INTERVIEW WITH MEGAN CARNEY

Megan Carney, Associate Professor of Anthropology at the University of Arizona, is a sociocultural and critical medical feminist anthropologist with specializations in critical migration and diaspora studies; food and water insecurity; migrant health; women's and youth migration; social reproduction, social solidarity, and the politics of (collective) care; critical food studies; and intersectional and diasporic feminist methodology and pedagogy. She conducts community-based collaborative research in the western United States and in Italy, specifically Sicily. From 2021-22, Dr. Carney was a Fulbright Scholar with the Fulbright Schuman European Union Affairs Program. She is a former Udall Public Policy Fellow (2019-20) and Public Voices Fellow with The Op-Ed Project (2018-19). Currently, she serves as Director of the UA Center for Regional Food Studies. She has published *The Unending Hunger: Tracing Women and Food Insecurity Across Borders*. Oakland: University of California Press. (Winner of the 2015 CHOICE award) and *Island of Hope: Migration and Solidarity in the Mediterranean*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2021. She is working on a third book entitled *Exit from the United States: Emigration, Carcerality, and Abolition Feminist Futures.*

Q. Can we start by asking about your role as Director of the UA Center for Regional Food Studies?

A. I started as Director of the Center when I was first hired at the University of Arizona in 2017, at which time the Center was a very new entity but had the mission of transforming food systems and strengthening the Arizona-Sonora borderlands foodshed through interdisciplinary and applied research. During the decade or so leading up to my appointment, I had been immersed in critical food studies both as an undergrad and then as a graduate student while also organizing for food systems change with students and activists across the country. It's to say that I really arrived at food studies by way of organizing. At UCLA for instance, I campaigned with

the California Student Sustainability Coalition to advocate for the adoption of sustainable food policies within procurement and dining services at college campuses across the state, and I co-founded the campus garden where students could grow food, host classes, and lead workshops. That was 20 years ago, and the campus garden still thrives today! I continued to organize for sustainable food systems on university campuses as a graduate student at UC Santa Barbara and also led the process of establishing a regional food policy council.

Overlapping with these phases of community organizing, I conducted research on alternative food systems in Italy – specifically in and around Firenze – and food insecurity in the U.S., particularly in contexts of transnational migration and displacement. Collectively, these are some of the experiences that I brought with me to the Center for Regional Food Studies. In my time as Director, we have prioritized decolonial and feminist pedagogies such as through The Future of Food and Social Justice Youth Storytelling Lab (Bellante 2024; Bellante et al. forthcoming), public-facing initiatives such as Arizona Water for All, and community-engaged research, much of it specific to southern Arizona, such as the Dunbar Wellness Project (Carney et al. 2024, 2023, 2022). We seek to co-produce knowledge with students from groups that have been historically underrepresented at institutions of higher education as well as with community members.

Q. We had the pleasure of reading and also publishing a review of your book *Island of Hope: Migration and Solidarity in the Mediterranean*, 2021. Can you briefly comment on this research and whether this interest and connection are ongoing?

A. This interest and connection are definitely ongoing! I spent almost a decade doing research in Sicily prior to publishing the book, but its publication by no means marked the end of my relationship with the people there. Several of the Sicily-based research partners that I continue to collaborate with are involved in migrant solidarity initiatives and/or mobilize around social, economic, and environmental struggles on the island. For example, my long-time collaborators from the Palermo-based organization Zabbara, my colleague Sara Vannini from the University of Sheffield, and I have been working together through the FunKino participatory film and storytelling lab. We received an Engaged Research Grant from the Wenner-Gren Foundation in 2022 and have been publishing on some aspects

of our collaborative work, in addition to producing short films (see Carney et al. 2025).

The politics of representation, of self-determination, control over local resources, and the right *not* to be displaced, remain urgent matters in this setting. More recently, I'm beginning to examine the problem of water insecurity that affects much of the Mediterranean and compounds with migrants' experiences of environmental displacement, threatens agriculture and food production in the region, and also generates new forms of displacement and dispossession across Sicily. This work also connects to community-based collaborative research that I'm doing on water insecurity (and justice) in southern Arizona. As both regions – Sicily and southern Arizona – are situated in arid environments and geopolitical borderlands, I'm hoping that we may facilitate a knowledge exchange and engage in cross-border dialogues about the future of water, among other vital resources, in these diverse locales.

Q. Your previous book, *The Unending Hunger: Tracing Women and Food Insecurity Across Borders*, and your most recent article focus on food insecurity and women (and women's activism). Could you expand?

A. Much of my work on food – and food justice – has been focused on the labor, particularly unpaid, reproductive *caring* labor, that is necessary for the very mundane activities of eating and feeding. This carework is generally devalued in society and also creates additional burdens, particularly emotional and psychological, for those performing it. I think heightening the visibility of this labor, the ways that it has been marginalized, and its connections to systems of violence and the expansion of neoliberal, racial capitalism, is of the utmost importance, especially as we mobilize for women's rights, racial justice, migrant justice, food justice, and climate justice. This is essentially the argument that I make in that recent article which was part of a special issue of *Global Food Security* on migration (Carney 2024).

As a continuation of this work, I'm collaborating with grassroots organizers to co-author a book that will draw on case studies from the US Southwest and the Mediterranean to examine the lived experiences of women displaced as a result of food, water, and climate apartheid. We are conceptualizing migrant women's health vulnerability as a site of racialized gender violence perpetrated through food, water and climate injustice.

Q. Are you presently working on another book or project on similar topics?

A. Yes, I'm writing a book about contemporary desires among U.S. citizens to permanently leave the United States as well as state attempts to control exit. There has definitely been an upswell of interest in the topic following the recent U.S. presidential election and as with the previous Trump presidency, many citizens are threatening to leave. But really, the focus of my book, and the stories shared by the several dozen aspiring and current U.S. emigrants that I interviewed (as well as the 550 or so individuals who completed my survey) hinge on something much larger than electoral politics or the political environment. It is much more about the disillusionment that people feel with the so-called American Dream and the unfulfilled promise of freedom, as well as the carceral logics that dictate mobility in U.S. society and override investments in care.

As suggested by my book's tentative title, *Exit from the United States: Emigration, Carcerality, and Abolition Feminist Futures*, I'm interpreting desires or manifestations of exit within the broader context of state violence. I'm also interested in how differential mobilities and carceral logics connect to or shape psychosocial wellbeing. Ultimately, I'm arguing that as an ethnographic object, exit not only reveals the carceral logics that produce violence and constrain mobility, but also points to the possibilities for liberation.

Q. How do you see the connection between food studies and Mediterranean Studies? How can this inform other disciplines' connection with food studies?

A. There is a clear affinity between food studies and Mediterranean studies, partly because "food" and the "Mediterranean" are closely linked in popular imagination – sometimes for better, sometimes for worse. Consider for instance, global commodification of the "Mediterranean diet" that has been promoted as a means to achieving health and longevity, especially in the global North. In the specific case of Sicilian food, there is some observable degree of both commodification and appropriation. One finds Sicilian restaurants and eateries across much of Italy, so it seems that the culinary practices of Sicily are very much celebrated, even though the culture of Sicily is oftentimes denigrated and mistakenly blamed for the economic problems experienced by the rest of the country. Tourists flock

to Sicily from all over to experience the "flavors" of Sicily; the region has become a veritable bastion of gastrodevelopment (Joassart-Marcelli 2021), observed for instance in the popularity of agritourism and wine tourism. But this also strikes me as a case of "eating the other" (bell hooks 1992), or a form of neocolonialism. It is salient here to keep in mind the impact of tourism on resource-related struggles, such as around water, that are disrupting local livelihoods and food practices.

I share these reflections in part as a warning to those connecting regional studies with studies of food. We have to be mindful about how the knowledge we're producing exacerbates some of the conditions that we wish to critique. In general, I think that most food scholarship would benefit from embracing a move toward the political, exercising more reflexivity, and engaging more directly with the politics of knowledge production.

Q. Do you think food culture and identity are related? And if so, especially in the case of Mediterranean Studies, how does it develop particularly in a modern and contemporary perspective which is inevitably characterized by migration of people?

A. As a cultural domain, food practices are dynamic, rather than static, and so always changing. Food practices are also sites of cultural exchange and diffusion, meaning they bring together a range of influences. From this perspective, it would seem that preoccupations with "authenticity" seem misplaced or shortsighted.

Identity is a very subjective category and often works through creative self-expression. The fusion or hybrid cuisines that are emergent across much of Sicily as a result of recent migration through the Mediterranean – and building on centuries of mobility and culinary exchange through this region – are important examples of how food practices are fluid and articulate with identity but are also generative and may yield to subversive identities such as using food as a tool of political mobilization.

Q. Food continues to draw a lot of attention from any kind of media: TV is packed with food shows; Instagram full of food videos; preparation of dishes; cinema has been producing movies for at least the last 30 years where food is central. What do you think is the relationship which links food and media? Do you think aesthetics surpasses the importance of flavor?

A. I'm certainly not an expert of aesthetics, but I believe the question opens up a rich line of inquiry. Regarding food media, we know that food is a very sensory experience and that there might be something therapeutic or mesmerizing about observing the care that goes into preparing food. The popularity of food media may also be explained in part by the ephemerality of food. I'm thinking here about how my children love to watch the series *Is It Cake?* which is much more about aesthetics than taste and plays on viewers' anticipation of destruction at the end of the creative process.

Our curiosity or fascination with aesthetics also serves as an apt example of how food is incredibly symbolic. As an undergraduate at UCLA in the early 2000s, I took a course on the history of Italian gastronomy with Professor Luigi Ballerini that engaged with a variety of texts, primarily cookbooks authored by figures such as Maestro Martino and Pelligrino Artusi. And I recall when examining the late Medieval period and Renaissance, we spent a good deal of time analyzing these elaborate descriptions of banquets that were much more about indexing wealth through aesthetic grandeur than savoring particularly tasty (or even remotely appetizing) dishes.

Does aesthetics then surpass the importance of taste or flavor? Perhaps sometimes. But should it? Probably not. I'm reminded of Carlo Petrini and the emphasis on taste which has been championed through the Slow Food movement, which of course began in Italy and has had significant global traction over the past few decades with the Terra Madre Salone del Gusto hosted every other year in Torino. One of the most resounding critiques made by Slow Food activists is that an emphasis on aesthetics has been detrimental to the struggle against industrial food. I'm reminded here as well of what one market vendor from Firenze's Mercato Sant'Ambrogio disclosed to me almost 20 years ago, when I was conducting fieldwork there. Concerned that people were increasingly relying on *supermercati* for all of their shopping needs and shying away from specialty stores and open-air markets – and where they could more easily touch, smell, and taste the foods being sold –, he made an observation about the misplaced importance of aesthetics: "Le persone comprano con gli occhi."

Q. Another big obsession is food and wellbeing. In your research what is the relationship you found between food and wellbeing? How do people approach the theme and how it affects both the consumption and/or the way of cooking?

A. Obsession is a keyword here. When we talk about food and its connection to health or wellbeing, the conversation can too easily spillover into a preoccupation with diet. I have found through many years of teaching especially and writing for broader publics that we have to be very careful with how we frame wellbeing in this context and put into circulation notions of "healthy eating."

When I teach anthropology of food for instance, I usually begin by emphasizing to students that there is no singular or universal definition of what constitutes "healthy" and that it is very place- and culturally-specific and connected to particular ecologies, bodies, and epistemologies.

Part of the focus of our feminist collective Nutrire CoLab is to de-emphasize diet when thinking about or examining chronic illness and to bring attention to the myriad other factors that shape wellbeing, such as toxic exposures in the environment, structural constraints on access to healthcare and potentially life-saving treatments, social stressors such as racism, exclusion and discrimination, etc. (Gálvez et al. 2020). Rather than simply health or wellbeing, our collective has been asking about nourishment and, in particular, exploring the transformative potential of nourishment as praxis (Valdez et al. 2022; see also Garth 2019; Yates-Doerr 2024).

Q. Do you have any advice to give to current and/or future scholars of food studies?

The advice that I usually give to my own students is that they find an anchor in something complementary to food studies. One reason is that it is fairly easy to be pigeon-holed, as I have discovered throughout my own career. But a more important reason is that, as Psyche Williams-Forson (2011) explains, food is intersectional, i.e., connected to everything, and requires an intersectional approach. While food can be a powerful lens for understanding so many aspects of human society, it proves rather shallow when looked at on its own.

I use the modifiers *critical* and *feminist* food studies because we cannot lose sight of power and the inequities that pervade our relationship to food across time and space. I have found that food studies as a field is often conflated with "food appreciation" and that those doing food studies research readily identify as gourmands, food snobs, etc. That is not to deny that

many of us may feel very passionate about food, but critical food studies is not apolitical, ahistorical food appreciation.

Without feminist and other critical perspectives, food studies itself risks becoming a space where power hierarchies get reproduced. My colleagues and I have been writing on these themes and alluding to the problems for instance, with the whiteness of food studies (see Bellante et al. forthcoming, Carney 2022). Black feminist, decolonial, and Indigenous scholars have persuasively argued for approaching the study of food as an opportunity to challenge and dismantle systems of white supremacy, cisheteropatriarchy, settler colonialism, and carcerality (Alkon and Agyeman forthcoming; Antonio et al. 2025; Chao 2022; Garth and Reese 2020; Reese and Sbicca 2022; Williams-Forson 2022). Again, because food is a site of politicization, I believe food scholarship must engage in the political, and by that, I mean foreground analyses of power.

Q. How do you see your role as an educator and an anthropologist for the future generations and their relation to food?

A. As an educator and anthropologist studying the relationships between food and mobility, my goal is to help people understand the origins of their food—not just in the immediate sense, but within a broader historical context. Over the past 500 years, periods of violent colonization and African enslavement, particularly in the Americas, played a crucial role in shaping the global-industrial food system we have today. The model of American agriculture was not only exported but also imposed on much of the world through various development schemes, deeply influencing modern food production (Garth and Reese 2020). In short, I hope future generations understand this history in being able to challenge power in our global food system and show greater compassion and care toward people from migrant backgrounds, recognizing mobility as essential to our survival – just like food itself.

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