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La comida y sus historias: Food-centered Life Histories of Two Mexican Women Living in the U.S.

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Abstract: An examination of the interaction of foodways with personal history, collective memory, and identity formation, through the food-centered life histories of two Mexican women, first generation immigrants living in the U.S. Discusses *espacios de convivencia*, social relations orchestrated on women's terms, the centrality of corn in the household's diet (and changes due to the implementation of new technologies), and the significance of festive meals in relation to personal identity, to draw conclusions on women's agency in preserving collective memory and knowledge through foodways. Includes Chicana feminist theories on women's spaces and ways of knowing.

Key Terms: Foodways; food-centered life histories; collective memory; ways of knowing; women's spaces; *convivencia*; *maíz*; *nixtamal*; tortillas

The recent influx of migration from Mexico and Central America (in the aftermath of trade agreements, NAFTA and CAFTA) has brought greater awareness of a people whose longstanding history and inherited values are still greatly discounted. Furthermore, Mexican-origin migrant women have been persistently stereotyped as uneducated “hyper-fertile baby machines” (Gutiérrez, 2008), unknowledgeable and unskilled (Wright, 2006), and their Native-based economies and practices discredited. Here we pursue a counter discourse—or, as theorized by Gloria Anzaldúa (1997), counter-knowledge, or *contra-conocimiento*—a shift in the frame of reference that challenges dominant opinions, giving power to Chicanas to control their own knowledge production. Our goal is to express the knowledge and ways of knowing of *mexicanas* by theorizing the knowledge production that informs Latina foodways.

In practice, identity is (re)produced in everyday practices and the narratives that explain their meaning. In this paper, we examine the lived experiences of María Guadalupe Pérez Muñoz and María Guadalupe Martín Sánchez, two working-class Mexican immigrant women living in the United States, as discernible in their food-centered life histories.¹ Their narratives reveal how memories and knowledge of food preparation influence their sense of identity in relation to family and community. Their reflections also stress the significance of women's spaces as sites for knowledge production

that are organized in terms of affect and reciprocity, expressed in Spanish as *convivencia*. Because of the centrality of corn in the Mexican diet, and the gendered knowledge that is implicit in its preparation, we highlight the importance of corn in their histories. We argue that the food-centered life histories of our participants demonstrate how immigrant Mexican women actively position themselves within a transnational narrative.

Through the narration of everyday cooking and the preparation of festive meals, our participants provided insight into their ways of knowing, their artistic sensitivities, and their formulation of identity. The themes for our discussion are drawn from the emphasis given to certain topics by the protagonists themselves: the first theme describes spaces in which social relations are orchestrated and organized on women's terms, such as *el molino* (the community mill), and its connection to *las visitas*, visits between neighbors to establish bonds and exchange goods. A second theme centers on *maíz* as a staple in the Mexican diet and the participant's assessment of how technological innovation and migration have affected the way it is cooked. A third theme focuses on the preparation of a festive meal as a conduit for identity formation, relating to the histories of a family and a local community. We conclude with *sobremesa*, discussion on women's agency through foodways that synthesizes our participant's insights.

SPACES OF CONVIVENCIA & WOMEN'S WAYS OF KNOWING

Recent interdisciplinary studies on food have focused on the ways specific foods and foodways, as well as the process of cooking in conventionally defined “women spaces,” shape the ethnic, class, and gender identities of women (Abarca, 2006; D’Sylva and Beagan, 2011; Marte, 2007; Pérez & Abarca, 2007; Williams-Forson, 2013). Others have focused on food-based notions of memory and how these impact the self, specifically in relation to ethnic identity in the United States (Holtzman, 2006; Marte, 2007; Sutton, 2013). Others, specifically Abarca (2006 & 2007), argue that Mexican working-class women, who lack spaces of their own within the household, have (re)claimed the kitchen as a space where women’s ways of knowing are produced and shared. Abarca disrupts the middle-class ideal of women requiring money and “a room of their own” to produce literary and artistic works, by reframing cooking as a form of cultural production in which women employ their knowledge systems and creative expressions as they add their own *chiste* (twist) to recipes. Indeed, preparing and serving meals is an art form, pleasing to the senses, and expressive of particular women’s ways of knowing. This study pulls from a wider narrative of migration and labor histories of women, to bring focus to the experiential knowledge of women, in historically gendered and conventionally defined “women spaces,” and toward the reappropriation of these spaces on women’s terms.

The narrators/protagonists in this study emphasized such sites as el molino and the kitchen as spaces where women organized the relationships and processes that take place. The social relations within these spaces take on the shape of “figured worlds” (Holland, et al., 1998; Urrieta, 2007a, 2007b) in which the invitation and recruitment of participants, women in this case, created and maintained such a vivid space. The social organization within figured worlds is based on roles and participation; the ascribed roles of the participants’ organized participation. We will examine the narrators’/protagonists’ remembrances of their participation in the figured worlds, and join these to notions of *convivencia*, a sense of co-habitation with others in a given space, imbued with *cariño*, or loving care (Urrieta & Villenas, 2013). Thus, we can conceptualize these sociocultural relationships as *spaces of convivencia*. In spaces of *convivencia*, legitimacy is constructed through reciprocity; materials and emotional resources

are distributed equitably, and organization is maintained within horizontal relations of authority (Rivera Cusicanqui, 2010). Such spaces are culturally and historically produced, and can be created and maintained in a variety of social contexts.

The oral narratives that accompany this approach are the material that bind and (re)generate personal and social identities. The individual’s recollection and narrative serves to maintain a collective memory, that is, “a current of continuous thought whose continuity is not at all artificial, for it retains from the past only what still lives or is capable of living in the consciousness of the groups keeping the memory alive” (Halbwachs, 2011, p. 142). In other words, continuity with the past is shaped by the consciousness of those in the present who actively recreate whatever they are able to. One vehicle for this process of recreation is the practice of food preparation and consumption, and the oral narratives triggered by these activities. Collective memory is also a process that makes an individual conscious of time in relation to her social position within the continuum of the group (Connerton, 1989). In this sense, engaging in collective memory by way of cooking and personal narrative can serve to both maintain and transform the relationships of power of the dominant social order. A feminist approach to collective memory highlights the way in which reconfiguring narratives and performances of the past can serve as tools to challenge oppressive institutions (Hirsch and Smith, 2002). Abarca (2006) in particular has recognized everyday cooking as a field of epistemology where “memory, emotions, and history are all evoked and shared within the discourse of the *sazón*, the sensory-logic of cooking, which is highly personalized but socially charged” (p. 11). *Sazón* refers to the cook’s personal touch that is recognizable in the taste of her food, which is achieved through both the use of ingredients and a mastery of culinary techniques linked to the cook’s own persona and her social relationships. In the process of recalling collective memory, the individual is not simply repeating and reproducing past experiences and knowledge but actively choosing which knowledge and which values are worth keeping.

FOOD-CENTERED LIFE HISTORIES AND HISTORY-IN-PERSON

This project draws from life history narrative methodologies, specifically those centering on women’s experiences and food. Life histories are useful in rewriting

history from below by allowing the protagonists of history to speak for themselves about events and to challenge the knowledge systems of dominant groups (Luken and Vaughan, 1999). Their purpose is not simply to list events or to explain what people did in the past, but rather to document the meaning the protagonists conveyed to those events or activities (Portelli, 1998). It is “an extensive

whether official, revisionist, or collective memory. History-in-person, on the other hand, refers to the narratives told by people about their experiences in given events, sites, or activities. In this case, the history-in-system of the participants is their migration from Central Mexico to the United States and their subsequent establishment in California. Migration and life as working-class immigrant

[L]ife histories examine an individual's life in the context of its social and cultural locations.

record of a person's life told to and recorded by another, who then edits and writes the life history as though it were autobiography” (Geiger, 1986, p. 336). Yet, life histories differ from autobiographies in that the examination of a single life “serves as one means of bridging what might be termed the “micro-macro dilemma” in contemporary social science” (Singer, 2006, p. 7). In other words, life histories examine an individual's life in the context of its social and cultural locations, whereas an autobiography, as proposed by Beverly (2000), is disconnected from the group or class from which the protagonist speaks in relation to processes of marginalization or struggle.

Women's life history narratives, in particular, provide a glimpse of lived experiences “at different points in their life cycles in specific cultural and historical settings” (Geiger, p. 336). They reveal social and cultural dynamics in the individual's lived experiences, which could be examined “as a microcosm of, at least to some degree, a wider group of people that are little known, perhaps gravely misunderstood, and often maligned” (Singer, 2006, p. 7). Women's food-centered life histories are semi-structured interviews that specifically focus on “beliefs and behaviors surrounding food production, preparation, distribution, and consumption” (Counihan, 2013, p. 174). Furthermore, they function in a similar way to *testimonios*² in that they bring forth the often neglected and silenced voices and perspectives of women (Counihan, 2010; 2013). As such, food-centered life histories seek to connect the personal with the political, the domestic and intimate sphere to the public and collective sphere (Counihan, 2013).

The connection of collective memory and lived experience reveals the intermeshing of history-in-system with history-in-person (Holland and Lave, 2001; Urrieta, 2006, 2007). History-in-system refers to a series of events or remembrances that are conceptualized as history,

mothers are the background that informs the participants' food-centered life histories as both collective memory and lived experience intermesh in their narratives. The food-centered life histories featured in this paper are, in a sense, the testimonios of two working-class immigrant women of Mexican-origin. Through their narratives, they are active agents as (re)generators of cultural practices and collective memory in the process of (re)claiming spaces, such as the kitchen, as women's spaces were where their ways of knowing thrive.

The women interviewed for this study kindly shared their stories and gave us permission to reveal their names. Their interviews were recorded and transcribed. When asked to state their name for the interview, they both decided that they wanted to go by their *nombre de soltera* (maiden names), María Guadalupe Pérez Muñoz and María Guadalupe Martín Sánchez. Respecting their wishes, we refer to them with the name they are known to their *amistades* (friends), María and Lupe, respectively. Given that the interviews were conducted in Spanish, when necessary we will provide translations to English in an endnote. There are also instances when certain words or phrases do not have a direct English translation or when a translation would be less palatable than the original phrase. In those cases, we provide the word in Spanish and a conceptual definition in English. As a sign of respect to the participants and an affirmation to their linguistic practices, their life histories will be provided in the paper as told.

MAKING TORTILLAS AND EL MOLINO AS A SPACE OF CONVIVENCIA

María³ narrated her recollection of memories of making tortillas, and in doing so, she highlighted changes to the social relations of her hometown in Mexico. She described the process for making tortillas: from the selection of the

corn, to making *nixtamal* and then grinding it to make *masa*, or dough, to the activity of *tortear* and the aesthetics of tortilla making. María explained that one of the first steps in the process of making tortillas is the *nixtamalización* of corn; this process requires boiling corn in water with a spoonful of *cal*, limestone dust, and then rinsing the swollen corn so the outer layer of the grain is removed. This makes the corn grains soft and easier to ground into the *masa* used to make tortillas. The *nixtamalización* of corn involves a practice that has been transmitted from one generation to the next through oral tradition and everyday practice of cooking. This is especially true in Mexico and Central America where corn has played a central role in establishing the material and social networks that resulted in complex civilizations. María explained the social relations involved in preparing *nixtamal*:

Es cocer el maíz, ponerle poquita cal y ya, al otro día lavarlo e ir al molino a que lo muelan pa' que te den la masa. La cal no era mucha, una cuchara y ya con eso ... Más antes se usaba mucho la cal de piedra. Había unas personas que la sabían preparar. Ya después ya era la cal, la de construcción, que también servía para el *nixtamal* ... Ahí siempre la traían de un ranchito que se llama Atemajac. Ahí había piedras, como piedras de esas como, [pues] vendrían siendo como lima, yo creo, porque las sacaban del cerro. Y ellos sabían cómo quemar la cal pero yo no sé ni cómo se quemaría. Nomás la traían ya en polvo. Sacaban las piedras del cerro y decían van a quemar la cal pero yo no sé como. Yo creo que nomás eran con agua, como que las cobijaban y las mojaban para que las piedras se desbarataran y se hicieran polvo. Entonces había señores que se dedicaban a eso, que sabían cómo, a prepararla para que quedara en polvo. Eran piedras pues.⁴

In this particular case, the *cal* for the *nixtamal* was obtained from another town that is known throughout the region as one of its main producers. Making *cal* was a specialized

task that only a few men from this particular town knew how to prepare. The knowledge regarding the ways to make *cal*, *nixtamal*, and tortillas has been transmitted over time through daily practice. Bonfil Batalla (1987) calls this process of organizing everyday life on a cultural matrix that has its origins in Mesoamerican practices, "México profundo." After the *nixtamal* is ready, María pointed out, it was taken to the community mill for grinding.

María then narrated her recollections of *el molino*, a space of *convivencia* where all the town's women would gather every morning to have their *nixtamal* made into *masa*. In some instances, children, particularly girls, were sent to *el molino* and thus were introduced to this space of *convivencia* organized on women's terms. *El molino* served as a multigenerational gathering space for the women of the community.

Tenía uno que ir todos los días a moler el *nixtamal* y te cobraban. Según el tamaño del balde era lo que cobraban. Te lo molían y ya se regresaba uno con su *masa*, era lo que se hacía. Se ocupaba de que todas las personas tuvieran que ir al molino ... Por lo regular eran las señoras [las que iban] porque los niños iban a la escuela. Y cuando no había clases era lo normal mandar a una niña al molino con el *nixtamal* para que regresaran con la *masa* ... Ir al molino era también ir a platicar con las señoras que iban o chismear las nuevas que hubiera. Mientras esperaba uno que la atendieran pos ahí platicaba uno con las señoras y ya. Se sabía las nuevas que hubiera en el rancho.⁵

Going to *el molino* also served as an opportunity to be updated about news or occurrences in the community and to share resources.

Más antes ahí se sabía que cuándo había un enfermo, que alguien ya se va a casar o todas las novedades. Ahí era, como digamos, las noticias. Las noticias del rancho, de lo que pudiera haber, ahí era donde se sabía. Y a veces decían que dijieron esto o lo otro. Y si

no, la que trabajaba en el molino era la que repartía. A ella le platicaban y ya después lo platicaba a las que iban más tarde. Al mismo tiempo iba creciendo la cadena para que todo mundo se diera cuenta de lo que pasaba ... también le podía uno decir, “ah, fíjate que quería ver a fulana y no la miré, tu le podrías decir equis cosa,” y ya ella les decía, les pasaba el mensaje.⁶

In this figured world, the women in charge of el molino often had the role of facilitator in conversations and distributor of *recados*, personal notices left by one person to another. In this way, el molino served as a communal communication network.

Changes in agricultural production brought forth by the expansive forces of global capitalism restructured the community by displacing people from their land, María and her family included, forcing them to immigrate due to

El molino was replaced by *tortillerías* (tortilla shops). The owner of the *tortillería*, as a capitalist, makes a profit from selling the tortillas and from selling masa so that tortillas can be made *a mano* (by hand), at home. Also, according to María, each person has their own way of making tortillas. Reflecting on whom amongst her sisters made the best tortillas, she stated,

Yo creo que de las tres, no es porque yo lo diga, pero yo. Yo torteaba mejor que ellas porque tu tía Elisa las hacía bien grandotas y otras no sé como. Yo siempre las tenía todas del mismo tamaño y no se hacían duras ni al calentarlas. Quedaban bien. Entonces de las tres, yo.⁸

María's description of the difference between her tortillas and those of her sisters exemplifies the way in which food is a site of artistic expression. Hers were the most

El molino served as a multigenerational gathering space for the women of the community.

economic hardship. Corn imports into Mexico decimated the agricultural life of the local community. In contemporary times, according to María, very few people grow a *milpa* (an efficient crop system where corn, beans, and squash grow together) or live year-round in the community. These changes destroyed el molino as a space of convivencia and communication, and disrupted the foodways of an entire community. The destruction of these spaces and foodways involve a necropolitics (Mbembe, 2003) in the sense that specific social relations and ways of life are annihilated and other types of relations are imposed upon subjugated communities. María explained,

Ya no se usa (ir al molino) porque ya hay tortillería y toda la gente va. Sigue habiendo molino pero ya nomás es el dueño de la tortillería que lo tiene porque él muele y vende la tortilla. Ya nadie va al molino ... Si alguien quiere hacer tortillas les vende masa. Pero ya casi nadie hace las tortillas porque todo mundo las compra.⁷

uniform in size and stayed soft when reheated; they were done right. Even though every woman has her own way of making tortillas, there is an aesthetic expectation of how they should look and feel.

In the process of making tortillas, personal experience and collective memory supply the tortilla with meaning. The mechanical reproduction of a tortilla, like the mechanical reproduction of art (Benjamin, 1968), separates the original from its spatial and temporal context, thus causing the tortilla to lose its aura. The pre-packaged tortilla is a reproduction that appears to represent the original practice of producing tortillas, but erases a set of social relations, a ritual function with a spiritual effect. Caring for the milpa, harvesting the maíz, preparing the nixtamal and going to el molino can be understood as ritual acts where the connection to the land is expressed in each tortilla; in other words, both physical and spiritual nourishment.

With the advent of *tortillerías* selling prepared masa to take home, or the restaurateur hiring Mexican women specifically to make tortillas “hechas a mano” for customers, the tortilla is in a sense, fetishized. The idea of “tortillas hechas a mano” implies that this food item is a

more “authentic” product, tied to the traditional foodways that linked people to the land where they grew their own milpa. However, the masa sold at the tortillerías is most likely harvested from multinational farms of Monsanto mono-crop.⁹ In this way, “tortillas hechas a mano” represent a form of commodity fetishism (Marx, 1867/1977), conjuring emotional knowledge of a time when social relations in the production of tortilla ranged from the selection of seeds, planting, caring for and harvesting the milpa, and continuing to the nixtamal preparation, the trip to el molino, and the task of tortear—all are obscured by the commodification of this relational process of production. The commodification and homogenization of tortillas empties them of emotional and relational value; they become mere products of monetary value. Thus, *el precio de la tortilla*, the average retail cost of one kilogram of tortillas, is used as one of the main indicators of Mexico’s economic health.

LA MEMORIA DEL POZOLE

When asked what plans she had for her birthday, Lupe¹⁰ replied she would be making *pozole*, a corn-based stew, which she described as, “algo sencillo ... lo más fácil y más rápido” (something simple, the easiest and quickest thing to make). Pozole has its origins in pre-Columbian Mesoamerica. It is made of nixtamalized corn and other ingredients.¹¹ At Lupe’s home, the obligatory condiments for pozole include shredded lettuce or *col* (cabbage), finely chopped onion, thin radish rounds, avocado, lime, Valentina brand hot sauce, and *tostadas* (toasted or fried tortillas). During the course of the interview, I recalled episodes from my childhood when my mother, my siblings, and I would visit a woman who had a vegetable garden at the edge of town to buy *col*. Lupe explained that in the U.S. she switched from using *col* to using lettuce because in the U.S. it is less expensive than *col* and it is versatile for other dishes such as sandwiches and *ensaladas* (salads). Also, in the *ranchos*, she explained, *col* was a good option because it is a hearty vegetable that does not require refrigeration; it also provides a crunchy texture for the pozole. Lupe stated that in the rancho, acquiring *col* was a non-monetary transaction often exchanged for other goods by women. Lupe explained that in *las visitas*, women would often exchange whatever resources they had; sometimes these transactions involved money, but most of the time tangible and intangible goods and services were exchanged. Lupe elaborated that in

Mexico she would exchange limes from her six prolific *árboles de limón*, as well as her seamstress work, for *col* as well as other goods and services with other women in the rancho. This exchange was especially important to women who were raising a family on their own while their partners worked in the U.S.

One of these exchanges with *limones* speaks to the transcendent nature of reciprocal practices that extend beyond the living realm. Doña Cuca was well known and esteemed in the rancho for her services as a *sobadora*. A *sobador* or *sobadora* is a person who heals muscular pain with massages and is often versed in other traditional healing methods. Lupe recalls:

A Doña Cuca la querían mucho porque ella no cobraba. La gente le daba cosas, siempre tenía mucha gente en su casa y todos la estimaban mucho. Lo que pasó fue que un día llevé a Julia porque se había torcido el pie, y ella [doña Cuca] no cobraba pero le podías dejar una propina si querías y podías. Y esa vez, no sé si tenía dinero pero le llevé una bolsa de limones y me dijo que amaneció con dolor de cabeza. Tenía otra persona ahí también. Esa misma tarde se murió Doña Cuca. Antes se acostumbraba que a los muertos se les tendía en su casa sobre una mesa y no sé por qué, pero se acostumbra poner limones partidos debajo de la mesa. Se parten en cuatro partes y yo creo que es para que absorban porque también dicen que debes tener un limón debajo de tu cama o en tu bolsa y si se hace aguado significa que alguien te está haciendo algo malo.¹²

In Lupe’s recollections, the bag of *limones* was exchanged for the service of doña Cuca, la *sobadora*, and these *limones* served to send her off into the next life. One story weaves into the next, with food serving as a means of exchange of knowledge and affect, and as a site where memories are deposited.

Lupe, like María, also recalled the process of preparing the nixtamal for the pozole, which she learned

at an early age. Cal is first added to the maíz in order for the kernel to lose its outer hull and so that it may soften in the stew. It is important that the hull be removed from the kernel in order for pozole to have a soft consistency.¹³ The nixtamal must then be tended to ensure that the water does not reach boiling point because otherwise the hull will harden. Lupe recalls tending to the nixtamal from an early age:

Desde que era niña pensaba que cuando uno hacía pozole, yo todavía hago bastante, lo tenían que restregar. Como no había agua de la llave, en el rancho, pos agua del pozo. Teníamos que irnos hasta junto al pozo y en un chiquihuite, ya sabes como son, como de la ropa ... Ponerlo ahí y alguien sacando agua y alguien a dos manos restregando, porque así se le tiene que quitar todos los pellejitos, hasta que quede limpio.¹⁴

Once the nixtamal had softened, separating the kernel from the hull was a two-person task. One person had to bring up water from the well and pour it over the *chiquihuite* (basket) that held the nixtamal, while the other person rubbed the kernels together with both hands. Lupe also added that pozole was made in great quantities in a pot large enough to fit a pig's head. Once the nixtamal and meat were combined, it would then take a whole night to cook over an open firewood stove. Lupe reflects that nowadays the process is easier and that less work is invested in making a good product and in lesser quantities:

El producto final está bueno, no necesito hacer todo lo demás de ir a desgranar y de ir a lavarlo. Hago todo pero está más simple que antes. Por eso el pozole no me da trabajo. Los tamales es lo mismo. Antes guardaban el maíz contó y las hojas. Igual, antes de hacer los tamales uno tenía que remojar las mazorcas conto' y la hoja. Algunas veces ya estaban limpias pero otras veces no. Y ya pues ahorita la vida es menos difícil.¹⁵

Modern conveniences, such as running water, have made the preparation of special occasion foods, such as pozole, less difficult. The same applies to the preparation of tamales, whereas before corn had to be preserved in its husk and soaked in water so they could be cleaned, today dried husks are sold prepared and packaged in most grocery stores in California's Central Valley, where Lupe currently lives. Certain steps of the process have been eliminated, and yet, according to Lupe, the final product is still good.

Lupe's recalling of her family's tradition of making pozole every October 12th, on the day of Zapopan's patron saint, represents a collective memory that connects to an undesignated earlier time. Her perspective connects the intimate with the social; she first provides an account of how the patron saint feast began and then explains the roots of her family's tradition of eating pozole on that day. Her explanation provides a practical explanation as to why this food is prepared for festive occasions when households gather for large *visitas*. Lupe explained:

La tradición del pozole en nuestra familia empezó porque el 12 de octubre es cuando la Virgen de Zapopan regresa a Zapopan. Ya lleva mucho tiempo la tradición del pozole. Hubo una temporada de mucha lluvia y cayeron muchos rayos en Guadalajara y de ahí se empezó a hacer una romería que es llevar a la virgen de Zapopan por todos los templos de Guadalajara. Y el 12 de octubre es cuando regresa a Zapopan. La llevan para evitar desastres de agua y la caminan de un templo a otro más o menos desde abril hasta octubre y hay una fiesta en cada templo y eso ayuda al comercio. Hoy en día hasta un millón de personas van a la romería el 12 de octubre. Esa es la historia comercial pero la historia de nosotros es que mi mamá comenzó la tradición del pozole porque es muy práctico. Llegaba la familia a mediodía y había comida caliente todo el tiempo. Cenaban y almorzaban pozole con tostada principalmente. Era la familia que venía

de lejos, como cincuenta personas y después regresaban caminando a sus pueblos porque no había transporte en ese tiempo. Eso sería como en el cuarenta y ocho.¹⁶

Lupe makes a distinction between “*la historia comercial*,” the history of how the procession of La Virgen de Zapopan was established, the dates and the acts that take place, and how it benefits the community, and as she states, “*la historia de nosotros*,” which refers to the family tradition of eating pozole that was established when Lupe’s grandmother suggested pozole would be the most convenient food to make in order to easily feed *la visita*, visiting family. The personal story that adds meaning to Lupe’s pozole demonstrates the transfer of women’s knowledge and a collective history.

SOBREMESA AND CONCLUSIONS

The period following the meal, *la sobremesa*, is an important final component of the meal itself. For Lupe, the *sobremesa* means,

Convivir ... platicar lo que está sucediendo, hay que quedarse un tiempo ahí, sentados para hacer la digestión un ratito después de comer ... [era] cuando la gente se transmitían las historias familiares o las noticias que estaban sucediendo ... la *sobremesa* es platicar.¹⁷

The conversation that occurs after a meal, *la sobremesa*, is a time to talk about what is going on with family members, while giving the body time to digest in peace. It is, moreover, *ambiente*; ambience formed by the presence of others and their contribution to *convivencia*. We finish with a literal *sobremesa*.

The food-centered life histories of María and Lupe are narratives representative of history-in-person. The events, sites, and activities that contextualize their narratives play a secondary role to the experiences recalled and the meaning that individuals attribute to them. In their references to the past, we are able to see the role of collective memory as the living consciousness of a group. For instance, María narrates changes in the social relations involved in making tortillas in her hometown as a result of social and economic changes. Lupe, on the other hand, places her family’s tradition of

eating pozole on October 12th in the historical narrative of Zapopan’s patron saint. The ingredients of staple meals, such as corn, and the science and spaces involved in their preparation, as well as the time spent gathering to eat with family, are sites of collective memory. There, individuals recall past experiences, images, narratives, and emotions. This allows individuals to actively position themselves within the narrative of the wider social context of a group.

Spaces organized on women’s terms, such as *el molino*, *las visitas*, and the kitchen, exemplify the importance of *convivencia* and reciprocity. *El molino*, in María’s narrative, served as a space where women socialized, exchanged information, and recruited younger women to become part of this figured world, orchestrated by women. María and Lupe’s narratives regarding the exchange of resources, and information between women in the setting of the rancho, underscores how women’s spaces are organized in terms of reciprocity, affect, and mutual support. The *limones*, in Lupe’s narrative, served not only as currency for services, but also as an expression of reciprocated affect, and then, these same *limones* served *doña Cuca*’s passage to the next life.

Life histories continue to be a useful tool for understanding the depth of experiences and knowledge of people belonging to marginalized groups. The careful listener can discern the intersections between the personal, the familial, and the larger historical contexts that inform an individual’s identity in their everyday practices. Our participants shared a view into their particular epistemologies, ways of knowing, that are organized through spaces of *convivencia* and relationships of reciprocity. This model of research has not exhausted the possibilities for coproducing *contrac conocimiento* from within Latino communities in the U.S.

ENDNOTES

- 1 The participants were born in Jalisco and Zacatecas, Mexico and migrated to the U.S. in the early 1990s, in large part due to the devastation of local subsistence farming economies as a result of neoliberal reforms in Mexico in the 1980s and 1990s. The inquiry we engage in is informed by our experiences as *mexicanas/os* who were raised in Mexico. When our fathers and uncles left our *ranchos*, it was women *madres*, *abuelas*, and *tías* who constructed our social worlds.
- 2 *Testimonios*, as explained by John Beverly (1989), refer to, “a novel or novella-length narrative in book or pamphlet (that is, printed as opposed to acoustic) form, told in the

- first person by a narrator who is also the real protagonist or witness of the events he or she recounts, and whose unit of narration is usually a 'life' or a significant life experience" (13). Testimonios are useful in that they bring forth, as Counihan (2010; 2013) states, the voices of narrators who, given their social location, might be silenced.
- 3 María was born in El Remolino, a small rural town in the state of Zacatecas. She spent all of her life in that village until she married in 1980 and immigrated to Los Angeles with her husband. She has resided in Los Angeles approximately twenty years *en dos tiempos*, in two halves, as she described it. Her first stay lasted until the mid-1980s, with her three children having been born in Los Angeles, when her family decided to relocate to their home village.
 - 4 Well, you needed to cook the corn with a little bit of limestone, that's all. The next day, you had to wash it and take it to the community mill to ground so you could get your dough. The limestone was not that much, about a spoonful ... Back then, they made limestone from a rock. There were only some people that knew how to prepare it. Later, it was the limestone used for construction that we used for nixtamal, as it was also useful ... The limestone came from a small town nearby called Atemajac. There used to be a kind of rock like limestone, I guess, that was taken out from the hills. They knew how to burn limestone, but I don't know how that's done. They would bring it to town in dust form. They would take out the rocks from the hills and they would say they were going to burn limestone. I think it might have been with water, I think they would cover them as they burned and then they would get them wet so they would crumble into dust. There were some men that knew how to prepare the limestone so it would turn to dust.
 - 5 You had to go to the community mill everyday to get your nixtamal ground for a small fee. You were charged according to your bucket size. It was ground and you would get your dough. Everyone had to go to the community mill ... In general, it was the women that went because the children went to school. When school was not in session, it was normal to send a child, usually a girl with the nixtamal ... Going to the mill was also an opportunity to talk with the other women or to comment [on] whatever news was happening in town as you waited your turn.
 - 6 Back in those days, you would find out about everything at the community mill, like when someone was sick, getting married, or whatever was deemed important. It was like a news show about the town. Sometimes they would tell you that someone left a message for you. The woman working the mill would distribute news to whoever would show up later throughout the morning; that's how the news chain would expand and everyone in town would find out whatever was happening ... you could also leave messages with her for whoever and she would deliver the message when your friend came around.
 - 7 Today, no one goes to the mill because there is a tortilla factory in town and everyone goes there now. There is a mill, but the owner of the tortillería has it because he is the one that grounds nixtamal to sell tortillas. No one goes to the mill anymore ... If someone wants to make tortillas, he sells them the dough. But almost no one makes them because everyone buys them now.
 - 8 I think that amongst three of my sisters, not because I'm saying it, but I think it was me. I made the best tortillas because aunt Elisa would make them really big. Mine were always the same size and they wouldn't get hard. They were well made.
 - 9 See González (2001), *Zapotec Science: Farming and Food in the Northern Sierra of Oaxaca*, for a discussion on Mexican people's attitudes towards imported Conasupo corn in south central Mexico.
 - 10 Lupe was born in Zapopan, a suburb of Guadalajara, Jalisco. She spent part of her childhood in the city, part in a *rancho* in the Ixtlahuacán del Río municipality. She describes her stay in the U.S. as two stages: The first occurred in the late 1970s and early 1980s during the early part of her marriage when she gave birth to her first daughter. Due to high medical bills, and the impossibility of fixing their undocumented status, the family decided to move back to Mexico to have their next daughter. Eventually, the family migrated back to the U.S. in the early 1990s after her husband had attained legal residency through President Regan's amnesty for agricultural workers. Three of her children were born in Mexico and two in the U.S. She is now a naturalized citizen living in a rural community in California's San Joaquin Valley. She works as a homemaker, taking care of her three grandchildren.
 - 11 Pozole was first documented in alphabetical script by Fray Bernardino de Sahagún in "Historia general de

- las cosas de Nueva España,” circa 1577. There, Sahagún notes that it was a dish prepared as an offering during religious ceremonies and that meat from sacrificial victims was added to the stew. Other accounts by Jesuit missionaries who lived among the Sonora and Arizona tribes in the late eighteenth century describe pozole as a meal made of maize boiled in water with different ingredients, such as beans, chickpeas, and meat, when available, added to the mix to improve the flavor (Pradeau, 1974). An alternate spelling is “posole.”
- 12 Everyone loved doña Cuca because she didn’t charge anything. People would give her things, she always had a lot of people in her house and everyone held her in high esteem. One day, I took Julia to see her because she had twisted her ankle. That one time, I don’t know if I had any money, but I took her a bag of limes and she said she had woken up with a headache. Doña Cuca had another person in her house at that time. That afternoon, doña Cuca died. In those days, it was customary to have a wake in the deceased person’s house with the casket usually placed on top of the dining table. I don’t why, but people also placed limes under the table. They were cut in four parts, and I think it was said to absorb energy. Some people say that you should have a lime under your bed or in your pocket; and if it spoils, it means someone is doing you harm.
- 13 The etymology of the word “pozole” informs us that *pozolli* in Nahuatl means foam, because the kernels rise to the top of the stew, resembling foam (Karttunen, 1983, 205).
- 14 Well, since I was a little girl, I thought that when you make pozole you had to wash it. There wasn’t running water so we had to go to a water well with the nixtamal in a basket, like the ones for laundry ... you had to wash it there while someone else took water out of the well, someone had to kneel down to clean it because that was the only way to remove the hull until the corn was clean.
- 15 The final product is good and I don’t have to do everything else that is involved like shelling corn and washing it. I do everything, but it is simpler. It is easier than in the past. That’s why making pozole is easy for me. Making tamales is the same thing. In the past, we stored the corn with its husk. Same thing, before making tamales you had to soak the corn ears with their husk. Sometimes the husks were clean but other times they weren’t. But now, life is less difficult.
- 16 The tradition of eating pozole in our family on October 12th started because on that day the Virgin of Zapopan returns to her sanctuary. It is a 30-year tradition. There was a heavy thunderstorm season in Guadalajara, and because of that, a pilgrimage started in which the Virgin of Zapopan traveled through all the temples in Guadalajara. They take her out to prevent floods from April to October and there is a big feast at each temple, which also helps all the businesses. About a million people participate in this pilgrimage. That’s the commercial history, but our history is that my mother started the tradition of pozole because it is really practical. Different family members would stop by her house around noon and there was warm food all day. They would eat pozole with tostadas. About fifty people, all family members, traveled from far away for the pilgrimage, and then had to return on foot to their villages because there wasn’t any other means to travel. It was probably in 1948.
- 17 Convivir ... to talk about what is going on, you need to stay still for a time, to aid digestion after eating, ... it was when people passed on family stories or news about what was going on ... sobremesa is to chat.

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