Los Chilaquiles de mi 'ama
The Language of Everyday Cooking

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... (text continues)
of everyday cooking to express artistic creation, manifestations of love, self-assurance, and economic survival. Therefore, in my desire to understand the discourses of quotidian cooking and how a working-class woman's sense of self is refashioned through such practice, I do not wish to limit this culinary language to literary interpretations. I am seasoning my work with ethnographic as well as poetic analysis. As my Aunt Esperanza says when speaking of the right etiquette for selecting a daily menu:

If you make a fried noodle soup, you have to make either a vegetable or a cream soup. So it will combine because you can't make fried noodles and noodle soup, right? Meaning, noodle soup and fried noodle soup, both noodle soups. These are things that you are constantly learning throughout life, right?" 

My aunt's articulation of soup combinations and her knowledge of an etiquette based on an evolution of specific cultural practices parallels theorists such as Stuart Hall, Aron Rodrigue, Anna L. Tsing, Emma Pérez, and other critics who ground the analysis of their subject research within its own cultural and historical specificity. Their rationale (their etiquette) for such grounding gives justice and merit to culture-specific practices. For Rodrigue to analyze tolerance in the Ottoman Empire, it would not serve him well to employ analytical methodologies based on the Aztecs' structure of power. These theorists argue that cultural practices have their own strategic order of production governed by their own specific historical evolution.

Following cultural studies methodology, the only fiction in this chapter is from Chicana women writers, since a similar cultural reference exists between these writings and the charlas culinarias I have had with Mexican women who live here in the United States or in Mexico. Chicana writings and the ethnographic research share a cultural specificity, or in my aunt's words, they share the same cultural etiquette. Therefore, the legitimacy of my analytical juxtaposition is the same legitimacy that governs the protocol of serving "sopa de pasta" with "sopa ya sea de verduras o ... sopa de crema" (fried noodle soup with a vegetable or a cream soup). While my analysis shares cultural specificity, my theoretical framework is what Chicana critic Tey Diana Rebolledo calls "salpicón," a bit of this and a bit of that, just as recipes are put together (5).

The language of everyday cooking is another avenue for both Chicana
writers and working-class, nonwriter women of “seizing . . . subjectivity—
evolving into speaking [and] writing subjects” (Rebolledo 4). Yvonne
Yarbro-Bejarano says that Chicana writers “search . . . for a language that
consciously opposes the dominant culture.” Yarbro-Bejarano states that a
number of Chicana critics, including herself, understand that a woman’s
“self-empowerment” comes through writing. She also claims that the
“Chicana subject as writer” is a central focus in Chicana literary creation.
“Writing,” writes Yarbro-Bejarano, “emerged as the medium for the de-
definition of individual subjectivity of the Chicana writer through the arti-
culation of collective experience and identity” (213–18).

While I agree with Yarbro-Bejarano, writing down stories regrettably
requires something that working-class women often do not have: the lux-
ury of time. The majority of working-class women do not have a “room of
their own” in which to sit peacefully and quietly, privately writing out their
lives. However, many women do have a kitchen in which they often make
their own food and inscribe their life experiences—through the seasoning
of it, through the sharing of their recipes, and through the time spent in
other women’s kitchens.

The language of cooking, with its gendered discourse, also opposes
the dominant culture. A literary and cinematographic example that illustrates
this defiant act is Laura Esquivel’s Como agua para chocolate (Like Water for
Chocolate). In this film, the act of preparing, cooking, and serving food is
a multifaceted, gendered discourse of health, pregnancy, sensuality, sexuality,
retribution, and liberation (see Leonardi; de Valdés). The simultaneous
coexistence of such discourses coming out of the kitchen has a subversive
function. A cultural and familial tradition confines Tita, the protagonist, to
life in the kitchen. The matriarchal power subordinating her denies her the
right to love. Nonetheless, Tita, as the agent of these discourses, learns to
overcome such obstacles by constructing alternative forms of expression.
For instance, eating codornices en pétalos de rosa (quail in rose petal sauce)
becomes her and her beloved the very act of sexual intercourse. Tita “in
spite of many troubles, a brush with insanity, jealousy, repression,” all the
outcome of a familial tradition, “manages, through her cooking, to develop
her own language that combines erotics with independence” (Lawless 271).

The act of resistance in culinary discourse is governed by an embodiment
of sense, smell, taste, touch, and texture that yields the right sabor (taste).
The logic governing this language is based on sensual forms of knowledge.
Such knowledge, with its disregard for the absoluteness based on empirical
knowledge, on scientific evidence, presents a challenge to the dominant
culture. For instance, during a charla culinaria with my mother, I asked her
how I would know the quantity—empirical means of knowledge—of lime
to add to water when soaking maíz for making masa for tortillas. She looked
at me with an expression that made me feel I had asked a rather obvious
question. She did answer my question. Extending one of her hands, she
showed me her palm while with the other she made a motion as if gather-
ing lime out of a sack and pouring it into her open palm and said: “Te la
pones así, la sientes pa’ calcular” (you put it in like this, you feel it in order
to calculate). My sister did something similar when she gave me a recipe for
pazote. As she gave me a list of “add this and add that” to a boiling pot, I—
the academically trained one—stopped her and asked her for quantities:
“No sé decir yo de cantidades porque es algo que yo le calcujo” (I don’t
know how to speak about quantities because it is something I just calculate).
However, culinary knowledge is not grounded only on intuition or pure
senses. This type of argument only reinforces the binary split of the mind
(men) and body (women) process of knowledge. The point here is to es-

tablish the notion that knowledge (just like the process of writing stories)
is obtained through a diverse realm of experiences. Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz,
a seventeenth-century Mexican nun, eloquently articulates the cooking ex-
perience as follows:

What could I tell you, my Lady, of the secrets of nature I have dis-
covered while cooking? That an egg holds together and fuses in fat or
oil, and that, on the contrary, it disintegrates in syrup. That to keep
sugar liquid, it suffices to add the tiniest bit of water in which a quince
or some other fruit has soaked. But, Madam, what is there for us
women to know, if not bits of kitchen philosophy? . . . And I always
say, when I see these details. If Aristotle had been a cook, he would
have written much more. (Lawless 269)

Culinary practices not only have their own distinctive epistemology; they
transform into culinary creativity.
Helena María Viramontes interconnects the power of the written word and the power of creative expression found in the kitchen:

*We mujeres are inventive people. My mother, for example, faced the challenge of feeding eleven people every evening. Time and time again, I saw her cut four pork chops, add this and that and this, pour water, and miraculously feed all of us with a tasty guiso. Or the nopales she grew, cleaned, diced, scrambled with eggs, or meat, or, chile, or really mixed with anything her budget could afford, and we had such a variety of tasty dishes!*(202)

Viramontes attributes her mother’s talent in the kitchen to her skills of invention, innovation, and imagination—crucial elements for the creation of written fiction. On a similar note, Rosario Ferré challenges the dominant culture in the realm of academic theoretical debate in regard to the supposed superiority of either female/male or male/female writing. Ferré de-mythes the dichotomy of such essential gender differences vis-à-vis our mothers’ cooking practices. She concludes her argument on gendered writing differences as follows:

*What is important is not to determine if we as women have to write with an open or closed writing structure, with a poetic language or with an obscene language, with our heads or with our hearts. What is important is to apply that fundamental lesson that we learn from our mothers, the first ones, after all, who taught us to fight with fire: the secret of writing, like the secret of good cooking, has nothing to do with gender, but with the wisdom with which ingredients are combined. *(154)*

Viramontes and Ferré thus find new creative expressions to challenge a dominant ideology that denies women creative and intellectual outlet. Both of these critics see the power of the written word and the power of the practice of our mothers’ cooking as part of the same continuum, as part of the same process of writing women’s stories.

The sharing of women’s stories takes place through the process of sharing recipes. But like a story that yields different possibilities with each new reading, so do recipes yield new stories with each new retelling. Susan

Leonardi describes a recipe-like narrative that is “reproducible, and further, its hearers—readers—receivers are encouraged to reproduce it, and, in reproducing it, to revise it and make it their own” (Leonardi 344). Consequently, a new story is narrated. The process of telling different stories that I speak of, however, is not in the hands of a re-creator (the reader) of recipes. The narration of a story is not in the recipe per se, but in the actual act of expressing the process of making a meal, of creating unique and distinct recipes, of adding a personal chiste (twist) to an old recipe. A recipe’s composition, according to Debora Castillo, “is not a blueprint. It is less a formula than a general model; less an axiom of unchanging law and more a theory of possibilities” that allows the recipe teller the ability to express multiple narratives (xiii). The ethnographic emphasis of this project is not to write out recipes so the reader can appropriate them through a process of re-creation. Such appropriation changes the meaning of the story. Within the frame of my analysis, if others revise the process and recipes conveyed by the charlas culinarias, the cooks’ own chiste in their cooking will be obscured. Each recipe, as Goldman says, is “an individual authority”; therefore, the appropriation of an individual’s recipe becomes the appropriation of that person’s authority and self-assertion. In the ethnography of *charlas culinarias*, these women’s voices are articulated through their own personal chiste, so the revision of their practices and recipes detracts from their moments of seizing subjectivity (Goldman 188).

**Writers as Cooks and Cooks as Writers—Marinating an Identity**

In a theoretical analysis of the historical evolution of female identity construction in Chicana literature, Rebolledo observes: “In the process of formulation [of] an identity both ethnic and female, one area that is distinctly original is the concept of the writer as cook. It seems that one way to express individual subjectivity (while at the same time connecting to the collective and community) is by reinforcing this female identity as someone who cooks. One of the spaces traditionally construed as female is the kitchen, and Chicana literature is filled with images of active women preparing food (130). Culinary imagery in poetic expressions is one way Chicanas writers, or the writers as cooks, negotiate their individual as well as
their collective subjectivity. Culinary discourses can be deciphered if food, like language, is treated as a code. Therefore, "the message it encodes," as Mary Douglas observes, "will be found in the pattern of social relations being expressed" (250).

An example of this is la Chriss's poem "La Loca de la Raza Cósmica." La Chriss's poem is a search for an identity in different and simultaneous registers of the social body. The poem is a recognition of the vast diversity of women within the Chicana (and Latina) community, therefore, the social relations expressed through culinary references in the conceptualization of an identity are the religious self, the keeper of tradition, the dutiful wife and mother, the socially and politically racialized other, and the modern liberated woman.

Soy tan simple como la capirotada . . .
soy la comida en la mesa cuando llegan del jale
soy la que calienta los TV dinners
soy tamales at Christmas time . . .
soy Coconut

"La capirotada" has religious implications: La capirotada is a traditional Mexican dish that carries with it a relation to one of the fundamental cultural identities for many of us (Chicanas/Mexicanas), Catholicism. La capirotada is a dish prepared only during Cuaresma (Lent), the period of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This line in its entirety connotes food as the embodiment of the self, the offering of the self through food. In la Chriss's poem, however, the act of self-giving for the formation of an identity resonates with an array of possibilities:

Soy love-maker to my main man . . .
living to love and support
my husband and to nurture and teach
my children . . .
soy la Revolucionaria . . .
soy la chicana en los confines . . .
soy wondering if there is a God

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soy la Virgen de Guadalupe
soy la community organizer . . .
Soy achieving a higher status en la causa
de la mujer . . .
Soy finding strength from within
my Chicana soul.

The act of self-offering is also symbolically charged in everyday culinary practices. In the cases of my Aunt Esperanza and my sister Alma, their sense of self is tenaciously sustained by the validation of their emotions, by the convictions of their thoughts, and by the right to their creative expression. They enter a third space where the act of self-offering is an active and conscious choice of identity assertion rather than a passive and submissive acceptance of the domestic space, the kitchen, as the proper woman's place. When she serves her comida en la mesa (food on the table), my aunt is serving the gift of her love and emotions.

It's a way of showing love. At least this is how I feel about it. And I feel that you also see it this way. And you like to cook. And I believe that you understand me because you also—I have seen you, when I come you cook, or someone that you love comes, you cook for them. Because you also like the kitchen. We enjoy it [cooking].

Not only does my aunt address the importance of her emotions toward her family with the offering of food, she also connects the gesture of self-giving as a communal act for women's emotional expression. Self-giving here becomes a communal act of showing gestures of love through plates filled with food. Yet my aunt's or my own act of self-giving does not follow the traditional implication of religious self-sacrifice: the denial of our individuality for the benefit of our family, community, and culture. Cooking for either of us is not an obligatory performance but rather a celebration of our own affectionate and creative expression.

Furthermore, my aunt's choice of words in speaking about her culinary practices claims her authority and knowledge. Her way of speaking about cooking indirectly questions the Western tradition of logical rationale. She affirms her knowledge not through a process of what she thinks about the act of offering her love through food, but through a process of how she
feels: “así lo siento.” She could have easily said “así lo pienso” or “así lo veo” (this is how I think, or, this is how I see it). One could argue that such choice adheres to an objective development of knowledge since “feelings” are subjective and often dismissed as less valuable. Yet this is one source of her intellect, knowledge, and creative expression. If women “professionals who can cook should never admit it if they want to maintain credibility,” as Leonardo says, because “cooking can be a dangerous thing for a woman” (341), my aunt’s culinary expression has yet another dimension for those of us working within the boundaries of the academic world. For those of us who are also cooks, affirming our culinary knowledge based on the observation of “chemical interactions, physics, and even philosophy while cooking,” as did the erudite seventeenth-century nun Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, will only add to our intellectual merit and growth (Rebolledo 133).

For my sister Alma, culinary knowledge foregrounds her creative identity. In her case, even though she mentions more than once that she does not like to cook, when she speaks of what in our family is known as “sus famosas enchiladas” (her famous enchiladas), this conversation takes place:

Alma: “Okay. The majority of people dip the tortillas in oil first. Then in the sauce. Then they put cheese in the middle and fold them. And this is how they do it. I did it this way once, and I didn’t like them. They tasted only like wet tortillas in a sauce. What I do, I dip the tortilla in the sauce first and then I fry it in oil. It’s more of a mess. Which means everything gets dirty. One more thing. Many people, for instance, they’re going to eat dinner together, therefore, they make many enchiladas. They put them in the oven, and then they put everything out and everybody serves themselves. I don’t like it this way. I like to prepare them as people are eating them.”

Me: “But in this other way, everyone sits and has dinner together.”

Mom: “Well, just because it’s more work to have to be making them. But the flavor. The steamy flavor.”

Alma’s affirmation of her right to creative expression becomes an affirmation of her agency. The narration of her process in adding her own chiste when making enchiladas conveys the story of a woman who at certain moments sees cooking as more than a wife’s duty and obligation. The confidence in Alma’s practice tells the story of a woman who no longer feels apologetic about her supposed lack of culinary knowledge toward her younger—aesthetic gour- met cookbook—sister. As a matter of fact, she even goes so far as to question my use of measuring utensils and cookbooks: “I never write down measurements. You also cook only be calculating. Or do you use measurements? I don’t think you go and look at the recipe. I don’t base my cooking on a book and looking at what must be added from a recipe.” The tone of suspicion with regard to measurements and cookbooks stresses and validates knowledge based on her specific lived experiences. Thus, my sister’s claim of agency comes from her creative interventions.

I wish to be careful not to romanticize the culinary practices of these women, or their lives for that matter. Their marital relations are still very much governed by old, traditional, and culturally gender-specific codes of behavior. However, although machismo often governs, marianismo does not always submit. Women like my aunt and sister are not devoid of agency and a sense of self, which is articulated through the narratives of their cooking practices. My sister’s style of making enchiladas and of normally eating when everyone has finished could tempt some of us to argue that she is not “at will the taker and initiator, for her own right,” as Hélène Cixous advocates women should become by taking a pen and writing poetry (880). If this is all we are able to hear, what happens to Alma’s statement: “Yo sé
como a mí me gustan y es como yo las hago” (I know how I like them and that's how I make them)? The self-assertiveness in this comment must not be dismissed just because Alma is standing over a hot stove. Alma and my Aunt Esperanza, nonacademic women, are working within and against social and cultural structures of power to rearticulate their subjectivity by adding their own chiste to the meaning and function of their cooking. My sister and my aunt as cook-writers are, like most writers as cooks, working in processes of re-visioning.

Adrienne Rich foregrounds the importance embedded in the act of re-visioning for women writers. “Women writers, even when they are supposed to be addressing women, write for men; or at least they write with the haunting sense of being heard by men, and certainly with the inescapable knowledge of having already been defined in men's words. That is why 're-vision'... is for women 'an act of survival'” (qtd. in Behar and Gordon 6). Re-vision of dominant ideologies—of social, of political, and of cultural practices—is an act of survival for all women. La Chrise's poetic metonymy—“Soy la comida en la mesa” (I'm the food on the table)—is a re-vision that works against the social construction of a woman's place. While it acknowledges the existence of the kitchen as the woman's place, this place does not necessarily constrain a woman's agency, as her poem illustrates—and as comments in the charlas culinarias demonstrate.

La Chrise's third culinary metonymy, “sólo la que calienta los TV dinners,” also works within and against dominant, conceived notions of a woman's place. The representations of self, of a woman's identity, embedded in the reference “TV dinners” offer multiple levels of a woman's connection to the fabric of social and cultural life. One of these levels challenges the myth of a woman's place by demystifying the patriarchal order of the nuclear family previously adhered to within this poem. Simply heating TV dinners is not the traditional and cultural image of the wife-mother nurturor. Another challenge to the idea of the nuclear family is that if heating TV dinners is an act of necessity, the woman doing this action might be the breadwinner. Not the man. “TV dinners” can also refer to the woman who does not like to cook (as in my sister's case). Furthermore, heating TV dinners, can be a discursive device to critique the potential essentialization of traditional and cultural practices by embracing modernization and its practicalities.

The significance of this critique is that it challenges the notion that cultural practices once conceived as authentic must not change. If modifications have occurred in the process of a cultural practice, a suspicion of its validity, of its credibility, is often raised. What I mean by cultural authenticity is that culture often is seen as whole and coherent, which also means it must be unchangeable and fixed (Hall 233). The danger of this notion is that it limits the variations of narrative composition found in the process of cooking. Culture is not found within unchanging paradigms. Angela McRobbie defines culture as “how people see themselves, not as class subjects, not as psychoanalytical subjects, not as subjects of ideology, not as textual subjects, but as active agents whose sense of self is projected onto and expressed in an expansive range of cultural practices, including text, [and] images” (38). Here McRobbie illustrates why cultural practices are always in transition or crossing borders. The writers as cooks and the cooks as writers—active agents—are constantly refashioning and re-creating their recipes as they negotiate and articulate their sense of self according to the changes surrounding their lives.

During the charlas culinarias, all the women speak of the implications of modernization and how technology can, does, and must alter cultural and traditional practices. They speak conscientiously and critically of how such modifications affect the understanding of their own social, cultural, and economic positions. In the charlas culinarias, Mexican traditions and cultural practices are spoken of as culture-in-transition. One reference to modernization, to culture-in-transition, is the use of microwaves or toaster ovens in the process of making enchiladas.

Me: “And when do you eat?”
Alma: “When everyone is done, I prepare mine. Or I try to make them fast so that there might still be one person eating who would eat with me.”
Mom: “And in the ‘micro,’ mi’ja. Maybe in the ‘micro’ could work.”
Alma: “No, where it would work very well is in those little toaster ovens.”

In this segment of our charla culinaria, both my mother and sister believe in a certain methodological process of making enchiladas to achieve a perfect
personal taste, texture, and flavor. The example of culture-in-transition taking place at this temporal moment shows how modern techniques can be incorporated into the methodology of making *enchiladas* without significantly altering for my sister and mother their own personal “perfect flavor” of *enchiladas*, without sacrificing their own stories.

My mother and sister experience culture-in-transition not only in terms of modern techniques but also through their different geo-economic and social levels. The following dialogue between my mother’s past and my sister’s present best exemplifies such difference:

*Alma:* “Sopitos, and all those things I like them but they are laborious. I’d rather buy them. That is the good thing about this country that I work, and I can buy whatever I want without the necessity of having to cook it.”

*Mom:* “That’s the best thing about this place. But over there in the countryside, from where one comes—”

*Alma:* “But the good thing is that I don’t live in the countryside, Mom.”

*Mom:* “Over there in the countryside you don’t have a choice. You have to do everything. The good thing about this place, if you don’t cook or if you don’t know, you can go and buy them. As long as you have a job. But over there in my countryside, from where I come. Either you learn, and you figure out ways of [cooking]—”

*Alma:* “Or you die of hunger.”

*Mom:* “Or you die of hunger.”

Stuart Hall says that cultural practices “are deeply contradictory,” and that “they play on contradictions” (233). I do not agree that cultural practices necessarily play on contradictions. What might seem a contradiction from an outsider’s perspective of a cultural practice, might be seen as adaptations to new circumstances from the standpoint of those actively engaged in given cultural practices, as my mother and sister’s conversation reveals.

My disagreement with Hall’s statement is articulated through my ambivalent reading of Cordelia Candelaria’s poem “Haciendo Tamales” (Rebolledo and Rivero 115). Two lines from this poem, “Trabajo de amor ‘pa enriquecer el saborcito’ (labor of love to enrich the flavor) and “she made her tamales from memory,” turn my own gaze to the warm, safe, comfortable embrace of my mother’s cooking. Whenever anyone asks my mother for a recipe, her answer always has two parts. First she says, “El secreto es hacerlo con mucho amor” (the secret is to do it with lots of love). Then from her memorized “cookbook,” she gives a recipe without ever saying how much of anything. From this familial perspective, I read “Haciendo Tamales” as a vivid cultural connection to my own life. But the air of authenticity suggested in making tamales in the following lines immediately fractures this connection:

nomas handgrown y home-raised, todo
Oregano had to be wildly grown
in brown earth ‘bajo la sombra
Tamale wrappers had to be hojas
dried from last year’s corn.19

Even though my mother alludes to a similar procedure in the making of tortillas, her daily practice during an early period of her life was not an act of conserving her heritage. For my mother, making things from scratch was an act of necessity and not of keeping a “heritage”:

In Atlisco we arrived at Aunt Dora’s house. And since she knew that I came from a small village, and she also had planted corn, she thought that I should make them tortillas. Therefore, I also had to prepare the *nixtamales* and to take it to the mill, and I had to make them tortillas. According to her, that work was easy for me. Don’t think it wasn’t a lot of work.20

My ambivalence with regard to Candelaria’s poem is that while there is a similarity between her poetic description of making tamales with lots of love and from memory and my mother’s expression of preparing a meal, there is also a great difference in terms of the reasons for preparing food from scratch. In Atlisco, making tortillas from scratch is for my mother a necessity owing to her dependent status in her Aunt Dora’s house. My mother’s comment about living in a village (el pueblo) before her relocation to Atlisco, a town, further emphasizes the concept of necessity rather than heritage. In her village or, as she calls it, her *cero* (hull), buying ready-made tortillas was not a possibility. There were none to buy. For working-class
people, doing things from scratch does not always represent an ideological, political, and cultural statement about heritage. Doing things from scratch is a process of gathering and reusing what they have access to. Another question raised by the difference between Candelaria's poem and my mother's *charla culinaria* is the issue of audience. My mother is speaking to her daughter, but to whom is the poem speaking? The mixture of Spanish language without translation gives some indication of the intended readers. Those people with a similar cultural background to the poet's would be receptive to the ironic implication that there is not a unifying, pure heritage as the four lines of the poem suggest:

\[
\text{cada sabor nuevo} \\
\text{como el calor del Westinghouse where} \\
\text{she cooked them with gas under G.E. lights—} \\
\text{bien original to the max!}\]

But is this a contradiction of cultural practice or is it really culture-in-transition? Does having no energy, no time, or cooking “under G.E. lights” compromise our heritage and make us cultureless? No. Our daily lives “are crisscrossed by border zones, pockets, and eruptions of all kinds” that transform our cultural practices (Rosaldo 207). The shifting of a culture’s traditional practices and their meaning exists because culture is not a fixed category of daily practices but daily practices always in constant dialogue within the ever-changing social body.

The changes within the social body greatly affect the implications of kitchen politics. During the *charlas culinarias* with my family, politics within the realm of racial and ethnic issues are not broached, as they are in Chiris's poem “La Loca de la Raza Cómica.” This is not to say that no political self-awareness is expressed. If we view my mother’s *charla culinaria* narrative as a continuum, her political consciousness is manifested through what Carol Hardy-Fanta defines as survival politics (46). The four basic principles of survival politics, according to Hardy-Fanta, are: (1) a class-linked concept—working class; (2) struggles outside political institutions; (3) individual, personal efforts that go on behind the scenes; (4) an informal, private, and individualistic process. None of these principles is difficult to illustrate within my mother’s narrative of cooking practices. For my mother, her politics of survival take her from a dutiful, submissive wife to an independent and economically self-sufficient woman.

The first stage of her survival politics is in effect as she carves out a public space from within the privacy of her home.

[Over there in Aguililla] when I already had many small children, you know that one needs to buy them clothes, underwear. I began to put my little selling stand right out there at the door of the house. I would make *morisqueta*: white rice and meat with chile. What else would I sell? *Testadas...* I would make *pozole.*

The “issue” in her political agenda, the selling of her food, is the literal necessity of dressing her many small children. Her *puestecito*, the table she located outside her door, does not constitute a conventional “political institution.” The political struggle within this site represents an economic one. Also my mother’s individual initiative, though not behind the scenes, is provoked by what she considers her only resources.

**Me:** “But why did it occur to you to sell food?”

**Mom:** “I thought of selling things there in the house, well, because I wanted to make some money; I wanted to have some money to buy something for my small children. And the only way was that I started selling right there at the door. Yes, I had customers. I don’t know, supposedly, they liked my cooking. I didn’t think my cooking was that good, but they liked it. Yes, yes, I would make a profit, because from the money I would make, I would buy more groceries, and I would still have money to buy little things for my small children, food, or clothes.”

This informal economic practice of selling food begins to represent for my mother independence and assertiveness. After the inauguration of her food-economic practice, her husband wants to move to another city. To such request, her initial response is

After I already had my selling stand in Aguililla, [the father of my children wanted us to move to Apatzingán. I would tell him that he should go, because from the selling of my food I was making enough money to feed the children. He still took me with him. But
later, when we were already in Apatzingán, your own father also started asking the workmen if they wanted to *asistirse* in a house to get their meals. Therefore, he started bringing me people from his work. And they gave me, I think, ten pesos daily for the meal. But I think that there were six or seven, so I would get seventy pesos. But with twenty, I would prepare the food. I would feed them, and I would still have fifty pesos left. And what is more, the food I would prepare was also enough to feed my children.  

At this point in my mother’s life, home becomes the social body where her motherhood, wifehood, and businessex are all simultaneously negotiated through her cooking practices. At this level of quotidian practice, of the mundane, my mother’s actions illustrate how kitchen politics yield for her a level of self-esteem and self-belief about her capability of earning a living for herself and her children independent of her marriage to a “macho mexicano.” My mother’s own definition of a “macho mexicano” is “mujer ego, borracho y pegalón” (womanizer, drunken and abusive).

**The Academic Cook**

The language of everyday cooking is for me an attempt to articulate my own academic and intellectual quest. How can I build a bridge that connects the practice and language of nonacademic women with the practice and language of academic women? My interest is not to speak as a representative of nonacademic Chicana (Mexicana) women vis-à-vis an act of translation. My Catholic, Mexican guilt does not allow me to forget that I am the one sitting in front of a computer analyzing various culinary practices of cooks as writers and culinary images of writers as cooks while some women like my mother and sister are cleaning house or, in my aunt’s case, running a boutique, coming home exhausted to face familial demands. What I am committed to is going through a process of reseasoning my own academic training so that I will not conceptualize and frame my subject of research within hierarchical and binary paradigms.

It is a privilege, a luxury, especially for someone who comes from a working-class background, to sit for endless hours writing and reading. But is it a better life choice or just a different one? My aunt, who acknowledges my privileged position during our *charla culinaria* when she asks me, “Y ¿qué tal, como la hice de contestadora?” (So how about it, how am I as an answerer?), also acknowledges the similarities in our lives toward the end of our *charla*. These are the words of a nonacademic, working-class Mexican theoretician, Esperanza Vélez:

Aprendes con la vida. Como has aprendido tú, por necesidad. Son necesidades que tienes que llenar. Si tú para hacer una carrera tienes que estudiar, ¿verdad? Tienes que sacrificar y tienes que echarse ganas. Y uno para ser ama de casa... tiene que aprender todas las labores del hogar. Entonces es una necesidad que tú adquieres. Es una necesidad que sepa aprender a comprar verduras, que sepa aprender a guisar. Son necesidades cotidianas. Son necesidades que la vida te exige y que tienes que aprender para cumplir con tus obligaciones. Porque en la vida tenemos obligaciones todos. Así lo veo yo, desde ese punto.

I have presented a metaphorical portrait of the process of cooking in order to define an alternative form of expression and so avoid silencing the voices of women who speak, share, and assert themselves in ways other than writing. The language of cooking yields various narratives of self-representation. As we listen to this language, we must ask ourselves these questions: What do women say in their kitchen talk, not so much about their food per se, but about their relation to the social body as it is articulated through their cooking practices? How do these relations frame their awareness of their familial, social, cultural, and political identities? The language of everyday cooking requires that we academics develop an acute hearing ability to understand how women using this language narrate their own life stories.

With this academic research on culinary discourses, I am also fulfilling—in theory if not in practice—my childhood dream of one day becoming a professional chef. My interest in kitchens and cooking is not recent. I am a woman of the kitchen—the kitchens of the restaurants where my mother worked when I was a child were my playgrounds. I have been cooking since I was five. In high school I read every single cookbook in the library. At seventeen I was an apprentice in my town’s most famous gourmet restaurant. Now to ease the pace of academic life, I read *Bon Appétit*.
The stories shared in the charlas culinarias are the stories I grew up hearing. The cooks—as writers’ strength, knowledge, creativity, and conviction are what allow me to conclude this chapter by saying that while I am not a chef, I am an academic literary critic with a strong passion for others’, and my own, culinary practices.

NOTES

1 “When I got married, your father’s sisters and his mother used to make really ugly tortillas. And when I saw they made some ugly tortillas, I no longer was embarrassed. I remember that I wanted to show them that I knew how to make tortillas better than them. They made really, really ugly tortillas. Uy—I would show off making my tortillas; I would put them in a little basket! Uy, my tortillas would come out so thin, puffed up so nicely! The ones I would make. I mean, yes, yes, I would beat them in making tortillas, over there. Yes, they would make some ugly, fat tortillas with holes in them.” (All translations in this work are my own.) The culinary talks were conducted in Spanish, but for the benefit of non-Spanish readers I have incorporated the translations in the main text; however, the original expressions are in the notes so that these women’s personal diaries is not lost in translation.

2 “Clases de cocina nunca tomé. Lo que pasa es que a mí me gusta guisar. A mí sí me gusta guisar. No sé la gran cosa pero dicen que tengo buen sabor. Pero yo nunca tomé clases de cocina. La verdad es que a mí me gusta hacer un platillo y que lo disfrute mi familia. Es una forma de apaciguar. O de agasajar a tu familia, ¿no? De dedicarle el tiempo en la cocina y prepararle algo sabroso y que digan, ¡Ay qué rico esto! Me gusta cocinarle algo a la gente que quiero. A mis hijos, a mis sobrinas, a mis hermanas. A mi cuñada. Me gusta cocinarles cuando veo que disfrutan y yo disfruto verlos disfrutar lo que hace de comer.”

3 “Pues no sé. Nunca me ha gustado la cocina. Me llamaba la atención andar de vaga. Cocinar nunca me llamó la atención. Hay personas que desde chiquillas tienen nociones de cocinar y otras no. Y a mí nunca me llamó la atención cocinar y hasta la fecha no me gusta. Lo hago porque tengo que. De que me guste, de que diga ‘Voy a meterme a la cocina.’ No. No me gusta. Este, no sé mucho de cocina.

4 “Si tú haces una sopa de pasta seca, tienes que hacer una sopa y a sea de verdura o una sopa de crema. Para que combine, porque no puedes hacer sopa de pasta y sopa de pasta, ¿no? O sea, sopa aguada y sopa seca de pasta las dos. Son cosas que vas aprendiendo o través de la vida, ¿no?”

5 Paule Marshall describes the function of women’s kitchen talk that took place in her childhood home: “The talk that filled the kitchen those afternoons was highly functional. It served as therapy, the cheapest kind available to my mother and her friends ... It restored them to a sense of themselves and reaffirmed their self-worth ... But more than therapy, the freewheeling, wide-ranging, exuberant talk functioned as an outlet for the tremendous creative energy they possessed.”

6 “Lo importante no es determinar si las mujeres debemos escribir con una estructura abierta o con una estructura cerrada, con un lenguaje poético o con un lenguaje obsceno, con la cabeza o con el corazón. Lo importante es aplicar esa lección fundamental que aprendimos de nuestras madres, las primeras, después de todo, en enseñarnos a bregar con fuego: el secreto de la escritura, como el de la buena cocina, no tiene nada que ver con el sexo, sino con la sabiduría con la que se combinan los ingredientes.”

7 “I’m as simple as bread pudding ... I’m the meal on the table when they come / from work / I’m the one who heats TV dinners / I’m tamales at Christmas time / I’m Coconut.”

8 The connection of la capinata and the body is established by the fact that la capinata is a dish made primarily of bread. The signifier of bread as the body in theological terms is that Jesus Christ says, “I am the bread of life ... This is the living bread ... the bread that I will give is my flesh, which I will give for the world” (John 6:48).

9 Louis Marin argues that the theoretical possibility for such connection is through the praxis of trans-significance, the process of a metaphor’s becoming a metamorphosis. Martin also argues that with no “desire to be provocative, one might say that every culinary sign is eucharistic in some sense and to some extent; or, to pursue this vein of thought one step further, one might say that all cookery involves a theological, ideological, political, and economic operation by the means of which a nonsignified edible food stuff is transformed into a sign/body that is eaten.”
women, wives, who are physically, emotionally, or sexually abused are, nonetheless, sometimes viewed as "misionistas."

Yo: "¿Y a qué horas comes tú?"

Abna: "Cuando terminan todos, preparo las mí; o tarto rápido para que quede una de las personas a comer contigo—"

Maná: "Y en el micro, miña. A lo mejor en el micro, sí."

Abna: "No, donde funcionaría muy bien es en los hornitos chiquitos."

Abna: "Sopitos y todas esas cosas, me gustan pero son laboriosas, Yo mejor las compreo. O sea, es lo bueno de este país que trabajo y me puedo comprar lo que yo quiero sin necesidad de ponerme a cocinarlo. Si no, lo cocino o no comes."

Maná: "Eso es lo mejor de aquí. Pero allá en el cerro de donde uno viene—"

Abna: "Pero lo bueno es que yo no me crié en el cerro 'ama.'"

Maná: "Allá en el cerro tienes que a fuerzas hacer las cosas. Lo bueno de aquí, si no cocinas o si no sabes, vas y compras. No más con que tengas trabajo. Pero allá en mi cerro, de allá de donde yo vengo, o te enseñas y le buscas la forma de hacerle—"

Abna: "O te mueres de hambre."

Maná: "O te mueres de hambre. . . ."

"only handgrown and home-raised, everything, / beneath the shade / . . .

leaves."

"En Atlisco llegamos a la casa de la tía Dora. Y como sabía que venía del pueblo y ella también tenía maíz, se le ocurrió que me pusiera a hacerles tortillas. Así que también me puse a poner el mictamal y a llevarlo al molino y a echarles tortillas. Según ella eso era fácil para mí. No te creas que era tan poquito quihacer."

Se ve Tawadro; books. Even though their explanation of gathering and reusing material available in the homestie of women (particularly poor women) focuses on the source of material for the creation of art and the inscriptions of their lives into their art, gathering and reusing is also a practice of simple necessity and survival.

"each new flavor / from the heat of the Westinghouse . . . / really original to the max."

"[Allá en Aguíllula] cuando ya tenía muchos chiquillos, ya cuando tenía muchas criaturas, tú sabes que se necesita para comprarles ropita, calzoncitos, y
empecé yo a sacar mi puestecito, ahí en la puerta de la casa. Hacía que morisqueta, arroz blanco y carne con chile. ¿Qué otra cosa vendí yo? Tostadas... hacía pozole.

24 Yo: “¿Por qué se te ocurrió vender comida?”

Maña: “Se me ocurrió vender cosas ahí en la casa, pos, porque quería ganar un cinco, quería tener dinero para comprar más a mis chiquillos. Y de la única manera era eso. Empezar a vender ahí en la puerta. Sí tenía cliente, no sé, que les gustaba mi sabor. Malaya pa’ el sabor que haya tenido yo, pero sí les gustaba. Sí, pues sí le sacaba dinero de ganancia porque como quiera, ya de allí volví a surtir y me quedaba para comprar más cosas a los chiquillos, comida o ropita.”

25 “Después de que yo ya tenía mi vivienda en Aguillla, [el] papá de mis hijos me quería que nos fuéramos a Apatzingán. Le decía yo que se fuera que el caballo que de años yo ya estaba dedicado para darles a comer a los niños. Y como quería mucho llevar. Pero luego cuando ya nos fuimos a Apatzingán, también tu mismo papá empezó a decirles en el trabajo y que si querían —allí les dicen ‘asistir’ en una casa para que les den la alimentación.” Así que yo empezé a llevar gente de los trabajadores. Y meaban creo que diez pesos por día pa’ la comida. Pero creo que eran seis o siete, así como son sucka pesos, pero yo con veinte hacía la comida. Les daba de comer y me quedaban cincuenta y es más, la comida alcanzaba pa’ mis hijos también.

26 “Life teaches you. Like you have to learn due to necessity. These are necessities that you must fulfill. For you, in order to have a career you have to study, right? You have to sacrifice yourself, and you have to put energy into your career. For us, to be a housewife... we have learned to do all the household tasks. Therefore, it is a necessity that you acquire. It is a necessity for you to learn how to buy vegetables, which you learn to know how to cook. These are quotidian necessities. These are necessities that life demands of you... You must learn to fulfill your obligations. Because in life, obligations we all have. This is how I see it, from this point of view.”

WORKS CITED


Women's search for personal identities has probably never been pursued so actively in the United States as during the past thirty years of the women's movement. At the same time, Alex Haley's *Roots* was inspiring many people to take pride in their ancestral cultures and genetic origins. According to Donna Gabaccia, food became an important part of an effort initiated by various ethnicities to reclaim a history of culture, community, and identity that had been lost through several generations of assimilation into the mainstream. This chapter explores how contemporary women of diverse cultures have used writing about foodways to reclaim a female identity within a specific ethnic heritage. Because recipes, like culture, are handed down from generation to generation by oral history, culinary literature conveys a sense of how food sharing creates solidarity but also allows women to speak across cultures. As public women, the Native American and Chicana writers covered in this chapter are committed to the struggle for social justice and personal recovery. But at the same time, they are submerged in the mundane, and so invest daily life with the significance typically accorded to official history. The activity of almost all underscores a public call for legitimation of a space traditionally associated with and devalued as female. Their critical reconsideration of hierarchical oppositions involves reappropriating household metaphors to revalorize them for serious critical purposes. Nevertheless, while a woman might look to her foremother's labor of feeding a family as skilled practice, she often finds that the kitchen has been the locus of