

Salpicando La Salsa and Spicing Up the Text:  
Power and Consumption in Latina Food Culture

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Latinas have always lived in the kitchen. Like all women, we have been expected to nourish our families, our men, and our heritage above ourselves through our labors. In "A Long Line of Vendidas" (1983), Chicana writer Cherríe Moraga remembers being forced to wait upon not only her father, but also her brother and his friends. She also recalls being chastised by her mother for feeling that such "slavery" was unfair because:

[My mother] had waited on her brothers and their friends . . . They'd come in from work or a day's drinking. And las mujeres, often just in from the fields themselves, would already be in the kitchen making tortillas, warming frijoles or pigs feet, albóndigas soup, or what-have-you. And the men would get a clean white tablecloth and a spread of food laid out before their eyes and not a word of resentment from the women (91).

Moraga discusses how cooking was a form of sex-play for her mother and aunts; in the role of cooks and servers, they could make themselves sexually available if only for flirtation. Thus, Moraga's mother remembers this service as an expression of true female power. In another vision, Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) sees the kitchen table as a site of servitude but also of female bonding and creativity. She encourages women of color to "Forget the room of one's own—write in the kitchen" (170), thereby recognizing not only the primacy of domestic work for most Latinas but also the necessity of including the domestic in one's writing. While Latina critic Debra A. Castillo writes in her book, *Talking Back: Toward a Latin American Feminist Literary Criticism* (1992), that although many Latinas communicate through the kitchen to see the recipe as an example of a utopian discourse amongst women of all classes, races, nationalities, sexualities, etc. as

well as a possible foundation of female community as some Anglo feminists have done, would be a mistake.<sup>(1)</sup>

An analysis of the language of consumption is particularly important in Latina fiction, I suggest, because of the new respectability that the work has recently gained. Latinas have created a new way of writing, a new way of articulating women's creativity and resistance, and a new form of politicization in this work. In this essay, I explore visions of the recipe, food, and service in Latina fiction: as legacy, as a multifaceted site of writing and creation, and as problematized politics of consumption. My purpose is to refocus the consideration of food culture in Latina texts, not to evaluate "the salpicón de la sopa" (the flavoring of the soup) (131), in Tey Diana Rebolledo's words (1995), but to examine the long-lasting effects that these texts/meals have on American culture.

In her landmark book, *Women Singing in the Snow*, Tey Diana Rebolledo (1995) analyzes the Chicana literary tradition since 1848. She recognizes the importance of food culture in Chicana identity and writes at length about "The Writers as Cook". She argues that not only have Chicanas created a new narrative tradition by this move, but also they have carved out a new vision of women's relationship to food and sex, and have used the kitchen to solidify their very identities as women of color. She argues this in part by exploring how recipes and household remedies reflect women's domestic agency and power. She sees these as "the central icons for 'seeing' and 'knowing,' freedom and repression. Meaning and authority are incarnated in the 'recipes' and their cultural context" (130)

Therefore, it is through this agency that Latinas can define themselves, their individual subjectivity, and connect to their community traditions simultaneously (Rebolledo, 1995). Furthermore, Rebolledo states that these elements necessarily illuminate how these writers see food preparation and its contexts as a metaphor for the covert and non-threatening introduction of political struggle. Although she does mention the negative consequences of woman as cook—insistence on labor, loss of time for other activities—she ultimately feels that "the subject, the cook, fabulate(s) herself within the collective identity of Chicanas and the processes of women's work" (143-144).

While I find all of Rebolledo's points valid and pertinent to understanding Chicana writing, I feel that she does not adequately represent political change through the inclusion of the kitchen metaphors and/or recipes that would make this material truly and solely celebratory. I find more pitfalls in the continued insistence on the Latina as cook, text as feast because of the ease of sublimating Latinas to stereotyped domestics. I would also like to focus more on how a range of these texts actually re-inscribe women's subordination rather than articulating women's agency, freedom, or power. While certainly critics should recognize the value of these new forms and statements, I am wary that the morsels might be too tasty and so consumed heartily only to be forgotten when the café con leche arrives. Therefore, I argue that we must examine the range of different visions of Latina recipes and develop in more detail the potentially transformative political power they could have.

#### Latina Leftovers

I don't think that the legacy of Latinas to the kitchen can be understated; whether it be from personal (or fictional) testimonies such as those already described from Moraga and her mother, or from writers such as Sandra Cisneros' (1985) in The House on Mango Street, wherein "Alicia Who Sees Mice" is forced to serve her family in the kitchen because "a woman's place is sleeping so she can wake up early with the tortilla star...Alicia, whose mama died, is sorry there is no one older to rise and make the lunchbox tortillas" (32). These accounts are first and foremost complaints about male oppression and/or female subservience. Indeed, Ramón Saldivar (1990) not only discusses job segregation and women's work in the tortilla factories (an institutional extension of Alicia's predicament), but he articulates how the control of women's labor is used to continue the dominance of men over women even after women may enter the workplace. He writes that "the concept of family [and gender roles] becomes a way that men socialize women to defer to them" and, in Chicano communities, "the ideology of traditional roles retains a powerful influence and source of conflict. Economic conditions and racism have thus combined to create a culturally specific version of family ideology"

(22). These visions of Latina domestic duties provide a chilling alternative to that of cook as knower and doer. The legacy of generations of Latinas as cooks and domestics, as a kind of heritage that supports cultural traditions to their own detriment, must not be forgotten in the charm of a whimsical or savory slice of fiction.

Denise Chávez's novel, Face of an Angel (1994), includes the full gamut of the visions of Latina as server. She includes the recognition of the legacy of subservience, women's creative revisions of these limitations, and potential change. The main character, Soveida, comes to terms with her troubled family's past through, and sometimes in spite of, her work as a waitress/philosopher.

Her entry into a life of service was preordained from the beginning of her life. She first envisions her life as service to God as a nun through the encouragement of her grandmother, Mamá Lupita. It seems to be predestined as Mamá says, "You are going to be a nun someday, one day, may I live to see it, and if I don't, you'll never rest until it's done or you're done or I'm done. One day or another. One time or another" (58). Soveida would rather be a saint than a nun, that is until she "saw Stevie Roybal and fell in love" (60).

Although Chávez continues to complicate the notions of service within the novel, she also clearly connects both women's servitude to God and to the roles that are its consequence as primarily destructive and limiting. For example, she parodies the "saint/whore" dichotomy for women through representations of Soveida and her cousin Mara. Soveida, as already discussed, saw herself fitting into the saintly role, which clearly was embraced by her family. On the other hand, Mara fully embraced women's freedom and independence, which is traditionally connected to the "whore" role. Soveida describes her as: "Goddess. Troublemaker. Distracter. Destroyer. The woman all women know and fear. The other half of the solid self. Dream sister" (72).<sup>12</sup> Mara seems to have inherited her role from her mother who was also called a "whore" by her family and, because Mara is being molested by her uncle (Soveida's father), she also must secretly carry the family's shame. It's a natural progression then, that she should run away, get married, and become pregnant while still in high school. However, as Mara later says, "Oh hell, all I ever wanted to do was to get away" (100). In her own eyes, her downfall came

because she was being trained for service; she clarifies this service to Soveida by shouting "This, Miss-Bride-of-Christ-Suffering-assed-little-Virgin," Mara said, patting her large belly (100). This vision of women's service as multi-faceted—as reflected in Catholicism, gender roles, marriage, pregnancy—and also as strictly negative, serves to color Soveida's own real entry into service as a waitress at the El Farol Mexican Restaurant.

Just as Mamá Lupita saw Soveida being put into service by becoming a nun, Soveida falls into a summer job at El Farol, and Milia, the head waitress, sees her being destined to be put into service as a waitress. Even though Soveida protests that she is only taking the job as a bus girl for the summer, Milia confidently states, "Someday you'll be a good waitress, and then a wonderful waitress, and then very soon you'll be the headwaitress, training other waitresses, and then best of all waitresses in Agua Oscura" (108) because, she states very simply, "The food gets you" (109). Now, clearly Chavez differentiates the notion of service, so that Mara's "service" does not equate to Soveida's; still she draws enough parallels so that early in the novel, women's servitude in all forms is presented as detrimental.

In Ana Castillo's short story, Crawfish Love (1996), the narrator draws clear class distinction between herself, "a professional," and Catalina her waitress at Mares Mazatlan. She even uses Catalina as a way to impress her non-Mexican colleagues as she energetically says hello, calls her by name, translates her Spanish and agrees that she was a "fine little waitress" (133). She treats Catalina negatively because Catalina serves her. It is only after Catalina treats her rudely when she's alone, that she recognizes how cruel she's been. She then acknowledges her attraction to Catalina through her blushes and brings herself "down" to an equal level by responding to Catalina's mistake of splashing chile sauce on her blouse with a "What the hell!" and by asking her, "you like to play pool?" (134). Clearly Castillo tackles class prejudice within communities and uses food as a bridge for potential "Craw-fish Love" between women. But because the story is very short and ends with the narrator asking the question above, it is the stereotyping of Catalina by the narrator that remains with the reader. As a woman trapped in a dead-end job as a waitress she's easy to ignore, easy to forget, and easy to use.

I have no doubt it was Laura Esquivel's well-received novel, Como Agua Para Chocolate (Like Water for Chocolate) (1989), that brought well-earned notice to different visions of Latina creativity. As Rebolledo (1995) states, this best-selling novel was extraordinary in that it brought dramatic recognition of Latina domestic culture and knowledge (130). However, because of its acceptance, I believe that much of the content that re-inscribes Latina servitude and women's deference to men through constructed ideologies of family have been seen as less important than the romance of the Latina as artist and as channeler of power in the kitchen.

The main character, Tita, is also seemingly predestined to live in the kitchen because when her mother's milk dries-up, she's sent to the cook, Nacha, as an unorthodox wet-nurse who provides tea and gruel, which Tita gobbles up. Tita literally grows up in the kitchen and so "the joy of living was wrapped-up in the delights of food" (7), but this delight also means that her world "is" the kitchen. Esquivel writes that "It wasn't easy for a person whose knowledge of life was based on the kitchen to comprehend the outside world. The world was an endless expanse that began at the door between the kitchen and the rest of the house" (7).

Right away then, Tita's world is solely the domestic and private sphere of the kitchen. To me, it matters little that she loves the world and is happy there; she is still isolated and forced to work in the kitchen. Her role in the family becomes more sinister when she learns from her mother that because she's the youngest daughter, she is obligated to stay home, remain unmarried, and take care of her mother until her death. When her true love, Pedro, comes to ask Tita's mother for her hand, and after he is refused, is seemingly content to marry her older sister Rosaura instead; Tita crumbles and lives bitter, cold, empty, and in pain. Indeed, one of the servants remarks that by equating one daughter with another through marriage, she seems to be offering Pedro a choice of meals instead of daughters. And as Chenchá, the servant, remarks, "You can't just switch tacos and enchiladas like that!" (14). This metaphor of women as food continues throughout the novel as Tita, sometimes unintentionally and sometimes intentionally, puts herself and her feelings into every dish she prepares.

Clearly Tita does gain power through her "doing" and "know-

ing" about the domestic culture that has been passed down to her through Nacha. But not only does this knowledge not come from her own mother, it in fact puts her relationships with other women in jeopardy, and also constantly forces her to serve Pedro for whom she continues to pine.<sup>43</sup> She soon lives through her sister Rosaura, after the marriage to Pedro, and even usurps the role as mother to Rosaura's son as Tita is the only one who can miraculously nurse him. Clearly here she becomes nourishment and can further connect to Pedro even by deceiving Rosaura. It is difficult to argue that the novel is focused on food, recipes, and domestic culture as purely positive incarnations of women's power, freedom, or subjectivity. Women in deference to men, as sacrificial, as giver that still center stage. Indeed, when all of these roles are taken from Tita (when her nephew dies in the incompetent maternal hands of Rosaura), she goes "crazy" and lives with her mother's birds in the dovecote until a local White doctor can "save" her.

#### Creating More than Culinary or Dirty Dishes

After the above realities have been taken deeply into account, I feel that readers and critics are free to newly evaluate Latina "recipes" for all of their creative power as Rebolledo has advocated. I agree with much of her evaluation that Latina characters as cooks, and other domestic agents, can newly (but not automatically) invest their devalued states with value. In my view, it is not an interest in including passionate and competent women in the kitchen, or in placing the private space as the center of a textual universe with its own codes and languages, that makes Latina recipe-making, creative and noteworthy. Rather, it is the placement of these elements in the relevant texts that illuminate the importance of both the "leftovers" that I explored above as well as women's claims to identity and authenticity, cooking/writing as connected forms of expression and Latina re-creations of genre and form.

Gloria Anzaldúa provides some useful context for appreciating Latina creativity in her book, Tlilli, Tlapalli/ The Path of the Red and Black Ink (1987), wherein she writes of the characteristics of Native tribal art forms. She positions this material to contrast these

visions of art to those of Western Europe in order to illuminate, amongst other things, that "Ethnocentrism is the tyranny of Western aesthetics" ( 68). The issues of primary concern for fuller appreciation of Latina creativity are centered on arts' place within the community, as well as for the individual, and the relationship that is derived from that position. Anzaldúa begins her argument by claiming that in tribal culture, art is not treated as separate from the larger society, but is brought into homes and constantly honored. Not only would people make sacrifices to honor the images, but they also clean them, dress them, and offer them food. For all intents then, the "works are treated not just as objects, but also as persons" and the audience "is participant in the enactment of the work in a ritual" (68). I suggest that many Latina writers invoke this relationship, which comes as a consequence of the writing itself, with their own audiences. Thus, I see much of their creativity in the fabrication of art that lives in relation to the audience, which includes the expectation that the reader will participate in their (re)construction. This vision gives us an entry to reconsider the prominence of cooking as reciprocal ritual behavior, and its connection to form.

In American culture no day is more representative of the centrality of food than Thanksgiving. Nicholasa Mohr's novel, Rituals of Survival (1985), includes one section that is focused on a woman's preparation of Thanksgiving dinner for her family. To some extent, Amy is the stereotypical Latina welfare mother totally without power and at the mercy of the various social agencies and lawyers, because of the accidental death of her husband. She sees her life as out of control and degraded. Interestingly, it's the inaccessibility of appropriate food that seems to shut down her ability to create a "real" family for herself. She reflects on her memories of her own childhood when she lived in poverty "but there was always food" ( 84).

Along with her memories of the food comes the vision of her grandmother's stories, and their power to transform history, vision, and even the experience of poverty. She further reflects on the reciprocity necessary in her grandmother's stories: the fantasy world was true if you believed. It is with her invocation of grandmother's presence that she becomes determined to provide her children a proper celebration. She decorates the apartment with streamers, a paper

tablecloth, and place cards; she serves them rice and hard-boiled eggs that are dyed orange. The children are hesitant about the "surprise" but are impressed with the decorations. Amy soon has to spin a story that the "turkey" eggs are a special delicacy and that their taste is unbelievable. Having been sold on Amy's performance, her children are all amazed and delighted with the "luxuries" before them. Amy soon tells them stories of her grandmother's life as well as the reciprocity expected of them. She states, "you have to believe what I'm going to say is absolutely the truth. Promise?" (88). It is here that Amy herself truly believes in the transformative power of food and story; she soon becomes satisfied that this dinner is the first step towards her family's physical and emotional survival.

Amy's creations serve to not only invoke Puerto Rican culture and values, but also the food and the story work together to "feed" the children the history of Amy's own family. The power of her grandmother's stories had been lost to her once she stopped believing in them; Mohr has her reunite with her grandmother's wishes—with the expectations of the stories as more than objects. She believes in the stories again, not in the same way as her children of course, but she believes in them as agents of power and change. Thus, she recognizes the communal value of story, and even of food as fabrication, if properly tended.

Laura Esquivel's book, *Like Water for Chocolate*, takes the power of food and story, which Mohr introduces above, to the next level, bidding the reader to enter into grandmother's agreement. We are given twelve recipes, one for each month, whose content corresponds with the story. We are told how to prepare the particular recipe, also how it relates to the characters in the section and given tricks of the trade or pertinent instructions. Tita is most directly connected with this material as she is the one who does most of the cooking. We learn about her character, her feelings, and her desires from what is being prepared, how it is being prepared, or what she includes in the dish. She can also (in)directly affect those whom she feeds in ways she wishes. In these ways then, Esquivel forces the reader to participate in the structure and events of the novel through food and the preparation of food. We are constantly reminded that the writing is a construction, is a putting together of elements, and is

built on "installments", as are all of the meals. We must tend to the preparation and the consumption just as Tita and the other characters must. The readers are participants and are continually invited to be such in the very ingredients of the story. In this way, we experience this story as a communal text that brings us into the functioning of its world and into the writing process itself, for which we have some responsibility. In my view, it is for sustaining this relationship, for elevating the role of author as bound with the reader, for highlighting the connections between cooking and writing that Esquivel deserves real praise.

Judith Ortiz Cofer not only connects her writing with food and food preparation but she dramatically increases the sphere in which this relationship has influence. In her collection, *The Latin Deli* (1995), she creates an aesthetic of communal consumption as the site of cohesion, connection, and meaning that exists to strengthen all the women that appear. Indeed, from the first pages she creates a new "ars poetica" that springs from the Latin deli, which continues to evolve and expand throughout the rest of the book. This space is controlled, defined, and overseen by woman who serve many roles for those who enter. She is a listener (she enters into the bargain of participation with the storytellers), she is a mother figure, a "Patroness of Exiles", and a diviner of needs. Her merchandise is what she "cooks" and what brings people to her store. The deli includes food that is welcomed and consumed by multiple Latino groups: Puerto Rican, Cuban, and Mexican. This abundance serves to not only connect members of individual ethnicities and cultures together, but also to build links amongst different groups. The store is, in some ways, a newly created sacred place where the memories come in cans; the visions of homelands are evoked by labels on jars, and produce "[hangs] in stalks like votive offerings" (3). Ortiz Cofer then combines all the positive elements of food culture with a minimal amount of effort on the owner's part. She is not expected to spend hours in the kitchen, to give without return, or to feed without cost. Indeed, the most strenuous activity mentioned is listening and slicing meats and cheeses that are transformed into "jamon y queso" because they exist in her store. She is compensated for her work and simultaneously can provide an important service to her community. Ortiz Cofer then weaves this place, its

food, and/or its customers into the stories and poems that follow.

Much of this collection centers on the mainly Puerto Rican occupants of "El Building" in Paterson, New Jersey. They are loosely connected with varying characters and narrators telling stories about barrio women. One story, "Twist and Shout", relates to a small moment in a young girl's life. In this brief one-and-one-half page story, we tackle assimilation and separation, generational conflict, language barriers, adolescent sexuality, and the colonial power of White culture. The power of White culture resides in The Beatles' music that "inundate[s] the airwaves in our apartment building, drowning out our parents' salsa" (22). The unnamed girl is forced by her mother to stay in the apartment to watch over the cooking beans as her mother runs down to the local bodega to pick up a missing spice. The girl has no interest in hearing her mother try to explain her recipe in Spanish, so her mother leaves her alone instead of sending her on the errand. Instead of remaining in the kitchen she runs up to a friend's apartment where The Beatles' music is playing and her friends are role-playing various White roles.<sup>(4)</sup> She is attracted to the boy there, Manny, and he, as John Lennon, "sings" to her the lyrics to "Twist and Shout" as he pins her against the wall kissing her and pressing his body against hers. She is both excited by, and afraid of, this as she states, "I think this is what I came up to 5-B for but too much all at once" (23). The question here is, has she come for the sexual initiation or the acculturation? They are both clearly connected. She suddenly remembers the cooking beans; fearful of ruining the beans and also of her mother's response to her failures, she escapes back to the kitchen. The beans serve as a magnet, drawing the narrator back to her own culture. The beans do not simmer easily. They are volatile. They serve to keep her in the kitchen and in line with "appropriate" Latina sexual restrictions, but they also serve as a reminder of the importance of her own heritage and of the importance of her mother's Spanish recipes.

In a poem titled, "The Changeling" (1993), Ortiz Cofer shows us the restrictions of the kitchen for women, but also the power of women in the kitchen. Here the difference between the private and public spheres, as women's and men's spaces respectively, is brought in clear focus. This poem focuses on an attention-seeking, young girl trying to make a connection with her father. To do this she dresses

to impersonate Che Guevara and speaks of the battles in the mountains, the drinking and the victories. She is allowed to perform in this way until her mother is finished with dinner and then, "She'd order me back to the dark cubicle/that smelled of adventure, to shed/my costume, to braid my hair furiously/with blind hands and to return invisible/as myself/to the real world of her kitchen" (p. 38). This description is a painful moment for the speaker wherein she, as a female, must be controlled and dominated by her duties as a good Latina daughter. Her brother and father are both entertained by her role playing as the "legendary Che", but it is her mother's power that echoes in the poem's last line. The kitchen here is not only prison, but also a different world of creativity, authority, and performance. One is left to wonder what character impersonation her mother would respect. The shadow of this limitation reminds the reader that just because something is cooking, doesn't mean that the food is romantic or transcendent.

The most important and developed story on this subject is in the middle of the book, a story titled, "Corazón's Café." This story appears to be the counterpart to the "ars poetica" that opens the book. Here instead of just observing the unknown owner behind the counter, Corazón tells her own story, which serves to explain the importance of The Latin Deli, not only to the customers. We follow her story of falling in love with Manuel in Puerto Rico, through their ten-year marriage, and to their move to the United States and into "El Building". From the beginning their relationship is connected to the love of food and food preparation. Their lovemaking is an invitation for the smells of the garden and kitchen to enter the room and join the lovers. In this way, the couple is not only connected through sex, but through their home, their source of nourishment and ultimately to their island. Ortiz Cofer writes:

They made love with the window thrown wide open to the smells of the Island, all concentrated on [Manuel's mother's] property—her little garden of herbs with the pungent oregano overwhelming all the other aromatic plants, the cayenne peppers, the cilantro, the tasty Puerto Rican coriander, the pimientos y ajíes that went into her condiments and permeated

even the naked wood of the house (103).

Manuel speaks of all of these spices to Corazón as a form of lovemaking. Interestingly, it is Manuel who is the cook. He uses his love of food to make love to his wife, and he also serves as a way for Ortiz Cofer to revise the traditionally limited Latino/Latina roles. Ortiz Cofer writes that Corazón "laughed gently at his love of cooking, and his amazing knowledge of plants and food; not long before, she had believed these interests were strictly feminine, but his hands caressing her body were also a revelation of what a real man could be" (103). The store that they own together then becomes reminiscent of their bond and of their passion; indeed, it soon comes to represent the child that Corazón learns she can not have.

The store is Manuel's vision and not one that just relates to his own love of food or even his love for Corazón. He sees its significance as a way to teach his customers. Further on in the story, the mercado takes on even more importance to him, Corazón, and to the community around "El Building". But at the beginning, "Manuel wanted . . . to offer people more than a place to buy their groceries, he wanted to create the ideal food store where he would teach his customers how to select each fruit and vegetable, and how to cook them too. [His mother] and Corazón smiled as they discussed Manuel's missionary commitment to his dream of a store" (104). They eventually do open Corazón's Cafe, which Manuel names, and live in "El Building" that Manuel particularly likes because it has "vida" (93). Slowly, and with the help of their competition, their store becomes accepted by the neighborhood. It is then that Corazón enters "ars poetica" as everyone's "confidante" (111). The store becomes a place to remember and express one's heritage, talk about family, and purchase food to celebrate "home." It becomes a kind of community center with Corazón truly being at the heart of the neighborhood, the bond between the couple, and by extension, the bond of the community as a whole. Ortiz Cofer writes:

[H]er life had meaning—all the people who depended on her and Manuel to provide them with a taste of home. There was not a birth, funeral, or holiday celebrated in the barrio

that they were not a part of: Manuel was never happier than when he was planning the food to celebrate life and never more beautiful in Corazón's eyes than when he comforted the grieving widow or orphan with food prepared with all the care and love he had to give, and she made it possible by doing all the work needed to make his labor of love easy for him (112).

After Manuel's death, Corazón thinks that she will move away and close the store because the memories are too painful. Even the way that the merchandise is stocked reminds her of him and his mission. But, soon it is clear that the community will not allow her to even think of leaving. As she stumbles through her work, thinking of what kind of announcement to make, her customers appear and soon a kind of receiving line forms with everyone giving condolences, hugs, and especially their reasons why the place is essential to their lives. One woman must have her banana leaves because "How am I going to make pasteles in time for Thanksgiving without the leaves?" (114). A young man enters announcing the birth of his son and asks if Corazón will come to meet him and bring them traditional foods. She actively listens to yet another customer complain about Castro and his attempts to free his sons from army service or prison. She recognizes the importance the mercado has for him, it gives him a place to speak and the strength to continue living for his children. The perfect gift that her customers give in Manuel's memory is recognition of the value of the store that was his dream. The perfect gift for her is that the baby she had agreed to visit was given the name Manuel by the parents. This allows her to feel that she did succeed in giving Manuel his dream and that she did, in essence, give birth to something that was equally his—a unified community, a real family, and "corazón y alma" (111).

This new vision of the importance of food, cooking, and even markets to the community, rather than solely to individuals, gives the Latina a different role and a different sense of power and placement. Yes, food can tie you to the kitchen; yes, the kitchen can be a place of bondage; but yes, food can be shared by both men and women—and prepared by both men and women—and can be tokens of intimacy,

community, and culture, strengthening everyone involved in any part of the chain. Ortiz Cofer's ability to create a new poetic vision of the bodega as the birthplace for a dynamic, cooperative community by connecting art, emotion, culture, politics, and traditional women's spaces makes possible multiple new options for Latina creativity and power, and the opportunity for these options to have positive and lasting consequences.

Denise Chávez also creates a new poetic vision of Latina work as a guiding image, in her novel, *Face of an Angel* (1994). Like Judith Ortiz Cofer, she extends the reach of the Latina kitchen out into the community. Chávez does not describe a Latin deli, but rather a Mexican restaurant; she describes it both as a limiting space for women as well as a potentially transformative space for women and for the community as a whole. I have already explored how Soveida's life can be seen as an example of the oppressive nature of women's service. I believe that Chávez emphasizes the painful legacy of servitude by not only describing various examples of it early on in the novel but by arranging the novel in sections and chapters that are reminiscent of the religious iconography that the young Soveida served. It is not until the beginning of the last two-thirds of the book that we read of Soveida's own alternative views of service. Here, I'd like to consider how Chávez develops this initial representation into something more powerful and dynamic.

Part of the way that Chávez develops this representation is by giving Soveida a turn to represent herself and her own view of service. Perhaps with a nod to Esquivel, Chávez gives Soveida's "book" in installments that parallel her own burgeoning awareness of the importance of women's service to women. She brings the audience in as participants in the novel directly through Soveida's own words, unlike Esquivel's book, whose recipes demand the respect for all women's service and for re-envisioning that service as transformative rather than submissive. At the beginning of Soveida's "The Book of Service", there is "the service creed" wherein Soveida explains her own views of service and how she envisions it as multi-layered and complex. She claims that "I was imbued with the idea that the purpose of life was service. Service to God. Country. Men. Not necessarily in that order, but lumped together like that" (171). This statement

reveals that Soveida's concept of service is that it connects service to women. After questioning the importance of these three things, she comes to a fresh understanding about her own role in the relationship and decides that it is waitressing, not God, country or men that gives her the most fulfillment in the agreement. She feels gratified and becomes part of a community through waitressing and soon comes to feel that she has the power to dictate the rules of her service. This power is significant for how she constructs her own identity, but Chávez also emphasizes a wider impact in that Soveida's "book" rewrites the rules for Latina identity and religious service as it replaces and parodies both. Chávez insists on these connections through Soveida's memories of herself as a child serving God and serving the stereotype of Latina femininity and submission. Soveida writes:

When I was a little girl, I wore white gloves and little flat pink-and-blue hats rimmed in black net with springs of tiny white flowers. I wore petticoats, three layers of yellow net that flounced when I spun. I was cute, dressed up, and silent... My gloves kept me warm and elegant. They reminded me that I was a young lady and that someday I would become a woman. I would wear white gloves to proms and down the aisle to the man who vowed to serve me all his life...White gloves were my training for service(172).

Chávez continues to intersperse chapters of Soveida's book within her own. Soveida earlier had made the remark that the book she is writing is not only about the art of waitressing but also about life, so that all of her writings allow her words about food service to have a large impact. For example, in chapter two, she makes rather contemptuous remarks about marriage by focusing on the uselessness of waitresses wearing rings: "Especially wedding, engagement, or friendship rings. They will go down the drain sooner or later, and cause some kind of chafing" (193). She clearly is making a direct comment on the importance of men in Latina lives. Later she elevates waitressing to a pseudo religious profession:

Everyone should wait on tables. A waitress is the observer/



observed, sanctified by food. That happens on occasion. Great happiness ensues. If you are a good waitress, you forget your physical self, you become a motion, color, machine, movement itself etched on the elusive, insubstantial canvas of time (271).

She then echoes and parodies scripture as she writes of taking orders: "The last shall be first and the first shall be last. Except when serving food. The first are always first and the last are always last... The order of waitressing is a holy one" (381). Here Chávez parodies the taking of holy orders with the waitress' taking and handling orders, and in the process, Soveida can re-order the world (in more ways than one!). Therefore, food becomes the basis of all the transformative power located in Latina hands.

The origin and the practice field for Soveida's book is of course, El Farol Restaurant. Soveida's visions of service are initially transformed by the context of food, but even more importantly she transforms the context of food with her recognition that service can be ultimately self-serving. The restaurant then becomes the replacement home for customers and employees as the food draws in everyone for specific emotional or spiritual reasons. At one point Soveida states, "Try as I might to leave it, El Farol was home to me. I could no more get away from it than I could my own face" (305). Her boss, Larry, says more colorfully: "Hell, this cockroach-ridden, leaky-assed, chile-spat-tered, greasy-smelling pit of a restaurant is home" (461). The status of food as unifier, as transformative agent, is underlined when the employees all refuse to work when their free food privileges are revoked.

Most powerfully though are the connections that the women make and the options that are open to Soveida after she realizes that all her years of service and all her philosophies about service come down to serving her own needs. It is when she realizes that, that she has the strength to serve herself and that the transformations really take hold. Chávez emphasizes that as the two worlds come together, Soveida tells her mother and grandmother that she has decided to have the baby she has conceived out-of-marriage, and she also gives her book to her subordinate, Dedeá, who she has been training for

some time. In this way, the next generations of server and served begin to overlap simultaneously; however, they are defined by Soveida's own vision and not the legacy of women's self-sacrifice that she had to overcome. She gives Dedeá her book, and in it she writes of her own freedom, her own development, and her own growth. She hands the book to us, as she hands it to Dedeá, as she hands it to her own child. She has transformed service from a burden to women on every level, to a powerful bridge between women and a place where women can transform not only her "other" family at the restaurant but the whole Latino community.

The main way that Soveida transforms her family, and by extension the possibilities for Latina subjectivities, is by serving herself. She has lived with, and through, a string of men encompassing with these relationships, just about every possibility for stereotypical Latina femininity. She starts with her first lover around whom she builds her life, who leaves her for another woman; she marries an emotionally damaged and distant man of whom she tries to take care; she falls into the arms of an intellectual from whom she learns and to whom she feels inferior; and she has an affair with the intellectual's married brother for whom she feels great passion. While she learns things, loves, and grows through, and in spite of, these relationships, she continues to serve others until she gets pregnant. It is when she realizes that she wants to keep her baby—in spite of going against appropriate behavior—that she can choose her own path based on her own needs and desires.

She expects to be rejected by both her mother and her grandmother for her choice to have her baby alone as a single mother. She is surprised to find that they both embrace her and actually feel that she was wise not to pick to be with a man just to fit into some moral scheme. She finally realizes that although she's appreciated women's work all of her life, she didn't understand that women's work could serve to redefine women's lives. Her pregnancy brings her mother and grandmother together, in spite of their differences, as is reflective of her heritage of strong women:

Well, we have to keep going on, her grandmother says, there's no other way, Soveida. Ni modo. What do you think? Having

a child is work, and you're used to work. It shouldn't frighten you. And in a way, you're lucky you don't have the wrong man around. Your mother and I didn't do so good, maybe you can do better ( 450).

Grandmother Lúpita ultimately determines that everything will be all right with the women of the family as "[they are] all men here" and will take care of everything ( 467). I suggest it is this newly found realization that the women have of their own power to determine and create their world in their own image and for their own needs that introduces the possibilities that these women bring to their community.

Chávez then creates an elaborate text that focuses on the limitations and redefinitions of and possibilities for Latina service. The novel introduces food not only to invite the reader in and bring Latina service into respectable focus, but also to undermine the very cultural and religious limitations that define many Latinas' lives. Thus, the novel itself furthers Chávez's creative new vision of the complexities of Latina service and introduces with it the possibility of political change.

#### The Delicious is Political

I'd like to turn again to Tey Diana Rebolledo's vision of the power of Latina cooking as political. With the aforementioned, while exceptions taken into account, I agree that there is political weight in kitchen talk and work. I also feel that in order to do justice to this language of the recipe, of service, of work, of consumption, we must explore exactly what is at stake, and what these writers add that should last well past the last page of their offerings.

At this point, I would like to introduce the framework of my discussion. One clear place to read contemporary contextualizations of Latina words is within anthologies. A prime example is Routledge's important anthology titled, Barrios and Borderlands: Cultures of Latinas and Latinas in the United States. Before I introduce the relevant selection, it strikes me as important to bring attention to the summary comments on the back of the book itself. In my opinion, these are very

telling of the publisher's recognition of the very creativity and redefinitions that I am discussing here. For example, one of the strengths of the anthology is that it contains narratives from multiple time periods, races, ethnicities, viewpoints, genres, and disciplines without ranking or privileging them. Academic essays, interviews with refugees, mothers, chefs, and artists, major canonical literature, and lesser known writings are placed side by side with no apologies and no road maps for the reader to make simple judgments about their meaning or their importance to Latina/o Studies.

As a framing device, the publisher calls attention to these connections, and to some extent reorganizes, disconnects, and disrupts the narratives anew. One description apparently focuses on "creative" material: "Each chapter focuses on a particular theme by presenting readings from a variety of genres, including short stories, poems, essays, excerpts from novels, a play, photographs, and even a few songs and recipes" (Heyck, 1994). I suggest here that the publisher has, by way of this advertisement, reflected the traditional Anglo desire to separate and undermine Latina/o visions. The songs and recipes now seem to be exotic afterthoughts that are meant to "spice-up" the more traditional creative works in the collection. Also, it is rather odd that after this paragraph devoted to creative works, comes the more sociologically flavored interviews "whose stories enrich the anthology" (Heyck, 1994). Why is it relevant to discuss the framing mechanism in one anthology? Because I suggest, the words reflect not only the multiple subtexts presented in the anthology, and thereby the powers that arise from, and face, the Latina/o speakers within it, but also the position of Latina/o Studies in academia in general.

For a Latina vision, I enlist Gloria Anzaldúa's contrast of Tribal/ Native art to Western European art. Indeed, I believe she aptly contrasts these two visions and demonstrates the difference between the voices of the narratives "inside" the Barrios and Borderlands text with an argument for their importance, which is included in the back cover. This device then could be characterized by what Anzaldúa defines as "the aesthetic of virtuosity" in that the statements "[attempt] to manage the energies of [their] own internal system, such as conflicts, harmonies, resolutions, and balances. [They bear] the presence of qualities and internal meanings. [They are] dedicated to the valida-

tion of [themselves]" (Anzaldúa, 1987, 67-8). Anzaldúa also contrasts Western art as the art of the individual "master" to Tribal art, which is art of and for the community (68). Thus, the topics included in the anthology represent traditionally communal arts that are still represented as exotic by the volume itself.

The selection within the text that I point to as important is "Interview and Recipes" with Viviana Carballo, who is a chef and columnist in Miami. First, this short narrative is included in the section that focuses on cultural identity and sits beside works considered to be cornerstones in the field including: Anaya's *Bless Me Ultima*, an analysis of the corrido, *With a Pistol in His Hand* by Paredes, and Elizondo's *The Future is Mestizo*. However, not only does this selection focus on the importance of food generally, it also serves to problematize the very category of "Latina/o" culture, if not just cuisine. In this way, it clearly cannot be written-off as a token romantic pleasantry, which resides next to "serious" scholarship.

In some way, it is because of its very consumable nature, the recipes for Aurelia's Sofrito and Fricasé de Pollo follow, that this selection has such power. The reader expects the subject to give recipes with no exchange or contextualization necessary. We are promised to some degree a purely consumable Cuban/Caribbean Culture: if we can just cook with lime and cilantro perhaps we can "have" and understand Cuba. After Carballo connects cultural identity with the sounds and smells of the kitchen and with traditional dishes, she gives us a history of colonization. She begins this with a rather startling set of statements: "Actually, there's no such thing as Cuban cuisine; I mean, we have a few dishes, but that does not make a cuisine. We have no natives because they were decimated by the Spaniards, so our influences are mostly Spanish and African. What we have is Caribbean cooking, which I like to describe as very opportunistic because it assimilates, integrates, and adapts all that it encounters" (Heyck, 1994, 395). Not only do these statements serve to relocate what "cultural identity" means, but they also clearly connect food with a politics of expression.

If one expands Carballo's description of Cuban "cuisine" versus "cooking" to include literature, experience or nationhood, for example, the power of her statement should be clear. If the "culture" of

Cuba resided in the natives who no longer exist, then what culture remains? Is the assimilation and integration of elements at hand, whether in the frying pan, nation, or individual, equal to a knowable and definable whole or do the elements just reconfigure themselves endlessly? The other rather troubling argument that can be made here is the importance of the conqueror's food. Not only are traditional dishes lost when cooks are gone, but arguably the ability to know one's culture is also minimized or clouded, if not lost entirely. On the other hand, can food serve as a conqueror itself? Is it possible for food to uproot tradition and conquer not only the dinner table but also the imagination of the consumer? One wonders about the long-term affect that the toppling of catsup by salsa as the primary table condiment will have on the larger American landscape. In any case, the "simple" exchange of recipes can no longer be seen as an innocent or one-sided venture, there are and must be consequences for both giver and receiver. Because as chef Carballo states, "Cooking is in a class by itself as an indicator and reminder of where we come from and who we are" (Heyck, 1994, 396).

It is not only the framework of individual anthologies that lends to viewing Latina writing as comforting and exotic, but also as not too spicy, dishes to consume. The praise and introductory remarks also sometimes advertise that inside lie rather tasty morsels to sample. For example, Esquivel's (1989) novel promises to be "delicious" and a "sumptuous feast" that should be served on a platter. Chávez's (1994) novel is "a veritable feast", a "noisy banquet", "a spicy southwestern stew", and "delicious as a hot new Mexican meal". I don't argue that these descriptions are not untrue or uncomplimentary. Rather, I question the repeated insistence of focusing on Latina writing as consumable through these statements in packaging the work. I find that the recent proliferation of comments linking Latina work with food has affected its presentation in the marketplace. In fact, I suggest Ana Castillo (1996) parodies this characterization when she writes in her story, "Crawfish Love" that "this is not at all a story about food" (132) as a way to exemplify the value given such stories.

The implicit enticement value can be seen as positive in that it repositions the writer as cook, deriving one's art from that secret space of the kitchen. On the other hand, I suggest it also limits vision

does not allow what I shall call, "Llorona's Revenge", whereby the author wants the text to choke and exasperate the reader, and ultimately to revisit her day and night.<sup>(5)</sup> In this way, the author and the text do not lay down to be digested and used only for the readers' purposes. I fear that if Latina writers are only or predominantly seen as cooks, then they will suffer the fate that Debra Castillo (1992) describes. She states that focusing on women writers as writers of recipes or as cooks does revalue women's creative power, but "it also describes a giving of the self to appease another's hunger, leaving the cook weakened, starving. To have access to [writing]...she must feed others, often from her most intimate self... Her own work and her hunger, both physical and textual, go too often unrecognized" (14).

In Chávez's (1994) novel, Soveida writes of "the waitress' face" as representing what Castillo describes above. She states that "We're always doing something for someone else besides ourselves... What is the face you greet the world with then, woman? A face that pacifies children when they cry, soothes old men when they are sad, and appeases hungry people who want more than food. An all-giving, all-loving face that never lies" (437). What is described here is the totally consumable woman. If we were to take this role of waitress as completely parallel to that of author, and not consider the ways that Soveida and Chávez undermine that connection and its legacies, then we only have text as entree with author as mediator between the menu and the stomach. This role is ripe for colonization by the American public, American literary history, and the publishing establishment who are ready to package women of color.

It is my view that when Latina authors use the domestic location and its tools to undermine the cultural and gender traditions contained within the same, they have provocative and important political effects. Not only are concepts of women's language and women's space further problematized by Latina vision, Latino cultural dominations as well as patriarchy and the colonizing forces of the marketplace also are viewed newly. Therefore, Latinas can recreate American literature to include an entire lost history of creative Latina "cooks"; they can escape the trap of hegemonic categorization of exoticized and authenticated experiences, and they can bring "La Llorona" to work on their behalf as a continual reminder to American consumer

culture that their lives and works are not found on nor bound by the "ethnic foods" aisle of the supermarket. It is only with an appreciation of all of this that the reader can truly understand the creativity, challenges, and legacies that are contained within Latina recipes for fiction.

#### Endnotes

1. Castillo refers to the work of Leonardí (1989) wherein she states that a good recipe book "reproduces the social context of recipe sharing—a loose community of women that crosses the social barriers of class, race, and generation" (342). Castillo argues that this utopian vision is really only convincing because women want it so badly. Castillo (1992) states, "at last, we dream, a common ground for positing a community of women." (14). She goes on to critique the ahistorical nature of Leonardí's analysis.

2. Indeed, Soveida's family sees Mara as a bad influence on Soveida's saintliness, so that when Soveida starts to dress as a whore and appears moody, the family puts her through an exorcism as if this "saint" and "dream sister" could not naturally be joined in the same woman.

3. Not only does she "kill" Nacha through the wedding cake she makes for Rosaura, she also drives Gertrudis out to the shower with the heat of another dish, where she is carried off by a revolutionary soldier and ultimately "poisons" Rosaura and her mother with her bitterness. Indeed, she is promoted as the ranch cook after Nacha's death where she is "the last link in a chain of cooks who had been passing culinary secrets from generation to generation since ancient times" (Esquivel, 1989, 48).

4. Also of note here is that the friends whom she visits chose to use Anglicized names. They clearly represent the option of assimilation for the narrator, and she is both intrigued and repulsed by them.

5. I use this term to parallel the infamous "Montezuma's Revenge" of ancient history and gastronomy. I use La Llorona as the closest female

equivalent, although she is generally read as a menacing figure rather than an heroic one. She does, though, appropriately haunt the imagination with a particularly female force.

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