

# Conclusion

## *Break and Revolution*

*There is no resistance without tears,  
but neither is there resistance without laughter.  
If there is no laughter  
there is no possibility of resistance.*

RICARDO FALLA, AUGUST 4, 2021, CITED IN TATIANA  
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I did not travel to Guatemala in 2020 or 2021 as the coronavirus pandemic swept through the country, devastating medical and public health infrastructures.<sup>1</sup> When I returned in the summer of 2022, Julia, who has worked with maternal health projects in San Juan Ostuncalco since I first met her in 2008, told me I should have come sooner. She would have invited me to her Casa Alegria (House of Joy), which she had hosted for women from San Juan a few weeks before my visit. The pandemic prevented women's circles from meeting face-to-face, but at the height of it all, when people were isolated in their homes, women in San Juan had used phones to send each other voice messages. As the daily case count began to drop and people were again permitted to be together, Julia decided to invite roughly one hundred women to the outdoor event to sing and feel comradeship in one another's company. The gathering that she described, with its celebration and reverie, had a clear evangelical resonance. But Julia explained that the purpose was to gather strength in community and not in the power of God.

Her family had survived. The cemetery was pushing up against its capacity, the pandemic taking its toll on her community. The months of isolation had been challenging, but she also said that the hardship had caused her to shift her priorities to ask for less. This narrative surprised me—Julia had so few material possessions as it was—but she said she had found happiness in her garden, becoming more connected to her plants and food than she had been in the preceding years. Indeed, the garden plots around her house were exploding with abundant produce, and



FIGURE 24. A community health leader walks in her garden, which flourished during the COVID-19 quarantine. Photo by author, 2022.

her family's plot of maize and beans on the other side of the valley had served them well, lifting her through the fear and mourning while also providing her family with good food.

Another silver lining of the pandemic that Julia pointed out was that her daughters did not have to spend their days at school. At the time of my visit, her youngest daughter was being punished by a strict primary school teacher who used corporal punishment to keep the class in line. The eight-year-old would return home with bruises, begging her mother to not send her back. Her older daughter, now thirteen, was also withering under the school's discipline. Julia was not against education, but she saw how their school literally and figuratively crushed her daughters and knew they deserved far better schooling than they were getting. International organizations working in San Juan Ostuncalco had spent so much energy talking about the need to help babies to achieve their potential through good nutrition. They were largely indifferent to how children the age of Julia's daughters were required to spend their days in austere classrooms with angry and sometimes violent teachers.

Rosario García Meza and I also visited Juana, the midwife whose grandson had left for the United States in the middle of the night, who lived in a San Juan

community near Julia. Juana's house was now unrecognizable to me. A three-story block house still under construction, it covered a large space of land that had served as a key site of USAID's development projects three years before. No longer was there a goat pen where urine was recycled into an organic insecticide, or a pepper garden built from recycled tires, or a chicken coop, or a greenhouse lovingly covered in empty burlap USAID supplement bags that would help to keep the thin tendrils of growing tomato vines from freezing. The hand-painted signs nailed along the path to guide neighbors on a tour of organic gardening had been taken down. The dreams of the future of sustainable development they had promised were gone, replaced instead by a towering half-built structure of cement.

With Julia's comments about finding joy in gardening still fresh in my mind, the disappearance of animals and produce on Juana's land struck me as devastating. Still, I understood. In 2021, relentless rain in another part of Guatemala had soaked into the mountains, causing landslides that buried entire communities. The earthen *barro* adobe-style houses traditional to the region are surely more sustainable than the cement block homes from the perspective of the resources required to build them, but they are hardly sustainable when considering the increasingly erratic rain. Given how rising global temperatures are saturating soils, houses made of mud and earth are not as safe—or sustainable—as they once were. The cement houses that are replacing them are, perhaps, a predictable outcome of sustainable development projects run by NGOs and USAID, which were always going to eventually leave families fending for themselves. Journalists were reporting that migrants, primarily to the US, had sent roughly \$18 billion home to Guatemala that year (@palabrasdeabajo 2022), most of which was spent on food, clothing, shelter, health care, and other basic services to help families in rural communities survive (Ortiz 2022). When it came to “financing for development,” most funds were coming from remittances, not from development aid, NGOs, or governmental support.

Juana told me that one of her neighbors had returned from a failed attempt to reach the United States and was not doing well. The neighbor had served as a health vigilante in 2008–9 and then as a promotora during Pérez Molina and Baldetti's Window of 1,000 Days initiative from 2012 to 2015. She had distributed supplements to other women, following the USAID model of maternal health even while her own family had been falling apart. All her children but one daughter had migrated to the US, and although her husband, still in Guatemala, had forbidden her to follow them, she attempted the journey anyway. The story told to me around a cup of warm atole in Juana's courtyard was that the woman was caught while attempting to cross into the US and deported, losing both the opportunity to see her children and the \$10,000 she had “stolen” from her family to make the trip.

I asked about her whereabouts now, worried about what happens to women who travel without permission from their husbands when they are caught and deported. Juana gestured toward the family's property up the hill, warning me that

the woman had not been seen for days and never left her house. The woman and I had exchanged a few text messages throughout the pandemic, although eventually her number stopped working, and I could see it was no longer hers. In the last message she sent, a few months earlier, she included no text but instead a single photograph of herself. In it, she is standing in her garden in handwoven Indigenous clothing, her hands in her pockets looking directly at the camera with an expression that was neither happy nor sad. Looking back, it must have been shortly before she left.

When our visit with Juana had concluded and we began to walk back toward Rosario's car, a teenage girl whom I recognized as the recently deported woman's daughter came running after me. "Can you help me get a visa to the United States?" the daughter asked expectantly. I explained I didn't have this kind of power, and she nodded and quickly turned away. As we walked in opposite directions, I wondered if she believed me and if I should have had a better answer for her.

Our last stop in San Juan that day was at the cemetery. A modest tombstone, painted green, had been laid for Victoria Méndez Carreto since my last visit. "We will guard your beautiful smile in our thoughts and you will live forever in our hearts," it read. The nearby grave of Claudia Gómez González was adorned with freshly cut flowers—the same yellow dahlias that had been there three years earlier as if they had survived all this time. Four kids who were playing together had seen me walking to Claudia's grave and followed me. As they looked at me looking at the tomb, I heard the oldest child say to the others, "I don't know why she got so much attention. People were dying before her, and they're still dying." This generation of San Juan children, all born to mothers targeted by the Window of 1,000 Days nutrition intervention, had their own critical window on the impact of American violence on their communities and lives.

On this same trip, I also met with a group of scholars who straddle the fields of anthropology and nutrition—Rosario García, Eileen Rivera, and Miguel Cuj—to discuss a symposium we had organized, along with Ted Fischer, Meghan Farley Webb, and Gabriela Montenegro, for the upcoming International Congress of Nutrition, to be held in Tokyo, Japan. The symposium was Dr. Solomons's idea. I had budgeted a collaborative workshop with scientists into my research grant, and he saw how presenting at Tokyo could help me meet this obligation while also providing the means for two of his center's scientists—Rosario García and Eileen Rivera—to attend the conference, a boon for their scholarship and careers. The \$3,500 fee to host the ninety-minute symposium at the conference (on top of participants' other registration and travel costs) seemed unfathomably expensive to me, although these costs are built into the funding structures of the European Research Council that supported my work. "Wouldn't this money surely be better spent in Guatemala?" I asked. But Dr. Solomons was a steadfast believer in international scholarly exchange, and he countered with the suggestion that I take a longer view: having a prominent panel so squarely focused on what anthropology

can offer to nutrition science would be especially useful there at the congress, in the belly of the beast.

When we met in Guatemala to discuss the symposium, our conversation was full of optimism about the possibilities of bringing the fields of anthropology and nutrition together. Rosario is a feminist mestizo Guatemalan with advanced training in social justice who teaches nutrition courses at one of Xela's most respected universities; Miguel is Kaqchikel-Maya with an undergraduate degree in nutrition from the San Carlos University in Guatemala City, whose PhD, from Vanderbilt, analyzes how K'iche' Maya women use food to help build their communities; Eileen is a mestizo Guatemalan researcher, also with a degree in nutrition from the San Carlos University in Guatemala City, who loves the part of ethnographic fieldwork where you learn from others why they do what they do. We saw clear benefit in centering Guatemalan sciences and scientists at this historically Euro-American-focused venue. We thought the added step of amplifying anthropological approaches would enable an important conversation about how and what the two disciplines of nutrition and anthropology might learn from each other. As both fields can be deeply feminist and deeply patriarchal, we could not just compare them, but we could also think about how to form new alliances and reorient our professional obligations and research.

Still, I was skeptical about whether the collaboration would result in meaningful change. Nutrition policy makers are frequently masters of the nonperformative, making reference to the importance of cultural diversity and local knowledge without any accompanying willingness to challenge the foundations of their field. "I like anthropology," I have heard from countless maternal health professionals who are disinterested in facing how racism and white supremacy are embedded in their own theories of knowledge. For them, anthropology is a field that romanticizes culture, not a field whose methodological introspection helps produce exacting and unsettling insight into the reproduction of privilege and power. I wanted to celebrate the inclusion of our panel on the program, but I also worried that this would do little more than check a box of "interdisciplinarity" in a way that would, as Sara Ahmed (2006) warns us in her theory on nonperformativity, prevent substantive change. Even before the pandemic, I had become concerned about the shortcomings of the mega-conference model: the carbon footprint, the unspoken expectations that someone else can handle care at home (and funding bodies that refuse to compensate for additional childcare costs), the speakers standing on podiums lecturing in a way that amplifies the style of colonial expertise, the inequity of access among disabled scholars or people unable to get visas to sponsor their travel, the sheer lack of creativity in format, and so on. After the pandemic, the literal and epistemic costs of large conferences seemed that they would never balance out.

And yet, in December 2022, when the nutrition conference was over, we all thought it had been worthwhile. We could be critical and also pragmatic. It didn't

have to be either/or but both/and, as Ted Fischer, with whom I organized the panel in Tokyo, was fond of saying. We could work on the outside and also from within.

On the stage in Tokyo, Miguel Cuj gave a powerful research acknowledgment in the K'iche' language, also raising the topics of informed consent and unethical extraction of knowledge from community members that had relevance for everyone at the conference. Rosario García and Eileen Rivera each presented about their efforts to incorporate nursing women's perspectives into research on breastfeeding. Gabriela Montenegro described how her nutrition research on vitamins had benefited from collaboration with the anthropologist Meghan Farley Webb, who was, in turn, able to stress the merits of long-term community engagement. We did not come close to filling the seven-hundred-person-capacity ballroom where we spoke, but the people who did attend asked thoughtful questions. A USAID employee shared that she had been working to advocate for local collaborations in her programs and wanted our feedback about her process. An Indigenous graduate student from a different field shared that she felt inspiration from seeing us there. An audience member commented that hearing the tensions between nutrition and anthropology spelled out explicitly was useful for understanding what has gone wrong in projects he had worked for in the past. Several people waited to meet with us afterward to share their appreciation for our presence at the conference.

At the panels I attended, I heard well-respected scientists questioning linear growth metrics for many of the same reasons that I critique them in this book, finding them stigmatizing and misdirected. Edward Frongillo, from the University of South Carolina, and Jef Leroy, from the International Food Policy Research Institute, presented research suggesting that the Window of 1,000 Days paradigm is far too narrow, with children “developing” long past the point that others have marked as a critical developmental window. Their analysis (2019) further indicated that although poor linear growth—also called stunting—may be *associated* with delayed childhood development, reduced human capital, and chronic disease, it was not a *cause* of these problems.

Frongillo and Leroy are among a growing group of scientists who have become vocally critical of stunting. The physical anthropologist Barry Bogin (2022), cited in chapter 2, had recently published a paper challenging the association of stunting and nutrient deficiency, instead linking linear growth failure to fear, violence, and toxic stress. He had worked with a group of twenty-seven other scientists to publish an article critiquing the WHO titled bluntly, “Stunting is not a synonym of malnutrition.” Published in the prestigious *European Journal of Clinical Nutrition*, the article demonstrated there was no correlation between nutritional status and height (Scheffler et al. 2020). Building on this work, several scientists in Tokyo were calling on the field of public health nutrition to stop using stunting as a proxy for undernutrition, which, they suggested, led to “blurred thinking” and damaging actions (Fongillo and LeRoy 2019).



In addition to questioning the historical focus on maternal undernutrition, others were questioning the way the WHO assesses child development. I came across a movement to develop a multidimensional index of child growth advocated by global health scholars such as Hinke Haisma and Sridhar Venkatapuram, who were trying to bring a health justice perspective to the conversation about children's growth. Reflecting on her decades-long collaboration with microbiologists, the anthropologist Amber Benezra (2023, 207) writes that she didn't anticipate "that a new generation of scientists would ask more of their disciplines and transform them in kind." I likewise found that even while my own field, anthropology, could add valuable critique, nutrition scientists were themselves demanding profound changes in their field.

The push for transformation was perhaps most obvious in a growing movement to end corporate sponsorship of the conference and conflict of interest (COI) in presentations, by disallowing researchers who were paid by industry for their research to present their findings. The nutritionist Jane Badham had produced buttons with the hashtag #EndCOIatIUNS that many people wore proudly. Carlos Monteiro, an esteemed epidemiologist from São Paulo, declared during a large standing-room-only lecture that no one with a commercial conflict of interest should be given a platform. When the UN's Special Rapporteur for the Right to Food, Michael Fakhri, presented, he noted that he would not attend the conference in the future if the policy enabling corporate partnerships did not change.

A decade earlier, at the meetings held in Granada in 2013, Coca-Cola had a massive presence, with a large stall featuring the slogan "Boost Your Life" adjacent to the main entrance of the conference. Under banners declaring that Coke had been "hydrating the world since 1886," conference-goers could have all of their biomarkers measured to receive a printout from Coca-Cola about how to improve their health. In contrast, industry presence was much more hidden in Tokyo, with the corporate booths in the basement and many of the industry-sponsored programs held in the evenings. Corporations were still everywhere along the margins of the conference, but several people were loudly calling this into question. I heard animated discussions of what it would take to end COI in a way that would not further exclude scholars from marginalized countries, who were unable to draw on governmental funding because it did not exist. At the conclusion of the conference, when the organizers announced that the ICN had taken a serious financial hit by losing corporate sponsorship, many people were sitting with the fact that the field as they knew it was thoroughly dependent on these partnerships and facing all it would take to genuinely change.

Attending the conference was not only useful for interjecting anthropological voices and a concern for corporate power into the agenda. It was also useful for me to have exposure to presentations that unsettled my own assumptions and arguments about what anthropology might have to offer. Ethnographic methods attune us to listen to people's stories, and we frequently draw on these stories to emphasize

nuance and variation in lived experience, illustrating outliers, exceptions, and places where patterns break. When it comes to the design of global health policy, anthropologists frequently argue for the importance of cultural specificity and adaptability, showing the fallacy of the “one size fits all” model of policy. I know I have made this argument before.

This impulse was challenged by several public health scholars at the conference, who expressed concern about the parallels between “cultural specificity” and “personalized nutrition,” which they saw as a neoliberal market ploy. Walter Willett, a giant in nutritional epidemiology, did not mince words. “Precision public health is the enemy of public health; if you think that everything has to be individualized, you disarm the most effective ways to do public health,” he told his audience. This extra warp and weft of complexity seemed especially useful given a clear need for robust public health measures during the COVID-19 pandemic. How can policy makers attend to ways that experiences vary while maintaining awareness of how personalization, and even cultural attentiveness, can become a profit-making strategy?

The answer that this book has offered is to pay attention to the cultures and practices of policy making. To create strong public health programs while respecting life in the communities in San Juan Ostuncalco necessitates looking carefully at all the ways that policies do not do what they appear at first glance to do. Time and again policy makers and politicians claim to care about women and Indigenous communities while saying little about self-determination. Their concern is with bodies and behavior changes that individuals can undertake to be healthier—not on the deep structures of violence that reproduce this harm.

As we saw in chapter 1, the narrative framing of the Window of 1,000 Days agenda, with its focus on the body and diet of the pregnant mother, ignores interventions in reproductive autonomy that might actually improve women’s lives. In chapter 2, we saw how the bio-logics of fetal and childhood stunting stigmatize Mam-Maya women, holding them responsible for histories of violence in a way that makes that violence worse. Chapter 3 explored the Guatemalan roots of global health interest in the first thousand days of life to show how the act of making height a proxy for health and intelligence that was integral to the US “war on poverty” ignored the literal war on poor, Indigenous communities taking place in Guatemala at the time. We saw in chapters 4 and 5 how interventions to end gender inequality and gender violence by targeting maternal nutrition frequently further stratify communities, exacerbating inequality and violence while also ignoring women’s own desires for their lives. Chapters 6 and 7 address how nutrition policies directed at maternal health and sustainability development rarely mention land sovereignty and labor environments, even though these are central to eating and living well. And as we have seen throughout the book, the US government has created supplement- and education-based nutrition programs to



ostensibly better the lives of people in Guatemala but has refused to make it easier for Guatemalans to travel between Guatemala and the US, something obvious and within its capacity to address that would have a clear benefit for the Indigenous Guatemalans who have been, for centuries, migrating to produce America's food and who have been a target of American war. The field of nutrition frequently claims to be working to end structures of poverty. It has not adequately faced how poverty is an outcome of pushing nutrients as a solution to poverty.

When I write of *mal-*, or *harmful*, nutrition, this fundamental misdirection that surrounds nutrition is what I mean. The common understanding of "malnutrition" in public health nutrition is that people face a problem of inadequate nutrients and that improving nutrition will improve their lives. Policy makers will then act to make nutrition better—distributing supplements, creating nutrition education programs that teach people to eat well—but because the problem was never principally one of nutrients, these actions will not lessen hunger. Nutrition will not become "better," because nutrition was not the source of the problem. The "revolution" that improving nutrition inspires is much more akin to a wheel revolving around an orbit, returning to where it began and upholding the status quo, than to a break in the cycle that brings about transformative change.

Throughout this book I have critiqued nutrition for its nonperformativity, but is anthropology any different? I raised this concern with my fellow panelists over dinner at a cozy restaurant under a metro line in downtown Tokyo. We had collectively spent thousands of dollars in grant funding to attend the conference and present our work to an audience of nutritionists, arguing for the merits of incorporating local and Indigenous perspectives, grounded long-term engagement with communities, and attentiveness to structures of power and privilege into nutrition research and policies. Would this gathering of ours help make any lasting difference? I was thinking of the daughter from San Juan who had approached me wanting my help to cross the US border and the powerlessness I felt as we walked away from one another. Was my work in Tokyo—my work writing this book or sharing my research experiences with my students in my classrooms—helping build a better world for people in San Juan?

The Guatemalan anthropologist Tatiana Paz Lemus had been in the audience at my panel and now joined us for dinner. Her own research was on youth mobilizations (2019), and the years she had spent learning about organizing led her to kindly reframe the problem of efficacy I was posing. Sitting side by side on a wooden bench in front of delicious Japanese food, she gently pointed out that my aspiration to improve the world for people in San Juan reproduces the same flawed theory of change that I have critiqued in nutrition. In the larger scheme there is very little I could do for San Juan. I could find a way to give money to the daughter, maybe even enough to help her cross the border, but then what? Even a lot of money will eventually run out. And would my academic panel help? Her answer again was no, not really. "For life in San Juan to change it's the structure of the state

that needs to change. Academic panels won't do much to change the structure of the state, and I think it's important to be upfront about this," she said.

This was not, however, a fatalistic message. She went on to explain, "It is okay that *you* are not changing the structure of the state. *You* are not responsible for political change because that is not how political change works. Individuals do not cause change. Change is brought about by collectives."

Mal-nutrition responsabilizes the problem of nutrition onto mothers. It teaches women with children that we are individually responsible for our children's futures—through our cooking and feeding, our childrearing, our bodies, and the bad decisions surrounding nutrition that we make. The pressure that women in San Juan face is particularly acute: American political systems force their families into conditions of hunger and then tell women that this hunger is their fault. If they behaved correctly or were better educated their children would not suffer. The solution this focus on nutrition offers—more nutrients, more education, more behavior change, all targeting individual bodies as responsible for their actions—entrenches women further into this trap. When people speak of "systemically marginalized" communities, this is an example of how systemic marginalization works in practice. The promised cure of better nutrition furthers the malady. Marginalization, much like malnutrition, reproduces itself, as a cycle of disadvantage forms.

Paz Lemus's point was that breaking this cycle is not something that is my individual responsibility—or the responsibility of any other individual on their own. Countering the premise of liberal politics, along with the premise of most nutrition advice and policy, I will not achieve change by acting differently myself. Systems will not be transformed by individual actors. If I want to make political or cultural change, a good place to start would be to become involved in community with others—replacing individuality with collectivity.

The last thing I did before leaving Guatemala in summer 2022 was to take my friend Carla to lunch for her birthday. She was at the time living with and dying from diabetes—or to offer another explanation of affliction, living with and dying from a lifetime of oppression stratified along hierarchies of capital: race, gender, income, ability, and so on. Now her body was failing and hurt, and she had not left her immediate neighborhood in several weeks. Over the years she had spent mothering others, she had experienced poor medical treatment. Doctors told her to eat better, writing prescriptions for medications and supplements that she could not afford that left her reliant on a cocktail of assorted and intermittently taken pills that may have done more harm than good. The field of public health had largely left women her age for dead, directing its attention to their pregnant daughters and their babies, as if these daughters and their babies would not irreparably suffer from losing their mothers and grandmothers far sooner than they should.

Her husband and older daughter were traveling to attend her youngest daughter's baby shower in the mountains a few hours away. Carla, too weak to join them, had planned to spend her birthday alone. Instead, her husband helped me pick a

place we could go together for a meal that she would appreciate: the regal Hotel Bonifaz, just off the city's downtown square. Carla had passed this restaurant almost every day of her life, but it catered to a rich clientele—women used to having, not being, domestic workers—and she had never had the financial opportunity to enter. As we walked there, I was not sure if she could make it. But we moved slowly, arm in arm, and before long we arrived.

A few months earlier I had been in pain and had undergone surgery. I was acutely anemic and needed a hysterectomy to stem the monthly loss of iron in my blood. Menstruation-related anemia is another example of a reproductive affliction where “nutrition” doesn't pertain directly to eating. In my case—as with many others—my iron deficiency was only marginally connected to what I did, or did not, consume. Even high-dose iron supplements made no difference in the overall iron stores in my blood.

Carla called me while I was in the hospital and every day for a week following the surgery to make sure I was okay. In a series of recorded messages I have saved so I can hear her voice, she recites a recipe for soup that she wants me to give to my mother to make for me. “Boil liver, onion, and tomato together, blend the mixture with a food processor, strain it into a broth to be consumed three times a week. Two cups per serving. Add some watercress if you can,” her message specified. She followed up with a warning: “One thing that is certain is that the midwives and ancestors (*viejitas de antes*) know that you have to follow a bit of a diet so as to not suffer when you're older, like I do.”

In this book I have argued that the field of maternal nutrition's focus on bodies and education misdirects attention toward individual choices of pregnant and nursing women and away from the patterned inequities shaping the systems in which people live. I have shown how this focus on fetal development is stigmatizing and misplaced, asking women to take personal responsibility for maladies whose origins lie in social structures. With this critique in mind, what are we to make of the practice, organized and administered by women across generations, of caring for people through food?

I might dismiss Carla's offering of broth, arguing that anemia is related to structures of violence and not my dietary choices about what to eat. Indeed, “eat better” can be the advice of racial capitalism, blaming one's inability to change on the self and framing the affliction as rooted in bodies and nutrients and not political-economic structures such as the inhumane conditions of labor or the dispossession of land. Yet the care for diet that happens when my friend passes along a family recipe to my mother is substantively unlike the care for diet that happens with the distribution of an anonymous iron supplement. “The diet” of the supplement is aimed at deficient bodies, doing nothing to care for toxic landscapes. It is a diet that strengthens corporate interests, causing relations between people to dissolve.

Meanwhile, Carla's broth strengthens interpersonal connections. Whatever is eaten is but a part of the recipe, which also offers a thread to stitch fragmented

communities together. What the midwives and *viejitas de antes* were saying was not only that you must follow a diet, but that you must let others in—to put yourself in the position of receiving care. It may seem as if their offering does not address the broader political landscape, but to make good soup can be healing and not harmful, precisely because of how it strengthens bonds between people over profit.

This is the kind of approach that Paz Lemus was also advocating. Just as “you” are not responsible for changing the structures of state politics, you do not need to—and moreover cannot—change nutrition on your own. Nourishment is not, ultimately, a property of a body and its nutrients to be transformed by individuals. To nourish entails a collective commitment to caring for connections between bodies, people, and their worlds.

As we ate at Hotel Bonifaz, I could see Carla was having trouble with the meal’s main course. Her teeth were not strong any longer, and the meat was too tough for her to chew. The mandate to “eat less” that had accompanied her diagnosis of diabetes more than two decades earlier no longer made sense. She was gaunt and frail and had trouble holding on to any weight.

After we had eaten as much as we could, the waiter cleared our plates and brought us two slices of rich white cake glistening with frosting. I had not known this was included in the meal, and almost instantly I began to moralize the desert in front of us. I could not help it. For all I knew about and understood the dangers of the logic of dieting—for all my arguments about how “nutrition” should not be directed toward individual bodies and what they do or do not eat—nutrition’s socialization is strong, and there I was, suddenly doubting that the lunch was a wise idea. “Don’t feel pressured to eat this on my account,” I told Carla. I was thinking of her diabetes and what the sugar in this decadent dessert might do to her blood and body, as well as of the longer histories of colonialism and exploitation that made a white sugary cake at a pretentious restaurant an object of desire and celebration.

But Carla did not hesitate. She grinned at me. “It is my birthday. I haven’t eaten cake in months, and it’s looking like I may not have another chance. Plus, I want to enjoy this time together,” she said, her delight radiant as she took a bite.