

COMINO CHRONICLES: A Tale of Tejana Migration

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Comino, or cumin in English, al-kamoun in Arabic, cuminum in Latin, the pungent, aromatic spice that has titillated the palate of humankind since at least 3,500 B.C., is an essential ingredient in Tejana kitchens and Tejana cooking. The dried little comino seed ground powder-fine in the molcajete, is what gives food, especially picadillo, arroz, fideo, salsas, and myriad other dishes, a distinctive flavor—that sweet, earthy saborcito—of what is called comida Tejana, Tex-Mex, comida casera, or simply what my mother cooked.

Comino, historical studies and cookbooks tell us, is the seed of a small, herbaceous plant belonging to the parsley family, which is indigenous to Upper Egypt but from earliest times was also cultivated in Arabia, India, China, and the Mediterranean basin. Readily used in Middle Eastern, Indian, North African, southern Spanish, northern Mexican, and many Latin American cuisines, comino's journey to the Americas is the story of the political and commercial economy in spices and other luxury items that drove Europe's search for a route to India, and ultimately, to Spain's colonization of the Americas, including Tejas.

When Indo-mestiza and Afro-mestiza women began migrating to Tejas in the eighteenth century, they brought cominos with them. Whether they came with the colonizing military forces of soldier-settler families from Nuevo León and Coahuila (1718), crossed oceans in the Canary Islander migration to San Antonio and Nuevo Orleans (1731), or migrated overland with the José de Escandón Expedition to colonize Nuevo Santander on the banks of the Rio Grande (1748-1755),

they carried cominos. Women would have carefully packed handfuls of dried comino seeds in bolsitas de gamusa, bolsitas de cuero, or perhaps just tightly wrapped in a piece of cloth, enough of a supply for cooking and for medicine, as well as to plant in spring gardens, next to the rancho homestead, or just outside the presidio walls. This first group of colonizing women planted their children's ombligos and the cominos, indeed, planted our roots, deep in the land of the Tejas (Manzanet 1899).

Elena Zamora O'Shea, in her 1935 novel, *El Mesquite*, in which an ancient mesquite tree narrates the history of her García ancestors, describes the gardens her antepasados, who migrated with Escandón, first planted in Tejas. "The ranchos were far apart, sometimes twenty and thirty miles between settlements. Each settlement had a well dug for its water supply, and had a pila (stone and mortar tank), for reservoir, and another one for bathing. Near these tanks were small truck gardens...which provided the few fresh vegetables and fruits that were consumed." The narrative details that they planted "cilantro, manzanilla, oregano, perejil, anis, and cominos, and a small amount of black pepper...Some of these vegetables are still grown by our people, who far from medical centers, depend on themselves for medical aid" (O'Shea 2000, 51).

El Mesquite alludes to what Jack Turner, in *Spice: The History of a Temptation*, calls "the invisible cargo" inhered in comino and other spices. Turner states that spices are imbued with "a history of meaning" and reads them as "a bulging bag of associations, myth, and fantasy." He continues that in addition to cooking, "Spices were put to such diverse purposes as summoning gods and dispelling demons, driving off illness or warding against pestilence, and rekindling waning desires" (Turner 2004, xiv, xvi). For example, folkloric wisdom of the middle ages held that a happy life awaited the bride and groom who carried cumin seeds

throughout their wedding ceremony. In herbal medicine, which my partera/curandera maternal grandmother practiced for forty years in Crystal City, comino was used as a stimulant and an anti-inflammatory agent. “A warming herb,” Turner continues, “is believed to help the metabolic process and to also help with indigestion and other digestive ailments, such as morning sickness, diarrhea, and flatulence. It is also great as a tea to help with the common cold” (see also websites listed in references).

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This essay, which is part of a larger study, uses comino as an organizing principle and connective tissue to chronicle the story of twentieth-century Tejana migration from the Lower Rio Grande Valley of South Texas to the Yakama Valley of Washington state in the post-World War II era, 1945-1965—de valle en valle. While migration, most specifically labor migration, is a pivotal constituent of Tejana/o history, and in Chicana/o history more broadly, for this project I sought to identify a specifically female-gendered organizing principle, beyond the female worker’s body, with which to frame my examination of twentieth-century Tejana migration to Eastern Washington.

I have thought a lot about the movement of rural Tejanas across vast spaces and temporalities, about the fact that for many, this migration from valle to valle was an annual circuit. They left the Rio Grande Valley in mid-March and returned to their boarded-up homes in mid-September. I have especially thought about the daunting reality that Tejanas faced of packing the entire household for a family of five children and two adults into a couple of boxes to be gone for six months at a time, or longer. What do you take? How do you choose? What do you cook with? What do you cook on?

In thinking through questions about Tejana migration and comino as a connective tissue, I sought a gender-centered theoretical framework that accorded with, but went beyond concepts of spatiality, labor, and the female body, especially the farmworking Tejana body, that I was already deploying in my work. Upon reading Meredith Abarca's *Voices in the Kitchen Space* (2006), I was struck by her argument that "everyday cooking is a language" and her use of chilaquiles as a metaphor for how working-class women speak with the seasoning of their food. Los chilaquiles, Abarca states, "blur the distinction between theory and action, between the field of knowledge in the library or laboratory and the field of knowledge in an ordinary home kitchen" (Abarca 2006, 3). My thinking about Tejanas, migration, and food, additionally draws on Emma Pérez' concepts of sitio y lengua, diasporic subjectivities, and the maneuvering of paradigms, which Abarca also references, as does Norma Cantú in her work on Tejanidades. With these readings, I also argue that Tejana migration—encompassing the creation and recreation of Tejana domestic and cultural space, often under conditions of extreme duress—is not only a field of history, but also a field of epistemology (Pérez 127). In my larger study, comino/cumin/al-kamoun is a thread with which I connect Tejana-Chicana history to the Arab, Iberian, Jewish, and African women of our medieval and colonial past. Here is the tie that binds the Tejana diaspora, Tejas, and Tejanidades to the Pacific Northwest during the post-World War II era.

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Al Norte

"Ándale, trépatate, no tengas miedo," my mother said, urging me to hop onto the back of the flatbed truck where my brother Jorge was perched, ready to pull four-year-old me into the troca enlonada that would take us al norte, to los trabajos. "Ándale, súbete," she urged.

En esos años, right after the War, a vast army of workers, Tejano families, men, women, and children, whom contratistas and agricultural enterprises recruited with promises of work, migrated from Tejas to the Pacific Northwest. Unlike the braceros, Mexican nationals recruited to the Northwest under bilateral agreements between the U.S. and Mexican governments, we were U.S. citizens. In many cases, we were the descendants of families who colonized Tejas in the eighteenth century; in others, we were the U.S.-born children and grandchildren of those who came to Tejas before or during the Mexican Revolution (Castañeda 1990, 2001; Gamboa 2000). Our migration was an internal U.S. labor circuit; sometimes within Texas itself, picking cotton, acelga, and other crops; sometimes following the migrant cycle, from Tejas to the Pacific Northwest and back again.

We migrated on the back of flatbed trucks—trocas enlonadas—with twenty-five or more people to a truck, or en carros particulares, pickup trucks, in any vehicle that would carry us. We migrated with family, sometimes with friends, sometimes with strangers. We came from rural towns strung across South Tejas, *pueblos arrumbados, que dios y la historia han olvidado*, my mother, Doña Irene, would sometimes say. *Donna, Mercedes, Edinburg, Kingsville, Mission, Raymondville, Harlingen, McAllen, Pharr, Elsa, Roma, Weslaco, La Grulla*. Pueblos of the Winter Garden area—*Crystal, Eagle Pass, Uvalde, Carrizo Springs, Cotulla*. Pueblos of no work, pueblos of constant migration. Pueblos, on the northern bank of the Rio Grande, our touchstone, our history, that shaped and formed our Tejanidad.

The stories of Tejas, of these pueblos that were our homeland, were the stories to which we woke every day. Stories recounted time and again at bautismos, bodas, velorios, rosaries, baseball games, on the trucks we rode to and from Tejas. Stories the adults told while working in the fields, up and down the rows; stories about the pueblos and land that we lost, land from which families were displaced, and the

pueblos where our great-grandparents went from landowners to landless workers; stories we didn't believe, "apoco our family had land that is now part of the King ranch. 'N'ombre, papá está loco,' what does he mean, we had land. . . ." Pueblos donde los rinches arrastraron con los Mexicanos; where grandparents, fleeing the Mexican Revolution, settled. Land where our parents were born, where the bones of our ancestors fertilize the soil, where our ombligo is buried. Pueblos of our yearning, where we belonged, where we were rooted, where we not only longed to return, but fully believed we would. And certainly Tejanas and families who worked the migrant cycle did return annually to the pueblos during wintertime seasons of no work en el valle de los Yakama. When they returned the following March they updated the stories, brought new ones, and they brought comestibles, including cominos, we could not get in the cold northwest.

Wherever they migrated, Tejanas took comino seeds with them. Cominos were one of the elements with which they remembered and created not only Tejana cuisine, but a Tejana cultural universe. They did so under conditions of duress, as they made homes, cooked, and did laundry in tent camps, stables, chicken coops, and labor camps while working en los files, the hop yards, row and orchard crops of the Yakama Valley.

The labor camps we lived in, the Golding Hop Farm in Toppenish, in my case, were often mirror images of the rural pueblos of South Texas. With few exceptions, ninety-plus percent of the seventy-five families who lived in the camp were from those pueblos. We breathed, ate, prayed, lived, socialized, sang, danced, and worked Tejano lives.

As in South Tejas, the family was an economic unit. Everybody worked, including children, and all of our earnings went to sustain the family: to build a casita

in Tejas, to pay for the ranchito we were buying in Tejas, to send home to grandparents in Tejas. We lived our lives in Spanish. Spanish was the language of our homes, our work, our play. Though U.S. citizens, our parents spoke broken English at best—the product of Jim Crow and segregated Mexican schools in Tejas.

Most families did not own cars and could not attend church on Sundays, so the Catholic church sent a missionary priest. We had mass and all sacraments, including weddings and bautismos, in the camp; and when there was no priest, Doña Irene, Doña Fina, y Doña Chelo led rosaries every night of the week, as well as novenas for vecinas/os recently deceased. The women also prepared the bodies for burial, or rather, for taking to the funeraria as we could not send our dead away without preparation and a velorio in the camp.

For the velorio, the comadres prepared the traditional guisos, mole, arroz, frijoles y tortillas. Also, we were in Washington, where Tejana resourcefulness meant creating, recreating, and transforming whatever was at hand. Consequently, depending on the season, our velorios included freshly caught or last winter's canned Columbia River salmon, a staple of Pacific Northwest Indian peoples, made into albóndigas simmered in a comino-laden salsita de tomate!

From Tejas to Washington, comino was, and still is, a Tejana staple. And every March, as the trocas enlonadas rolled into the camp, I would hear my mother's excited call, "Ya llegaron las Martínez!!! Vienen de McAllen. Anda corre, a ver si trajieron los cominos que les encargué."

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