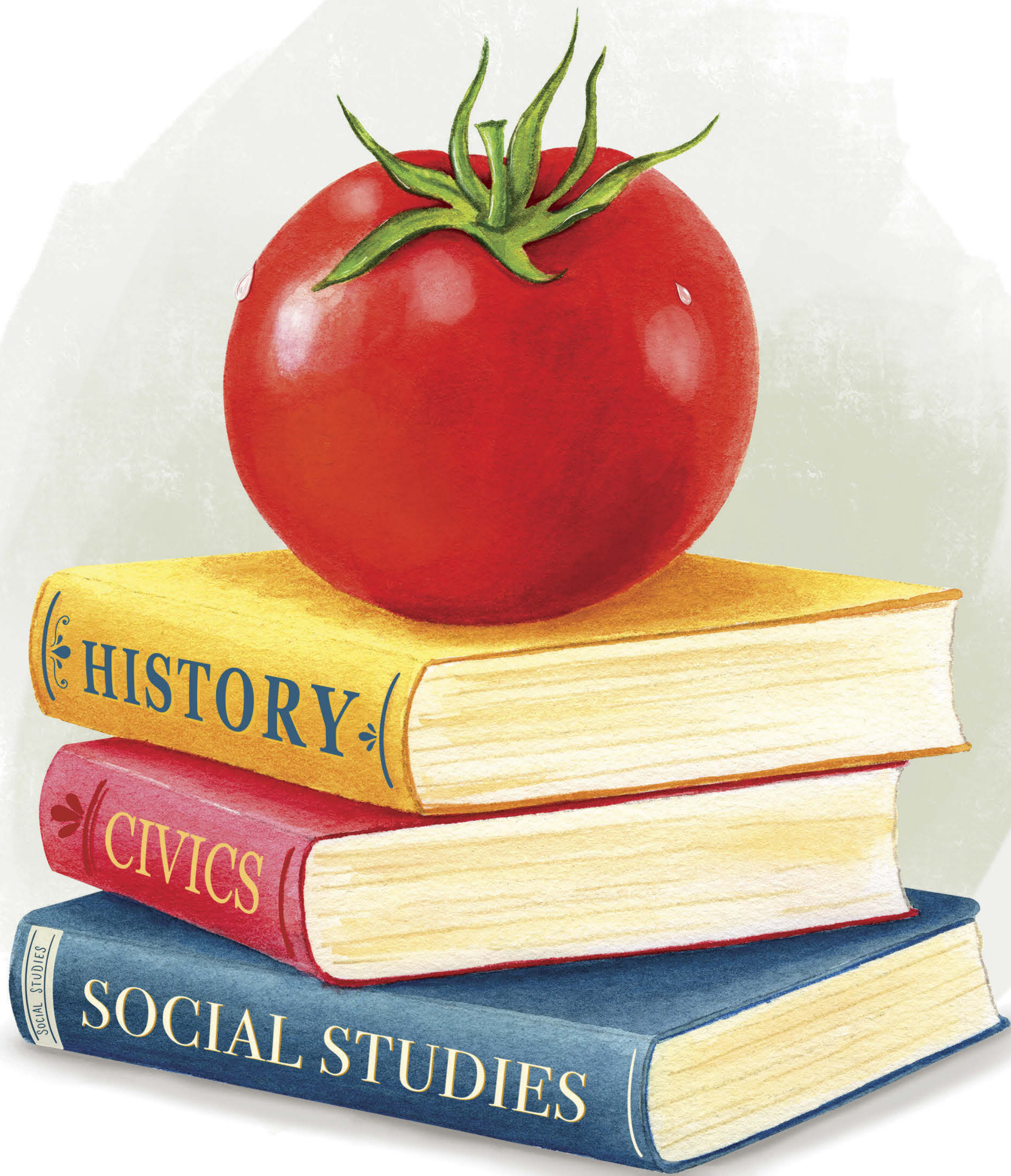

Illustrations by Disha Sharma

ROOTED IN SAND

A reflection on teaching and tomatoes

BY CATARINA PASSIDOMO

I DON'T REMEMBER BEING A PICKY EATER as a kid growing up in south Florida. But I had strong feelings about tomatoes. They were the everyday food I most detested, the food most likely to show up in a meal and offend me with their presence. I hated them. When I was about ten, my aunt offered me a tomato slice for my hamburger. "I HATE tomatoes!" I said.

"Hate is a strong word, Katie. We say, 'I don't care for tomatoes.'"

"I know it's a strong word," I said. "That's why I chose it."

Conversations like this led to bargaining and whataboutism: "What about ketchup? Ketchup is made from tomatoes!" This sort of gotcha never worked. Ketchup is also made from sugar.

At some point, my repulsion toward tomatoes softened. I slowly grew to tolerate them, even like them. Eventually, my feelings were as strong in favor of tomatoes as they'd once been in opposition. When I was pregnant, I craved tomatoes. I slurped tomato soup, chugged tomato juice, spooned salsa straight into my mouth. I bought Bloody Mary mix and drank it neat. I couldn't get enough. What the hell happened? I guess taste buds, like the rest of us, change.

Yet my relationship with tomatoes remains complex. The fruit forces me to confront the place I'm from and my complicated relationship with it, particularly in this moment of Florida's political and social history. I fell in love with tomatoes after leaving home for college, around the same time I came to think more critically about their origins; college taught me to think more critically about everything I thought I knew. When I ws growing up, most of the winter tomatoes Americans ate grew in the nutrient-poor sand of south Florida, about fifty miles from where I was cultivated in the extraordinarily valuable sand of Naples, home to some of the country's most expensive coastal real estate. Tomatoes are not Florida's most iconic crop, but they help me draw connections among food, labor, politics, and history—connections that feel especially resonant right now.

I have been thinking a lot lately about efforts to restrict what we teach about the past and how it informs our present. From 2022's "Stop WOKE Act" and the removal of library books deemed offensive to restrictions on the content of K–12 curriculum and eliminating state funding for DEI efforts in higher education, Florida has been particularly egregious in its attempts to contort

diverse and nuanced histories, people, and narratives into a single, simplistic story. Mostly, I think about these efforts as a teacher and a parent and as someone who is personally committed to truth-telling. But I am also in the unique and occasionally thorny position of being those things while also being the daughter of the current Republican president of the Florida Senate. In that role, my mother has been known to work across the aisle on conservation and affordable housing issues and to listen to alternative viewpoints (even my own). Still, if the personal is political, the inverse can also be true.

I TEACH SOUTHERN Studies, anthropology, geography, and food studies classes at the University of Mississippi. I also research and write about food's relationship to place, race, and power. Teaching and writing about food necessarily means grappling with culture and history; food is embedded in both. Tomatoes, for example, make me think of the modern industrial fruit's wild ancestors that grew on the slopes of the Peruvian Andes and then, through forces of colonization and culinary experimentation, became a staple ingredient in the Italian cuisine of my ancestors, and then, eventually, the most ubiquitous and popular "vegetable" in the whole damn world. Connecting our ketchup or the red wedges studding our salads to colonization, empire, and a massive industrial food regime is not an attempt to stir up controversy. It is an earnest effort to better understand the world around us and the meaningful and often unseen connections we have to other people, places, and times.

> When I show *Harvest of Shame* in my classes, I don't imagine I am indoctrinating students into a woke ideology.

Of course, I didn't really think about these things as a child. I didn't even know that tomatoes were big business in Florida, despite the fact that I had some very formative experiences in the place where they grew. Every Thanksgiving when I was a kid, my dad and I would drive from our home in Naples fifty or so miles to the town of Immokalee to assist with a local faith community's effort to provide a hearty meal to people living in poverty there. Suspecting this may have been an attempt to extract himself (and me) from the food labor happening at home, I asked my dad recently why he felt called to make this annual pilgrimage. "To expose you to another perspective, obviously," he responded. My dad knew it was important for me to understand that our rarefied existence in Naples was just that.

The meal service was massive in scope—dozens and dozens of turkeys! Hundreds of pounds of potatoes! Over a thousand people to feed. In the early days, when I was so little I could only be trusted with the empty plate, which I handed to my dad to pile with turkey (an important job in which he took considerable pride), nearly all the people who came to eat were men who had come from Haiti, Mexico, and Guatemala to work in Florida's tomato fields for a portion of the year. Before the meal service began, a priest led us in prayer, and reminded the volunteers that we were here on this one day to feed the community that fed us all year long—the farmworkers. He switched languages to thank those gathered for their labor in the fields surrounding Immokalee, where they spent the winter months harvesting tomatoes.

As far as we both can remember, my dad and I kept this tradition for over a decade, stopping only when the number of volunteers became so great that we felt obsolete and unhelpful. At some point, my Spanish proficiency had moved beyond the rudimentary vocabulary we learned and relearned in school each year. I must have been in high school when I graduated from my spot at the beginning of the Styrofoam plate assembly line. No longer in charge of the empty plates, I was entrusted with full ones, which I handed through a window to people who had waited hours in line to receive them. We exchanged *hola*s and *gracias*es and awkward smiles.

When I was in high school handing out those Thanksgiving plates, I did not yet know about the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW) and their efforts to make consumers aware of the conditions in Florida's tomato fields, where wage theft and debt peonage were common, where women workers endured sexual violence, and where at least one worker was severely beaten by a crew boss. I don't recall ever seeing members of the CIW marching, or protesting outside of Publix,

our beloved Florida supermarket chain "where shopping is a pleasure." When did I begin to contemplate all the things that happen before the shopping, prior to the pleasure of encountering bountiful mounds of colorful produce comprising a postmodern Garden of Eden?

I don't know. Memory is so slippery. This is just one reason we need history—it offers a corrective to our reliance on own muddled memories as a way to make sense of the world. I have some impressions of standing on one side of the food line, but I did not really appreciate or understand the experiences of people on the other side.

HERE IS WHAT I know now. The Coalition of Immokalee Workers began organizing for better wages and working conditions in the 1990s, when I was in middle and high school. The demographics of agricultural labor are constantly shifting, as commercial agriculture replicates the logics of the plantation—that is, its reliance on un- or underpaid labor performed by racial and ethnic minorities. The historian Cindy Hahamovitch writes that the first paid farmworkers in south Florida were the Seminoles, whose ancestors first fled to the Everglades from the upper South in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Next came Bahamians, who, by the 1920s, migrated to south Florida at the rate of about 6,000 per year, as wartime labor constraints compelled the federal government to relax immigration restrictions. And as Jim Crow laws and racial terror swept the South between the last decades of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth, Black Americans migrated north, west, and, yes, south, where they came to comprise a majority of the agricultural workforce in south Florida through World War II. Some of their enslaved ancestors had labored throughout the South for centuries, including those who arrived with Hernando de Soto in 1539 and those who helped construct the first permanent European settlement at Saint Augustine.

Of course, north and south Florida feel worlds apart, even today; while north Florida is an extension of the South, south Florida feels more like an extension of the Caribbean, creolized with a hefty dose of New Jersey. Before the advent of canal dredging and mosquito control, not to mention air conditioning, south Florida from Lake Okeechobee to Key West was mostly uninhabitable

swampland. But it held high commercial potential in the form of agriculture. The draining of the Everglades in the early 1900s opened up south Florida to commercial agriculture on a large scale and drew large pools of migrant laborers who were willing to travel south each year for the winter harvest of beans, tomatoes, potatoes, and sugarcane.

The 1960 CBS documentary *Harvest of Shame* traces the desperate living and working conditions of the migrant farmworkers of that era—the pitiful wages, the hopelessness, the generational poverty, the instability of a life spent following the harvest, the government's consistent failure to protect contingent workers. The film begins and ends in the fields of Belle Glade, Florida, about seventy miles across south Florida scrubland and swamp from Immokalee. At one point, a farmer quips, "We used to own our slaves. Now, we just rent them."

We are, after all, products of our distinct place and time, but we do not live exclusively in the here and now.

When I show this film in my college class, I don't imagine I am indoctrinating students into a woke ideology; they are smart and thoughtful enough to understand the relevance of this particular documentation of history, social attitudes, and food production to how we eat and treat people today.

In 1960, nearly all East Coast fieldworkers were Black. Half a century later, the documentary film *Food Chains* highlights the work of the CIW but includes a clip from *Harvest of Shame*, suggesting both progress and continuity. Same place, same backbreaking work, different people doing it. And a few very hard-earned improvements in working conditions and wages, thanks largely to the success of the CIW's Fair Food Program.

As a college teacher, one of my jobs is to provide context for students, so that they might better understand the increasingly confusing and complicated world they are navigating. Sometimes this means reflecting on their own histories and situating them within broader social histories; we are, after all, products of our distinct place and time, but we do not live exclusively in the here and now.

In some places, history is easily discernable. In others, it has been nearly erased. Obscuring those histories we find uncomfortable leaves us with an incomplete and inaccurate understanding of ourselves and one another. If we refuse to study the history of agricultural labor in the United States, beginning with indentured servitude and race-based slavery, it is more difficult to understand contemporary connections between labor, migration, and our food system. It is easy and expedient to dehumanize those people and histories we choose not to understand.

Acknowledging that we inhabit just one thread of a richly woven tapestry that spans space and time should humble and awe us. Some of our ancestors endured and survived tremendous suffering, and some other of our ancestors inflicted it. Some of our contemporaries are enduring and surviving tremendous suffering, and some other of our contemporaries are inflicting it. I'm not saying it's easy, but we are capable of holding all these truths in our head at once. In fact, it is our obligation to do so.

Ultimately, cultivating curiosity about our connection to places, people, and times unknown to us can only serve to deepen our reserves of empathy. We can remember our own pasts with nostalgia, sadness, pride, anger, or any combination of those. The maligned tomatoes of our childhood can make way for adult adoration. My own memories of those Thanksgiving forays away from the familiar and the comfortable suggest that my dad's efforts to expose me to another perspective were successful and deeply formative. I also have some conflicted feelings about the impulse toward charity, given what I now know about structural inequality. But we can and should also scour the past for clues to our present, and seek out even and especially the truths that challenge us. We may be surprised by our capacity to learn something new, just like taste buds do.

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