

## Something Better

On days when he works in his fields of maize, beans, and broccoli, Felipe Xul wakes up before dawn, washes off with water cold from the night air, and wolfs down a fried egg or a leftover piece of meat along with a plate of black beans and a tall stack of tortillas. While he eats, his wife packs a lunch of maize dumplings in a large, handwoven napkin, which he will carry along with his machete and the other tools he needs that day (a hoe, perhaps, or a fertilizer pump). Along the three-kilometer walk to his fields, Xul occasionally greets other farmers headed to their plots, but mostly he keeps to himself, planning out the day's tasks. He also spends time thinking about the future. He farms not simply to survive, he tells us, although the basic need to put food on the table is essential to his life and work.

Xul lives with his wife and six children in a small Maya hamlet precariously carved out of a mountainside overlooking one of Highland Guatemala's fecund valleys. The several-room cinder-block house is larger than average for the area, evidence of the little extra cash he has secured through export agriculture. More than simply a roof over his head, the house is a spot

of repose that reflects the closeness of living in a place for decades, the closeness that makes a shelter into a home and a fuel source into a hearth. In the same way, his fields are more than a site of basic survival — they embody a host of legacies from the past and possibilities for the future, some good and some bad. Xul speaks of his land in loving, anthropomorphic terms, and, in the abstract, he finds his work deeply meaningful.

Hearing Xul speak in his native Kaqchikel of the fertile Rajawal (“ Spirit of the Earth”) and his symbiotic relationship with Mother Nature, it would be easy to romanticize the life of a Maya farmer. But let us not forget that Xul’s work is backbreaking labor. Xul is only forty-one, but his callus-covered hands and feet could belong to an eighty-year-old. He walks with the stoop of a much older man, a legacy of years of hauling bushels of maize back from his fields. His poor posture also comes, he explains with a wry smile, from keeping his head down during the violence and terrorism of the 1980s.

Xul’s sons help in the fields after school, and he frequently reminds them that this land will one day be theirs. He consciously tries to instill in his children a love and respect for the land and a view that working it is part of a larger social context of meaning and planning. He tells them that working the land is important for the future. Part of the reason that he took up broccoli production is because he realizes that growing only milpa (subsistence plots of maize and bean) will not, in the future, afford the standard of living that he desires for his family. He wishes for greater worldly success for himself and for his children, and so he seeks fuller participation in a project of global capitalism that risks social alienation for the *algo más* of consumptive dreams.

At times, these various desires converge, as with Xul’s venture in non-traditional agriculture. At other points, they diverge, leaving Xul feeling both shortchanged about the less-than-ideal returns on the export crops and anxious about whether his children will indeed want to take up farming. The horizon of fecundity that motivates Xul to not simply work milpa but to grow export crops threatens as well as inspires, embodying all of the contradictions involved in anticipating, even desiring, a changing form of life. He grows broccoli because he wants something better for his children. And yet, he realizes, it is exactly by encouraging his children to pursue broader horizons and goals that he also risks pushing them away from the land on which he wants them to stay and prosper.

In growing broccoli, Xul’s general desire for *algo más*, his desire to take

advantage of opportunities in the global marketplace, converges with the reality of local struggles, ambivalent outcomes, and transforming streams of social experience and collective identity. We might characterize such global connections as eroding local norms, threatening the very culture of Highland Guatemala. Yet, it is precisely because such practices become so deeply embedded in local forms of living that they are compelling, durable, and, for farmers like Xul, worth doing despite the many obstacles and risks.

### *The Commodity Chain*

Broccoli is a cole crop (the same species as brussels sprouts, cauliflower, and cabbage) that was probably domesticated in the last centuries BCE in the cooler regions of northern Greece and Italy. Broccoli was reportedly first grown in the United States in Brooklyn in the 1890s, planted in backyard gardens by Italian immigrants and enmeshed in schemes of desire enjoining frugality and subsistence (the same historical juncture that conditioned the production of spaghetti, pasta e fagioli, and other “typically Italian” food items). By the 1920s, broccoli was being grown commercially in California and shipped back on trains to the large urban markets of Chicago and New York. However, it is only recently that broccoli has become a true staple in the American diet. California farming operations still supply the lion’s share of the market during their “in” season, from May to October.<sup>1</sup> But supermarkets stock broccoli year-round, and in the winter months an increasing portion of their supply comes from Guatemala. In 2000, Guatemala exported about 60 million pounds of cut broccoli to the United States, up more than 900 percent over the previous twenty years, and most of this was grown by smallholding Maya farmers in the region around Tecpán.<sup>2</sup>

The production cycle for nontraditional crops grown around Tecpán is short — in the case of broccoli, less than ninety days from planting to harvest. At harvest, farmers, their families, and hired hands cut the broccoli stalks in the late morning and early afternoon, packing them into bushel-sized nylon bags or plastic boxes that look like milk crates. Packing plants and cooperatives send trucks to pick up broccoli produced under contract, but small farmers without contracts find themselves at the mercy of predatory intermediaries (“coyotes”) who buy produce at a discount on the side of the road. One farmer complained: “Sometimes we don’t get paid. This has happened

a lot. Coyotes take the product and disappear, and we are left with a big debt. That's how the farmer loses. . . . It is work for nothing. We lose time, money, everything." Because produce such as broccoli spoils so quickly, and because it has virtually no value in the local subsistence market, farmers are compelled to sell their crop, giving buyers a clear advantage. Intermediaries play on the vulnerabilities of farmers, using their privileged access to market information and the farmers' need to sell to establish prices in a field of power where the rationality of choices always touches upon the anxiety of not really being able to choose.<sup>3</sup>

Like Adam Smith's (1976) "forestallers" and "engrossers" of grain who were often the subject of witchcraft-like accusations, coyotes occupy a morally ambiguous position in Tecpán. Most farmers view them as pariahs, making money not through hard work but through the rather arbitrary good fortune of owning a pickup truck: "If you own a truck, you can make more money," one farmer said. "But it does not mean that you work more." This negative view is largely shared by development workers encouraging non-traditional production; one explained that "the problem is that intermediaries are the ones who earn the most. The producer takes on the risks but does not share equitably in the earnings."

In Tecpán, the nefarious means that individuals can employ to get rich quickly — Faustian pacts with extra-worldly demons — is a common subject of gossip. Such stories are told about coyotes and their dealings. These stories speak to the sense that nontraditional agriculture is something of an anxious pursuit, linked as much to emergent dangers and uncertainties as to the optimism of new opportunities. It is also clear that these anxieties are not just about broccoli: the production of nontraditional produce articulates, at least in such stories, with the licit and illicit production of other products.<sup>4</sup> One man in Tecpán, a chronically underpaid schoolteacher who does not grow nontraditional crops, narrated a story he had heard about a friend of a friend, Marcos. "Some coyotes, acquaintances of Marcos," were hauling a load of bagged produce in their truck when they saw a police car down the road. They pulled in at Marcos's house and asked if they could leave their bags of broccoli until the morning. He agreed. At dawn the coyotes returned to retrieve their bags, giving Marcos 100 Quetzales [about \$13]. He protested this was far too much money, but the coyotes urged him to just keep it, to not worry about the exchange, and they left." Looking at our clearly puzzled faces, our friend connected the dots: "It must have been marijuana. There

are lots of drug dealers passing as vegetable traders. They fill their pickups with produce, but below that they put drugs, or sometimes they hollow out broccoli stems and hide the drugs inside. Because of this, they only do their business at night, when the police aren't around, and since they are posing as broccoli merchants the police don't suspect anything."

Whether such stories are "factual" or not is beyond the point, although it should be noted that in the late 1980s and early 1990s the Cali cartel shipped tons of cocaine through Guatemalan produce exporters in what the DEA dubbed "the broccoli routes."<sup>9</sup> More important for us, however, these stories fold together not only the terror signified by economic exploitation and the threat of losing traditional culture but also the imaginings of translocal flows of opportunity and potential excess, where making "far too much money" is possible but consequential, risky, and morally ambiguous. Such stories reveal the persistence of a moral economy based on fairness, on corporate labor over individual gains, and on modesty (for more on this, see the results of Ultimatum Game, reported in Chapter 3). Such a perspective makes clear that the economic well-being of producers is affected not just by changing political economies, but by changing streams of social experience and moral understandings. In this case, the allure of economic well-being draws producers close to cultural anxieties and illicit behaviors that reflect on the character of those involved, even if they are innocent.<sup>6</sup> This moral model intensifies at the margins of the global economy as local producers are brought into tense relations with the global marketplace, where they are not benefiting — as they are well aware — when compared to distributors and packers.

Once it reaches the export packing plants that line the Pan-American Highway between Guatemala City and Tecpán, the broccoli is weighed and classified according to size and aesthetic quality. Sanitized in warm chlorinated baths and rinsed in cool water for preservation, the produce is then packed in cartons already stamped with a U.S. distributor's brand logo. The packing plants truck boxes of broccoli to cool storage facilities at Guatemala City's international airport, where they arrive between 7 and 10 o'clock at night. Loaded onto early-morning cargo flights, the produce arrives in Miami before 6 a.m. and, if all goes smoothly, will clear customs within a few hours to be shipped to grocery distributors throughout North America. All in all, the produce usually arrives on supermarket shelves within forty-eight to seventy-two hours of the time it was cut in Guatemala. Broccoli can then last another fifteen or twenty days on the shelf and in the consumer's refrigerator.

Sipping coffee and eating apple strudel at Guatemala City's upscale Café Wein, exporter Tom Heffron extols the virtues of globalization and explains Guatemala's logistical advantages: "Any point in Guatemala is closer to Washington or New York than any point in California, so Guatemala has an advantage in the Eastern Seaboard market. Going to Miami with product is still closer than it would be from Salinas or other points in California." Heffron passionately advocates free trade, arguing that open markets for broccoli benefit everyone involved, not only Guatemalan producers and U.S. consumers but the California competition as well:

The production we are doing [in Guatemala] is not competing with the U.S. There is a complementary relationship because most of the California production occurs from May to October. At that point, California bows out of the market, their weather not permitting year-round cultivation. Guatemala production begins at the end of October and bows out in May, at the onset of the rainy season. So we are sharing the same consumer in New York with our friends in California: they need us in the winter months to keep the product in front of the consumer's eyes, and we need them in the summer months to do the same thing. Hopefully, then, we are making sure that the same consumer is fed all year-round.

Heffron is not simply deploying an ideology of neoliberalism to cover over the crude self-interest of a businessman. He comes across as sincere, separating, at least in his own mind, the bad aspects of globalization from what he sees as its genuine benefits.

The reality is not so rosy, and the good and the bad are not so easily divided out. Packing and shipping plants in Guatemala work in close association with distributors and big retailers in the United States to predict demand and ensure the supply of broccoli. They then contract out most of the production to smallholding Maya farmers, buying the remainder of the produce needed to fill demand on the open market (which allows some leeway in the event that demand drops or in case more supply is needed). This is a crude but effective strategy: prices are minimized by strategically contracting for less than the anticipated demand, with the remainder purchased only as needed and at bottom-of-the-barrel prices. Farmers have little choice in this matter. They can sell whatever crops they have left over after the contract is fulfilled at prices set by the packing plants, or they can leave the leftover crop in the fields to rot (the latter option is not a culturally viable alter-

native, however). There are no local markets for the leftover supply since broccoli is not part of the local diet and is distasteful to the Tecpaneco palate — and so once they have entered into export production farmers must play the global food game as it is structured from afar. Thus, Tecpaneco farmers are vulnerable to market fluctuations predicated on consumer events in the United States and Europe about which they have little information. As production has dramatically expanded in the last twenty years, and as demand has begun to flatten, packing plants have lowered prices while raising quality standards. In this way, the strategies packers use to insure themselves against oversupply transfers risk to smallholding farmers who are financially ill-prepared to bear it.

Increased quality standards have brought a related set of concerns to bear on Highland growers. Because broccoli and other export crops are destined for U.S. consumers — with their socially produced desires for visually attractive vegetables — cosmetic quality is of paramount importance. Broccoli stems must be of a uniform length with no bruising or other deformities, and packing plants go to great lengths to ensure that each piece of produce lives up to these demands. This also means that the contracts that Maya farmers have to ensure them a market are not firm contracts at all since their produce can easily be rejected at the packing plant with the vague explanation that it does not live up to quality standards. And the difference between a perfect broccoli grade and an inferior, unacceptable one is slim. Danis Romero, a government development specialist in Guatemala, reports that packing plants “reject about 15 percent of broccoli based on appearance. The color has to be green or blue-green, and if it’s yellow it will likely be discarded, even if the taste and quality are the same. If there are holes in the stem, they reject it. And it has to be completely compact, including the flower.”<sup>7</sup>

Obsessive cosmetic concerns do not mesh with Kaqchikel Maya farmers’ culinary standards. For them, wasting food is taboo (*xajan*), a cultural norm borne of necessity and instilled in children from an early age. They find it not only odd but immoral for packing plants to let produce rot just because the color is off or the stalks are out of shape. This local moral model intersects with the fluctuations in the marketplace in interesting ways. Farmers do not want to waste good food and yet they do not have a taste for the broccoli and other export crops they grow. One Tecpán farmer had a fair amount of leftover produce when we came to interview him in 2001. His wife prepared a Chinese-style stir-fry for us with the extra broccoli, snow peas, and French

beans. After we had eaten our fill for lunch, she packed up the rest (perhaps ten pounds worth) and insisted that we take it with us. At first we refused — it seemed untoward that we take such a large quantity of food from a family of such humble means — but they insisted. It was not just that they were trying to be generous but that, as they told us, the vegetables would just rot since they cannot bring themselves to eat broccoli or snow peas. Food tastes — not just how we view food but also how things taste, what we like, what we put together on the plate, what we want deep down in our guts — are deeply ingrained, socially produced desires that are hard to shake.

Maya export farmers often speak of the contradictions of producing a product that is more-or-less useless in their local world. It is not so much that exchange-value is elevated over use-value as that it is nothing more than an expedient means to higher profits. Rather, the imperative to move the product before it rots often means that profits are elusive. In this context, not being wasteful, even if it means taking a financial loss, can be an important source of moral and cultural capital for farmers.

To ensure cosmetic quality requires farmers to apply large quantities of fertilizers and pesticides to broccoli, resulting in the crops being much more labor intensive than subsistence agriculture (see Watts 1992; von Braun, Hotchkiss, and Immink 1989). Farmers are often unfamiliar with the recommended application regimes and safety procedures of the products they apply. Many are illiterate, and often the labels are only in English. They need to adopt forms of knowledge and discipline that were not necessary just years ago. They need to be aware of the dangers associated with chemical use, proper usage ratios, storage requirements, and possible outcomes — agonomic or human biological — associated with chemical usage. Although few studies have been conducted, farmers themselves believe a number of health problems can be traced to the chemical fertilizers and pesticides they apply. Farmers report that chemical fertilizer “burns” the soils, slowly depleting them of their nutrients and thus requiring ever-larger doses. David Carey (n.d.) reports that Kaqchikel farmers simultaneously value chemical fertilizers for the increase in productivity they provide and lament the long-term costs they are taking on their lands and their vulnerability to price increases. He notes that an increasing number of farmers in the area are returning to organic fertilizers.

Changing forms of agricultural production in the Guatemala Highlands reflect general trends in global food systems. Smallholder farming still pre-



dominates in this area, but contracting production is the new model. Food-processing corporations transcend the fray of risk and uncertainty by contracting supply along a transnational chain of intermediaries. This leads to a paradoxical convergence of intensive production techniques and reduced prices — a detrimental trend for small growers on the margins of the global economy that highlights the human, environmental, and economic costs of food and farm labor (Thompson and Wiggins 2002; see also Hughes and Reimer 2004). Global food systems are often justified through recourse to an uncomplicated conception of desire: consumers want good-looking food year-round at low prices. But desire is not neutral. Desires arise at the interface of cultural representations, social experience, and large-scale systems of production and distribution — processes that combine, at the supermarket, for example, to determine for shoppers what is — and what appears to be — available, desirable, and affordable.

### *The Grocery Store*

The fruits of alterity have acquired an immediate value even where the company of the people who harvested them is not itself desired.

— PAUL GILROY, *Against Race*

Supermarkets are important cultural spaces in the United States where consumptive desires meet the offerings of industrial alimentary capitalism and the two are reconciled through practice.<sup>8</sup> Supermarket shopping is one of the most widely shared quotidian experiences of adults in the United States, part of the daily rhythms of urban and small-town life for all but a very elite social stratum; the average American visits a supermarket about twice a week and spends half of his or her food budget there (Food Marketing Institute 2003).

Over several months in late 2002 and early 2003, we conducted surveys of 106 shoppers in a Nashville, Tennessee, Kroger supermarket to document their buying habits in general and their selection of produce in particular.<sup>9</sup> We followed up these surveys with ethnographic observation, interviews, and informal conversations with shoppers as they shopped for fruits and vegetables, as well as with conversations with produce manager and workers about marketing strategies and presentation.

While several national supermarket chains operate in Nashville, including

Harris Teeter and Albertson's, Kroger fills the local default category of "grocery store," blanketing the metropolitan area with its twenty-three stores. We focused on a Kroger in a busy commercial district of the Green Hills section of Nashville. For our purposes, though, we might as well have been in Cincinnati or Oklahoma City, since Kroger works hard to ensure standardization across its 2,300 stores nationwide. It is often precisely such mass production and uniformity that ironically produce feelings of familiarity among shoppers.

On average, U.S. produce purchased in the middle of the country has traveled over 1,500 miles to reach the shelves of the grocery store (see Pirog et al. 2001 on calculations of "food miles"). While the logistics are remarkable, our concern is with the social web that overlays this lengthy commodity chain: the hundreds or thousands of lives a given product has touched—the hopes, fears, and desires of men and women whose interconnectedness generally remains opaque.

The grocery store is a site of consumption and production. It does not simply respond to consumer demand but controls and produces demands that inform the broader agricultural market. Shoppers become certain kinds of consumer-subjects through specific consumptive acts, as even a single purchase plays a functional and productive role in broader discursive and economic formations. Here it is helpful to call on Crang's (1996, 63) view that "we consumers make all sorts of 'inhabitations' of commodity systems; and these ways of inhabiting result not in a simple alienation, a losing of our real selves under the pressures of various corporate and other institutional strategies and technologies . . . , but rather in a series of 'entanglements' of consumers and consumer systems, both being opened up to the other."

Shoppers enter Kroger with at least some vague expectation of what one can find there and of what one likes, expectations mediated by popular discourses on what is healthy, clean, a bargain, or good at this time of year, as well as by personal preference and the practical limitations of "making ends meet" (Lunt and Livingstone 1992, 89). In our surveys of Kroger shoppers, less than a third arrived with specific written itemizations. The rest brought only a mental or written tally of generalized "needs" (vegetables, meats, breads) that would be narrowed down to specific products in the course of shopping. While particular consumptive acts have the appearance of being spontaneous and willful, they are also conditioned by preexisting economic and political structures. Consumers enact a certain "vote," reiterating or per-

forming the various cultural meanings that congeal around objects of desire (Miller 1997). A discourse of “options” and “choices” underwrites this sense of “freedom”—*at least* there is a choice—thereby making the grocery store seem optimal relative to less “democratic” or “free market” situations. In this sense, hegemonic power is exercised through the very existence and proliferation of choices, which act as limit points.

Although the act of consumer choice is not the altogether subversive moment anthropologists often romanticize, it does provide at least a modicum of cultural agency and material realization of desires. After all, the supermarket is a space in which consumer interests are ostensibly met, albeit through an apologetic “at least” stance toward the activity. This is seen in strategic trade-offs. One shopper showed us her cart, with a few gourmet-style frozen dinners, explaining that she dislikes buying such processed foods but is too busy to cook, and *at least* she buys healthy food, like her chicken and broccoli dinner.

In the produce section, shoppers are required to select fruits and vegetables directly from display bins. The determination of “quality” generally depends upon appearance, focusing on freshness, ripeness, color, texture, and consistency. Broccoli must be dark green as well as seductive in its size and buoyancy, buds flowering out and around the stalk like a mushroom cloud. Tungsten lights enhance the aesthetics, making the produce section an enticing palate of colors, with vivid orange carrots lying alongside deep green broccoli and exotic mushrooms and lettuces (cf. Freidberg 2004 on vegetable aesthetics in England and France). Kroger uses misters to sprinkle cool water drops on the fresh produce, a strategy that aims not only to increase shelf life but to forge a symbolic linkage between customers and the farms from which the vegetables come.<sup>10</sup> Cook and Crang (1996) point to the “double commodity fetish” of foodstuffs: an ignorance of the origin and conditions of production of the desired items combined with geographical and commodity “lore” about these origins (see also Cook 1994, Guthman 2003). Such lore, evident in shopping and over dinner-table conversations, operates by channeling consumer desires, not through overt coercion but by inspiring the consumer’s imagination to want a certain product or self-image.

U.S. consumers happily, if also hesitantly, participate in global processes from the safety of their favorite supermarkets. And yet they often also lament or want to remedy the very site of the exploitative labor that makes that safety and that consumption possible (cf. Crang 1996, Moberg 2005).