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**CORN AND CULTURE:
THE INFLUENCE OF *ZEA MAYS* ACROSS CULTURAL
AND HISTORICAL BOUNDARIES**

BY

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Undergraduate Thesis

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the University Scholar distinction

The University of Montana
Missoula, MT

May 2011

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Corn and Culture: The Influence of *Zea mays* across Cultural and Historical Boundaries

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Corn's status as a critical food crop, and its location within indigenous new world cosmographies, illustrate the important sociocultural role the plant has played for millennia. However, modern society has elevated *Zea mays* far above the status of mere plant, fashioning it into a commodity intimately connected to systems of control and capitalism. Consequently, corn has played an essential role in colonization, industrialization, and the advent of overproduction. The beliefs and literature of numerous new world cultures, along with the literatures of modern Western cultures, offer a striking analysis of corn's current position in western society. The far-reaching impacts that corn has on our socioeconomic and subsistence systems reveal a great deal about globalization, commodification, and dominance. This paper examines corn through a cultural studies lens, documenting the influence of this iconic foodstuff and analyzing its effects over historical and cultural boundaries.

Corn has long been located at the center of indigenous new world cultures, as well as at the center of modern Western society, and its presence spans and transcends boundaries between cultures and time periods. Corn's genesis as a foodstuff, and its ascension to the status of spiritual being in the Maya cosmography, has allowed it to thrive within many different realms of civilization. Modern western culture has further elevated *Zea mays* from the status of a plant, where it has become a commodity intimately connected with systems of control, domination, and capitalism. The real 'meaning' of corn is multifaceted, and is augmented by location and history. This constantly shifting meaning is determined by corn's past, its place in culture today, and its location in the individual's worldview. Literature plays an essential role in the formation of corn's diverse meanings, providing contesting viewpoints from which to understand its markedly different roles. Comparing and contrasting corn's place in the literatures and cultures of the ancient Maya, 19th century Britain, and contemporary Western society provides a deep and profound illustration of what corn means to humanity.

MAYA CORN: THE LIFE-GIVER AND THE OFFSPRING OF HUMANS

Corn's long-standing status as a critical food crop, and its location within indigenous new world cosmographies, illustrate the important sociocultural role the plant has played for millennia in the Western Hemisphere. Like other indigenous tribes in the Americas, the Maya people were dependent on corn both culturally and agriculturally. Lynn V. Foster and Peter Mathews, in *Handbook to Life in the Ancient Maya World*, document how corn's presence dominated the Maya landscape, their diets, and their beliefs, and held "the key to the development of more complex Mesoamerican society" (21). The cultivation of corn was a key factor in health and success, as well as in relationships with surrounding tribes. However, corn was much more to the Maya than just a foodstuff; it was equally significant within their spiritual beliefs and literature.

The centrality of corn in the Maya myths of creation shows the mythical and glorified status corn had in Maya society. In *Popol Vuh*, a collection of Postclassic Quiché Maya myths, corn's presence is very prominent. Numerous Maya deities are based on corn, and their stories explain the world's creation and organization. In Adrián

Recinos' translation of *Popol Vuh*, the Maya gods attempted to create humans, experimenting with different mediums. Using mud and wood to create men was unsuccessful because the creatures lack souls and intellect. After several failed attempts, the gods use corn dough. In Recinos' version, the ultimate creation of man is portrayed as strongly involving corn:

Grinding the yellow corn and the white corn, Xmucané made nine drinks, and from this food came the strength and the flesh, and with it they created the muscles and the strength of man....of yellow corn and of white corn they made their flesh; of corn meal dough they made the arms and legs of man. Only dough of corn meal went into the flesh of our fathers, the four men, who were created (167)

In this creation myth, the intimate relationship between corn and the Maya is obvious: for corn is the only ingredient of man. This gives background to the Maya's incredibly close, kin-like bond with corn. The spiritual significance of corn, along with the Maya's dietary reliance on it, permanently and intimately connected corn to humans. At this time, the corn plant began to embody humans, and humans began to embody the corn plant. Karen Bassie-Sweet, an anthropologist from the University of Calgary who has published research on Maya deities and cultural beliefs, has found that maize was often referred to as "our mother corn," portraying the creation of the first humans as a sort of birthing (3). From corn's beginning within the Maya cosmography, it was an essential part of human life.

Interestingly, corn evolved through human intervention to meet human needs. Over the course of its evolution, corn altered its physical and reproductive morphology, which Arturo Warman, a Mexican anthropologist and author of *Corn and Capitalism: How a Botanical Bastard Grew to Global Dominance*, attributes to "human labor and knowledge" (14). Corn developed larger and more protected ears, as well as the ability to thrive when planted close together, which Warman believes was "all so that people [could] reap the benefit" (27). In this relatively 'new' form, corn is completely unable to disperse its own seed because its ears are covered by a thick and tightly-grasping husk. Without the labor of humans, corn would not dominate the globe: it would, according to Warman, "disappear in only a short amount of time" and eventually cease to exist (27).

Thus, human involvement is absolutely essential to corn's success. It has been through this relationship that corn and humans have co-evolved, and corn has become increasingly human-like.

Warman suggests that through the process of this evolution, humans "invented corn" (27). Warman further argues, rather provocatively, that corn's response to our demands, through the evolution of its reproductive growth form and adaptation to various climates, suggests that it is a near-cognizant being: almost aware of its symbiotic relationship with us. Beginning with the Maya, corn has been compared to humans and has often been viewed as having human-like qualities. In some indigenous art, such as the Cacaxtla mural in Tlaxcala, Mexico, corn has human features such as eyes and a mouth. Even visually, the plant stands at about human height. Warman discusses the intimate connection comparing humans and corn and alleging that corn is our relative: "it occupies a position comparable to that of human beings in the animal kingdom. The analogy is appropriate, because corn is clearly the offspring of humans, a gradual and impressive product of human intervention, much closer to them, in a certain sense, than to any other living beings" (26-27). Warman further illustrates the complex and internal relationship between humans and corn, referring to corn as "a human offspring, our plant kin" (27).

Although corn evolved to meet our needs, it is essential to recognize that this evolution has taken place within the frame of a simultaneous social evolution. Warman acknowledges the intertwined nature of humans and corn, arguing that "people and corn depend upon each other in order to subsist and survive as a species" (27). Human involvement has been absolutely essential in corn's success, but our society's success, from colonization to globalization, is in large part due to corn. Consequently, we are equally dependent upon each other. Corn is as much a product of human involvement as society is a product of corn. Although contemporary societies in the Americas do not often worship corn or corn gods, the status of corn in our culture is no less mythical or significant.

Corn has also had a surprisingly intense influence on relationships between groups of people. According to Foster and Mathews, corn cultivation necessitated a switch from a nomadic lifestyle to the establishment of permanent settlements, which in

turn led the Maya to expand their territory, divide labor, and develop more complex social stratification, thereby allowing the Maya to “sustain larger populations and create food surpluses” (21). Consequently, the Maya began exerting force over other tribes for control of people and resources. Foster and Mathews document how the Maya began to fight battles to protect and “expand their territory[ial]” boundaries (148). The expansion of territory allowed the Maya to increase corn production and establish control over trade routes, giving them the ability to support growing populations and gain power over other tribes. They also sought to establish control over trade routes. Aside from battles fought for the control of natural resources, Foster and Mathews discuss Maya warfare for the purpose of acquiring slaves and “sacrificial captives” (148). Although slave ownership was not limited to the elite, and many types of work existed, slaves were often used for agricultural labor. The prisoners of war who were not forced into slavery were often sacrificed to one or many Maya gods, which, according to Foster and Mathews, “opened portals of exchange between gods and humans” (187). Due to the heavy reliance on corn, and the harsh reality that failed corn crops could cause their civilization to collapse, the Maya often sacrificed to deities of maize. In these instances of slavery and human sacrifice, corn was often the catalyst. Thus, its use as a tool of subjugation begun.

CORN, CONTROL, AND CAPITALISM

Much as it developed into a tool of domination and control in Maya culture, corn’s influence both intensified and became something new inside Western society. Corn found an apex of development under European colonialism and capitalism, enabling these structures to further dominate the globe. European colonization of both Africa and North America may not have happened without the cultivation of corn; as Warman says, “it would [all] have been impossible without corn” (151). The first colonists in America had brought European grains and cereals with them, but according to Warman, were unable to successfully cultivate them due to “many possible explanations” including differences in soil, climate, and landscape, as well as the “limited practical agricultural experience” of the colonists (152). Starvation seemed inevitable until the Native Americans began sharing their harvests and their corn-cultivating secrets. Still, the colonists did not have a successful corn harvest for two years. There is also record of

colonists trading for corn, or stealing it. Warman notes that they even “obtained it as regular tribute exacted by force of arms,” and sadly, “such practices continued well after settlers learned to grow corn for themselves” (152).

With a reliable source of food and a crop on which to base an economy, the colonies were able to survive and expand. They were not only able to dominate the landscape, but also the Native Americans. Corn was integral to colonization and allowed the colonists to forcefully overtake the land and the indigenous people. The changes that corn prompted were far-reaching and immense, as Warman argues:

Corn was everywhere and became the organizing axis of pioneer agriculture and pioneer subsistence. Corn set precedents for the sequence and style of work and served as a bridge for the transformation of agriculture. Corn was the foundation of the household economy and allowed for the preservation of a high degree of self-sufficiency. Corn was also the basis for the realization of surpluses and participation in a wider market. Corn was the means that permitted successive waves of pioneers to settle new territories. Once the settlers had fully grasped the secrets and potential of corn, they no longer needed the Native Americans. Indigenous peoples were wiped out, scattered, or relocated as settlers penetrated even further inland. (155)

When one considers that the colonists’ first harvest prompted them to begin controlling, killing, and extirpating the Natives they learned from, it becomes clear that corn’s forceful new presence in the lives of American colonists resulted in sweeping societal and cultural changes. As corn supported the marginalization of Native Americans, it also promoted population growth, agricultural efficiency, expansion of territories, and the establishment of a monocrop culture. From the very beginning of corn’s entrance into the global realm, it symbolized power, domination, and expansion. Most devastatingly, it symbolized a power struggle between European and indigenous cultures.

Corn’s spread, or more fittingly, its colonization, of continents where it had previously been absent, paralleled the expansion of European colonization in North America and Africa. Within the slave trade, corn became a commodity, a means of trade,

and a weapon of control. Warman notes that corn was also nearly the “leading commodity and principle means of exchange,” second only to slaves (63). Corn production began supporting the slave trade, and consequently, the growing slave trade demanded increased corn production. Africa began providing not only slaves, but corn for the slaves; “more than 13 tons of corn” were used for each transatlantic voyage with a boat full of captives (63). Although corn found its global footing within the structure of the slave trade, the abolishment of slavery by no means caused a decline in corn production. After the slave trade ended, corn was able to expand its presence, further establishing itself within other economies of power and dominance.

The systems of control that corn infiltrated were unlike the violent dominion of the slave trade. Domination through economic structures is also oppressive, but less direct. As corn made the transition into much different structures of domination, its implications became less external, and corn production began to affect humans more subtly. Within the class-based capitalistic society of 19th century Britain, corn’s presence, price, and availability began to exacerbate gaps between the rich and the poor. This happened when the Corn Laws were implemented, which placed tariffs on all imported grains and significantly raised the price of grains. Joseph Shield Nicholson, author of *The History of the English Corn Laws*, argues that the increased price of grains caused food scarcity, job shortages, lower wages, and a significant widening of the class gap (53). Nicholson also reveals that the upper classes were able to benefit greatly from the lower cost of labor due to the Corn Laws. He discusses that the higher grain prices had a minimal affect on the upper classes, but “the price of bread was the principal factor according to which the material comfort of the labouring classes varied,” and it is clear that the Corn Laws “pressed most heavily on the working classes” (53-54).

In the instance of the Corn Laws, the sociocultural changes that were taking place depended upon the suppression of lower classes, and the concentration of power and wealth in the upper classes. In England, Ebenezer Elliott became well-known for his political poetry that protested oppressive aspects of the British government. Elliott had been a laborer in the iron industry who had experienced severe poverty and homelessness. Although he enjoyed moderate success later as an iron merchant, Elliott remained convinced that his earlier hardships could have been avoided if the Corn Laws

were not in place. Having always been a poet, Elliott added political themes to his work, eventually writing a series of poems titled *The Corn Law Rhymes*. In these poems, Elliott demands justice for the lower classes, and challenges his fellow citizens to demand justice and form an economic revolution. According to Alexis Easley, a professor of English at the University of St. Thomas, Elliott referred to himself as “the poet of the poor” and attempted to give the lower classes the ability to stand up for themselves (303). In a biography on Elliott, George Searle Phillips (pen name January Phillips) quotes an article describing Elliott from the Sheffield and Rotherham Independent in 1849:

In politics, the great object of Mr. Elliott was the abolition of the food monopoly. Some were ready to say that he was a monomaniac on this subject. But he saw that this question lay at the root of all others in regard to politics and national prosperity; that a nation confined to a limited supply of food could never be permanently happy and prosperous; and that a commercial system based on restriction could not be sound (96)

These strong convictions regarding food and political and economical justice are evident themes in many poems from Elliott’s *Corn Law Rhymes*. But, as Easley argues, his poems are valuable on more than just the political level: they are “a source for understanding shifting definitions of ... class within radical discourse of the 1830s and 1840s” (304). These two emphases give Elliott’s work breadth and depth, and provide a medium with which to analyze corn’s political and social roles during the early part of the 19th century.

In “The Taxed Cake,” Elliott describes massive governmental power that allows lower-class suffering to go unnoticed. Elliott bemoans the government’s harsh dismissal of the working class’ misery when he declares, “the starved, they say, are fed” (12). Later in the poem, he depicts governmental corruption, exclaiming, “...law’s best fruit is crime!” (20). In this poem, Elliott shows the devastating effects of the Corn Laws on the lower classes while simultaneously describing the positive effects on the upper classes. These effects, Elliott argues, served to increase the gap between social levels: “our rivals fatten fast, / But we are free to pay” (13-14). The theme of unjust class divisions continues in the poem “What is Bad Government?” when Elliott describes bad government: “It is the deadly *Will*, that takes/ What labour ought to keep;/ It is the deadly

Power, that makes / Bread dear, and labour cheap” (3-8). These lines lament the skewed relationship between labor and capital: a connection that forces man to “Harder work, and poorer get,” as the poem “Drone v. Worker” makes clear (19).

Elliott’s “Caged Rats” furthers the theme of suffering that characterizes the growing gap between the rich and poor, and calls attention to the distress and abuse the lower classes endure. The opening lines of the poem describe the differences between the upper and lower classes: “Ye coop us up, and tax our bread,/ And wonder why we pine;/ But ye are fat, and round, and red,/ And fill’d with tax-bought wine”(1-4). In these lines, Elliott juxtaposes the happiness and comfort of the upper classes with the woe and confinement of the lower classes. He seems to portray the rich as ignorant, unaware of the devastating effects of the Corn Laws. Elliott may, however, also be alluding to the view that the upper classes had of the lower classes; by treating the lower classes as rats, the lawmakers and the rich were able to deny the lower classes their humanity, and refuse to acknowledge the Corn Laws’ destructive effects. The next lines in “Caged Rats,” wherein Elliott illustrates the growing gap between rich and poor, read: “Thus, twelve rats starve while three rats thrive,/ (Like you on mine and me,)/ When fifteen rats are caged alive,/ With food for nine and three” (5-8). The poignant portrayal of humans caged like rats, fighting over scarce food, allows Elliott to demonstrate how the rich were, in effect, stealing from the poor in order to gain capital and power. He questions the character and intention of the upper class, asking, “Why are ye call’d ‘my lord,’ and ‘squire,’/ While fed by mine and me,/ And wringing food, and clothes and fire/ From bread-tax’d misery?” and bringing into question the validity of the class system (13-16). Elliott goes on to say, “Make haste, slow rogues! *prohibit* trade,/ *Prohibit* honest gain;/ Turn all the good that God hath made/ To fear, and hate, and pain,” characterizing the harsh effects of the Corn Laws on the lower classes (17-20). These lines show Elliott’s condemnation of the Corn Laws in religious terms, as he indicts the lawmakers and upper classes for their sacrilegious, greedy, and hypocritical behavior.

The notion of the British people being reduced to slaves or animals is one that recurs thematically throughout Elliott’s poetry. In “Oh Lord, How Long?” Elliott addresses his British audience as a “bread-tax’d slave” and satirically calls for them to “toil in hopeless woe” for eternity (1, 26). A desperate and sickened tone is used

throughout *The Corn Law Rhymes*, which gives the poems darkness as well as urgency. Through Elliott's poetry, it is clear that corn's use as a tool of subjugation and exploitation was very effective in the 1800's. Its use as such did not end there, however. As the global market expanded, corn's influence also expanded.

CORN TODAY: THE HEART OF MODERN CULTURE

The societal and cultural changes predicated on corn have been vast and varied. Trends towards industrialization, capitalism, and globalization (which, as Warman notes, are often collectively "referred to as modernization") have all been sustained by corn's expansion (233). Corn fit very neatly into industrialized agriculture, responding with higher yields and agricultural surpluses and enabling Western society to become involved in a globalized market. Warman reflects on corn's expansion, arguing that the appropriation of dominance within economic and cultural structures of society provided corn a position in which to thrive:

Change was promoted in the periphery from above and from abroad in order to recreate society in accordance with an ideological model: the industrial millennium that sought to establish a homogenous world. In order to achieve such a goal, everything in the past, all that was varied, all that was different, had to be destroyed. It was a question of an authoritarian modernization that relied on subjugation, on the concentration of power, and on exclusion in the name of progress, with the inevitable evolution of humanity toward the one true civilization. It was modernization with a vengeance that destroyed and changed everything in its path in order to preserve dominance and promote disparity. It was modernization without democracy (150)

The developing structure and purpose of capitalist Western society redistributed power and wealth and promoted widespread change. As Warman's words anatomize these changes in the 1800's and 1900's, it becomes clear that corn's rise has much deeper implications; implications which encompass notions of power, progress, and civilization, and put even more at stake for those who suffer the brunt of social power. Corn's prestige and power has expanded even further since Ebenezer Elliott fought against its

influence. Today, corn is stronger, and more dynamically located within systems of power.

The United States government provides massive subsidies for corn farmers, and encourages them to over-produce. The surplus corn we have is so highly subsidized that it is artificially “cheap.” Thus, it is used for food production, animal feed, and international food aid. Today, strategic interests along with the enormous corn surpluses present in the U.S. have created ‘food power,’ which Warman refers to as “a weapon of subjugation” (207). Under humanitarian pretexts, using surplus corn for food aid would allow the U.S. to secure its position as a leading power and reinforce other countries’ dependencies. By supporting this unequal global development, corn production is doing today what it began to do in Britain in the 19th century, only on a much larger scale.

Sidney Mintz author of *Sweetness and Power*, has said that a food’s ‘meaning’ and uses are largely determined by “the will and intent of the nation’s rulers” (151). An extreme example of this is the genetic engineering of corn. According to a paper by Rebecca Bratspies in the *American Journal of Law and Medicine*, biotechnology company Epicyte successfully genetically engineered a type of corn to have spermicidal qualities (382). Men who eat the corn cannot produce viable sperm, thus making reproduction impossible. The intent was to distribute this spermicidal corn as food aid, forcing population control onto people of other countries without their knowledge. Although the use of spermicidal corn as a form of population control has not been publically discussed since 2001, its presence is certainly frightening, especially considering how effectively corn has been used as a method of control in the past.

Chicano Poet Juan Felipe Herrera, in his collection *Mayan Drifter*, contemplates corn’s presence in his life by relating to the ancient Maya, seeking a deeper understanding of himself and his origins. Herrera does not, however, ignore the tremendously negative effects that corn has had on the native people and the native landscape. In “Tuxtla Oil Float,” Herrera documents the devastating changes that corn has caused since he had last visited the Maya territory:

What had happened to the highland Mayas since I left in 1970? After the 1982 debt crises, many indios in the highlands came back with new ideas, with new ways of seeking money, with new investments in trucking and

motorized transport, new agricultural practices, with herbicides and chemical fertilizers so they could cultivate their forest lands season in, season out. As corn production in Chiapas swelled to more than 1.5 million tons in 1993, the gap widened between the wealthy and the poor indio (22)

As Herrera reveals, the changes predicated on the production of corn were rapidly taking over the Maya domains, transforming them into communities centered on capitalism and land exploitation. Just as corn and industrialization had so negatively affected the lower classes in Britain during the Corn Laws, the same thing was happening in Central America in the late 20th century.

Although Herrera acknowledges corn's negative implications, he also recognizes corn's positive cultural and connective qualities. Herrera describes "being true to [him]self on this road into Mayan territory," finding themes and purposes of his personal journey in many places, ending with corn's "sweet dark leaves" (27). In his poem "Anahuak Vortex," Herrera addresses the Corn Goddess, discussing his culture's dependence on corn, describing himself as "stapled" to her (236). Herrera's relationship to corn also clearly defines his relationship with his family. As he contemplates his strained and distant relationship with his father in "The Man With A Machete," he remembers planting corn with his father, listening to stories about his childhood. Corn is central to his only recounted memory of his father; even his father's body bears the representational impress of corn, as his hands are "coarse from... planting corn" (95).

Herrera's conflicting feelings about corn are characterized in "Eating Tortillas 160 Kilometers North of Guatemala" when he describes eating corn tortillas made by a native Maya woman. He writes:

[I] tried to push the food down my throat. Even though I was ravenous, even though I chewed hard, I wrestled with the corn paste in my mouth. It went down in clumps. Some of it stuck to the inside my cheeks, some of it dissolved on my tongue and stayed there; the rest knotted itself in the middle of my throat... something was bruising me and did not allow me to chew and swallow. It was forcing me, against my will, to spit everything out. Most of all it wanted me to spit myself out. The tortillas wanted to

turn me over, upside down, with the guts out, with the fluid out too....
Something didn't permit me to swallow, to fill myself, to become solid; it
wanted me to spit, to drench myself, to scream, to sing, with the head up,
with the body open (39)

As Herrera's mouth and body wrestle with corn, so does his heart. He identifies a deep love and admiration for corn, knowing that it is part of who he is. At the same time, he recognizes its oppressive effects and how it has corrupted many lives and landscapes. Corn, at the very core of his culture, enables and detains him, gives him joy and despair, uplifts him and afflicts him.

CORN AND THE AMERICAN DIETARY STRUCTURE: A CODA

Corn's dominion throughout the world has assumed numerous and potent forms, but the presence of corn in systems of domination has become so subtle that it now happens at the level of individual consumption. Michael Pollan, author of *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, documents corn's dominance in the food system today, asserting that "there are some forty-five thousand items in the average American supermarket and more than a quarter of them now contain corn" (19). As Pollan's words indicate, corn's submerged nature in Western culture, its phantom presence, is important to investigate in the present moment. Corn's movement away from more external systems of oppression has allowed it to become internalized, embedded in our very bodies.

Just as corn was an integral part of life in Maya culture, it is an integral part of life in Western society today. Corn has become an inextricable part of our lives, and its vast and dark shadow falls over the entire world. The implications of corn's overwhelming presence are far-reaching; it seems as if this presence will only continue to grow. The prospect of using corn as a tool of subjugation is more real than it ever has been, and it is imperative that each individual recognizes the incredible impact that corn has on the world. Just as Herrera struggles with corn's meaning, so must we. Its presence needs to be acknowledged and analyzed, and integral to this process is the acceptance that humans are intimately linked to corn, in every aspect of life. Corn is our kin, and as it has inhabited our world, it has inhabited us.

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