards Europe.

My initial observations and interviews were conducted mostly in Queens at different periods of time during 2008 and 2009 whereas *Al Locro Lado* took place between January 16th and 30th, 2010. The data collected deals with the multiple ways by which the re-signification and re-invention of (national) identities through "already-present home from home" feelings allow new transnational imaginings and connections to the homeland. It also illustrates how commodity chains act as vehicles through which producers and consumers interact to create new relationships across economic, geographic and political boundaries (Watson 2005). Having said this, it is crucial that we frame the social construction of belonging with respect to Anderson's conceptualisation of "communities", whereby emphasis should not be

⁵ For more information on Ecuadorians migration to Spain, cf. Camacho and Hernández (2008).

upon their falsity/genuineness but instead, upon how they are imagined. Within this framework, Sutton (2001, 83) talks about the process of synaesthesia defined as food's memory power derived from the crossing of experiences from different sensory registers. Synaesthesia, according to Sutton's ethnography with the Kalymnos, could help us understand the significance of food as part of identity maintenance (and re-signification) when migrants leave their homeland.

NOSTALGIA, FOOD AND IDENTITY(IES)

As Latino immigrants, and immigrants in general, carry a myriad of identities that are not static, these identities are subject to constant negotiation before, during and after the experience of border-crossing in non-linear ways. In addition to this, the "immigration problem" is more often than not analysed within a hetero-normative framework that assumes most immigrants have either a nuclear family of their own in their home countries or that they wish to have one in the U.S.

Immigration restrictions and exclusions are historically rooted in the concern for maintaining power and shaping policies on citizenship (Cantú 2009, 42). That is to say, cultural citizenship as discussed by Rosaldo (1989) and Ong (1999) will go beyond enabling assimilation to enforcing it whenever possible through the various mechanisms of power that end up as immigration policies in the U.S.

Those same categories that the government has created to grant rights to what they have conceptualised as minorities, pose a serious limit to full citizenship in terms of how we perceive, imagine and act upon sexual, racial, ethnic, class and gender representations that accompany their interpretation. Modern conceptions of citizenship, tied up with various forms of democratic universalism, tend to demand a homogenous people with a standardised package of rights (Appadurai 2003, 339). An immigrant's cultural practices, despite persecution and contradictory discourse regarding their rights, are key to further understanding the engagement of each diasporic community in what are usually double tracked politics: those of their homeland and those of their current residence. In terms of cultural practices, food is strongly attached to the creation, development and reification of national identities.

As my own prior research work illustrates, belonging, as interpreted at the receiving land within an immigration framework is usually described as an imagined and desired citizenship (cf. Viteri 2008a; *ibid.* 2008b; *ibid.* 2008c; Viteri and Tobler 2009). Nevertheless, according to Yuval-Davis (2007), belonging is not just about membership, rights and duties, but also about the emotions that such memberships evoke; nor can belonging be reduced to identities and identifications, which are about individual and collective narratives of self and others, presentation and labelling, myths of origin and myths of destiny. That is to say, belonging is not determined either solely by migratory status; just as “American citizenship” does not necessarily override the hierarchical rendering of peoples within stereotypically racist and ethnocentric categorisations of peoples (Viteri and Tobler 2009).

Different authors such as Stewart (1988, 227) have conceptualised nostalgia as a cultural practice that reminds us of the importance of considering particular positionalities when analysing its meanings. When critically looking at food and nostalgia *in relation to* belonging, we go back to the Nineteenth Century where the study of food and eating in the anthropological field began as Mintz and Du Bois (2002) further illustrate. What stands out in some of the literature Mintz and Du Bois discuss, is the role of food in the social construction of memory, that is to say, the embodied forms of memory that constitute food as a locus for historically constructed identity, be they ethnic or nationalist (Holtzman 2006, 364).

This embodiment pertains to specific material aspects that need to be considered. In the particular case of the Ecuadorian diaspora in NYC the ability of going back or not is one aspect that will trigger different experiences and feelings of the homeland. This ability is usually framed mainly through the immigration status rather than economic capital.

DESDE QUE LLEGUÉ QUIERO IRME (“SINCE I ARRIVED I WANT TO GO BACK”)

Roberto is a mestizo sociologist in his early 30s who came to NYC around seven years ago and remained undocumented throughout. Roberto’s status dramatically changed again after his deportation to Quito in November, 2010. Roberto has been not only a marvellous source of information but a great friend who generously introduced me to the world of “Little Ecuador”

in the NYC area. Roberto's mapping of Ecuadorians in NYC is quite accurate as it looks at timeframe, historical context and acculturation processes. For him, there are three types of Ecuadorian immigrants that need to be considered when thinking about the consumption and understandings of certain Ecuadorian products sold in the NYC area. The first type are those that have adapted to NYC and are able to navigate it like a fish in a pond ("como pez en el agua"). The second type are what Roberto calls *duales*, those that move between here and there either physically through constant travel or symbolically through the regular exchange of goods, letters, phone calls, and even fantasies of returning to one's homeland. The third group is comprised of those that have not adapted to the NYC life and who never will. Roberto also mentioned how the latter group represents the best market for alcoholic beverages such as Zhumir, as nostalgia is rendered, reproduced and embodied through this iconic sugar cane liquor. According to one young female Colombian waitress hired to distribute samples of Zhumir at Ecuadorian and Latin American events, Ecuadorians use Zhumir for everything from curing a cold to celebrating traditional religious events and even as a lucky charm. Despite being readily available in NYC, one of the post-it notes written by an Ecuadorian at the multimedia installation mentioned missing Zhumir. This could be further explained following Moscoso (2010, 178) where memories of food are articulated through a particular time and history. Within this framework, it is the people, the dynamics of cooking and the place(s) related to that particular symbolic object – in this case Zhumir – that are particularly missed.

Ricardo is a 35 year-old indigenous man who came to NYC 15 years ago from the province of Girón located in the Azuay Andean Province of Ecuador. He lives with his wife and two kids in the Bronx. Ricardo is among those Ecuadorians that have not been able to return to Ecuador even for a visit because of his immigration status labelled by the U.S. government as "illegal". When talking about favourite dishes that we both miss, Ricardo looks away while saying "since I arrived I want to go back" ("Desde que llegué quiero irme"). Ricardo could well be a member of the third category described by Roberto as those that might never be able to fully adapt.

Some of the elements through which Ricardo constructs his memories and his longing for the past are his hometown, his mother, the "people" and the food. This is very similar to the information gathered at the *Al Lacro Lado* installation, where almost identical references to the family (including

extended family), the landscape, the “people” and the food were recorded alongside many others that included references to either football teams or football itself. The following text is illustrative of such references: “Extraño los motes de San Juan, a mis panas de Chimbacalle y el fútbol de la Tola.” (“I miss hominy from San Juan, my buddies at Chimbacalle and football at la Tola”).

Delving further into the topic of food Ricardo mentioned “*guatita*” as the dish that he misses the most. *Guatita* is a traditional Andean dish of tripe stew in a potato and peanut sauce. Similar to the *Zhumir* example, I know that *guatita* is readily available at almost all of the many Ecuadorian restaurants on Roosevelt Avenue, so I was surprised at Ricardo’s response. Interpreting my surprise Ricardo quickly added, “that *Guatita* is not the same!” He went on to share how his family sends him cheese and guinea pig.⁶ The latter is another Andean traditional dish that was repeatedly mentioned on the post-it notes, revealing to us the majority of Andean people who attended the installation. Transnational identities are thus forged through material and imaginary exchanges of food, phone calls, letters, gifts, donations and money transfers. In Ricardo’s own words: “These dishes (traditional farm cheese and guinea pig) help a lot because then I feel as if I am myself again” (“*se siente como uno mismo*”).

Similarly, Franklin, a *mestizo* man in his 30s working as a technology engineer at one of the prestigious universities in NYC, mentioned how before they started importing *Zhumir* he would ask his relatives to send moonshine (hard liquor). Franklin has been living in NYC for twelve years and as with Roberto, his emphasis has been upon pursuing a college degree while looking for better opportunities in the country. Despite having his dad’s partial support when he first came to NYC, he had to work in all manner of different jobs, from selling purses to working at a bakery. On reflection, he realises that these jobs were transcendental in helping him speak the English language that will now be essential for his future career in engineering.

Both Ricardo and Roberto speak about the multiple ways in which the experience of food evokes recollection, which is not simply cognitive but also emotional and physical, paralleling notions such as Bourdieu’s (1977) *habi-*

⁶ For more on the symbolic meaning of guinea pigs cf. Archetti (1997).

tus, Connerton's (1989) notion of bodily memory, and Stoller's (1995) emphasis on embodied memories (Holtzman 2006, 365).

Franklin talks about a "still picture" that remains in your mind from the time you leave your country. This "still picture" stays close, immovable, and unchangeable until the day you return. The problem according to Franklin is that you are never able to match that "still picture" with the real picture that you will see upon your return, whenever that may be. Nostalgia sets in motion a dialectic of closeness and distancing (Stewart 1988, 228) where popular Ecuadorian food brands like La Cholita, Van Camps tuna fish, La Universal and Amor, among others, trigger a chain of signifiers where food enables – although only momentarily – a "return" to the lost homeland.

Franklin recalls those first feelings of nostalgia when he first came to NYC. What he missed the most were his girlfriend and his friends and he would call at least three times per week. Eventually, he decided to collect all of the used phone cards at which he realised that he had spent around US\$ 2,000 on international calls to Ecuador during a 6-month period. After a two-year period of maintaining a long-distance relationship with his girlfriend, he sensed that his return to Ecuador would be delayed, bringing him to end the relationship and, in his own words, "freeing" his girlfriend.

Is food a central ground through which Franklin further connects with his Ecuadorian identity in NYC? Franklin believes that the places where Ecuadorians play traditional sports such as volleyball and soccer are the instances where you "forget that you are in the United States". Traditional Ecuadorian food and drinks are a vivid part of these events, hence embodying nostalgia and constructing belonging in non-linear, subjective ways. Other important events mentioned both by Roberto as well as by Franklin are the Virgin Mary processions that closely follow the traditions in Ecuador but with a New York twist, however these are not the focus of this paper. Parks like Flushing Meadows Corona located in Queens, NYC is, for instance, a space where mainly Ecuadorians recreate the cultural, social, economic and political practices that they would usually carry out in their native hometowns: from discussing politics to organising a march, to playing their beloved national sport 'football', to couples caressing each other on the grass. All this is accompanied by traditional food and usually special Ecuadorian dances and music organised by the Queens Museum of Art. Similar scenarios

have been reported in Spain as portrayed in Lisandra I. Rivera and Manolo Sarmiento's documentary "Problemas Personales" (2002, 72').

Franklin and I got into an elaborate discussion about "what actually changes in your identity(ies)" if as an Ecuadorian in NYC, you have access to traditional food, sports, cultural and religious traditions. As an Ecuadorian living in D.C. with only one or two Ecuadorian restaurants scattered between Dulles Airport and Baltimore and none of the rich cultural and religious traditions that are part of the everyday life of Ecuadorians in NYC, I use NYC as a refuge to calm my nostalgic feelings when the trip back to Ecuador seems too far away on the calendar. What changes according to Franklin is that the access to familiar food that is readily available allows him to maintain a strong Ecuadorian identity, as restaurants are also places where you can meet other Ecuadorians for different types of networking. The fact that Spanish is spoken widely in NYC, particularly in the enclaves where Latinos are established, aids significantly the ability to navigate the foreign city.

Franklin highlights that some of the tangible changes are how one's "last name doesn't count anymore" and how the work one does in the U.S. acts as a sort of equaliser whereby people from different social classes can come together. The references to the "last name" that Franklin mentioned are loaded with Ecuadorian understandings around skin colour in relationship to social class and "race" categories (cf. Roitman 2008). Broadly speaking, the lighter your skin is, the better off you are, which is not restricted to economic capital but also social capital when using Bourdieu's terms. These hierarchies and their interpretations will in turn have an impact upon the choice of food as well as the value and meaning associated to it. In addition, having a last name that comes from indigenous origins is still devalued by the larger *mestizo* community. A strong sense of regionalism is reified in NYC where Ecuadorian restaurants, as well as festivities, are well delineated between the Andes and Coastal regions in particular.

As these narratives show, the conflation of food, memory and nostalgia in relationship to identity(ies) becomes relevant as we move not only between geographically delimited borders, but also between and within these borders that we negotiate daily craft our mobility in some stances as immigrants and in others as citizens. This mobility becomes imperative as such borders are continually changing and mutating within the fast-forward dynamics of globalisation (Giroux 2005, 6-7).

CONCLUSIONS

Similar to Holtzman (2006, 364), I see food as a particularly rich arena in which to explore such complexities of memory, considering at its forefront the notion of experience in reference to the past. In this context, I believe that Ecuadorian “nostalgia products” could be used as a window through which anthropologists seek a broader understanding of the dynamics of this community as they continue to re-configure their past and present, re-drawing in a number of unpredictable ways the maps of where they belong or not.

The forging of renewed though malleable identities within the diaspora are engrained with bodily memory as illustrated by Franklin’s narrative where he goes back to *being himself* after eating traditional Ecuadorian food, and particularly so if this food is sent from Ecuador. The senses, as a recollection of the past, become another opportunity for an interpretive anthropology, steering us towards an anthropology of the senses, as originally suggested by Stoller (1995) and Howes (1991), among others. Nevertheless, nostalgia should not only be interpreted as a re-experiencing of emotional pasts but also in consideration that it may be a longing for times and places that one has never experienced (Holtzman 2006, 367).

As I am interested in looking at food as a site where the re-construction of identities takes place, frames ideas and feelings related to citizenship and influences various facets of an immigrant’s life, from everyday practices to more strategic decisions, some important issues are key to this analysis: 1) legal citizenship versus political participation even at the risk of deportation, as in the recent case of Latino students fighting for legal status so that they can enrol in college; 2) national and bi-national identities in relationship to belonging and the role of food within this process; 3) methodology-wise, considering affect in terms of the role of memory in the re-construction of identities and citizenship in relation to a nation-state; 4) the juxtaposition and re-signification of a multiplicity of identities and their role in how Ecuadorians in NYC identify with one or more spaces at the same time.

The ways in which we remember are contingent to both bodily memory and the multiplicity of non-linear ways in which we apply meaning to certain products, as well as the particular context where these products are available. National symbols ranging from the colours of the flag to traditional dishes and the availability of their ingredients are magnified by many through the lens of nostalgia as illustrated through the successful and massive

participation (approximately 500 people) at the multimedia installation *Al Lacro Lado*.

Belonging, within the analysis presented, considers identity as a plural, closely connected with a fluid space where both imagined and physical borders permeate new imaginings that go beyond traditional and state definitions of citizenship. The latter doesn't translate into less surveillance but it does render alternative possibilities for the forging of transnational Ecuadorian identities in the NYC diaspora where food constitutes a never-linear continuum.⁷

Some final considerations as we continue building a thread that further connects diaspora, immigration, food, nostalgia and belonging, are the way diasporic communities construct stories that push the boundaries of place and space. That "still picture" brought forward by Franklin which is nevertheless mobile, as it is filled and re-filled with renewed "structures of feeling" triggered by food in this discussion, speaks both to the homeland at the same time as it confronts any linear reading of belonging. All the same, we are reminded by Bhabha (1994, 22) that not all negotiations are the same, as they are influenced by particular subjective positions and the limits of choices and agency these might either enable or disable. Mapping the crossroads where people inhabit a multiplicity of transnational borders, identities, spaces and structures might enable a theoretical and methodological critique that furthers potential interventions related to citizenship. Doing so through different means such as the use of art and popular culture could further engage these communities in more horizontal dialogues while also providing a venue to reflect upon these matters of importance.

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⁷ Many Ecuadorians married with Colombian/Mexican/Salvadoreans have started to sell and advertise Ecuadorian/Mexican food and in many of these restaurants (located in Roosevelt Avenue) the menu includes all this culinary fusion.

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