

Food As Resistance Oral History Project  
University of British Columbia

Tal Letourneau

Interviewed by Maiya Letourneau  
March 7<sup>th</sup>, 2021  
Vancouver, British Columbia

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[00:05] ML: Today I am conducting an interview with Tal Letourneau from the traditional, unceded territory of the Musqueam people. Today's interview is on the theme of food as resistance during the COVID-19 pandemic. Can you please state your name for me and whether or not you consent to having this video recorded?

TL: Name, Tal Letourneau, and I consent to your recording this video. And I'll just add, thank you for taking the time to interview me, Maiya.

ML: You're welcome, thank you for taking the time to let me interview you. Um, so I'm going to begin by asking you just a few very broad questions about where you live just to kind of give some geographic context to the interview. So first can you just tell me a little bit about where you live?

TL: Okay, so I am originally from Winnipeg Manitoba, and for the past five and a half years I've been living in Toronto. Um, currently I live in a — a house in the west side of Toronto. Uh, my girlfriend and I rent the main floor of a house.

ML: Great thank you, and can you tell me a little bit about —um— what's the — how would you describe the food scene in Toronto?

TL: It's—it's quite the scene. There are a ton of restaurants here, it's obviously a very multicultural city. Um—you know, lots of immigration into Toronto and there are different neighborhoods that are populated by different ethnicities, so there's a vibrant China Town, there's a Korea town, we live sort of on the border of between what's called Little Italy and Little Portugal and so it's a big, —um— a quilt or melting pot of different ethnicities and cuisine, and so there's a lot of great restaurants. We used to go eat at restaurants, like currently that's not allowed, so we've been eating in more often and cooking more often but we still like to explore and order takeout and delivery so, you know, that's one of our favorite things about Toronto is the food scene.

[02:55] ML: Okay thank you, that was actually going to be my next question is, how important is it for you is it to live in a city with a big food scene?

TL: Um—well, you know, growing up in Winnipeg there isn't quite as much of a food scene and so—I also spent a few years in Vancouver and when I moved to Vancouver, like, I thought that that was very, very eye opening. I didn't know that a city could have such a restaurant culture and so many good places to eat. Um, and then when I moved from Vancouver to Toronto, I mean, I realized that really Vancouver is child's play and—I think that I've kind of experienced either side of the spectrum and—how important is it to me? I don't think—I know that I can live very happily in a place without a vibrant food scene. Um, so you know, it's certainly not an essential, but it's definitely a huge bonus to have a great food scene.

[04:16] ML: So do you think that the fact that a lot of restaurants are closed in Toronto now, has that changed your appreciation of the city at all or has that not really had much of an impact in terms of how much you enjoy living in Toronto?

Tal: Um, well the fact that most things are pretty much closed has definitely impacted our quality of—not quality of life but like, level of enjoyment of the city. You know there is not a whole lot if you can't—there's not so much to do in Toronto if you take away all the concerts sporting events and restaurants. You know, luckily restaurants, many of them have been forced

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to close but many of them remain open to takeout and delivery. So I mean, that's one of the things that we still have during the pandemic is food, and if anything we've become more into food since we've been prevented from doing all the other things we might enjoy like, going out, hanging out with friends in public, that sort of thing.

[05:33] ML: Why do you think you care about it now that you might have before?

TL: I think it mostly just has to do with having a bit more down time. It's not just that we can't do anything else but also working from home eliminates about an hour a day that would be spent commuting. We've gotten a little bit more into cooking and baking, and I think that the— one of the benefits of that is that when you're stuck at home—working from home and you're busy, it's very easy to just spend the whole day in front of the computer, and even when you can't go outside or go somewhere you can always take an hour to cook and it's just a way to be not in front of your computer, in front of a tv, not sitting down for like, half hour or forty five minutes, just doing something completely different, being in the moment, spending some time with whoever you live with—so I think that's probably one of the reasons why we've been experimenting with a lot of different food during the pandemic.

[7:01] ML: Okay, so would you say that—um—cooking has had maybe like, a positive effect on your mental health overall during the pandemic?

TL: Uh—Yeah, definitely. Definitely. Like I'm very glad that—you know I think— um—like, before the pandemic I was working downtown and food was kind of just like an errand or a chore or something you had to like—you would eat to live sort of. So like at lunch you know I would often just go down the street level and grab something from the path, bring it back up to my desk and just eat it as quickly as possible. Um, and I think that that's fine but there's so much more of an experience to be had with food and you get that more if you take the time, not only to cook it, but like, to plan it, you know, think about what you're going to eat in advance. Like, one of the things we've been able to do because of the pandemic that we weren't doing before is just like, meal planning further in advance. So that might also include baking something that you're going to—you're going to pull together various components of the meal. So I've been making some condiments, doing a little bit of pickling, making my own hot sauce. And so I do think that if you're planning a meal a few days in advance and trying to pull together all those things that need to come together you appreciate it a little bit more when you eat it.

[9:05] ML: What has been your go to meal during the pandemic?

TL: Oh—um—we've played around with a lot of different things. Um—one thing that we weren't making before the pandemic that we're making now is Sabich, which is kind of a, I think it's a middle eastern dish, I think it's Jewish Iraqi in origins and it's basically fried eggplant and salad, egg, like a mashed up, hard-boiled egg, and various condiments inside a pita. And so, there's a few different components that go into it, like the salads and the sauces and the pita. And you know we've—that's one of the things that because of the pandemic we've gone through the lengths of making the pita fresh, and making all the condiments not just buying them, and that's a meal with a few different parts that we've managed to pull together really nicely. So, I mean it's a little bit time consuming, so it's not like we're making it every week, but that's a nice treat.

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[10:40] ML: I'm just wondering, does food or cooking have any significance to you culturally? Like, other as a means of survival, is there any cultural or familial significance that food holds in your life?

TL: Uh—well, not really, I don't think of it really as—cultural, but I do think that we have memories that are tied up in the foods that maybe people made for us in the past. Um—I made like, a mushroom stroganoff the other day, and I think the recipe that we were looking at called for putting it on potatoes but I remember that my grandmother used to make beef stroganoff and she'd put it on these egg noodles, so I went out and got these good noodles, and, you know, like, even though it was a completely different meal that I made it was still very nostalgic and it's nice to be able to tell a story to yourself or to others when you're making food and share experiences that you have tied up in your meals. And so I think that when you're making food to share with somebody else it adds a bit of an element of storytelling into it and so it's a way of bringing people closer together. Um, so I don't know if that's at all what you were asking but—

[12:35] ML: Um, yeah it actually—it does help to answer my question and one of the reasons I asked it is because isolation has made that sort of hard to have that experience of where you're sharing your cooking with someone else. Um- you live with someone else at the moment so you might not have had a similar experience but have you found the fact that you maybe can't eat so much with your family or your friends, has that—how have you maybe tried to replicate that experience? Have you—have you tried to replicate it, or have you just kind of accepted that you might have to wait until you can have that experience again?

TL: Well, we really haven't seen that many people so I think we've mostly decided that it's going to have to wait. But, you know we have—we saw family over the December holidays and over the summer and so, for example, it was neat to be able to make each other food and share with one another some of the dishes that we've been experiencing with over the last several months. I mean, I baked bagels for my family because we learned how to make those last winter, so stuff like that I think has been, I guess—maybe that was a little bit more enjoyable just because of the fact that we haven't been able to do—to share our cooking with others in so long.

[14:19] ML: Have you tried cooking over facetime with anyone? Or anything like that?

TL: No I haven't done that but I think we sort of toyed with the idea of doing like one of those virtual cooking classes? But haven't done it.

ML: Okay. And have you hopped on any of the food trends during the pandemic? There were a lot of—you know people were starting sourdough starters, banana bread was another really popular one, were there any other food trends that you kind of jumped on?

TL: No, I don't think so, I mean neither of those. Um—maybe was there a hummus making trend? Was that a trend?

ML: I'm not sure.

TL: Well, we've made all sorts of different things then that we thought—that looked good and that maybe we wouldn't have had time to do before but I don't know—I don't know how much any of it was influenced by trends.

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ML: Okay and do you have any—you sort of—you talked a little bit about some of your cooking experiences, you mentioned the mushroom stroganoff, and the Sabich. Can you think—what was your most memorable cooking experience during the pandemic, maybe thinking all the way down to lockdown even last march if you can remember. Doesn't have to be that far back, but do you have any memories that stand out during the pandemic?

[15:54] TL: Um—well, all of the things that involve baking stand out a little bit more just because they take longer. So, I mean, we baked a cake for my nieces' first birthday, so that was a lot of fun. Uh, the Sabich. Um—we baked—yeah, we baked a challah which was really good, we used that to make grilled cheese, those were delicious. Baked a ton of bagels. Um—a chocolate babka. That was—yeah, the chocolate babka was insane. Um—I needed to take a break from baking for a little while after that. [ML laughs] Because—yeah, it wasn't too kind to my waistline. But we're back into baking, we made chocolate chip cookies last night.

ML: Um —

TL: —And we made more this morning. [ML laughs]

ML: Very jealous. Would you say—so you talked a little bit about your expanding waistline. I'm curious to know, because restaurants have been closed and you've been talking about the fact that you've been cooking a little bit more often—um— would you say overall have your eating habits become healthier or worse?

[17:30] TL: I think the meals are healthier but the fact that I'm at home all day means I'm snacking more so I think, overall, better health wise not to be eating and grazing all day.

ML: Right and it's—I guess it's also hard not being able to exercise as much probably.

TL: Yeah, exactly.

ML: Um— so I'm— I wanted to ask just a couple of questions about your experience with the grocery store. Um, thinking back to March of last year, there was a lot of—uncertainty—about going to the grocery store. Can you describe at all, what were your feelings when you went to the grocery store back in March, just as the pandemic had been declared?

[18:20] TL: Um—I don't know, we've never—I don't think—yeah, we just see going to the grocery store as something that we have to do, like we're careful and we take the precautions and I think the stores have been pretty good about implementing them and people seem to respect the rules and so obviously any time you have to go to the store you're taking a little bit of a risk, but what are you going to do you've got to eat. So I think that that's how I've looked at it. We've done some—you know my girlfriend went to visit her family in Columbia for a couple weeks and so when she came back we both had to quarantine for a couple weeks so we ordered—so like, we did online groceries a couple times, didn't like that all because they just send you the wrong stuff. Um—but mostly grocery shopping has just been the same except that we try to do bigger grocery shops so that we go less frequently, and, you know wearing masks and all that jazz.

ML: Has that been a learning curve for you, to be ordering groceries in bulk?

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TL: Um—a little bit. Uh, a little bit but I think—well, last— this past fall we got a car which we didn't before and so that sort of enabled us to get more groceries, which I think is something that we would have done before if we just had a way of carrying them all.

[20:22] ML: And would you say any of these changes that you've made have made any sort of impact on your savings or have you been finding that you're spending less money because you're eating in more often, or maybe vice versa?

TL: I definitely am spending less money because we're eating in more often. Among other—you know—among other reasons. Like—you know—are we including, like, alcohol? So, you know, paying a lot less for alcohol has definitely been positive for savings.

ML: Yeah, and also having less to do in the entertainment industry also—[both talking at once] I'm sure there are a lot of different factors.

TL: Well, since the golf courses closed, you know, haven't been spending money on very much at all.

ML: [laughs] silver linings [bot talking at once]

TL Just groceries.

ML: Silver linings. So I actually I wanted to go back to the start of our interview, there were a couple of questions that I was hoping to ask you. You talked a lot about the restaurant scene in Toronto, do you have a favorite restaurant that you used to love to go to before Covid?

TL: Uh, a few. A few. Um—one of my favorite restaurants for Italian food is “Piano, Piano”. My favorite Chinese restaurant is “Hong Shing”. My favorite Mexican restaurant is probably either “Campechano” or “Wilbur”. Um—these are all places though that we've eaten since the pandemic started, we just do it take-out.

[22:20] ML: Do you enjoy the experience just as much as you would have eating inside the restaurant?

TL: No, it's not as enjoyable takeout. I think part of that has to do with the ambiance, another part of it just had to with like, delivery food isn't as good, it's way better hot. And you know some things deliver kind of well, like, pizza delivers pretty well, Chinese delivers pretty well. Um, but other things, like a plate of pasta, doesn't deliver very well, like you could make it I think just as well—like it's better if you just make it at home. Um so it depends. It depends on the restaurant, but I think generally that's another reason why we've been cooking in a lot is because restaurant food just isn't - if it's being delivered it's not better than what you can make at home.

ML: Right, yeah, I would agree with that I also don't like takeaway pasta. [Laughs]

TL: Yeah, most of these things are, you know, they're made to be eaten right away.

ML: Were you satisfied with the changes that restaurants—you know obviously a lot of restaurants had to completely change their service but it's been different the way they've done it in every city. For example in Vancouver, you can still go to a lot of restaurants because the

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patios have opened up. So, I'm interested to know how exactly did the restaurants in Toronto adapt, would be the first question, and then the second question would be, were you satisfied with how they adapted?

[24:06] TL: Uh well, for the last few months in Toronto, and for much of the pandemic, the rules—because you know Toronto has been um—Toronto has been a hot bed for Covid for the last year and so the restrictions have been pretty tight I think compared to the rest of the country. So, for much of the time the rules are pretty just black and white, no dine in, only take-out and delivery and so all the restaurants kind of adapted in the same way by moving their offerings to delivery. Um, there was a few months during the summer and into the fall where the restrictions lightened up a little bit and restaurants were allowed to have their patios open and then, as it got colder—the restrictions were such that you could still keep your restaurant open, but only the patios. So as it got colder, restaurants were scrambling to buy outdoor heating lamps and then they were—and then they were going even further and kind of, like, erecting these semi-enclosed, like, patios, so that basically the patios weren't patios anymore, they were just, you know, poorly insulated extensions of the main restaurant, which were difficult to heat, and I don't blame the restaurants for that I just think it was a bit of a silly rule to allow restaurants to remain open during November, but only the patios. I think that put the restaurants in a tough place. So I thought that was a little bit silly but I don't—I don't blame the restaurants for that.

[26:20] ML: So sounds like maybe more of a disagreement with the government, than with the restaurant industry?

TL: Yeah, I just think the government sort of, you know, made a rule that made sense during June and July and then they didn't update it till December and it left restaurants in a tough place during October and November.

ML: Do you know anybody that was working in the restaurant industry, maybe that still is, at the start of the pandemic?

TL: No

ML: No, okay. Okay so I guess my last question for you is, to what extent do you think food maybe made your experience of the pandemic either, you know, more bearable or, I guess, yeah, did it make it more bearable for you?

TL: Yeah, I think it was one of the silver linings of the pandemic was you know—it's like at the end of 2020, like, on new year's, I was reflecting on the year a little bit, and one of the things I was able to say was that 2020 was a good year for lunch if nothing else. It was a good year for lunches. So I do think that you know food and being able to spend a little bit more time preparing our own food was a silver lining.

ML: Right, it might be something special that you can look back on. Maybe.

TL: Yep—I hope that if and when things go back to normal that, you know, I'll have found some sort of appreciation for food and developed some skills in the kitchen that I can take forward. I hope that happens for other people too.

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[28:24] ML: That's really interesting and actually I want to ask you another question off of that. Do you think when—if and when things go back to normal do you think you'll go back to old habits or will you, you know, continue to grocery shop more often and cook at home more often? Or will that maybe be impossible to do once you go back to the workplace again?

TL: Yeah, I think it will probably be something in the middle. I'll probably go back to some old habits but hopefully not revert back entirely.

ML: Okay. All right, well, great, thank you so much, that concludes the interview, unless if you have anything else that you wanted to add for the record?

TL: Uh, I just have actually one question if you don't mind.

ML: Sure, yep?

TL: What's for dinner?

ML: [laughs] What's for dinner – oh boy, salmon and stir fry. What's for dinner on your end?

TL: Um—I think we're going to make roasted cauliflower pita pockets. Have you ever been to the restaurant Miznon in Tel Aviv?

ML: I have been to that restaurant.

TL: So they have a pita—I think most of their mains are like basically stuffed pitas and one of them is the Lavan, that's Hebrew for white, and I think it's basically roasted cauliflower sort of mashed up with tahini sauce and some salad and then stuffed into a warm pita. So that's what we're going to try to make tonight.

[30:08] ML: That sounds so much better than what I'm having. [laughs]

TL: Yeah, I think so too.