

Actually existing tomatoes

Politics of memory, variety, and empire in Latvian struggles over seeds

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Abstract: In March 2012, a small farm in Latvia with a collection of over 200 tomato varieties was charged with the illegal sale of seeds not included in the European Union's Common Catalogue. The farm's collection includes traditional Latvian varieties that have never been officially registered, Western varieties imported illegally during the Soviet years, and Russian varieties that came into use during the Soviet years and are now defended by Latvian gardeners as "traditionally grown" and representing the taste of their childhoods. The debate highlighted the continuing struggle over Latvia's geopolitical positioning between Russia and the European Union and control over seeds as a tactic of empire. I explore the cultural memories embedded in the contested tomato seeds and how they contribute to an intertwined imaginary of the Latvian landscape idyll with a Soviet sociality. I argue that the innovative resolution to this conflict represents a process of transculturation in a contact zone between empires (Pratt 1992).

Keywords: biodiversity, borders, cultural memory, intellectual property rights, seeds, variety

At the height of tomato season in August 2011, I visited the greenhouse of Aija and Edgars¹ outside Riga, Latvia, and marveled at the colors, tastes, and dramatic histories of their nearly 200 tomato varieties. One was given to them by a Latvian family who had brought it back from exile in Siberia: legend had it that the seeds were originally carried over the ice bridge from Alaska to Russia, and the variety was thus named Alaskan Wonder. Others were brought to them in the Soviet years by sailors who could travel to the West, prized and illicit treasures from beyond Soviet borders.

Descriptions of seeds as "heirloom varieties" conjure images of carefully protected and cher-

ished objects with an enduring past ritualistically laid in the hands of the next generation. Yet seeds are quintessential migrants, passing unseen across human-created borders throughout time, bringing old-world crops to the new, and sometimes invading new territories on their own (Crosby 2004). For people, seeds and plants can be the embodied memories of home and a marker of tradition (Nazarea 2005b). For governments, however, they can be seen as a biothreat, an alien invader, and a carrier of disease. This movement of seeds, overlaid by the migrations of people and—in the case of Eastern Europe—the shifting of borders, results in a much more tangled history of heritage and memory.



This messy articulation of shifting people, seeds, borders, and memories emerged suddenly into the public eye in Latvia one afternoon in January 2012. Aija and Edgars conducted a seminar on tomato-growing techniques for over 100 would-be tomato growers, as they had done many times in the past decade. After the seminar, Aija and Edgars had a table of their tomato seeds on offer. Two people asked to purchase a seed packet, and upon receiving their change, identified themselves as inspectors from the State Plant Protection Agency (henceforth the Agency). They charged the farm with the illegal sale of seeds of varieties not registered in the European Union's (EU) Common Catalogue of Varieties of Vegetable Species (henceforth the EU Common Catalogue), as required by the EU Seed Marketing laws.

The accusation against the farm prompted hundreds of comments on news websites and a sudden protest at the Agency's offices at the farm's scheduled hearing, deemed by the press "the tomato rebellion" (see Aistara 2014 for details). This conflict elicited not only a spontaneous demonstration, but also a prompt reaction by lawmakers. Due at least in part to the protests, the hearing was postponed and eventually dropped altogether, and the Ministry of Agriculture convened a public roundtable and working group to propose legislative changes to resolve the issue.

The innocent packet of tomato seeds and its alleged transgression exposed the way in which Latvia's shift from the westernmost edge of the Soviet Union to the easternmost border of the European Union has reconfigured boundaries of cultural memories associated with tastes and social relations, as well as the shifting scientific, bureaucratic, and economic categorization of seeds and plants throughout history. In this article I explore how this relocation of Latvia's geopolitical borders has left certain people, seeds, and memories stranded on opposite sides of spatial and temporal boundaries.

Categorization and registration are techniques of discipline through which power circulates (Foucault 1980), and the naming and categorization of plants has long been associ-

ated with empire (Bonneuil 2002; Kloppenburg 1988; Pratt 1992). Empires "invite analysis as spaces in which power is exercised through complex, often subterranean means" (Jasanoff 2006: 274), such as the use of natural sciences (Jasanoff 2006: 276). Foucault (1980) has identified the emergence in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries of new technologies of power through the construction of new types of knowledge, such as the science of taxonomy as a classificatory project. This was a rewriting of history and a reordering of nature into tables of plant varieties, through the creation of

herbariums, collections, gardens; the locus of this history is a non-temporal rectangle in which, stripped of all commentary, of all enveloping language, creatures present themselves one beside another, their surfaces visible, grouped according to their common features and thus already virtually analysed, and bearers of nothing but their own individual names. (Foucault [1966] 1994: 131)

Plants were thus stripped of both their ecological and social connections in a process of bringing order to chaos. Mary Louise Pratt (1992) has shown how Linnaeus's taxonomic classificatory project was part of the establishment of Europe's "planetary consciousness": One by one the planet's life-forms were to be drawn out of the tangled threads of their life surroundings and rewoven into European-based patterns of global unity and order (Pratt 1992: 31). Pratt emphasizes that the interactions of such ordering happen in what she calls the "contact zones" between empires, meaning the "spatial and temporal copresence of subjects previously separated by geographic and historical disjunctures, and whose trajectories now intersect" (Pratt 1992: 7). Within such contact zones, she investigates "transculturation", or the process by which "subordinated or marginal groups select and invent from the materials transmitted to them by a dominant or metropolitan culture" (Pratt 1992: 6).

I am interested here in exploring how this sudden seed scandal brought to light Latvia's

still-tenuous position between its Soviet past and its European future, or its position in the contact zone in relation to not one empire but between two, and the processes of transculturation that ensued. Following Foucault's (1980: 96) suggestion to study power at its extremities, rather than its central locations, how might we study the implementation of EU seed laws on the new European periphery as a tactic of empire? How does it mirror previous techniques of classification and control? And how have actors negotiated the complicated relationships between cultural memories embodied in seeds, the bureaucratic and scientific definitions of varieties, and their economic value?

I trace here how the contested tomato seeds in Latvia have changed hands and been inherited across political regimes, and how as a result the cultural memories embodied in them intermingle a longing for both a romanticized national landscape and a Soviet sociality. I argue that the denial on legal grounds of a great number of these varieties delegitimizes the memories and the social pasts they represent. Yet the conflict also revealed how political reconfigurations have placed both tomatoes and actors in sometimes surprising positions: State Plant Protection Agency officials declaring that certain tomato varieties "have never actually existed" and patrolling border infringements to protect the European common market; Latvian elderly gardeners defending Soviet tomatoes as a national project; public breeders taking their breeding activities underground; and farmers continuing to sell contraband throughout.

As a result of the conflict, a legislative change has been proposed that adds a new category of "collector's variety" to Latvian legislation. I argue that this innovative resolution makes a space for seeds that embody these complex interminglings of memories across time and space, which can be seen as a process of transculturation in the geographic and temporal contact zone between the former Soviet Union and the European Union. The future of this change, however, after the revamping of the EU's seed laws, is far from certain.

The research for this article includes interviews and discussions conducted with farmers,

gardeners, breeders, researchers, officials, and seed company representatives in Latvia over a two-year period both before and after the conflict. I was active as a researcher and participant in the public debates surrounding the conflict. The remainder of this article is organized into three main parts. First, I discuss the range of cultural memories embodied in the seeds, representing spatial and temporal disjunctures in people's experiences. Then, I analyze connections to seeds and empire in Latvia's history, and the politics of naming and categorizing these seeds bureaucratically, scientifically, and economically. Finally, I reflect on what the resolution of the conflict shows us of the processes of negotiation between Latvia's past in the Soviet Union and future in the European Union.

Growing memories

In August 2011, Aija and Edgars proudly showed me yellow, green, red, orange, and purple tomatoes in a range of shapes and sizes—a mere fraction of the 800 varieties they have tried out in their three decades of tomato growing. Yet they expressed dismay that this hard work was seemingly irrelevant to the state, even though they were minor celebrities in the popular media and consistently had the longest lines for their seedlings at spring markets. After the "raid" on their seed selling in 2012, it seemed that not only was their previous labor not valued, it was seen as a threat.

In January 2011, they were warned by Agency inspectors that they would no longer be able to sell their tomato seeds unless they registered them in line with the EU Conservation Variety Directive (discussed below). Agency officials urged them to specialize in the most popular three or four varieties, and register them to legalize their business (Latvijas radio 2012). Registration was a costly and time-consuming process, however. Furthermore, the owners emphasized that the diversity of their collection made it impossible to simply choose a few and forget the rest. In the meantime, they displayed a sign next to their seed table that they were not allowed to

sell seeds, but could exchange them, and their favored medium of exchange was coins. The inspectors who received change from their purchase were not amused and not convinced that this did not constitute a sale.

Seeds of the displaced

The diversity invoked by the farm is far more than just morphological or genetic; rather, it reflects the social history of the seeds as well. During the controversy, this description appeared on the farm's website:

The collection developed gradually from Latvian traditionally grown varieties, and those that came from far away. There are varieties that had traveled from Alaska to Norilsk [Siberia], and were given to us as gifts for our collection by Latvians returning from the Gulag, so that their accomplices in this painful journey would also live in Latvia. Others are gifts from Australian Latvians...

By drawing attention to the origins of seeds as cultivated by Latvians living in these opposite ends of the earth, the farm captures the practices described by Nazarea (2005b), whereby immigrants create an "out-of-place sense of place" by planting seeds that remind them of home, thus recreating a sensual home-place:

In heirloom plants and folk varieties, we find "artifacts laden with perceptual recall" (Seremetakis 1994: 10). Their persistence against the hegemony of modernity sustains stirrings of nostalgia, making the desire to journey back, or to re-create a place, less of a romantic anachronism and more of a real possibility. (Nazarea 2005b: 114–115)

Thus, the Latvian seeds that have traveled back and forth between continents along with their keepers have served to connect and reconnect people and places throughout generations, across borders, and throughout exile from political regimes.

In fact, tomatoes are a personal part of Edgars's biography. He had first helped his parents grow tomatoes as a child during Latvia's first independence period (1918 to 1940), but his entire family was deported to Siberia in the 1949 Soviet push to force collectivization in Latvia. Relatives from Latvia sent them seeds, and they began growing tomatoes in Siberia. He recalls that locals grew other crops such as cucumbers, potatoes, and cabbage, but came to their plot to marvel at the tomatoes and began growing them themselves. After eight years in Siberia, Edgars's family returned to Latvia, and years later he met Aija and "invited her to grow tomatoes with him," thus recreating the home-place of Siberia that was the recreation of the home-place of Latvia.

Throughout the Soviet era, they both worked salaried jobs but grew tomatoes on the side. They began saving seeds largely because store-bought seeds were of poor quality and unreliable, including several varieties mixed together. Thus, they started growing and selling tomato seedlings at markets, an activity that was not explicitly allowed but was tolerated by the authorities.

The other reference on the farm's website to Australian Latvians conjures an alternate trajectory to the one lived by Edgars and his family, and thus brings together two divergent paths of travel that divided many Latvian families after World War II. Many who feared deportation to Siberia fled Latvia, ended up in displaced person camps, and, unable to return home, were relocated to countries in the West accepting exiles. Like the immigrants described by Nazarea, many of these people tried to recreate Latvian landscapes through planting familiar trees and vegetation (Bunkše 2007). And thus it is equally symbolic that after so many years abroad, many people from the diaspora did not return to Latvia, but some sent seeds from their gardens to the farm's collection, to make the journey for them.

The place recreated by both groups of exiles in these far ends of the earth is the landscape of the often-romanticized Latvian farmstead of the first independence period that has become a cultural referent for prosperous times (Eglitis

2002; Schwartz 1999). This landscape is often depicted as a backdrop for a narrative, like a landscape painting of the seasons, typified by the arrangement of buildings in the farmstead, visible in the ethnographic open-air museum in Riga (Skultans 2001). Thus, just this one paragraph on the farm's website summarizing the travels of the colorful tomato seeds captures within it several deeply symbolic moments and places in Latvian history, embodied in the seeds themselves. Yet discussions about the way the farm's collection developed also signaled the temporal and social disjunctures brought about by shifts in political borders.

An “out-of-time” sense of place

In addition to the value attributed to these tomato seeds as carriers of different places to and whence they have traveled, they are also treasured anachronisms that bring memories from different eras and social relations. Aija stressed that many seeds were given to them personally during the Soviet years: “That was common then—but not anymore ... people used to know that we were interested in tomatoes, and bring us seeds. We have many varieties brought to us by sailors, or those who could travel.”

Aija told me this with marked nostalgia for times when social relations were closer and seeds weren't simply purchased on the Internet. As she put it, “[B]ack then no one had phones or the Internet, but everything just happened.” In those times varieties brought by travelers from the West, in part because they were illegal and represented the forbidden, had a special appeal for consumers, and information about them spread by word of mouth.

These statements express a longing for a different sociality—when people shared more, interacted more. This resonates with other accounts of the Baltic countryside, where people miss what Alanen (2002) has called the “Soviet community spirit”. Memories of collectivization in Latvia are often conflicting—the early years are depicted as traumatic, but during the late Soviet years the *kolhozs* was an important social space.

Countless organic farmers have told me that people used to gather more often for celebrations and feel more united, but now they lack a social structure for support and exchange.

Such descriptions of *kolhozs* sociality are selective memories, but as such, as Klumbyte (2010) and Berdahl (1999) have discussed, exercise a powerful critique of current social relations, or what people miss in the relative isolation of their recreated family farmsteads. In the absence of collective farms to organize events, gardening clubs have to some extent replaced and recreated similar forms of sociality by organizing seminars and joint excursions. This perhaps helps to explain why the response to the scandal was so severe. Rather than being simply an administrative charge against a small business, it was seen as an attack on people's social networks created around seeds and gardens since the fall of the Soviet Union.

Furthermore, many of these contested varieties were introduced during the Soviet era. These varieties became common household names and tastes, grown in every greenhouse and eaten as summer treats in tomato sandwiches. Therefore, one of the most common complaints made during the conflict was that the flavor of tomatoes, representing the taste of their childhoods, would be replaced by rubbery, tasteless supermarket tomatoes: “Please, please, give us back Latvia's delicious tomatoes! ... Please fight, so that it is allowed to grow tomatoes in Latvia like they were before. Such delicious tomatoes don't exist anywhere else!” (Apollo 2012b).

Thus, for people in the Latvian countryside today, these tomatoes conjured up not another physical place per se, but different times, tastes, and social relations, now stranded on the other side of a temporal border. Building upon Nazarea's (2005b) work, we might call this an “out-of-time” sense of place. These tomatoes represented both a national landscape and a Soviet sociality, which could not simply be substituted, as suggested by the officials, by one of the more than 3,000 varieties available in the EU Common Catalogue. Yet simply registering the so-called illegal varieties would not resolve the

issue, either, for it would only record the varietal name and morphological description, without the cultural memories that form the significance of these varieties (Nazarea 2005a).

Planting empires

The loss of old varieties and their tastes is not unique to Latvia. Nadia Seremetakis has written of the loss of a peach variety from her childhood in Greece, which prompted comments about the “tastelessness of new varieties” and that “nothing tastes as good as the past” (Seremetakis 1996: 1). She noted that her inquiry into the variety “resurrected observations, commentaries, stories, some of which encapsulated whole epochs marked by their own sensibilities” (ibid.: 2). Thus, the peach’s disappearance was a “double absence; it reveals the extent to which the senses are entangled with history, memory, forgetfulness, narrative and silence” (ibid.), much as the tomatoes in Latvia.

Yet Seremetakis has also related this “vanishing of tastes, aromas, and textures” directly to the influence of European regulations and their market rationalities (ibid.: 3). She notes that these rationalities have the power to determine what regional foods are allowed or prohibited, which resocializes tastes and reorganizes public memories (ibid.). Thus, the EU seed marketing laws are similar to EU hygiene regulations and other new EU standards that have discriminated against small farmers throughout Europe (Dunn 2005; Gille 2009; Mincyte 2011) and have inspired a revaluing of local products and devaluing of Western ones (Aistara forthcoming; Pine 2001). These regulations may thus be seen as a tool of empire, and must be compared to previous taxonomic and classificatory projects of empires.

In between empires

Latvia is no stranger to empires, and has often found itself not only on their periphery, but in the awkward space in between a succession of empires. It was transferred from German to Pol-

ish to Swedish to Russian rule from the thirteenth to the early twentieth centuries, then enjoyed a brief period of independence between the two world wars. It became the front between Soviet and German armies during World War II, and was subsequently occupied by the Soviet Union until it regained independence in 1991. The classification, conquest, and governance of plants and seeds has been instrumental throughout these historic shifts.

The Baltic states have always been at the border between Europe and Russia, which has been not only a military battleground, but also one of knowledge production, particularly in the realm of botany. “Knowledge in the European eighteenth century cannot be separated from geography,” says Knoespel (2011: 207), who described Linnaeus’s “Siberian expeditions” as a reconfiguration of military conflict into scientific competition. After the Great Northern War in 1709, Sweden lost a part of its territory to Russia, including Swedish Livonia (part of the current territory of Latvia). Having lost militarily, Knoespel contends that part of the Linnaean legacy was to make up for this loss: “[T]he translation of Sweden from a nation engaged in expanding political empire to a nation that comprehends the value of an expanding empire of knowledge” (Knoespel 2011: 222). While Linnaeus’s and his students’ expeditions concerned themselves with the classification of wild plants, the world leader in the collection and classification of crops and their wild ancestors to be used for breeding was the Russian scientist Nikolai Vavilov, who together with his coworkers conducted over 180 expeditions all over the world from 1917 to 1933 (Elina et al. 2005).

Seeds have been both valued and vulnerable in Latvia’s transfer between empires. During World War I valuable seed material was lost or mixed (Belicka and Kalmanis 2012). During Latvia’s independence in the 1920s and 1930s, no doubt inspired by the work of Vavilov, researchers collected, evaluated, and classified thousands of local varieties and landraces of grains and legumes, and breeding became an important scientific discipline (Belicka and Kalmanis 2012; Strazdiņa 2012). During World

War II, the Vavilov collection in Russia was the most highly valued agronomic resource and was fought over by the Russian and German sides (Elina et al. 2005). The collection was divided, transferred across borders, and hidden. One part ended up in Latvia during the war but was later lost (Zute et al. 2012: 63; Elina et al. 2005), and parts of Latvian collections were transferred to Russia or Germany (Strazdiņa 2012).

After Latvia was occupied by the Soviet Union, breeding was reorganized according to Soviet prescripts:

The scientists of Stende [breeding station] had to follow political or pseudoscientific instructions. For example, they had to demonstrate that they supported and in their work followed the theory of the Soviet academician Timofey Lysenko, who rejected traditional breeding methods and recognised changes caused by various external factors as hereditary changes in species. (Zute et al. 2012: 64)

Nevertheless, in later Soviet years, breeding was supported again as an important scientific discipline, and many new varieties were developed.

After independence in 1991, the project of building up national collections of plant genetic resources had to be started all over again. Old wheat, flax, rye, barley, and potato varieties were repatriated from the Vavilov Research Institute gene bank (Strazdiņa 2012; Zute et al. 2012). A new national gene bank was established, but one researcher told me that it lacks many of the original landraces collected in the 1920s and 1930s, because these were either used for breeding new varieties and discarded or lost in the shuffle among empires.

Today, public breeding stations have again come upon hard times, fitting neither the Soviet state-funded research institute model nor the private-sector competitive business model of the West. They realize that they cannot “compete with the Monsantos and the BASFs” of the world and feel that they shouldn’t have to, yet public support has dwindled or even been cut off completely, as plant breeders must fight for

funding from competitive sources since entering the EU. In some cases this has meant that their breeding activities were pushed underground, funded by other activities or continued on a volunteer basis. Thus, the shift in border has also stranded the public breeders on the antiquated side of the temporal scientific border, now devoid of capital.

Several key differences mark current efforts to fit Latvia’s existing seed stock into the European Common Catalogue in comparison to previous historical eras. In previous transitions, seed collections were lost through war and violence, which in part justified the introduction of new varieties. After the breakup of the Soviet Union and EU accession, however, there was not a loss of varieties but rather a net gain, and bureaucratic systems of categorization must contend with the trail of seeds brought along from a previous imperial project of the Soviet Union.

This is comparable to the daunting task described by Bonneuil (2002), when nineteenth-century botanists were faced with the challenge of fitting a huge influx of species from the colonies into the “established Eurocentric taxonomic order” inherited from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Similarly, Latvia’s entry into the EU brought along with it not only its own handful of local tomato seeds, but a long tail of Soviet ones as well, with the added weight of cultural memories, perplexing Eurocentric regulations. The tomato scandal thus initiated a debate over how this sensual recall from different places, times, and tastes would be incorporated into the new European project.

A tomato by any other name . . .

The negotiation over the inclusion or exclusion of the existing tomato varieties into the EU Common Catalogue is what Jasanoff has called “boundary work,”

to smooth out the messy spaces between classes and to create the appearance of sharp divisions. . . . In the process of classification, problematic hybrids and hard-to-fit entities or communities may be erased,

either through forcible elimination or through administrative and symbolic moves ... that take the unclassifiable things out of the ruler's visual space. (Jasanoff 2006: 278–279)²

I now turn to how this boundary work proceeded in Latvia, through the classification, nationalization, and rejection or defense of historical varieties.

Nonexistent tomatoes

In the midst of the scandal, one conscientious citizen wrote on the Agency website, asking where she could legally obtain seeds of six of her favorite varieties. The Agency replied that the first one, *Vērša Sirds* (Oxheart), was registered under English, Portuguese, and Italian names and was legally purchasable. They explained that the next three varieties (*Apelsīntomāts*, *Delikatese*, and *Spridītis* [Orange, Delicacy, and Short One]) were registered in Russia, but not in the EU, and thus could not be legally sold in the EU. Regarding the last two varieties, the Agency concluded: “In reference to the tomatoes *Videzemes Karalis* [King of Vidzeme] and *Rīgas Lielais* [Riga Big], currently a situation has developed that these names get used in the sale of seeds and plants, *but these varieties have never actually officially existed*” (emphasis added).

Yet the Agency's answer, denying the very existence of tomatoes clearly found on the kitchen table, caused further consternation. A few days later, another question appeared on the Agency's website: “Please explain how it can be, that the tomato variety *Delikatese* according to you was only registered in 2007, but I have been eating it for at least 35 years?”

These examples allow us to explore the relationships between “actually existing” tomatoes and the complex nature of scientific, bureaucratic, and economic-political categorizations across various regimes.

National tomatoes

We see from the Agency's answer that it divides tomato varieties into three bureaucratic categories, each with different legal options: (1) va-

rieties registered in the EU, and thus legal; (2) unregistered “foreign” varieties, that may or may not be legally registrable, depending on whether they have already been registered outside the EU; and (3) “traditional” varieties that are potentially legal if registered according to the proper rules.

The last two categories reveal how the reconfiguration of Latvia's borders also entailed a designation of “citizenship” of plant varieties. While the currently “nonexistent” varieties may be legitimized as “Latvian” and “traditional”, the once “Soviet” tomatoes are now reclassified as “Russian”. And if Western varieties were once an illegal and highly prized commodity in the Soviet Union, then today it is Russian varieties that are illegal in the European Union, and the irony is not lost on people.

In fact, the vast majority of seeds in the farm's collection are Russian varieties, many that became popular during the Soviet era, when they were not only legal but also moved between republics as readily as Soviet human subjects. Because these Russian tomato varieties represent the taste of childhood for many elderly gardeners, their overnight transformation into contraband in Latvia highlights the artificiality of geopolitical borders. Indeed, the question of why these Russian varieties were suddenly “bad” stumped even the bureaucrats. Asked by a journalist, “How is this Russian seed worse than European seed?” an Agency official stammered, “Mmmm, it will be difficult for me to say how it is worse. But we have joined the European Union and these are the European rules” (Čunka 2012). This inability to explain the logic behind the new EU rules is reflective of similar situations with EU hygiene standards in new member states, which are partially implemented but not necessarily internalized, as in the case of Lithuanian milk producers (Harboe Knudsen 2010).

Yet defenders of the farm's seeds pointed to the ecological logic behind the use of Russian varieties. Besides the historical connection, Aija told me the Russian varieties are more appropriate for the Latvian climate than southern ones. Varieties grown during the Soviet years

have also adapted to local conditions since their introduction. Agency officials emphasized that importing seeds from Russia posed a threat of importing plant diseases. Yet given the historical use and local propagation of these Soviet/Russian varieties in Latvia for decades, their use now can hardly be seen as a breach of borders that may carry the threat of disease or other biothreat, the alleged purpose of seed controls.

The case of the variety *Delikatese* shows that the nationalizing of varieties happens on the opposite side of the border as well. According to the Agency, this variety, popular for decades throughout the Soviet Union, was registered in Russia in 2007, granting exclusive intellectual property rights and economic benefits to the party registering it. Several protestors pointed out that it is not the Agency's job to patrol borders; it is up to the holder of intellectual property rights to contest the infringement. Yet the Agency's answer to the woman's question revealed that in Latvia's new location on the Western side of the border, plant protection did not mean (just) protection against disease, but also placed the plant protection agents in the unexpected role of investigating the geographic domain of intellectual property rights for historically used seeds. While intellectual property rights debates are typically cast as contests between individuals or corporations, the political reconfigurations in Latvia have shown that they also have a national and historic dimension.

Unquestionably, the geopolitics of borders and seed control are tightly tied up with markets and commerce, much as in the case of the imposition of EU hygiene standards in new member states to "level the playing field" (Aistara forthcoming; Dunn 2005). In an interview the summer before the scandal, an official from the Agency explained to me bluntly that the EU was simply protecting its markets with the seed laws, and it was only a question of "which political pot" Latvia was now in. This switching of political pots caused resentment among gardeners about the fact that practices at least tolerated in the Soviet years were now prosecuted as illegal in the EU.

The summer before the conflict, Aija explained to me her understanding of the reasoning behind the EU seed laws:

Well, we're a country of the European periphery, at least in my view. And Europe needs someplace to sell its products, its seeds, and everything. So the laws are made in a way that allow them to develop their seed companies, to develop their hybrids, and so they can have a profit and make a market. Therefore, they have to stop the diversity of tomatoes that we have. ... That is my interpretation.

Aija was not the only one with this interpretation; similar comments reverberated throughout Internet discussions during the conflict (see Aistara 2014). One activist summed it up by saying, "This used to be called colonialism." This echoed what many organic farmers have told me over the last decade, that they were being thrown "from one union to the next." These discourses simultaneously resonate with global concerns over the corporate control of food and seeds as property, corporate influence on regulations, and power imbalances in agro-food systems (Aistara 2011; Kloppenburg 1998; McMichael 1994; Müller 2006).

The science of tradition

As a result of the conflict, the definition of "tradition" was opened up for questioning. Only a small part of the farm's collection is what would be called "traditional" varieties. Yet what does "traditional" mean? When the issue of Russian versus Latvian varieties came up at the farm's hearing, one elderly protestor pointed out in exasperation that in that case all tomatoes and potatoes should be sent back to America, none being authentically local. Plant breeder and researcher Līga Lepse (2012) notes that Latvia has long been a genetic meeting point of East and West, and that Latvian gardens were full of foreign-named varieties already in the early twentieth century. This brings us to the defini-

tion of variety, what it means to different people, and how to register it.

Only four tomato varieties are registered in the Latvian national catalog;³ a handful of other local varieties could be considered “traditional,” as products of “mass selection,” meaning that no breeder is known;⁴ several others were developed by Latvian breeders during Latvia’s first independence period or during the Soviet era when vegetable breeding was supported in two state research centers.⁵ Yet many of these have never been registered under any political regime, but simply grown and eaten. Some, like Videzemes Karalis,⁶ were developed by the late Latvian amateur breeder Atūrs Silde, who founded the amateur gardening club “*Tomāts*” [Tomato] in 1997 specifically because he felt that local seeds would be threatened by new intellectual property rights regulations. Aija recalled Silde’s opinion about the possibility of registering his own two favorite varieties:

“The author’s rights for me will serve only as a certification, but I won’t get any money from it, so I will have just spent money to register them,” he said. “Forget it—let them spread among the people on their own.” ... Varieties live among the people when they are grown, and if people stop growing them, they will no longer be—they will simply disappear. Then what is better, to develop a variety, insist on some sort of property rights so that each grower pays you, or rather to just let it go on and live, carrying your name?

Thus, Silde’s followers believe he purposely never registered the varieties, because to him a variety was defined by the tomato’s actual continued existence, rather than its registered name.

Botanically, a variety is a sub-species taxonomic category historically used to refer to populations that developed different traits due to geographic separation. If not kept isolated, they may cross. Since tomatoes are self-pollinating, it is possible to maintain variety characteristics by preventing pollen from spreading to other

plants and through selecting fruits from plants that most exactly exhibit traits characteristic to the variety, which is the work that Aija and Edgars have been doing in their greenhouses. During the conflict some plant researchers cast doubt on whether Aija and Edgars maintain the characteristics of the varieties according to high scientific standards. Yet variation in the characteristics of the variety is also a sign of adaptation to local climate and conditions. Aija told me she compared the same Italian variety from a purchased seed packet versus ones she had reproduced for several years, and saw that the locally propagated seeds grew better. According to strict norms, they should be the same. For most amateur gardeners, the seeds that are slightly less characteristic of the variety but do better in local conditions would be preferable.

The term “variety” is also a legal term, however, defined by the International Union for the Protection of New Varieties of Plants (UPOV) as the grounds for granting intellectual property rights,⁷ and incorporated into EU seed laws. In order to register a variety, it must undergo tests for distinctness, uniformity, and stability (DUS tests) (European Union 2002: art. 4, par. 1). DUS tests are not available for tomatoes in Latvia, so they must be sent abroad. This takes time and money, which becomes a limiting factor for a small business even for a few varieties, let alone their entire collection.⁸

Advocates of farm-saved seeds in Europe have long pointed out that many local varieties are genetically diverse populations and therefore may not pass DUS tests. In 2009 the European Union passed the Conservation Varieties Directive, which eased requirements for registering “conservation varieties.”⁹ Ironically, it is the implementation of this directive that was responsible for the farm’s charge of the illegal sale of seeds, as before its implementation no one expected them to register their varieties at all. In order to qualify for the “conservation variety” category, the state gene bank must testify to the variety’s local significance as a genetic resource, the seed must still undergo at least one

year of testing, and one must pay registration fees. Furthermore, it may not be possible to register the Russian varieties at all, if they have already been registered under the UPOV Convention in Russia. Therefore, this conflict raised the tricky question of what counts as a “traditional” variety, or, to put it another way, when the socially invented tradition of growing these Russian tomatoes in Latvia could become a biologically registrable fact by virtue of the variety having adapted to local conditions.

Traditional versus traditionally grown

The response of tomato growers and consumers was to defend the Soviet varieties and tastes as a Latvian national project. Significantly, the Russian varieties were defended as “traditionally grown.” This is more than a linguistic slip or shift; it also destabilizes the solidity of the concept “traditional” and the artificial boundaries of space and time that have not only reclassified tomatoes but also segmented people’s lives. To gardeners and consumers, these tomatoes represent the taste of their childhoods. Therefore, their criminalization is also a delegitimization of all that those memories represent to their holders.

The defense of the Soviet tomato varieties is similar to what Klumbyte (2010) has described in the revival of sausages marketed as “Soviet” in Lithuania nearly 20 years after the collapse of the Soviet Union. As with the sausages, this claim for cultural memory of taste blurs the boundaries of historical, national, and ethnic categories. Klumbyte notes: “For producers and many consumers of ‘Soviet’ sausages in this changing political, economic, and social space, ‘Soviet’ increasingly becomes [a] synonym for ‘ours’ and ‘Lithuanian,’ which challenges the normalized dichotomy of ‘Soviet’ versus ‘Lithuanian’ in the mainstream official discourse” (2010: 30).

Indeed, in the midst of ethnic retrenchment in Latvian politics in recent years, the tomato seed scandal was one of the rare moments that stimulated rhetoric of multiethnic unity. Aija told me that both Latvian and Russian gardeners had contacted them to express support, and

the long lines I saw at the market stalls revealed no ethnic division. Despite the fact that it was mostly elderly Latvian ladies at the hearing publicly protesting the criminalization of Soviet tomatoes in their gardens, commentators also used slogans such as: “In the tomato rebellion, Latvians and Russians will be united!” (Apollo 2012a). This evokes the independence movements of the 1990s, when environmental movements were a platform for larger social and political protest against the regime (Dawson 1996), whereby ethnic groups were united against one common enemy, a moment I have called eco-sociality (Aistara 2014). Perhaps the resurgence of this multiethnic ecosociality in defense of the right to grow “Russian” tomatoes in European Latvia shows the strength of the discomfort caused by the relocation of geopolitical borders, with their resulting reshuffling of cultural memories, social ties, and political categories. Nostalgic practices of recreating material objects of the past may ease such discomfort of having “emigrated without leaving home” (Berdahl 1999) and offer a way of connecting personal memories and biographies to lost histories.

Mixing memories

The messiness and the symbolic importance of this conflict are both best captured by Aija and Edgars’s occasional attempts to breed their own varieties alongside their main task of evaluating existing ones. They obtained their favorite variety by crossing a tasty purple but delicate Russian variety called *Radiniece* (Relative) with Silde’s variety *Vidzemes Karalis* (King of Vidzeme, a region in northeast Latvia), which has a good form and is more resistant. The result was a violet, round, smooth, tasty, and resistant tomato, “combining all the best characteristics from both parents.” They named it *Radinieces Meita* (Relative’s Daughter) and have worked to stabilize it. They have never registered the variety, as it is too costly and difficult a process and not their main interest, but some regular customers know it by name.

This tomato, the hybrid of a Latvian King and its Russian relative, perhaps most vividly embodies the dilemma that perplexed authorities. It combines Russian and Latvian geographies and national and Soviet timescapes and evokes cultural memories of tastes of the past. The existence of all of this is denied if this tomato is deemed not to exist.

Furthermore, this tomato symbolizes the recuperation of pasts and integration of memories in ways that diffuse rather than charge ethnic tensions. Unlike highly politicized symbols such as war memorials (Melchior and Visser 2011), through which ethnic issues in the Baltic states often get discussed, seeds as a material object allow memories to coexist in the more complex everyday manner in which populations actually coexisted during the Soviet era, and continue to negotiate situated and relational identities (Cara 2010). As recent events in Ukraine show, Latvia is still geographically between empires. Recuperating mixed memories may in fact be necessary to recreate multiethnic sociality as geopolitical struggles between Russia and the EU intensify.

Transculturation of variety

The most surprising thing about this conflict was not the protests it generated, but the response from officials. Not only was the hearing cancelled due to the unruly protestors, but the Ministry of Agriculture also convened a working group, comprised of the accused farm representatives, members of gardening organizations, the Agency, a seed company representative, and several breeders and researchers. They deliberated over how to resolve the conflict without violating EU regulations. The legislative working group came up with an innovative proposal that was recently approved by the Cabinet of Ministers.

Through long and at times difficult negotiations, the diverse working group invented a new bureaucratic category of “vegetable variety collectors” and a new scientific seed category, a “collector’s variety”, seeking to resolve both the administrative and scientific issues of how to designate a variety and how to get around the

Russian, Latvian, and European distinctions. The definition of “collector’s variety” included in the legislation reads: “[A]n ecologically plastic genotype/population, that can be changeable in time and space, and that retains its originally characteristic traits, which may change slightly in simplified seed harvesting conditions. Varieties in a vegetable variety collection are without an officially granted name” (Latvijas republikas Saeima 2013).

With the change in legislation, collectors like Aija and Edgars have to register with the State Plant Protection Agency and update a list of the varieties they intend to grow for seeds each year, but they do not have to register or test each individual variety. They are allowed to sell seeds from their collection, bearing a special label of “collector’s variety”. The state thus deflects responsibility from itself for the quality of the seeds or the correlation between name and variety. More importantly, the phrase “changeable in time and space” elegantly allows people to maintain their collections of memories, tastes, and seeds.

Mary Louise Pratt (1992) uses the term “contact zone” to describe “social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination” (Pratt 1992: 4). She uses the concept of transculturation to indicate the improvised languages invented to communicate with one another. What proceeded in Latvia, then, in the attempt to resolve the conflict was a process of transculturation in the contact zone between the Soviet Union and the European Union. A ministry official involved in the legislative change told me that they see it as their job to hear the different perspectives of the stakeholders and find a new language that will also satisfy Europe. “We squeezed through the eye of the needle,” she told me.

The change in legislation legitimizes this new language that must be found between the spatial and temporal shifts accompanying Latvia’s repositioning from the Soviet Union to the European Union, thus also legitimizing the memories and pasts carried by the seeds. The

redefinition of “variety” was a new language found to accommodate actually existing tomatoes and their accompanying cultural memories of place, time, and taste.

Conclusion

Elaborate regimes of control have been constructed by political regimes to monitor the circulation and sale of seeds, and the Soviet Union and the European Union are no exceptions. The naming and categorization of seeds as bureaucratic entities decontextualizes them from the cultural memories that give them meaning and are entwined with attributing political affiliations to seeds. Just as people are moved by empires during war and are designated friends or enemies of regimes, so are seeds. And just as after Latvian independence Soviet citizens had to become national subjects or be stranded and rendered stateless, so too were tomato seeds now deemed nonexistent or foreign. As I have shown here, the tomato rebellion revealed the complexity of people’s cultural memories surrounding these shifts of borders, people, seeds, and social relations, and the out-of-place and out-of-time sense of place that they attempt to recreate. This intertwines a nostalgia for Latvian historical landscapes and Soviet sociality in the face of political control over seeds deployed as a tactic of empire.

This can be interpreted as a protest against the “non-temporal rectangles” (Foucault [1966] 1994) required by the classificatory project of the EU Common Catalogue. Rather, protesters on the edge of Europe attempted to re-embed these plants in their histories, and lawmakers allowed them to be replaced back into the “tangled threads of their life surroundings” (Pratt 1992). Just as actually existing socialism was more complex than Cold War ideologues liked to present, so are the histories, memories, and futures of the actually existing tomatoes in Aija and Edgars’s greenhouse in the contact zone between geographical and temporal empires.

Nevertheless, while this process of transculturation attempted to destabilize “European-based patterns of global unity and order” (Pratt 1992), this elegant solution is a temporary one, as the EU had begun a massive overhaul of its seed legislation even before the Latvian legislative changes were finalized. Currently, fierce debates surround the European Commission’s proposal, which maintains the need to classify and register all varieties, though it makes an exception for small niche market seed producers. While such an “eye of the needle” may be large enough for Aija and Edgars’s tomato seeds, many more cultural memories of tastes, smells, and places may be under threat throughout all of Europe.

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Notes

1. All names have been changed and all translations are my own.
2. Another issue is “how subjects buy into the imperial projects of which they are part” (Jasanoff 2006: 279). This is interesting for future research to ask how Soviet seeds were initially popularized, received, and subsequently appropriated.
3. Jūrmala, Tīraines, Kondīnes Uzlabotā, and Pūres Konservu.
4. For example Latgales Agrais.
5. Such as Dindoņa, named after breeder Pēteris Dindonis; Tīraines and Pūres Konservu named after breeding stations.
6. As well as Gaujamla and Cēsu Agrais.
7. The UPOV definition of variety is “a plant grouping within a single botanical taxon of the lowest known rank, ... defined by the expression of the characteristics resulting from a given genotype or combination of genotypes; distinguished from any other plant grouping by the expression of at least one of the said characteristics and; considered as a unit with regard to its suitability for being propagated unchanged” (UPOV Convention 1991: Article 1[vi]).
8. The closest tomato DUS test in Poland costs zł600 or €150 and takes one year (see http://www.coboru.pl/English/Rejestr_eng/rejestr_eng.aspx). Registration carries an additional fee. Aija estimated it would cost €900 to test and register each variety.
9. These include landraces, varieties that have been traditionally grown in particular localities and regions and are threatened by genetic erosion, and varieties with no intrinsic value for commercial crop production but developed for growing under particular conditions (European Union 2009: chap. 1, art. 1, par. 1).

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