Migration, nostalgia and the building of a food imaginary: Mexican migrants at "La Pulga" Market in San Joaquin Valley, California

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Abstract: In the context of transnational migration, ethnic markets function as segmented spaces where migrants *as a group* may be observed on many levels. Provisioning in the market (as much by immigrants as by natives or long-term residents) as well as the consumption of prepared food in situ compel a multiplicity of social interactions that facilitate knowledge and social relations, including recipes, memories, nostalgia, circulation of products and culinary techniques. In addition, a market can acquire a role as a meaningful transnational space of confluence for a system of relations and representations that help to decipher the complex social reality of subjects involved in a transnational migration phenomenon. With this paper we aim to highlight how a migratory context as well as the collectivization of a sensory experience as seen in an itinerant Mexican food market in California lead to the construction of a food imaginary related to Mexican food when it is disassociated from the original context in which it is produced. Thus, by means of an ethnographic approach, this paper aims to demonstrate how the collectivization of a sensory experience, framed under culinary nostalgia and triggered by the performativity and reflexivity of the subjects that take part in market activity, enables the construction of a food imaginary for the Mexican migrants that are regular clients of an itinerant market in California.

Keywords: food, migration, nostalgia, market, food imaginaries, Mexico-California

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Migration, nostalgie et construction d'un imaginaire alimentaire : les migrants mexicains au marché "La Pulga", Vallée de San Joaquin, Californie

Résumé: Dans un contexte de migration transnationale, les marchés ethniques fonctionnent comme des espaces segmentés où les migrants peuvent être observés collectivement sur de nombreux niveaux. L´approvisionnement de produits alimentaires dans le marché (aussi bien par les immigrants que par des résidents de longue durée) ainsi que la consommation d'aliments préparés *in situ*, comporte une multiplicité de rapports sociaux qui facilitent la connaissance et les relations sociales, comprenant la circulation des recettes, les souvenirs, la nostalgie, la circulation des produits et des techniques culinaires. De l'autre côté, un marché peut acquérir un rôle significatif en tant qu'un espace transnational de confluence pour un système de relations et de représentations qui peuvent aider à déchiffrer la réalité sociale complexe des migrants transnationaux. Dans cet article, nous visons à éclairer comment un contexte migratoire ainsi que la collectivisation d'une expérience sensorielle affiché dans un marché alimentaire mexicain itinérante en Californie, conduisent à la construction d'un imaginaire alimentaire lié à la *cuisine mexicaine* en dehors de ses contextes d'origine. À partir d'une approche notamment ethnographique, ce document vise à démontrer comment la collectivisation d'une expérience sensorielle encadré sous la nostalgie culinaire et déclenchée par la performativité et la réflexivité des sujets qui participent à l'activité du marché, permet la construction d'un imaginaire alimentaire pour les migrants mexicains, clients habitués d'un marché itinérant en Californie**.**

Mots-clés : alimentation, migration, nostalgie, imaginaires alimentaires, Mexique-Californie

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1. "La Pulga": a transnational sensory market

It is just a few minutes after noon on a sunny Saturday in September. The queue to get into the parking lot shows just how busy "La Pulga" is at this hour. In the queue, people wait in their car to get a parking spot while listening loudly to regional Mexican music's latest hits. Pick-ups with families, cars with couples waiting for a spot in the parking lot and people arriving on foot have something in common: most of them are Mexican migrants that live in the surrounding area of San Joaquin Valley in California. As one gets closer to the market entrance, the smell of fried *churros* and the citric aroma of the chili- and lime-marinated fruit get more intense. Once the fifty cents have been paid to get into the market, the smell of the fruits and *churros* is overcome by the intense aroma of *carnitas* (deep-fried chunks of pork) and tacos coming from the prepared food area of the market. *It smells like my hometown!* a middle-aged woman exclaims loudly in Spanish to the rest of her companions.

"La Pulga", as it is popularly known, is an itinerant market identified as Mexican, which visits various towns in the San Joaquin Valley region of the U.S. state of California on a weekly basis, most notably the towns of Atwater, Madera and

Merced. This paper focuses on a study conducted in the city of Merced (approximately 110 miles/180 km from Sacramento, and 130 miles/210 km from San Francisco). In this city, the market is set up every week *on the other side of the bridge, where the Mexicans are*[1]. In this city of more than 200,000[2] inhabitants (of whom, according to official data, approximately 38% are Mexican or of Mexican descent), a Mexican enclave has gravitated towards the south-west area, due to the distribution of Merced, which is bisected by Highway 99.

There is a high concentration of Mexicans in the area where the market sets up, and on Saturdays it serves as a central meeting point. For many of them, coming to this type of market "becomes the weekend stroll they don't want to miss" (Pizarro, 2010, p. 124). Although the market predominantly sells food products, the transnational flow of other commodities can clearly be seen. Thus, the area in which food products are sold is surrounded by stalls selling clothes, records, cleaning products, household appliances, kitchenware (especially utensils for preparing traditional Mexican food), and even car parts and furniture.

This paper aims to highlight how food nostalgia in a migratory context enables the construction of a food imaginary as seen in an itinerant market. Thus, this paper seeks to demonstrate how the collectivization of a sensory experience triggered by the performativity and reflexivity of the subjects taking part in market activities promotes the creation of a food imaginary around the nostalgia for Mexican food in the United States. We suggest that this food imaginary is based on the memories of flavours and aromas contained in the *sensory biography* (Vannini, Waskul & Gottschalk, 2014) of the Mexican migrants, collectivised through the food experience in the market. The atmosphere of this kind of market incites the subjects to test and share the contents of their memory banks, namely the flavours acquired when in Mexico related to Mexican food due to the sensorial stimuli and the appropriate environment of the market that allow Mexican subjects to enable a collectivisation of a culinary nostalgia of Mexican food. Furthermore, this market also becomes a centre of cultural reproduction due to the specificity of trade products for the preparation of Mexican food. Along these lines, Choo points out:

Sensory experiences of food contain memories, feelings, histories, places and moments in time. Likewise, changes in these sensory experiences encode broader societal changes and provide reference points between then and now, here and there. They contain collective embodied memories, encoded by shared experience and points of identification and there is a symbiotic relationship between senses and memory with sensory experiences contained within memories and at the same time memories contained within sensory experiences… (2007, p. 209).

[1] A restaurant employee. Mexican by birth, he migrated to the USA 18 years ago.
[2] According to data from the Census Bureau for the year 2012.

1.1. *Methodology note*

By means of participant observation and various interviews conducted during eight visits to the market in the autumn of 2012, with both regular traders and visitors to the market, the attempt was to gain an insight into this complex space, in continuous movement, which represents, on the one hand, a place where the Mexican residents in the region can meet and communicate, and, on the other hand, a space not only to recall, but also to experience Mexican food in the United States.

Thanks to our Mexican roots and ties, we were able to be not only silent observers, but also clients and countrymen, active observers in the regular activities of the market. The visits to the market were held at different hours, covering all hours of operation. Each visit was of a different duration, but most of them lasted between 4 and 5 hours. All the interviews were conducted in Spanish and were translated by us. We provide only basic information about our informants in order to maintain their confidentiality. Other quotes of informal chats held outside the physical space of the market with Mexican migrants related with their experience at the market are included in this article to support our analysis.

2. The market: from trading place to meaningful transnational space

As stated in a previous paper (Vázquez-Medina &Medina, 2014), the market of "La Pulga" in San Joaquin Valley serves as an example of how migrants are able to create ephemeral spaces of food consumption in the United States with a powerful symbolic charge in order to maintain their links with Mexico. As a middle-aged man who had not returned to Mexico in seventeen years reported:

It is hard not to go to Mexico for so many years. But at least, here, once a week you can have a little piece of Mexico. You cannot go there, but at least here you can have proper Mexican food and get almost every ingredient to cook something Mexican.

As they seek to maintain this relationship with their motherland, social dynamics related with culinary nostalgia set the basis on which to build a food imaginary related to the Mexican food prepared in their homelands. In this scenario, in addition to aspects that are merely commercial, implications appear that are related to commitment, memory and the experience of nostalgia, making the visit to the market a reminder of transnational migration. Indeed, this market offers the opportunity not just to *remember,* but also to *recreate,* while experiencing a synesthetic recollection of Mexico. As Cantarero and Medina (2000, p. 354) pointed out:

> It is also important to stress that people prefer certain foodstuffs because of the psychological comfort produced by their symbolic meaning (…) [including] foodstuffs which have immediate therapeutic effects: they tranquillise, cheer up, amuse, entertain, eliminate anxiety, etc. (…) The taste of a specific foodstuff, in

fact, brings back to memory its specific context. If the context in question was a pleasant one, that foodstuff is more likely to *taste good*.

However, it also must be said that within this recreation lies an inevitable trace of the migratory phenomenon that characterizes these types of spaces, and as a result they may be seen as microcosms, where people, goods, information, interactions, knowledge, flavours and smells converge to stage the spectacle that is the Mexican market. Moreover, because of the fact that they are places reserved for collectively accepted functions, markets must also be interpreted as cultural forms governed by a given *symbolic order*, which intervenes in the categorization of the elements exchanged and in the models of consumption that the sale and consumption of products presuppose, in accordance with a shared code of meanings and values among the different participants (Medina, Provansal & Montero, 2010).

At the same time, there is an awareness of dislocation, thanks to the synesthetic experience, which overpowers the memory and is instrumental in inducing a vivid experience that transports the migrant back to his or her community of origin in Mexico. Sutton (2001, p. 74) explains that food products "can shift levels of identity when experienced in new contexts, becoming a symbol not just of home or local place, but countries or perhaps regions". Food products and prepared food ready to eat in this market serve the prime purpose of satisfying the needs of the consumers who use them, but they are also capable of bringing the past to life, linking these consumers to their homeland thanks to the meaning the food acquires when removed from its original context.

In this sense, food appears as an instrument in the field of cultural and collective identity, but it also becomes one of the main symbolic boundaries that must be considered among groups in contact, because they highlight the differential participation of individuals in a broader socio-cultural context (Medina, 2001). Hence, Belasco (2008, p. 27) notes that when memories of certain foods that are labeled as ethnic markers are "filtered through the lens of nostalgia, such memories become a way of preserving identities now perceived to be endangered by migration, mobility, and suburban mass culture".

Furthermore, bringing those memories to the present by means of the synesthetic experience brought about by the visit to the market facilitates what Wilson (2005, p. 35) calls *the continuity of identity* through a vivid nostalgic experience. That is, the exchange of products and information and the flow of a collective *memory bank of Mexican flavors* between Mexico and the United States imply an emotional field mainly constituted by culinary nostalgia. Hence, as Lupton (1996, p. 30) has noted, food "stirs the emotions" precisely because of its physical substance, its sensual properties, and its wider social and cultural meanings as a marker of identity and difference

In the case of La Pulga, the market represents a place where "memory" comes to the fore and nostalgia for Mexico is evoked, where the players are Mexicans, the language is Spanish, and the food recreates the food they remember from the time

they lived in Mexico. In fact, due to the dimensions of Mexican migration, Mexican food is a representation of the fluidity of the borders between Mexico and the United States (Vázquez-Medina, forthcoming). As Parasecoli (2014, p. 416) noted, "immigrants cope with the dislocation and disorientation they experience in new and unknown spaces by recreating a sense of place around food production, preparation, and consumption, both at the personal and interpersonal levels." A female circular migrant put it this way:

It is like going to any flea market there in Mexico. Here I even have my *marchante*[3]...

The search for a sense of place and a strong longing for the food prepared in Mexico contribute to La Pulga's consideration as a transnational space that allows the Mexican migrants to be part of the collectivization of their self-identification as Mexicans around food. In this sense, Christou (2011, p. 249) highlights:

Belongingness is defined here as a process of identification and contestation generated by migrants' struggles to understand their sense of self through place-based emotional attachments…. (S)ubjects negotiate "being" and "becoming" in the diaspora with nostalgia for an imaginative home/land.

Along these lines, recent approaches to Mexican migration in the United States have pointed out the need to study emotional and symbolic aspects of the migrant subjects in order to understand the complexity of the social reality (Canales & Zlonsky, 2001; Hirai, 2009). Likewise, Giménez (2001) asserts that, within transnational migration, in a way, spaces appropriated by migrants become a territory due to the political and symbolic charge within the social reality of the migrant actors.

Taking into account the previous theoretical considerations, we consider that the appropriation of La Pulga as a territory is caused, in terms of food, because it triggers- and heals- at the same time, the culinary nostalgia. It becomes a sort of ephemeral comfort space that goes beyond commercial activities. Besides to confer a special meaning to the physical place, the experience of the market often implies a stage of self-reflective awareness about longing and migration among Mexican migrants. This fact lead the collectivization of the notion of a food imaginary about Mexican Food that rests upon in the memories of the childhood or the hometown of Mexican migrants, as we stated in the first paragraph of this article.

When this awareness is externalized and collectivized among other subjects that take part in the market activities, the food imaginary becomes as well a powerful aspect of the Mexican ethnic identity thanks to the sensorial environment contained in the market, and the continuous flow of food and culinary information about Mexican food framed under a familiar environment. As a middle aged woman that is the owner of a Mexican restaurant in town, expressed:

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[3] In Mexican slang, *marchante* means a market food dealer that gives preferences to his or her regular customers, such the best products, discounts, and extras in their regular purchases.

> At La Pulga, you can speak in Spanish, chat with the traders and even get at discount. They really catch what you want to buy. They understand the dishes you want to prepare because they know them. They do really know the real taste of them. The other day I went specifically there to buy some chile guajillo[4] to prepare *birria* (a chilly and goat stew*)* and after all, it tasted as it tastes in Mexico. I have had some bad experiences making the adobo (chilly marinate), because I used to buy the chilies somewhere else. Even here *(in her restaurant*) the provider that brings me all the vegetables recommended me to go and get the chilies there to make a proper *birria* with a trader that is his friend because they are from the same town, probably they are even related to each other. I explained to the trader the bad experiences with the chilies, and he offered me a mix of chilies for making the birria.

Thus, as Parasecoli (2014, p. 418) states, "migrants transform anonymous and threatening spaces into significant and culturally meaningful places that blur the apparent dichotomy between the global and the local". In this sense, migrants build spaces of collective significance and identity in the diaspora. Frequently, these spaces, more than quotidian places, are spaces "to live" collectively, where memories, meanings, identities or simply the fact of "being together" as a group (Maffesoli, 1988) are the basis for a particular expression of a common will. At is shown in the previous quote, the relationship among clients and traders goes to a deeper level; they recognize themselves as Mexicans, thanks to the shared code about flavour ranges contained in their sensory biography and, at the same time, they set up strategies to reproduce those flavours in their current context.

As it is shown in the declarations of the last informer, in the case of an ethnic market such as La Pulga, the appropriation of the space by the Mexican collective promotes the sharing of experiences around food. The structure of the market in the prepared food area invites consumers to share not only a place, but also experiences, with food as a backdrop. Indeed, in the middle of the area for prepared food, four large tables with benches promote interaction and commensality among diners. This commensality is framed under technical gestures of eating, such as adding chilli, rolling a tortilla or handling *properly* a taco, that allows the rise of a symbolic communication channel among diners, in terms of ethnic belonging to that is translated in terms of a good performance of *eating Mexican* properly.

In one of our visits to the market, as we got our plate of *menudo* (beef tripe and chili broth) we found a place at the tables after a few minutes of waiting to sit down. In front of us, a family – a man, woman and two children – were just about finished with their meals. As we took a seat, the man started a conversation: "There is nothing better for a bad hangover than a smoky plate of *menudo*". After exchanging a few words about the best stall for *menudo*, the man said that he was from the Northern-Pacific coast in Sinaloa, and how different the *menudo* was there: "Although it is

[4] A dry chili.

different from my hometown, this one tastes very good. It still tastes like a proper Mexican *menudo*. It is very healing after a night of partying".

The food on offer, apart from the fact that it is all traditional Mexican fare, has something else in common: in the collective imagination of the Mexican people, every single dish or item has festive connotations or possesses specific properties (such as helping to cure a hangover, for example), although they originate from different regions of Mexico (Vázquez-Medina & Medina, 2014). However, despite the festive associations that these dishes have in Mexico, at the market of La Pulga there is praise for and a sharing of the sensory characteristics of their faithful recreation. Thus, it is inevitable that the dishes acquire new meaning due to the phenomenon of migration in the area where they are consumed, which implies their delocalization (cf. Calvo, 1982), while the benefits of preparing food with traditional techniques are acknowledged and extolled.

3. Testing flavours and ingredients: the market as an institution of *authenticity*

While blurring the dichotomy of the global and the local, the food imaginary of Mexican food reaches new connotations in terms of *authenticity*. As Medina (1998, p. 349) points out, one of the most important aspects related to tradition "is living memory; the reminiscence; the memory of taste; the flavours, the colours and smells of childhood (…) from the present, to a beloved alimentary past, *authentic*, and above all, living". The market of La Pulga has become a supplier centre where, according to all our informants, goods with *authentic Mexican flavours* can be procured.

The concept of *authenticity* is always tricky. Many people seek "authentic things", "authentic food" and "authentic flavours", but few can explain what they are looking for, and even fewer have devoted time to thinking about it. Regarding food, and as Wight points out, *authenticity* is frequently "(…) simply a static and representational concept, a way of communicating a romanticized image (…)" (Wight, 2008, p. 155). But in the case of transnational migrants, unlike those seeking an exotic experience in a Mexican restaurant (Ferrero, 2002) or tourists who try to taste authentic Mexican food, what they seek is more intense and defined: something that reminds them of their origins, that brings them back to Mexico, even for a short while. In this sense, Mexican markets are seen as the real places you go to for authentic products, authentic flavours. As one Mexican chef in Los Angeles argued in Ferrero (2002, p. 205): "To taste real flavour of Mexican food, one must buy Mexican ingredients, pans and crockery in Mexican markets (…)".

Due to the increasing culinary products offered all over the city, La Pulga has become a point of reference among Mexican people for finding products and ingredients with authentic Mexican flavour and at competitive prices. In the search for flavour *authenticity*, some strategies to reproduce culture take place in the market in

which food procurement and consumption play a main role in the construction of food memories, as one middle-aged woman expressed:

Tonight my son will have a party at home. He asked me to make him a *pozole* (pork and maize stew). Some of his friends have never tried *pozole* before. I wanted to come to La Pulga because, here, I think the chilies are fresher or something. When I make *pozole* with chilies bought at the supermarket, something is wrong with the flavour. It doesn't taste as it tastes there in Mexico. So if there will be the first time of some people trying *pozole*, I will try to do the best I can. Here I found a provider from Zacatecas that sells very tasty chilies.

The *sensory biography* (Vannini et al, 2014), understood here as the memories of the flavours that subjects have recorded in their memory banks before migrating, sets the foundation for determining the authenticity of ingredients for cooking Mexican food.

The previous testimony also gives insight into the flavour classification system used by migrants, which establishes the authenticity of Mexican dishes based on the aspect of the ingredients. In these cases, what is evident is "an *ideation* process involving tastes from the past that take the migrant back to his or her most personal memories of home, family and community of origin. When someone tries to replicate these flavours outside of Mexico, they acquire a *nationalizing* character" (Vázquez-Medina, forthcoming).

Thereupon, the construction of a food imaginary related to authenticity often comes out as a test, in order to reproduce those flavours experienced back in time in Mexico. It is that "living memory" explained earlier, tastes and flavours from a beloved – and frequently mythicized – culinary past, that search engine of flavours that tries to replay an idealized time in an idealized place.

4. Displaying food skills: the commodification of culinary dexterity

As you trace a path through the stands, you begin to notice the way in which the sellers interact with the customers. The traders present their produce in an eye-catching way, and it is almost like watching a performance to see them skilfully prepare food in the traditional way. This is an extra draw for customers, because the memory of Mexico is evoked. So at La Pulga it is common to see women cleaning and skilfully removing the spines from *nopales* and, with nothing more than a knife, cutting them up finely. This show of dexterity adds to the food imaginary and becomes a commodity among consumers, relating this process to a positive alteration in the taste of the products. As a housewife from Aguascalientes, a circular migrant, reported:

I don´t know if it is me or what, but seeing how they peel and cut the prickly pear makes it taste better. When I cannot come on Saturdays, I have to buy them at the

supermarket and they are never as tasty as here, although I have been told they come from the same supplier as the supermarket.

These rituals apply to prickly pears, which are peeled before the customer's eyes, and to cold coconuts, which, having had the water removed, are split open, cut up and prepared with chili and lemon as a snack for customers to eat while they wander through the market. As Christou (2011, p. 251) explained, "routine practices can produce performative spaces of embodied representations of be/longing. Migrant lives can become saturated by performativities that enact memorialized and emotionalized reflections of where belonging lies". Indeed, the skill and expertise employed in the traditional food-related trades play an important role in the market. In contrast to the jobs in which the majority of the migrants are employed, their status as migrants often obliging them to remain silent in their places of work, here the atmosphere is conducive to the forging of more informal relationships between traders and customers.

In among these displays of dexterity you can also observe the customers' interactions with the sellers, who, in the traditional style of the stallholders in Mexican markets, are capable of reading the tastes of the customer. At La Pulga, haggling, the little extras given and displays of courtesy are also common, and they increase the sensory and commemorative value of the visit. *Come on through my friend, try these oranges… Taste how sweet these grapes are…* yell the sellers by their stands. The trader demonstrates his proficiency and knowledge of his customers' tastes by suggesting the dishes that can be made with his products (all within the realm of traditional Mexican cuisine): *This chili is a spicy one for a good* molcajete[5] *sauce,* a trader explains.

The construction of the food imaginary not only comes from the personal memory bank of tastes recorded in Mexico, it is also constantly enriched with the display of the ingredients' transformation. Thus, food imaginary not only occurs in terms of representation of taste, it also materializes with exposure to the transformation of ingredients into food. In this vein, it is also implied how the actions of trading and transforming ingredients into products or prepared food demonstrate not only the commodification of the performance of the food product's transformation, but also represent in and of themselves another way to *commodify ethnicity* (Commaroff and Commaroff, 2011).

At La Pulga market, the commodification of the transformation of food products into dishes is a show of transnational dexterities. This practical knowledge can be regarded as a means of cultural reproduction among Mexican migrants while it promotes a nostalgic environment around Mexican food. This transformation also shows us how the construction of the food imaginary also comprises the representation of the trades related to food preparation. Likewise, the performativity of the transformation of the products reaches a symbolic meaning due to its power as a code of recognition that links traders and clients as Mexicans. That is, this performa-

[5] Pre-Hispanic cooking tool made of volcanic stone that it is still used to grind ingredients.

tivity can be commodified because it is framed under a system of symbolic communication about food preparation shared by all the subjects that take part in the scene.

The previous observations can be applied to the prepared food area as well. There, being exposed to how ingredients come together to become a dish turns into an added bonus that reinforces the food imaginary among market customers. *Rico menudo con tortillas hechas a mano* (Delicious *menudo* with handmade tortillas)[6] says a sign hanging in the front of a stall. It is one of the busiest stalls in the entire prepared food area. More than 10 people wait to order food. On one side of the stall, customers, delighted spectators, observe how a woman dexterously makes corn tortillas by hand while a big pot of *menudo* simmers next to her. While we wait for our order to be taken, we ask the man in front of us if it was worth spending so much time in the queue, and he declares:

It is not only the flavour of just-made handmade tortillas. It is everything; you can watch how they are making your food. That makes it tastier. While you are waiting for your order you really crave a plate of *menudo*… Here is different than other Mexican restaurants in town that offer *menudo* on their regular menus. I think here is better because it is fresher, you can prove it because you can see it. Actually, it smells better. In other restaurants I think it is not that fresh. Sometimes it even tastes like a fridge… but I think, that as a Mexican one can feel the difference; I don't know if non-Mexican people who eat *menudo* somewhere else can distinguish the difference.

The previous declaration shows how food is able to trigger reflection among migrants, not only on eating authentic Mexican food in the United States, but also on what means *to be a Mexican in the United States*. We consider this reflexivity to also be embedded in a context that allows migrants to establish a connection between who they were with who they are as well as with the host society they engage in in terms of ethnicity. All the processes related to food preparation, procurement and consumption displayed at La Pulga, show how *Mexicaness* in terms of food, cannot be assumed only as a fixed concept given to Migrant people as a feature of difference or just as an ethnic marker of identity, it has to be observed as a complex phenomenon that implies a deeper reflection about the position of the migrants between two different cultural fronts in order to define who they are in their social reality.

Conclusions

In analysing the stage on which food is chosen in general, markets are turned into a space that conveys social relations, knowledge, identities and memories, percep-

[6] In the culinary collective memory nurtured by sensory experience, offering handmade tortillas indisputably implies a product of higher quality. For a more detailed discussion of the point of tension between machine-made and handmade tortillas from a historical perspective, see *¡Que vivan los tamales!* by Jeffrey Pilcher (2001).

tion of similarities and differences, foods, textures, colours, aromas… and all of this comes together with the everyday movement of the market.

In this sense, La Pulga can be regarded as an institution that fosters the notion of "Mexicanness" while also building a trans-migrant identity where food plays a starring role. As we said at the beginning of this article, La Pulga market incites the subjects to test and share the contents of their memory banks, the flavours acquired in Mexico related to Mexican food. Furthermore, the market is also a centre of cultural reproduction, due to the specificity of trade products for preparing Mexican food.

It is a cultural capital for Mexican migrants, which they claim as a territory as well as a way of linking themselves constantly with *Mexico* (or with the representation of Mexico they have in their minds). Thus, the market is a place for trading and exchanging products, but, in a migrant context, it can be regarded as a sort of *sanctuary* where the inherent nostalgia of displacement is healed by a collective sensory experience. In this scenario, the market of La Pulga also demonstrates how the concept of authenticity is challenged. Here we explained how this concept doesn't necessary remain in the plain of representation, but it is analysed and materialised through a vivid sensory experience in order to taste the flavours of some place and time that are not physically present. According to Sutton (2001, p.74), "sensory experiences take on importance due to the capability of reconnecting and remembering experiences and places one has left behind for short- or long-term migration". There is an awareness of dislocation, thanks to the synesthetic experience which overpowers the memory. This fact is instrumental in inducing a vivid experience that transports the migrant back to his or her community of origin in Mexico.

This paper has shown that the collectivization of the *Mexican sensory experience* that takes place in market activities promotes the creation of a food imaginary around nostalgia for Mexican food in the United States, contributing not only to a greater sense of cultural comfort and the feeling of a kind of contact with Mexico, but also to the cultural construction of the Mexican identity in the United States through food.

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