Lead Essay

Globalizing Quinoa: Constructing Food Desires & Indigenous Food Tropes

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Abstract: This essay discusses the entangled trajectory of quinoa's globalization in the late 20th century examining selective narratives designed to entice a type of virtuous consumption whereby one can simultaneously satiate the desire for authentic foods and for ethical eating. As this pseudo grain became uprooted from the Andes and replanted across different geographies, it has gained new consumers enticed by the allure of ingesting the ancient Incan "super food" packaged in indigenous authenticity. Allegedly, quinoa is not only heathier than other grains, but its consumption also creates an ethical bridge between what we have on the table and what small farmers in the distant Andes have been cultivating for centuries. While it took over a century before Andean crops such as the potato to find its way to European tables; quinoa has reached Western tables and global markets almost instantaneously undermining any desire for slowly ingesting authenticity. As soon as consumers realized what quinoa is—it was no longer from the Andes.

Keywords: Indigenous Peoples, nutrition, food consumption, globalization, markets

Introduction: Ingesting the Andes

Five hundred years ago the European conquest of the Americas set in motion agricultural and dietary transformations of global proportions. The edible world was fully transformed as plants originally domesticated by the indigenous populations of the Americas were extracted from their native soils, shipped across the oceans, replanted, and adapted across five different continents forever changing the interstices between local and global diets. Most importantly, as Andean foods became globalized, indigenous foodways were undermined, first by indigenous people dispossessed from their lands, later by being forced to work in Spanish plantations at the expense of their own food systems. As Paul Freedman points out, this rapacious conquest was denounced in 1552 in the classical work by Bartolomé de las Casas*, Short Description of the Destruction of the Indies.* His writings remain a strong reminder of the "depravity of power" carried out during Spanish conquest and colonialism, which left the indigenous populations in a condition of enslavement and servitude (Freedman 2021:71).

Furthermore, as Freedman points out, extraction and globalization has had cumulative effects across generations. Present day indigenous food insecurity is a reminder that conquest is not over, and that global capitalism continues to undermine indigenous food systems. Likewise, quinoa, which was once an unmarked staple of the Andean region commonly despised by the Euro descendant population, once globalized has seen its prices rise beyond local affordability (2021: 69-70). As a result, as this grain becomes coveted across the world, it becomes less affordable to the original peoples whose culture and folklore tightly converges with agriculture.

Moreover, European conquest across the Americas reversed the logic of reciprocity with nature imposing instead the logic of extraction and commodification. This has affected local foodways to the present day and is evident in the studies of folklore on indigenous cosmology. Decades ago, Bernard Mishkin (1940) who conducted ethnographic research on indigenous folklore in *Kauari*, a rural village in Perú, reported that many locals suffered from hunger and poor health which was sedated by chewing coca leaves. Their living conditions were such that they displayed no interest in sharing their knowledge of folk traditions. Furthermore, over the years the tentacles of the Catholic church had infiltrated rural areas and as a result local Incan cosmology often converged with Christian traditions with names of Spanish saints and divine figures having an equivalent among Quechua speakers that overlayed Catholic identities on existing indigenous religious figures.

Despite conquest, the Sun or *Inti* was still seen as the primary deity venerated and respected on a daily basis and in relation with successful crops. Remembrance of the Inca Emperor Hauyana Capac (1464-1488) who extended the empire from Cusco to Quito, remained a strong presence in folk traditions. Moreover, the emperor was venerated as a deity as the son of the Sun whose light bestows auspiciousness and good crops. In other words, Hauyana Capac was regarded as the hero of agricultural peoples protecting and solidifying an empire that was once food secure. Significantly, his strength derived from eating quinoa, which was believed to be among the richest Andean grains (1940: 235-236). These beliefs are still alive in rural areas across the Andes. Their documentation, by folklorists and anthropologists alike, can contribute to the growing interdisciplinary field of sustainability and to alter the extractive and unsustainable relationship with nature that was set in motion through global capitalism.

Significantly, for the indigenous populations of the Andes, agriculture has been at the center of their lives and at the heart of their identities and cosmology. In many indigenous rural areas, private ownership of the land remains seen as a Western aberration and a source of conflict that undermines a healthy balance with nature and relationship with fellow humans. Ideally all relationships, including those with nature, should entail reciprocity, or *ayni* in the Quechua language. Practicing *ayni* is thus considered a guiding principle that fosters sustainability and oneness with *Pachamama* (Mother Earth) and with the cosmos. This conception differs from popular Western interpretations about indigenous people's relationship with nature, which is often simplistically translated as the sacralizing of landscape and of nature itself. Rather, in the Andes land is part of who you are, without which one ceases to be. Per extension, agriculture is integral to being.

Conversely, as folklorists and ethnographers insist, cultural identity is not disconnected from wider regional contexts and ecosystems. Rather, in the Andes identity is built in reciprocity with one another, with the land, the mountains, lakes, rivers, and the cosmos. Therefore, foodways are part and parcel of these ongoing reciprocal relationships where humans are not separate from the natural world, but coexist in continuity with it, across time and across the Andes. By extension, agriculture is not a mere economic activity, but the substantiation of being. As such, any agricultural policies, whether promoted by governments or non-profit organizations, even when geared to improve local health or subsistence, have to consider this holistic context. Circumscribing agriculture to market

economics fails to capture why growing certain foods are integral to existential survival in a territory still dominated by the Euro descendant population that has disposed them.

Accordingly, grains are the center of Andean cultures, not just for food security or economic reasons. Grains are still believed to be the source of vitality and longevity, bridging humans with deities, and the land with *Inti* (the Sun in Quechua). A rich folklore weaves together these agrarian traditions, who had masterfully developed agriculture across mountainous terrains. This transplantation was not serendipitous but based on imperial conquest and the need for Europeans to survive across multiple latitudes during the age of seafaring—when transportation of supplies and commerce required months of perilous navigation often followed by periodic food insecurity. The rich repertoire of foods appropriated from the Americas facilitated European colonial settlement and the progressive extraction of indigenous lands, seeds, plants, and agricultural knowledge. In turn, colonial extraction for global markets undermined indigenous food sovereignty, converting what were once food secure communities into landless subaltern hacienda workers, reduced to a position of serfdom, whose seeds and food knowledge would feed the world (Galleano 1997, Quijano 2000). Significantly, in the present, indigenous crops remain subjected to a history of appropriation and extraction that started with colonialism of the Americas and the globalization of American commodities—including food and seeds.

In other words, foods that once originated in the Americas expanded the food security of peoples across five continents—particularly through the highly adaptive corn and potatoes (Coe 1994, Long 1996, Messer 1984, Brandes 1997). Today, staples such as the potato are considered intrinsic to multiple national diets and most consumers ignore their origins. Potatoes, first domesticated in the Peruvian Andes, initially failed to adjust to the Spanish climate. It was only after their adaptation to Irish conditions in the 1600's that the potato spread across the rest of Europe. Resisting the destruction brought about by invading armies, including during the present war in Ukraine, the globalization of the potato illustrates the resilience and dependability of Andean crops. Yet it took almost a century after Pizarro conquered the Inca Empire in 1535 for the potato to be successfully disseminated across the globe. Likewise, today's Andean crops encapsulate entangled histories of a world where power and conquest were forever entwined with food production and extraction (Garcia 2013, Gree 2016, Long 1996, Wolf 1990). However, globalization has compressed time and space at a velocity unimagined five hundred years ago (Appadurai 1988, 1986). Foods planted and harvested in South America reach North American supermarkets in just hours. Packaging and refrigeration have rendered seasonality irrelevant.

Nevertheless, it is worth remembering that present food choices and desires are not merely a product of global history, but history itself in its most sensorial form. As in the past, what gets to our tables and shapes our food preferences, is entangled with social relations of domination and extraction. As the late Eric Wolf pointed out, power operates through settings of converging global and local forces that rest on historical processes of extraction of labor and production (Wolf 1990). Yet, consumption patterns are rarely based on agricultural production and colonial histories alone. Furthermore, the divide between consumption and production, so common in early plantation and colonial histories, has

shrunken as consumers and goods overlap multiple geographies. Here, I argue that a similarly entangled trajectory is taking place with quinoa consumption and globalization as once occurred with the potato—becoming uprooted and rooted across different geographies, gaining new markets, and becoming attached to novel narratives and desires about the Andes and its indigenous allure. While it took over a century before Andean crops found their way to European tables; today food imports and laboratory seed modification travel to the speed of jet fuel, becoming globalized in less than a decade.

Whereas in the 15th and 16th centuries botanical experimentation relied on peasants' know-how —who themselves relied on transgenerational transmission of agricultural experimentation to counter their chronic food insecurity—today this process is expedited by global markets, consumer demands, and scientific manipulation of seeds. In such a fast-paced global exchange of crops and tastes, most of us consume foods that have had multiple origins and hybridizations. Ironically, it is precisely against this context of food crossovers and hybridizations that the desire to eat "genuine," "authentic", and organically sourced "whole" foods continues to grow. I am interested in examining why, and through what mechanisms, the desire and yearning for authenticity appeals to those who not only want to be satiated, but also desire to engage in a virtuous type of consumption based on selective eating. Unlike the era of Pizarro when conquered foods and spices were unashamedly sold in street markets and maritime ports across the globe without labels or certified provenience, todays' organic consumer expects to be told a story, a credible narrative—and a believable one preferably— that restores a sense of justice. Quinoa, I argue, has until recently fed this growing desire. Commodified as the Inca grain that fed the Andes, its recent globalization promises to satiate the craving for authentic whole foods while simultaneously restoring a sense of virtuous consumption. Allegedly, consuming quinoa is good for us, restorative of our relationship with nature, and ethical via-à-vis the indigenous communities that first domesticated the plant.

As mentioned above, these narratives of redemption contrast with the world of Pizarro that once fueled the globalization of potato. In addition, while early American crops became staple foods of peasants and commoners worldwide before they seduced the upper classes, this has not been the case with quinoa, which has ascended food hierarchies by seducing the global educated middle classes (Andrews 2017, Urdanivia 2016). Quinoa is globalizing through a modern logic of cultivating and ingesting healthy, protein-rich, and gluten free "resilient crops" in salads, soups, and as a side dish substituting other grains. An assortment of quinoa recipes such as salads with mango, herbs and Asian spices abound the internet and social media in ways that are rarely consumed in the Andes. These are appealing to the educated middle classes who can afford to replace cheaper rice with quinoa and who are eager to substitute industrialized foods with ethically sourced whole foods.

Here I am not suggesting that consumers are passively and uncritically ingesting these foods or swallowing idealized food narratives concocted by the advertisement industry to expand profits. Rather consumption itself, as Richard Wilk pointed out, is used as a metaphor for eating in modern capitalism; the two have been inextricably associated (2004). There is no question that the least examined of all desires is the desire for food. As

Graebar (2011) points out, desire itself is always rooted in the imagination and the quest for gratification and recognition by others. In that sense, desire differs from need or urge. Desire directs itself to social relations, some of which may be fully imagined. Likewise, quinoa becomes desirable beyond the Andes through processes that have as much to do with eating and savoring as with the ways through which we imagine its provenience. Such processes change over time as certain foods become desirable and undesirable depending on cultural context and the ways through which stratification is signaled through food. As we will see below, quinoa's social ascent is recent and has much more to do with the ways through which we imagine and idealize certain foods than with the realities of food production.

Stratification and Quinoa: Ascending Desires and Global Markets

Quinoa—*Chenopodium quinoa*— was first domesticated in the Andes over 5000-7000 years ago yet made its way to Western tables only in the 20th century. Despite its recent introduction into western diets, today quinoa is sold both online and in supermarkets across the world claiming to change the way we eat, think about food security, and design healthy sustainable diets (Bermejo & León 1994, Ofstehage 2011). Much of its recent popularity is related to food trends aimed at reducing carbohydrate intake by restricting the consumption of cereals and grains commonly used in breads, pastas, and other more affordable options widespread across the globe. From the "keto" to the "paleo" diets, these grains have been under attack by the popularization of protein-rich nutritional plans. Among the multiple claims of protein-rich diets, some more substantiated than others, is that there is anthropological evidence which suggests that human evolution relied primarily on a low grain/low carb diet, based on hunting of undomesticated animals and gathering of wild plants. Moreover, with domestication of plants—including wheat—only taking place around 12,000 years ago, sedentarism and the diseases of civilization went hand in hand. While some of these arguments are shared by anthropologists, such visions of our sedentary ancestors are often too simplified. Cereals have been associated with state formation and social stratification, largely due to their ability to be stored, easily quantified, and extracted as tax collection. Recent evidence suggests that our ancestors lived in relatively flexible social structures and agriculture most likely took place side-by-side with hunting and gathering (Scott 2017).

In *Against the Grain*, James Scott (2017) suggests that cereals such as wheat played a pivotal role as crops associated with state formation in Mesopotamia because they ripen all at once, facilitating tax collection and state control. In contrast, the Inca empire relied heavily on taxes paid as labor, often using farmers as a seasonal labor force to build roads, terraces, and irrigation systems. Archaeological evidence suggests that the diet of the Inca empire was predominantly vegetarian, relying on heavily on potato, maize, and pseudo-cereals such as quinoa, which are seeds that can be used as grains but are not within the botanical family of staple cereals. Both quinoa and amaranth belong to the family of pseudo-cereals that can grow at high altitudes and be dried, grinded, and stored to mitigate food insecurity in times of need. This versatility explains why so many Andean countries have supported its growth and dissemination (Peralta 2011, Ministerio de Agricultura 2019). As Scott suggests, they may have escaped extraction and tax collection during the

Inca Empire, which relied preferentially on labor tax (as opposed to food extraction) to build infrastructure and preserve overall food security.

Thus, one could argue that quinoa seeds and their cultivation across the Andes have been associated with long-established survival strategies across imperial agrarian traditions that were transmitted across generations through seed preservation and agricultural—and thereby also cultural—practices of working with the landscape (as opposed to working against nature) across different altitudes and ecological zones. After Spanish conquest, European cereals, such as wheat and barley, were introduced in the Americas. Following Spanish tastes, they were given preferential resources and the best arable lands, becoming over time ubiquitous across Latin America. These European cereals, albeit of Middle Eastern origin, were the primary staples of Europe throughout the Middle Ages and when their crops failed, famines quickly ensued. Therefore, their successful cultivation across the Americas was seen as critical to food security as bread continued to be the primary source of calories across Europe. This tradition was implemented across South America where even today bread coexists with corn tortillas as a primary stapple. Not surprisingly, the Spaniards used the hacienda system to impose their agricultural and dietary preferences in the Andes while selectively adopting and globalizing adaptable American crops such as corn, potatoes, tomatoes, and a variety of beans. Resting on indigenous dispossession of land, the hacienda system perpetuated the Spanish logic of cultivation to serve European food preferences and maximize yields, leaving indigenous populations food insecure and dispossessed (Escobar 1995).

Unlike wheat, quinoa— perhaps due to its bitter taste and lack of gluten— is not conducive to baking leavened breads. As a gluten-free seed covered with a layer of saponins, its flour is not naturally binding and leavened; even when mixed with other flours the breads made from quinoa become denser and tend to crumble. Furthermore, the abundance of corn across the Americas and other more palatable food choices contributed to the relegation of quinoa to a secondary position. For European diets used to wheat, barley, and oats, quinoa's taste was distinctively bitter and its texture hard. While corn was fully adopted as a substitute for European grains, quinoa was progressively peripheralized and over time in many parts of the Andes it became a neglected low status crop only to be rediscovered as an idealized Inca grain in the late 20th century.

Nevertheless, the indigenous populations of the Andes continued to cultivate quinoa beyond the confines of the hacienda system. Even when relegated to the least productive lands, they continued to sow their native crops despite being exposed to an unfavorable market economy and the hierarchical reordering of their foodways. Unlike Spanish diets, which were heavily reliant on meats and in particular pork, traditional Andean diets were mostly vegetarian interspersed with guinea pig, llama, and alpaca meats on special occasions. Protein-rich bean and grains, such as quinoa, substituted for animal protein and had long been used as main sources of sustenance. As a pseudo-grain, quinoa contains 12 to 18% protein, is rich in essential amino acids such as histidine and lysine, each with 3.25 and 6.1% of protein composition respectively. When cooked, this protein has high absorption rates. In addition to being protein rich, it is also rich in vitamins A, E, and B2, and has more calcium, potassium, and magnesium than most grains (Koziol, 1992). Thus,

for indigenous populations who were marginalized and unable to afford other sources of animal protein, quinoa served as the ideal food to provide the necessary micronutrients to sustain a life beyond colonial control.

During Spanish colonialism, and until recently, quinoa was considered an undesirable and unpalatable crop, relegated to a low-status food (Bermejo & León 1994, Mujica et al 2013) reserved for "los indios" who used it in stews, soups, and as a side dish often mixed with other grains to mollify its bitterness. Quinoa can also be brewed and substitute for maize in the making of *chicha*, which is a popular alcoholic drink produced across the Andes. The indigenous populations also knew how to clear and recycle saponins. Before mechanization, they cleared saponins through multiple contained washes, often carried out along river streams, recycling the waters containing ground saponins as a natural disinfectant with antibacterial properties that could be used as soap. While in the present this knowledge is mostly forgotten, as the tentacles of market economy expand its reach across the Andes bringing cheap industrialized products, in indigenous rural areas that know-how has allowed many indigenous communities to survive and preserve healthy diets despite the Spanish influence.

Thus, it is ironic that the world would rediscover quinoa in the most expensive organic supermarkets outside the Andes, sold as an ideal, protein-rich grain, when for centuries it was relegated to a low status food across South America. The growing demand for quinoa in North America and Western Europe has given rise to new concerns about the rising cost of quinoa intended for export, which affect local markets, and ultimately makes it unaffordable to the indigenous communities who have depended on this pseudo-grain to survive. It is worth examining the strategies used to globalize quinoa outside the Andes and to interrogate how certain foods, once removed from their native social context, gain status and climb new hierarchies, much of which outside indigenous control.

The rapid desirability of quinoa in rich countries has not gone unnoticed. From the readers of the *New York Times* to the *Guardian*, the growth in quinoa demand is well documented, giving rise to new concerns about price gauging and its negative effects on the local level. The alarm bell has also sounded from international humanitarian organizations, such as Oxfam and Food First (Li & Urdanivia 2020). Oxfam has called for state measures to mitigate food insecurity due to global food price volatility and the potential for quinoa to become unaffordable, particularly in food-insecure countries such as Bolivia—the main producer of one of the most desirable types of quinoas, royal red quinoa (Grossman-Cohen 2011). Anthropologists Fabiana Li and Claudia Urdanivia draw on their anthropological research conducted in the Punu region of Peru in 2012 and in 2019 after quinoa prices had somewhat stabilized. They point out that small farmers' high expectations to maximize profits from quinoa production have not been met. Nevertheless, the rise in quinoa demand and its branding has led to a renewed appreciation and revitalization of Andean foods and indigenous foodways (Li & Urdanivia 2020). Moreover, most producers do not have direct access to global markets, relying on intermediaries in co-ops and other NGOs to market their products, therefore, their margin of profit is reduced. Furthermore, while quinoa is still branded as a product of the Andes, it is no longer solely produced in the Andes. However, the allure of the distant Andes ignites desires that other places do not,

and while quinoa produced in Colorado and California may be just as tasty, it is not self-evident that its ingestion meets the same desires consumers are trying to satiate.

As David Graeber points out, too often anthropologists overuse the term "consumption" as self-evident behavior predicated on the separation between production and consumption. This is evident when describing modernity as a culture of "mass consumption" and materiality that comes to define our identities and our relationships with others (Miller 1998, 2010). Yet while consumption is regarded as indispensable to modern way of crafting identities, it also entails a transformation and a form of destruction (Graebar 2011). Likewise, something that is ingested, like quinoa, is to a degree forever altered and in essence destroyed. As the desire for quinoa continues to grow, one may wonder to what extent this constructed desire is fully satiable when the original grain itself is being altered to suit our tastes and desires.

Crafting Desirability: The indigenous appeal and virtuous consumption

After centuries of being peripheralized as undesirable *comida de Indio* (Indian food), quinoa's ascension in South America is taking place largely through chain supermarkets that target an urban upper class of European descent and a well-traveled elite, most of whom have learned about the benefits of quinoa through global markets, not from their indigenous neighbors. Conversely, in North America and Western Europe, quinoa has entered markets primarily as an upper middle-class food associated with conscientious yuppie preferences despite remaining largely unknown among common folk.

Fetishized as an indigenous ancient grain worth the highest prices in American elite supermarkets, quinoa's globalization has been promoted by international organizations, many of which are interested in promoting indigenous grains and climate-resilient crops. Such was the case when the United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) declared 2013 the "year of quinoa," suggesting that this nutrient-rich and highly adaptable plant could play a critical role in eradicating world hunger (FAO 2013). The plant has also gained attention as a rich source in *triterpenes saponins*, which are concentrated in the husks of the seeds (Ahumada et al 2016: 439). Ever since, Andean countries have routinely organized a biannual world conference—the *Congreso Mundial de la Quinua*—aimed at enhancing agricultural productivity and its dissemination beyond the Andes. Bolivia, where around 60% of the population is estimated to be of indigenous origins, has been pivotal in the promotion of quinoa as an ideal grain to counter poverty and food insecurity due to its rich nutrient content. Bolivia has hosted several biannual world quinoa conferences, most recently in 2023. As the home of the highly desirable "royal quinoa" variety, considered one of the nuttier and most palatable of all seeds, the Bolivian state has also played a pivotal role in its idealization and globalization.

The biannual world conference has been an important meeting place for indigenous producers and the international community to come together, share concerns, listen to local producers, create new contacts, and expand support. The next 2025 quinoa conference will be held in Ecuador and the Cañar region, known for being home to small-scale agriculture and family farms, will be at the center of its organization. Local associations and co-ops are eager to be at the center stage of the world's biggest quinoa

conference and thereby also gain international attention and publicize their multiple needs. Such endeavors have also resonated with nation-states' attempts to increase exports while simultaneously promoting indigenous foods from the Andes. These efforts have appealed to Western consumers eager to replace highly processed industrialized grains with healthier options. However, it is worth questioning through what mechanism is this ancient seed that purports to replace more established cereals becoming attractive. What desires and ideals is quinoa satiating?

These questions arise from the long-held anthropological assumption that humans do not simply eat to satiate hunger. Instead, eating is deeply entwined with our belief systems, sense of belonging to social hierarchies, and identity (Goody 1982, Messer 1984, Mintz 2009, 1986, Mintz & Du Bois 2002). In other words, food consumption satiates and restores what anthropologist David Sutton as aptly termed our sense of "wholeness." Here, I am suggesting that the success of quinoa's commodification rests precisely in its restorative idealist promise as a grain that purports to simultaneously heal our gut and restore our broken bonds with nature and each other. At a time of growing Western dismay with modernity and industrial food production, including processed grains (Pollan 2006), food choices—such as quinoa—have become associated with a different kind of consumption that is arguably more virtuous, thoughtful, and ultimately just.

However, in a context where food needs and desires are constantly changing and fabricated by the industrial food chain, quinoa is also being transformed and processed. A new generation of pastas, cookies, crackers, fermented drinks, milks, and breads are being derived from processed quinoa. These products are commoditized in the USA as healthier, organic, and ultimately restorative of an "ancient Inca way of life." Packaged as the ideal grain, this virtuous consumption rests largely on unverified food narratives that appeal to white middle-class consumers conscious that consuming habits have the power to alter our relationship with nature and ultimately create a more just world. The principal consumers are in wealthier nations where middle-class desires for healthier whole foods are expanding; these include the USA, the European Union, Israel, Switzerland, and lately China. Furthermore, the commodification of quinoa in wellness and organic food stores rests on potent narratives designed to create desires, expand our food palate, and transform food consumption into a moral act. While not yet in the majority, a growing percentage of consumers are demanding healthier food choices and chain supermarkets have not been immune to this demand, expanding their organic sections as they also gain from the sales of more expensive certified organic labels.

Despite the good intentions and market strategies to sell ethically sourced authentic indigenous foods, most consumers ignore the fact that quinoa is no longer solely an authentic crop of the Andes, but is now grown in North America (Colorado and California), Africa (from Kenya to Malawi), Central Asia, Scandinavia, Saudi Arabia, China, and the mountain regions of Europe. Unlike the potato that took over a century to adapt to European conditions, its seeds have been genetically altered to adjust to the specificities of different climates and to the different tastes and palates in less than a decade. Furthermore, these altered seeds have also returned to the Andes to be repropagated, and reintroduced, as "native" crops, despite having been modified outside of the Andes. Moreover, as

mechanization is introduced to remove saponins, quinoa's original bitterness and toughness has been reduced, making quinoa more appealing to sensitive tastes and satisfying a preference for neutral or bland flavors.

Far from the Andes and technically no longer an indigenous crop, in a matter of decades quinoa has been transformed from a grain that was barely known beyond the Andes, into a gluten-free alternative now found modified across the globe in urban upper-class supermarkets, despite now tasting more like wheat couscous than the original variety. This transformation is fueled by a growing concern with "ethical eating" promised in food narratives that package quinoa in supermarkets stores and online as an ideal grain. For instance, the brand *Zint Quinoa* illustrates this tendency, claiming to be the "epiphany of wellbeing":

> Consider the moment when you first realized you could take control of your health and change for the better. That realization is at the heart of Zint's vision. We're here to boost that empowered feeling of vitality, enthusiasm, and zeal for wellbeing. Eat well; live a harmonious life physically, mentally, and spiritually. Of course, this isn't always easy, but by sprinkling a little Zint throughout your day, it all becomes possible. (Zint 2003)

While these narratives feed our desires for a replenished life, they also sell more than physical vitality. They build on a sense of loss by metaphorically promising to fulfill an inchoate desire for a spiritual replenishment through communion with a distant Andean past. By ingesting this "Andean crop revered by the Incas as 'the mother of all grains,' one can find a connection with this ancient civilization without having to substantiate any ties with the Andes. Notably, whereas other grains such as wheat or corn were domesticated over 8,000 and 10,000 years ago respectively, they are rarely advertised as ancient crops.

In contrast, the relatively more recent domestication of quinoa (5000 to 7000 years ago) receives the metaphoric "ancient" qualification as being first cultivated in "South America over 6,000 years ago… shooting to superfood superstar status for its amazing nutritional profile" (Zint 2003). These narratives promise a connection with an indigenous past associated with the Incas thereby discursively connecting consumers with a 7000-year-old history of domesticating quinoa in the Andes. Such a historical leap bridges a fictional continuity between past and present, and the erasure of an entire colonial history of conquest, colonialism, and the hacienda system that have characterized the lived history of the indigenous population since Francisco Pizarro conquered the Inca Empire.

Similar historical claims have an enduring prophetic quality that equate the physical ingestion of food with a spiritual act. For example, the brand *Ancient Harvest* claims to be selling an "ancient grain" that "…carries 5000-7000 years of cultivation history because of its unique rich nutritional value and from raising the nation of the ancient Inca, known as 'the mother of food.'" Not only is it gluten-free it also claims to be "Kosher so you don't have to worry when you add it to your recipes" (Ancient Harvest 2023). Indeed, Israel is among the world's largest consumers of quinoa due in part to Jewish dietary restriction on fermentation and leavened breads.

The company Ancient Harvest claims to have introduced quinoa to the United States in 1983 and that after the first trial they "instantly fell in love with the versatility and timelessness of this plant-based powerhouse and began our commitment to sourcing the highest quality quinoa and supporting the farmers who grow it" (Ancient Harvest 2023). While they claim to source their quinoa from Bolivia, the exact region where it is sourced is not revealed on its web page, and while farmers are said to be supported, it is difficult to verify how and where that support takes place. As with many quinoa products, once the grain is sourced from the Andes, it is de-saponized, cleaned and transformed in multiple pastas and other products that enhance processors' profit margins. In fact, this process entails mechanization, however minimal it may be, a transformation from an agricultural product to a processed one. Once processed and branded, quinoa is packed and sold as a wholesome agricultural product as if it had been unmodified for 7000 years.

Among the multitude of market strategies is the sharing of recipes online couched in the language of "offering" free recipes to make life a bit easier. Such recipes for cooking quinoa dovetail textual information with colorful photographs that appeal to the senses. Globalized in the digital age, quinoa has had the advantage of becoming marketed through instantaneous communication sharing via social media, influencers, bloggers, and traditional advertisement. In record time, a recipe cooked in the USA is quickly shared across the globe through pictures posted on social media laced with sensuous metaphors that appeal to our gustatory palate—nutty, wholesome, delicate, fluffy, textured, and ultimately wonderfully delicious— that capture our taste buds and our imagination.

In addition to these sensuous metaphors, a recuring strategy to craft the allure of authenticity is to appropriate presumably ancient Quechua words as if they were fossilized from the Inca past of 500 years ago. For instance the brand *Alter Eco*, claims that the ancient Incas called quinoa, particularly black quinoa, "chisaya mama" (chee-sa-waya ma-ma) or "mother grain," which is defined as a "heirloom nutritious source is fluffier, nuttier" and devoid of bitterness "so common to lesser grades" of quinoa (Alter Eco 2023). In fact, the word quinoa derives from modern Quechua itself, and it is the most commonly used in markets across the Andes. Distinctions are made by color and texture preference depending on the kind of recipe one plans to produce and serve, but these distinctions are not hierarchized. Furthermore, among the brand's strategies for quinoa, which include chocolate with quinoa, are claims to restore rather than deplete the Earth by practicing regenerative agriculture and supporting small farmers. Pictures with indigenous farmers happily posing with their families and communities provide the empirical ingredient to make these food narratives believable and digestible.

(http//www.alterecofoods.com extracted from the Web Archive.org 2024)

Among the multiple claims that are beginning to gain traction in the organic food market is that selling food is only a "modest" part of their business model. A growing trend associated with the branding of quinoa and other "fair trade" organic agricultural products is to share a narrative, create a believable storyline that dovetails with photos from afar, and craft a history of virtue. This structure serves as the organizational principle of products' webpages, which once successful are repeated across the multiple sites on the web. The inquisitive consumer is led to these pages to find where their products come from and what kind of mission they serve. As such, the act of opting to purchase a certain brand of quinoa is increasingly based on this narrative structure. In other words, purchasing becomes part of shared mission whereby buying a 10-dollar half-kilo of quinoa is seen as an equitable transaction benefitting consumers and food producers alike. Brands, such as Alter Eco, have also created a foundation that purports to support regenerative agriculture, indigenous farmers, and their holistic worldviews (Alter Eco 2023). Moreover, the Alter Eco Foundation claims to support farmers in Ecuador transitioning from plow agriculture to agroforestry with minimal tilling of soils to preserve plant and forest diversity. These narratives also presume that indigenous agricultural practices have to realign with organic expectations of Western consumers when the indigenous domestic production and consumption of quinoa has historically been organic, despite not being certified as such by Western authorities.

The online virtual world of similarly appealing discursive strategies has been pivotal in catalyzing rapid dietary changes. Likewise, the promotion of quinoa to superfood status was meteoric. Remarkably, the very companies that promote wellness and another kind of

consumption—that which contributes to food justice—stand to profit the most. These commodification strategies also entail changing consumption into a redemptive act that ultimately promotes the greater good. For instance, *Healthworks Quinoa* claims they have been focused on sourcing from small sustainable farms across different countries by travelling all over the world to directly meet with local farmers and carefully "hand select the best quality superfoods for our customers" (Hearthworks 2023). The farmers are aptly called "partners," although details about these partnerships are not featured in the companies' webpages. Most importantly, the profits made by these companies are not publicized or shared as part of the storyline "about us." Pictures of indigenous people, dressed in indigenous garments (as above), and rooted against a remote mountain environment, contribute to the fiction that the Andes are saved by our actions as consumers invested in buying products that serve small farmers and small agricultural coops.

As the production of quinoa multiplies outside the Andes, these narratives about indigenous and Inca authenticity are becoming blurred against a changing background where uprooted crops have become the norm and its origins forgotten. In the present, quinoa is commonly found in urban American supermarkets. As its vulgarization widens, its packaging resorts less to its Andean provenience and more to the history of the brand itself. Perhaps like the potato, which is now from everywhere and nowhere in particular, and is best known as the "Irish potato," quinoa's multiplicity as it becomes a commonplace presence in Western tables will also lead to a global amnesia about its origins. The Andes progressively disappear behind the growing number of brands and geographies that now sell different brands of quinoa from multiple regions in supermarkets and on the ungrounded World Wide Web. While many of these brands claim to support small farmers in the Andes, we have yet to fully discern how local small farmers have gained from quinoa's globalization. Like the Andes, quinoa's global appeal has hardly been without twists and turns. Yet while its original desirability was built on indigenous agricultural know-how and appeals to an Inca past, over time that provenience is likely to dissipate as its production is now also fully globalized.

Conclusion: Creating Food Desires Reconsidered

In the current global economy food desires are endlessly being crafted; shrouded with innovative appeals to our imagination promising to bring us a world that has already vanished, restore a sense of wholeness to our fractured lives, or even to recover our connections with distant lands and with nature in its purest form. Quinoa's globalization, from a low-status food circumscribed to the Andes to a globally desirable pseudo-grain, was forged out of the desire to satiate this sense of loss and to repair injustice brough about by global capitalism and industrial food consumption. Branded as the indigenous grain from the Andes—*the mother of all grains*—this seed that is not a traditional grain has captured our taste buds by promising to become yet another transformative crop from the Andes that can be adapted to different climate zones in the far corners of the world. Here I am not suggesting that consumers—yuppie or otherwise— are passively ingesting these idealized foods in a naïve act of purchasing a fantasy. Rather, it is precisely in the context of transforming consumption and selecting foods that promise to get us out of industrial food

production that quinoa became popular, suggesting that the act of consumption and eating are entwined and changing.

There is no denying that a growing number of niche consumers search for foods that are associated with a more just and equitable world, and that globalization of products through social media and the internet has accelerated this awareness. As such, the act of purchasing food is increasingly selective based on sensorial narratives, websites structured to provide a connection with food justice, and photographic place making often featuring indigenous food producers from afar. Equated with virtuous consumption, consumers hope to contribute to a world that is more just and equitable. In so doing consumption and eating become morally entwined. The meaning of consuming under modern capitalism, as Richard Wilk points out, is closely associated with eating as a deliberate act that involves in one way or another a type of ingesting and transformation (2004). Moreover, as David Graeber (2011) suggests, consumption is no longer predicated on the separation between consumption and production as it was in traditional plantation economies (Mintz 1986). As we can see with quinoa's globalization, the worlds of production and consumption often overlap. Thus, it is useful to closely examine how food desires are created as if this overlap did not exist, as if foods such as quinoa were still circumscribed to the distant Andes where indigenous people equipped with centuries of agricultural knowledge make a living from its commodification.

There is no question that the least examined of all desires is the desire for certain foods, which differs from appetite., particularly the type of food that promises to be transformative and deliver a healthier and better person. David Graeber recognized this growing trend in modern capitalism asserting that desire itself is always rooted in the imagination and the quest for gratification and recognition from others. As he reminded us, desire for recognition from others is universally human and differs from mere need or urge. Rather, desire directs itself to social relations, some of which may be fully imagined (Graeber 211). The same could be argued about the desire for quinoa. Likewise, quinoa became desirable beyond the Andes through processes that have as much to do with eating and savoring as with the ways through which we imagine its provenance and hope to contribute to wellbeing of small farmers in the Global South.

David Sutton, in his work on Greece and food tropes, argues that food has the power to make us "return to the whole," instantiating a marriage between the sensorial and the conceptual reminding us where we came from and contributing to the restoration of a sense of community and belonging after displacement. Food has the power to bring us to a place we long for yet is physically remote. While his work deals primarily with migrant's need to reconstitute a sense of homeland abroad through shared food memories, recreation of meals, and what he terms a synesthetic experience; a similar argument could be made for quinoa. Here I am arguing that a parallel could be made with Andean foods such as quinoa and the market narratives that build on our inner desires. They metaphorically bring us to a place of redemption through tropes of wholeness whereby the ingestion of this "ancient indigenous grain," allows us to re-invent our place in history as virtuous consumers.

Arguably, the allure of such foods was carved out from the contemporary desire to redeem middle-class consumers from a place of privilege by discursively creating the illusion of social proximity with indigenous foodways and small-scale farmers from afar presumably contributing to a better world, despite neither sharing a place at the table.

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