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**“A Kitchen of Her Own”: Chicana Identity  
Negotiations Framed Through Foodways  
in Carla Trujillo’s *What Night Brings***

Out of corn, water, and lime the tortillera makes  
the masa of her identity.

–Alicia Gaspar de Alba, “Tortillerismo”

Latino culture is founded upon very strict gender polarities. Any transgressions of those dichotomies (femininity connotes passivity, tenderness, gentleness, while masculinity authoritarianism, violence, egoism)<sup>1</sup> threatens the status quo of the society. Any woman who, through insubordinate behavior, defies the status quo is shamed, if not ostracized.<sup>2</sup> Thus, women who wish to disagree with Latino *machista* logic often resort to inconspicuous strategies of “civil disobedience” rather than to a blatant undermining of patriarchal authority. One of such methods is culinary negotiation with machismo culture. Thus, T. D. Rebolledo’s claim that “[i]n the cooking, we see admiration, contempt, understanding, and rebellion” will resonate with my arguments about the process of identity formation in Carla Trujillo’s *What Night Brings* (2003). The novel, set in California in 1967,<sup>3</sup> follows the struggles of Marci Cruz, an 11-year old Chicana, to contest gender constructions imposed on women such as Delia, her mother, or herself by Latino machismo and simultaneously to reconcile her queer sexual appetites. The traditionalist Latino family, which unquestioningly the Cruzes are, is more than often an unfavorable space for queer appetites. Therefore Marci prays to God to make her abusive father Eddie vanish and to turn her into a boy. Meanwhile, through the acts of

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1 Alfredo Mirandé claims that “[w]hen applied to Mexicans or Latinos, ‘macho’ remains imbued with such negative attributes as male dominance, patriarchy, authoritarianism, and spousal abuse” (66).

2 Carla Trujillo remarks that “[t]he majority of Chicanas, both lesbian and heterosexual, are taught that our sexuality must conform to certain modes of behavior. Our culture voices shame upon us if we go beyond the criteria of passivity and repression, or doubts in our virtue if we refuse” (“Chicana Lesbians” 186).

3 References to the political situation in the African state of Biafra locate the plot of the narrative in 1967. For a more detailed presentation, see Ehrhardt 108.

female agency, she attempts to gain some control over the oppressive domestic space through challenging culinary practices in her family home.

Food, as cultural production, allows us to problematize questions of gender identity and sexual orientation. Thus, Julia Ehrhardt's remark that "insights from queer studies have the potential to enrich our understandings of the interrelationships among food, gender and sexuality by encouraging us to rethink and redefine our conceptions of these connections" (92) will be instrumental in my analysis of how Latino domestic space and culinary practices allow women to either reproduce or contest constructions of both gender and sexuality. Inspired by Ehrhardt's reading of *What Night Brings* as a "project of queering food studies," I propose an alternative paradigm in which a greater focus is placed on the mutual interdependence and interconnectedness between gender and sexual identities. First of all, I would like to chart Marci's challenge of a "proper" female gender identity on the broader canvas of the Chicana cultural tradition in which acceptance or rejection of the prescribed model of femininity is often presented through the heroines' attitude toward food. Various forms of gender inequality, which are advocated by patriarchal Latino families, influence the constructions of heteronormative sexuality. Hence, secondly, I will offer a reading of the correlation of gender, sexuality and foodways employed in *What Night Brings* which asks us to look more closely at the fact that, in order to understand and name her queer self, Marci first has to deal with the position of a woman in a Latino family and society at large.

As Gloria Anzaldúa points out, Chicanas have three mythical mothers: "*Guadalupe*, the virgin mother who has not abandoned [them], *La Chingada* (*Malinche*), the raped woman whom [they] have abandoned, and *La Llorona*, the mother who seeks her lost children and is a combination of the other two" (52). Patriarchal ideology uses La Virgen as a desirable role model for women in juxtaposition to La Malinche and La Llorona, the usual suspects in Mexican/Chicano mythology. "These mythical Mexican mothers form a maternal trinity in the Mexican and Mexican American cultures. . . . [T]oday they are commonly figured as the sexual mother, the virgin mother, and the murderous mother" (Esquibel 23). Their symbolic iconography is ambiguous, though, and as such has been used to dominate Chicanas: "the true identity of all three has been subverted—*Guadalupe* to make us [Latina women] docile and enduring, *la Chingada* to make us ashamed of our Indian side, and *la Llorona* to make us long-suffering people. This obscuring has encouraged the *virgen/puta* dichotomy" (Anzaldúa 31).

The patriarchal *machista* logic inscribes submissiveness into women's behavior and imprisons women in the domestic space. La Virgen de Guadalupe, the patron saint of Mexican Indians (Rebolledo 50), is the embodiment of all desirable

traits of female character: “piety, virginity, forgiveness and submissiveness. [She is a] nurturing mother offering only supreme good. Her religiosity and unselfish motherhood make her a positive model” (Zygadlo 120). Even though it is hard to live up to the ideal, the cult of *marianismo* instills into women the role model of the passive, self-sacrificing, meek and self-abnegating Virgen de Guadalupe. In *What Night Brings*, Delia Cruz’s actions promote the traditional view that women should master humility and self-abnegation. At the same time, Delia’s actions reflect the patriarchal belief that “[w]omen are to be fulfilled by fulfilling the needs of men” (Castillo, *Massacre of the Dreamers* 117). Delia’s culinary choices reveal not only her prescribed self-abnegation but also, and maybe more importantly, female subjugation internalized and reenacted by Delia herself. Through the denial of nutritious food and such delicacies as Hostess cupcakes to her daughters, Marci and Corin, Mrs. Cruz strengthens male domination which oppresses her and her daughters.<sup>4</sup> Culinary choices and rituals in the Cruz household reveal that Eddie’s position in the family is predicated on female subjugation.

The patriarchal *machista* logic advocates weakness in women, while in reality Latino households function because of women’s strength and resilience. Rejecting the prescribed female weakness, Carla Trujillo claims that “Chicanas need not be passive victims of the cultural onslaught of social control. If anything, Chicanas are usually the backbone of every familia, for it is their strength and self-sacrifice which often keeps the family going” (“Chicana Lesbians” 189). In Josefina López’s play *Simply María, or the American Dream*, María is brought up to believe that she will not make it on her own. Paradoxically, it is her own mother, Carmen, who leads María to believe that “[w]omen need to get married, they are no good without men” (28). Many women do accept this belief, but not María or the speaking persona in Evangelina Vigil-Pinon’s poem “Kitchen Talk.” This persona reveals the suspicion of *machista* logic, which dramatically narrows down Latina women’s life choices. She notices that her grandma’s comment about women’s inability to predict what life has in store for them is “perfectly balanced / with routine rinsing of coffee cups and spoons / [and words] que barbaridad (how absurd)” (163). The dialectic between the grandmother’s verbal incredulity and her servitude as women’s second nature reveals the depth of patriarchal indoctrination.

Within Mexican/Chicana culture, the man as the dominant member of society displays a strong macho attitude; his status as a breadwinner entitles him to dictatorship. Ana Castillo maintains that “the objectification of females in

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4 Marci explains that cooked ham served for Eddie’s lunch “cost too much for *our* lunch” (186), while such delicacies as Hostess cupcakes were reserved only for Eddie (185).

society has been the result of man's enforced economic dominance and spiritual repression of humankind" ("La Mancha" 31). In such an environment, "[w]oman is not only man's property and man, through the sanctification of the Church, her owner, but her children also belong to him and the Church" (Castillo, "La Mancha 32). Thus the mother, as a perfect housewife, submits her selfhood in the service of pleasing "her master." Submissiveness, subordination, and self-abnegation are inscribed in her identity, all of which augment the dichotomy between the dominant and the dominated gender. Cherríe Moraga, acknowledging female self-sacrifice on the altar of the men of *machista* culture, remarks that she has "never met any kind of mexicano who . . . did not subscribe to the basic belief that men are better" (93). The feeling of male superiority, granted by the Catholic Church and perpetuated by women, allows men to act upon their own wishes, instincts or desires, with no justification required (Moraga 94).

Gender relations in the Cruz family are shaped in such a way as to accommodate Eddie's hyper-masculinity. Delia is immobilized, if not metaphorically imprisoned, in her household, as Eddie "won't let her" work outside the home (3). While her major household duty is to plan "every dime [they] spend on food" (10), Delia needs Eddie to drive her to do the shopping (3). Dietary habits in the Cruz family also reflect Eddie's dominant gender position. Delia prepares the meals, but only the ones that Eddie chooses to eat. Thus, the preparation of meals in the Cruz family is a political act demarcating the vectors of power relations in the household. Demanding particular foods and complaining about their sub-standard quality is one of the many rituals of subjugation that Eddie has imposed on Delia. As a breadwinner, he demands a culinary tribute to his position in the family. Thus, any food that does not come up to his standards causes his visible displeasure. As Marci narrates it:

I walked into the kitchen and saw Mom frying to death some pork-chops she got on sale that were cut so skinny you could practically see through them. Already, I knew my dad would use his fingers to throw the dried-up meat on his plate with the same old 'this makes me sick' look he always had when he hated my mom's cooking. (10-11)

Frustrated and angry with the father's demands for tribute and his suppression of Delia's sovereignty (Ehrhardt 97), Marci questions and then finally rejects female acquiescence, first in thoughts and then in action:

It's just that I felt sorry for Mom because she was always trying to make Dad happy. She'd look at him like a scared pup, hoping he'd eat anyway. I hated that look. I wanted her to tell him to 'eat shit,' or 'get up and fix it yourself.'

I practiced those words for her, but she never said them. Instead, she'd say 'What's wrong with it?' or, 'Can I fry you some eggs?' (11)

Marci feels revulsion for *frijoles guisados*, a combination of beans fried with onions, bean juice and thickened with flour (57), which happens to be Eddie's favorite dish and thus is prepared almost every day. Marci's disgust with it is correlated with her growing voice of dissent: "Mom fixes them this way because the king of the castle likes them like that. Since the king says, 'I pay the bill,' I have to eat them the way he likes them" (57). Demanding the beans *guisados* on a daily basis is clearly one of the most focal rituals of subjugation Eddie imposes on women in his family. He achieves the status of the master of his domain directly through references to the paychecks he brings home, and indirectly through Delia's forcing their daughters to honor his wishes: eating one big spoonful of *frijoles guisados* is a prerequisite for the girls leaving the table (57). Marci's disgust and frustration symbolize her disagreement with Eddie's authoritarian rule and rejection of Delia's meek acceptance of her servile, subjugated position in their family.<sup>5</sup>

The lives of Latina women are framed in servitude from early childhood.<sup>6</sup> For instance, in *The House on Mango Street*, the rolling pin Alicia has inherited from her mother symbolizes feminine subjugation—Alicia has to slave for her aging father (Cisneros 31). Alicia's making tortillas is inconsistent with her aspirations; she has to get up very early with the tortilla star—the morning star, here associated with female servility rather than with romance—in order to be able to receive a university education, a ticket to freedom from the servitude symbolized by making tortillas.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, Soveida in Denise Chávez's

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5 Ehrhardt succinctly captures the symbolism of Marci's culinary rebellion: "[b]y rejecting this particular dish [*frijoles guisados*], Marci symbolically refuses to ingest the subservient culinary role her culture expects her to embody" (98).

6 Interestingly, there are women who accept the ethics of servitude and adopt it to their own needs. For instance, Cherri Moraga presents servitude as female power over men: "[t]he men watched the women—my aunts and mother moving with the grace and speed of girls who were cooking before they could barely see over the top of the stove. Elvira, my mother, knew she was being watched by the men and loved it. Her slim hips moved patiently beneath the apron" (91).

7 In Josefina López's play *Simply María, Or the American Dream* the opinions of María's father reveal the internal conflict between female aspirations to individual fulfillment, which Ricardo denigrates, and feminine servitude and self-sacrifice in the name of patriarchy, which he praises: "Don't tell me about modern women. What kind of wife would that woman make if she's so busy with her career and can't tend to her house, children, and her husband?" (28).

*Face of an Angel* exemplifies a greater tendency in Latino culture: “As a child, 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. . . . In our family, men usually came first” (171). In the La Virgen fashion, good women are supposed to passively accept their fate, to embrace dutiful service to men. Likewise, female servitude has been inscribed in Delia’s married life since its beginning. Delia confesses to her daughter: “Your daddy was damn cute I practically knocked your grandma over running up to give him his beer. . . . And in two weeks I became Mrs. Eddie Cruz” (2). In a wedded state, Delia continues to embrace the virtue of service; she always waits for Eddie with suppers. Delia’s anger with Eddie when he comes late for evening meals (35, 175) exposes the general fact that a Latina woman’s “sense of identity is tied to that of a man, she is dependent on this relationship for her own self-worth” (Trujillo, “Chicana Lesbians” 188). Thus, Delia’s anger is directed not so much at Eddie for his being late (she can easily heat the dinner), but at the fact that Eddie’s tardiness or absence exposes her dependence on a man to the point of defying her self-worth. Without his appreciation of a well-cooked meal, Delia has to face the inconvenient truth that her services are taken for granted.

During Eddie’s unexpected, albeit temporary, absence (he moves in with his girlfriend), the culinary repertoire in the Cruz household changes diametrically. The leftovers Delia brings from work at Woolworths coupled with the food that the guests bring make the girls “happy because [they] didn’t have to eat beans so much anymore” (100). The lunch counter leftovers do not coincidentally create associations between cultural signifiers of food and mainstream culture. So far gender negotiations normally have not been within the purview of the younger generation in the Cruz family home. However, the newly-gained access to mainstream American food—hot-dogs, macaroni and cheese, fried chicken, fish sticks and meatloaf, “grilled-cheese sandwiches, spaghetti, cold cereal, or weenies wrapped in bacon” (100)—mirrors Marci’s nascent self-conception which challenges her gender identity predestined by Latino culture. Furthermore, the girls receive guests who often bring “little presents, like a dozen fresh tortillas, avocados from their trees, or eggs from someone’s backyard” (101). The gifts of food, as a binding familiar and communal force, make Marci and Corin part of a supportive network of relatives and friends. Sharing food is a means by which the girls establish physical and psychological oneness with their relatives. Gone is the situation of hopeless isolation and vulnerability to the outbreaks of Eddie’s gratuitous violence.

Marci finally finds freedom to act when Eddie is absent. Delia’s decision to get a job precipitates Marci’s “tak[ing] control of the kitchen on her own

initiative and teach[ing] herself to cook meatloaf, hamburgers, and spaghetti” (Ehrhardt 102). Through her culinary preferences, Marci questions the denial of many Latina women of their “own individuality for the benefit of [their] family and community,” at the same time transforming cooking from “an obligatory performance . . . [into] an occasion to celebrate her affectionate nature with her culinary creative expression” (Abarca, *Voices in the Kitchen* 24). The space of the kitchen, apart from being a locus of stifling social entrapment in the domestic environment, whose “walls limit her social, economic, and personal mobility, which derives from conceptualizing *place* as a fixed, unchanging, and nostalgic location” (Abarca, *Voices in the Kitchen* 20), can also become a site of creativity, female authority and agency. Many Chicanas share Meredith Abarca’s perception of women’s cooking “not [only as] an obligatory performance but rather a celebration of . . . [their] own affectionate and creative expression” (“Los Chilaquiles” 127). For instance, Viramontes in her essay “*Nopalitos: The Making of Fiction*” comments on women’s ability to claim subjectivity through cultural politics of food in the oppressive environment. Benay Blend perceptively observes that “[g]ender definitions most likely placed her mother in the kitchen, but she converted what might have been a demand into a desire, a responsibility into a delight, a chore into a talent. For Viramontes, food making is valuable because it revalorizes women’s work as a more creative form of labor within the home” (156).<sup>8</sup>

With the awareness that her mother always takes Eddie back, Marci is not particularly surprised when their five-month culinary domestic bliss ends with his grand comeback.<sup>9</sup> Eddie immediately attempts to restore the domestic status quo. His authoritarianism and chauvinism is yet again coached in culinary terms: “Where the hell is your goddamn mother and why isn’t there any food on the table?” (107). However, with the prospect that she can be “finally happy” at home (107), Marci no longer wants to accept passively her role within the domestic

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8 The kitchen may also afford comfort and pleasure, as in Pat Mora’s “Layers of Pleasure,” where she claims that she managed to create “a kitchen of her own.” Blend observes that “[f]or Mora, food work became communal, creative, and comforting; ‘the kitchen became Pat’s place, the special room in which I succeeded in bringing myself and others pleasure’” (154).

9 At this point it is not amiss to mention that romantic heterosexual love is not shown in a very positive light in the novel. The comments about Delia’s love for Eddie evoke entrapment, retardation, and passivity. For instance, Tia Leti claims that Delia “can’t even think straight when it comes to that man” (10). With disarming honesty, Marcy admits that “when it’s about my dad, she’s practically retarded” (10). Grandma Flor sums up her daughter’s fatal infatuation with Eddie: “She don’t hear shit, she don’t see shit, and she don’t do shit” (10).

space. Meredith Abarca's claim that "[c]ooking is a language of self-representation" ("Los Chilaquiles" 120) reverberates in Marci's decision to stage her domestic rebellion through foodways. One night Eddie comes back home from work to see spaghetti for dinner. Marci's replacement of Eddie's favorite *frijoles guisados* with the dish whose ethnic connotations have been neutralized into the mainstream American culinary repertoire may suggest that Marci has broken out of the spell of the cultural authority that comes with Eddie's machismo. Rebolledo's suggestion that through devaluing of "traditional foods" a woman can articulate a denial of cultural authority (134) seems to define Marci's choice. Beans *guisados* are semiotically deployed in the narrative as a way of coding female oppression. Thus, the unruly daughter's decision to replace the dish with food that is coded as a part of mainstream American culinary culture clearly fits into the discourse of resistance. Marci's breach of the Cruz family culinary rituals shows that, to use Abarca's words, "affirmation of her right to creative expression [through food] becomes an affirmations of her agency" ("Los Chilaquiles" 129). Marci rejects the traditionalist idea that in the kitchen Latina women lose their agency; it is exactly the opposite in her case. Hence, spaghetti becomes a sign of Eddie's challenged, if not diminished, authority in the Cruz household.

Eddie's aggressive reaction to spaghetti, masking his incredulity, echoes his status of an underdog in American society who has to take it out on his women at home to boost his violated macho self-image: "Chinga, chinga, chinga, I put up with este pinche mierda all goddamn day, then I got to come home to this kind of crap. I hate this shit! Every time you mom has to work I gotta eat dog shit for supper. . . . Why do you cook this crap, huh?" (124). Eddie supports his ego through aggression and expects the female to passively accept it, which alludes to the mythical La Chingada. According to Octavio Paz, gender relations between Mexicans are predestined because of Hernán Cortés's sexualized conquest of la Malinche, thus these relations will always vacillate between two poles: *chingón* and *chingada*. One of the primary meanings of the colloquial expression *chingar* is to do harm or to fail. The verb *chingar* always denotes violence, aggression, and cruelty. Due to its historical context, the verb is invested with notions of sexuality, alluding to rape and sexual conquest. The word empowers the male through references to female passively and involuntarily suffering male aggression, sexual conquest and/or cruelty. All those lexical and historical insinuations resonate in Eddie's expression, making his interactions with women in his family highly gendered.<sup>10</sup>

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10 I would like to thank professor Constante González Groba for guiding me through the lexical and historical meanders of the word *chingar*.

Yet, Marci shows self-control and does not want to relinquish the new role in her family home which she has experienced as rewarding. Maintaining her composure, the rebellious heroine explains: “Mom told me to make spaghetti ... and you don’t have to eat it” (124). Eddie correctly recognizes his daughter’s culinary disobedience as an act of female agency and authority, which comes from “gaining knowledge of food and its preparation” (Ballard 178).<sup>11</sup> Female agency comes with a price, though. The unruly daughter has to deal with Eddie’s physical retribution as his verbal aggression is always just a prelude to physical violence against his daughters. After knocking Marci down, he kicks her hard, with his work boots on, repeatedly all over her body: “From now on, if you don’t learn some respect for your father, I’ll just have to knock the shit out of you until you do” (125). Then Eddie takes the tool of culinary disobedience—the pot of hot spaghetti sauce—and starts to tip it over Marci’s head saying: “This is what I think of the fucking mierda you cooked” (125). Finally he pours the sauce across the kitchen floor, scalding her arms and legs. Psychological trauma and physical injuries are the price Marci has to pay for the deliberate breach of the prescribed female servility and submissiveness.

Despite Delia’s attempts to pass the ethics of service and servility to Marci, the unruly daughter refuses to serve Eddie. Once Marci appropriates the kitchen as her space, she decides to deal with her father’s machismo on her own terms. She celebrates her cultural resistance by purposefully spoiling the food she has to prepare for Eddie (Ehrhardt 102); Marci frankly admits: “Course I cooked bad on purpose. ... I did it because I hated cooking for him. Just because I had to cook didn’t mean it had to taste good” (123–124). The more she objects to servitude and subjugation, the greater is her ability to understand the implications of gender dichotomies in a Latino family. Through Soveida’s words, Denise Chávez captures what Marci and so many Latinas have experienced: “Life was, and is, service, no matter what our station in it. Some wrestle more with service than others. It is those to whom more is given from whom more service is demanded” (172).

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11 In her article “The Keys to the Kitchen: Cooking and Latina Power in Latin(o) American Children’s Stories,” Genny Ballard sees “the acquisition of knowledge regarding food and cooking as a right of passage for young women” (167). Ballard’s observation that “being able to cook and acquire food for the family represents the acquisition of power for female characters” (167) made about three texts: *Las Hermanas*, *Too Many Tamales*, and *Prietita and the Ghost Woman* is also illustrative of Marci’s culinary choices. Despite the fact that Marci does not have a special bond with her mother based on culinary mentorship as is the case in the texts Ballard chose for the analysis, Marci becomes empowered and stages her rebellion through food selection and preparation. Much like for characters analyzed by Ballard, cooking becomes for Marci “a marker for maturity” (Ballard 174).

However, once Delia steps out of her prescribed silent, submissive role and stands up against Eddie's abuse of paternal power, she and the girls are quickly reminded of their inferior status in the family. On Easter, the daughters share eggs in the morning: Marci eats whites and Corin yolk. Eddie perceives "their own system of egg consumption—each eats only the parts she wants" (Ehrhardt 99) as a challenge to his authority in the family: he is the one to decide who eats what and how. He slams the girls with a belt on their faces for disobedience and shouts: "I'll teach both of you to tell me what to do. Don't forget *I'm* the one in charge" (85–86). Ehrhardt pertinently observes that "in Eddie's eyes they are guilty of assuming the power that rightfully belongs to him as the person with the 'huevos' (balls) in the family. . . . Eddie's words imply that because he is a man with the parts to prove it his daughters will never succeed in defying his rules" (99).

As opposed to most Chicana writers who use traditional Mexicano/Chicano/Indian foods to symbolize their ethnic identity (Rebolledo 133),<sup>12</sup> Carla Trujillo uses Marci's food preferences to reinforce her gender and sexuality. Marci disgust with Eddie's favorite *frijoles guisados* is counterbalanced with her taste for Delia's "thick and puffy" tortillas (46), a culinary choice reinforcing Marci's identification with generations of women. In Mexican cultural heritage, tortilla-making is a time- and energy-consuming activity which underscores a woman's position as an object of male desire,<sup>13</sup> and as such it stands in as a signifier of gender subjugation. After confrontation with Eddie over her culinary choices, Marci seems to force herself to accept patriarchal rhetoric which indoctrinates women into believing that their destiny is to slave away in the kitchen, preferably making tortillas. With the instinctive knowledge that women "became inextricably connected with the

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12 In *Latino Food Culture*, Zilkia Janer discusses the foundation of Mexican American cuisine: "[t]raditional Latin American diets used to give central stage to maize, beans, rice, and fresh fruits and vegetables, reserving the richer meat-based dishes for occasional consumption" (141). Janer goes on to explain that "The Latino food pyramid uses foods like maize, tortillas, potatoes, plantains, avocados, and papayas to illustrate how to compose a balanced Latino meal" (143).

13 Pilcher refers to anthropological research which suggests that "a woman cooking for a large family typically spent the entire morning, five or six hours, making tortillas" (101). Making tortillas required a lot of energy, finesse and skill from a woman. On the other hand, a decent, marriageable woman would not allow herself to fail at tortilla-making: "[b]ecause tortilla making demanded so much time and effort—as much as a third of a woman's waking life—the activity acquired a corresponding significance in her personal and family identity. . . . Tortilla making was so essential to domestic life that no woman in the [studied] village became eligible for marriage until she had demonstrated this skill" (Pilcher 106).

food they [have] cooked” (Pilcher 107), Marci attempts to recreate her mother’s position in the kitchen as a “dutiful Chicana cook” (Ehrhardt 103). Interestingly enough, Delia, for whom tortilla making becomes her second nature, never assists Marci in her endeavors to find her place in the matrilineal heritage. If “[t]he Kitchen as a woman’s *space* . . . can represent a site of multiple changing levels and degrees of freedom, self-awareness, subjectivity, and agency” (Abarca, *Voices in the Kitchen* 19), then Delia’s absence in the kitchen when Marci attempts to define who she wants to be through foodways signifies the mother’s inability to encourage her daughter to contest gender relations in Latina families. On the other hand, Delia’s lack of tutelage or even assistance in Marci’s tortilla making, or any culinary activities for that matter, could be understood as her indirect way of discouraging Marci from adopting a servile and submissive gender role, if it were not for the fact that for many years Delia was a passive witness to her husband’s brutal abuse of their daughters.<sup>14</sup>

The neutral term *tortillera*, meaning a tortilla maker, has also sexual connotations. The reference to slapping—the sound of tortilla making—is used to evoke

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- 14 The lyrical speaker of Odilia Mendez’s “Mother” receives much more obvious encouragement from her mother. The daughter appreciates and cherishes her mother’s self-sacrifice and maternal love which make it possible for her to define her selfhood and not simply repeat her mother’s fate:

Mother, I see you make tortillas  
and tamales and caldo especially for me.  
I see you beaten in spirit by my father  
You lay there quiet as plates fly through  
the air as he releases his oppressions on you. . . .  
You don’t expect me to make tortillas  
but to think about who first made tortillas  
and what the future holds for the tortilla  
And my relatives laugh at you for not preparing me to be a good wife. . . .  
Your daughter will never see the abuse  
that you experienced out of necessity. (*Compañeras* 166–167)

The daughter can refashion her sense of self through the reverse reference to her mother’s embrace of *marianismo*—“a woman’s spiritual and moral superiority through absolute submission of her will and invisibility of her self” (Abarca, “Los Chilaquiles” 140). The educational value of mother’s *marianismo* cannot be denied, as “[w]itnessing . . . mothers’ endurance of husbands’ physical abuse, alcoholism and extramarital affairs, *sometimes* serves some women . . . as an example of what *not* to tolerate in their lives” (Castillo, “La Mancha 35). In Mendez’s poem the mother engages in the culinary discourse of resistance (not forcing her daughter to make tortillas), however, at the same time, she encourages her daughter to remember her matrilineal heritage.

associations with the sexual act. Thus, as Alicia Gaspar de Alba shows in her poem “Making Tortillas,” *tortillera* is a colloquial, derogative term describing queer Chicanas (Ehrhardt 94). Marci is not an experienced or conscious *tortillera*—in both meanings of the term. Thus, her failed attempts to make tortillas, which resemble “a map of California” (143), reveal not only her inability to internalize prescribed femininity,<sup>15</sup> but also her lack of readiness to name her queer appetite. Indoctrinated by the educational system and the media, Marci internalizes the paradigmatic heteronormative relations; she narrates: “I have to change into a boy. . . . It’s because I like girls. . . . Maybe I was born this way, but the second I saw chiches, I wanted them. . . . Now, I know you can’t be with a girl if you *are* a girl” (9).<sup>16</sup> However, the references to foodways she makes subconsciously equate her sexual desire with that of her father. The invocation of food in the descriptions of Eddie’s desire for a woman with “big chiches, [who then] smiles and looks at her like he’s about to eat pudding” (1) and simultaneously referring to food to express her own sexual attraction to Raquel, “I felt all melty and good when I looked at her, like I’d just eaten two packs of Reese’s Peanut Butter Cups” (26) subverts the belief in Latino culture that “love and desire are constituted in relation to heterosexuality” (Esquibel, qtd. in Ehrhardt 100).

Since his grand comeback, Eddie keeps making allusions to the social constraints of Marci’s prescribed gender role and sexuality. Yet, emboldened by her newly-found female agency, Marci does not ignore Eddie’s chauvinist taunts. Holding a knife in her hand, she talks back: “If you want food, why don’t you ask that girlfriend of yours to come over and cook it?” (107). His position of domination in the household is threatened by her cheekiness and self-confidence expressed by both a physical gesture of waving a knife and a verbal confrontation. Therefore, Eddie retorts: “Hijo, Marci, what a big little man you are now. . . . Que hombre! I didn’t know I had me un *hombrecito*. Here I was thinking you was my little girl. . . .’ I slapped his finger away. ‘Oh, and a macho, tambien” (108). Through the use of the word *hombrecito*, which in a colloquial register means lesbian or

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15 Ehrhardt rightly observes that “[w]hile Eddie concedes that her [Marci’s] mistakes ‘taste pretty good’ (143), he ultimately regards her culinary shortcomings as indicative of her failure as a female” (103–104).

16 Avotacja’s testimonio reveals that lesbianism was treated within Latino community as a dangerous aberration which could be treated in a mental institution. She also refers to “the common knowledge” of the 1950s about the dangers of being lesbian: “I *knew* that if I ever kissed a woman, my voice would drop three octaves, my hips would disappear and my hair would fall off into a *quo vadis*” (*Compañeras* 66).

effeminate gay,<sup>17</sup> Eddie makes a veiled reference to Marci's sexual orientation. The contempt for queers Eddie earlier conveyed in an epithet "jotito" (75) reverberates in the name he calls Marci now. The word *hombrecito* conveys the threat to Latino patriarchy on two counts: gender and sexuality. The reference to gender—as a diminutive of *hombre*, a small man—positions Marci as the one who might compete with Eddie for domination in the Cruz household. This understanding of the word is reinforced through Eddie's evocation of a macho in the next sentence. However, the queer connotation of the word *hombrecito* defines Marci as a bad woman whose negative sexuality positions her beyond the control of patriarchy (the object of her sexual desire falls outside the heteronormative matrix).<sup>18</sup> Instead of seeing Marci as a failed *tortillera* (Ehrhardt 104), I am inclined to see her as a girl who tries to regain her lost female agency through "negative" sexuality. Her improper desires and potentially threatening behavior signify her unwillingness to embody the La Virgen ideal of a self-sacrificing mother and wife.

In patriarchal ideology, the malicious Malinche is responsible for the destruction of her own people by selling-out to the Spanish (Rebolledo 125; Castillo, *Massacre of the Dreamers* 139). However, a feminist reinterpretation of the myth of La Malinche makes room for an alternative reading. The challenge of the notions of (im)proper womanhood sanctioned by patriarchy reveals the other side of the coin: "The stigma of *malinchismo/vendidismo* has been repeatedly used to keep Chicanas 'in their place'" (Esquibel 24). Moraga goes even further and appropriates the myth within lesbian studies:

The woman who defies her role as subservient to her husband, father, brother or son by taking control of her own sexual destiny is purported to be a 'traitor to her race' by contribution to the 'genocide' of her people—whether or not she has children. In short, even if the defiant woman is *not* a lesbian, she is purported to be one; for like the lesbian in the Chicano/a imagination, she is una *Malinchista*. Like the Malinche of Mexican history, she is corrupted by foreign influences which threaten to destroy her people. (113)

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17 In a poem "Intentarás Imponerme" Lidia Tirado White provides readers with a list of terms used to describe queer Chicanas: "Cachapera, Manflora, Jota, Rara, Maricon, Anormal, Tortillera, Lesbiana, Marimacha, Androgina, Hombrecito, Muchachito" (22).

18 Ehrhardt mentions another situation when Eddie calls Marci *hombrecito*: "[t]hough Eddie acknowledges Marci's queerness . . . by suggesting that she is at once a boy with a 'bizcocho,' he stops short of calling her a 'tortillera' because the possibility that his daughter really is queer is too frightening for him to imagine" (Ehrhardt 104). My analysis of this scene departs from Ehrhardt's line of argumentation, in which she claims that "[b]y referring to her as a boy, as opposed to a lesbian, Eddie implies that Marci is not only a failed tortillera literally, but queerly as well" (104).

Marci's negotiations of sexual orientation are framed by references to La Malinche, the evil female betrayer. The perception of Marci's budding lesbianism as a form of "cultural betrayal" of her own ethnic group—her inability and/or potential unwillingness to reproduce Latino heteronormative patriarchy—can thus transform her into a modern avatar of La Malinche. Marci translates prescribed passivity into culinary dissent and the desire for a foreigner into queer desire. With men removed from the picture, Marci's empowerment locates her beyond the control of patriarchy.

Marci's sexual orientation, which challenges the domination of and dependence on men, is illustrative of the fact that "Chicana lesbians are perceived as a greater threat to the Chicano community because their existence disrupts the established order of male dominance, and raises the consciousness of many Chicana women regarding their own independence and control" (Trujillo, "Chicana Lesbians" 186). Marci manages to challenge Eddie's male dominance by making spaghetti for dinner, as mentioned before. Spaghetti does not seem to be a coincidental choice. It is during the spaghetti feed that Uncle Tommy and Father Chacon together cook spaghetti to raise money for the starving refugees in Biafra. The symbolism of this social event for Marci's recognition of her own homosexual desires (her very first suspicion of the relationship between these men) is undeniable.<sup>19</sup> Thus, spaghetti provides the locus of Marci's nascent self-conception and queer sexual identity. With this particular dish, the unruly daughter sets up an important relationship between food, gender/sexuality and resistance. Eddie rightly sees her culinary transgression of domestic subservience as an affront to his machismo:

I don't ever want to eat this spaghetti crap again. You hear me?! If you have to cook, you'd better cook me some goddamn beans and chile. And learn to make tortillas, too. I ain't eating none of this shit you cook anymore. It's about time

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19 On her further quest to define her sexuality, Marci will try to find some answers during the Thanksgiving dinner organized at Uncle Tommy's. Eddie's refusal to go to the house which has "a bunch of queers in it" (164), is an additional incentive for Marci to attend the festive dinner. She watches uncle Tommy and Father Chacon prepare dinner—a task which is traditionally codified across various cultures as feminine (Goody 193). Moreover, the sexual tension Marci senses in the kitchen gives Marci hope that she also may be able to resist the dominant heteronormativity. However, "when she attempts to come out to the couple by alluding to their queer behavior in the kitchen—'You don't usually see men cooking' (167)—the men ignore her innuendo" (Ehrhardt 105). Uncle Tommy's response "No, you don't. . . . And for sure, not in our family" (167) attempts to sever the relationship between food, gender/sexuality and resistance.

you started learning things that's gonna do you some good, and that's learning how to cook food a man will eat. I wouldn't give this shit to a fucking dog. Don't fix this crap again, Marci. You hear me? (126)

The attack on Marci's culinary abilities conforms to a formulaic pattern of reprimands for Latina women's lack of housewifery skills. The rebuke that López's María receives from her father: "[n]o Mexican man is going to marry a woman who can't cook" (*Simply María* 25), in Marci's case turns into the "the unspoken demand that she [Marci] assume a heterosexual female identity" through cooking proper food a man would eat (Ehrhardt 103).

In *The House on Mango Street*, Esperanza says that "Mexicans don't like their women strong" (10). Eddie Cruz is no exception. When Delia finally stands up against Eddie and confronts him about his sexual indiscretions, authoritarian behavior, and abuse of the girls, her strong convictions (coupled with photographic evidence of his extramarital affair) infuriate him so much that he lashes out at his wife for the first time ever (226–227). In order to prevent her mother's serious bodily harm, Corin shoots Eddie with his own gun. After the incident, the girls find permanent shelter with their maternal grandmother in New Mexico. In a safe environment, away from Eddie's brutality and Delia's ultimate indifference, Marci comes out of the closet and shares the first kiss with Robbie, her neighbor who becomes her "blood sister."

Food as semiotic praxis can reveal aspects of identity negotiations. Marci Cruz does not want to accept passively the rules of the social milieu. Through her culinary transgressions, she becomes an active agent of her life as she speaks out against the imposed silence, submissiveness, self-sacrifice, and servility. Marci successfully attempts to free herself from the debilitating concepts of traditional Chicana womanhood and heteronormativity.

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