

“Falling off the Tomato Truck: Food Globalization and a Placeless Generation”

I ate taco salad for lunch today.

As a native Californian who accidentally fell in love with a Southern city where the entire menu is fried, I did not take the abundance of fresh vegetables for granted. I savored every slice of tomato, fork-full of guacamole, and shred of lettuce.

Usually, this is where the story would end. I'd have enjoyed my meal and gone on with my day. But today, that taco salad left an unexpected taste in my mouth: the strong bitterness of ignorance.

I do not know where that tomatoes, guacamole, and lettuce came from. *From a container somewhere in the kitchen* is my relentlessly sardonic brain's initial thought. Still, I am aware that the process from farm to fork is complicated. I've watched "Food Inc." and Stephen Colbert's Supreme Court testimony. I've read *Food Matters* and even spent a cumulative five weeks of my life working farms. My two best friends are vegetarians.

So, here is the short version of the journey my tomatoes made: someone planted a tomato plant, watered and waited, picked the tiny rewards off the vine, and put them in a box. My best guess, from my very limited understanding of the global food industry, is that a different person took those bright, round tomatoes and put them in a truck with a bunch of their kin and drove them – maybe even flew them or shipped them – far away. Those small fruits passed from hand to hand, buyer to buyer, until they ended up in the carton I bought at the grocery store last week.

I washed a handful of tomatoes, chopped them, and gobbled them up without care for their strenuous journey. I do not believe that plants have feelings. I do believe, though, that people have feelings. I believe that the person who planted the vine that birthed these tomatoes has as many and as complicated feelings as I do. I began to think about this nameless farmer, however many miles away she may be, and how we had a very small relationship to one another, in a way, through a piece of fruit. *...vegetable?*

This is what I do at Vanderbilt University: I sit around overthinking my salad ingredients and pondering the relationships between people and their environments. I have had the marvelous opportunity to construct my own degree. Thus, I study Space and the Human Condition. *Don't worry – I didn't give it that pretentious name; the approving committee did.* This week, in an anthropology course I selected for my made-up major, we discussed the relationship between people, space, and time.

There is a boundary, which theorist Torsten Hägerstrand called a space-time prism, for what an individual can do in a day based on his original location, mode of transportation, and the number of hours in a day.

The grocery store where I bought my taco salad ingredients is within my prism. The farm where the tomato originated is probably not.

There is another concept we discussed which concerns the nature of authenticity as place-bound. Scholars like Edward Relph and Marc Augé are concerned that in order to have an authentic human experience – *whatever that means* – people need to feel a connection to a specific place. This place may not be home as we usually define it, or even a single location, but it is somewhere that a person learns cultural and social practices and forms an identity.

Somewhere along the last fifty years of the world timeline, modern transportation technology (*God bless the Wright brothers*) combined with evolving social conventions to create a generation of largely placeless people. Millennials have been equipped with pocket computers and have grown up with expectations of drive-thru-paced living. The space-time prism has expanded for middle- and upper-class young people at an astonishing rate.

This expansion has not been without cost, though. Sure, social media enables connections around the world to be maintained at the stroke of a key. And globalization of the food industry brings a cornucopia of exotic ingredients to our dinner table nightly. But the nature of each of these connections is fleeting at best, far from the “authentic” connection to place that supposedly informs human identity. The millennial generation, as its nickname “generation me” hints, runs the risk of being a generation of islands – a population equally connected to every place and every person such that no truly meaningful connection exists.

I realize that my one tomato has brought me to a rather cynical conclusion. There is hope yet for my generation. There is hope in every genuine face-to-face friendship. There is hope each time a pen is put to paper instead of fingers to a keyboard. This is not to say that technological innovations are devoid of meaning or value. As a self-proclaimed Photoshop nerd and recent student of Human-Computer Interaction, I cannot accept this view. It is, however, a delicate balance of which we should be acutely aware if we are to consider ourselves responsible cosmopolitan citizens.

Now, I think this balance is less of a crossable finish line and more of a rickety teeter-totter. When it comes to food, I am not suggesting that we pull a Portlandia and request the birth certificate of every chicken in every nugget. Nor am I promoting an abandonment of the global food exchange that brings us such a variety of products. *I quite like my Chilean strawberries in the winter, thank you very much.*

I simply see a direct correlation between this generation's growing collective space-time prism and the ever-increasing carelessness for others (*e.g. my distant friend, the tomato farmer*). Perhaps you'd like to meet the farmer who grew the salad components you eat, say thank you, and make the space-time prism a little smaller, a little more human, a little more genuine. If that's the case, perhaps I'll see you at the farmers market sometime.

BIO:

Emma Grager is a Vanderbilt University undergraduate who studies Creative Writing and Space and the Human Condition as a means to the end of being a starving musician. She spent the summer of 2013 as a new media documentarian and energy liaison for a sustainability project in Hawai'i. She recently returned from studying Shakespeare and Chaucer at University College London and trekking across Europe. Emma is Seattle-born, California-raised, Nashville-based, and world-travelled.