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Sweetness and Loss: An Urgent Call for Affiliative Modes of Living

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Introduction

Framing the tales, textures, and understandings of sweetness found within this special issue took time, thought, and seeking. These studies speak to how intensely meaningful sweetness is to people and how hard it is to inhabit a world perceived to be without it. Our goal with this introduction is to create a medium appropriately inspirited with the meaningful and dynamic content of these studies so they can take flight with sureness and integrity. There were challenges to arriving at our goal. For starters, the contributions as a collection resonate with rather grand issues, including mass homogenization, disappearing foodways, diet-related disease, enduring cultural memory, the cultural meanings of taste and senses, and more. Permeating nearly all of the content herein is a deeply affective, dare we say sappy, theme speaking to the erosion of tradition, the relegation of charismatic experiences to the past, the disenchantment of the ecosphere, and the foods which sustain us. And yet, all these pieces finish with a hopeful note: the value of traditional foods being recognized at the last minute, nearly abandoned flavors making their way into innovative cuisine, or the enduring appreciation of original, unadulterated recipes. Another, more looming, challenge is the pressurized historical moment we now live in. It is just simply not a time when sweetness—in the beloved and nourishing interpersonal, visionary, and culinary forms captured in this issue—is being given its due. The importance of crafting this issue at this time into a message of broad societal relevance is, therefore, plain. In the way of the inter-discipline of ethnobiology, what follows is a frame we hope is capable of displaying the enduring pricelessness of biocultural diversity today, in this case, drawing on the lovely, tender, fulfilling, and pervasive nature of sweetness.

Our main conceptual approach is to situate sweetness within what has been described as the reading-off hypothesis (Barry 2007). Argued consistently to be the most fundamental human-nature conceptual channel, the reading-off hypothesis describes a conviction that thorough examination of the natural world brings worthy prescriptions for human flourishing and goodness. In its firmest form, it places nature as an authority for social norms (Smith 1996). First Nation Canadian Anishinaabe legal scholar John Borrows (Borrows 2013) describes it like this:

> If you see a bird and the way that that bird takes care of its young, and you recognize that there is something in that interaction that you should be taking into your life, you would find

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> law in that source.... And so you make a judgement about whether or not what you're seeing around you is worthy of emulating, is worthy of taking guidance from, is authority in how you should be living your life today.

There is considerable evidence that sweetness has been cast as a desirable model for social norms across cultures. The fundamental and bone-deep appreciation of sweetness in taste translates well into an appreciation of so much about the human condition, but especially kindness, vulnerability, tenderness, and all-round goodness. A simple survey of ethnobiologists, many contributors to this issue, returned with abundant supporting evidence for this claim. Jeffrey Wall fondly recalls hearing shouts of "you are sweet!" (انت حلو) while walking the streets of Cairo as a young man; passersby in Turkey calling out "my goodness, how sweet!" (*Maş Allah! Ne kadar tatlı bu!*) to his young son; and Jewish relatives threatening to "eat his children" because they were so sweet. These examples show how powerfully sweetness is embedded in our social norms and moves beyond a mere pleasant sensory experience and into the spoken language. In Irene Teixidor-Toneu's native Catalan, sweetness (*dolç*) "makes on the ear, sight, or mood, a pleasant impression comparable to that of sugar" (DLC 2020). In French, a sweet (*douce*) person is to be favorably peaceful, gentle, not tiring, and not annoying. Elizabeth Paris notes that, in the southern United States, women and children, more than men, embody the meaning of social sweetness, and that sweetness is referenced consistently by partners in romantic love. From his native Spanish, Nemer Narchi adds that the sweetness of experiences and mental states is highly salient in spoken language. Vartika Jain of Govt. Meera Girls' College in Udaipur, India, adds to this mental state dimension by citing the Vedic teaching of "Madhu-Vidhya," which she gorgeously defined as:

> when one sees that every object is a manifestation of One Supreme Consciousness, then he/she feels a sweet pleasure from every object whether living or non-living and persons imposing this ideation to every object, always remain in a calm, peaceful and balanced state of mind and spread sweetness from his/her acts. This is also known as the Knowledge of imparting Honey. (pers. comm., October 2019)

And so, by rote and cross-cultural reading-off, what and how sweetness is encountered in the sensorial world translates ever so freely into felt sweetness within our interiors and between each other. Consequently, investigations, like those found here, of the intricacies of sweet encounters shed light on larger aspects of the human condition. To be sure, the primordial, original knowledge of sweetness for most of us is mother's milk. Ushered by this sweet grace and perceived unconditional generosity, many wind-up transferring their taste and passion for sweetness onto the world. As this collection of studies shows, this transference finds host in a multitude of forms with trees, larvae, noodles, hives, herbs, and more. Even amid our current rubble of industrial sweeteners, in the aftermath of sugar's colonization of tastes and societies (Mintz 1986), and perhaps more so, this transference is packed full of yearning. Perhaps stemming from the fact that we are born with a crescendo of taste buds which dwindles thereafter, our later experience of sweet ports in yearning for the once-accompanying emotional sustenance and splendor, yearning for overwhelming sweet-power.

Beyond yearning, this boundary/structure dissolving power of the sweet is embodied in perhaps our most fundamental maneuver in understanding: metaphor. Aristotle wrote that metaphor "has clarity and sweetness and strangeness," and that it is a sign of genius because "a good

metaphor implies an intuitive perception of the similarity in dissimilars" (excerpts from Altfeld and Diggs 2019). Metaphor helps us make sense of new entities by comparing them to those that we already know from our culture, environment, and identity in complex and emotional ways. A metaphor has clarity in assisting us to better understand the world; it has strangeness in equating dissimilar things, and sweetness in sticking the unknown onto the familiar. And so, through their gustative and metaphorical sweetness, a myriad of non-human beings become our allies in culture-making (Teixidor-Toneu et al. 2020).

Perhaps no thinker since Aristotle has gazed more fixedly at sweetness than Peter Sloterdijk (2011, 2014, 2016), who founds his ponderous, nearly astral, *Spheres* trilogy on the assertion that a philosophical worldview powerful enough to "refute" the cosmological "loneliness" (Sloterdjik 2011:13), ushered in by the Copernican Revolution, must anchor in intimacy and its all-pervasive attribute of sweetness. Extolling the "doughy, vague and humble-matriarchal space in which humans—at first and in most cases—have settled," he advocates a worldview rooted in sweetness and intimacy in contrast with a modern worldview disposed towards "intellectual and existential sharpness" (Sloterdijk 2011:90–91). For our purposes, Sloterdijk highlights the conceptual timeliness and significance of a volume like this one, dedicated to better understanding various sweet traditions and what they have in common.

In light of this pervasive stick of the sweet on psyche, society, multispecies relations, dreams, desires, and more, and in light of the constancy and ubiquity of the read-off tendency, here, we sketch out the ways in which the sweetness in our world may be read-off to teach us how important it is to be sweet and how to do it. We turn towards two self-evident principles regarding sweetness, principles which have long been on offer to much of humanity due to widespread favor for sweetness.

Sweetness as Wealth

Perhaps the least touching and most accurate descriptions of sweetness are storage material and reward for services rendered. Nevertheless, as honey, sap, and nectar, it often takes the form of a wealth steered through time, by turns stored and metered out, and, at all times, guided. Most vividly embodied in the cases of sweet roots, barks, saps, and honeys, evolutionary biologists see well how sweets are treated with deserved preciousness. Reflecting this, the ephemeral nature of the sweet throughout human history cannot help but cement its understanding as a fleeting and rare good. While Marshall Sahlins (1996) dubbed this ephemerality the "sadness of sweetness," the collection of accounts within this issue point to a counter proposal. Through these studies, we receive the impression over and over again that attitudes toward the temporary availability of sweets in the calendar year are strikingly positive and satiated. As Turner's participant, Secwepemc elder Mary Thomas, from northwest North America, recounts, there was an unforgettable spike of joy and appetite when granny got the berry fruit leather (Turner 2020). In Faast et al. (2020), we read settler accounts of Aborigines luxuriating for weeks in Victoria, Australia, eating nearly nothing but lerps, and positively fattening up and glowing from it. The flush of sweet sap in the early spring, the dried balsamroot in the fall, the glistening lerps in the dry season, and the hunger of the hive in the fall are all visceral shows of timing, haste, and urgency stemming from undeniable worth. In Mexico, the cyclic nature of fruit ripening is inscribed in the lunar calendar of the Seris, a reminder of a yearly celebration of sweet gifts from an arid land (Narchi et al. 2020). Reading-off on these tender and intricate dynamics, what exactly might people today and yesterday have come to know about value?

In perusing these cases, the relaxed-yet-precise mediation of sweet-wealth by all these creatures and cultures, we recall

Marcel Mauss (1954) and his delineation of the world of value exchange absent of competitive gift exchange, money, and capitalist exchange; what he describes as "total prestation." Also known as "total reciprocity," in this value mediation mode, "no accounts need be kept because the relation is not treated as if it will ever end" (Graeber 2001:218). Other modes of value, by contrast, clearly cut against the graceful principles of the sweets found in these pages. For instance, as Marx insightfully articulated, the inception of money, from its more magical progenitor, the coin, is found in the hoard at precisely that moment when coinage is accumulated and socked away in a "subterranean horde with an entirely furtive and private relationship to the" hoarder (Marx 1859:30). The mode of exchange central to capitalism—pinpointed by Graeber (2001:154) as inherent to "the way one acts with people towards whose fate one is indifferent"—reflects an even deeper deviation from the way of the sweet as recounted here by our authors and their human and plant participants. The cases of sweets we encounter in this collective exploration largely speak to aspiring permanent ecological relations, an observation which points to our second principle.

Sweetness as Enduring Relations

A second and similarly plain observation of sweetness is that it indicates relationships between species. If we read-off of sweetness in nature the invaluable role of relations to survival, the result is a magnified value for co-existence in human life. Coexistence is enshrined in Indigenous concepts such as *q'waq'wala7owkw*, or "keeping it living" (Hereditary Chief Kwaksistala Adam Dick; Deur and Turner 2006:31), and the broadly shared Indigenous North American understanding of relations and kinship as including land, creatures, and many other attributes of more-than-human nature (see *mitákuye oyás'iŋ* in Lakota and *ko'kmanaq* in Mi'kMaq, for instance). By embodying the furtherance of relationship, empirical evidence of sweet traditions lends weight to arguments for biocultural conservation. This helps such arguments to handily satisfy the challenge posed by environmental philosopher John Passmore (1974:56), that if a new environmental ethic is to be compelling and influential it "will arise out of existing attitudes or not at all."

We argue that the sweet traditions documented here point to such a new ethic: an "affiliative mode of living" (Miller 1986:88), a way of life anchored in the need, and the drive, to promote the existence and thriving of others. The affiliative attitudes on display in this collection are pre-existing and they have endured terrific challenges. For example, Franco and Bakar (2020) document that, in rapidly developing Brunei, the urban public persists as a reservoir of appetite and desire for the dwindling tradition of *gula anau* (*Nypa fruticans*). What is curious is that today's persistent favor for this intriguing food was born during Japanese occupation of Brunei beginning in 1941, where it entered the diet as a famine food. The *gula anau* case then points to what we might understand as a marker of collective trauma being rendered into a delight and a vehicle of complex cultural meaning. In another illustrative case, what might be first glimpsed as an onslaught of industrial sugar flooding into the lifeways of Indigenous Peoples of northwestern North America, is, according to Nancy Turner's research participants, a new ally spun into cultural survival. Sugar bags were woven into sails for canoes. Molasses jars are stuffed with preserves for the winter. Sugar itself is dusted on thimbleberry sprouts, cow parsnip, and fireweed stalks "often along with oulachen grease and eaten fresh" (Turner 2020). Further, according to Turner, industrial sweets were channeled right into a women's baking renaissance, bringing fame and, with it, a more sure and entrenched fate for their people in modernity. Similarly, Teixidor-Toneu et al. (2020) trace the enduring yet metamorphizing

appreciation of angelica in Nordic culture from medieval gardens to hyper-modern restaurant kitchens. Paris et al. (2020) show the millennium-long persistence of symbiotic relationships between people, plants, and bees sanctioned by the powerful in the Yucatan Peninsula, Mexico. In these cases, and more, sweet-giving ecological alliances illustrate the adaptability, creativity, and resilience of affiliative approaches to survival.

Conclusions

The immediate, even urgent, societal resonance of sweet contemplations is clearly seen through the resounding public reception of the recent film "Honeyland" (Kotevska and Stefanov 2019). Following a single traditional sweetener harvester, a Macedonian Turkish woman partaking in traditional honey collection, the film delivered an inherent and highly motivating argument for conservation (Brody 2019). Contemplating the extensive favor for the film, it is as if the sheer knowledge of the existence of such an elegant and arousing practice is argument enough for its continued existence. Eugene Hargrove (1989) identifies this exact argument as the ontological case for preservation. Atanas Georgiev, producer and editor of "Honeyland," testifies to the simple power of its workings. In an interview, he relates how the production team had vigorous debate as to whether words were necessary in the film. "The content of the story was so powerful without any dialogue included" (Georgiev 2019). Much like "Honeyland," cumulative insights from this collection shed light on the value for not just complexity but continued within-complexity affiliation.

This insight applies even in the headwinds of widespread homogenization. The ocean of grief arriving in the Anthropocene, with seemingly titanic biocultural loss, cries out for sweetness in all the ways we know it. As we show, sweetness, understood holistically, can guide us in enduring affiliative modes of living. The sheer existence of the traditions documented here, and others like them, is argument enough for championing their continuation. Fortunately, the meanings of sweetness persist in mediating our relationships with other people and the more-than-human world (Tsing 2012). The humanity of sweetness in nature can inspire is not only capable of furthering the continuation of biodiverse affiliative modes of living but will find its pursuit delicious in every way.

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