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GASTROPOLÍTICA: UNA MIRADA ALTERNATIVA AL AUGE DE LA COCINA PERUANA BY MARÍA ELENA GARCÍA

(A Book Review)

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With a captivating narrative, María Elena García describes the experience of eating at the Astrid & Gastón restaurant: "The guinea pig, or cuy, arrived hidden, beautiful, never betraying the rodent it once was. The animal appeared in two small circular bits, and when you popped one into your mouth, it dissolved into air, with just a hint of the flavor of cuy meat" (García, *Gastropolitics* 27). Her words, in addition to highlighting the sensations involved in eating, aimed to exemplify the dominant gastropolitics that have integrated Indigenous and Andean culinary elements into haute cuisine. The Astrid & Gastón restaurant, owned by the famous Peruvian chef Gastón Acurio and his wife, chef Astrid Gutsche, is in the main house of a former hacienda in the exclusive San Isidro district in Lima. Casa Moreyra provides a perfect setting to transport diners back to an idealized colonial era, seemingly more favorable than contemporary Lima, whose edges are widened with waves of Andean and indigenous migrants.

In *Gastropolítica: una mirada alternativa al auge de la cocina peruana* (2023),[1] García interprets Perus' current gastronomic boom as a historical process that perpetuates racial and gender structures associated with the coloniality of power. This interpretation is grounded in at least two theoretical approaches: gastropolitics, understood as the power relations surrounding food that involve competition

1 Translated into English the title would read *Gastropolitics: An Alternative View of the Rise of Peruvian Cuisine*. Two years earlier, in 2021, the University of California Press published the book in English entitled *Gastropolitics and the Specter of Race: Stories of Capital, Culture, and Coloniality in Peru*.

and conflict (Appadurai 495), and the naturalization of colonial domination through the concept of race; which Aníbal Quijano (216–218) calls the coloniality of power. To understand their relationship, García first examines the influence of chefs, restaurants, and gastronomic events on the gestation of the dominant gastropolitical complex in Peru. Then, she explores the agency of subaltern subjects that offer counterhegemonic narratives.

This gastropolitical complex involves several organizations and individuals. García emphasizes the role played by the Commission for the Promotion of Peru for Export and Tourism (Promperú), which created the Marca Perú (brand name Peru); the Peruvian Society of Gastronomy (Apega), which organized Mistura, the most important gastronomic festival in Latin America until its last edition in 2017; the National Association of Ecological Producers of Peru (ANPE); as well as international renown restaurants and chefs, such as Gastón Acurio and his restaurant Astrid & Gastón, and the Central and Mil restaurants of chef Virgilio Martínez. Acurio is an iconic figure of the Peruvian gastronomic boom, not only for being its most recognizable face but also for actively promoting cuisine as a tool of national resurgence. Martínez, on the other hand, represents the next generation of Peruvian chefs. His approach aims to revitalize culinary nationalism using ingredients sourced from the diverse Peruvian ecosystems. He emphasizes the use of native ingredients, considering them "authentic," and connecting them to the "ancestral knowledge" of Indigenous Peoples.

The link between cuisine and nation has been deeply explored. Appadurai (1988) connects cookbooks to the construction of Indian national cuisine, Cusack (2000) to African national cuisines, and Pilcher (2001) examines the formation of Mexican identity through cooking. Unlike these authors, who associate cuisine with political emancipation, García tells a story of national resurgence. Peru was an independent and consolidated nation-state but was destabilized by violent internal conflicts, which motivated some elite groups to develop a nationalist gastronomic project. To shape this narrative, Garcia conducted his fieldwork in Lima and Cusco, visiting restaurants, fairs, markets, and farms. Her analysis incorporates several interviews and conversations, printed publications such as newspapers, cookbooks, novels, and comic strips, as well as audiovisual materials. She also reflects on her cultural connections with Peruvian cuisine and the experiences of her family, who left Peru in 1985 due to violence.

According to the author, the direction of Peruvian gastropolitics is largely explained by an attempt to blind the violence experienced

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by the population during the 1980–2000 period, caused by the conflict between the Peruvian state and the armed groups Sendero Luminoso and the Túpac Amaru Revolutionary Movement. Sectors of the Peruvian population composed of middle classes and individuals in positions of power perceive this violence as a consequence of the agrarian reform implemented by the government of General Juan Velasco Alvarado (1968–1975), who aimed to lead a "second independence" (Aguirre 49–50). The concept of "second independence" was resignified by Acurio and other members of gastropolotical elites, transforming it from a nationalist revolution to a project of peace and prosperity far removed from popular demands. The current international prestige of Peruvian cuisine presents an opportunity to develop markets for local producers and promote tourism while inspiring national pride. Since Acurio's return to Peru in 1994, after training as a chef in France, he has been driving national reconciliation by using cuisine as a banner. For him, Peruvian cuisine reflects the fusion of "all the bloods," a harmonious cultural hybridization rooted in the peoples who have shaped Peru.

However, as García reveals in her ethnographic study, this project of national resurgence remains silent about the violence of conquest and colonization, which implicitly involves sexual violence against Indigenous women to produce the mixing of "all the bloods." It also reinforces the racial, gender, and interspecies hierarchies that have persisted in Peru since European colonization. Just as nouveau Andean cuisine disguises the appearance of cuy (guinea pig) to avoid repelling certain tourists and diners, the cultural traits of indigenous peoples that do not align with the Eurocentric idea of modernity are denied or concealed. At events like Mistura and other agricultural fairs, there are efforts to present a sanitized and civilized image of producers, who are often Indigenous or peasants. They participate in a performance where they wear folk clothing, smile, and exude friendliness in a clean, organized environment that appeals to customers seeking an "authentic" experience and are willing to pay for it. Of course, this performance reflects not their own cultural dynamics but rather the interests of the neoliberal market and the gastropolitical elite.

Chef Virgilio Martínez also engages in performativity but from a different angle. He presents himself as the explorer who "discovers" Peru's culinary treasures on a journey as that of the colonizers who "discovered" new lands. Their "discoveries" are served on plates to high-income diners, and recorded and studied by Mater Iniciativa, a research center attached to Central. Martinez's dishes are the delectable products of "ancestral knowledge" refined by science and embellished for tourists. Through the windows of the Mil, diners are treated

to a spectacular panoramic view of the Andes and the archaeological site of Moray, with the living communities near the restaurant excluded from the frame.

García relies on multiple theoretical sources to discuss the colonial nature of certain hegemonic groups' practices. The performance of indigenous people at Mistura illustrates the concept of permissible Indian by Rivera Cusicanqui (83). Virgilio Martínez's "discoveries" echo Pratt's analysis of the imperial eyes, a supposedly neutral perspective, through which a non-European domestic subject is created (Pratt 4–5). The territory and culture of this subject are presented as waiting to be "discovered" by the colonizing gaze.

Highlighting these practices and symbolic forms of neocolonial domination has sparked controversy in Peru. However, beyond controversy, this book can serve as a starting point for broader discussions about the consequences of neoliberal extractivism in Latin America. Chefs and restaurants gain prestige; native products are studied, showcased, and consumed, yet the producers often remain anonymous. García acknowledges the exceptional virtues of the chefs who have elevated Peruvian cuisine to international fame. She also recognizes their genuine desire to help rebuild a wounded nation and extend the economic benefits of the restaurant industry to producers. However, she warns that their efforts are part of gastropolitics perpetuating long-standing inequalities.

García's alternative perspective on the Peruvian gastronomic boom not only considers hegemonic agents and discourses; she also emphasizes that the gastropolitical complex incorporates vernacular forms in which subaltern agents negotiate their representations, recognition, and sharing of economic benefits. Such negotiation oscillates between resistance and compliance. A representative of the ANPE, whom García calls Aída, underlines the visibility that producers gain through their partnership with chefs. However, she acknowledges that chefs receive greater economic benefits from these relationships. She also points out that these relationships are still rooted in a colonial order where Indigenous producers are tied to the land. This perception of indigeneity is inconsistent with the increasing presence of Andean and indigenous migrants in Lima. Aída says: "We have made ourselves visible" (García, *Gastropolitics* 126). The word "ourselves" carries weight in a historical context where producers have leveraged the rules of the gastropolitical complex to occupy spaces in which they demand state support, access to knowledge and technologies, and opportunities to improve their economic circumstances. Aída is also keenly aware that indigenous

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and peasant women producers have suffered the most from marginalization and face the greatest barriers to empowerment.

Similarly, the organization Ccori offers a counterhegemonic gastropolitical approach through the optimization of cooking, which means reducing food waste, combating hunger, and working with female cooks in their communities. Ccori is an initiative driven by chef Palmiro Ocampo and his wife, Anyell San Miguel. Ocampo is part of the Generación con Causa,[2] a movement aimed at addressing social and environmental issues. He realized that his talent for creating gourmet dishes using ingredients often discarded for aesthetic reasons could be utilized to provide food for those experiencing food insecurity and to rally other social actors to support the same cause. Ocampo's relationship with Indigenous and peasant populations, particularly with women, is shaped by a deeper connection to his cultural roots—his grandparents were from the province of Andahuaylas—and by his commitment to transforming representations and imaginaries of indigeneity. Through various examples, García highlights the struggle for recognition of indigenous culinary knowledge, the contribution of women in combating hunger and food waste, their mobility and entrepreneurship, and the quest for food sovereignty.

García's analysis includes several voices, without neglecting the cuyes. Her approach to the figuration of the cuy offers a reflection, perhaps an argument, in favor of multispecies research. The cuy is a prominent cultural reference in contemporary Peru. It is not only a key ingredient in both traditional and modern recipes, but also a subject of domestic production and large-scale breeding, including for male and female stud reproduction. It is the protagonist of a comic strip, the mascot of the Credit Bank, and a symbol of Peruvianness. The treatment of the cuy serves as a metaphor for the "poor" and "dirty" Indigenous people who have migrated to Lima; its body is subjected to the same violence. The representation of the cuy and its assimilation with racialized populations reveals connections between the semiotic and the material, in line with how Castañeda (3) defines figuration. Observing the slaughter and exploitation of cuyes, particularly females, led García to explore the ethical and affective dimensions of ethnographic practice, one that must account for grief, pain and shame. García's multispecies perspective is not limited to the cuy; instead, she uses this animal as a focal point due to its increasing significance in nouveau Andean cuisine.

García presents a different perspective of Peruvian cuisine, connecting it to gastropolitics, coloniality of power, and interspecies

2 "Generation with a Cause." Causa is a Peruvian dish, too.

relations. This critical approach has gained increasing relevance in anthropology in recent years (Seshia Galvin 235–238; Petitt 23–24). In Latin America, cooking has played a significant role in constructing national identity, while also serving as a battleground for class, race, and gender dynamics. As national and regional cuisines undergo accelerated processes of gourmetization—an expression of culinary colonialism that exacerbates existing inequalities—García's critique of the Peruvian gastronomic boom is highly relevant.

Abstract: I review *Gastropolítica: una mirada alternativa al auge de la cocina peruana* (2023) by María Elena García, focusing on her interpretation of the Peruvian gastronomic boom as a historical process that, while pursuing national resurgence, maintains class, race and gender structures rooted in the coloniality of power. García explores the actions of gastropolitical elites and the subaltern subjects who develop forms of resistance and negotiation, while also considering interspecies relations. The collaboration between internationally renowned chefs and local food producers is often established in terms of inequality, reinforcing the racialization of indigenous and Andean peoples, as well as symbolic and economic violence against women.

Keywords: gastropolitics, coloniality, Peru, María Elena García,

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