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Lidia Marte

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## FOODMAPS: TRACING BOUNDARIES OF ‘HOME’ THROUGH FOOD RELATIONS

LIDIA MARTE

Anthropology Department, The University of Texas at Austin, Austin,  
Texas, USA

*This paper aims to explain food mappings as a methodology to research spatial-temporal aspects of food relations as experienced from the cultural perspectives of people in specific communities. It proposes the concept of foodmaps as a useful tool to trace gendered boundaries of home among working class immigrant communities. I ground this discussion through sample foodmaps taken from fieldwork among Dominican communities in New York City and reflections on Dominico-Mexican food alliances. I conclude with some implications of food mappings, suggesting directions for future research on Greater Mexico and “Latino” food studies in the US.*

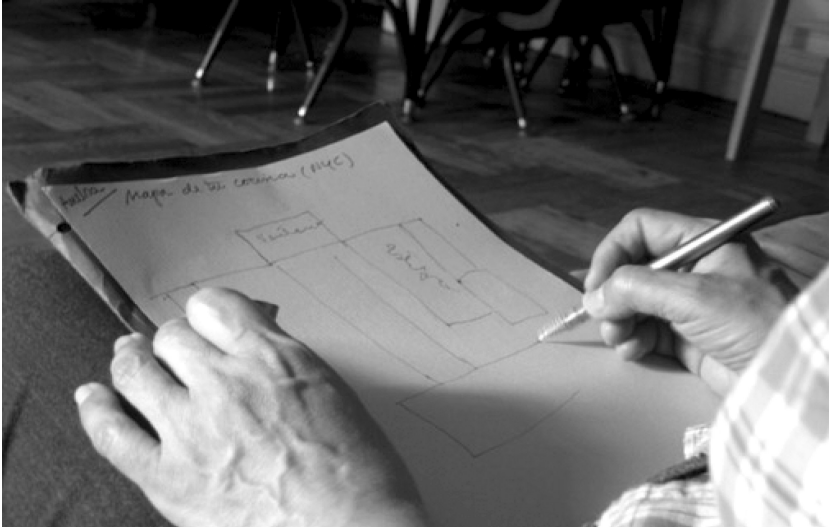
**Keywords:** Dominican food practices, Dominico-Mexican food alliances, foodmaps, place-memory

### Introduction

To trace means “to draw,” but also “a mark of a former presence or a small amount.” It is in this sense that *tracing* boundaries of “home” through a foodmap means producing a graphic depiction of food-place connections and can reveal—through ethnographic analysis—the former presence of cultural histories, as experienced from the present through the unnoticed threads that food relations create. To trace a foodmap (from a researcher’s perspective) is to track the role of food in the way immigrants search for home in a new society. For individuals that agree to work with me in the field, it might mean much more, placing themselves as visible subjects in the social maps of a city in which they are almost anonymous. Food serves to ground body-place-memory in the way immigrants

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Address correspondence to Lidia Marte, Anthropology Department, The University of Texas at Austin, P.O. Box 7864, Austin, TX 78713. E-mail: moth@mail.utexas.edu



**FIGURE 1** Dominican woman in the Bronx (2006), creating a foodmap. (photo by the author)

live and re-imagine their cultural histories in consecutive ‘homes,’ manifesting their movements through neighborhoods, cities, and countries. Through food mapping we can get a glimpse at the way migrant memory-work helps produce a sense of place through food roots and routes<sup>1</sup> as migrants re-invent new cultural regions of “home.”<sup>2</sup>

In this article I share how the use of food mappings can help us research and analyze the role of food in such immigrant “boundary projects.”<sup>3</sup> Using some ethnographic vignettes from my fieldwork with Dominican immigrant communities in New York City, (henceforth NYC), this paper offers descriptions and uses of foodmaps, presents two examples of their readings through one Dominican staple meal (“la bandera”), considers Dominico-Mexican food alliances, and concludes by discussing implications of this concept for food research especially among “Latino” and Mexican communities in the US.

### **Food Mappings: Tracing Relations, Contexts, and Histories**

Foodmaps are maps of relations, perceptual models of how people experience the boundaries of local home through food

connections. Foodmaps thus reveal areas of an extended shifting map of the multiple locations anyone needs to navigate in order to feel at home. The word *foodmap* could be assigned to any representational trace related to food produced by a specific person: a plate of food, an actual map (hand drawing) emphasizing food connection, a food narrative, or audio-visual documentation related to food (photographs, video clips, sound recordings). I suggest we could map (in collaboration with participants in our food studies experiential and perceptual boundaries of home through food practices and narratives. Even though food mappings are concerned with localities, tracing those immediate relations reveals the global connections of personal histories, households and neighborhoods.

Working with small samples and more in-depth field research we can study food through *miniature* ethnographies from the shared grounds and cultural perspectives of specific people in relation to specific foods. From this apparently narrow focus we can trace, for example, food relations through the choreographies of daily survival of families and individuals, from their local homes within cities and regions.

Food mapping is an image-based approach to research that pays attention to the way people relate to food in the interaction of senses, emotions, and environments. The visual foodmaps that appear in this paper are in themselves sources and representations subject to analysis, not only illustrations. Their visual poetics are not necessarily artistic statements, but aim at showing the aesthetic impressions and sensory moments that food helps generate. As thematic ethnographic maps, foodmaps can be used to research actual places, but also spaces (social/racial relations, community networks, local food paths, etc) and place-memory (sense of place and home, relations to homeland, linguistic landscapes, etc). Food mappings can also be produced by tracing food relations to states, institutions, organizations, local neighborhoods, social networks, and family histories, paying special attention to how and where individuals earn their “bread.”

Like many methodological innovations, the genesis of foodmaps in my work happened through a mix of chance, intention, and interaction in the field. In my pilot projects with Dominican communities in NYC, I noticed that often women expressed how “*no aparecemos en el mapa*”—“we don’t appear on the

map”—implying their invisibility in the Dominican Republic and in the US. I wanted to find an approach that did not leave out these spatial aspects of food that seem crucial to understanding Dominican foodways. I asked myself: whose foods, memories, and homes am I trying to understand? How could I understand the present encounters of foods, people, and cultures in the Caribbean mosaic, and the centrality of place-memory for populations that emerged from conquests, slavery, and colonial regimes? To ground this *gigantic* scale I focused on the *miniature*—the performance of food in households and kitchen spaces, the sensory-visual aspects of daily food uses, and the contested domestic and public narrative memories of the food experiences of each migrant family.<sup>4</sup>

In my search for suitable theoretical and methodological frameworks, I arrived at an approach to research that engages transdisciplinary food research methodologies.<sup>5</sup> My use of food mappings through narrative sites is inspired by decolonizing methodologies, space-place-memory studies, and third world feminist theory.<sup>6</sup> The need for a grounding of food relations in-place and for a method to research place movements led me to discover a big gap in the anthropological uses and theorizations of mapping methodologies. Nevertheless, the mapping work of feminist cultural geographers, social historians and bioregionalists, especially in relation to gender, offered practical applications and greatly helped in the developing of this framework.<sup>7</sup>

Informed by these sources and by the need to render visible the cultural history of participants in my research, I have used a combination of place-memory mappings and food mappings to gather materials on memory and space perceptions of kitchens and neighborhoods (past and present). I place emphasis particularly on tracing food paths—how individuals navigate local place and their translocal relations through food shopping, restaurants, food sharing, food exchanges, and community networks of survival. My use of foodmaps differs from other approaches. It is a framing device to gather data and a guide to collaborative engagement in the field, but it serves also as a conceptual framework of analysis. It is guided by food narratives from individual perspectives, paying attention to expanding contexts of food relations from the plate of a meal to its translocal routes, the socio-cultural relations of foods, and the people and places implicated in these passages.

Food mapping has been the closest I have come to understanding and documenting the gendered food histories of my research collaborators, and the effect of my own foodmaps in my research approaches.<sup>8</sup>

I suggest beginning food mapping with how certain foods are used and expressed in the present in kitchens and domestic spaces where collective/personal, public/private, past/present are negotiated. For example, I elicit food maps in domestic and public spaces by traveling with participant-collaborators their daily, weekly and monthly food cycles, gathering primary sources and life histories of Dominican immigrant families and their *communities*<sup>9</sup> through the perspectives of women cooks.

### **Tracing Dominican Immigrants' Boundaries of "Home" in New York City**

Food mapping is useful to research Dominican family cultural histories by focusing on migrant food, home, and memory as a continuous narrative about gendered experiences of survival. This tool helped me, for example, to locate which aspects of gendered boundaries of "home" were relevant by paying attention to which food relations are significant to both women and men. Food narratives reveal the need to re-think memory-work<sup>10</sup> as not only a nostalgic exercise, but also as a critical and traumatic historical imagination with important implications for immigrant communities. Food mappings are useful in tracking such Dominican Afro-diasporic entanglements of body-place-memory through the connections participants have to specific food sites.

Following these paths made it easier to identify how Dominican women who are the main cooks in the family (and one man who performed such labor in his household) placed more emphasis on food sites as landmarks to navigate their local places, to reimagine their cultural memory and sense of home, and as narrative sites to share their migrant histories with second and third generations. For this project, food mappings began with participants and I documenting their main staple meals, kitchens, and homes. Their food paths extended as far as they considered the boundaries of their homes to be (including other states in the US, Puerto Rico, and the Dominican Republic

[henceforth DR] in the cases in which they still maintain networks there).

During fieldwork I use a combination of video and photo/audio devices for oral histories and fieldnotes, food journals, and ethnographic mappings, all within the deep hanging-out of ethnographic participant-observation. Formal or informal interviews are rigid frames that do not work well to engage with these communities since they have oral-centered practices and whose story-telling is not lineal, but contrapuntal. I gathered collaged segments of oral histories through informal interactions around food preparation, shopping, and consumption, as I helped around the house with chores and occasionally at their job sites. The narratives arose spontaneously as we engaged in conversation. Sometimes I asked questions when I felt it was appropriate. My task was to be attentive and gadget-ready to document such interactions through video and sound recordings.<sup>11</sup>

Again, foodmaps can encompass a range of narrative traces created by researcher and study participants, ranging from hand drawn maps to oral histories. For documenting home boundaries through local food paths I work with two types of mapping. Mappings created from my perspective are useful for studying local food relations, and neighborhood and community boundaries across translocal and extended networks. The other type of mapping is produced by the participants in the study. I provide collaborators with disposable cameras and ask for hand-drawn memory maps of present and former kitchens, neighborhoods, food routes, and community maps. Their memory maps are especially useful for identifying perceptions of place, and how women and men express senses of “home” through visual means. Each trace becomes a part of the many layers of context of an ongoing foodmap of “home.”

For place mapping, first I create a base map of the area where the families live, using a pre-existing map of NYC. Over this base map, I mark their food paths to grocery stores, supermarkets, street food vendors, restaurants, and people and organizations they share food with in order to have an idea of how they move through the city. Once I explained to the participants my approach to study their food practices, I distributed drawing papers, pens, and disposable cameras. However, given the daily tasks people face in



**FIGURE 2** Left (top & bottom), disposable camera photo-maps taken by Elsa Fernandez in one of her visits to DR. Right (top & bottom), photo-maps of Elsa's kitchenspace taken by the ethnographer.

their survival, especially in NYC, the time for elicitation of maps was unpredictable. Only three participants actually used the disposable cameras. The rest seem to have been either intimidated by them, or in some cases, their schedule and hectic job duties were overwhelming (cooking in a restaurant seven days a week, for example).

Elsa, one of the women participants, took her disposable camera with her to her hometown, Santiago, DR, on an emergency trip for a family illness. The two images on the left in the above collage show the traditional way of cooking *sancocho* (roots & meat stew) in an outdoor patio (top), and an empty plate surrounded by darkness (bottom). These photo-maps Elsa brought back show her particular sentiment and perspective towards the foodscapes around her sister's household, and the importance these former home spaces still hold for her. There is a *ternura* (a gentle tenderness) to these images that I, as an ethnographer, would not have captured.

When I asked her to share her experiences of making these photos, she explained that the cooking of the *sancocho* in the photo was an occasion that she has never experienced again in NYC. In

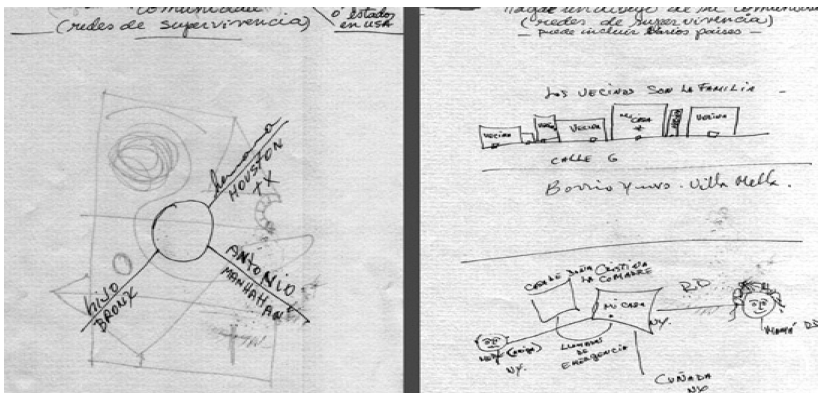


NYC, there are no outdoor spaces to cook a proper *sancocho*—in the midst of music and conversing, nor the open invitation to neighbors and family to come share the 3–5 hour labor-time that it takes to cook it. About the lonely empty plate, she said, “*ahí taba, se beía bonito y trite una tarde que como siempre se fue la lú. . . en Nueva Yor uno ya no pasa hambre. . .*” [“There it was, it looked beautiful and sad, one afternoon when electricity was gone as usual. . .in NYC one does not go hungry anymore”].

Some participants were comfortable with reading my guide questions to produce maps in my absence. With others, I needed to negotiate brief moments here and there (between food preparations, shopping, and documenting them at their job sites) to get hand-drawn maps, oral histories, and sound narratives as part of the food mapping documentation. Initially, asking for “memory maps” was confusing, until it became clear that *recuerdo* (remembrance) was a more appropriate word to use in explaining the kinds of drawings I was requesting. Once this was clear, I just waited for the appropriate moments to ask for the different hand-drawn maps throughout the year.

I gathered eight kinds of memory-maps in total for each cook: 1) A map of a plate of their main staple food with the names of the ingredients; 2) a food route map of where they shop for food in the city (for cooking and when eating out); 3) a set of kitchen maps (before their migration and their present one); 4) a set of neighborhood maps (before migration and present); 5) and a community map (people, organizations, etc. they considered key networks of survival, including those to whom they send remittances).

I also asked for three other kinds of maps to explore senses of place and home: 1) A map of “your country” to elicit which national territory they feel more attached to. (This depiction—as all the others—needs to be contextualized and critically read against what participants expressed through other primary sources, since a “national sentiment” did not necessarily mean that DR was their primary residence); 2) A “map of NYC,” which gave me a sense of the way they navigate the city. In most cases it corresponded to the food sites and social networks as places they frequented the most, for example NYC becoming a map of the Bronx or Manhattan. The last in the sequence was 3) a map of “home” (*hogar*) to elicit the meaning this concept had for each person. I expressed



**FIGURE 3** Two different memory-maps of *community* (survival networks) showing contrasting depictions of place & social networks. (The one on the left depicts isolation in NYC.)

to them that I was interested in their open interpretations of these three requests, unlike the other more direct food-related maps, in which I had explained in more detail what I was looking for.

In my analysis, I examined these foodmaps—in whatever medium—as narrative sites of the personal and family migrant trajectories of each household. I asked through them what such narrative memories and practices reveal about food socialization and kitchens as gendered performative spaces of subjectivities and community formation and how they enter into conversation with wider public discourses (for example of Dominican national cuisine and national belonging) as Dominicans are drawn into the racial, class, and state maps of NYC. I also examine which movements, roots, and routes are named and spoken of through food, and how far immigrants need to travel physically and socially in order to feel a sense of “home” in their localities. I propose these ethnographic readings to question how all these traces (conscious and unconscious marks left in the wake of foodpaths) help us to understand how Dominican immigrant women experience, re-imagine, and claim their presence, visibility, and value in NYC as they engage in their daily survival in dialogue with US narratives of migration and citizenship.

To get a taste of foodmaps and concrete ways to use them, below I elaborate briefly on two examples: mapping a Dominican

staple food, *la bandera* (the flag), and Dominican-Mexican shared foodmaps in NYC.

### Mapping *La Bandera*: Contested Versions of a Plate of Rice & Beans

“Rice, beans and **meat** is our national flag, *la bandera*. . .”  
(M. Veloz-maggiolo, *Antropologia Portatil*, 2001)

One of the most direct ways to try food mapping is to explore the individual plate of food, its ingredients and historical implications, pointing to the way it becomes a staple meal with specific meanings in the present through its historical emergence within a given region. We can map a present version of that meal cooked in a specific kitchen context, and made possible through the labor and cultural history of an individual, family and community. From a miniature plate map of *la bandera*, one main Dominican food staple (eaten usually as the main meal of the day), one can trace expanding context of relations from individuals that cook and eat this staple in NYC.

From the actual preparation of the meal, we can expand to larger contexts, such as the kitchen and household as gendered labor spaces, the way the cooks earn their income, and the places where they procure ingredients in their local neighborhoods. Each of these “domestic” realms is tangled with “public” spaces such as local Dominican food businesses implicating imports of food products, labor relations and the migrant trajectories between DR-US that made their existence possible. The food routes traveled in order for this meal to be cooked in that particular kitchen can be further expanded to include the geopolitical relationship between DR and the US, and the emergence of this staple as an icon of Dominican national cuisine.

In Dominican public culture, rice, beans, and meat is known as *la bandera*. This working-class meal became a prominent national culinary representation, together with *sancocho* and *mangú* (mashed green plantains) after a massive Dominican emigration between the years of 1960–1990 became established as a visible diaspora in the US.<sup>12</sup> The iconic representation of a proper *bandera* shows a plate with half rice, half beans, and a piece of meat on the



**FIGURE 4** Four versions of *la bandera* cooked by Dominican women in NYC: the preparations of the rice and the beans are very similar, while serving styles are somewhat different; most working-class women cooks serve each person in separate plates. The top left frame shows a change in this practice (Photos by the author)

side. An optional salad is usually made of avocado, lettuce, tomatoes, and radishes with lime juice. Beans are assigned a charged gendered value in the sense that their seasonings and flavors may represent a woman's reputation as a cook. The main "fringe" (Mintz's term) ingredients of Dominican beans are onions, garlic, cilantro or culantro, sweet peppers, and olive oil, but these ingredients vary of course, depending whose version one is tasting.

This national dish can be decoded through the foodmaps of specific Dominican communities in NYC, by reading this "gigantic" narrative against the "miniature" immigrant personal experiences of specific individual cooks, through their own version of *la bandera*. One of such specific versions is Elsa's *bandera*. Elsa is an older first generation immigrant living in the Bronx (NYC). She migrated from El Ejido, a small town in the province of Santiago, DR, in 1986. She lives with her husband and three grown offspring in a small two-room apartment close to Yankee Stadium. Her household is partially her job site as she works as a child attendant five days a week. To prepare her *bandera* she goes to her neighborhood supermarket a few blocks from her building where

she gets the dried red beans in a bag, a packet of rice, olive and corn oils, onions, sweet peppers, chicken bouillon, limes, and a box of lasagna. The Dominican condiments culantro, cilantro, and big avocados, she obtains from a Dominican grocery store across the street from her building. The oregano she receives directly from Santiago, DR via her sisters, or she has to take the bus to 207 St. in Upper Manhattan to get it from a Dominican-owned supermarket (where she also purchases well-priced bulk rice, beans, tomato sauce, etc. to send to her family in Santiago every few months—a box worth at least \$75 that she sends through a Dominican shipping company).

As with other Dominican preparations of *la bandera* that I encountered, she cooks the rice in plain water with a dab of corn oil and salt. The beans are boiled after breakfast for a few hours (sometimes pre-soaked overnight), and when tender, she adds the condiments. She makes her side dish for the day while the beans simmer. Elsa likes to talk and converse while cooking (a mix of reminiscences of food memories of DR, evaluative narratives of her life in NYC, and/or about family problems). There is much laughter and humor, even when the topics of conversation may



**FIGURE 5** Top view of Elsa's version of *la bandera* (beans, rice, lasagna). One of the children she baby-sits passes by the table. Bronx, NYC 2006 (Photo by the author)

be sad. She spends most of her day in the kitchen. This is also where she takes a bite here and there as her job permits. Once the meals is ready, she serves men if they are present, or dishes up their plates when they arrive; women, (including me), she asks first if we want to serve ourselves. Excerpts of Elsa's narratives shared below serve to anchor the photo-map of her version of *la bandera*. They also expand the contextual layers of mapping a plate that point not only to the ingredients, but also to the labor needed to procure them. Her excerpts take us further into the contrasting meanings between her specific bandera version and the national cuisine discourse of this dish: "*La bandera* for me is rice, beans, and spaghetti, so it can feed more people . . . this is our main staple . . . my *bandera* is accompanied also with lasagna . . . I liquefy my beans, that is the way my mother cooked them, with very few beans in it, and that is the way I cook them, creamy . . . I started adding celery to my beans here, it is very healthy . . . that is the *bandera* that I understand, but it brings contradictions with other Dominican versions . . ."13

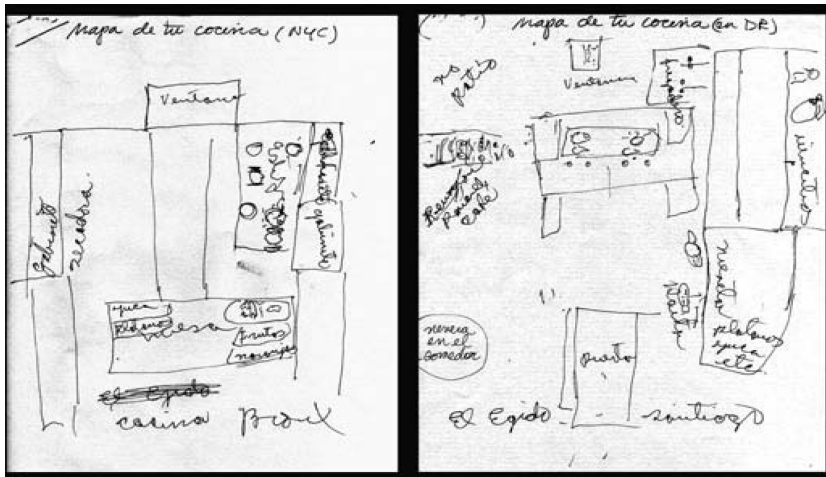
Reading this food narrative (taken from a sound file) as a layer of this woman's extended foodmap can be useful. The oral narrative in her Afro-Dominican Spanish (a non-prestige dialectal form that is usually erased even from academic studies) expresses the poetic shapes of a food memory that has personal and collective political implications. Stating her seasoning style of beans (preferring creamy beans, and using celery as a new ingredient), as "epistemologically valid knowledge" (Abarca 2006) reveals the contested spaces and experiences of domestic cooking practices, which function at times as liberated territory, and at others, as inscriptions of marginality and oppression. One of the most obvious contrasts in her version is the substitution of pasta for meat, because as she states, it can feed more people. A counter-narrative of gender-class-citizenship seems to arise here that contrasts with the monolithic representation of *la bandera* as a meal of national unity and equality, which is also contested in this quote: "My family did not get bags of rice, beans, and powdered milk from the Balaguer government (1970s), we did it out of principle, since they used to play with the hunger of the people . . ."14

Furthermore, the first foodmap layer of this meal in its specific kitchen context in the Bronx, as prepared food, it has resonances with other expanding contexts. For example, how she earns her

bread (“*como se gana el plátano*”—how she “earns her plantain” is her expression), as expressed in the next quote, help to further contextualize her meanings of *la bandera* in her working-class experience as she struggles to make a decent wage. The class, gender and racial locations that position her on the labor maps of both DR and the US can be followed from the threads here: “I have my own way of getting income, doing little things here and there . . . I give more than 100% to keep my home functioning like a ship, when it is going down I find a way to save it . . . I used to work in factories, migration agents come there and even the owners had to run because they did not have papers . . . In Santo Domingo I worked in free trade zones . . . there one had to eat on the street, like a dog, that is how it was at lunch time . . . I work now as a child attendant at home, I have seven children to my care . . . This job and this city are tough, but . . . if the enemy did not kill me in DR, these jobs here are not going to kill me either . . .”<sup>15</sup>

From these narrative layers, I read her location with respect to the Dominican state as inscribing her as a disposable citizen, yet Elsa contests this by reclaiming the dignity and strength of her creative survival under oppressive circumstances. These food narrative memories obviously mark her gendered body and created an echo in the way she re-claims place and sense of “home”, and spaces for her survival in the present from her local grounds in NYC. The narrative of failed return she shares with many other immigrants expresses here this rupture: “When I first came here, I used to see people crying in the trains, and wondered what may be happening to them . . . one day I started crying right there in the #4 train, without minding anyone . . . now I know, in this city we drag around so much sadness . . . I always thought about returning [to DR], I did not imagine this, this cold, this mess, four walls at all times . . . I migrated with an objective, but some things are lost, yet others things are gained . . . I am now a citizen, I did what I could for my children . . .”<sup>16</sup>

In her hand-made memory drawings of her kitchen (Figure 6) in the DR and her present one in NYC, we notice food-place-memory connections: for example, how the past kitchen in DR is represented in more details and associated with remembered events, in contrast to the one in NYC. (It seems that the restricted and uneasy way in which marginalized immigrants feel their bodies in a new society translates into more sparse drawings of the present



**FIGURE 6** Elsa's memory-maps of her past and present kitchens. Left (Bronx, New York City), right (Santiago, DR).

place they inhabit.) This experience of place also points to tropical depression<sup>17</sup> resulting from a drastic change of environments from the Caribbean to a northern zone; most of the participants in this research expressed similar difficulties. The way kitchens in DR, and especially in Elsa's semi-rural province, become transit spaces between public-private is also a major difference between them and a kitchen in a small apartment in NYC, secured with three different kinds of locks, in an enclosed building for which one needs keys to enter.

This tour around the space of a plate of rice and beans (which I could only sketch superficially in the space of this paper) is an example of how we can travel from a domestic meal to the hands that cook it, to the cook's migrant experiences of place, as well as to the translocal implications of this specific Dominican household in NYC. We can keep expanding even further the visible and invisible lines that intercept these personal histories with the collective ethnohistory of the Dominican Republic if we examine each of the ingredients in *la bandera* as they point to the emergence of Caribbean food systems born out of biocultural encounters of foods, people, and lands through conquest, colonization, and slavery. The resonances of such a history of displacement and marginalization created by colonial and present global relations



are experienced and contested now by these Dominican immigrants locally from given neighborhoods in NYC.

### **Dominico-Mexican Foodmaps: Re-Imagining Boundaries of Communities**

Foodmaps reveal not only food routes within one person, family or community history as seen above, but also help us trace how working-class Dominican immigrants in NYC experience multicultural encounters and food alliances with other marginalized groups. As Tuchman and Levine (1998) reveal in their study of New York Jewish communities and Chinese restaurants, immigrants integrate into this new society not necessarily through mainstream “America”, but through contact with other “minority” communities through food relations. Dominico-Mexican alliances are a good example of some of the transformations of food roots and routes in such encounters.

I share below ethnographic vignettes about Dominico-Mexican shared foodmaps in the chronological order in which their importance came to my attention. A researcher’s personal foodmaps may seem inconsequential, yet they condition in great measure the themes and communities we choose to work with, the specific poetics of our documentations, the degree of attention we place on particular food items and situations, interactions, and ultimately the types of analysis and their political implications.

Exploring NYC as a new resident in the early 1990s (long before I became an anthropologist) I stumbled into a Mexican restaurant in lower Manhattan around Bleecker Street. After eating there a couple of times I discovered that the beans were very familiar. My curiosity grew strong, and so did my certainty that I knew the flavors and seasonings of those beans. A hint of *recaito*,<sup>18</sup> red onions, lime, and a bit of sugar? They did not taste to me like Mexican “foreign” food! I finally asked if I could talk to the chef (the restaurant was not upscale, but it was not a fast food place, either). He greeted me in a beautiful Santo Domingo accent, we talked briefly, I commended him on the food (especially the beans), we exchanged impressions, and I went back to my table. From that day on I started an informal mini-project of touring other Mexican restaurants in Manhattan, the Bronx, and Brooklyn, paying particular attention to the flavors of the beans.

I discovered at least five other Mexican restaurants in Manhattan where Dominican men were the main cooks.

As I underwent a process of re-Dominicanization due to personal re-evaluations of my family and community, I started hanging out around Dominican areas more frequently. By the late 1990s I stumbled again into a similar situation: I found Mexican men working in Dominican restaurants around Washington Heights, Manhattan, and the Bronx. They were not the main cooks but mostly kitchen helpers; however, I did notice a slow seeping-through of Mexican cuisine in these restaurant menus. Thanks to an “Anglo” friend of mine I got to eat at a Dominican restaurant in Chinatown (the only establishment of its kind in the area) that had an interesting blend of Dominican and Mexican foods, and had employees from both countries. Our favorite meal there was a black bean burrito, which in retrospect epitomizes for me the fortunate blend of these two cuisines—Mexican and Dominican—and the labor alliances of these two “ethnic” groups.

During my fieldwork in NYC this past year I went back to eat at the West Side Cafe in Chinatown with my friend to celebrate our encounter and to remember past times. As we conversed, I realized that this Dominican restaurant has been in my friend’s foodmap for fifteen years. We ordered our favorite black bean burrito with



**FIGURE 7** Left, menu page from a Dominican restaurant (West Side Cafe, Chinatown, NYC), listing Dominican, Mexican, and “American” dishes. Right, view of interior (top) and a black bean “burrito” plate. (Photos by the author)

extra cheese and their special extra-hot sauce. This was a tropical version of a Mexican burrito; by excluding the rice, it is also very different from the Tex-Mex burritos served in Manhattan. A future mapping of this plate could reveal some interesting interpretive versions of both Mexican and Dominican foods and point to some Dominico-Mexican food alliances in public spaces.

This time, as an anthropologist researching food, I had a specific awareness, questions, and ways of interacting. I looked carefully at the menu and the space, and ate mindfully. I noticed that both Mexican men and women were working at the place. The owner-manager told me that clients were very diverse, not exclusively Dominican or Mexican, but an assortment of employees from nearby office and federal buildings. The Mexican dishes expanded the range of food offerings and built on the already domesticated taste for Mexican foods in NYC, broadening the restaurant's clientele. At the time this restaurant opened in Chinatown (1980s, before Sammy Sosa's renown as a baseball star), Dominicans and their foods were not as visible outside of Washington Heights, so it made sense to expand the menu to include more well-known fare.

Another Dominican restaurant, *El Cofre* (in Brooklyn), that I got to explore during my fieldwork reveals some other aspects of these public Dominico-Mexican food alliances. This restaurant has become a site of cultural encounters in a diverse neighborhood, with regular clients such as Mexican construction workers in the area who gather there everyday for lunch. They choose Dominican food for a variety of reasons that need to be studied. I venture that one reason may be that the Mexican restaurants on the same few blocks in this area (Clinton Hill) are more expensive and more formal.

Because *El Cofre* offers inexpensive, tasty, and still familiar foods in a welcoming atmosphere and is close to their work sites, construction workers can go in work clothes, and eat there during their short breaks. But whatever reasons they may have for their choice, their presence and sponsorship of this establishment creates social relations that motivate them to come back. For example, on Sundays they eat there with their families while listening to music on the jukebox. There are also other social ties as three employees, including kitchen helpers, are Mexican.

These shared foodsites implicate the plate of food, the hands that work to get it to the table, the earning of income to obtain



**FIGURE 8** Left, two views of the Dominican restaurant El Cofre (Brooklyn, NYC). Right, a food-route-map showing this restaurant as one neighborhood landmark. (Photos by the author. Map by Rosa Mota)

the foods, and the places and shared spaces where they are consumed. Such shared “Latino” foodmaps reveal cultural exchanges and movements through food paths that help create specific neighborhoods out of commonalities of language, taste and migrant conditions. I am not suggesting that these sites of food encounters are harmonious and without tensions. Work needs to be done to find out if, indeed, Dominican and Mexican workers are being fairly treated at each others’ restaurants, if immigration status is one motivation for alliances, and if this leveling of equals is possibly due to the fact that most restaurants are family businesses.

The vignettes of foodmap encounters do not end in this public setting. There are also Dominico-Mexican food alliances occurring in domestic spaces among NYC immigrant communities. A second layer of mappings in this realm could reveal the extent of pan-ethnic “Latino” food-home alliances.<sup>19</sup> Through labor partnership and marriages (usually between first-generation immigrant Dominican women and first-generation immigrant Mexican men) that create Dominican-Mexican offspring (or Mexican-Dominican depending on who is naming) these foodmaps acquire a depth and intimacy that have crucial repercussions for new cultural formations of communities and specific individual flavors

of new Americans in NYC. Two of the participant families in my fieldwork are part of the bicultural encounters that have produced a blend of foods, children and domestic spaces. The Dominican wives spoke about the transformation of their cooking through these cross-cultural food encounters: “I didn’t know how to cook *mangú* (boiled and mashed plantains) but my Mexican husband tried it once in a Dominican restaurant and he asked me if I could make it at home. I have also learned how to cook Mexican foods. I love to make tacos on Sundays and our son likes them too . . .”<sup>20</sup> [Carmela]. And a similar experience shared by Nina: “. . . I prefer *moro* (rice cooked inside the beans - dried) . . . but a mi mejicano [my Mexican] he likes my beans, so I cook rice and beans for him . . . now in my kitchen altar I have the virgin of Guadalupe and the virgin of Altagracia so we both feel blessed . . .”<sup>21</sup>

A research exploration of these domestic gendered alliances is needed to understand some of the cultural transformations of both sides of such networks. From my superficial examinations of these encounters I have noticed that it is usually men who seem to be at the center of the traffic exchange as cooks, kitchen helpers, and partners. Alliances, at least initially, may have to do with restricted



**FIGURE 9** Left, kitchen altar and Dom-Mex boy eating *mangú*. Right, maize (corn) staple and Dominican kitchen with Mexican decorations. (Photos by author.)

labor opportunities for non-English speaking immigrant workers. The formation of new families and the blending of two cuisines will continue to render new linguistic innovations and community networks. These tangled public/private experiences of place, space and memory-making could give us a launching pad to trace the extending boundaries of Dominican foodmaps in NYC, but also open lines of inquiry for other studies addressing how these food alliances emerged, and which kinds of Mexican narratives are arising about such processes.

Present food relations implicate a shared ethnohistorical emergence of these two Latin American nations. Dominican and Mexican food systems already shared geopolitical alliances as they emerged out of colonial encounters in the Americas.<sup>22</sup> As parallel appropriations in response to colonial violence, these encounters produced complex food systems and delicious meals out of indigenous, European, African, and many other untraceable mixtures.

Today in Mexican and Dominican kitchens in NYC some similar meals are prepared such as *majarete*, a maize-based, light, hot meal similar to Mexico's *atole*, eaten by Dominicans mostly for breakfast and dinner. Another maize-based snack is *gofio*, similar to *pinole*, but eaten in the DR dry, as a snack for children, and very convenient to help deal with hunger in times of crisis. Hot chocolate is drunk almost daily in Dominican households in both the DR and NYC. And, of course, rice, beans, corn, and squash are present in diverse meal preparations. Even for Dominicans who don't have direct food alliances with Mexicans, ordering out or eating at Mexican restaurants is already part of weekly or monthly food cycles, not ethnic excursions into the exotic.

There are also sentiments and affinities, at least from Dominicans to Mexicans, that were fostered in pre-migration exposure to Mexican cultural productions in the Dominican Republic that, as in my case, have marked routes in my own foodmaps. To this day I still associate Mexican boleros and ranchera music with a memory of my mother cooking her Dominican *sancocho* (root & meat stew) on certain Sunday mornings. Another personal Dominico-Mexican alliance happens in more subtle ways in Austin, Texas, as a breakfast taco at my favorite local restaurant (owned by a family from Saltillo, Mexico) becomes the central meal of my day. My choice responds to the familiar flavors of their bean taco, but responds also to practical reasons in the way I navigate my local

neighborhood, and to long-ago formed affinities from my previous encounters with Mexican culinary culture in Mexico, DR, and NYC.

### Mapping Food as Culture Theory

As my brief excursion into Dominico-Mexican foodmaps within Mexico and its diasporas in the US shows, there can be interesting future research departing from shared foodmaps among Latinos in the US. There is still much work needed addressing “Latino” food practices in the US, and their place-specific food cultural histories. This approach is needed in particular to address “ethnic” food histories beyond continuity and change, nostalgia and tradition. There is also a need for more nuanced food-centered case studies, and theoretical and methodological explorations that go beyond “ethnic” groups and identity. Since social networks are produced around ethnic labels, and since social-institutional identities do not necessarily correspond to lived experiences, it is important to move beyond these frames. Focusing on performance of subjectivities and communities of practice, situated in-place and foregrounding space as sites of social relations and cultural encounters<sup>23</sup> could be more productive in recognizing the complex and creative agency of our fieldwork collaborators.

Extending foodmaps insights into greater Mexico, I suggest it could be useful to research Mexican working-class social processes through the performance of food-place-memory from the perspectives of individuals and families in specific urban neighborhoods as they search for a sense of “home.” Such food-networks of survival need to be examined in the context of gender/class/race/national and global formations that they implicate. This *indirect* approach focusing on processes of survival instead of processes of identification is a good way to question how migrants (be it migration from rural to urban in the same territory or internationally) navigate and narrate their multiple and shifting belongings, and how food in domestic-public spaces become contested zones of individual and collective projects.

Grounding studies in place-memory<sup>24</sup> and ethnohistories, participatory research can be designed to explore how working-class communities, social networks and individuals (especially women) are racialized and marginalized within present neoliberal

restructuring of the Mexican state. Tracing daily food paths of particular communities in specific barrios in Mexico City one could explore how they are mapped in the urban space and how in turn they re-claim places and spaces for themselves through informal food-labor across public/private sites.

In summary, the use of foodmaps as a framework has many implications for food studies. It can help ground food research in place-memory, tracking how localities are experienced and transformed through food relations. Food mappings could be useful in this respect to trace negotiations of public/private and their counter-spaces of *calle/casa* (home/street), in local homescapes<sup>25</sup> as gendered labor is implicated in procuring, preparing and consuming foods, but also the socio-historical relations that made these foodmaps possible in the present. Mapping literally and conceptually this food spatiality of power may reveal small claims to autonomy, self- and community-making practices that individuals, families and networks have to negotiate in order to produce daily a sense of “home.”

For me, the beauty and productiveness of foodmaps resides in this capacity to encompass so many experiential, representational and geopolitical layers, and still allow one to focus on specific aspects of food relations. Even though we may end up with more information on our plates than we can chew, one could leave aside totalizing ambitions (so common among ethnographers). The idea is to use many spatial-temporal aspects to contextualize food relations, yet place the emphasis on a particular layer we wish to understand. The limits will clarify themselves if we focus on tracing the boundaries of such home maps through the perspectives and food relations of those individuals working with us.

One of the most important implications of foodmaps is the way they can help ground research from specific narrative points and marginal histories. Through food mappings we can work with marginalized communities and individuals from their daily grounds, in appreciation of their creative strategies of survival, recognizing how they *narrate* to themselves and to us what it means for them to be “human.” Mapping everyday local choreographies through food helps us re-inscribe in national (and transnational) maps local histories neglected in official archives and mainstream public culture, even when they are central to the survival of neighborhoods, regions and nations.



The processes and products under the umbrella of foodmaps are particularly suited to develop collaborative research, as well as to share with local communities the primary sources that they are helping us create. For the closing ritual of my fieldwork in NYC we produced an ethnographic exhibition and a film using the foodmaps that participants shared as cultural testimonies with their families, communities and a diverse audience in the City. This way the outcome of fieldwork was not only “data” for my dissertation but reciprocity gifts that have now become family and community archives, as copies of the film and hand-made books exhibited were given to them at the closing of the events.

Food mapping may be primarily appealing to feminist researchers, and especially to “native” or “insider” ethnographers. It may entail rethinking the ways we define the ‘field’ and clarifying what kind of labor-intensive interactions we want to develop with specific communities. However, if we consider it as an experimental, partial and provisional framework, one or another aspect of it may be useful to diverse researchers. Foodmaps for example, are useful not only for food studies, but also for other kinds of research,<sup>26</sup> and even to create alternative histories by excavating invisible communal layers in the transformations of specific places and regions.

A wider contribution of this experiment is to further ethnographic research engaging mapping methodologies. Ethnographic mappings help produce thematic maps for tracing the ecological, socio-economic, poetic, and political relations that delimit *where, when, and how* we survive. This approach can help us understand how we, as humans, survive through our search for “home,” and how in this process we perform and transform subjectivities, places, histories and ways of knowing.

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help with grammar and syntax. To Jean Duruz for suggestions that helped me improve an earlier draft.

### Notes

1. For a similar usage see, Barndt, Deborah. 2002. *Tangled Routes: Women, Work, and Globalization on the Tomato Trail*. Lanham, MD. Rowman and Littlefield. Informed by African Diaspora theory, I mean by *roots* specific foodways that Dominican families bring with them as they struggle for spaces of home in NYC. *Routes* are actual geographic trajectories, movements within and outside of neighborhoods and households, as well as the narrative memories and relational traces we leave as migrants in our search for shelter and senses of home.
2. Based loosely on Mohanty (2003) and Ahmed (2000), I define *home* as a place-specific *historical relation*, an *experience*, and a *narrative site*.
3. Donna Haraway's term (1991), the way I interpret it means that socio-cultural boundaries do not pre-exist but are conditioned by the life projects of situated subjects, in daily interactions and negotiations with institutional agendas and historical power regimes.
4. These apparent—subtly gendered—dichotomies of the “miniature” personal-domestic and the ‘gigantic’ political-public implicate each other as they dwarf and magnify matrixes of power and agency. As Susan Stewart (1996) has suggested for other kinds of narrative memory-work such as keeping souvenirs and collecting.
5. Mintz (1997), Douglas (1997), Counihan (1999), Christie (2003), Bentley (1998), and Williams-Forsen (2006) document the emergence and transformation of food substances and their meanings in social context as they are produced through cultural histories of specific people and places.
6. Mohanty (2003), Ahmed (2000), Duncan (1996), Visweswaran (1994), Scott (1992), and Massey (2001) focus on spatial-historical aspects of marginalization, foreground *personalexperience* as mediated through narrative testimonial practices, and pay attention to race/class/gender in the historical and present struggles of third world populations.
7. Cognitive mapping has been used successfully especially by feminist cultural geographers (Rocheleau 1995), in studying women's agricultural and environmental local knowledge of food production, and for cognitive and memory mappings of kitchen spaces (Christie 2003). Also a new wave of social historians uses mapping to study local neighborhood histories and senses of place, revealing through multiple voices many layers of one single area (Hayden 1997). Bioregionalists (Aberley 1993) have developed participatory regional and home mappings focusing on ecological environments. These ecological mappings and their uses have theoretical implications if one tailors this method to trace ethnographically cultural regions of home.
8. Foodmaps are always situated from the perspectives of the people that are drawing such maps. Hence the parallel maps that I produce through my field-work documentation and in my academic narratives have specific partialities.

I engage with food research as a Dominican “native” anthropologist, and as a visual artist with an interest in material culture and its representation. I consider these cultural locations as partial and privileged perspectives (Haraway 1991) requiring critical awareness. Researchers are *cultural workers*, meaning that what we produce as academic narratives are also cultural representations and creative projects. That is why I consider important to at least pay attention to our own foodmaps, at least as a self-calibrating device since we are the main instruments of inquiry.

9. The emphasis on *communities*, instead of *ethnic group* points to the diversity of formal and informal networks that arise across ethnic and geographical lines in neighborhoods, cities and states that have a sizable Dominican population. The Dominican population for example, in NYC is very diverse; among the seven families I worked with only two had intersecting networks. They navigate different food routes and places in the city, socialize and create communities with different sectors of Dominican and other Latino groups and local organizations.
10. In contested and contradictory spaces such as migration and displacement, people experience a need to invest specific artifacts such as food, plants, or songs with “commemorative vigilance” (Bardenstein 1999; Bal 1999). Memory work is created through cooking practices and food narratives, and both are actively re-invented from the present; they are interpretive, imaginative, and in constant negotiation between forgetting and remembering, excluding/including. Acts of remembrance occur through the confluence of nostalgic (affective), traumatic, and critical memory (Sturken 1999; Bal 1999, Spitzer 1999).
11. I also created seven questionnaires on food socialization, which became mostly a guide to myself to make sure I was getting all the aspects of food relations I needed. I occasionally will use questions from them that they will answer orally as we went about the day. I found however, that what obtained were bare bone answers, without the richness and food-memory details present in the ones gathered through spontaneous interactions.
12. This reveals a similar phenomenon in the transnational roots of national cuisines in the Caribbean identified by R. Wilk in the case of Belize.
13. “La bandera pa mi e’arró, habichuela y epageti, pa que rinda y alcance pa’ mágente . . . ese e’ el plato principal nuestro . . . mi bandera la acompaño con lasaña tambien . . . yo licuo mi s’habichuela, asi la hacia mi mamá, con poquito grano, y asi yo la cocino, con mucha crema . . . yo le empecéa añadir cerey aqui, dicen que muy saludable . . . esa e’la bandera que yo entiendo, pero trae contradiccion con la version de otra gente . . .”
14. “. . . mi familia no bucófundita con arróhabichuela, y leche en polvo, de esa que daba el gobierno de Balaguer, por principioje’ que se jugaba con el hambre del pueblo. . .”
15. “. . . yo me gano mi propia entrada, chiripiando aqui y allá. . . yo doy máde 100% pa’ mantenéel hogar a flote . . . como un barco cuando se táundiendo siempre hay una forma de salbarlo. . . . yo trabaje en factoria, inmigracion venia, y lo primero en juir eran lo jefe, porque no tenian papele . . . en Sto. Dgo. trabaje en la zona franca y en telecomunicacion . . . en la zona franca

uno tenía que comer en la calle, como un perro, así era el lunche. . . . ahora trabajo de niñera en mi casa, tengo siete carajito a mi cargo . . . eto trabajo y eta ciudad matan a uno, pero . . . si el enemigo no me mató, eto tampoco me va a matá. . . ”

16. “Cuando llegué aquí me asombré de vé gente llorando en lo trene, yo me decia, diantre! que le pasará a esa gente. . . un dia fui yo la que rompí a llorá en el tren 4, así, sin que me importara quien me viera. . . ahora e’ que yo entiendo, ay!, e’ que la gente arratra tanta tritesa en eta ciudá. . . siempre pensé en regresar, no me imagine eto, ete frio, eta baina, cuatro parede tó el tiempo. . . vine con un ojetibo, pero una cosa se ganan y otra se pierden. . . y ya soy ciudadana, lo hise po mi’s’joj. . . ”
17. Thanks to Ramona Lee Perez for reminding me of the importance of immigrants’ traumatic experiences of new climatic environments. More elaboration on the specific ways participants experience this syndrome can’t not be discussed in the space of this paper.
18. There are some interesting distinctions here. Recaito in DR is the herb *Arenigum fetidum* (a new word plant), what may be called culantro in Mexico. In DR *verdura* or *verdecito* refers to cilantro leaves (*Coriandum Sativa*) an old world herb introduced in the Americas by the Spaniards during colonization.
19. For a great discussion of ‘convivencia diaria’ (daily interactions of women across pan-ethnic lines) Ricourt & Danta (2003) *Hispanas de Queens: Latino Pan-ethnicity in a NYC Neighborhood*.
20. “no!, yo no sabia cociná mangú, pero mi marido mejicano lo probó un dia en un retauran dominicano y le gujtó, me preguntó si yo lo sabia hacía. . . ya aprendí a cociná comida mejicana, me encanta hacía taco lo domingo, y al niño le gujtan tambien. . . ”
21. “. . . yo prefiero el moro. . . pero a mi mejicano le gutan su habichela, siiii, entonce la cocino para él. . . mira, ahora en el altar de la cocina tengo dó virgene, la de Guadalupe y la de la Altigracia, así lo dó no sentimo bendecido. . . ”
22. See Mintz’s work for analysis of the emergence of food systems in the Caribbean, Sophie Coe *America’s First Cuisines* (1994) for Mesoamerica. Read also Abarca (2006) pp. 96–100 for a wonderful interpretation of *mole* as a foundational meal in Mexico.
23. Arjun Appaduari’s concept of ethnoscapes is of great usefulness here if taken beyond a theoretical nicety. See Jean Duruz’s *Eating at the Borders: Culinary Journeys*, for a nuanced use of this concept.
24. Place-memory implicates here spatio-temporal positions. I define place as a geopolitical and socio-culturally produced location. Since places are experienced from culturally specific personal histories one place (such as a neighborhood in the Bronx) has many possible representations. A definition of *space* as “social relations” (Duncan 1996) seem to be the most productive in analyzing how places from kitchens to streets are produced in the present through historically specific political relations. These definitions are key to me for mapping transformations of food, place-memory and gendered migrant cultural histories.
25. The use of “scape” in home, food, etc., is meant to highlight the focus on place-space.

26. For example, I have two pilot projects in progress, one mapping learning trajectories (through formal and informal education) and the other a local history project of East Austin, as mapped through community gardens.

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