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POWER

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GLORIA DEL FOGÓN

A conversation with the Venezuelan chef about power dynamics, identity and loving what you cook.

I know you from a lot of different projects. The first time I met you, you were working at Yedra as a replacement in the kitchen and you shared this really incredible arepa with me. Then I saw your art installation about arepas and hunger and your pop-up Trashumantes. How do you find the balance as a person who creates their own projects and works in restaurants at the same time?

I always had wild ideas that I wanted to create independently. But there was also a moment where I wanted to find some work references. Truthfully it is really hard to find work. In my experience, it was always a lot of ‘Who have you worked with? Who are your references?’ My plan was always to seek out mentors but I was quickly put off by the disgusting culture that I found in the kitchen. This violence which is not just chauvinistic but structural. The hierarchy itself that guides gastronomy is very violent. I come from a country that is very machista. Argentina has a different machismo but then with the xenophobia on top of that [sic] it was very difficult for me. Creativity isn’t always well received in a lot of kitchens. You can’t just show up and be like ‘hey I have an idea for this plate.’ They look at you like ‘who is this person to have ideas?’ I got really sick of that. Actually I was more tired of that than the machismo. That sanitization of free thought in the kitchen in favor of a military structure. I just stopped looking. I ended up finding a job as a private chef for a very important politician and businessman. I was a recluse for like three years.

I’ve felt that lack of creativity or hierarchy in kitchens where I was supposedly invited to collaborate. I have a hard time imagining you working for a politician.

They gave me the possibility to work with the best ingredients [sic] everything I wanted and a really beautiful garden. But it was really boring to cook. Lots of steak and mashed potatoes and hold the salt. I did have some space to experiment when people came over to eat. The mayor of the city, the entire cabinet of Cambiemos [Editor’s note: Conservative political party Cambiemos has been in power in the city of Buenos Aires since 2007 and its leader, Mauricio Macri, served a single term as President]. Power amongst power. I was there when they had recently risen to power and they were in their grand splendor. Political people make my hair stand on end. It is really hard to see them up close and listen to them talk about their miserable lives and see the bubble they live in. One day the President came for dinner. I was really conflicted because I was cooking for a President regardless of who it was. I served a drink called ‘Venezuela Libre’ and explained the drink with my usual poetry [sic] the way that I love to talk about food and the President turned around and asked me to repeat myself. Everyone was a little tipsy and so I said, ‘Thank you for being in favor of Venezuela’s freedom,’ because at the time they were all talking about the ‘freedom of Venezuela and human rights’, and he said to me, ‘Yes, we are going to keep fighting’ and raised his glass and everyone cheered for a free Venezuela. I went back into the kitchen and cried. It felt like this disgusting pantomime of human cruelty and political hypocrisy. Not that long after I was let go for being too young and rebellious. I was thrilled to leave.

From there did you go back to working in restaurants or did you start developing Trashumantes. What was it like returning?

One of my last jobs was as a replacement in a restaurant that was opening a second one and they offered me a position as head chef. When I arrived, I wasn’t really head chef because there were two other chefs above me that weren’t even working in the kitchen. So I would arrive and would find, I don’t



know, two bags of carrots in a kitchen that needed a few carrots for the whole menu. They were throwing food away, things were left to rot, everything was just [sic] whatever. It was a brand new restaurant and the executive chef had basically said he wasn't going to design the menu. So I made the menu for the opening, I created the recipes, I did all of the testing and that investigation. Later on I was getting ready to quit because it was just a totally unsustainable situation. But before I could my boss pulled me aside and said that he was going to let me go and since I was already halfway out the door, I didn't really care. He got really mad at my reaction. I think maybe he was expecting me to like 'oh my god but what happened?' He told me that I didn't have what it takes to be a boss and that I was an impossible person to work with. That I was really conflictive. And I told him, every single 'conflict' was because I was trying to minimize waste and create a better work space. Clearly it was a system that they were all very comfortable with and I came to shake things up, that's why I was hired I thought. I think that I took this power that he thought he had over me. **When I was the head chef and the authority figure in the kitchen was me, the problem and the way to insult me was always 'what is this immigrant woman doing here in this position?' It was then and there that I told myself that I needed to stop inserting myself into structures where I clearly wasn't meant to enter. If I'm round, why am I trying to push myself into a square peg?** I thought, stop.

So you threw yourself into the pop-up.

We have been cooking for two years in the kitchens that will open their doors to us. It has been very difficult to get our foot in the door because we weren't backed by a big Instagram following. That stuff has a lot to do with it. With an independent project, it's really hard for people to say 'yeah sure I'll pay \$1500 pesos for a meal' and let me make the best fucking meal I can. I started seeing this line between knowing that what I was doing was interesting and had value and learning to let go of this need for validation. That constant search of like 'please validate what I'm doing' makes no sense.

I feel that a lot. You know it wasn't easy for MASA either. I spent a lot of time feeling really down about myself. You sort of think, what am I doing wrong? I waited for a long time to be validated by the people who could've given me that boost and they never came. Press, people with a lot of influence in the restaurant world, people I had supported too.

We did this tasting menu pop-up once and filled up the place. I had been talking to this journalist and I sent her the menu and she responded to me, 'wow what a great menu' and started telling me that it was so different from other things she was seeing, really nice things. I sent her the menu so she would reserve a spot and she responded, 'yeah, I will do a write up in the newspaper'. And then when I sent her the link to pay she left me on read. I thought to myself, no one ever says to me, give me free food and I'll give you good press, but that is exactly what they are saying to you and in a way that is just so gross. Later I wrote back and told her that we would love to invite her but this is an independent project, there are two of us, and if we gave her and obviously a plus one free seats that it would have too much of an effect on our profit. She just kept leaving me on read and didn't speak to me again for months.

I really worry with food journalism here being perceived as inconsequential because it allows that practice of I'll cover this if you invite me. There are a lot of people who work like that exclusively whether it is their decision, the policy of the place they work or a combination of both. Whatever it is. Journalism has a really important role and a responsibility within a society to inform. When I realized that was how journalism worked here, I really started seeing the development of restaurants in Buenos Aires very differently, and it was suddenly really clear that that development was really imbalanced. Here you really see this concentration of restaurant culture in the north part of the city and that is where all the coverage is, and it really isn't coincidental. So it's this game and who has the privilege to participate. Whoever has more resources gets ahead faster. And that transforms this whole thing into a very classist exercise. Projects that are run by other people in

other circumstances or from other neighborhoods [sic] people who are doing everything themselves are left behind or they never get off the ground. Obviously, the media isn't the only thing at fault, obviously there are a lot of socioeconomic factors and also those ugly realities you experienced in the kitchen, but visibility and the right to access visibility is incredibly important. Visibility can create or accelerate a lot of other opportunities. I know a lot of very talented cooks who had projects that I considered to be really innovative and they failed or they left the kitchen or they moved away because it was too difficult to establish themselves and I really think that Buenos Aires gastronomy falls further and further behind everytime that happens. In a lot of cases, lack of visibility and not having the attention of the people with the power to visibilize was there. And as a journalist who is also a cook, I refuse to work like that. So, I really ask myself as a food journalist, if everyone were anonymous and had a budget, if all this was more ethical and based on real journalism, imagine how different the restaurant scene would be.

It's abusive. But I had to accept that reality. I learned to put my energy somewhere else and I know that someday it's going to come. I think that when the people really begin to validate us that journalist is going to come back to throw me a bone like nothing happened. But that is all part of learning that this path is intrinsically violent. It isn't just machismo it is the hierarchy inherent in everything. That's the way it is.

I want to go back to something you said about learning to stop insisting and follow your conviction. Work and work and hope to see the fruit of that. Trashumantes is doing really well and has grown during the pandemic.

When the lockdown hit, we started making pasteles [editor's note: a pastel is a Venezuelan version of something like a dumpling, empanada, pierogi] and in one weekend we sold 400. We realized that people were waiting for us. All of these people who had come to pop ups or seen us at a fair were waiting for us to do something. That was this moment of clarity of understanding that all of that work we had done, all that fight, struggling to get people to get to know us, that all had a final result. It was a



big contrast to everything, the pandemic and everything else. Right now we are working with a lot of regular clients who ask us to fill up their fridge for the week and they trust us and give us complete freedom to do whatever we want.

How would you describe Trashumantes' food?

With my partner Damian [sic] we always wanted to pay a lot of attention to the aesthetic. The aesthetic of the project itself. Lots of things. At first when we started making pasteles, I kind of felt like I was taking a step backwards. But there is a reason why I am making Andean food. There is a reason why the pastel called me. It is part of my origins. I understood that in moments of uncertainty the only thing that was going to save me was to build a foundation and build it strong. That foundation was identity. I really understood that you have to truly love what you are cooking. I make pasteles because they remind me of all the mornings that I was happy in my country, in a country that doesn't exist anymore, in a reality that doesn't exist anymore. We don't have the privilege of standing on the corner and eating a pastel. That urban culture of eating a pastel at four o'clock in the morning on your way back home, that is gone. So this is about saving something. This is about a need to rescue these recipes. The relationship we have formed with our clients, that are usually friends of friends of friends, it's an emotional bond. There are people who I have no idea who they are and they write to us. The other day this woman sent me an audio crying because she ate our food and she felt like she was in her old home.

What do you think will happen to Trashumantes after Covid?

I was working at a place called Fogón and one day this German couple came in and kind of went wild over me. It was a really challenging service because it was a tasting menu for tourists and so I had to explain everything in English while running the grill and helping clear dishes and washing cups in the sink and making sure everyone had wine. It was like that every single night and I just had it down. They started talking to me and were asking me questions that were a little more philosophical. We talked about nostalgia. Our emotions. It turns out he was a restaurateur. He gave me his card, we got together a few days later and he offered me a job as head chef for a minimum of five years. I told him that I wasn't going to separate from my partner Damian, so they interviewed him and offered him a job on the spot too. He treated me in a way that I had never been treated before. He treated me like a chef [sic] with respect. It was the complete opposite of all of the things that had happened to me before, being treated like I should be grateful to even be hired, that someone is doing a favor paying me. I just couldn't believe it. How crazy! How far do we push ourselves and our conception of how miserable a job should be? For me it had been pushed so far that I couldn't believe what this man was offering me. We were meant to go visit the restaurant in March but obviously that didn't happen. The offer is still on the table and as soon as we can get out of here we are going.

In the meantime, you have another parallel project in development. Tell me about that.

Food has the power to dignify or humiliate humans. It isn't the same thing to give someone a piece of leftover bread and some noodles and give that person a meal made for them. There is nothing better or worse about either, it is food and it is appreciated. But I always wanted to make food that dignified people, especially people who find themselves living in the street, people who are really far from what a human should feel like. I am working on a solidarity project with Juan from Centinela de la Luna [sic] I love his bread, I love him. We met each other through you actually. We want to use his hamburger buns and make lentil burgers to give to people and I would love to be able to make soup and sell them at half price for the people working for those delivery apps who are mostly Venezuelan men. My philosophy as a cook is that food has an energetic and emotional power. I think that when you cook with intention, that energy is passed to the person eating it. Literally. I am not talking about magic or the joy of eating a piece of chocolate. I mean my energy passed to them. We are cooking for the return.





THE WOMEN OF BANCO ROJO

The story of a group of women worker's who banded together to demand equality.

“I have to be really sincere, I laughed my ass off. I couldn’t help myself. Like, huh? Where am I? Am I at work or middle school? This is the best insult you could think of? That’s someone’s job! It’s like yelling ‘repairman!’, you know? ‘Doctor!’ Ooohhhh ok, I’m supposed to be offended by this? It’s so basic. I just imagine this little kid,” begins Maria Antonieta Brignardello before lowering her voice several octaves, folding her hands into her chest and yelling between pouty lips, “I’m so mad! I’ll show these dumb whores.”

This was back in mid-May, two months into Argentina’s continued Corona lockdown inside a once busy restaurant that felt like a ghost of itself. The word “**putas**”, or whores, had been written out, letter by letter, on pieces of paper tape that were stickered onto the women’s restroom door. At first, the tight knit women thought that it was a weird joke from another, a failed punchline that was the delirious fruit of a world falling to pieces. When none of the women fessed up, the fingers pointed to the male staff and it quickly became very unfunny. In the three and a half years that El Banco Rojo had been opened, nothing close to this had ever happened before and especially not aimed directly at all the women.

“We were all really bothered. This is the place that we work and spend most of our time, we see one another more than our families,” cook Carla Bertolo recalls, “The thing is, there hasn’t ever really been a staff rotation and so it was really shocking. That nuance sort of made everything blow up.”



In Buenos Aires, it is difficult to pinpoint how many women work in restaurants and even harder to determine exactly how many work in positions of power within those restaurants. According to an exhaustive 2018 global analysis conducted by Our World in Data, an estimated 92% of Argentine working women hold jobs in service industries compared to 65% of their male counterparts. According to numbers released in 2017 by the Argentine Ministry of Labor, within the hotel and restaurant industry, women made up 72% of that workforce. It is unclear, however, if numbers from either study exclusively contemplate formal employment or if it considers the 32% of estimated precarious workers in that same industry. Regardless, the number of women working in restaurants is disproportionately high compared to the managerial positions they occupy.

Laura Marajofsky, journalist and founder of Mapa de Barmaids, a project that offers free legal consultations and runs anti-gender based violence campaigns and training to the restaurant industry, confirmed that there is no way to calculate the number of women workers or bosses. She explained that in her five years of working around themes of gender discrimination and violence in gastronomy, she has yet to find a comprehensive study: “You aren’t going to find any data. There is very little research about themes related to gender and gastronomy in Argentina, and, as we all know, the sector is profoundly precarious and informalized.”

Low percentages of positions of power and the imbalanced socioeconomic structures they reflect within patriarchal social frameworks, at least, is what international numbers would illustrate. It starts with lack of opportunity, in the United States, just 7% of executive chefs identify as women, and in the corporate fast food world, women across races are 21% (and Black women specifically are 60%) less likely to be promoted to shift managers despite being hired into entry level positions at the same rate as their male co-workers. It is strengthened by lack of ownership, if we pull back the gaze further into farming according to the United Nations, 60% of the world’s food is produced by women farmers while only 8% of the land is owned by women proprietors. And it is manifested with physical and emotional abuse. In Argentina, according to 250 women and dissidents polled by Mapa de Barmaids, 40% of respondents felt uncomfortable at work, 30% were victims of physical abuse in the workplace, 65% felt like they had been passed over opportunities because of their gender identity and 41% felt like the opportunities weren’t there for them to begin with.

Not surprisingly, the imbalance of domestic cooking has the inverse relationship. The same study by Our World In Data discovered that women in Argentina perform 3 times more domestic work than their

male partners, although it doesn't specify exactly how that breaks down into grocery shopping, meal planning, cooking and cleanup. Although specific data could not be found about the number of women working with the nation's most stigmatized populations in soup kitchens or school cafeterias, official language frequently describes head cooks with the feminine pronoun 'cocinera'. No matter what point you stop on the food supply chain, from the land where food is grown to the kitchen where it turns into the final plate, women hold much less power capital within the privileged restaurant and bar spaces at the top of the culinary hierarchy and receive significant more mistreatment across the entire pyramid.

From the outside looking in, El Banco Rojo seemed like a restaurant that was actively running against that current—more intune to wider conversations and action against discrimination and violence related to gender identity growing in Argentina and across South America and the world.

The story of the restaurant begins a few blocks north. More than a decade prior, La Puerta Roja opened on a second story walk up in the unfriendly restaurant neighborhood of San Telmo, years before a slow burning gentrification would begin to swallow up the neighborhood. Pre-dating a new wave of bar and dining culture in the city, the bar quickly became a mixed bag of backpackers, San Telmo locals, the after-office crowd and off-duty cooks and bartenders. It was a sort of all-things-go kind of place in the middle of no-man's land. The music was loud, the bar and kitchen stayed open much later than the norm and the room progressively filled with chain smoke as a generous happy hour and potent shots pushed far into the night. By the 5am closing, it was wise to grip onto the handle rail as you went down the steep marble staircase.

A few years later, they expanded to El Banquito Rojo. The miniscule take-out spot sold cheap tacos, burgers and falafel and very quickly became too small for its legions of fans. In mid-2016, in the middle of a sustained high note in the Argentine economy, El Banquito Rojo became El Banco Rojo, moving to a significantly bigger location a block away. Dinner rushes meant a line wrapped out the door and into the street for hours on end. A bigger spot meant more cooks, cashiers and food runners and a restaurant group with nearly double the personnel almost overnight.

The line between kitchen staff and servers was fairly evenly divided between genders, according to the women. At the restaurant's opening, the front-of-house was mostly staffed by women whereas the downstairs kitchen, upstairs grill and management were occupied by men. A sense of camaraderie amongst the female staff began to develop and much of that was due to strong friendships being developed outside of the workplace.

Bertolo, who started at the restaurant's opening as a runner before moving around to register, bar, prep and finally hot dishes, explains, "My first job in food was when I was 16 years old at McDonalds. This was a very different place. It was a small business and everything was just friendlier. The contact with the people was much more kind, and just being able to have this direct contact with the owners. I thought that Lenny was one of my co-workers when I met him, it wasn't until a few days into the job that I realized he was an owner. That was completely different for me. Slowly the girls started to build this really interesting relationship. Didactic. Football really helped. It was this tool that we used to build sorority that carried over into work. We started playing together, started competing, we were good fortunately, and we really started relating to each other differently, outside of a work relationship. I think we all really began to empathize with each other much more."

Over the course of roughly three years, the segregation between female servers and male cooks began to dissolve. By 2018, the space possessed a more noticeable feeling of feminist energy. The grill and fryer behind the long white counter started to be occupied by men and women and the cash register,

too. A chalkboard placed prominently in the middle of the room read "Logis Machistas Go Home", or Idiot Machista Go Home, a nod to the old anti-neoliberal phrase, Yankee Go Home, and a thriving feminist movement. In 2018, the shop closed for three hours so that the staff could attend 8M and the massive marches that took place under the Ni Una Menos movement, one of the largest grassroots pro-choice and anti-femicide movements in the world. The following year, the women staff joined the national strike. They refused to work, demanded that the men cover their shifts and returned from the nearby march to be served and fed drinks by all the men.

Sara Ahmed writes in her book *Living a Feminist Life* that "feminism often begins with intensity", a series of sensations and experiences that stimulate guttural reactions and shape knowledge formation, world view and the foundations for radicalism through recognition of individual circumstances as they relate to the world around us. **This was the case of working in El Banco Rojo for many of the female and non-cis gendered staff, where working conditions and opportunity across all areas of the restaurant were consistently being improved but were frequently clouded by repeated episodes and microaggressions steeped in sexism and machismo.**

Aldrhy Fernandez emigrated to Argentina from Venezuela in 2017 and applied for jobs in restaurants after she was unable to find employment in Public Relations to match her Bachelor's degree. She quickly joined the staff at Banco Rojo as a runner and explains her shift from serving to cooking:

"The dynamic of the restaurant over the last few years started adapting and a lot of that was focused on the needs of the kitchen. That was always an area where the boys worked. We had the opportunity to break that concept. A lot of the girls who started as runners or at the register began working service on the grill or the fryer or doing prep downstairs. None of us could have imagined that. Three years ago, I couldn't make you a pot of rice but now I have a ton of new knowledge and abilities that I developed here in this kitchen. The great thing about this kitchen is there is a lot of space to learn and create. Lenny created this space to listen to new ideas about how to run the kitchen or create new or better food, and he genuinely took our ideas into consideration."

As the women began occupying more space inside the kitchen, Fernandez explains a strange dichotomy of increasingly egalitarian work roles that were constantly interrupted by a traditional restaurant construct that looks the other way to abuse from colleagues: "There were repeated instances of machismo and disrespect, they kept building one on top of another, and we were getting sick of it."

PUTAS was at the end of a very long list of grievances and caused new ones too. When no one would take responsibility for the assault, the owners initial reaction was to threaten to delay pay until someone came forward.

"I thought, 'What is this recess?' Am I being sent to timeout? Pay me my money or I'm going to burn this place down. We were being punished twice. First you call me a 'whore' and then a 'poor whore' because I'm not getting the money I earned." Brignardello continued, "If they wanted to know who did it, I told them that they needed to go one by one and ask every single employee: how do they feel here? What do they like? What do they not like? But then a lot of other things were going to come out that they didn't want to hear which is why it didn't ever happen in the first place."

For nearly three weeks, Whatsapp messages flung back and forth. Towards the bosses to lift the pay delay and then to one another to talk about the sexist jokes that happened in passing, horsing around that made some feel uncomfortable and other chauvinist microaggressions that had all become normalized. That conversation morphed into general attacks normalized as part of the industry, whispers and looks that went beyond gender and reflected larger power structures, poor management decisions and feelings of being undervalued and overworked. There wasn't a monolith to the reaction



either. Some of the women wanted to exclusively talk out the writing on the wall while others saw this as an opportunity to tear the whole wall down.

“I personally didn’t give a shit about the sign. It took so much to get this meeting I wasn’t going to get stuck talking about a sign. I cared that I wasn’t being paid. I was moving. I was in a total financial crisis. I was late on rent and had a loan to pay on the lease. I was taking care of my father who lost work and didn’t have a cent. I had no idea what to do and there weren’t any answers. Everything all at the same time,” Brignardello explains, “Some of the girls got together the day before and we organized all of our ideas. We decided to try to take out the emotion and lay out different issues. The next day there was a meeting between the owners and the women. We sat them down and let them know that this was not a meeting about listening, we were tired of being listened to, this was a meeting for them to tell us what they were going to do.”

Lenny Lennon and Greg Harvey sat quietly during the meeting and admitted that they had no set plan and wanted help from the women to move forward. The women laid out their bullet points and left the meeting with a mix of hopefulness and uncertainty.

“We had received occasional complaints and comments about the discomfort that existed here but we weren’t dealing with it the best way we could have,” explains Lennon, “Ultimately we did not have a gender perspective to understand the seriousness of what they were telling us or give it the attention that it deserved. That really is weighing on us and sadly this situation had to happen to accelerate a growth process that we wish would’ve happened before.”

Two days later the three main bullet points were addressed. Their checks were deposited, a long-time manager resigned and a specialist in gender training was scheduled to lead two day’s worth of workshops.

Ahmed continues to point out that society forces victims of mistreatment into circular processes of abuse, first as victims and then as their own attorneys. She points out that activism and ‘radical’ thinking is a sensible reaction to injustice, but that feminism and social justice often means that those which are subject to oppression are forced to constantly recount, convince others and defend themselves against “experiences that they wish they could simply forget.”

Mariela Alvarez is a teacher specialized in gender violence that runs ‘conscious building’ workshops for small businesses. She confirmed that her experiences intervening in workspaces aligned with Ahmed’s hypothesis. When asked whether most of her clients were taking preventative or reactionary stances or if she saw differences across otherwise ‘progressive’ businesses, she explains, “I would love to tell you that this happens regularly and independent of a conflict but pretty much every time it is the result of one. Someone who has experienced physical violence or some other unwelcome behavior. These are a lot of microaggressions or micro-violences, and they often are invisibilized because they don’t generate a big conflict. Or maybe someone doesn’t make a comment because they are afraid of being fired or demoted. Usually that means that everything explodes when you are least expecting it. In this case, it was a situation which forced the women to all talk to one another in a really deep way that they never had before.”

Alvarez gave a series of workshops spread over a few days in mid-June. Nearly the entire team—workers and bosses alike—sat down to talk it all out. Women revealed discomforts that they had long held on to, men opened up about their own experiences with violence and silence. What began to develop was a collective consciousness, which Fernandez described as “an intimate space where this bond started to form that made it a lot easier to talk about our lives and how we felt at work.”

The workshop, the exit of a toxic manager and additional efforts like hiring an independent human resources manager and establishing a protocol to field complaints very quickly created, for everyone I spoke with, a completely different atmosphere and renewed relationships with work and colleagues. Everyone recognizes that they are still pushing the boulder to the top of the hill and this is just a little more muscle to make that advance a little less painful.

“I never imagined that what we were prepared to do would carry so much weight. I swear I am so surprised. Banco Rojo is led by women right now. Not served by. Led by. And it is a pleasure to be here. The people making decisions and who are closest to the bosses are the women because they realized that with the guys nothing was working [sic] unfortunately,” Brignardello finishes. “But everything has a bittersweet taste to it. This is the calm after the storm. Now we have human resources, now there is a protocol to make complaints, to talk about how we feel and what hurts us and a new poster on the door that explains what to do if we suffer violence. And I love that sign. It’s beautiful. But look at all the shit we went through to get it. There is a lot of pain behind that. The toxic behavior existed because it was permitted. Because this place was being run by the rules from before. And they had to change. Because we didn’t give them another choice. Because this was stronger and now it is history. What we are leaving behind for the ones who follow. These are the new rules.”





MEDITATIONS ON DESTRUCTION



“Without technology, man would not exist nor would he have ever existed,” writes philosopher José Ortega y Gasset in his 1939 essay, *Meditation on Technology*. When he talks about technology, he is referring not just to gadgets and machinery but to humanity’s need to create and constantly create as a means of both proving our own existence and separating it from that of other life forms. The first time that I read this was in university for a French Film & Philosophy class to analyze the modern dystopias of films like *Weekend*, *La Jetee* and *Playtime*. At the time, I related Ortega y Gasset’s ideas as supremely apocalyptic—the ironic destruction of mankind through the constant creation of stuff.

I have been thinking a lot about that essay lately within a completely different frame, as I construct this very project; creation and creative expression as a means of proving to myself, and maybe others too, that I still exist.

This concept, in practice, isn’t entirely new for me. It just wasn’t so glaring until the pandemic hit and I, like most of the world, retreated into a mostly sedentary life inside. In March, I lost all of my sources of income and was immediately and unwillingly separated from my lifeline: independent DIY projects. Dedicating my energy to pop-ups, menu consulting, writing about restaurants and building an alternative food travel company were suddenly all obsolete. They felt like memories from another life or visions of an unknown future. I skipped from one way of saturating my mind to another. In April, I threw myself into cooking and started quarantine with elaborate meal calendars and grocery lists. By May, I was ready to set my kitchen on fire and spent the month reading more than half a dozen different novels from my neglected bookshelf. By June I was exhausted. Exhausted from sporadic employment. Exhausted of feeling stuck inside a void. Exhausted from picking fights with my wife. Exhausted from feeling stuck in a perpetual loop. Exhausted from the news. And so I took that exhaustion and created this fanzine.

Because creation and construction is such a nutritive part of my life, it often has the power to obscure the ‘why’ behind creating and constructing this project or another. Construction is also a form of destruction. All physical masses are made up of matter, physical and chemical properties made up of atoms which grow and change and evolve. What doesn’t change is the mass of that matter. The physical world changes and also remains the same. We do that too, not only in our physicality but in our emotions and our mentality. Growing into one direction simply means growing away from another but never fully separating from it.

Yesterday my therapist told me that I am a chutney pretending to be a jam. That I project to the world and to myself that I am sweet when really I am sweet and bitter and spicy and sour. We are all chutney. If it weren’t for the bitterness and spice and sour, our sweetness wouldn’t taste the same.

Maria Antonieta Brignardello said something really interesting during our interviews about El Banco Rojo and the new anti-gender violence sign on the bathroom door. “I love that sign. It’s beautiful. But look at all the shit we went through to get it. There is a lot of pain behind that.” In a perfect world, that pain would not have ever existed but here we are. In the reconstruction of the world that we do want, that pain is important to hold on to. It is important to recognize it, less so for the ones who suffered it and much more so for the ones who caused it, because no matter what, that pain will never cease to exist.

I think back to moments of self-realization in my life of specific actions or words or attitudes contributed to someone else’s pain. Almost a year ago exactly, I was sitting down with my friend Tomillo for a goodbye lunch before they set off for Spain. After digging through a pile of bright red kam-lu wantan, we crossed the plaza and had a long conversation about the difficulty of nurturing an independent project from scratch, to which I talked with a mixture of braggadocious and complaint. I told a story of building myself up in a city where I had arrived with no support network and all of the things I was able

to accomplish anyway. Their eyes glazed over and they said to me, Sure you work hard but you have a lot of privilege working for you too. I remember feeling immediately and profoundly embarrassed. I had been retelling my narrative as a story of pure merit, confusing moments of personal hardship, which each and all of us face, as if they cancelled out the role of pure luck of being born in this body in front of this society, which not everyone has. My story, split in half, could only exist within a telling of it that denied half of Tomillo's. Since then, I have tried with enormous effort to destroy the last vestiges of that old perspective and construct a new self. It is important that those sensations of discomfort and embarrassment and shame stay with me, that I don't erase them from me but instead that I use them as tools not just to rebuild but to not return to an old construction of myself.

We often fall into the same trap of believing that we are building with entirely new nails and planks rather than the old ones straightened out and repainted. We may change shape but our mass is always the same. It is much easier, and in many cases a privilege, to wipe ourselves clean of embarrassment or shame once we have corrected the behavior, but denying its presence in the new construct is to invite it to come back in. Leaning into that destruction, questioning it constantly, acknowledging that it is still there, building and constantly building from it, hanging it on the bathroom door, all that will create a more powerful structure.



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10% of the July subscriptions will be donated to Trashumantes and Centinela de la Luna to purchase supplies for their first solidarity initiative to cook meals for people living in the streets of Buenos Aires.