

Speculative Fermentation

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Chapter 1. Introduction: The Visualizing Foodways Field School (VFFS)

In a world where food is increasingly commodified, the Visualizing Foodways Field School (VFFS) invited us to slow down, savor the past, and imagine futures that challenge dominant paradigms. This unique initiative was produced by Hemispheric Encounters and supported by the Food Art Research Network, the Centre for Sustainable Curating at the University of Western Ontario, and the Creative Food Research Collaboratory. These collaborations provided the fertile ground for interdisciplinary dialogues between artistic practice, food sovereignty, and ecological resilience, framing the Field School as a site for deep engagement with speculative futures. The project's focus on foodways made clear that the acts of growing, preparing, and sharing food are deeply connected to questions of resistance, resilience, and the future.

Fermentation—as both a biological process and a cultural metaphor—captures the transformation from the simple to the complex, from the known to the uncertain. In the context of cultural exchange, fermentation reflects how ideas, identities, and practices gradually evolve when diverse communities come together. This dynamic was powerfully illustrated at the 2023 Hemispheric Encounters Visualizing Foodways Field School (VFFS) in Mexico City. Through the exploration of food, art, identity, and history, participants uncovered how cultural "fermentation" sparks new connections and shifts in perspective.

At the VFFS, speculative fermentation came to represent a process by which cultural traditions and knowledge were not merely preserved but transformed into potential futures. This framework helped us see how foodways—the cultural, historical, and social practices surrounding food—could catalyze innovative responses to contemporary challenges such as climate change, food sovereignty, and inequality. Just as fermentation transforms raw ingredients into something richer and more complex, speculative fermentation reveals how traditions can evolve to address future conditions.

This process is not just abstract speculation—it has practical, real-world applications. Participants engaged with the ways food sovereignty and traditional food practices could inform future policy changes, community resilience strategies, and sustainable agricultural models. By reclaiming traditional knowledge and reimagining food systems through the lens of speculative fermentation, the VFFS invited us to envision policy

frameworks that could support localized, ecologically sound, and culturally sensitive food systems in the face of globalization and environmental crises.

Though rooted in Mexico City, the implications of speculative fermentation stretches far beyond this specific context. The lessons learned at the VFFS have global relevance, offering insights for food systems across the world. In places as diverse as smallholder farms in Sub-Saharan Africa, community gardens in North America, and Indigenous food practices in Australia, the ideas explored in Mexico can be applied to rethink and reshape food sovereignty efforts and ecological sustainability on a global scale. As climate change threatens global food security, speculative fermentation offers a model for how local knowledge and traditions can adapt to new challenges while preserving cultural identity.

The Field School didn't explicitly center on social foresight or policy-making, but speculative thinking naturally unfolded. The gathering became a space for reflecting on how cultural practices might shift and adapt in response to global challenges. Speculative fermentation, in this sense, not only invited participants to reflect on the present but also encouraged a deeper engagement with future-making—anticipating how foodways might need to evolve to meet disruptions in food systems and ecological balance.

The event brought together a diverse group of artists, scholars, and community leaders, each contributing unique perspectives to this dialogue. Their experiences and insights underscored the importance of collective action in shaping the future of food. While many voices shaped the dialogue, this work focuses on those whose contributions aligned closely with my own research on festive happenings and futures.

As a researcher rooted in Art-Based Action Research and Future Studies, I found the speculative possibilities within the VFFS particularly compelling. My methods use festive happenings—those moments of collective joy and cultural celebration—as active drivers of transformation through which to collaboratively imagine, create, project, and catalyze futures. While speculative fermentation wasn't a formal theme, the activities at VFFS reflected this process in action. We explored how foodways can not only honor the past but also offer solutions for futures that challenge industrial agriculture, neoliberalism, and colonialism.

Through its examination of food, ritual, and memory, the VFFS created fertile ground for speculative engagement while remaining connected to both past and present realities. Participants' experiences of cooking, tasting, and storytelling mirrored a process of transformation, where ideas and perspectives fermented and evolved over time. These collaborations left space for reflecting on how cultural practices might shift and transform in the face of future challenges.

In the chapters that follow, we will explore how speculative fermentation can help shape adaptive, resilient futures. Chapter 2 delves into how the VFFS was a transformative experience that unfolded slowly, deepening over time, like a well-aged ferment. Chapter 3 focuses on how foodways, cultural studies, and performance studies at the Field School were platforms for exploring identity, resistance, and food sovereignty. Chapter 4 examines how food and ritual became speculative acts of future-making. As the essay progresses, we will further investigate how collective action, slow knowledge, and anticipatory futures can shape sustainable food systems. Finally, we will explore how speculative fermentation offers both a metaphor and a practical tool for transforming cultural practices into resilient, future-oriented systems.

Ultimately, this essay looks at how the VFFS employed cultural studies, performance studies, social foresight, and collective action to create a vibrant space for critical social engagement—and through my lens as a researcher in festive happenings and futures, a compelling site for speculative fermentation. Together, we will investigate how these practices not only serve to preserve cultural memory but also hold the key to reimagining our collective future.

Chapter 2. The Impact of VFFS: A Slow Unfolding

The Visualizing Foodways Field School (VFFS) was not simply a one-time event but a transformative journey, one whose impact, like a sauce left to age, deepens over time. The significance of the Field School gradually reveals itself as participants continue to reflect on and digest the ideas and experiences it facilitated. From my perspective, the VFFS became a space for long-term reflection, where knowledge wasn't just consumed but absorbed, integrated, and reshaped into fresh ways of seeing and engaging with the world.

The concept of fermentation serves as a fitting metaphor for this process. However, it is more than just a metaphor—it reflects how knowledge, ideas, and perspectives were exchanged and transformed during the VFFS. Like the unseen alchemy of fermentation, shifts occurred beneath the surface. Donna Haraway's concept of "situated knowledges" helps frame this, where understanding was shaped by the diverse backgrounds of the participants—artists, activists, researchers, farmers, and cooks—who co-constructed and embodied new forms of knowledge through shared experience.

Anna Tsing's work in *The Mushroom at the End of the World* resonates with this dynamic. At the VFFS, diverse interactions led to transformative, often unpredictable outcomes, just as Tsing describes in her work on collaboration. These moments of exchange embodied speculative fermentation—where the blending of ideas and traditions didn't

just spark reflection but also imagined new futures. The Field School's diversity became fertile ground for new insights, collaborations, and creative possibilities to emerge.

This process wasn't confined to theory but unfolded through multisensory experiences with Mesoamerican foodways. Participants visited places like Milpa Alta and Xochimilco Chinampas, where agricultural and culinary traditions have sustained communities for centuries. The act of tasting, cooking, and sharing food with local communities mirrored cultural fermentation, where knowledge is passed down and reinterpreted to ensure its vitality for future generations.

I remember how the tortillas felt warm in our hands, and with each fold of masa, we connected not only to centuries of tradition but to the potential futures these hands could shape. That simple act of shaping food became a sensory gateway into the speculative, as we imagined how these traditions might evolve to address contemporary challenges like food sovereignty and climate change.

Zoë Heyn-Jones's careful curation of the VFFS allowed artistic experimentation to intersect with historical knowledge. Just as fermentation requires time and care, the interactions between participants and local communities sparked moments of deep reflection and learning. For example, Colectivo Amasijo and Cocina CoLaboratorio showed how artistic and cultural practices could intersect with activism to imagine new possibilities for food sovereignty and sustainability.

Performance art also became a speculative experiment, allowing participants to engage with future scenarios in embodied ways. This aligns with Rebecca Schneider's emphasis on performance as a medium for imagining possible futures. Through these acts, we didn't just re-enact rituals but actively explored how cultural traditions might evolve to address future challenges, especially those related to sustainability, food sovereignty, and identity.

Beatriz Paz Jiménez's work, centered on Indigenous knowledge and ecological sustainability, demonstrated how artistic practice can bridge tradition and future-making. Her research on quelites—wild edible greens—highlighted their importance not only for nutritional resilience but also as symbols of cultural and ecological continuity within the milpa system. As we gathered around, surrounded by colorful displays of traditional crops like native maize, beans, and other local varieties, along with metates (grinding stones), we listened to Beatriz and observed the thin, green leaves of the quelites—survivors in the face of industrial monoculture. Holding these wild greens in our hands, we weren't just holding food; we were holding a living symbol of resilience. The VFFS became a space where artistic practice, ecological activism, and cultural research converged in enriching and unexpected ways.

The VFFS also reimagined the concept of the archive. Traditionally seen as a static repository of documents and artifacts, the archive here was treated as a living, dynamic process. Knowledge wasn't just preserved—it was continuously produced through the everyday acts of cooking, eating, and storytelling. In this living archive, knowledge was not only preserved, as Foucault and Derrida might suggest, but also reinterpreted and speculated upon, planting seeds for how future communities might reshape these traditions to respond to evolving cultural and ecological challenges.

David Sutton's work on food, memory, and identity provides a relevant lens to view this living archive. He argues that eating connects us to the past while helping us envision the future. The Field School's activities showed that the archive is not static but dynamic, evolving through lived experiences. Much like fermentation, this living archive ensures that cultural memory remains adaptable to future challenges.

Ultimately, the VFFS was more than a gathering—it became a crucible for transforming ideas, practices, and identities. By integrating cultural studies, performance, social foresight, and artistic research, Zoë Heyn-Jones's curation created a fertile space for participants to engage with the past while subtly imagining and shaping future possibilities. As these experiences continue to evolve in us, the insights we gained offer new paths for understanding and action.

The concept of slow knowledge—knowledge that unfolds over time and through deep engagement with place and practice—offers a critical lens for future-making. In contrast to the fast-paced consumption of information that dominates today's world, the VFFS embraced slow, deliberate engagement with foodways, history, and community as a model for sustainable futures. Speculative fermentation suggests that resilience and adaptability are cultivated not through rapid innovation, but through careful, thoughtful transformation of what we already know.

By embracing the slow unfolding of knowledge, we come to realize that much like fermentation, the future isn't fixed—it's continually reshaped by our actions, stories, and rituals. It's in these collective acts of engagement that we plant the seeds for more resilient futures. In this way, speculative fermentation becomes a framework not just for understanding the past, but for actively shaping the future—through continuous adaptation and transformation, grounded in the everyday rituals and acts that connect us to our cultural roots.

Chapter 3. Cultivating Food Sovereignty: Performance, Resistance, and Envisioning Futures

Cultural studies provided a critical framework through which the Visualizing Foodways Field School (VFFS) became a space where power, identity, and resistance intersected.

As a participant, I witnessed how food acted as a powerful medium for exploring these dynamics, closely tied to sovereignty, colonialism, and cultural identity. By situating the Field School in historically significant sites like Milpa Alta and Xochimilco Chinampas, the organizers highlighted how place and history shape cultural identities. This approach aligns with Stuart Hall's theory that identity is not fixed but continuously shaped by cultural practices and discourses.

At the VFFS, foodways—especially within Mesoamerican traditions—became a platform not only for reflecting on cultural memory but for imagining future food systems. Hall's notion of identity as fluid was particularly evident as participants engaged with food as a tool for both preserving and transforming identity. These acts of renewal weren't solely about the past; they carried within them seeds of speculative futures—new food systems that could address environmental crises and social inequalities.

One of the central themes at the VFFS was the politics of food sovereignty and its deep connection to cultural identity and political resistance. Dr. Priscilla Settee, an activist and key speaker, provided critical insights into food sovereignty as a right—communities' right to control their food systems in ways that prioritize local economies and ecological sustainability. This idea, deeply rooted in Indigenous knowledge systems, framed the discussions around food sovereignty as not just about access to food, but about the right to preserve and adapt cultural practices that reflect community values and long-term ecological balance. Settee's vision wasn't limited to the present—it invited us to speculate about what future food systems could look like if they were guided by principles of ecological balance and care. Her work in *Indigenous Food Systems* (Settee & Shukla, 2020) emphasizes how Indigenous food systems function not only as methods of cultivation but as pillars of resilience, enabling cultural survival in the face of exploitation and displacement.

Engagement with local organizations like Colectivo Amasijo, Cocina CoLaboratorio, Mujeres de la Tierra, Calpulli Tecalco, Chinampa Ttlazolteotl, and Colectivo Ahuejote illustrated how food sovereignty movements reclaim traditional food practices and resist the homogenizing forces of global capitalism. Their work emphasized that food is not just sustenance but a powerful site of resistance, imagination, and cultural resilience.

For example, Colectivo Amasijo is based in Milpa Alta and emphasizes the communal use of land and agricultural practices deeply connected to women's solidarity and environmental justice. Their initiatives seek to highlight the parallels between violence against the land and violence against marginalized communities, particularly women. By safeguarding traditional food practices, Amasijo ensures the continuation of cultural knowledge essential for community autonomy and resistance against industrialized food systems.

Similarly, Mujeres de la Tierra frames food production as an act of self-determination, focusing on sustainable agricultural practices that empower women to resist the commodification of food. Their work aligns with food sovereignty as a mechanism for preserving ecological and cultural heritage through collective food production and community engagement.

Calpulli Tecalco in Milpa Alta plays a crucial role in both preserving traditional agriculture and advocating for sustainable food systems. They focus on seed exchanges and the integration of ancient knowledge with modern sustainability practices. By bridging educational initiatives with traditional food sovereignty practices, Calpulli Tecalco ensures the resilience of these methods in the face of modern agricultural challenges.

Cocina CoLaboratorio and Colectivo Ahuejote have been integral in highlighting the importance of reimagining traditional food systems as speculative futures. Their work illustrates how ancient practices can be adapted to meet contemporary needs, offering solutions to the environmental and social crises created by globalized food production.

Through these collectives' efforts, foodways became a medium not just for resisting current systems of oppression but also for building futures in which traditional knowledge informs sustainable systems capable of withstanding the pressures of modernity. Reclaiming agricultural practices, while integrating them with sustainable methods, shows that food sovereignty is not only about heritage preservation but also about building forward-thinking systems that prioritize justice, resilience, and cultural identity.

This theme of balancing tradition with innovation was vividly embodied in Santiago del Conde Morales' tortilla-making workshop. Santiago's workshop demonstrated how performative acts around food at the VFFS created moments of future-thinking. Through the ancient nixtamalization process—soaking and cooking maize in an alkaline solution—Santiago connected participants with centuries-old agricultural knowledge. This hands-on, tactile learning experience allowed participants to see that food sovereignty isn't only about access to food, but also about protecting and revitalizing traditional methods that enhance biodiversity and ecological sustainability. As participants ground maize, shaped dough, and cooked tortillas on the comal, they weren't merely preserving a practice—they were actively imagining how these ancient techniques could evolve to become key to future sustainable food systems in a world increasingly affected by climate change.

Santiago's workshop aligned with the Field School's central idea that foodways act as a metaphorical loom, weaving together threads of tradition and innovation to explore sustainable futures. Just as threads are intricately woven into complex patterns, food became more than sustenance—it became a medium for cultural transformation.

Santiago's emphasis on maize as a sacred crop connected participants to a cultural lineage that stretches back centuries, while the hands-on nature of the workshop encouraged reflection on how these practices could shape future food systems to address challenges like climate change and food insecurity while staying rooted in local knowledge and memory. The tortillas, warm in our hands, were not only products of history but speculative objects, offering glimpses of how simple, ancient processes might guide us toward more equitable and sustainable futures.

The notion of food as a speculative medium echoed Toni Cade Bambara's ideas about community-based storytelling and collective action. Bambara emphasized that cultural memory and storytelling are essential for both preserving heritage and imagining new futures. At the VFFS, food practices connected participants to their past but also opened pathways to alternative futures. The collective engagement with foodways—exemplified in Santiago's workshop—became a form of cultural storytelling, where each act of cooking, eating, and sharing wove together narratives of resistance, renewal, and growth. In each tortilla pressed, each meal shared, the speculative future became tangible—new possibilities emerged through the repetition of ancient acts, offering blueprints for resilient communities.

Bambara's focus on community action and cultural resilience resonated deeply with the discussions around food sovereignty at the VFFS. Just as Bambara believed in the transformative power of storytelling, the cultural weaving at the Field School encouraged participants to imagine new food systems that are socially just, ecologically sustainable, and grounded in community knowledge. The interaction between local food traditions and innovative practices—whether in tortilla-making or other traditional processes such as cooking on a large comal (traditional griddle)—underscored how foodways serve as both cultural preservation and seedbeds for future growth. These seedbeds weren't static—they pulsed with speculative potential, as participants considered how to adapt these traditions to an unpredictable future.

The VFFS's performative approach to foodways also highlighted the importance of embodied knowledge in shaping cultural identity and resistance. Cooking, eating, and storytelling weren't just functional acts—they were performative engagements with history, identity, and community. This aligns with Diana Taylor's concept of the "repertoire," where knowledge is embodied and transmitted through action rather than text. At the VFFS, food became a performative medium, allowing participants to engage with both past and present, using embodied practices to explore future possibilities. Santiago's tortilla-making workshop reinforced this idea, as the process of preparing maize became a metaphor for cultural resilience, and the tortilla itself became a symbol of continuity and innovation. In this context, each tortilla was not just food but a speculative object—what might these humble, resilient practices offer to future systems struggling against the forces of industrialization and environmental degradation?

These performances and artistic interventions didn't just preserve cultural traditions—they reimaged them. Through cooking and sharing meals, participants enacted new possibilities for food systems that could respond to today's pressing needs while staying deeply connected to cultural roots. The blending of artistic research with cultural practices created a speculative weaving of identity and place, where food became a canvas for collective reflection and creative action. As we crafted tortillas together, each fold of masa became an act of future-making, a way to imagine how these simple, enduring practices might contribute to broader ecological and social transformations.

Throughout the Field School, discussions around food sovereignty demonstrated how reclaiming food systems is a form of cultural and political resistance. Settee's emphasis on restoring control over local food production processes highlighted the importance of food sovereignty for cultural resilience and self-determination. While Settee's focus on local control is foundational for food sovereignty, it raises questions about scalability. Critics argue that relying solely on localized food systems could limit the reach of food sovereignty efforts, particularly in regions heavily reliant on global trade. Yet, Settee and Shukla (2020) argue that these critiques often fail to recognize that Indigenous food systems offer models of resilience that can inspire global policy shifts, pointing to the need for multi-scalar approaches. Within this context, Santiago's workshop on tortilla-making served as a microcosm of the broader exploration of food sovereignty at VFFS. His workshop, like the process of ripening, reflected the slow, deliberate transformation of traditional practices into sustainable, future-oriented food systems. Ripening, like speculative fermentation, became a metaphor for how the careful nurturing of traditions can shape resilient, adaptive futures.

Ripening, with its slow, deliberate transformation of ingredients, mirrors the efforts of food sovereignty movements that aim to build food systems that are both ecologically sustainable and culturally reflective. This process requires deep knowledge of local biodiversity and the careful transmission of cultural practices from one generation to the next, much like the passing down of farming techniques in Indigenous communities. The metaphor of ripening captures the slow, intentional work of transforming food systems into those that are more just, sustainable, and rooted in cultural memory.

The performative aspects of the VFFS allowed participants to engage directly with cultural rituals surrounding food, treating them as speculative experiments in which food practices were re-enacted and reimaged. These performances became forms of cultural alchemy, where participants collectively engaged in future-making by imagining how food traditions might evolve and adapt to meet contemporary challenges. These acts of culinary alchemy weren't just reflections on the past—they were invitations to consider how these traditions could become tools for building future systems that are as resilient as they are nourishing. Through these speculative acts, the VFFS demonstrated

how artistic practice, and cultural research can serve as powerful tools for envisioning new possibilities for food systems and social transformation.

Through the combined lenses of cultural studies, performance studies, and food sovereignty, the VFFS revealed deep connections between food, identity, and power. Stuart Hall's theory of identity as a continuously evolving process was evident in how foodways were treated as living cultural practices that both preserve and transform cultural identity. The performative acts of cooking, eating, and storytelling—highlighted in Santiago del Conde Morales' tortilla-making workshop—underscored the importance of embodied knowledge, where cultural traditions are not just preserved but actively woven into new responses to modern challenges.

The discussions led by Dr. Priscilla Settee and the involvement of local food sovereignty organizations illustrated the critical role that food systems play in both cultural survival and political resistance. By engaging with food as a site of cultural ripening, participants at the VFFS explored how heritage preservation and future-making can coexist. However, food sovereignty doesn't operate in a vacuum; it necessitates structural shifts that extend beyond local movements. Settee and Shukla (2020) emphasize that Indigenous food systems are political acts of sovereignty and safeguarding them requires comprehensive policy frameworks that protect biodiversity and cultural practices on an international scale. To achieve true food sovereignty, speculative fermentation must engage with policy changes that limit the influence of global industrial food systems, much like the advocacy for seed sovereignty in Indigenous communities. Ultimately, the VFFS showed that food is not just sustenance—it's a medium for imagining and creating more just, sustainable futures, where cultural memory and collective action are central to cultural transformation. Santiago's workshop provided a concrete, embodied example of how performance and food sovereignty intersected at the VFFS, reinforcing the idea that cultural memory and foodways are key sites for future-making.

Chapter 4. Fermentation as Ritual: Celebration, Commemoration, and the Fermentation of Knowledge and Memory

Across many cultures, fermentation is more than just a way to transform ingredients—it's deeply embedded in rituals and ceremonies, symbolizing life's cycles, the passage of time, and the connections that bind communities together. Whether it's turning grains into beer or grapes into wine, fermentation often takes center stage at harvest festivals, transforming the raw gifts of the earth into something that brings people together. These rituals elevate the ordinary—just as fermentation changes simple ingredients into something richer, festivals turn everyday moments into communal acts of renewal and reflection.

At the Visualizing Foodways Field School (VFFS), I experienced firsthand how this idea of fermentation—both as a biological process and a cultural act—helped us understand the connections between food, community, and time. The act of transforming ingredients became a way to see how communities connect with nature and with one another. Yet, beyond celebrating the past and present, these rituals also offered speculative glimpses into the future, showing how traditions like fermentation can adapt to the challenges ahead. Practices such as Kimjang in Korea or Meskel in Ethiopia illustrate how communities not only preserve their past but also transform these traditions into tools for resilience and resistance as they face new ecological and social realities.

This invites an essential question: How might future festivals anticipate the changes in our world—whether in agriculture, climate, or politics? How can these rituals be designed not only to honor history but to serve as proactive strategies for shaping emergent futures?

This connection between food, memory, and ritual is particularly strong in Indigenous knowledge systems. Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui's exploration of Andean cosmology and ecological reciprocity offers a way to think about speculative fermentation as a practice that honors the interconnectedness of all life. For Cusicanqui, fermentation is more than just a culinary process—it's a ritual exchange with the Earth, reflecting the ongoing relationship between humans and the natural world. At the VFFS, we explored how the transformation of food mirrored this deep interdependence. These acts of speculative fermentation, in turn, push us to imagine how such relationships might evolve under future pressures, like climate change, and how traditional ecological wisdom can guide us in adapting to these new conditions.

Consider Kimjang in Korea, where families gather to prepare large quantities of kimchi as they transition into winter. This practice symbolizes continuity, linking people to seasonal cycles. Similarly, in Japan, the fermentation of sake plays a role in Shinto rituals, symbolizing the community's bond with nature. But these rituals aren't frozen in time—they hold speculative potential. Communities can adapt these practices in response to changes like globalization or the impacts of climate change. How might we imagine future rituals in which communities anticipate disruptions to staple ingredients like cabbage for kimchi or rice for sake? Could these rituals shift in response to ecological changes, reshaping how they maintain balance between culture and nature?

These cultural fermentations echo Cusicanqui's idea of ecological reciprocity, where food isn't just consumed—it plays an active part in a dialogue with the Earth. In Ethiopia, for instance, injera, a sourdough flatbread made from teff, carries deep cultural and religious significance. Shared during Meskel, a celebration of the True Cross, the preparation of injera ties people to their agricultural roots and seasonal cycles. Here,

too, fermentation offers speculative potential—how can these traditions help communities remain resilient in the face of an unpredictable future? And in Mexico, the fermentation of pulque, a drink made from agave sap, has been tied to religious rituals for centuries. Pulque connects people to the cycles of life, harvest, and time itself.

But what happens when agriculture is disrupted by droughts or shifts in biodiversity? Could these fermented foods evolve as communities actively forecast these challenges, adapting their practices while holding on to their traditions? The anticipatory element is key here—how do these practices pre-emptively adapt to new ecological realities, safeguarding the sovereignty of their food systems?

Fermentation as a form of ecological reciprocity also connects to the milpa system, an ancient Mesoamerican agricultural practice that intercropped maize, beans, squash, and wild greens like quelites. This agricultural diversity is more than just a farming strategy; it's a form of cultural continuity. At the VFFS, when we shared a traditional soup from Milpa Alta made with ingredients from the milpa, we weren't just eating—we were connecting to an ancient cycle of renewal. Like fermentation, this soup nurtures both the body and the spirit, linking us to the earth.

This experience reminded us that food rituals are acts of cultural memory. As we gathered around the fire, sharing stories and meals, we saw how festivals and celebrations become moments of cultural fermentation, turning the ordinary into something meaningful and shared. These gatherings mirror Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque, where social structures are temporarily suspended, allowing new forms of culture to emerge. But these cultural expressions don't only reflect the past—they also invite us to imagine how rituals can adapt to new realities. What does it look like to design festivals that anticipate the future, rather than just celebrate the past?

Yet, even in spaces committed to decolonial practices, tensions surfaced at the VFFS. At the welcome reception, where indigenous community members served food to foreign participants, complex questions about class, race, and power dynamics arose. These undercurrents of inequality challenge us to think about how speculative fermentation can move beyond symbolic gestures to address deeper power structures. How can we create food systems that truly decolonize, rather than reinforce old hierarchies?

This tension between celebration and socio-economic disparity invites us to reflect on how foodways intersect with power, class, and memory. José Esteban Muñoz's concept of "disidentification" helps us understand how marginalized communities rework dominant cultural symbols, using them for resistance and survival.

At the VFFS, food practices tied to cultural memory were preserved but also reimagined. The act of fermentation itself becomes a speculative act—a way to rethink survival and

imagine possible futures where food sovereignty stands firm against the forces of globalization.

Both fermentation and commemoration work slowly, evolving over time. Just as fermentation deepens flavors, commemoration deepens memory, allowing it to mature and take on new meanings. This process was embodied at the VFFS, where the simple act of sharing food transformed into a metaphor for cultural fermentation. Just as pulque and mezcal are offered during Día de los Muertos, these fermented drinks acted as bridges between the living and the dead, connecting us to the past while also creating pathways for the future.

A key moment was Grace Deni's *Aural Oral* project, presented during the closing dinner. Her performance invited participants to experience food not just through taste but through the sounds of eating, turning the communal meal into a rich, multisensory experience. The crunch of vegetables, the murmur of conversation—these sounds carried cultural memory, transforming the act of eating into a ritual of transmission and reflection. Grace's work reminded us that food is not just sustenance—it's a story we tell through our senses, linking the past, present, and future.

But how might the future of these rituals look? As we shift into more digital, globalized worlds, will the sensory experience of food evolve into hybrid forms of gathering? Could virtual spaces blend with embodied experiences, challenging us to rethink the meaning of connection in a mediated world?

Grace's work also echoes Toni Cade Bambara's belief in cultural memory as a tool for liberation. Eating together is not just a social act—it's a speculative one, opening space for imagining futures by reconnecting us with the past. In this way, her performance became a speculative act of future-making, where the meal itself served as a canvas for blending intimacy and collective memory.

At the heart of this chapter, the rituals we explored at the VFFS remind us that food is more than nourishment—it's a way of anticipating and shaping futures. By engaging with ancestral knowledge in new ways, we can reimagine the future through the collective act of storytelling, ritual, and celebration. How do we create rituals that not only preserve but anticipate change, allowing us to design the futures we want to inhabit?

Chapter 5. Cultural Fermentation, Speculative Action, and the Politics of the Possible

The Visualizing Foodways Field School (VFFS), held in Mexico City in 2023, offered a profound example of speculative action, creating a space where the politics of the

possible could be explored through collective imagination and action. Through foodways, participants were encouraged to challenge dominant systems like industrial agriculture and neoliberalism, imagining alternatives rooted in community resilience. This overarching theme guided our exploration of how food practices could resist capitalist paradigms and envision new, more equitable futures.

At the VFFS, food wasn't merely a subject of inquiry—it became a tool for speculation. Through food sovereignty practices like seed exchanges, collaborative cooking, and the sharing of agricultural knowledge, participants could experiment with new forms of social organization. Drawing on Octavia Butler's emphasis on adaptability and resilience, the Field School underscored the importance of collective action in shaping sustainable futures. Butler's work reminds us that in the face of environmental, social, and political challenges, adaptability is key. Similarly, the foodways explored at the VFFS acted as seeds for radical transformation—each practice, from planting heirloom seeds to cooking traditional meals, had the potential to grow into new social systems that resisted the capitalist model.

But what does this mean in simple terms? The practices we engaged in—exchanging seeds, cooking together, learning about sustainable farming methods—might seem small. But, as Butler and other thinkers suggest, these small acts are what build resilience. By preserving and adapting food practices that prioritize local communities and ecological balance, we're laying the groundwork for larger, systemic changes. In other words, if enough people reclaim control over their food—what they eat, where it comes from, and how it's produced—then we could shift away from the global systems that prioritize profit over people.

This idea of speculative fermentation—where food practices are both preserved and reimagined—was central to the VFFS. As Sohail Inayatullah has suggested, “changing the stories we tell about the future can alter the course of that future.” Through food, art, and storytelling, we reshaped cultural narratives at the Field School. Fermentation, in this context, isn't just about preserving food or traditions—it's about evolving them in response to contemporary challenges. For instance, how could traditional farming techniques be adapted to withstand the climate crisis? How could community kitchens become centers of resistance against food deserts and inequality? These are the speculative questions that arose, and through our practices, we began to imagine concrete answers.

What does this look like in everyday life? At the VFFS, we performed these future possibilities. We didn't just talk about changing the food system—we enacted it, through the physical act of cooking together, sharing knowledge, and exploring alternatives. These performances became speculative experiments, allowing us to blur the boundaries between past, present, and future. In this sense, speculative fermentation

served as a framework for long-term cultural transformation. Every tortilla we made, every heirloom seed exchanged, carried with it the potential to reshape a small part of the food system—one that prioritizes sustainability and equity.

This process of cultural fermentation resonates deeply with Toni Cade Bambara's vision of cultural memory as a tool for liberation. Bambara emphasized that engaging with cultural memory isn't just about preserving the past—it's about using that memory to create better futures. At the VFFS, we weren't just remembering how foodways have sustained communities in the past—we were imagining how they could sustain communities in the future. Collective actions—like preparing and eating meals together—became sites of speculative potential, showing that transforming society through food is possible, not just theoretical.

And yet, how do small, local actions like these connect to the broader, global food system? The Field School reminded us that change doesn't always happen from the top down. Sometimes, it's the small-scale, local actions—what might seem like insignificant gestures—that end up catalyzing larger transformations. By nurturing local food sovereignty and sustainable practices, we are planting the seeds for systems that can withstand the pressures of globalization and environmental degradation. Just as fermentation is a slow, deliberate process, so too is social transformation. The key is to start with what's tangible, what's immediate—our communities, our food, our practices—and let these small acts ferment into larger changes.

Through performances, art, and storytelling, we began crafting new narratives about justice, community, and ecological balance. These narratives weren't just speculative—they were actionable, grounded in the politics of the possible. By engaging in hands-on, multisensory practices, we explored how future food systems might work in real-time, shaping futures that challenge dominant food systems not just in theory but in practice.

As we planted seeds for new social structures, we asked: What does it mean to resist neoliberal and capitalist paradigms through food? One answer lies in the act of reclaiming control over our food systems. By rejecting industrialized food systems that prioritize profit, we can instead foster local economies that prioritize the well-being of communities and the land. And what does this resistance look like in the future? It could mean more community-run farms, more seed exchanges, more collective kitchens—each a node in a growing network that challenges global corporate control.

The speculative practices and collective actions undertaken during the VFFS allowed us to engage deeply with the complexity of the present while planting seeds for alternative futures. The foodways we explored weren't just about survival—they were about transformation. Through these collective actions, we saw how food can be a medium for both social change and environmental resilience. These small, tangible acts of

resistance—whether it was cooking a meal together or discussing sustainable agriculture—became part of a larger speculative pathway toward radical reimagining of food sovereignty.

In sum, the VFFS showed us that foodways are at the heart of speculative action—an essential part of rethinking the future. The deliberate process of fermentation, whether literal or metaphorical, offered a powerful model for how collective action in food sovereignty could create lasting change. By planting the seeds of cultural fermentation today, we lay the groundwork for more just, sustainable futures—where food, community, and resilience are central.

Chapter 6. Embodied Futures: Sensory, Participatory, and Queer Pathways to Transformation

At the Visualizing Foodways Field School (VFFS), food became more than nourishment—it became a gateway to imagining and shaping futures. Through multisensory, participatory experiences, participants explored speculative futures by engaging with traditional foodways, collective action, and alternative ways of thinking about time. These embodied interactions brought forth speculative fermentation as a living process—one that was slow, transformative, and rooted in community.

Sameer Farooq’s intervention, centered around building and baking bread in a traditional tandoor oven—a practice with over 5,000 years of history, encapsulated this process. The simple act of baking bread became deeply symbolic and participatory. As we worked the dough, felt the warmth of the oven, and smelled the bread baking, the past, present, and future converged. Farooq’s tandoor embodied speculative fermentation by connecting ancient traditions with future possibilities, imagining sustainable food systems that resist industrialized, profit-driven models. The texture of the dough, soft and pliable at first, became firmer with every fold, as hands worked together to create something new grounded in the past but looking forward. The scent of bread rising was a sensory reminder of what could be reclaimed and transformed.

Stuart Candy’s concept of experiential futures, which emphasizes making the future tangible through immersive, participatory environments, naturally fit within the VFFS’s design. The rich sensory experiences turned abstract ideas into lived reality. Farooq’s tandoor wasn’t just about baking; it allowed participants to physically engage with speculative futures. The warmth of the fire, the rhythmic kneading of dough, and the sharing of bread made futures real and accessible. It was not merely a moment of nourishment, but a collective imagining: How could such ancient practices point us toward a future where food systems are resilient and grounded in care?

Every element of the VFFS invited us into this speculative process. From the tactile experience of shaping masa to the aromatic complexities of roasting maize, each moment was a sensory encounter with future-making. These acts of food preparation weren't just about preserving tradition—they were about actively creating futures rooted in sustainability and care. As participants tasted, touched, and shared food, they began to see how these simple acts could transform the way communities respond to future crises. What if preparing food became a deliberate act of future-making, where each step considered how to care for the earth and its people? What if every shared meal was a chance to create new ways of living together?

Sarah Pink's sensory ethnography offers a way of understanding how futures are experienced through the senses. At the VFFS, this was palpable. The texture of hand-pressed tortillas, the tang of fermented pulque, and the warmth of the comal became visceral links to speculative futures where food sovereignty is central. Farooq's intervention heightened this sensory engagement, as the smell of bread rising in the tandoor grounded participants in a collective vision of a future where ancient practices provide solutions to modern-day problems. As participants tasted the bread they had shaped, the future was no longer abstract—it was tangible, warm, and real, a future that felt possible through the collective act of baking.

Participatory futures were also a key part of the VFFS's speculative process. José Ramos emphasizes that inclusive and democratic future-making depends on communities shaping their own futures. At the VFFS, participants—whether artists, activists, farmers, or cooks—worked together to imagine these futures through shared practices like seed exchanges and collaborative cooking. In Farooq's collective baking session, the act of shaping dough became a symbol for how communities could mold their futures together, creating something that resisted the pressures of profit and exploitation. Future-making wasn't just about theory—it was about hands-on collaboration that allowed for meaningful change. The bread rising in the oven mirrored the potential for communities to rise together, slow but strong, as they took control of their futures.

Fermentation as a metaphor took on new layers in this context. Fermentation requires time, care, and the coming together of diverse elements to create something greater than the sum of its parts. This mirrors the speculative futures explored at the VFFS. Like fermentation, the future isn't about rushing or forcing outcomes—it's about letting things unfold in their own time, nourished by diverse perspectives and careful attention. These futures weren't predetermined or singular; they were plural, collective, and adaptable. Just as the dough was kneaded and left to rise slowly, the futures imagined at the VFFS were allowed to grow and transform over time, shaped by the hands of many.

At its core, this process aligned with the principles of food sovereignty, where communities reclaim control over their food systems. Participants at the VFFS explored

how local, resilient food systems could provide models of ecological balance and equity for the future. The hands-on engagement underscored José Ramos's belief in participatory futures, where communities actively shape the narratives and practices that define their futures. Farooq's tandoor was both a metaphorical and literal tool for reclaiming traditional techniques while imagining sustainable food systems. The act of baking bread together wasn't just a moment of reflection—it was a tangible step toward reclaiming power over food and envisioning futures where communities are self-sustained and resilient.

But it wasn't just about engaging the senses or reclaiming food sovereignty. The VFFS also introduced a profound layer of speculative thought through José Esteban Muñoz's theory of queer futurity. Muñoz invites us to imagine futures that break free from the rush and constraints of the present. His idea of queer time asks: What if we embraced slow, deliberate processes like fermentation, where futures unfold at their own pace, rather than being driven by profit or efficiency? Farooq's tandoor intervention directly challenged capitalist notions of efficiency and productivity by inviting participants into an ancient, communal rhythm of bread-making. The slow process of fermentation, far from being wasteful or inefficient, became a way to imagine futures that are rich, sustainable, and deeply connected to community.

Speculative fermentation—as both a process of change and a rejection of linear, productivity-driven models—takes on a distinctly queer dimension. It rejects the pressure to rush, to produce, to achieve. Instead, it values sustainability, care, and gradual transformation. At the VFFS, participants embraced this alternative rhythm, imagining futures where foodways and communities thrive on their own terms, outside of normative frameworks. What if, instead of striving for endless growth, we focused on nurturing what we already have, allowing it to grow slowly and deliberately? What if the future wasn't something to race toward but something to savor, like bread rising in a communal oven?

Foodways themselves, tied to the cyclical rhythms of the land and seasons, provided a natural starting point for queering time. The collective acts of preparing and sharing food offered a space where speculative futures could emerge, not as abstract ideas but as lived experiences. These acts challenged capitalist notions of efficiency by prioritizing sustainability, care, and community. In these speculative futures, it wasn't about how quickly something could be produced—it was about how meaningfully something could be created and shared.

Through these collective, sensory, and participatory acts, the VFFS demonstrated that speculative futures are not only possible but already in the making. The simple acts of shaping dough, sharing food, and embracing alternative temporalities opened new

pathways for imagining and creating futures where sustainability, care, and community take precedence over profit and exploitation.

Chapter 7. Ecological and Slow Futures: Resistance through Food Sovereignty and Indigenous Knowledge

At the Visualizing Foodways Field School (VFFS), the act of slowing down was not just an invitation to savor the moment—it became a radical form of resistance. Participants learned that imagining sustainable futures demands an embodied, sensory connection to place, culture, and community. By engaging deeply with traditional foodways, we began to see that slow engagement with local ecosystems is essential to reimagining futures that challenge the industrialized pace of modern food systems. This idea echoed Jenny Odell’s argument in *How to Do Nothing*, where she advocates for forging deeper, intentional connections with our environments to resist the fast-paced demands of modernity.

At the VFFS, the slow rhythms of traditional agricultural practices like the milpa offered a tangible model of resilience. Through hands-on activities such as harvesting, cooking, and tasting food grown within the milpa system, participants gained a profound appreciation for the interconnectedness of culture and ecology. This intentional engagement with local ecosystems illustrated how biodiversity, community, and traditional knowledge can offer pathways toward ecological sustainability.

One striking example was the presentation by Beatriz Paz Jiménez, who introduced participants to quelites—wild edible greens integral to the milpa system. For many of us, tasting these greens for the first time was both surprising and revealing. The quelites, with their sharp, tangy flavor and slightly bitter undertone, were a far cry from the domesticated greens we are accustomed to. Their acidity left a tingling sensation on the tongue, and for some participants like me, mild allergic reactions highlighted how far-removed industrial diets have become from these nutrient-rich wild foods. This sensory encounter offered a direct, embodied understanding of the biodiversity that the milpa sustains—and how much of that diversity is being lost in the homogenization of global agriculture.

Tasting quelites became a gateway to understanding how these wild greens, once considered weeds by industrial standards, are integral to the health of the ecosystem. Paz Jiménez highlighted that the milpa—which interweaves maize, beans, squash, and wild plants like quelites—is more than a farming system; it is a living model of biodiversity and cultural survival. The slowness of the milpa, with its seasonal rhythms and intercropping practices, stands in stark contrast to the monocultures promoted by

industrial agriculture. This slowness, as Settee and Shukla (2020) discuss, is not merely an agricultural practice but a deliberate resistance to the global push toward industrialized efficiency. In Indigenous knowledge systems, slowness represents a form of resilience, offering alternatives that prioritize ecological balance and cultural survival over short-term productivity. This concept of slow futures extends beyond agriculture into broader economic and social systems, urging a rethinking of how global food policies might embrace these slower, more sustainable models. How can such a system be preserved in a world that prioritizes speed, efficiency, and profit?

This question becomes even more pressing when we consider Vandana Shiva's work on seed sovereignty, which emphasizes the critical role of biodiversity in maintaining resilient food systems. At the VFFS, the preservation of heirloom seeds and traditional plant varieties like quelites became a central theme. The milpa, with its diversity of crops, offers a defense against the ecological and cultural erosion driven by industrial agriculture. It acts as a safeguard, ensuring that future generations inherit not only a rich ecosystem but also the knowledge to care for it. As discussed by Settee and Shukla (2020), Indigenous food systems like the milpa embody resilience through biodiversity, providing a model for both ecological and cultural survival in increasingly globalized and industrial food landscapes.

While the milpa offers ecological resilience, Paz Jiménez's presentation also underscored the socio-political challenges threatening this system. The survival of milpa permaculture, along with traditions surrounding quelites, faces pressure from classism, racism, and the rise of industrial agriculture. These forces, which prioritize profit over sustainability, mirror colonial attitudes that have long devalued Indigenous agricultural knowledge. In a global economy dominated by industrial farming, how do we ensure the survival of systems like the milpa that prioritize ecological balance and community resilience?

Settee and Shukla (2020) remind us that these food systems not only nourish communities but act as counterforces to colonialism, emphasizing that sustaining Indigenous foodways is a political and cultural act of sovereignty, one that requires both local empowerment and international advocacy.

This tension between tradition and modernity was also reflected in the work of the collective Mujeres de la Tierra. Their philosophy, "Cooking your own food is pure resistance," speaks to the power of reclaiming food systems to resist commodification. By growing and preparing their own food, they emphasize self-determination and community care. This idea of resistance through food practices was echoed throughout the VFFS, highlighting how slow, intentional food practices can foster autonomy and resilience in the face of a globalized economy.

What role does policy play in this slow future? This question loomed large as we considered the challenges facing local food systems. While grassroots movements like Mujeres de la Tierra, Colectivo Amasijo, Calpulli Tecalco, and Colectivo Ahuejote are preserving traditional farming methods, the question remains: can these local efforts scale to influence global food policies? The work of these collectives, which blend ancient wisdom with contemporary research to preserve natural reserves in southern Mexico, underscore the need for policy frameworks that protect biodiversity, seed sovereignty, and local farming systems from the encroachment of industrial agriculture.

From a policy perspective, protecting local knowledge and food sovereignty could be achieved through laws that prioritize seed-saving practices, prohibit the patenting of Indigenous seeds, and promote agroecology. These policies would need to address not just agricultural practices but also education, ensuring that future generations are equipped with the knowledge to continue these traditions. Could governments implement policies that incentivize small-scale farming and biodiversity, resisting the pressure of monocultures and GMOs? The answer to this question holds the potential for not only preserving the past but also anticipating future crises in global food security.

The VFFS also emphasized the anticipatory nature of these practices. Just as the milpa has sustained communities for centuries, it holds the potential to adapt to future challenges. The act of growing quelites, saving heirloom seeds, and preserving Indigenous knowledge becomes an anticipatory practice—a way of preparing for the ecological uncertainties of the future. Can these slow, local practices become models for global food systems that are more resilient to the impacts of climate change? As participants engaged with the slow rhythms of the milpa, they also engaged with a future that prioritizes ecological balance over industrial efficiency.

Through its emphasis on slowness, care, and reciprocity, the VFFS showed that the preservation of traditional food systems is not just an act of cultural memory but a strategy for future resilience. How do we translate this slow knowledge into broader political and economic frameworks that can support global sustainability?

By drawing on thinkers like Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui and Vandana Shiva, we see that these systems are not merely relics of the past—they are anticipatory models for future food sovereignty. The slowness of the milpa and the cultivation of quelites are forms of resistance that anticipate a world in which biodiversity, ecological sustainability, and cultural continuity are central. Yet, the preservation of traditions in the face of global pressures raises important ethical questions: How can cultural practices remain intact while adapting to the challenges of climate change and industrialization? Settee and Shukla (2020) remind us that Indigenous food systems are continually evolving, and adaptation does not necessarily mean erasure. Instead, these transformations are vital

for the survival of both cultural and ecological systems, ensuring their relevance in a rapidly changing world.

Through these practices, the VFFS participants experienced firsthand how food sovereignty can be a powerful tool for shaping a future that resists the homogenizing forces of globalization. In the face of climate change and global industrialization, the slow, deliberate practices of the milpa and other Indigenous agricultural systems offer an urgent vision for the future. These practices challenge the speed, exploitation, and short-term thinking of industrial agriculture, providing a blueprint for ecological and cultural resilience. But how do we ensure these practices can thrive in a world driven by profit and speed? The answer lies in the integration of policy, education, and community-driven action, creating a slow, intentional future that prioritizes care, sustainability, and equity.

Chapter 8. Speculative Fermentation: Bridging Food Sovereignty, Cultural Resilience, and Future-Making

The concept of speculative fermentation connects food sovereignty, cultural resilience, ecological sustainability, and future studies into a framework for envisioning adaptive, sustainable futures. Speculative fermentation—both a metaphor and a practical approach—represents the slow, deliberate transformation of traditions, knowledge, and communities in response to contemporary and future challenges. This chapter synthesizes insights gained from the Visualizing Foodways Field School (VFFS) and illustrates how speculative fermentation can be a powerful tool for future-making, a method for balancing preservation and transformation.

In speculative fermentation, the biological process of transforming raw ingredients into something richer becomes a model for cultural and social change. Just as fermentation requires patience and care, sustainable futures emerge through slow, iterative engagement—where new ideas evolve through interactions with tradition, ecology, and community. At the VFFS, participants immersed themselves in traditional food systems like the milpa, a symbol of biodiversity and cultural sustainability. The cycles of intercropping maize, beans, and squash provided a living model for speculative fermentation, showing how ancient methods remain adaptive, offering solutions for food sovereignty and ecological resilience.

Settee and Shukla (2020) underscore how Indigenous food systems, such as those highlighted in the VFFS, serve as both ecological anchors and tools of resistance. These foodways, deeply rooted in ancestral knowledge, not only provide sustenance but also counteract the forces of colonialism and capitalism. They are part of a global effort,

demonstrating that food sovereignty is a political act as much as a cultural one. By safeguarding these traditions, communities actively resist external pressures while reclaiming their narratives and fostering sustainable futures.

Speculative fermentation allows communities to not only respond to present challenges but to anticipate and prepare for future disruptions, creating a buffer against unpredictable ecological and social shifts. Settee and Shukla's (2020) insights help further illustrate this, as they argue that preserving Indigenous foodways is not simply an act of cultural preservation, but a proactive strategy for long-term resilience. Engaging with slow, intentional practices empowers communities to mitigate current threats while building systems that can endure future crises like climate change and food insecurity. This future-oriented lens turns speculative fermentation into a proactive strategy, where adaptation and foresight merge to create long-term sustainability.

Collective Wisdom and Cultural Empowerment

The VFFS highlighted the wisdom of collectives like Colectivo Amasijo, Cocina CoLaboratorio, Mujeres de la Tierra, Calpulli Tecalco, Chinampa Tlazolteotl, and Colectivo Ahuejote, emphasizing that traditional food practices are not merely survival mechanisms—they are acts of cultural empowerment and resistance. Mujeres de la Tierra reframed the kitchen as a site of autonomy, reinforcing that "cooking your own food is pure resistance." Meanwhile, Calpulli Tecalco emphasized the revival of Indigenous agricultural knowledge as a blueprint for future ecological sustainability.

Colectivo Amasijo focuses on connecting everyday life with sustainable practices, exploring the intricate relationship between traditional knowledge and contemporary environmental challenges. They organize workshops, performances, and shared cooking events to promote awareness of Indigenous foodways and their importance in resisting industrial agricultural norms. Cocina CoLaboratorio, similarly, showcases food as a medium of cultural storytelling and innovation, blending artistic research with traditional practices to explore alternative futures.

Chinampa Tlazolteotl centers its work on the chinampa agricultural system in Xochimilco, aiming to protect and revive ancestral farming techniques as a living example of biocultural heritage. This approach underscores the deep connection between sustainable farming and cultural identity. Colectivo Ahuejote also operates within the chinampa system, merging traditional practices with new tools and processes to promote a more equitable and sustainable agro-food system.

These collectives embody the slow, deliberate cultural transformation at the heart of speculative fermentation, fostering food sovereignty by interweaving ancestral knowledge with modern sustainability efforts. Their focus on reimagining food systems

demonstrates how traditional agricultural practices can be adapted to meet modern challenges while creating more just and resilient food systems for the future.

Speculative fermentation provides a model for scaling these small, local actions into larger systemic changes—demonstrating how grassroots movements can inspire wider social and policy shifts. The reclamation of food sovereignty at the VFFS was not an isolated event but part of a larger movement towards sustainable futures, where cultural resilience and ecological balance form the foundation of community-driven change.

Movements like La Vía Campesina, which advocate for agroecology and small-scale farming, align with speculative fermentation's focus on biodiversity and local economies as essential components of future-making. Furthermore, Settee and Shukla (2020) argue that Indigenous food systems hold the potential to reshape global movements for food sovereignty by offering models of agroecological balance and long-term sustainability. These movements demonstrate that preserving biodiversity isn't just a local effort—it requires global policy shifts that honor the role of Indigenous practices in sustaining both culture and ecology. By preserving heirloom seeds and maintaining local practices, these communities engage in slow, deliberate transformations that resist the homogenizing forces of industrial agriculture. These small-scale actions, over time, ferment into broader systemic changes, creating new models for global food systems.

Ethical Tensions: Preservation vs. Transformation

One of the central tensions in speculative fermentation lies in the balance between preservation and necessary transformation. This challenge is especially pressing when engaging with Indigenous knowledge systems, where preserving traditions ensures cultural continuity, but adapting them ensures their relevance in a rapidly changing world. Communities must decide which elements to preserve intact and which to evolve to address modern challenges like climate change and food insecurity.

At the VFFS, participants experienced this tension firsthand, engaging in practices deeply rooted in cultural heritage while also adapting them to meet contemporary needs. For instance, while the milpa system has sustained communities for centuries, it must evolve in response to industrialization, deforestation, and biodiversity loss. The slow, deliberate process of transformation reflects the core philosophy of speculative fermentation: maintaining cultural significance while embracing change.

This raises essential questions: How do we ensure that these transformations do not dilute core values? How do we allow communities to retain control over their narratives while adapting to new realities? The VFFS reminded us that the ethical challenge of speculative fermentation is in respecting both continuity and change—allowing traditions to evolve without losing their cultural integrity. Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui's work

on ecological reciprocity emphasizes that transformation, when grounded in justice and sustainability, enables communities to shape their own futures, rather than having those futures imposed from external forces.

Disidentification and the Political Power of Foodways

José Esteban Muñoz's concept of disidentification became a key tool in speculative fermentation. Disidentification allows marginalized communities to reshape dominant cultural narratives, creating spaces of resistance. At the VFFS, speculative fermentation embodied this process as a means of resisting capitalist commodification and cultural homogenization.

Take the example of mezcal and pulque, fermented beverages deeply rooted in Indigenous ceremonial practices. These drinks, once central to rituals, have been commodified in global markets, often stripped of their cultural meaning. Yet, at the VFFS, these drinks were reclaimed within local contexts, where participants engaged with them as symbols of cultural identity, resilience, and ancestral continuity. In this process, mezcal and pulque became political acts, asserting food sovereignty and challenging their commodification.

This approach to fermentation as a form of political resistance mirrors speculative fermentation's philosophy: transformation without erasure and adaptation without losing identity. Just as fermentation requires patience and care, communities must nurture their cultural identities while adapting to global challenges.

Embodied Futures: Sensing, Crafting, and Living the Future

Speculative fermentation thrives on the idea that futures are lived and felt, rather than merely intellectualized. Scholars like Stuart Candy and Sarah Pink argue that futures are made tangible through sensory experiences, which was evident at the VFFS. Whether through the warmth of the comal, the tang of pulque, or the feel of hand-pressed tortillas, participants connected deeply with speculative futures by engaging in embodied experiences of food preparation and consumption.

This embodied engagement made futures more than abstract concepts—they became real, tangible, and accessible. The slow transformation of ingredients during fermentation mirrored the slow, deliberate transformation of future-making itself. Through these sensory encounters, participants experienced how slow, collective action fosters sustainable futures.

The Future of Speculative Fermentation: Policy and Practice

The speculative futures explored at the VFFS are not only theoretical—they demand action. Moving forward, speculative fermentation offers a model for future resilience, where slow, deliberate transformations foster adaptable food systems and sustainable communities. This is the essence of speculative fermentation: small, local actions that, over time, ferment into larger systemic changes. But how do we scale these insights? The role of policy is crucial here. Governments can create frameworks that protect traditional knowledge systems, promote agroecology, and support seed sovereignty, ensuring that small-scale farming and biodiversity are at the heart of future food systems. As Settee and Shukla (2020) highlight, protecting Indigenous food systems requires not only local empowerment but also international advocacy, ensuring that global policies reflect the needs and knowledge of Indigenous communities. Speculative fermentation offers a pathway for these policies to evolve, by centering biodiversity and small-scale farming at the heart of international food security strategies.

For example, policies that encourage heirloom seed preservation, limit industrial monocultures, and promote local food economies would align with speculative fermentation's emphasis on sustainability and cultural continuity. Through advocacy, grassroots movements, and collective action, communities can help shape the policies that will secure food sovereignty and ecological balance for future generations.

The speculative futures discussed throughout this essay call for a fundamental shift in how we approach food systems, sustainability, and culture. Speculative fermentation allows communities to act now in ways that anticipate and prepare for future disruptions, making it a crucial tool for long-term resilience. By embracing the slow, deliberate process of speculative fermentation, we can build futures that honor the past, adapt to present challenges, and anticipate the needs of tomorrow.

The process has only just begun. And like a fine fermented sauce, the results will unfold slowly, but with richness, complexity, and possibilities beyond what we can yet imagine.

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