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ARTICLE

Kitchen phenomenologies: Antiromantic poetics of space and food in the Anthropocene

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Abstract

This paper considers the kitchen and the phenomenological values that emerge from it. In this text the kitchen is seen as a space of possibility within the context of the Capitalocene, from which new values and imaginations for a more sustainable future may emerge. Drawing upon ecofeminist critiques and feminist food studies, and building upon the phenomenologies of space of Gaston Bachelard and Yi-Fu Tuan, this exploration surveys how intimacy, memory, care, and relation emerge from kitchen endeavours and what these notions mean for a Capitalocenic world. These theoretics are intertwined with ethnographic materials on foodscapes and foodways gathered in Xochimilco, Mexico City. From this, radical conceptualisations of the kitchen emerge and everyday phenomenologies spread into new spaces, while bringing together these subjects with environmental issues. I propose the notion of the antiromantic as an approach emerging from the kitchen's history as a gendered and contested space, and as a way to approach the kitchen and its labours in the midst of our current ecological crises; in this way the kitchen can be understood and inhabited as a political space of possibility for sustainable transformations.

KEYWORDS

Capitalocene, ecofeminism, ethnography, food geographies, sustainability, Xochimilco

> The world is romantic as the home is not. Men are romantic as women are not.
>
> — Yi-Fu Tuan, *Romantic Geography*

> what can we women know, but kitchen philosophies?
>
> — Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, *Respuesta a Sor Filotea*

1 | CHICKEN BONES, CAPITAL, AND KITCHEN PHILOSOPHIES

We live in a new geological epoch caused by humans, marked by plastic and chicken bones. Or that's how the Anthropocene is oft-portrayed in media and pop science (e.g. Gorman, 2018). While the scientific, social, and humanistic aspects of the Anthropocene have been widely discussed (Bonneuil & Fressoz, 2016; Lewis & Maslin, 2015), here I follow the critiques that see this epoch as indivisible from Modern Capitalism.

Marxist critics have developed the idea of the Capitalocene, arguing that this epoch is not the responsibility of an ambiguous *antrhropos*, but of a specific kind of man — Western, White, and Capitalist. The Capitalocene places the blame for our ecological crises squarely upon Capitalism's history, ecology, politics, and its exploitation of subaltern Others. Thus, Capitalism is not only an economic system, but a 'world-ecological-political-system' (Machado Aráoz, 2016; Moore, 2017), the foundational event of which can be seen in the colonial invention of the 'New World' which leads to global racial Capitalism, and the emergence of the Capitalocene.

Here, I use the Capitalocene as a method, following Tornel and Lunden, to 'formulate and construct a political subjectivity of the ongoing civilizatory/planetary crisis' (Tornel & Lunden, 2022, p. 3), in this case applied to kitchen space. Following the argument that to find more just and sustainable futures requires not only better science or meticulous policies, but a shift in values (IPBES, 2022); I consider the overlooked values, imaginations, and 'kitchen philosophies' accrued by women over centuries. In line with recent ecofeminist scholarship and the relational turn of sustainability science, I propose that kitchen philosophies, more specifically, kitchen *phenomenologies*, can provide us with alternative ways of inhabiting the earth — different 'political subjectivities' — that can help us build more sustainable futures.

Why the kitchen? Because it links with ecofeminist critiques that see in women's ignored labours of care knowledges and perspectives that can be useful in our context of crisis (Barca, 2020; Salleh, 1995). Because it is a room somewhat ignored by phenomenologists, although feminist scholars have started to pursue this avenue (Duruz, 2004; Meah, 2016b). And because the Capitalocene is intimately related to food, both in that current crises bring forth questions regarding the sustainability and resilience of food systems (Garnett, 2016), and in that the history of this epoch is closely related to the history of industrial agriculture and the making of the modern diet where food becomes a commodity (Moore, 2015; Shiva, 2009). In this way, I bring into conversation ecofeminism, feminist food studies and phenomenologies of space, all considered within the Capitalocene.

Grounding these theoretics, I present ethnographic data gathered in Mexico City's borough of Xochimilco where the lacustrine landscapes, once prevalent in the city, still exist. Xochimilco's waters are covered in *chinampas* — plots of land built over water with organic matter and lake silt — making this a network of canals and allotments. This landscape survived three centuries of Spanish colonialism and two hundred years of national development, and still provides large portions of Mexico City with food and water. Ethnographic materials were gathered through conversations with producers, cooks, and other Xochimilcas, during community workshops led by local organisations and collectives over the course of a year. These workshops focused on different aspects of everyday life in Xochimilco including chinampas' soil and agriculture, the building of traditional Xochimilca flower-signs, or the inauguration of a communal kitchen space in the lake. The vignettes presented in this paper were translated into English from my fieldnotes on these workshops.

I will start this exploration by looking at the place of the kitchen in the phenomenological house, specifically in Bachelard's poetics of space. Afterwards, I will consider the values that emerge from the kitchen, as well as the gender politics of this space. Finally, I will ponder what these values mean for life in the Capitalocene and the alternatives that emerge from them.

2 | THE POETICS OF KITCHEN SPACE

While many have written on the oneiric space of the house, the kitchen does not always feature in phenomenologists' dreams. For Bachelard, '[a] house is imagined as a vertical being' (Bachelard, 2014, p. 30). In this house '[v]erticality is ensured by the polarity of cellar and attic' (Ibid.). Yi-Fu Tuan says something similar: 'the dream house...is a vertical structure...Attic is the place for the dreamer and poet. The cellar is the dark ground of being, the place of the furnace that fuels the passionate self.' (Tuan, 2013, p. 22) However, Tuan rightly points out that 'the vertical house is characteristic of the late nineteenth century middle class' (Tuan, 2013, p. 21). *European* middle class, I would add.

I enjoy Bachelard's phenomenology, but his Eurocentric dream house makes me uneasy. Are other houses not oneiric? Few traditional homes are vertical, does this mean they are devoid of dreams? To Bachelard, in many instances '[h]ome has become mere horizontality', lacking 'one of the fundamental principles for distinguishing and classifying the

values of intimacy' (Bachelard, 2014, p. 18) — the principle of verticality. What of the places where dwelling was always horizontal? This vertical house is representative not only of 1800s European middle classes, but of the Western Modern Capitalist imagination — the same imagination underlying the Capitalocene.

Nevertheless, there are rooms beyond verticality. The kitchen is relevant to the poetics of space not only because of its absence in Bachelardian thought,[i] but because in tropical and subtropical countries — and, I'd argue, in most countries of the 'global south' — the place of fire is not the cellar with the furnace (here, we need no central heating), but the kitchen. The kitchen corresponds to knowledges, values and spaces Othered and omitted by Capitalocenic logics. Let us then consider the phenomenological values of the kitchen: we will look at the dichotomies of inside/outside and culture/nature, and the questions of intimacy, care and memory that come into play.

2.1 | Inside/outside

Feminists and phenomenologists alike speak of the inside/outside divide that exists between 'home' and 'the world'. The inside is equated with the feminine and with unpaid domestic labours of care, like cooking. The outside is seen as the romantic world of men, power, politics, and profit (Bachelard, 2014; Counihan, 2012; Salleh, 1995; Stovall et al., 2015), or as Tuan puts it: 'The world is romantic as the home is not. Men are romantic as women are not' (Tuan, 2013, p. 23). It is this non-romantic inside that interests us.

To Bachelard the inside/outside dialectic gives way to values of intimacy; the inside is the place of dreams and memories, and there's a cosmicity to the dualism. He speaks of houses and wardrobes, but intimacy is also found in the kitchen, partly because of its place inside the house. The kitchen is one of the most intimate places there are; a place of fire for warmth and food at the centre of home; as Meah points out, 'kitchens have symbolic significance as the heart of the home' (Meah, 2016b). This speaks of the values of intimacy held by kitchens, fire, and food.

The intimacy of the kitchen lies also in recipes given to us by loved ones, zealously guarded, disclosed to few. Duruz notes that 'the stories of their making passed from grandmothers to mothers to daughters in secret, almost liturgical rituals' (Duruz, 2004, p. 57). These rituals speak of the secrecy and intimacy of the kitchen, where women labour. This everyday work has been discounted and invisiblised by capitalist patriarchy, and even by second-wave feminisms which inadvertently disregarded women's domestic labours by focusing on the public sphere (Stovall et al., 2015; Tuan, 2013).

This inside/outside dialectic is not only the basis for phenomenological values of intimacy, it is part of the woman/man, private/public, and culture/nature dualisms which are central to Modernity and underlie the Capitalocene (Latour, 1993; Moore, 2017). It is necessary to deconstruct these 'simple polarities' so as to avoid essentialisms (Salleh, 1995, p. 23), but what happens to the kitchen when we try to bridge these binaries?

2.2 | In-between

In traditional Mexican kitchens the inside is not always the norm. While most kitchens in modern spaces are inside the house, traditional spaces of cooking are less embedded in this dualistic thinking (for more on Modern kitchens see Meah, 2016a). Traditional kitchens often use open fires — *anafres*, *fogones*, woodburning stoves — kept outside, given the smoke and soot that they entail, or in an in-between space, outside but under a roof. Xochimilca kitchens are sometimes located in chinampas; surrounded by water, embedded in the lacustrine landscape. This does not mean there are no inside cooking spaces, rather that the kitchen is not exclusively inside. The border between inside and outside starts to blur when we think of kitchens outside (or in the periphery) of Modernity, like the ones in chinampas and backyards. But it is not only the place of kitchens that blurs these lines, it is also their connection with the socioecosystem in which they are embedded.

> A Xochimilca cook/boatbuilder/rowing champion speaks of canoes and canals. I ask her why she became interested in boat building, and if it relates to cooking at all.
>
> Well, it's all connected
>
> she says

> You need the canoes to navigate the canals, you need them to move, it's part of our everuyday life. If you don't have access to the canals, you don't have access to the chinampa, and without the chinampa there's no food. Xochimilca cuisine depends on the chinampa, and so it also depends on canoes.

Xochimilca kitchens are not extricated from the outside world; they are in-between. The watery landscape — chinampas, canals, canoes — is necessary for Xochimilca kitchens to exist; indeed, the kitchen is a part of this socioecosystem, as we see in the foodstuffs that come into the kitchen from both the chinampa and the canals themselves.

> A campesino in San Gregorio Atlapulco talks to me of his memories of lake foods:
>
> I would go fishing with my granddad when I was a kid. You'd find carps and crayfish and axolotl, and they were delicious.

The memories of this chinampa farmer speak of the connection between food and lake, blurring the lines that locate the kitchen inside, placing it instead in-between inside and outside. This in-betweenness has been noted by other authors who write of the activities beyond foodwork that happen in the kitchen (Wills et al., 2013) or of the foodwork that takes place outside kitchen spaces (Sutton & Hernandez, 2007). Xochimilco's outside, however, is not the Modern outside — that of an abstract empty nature — but the outside world of nature inhabited by humans and non-humans alike. Unlike Modern nature which is independent from humanity (Latour, 1993), this is a cosmopolitical nature entangled with society and culture. This idea might seem to introduce yet another dualism of nature (Modern/cosmopolitical), but it is more like Escobar's anti-essentialist political ecology of difference where nature is manifold and holds multiple meanings at once (Escobar, 1999).[ii]

The nature of Xochimilca kitchens is a nature found in canals and kitchens alike — at least until recently. Xochimilca kitchens are not only an intimate space of fire; they are a space where landscapes — chinampas, bonpland willows, canals, and the beings that inhabit them — become intimate. This understanding of the kitchen deconstructs the 'received dualisms' that Salleh critiques, blurring the lines between culture and nature and centring women's work that links us to nature.

The kitchen as a site of entanglement with nature, also brings forth another value often present in ecofeminist critiques: care. This is not just the care of nourishing kin. As numerous authors contend, women's labours are life-affirming endeavours that make the world inhabitable, especially in the kitchen (Duruz, 2004; Salleh, 1995; Tuan, 2013). From an ecofeminist perspective the value of care, often seen as something done in private for family or friends, acquires a cosmicity that reaches the whole of nature. This cosmicity of care not only embeds the kitchen with values associated by Bachelard almost exclusively to the Western-European home; it further subverts the dualisms that uphold the Capitalocene.

2.3 | Memory

As we have seen, the kitchen speaks also of memory. Kitchen rituals and flavours speak of intimacy and in-betweenness, but they also trace genealogies and elicit remembrances. The campesino from San Gregorio remembers the flavours of the lake — *they were delicious*.

Like Proust's madeleine, food triggers memories among Xochimilcas, except here it's not madeleines. A young *chinampero* says he remembers eating axolotl *tlapiques* — a type of doughless tamal. A bicycle-taxi driver who once worked making tlapiques also speaks of axolotl: 'its meat is white, white, white, and tasty — but there are no axolotl anymore'. Once again, memory comes up in the flavours of lacustrine foods, but alongside memory the Capitalocene rears its ugly head — *there are no axolotl anymore*. Among endangered species and at-risk landscapes, memory remains. In memory remain the canals-tuned-tarmac and the axolotl that existed in them and in Xochimilca kitchens and plates.

Memory is an embodied sense. In the kitchen, through summoned organoleptics, we remember things, times, places, and presences lost. This phenomenon of food and memory has been noted by numerous scholars across disciplines (Counihan, 2004; Holtzman, 2006; Meah & Jackson, 2015; Sutton, 2011) Sutton (2011) proposes a 'gustemological' approach to this phenomenon; thus, the kitchen's organoleptics 'become abodes for an unforgettable past' as per Bachelard's oneirism (Bachelard, 2014, p. 19); in this case, a past where canals were less polluted, and water critters more abundant.

The kitchen is then not only in-between inside-and-outside, because of its mnemonics, it is also a space in-between present and past, potentially stretching into the future. As Sutton notes, 'memories of the past combine with present impressions to spur future actions' (Sutton, 2011, p. 472). In this way there is a 'polytemporality...on the tongue of the eater' (Ibid., p. 473). In this polytemporality 'past(s) and present...converge in the form of absent presences' (Meah, 2016b, p. 58); Xochimilca kitchens show this includes not only human presences, but also nonhumans who inhabited the kitchen and its landscapes, be they bodies of water or of watery creatures from which we once fed. These mnemonic values make of the kitchen a space of possibility where alternatives to the Capitalocene can be imagined and cultivated.

3 | KITCHEN FEMINISMS BEYOND THE NON-ROMANTIC

Values of intimacy, in-betweenness, memory, and care emerge when we look at kitchens; however, a critical approach to these phenomenologies is needed, since feminine spaces and their attributes have been historically subordinated to the masculine in patriarchal societies like ours (Mclean, 2013). The gender dualisms of inside/outside women/men remain, as we see in Tuan's remarks that the kitchen is not romantic or in recent data that shows women still undertake most domestic cooking labours (Gallup & Cookpad, 2022).

Why is the kitchen not romantic? Is foodwork not a daring endeavour? Is this space, after all, devoid of dreams? Is life-making not a crusade against the proverbial windmills of the Capitalocene that place profit before everyday life — or any sort of life? Is this not romantic?

Perhaps it is not. Perhaps it is precisely this lack of romanticism what makes the kitchen a potential space of resistance and possibility. As Forbes notes, 'women's subordination to men can be understood as mediated through ideologies of romance' (Forbes, 1995, p. 294), in this way the antiromantic is part of 'women's...resistance of patriarchal ideologies of romance' (Ibid.). While the romantic builds aggrandizing narratives — of heroes, explorers, and geniuses — the antiromantic does the opposite, centring the small and the everyday.

Through an antiromantic lens, we can see the kitchen as a space that can challenge Capitalocenic ways of inhabiting; where memory and taste incite other ways of being. In the kitchen we find ourselves before a calm, burning fire; we become immersed in this slow being that must be fed constantly and requires consistency rather than bravado and one-off grand gestures; we are in a space that prizes care over profit. This, once again, falls into values traditionally seen as feminine, and dismissed by patriarchal romantic hegemonies. But am I not now romanticising the kitchen? After all, this is not only a feminine space but a space of feminine exploitation. As Giard writes, the kitchen is a space of 'women's work, without schedule or salary...without added value or productivity... subtle and interminable.' (Giard, 1998, p. 159).

But the kitchen is also a space of fulfilment and skill with 'a subtle intelligence full of nuances and strokes of genius, a light and lively intelligence that can be perceived without exhibiting itself...*a very ordinary* intelligence.' (Ibid., p. 158, emphasis in the original). The kitchen's history is complex, as feminist works on this domestic space attest. The kitchen exists in tension, as 'a site of confinement and erasure that reproduced inequality...that reflects and reproduces the subjection of women and the devaluation of their creative work' (Flores Jurado, 2018, p. 119). At the same time, women have made of the kitchen a space 'for artistic expression, a source of sensual pleasure, an opportunity for resistance and even power' (Avakian, 1997, p. 6). In this sense 'the work of cooking is more complex than mere victimization.' (Ibid.). An adage of 17th-century Mexican writer and nun, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, sums up this tension; she was sent to the kitchen by her superiors as punishment for her improper hunger for knowledge, after working the nunnery's kitchens she wrote this aphorism:

> Had Aristotle cooked, how much more would he have written!.

4 | ANTIROMANTIC LOVE ETHICS

The antiromantic allows for the contested history of the kitchen to exist in tension with Capitalocenic crises, notions of cosmic care and possibilities of sustainable futures. But how do we go beyond discourse and enact this in the everyday? Giard writes that '[t]he nourishing art has something to do with the art of loving' (Giard, 1998, p. 169). With this in mind, I offer the notion of love — also dismissed as feminine and unimportant by romantic and patriarchal logics (hooks, 2018,

p. xxvii; Morrison et al., 2013; Mould, 2019, pp. 167–168) — as a guiding ethics through which we may engage with the kitchen antiromantically.

Speaking of love is complicated, not only because of the aforementioned tendency — especially in academia — to consider it corny and irrational; but also because the language of love has been used to constrain and justify oppressive relations throughout history (Morrison et al., 2013). Here, however, I follow in hooks' scholarship, where love is seen not as an affect or a discourse, but as an ethics and a praxis seeking liberation (hooks, 2018).

4.1 | The search of love above the kitchen sink

Above her kitchen sink, bell hooks hung pictures of a graffiti that read '*The search of love continues even in the face of great odds*' (hooks, 2018, p. xvii). This street-art-turned-mantra was hung not above her desk or front door, but above her kitchen sink, because of the everyday practices that take place in the kitchen: 'Every day, when I drink water or take a dish from the cupboard I stand before this reminder that we yearn for love' (Ibid.). But what does it mean to yearn for love in the kitchen, especially in the midst of the Capitalocene?

When considering love in the kitchen another phenomenological value emerges: communality. The kitchen's values of intimacy, in-betweenness, and care imply the existence of Others we relate to through cooking and food in myriad ways — from communal kitchens, to cooking for loved ones, to the kitchen connecting us with nature's Others (some of whom we devour). An antiromantic love ethics requires that we enact these relations seeking liberation in the everyday rather than through romantic conquest or expansion. An antiromantic love ethics allows for the contradictions and tensions of the kitchen while challenging us to go beyond the history of oppression and co-create new possibilities alongside Others (see also Kooi & Martínez Balvanera, 2021).

Glissant, in his *Poetics of Relation*, writes of a notion of love similar to this, emphasising nature's Others; to him this form of love entails

> an aesthetics of disruption and intrusion. Finding the fever of passion for the ideas of 'environment'...and 'ecology,' both apparently such futile notions in these landscapes of desolation. Imagining the idea of love of the earth—so ridiculously inadequate or else frequently the basis for such sectarian intolerance—with all the strength of charcoal fires or sweet syrup.
>
> (Glissant, 2010, p. 151)

Food plays a part in Glissant's 'love of the earth' as his reference to sugarcane's fires and sweet syrup suggest. Furthermore, it speaks of the role love, food, and the kitchen have for sustainability, beyond questions of diets and produce — though by no means dismissing them. An antiromantic kitchen holds in itself and its labours the possibility of new ethics and aesthetics where relation and communality become central. An antiromantic kitchen provides us with a way to restructure our relationships with Others — both human and nonhuman — even in the midst of the Capitalocene's 'landscapes of desolation'.

5 | FUTURES BEYOND CHICKEN BONES

How can we go beyond Capitalocenic desolations when they seem so prevalent? What do these kitchen phenomenologies mean for our lives within complex crises?

The connection of the kitchen to local socioecosystems, for instance, is not always straightforward. Maybe I romanticised the memories of Xochimilca foods and foodscapes. The campesino who remembered fishing for carps, crayfish and axolotl with his grandfather spoke of more than his memories of fishing. He spoke of changes:

> ...they were delicious.
>
> He says. But he goes on:
>
> That was back then. I'm 60 now.

> Since they pumped in the sewage waters you can't find any of that anymore. The other day some folks in the lagoon over there gave me four fish for my grandkids.
>
> They tasted of petrol and mould.

Musty Capitalocenic flavours and environmental degradation are far from romantic — yet, what love is left? Furthermore, the remembered carp is in fact an exotic species that has worsened environmental issues. Axolotl aren't eaten anymore — they are seldom found outside of breeders' fishtanks. People still fish but their praxis cannot be romanticised:

> the other day we caught a huge fish with, like, two kilos of roe. It was delicious!
>
> A *chinampera* says shortly after telling me that the canals receive the raw sewage of nearby houses;
>
> You have to fish over yonder, you see, far away from the houses,
>
> she adds.

We cannot romanticise these things; the kitchen cannot be an acritical panacea. And it is not enough to not romanticise, we need to be actively antiromantic. The antiromantic allows for the contradictory, for the strange, for memories and tastes not only of beauty, but of loss and devastation.

Many lacustrine foods now come from elsewhere or are raised in captivity. Many lacustrine flavours remain only in memory. But the kitchen's endeavours are not confined to memory; its fires fuel our imaginations still. In the kitchen, embodied organoleptic memories become organoleptic futures, they provide possibilities that demand our work for a future where dwindling things remain and things past can return. Once again, this falls in line with hooks' notion of love as praxis, for 'love is all about work' (2018, p. 183). This, along Glissantian love of the earth, guided by memories and imaginations, makes the kitchen a space of possibility where food and futures beyond chicken bones may yet be prepared.

The antiromantic is not only a way to centre the everyday, with its values of cosmic care, relation and communality, but also a way to inhabit the kitchen without erasing its complex and contested history, its politics, and the sometimes-dejected socioecological realities in which it is embedded. The antiromantic impedes single and simple narratives and hinders depolitisation.

Capitalocenic trends demand that we look for alternative stories and imaginations to the system of exploitation that led to our current crises; we need alternatives to patriarchal narratives and Euro-Western Capitalism. Here I have argued that these alternatives can be found in the kitchen, the everyday practices that take place in it, and the values that emerge. However, we must avoid the temptation of romanticising kitchens, instead approaching the kitchen with its nuances and contradictions, enacting its values through an antiromantic love ethics and its accompanying aesthetics if we are truly to disrupt the bases that sustain the Capitalocene.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data are not shared.

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ENDNOTES

[i] While Duruz (2004) takes Bachelard's "bosom of the house" in which life begins to mean the kitchen, Bachelard does not actually write of or mention the kitchen.

[ii] To further the anti-essentialism of Escobar's proposal it is worth considering the political implications of other American interpretations of nature like Amazonic perspectivism explored by Viveiros de Castro (2014), or Canadian Indigenous critiques like Todd's (2016).

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