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## **“Don’t Pack a Pest”: Parts, Wholes, and the Porosity of Food Borders**

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### **Abstract**

Food retailers, restaurateurs and transnational families rely on continual border-crossings for the global circulation of foodstuffs. Those crossings are highly regulated. Not everything gets in. This paper provides an overview of how food safety is (unevenly) enacted at U.S. ports of entry. Where government regulators and enforcement agents perceive in certain foods danger of adulteration or contamination, importers and producers also experience threat to customary practices of foodmaking, provisioning and commerce. Synecdochic, part-for-whole, reasoning guides food journeys and helps determine the fate of perishable foods as they attempt to cross semi-permeable thresholds that delineate and connect nation-states, and that make possible, even as they also restrict, the flow of international trade.

### **Keywords**

food safety, biosecurity, borders, trade, gastro-politics

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Throughout summer 2013, the French cheese Mimolette made U.S. news headlines when inspectors with the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA), from New Jersey shipping ports to California airports, refused entry to one-and-a-half tons of the imported product, classifying it as “a filthy, putrid, or decomposed substance or ... otherwise unfit for food” (Barry 2013). The complaint had to do with “unacceptable” levels of cheese mites (tiny arachnids that can colonize cheese rinds). U.S. import regulations stipulate a limit of 6 mites per square inch of cheese. The French samples were found to far exceed this, with the excess qualified as “filth.” But in France, makers of Mimolette actually *encourage* mites, whose munching aerates the surface of the cheese, promoting ripening and, according to the *Oxford Companion to Cheese*, makes for “a special aroma.” The mites contribute to the cheese’s pitted and crumbly rind (to be removed before eating). But if connoisseurs perceive in the “patina of gray dust” left by mites a “characteristic” trace of authenticity (per the *Oxford Companion*, pg. 483), FDA agents instead saw potential allergenicity. The North American representative for Isigny Sainte-Mère, a cheese cooperative in Normandy financially hit by the import holds, was unimpressed. “You can’t have Mimolette without cheese mites,” he told a reporter with *The Washington Post*. Without mites, “It wouldn’t be Mimolette” (Dennis 2013).

Legal regulation of international travel and trade facilitates the movement of *some* products (and people) while restricting or impeding the smooth movement of *others*. The importance of federal oversight of international food trade is all too routinely highlighted by devastating outbreaks of disease, both food-borne illnesses in humans traced to eating foods infected with pathogens like salmonella or *E. coli*, and the decimation of livestock owing to such zoonotic diseases as bovine spongiform encephalopathy, avian flu, SARS

and foot-and-mouth (e.g., Dunn 2007; Law and Mol 2008; Smart and Smart 2016). The food-borne introduction of still other “invasive” pests can wreak havoc on agricultural crops and natural resources (Subramaniam 2014). Consequently, foods that show up at national ports of entry, whether packed in the suitcase of an airline passenger or loaded onto wooden pallets and into a refrigerated cargo container, are subject to federal inspections that could result in refusal of entry.

After studying the artisan production of cheese in the United States, I have become interested in the practical and semiotic work required to move perishable foods across international borders. Such work entails efforts to standardize not only tradable goods, but also passenger travel and artisanal, no less than industrial, methods of food production. “Standardizing,” write Martha Lampland and Susan Leigh Star, “has become a central feature of social and cultural life in modernity. The purpose of standardizing—to streamline procedures or regulate behaviors, to demand specific results, or to prevent harm—is rarely queried because it has come to be understood as a valuable and necessary, even if cumbersome, process” (2009, 10). And yet it is a process, too, that inevitably entails loss. “To standardize an action, process, or thing means, at some level, to screen out unlimited diversity. At times, it may mean to screen out even limited diversity” (Lampland and Star 2009, 8).

The sprawling U.S. American food system reflects the paradoxical logics of national narratives. The modern nation, since at least Durkheim, has been conceptualized as a body with organs, including digestive organs; thus “the definition of ‘good food,’” understood to satisfy appropriately “civilized” appetites and to nourish healthy bodies, has served “as a metaphor for both the creation and defense of national identity” (Du

Puis, Garcia and Mitchell 2017, 3). The early-20<sup>th</sup> century “home economics” movement that aimed to train American housewives in the “domestic science” of preparing economical, healthful, digestible — and standardized — recipes (Shapiro 1986) emerged, in part, as a response to late-19<sup>th</sup> century arrivals of new immigrants from Central, Eastern and Southern Europe (Gabaccia 1998, 125-129). Kyla Tompkins argues, “‘eating American’... was one way to produce a moral body, unswayed by dangerous appetites for exotic and overstimulating, that is, ‘foreign’ foods” (2012, 6).

And yet, since Colonial times the culinary history of “America” has also been about selective, regionally inflected absorptions of indigenous foods in combination with new introductions from foreign lands — spaghetti, “Swiss” cheese, bagels, tortillas, garlic were all once considered “exotic” in some regions while embraced in others as comfortably familiar (Gabaccia 1998). To satisfy shifting “American” tastes, transnational trade in edible goods has from beginning been a key sector of the national economy. Today, according to an FDA report, “American consumers seek a diverse and abundant food supply that is simultaneously affordable and available throughout the year. To help meet these consumer demands, the United States imports about 15 percent of its overall food supply” (USFDA 2019, 1). For all their supposed moral and material hazards, imported foodstuffs remain central to the U.S. economy, and to the American value of (consumer) choice.

What can we learn from and about the mobilities of perishable foods as they attempt to cross semi-permeable thresholds that delineate and connect nation-states, and that make possible while restrictively defining the flow of international trade? If in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, as Hannah Landecker suggests, we are witnessing in biology the rise of a

new “post-industrial metabolism” characterized as “a regulatory zone, not a factory system,” whose “disorders are regulatory crises” (2013, 496), what might attention to such zones as international borders tell us about how government agencies confront their limited ability to regulate individual eating — to impose rationalized appetites — by regulating the market availability of foods? To what extent is the metabolism of a body politic able to determine absorptions at its political borders? Beyond political will, what other forces have a say in the metabolic filtration of a national food system?

Microbes, for some. Geographers have described the leaky “geometry” of biosecurity efforts that attempt, with significant yet limited success, to halt the flow of microscopic disease agents by regulating the circulation of known hosts (Hinchliffe et al. 2012; see also Dunn 2008). In *Contagious*, Priscilla Wald traces how, in “outbreak narratives,” “Microbes tell the often hidden story of who has been where and when, and of what they did there. Contagion, that is, charts social interactions that are often not otherwise visible” (2008, 37). But if “the outbreak narrative manages the consequences, as it makes sense of, what the communicable disease makes visible” (Wald 2008, 39), routine border patrol does not have the “benefit” of disease to make visible microbial presence. Their recourse is to infer the possibility of future contagion based on the lessons of prior outbreak narratives. Previous known hosts remain suspect; the mere possibility that a food substance (beef, mango, etc.) may again serve as a pathogenic or zoonotic disease vector can determine that substance’s permissibility for entry.

Absent the subvisible trace of disease outbreak, I argue, food safety inspection relies on *synecdochic* reasoning to generate narratives of *potential* revelation. Through synecdoche, an elemental *part* — say, cheese mites colonizing a rind — is isolated and

made to stand for the *whole*, be it the whole wheel of cheese, an entire shipment of goods, or the very product category of *Mimolette*. Synecdochic reason both participates in and complicates the *standardizing* procedures through which the global circulation of (select) foodstuff occurs. Part of what makes harmonization of trade so challenging is that meaningful part/whole relations may be variously parsed on different sides of a legal border, or by different agencies within a government apparatus, or by various actors along a commodity chain. Proliferating synecdochic possibilities compete for semantic, and pragmatic, dominance.

Jurisdiction for safeguarding the U.S. border against potentially injurious food substances is divided between two agencies: Customs and Border Protection (CPB) and the Food and Drug Administration (FDA). At airports and shipping ports, “agriculture specialists” with Customs and Border Protection work to safeguard the national interest by enforcing standards set by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) to prevent the absorption of hitch-hiking “foreign pests” and animal diseases that could potentially undermine U.S. agricultural industries and national resources — while maintaining the profitable flow of approved goods. One cause of fresh produce being refused entry into the U.S., reported in *bon appétit* magazine, is the possible presence of “Asian longhorned beetles, which threaten ash and maple trees—the raw material of baseball bats and thus the American soul” (Casteman 2014).<sup>1</sup> Protection against the pest, beginning with regulating the exclusive use of heat-treated or fumigated lumber in the construction of shipping crates and pallets, has become an obligatory passage point for virtually all commercial trade into the U.S.

After 9/11, the 2002 Homeland Security Act transferred responsibility for agricultural inspection from the USDA to Customs and Border Protection (housed within the Department of Homeland Security), whose oversight expanded to include “agro-terrorism,” the *intentional* introduction “of an animal or plant disease with the goal of generating fear, causing economic losses, and/or undermining social stability” (Monke 2007, 1). CBP enforcement includes the work of reviewing passenger declarations and cargo manifests, inspecting international passengers and luggage for impermissible agricultural and animal items, “holding” items “of suspected agricultural quarantine significance,” and preparing pest and disease samples of held items for USDA testing (Ridge and Veneman 2003). As of early 2016, according to the agency’s website, Customs and Border Protection deployed more than 2,400 agriculture specialists at approximately 182 ports of entry.

In parallel, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration conducts its own border operations to guard against the market absorption of adulterated or misbranded commercial products that could harm the health of consuming eaters. Misbranding violations concern misleading or incomplete labels (e.g., “failure to bear” a nutrition label or ingredient list, or lacking English-language labeling). Biological or chemical contaminants account for roughly half of adulteration violations; the remainder are classified as “other sanitary” contamination, i.e., “filth” (Bovay 2016, 13). *Salmonella* and *Listeria*, along with aflatoxin, a carcinogenic byproduct of mold infestation of food crops, represent the most common culprits of biological contamination; chemical contamination points most often to impermissible or overly concentrated residues of pesticides found on produce. “Filth” — the violation that stopped Mimolette — is the

most common FDA charge code to trigger shipment holds, “accounting for 20.8 percent of adulteration violations ... and 11.8 percent of all violations” (Bovay 2016, 10).

Between 2005 and 2013, the FDA refused entry of 87,552 commercial shipments of food found to violate U.S. health and safety laws.

As Nick Bingham and Stephanie Lavau write of food safety, “Security centres on the regulation of what circulates and how: qualifying good and bad circulations; maximising the good, minimising the bad” (2012, 1591; see also Caduff 2012). I am interested in *how* circulations of foodstuffs into the United States are *qualified* as good or bad — by USDA, FDA, and by the people whose job it is to move it — and as good or bad *for what* in particular. In “The Economy of Qualities,” Michel Callon, Cécile Méadel and Vololona Rabeharisoa describe a series of “qualification trials” to which a good is subjected in its “career” as a product, from design to manufacture through distribution to retail and point of sale. “All quality is obtained at the end of a process of qualification, and all qualification aims to establish a constellation of characteristics, stabilized at least for a while, which are attached to the product and transform it temporarily into a tradable good in the market” (2002, 1999). Regarding food safety inspection as a mode of *requalification* made to factor into models of risk-assessment as well as value formation, I ask: what *else* may be put at risk by the requalifications that mark some items as permissible and others as impermissible to cross national borders? Certainly, profit is put at risk when brokers, importer and retailers must await the delayed release of a pallet of perishable goods that has been held at the port of New Jersey for further scrutiny (Paxson 2014). And for every thwarted disease outbreak, how many *heartbreaks* do airport food confiscations generate?

I explore these questions by taking up two sets of examples. First, drawing on media reports and ethnographic scholarship, I look at the airport confiscation of personal food items from international travelers carried out by CBP officials on behalf of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Second, drawing on my own ethnographic encounters with professionals in food import/export and retail businesses over a number of years, I return to FDA import refusals on commercial shipments, revisiting the case of Mimolette. Again, whereas the CBP/USDA requalifies goods as risky in terms of perceived threat to agricultural industries and the national economy, the FDA's requalifications concern perceived threat to the health of an eating public. Both border operations deem some edible materials as appropriate for absorption by the national body politic while rejecting others as filthy, adulterated, infected, misbranded or otherwise unfit. Examining these judgments as the result of synecdochic reason — and more precisely, of competing regimes of synecdochic connection that qualify (different) parts differently to arrive at contingent assessments of wholes — offers a way to account for, and to contest, the cross-border politics of food safety assessment.

### **Synecdochic Meanings for Traveling Foods**

What diversity of tastes and commensal relations may be precluded by efforts to prevent the absorption of “foreign pests”? On November 2, 2015, agricultural specialists with U.S. Customs and Border Protection confiscated 450 individually wrapped, handmade tamales from the luggage of a passenger arriving from Mexico into Los Angeles International Airport (Rocha 2015). Unlike the FDA's import hold on Mimolette, CBP officials were not worried that eating the tamales might sicken anyone. Instead, detecting

that the tamales were filled with pork, their concern was for the economic health of California's livestock industry. In a statement reported by the *Los Angeles Times*, CBP's acting field operations director commented, "Although tamales are a popular holiday tradition, foreign meat products can carry serious animal diseases from countries affected by outbreaks of Avian influenza, mad cow and swine fever"; Mexico has been such a country.

In a given day, CBP agricultural specialists will confiscate 400-600 pounds of foodstuff from passengers flying into one international terminal at New York's JFK airport alone — a figure I learned watching a 1':53" video produced in December 2015 by A Great Big Story, "Where Illegal Food Goes to Die." The video's opening shot pans over mounds of tropical fruits, part of a messy foodscape arrayed on a stainless steel table that includes salami from Italy, Serrano ham from Spain, a package labeled "beef candy China," and lots of avocados. Standing over it all, CBP supervisor Ellie Scaffa explains, "The reason why we're confiscating all this stuff is not because it's harmful to the human being. It's harmful for our plants and our animals." The "stuff" of meat and mangoes that concerns Scaffa is not, in this instance, *food* — to be eaten, gifted, tasted. Rather, it is that, "things eaten have travel companions" (Solomon 2016, 6). From home-cured salamis to processed foods containing beef broth, meat products are refused entry on the basis of their *requalification* as animal substance that could harbor disease-causing viruses and other unseen biological agents that might infect American livestock. Animal products are trucked off-site and incinerated. In the video, Agent Scaffa bisects tropical fruits with a long-bladed knife before tossing them into a heavy-duty garbage disposal dubbed "the grinder," not so they will go down the drain more easily, but to open them

up to her visual inspection. Items “of suspected agricultural quarantine significance” — e.g., fresh fruits containing insects or wiggly larvae — will be sent to the U.S.D.A. for testing. The remaining plant matter — still forbidden though likely harmless — is ground up to be washed away. “This is what we have to do to protect American agriculture,” Scaffa says matter-of-factly: “Part of our job.”

For CPB agriculture specialists, the problem with foods is a problem shared by the nation and its human and non-human animal residents: namely, *porosity*. Foods, no less than the bodies that ingest, metabolize and incorporate them, are semi-permeable to their environments (c.f., Mol 2008, 30; Solomon 2015, 179; Roberts 2017). From the *terroir* taste of an estate wine to the heavy metals in contaminated waters that have become part of the nutritional composition of top-predator fish (Mansfield 2010), foods materialize and propagate the ecological and social worlds in and through which they come into being, mature, circulate, and eventually decay. Such materializations and decompositions are not only suffused with politics — e.g., Dunn’s (2008) analysis of how botulism-prone home-canning reflects the decaying post-Soviet Georgian state. They are the stuff of which politics can be made. On January 12, 2018 — following a “thorough review” undertaken “at the request of Mexico’s government” — the U.S.D.A.’s Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) recognized Mexico as free of classical swine fever. Mexican pork and pork products may now again be imported to the U.S., but only if “accompanied by a certificate issued by a Mexican government veterinary officer” (USDA 2018). (Without such certification, the LAX tamales would still be subject to confiscation.)

“Porosity,” writes Harris Solomon, “requires work: work by persons who open up to or refuse materials like food, and work entailed in moving materials across uncertain boundaries” (2016, 9). Border checkpoints and surveillance systems intended to keep pathogens and other disease-causing agents “out” of ostensibly “healthy” bodies — whether human, animal, or bodies politic — are predicated on what Steve Hinchliffe and colleagues have named a “disease geometry” that imagines “healthy life and disease as separate spaces” (2013, 532). On this view, biosecurity is “understood as a practice of demarcating and shoring up borderlines” intended to secure the separation and differentiation of such spaces.<sup>2</sup> Biosecurity efforts of this sort reproduce at a larger scale what Solomon (2016) characterizes as the “elemental” logic of food safety regulation. Concerned with food’s potential to become infected or contaminated with not-food (pests, filth), the implementation of food safety regulation is premised on the possibility of “weeding out” harmful elements from foods, which in practice means “weeding out” of the marketplace foods deemed particularly “at risk” for chemical adulteration or microbial contamination. That this costly standardizing procedure would seem sensible reflects a broader cultural logic that assesses food as the sum of component parts — consider how American consumers been encouraged to “weed out” of our diets foods that are “bad” for our health or waistline and, indeed, to view foods as collections of nutrient component parts, some parts of which might be swapped for others to transform the whole into a “reduced fat” or “gluten free” version of itself. The reductive, rationalist logic that Gyorgy Scrinis (2008) so aptly named the ideology of “nutritionism” participates in the same synecdochic thinking as food safety risk assessment.

Synecdochic reason offers a way to account for contingent relations, with parts and wholes flipping as between figure and ground. Using an electronic screening tool, PREDICT (Predictive Risk-based Evaluation for Dynamic Import Compliance Targeting), FDA “screens all regulated shipments, taking into account multiple factors about each import shipment — everything from compliance history of the facility that produced the imported product to the level of risk associated with that product. With that current intelligence, PREDICT assigns a risk score to every imported food shipment, identifying higher-risk shipments for potential examination and expediting the clearance of lower-risk cargo” (USFDA 2019, 11). What is “scanned” at the border is not, in the first instance, actual food, but instead a product code affixed to food packaging, along with the manufacturer’s name and country of origin. The product code is itself a string of five codes that identify a food by industry, class (type), subclass (e.g., container or packaging type), and manufacturing process (e.g., frozen, dried or cured).

When a food import is “scanned” and/or inspected at the U.S. border, the part that might be made to stand for the whole food/shipment — such that it may be held for further inspection — could be its material components, the means of processing or type of packaging, the prior record of the manufacturer, or broader context of production. In practice, at any given border crossing, the qualification of a food item or shipment as permissible or impermissible for absorption into a political body might be (a) an assessment of “product risk” for a *type* of food (classified by ingredients, processing, or packaging); (b) the violation history of a manufacturer; (c) the reputation for safety and regulatory compliance of an entire country of origin; and only then, (d) visual or other empirical assessment of a *particular* food substance’s subjection to infection or

infestation. In the case of the confiscated tamales, the meaningful parts that came to stand for the whole were: (a) pork ingredients and (c) country of origin: Mexico.

Over the last several years, the highest rates of biological and chemical contamination detected by FDA inspections have been detected in food imports from three countries of origin: Mexico, India and China. U.S. officials read this as indication of insanitary and otherwise improper methods of agricultural production and processing — in other words, of other countries' failure to fully modernize or “clean up” their markets and processing practices. By way of synecdoche, countries and even businesses whose practices have produced “dirty” foods in the past continue to receive extra scrutiny at the border, while “dirty” foods are themselves read as signaling the presence of “dirty” or “immature” business practices, practices that US officials understand to warrant further paternalistic oversight — for example, in the form of US-approved “pre-clearance centers,” where certain plants and produce destined for commercial sale are subject to phytosanitation procedures prior to boarding ships headed for U.S. harbors.

In 2007, in what the *New York Times* heralded as “probably the most eagerly anticipated fruit delivery ever,” the first legal shipment in decades of Indian-grown mangoes arrived at JFK airport (Karp 2007). Previously, the mango seed weevil, endemic in India but “unknown” in North America, had precluded Indian mangoes from reaching U.S. soil. For Indians in America, “The taste of mango was a price of immigration” (Roy 2009). But in January 2006, the U.S. Department of Agriculture and its Indian counterpart struck a deal: the U.S. would allow importation of the desired fruit if India first assumed the microbiopolitical job of exposing it to low-dose radiation (400 gray) to kill or sterilize possible lurking larvae.<sup>3</sup> That summer, President George W. Bush, while

visiting India to work out an agreement on nuclear energy and trade, cheered in anticipation, “The United States is looking forward to eating Indian mangoes” (Karp 2007).

Phytosanitary treatment by irradiation occurs in a USDA-certified facility 125 miles from Mumbai, “close to the prime coastal orchards growing Alphonsos” (Karp 2007). Select varieties of Indian mangoes are subject to USDA-dictated health inspection, sanitization and standardization before the U.S. agrees to absorb them into its food supply. It is hard not to hear this through the rhetoric of immigration policy, with loud reverberations of how immigrants were “processed” a century ago at Ellis Island (Zolberg 2006; Subramaniam 2014). The logistics of exclusion is part of logistics as usual — for international trade no less than immigration. Demonstrating a sort of parasitic state metabolism, as of 2014 thirty countries participated in the USDA’s Plant Protection and Quarantine Preclearance Offshore Program (USDA 2014), a program that originated in 1951 to prepare Dutch tulip bulbs for U.S. entry (the primary targets of bulb inspection are nematodes, hiding in traces of soil or clinging to root structures). With the Marshall Plan in effect, the flower trade offered a symbolically felicitous means of reconnecting the U.S. and Europe. From the beginning, as the USDA preclearance program director based in the Netherlands told me in 2016, agricultural “preclearance” has been “politically motivated.”

Elemental thinking is a form of requalification based on synecdoche. But which parts are to represent what wholes? This is not self-evident. “Don’t pack a pest!” warns the CBP’s traveler education campaign, launched in 2011 at the Miami International Airport and recently taken nationwide. But travelers do not think of themselves as

packing pests; instead, they pack gifts, payments, remedies, mementos, treats — objects imbued with good intent; materials whose very edibility contraindicates the possibility of filth or pestilence. In the case of the confiscated tamales, what to border patrol was undesirable “pork” (i.e., potential swine fever) was to the international traveler tasty (and profitable) holiday “tamale.” In its reporting, *The Los Angeles Times* pointed out that, “The passenger would have been in the clear had he tried to bring sweet tamales — or those all-masa ones that always seem to be left over” (Rocha 2015). As Bingham and Lavau note, that “meat as foodstuff” (say) and “meat the carrier of disease” circulate together in “the same framework” is one reason why the regulation of food is “so challenging” (2012, 1592).

What other synecdochic relations are thinkable? What else can foods absorb? Food, after all, “is expected to be all kinds of other things apart from safe” (Bingham and Lavau 2012, 1601). The confiscated tamales, salamis and yak’s milk are not merely food items — food is *never* just food — but also edible gifts, culinary staples, medicinal substances. To travelers, the suspect foodstuffs may have absorbed affective meanings attached to culinary tourism, in which case food’s capacity to convey “otherness” is fetishized rather than feared (Heldke 2003; Long 2004; Molz 2007). I suspect, however, that most food packed for international flights represents not the other but the (whole) self, left behind, at home (cf. Sutton 2001; Abbots 2016).

In “Whole Foods: Revitalization through Everyday Synesthetic Experience,” David Sutton suggests that the multisensory experience of preparing and eating food — registering scent, flavor and texture all at once — is what enables a part to stand so evocatively for the whole. Food, in other words, serves as a synaesthetic resource for the

synecdochic experience of a “Proustian moment,” in which encountering a familiar taste or odor (as with Proust’s madeline dipped in a cup of tea) can summon forth the “whole world,” as Sutton puts it, of another time and place. For this reason, he continues, “food is essential to counter tendencies toward fragmentation of experience” wrought by migration. For migrants, “integrity is restored through a remembered coherence” as “the food event evokes a whole world of family, agricultural associations, place-names, and other ‘local knowledge’.” At the same time, “there is an imagined community implied in the act of eating food ‘from home’ while in exile, in the embodied knowledge that others are eating the same food” (2001, 126).

No wonder food parcels, despite official warnings, are so commonly packed into the luggage of international travelers — perhaps even wedged between strong-smelling soaps, or tucked into a can of coffee beans, or wrapped in layers of metal foil, to throw off CBP’s food-detecting canines. “Preparing, sending, consuming, selling, sharing or giving away food are important transnational connections, reminders of mutual obligations, as well as tokens of love,” write Diana Mata-Codesal and Maria Abranches (2018, 11). Moreover, food parcels’ worth “derives not so much from the final product itself as from the work devoted by relatives to cooking, selecting, wrapping and sending it, and from the symbols and memories attached to it” (2018, 9). “For many families,” *The Los Angeles Times* noted sympathetically, “tamales are a quintessential holiday tradition. Making a batch takes days of planning and exhaustive preparation — all for a tasty bite of corn masa, red chile mole and pork, beef or chicken” (Rocha 2015). By impeding the transnational flow of foodstuffs, biosecurity demands may undercut the moral intentions of air travelers intent on fulfilling gastropolitical obligations upon arrival

(Appadurai 1981).

Consequently, absorbing passengers' rage and disappointment is equally "part of the job" of agricultural inspection. "I've taken mangos from passengers from Jamaica and been threatened with my life," Ellie Scaffa says in the video. In a 2014 *bon appétit* story on airport food confiscations, a Seattle-based agriculture specialist is quoted as saying: "Take away their ham, and people shout, bang the table, and throw things.' ... 'One Spanish lady put a hex on me that my stomach would rot out'" (Castleman 2014). At one level this can be understood in terms of "the arbitrary nature" of standards themselves: "The confusion, anger, and frustration people express about standards are easily related to the apparent alogical or irrational character of standards" (Lampland and Star 2009, 15). The apparent arbitrariness or even capriciousness of individual instances of food risk registered at the border — through confiscations of some foods but not others, on some occasions though not every one — is, in part, consequent upon a multiplicity of standards against which risk may be perceived. Standard procedures for international travel may be informed by government agencies — through the CBP's "Don't Pack a Pest" campaign, for example — but these are *also* informed by families, schools, private enterprises, and professions asserting their own gastro-political expectations for gift-giving and provisioning.

At the same time, "sending and receiving food parcels is not only about family obligations and solidarity; it is also about creating spaces of resistance, continuity and economic strategies" (Mata-Codesal and Abranches 2018, 13). At LAX, not only were the 450 tamales confiscated and, later, incinerated, the passenger was fined \$1,000 "because authorities believed the tamales were going to be sold and distributed," thereby

elevating risk to the state's pork industry (Rocha 2015). Through their study of Mexican migrants in the United States, Medina and Vázquez-Medina confirm that, “In the search to replicate the (many times, just remembered) authentic flavours of their home communities, migrants create new” — and often “clandestine” — “distribution networks” (2018, 197). Through tracking “how the geopolitical borders of nation-states are overtaken in terms of the mobility of food cultures,” they show how Mexican migrants “whose [legal] status entitles them to travel to and from their home community are not merely transporters of [food] supplies, they are also agents in the transmission of culinary information” — a role that may come with “an economic benefit” for some via informal food businesses, such as selling tamales during holiday seasons (2018, 191, 192).

If understanding food safety and risk management is already well informed by biopolitics and even by microbiopolitics — i.e., ideological commitments to how humans ought to behave in light of their entanglements with microorganisms (Paxson 2008) — we might add to our frame of reference the lens of *gastro-politics*, Arjun Appadurai's call to take seriously the “conflict or competition over specific cultural or economic resources as it emerges in social transactions around food” (1981, 495). Gastro-political conflicts can manifest through competing synecdochic understandings of which elemental parts absorbed by foods should come to stand for what wholes.

### **Importing Commercial Goods, and Possible Bads (FDA)**

To be sure, “foreign bodies” are successfully absorbed into bodies politic all the time. As Melanie DuPuis and colleagues note (2017, 3-4), “the food that creates an American ‘us’” requires at least two sets of routine border crossings: “people crossing territorial

borders in order to provide labor to produce that food,” as well as the crossing of food itself “to provide the key ingredients of an ever-evolving American cuisine” and to satisfy a growing taste for year-round fresh produce (cf. Freidberg 2010). Borders serve — for most cargo shipments and travelers, most of the time (though neither consistently nor evenly) — more as gateways than as obstacles. According to government estimates, 94 percent of seafood consumed in the United States is imported, while roughly 55 percent of fresh fruits and 32 percent of fresh vegetables sold in the country were grown outside of it (USFDA 2019). Meanwhile, in the month of December 2016 alone, 2,577,907 international passengers (and most of their luggage) passed through customs inspection at JFK airport.<sup>4</sup> But who and what get to become passengers in the first place?

Returning to the case of the mitey Mimolette, recall that the customary value of a part — namely, a mite-riddled rind — was, for a time, requalified by safety inspectors as an adulteration of the whole. If Mimolette, a traditional French cheese, is distinguished for producers and consumers by having mites around, why did the FDA suddenly object only in 2013? Was it coincidental, cheese professionals I know asked, that the European Union had recently issued a trade demand insisting that American manufacturers cease using European cheese names, including such genericized staples as Parmesan, Feta and Gouda? (Schultz 2014). Ripe with symbolism, cheese has long been a favored pawn in trade wars between the U.S. and European Union — gastropolitical contests, we might say, within a family of nations. In 2009, in a parting act when leaving the White House to Barak Obama, President George W. Bush tripled the tariff on Roquefort in apparent retaliation for France’s refusal to import hormone-raised U.S. beef (Keating 2009). In April 2019, the Trump administration proposed tariffs on goods from the EU in

retaliation against European subsidies for Airbus that Trump claims are “harmful to the US.” Amounting to US\$11 billion, as an April 9, 2019 article in *The Guardian* noted, the proposed levies single out aircraft parts, wine and cheeses — Roquefort and Stilton, but also Cheddar, Emmentaler, Pecorino — made in any EU member state.<sup>5</sup> Clearly, there is more than symbolic value at stake in these trade wars.

Since 2014, Mimolette is once again allowed onto U.S. soil, although an importer did acknowledge to me that, “they seem to sending cleaner wheels.”

On April 20, 2016, FDA inspectors in Minneapolis refused entry to an air shipment of cheese sent by Fromagerie P. Jacquin & Fils, a 60 year-old business in Berry, France. The Import Refusal — one of many issued against similar products for similar reasons since 2015 — cited two violations of chemical adulteration: “unsafe additive” and “unsafe coloring.” Among the name-protected, traditional cheeses fabricated by P. Jacquin & Fils (Selles sur Cher, Valençay, Sainte Maure de Touraine) certain qualities, only partially reflected in the FDA product code 12CMP15, are shared: they are made of goat’s milk, and they are dusted with ash, otherwise known as “charcoal powder” or, more technically still, food-grade vegetable carbon. Without the ash, the cheeses would lose their characteristic character and identity — not to mention their name-protected AOC status and accompanying price premium. And yet the FDA violations point to an “E-number” — E153 — by which the European Food Safety Authority labels “vegetable carbon” as a permissible food additive. E153, classed as a colorant, is not newly used in these cheeses, but beginning in early 2015, without prior notice, E153 began flagging FDA holds of cheese upon entry to the U.S.

E153 is not and has never been on the FDA’s list of permitted additives. That

regulatory body, unlike its European counterpart, considers the substance a suspected carcinogen (Bacak 2018, 137). But the sudden, selective enforcement of this restriction by refusing (some) ashed cheese imports was flummoxing for the industry. E153 is expressly permitted in Canada and the European Union, deemed safe for foods, such as cheeses and confectionaries, “at its reported uses and use levels” (EFSA 2012). Moreover, ash-ripened cheeses have continued to be manufactured *domestically* in the U.S. and sold without question (an indication of limited communication between the domestic and import branches of the FDA). In response to the United States’ sudden rejection of European ash-ripened cheeses, a food-products lab in Denmark got to work on an alternative product whose culinary qualities would replicate those of the currently offending product, but be sufficiently different materially to be coded using a new E number. Notably, I heard no mention of or even curiosity among cheese retailers and writers about whether a new version might also be less carcinogenic.

At an international food exposition I attended in Paris in fall of 2016, I spoke with a representative of Fromagerie P. Jacquin & Fils about the ash issue. It was yet been resolved, he conceded. A company in Canada produces an ash that the FDA would approve, he told me, but the European Union does not allow it, so that is no solution. Meanwhile, the Danish firm’s new colorant was extracted from a petrochemical (“like they use on the roads,” he explained) and EU regulators had not approved it. With ash at an impasse, the fromagerie considered sending “white cheese” to the US — meaning fresh, unripened cheese — then relying on retailers to “do the ashing” on the receiving end. But the fromagerie concluded that too few of its retail partners in the States were equipped, or have the skills, to do this reliably, and so they abandoned the idea. The

family firm remained in a precarious position, sending off cheeses in hopes that enough inventory would make it through to the final destination to make the shipments financially worthwhile. One lesson from this story is that seemingly arbitrary enforcement of questionably reasoned policy entails a risk of its own: of being dismissed as “mere politics,” and thus as something appropriately (even patriotically) to be resisted.

On the retail end, U.S.-based importers I know spoke dismissively of “the ash problem” as a nuisance; in conversation, one store manager in New England referred to shipment holds of ash-ribboned Morbier as simply the “flavor of the day” when it came to FDA import restrictions. Specialty importers — whether professional purveyors of artisanal foods or suitcase salespeople trading on tastes from home — are well aware that edible matter is neither stable nor self-evident as food, and that absorbing (some) loss — loss of inventory, edibility or palatability — is part of doing business. Foods deemed impermissible for border crossing may be destroyed, or left to rot or spoil. Such wastage is called “shrinkage” in the trade. Anticipated shrinkage is factored into the cost of moving perishable goods and, then, into retail mark-ups. However, when the routine navigation of (presumably) politically motivated blockages to the flow of goods is brushed off as part of doing business, this flattens the microbiopolitics of food safety. In other words, viewing the ash problem as the latest iteration of the Mimolette problem, and the Mimolette problem as the latest iteration of the raw-milk problem — as synecdochic equivalents — erases differences between charges of “adulteration” by contaminant (as against Morbier) and of “filth” (as against Mimolette). Whereas classifying vegetable ash as an adulterant queries the possible carcinogenicity (and, by extension, healthfulness) of industrially processed foods, classifying food shipments as

“filthy” may be to presume or to imply — again, by synecdoche — the presence of “dirty” or “immature” business practices that warrant further, paternalistic oversight. The economic stakes, and the politics, of these two implications are quite different. To treat these as the same “nuisance” obscures the international and cultural politics of trade, and of food, that generate corporate profits for international conglomerates while squeezing the margins and restricting the flexibility of small operations, and that reinforce global hierarchies.

### **Synecdoche and Body/Border Politics**

Food, as “edible matter,” “is not something that one can ever say is completely ‘made’ or made ‘complete’ if that means disentangled, or possible to disentangle, from its conditions of possibility” ((Bingham and Lavau 2012, 1601). Food shipments are always at risk of coming apart, losing value — of being qualified as spoiled or stale or rancid or otherwise inedible. “Eliminating every border threat is unrealistic, CBP Chief Says” — or he did back in October 2016, when the CBP Commissioner was Obama appointee, Gil Kerlikowske. As reported in *American Shipper*, Commissioner Kerlikowske acknowledged at an air cargo trade conference, ““we know when we try to stop risk totally we also stop the supply chain and we have incredibly adverse impacts on our economy”” (Kulisch 2016). As material objects, food imports are “multiple,” “mingled in and into the rest of the world by virtue of being done in practice” — or better, being done in multiple practices: safety practices but also “culinary practices, business practices and so on” (Bingham and Lavau 2012, 1601). This shifting and mingling of parts and wholes, elements and meanings, resists sovereign discipline, making the “geometry” of

biosecurity, food safety and trade almost impossible to square (Hinchliffe et al. 2012). It also provides the basis of our contemporary food system. A consistent inflow of foreign agricultural labor and foreign food products and techniques not only sustains the American food system, it makes the food system *American* — ethno-culturally diverse, economically tiered, future-facing rather than oriented to tradition.

At a time of increasing border policing and wall building — with anti-immigration efforts putting pressure on American agricultural industries and exacerbating the food insecurity faced by migrant farmworkers (Mares 2019) — the U.S. has by no means lost its taste for cosmopolitan flavors. Lauren Collins writes in *The New Yorker*, “Novelty is America’s tradition. In the culinary realm, this manifests as an aggressive metabolism for other nations’ foods” (2019, 24). Reflecting, perhaps, a kind of imperialist nostalgia — Renato Rosaldo’s term for “a particular kind of nostalgia, often found under imperialism, where people mourn the passing of what they themselves have transformed” (1989, 69) — supermarkets race to provide American consumers with (palettable) access to an ever-increasing array of global foods, even as greater numbers and types of people are subjected to enhanced scrutiny and possible rejection at U.S. points of entry.<sup>6</sup> When misaligned agri-food and immigration policies converge at the border, seemingly inconsistent or even “haphazard” acts of metabolic filtration are carried out on behalf of the “American” body politic.

“It’s interesting,” then-CBP Commissioner Kerlikowske continued in his address to air cargo professionals, “when I think about my career as a police chief in two of the country’s largest cities, working for mayors and city councils, nobody held me accountable for a crime free city. ... I’m not quite sure why [there’s] this accountability

for ‘no cargo can ever get in that could possibly ever harm anyone at any time in this country’” (Kulisch 2016). Synecdochic thinking, pointing to moving parts and morphing wholes, suggests that such accountability is imaginable insofar as a sense of a (whole) harm being “kept out” does not preclude “letting in” innocuous-seeming parts. For example, when for many months in 2016 the FDA flagged imports of European cheeses known to be “made from raw milk” for bacteriological testing as part of a challenge study, my local cheese shop responded by upping its orders of lesser-known raw-milk cheeses from countries like Corsica. Through different synecdochic logics, Persian cuisine can be the next new thing without welcoming Iranian cooks, and President Trump can celebrate “Taco Tuesday” while calling for a “total” border shutdown. Synecdochic reasoning remind us that borders are thresholds, where “what gets in” is a contingent matter of (bio)political expediency and power (cf. Roberts 2017; Jusionyte 2018).

In March 2019, the Italian-Canadian artist Cosimo Cavallaro began constructing a wall using 200 blocks of Cotija, a Mexican cheese. Cavallaro erected his cheese wall in San Diego County, just 45 feet from the border fence dividing Tecate, California from Tecate, Mexico. Cavallaro paid \$100 for each block of cheese, all past its sell-by date. In a video posted on his website, the artist explains:

This is a wall that I can handle, this is a wall that I’m willing to live with. Because this wall is a perishable, it will not last. ... The cheese is spoiled. It just means that, for the regulations, it’s not to be consumed. Here you take a piece of cheese and after a certain date you have to throw it. I don’t know why. Maybe that’s part of the whole system of commerce. You must waste cheese to keep making cheese

here. And that's the point, is that maybe we're all involved in this wasting. ... I'm taking this cheese and making a statement with it, making an art statement with it.

One suspects that Cavallaro, having long sculpted with perishable foodstuff (previous media include chocolate and melted mozzarella), would be not only unsurprised but pleased if the rotting cheese attracted pests and vermin that picked apart his construction. Indeed, Cavallaro virtually *invites* pests to enter, to make a home within (i.e., infest) his wall, thereby revealing this border — and the larger one for which it stands — to be less a barrier than a threshold. As a comment on the inherent permeability and perishability of border walls, Cavallaro's "art statement" with spoiled cheese reminds us that the CBP edict, "Don't pack a pest!" relies on shifting, politically contingent interpretations of which "pests" are to be kept out to allow for what wholes to remain "uncontaminated" — or be let in. Borders are continually in need of shoring up, of having their perishability staved off through mechanisms of material and semiotic enforcement. Shift the synecdoche, however, and borders are reconfigured as regulated doorways oriented more toward holism than fragmentation.

Cavallaro's cheese wall is semiotically dense, merging the metaphors of cheese (e.g., the cheesiness of political stagecraft) and of walls (e.g., the imaginary of clean separation between an 'us' and a 'them') to call attention to how political mobilizations of synecdoche are themselves mobile, only temporarily stable. This paper, focusing on the presence and effects of synecdochic reasoning, has aimed to open new sightlines within critical studies of security and circulation for further investigation of the semiotic

work and gastropolitical stakes entailed in the regulated movement of (some) foods across (shifting) borders.

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### **Biography**

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### **Notes**

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<sup>1</sup> In Banu Subramaniam’s telling, the Asian longhorned beetle’s story as a global “invasive” originates in China’s policy decision to plant monocultures of poplar trees in an effort to mitigate soil erosion and correct for deforestation (2014, 147). The Asian longhorned beetle, partial to poplars, thrived as a result. When, in the 1970s and 1980s, global trade “opened up,” this opened a growing market for pallets and crates to facilitate the shipping of goods. Along with those goods, burrowed in the wooden infrastructure of commerce, Asian longhorned beetle larvae traveled the world and began to infect lumber industries in the West. The “problem” of the Asian longhorned beetle thus arose as a direct effect of the very trade it purportedly threatens today.

<sup>2</sup> As Lampland and Star note, “The push to standardize presumes the ability to constrain a phenomenon” (2009, 14).

<sup>3</sup> Any shipment found to have live pests is rejected prior to prophylactic irradiation.

<sup>4</sup> Port Authority of NY & NJ December 2015 Traffic Report.

<sup>5</sup> See also *Federal Register* 84 (71): 15028-15036. April 12, 2019.

<sup>6</sup> My thanks to an anonymous reviewer for the notion of “(palletable) access.”

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