READING FOOD: GENDER, ETHNICITY, AND TRANSNATIONAL IDENTITIES IN
LATINA LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

KAREN CRUZ STAPLETON: “Reading Food: Gender, Ethnicity, and Transnational Identities in Latina Literature”
(Under the direction of María DeGuzmán)

This study analyzes intersections of gender, ethnicity, and transnational identities in the literature of Latina/o writers Ernesto Quiñonez, Judith Ortiz Cofer, and Loida Maritza Pérez. Although the project includes an analysis of Quiñonez’s novel to demonstrate the novel’s discursive approach to identity, this study focuses on the texts of Latina writers. I explore how their works explore the highly contested grounds of “Americanness” and the ways in which these writings use representations of food as a means to establish, and sometimes resist, various gendered and ethnic identities. My critical lens combines Latina/o Studies and feminist theory as I interrogate the breadth of their transnational textual negotiations. This strategy lends itself to various forms of social critique and investigations of cross-cultural representations particularly since they occur in diasporic contexts as two of these authors, Ortiz Cofer and Pérez, hail from the Spanish Caribbean, Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic, respectively. Quiñonez is from New York City and has both Caribbean and Latin American roots. Their fiction maps experiences of migration to the Northeastern United States. The final chapter is an autoethnography, an analysis of a Puerto Rican food event, a holiday celebration that features a very important ethnic food, a Puerto Rican dish called pasteles.
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CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION: ON GENDER AND ETHNICITY

Before I delve into the literary texts I have chosen to analyze, I would like to offer two personal recollections. The first highlights the importance of foodways in identity issues, the latter gender and ethnicity in those same issues.

My first memory focuses on the ways food worked in a positive experience of my identity as Puerto Rican. Throughout my entire childhood, every Saturday afternoon my family would head from the Bronx to my abuela’s home in Yonkers, NY where we would visit for hours and eat the most delicious Puerto Rican meals.¹ The appetizing aromas of my grandmother’s pernile, empanadas or arroz con pollo circulated and so too did some Spanish.² I would catch fragments and expressions here and there, but we children—my siblings, cousins and I—were never spoken to in Spanish. Thus, it was through my abuela’s food that I experienced the only ethnic culture I had ever known. The family bonding and the delicious food comprise some of my very fondest memories as I primarily understood my ethnicity through the foodways my abuela shared with us each weekend as she recreated a little bit of Puerto Rico in that Yonkers apartment. As an adult, I have actively sought to

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¹ Yonkers is a city just north of and contiguous to the western section of the Bronx along the Hudson River. Though lesser well-known, like the Bronx, Yonkers, NY also has large Latina/o and African-American populations.

² Pernile is a heavily-marinated roast pork butt or shoulder. Empanadas, a fairly labor-intensive dish when made from scratch, are patties stuffed with meats or cheese. Arroz con pollo, chicken with rice, may be familiar to most readers.
learn my family’s foodways, as well as some Spanish, in an ongoing process of acculturation to my Puerto Rican heritage.

The second recollection is not pleasant. When I was in seventh grade and attending St. John’s Catholic Middle School in the Bronx, a group of approximately ten students was selected to bypass eighth grade and advance directly to high school, to “skip” as we called it. I was one of those lucky students. Later that afternoon as school let out, a group of kids stood around on the sidewalk kicking around this news. Another seventh grader, Jimmy Byrne, approached me. “So you’re one of the kids that’s gonna skip?” he inquired with a rather menacing look on his face. I was very shy in those days and I quietly confirmed this. “Well, I should be the one skipping, not you! You’re just a girl and you’re a spic,” he spewed. I could feel the heat rise to my cheeks and my eyes begin to sting and fill with tears. “At least I’m not ugly like you!” I struck back in true seventh-grade fashion as I cried my way home down Kingsbridge Avenue.

When I told my Irish-American mother what had happened, her “sage” advice, in a genuine effort to console me, was “Don’t tell anyone you’re Puerto Rican. Tell them you’re Spanish.” This episode has stayed with me, etched indelibly in my memory. It was a painful moment in some ways; Jimmy Byrne marked my difference in a public way. Two of the facets of my identity—my gender and my Puerto Rican heritage—two aspects of my being that I hadn’t considered very much at the ripe old age of twelve, became for me potential sources of shame. I did not recognize prior to that scathing critique that I was supposedly somehow deficient on two counts. It appears that gender and ethnicity issues can confront a person when she is neither aware of, nor expecting, them.
My mother’s third generation, very “Americanized” family was thoroughly assimilated and seemingly devoid of culture. In fact, no recognizable traces of Irish heritage informed their language or their foodways. They became transparently “American.” With no foreign accent, nondescript fair skin and no discernible ethnic, phenotypical features, my mother and her siblings dissolved quite readily into the “American” cultural melting pot. My mother’s command that counseled “not to tell anyone” that I was Puerto Rican was, in her mind, a measure to protect me from what she construed as a state of being (being half Puerto Rican that is) worse than that of an identity originating more directly from Spain. Her advice created a somewhat conflicted sense of my identity and heightened my ambivalent subject position. My ambivalence derived from the tension between my affinity and fondness for Puerto Rican culture and my mother’s recommendation to deny that part of myself. Apparently, my mother was aware of the colonial hierarchy implicit in her comment about choosing “Spanish,” rather than claiming a Puerto Rican background, as she urged a European identification. Although she never articulated her reasons, in retrospect, I am certain she intuited that to embrace a Puerto Rican heritage was also an admission of an alignment with the natives of the island, as well as with the Africanness inherent in such an identity, an element of Caribbean populations as a result of the slave trade. Though I am certainly not defined by this psychic wound in any over-determined sense, I have on occasion

\[\text{^3 The extent of my mother’s acknowledgement of her Irish heritage was an annual meal of boiled corned beef and cabbage on St. Patrick’s Day. Somewhat comically, and ironically, she was more interested in how to make a good pernile.}\]
wondered, how does such a suggested disavowal of self function, especially when it originates from one’s own mother?

Perhaps it functions partly through one’s work since my decision to focus this project on “girl spics,” like myself, is a political act, a conscious and deliberate form of resistance to the male, Anglocentric and Eurocentric center that still informs our cultural, literary and educational institutions; yet in some oblique way, it’s also a very belated retort to the “Jimmy Byrnes” of the world, a kind of castigatory response for the humiliation I experienced so very long ago. The Puerto Rican heritage that the ignorant boy so cruelly disparaged, and that my loving, but ill-advised and ill-advising, mother suggested I deny, was the source of many of my most cherished youthful experiences, and his comment about gender was only the start of a long realization about the inequities that women have faced, and continue to suffer, to this day. But I also chose to focus my textual analysis on these Latina writers for several other reasons: because their texts are woman-centered, provocative and challenging, and because they are serious authors who are in the process of rewriting culture and redefining the “American” literary canon.4

The literary works in this study feature Latina/o protagonists who offer fresh vantage points to the “American” experience and are in the process of attempting to build a new life and to claim the United States as their home. In contradistinction to many previous immigration narratives that portray paths following rigidly assimilationist patterns, these

4 For a comprehensive study on Latina/os’ profound and pervasive influence on U.S. literature and culture see María DeGuzmán’s 2012 Buenas Noches, American Culture in which she examines the aesthetics of night in representations of Latina/o identities and how the cultural production of Latina/os is transforming the “American” cultural landscape.
texts offer new ways of describing what it means to be “American,” ways that negotiate hybrid cultural experiences and preserve important aspects of Latina/o culture(s) such as Latina/o foodways, bilingualism, and Latina/o spiritualities. This focus on issues relevant to Latina/os brings great cultural synergy and energy to “American” literature.

These pressures on the canon invite the creation of alternative models of interpretation too. Offering the reader new and exciting literary constructs, these authors and their protagonists do not insist upon an either/or dynamic regarding ethnic identification, a process in which immigrants must simply relinquish the country of origin in a conventional, assimilation model in order to become fully or truly “American,” or they simply remain thoroughly loyal to the original, native country without adopting new customs, language, and culture. Rather, the protagonists in these novels unapologetically maintain selective facets of the culture from the country of origin without compromising their new status as “American.” They become “American” on their own terms. Indeed, these authors depict characters at various stages in this complex negotiation of identity. In *Bodega Dreams*, Ernesto Quiñonez relies on the emergence of Spanglish as the predominant means of articulating a new hybrid identity as he inserts Spanish into “American” literary discourse. I use Quiñonez to establish a contrast with the two Latina writers and their greater focus on the language of food as a means of expressing ethnic identities.

The other two literary works, *The Latin Deli* and *Geographies of Home*, are woman-centered texts. With my readings of these texts, I am developing a mode of interpretation that

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5 Quiñonez is actually second generation. His mother is Puerto Rican and his father Ecuadorian.
allows for a focus on quotidian matters such as foodways. In significant measure, these Latina authors use the language of food to write against stereotypes and provide a counterdiscourse against the racism and misogyny inherent in Anglo-American U.S. culture and in the exclusions from the traditional “American” canon, more specifically. Thankfully, times are changing. In fact, the work of one of the authors in this study, Judith Ortiz Cofer, now appears in *The Heath Anthology of American Literature*, fifth edition.  

\[^{6}\] In addition to Ortiz Cofer, *The Heath Anthology of American Literature*, fifth edition, features a considerable number of Latina authors including Chicanas, Gloria Anzaldúa, Sandra Cisneros, Helena María Viramontes, Lorna Dee Cervantes; Puerto Rican writers, Sandra Maria Esteves, Aurora Levins Morales, and Nicholas Mohr; and Filipina Jessica Hagedorn. *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, seventh edition, is less inclusive and lists only one Latina, Gloria Anzaldúa, in the table of contents.
CHAPTER TWO

FEMINISM, IDENTITY POLITICS, AND FOOD

My personal recollections serve to underscore some major themes about identity in this project. The main objective of this study is to demonstrate how food, in literature and in lived experience, functions as an important cultural signifier which powerfully informs the construction of gendered, ethnic, and transnational identities in the works of two Latina writers. I will examine through a feminist and Latina/o Studies perspective the ways in which foodways act as basic and important medium of cultural practices through which ethnic identities are negotiated, constructed, and even resisted, in the works of Latinas who write in English, but hail from the Spanish Caribbean, namely Judith Ortiz Cofer (Puerto Rico) and Loida Maritza Pérez (Dominican Republic). The two Latina authors in this study skillfully

7 Latina/o Studies is a transdisciplinary and heterogeneous field of study which takes as its focus Latina/o cultural production and experience with a broad constellation of factors and possibilities making it a very, pliable, porous and useful field of study. From its inception, it is transnational, and even international. According to the Carolina Hub for Latina/o Studies at The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, “Latinas/os are defined as people of Latin American and/or Iberian heritage living and working in the United States or U.S.-based but also moving between the U.S. and the rest of the Americas. Latinas/os are ethno-racially diverse, of African, indigenous, Asian, and European descent; linguistically diverse, speaking varieties of English, Spanish, Portuguese, Spanglish, African, Asian, and indigenous languages; and culturally diverse, coming from more than 35 countries and 5 continents. Unlike Latin American Studies where the primary focus is on the cultures and experiences of various parts of Latin America (an umbrella term covering Mexico, Central America, the Caribbean, and South America), Latina/o Studies takes as its primary concern the presence of Latin America, Spain, Portugal, and the myriad combinations of Hispanic-Native-African-Asian-and-European non-Hispanic cultures within the borders of the United States.” Additionally, for a sound overview of the various concepts and paradigms, such as mestizaje, border studies, immigration and bilingualism, to name a few, that are pertinent to Latina/o Studies see Antonia Darder and Rodolfo D. Torres’s The Latino Studies Reader: Culture, Economy and Society. For an explanation of the similarities and distinctions between Latin
deploy a variety of food tropes which invoke aspects of Latina/os, gendered, ethnic, and transnational identities.

Mary Jane Suero-Elliott writes: “The last several decades have witnessed the emergence of a distinct thematic trend in contestatory Latina literature. This trend is transnational and theorizes a new model of immigrant bicultural identity based on the transmigratory patterns of Latinos in the twentieth century, specifically Mexican American, Cuban American and Puerto Ricans [and I insert Dominican Americans here] (332). The Latina authors I treat here demonstrate the “transmigratory subjectivity” Suero-Eliott references, albeit in different ways. In addition, I conceive of this relation between literature and lived experience as reciprocal, as a productive relationship from which may emerge affirming new possibilities for Latinas. Clearly, the Latina texts that I analyze are considerably autobiographical. In turn, Latina readers of such literary texts, and others, may develop insights for ways to survive and thrive in real relations in a world still troubled by ethnic and gender power inequities. Non-Latina readers may develop empathy and an enhanced understanding of various Latina immigrant experiences. Thus, I am arguing for the importance of literature and literary criticism in the struggle against racism and misogyny. However, I am not suggesting that the only quality these literary works possess is their social use value. The texts are also well-crafted, lyrical at times, and aesthetically pleasing.

American Studies and Latina/o Studies see Critical Latin American and Latino Studies by Juan Poblete.
Food and Identity

"The way we eat represents our most profound engagement with the natural world" (Michael Pollan, The Omnivore's Dilemma).

The consumption of food in one form or another is a daily human requirement, a necessary and fundamental activity, and although the major functions of consumption are to sustain life and to nourish the body, food and food practices can have profound cultural significance. To be sure, there are few aspects of human existence quite as universal as eating though how food is acquired, prepared and consumed varies in a nearly infinite number of ways. Pollan’s quote above signals the deep meanings people create, even unwittingly in many cases, through the ways in which they eat and produce culture from that engagement with the natural environment. In addition to biological sustenance, food also can provide great personal and collective meanings as people re-present themselves, their identities, their values and their world views through foodways. Social scientists such as Claude Levi-Strauss, Mary Douglas, and Claude Fischler, to name a few, have all interrogated the importance of foodways in regard to the meanings of food in social relations and identity construction.8 Indeed, experiences of eating surround many important rituals in the lives of human beings, experiences that support particular identity formations and bind people together, or in some cases, differentiate them, in compelling and lasting ways. From the ordinary practices of cooking and sharing nightly dinner, to large communal feasts such as weddings and holiday gatherings, food signifies about how we experience ourselves and

8 See Levi-Strauss’s The Raw and the Cooked; Douglas’s Deciphering a Meal; Fischler’s Food: A Culinary History from Antiquity to the Present.
others. Food historian Peter Scholliers invites us to consider the relevance of the many facets of food practices relating to social inclusion as he explains “that sentiments of belonging via food do not only include the act of classification and consumption, but also the preparation, the organisation, the time, the language, the symbols, the representation, the form, the meaning and the art of eating and drinking” as close evidence of the intimate connection between food and identity (7). Thus, this analysis will take into account a variety of consumption and food-related behaviors.

Traditionally, language, for many writers and scholars, has been the predominant vehicle through which people understand and acknowledge what constitutes primary aspects of identity formation, but food acts are also important acts of identity. My aim is not to deny the profound importance of discourse as one of the ways in which identities are constituted. Certainly, language has great power to shape and influence real lives, as well as the power to encourage new world views and new valuations of ourselves and others. Rather, I wish to offer a perspective on the significance of foodways and to think about the relationship between experiences of eating and discursive modes of apprehending and defining the self. In *Food, the Body, and the Self*, Deborah Lupton asserts correctly: “Food and eating are central to our subjectivity, our sense of self, and our experience of embodiment, or the ways that we live in and through our bodies, which is itself inextricably linked with subjectivity” (1). Like Lupton, I aim to offer a productive interrogation of foodways in establishing and maintaining identities both through the discourse that surrounds foodstuffs and consumption practices, but also, in some instances, through eating as an experience of embodiment, an experience that also invites us to recognize the significance of non-discursive identificatory
mechanisms. This strategy, I hope, highlights female forms of cultural production, such as women’s creative relationship with foodways, which has been historically overlooked. This study explores questions such as: What is the meaning of transforming the raw materials of nature into an edible and cultural production? And what then of writing the food into text? What connections exist between food and epistemology; between epistemology, food and geography; between food and aesthetics; and how do these questions intersect with concerns about gender, ethnicity, and transnationalism? This project will consider these questions and others, and attempts to lay the groundwork for further thinking about U.S. Latina cultural production in food and in letters.

**Women, Philosophy and Food**

One might ponder why forms of female cultural production have been routinely ignored and depreciated, and I would like to explicate some concepts that seem to inform western culture at its source. In part, the exclusion of women and the devaluation of their work relates to ideas about what constitutes knowledge and what kinds of knowledge women may or may not possess. Indisputably, valuations of knowledge have a long history that originate in some of the instantiating texts in western civilization and thinking. In *Woman and the History of Philosophy* Nancy Tuana examines the position of women in relation to the study of philosophy, specifically how women are constructed in canonical philosophical texts, an exploration which leads to a greater understanding of how and why the cultural productions of women, and I include food practices here, have been undervalued for so long. Tuana argues that women are forced to identify against themselves in order to be part of philosophical and political discourse, and I posit academic and literary discourses as well.
This identification is problematic, however, since by doing so, many women deny some important characteristics that are valuable to their conception of themselves as women, such as “emotion, empathy, connectedness” (4), qualities that most women employ to enhance a broad spectrum of social relations, relationships with children, other women, men, animals and even the natural world.

Tuana proposes that using the practice of reading as a woman “reveals the ways in which philosophers’ [and other scholars] culturally inherited beliefs about women affect their theories. We very quickly discover that the discourse of philosophers is not gender neutral” (5). Indeed, neither are conventional valuations of culture and knowledge. Tuana also observes that “Focusing attention on the subject of woman exposes the fact that philosophers have inscribed gender biases on the central categories of their thinking- what it is to be human, to be rational, to be moral, to be a political agent” (5). Thus, if women’s humanity, rationality, morality and political agency have all been dubious since the inception of western civilization, is it any wonder that the social, cultural and political contributions of women have been historically overlooked, even disparaged?

In addition to the ancient philosophers, Tuana also examines, and criticizes, Enlightenment thinkers such as Descartes for his impossible theory of absolute objectivity and detachment. She observes that “human knowledge is envisioned by Descartes as objective, that is, independent of human concerns or values” (36). Explaining that Descartes excludes the senses and the imagination (notably two resources necessary for cooking), from the realm of reason because these faculties are subjective, Tuana refutes Descartes’ conception of a radical separation of mind and matter, an artificial separation that then invites
a binary upon which a hierarchy is imposed. This hierarchy subordinates the body, the pole with which women are conventionally aligned. According to Descartes, in order to be rational, one must detach from needs, desires and the particularities of the body, and certainly an important need and desire is food. This dichotomy problematically polarizes and genders reason and emotion (as if women and men do not possess and utilize both faculties). Tuana admits that Descartes believed women, too, could be reasonable with training that taught them to ignore their bodily appetites and their emotions. He considered that emotions are transitory; he rejected affect as a source of knowledge of the good or the just, and that an action is moral only if based on reason. This philosophizing may seem gender neutral, however, the prevailing view of women at the time was that they were more carnal, and the desires of the female body stronger, thus, implicitly, the majority of women were incapable of reason and moral agency.⁹

In contrast to these traditional and negative assessments of women’s capacities, some contemporary theories validate lived experience as sites of knowledge and I strongly believe that women throughout the ages have had their own particular wisdom, a wisdom rooted in the everyday and in concrete, bodily experience. In Deane W. Curtin and Lisa Heldke’s *Cooking, Thinking, Eating: Transformative Philosophies of Food*, the authors propose that

⁹ Although Descartes never explicitly stated that women were unfit for advanced learning, Tuana infers that the social reality of a life of contemplation and of the difficult intellectual training required was antithetical to the socially mandated, practical demands made on the lives of most women.
innovative ways of thinking about food may inspire new questions which challenge some of
basic tenets of western philosophy. They inquire:

One might well ask why the philosophy of food does not already exist as a
domain of philosophical discourse on par with epistemology, metaphysics, or
aesthetics. Why have philosophers not treated food as a proper subject of
philosophical inquiry, equal in importance to subjects like the nature of
knowledge and the human soul? (Curtin and Heldke intro xiii)

Given the universal aspect of food consumption, their question about food as a fit topic for
philosophical contemplation broadens the philosophical and academic field. The writers offer
a highly probable reason for such an oversight as they suggest that, “One important feature of
an explanation for this philosophical neglect is clear. In many, if not most, cultures, food
production and preparation activities are women’s work and/or the work of slaves or lower
classes” (Curtin Heldke xiii), an observation that will help to develop my analysis in terms of
both gender and ethnicity. Despite traditional discourses that ignore food, experiences
surrounding eating inform both epistemology and aesthetics in literature and in life. The
ways in which we experience food reveals much about epistemology and how we know the
world. Indeed, our very sense of timing and the rhythms of everyday existence, to a
significant degree, is measured out by daily, repeated acts of consumption. Regarding
aesthetics, one might contemplate the beauty of formal food art, such as butter or sugar
sculptures, or even the riot of color in an ordinary summer salad. The relation of food to
epistemology and aesthetics can also be observed in literature as I will demonstrate in the following chapters.

In addition, Curtin and Heldke insist that, [their] interest in food, however, goes deeper than explicating the claim that many western philosophers have simply been sexist in the most transparent way. Making a more radical claim, one that argues for the centrality of food at the root of human experience, the authors suggest that thinking about food philosophically,

[c]an also reveal that the basic projects of western philosophical inquiry have been skewed. Our tradition has tended to privilege questions about the rational, the unchanging and eternal, and the abstract and mental; and to denigrate questions about embodied, concrete, practical experience. For example, the way in which the concept of personal identity has classically been approached by philosophers is by assuming the self to be a discrete, disembodied ego....By contrast, taking the production and preparation of food as an illuminating source, we might formulate a conception of the person which focuses on our connection with and dependence on the rest of the world. (intro xiv)

Like Tuana, Curtin and Heldke locate women’s various exclusions in the problematic alignment of women with “embodied, concrete, practical experience” and with the characteristically male fiction of an “abstract,” and “disembodied self.” Curtin and Heldke
invite a consideration of the possibility of a “food-centered philosophy of human being” (intro xiv), and, of necessity, this prospect demands taking into account the daily rituals surrounding consumption. Food is a critical medium through which to explore the everyday, the relational and the transient, though no less important for not being “unchanging and eternal” aspects of human existence. Indeed, part of my project is to recast as highly significant the cultural assessment of the importance of foodways which relates intimately to women’s experiences and female personhood. My aspiration is to contribute to the feminist tradition in scholarship that is personal as well as political in that this kind of study may bring greater critical awareness to the cultural work of Latinas who perform both “women’s work” and the “work of the lower classes.” Such an approach, I hope, serves to validate women’s contributions to culture, as well as to emphasize the ontological status of women as fully human in a culture that, unfortunately and pervasively, continues to objectify and dehumanize them, especially women of color, in a myriad of damaging ways. Thus, feminist philosophy informs my critical stance in this project. “Feminist philosophy can be seen partly as a process of learning how to value the ordinary experiences of women’s lives, experiences that have been defined by patriarchal culture as trivial” (Curtin, “Food/Body/Person” 8).

Focusing on the concept of women’s lived experience, in a segment entitled “The Brutal History of Women’s Silencing” in The Everyday World As Problematic: A Feminist Sociology, Dorothy E. Smith cites several instances of women’s “peculiar eclipsing” such as Caroline Herschel’s “major work” in astronomy, which is solely attributed to her brother William Herschel, or the “subordination of genius to the discipline of service in the home” in the case of the Brontë sisters, or even the accidental female mathematician who discovered
math by exposure to a brother’s lesson (23). Smith insists that “the exclusion of women from the making of our culture is not the product of some biological deficiency or a biological configuration of some kind. As we learn more about women’s history we discover that a powerful intellectual and artistic current moves like an underground stream through the history of the last few centuries” (22). Thus, Smith highlights the fact that women have, indeed, had their own “powerful intellectual and artistic current” but one that androcentric culture was, and is, loathe to appreciate or even acknowledge. Smith observes that since we live in a world in which male thinking rules, “women’s opinions are sharply separated from their lived experience” (35). Smith explains that:

The ideological practices of our society provide women with forms of thought and knowledge that constrain us to treat ourselves as objects. We have learned to set aside as irrelevant, to deny, or to obliterate our own subjectivity and experience. We have learned to live inside a discourse that is not ours and that expresses and describes a landscape in which we are alienated and that preserves that alienation as integral to its practice. (Smith 36)

Part of the response to this state of affairs of self-objectification and alienation in an effort to dismantle this insidious hegemony “involves taking up the standpoint of women as an experience of being, of society, of social and personal process that must be given form and expression in the culture, whether as knowledge, as art, or as literature or political action “
The writers I treat in this study produce art and literature that does indeed raise awareness of gender and ethnic/racial inequity and may possibly spur political action.

Identity Politics

More recent discourses on knowledge and subjectivity arise in postmodernist theories. Admittedly, postmodernism with its various anti-essentialist arguments and well-considered manifestos against universals, transcendent reason, and objectivity has done much to challenge the grand narratives of western culture, an effect which has opened up social, literary and political spaces for many marginal groups and has thus rendered the academy significantly more inclusive. As Linda J. Nicolson explains, postmodernism has pointed toward “the failure, common to many forms of academic scholarship, to recognize the embeddedness of its own assumption within a specific historical context” and that even early feminists “were not used to acknowledging that the premises from which they were working possessed a specific location” (2). Indeed, postmodernism has exposed the fiction of ideological neutrality in literature, interpretation, even philosophy, and has fostered an awareness by drawing attention to the social positions of scholars and theorists and how “all scholarship reflected the perspectives and ideals of its creators” (3). Thus, I gesture to the particular social location, as demonstrated in my opening anecdotes, from which I write (female, partial Puerto Rican, working class, and also heterosexual). In fact, the postmodern critique has in some way has made possible such a project as this one since it has challenged the rigid distinctions between “high” art and mass culture, and certainly the importance of
food, and its “low brow,” mundane characteristics, arises from the possibilities inherent in such a postmodern challenge to this dichotomy.

Nevertheless, from a feminist and ethnic perspective, I believe I must offer a brief explanation for my privileging and maintaining gender and ethnicity as key factors in my analysis, I take issue with postmodern theory on a few important counts. The first is that one undesirable result of the widespread influence of postmodernism in the humanities and social sciences is that as more women, and people of color, have found their voices and achieved success in letters, education and a wide range of disciplines, postmodernism and its obsession with fragmented selves seems to have eviscerated the notion of the subject, just as marginalized people were finding their voice and gaining ground, so to speak (though some postmodernists might argue that there is no ground to gain). Along these lines, Christine Di Stefano rephrases Nancy Hartsock’s (1987) incisive query: “Why is it, that just at the moment in Western history that previously silenced populations have begun to speak for themselves and on behalf of their subjectivities, that the concept of the subject and the possibility of creating discovering/creating a liberating ‘truth’ become suspect?” (75). In addition, Jane Flax, in accord with Hartsock and Di Stefano, is “deeply suspicious of the motives of those who counsel such a move at the moment when women [and I add here Latinas/os] have just begun to remember their selves and claim an agentic subjectivity” (106). So just as Latinas begin a commitment to an exploration of the self, there is no longer

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10 For a study that offers several arguments covering the positive intersections between feminism with postmodernism, as well as essays that register anxiety about what postmodernism might mean for women, see Linda L. Nicholson (ed.), *Feminism/Postmodernism.*
a self to explore. How terribly inconvenient this is for women, and people of color, as they, too, have fairly recently begun to claim “an agentic subjectivity.”

Let us focus more specifically on women for a moment. Historically, women have been effaced in numerous ways which preclude a strong sense of self. Consider the longstanding tradition of the use of male generics, wives taking their husbands’ names, or the legal practice of coverture. Unfortunately, such customs are not so removed from the contemporary moment. Male generics are still in use in far too many contexts. Occasionally, I still receive mail addressed to Mrs. Paul J. Stapleton. Even more disturbing are some recent essays by some of my first-year students. In fact, in the spring semester of 2012 during a unit on gender in a writing course I taught at North Carolina State University, one young man wrote an essay about his mother’s trying to purchase a car. Unbelievably, the salesman would not show the woman a car without her husband present. Another student described a situation in which his cousin and her husband were buying a house and the male lawyer who was to perform their closing refused to put the wife’s name on the legal deed as co-owner, even though she worked and was paying half the mortgage. Thankfully, in the first example, the woman took her business elsewhere. In the second, the couple hired another lawyer to close their real estate transaction. I cite these specific instances to demonstrate that the struggle for an “agentic subjectivity” is not merely theoretical and certainly not over.

Taking again the oft-cited feminist mantra that the personal is political, I posit that perhaps the deconstruction of personhood may also be political, and androcentrically, motivated. For example, Di Stefano writes:
First, postmodernism expresses the claims and needs of a constituency (white, privileged men of the industrialized West) that has already had an Enlightenment for itself and is now ready and willing to subject that legacy to critical scrutiny...mainstream postmodernism theory (Derrida, Lyotard, Rorty, Foucault) has been remarkably blind and insensitive to questions of gender in its own purportedly politicized rereading of history, politics and culture...the post modern project, if seriously adopted by feminists, would make any semblance of a feminist politics impossible. (30)

Thus, women have barely begun to construct a “legacy.” I am not arguing for an essentialist, unreflective critical position. However, since women have historically not been subjects in the ways that men have been, perhaps a different kind of “critical scrutiny” is in order. Why destroy the tentative and precarious scaffolding of women’s culture and politics that the women’s movement in its various waves has so painfully constructed? I agree with DiStefano in that some postmodern notions are “remarkably blind and insensitive to questions of gender” in that perhaps the postmodernist undermining of “the concept of the subject” is in itself a highly political project, one that leaves women without a “feminist politics,” bereft of a sense of self and lacking a foundation to stand on, and perhaps no better off than with the previous aforementioned ancient and Enlightenment male-authored, male-centered discourses. Perhaps postmodernism also insists that women must embrace a discourse that is not of our making and that describes a world in which we are encouraged to accept the eradication of ourselves as subjects, a world in which “any semblance of a
feminist politics [is] impossible.” Thus, I maintain that while not making universal claims, feminist scholars should not be too willing to abandon “woman” as a category of analysis.

Unfortunately, misogyny and the systematic oppression of women in the 21st century is still a fact of life for far too many women. For example, recent efforts by U.S. Catholic bishops to deny woman who are employed by Catholic institutions health coverage for contraception demonstrates the fact that in some instances women are still oppressed as a category of people though, admittedly, this denial of a health service would affect various women in a multiplicity of negative ways. Predominantly, this restriction would have an impact on heterosexual women of child-bearing years most profoundly and extensively. However, hypothetically, even a middle-aged lesbian, working for a Catholic institution, who required birth control pills for the amelioration and regulation of peri-menopausal symptoms would be denied access to this basic health care, or would have to pay the exorbitant price for this medication without prescription coverage, or would be forced to confess to her employer the very personal nature of her condition. The Catholic bishops have also recently taken aim, (comically I find), at the Girls Scouts’ organization and their supposed allegiance with Planned Parenthood. Indeed, the media has reported that there may indeed be a new “war on women,” and while one rightly might be suspect of such media rhetoric, a recent docudrama The Invisible War (2012) by Kirby Dick exposes the crisis of the epidemic rape of female soldiers in the U.S. military. The film discloses such disturbing facts that a female soldier is more likely to be raped by a fellow soldier than killed by enemy fire, and that a mere two percent of reported cases ever result in a conviction. With little recourse and access to a system of justice, most victims remain silent and the ones who speak are threatened in a host
of punitive ways. There may, indeed, be a war on women, as a general, though not entirely universal, category of people. I offer these examples a means of demonstrating the persistent misogyny, devaluation and disempowerment of women that still pervades U.S. culture.

An additional issue I take with postmodernism is that the exclusive focus on language and the discursive construction of identities seems to fail to adequately address aspects of embodied and material experience. Although I do not deny the fluid, constructed and discursive nature of many aspects of identity, I am loath to privilege discourse and constructedness to the extent of the near exclusion of the body and the ways in which embodiment does, in fact, lend a real cohesion to the human experience of selfhood. Furthermore, I suspect, (though how is anyone to know for certain?), that reality, and identity, is not all language, not entirely discursively constructed. I point here to Žižek’s idea about “some real nondiscursive kernel of enjoyment,” (202), the partially non-discursive nature of nationalism that I write about in chapter five and perhaps there exist some “kernels” of the real in other types of human experience, some kernels that relate to embodied experience.

Perhaps it is true that human beings do not have direct access to “the real” and that all experience is mediated through the senses and that most experience is mediated through language. However, my language, or anyone else’s, does not entirely construct the universe, or the self. The physical fact of possessing female reproductive organs or the biological fact of one’s dark skin cannot be entirely discursively constructed or deconstructed beyond the limits of one’s body. For me, some postmodern thinking fails to engage with the “hard” facts of the realities of human bodies. According to Linda Martín Alcoff, bodies function in the
world, and that possessing certain kinds of bodies restricts or expands a person’s possibilities in life, possibilities for tangible social goods such as education and jobs, but also the more abstract possibilities like autonomy and self-determination. Admittedly, the meanings ascribed to these “facts” are socially constructed and therein lies the problem. The negative qualities and restrictions applied to certain bodies are not natural. Nonetheless, many people cannot readily escape the racialized body, the ethnic body, the female body or the disabled body. For these reasons, when I encountered the concepts articulated by post-positivist theorists such as Alcoff regarding a reconsideration of identity politics, I discovered a more nuanced and developed expression which addressed many of my own concerns regarding postmodernism, its uses and its limitations. In Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self, Alcoff rehearses some of the usual objections to identity politics:

Political critics of identity politics claim that it fractures coalitions and breeds distrust of those outside one’s group. Theoretical critics of identity politics claim that identities are social constructions rather than natural kinds, that they are indelibly marked by the oppressive conditions that created them in the first place, and therefore should not be given so much weight or importance. They point out, with some justification, that racial categories are specious ways to categorize human beings, that gender differences are overblown… These and other sorts of arguments are used to suggest that identities are ideological fictions, imposed from above, and used to divide and control populations…we
should eliminate the salience of identity in everyday life, not institutionalize it

Alcoff admits that “[I]dentity designations are clearly the product of learned cognitive maps and learned modes of perception” (italics hers) but counters with the argument that “they operate through visible physical features and characteristics, and one cannot simply ‘rise above’ or ignore them” (ix).

Thus, I position myself as a post-positive realist, a qualified defender of identity politics, in a feminist and Latina/o Studies theoretical space between objectivist, essentialist, realist theories, and the more fluid, contingent site of postmodernism. Alcoff explains that the broad goal of her project “is to elaborate identity as a piece of social ontology whose significance is still under-emphasized in most social theory,” and she “appreciate[s] and [does] have in fact some direct acquaintance with the contextual nature and fluidity of identity as well as the extent to which identity ascriptions can be oppressive” (ix). Thus, like Alcoff, while acknowledging the enormous import of language and representation, I also admit the ontological and epistemic value of having a recognizable, somewhat coherent identity though in no way am I arguing for categorical absolutes or for a totally reified sense of self. I would like to operate in such a way as to allow the body to exert a bit of pressure on discourse, and to acknowledge the tension between representation as an aspect of discourse and the embodiment people experience outside of texts. The lived experience of being female and/or Latino, African-American or Asian American is such that the harsh reality of embodied experience demands an admission of the importance of gender, ethnicity and race
in the lives of real people. Hence, although absolute objectivity can never be attained, and we
can never fully know our changing selves or the changing world, nevertheless, we can
certainly know a great deal, and I read food, and its concomitant activities, as an important
source of both knowledge and identity.

The final count rests on the postmodern evasion of all generalization and theoretically
totalizing tendencies. Though I recognize the ways in which these kinds of gestures have
been oppressive, I nonetheless resist relinquishing all theories, especially ones that attempt to
create meaningful insights about gender, even those insights that cross cultures and time
periods. Perhaps it is possible to both create meaningful, though not totalizing,
generalizations as I believe that gender is still a basic and significant axis of domination,
while maintaining deep sensitivity to the fact that any observation is never entirely accurate
or universal, but that nonetheless illuminates certain truths for a broad swath of society.
Regarding gender, Alcoff aptly describes the contours of experience shared by many women.
In a move that makes some generalizations postmodernists might argue with, she locates
herself as being

privy to a space of experience many men do not know enough about to really
understand: the double day, the ordinary stress and guilt of the working
mother, the sexual harassment that is a constant aspect of the working
environment, the epidemic of sexual terrorism that is neither named as such
nor addressed with effective deterrents, the daily cultural assault of
instrumentalized reductions of women to their appearance. These life
experiences have both motivated and informed my feminism, which I define simply as a nonfatalistic attitude toward “women’s lot in life” (xi).

In this veritable litany of oppressions, Alcoff outlines the ways in which gender exerts exceedingly real pressures on the daily lives of women. I would add to this list the enduring constraint of women’s having been responsible for the feeding of people throughout the ages, a responsibility that impresses itself upon many women worldwide to this day. Alcoff qualifies her observation by admitting that “many” men do not know these experiences, which suggests she believes that some might and she admits that it is indeed her “life experience.” Alcoff does not speak from an Archimedean point, nor does she attribute women’s oppression to one single cause. Nevertheless, I would posit that these generalizations are by and large an accurate depiction of the life conditions of a number of women, and, in my opinion, remain a useful form of analysis. Whatever dissonance and differences exist among various groups of women must be acknowledged, interrogated and appreciated but perhaps not privileged as the central sites of analysis.

Again, I turn to Di Stefano who argues, “To the extent that feminist politics is bound up with a specific constituency or ‘subject,’ namely, women, the postmodernist prohibition against subject-centered inquiry and theory undermines the legitimacy of a broad-based organized movement dedicated to articulating and implementing the goals of such a constituency” (30-31). In fact, a recent demonstration at Chicago’s NATO summit, one comprising groups of environmentalists, anti-war activists and union supporters, revealed what a postmodern protest might look like. For instance, one of the protesters was quoted as
lamenting the fact that, “the issue with the protest here is that everybody is kind of protesting their own thing” and “it isn’t super-effective,” and another protester characterized the event as “very disorganized” (“Lots of Voices, Very Little Unity,” News and Observer, May 22, 2012). Though this was not a women’s or civil rights march, so to speak, the comments underscore the political inefficacy of highly fractured, disunited bands of aggrieved people.

Let us be clear that what we read in the mainstream press in regard to such protests like this NATO summit demonstration and The OCCUPY Movement must be considered with some measure of skepticism. I will rely on the numbers here to support my point. It was also reported in the same article that police estimated attendance at the NATO summit demonstration at 2,200 while organizers highballed that figure at 15,000, but this discrepancy is not what interests me. Not surprisingly, another statistic relating to ethnicity serves to emphasize the potential political effectiveness of identity-based movements. The article noted that, in comparison to the NATO protest, a previous demonstration that marched through the streets of Chicago in 2006 boasted roughly 500,000 participants, a march for immigration reform (“Lots of Voices, Very Little Unity,” News and Observer, May 22, 2012). More recently, just days ago President Obama in a unilateral move offered “amnesty” for approximately 800,000 illegal immigrants brought to the United States by their parents, young people who will no longer have to live with the dread of deportation (“Obama to Permit Young Migrants to Remain in U.S.” The New York Times, June 15, 2012).  

11 In what

11 In the same article, Obama emphasized that the relief was not technically amnesty, but rather a revision in deportation practices. In addition, The Pew Hispanic Center, a nonpartisan research group in Washington, estimated that as many as 1.4 million immigrants might qualify for this relief.
was considered a political move to entice the Latina/o voting bloc, Obama’s maneuver demonstrated that he keenly felt the political pressure. Certainly, the persistent press coverage of The Dream Act protestors provided further impetus to force the President’s hand. Seemingly, there is political power in numbers. I am not proffering a derisive criticism of the NATO Summit protesters or the OCCUPY Movement. Rather, I am suggesting that the demonstrators of the 2006 immigration reform protest in Chicago, or even more specifically, The Dream Act protestors across the nation, have a more precisely delineated and unified, thereby efficacious, agenda and set of goals. Indeed, the Dream Act advocates for protections specifically for youth, youth who otherwise would be terminated and undeservedly placed on a dead end social track.

**Gender and Food**

For centuries, women have been denied access to higher education, even basic literacy in certain places and eras, and thus also denied access to sophisticated forms of linguistic production. The kitchen, however, has been a site where women have had some measure of cultural expression and influence on identities, their own and those of others. It is my assertion that this cultural expression functions both in literature and in lived experience. I am reminded of Alice Walker’s mother, who “In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens,” produced beauty from the scarce materials at hand, and planted flowers in the cracks of the walls of their less-than-adequate house. It seems resourceful women will find a means to express and create, sometimes even making beauty out of practically nothing, almost magically transforming scarcity into plenitude by creatively utilizing the meager domestic materials available to them. Similarly, in lived experience, foodways can function as a mode
of creative expression and a source of pleasure, even beauty. In addition, the language of food in literature is a rich and pliable vehicle for articulating important cultural expressions, aspects of ethnic, gendered and transnational identities. On the other hand, food practices can also have negative effects and serve to establish oppressions, hierarchies and boundaries. The Latina authors whom I treat in this project all utilize food tropes in various and highly symbolic ways as they articulate both liberating and constraining social dynamics and complex aspects of gendered, ethnic and transnational identities.

The way cultures structure and interpret food practices is greatly inflected through ideas about gender and the process of identity formation. Henrietta Moore insists “Gender matters in food-centered activities” (quoted in Counihan and Kaplan 1). When I first began to consider this project and was arguing for the significance of food and speculating about how some more traditional scholars might not view food as a worthy subject, Latina/o Studies scholar María DeGuzmán quipped “It certainly is important. Try getting through a day or two without it.”

The power which society allocates or denies to men and women and their respective social positions is deeply implicated in matters of the everyday, and food is a recurrent everyday need. The ways in which we satisfy this need vary widely and signify profoundly. To deny the social power of foodways and the ways various people relate to food and eating is naïve, especially as this relates to gender. Counihan writes about how social power is communicated and potentially stratified through food experiences: “Men’s and women’s attitudes about their bodies, the legitimacy of their appetites, and the importance of their food work reveal whether their self-concept is validating or denigrating. We are concerned with
how their relationship to food may facilitate gender complementarity and mutual respect or produce gender hierarchy.” (2) Counihan’s observation links notions of “self-concept” to the ways people perform food work which might relate to dynamics such as who cooks, how often, and under what kinds of pressures and expectations; who serves whom at meals or even who eats first. Unfortunately, such cultural patterns have sometimes produced more “gender hierarchy” than “mutual respect” in the lives of most women, thus reinforcing the historic and longstanding weight of women’s oppression.

**Food and Latina/ós**

In addition to feminism, Latina/o Studies is a central lens through which I view these selected literary texts. Ortiz Cofer and Pérez write in English and have immigrated, or migrated in the case of Puerto Rican Ortiz Cofer, from the Spanish Caribbean and thus, have highly transnational life experiences, whether in frequent actual returns to the island of origin, or through ways in which Latina/o communities form enclaves that reproduce the homeland, or even through depicting how the legacy of island culture and politics can haunt the Latina in the diaspora.¹² Latina/o Studies discourses do not attempt to contain the linguistic, ethnic, and cultural variations of these groups, yet usefully supply critical tools and an inclusive scope for thinking through the topics relevant to this project. The multifaceted and interdisciplinary features of Latina/o Studies allow me to work with literary and

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¹² I use *Bodega Dreams* by Latino writer Ernesto Quiñonez to establish a contrast with the other two texts. *Bodega Dreams* relies more on language, and although some food references appear in the novel, Quiñonez does not use the language of food as extensively or effectively as the two Latina authors whom I treat in this study.
sociological discourses in order to explore the borders, the liminal and intersecting spaces of histories variously marked by the effects of patriarchy, imperialism, even dictatorship. These liminal spaces are sites in which languages and cultures clash, including foodways. Donna R. Gabaccia writes, “To understand changing American identities, we must explore also the symbolic power of food to reflect cultural or social affinities in moments of change or transformation” (9). Thus, examining the language of food can reveal the various ways in which the processes of “Americanization” and cultural identities are constructed and experienced by Latinas/os.

With all the media hype, one would think the Latina/o “invasion” is a new phenomenon. On the contrary, the Latina/o presence, and implicitly the legacy of Spanish colonialism, in the Americas has been intermingled with U.S. history for centuries. Indeed, (preceding the advent of the British), from the founding of the city of St. Augustine in Florida (1565) by Spanish explorer and admiral Pedro Menéndez de Avilés, to the incorporation of much of northern Mexico with the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (1848) that ended the Mexican-American War (1846-48), to the Spanish-American War (1898) and the Treaty of Paris that foreclosed Spanish colonial rule in North America and ceded the territories of Puerto Rico, the Philippines and Guam to the U.S., Latina/os, have been a constant and have exerted a steady influence on the culture of the United States from its inception to the present. In addition, Cuban and Puerto Rican settlers have been an important population in a major U.S. metropolis, New York City, since the early colonías coalesced at the end of the 19th century.
Recent demographics offer more dramatic news as they suggest that Latina/os became the largest minority group in the United States as recorded in 2010 census.\textsuperscript{13} Certainly, this demographic shift and the prevalence of Latina/os in the United States have in turn profoundly affected U.S. culture in a variety of manifestations from language, to music, dance and even foodways. Indeed, Latina/o foodways have permeated the U.S. cultural imaginary. One might consider the large number of bodegas (small Latina/o grocery shops) in New York City, the ubiquity of Tex-Mex cuisine nationwide, or, in the late 1990s, the pop culture canine, the talking Taco Bell Chihuahua, and her now famous refrain, “Yo quero Taco Bell.”

Since food and consumption are important in all cultures and identities, one might ask: Can Latina/os claim a particularly significant relationship between food and identity? I will argue that food tropes and attitudes toward consumption can function in especially poignant ways, to liberate in some instances, but also to exoticize, to racialize, and to subjugate Latinas. One striking example of the latter three negative dynamics is the widely known figure Carmen Miranda, the famous Brazilian who sported a basket of tropical fruit as a headpiece. Peter Chapman in \textit{The United Fruit Company} explains that “in the US Carmen Miranda danced and sang with bananas to great acclaim in her films of the 1930s and 1940s. In one, \textit{The Gang’s All Here}, her female chorus laid around her waving huge make-believe bananas between their legs. The scene ended with an explosion of fruit from her tutti-frutti hat” (15). Whereas such an exotic, suggestive, and fruity, representation using

\textsuperscript{13} For further reading on the major impact of Latina/os in the United States see \textit{Latinos Remaking America} edited by Marcelo M. Suárez-Orozco and Mariela M. Páez.
a blonde Anglo-American beauty in the 1930s and 40s might have been unacceptable to the mainstream American viewing public, as a Portuguese-born Brazilian, although she was quite fair, her Iberian/Latin American status as “not quite white,” (not quite right?) made it acceptable for such a graphic sexual depiction with food play. The phallic connotations of the “bananas” and the orgasmic intimations of the “explosion” are so obvious as to not require comment, but clearly, as a Brazilian Latina, Carmen Miranda was fetishized and became a desirable object for mainstream Anglo-American consumption. The dancing Chiquita Banana, and the catchy lyrics of the tune she sang, is yet another media representation that reinforces this exoticized and consumption-driven dynamic.

In regard to food production, Latina/o history is deeply intertwined with U.S. agriculture and food, and the production and harvesting of food became salient aspects of the Latina/o arm of the Civil Rights Movement in connection with the United Farm Workers unionization under the auspices of labor leader, and now cult hero, Mexican-American César Chávez. More recently, with much vitriolic discourse, litigation against Latina/o immigrants, particularly Mexican immigrants, was passed. The harsh and punitive Arizona immigration litigation, Senate Bill 1070, was signed into law in 2010, and, not unexpectedly, Anglo-Americans are loathe to fill the jobs that Latina/os had previously occupied, especially considering the literal toxicity of this farm work where workers are poisoned by pesticides and burned by incessant sun exposure. In the aftermath of the passage of the SB 1070, many crops were left rotting in the fields unharvested. Thus, the incendiary rhetoric surrounding this bill and its consequent legal effects have done little to improve the lives of either Anglo-Americans or Latina/os. In addition, Latina/os occupy, and are subjugated in, many food-
related jobs in service and hospitality industries, jobs such as cooks, dishwashers, bus boys and girls, and waiters, jobs with little occupational advancement.

**Food in Latina/o Literature**

Some Latin American literature relies heavily on gustatory tropes such as the Mexican writer Laura Esquivel and her popular and influential novel *Like Water for Chocolate*. Against the backdrop of The Mexican Revolution, the protagonist in Esquivel’s story is frustrated by her domineering and constraining mother, and the unfortunate Tita is able to express herself, and her raging passions, only through her cooking. Each chapter is accompanied by a recipe which is relevant to the particular narrative details of that chapter.

As can be observed in a sampling of titles, the trend to employ food metaphors is also present in the writing of Latina authors working in English, authors such as Sandra Cisneros’s *The House on Mango Street*, Angie Cruz’s *Let It Rain Coffee*, Jessica Hagedorn’s *The Dogeaters* or Judith Ortiz Cofer’s *The Latin Deli*. Food and its representations operate as powerful cultural markers with a profound influence on the ethnic subject formation, and the perpetuation, of individual and collective identities.

Food, as it appears in the writing of various Latina authors, is a defining vehicle through which some writers articulate, and interrogate, Latina/o gendered, ethnic, and transnational identities. Carol Counihan explains “[b]ecause food is such a gripping need, day in and day out, it takes on additional social and symbolic significance. It is a powerful channel for communication and a means to establish connection, create obligations and exert influence” (53). This examination raises questions about the significant ways that Latina writers use food tropes in their writings with varying degrees of emphasis. I am not
suggesting that these writers use food in precisely the same ways for the same reasons. Rather, they deploy food tropes in a multiplicity of ways. I will use food as the matrix through which I will interrogate notions of gendered, ethnic and transnational identities. I argue that the language of food is deeply implicated in subjectivity in these literary texts. Much of this writing occurs in a transnational context; hence, the import of foodways takes on special significance, especially in exile after the trauma of migration. In these texts, food can become the means to express a physical and psychic attachment to a lost homeland or to signal a closer affinity with the United States. The ways in which theses attachments manifest vary according to the particular context. Food tropes also help these Latinas to write against the mythologies of male superiority and American exceptionalism. For example, in Ortiz Cofer’s texts much of the alimentary rhetoric subverts gender stereotypes between Puerto Rican men and women in marriage, and ethnic stereotypes in regard to Anglo-Americans. Set in Paterson, New Jersey and Puerto Rico, her writings reveal that connections and returns to the island are a continuous part of the Puerto Rican diasporic experience.

Pérez’s novel describes a family’s emigration to Brooklyn and utilizes a variety of foodstuffs, as well as a severe lack of food, largely, to articulate extremely disturbing abuses of various types of male power. The poverty and serious economic struggles of this family make actual returns to the Dominican Republic improbable and more of a haunting dream than a reality, and the use of food reflects both the aforementioned abuses of power and these nostalgic desires. In the written text, the use of food functions in the construction of various types of identities and, indeed, works as a rich and “powerful channel of communication.”
There is, of late, a considerable amount of research and critical study of food in relation to identity. However, one is less likely to find a work on the ways in which food and identity function in literary texts. One Asian American scholar, though, has paved the way. Jennifer Ann Ho’s groundbreaking study, *Consumption and Identity in Asian American Coming-of-age Novels*, considers food tropes as they relate to adolescent protagonists’ complex processes of “Americanization.” Following Ho, Wenying Xu’s *Eating Identities: Reading Food in Asian American Literature* also analyzes Asian American literary texts and the uses of food tropes as they intersect with gender, ethnicity, class, and sexuality.14 Although there are several articles on food, identity and Latina/o literature, to date, there has not been a book-length study.15 I hope this volume serves to fill that gap and invites scholars and activists to participate in future exploration of this burgeoning field.

In the third chapter, as a point of contrast to the Ortiz Cofer and Pérez chapters, I map out critically acclaimed novel *Bodega Dreams* by Latino writer Ernesto Quiñonez. I use *Bodega Dreams* as a strong example of a Latino text that is obsessed with language as the primary mode of Latino identification. I argue that this obsession is considerably abstract and masculinist in nature as I cite several important critics who also highlight this strong

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14 See also Allie Glenny’s *Ravenous Identity: Eating and Eating Distress in the Life and Work of Virginia Woolf* and William R. Dalessio’s *Are We What We Eat?: Food and Identity in Late Twentieth-century American Ethnic Literature*.

15 See Manuel M. Martín-Rodríguez’s article “The Raw and Who Cooked it: Food, Identity and Culture un U.S. Latino/a Literature.” See also, "Boast Now, Chicken, Tomorrow You'll Be Stew": Pride, Shame, Food, and Hunger in the Memoirs of Esmeralda Santiago by Joanna Barszewska Marshall. Also of interest is “What Doesn’t Kill You Makes You Fat: The Language of Food in Latina Literature by Jacqueline Zeff. Though not entirely about identity, some of Zeff’s examples touch upon the theme.
discursive focus. This is not to say that Latina writers are not also highly concerned and attuned to issues of language. They certainly are. But rather, I wish to indicate how Latinas are also deeply engaged with foodways as they relate to identity. Again, this dynamic may be a result of women’s greater, more intimate, historical connection with foodways, as well as a willingness to endow with significance aspects of human experience that are mundane, embodied and concrete. Furthermore, I am not suggesting that Latinos never allude to food. They do. I argue, however, that there is significant disparity in emphasis and intensity of the uses of food in subject formation and identificatory mechanisms. The integral connections between ontology and food are more pronounced in the texts of the Latina authors I treat in this project, and in chapter five on a special Puerto Rican food.

Exploring intersections of gender and ethnic concerns as they relate to individual and collective identity in a transnational context, in chapter four, I investigate the various ways in which the Puerto Rican writer Judith Ortiz Cofer employs food tropes in her delightful volume *The Latin Deli*. Ortiz Cofer “subverts the mainland,” to borrow a phrase from Mary Jane Suero-Elliott. In the short story “Corazón’s Café,” Ortiz Cofer uses food as a means to upend and contest several aspects of traditional gender roles as she critiques the objectification of Latinas and establishes mutuality between spouses in the marriage of the title character, Corazón. The titular poem “The Latin Deli: An *Ars Poetica*” also presents a female figure which resembles the character of Corazón, but this time is transmuted in such a manner as to demonstrate how the female figure is instrumental in constructing a multiethnic, *pan-Latinidad* community at the site of a Northeastern bodega. One of the most significant characteristics of transmigration for the analysis of Latina literature is the access to the
original culture, and in the case of Puerto Ricans, they have had greater mobility and unimpeded access to the mainland than just about any other immigrant population. In another piece of short fiction, “The Witch’s Husband” an “Americanized” granddaughter visits her abuela who still resides in Puerto Rico. Ortiz Cofer exploits a kind of transnational tension between a realist narrative and a Puerto Rican folk tale, both about female desire, in order to create a space for greater female freedom through transnational feminist community.

In chapter five I treat Geographies of Home (1990), the debut novel of Dominican-American writer Loida Maritza Pérez. I investigate how food operates as a central metaphor in the various characters’ gendered relations to power and desire. In a transnational narrative in which a Dominican family emigrates to the New York City, the borough of Brooklyn specifically, two crucial scenes in the text invite careful critical attention, and the motifs about food, power and desire expressed therein are woven throughout the novel. The first textual moment occurs fairly early in the narrative and uses sugar to evoke and conflate several concepts as they relate to various manifestations of patriarchal, imperial and even dictatorial power. The second, highly dramatic, scene I examine involves voodoo, and the sacrificial use of livestock, chickens to be exact, to commit a murder. The murderous action of the character Mami in response to domestic violence, enacts a problematic maternal response to the abuses and desires of patriarchal power and its various relations of ruling. A final consideration regarding the food is the text’s representation of powerlessness as the three children of the eldest daughter Rebecca are consistently hungry, almost starving, throughout much of the novel.
Chapter six entails a table narrative which analyzes the ways in which food and gender have informed various aspects of Puerto Rican identity in the diaspora. It is a look at my own family’s particular experience of themselves as Puertorriqueñas. Through an interpretation of a celebratory, holiday food event, I argue that an especially treasured Puerto Rican dish, pasteles, the cooking and eating of them, conveys a strong sense of ethnic pride and articulates an important aspect of cultural nationalism, but that since it is a form of female cultural production, as with most other forms of female cultural production, it has been largely overlooked and undertheorized, relegated to the domain of the mundane and insignificant. Women inscribe their reality on cooking practices so that their knowledge, talent, wisdom are not lost. It is my contention that this highly symbolic food operates in important ways in terms of subjectivity and how many Puerto Ricans experience themselves as Puerto Ricans.

Part of my project in this chapter is to elevate the ways in which scholars, and others, evaluate women’s contributions to culture. Furthermore, most of the women in my family, my grandmother Wela especially, have spent considerable, long years in the kitchen, so I am compelled to think about the meaning and value of time spent in such a manner. A conventional assessment appraises such domestic and gendered life experience as not constitutive of knowledge, or perhaps more accurately, not constitutive of a socially valuable form of knowledge. This valuation has implications for millions of other women who share similar life experiences, and more broadly, implications for the assessment of women, their labor, their contributions, their cultural production, their thinking, even their lives.
CHAPTER THREE

LANGUAGE OR FOOD? LANGUAGE AND FOOD

“Who we are is what we speak” (Pérez Firmat 90)

When one considers the semantics of a meal, it provides an opportunity to take into account the ways in which individual subjectivity and one’s ethnic, collective, and/or transnational identity might be constructed, in some measure, through the language of food. In spite of, maybe because of, the mundane, quotidian nature of such experiences as cooking and eating, food functions symbolically in extremely important ways in both life and in literature. But do practices surrounding consumption function in a similar way as language does in regard to identity formation? As Terry Eagleton muses, “Food is cusped between nature and culture, and so too is language, which humans have as a dimension of their nature but which is as culturally variable as cuisine. Nobody will perish without Mars bars, just as nobody ever died of not reading Paradise Lost (205). Ragleton asserts that “Language is at once material fact and rhetorical communication, just as eating combines biological necessity with cultural significance. Food and language of some sort are essential to our survival” (205).

Food, too, is both “material fact and rhetorical communication,” and when we eat, we experience the materiality of food as substance; when we interpret the meanings of food, this points toward food as communication, maybe even food as text. Indeed, both language and food partake of orality. And although most often, people probably think about language as an abstraction, it is also deeply rooted in bodily experience in many significant ways- the
tactility of moving our tongues, the vibrations of the tympanum in our ears, the moving our fingers on keyboard or with pen on paper, the materiality of the book, the computer screen or the body of an interlocutor. And perhaps with the increasing advances in neuroscience and neuroimaging we will someday be able to observe and understand how language functions at the level of axons and dendrites. To be sure, there are some important similarities between cooking and writing too; both require focused attention (if one does not wish to make awkward constructions and grammatical errors or in order not to get one’s fingers really burned); both work with the push and pull of convention and innovation, as in traditional family recipes that have been handed down for generations versus fusion cuisines or experiments with traditional recipes to lighten them up for health reasons; both are creative processes that produce artifacts and culture.

Meredith Abarca, whom I will use more extensively in chapter six, writes, “Everyday cooking, food as voice, reveals the existence of a different field of epistemology (4). Indeed, this field of epistemology is not apparent, and certainly not privileged, in the writings of many Latino, and here I underscore the masculine, authors and critics even though both cooking and eating are very much implicated in identity issues. As gastronome Brillat-Savarin has famously noted “we are what we eat.” In the epigraph to this chapter, in contrast to Brillat-Savarin, I introduce Cuban creative writer and scholar Gustavo Pérez Firmat’s notion about language as the defining feature of identity. For Latinos, and others, it seems that foodways has been clearly subordinated to language as an aspect of identity construction. For most Latino writers and literary critics the primary marker of identity is language, and,
more specifically, language has emerged as the main mode of demarcating the formation of identities in Latino ethnic, exile and diasporic writing.

Let us now consider a few other representative examples of Latinos and their take on language. Tato Laviera is a Nuyorican poet whose work is often bilingual. In fact, his work registers a highly transcultural and transnational New York experience as his poetry is deeply inflected with the rhythms of the city, and with the rhythms of both Spanish and English. He sometimes writes in Spanglish, a discourse that combines the two. While analyzing Laviera’s poem “My Graduation Speech,” a text that expresses a cultural and linguistic indeterminacy, William Burgos in “From Nuyorican to Borinquen,” observes that

Neither English nor Spanish is subordinated to the other, but both are equally part of the speaker. He does, however, mark a distinction between an inner and outer language (or a private and public): Spanish is the language of thought ... and English is the language of public expression. Yet as the poem proceeds, this neat division of language does not hold. The speaker cannot keep English out of his thoughts or Spanish out of his writing. As the ‘graduate’ ricochets between the two linguistic poles of his identity, a third term emerges: “spanglish.” (131)

As Burgos notes, the speaker in Laviera’s poem grapples linguistically with how to define himself. An identity, and a discourse, emerges out of this ambivalence, one that syncretizes both Spanish and English; the speaker of the poem labels it Spanglish. Spanglish
becomes the marker of this new Puerto Rican, or Nuyorican self-identity. Firmat observes that “a crucial component of our self-image is the idea we have ourselves as language users. One of the most disabling forms of self-doubt arises from the conviction that we cannot speak our native language well enough” (90). This self-doubt emerges in Laviera’s “graduate” in that he claims, perhaps quite ironically, that he is proficient in neither language, but the playfulness and skill in the poem demonstrate aptitude and artistry in all three languages. My point here is that for Laviera, Firmat and Burgos, the self is constituted through the discursive moves of the speaker.

To focus more specifically on Puerto Rican identity, Jorge Duany in The Puerto Rican Nation on the Move, which I will refer to again in chapter five, “redefine[s] the nation not as a well-bounded sovereign state but as a translocal community based on a collective consciousness of a shared history, language and culture” (4), both on and off the Island. Duany insists that “Puerto Ricans display a stronger cultural identity than do most Caribbean people, even those who enjoy political independence” (1). Duany also draws insight from contemporary writing on the public representation of collective identities, especially the idea that all identities are constructed through particular discursive modes. Although Duany purports to discuss culture, which one would surmise includes foodways, very little attention is afforded to this topic in his study.

It would be difficult to contemplate the importance of language in Latina/o cultures, however, without reference to the Hispanic scholar and critic Ilan Stavans. Stavans, a sociolinguist, is an influential and prolific writer with eclectic interests that range from Jewish culture to Latin American authors, such as Neruda and Márquez, to Latina/o writers,
but his main object of study is language. In order to highlight his focus on language I offer just a sampling of titles of his publications: *Dictionary Days: A Defining Passion* (2005), *On Borrowed Words: A Memoir of Language* (2001) and *Lengua Fresca* (Augenbraum and Stavans, 2006). He is also the editor of *The Norton Anthology of Latino Literature* (2011). In a recent volume *What is la hispanidad?: A Conversation*, Stavans discusses various issues surrounding Hispanic/Latino identity and culture with fellow scholar Iván Jaksić. To Jaksić’s observation about the relation of Spanish to *la hispanidad*, a term they initially defines as “the shaping of the concept of Hispanic civilization,” (1) (although the entire book is an investigation of *la hispanidad*,) Stavans responds: “Language is not only about word choice but also about a way of articulating Spanish identity in its multiple vicissitudes, contains in itself the DNA of Hispanic civilization” (89). My aim in this study is not to argue against the ways in which language articulates identity, but rather to insist on the manner in which foodways is also constitutive of identity. It is interesting to me that Stavans use a biological discourse to describe the intimacy that speakers have with language. Thus, it is not the focus on discourse that is problematic for me, but rather the *exclusive* focus on discourse, an oversight that precludes much about human experience, and particularly women’s experience. Foodways is a cultural production that does, in fact, become part of the DNA, literally, in the material sense, at the cellular level of being, as well as symbolically in how people define themselves.

I turn now to Latina scholar Elena Machado Sáez who argues that the multiculturalist approach of Ilan Stavans “is based on an equation of culture with language” (Latino Studies Journal). Sáez traces Stavans’s linguistic formulation of Latinidad using “language as its
defining facet,” as Stavans favors reading of Latino/a history, in almost exclusively Western European, specifically Spanish, terms. Sáez’s major concern is how this formulation of US Latina/o identity performs in “opposition to American indigenous cultures” and how Stavans’s conceptualizations of the indigenous as Other has implications for both the constructions of academic disciplines and of the Latina/o literary canon. I will quote fairly extensively from Sáez here as her theorizing has important implications for my argument.

Sáez explains:

The association of an exclusively linguistic construction of Latinidad with an apolitical approach to literature, however, is disingenuous considering the broader context of a colonialist methodology informing Stavans' work. With a celebratory reading of empire's history in Las Américas, Stavans is far from disinterested in his theorization of US Latino/a culture and anthologizing of Latino/a literature. In particular, I want to call attention to the conservative colonialist logic operating within the language-based definitions of Latinidad used by Stavans, definitions that are representative of a broader trend of analysis that has been institutionalized in the field. By using the term colonialist, I refer to how Stavans celebrates the Spanish language as a tool of colonialism inherited from Spain...he does not acknowledge how Spanish in the Americas has its roots in a diverse set of cultures, for example, African diaspora and indigenous cultures. Rather, Stavans establishes a colonialist and one-dimensional approach to the development of the Spanish language in the
New World, emphasizing only the purity of its Eurocentric roots, as if it has not been transformed and accented by Other languages and experiences.” (Sáez).

This “exclusively linguistic construction of Latinidad” is indeed political as Sáez labels Stavans theorizing as “conservative.” As Sáez indicates, Stavans’s approach privileges even “celebrates” the Spanish language to the exclusion of considerations of the “African diaspora and indigenous cultures” establishing a “colonialist and one-dimensional approach” to the formation of Latinidad and Latina/o identities. One might usefully apply her reasoning to how the discourses of identity formation are also “one-dimensional” in their exclusively linguistic construction. Furthermore, when describing the development of the Spanish language in the New World, Sáez charges that Stavans proceeds as if this development has not been influenced “by Other languages and experiences.” In a similar fashion, considerations of identity construction have also been “one-dimensional” in that they, too, do not acknowledge how identity formation is “transformed by Other...experiences,” experiences other than language. Thus, in this study, I attempt a decolonizing of the exclusively linguistic, and what I construe as male-gendered, approach to identity formation by bringing into the analysis of identity “Other” kinds of non-linguistic experiences, such as eating, cooking and various related practices.

Commenting on the ways in which people organize their consciousness in relation to the projects in the world of work, Dorothy E. Smith responds to one male philosopher’s view:
‘when we turn to such routine work, the activities connected to it are constituted as thematic, requiring and receiving our full attention, if only temporarily’ (Schutz quoted in Smith) is problematic. She answers: what is presupposed in just that organization, namely, that the routine matters, the household chores, are not problematic, do not become a central focus of man’s work, or at least, ‘only momentarily.’ Once we are alerted to how woman’s work provides for this organization of consciousness, we can see how this structure depends in actual situations on the working relations of those providing for the logistics of the philosopher’s bodily existence—those for whom household chores are not horizontal, but thematic, and whose work makes possible for another the suppression of all but passing attention to the bodily location of consciousness. (83)

Thus, perhaps Stavans, and many male philosophers, writers and critics, has a wife, or a cook or a maid, or all three. It seems a very privileged position to have such “an organization of consciousness,” to allow for intellectual work, to not have to account for, take care of, or heed the demands of bodily existence.

A Critical Reading of Bodega Dreams: “Who we are is what we speak”

In Killing Spanish, Lyn Di Iorio Sandín writes, “The phrase ‘killing Spanish’ is also a direct deliberate, translation of a common Puerto Rican idiom ‘matando el espaniol,’ which refers to what islanders believe happens to Spanish when Nuyoricans or Dominican Yorks of
a working-class background forget, hybridize, and reconstitute language fragments” (Sandín 4). She also observes that there is a gendered distinction in that the Latino writers she examines rely much more heavily on Spanglish and Spanish, but that “most of the women writers do not experiment with Spanglish, and, indeed, hardly use Spanish at all” (5). This concern for killing Spanish and the consequent identities that emerge from the process is effectively presented in *Bodega Dreams*.

*Bodega Dreams* is a highly acclaimed novel in which the author’s use of language and culture utilizes a mixture of both Spanish and English influences. The novel’s crucial linguistic ambivalence reflects the lived experience of the author (who is half Puerto Rican, half Ecuadorian, grew up in *El Barrio* and attended college in New York City).¹⁶ Like his narrator Julio Mercado, Quiñonez has experienced life in a “contact zone,” to use Pratt’s oft-cited term. An important aspect of the novel is its literacy in terms of Latino culture as the text is peppered with a number of cultural references that adds a Latino sensibility to the novel. The Anglo-American reader unquestionably understands the main ideas conveyed in the narrative, but knowledge of the Puerto Rican references certainly enhances the reader’s comprehension of the story. Thus, the ideal reader of *Bodega Dreams* is bilingual and bicultural. First, I will examine Quiñonez’s use of language in relation to identity. In light of the focus on the future in *Bodega Dreams*, it seems to me that there is a denial of a key aspect of ethnic identity, the past. I am interested in the ways in which representations of food tropes have the capacity to recapture this past, especially in exile and diaspora.

¹⁶ His second novel *Chango’s Fire* has been somewhat less successful.
*Bodega Dreams* is an interesting read, at times lyrical, at times brutally cynical, as it vividly captures both the horror and the vitality of the Puerto Rican urban experience in New York City. The novel speaks of tragedies such as “fires, junkies dying, shootouts, holdups, babies falling out of windows [which] were things you took as part of life” (5). Quiñonez also depicts the highly animated street life of El Barrio: Children had opened fire hydrants, and danced, laughing and splashing water on themselves. Old men were sitting on milk crates and playing dominoes. Young men left their car doors open, stereos playing at full blast” (231). Even the elders participate in the vitality of urban life as “old women gossiped and laughed as they sat on project benches or by tenement stoops, where they had once played as children with no backyards--yes, they were happy too. (213)

Quiñonez’s *Bodega Dreams* is a novel obsessed with language and Puerto Rican ethnic identity. Quiñonez’s first representation of a kind of ethnic nationalism occurs in his reference to the Young Lords. The protagonist, Julio, also known as Chino by his friends, encounters a larger-than-life drug lord, Willie Bodega, who wants Chino to join his organization. Bodega is a former member of the Young Lords, a widespread, militant Puerto Rican nationalist group formed in the late 1960’s who were advocates for socialism and were vociferously anti-imperialism. Talking about when the neighborhood was alive with political passion, Bodega explains:

> It was a joy because there was pride and anger and identity. The Black Panthers in Harlem were yelling ‘Power to the People! Us here in *El Barrio* saw what they were doing up in Harlem. We began to ask ourselves, why can’t we do some shit like that here? Somethin’ had to be done, otherwise
we were goin’ to kill one another. So then came Cha Cha Jimenez, a cat from Chic Chicago. He started speakin’ about Puerto Rican nationalism and soon formed the Young Lords. Us here in Harlem took that movement and ran with it. (32)

Bodega then recounts how they wanted real jobs and education for the youth. He is a Puerto Rican with a vision that seeks to transform Spanish Harlem by a method which uses the profits from his illegal occupation to fund new immigrant businesses, to provide decent and affordable housing for the residents of El Barrio, and most significantly, to ensure the higher education of smart, young Puerto Ricans, thereby creating a new class of accomplished Puerto Rican professionals. Essentially, Bodega Dreams is an account of a vision that maps out the rebirth of East Harlem. Julio recalls that they were all “dwarfed by what his dream meant to Spanish Harlem” (19).

With his Pentecostal wife, Blanca, urging Julio to stay clean and steer clear of trouble with the law, and his criminal, but loyal, best friend Sapo encouraging him to work for Bodega, Julio is caught between repulsion and attraction for Bodega’s dream. As a college student striving to create a better life for himself, the illegality of Bodega’s operation is problematic. Yet, the romantic fervor with which Bodega describes his vision for the people of Spanish Harlem, as well as the very real material changes Julio witnesses (such as newly renovated buildings that charge very affordable rents), exerts an undeniable and powerful influence on Julio’s imagination and on his own strong desire for the social transformation of the living conditions of his people and the advancement of the Puerto Rican community.
Thus, Bodega’s dream has appeal for Julio in some ways:

That’s what it was always about. Shedding your past. Creating yourself from nothing. Now I realize what attracted me to Willie Bodega. He changed the entire landscape of the neighborhood. Bodega would go down as a representation of all the ugliness in Spanish Harlem and also all the good it was capable of being. (11)

The location of Spanish Harlem as the setting for the novel provides a fascinating glimpse of a social space where two cultures and languages collide. *El Barrio* functions as an exemplar of a cultural and linguistic “contact zone” of colonial encounters. According to Pratt, a contact zone is a “social space where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in terms of highly asymmetrical relations of power” (34). Situated on the Upper East Side of Manhattan, Spanish Harlem runs from 96th Street to 125th, and from First Avenue to Fifth Avenue. It is essentially an enclave of Spanish speakers surrounded by a dominant Anglo-American culture, almost a Third World community positioned in the affluent space of Manhattan where interaction between the groups occurs on an everyday basis. Interestingly, the border of this contact zone is a dramatic and sharp demarcation (which Julio mentions in the novel). Exploring a few blocks either north or south of 96th Street will demonstrate a dramatic disparity in wealth and material conditions. In the novel Julio recounts,

One day when I was in the second grade I was too sick to go to school, and
since Mami didn’t want to miss work she took me with her. When I entered
the apartment my mother was supposed to clean, I felt like I was inside the
Museum of the City of New York. The place was huge. There were paintings
and statues and mirrors and beautiful wooden things—nothing like where we
lived. That was the first time I really saw the difference between those that
had and those that didn’t. (44)

A few city blocks, more of a geocultural rather than geophysical divide, truly functions as a
First World/Third World border.

Moreover, within this space both cultures exert influence in a process of
transculturation which scholars no longer consider a unidirectional and exclusively top-down
phenomenon. Quiñonez’s novel, like the community of people he writes about, performs the
cultural work of “tropicalization,” or perhaps more accurately self-tropicalization. Aparicio
and Chavez-Silverman distinguish between the hegemonic tropicalization, or a type of
injurious troping of the subaltern subject by the dominant culture, and self-tropicalization or
self-representation (Tropicalizations 1). Not produced in accord with stereotypes or the
dominant misconceptions about Latinas/os, such self-tropicalizations consist of
representations that emerge from the lived experience of gendered, ethnic and/or immigrant
subjects-artistic, literary, or culinary cultural productions. In Bodega Dreams, Quiñonez
articulates a fictional discourse filled with cultural and linguistic practices from the
perspective of the colonized. He defies the more familiar hegemonic tropes of Latina/os that
occur in U.S. cultural production, such as the hyperbolic troping of the entertainer Charo, and
her trademark refrain cuchi-cuchi, or Ricky Ricardo the hot-headed, Latino husband from the
_I Love Lucy Show_. In contrast, by depicting Julio his narrator, and his wife Blanca as
intelligent and articulate, college-educated, Puerto Ricans, Quiñonez speaks against
traditional stereotypes of Latinos, stereotypes which have been so persistently textualized in
various media. Quiñonez narrative denies the dominant Anglo-American ideology by both
defying certain stereotypes, as in the case of Julio and Blanca, as well as utilizing and
humanizing other stereotypes, criminal types, as in the case of his best friend, his _pana_, Sapo,
and also perhaps in the case of Bodega himself. Thus, his novel demonstrates a willingness to
interrogate and critique existing representations of Latinos, in addition to the implicit power
relations involved in such representation. These relations are intimately involved with aspects
of Puerto Rican culture and the Spanish language.

If there is, in fact, a contemporary “latinization” occurring in various areas in the
United States, including New York City, as many scholars such as Celeste Olalguiaga and
Frederick B. Pike suggest. Latinization is not exclusively a process whereby Anglo-
American mainstream consumers appropriate certain attractive aspects of Latino culture and
purchase commodifications of Latino cultural production, but it is also a process which is
affected by the cultural agency of the Latino community itself. This novel is assuredly a
prime example of a process that establishes such agency. For example, Julio’s grammar
school Margaret Knox is renamed Julia de Burgos, thus representing and affirming the Latino
presence, but most significantly, the publication of this novel itself, by a division of Random
House no less, attests to the burgeoning cultural, linguistic and literary agency of the Puerto
Rican community, and specifically Puerto Rican artists. Finally, Quiñonez affirms the
importance of the historical and cultural memory of an oppressed people who “were almost convinced that our race had no culture, no smart people (6). Via numerous linguistic examples, Quiñonez demonstrates a belief in the efficacy of language to articulate a discourse of political resistance and, perhaps, even to bring about social change.

The language of Bodega Dreams may pose a problem for some readers. As Antonia Domínguez Miguela notes,

The introduction of Spanglish into the narrative discourse is another powerful tropicalizing technique. In Bodega Dreams, the language of the streets and Spanglish permeate the whole novel, emerging in the dialogue and characterizing the inhabitants of the barrio, Puerto Ricans are reinventing themselves, and a new language comes to characterize this new identity” (179).

The primary language of the novel is English, but Spanish plays a very consequential role as well. In Bodega Dreams, there are numerous Spanish utterances. Some words such as mira and pana are repeated frequently throughout the text. These speech events consist of single words, phrases, complete sentences and even song lyrics. Quiñonez use of language in the novel, namely a mixture of both Spanish and English, reflects the lived experience of the author is half Puerto Rican, half Ecuadorian. Like his narrator Julio, Quiñonez has experienced life in a contact zone. Furthermore, this liminal position between both Anglo-American and Latino cultures provides for a new category of experience, a kind of hybrid
linguistic encounter that is both thematized in the final book of the novel and enacted throughout the course of *Bodega Dreams*. In linguistic terms, Quiñonez’s novel is rather innovative in contesting U.S. dominant monolingual constructs. *Bodega Dreams* is an interlingual text, with a strong push and pull of the interlingual voice, a very hybrid novel.

Taking such liberties with language indicates linguistic autonomy on the part of Quiñonez. Potentially, the linguistic hybridity of *Bodega Dreams* may have alienated many Anglo-American readers. However, Quiñonez’s decision to incorporate Spanish into his text to such a considerable extent demonstrates his own political resistance to the hegemonic discourse of English-only texts. This resistance is also highlighted by the author’s use of the term “rounds” as in a boxing match, instead of the traditional label of chapters. Quiñonez’s use of Spanish is a kind of tropicalization of a primarily English novel which gives rise to self-representation and cultural autonomy.

Quiñonez’s textual strategy in employing both languages is remarkable. First of all, in the exposition of the novel very little Spanish is used, mostly single words that the narrator either translates or that are immediately understood through context. For example, the author uses the word *bembas* (3), but the meaning is readily grasped from the context. Julio describes Sapo as “strong, squatty, with a huge mouth framed by fat lips, freaking *bembas* that could almost swallow you (3). Basically, Quiñonez translates the foreign word for the Anglo-American reader. While taking about kids carrying knives Julio says, “Everyone did and everyone knew that 80 percent of it was just for show, *puro aguaje* (8). Thus, Quiñonez uses interesting and effective linguistic maneuvers designed to draw the reader in, making her feel comfortable with the presence of Spanish in the text. Next, in a similar move, the
narrator refers to Sapo as “my pana, my friend” (4).

However, as the reader progresses through the novel, the Spanish usages increase in both frequency and length. When Julio and Sapo are parked on the street, some old men are sitting on a stoop listening to an old love song on the radio: “Mujer, si puedes tu con Dios hablar preguntale si yo alguna vez te he dejado de adorar” [Woman, if you are able to speak to God, ask him if I have at any time ever stopped loving you] (22). There is no translation of the lyric and no contextual clues other than that it is a love song. Later in the text, Sapo is advising Julio that he should become part of Bodega’s organization, knowing he will earn much more money with Bodega than working in the supermarket. Then Sapo sings “pero, no tenia dinero. So mami, mami perdoname pero no es que tuve que darle un holope a algun” [Because I have no money. But mami, mami, forgive me if I have to holdup someone] (40)

Again, the author offers no translation and no apology, only the slight hint that the words are about money. Such usages occur frequently throughout the remainder of the book, and much of the Spanish is in prose, not lyric, as are the previous two citations. The Anglo-American reader is faced with a dilemma, to simple continue reading and derive what she can from the story, or to attempt a translation. Either way, Quiñonez implicitly makes the Anglo-American reader mildly uncomfortable, a discomfort that Latinos have experienced for years in this English-speaking nation. At the very least, the writer demands that attention is paid to the presence of Spanish. The Spanish language will not be silenced in this text.

In contrast to the reader’s not having enough Spanish, Quiñonez also offers an example of what can transpire when a Latino has too much English. He dramatizes what can occur when a Puerto Rican loses his linguistic and cultural identity in the face of immersion
in mainstream United States popular culture. Because the relationship of Puerto Ricans to United States culture is unique from the outset, Puerto Ricans are in a singular position among immigrant groups in that they are already U.S. citizens due to the colonial status of the island. Klor de Alva confirms that “the U.S. presence is ubiquitous affecting every institution on the island. From birth the islanders are intimately enmeshed in the political context of the US, from the postal service to the welfare system, from TV to the local naval bases” (74). Thus, before Puerto Ricans even arrive in the U.S., they have extensive exposure to various aspects of U.S. culture. Klor de Alva also characterizes the connections between mainland and homeland as “extensive and intensive” (74).

So, if exposure to U.S. culture is extensive before Puerto Rican emigrants embark on U.S. shores, what might happen to the culture and language of second generation Puerto Ricans whose immersion in U.S. culture is dramatically greater than even that of their parents? What happens when one is born on U.S. soil, but lives in a culture that is subordinated to the dominant Anglo-American ideology? Perhaps, the resulting weakened affinities with the Puerto Rican language and culture can make the development of identity a complex and sometimes problematic issue. In the novel, Quiñonez voices frustration and concern with the pervasive and potentially deleterious effects of U.S. pop culture. His focus, in particular, is on the figure of the pitiable Nene, Willie Bodegas developmentally retarded cousin.

A tall, big man with a baby’s face and the shoulders of a bear opened the door.

He was slow, but only in intelligence. Later on I would find out that he was
actually light on his feet, like a feeding grizzly. I guessed he was in his forties...He was a child of AM radio’s Top Forty heyday. Word had it he started to talk in song years ago, when AM radio broke his heart by going all talk. (23)

Nene’s response is to go all lyric, effacing normal linguistic patterns of speech and eroding his use of the Spanish language. When Julio attends a meeting with Bodega and Sapo, Sapo quietly slips out for a moment. Julio inquires where he has gone and Nene replies, “He like ignored me and just took off with no direction home. Like a complete unknown, Like a rolling stone” (39). Or when Julio asks Nene how he’s been, he responds, “you know me. I’m just a soul whose intentions are good” (50). The novel’s juxtaposition of the characters of Nene, an Anglo-Americanized mouthpiece for American radio, and Bodega, an ardent activist for Latinos, as members of the same family demonstrates the extraordinary tensions and contradictions that influence and shape the construction of Puerto Rican identity in the United States, even within the same family. Interestingly, the sole case of Nene speaking any Spanish whatsoever is when he sings the lyrics, “Oye como va. Bueno pa gozar,” the ever-popular lyrics to Santana’s famous song, a song that plays frequently on American radio.

Nene illustrates a case of excessive cultural competence in U.S. pop music. Other characters in Bodega Dreams demonstrate varying degrees of linguistic proficiency. Another measure of linguistic ability lies in a speaker’s capacity to codeswitch, “the use of two or more linguistic varieties in an encounter” (Flower 221). Julio is the speaker who exhibits the most fluency in his ability to change from formal to informal linguistic realms.
Indeed, *Bodega Dreams* is a novel so obsessed with language one could perform an interesting linguistic analysis of the text. While talking with his wife Blanca who also attends college, he never uses street dialect, that is to say his pronunciation and word choice are formal, or proper, a prescriptive linguist might say. On the other hand, in conversations with Sapo, Nene and Bodega, Julio’s speech takes on a decidedly different quality. For example, when Julio speaks to Blanca he refuses to use slang such a “wack,” but in the company of his friends, he uses the word (49). In the midst of a police interrogation, when asked about his identity Julio replies, “That’s me” (173). On the other hand, when Julio if addressing Nene he inquires, “Whass up?” dropping the ‘t’ and extending or elongating the terminal fricative’s’ sound. Unlike Julio whose ability to codeswitch depends upon the context of a conversation, Sapo’s language is always the same. He speaks the language of the street both in terms of word choice and pronunciation. For example, Sapo asks Julio, “Wha’ the fuck’s the mara wi’choo?” about Julio’s indiscreet mention of Bodega in public (49). *Sapo* means toad in Spanish, a rather undesirable representation, and perhaps more interestingly, in English “sap” means “to undermine by digging away the foundations” (Webster’s). Thus, his name and his use of language reveal a commentary on the ways in which his highly Anglicized, pop cultural, and, perhaps, vulgar discourse, disrupts the foundations of Spanish culture and identity, through language.

There are numerous other instances of similar speech with Sapo, and these speech patterns closely reflect actual speech of many, but certainly not all, New York Puerto Ricans. Sapo’s speech is also saturated with obscenities. Here language serves as somewhat of a social index. Sapo is not educated, as is Julio, and therefore lacks the linguistic aptitude to
codeswitch. His speech patterns remain constant because of his limited linguistic repertoire. The same is true of Bodega and Nene as well. Julio manifests greater linguistic autonomy in his aptitude in both registers.

In addition, it is noteworthy, that Julio and Blanca do not converse, or especially do not argue, in Spanish, but for an occasional “Gloria a Dios” spoken by Blanca. Even when the couple fights, it is rendered in English. Contradicting this model is Blanca’s sister and her husband who often use Spanish, and Spanish obscenities, when they have confrontations. The conflict between Negra and Victor is fiercely passionate; she stabs him, and then calls him a cabron [bastard] (57). It would seem that Quiñonez is highly reluctant to portray the main couple as too passionate, too stereotypically Spanish. Rendering their arguments in Spanish might accomplish an uncritical and undesirable act of negative self-tropicalization. Thus, by casting his characters as controlled, he refutes the stereotypical depiction of irrational and hot-tempered Latinos.

What is probably the most radical aspect of language use in the novel is not Julio’s construction of an interlingual text, but rather his desire for the birth of a new language, Spanglish, at the end of the story. In Julio’s dream, a mother shouts out the window to her son,”Mira, Juanito, go buy un mapo, un conten de leche, and tell el bodeguero yo le pago next Friday. And I don’t want to see you in el rufo” (212). Then, Bodega speaks to him:

You know what is happening here, don’t you? Don’t you? Don’t you see what’s happening? A new language means a new race. Spanglish is the future. It’s a new language being born out of the ashes of two cultures clashing with
each other. You will use a new language. Words they might not teach you in college. Words that aren’t English or Spanish but at the same time are both. Now that’s where it’s at. Our people are evolving into something completely new. (212)

The mother’s speech to her son dramatizes the very concepts Bodega refers to. Her instructions to the boy are given in a mixture of Spanish and English. She uses two loanwords, *un mapo* and *el rufo*, which are derived from English but their morphology has been changed. *Un mapo* is mop with a vowel change, and the addition of the Spanish suffix -o. The same is true of *el rufo*.

Additionally, Bodega’s speech articulates what many scholars concur on—the theory that identity is mediated and constructed through language. The particulars of Bodega’s vision suggest that new hybrid subjectivities will be constructed from the evolving new language, Spanglish. Quiñonez himself textualizes such a hybrid subjectivity throughout the course of his novel.

Duany notes that “During the first half of the twentieth century, Puerto Rican nationalists embraced Spanish vernacular as the dominant symbol of their culture…” (19). He continues, “language is a crucial element in Puerto Rican nationalism, partly as a reaction to the ill-fated attempt by the U.S. colonial government to impose English as the official language of public instruction on the Island until 1948” (19). Hence, Quiñonez’s focus on language makes sense in terms of the sustained efforts by the U.S. to suppress it. Duany also takes issue with Puerto Rican political nationalism in that can create a rather rigid and false
binary between the U.S. and Puerto Rico, between English and Spanish. In the novel, Quiñonez’s great freedom with both languages implies a diasporic, fluid, bilingual and bicultural sensibility, one that accommodates both Spanish and English and is unwilling to relinquish either. Quiñonez succeeds in capturing this linguistic complexity.

Nonetheless, it also demonstrates the nearly exclusive focus on discourse. Thus, literary critics like Stavans, sociologists like Duany and novelists such as Quiñonez all privilege discourse as the means of identity construction. It seems to me that recent work in identity issues focuses almost exclusively on the discursive aspects of identity, while ignoring the material. To turn again to Duany and identity, he does, in fact, cite some examples of non-discursive modes of identification, for instance, the *pava* being worn at festivals in Central Park or public schools in Brooklyn, or *casitas*, in the South Bronx and Lower East Side. Indeed, Duany’s study adds much to our understanding of public representations of Puerto Rican identity, yet he neglects to discuss food. He fails to take in to account the enormous cultural production of women and their contributions in maintaining a strong sense of Puerto Rican identity in the diaspora.

**A Focus on Food: “We Are What We Eat”**

I wish to reiterate that I am not suggesting that discursive modes of identity are not constitutive. Certainly, my focus on literature speaks otherwise. What I am asserting is that a focus on foodways in life and the language of food in literature can affect the way scholars conceive of identity formation and may also affect the way we read literary texts, what we focus on as important. Like language, cooking and food practices are portable and endure over space and time. Food practices have a profound impact on the formation of both
individual and collective identity, and one might argue especially in diasporic contexts where
the nature of desire for home can be exceptionally intense. As a link between language and
food, I will demonstrate just how ubiquitous and important pasteles are in Puerto Rican
culture, tradition and Puerto Rican literary texts. Literature by U.S. Puerto Ricans writers
frequently alludes to this distinct food. I am also interested in how critics can read food in
texts.

All ethnicities have relationships with food and eating that reveal much about the
culture, rituals and ideology of a particular group, but I submit there is a fairly unique
phenomenon at play in the writings of many Puerto Ricans. They almost obsessively allude
to pasteles, a food I will discuss at length later in this study. This heavy emphasis may signal
a vulnerability or anxiety in terms of Puerto Rico’s status as the oldest colony in the world, or
it may relate to Puerto Rico’s, indeterminate political status as a commonwealth or perhaps it
is also a preservationist impulse, a form of resistance against the overwhelming presence and
influence of Anglo-American culture, both in the U.S., more obviously, but also on the
island. Pasteles punctuate the literary texts of Puerto Rican writers as if a piece without
pasteles just simply will not suffice as Puerto Rican writing. Since all of these writers are
U.S. authors writing in both Spanish and English, it is important to remain critically aware of
how these pieces function as diasporic texts. Also, I am not arguing that these writers offer
homogenous portrayals of this highly ethnic food. Rather, each writer uses the sign of
pasteles for her or his own particular purposes. Nonetheless, references to pasteles do indeed
constitute a literary performance of identity using this food that marks their works as Puerto
Rican.
Even in a narrative so obsessed with language and so marked by Spanglish, Quiñonez still is compelled to mention *pasteles*. One might ponder why? Is the presence of this food the imprimatur of Puerto Rican identity and authenticity, an authenticity Quiñonez did not accomplish through his extensive linguistic play alone? When the lawyer Nazario, Bodega’s smooth-talking right hand man (and public face of Bodega’s organization) appears on the scene at Julio’s new residence, one of Bodega’s beautifully renovated apartment buildings, a woman rushes out to him. Then:

She gave Nazario a small packet of food wrapped in tin foil. ‘For your lunch’ she said. He refused to take it, gently suggesting that she needed it more than he did. The single mother of two, who lived in 5E told him it was last night’s *pasteles*, which should still taste good, all he had to do was heat them up.

(98)

For the Anglo-American reader, the woman merely handed him a leftover; for the Puerto Rican reader, the little packet of food is an extraordinary gift since the making of *pasteles* is a labor-intensive and time consuming production. Customarily, they are served on holidays, especially Christmas Eve, or for a very special occasion, such as a graduation. It is possible, but unlikely, that a busy, single mother of two made them for a routine dinner. What is implicit in this passage is that she quite probably prepared them as a special gift for Nazario. This food is culturally dense and only a Puerto Rican, or a reader acquainted with Puerto Rican culture, can fully appreciate the remarkable gratitude this woman exhibits for Nazario.
with the offering of this precious packet of gold. On the other hand, the gendered nature of food preparation might problematize my reading. It is possible that Quiñonez, a male Puerto Rican, might not be entirely aware of the labor involved, as many men in my own family are not, and thus, this would challenge my interpretation of this moment in the novel. Nonetheless, the mere mention of the *pasteles* marks this text. It is important to consider the gender of the author and to what extent and why he deemed this inclusion of *pasteles* necessary. They figure more significantly among some of the female writers, yet one must speculate about the male author’s reason for this inclusion. Is it a textual insufficiency on the part of Spanish to fully articulate a Puerto Rican identity in the diaspora, or perhaps anxiety on the author’s part to not properly mark the text with *la mancha de la platano*, the stain of the plantain?

Quiñonez invokes the symbolic power of *pasteles* as an important facet of his construction of Puerto Ricanness. Granted he mentions other foods, but none have the evocative power of the *pastele*. In another scene, when Julio and Bodega are smoking marijuana, Julio describes the seeds as big as *quenepas* (25). A *quenepas* is a tropical thick-skinned fruit that is considerably larger than a grape. Thus, an inside reader (a bilingual/bicultural reader) would know that his simile is somewhat hyperbolic. Also, the Puerto Rican foods *asopao, empanandas, rolitos* and *flan* and *Bustelo* coffee are all mentioned in the novel. On some level, Quiñonez is aware of the value of a culture’s food practices. In some situations of migration or of minority cultures, it has been observed that certain features of cuisine are retained even when the original language of the culture has been forgotten (Calvo quoted in Fischler 280).
Another revealing instance of the cultural import of *pasteles* in Puerto Rican literature occurs with an allusion in a work by Dolores Prida—born in Cuba, raised in Puerto Rico, and living in New York. In her play “*Botanicas*,” Prida uses *pasteles* as deeply imbricated in the ways that the protagonist conceptualizes herself. For Millie, *pasteles*, and all they represent, must be denigrated so that she can maintain the psychic distance from her working-class family. *Pasteles* create a space of anxiety, a textualization of her identity, representing everything she desperately wishes not to be. In the logic of abjection, she rejects her Puerto Ricanness in an attempt to define herself against what she is, constructing her identity by protecting its boundaries through mechanisms of exclusion, and rejecting the incorporation of the food into her body. Her grandmother’s *pasteles* cross her constructed psychic boundaries. She wishes to neither eat them, nor smell them. Her disgust with the smell of the food indicates the intimacy between the olfactory sense, memory and identity. The editor of *Botanicas* Judith Weiss explains:

In the first scene of *Botanica*, the *pasteles* that Millie’s mother and grandmother are lovingly preparing for her graduation party are, for Millie, the concrete reason why she did not tell her family exactly when she was graduating. Those plantain and pork tamales would have been an invasion of the WASP space in which she had learned to survive by quietly denying her roots under peer pressure; the very smell of *pasteles* would have thrown her back four years, when as a frosh, she was first confronted by her classmates’ racist prejudice. Rejecting her family and keeping her family away from her
college campus on graduation weekend means rejecting her grandmother’s world. (15)

Another textualization of *pasteles* occurs in the memoir *When I Was Puerto Rican* by Esmeralda Santiago. This representation figures a traditional scene in which the mother performs a great deal of labor, apparently alone, for the Christmas season. It is a rendition which evokes great nostalgia for the food, the season and the island hospitality:

> From the beginning of December, Mami spent most of her time in the kitchen. For weeks the house smelled of crushed onions, fresh oregano and cilantro. Relatives I’d never met appeared to sit for hours at the kitchen table with Mami and, if he were visiting, Papi, to eat rice with pigeon peas, *pasteles* wrapped in banana leaves, crispy fried green plantains and yucca. (40)

The Puerto Rican poet Victor Hernandez Cruz in *Panoramas* describes the departure of Puerto Ricans from the island; “It was not the upper class that had to leave; the bourgeois never leave where they are milking. In proportion to the population of the island, it was one of the most one-dimensional of human exoduses. People were tying boxes like they were *pasteles* with banana leaves and heading for the iron bird” (19). His metaphor illustrates the value of *pasteles* as he compares them with what must be the most treasured possessions of the migrants boarding the plane, belongings that the travelers are unwilling to part with.

These literary references serve to inscribe a Puerto Ricanness in the various texts.
They locate the practice of cooking pastele in a wide cultural context. In fact, pastele, both in literary texts and in life, serve as a significant indicator of Puerto Rican national and cultural identity. In life, both the actual food and its production function signify Puerto Ricaness. In literature too, the presence of pastele operates as a cultural sign that marks the text as Puerto Rican. Reading, and living, with an eye for food can enhance our understanding about the formation of gender, ethnic and transnational identities.
CHAPTER FOUR
READING FOOD IN THE LATIN DELI: THE GENDERED SELF AND LATINA/O COMMUNITY

Much of the writing of Puerto Rican author Judith Ortiz Cofer, whose work has enjoyed considerable critical acclaim, is preoccupied with the struggles of women and girls in the face of both gender and ethnic oppression. Born in the town of Hormigueros, Puerto Rico in 1952, she and her family migrated to Paterson, New Jersey in 1956. In 1967, they relocated again to Augusta, Georgia, where the family remained until her father’s untimely death and her homesick mother returned to Puerto Rico shortly thereafter. Ortiz Cofer has resided in Georgia for decades now, currently teaches at the University of Georgia in Athens, and fall 2009 was chosen as an inductee and was inducted into the Georgia Writers’ Hall of Fame in April of 2010. She is widely anthologized: her novel The Line of the Sun (1989) was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize.

Ortiz Cofer’s texts relate to my project in that they treat food as a major motif presented through a feminist discourse about the self and community, especially in the terrain of ethnicity, gender and the transnational. By the transnational, a term that coheres with the geographical contours of Ortiz Cofer’s lived experience and the settings in her literary productions, I mean a dynamic through which she engages with different locales and highlights the social, cultural and political interconnectedness and ongoing movements between Puerto Rico and the United States mainland and their longstanding and deeply enmeshed colonial relationship. Many aspects of her rich, transnational experience inform
her writer’s imagination. In her youth, she traveled back to Puerto Rico each summer to visit her maternal grandmother from whom she learned a great deal about the art of storytelling. This movement back and forth from the mainland to the island, a common Puerto Rican experience (what they call el vaivén, which means a coming and going), endows her work with a tension and energy in terms of bicultural synthesis. On the island, she witnessed the extraordinary social power that comes with telling a tale effectively as she would frequently devour her grandmother’s clever and instructive narratives. Thus, these transnational and matrilineal trajectories of storytelling and transmitting knowledge emerge as major facets in the construction of Ortiz Cofer’s sense of self, her Puertorriqueñan subjectivity, as well as in her art as a writer.

But her abuela was not the only captivating and proficient storyteller in the family circuit. When talking about her tío, her uncle, and his visits to Paterson, New Jersey, Ortiz Cofer describes the vitality he brought to her rather somber household with his own storytelling and lifestyle: “He was the spirit of Navidad in our house, with just a hint of the Dionysian about him” (Woman in Front of the Sun: “The Gift of a Cuento” 37). Tío was often on the town gallivanting, womanizing and drinking rum, but the comfort, companionship and entertainment he offered her mother surpassed her mother’s mild disapproval of his debauched ways. Ortiz Cofer notes how:

Mami would frown through her first cup of coffee, then break down in girlish giggles when Tío told us a new joke or cuento he had picked up in his wanderings. I gathered these stories in my memory and brought them out during the loneliest times of my life. They nourished and comforted me, as
they had my mother, who was always hungry for words in Spanish during those first years away from the Island. (Woman “The Gift” 42) Her mother’s state of exile and the subsequent solace in the company of Tío, the pleasures of the renditions of his excursions and the drinking of coffee, were due in some measure to the fact that her mother rarely ventured out and that only on those occasions accompanied by her father did she journey beyond the safety of El Building. These stories “nourished” Ortiz Cofer as they fed her mother’s “hunger” for words in Spanish. Ortiz Cofer’s word choice highlights the connectedness of desires for both food and language, much as Terry Eagleton skillfully demonstrates in “Edible écriture,” in which he playfully, but cleverly, highlights the connections between writing and food, between the consumption of food and the “consumption” of words, and the various descriptors used for both texts and foods.

Ortiz Cofer’s family would shop first at the A and P, and then the bodegas, which were Puerto Rican groceries in the barrio where her mother purchased the ingredients for her favorite Puerto Rican dishes. Ortiz Cofer remembers that, “The people in these bodegas shot Spanish at one another like machine-gun fire. So fast did they speak that I could barely understand what they were saying” (Woman, “A Prayer, a Candle, and a Notebook” 25). Because of her father’s relative success as a Navy officer, her family often seemed out of place and overdressed by barrio standards, and she explains we “were suspect to the other customers. Little pockets of silence would form around us as my mother examined the yuccas, plantains and other viandas she would need for the week’s meals (“A Prayer, a Candle, and a Notebook” 26).
Considering that some of Ortiz Cofer’s work challenges constraining aspects of Catholicism, a rather improbable source that also fostered her creative sensibilities came during her school years in the form of Sr. Rosetta, a rebellious Catholic nun, who played classical music during the school day and supplied Ortiz Cofer with an impressive array of reading material, literature that was not in the grammar school curriculum. Ortiz Cofer credits Sr. Rosetta with offering her an “education of the senses” (*Woman* “My Rosetta” 17). She reflects on some early, formative experiences with Rosetta:

> Her awareness–raising seminars were ridiculed by other nuns and laughed at by her more conservative students, but they gave me my first essential tool as a writer: the ability to absorb sensory detail from the pungent aroma of *la vida*, the siren call of religion, the sweet aftertaste of hard won victory. I learned to re-experience it all at will in my mind and later on the page. Those months were the beginning of my long affair with the word, or should I say my lifetime commitment to it? The seductive power of language was introduced in my life when I needed it the most by the most unlikely and remarkable of my mentors, my radical sister, my Rosetta.” (*Woman* “My Rosetta” 17-18)

Ortiz Cofer’s description of Rosetta’s tutelage relies on language such as the “aroma” of life and the “aftertaste” of victory that permeates the texture of much of her writing, a texture which embraces the sensual and informs her aesthetics. In addition, Sr. Rosetta, ironically,
may have inspired Ortiz Cofer to contest many of the sexist opinions and patriarchal discourses about women in Puerto Rican and Catholic culture. For instance, Ortiz Cofer criticizes the social practice of young single girls wearing a white mantilla at mass, while married women don black, as a method for advertising a female’s sexual status, her sexual availability, or lack thereof. A woman who opposed or criticized this practice was labeled a *malcriada* (*Woman “My Rosetta”* 11). Ortiz Cofer also interrogates island gender attitudes about language and how women were expected not to interrupt men’s conversations (11). In addition, she criticizes the preposterous practices at the table, specifically of women’s officiously serving men first at meals (*Woman “My Rosetta”* 11).

Forced to engage with an evolving, transnational identity after her move to the mainland, assuaging her cultural and national alterity, Ortiz Cofer retains a connectedness with Puerto Rico through her frequent visits and, in significant measure, through food, both eating it and writing about it. In “Woman in Front of the Sun,” an excerpt from a short eponymous volume, Ortiz Cofer describes a return trip to Puerto Rico. As the plane touches down in San Juan, she recounts a visceral reaction to being there: “Immediately I can feel the strangely physical way I am changed when I arrive on this island. It is a flutter in my chest, an excitement, a feeling of joyful anticipation. It’s almost like falling in love, or maybe the start of a fever” (“Woman” 48). Ortiz Cofer insists that this response is biological as her body “is desperately trying to adjust to the heat and humidity” (“Woman” 48). As she waits for the next flight to Mayagüez, the primary order of business is eating. She makes a beeline for the *fritura* stand as she exclaims:
The man at the counter waves to me; my order is ready: cod fritters, rice and red beans. My health-conscious daughter would lecture me sternly if she could see what I am about to consume. She would point out that the grease is the fatal flaw in Puerto Rican cuisine…. Though I know the sermon verbatim, I dig in. My adipose cells yell, ¡Ole! My body celebrates the orgy of oil and fat and spices. The taste and aroma of the meal take me back to my primal Puerto Rican self. (“Woman” 53)

What is at work here is a similar dynamic to the generational, transnational and epistemological conflict in “The Witch's Husband,” (which will be examined below), the kind of transcultural conflict in respective ways of knowing and experiencing the world. For Ortiz Cofer, the sheer satisfaction of consuming this delicious, grease-laden meal trumps any U.S. “progressive” health concern about cholesterol that her daughter’s sermon might espouse. Ortiz Cofer relishes every bite as they bring her back to her “primal Puerto Rican self”: the food she savors signifies her cultural affiliation and her place on the island. Ortiz Cofer also emphasizes the biological, embodied and visceral nature of the pleasure of eating as she gives voice to “her adipose cells” that exclaim “¡Ole!”

The above passage demonstrates Ortiz Cofer’s delight in Puerto Rican cuisine. What seems clear is that the privileging of food in the very title of another of Ortiz Cofer’s works, The Latin Deli, indicates the salience of the concept of food at play in several of the poems and stories throughout that volume. In a fairly sustained manner, the pieces reveal how food and consumption are used to explore and to mark ethnic and gender identity, and to shape various social connections, especially: male/female relationships as in the marriage between
Corazón and Manuel in the short story “Corazón’s Café;” dynamics of ethno-national community formation which emerge in the diaspora such as the constitution of a pan-
Latinidad community in “The Latin Deli: An Ars Poetica;” and finally in the establishment of a female, and feminist, Puerto Rican community in her short story “The Witch’s Husband,” a Puerto Rican, feminist community which perhaps gestures to an even larger transnational, even transatlantic, feminist community. This connection between feminist community and food manifests in a variety of ways in the narrative, but most overtly in a salient scene from the short story in which the witches converge to raid a cellar and feast communally. For many Puerto Ricans and Latina/os, questions of identity and authenticity are perpetually vexing and hotly contested issues and Ortiz Cofer uses images of foodstuffs and other alimentary tropes to negotiate her bicultural, bilingual and transnational experience, partly in an effort to develop an emotionally coherent account of her identity but also to lend a road map to other migrants and immigrants.

For Ortiz Cofer, the experience of exile functions as a catalyst for writing in terms of her own sense of a transcultural self as she foregrounds many of the dynamics of complex transnational issues such as dislocation, hybridity, bilingualism and even the distinctly Puerto Rican circular migration experience of el vaivén. Significantly, the Puerto Rican migrant, who is officially a United States citizen and enjoys great mobility between the U. S. mainland and Puerto Rico (unlike immigrants whose presence in the Unites States may or may not be legal, and who are not afforded such mobility between the U. S. and their country of origin), is forced to engage with a dominant U.S. culture and, at the same time, typically may wish to retain a sense of the past and one’s original traditions, the vestiges of that
“primal self,” a self which Ortiz Cofer is clearly able to feed with each subsequent return to Puerto Rico. Ortiz Cofer’s experiences thus move away from linear narratives of immigration and assimilation. Her poems and fiction are situated both in Paterson, New Jersey and on the Island as her writing easily flows back and forth like the circulatory migration pattern of el vaivén. In significant measure, a sense of loss and hybrid identity is inscribed in her writing, not solely, but frequently, through representations of food, representations which function as signs about identities in formation and in flux. However, uses of food in Ortiz Cofer’s texts also articulate moments of pleasure, joy and liberation from constraining aspects of gender and ethnic oppressions. Under close inspection, the social significations of consumption present Ortiz Cofer’s readers important insights into Puerto Rican culture and identity, as her work encourages a renegotiation of gendered subject positions regarding Puerto Rican women in relation to their desires and their autonomy, as well as an articulation of Puerto Rican identity positions more generally as they relate to a white, Anglo-American, hegemonic culture.

**Representation and Latina/o Identities**

In *Tropicalizations*, a text which challenges the colonizing discourses that have permeated Anglo-American culture and society, “tropicalization,” as the editors Aparicio and Chávez-Silverman define its usage, “means to trope, to imbue a particular space, geography, group, or nation with a set of traits, images, and values” (8) that are disseminated through a variety of texts and cultural productions. The editors, however, continue by making an important distinction in their particular use of “tropicalization,” namely that with their definition, the cultural agency of the Latina/o subject is acknowledged, even privileged,
thereby insisting that cultural influence is not unidirectional, not merely top-down, but rather a series of transculturations with a dynamic of give and take. To tropicalize from a dominant, Anglo-American position is clearly a hegemonic move, however, according to Aparicio and Chávez-Silverman, “[w]e conceptualize tropicalizations precisely as a tool that foregrounds the transformative cultural agency of the subaltern subject” (2). Their work also examines how Latina/o writers and artists have internalized, adopted, and transformed hegemonic definitions, almost exploding them from the inside out. Cultural survival, which embodies a resistance to oppressive tropes, can be seen in the various approaches of writers, such as the Puerto Rican poet Victor Hernandez Cruz, who coined the term tropicalization in his collection of the same name published in 1976. Cruz’s poetry often employs a fusion of images that conflates the concept of home and the imagery of the island largely using natural images such as foods and vegetation. For example in his volume of poetry titled Red Beans and Rice, Cruz’s notion of tropicalization seems to act as a force of nature, transforming the geocultural landscape of the receiving society, specifically New York City. Thus, the wave after wave of Puerto Ricans moving to New York City, or to Paterson, NJ, seems as natural, and transformative, as a hurricane. Also, the recognition of tropicalization as an ongoing process is important; it is still widely occurring today.

In Transcultural Women of the Late-Twentieth-Century U.S. American Literature: First-Generation Migrants from Islands and Peninsulas, Pauline T. Newton investigates the challenges facing women immigrant/migrant writers and their attempts to articulate transcultural identities. In fact, her study points toward a reorientation in literary criticism. Her subjects are all immigrant/migrant women authors, namely Judith Ortiz Cofer, Julia
Alvarez, and Jamaica Kincaid from the Caribbean, as well as two other important writers, Shirley Geok-kin Lim, a Chinese Malaysian, and Lan Cao, who is Vietnamese. Newton rejects the kind of binaristic thinking which reduces the immigrant/migrant trajectory to a split between New World and Old World. In contrast, she acknowledges immigrants’/migrants’ “transcultural evolution within, outside of and across their cultural regions” (2). Moreover, she critiques the notion of hybridity as theorized by Bhabha and others. She argues that hybridity is not precisely the term for her particular conception of the cultural complexity of immigrant/migrant identity, and thus, perhaps not exactly the most appropriate way to describe the cultural dimensions of these writers. She reasons that the notion of a postcolonial “Third Space” is inadequate to encompass the complexities of contemporary dislocations that require negotiations among spaces that “form multiple cultures and customs, some of which are already constructed from more than two cultures or spaces” (4). Furthermore, Newton observes that the concept of third space suggests a colonial relationship that is not yet transformed by the authors’ leaving their native cultures and countries behind as “they move beyond reacting to the imperialistic actions of a colonizer” (5). Even movement within the U.S. after immigration or migration may further complicate one’s sense of self, as regions vary widely and the various region’s inhabitants respective reactions to immigrants and migrants will dramatically differ too.

This theorizing is especially relevant for Judith Ortiz Cofer, the focus of my own investigation, in that Newton’s more nuanced understanding of the intricacies of Ortiz Cofer’s migrant experience encompasses the vexed and complex relationship, both political and cultural, between Puerto Rico and the United States. Additionally, Ortiz Cofer’s
movement once residing in the United States also confirms the usefulness of Newton’s more fluid terminology. Ortiz Cofer first lived in Paterson, New Jersey, an urban, Northeastern city, practically a suburb of New York as is most of northern New Jersey, yet not quite the highly metropolitan setting of New York City proper. Next, she frequently traveled to the island and spent summers with her grandmother whereby these repeated dislocations fostered a sense of not belonging completely to either culture. For example, in *Silent Dancing* Ortiz Cofer explains:

> As a Navy brat, shuttling between New Jersey and the pueblo, I was constantly made to feel like an oddball by my peers, who made fun of my two-way accent: a Spanish accent when I spoke English; and, when I spoke Spanish, I was told that I sounded like a "Gringa." Being the outsiders had already turned my brother and me into cultural chameleons, developing early the ability to blend into a crowd, to sit and read quietly in a fifth story apartment building for days and days when it was too bitterly cold to play outside. (18)

Then, as a young adult, Ortiz Cofer relocated to rural Georgia. Rather than a unidirectional, assimilationist paradigm, the terms *transcultural* and *transnational* more accurately portray Ortiz Cofer’s experiences and her literary expressions with their concomitant movements and influences which cross back and forth from the colony to the metropolis. Even Ortiz Cofer’s own phrase “cultural schizophrenia” reveals the possibility for more than two modes of being, for herself, and for some of her characters.
For a young Puerto Rican, adolescence in the U.S. frequently entails an internalization of the negative representations and stereotypes fostered by many Anglo-Americans and their derogatory stance towards migrants, and especially people of color. Thus, initially Ortiz Cofer experienced a kind of in-betweenness, not entirely fitting in with either Puerto Rican or Anglo cultures as she straddled these two worlds of Paterson and the Island. Jorge Duany explains, “most Puerto Ricans value their U.S. citizenship and the freedom of movement that it offers, especially unrestricted access to the continental United States. But as Puerto Ricans move back and forth between the two countries, territorially grounded definitions of national identity become less relevant, while transnational identities acquire greater prominence” (2). To reiterate, in addition to her transnational movements, Ortiz Cofer’s position was further complicated when the family moved to rural Georgia as there were even fewer Puerto Ricans residing in the South than there were in the major urban areas of the Northeast, and as one might reasonably argue that the U.S South has existed in a subordinated position to the North, especially during the time of Ortiz Cofer’s relocation to Georgia, long before the advent of what we now term The New South, long before the massive migration of Northerners and immigration of Mexicans to the southern U.S. Thus, the reception of migrant Puerto Ricans in New Jersey would have differed fairly dramatically from that of the disposition to migrant Puerto Ricans in rural Georgia. This may demonstrate the complex ways that various U.S. citizens relate to their colonial others. Ortiz Cofer’s cultural schizophrenia is one in which multiple layers of identities are mapped onto each other with particular colonialities and tropicalizations at work in this palimpsestic relation. Acknowledging the complexity of such experiences, Newton correctly reads several of Ortiz
Cofer’s works through a transcultural lens, a lens that highlights the author’s emerging consciousness about her identity as a Puerto Rican residing in a new land, the United States, and who frequently returns to the island.

Perhaps as a result of this cultural complexity, Ortiz Cofer eschews labels. In an interview with Ralph Ocasio, he inquires whether Ortiz Cofer has been influenced much by Nuyorican writers and although she admits that she appreciates their work, she explains:

There is not just one reality to being a Puerto Rican writer. I am putting together a different view. I am not just one isolated Puerto Rican writer in Louisville, Georgia, who writes about something that no one else has experienced. I am writing about any woman whose life takes her to many places and that's the way I'd like to think about it. (45-46)

Basically, Ortiz Cofer’s entire opus can be construed as a nuanced effort to make sense of her migrant experience. Thus, her adulthood and, in a sense, moving to Georgia, allowed her the psychic freedom, the time and space, to begin her practice as a writer. Ortiz Cofer recognizes that only “At a safe distance from the chaotic world I grew up in—and Tennessee Williams was right when he said ‘time is the longest distance’—I now have enough space between my selves for my investigation to proceed. And that is why I write. I write to know myself. It is a job that will occupy me for life” (Woman “A Prayer, a Candle, and a Notebook” 21).
In this chapter, I will concentrate on Ortiz Cofer’s volume *The Latin Deli* which fits in to my larger project in that I will demonstrate how representations of food function as powerful symbols that communicate social attitudes and values, especially about the gendered self, ethno-nationalism and community. As the name of the volume suggests, Judith Ortiz Cofer employs an explicit food reference conspicuously in the title of her mixed genre volume *The Latin Deli* in which food is a prominent signifier. This collection especially, but also other texts in her canon, focuses on food as a vehicle to explore some of the complexities of Latina/o culture and identity, specifically within the context of migration and the Puerto Rican diasporic experience. I will examine the ways in which Ortiz Cofer uses food as a trope, often a locus for the sensual and the exotic, to provide a counter discourse to the fetishizing of women as objects: Ortiz Cofer does indeed write against an aspect of the western tradition that frequently figures women metonymically and metaphorically as food, a fetishizing which denies women’s status as fully human and reduces them to objects, delectable objects though they may be. This use of metaphor in turn prevents healthy and egalitarian gendered relationships between men and women, a concern that inspires much of her writing. Ortiz Cofer also critiques Latino culture in terms of the machismo that keeps most Latinos out of domestic kitchens. In addition, she critically assesses the kind of exoticized troping of Latinas by mainstream Anglo-American culture, a practice that discourages a full appreciation of Latinas’ self-worth and disallows Latinas’ status as legitimate American subjects. Ortiz Cofer even cites an incident with an Anglo-American woman regarding the ways in which ethnic assumptions place Latinas in positions of
servitude. Thus, I am writing here, at the intersection of gender, ethnic, national and transnational concerns.

The literary and cultural practice of figuring women as edibles has a very long history, so long that it has come to seem almost natural. From the “Song of Songs” in the Old Testament to contemporary culture, women are often represented as items for consumption. For instance, in “Songs” the lover rejoices in the female beloved as he exclaims, “Your lips distill nectar, my bride/ honey and milk are under your tongue/…your channel is an orchard of pomegranates with all the choicest fruits.” Later in the Renaissance, writers often used a catalogue of beauty, or the blazon, which dissects the woman and sometimes depicts her physical qualities as food. Authors such as Spenser in his *Amoretti* sonnet cycle writes of “two golden apples, Her brest, that table was, so richly spredd.” In *Astrophel and Stella*, Sidney’s famous sonnet cycle of the Renaissance, after the speaker’s Platonic contemplation of Stella’s virtues, he offers his famous exhortation, "But, ah," Desire still cries, "give me some food." Even in the 20th century, there are famous literary utterances such as Prufrock’s timid inquiry if he should “dare to eat a peach” and “force the moment to its crisis.” Latino writers are also complicit in this type of objectification. Quiñonez in *Bodega Dreams* describes the New York streets where “young girls strutted their stuff, shaking it like Jell-O” (213). I hope these representations serve to establish the deeply entrenched connection in the western cultural imaginary between women and the oppressive metaphoric potential of food tropes. Admittedly, there exists a deep and important connection between women and food, most profoundly perhaps in the fact that some women, mothers, are often first food. Nonetheless, as with other biological facts, culture has exaggerated and inflated the
biological reality to utilize these facts as a hammer, as a means to create highly problematic representations of women.

Ortiz Cofer’s *The Latin Deli* (1993) articulates *la lucha*, the struggle, of a range of Latina characters. Her writings are a witness to the Puerto Rican diasporic experience, a conflicting experience that her writing helps to make sense of. Her notion of writing as quest for self-knowledge and a way of exploring uncharted territory can be inferred in the epigraph to *The Latin Deli*. She cites San Juan de la Cruz “To come to what you do not know, / you must go by the way you do not know” (5). And perhaps part of the unknown or unexplored route necessitates being guided, not by tradition, but by female experience. Ortiz Cofer is acutely aware of the societal constraints placed upon women, especially in Latina/o cultures, and so her literary interventions offer an alternative way of seeing, imagining and living with regard to gendered and ethnic identities and relationships.

An entry from *The Latin Deli*, entitled “The Myth of the Latin Woman: I Just Met a Girl Named Maria” contains four autobiographical, textual moments, which reveal important aspects of her literary project, when Ortiz Cofer’s keen insights and satiric treatment enable her to comment on uncomfortable and violating, cross-ethnic and/or cross-gender encounters. Ortiz Cofer tells the story of an awkward experience she once had while a graduate student at Oxford. On a bus trip she took into London, a rather drunk young man got down on bended knee “as if struck by inspiration” (148) and serenaded her with the famous song, “Maria,” from *West Side Story*. She is approached in this manner and made a spectacle of because she looks like a “Latina.” Although the experience is unpleasant, she handles it with grace. Ortiz Cofer then recounts another unfortunate meeting, this time with a white, middle-aged man,
who was “probably a corporate executive, well educated, even worldly by most standards” (152). He detained her and a colleague, raised his champagne glass towards her, and toasted “Evita!” (151). Then, he “half-recited, half-bellowed ‘Don’t Cry for Me, Argentina,” (151) as she was walking toward her room in this upscale hotel. His unfortunate young daughter accompanied him, but the child’s presence did not prevent the remarkably offensive serenade. He followed this act with a dirty ditty sung to the popular and stereotypically Latino tune of “La Bamba,” except, as Ortiz Cofer dryly explains, that “the lyrics were about a girl named María whose exploits all rhymed with her name and gonorrhea” (152). Although she admits she would have liked to have shoved him into the swimming pool, she explains that “When he finished, I looked not at him but at his daughter. I advised her calmly never to ask her father what he had done in the army. Then I walked between them and to my room” (152). She muses that the ignorant crooner would most likely have not behaved in this manner with a white woman, but because she was simply some Latina, some Evita or María, there would be no offense taken, or even more disturbingly, that he did not care whether offense was taken as, according to him, she was not his equal via gender or ethnicity. Certainly, media representations of Latinas inform the presumptions of these men, and such encounters raise the question about what makes an Englishman or an Anglo-American feel culturally authorized to make such public declarations and ethnocentric assumptions, to claim the right to accost total strangers in this manner. But Englishmen and Anglo-American males are not the only persons who perpetuate and enact such ethnic subjugations.
Ortiz Cofer recognizes that through the privilege of her education and her facility with English, she has learned how to deal with such untoward events. Nonetheless, she laments how the myth of the Hispanic menial is difficult to evade and to dispel as the stereotype that “they make good domestics” (152) permeates U.S. culture and media. She admits that “I too have on occasion been sent to that ‘kitchen,’ where some think I obviously belong” (153). Ortiz Cofer, who was excited at the prospect of her first public poetry reading, describes an event which occurred at a restaurant in Miami where an older woman gestured her to the table where the woman was seated. Thinking that the woman wanted an autograph, Ortiz Cofer made her way over and much to her chagrin, the older patron, believing Ortiz Cofer was a waitress, ordered a cup of coffee from the poet. Ortiz Cofer speculates the female customer must have assumed that the chapbook of poetry in her hand was a menu. She recalls that of all the excitement and happenings on that day, and even despite the fact that she acknowledges this was not “an intentional act of cruelty,” (153) nevertheless, that particular discriminatory event was etched in her memory. She explains, “I remember that scene most clearly, because it reminded me of what I had to overcome before anyone would take me seriously” (153). Her Latina appearance and the “menu” in her hand encouraged the false assumption she must be connected with the kitchen and with servitude. Ortiz Cofer explains: “That day I read to that woman and her lowered eyelids told me that she was embarrassed at her little faux pas, and when I willed her to look up at me, it was my victory, and she graciously allowed me to punish her with my full attention” (153-54). The two women shook hands at the end of the reading. Thus, Latinas are both hyper-sexualized and also ethnically stereotyped.
Ortiz Cofer’s essay explores what it means to be stereotyped in a cultural framework regarding sexuality that views the “Latina” by the dominant Anglo society as, to use her examples, “Hot Tamales and sexual firebrands” (150). Regarding the circulation of such representations, she explains, “in their special vocabulary, advertisers have designated ‘sizzling’ and ‘smoldering’ as the adjectives of choice for describing not only the foods but also the women of Latin America” (150). Indeed, “sizzling” might as well describe either a Latina or a fajita. This kind of discourse exoticizes women of color and encourages Anglo-American men in a kind of imaginative pleasure seeking. It supports and promotes these colonizing gestures toward all Latinas as wild and exotic, deformed representations of Puerto Rican women, and Latinas more broadly, that have often appeared in the popular media. According to bell hooks, “Cultural taboos around sexuality, desire and ethnicity are transgressed and made explicit” (21) and the language Ortiz Cofer points out about food certainly reverberates with sexual innuendo. Perhaps, hooks suggests, it is an interest in the exotic, a desire to taste a “bit o’ the other” to use her phrase, that reveals the West's fascination with the primitive which actually has to do with its own crisis in identity. Renato Rosaldo describes that this longing for the exotic other, this “imperialist nostalgia” of a sort, is “the process of yearning for what one has destroyed as a form of mystification” (109). Thus, in contemporary cultural politics, consuming the other can take the form of eating exotic foods or sexual activity, or both. June Carter examines such racialized constructions of tropical beauties such as “la negra” as an object of sensuality and evil, and “la mulatta” as sensuous, and both are connected to images of fruit: “cultivated not for their beauty, as is a flower, but to carry out the more utilitarian function of nourishing and sustaining the
consumer,...[to]...perform its duty, it is handled, squeezed, tasted and finally devoured” (73). Her lighter counterpart, “la blanca,” is typically associated with flowers. Carter cites the examples of “la rosa,” “el lirio,” “el jazmin” as beautiful objects of adoration. She correctly claims that the difference in these representations “underlines the society’s assumptions about the cultural and aesthetic inferiority of the black female” (Carter 73).

Carter’s analysis exposes the ways in which even among representations of women of color there exists a structure in terms of skin color in which the women of fairer complexion are described, and albeit are objectified too in a somewhat horizontal move in that women are ubiquitously objectified, as flowers, objects of admiration which suggest a preciousness and ethereality. The more darkly complected women, existing on the lower end of the vertical color hierarchy, are objects for consumption, an important and pernicious distinction indeed.

One final example of this exoticizing in The Latin Deli, specifically in regard to food, is when a boyfriend kissed Ortiz Cofer sloppily and then resented her insufficiently fiery response—he spewed, “I thought you Latin girls were supposed to mature early” (151). She addresses this invidious comment with wit and mild indignation as she explains, this was “my first instance of being thought of as a fruit or vegetable—I was supposed to ripen, not just grow into womanhood like other girls” (151). She offers these autobiographical incidents to challenge the Latina myth, and the construction of female identity more generally. Using a post-positivist realist perspective, Alcoff and Mohanty theorize that realists about identity insist that “identities are not our mysterious inner essences but rather socially embodied facts about ourselves in our world; moreover, they are not mere descriptions of who we are, but, rather, causal explanations of our social locations in a world
that is shaped by such locations, by the way they are distributed and hierarchically organized (6).

Ortiz Cofer’s life stories demonstrate some of the intersections between representation and actual experience, and they may gesture toward the ways in which a post-positive realist perspective can validate the importance of ethnic and gender identity in embodied, lived experience and help us recognize the ways in which the racialized, sexualized female cannot evade the meanings generated by her marked body. Thus, identities do relate to biological realities and are “socially embodied facts about ourselves,” not merely socially constructed fictions, although they are that too. Indeed, an example of such social constructedness and the fluidity of racial designations is evident in the ways Ortiz Cofer, and many other Latina/os, are unaware of themselves as people of color until they emigrate to the United States and encounter the pathologically rigid U.S. black/white racial binary. Nonetheless, these realities are not merely “descriptions” as these inescapable, hard facts of Ortiz Cofer’s experience, which certainly entail some painful lived realities, are not entirely arbitrary, but also relate to embodiment. With a burgeoning awareness of self, she explains how: “María had followed me to London, reminding me of a prime fact of my life: you can leave the Island, master the English language, and travel as far as you can, but if you are a Latina, especially one like me who so obviously belongs to Rita Moreno’s gene pool, the Island travels with you” (148). Through her writing, Ortiz Cofer attempts to alter the social perceptions and meanings attached to the Latina body.

Ortiz Cofer offers a remedy to oppressive representations with her oppositional strategy in the short story “Corazón’s Cafe.” Rather than objectifying misogynistic
discourse, Ortiz Cofer focuses instead on the use of food references as a vehicle for liberatory possibilities for Latinas as she debunks both gender and ethnic-based myths and stereotypes. This tale commences after closing time, in the bodega where Corazón and Manuel built their life together. Now, she finds herself grieving and utterly alone. Distraught by Manuel’s dying from heart valve disease earlier that day, she sits behind the counter and reflects over the events of their history and their love story. Back on the island, her mother died while she was very young, and her father thereafter retreated into severe alcoholism. After meeting Manuel at the market, she is instantly and powerfully attracted to him. From its inception, their love affair is connected to food as the aromatic trace of coffee he leaves on her skin after handing a package to her haunts her for the remainder of the day. Afterward, she leaves her father’s abusive household to find refuge with Manuel and his elderly mother, Doña Serena. Their early life together is pleasant, but after Corázon’s miscarriage when she learns that she will never be able to bear children, and then the death of Doña Serena, the narrative takes a transnational turn as the young couple relocates to New Jersey to open a bodega, a grocery store that sells ethnic, specifically Latina/o, foodstuffs, of their very own. I will now focus attention on several instances in which Ortiz Cofer’s treatment of gender and ethnic food tropes argues convincingly for new subject positions for Puerto Ricans, and most poignantly for Puerto Rican women.

Carmen S. Rivera in *Kissing the Mango Tree: Puerto Rican Women Rewriting American Literature*, comments on a remarkable split in society, one that Ortiz Cofer had observed herself in an interview with Acosta-Belén.”During her stays on the island, she [Ortiz Cofer] notices that the two worlds are very definitely demarcated and that one is not to
cross over the boundaries. Gender roles are specifically defined. Cooking, childbearing, child-rearing, housekeeping and the preservation of morality and local traditions are the realm of women. Working, drinking sexual entertainment, traveling and wandering are the men’s” (Rivera 151). On the contrary, in “Corazón’s Café,” the gender politics between Corazón and Manuel challenge the cultural fictions of femininity since it is she who controls the finances, paying the bills and keeping accounts, and Manuel who prepares the meals as he “had learned to cook, by helping his widowed mother in the kitchen” (95). Manuel is the one who is intimately connected with food, its preparation and aesthetics, basically transposing and decisively reversing traditional gender roles regarding the social positions of men and women. A description of the layout of their bodega is as follows:

*Habichuelas rojas,* the cans of red kidney beans they stacked in a little pyramid. There were little sacks next to it holding the long grain rice that Puerto Ricans like to eat. The logic that Manuel followed in stocking his shelves was based on his idea of what most people wanted to see in a barrio store: foods that go together arranged in interesting ways in one area: rice and beans, with plantains nearby, as well as sliced breadfruit, pumpkin, and other side dishes to inspire more creative meals. (93)

Corazón also reflects on their rather unusual courtship and several intimate interactions. At their first romantic liaison, “Manuel was waiting for her on the back steps of the store. Her own daring had made her feel reckless, and she leaned down and kissed his mouth. It tasted
like a sweet, moist fruit straight from the tree of summer” (97). She gives herself to Manuel shortly thereafter. Ortiz Cofer’s use of simile is an instructive reversal and calls attention to the need to take a full account of the use of food tropes in this tale. When describing Manuel, Ortiz Cofer gestures to the Renaissance blazon: “Manuel had a little beard then too…But the beard only framed and softened his features. His eyes were almond-shaped with long eyelashes that made shadows on his cheeks when he looked down to figure an account for a customer. His lips were an invitation for a kiss: full and sensuous” (94). Ortiz Cofer tropes Manuel as food with his mouth like “sweet, moist fruit straight from the tree of summer” and his “almond-shaped” eyes. She also feminizes him in significant ways as well with his “little beard,” “softened” features and “long eyelashes,” representations which undermine conventional notions of masculinity, yet ostensibly do not compromise his status as a lover, or what a “real man” might be (as quoted below). This representational dynamic might usefully relate to Aparicio and Chávez-Silverman’s concept of tropicalization as it intersects with gender in that Ortiz Cofer is deploying tropes in such a way that they accentuate “the transformative cultural agency of the [female] subaltern subject,” (2). In contrast to the examples of misogynist representations in “The Latina Myth,” in “Corazón’s Café,” Ortiz Cofer takes full advantage of her authorial power and artistic license to trope Manuel in accord with her own vision and desires about masculinity which clearly challenge the fairly pervasive discourses of hyper-masculinity and the macho in Puerto Rican culture. In Ortiz Cofer’s description, Manuel becomes tropicalized, and feminized, as a “sweet, moist fruit” and the writer enacts “the transformative cultural agency” of the female Puerto Rican subject as she decolonizes both the kitchen and the bedroom. Furthermore, I would argue, Ortiz
Cofer does not merely effect a turning-of-the-tables, but rather writes toward a revision of marital relations in which reciprocity is a highly desirable and significant dynamic.

Ortiz Cofer then writes an entire segment of the short story replete with the poetics of food as she revels in the enticing aromas and delectable foods of the island. This description of fecundity, in contradistinction to the aforementioned objectifying, cultural inscriptions noted in the western literary canon, symbolizes the highly reciprocal and very intimate physical relationship between the lovers. For example, Corazón recalls the smell of the “warm milk sweetened with cinnamon” that he drank each night as she and Manuel embraced each other in his room (100). Then, Ortiz Cofer uses the olfactory sense as a means to create metaphors for the mutuality of the love Manuel and Corazón shared as the text surrounds the lovers with the sensual beauty of Puerto Rico:

They made love with the window thrown wide open to the smells of the Island all concentrated on Doña Serena’s property--her little garden of herbs, letting in the Island smells of pungent oregano overwhelming all the other aromatic plants, the cayenne peppers, the cilantro, the tasty Puerto Rican coriander, the *pimientos y ajies* that went into her condiments and permeated even the naked wood of the house with the smell of the food cooked in her kitchen every day. The breeze blew through the trees that surrounded and protected the little plot of cultivated ground, and it too added a special fragrance of the papaya with its pendulous fruit hanging delicately from its slender branches, and the bananas trees, even when not laden with the stalks of the fat little *guineitos*.
ninos that are melt-in-the-mouth sweet when fried, still bore the leaves that
the expert cook knows should be used to wrap the food that is boiled--to add
the final touch of taste and also to make food a gift to be unwrapped in
celebration. Manuel whispered these things to her as they lay in each other’s
arms at night. She laughed gently at his love of cooking and his amazing
knowledge of plants and food; not long before, she had thought these interests
were strictly feminine, but his hands caressing her body were also a revelation
of what a real man could be. (102-3)

The reader delights in these sensuous and sensual images, images that link the foods of the
island with the sexual intimacy, mutual pleasure and respect between the lovers, as they give
themselves to each other as gifts. The qualitative attributes of some of the items in this
passage suggest a kind of gendered, revisionist aesthetics. Unlike so much representation of
male desire in the discourse of Western literature, representation that has framed women as
objects for consumption, Ortiz Cofer disrupts this discourse as she recasts and recognizes
female desire. In this passage, she elevates the importance of the other senses in significant
measure, not focusing simply on the West’s and I would assert, male, cultural obsession with
the visual. Rather, she offers tropes that favor the olfactory sense, the heady aromas of the
herb garden and “the special fragrance of the papaya,” scents that permeate the room during
their lovemaking, or the tactile sense as she celebrates the delicious feeling of his hands on
her body as they solidify their bond through touch, or the sense of taste with the “guineitos
ninos that are melt-in-the-mouth sweet.” Ortiz Cofer manipulates and inverts tradition to
produce a strikingly different kind of aesthetic, one that explores female sexuality and
gendered relationships from a refreshing perspective, and one that offers insight into the
creative mind and life of this Puerto Rican female writer. Ortiz Cofer succeeds with her food
play and gender reversals in making these scrumptious smells and tastes of foods an integral
part of the experience of their lovemaking. Nowhere in the text are women exoticized and
likened to fruit. The dynamics of conventional, asymmetrical, male-female relationships
become reconfigured as interdependence as Ortiz Cofer plays with the politics of the kitchen
and the bedroom, and she achieves this effect largely through the use of food metaphors and
an aesthetics of sensual liberation.

Ortiz Cofer’s ability to reconcile both the politics of gender and aesthetic elements is
reflected in her revising many of the plots and tropes of patriarchal culture and literature. As
male dominance is deconstructed and subverted by her woman-centered writing, she
effectively uses culinary knowledge and practices to mediate the meanings and power
relations between the sexes, and may well succeed in teaching and encouraging women to
articulate, interpret and explore their own perspectives and desires. It seems clear to me that
one of Ortiz Cofer’s persistent endeavors is to emancipate women from a system of
representation deriving from male perspectives and desires and move women towards the
fulfillment of their own desires with writing that works against the processes of
objectification, specifically through the use of food tropes, perhaps leading to greater
liberation, and satisfaction, in the actual lives of her female readers.

The above passage on gender may also be construed as intersecting with ethnicity
since it asserts a positive Puerto Rican identity and argues against certain aspects of the
dominant Anglo-American gaze with its ethnic assumptions about Puerto Ricans. Much of the U.S. discourse on Puerto Rico, and Latin America more broadly, relies on a rhetoric of tropical exoticism and primitivism with its concomitant derogatory descriptions of the inhabitants of such places as primitives, as mongrels, and as lacking in any “real” culture, or as Rosaldo phrases it places “where civilized nations stand duty-bound to uplift the so-called savage ones” (108). To wit, Ortiz Cofer’s description of the lovers reveals a human relation of mutual desire and affection, rather than a wild, exotic, animalistic encounter. Furthermore, the careful cultivation of the beautiful little garden and its variety of plants and herbs suggests culture in one of its most fundamental forms and original senses, namely that of agri“culture” (consider Virgil’s Georgics) as the small property yields a bounty of the earth’s good products. Lastly, the mention of the daily cooking, and how the fragrant smells of the kitchen pervaded the very wood of the house, indicates established practices in culture, in an ethno-national cuisine, so to speak, replete with “the cilantro,” “the tasty Puerto Rican coriander,” “oregano” and “pimientos.” These ingredients are ubiquitous in Puerto Rican recipes. Cuisine, I would argue, comprises some of the most significant rituals of any civilization.

**Food and Ethnic Community**

At the end of the story after Manuel’s death, Corazón decides to keep her bodega open. She stays because she and Manuel both recognized the importance of providing their people with a “taste of home,” (112) a place where “the body and the spirit could be nourished” (126) as, outside of the bodega, her customers endure their quotidian encounters with poverty and marginalization. Ortiz Cofer’s writing signals a small movement that marks
a transnational turn in American literature. The city of Paterson, New Jersey is tropicalized as the little bodega effects a geocultural transformation of the U.S. Northeast. Corázon will be an independent shop owner and she becomes, as we learn from the titular poem, “The Latin Deli: An Ars Poetica,” the “Patroness of Exiles,” an interstitial figure who survives a devastating miscarriage, migration and then the tragic loss of her young husband. The placement of the poetic version of the female figure who is remains unnamed, but whose experience reflects that of Corázon, in the privileged initial position in the volume, *The Latin Deli*, speaks to the continuing power of the poem as a standard bearer of culture: it is important to note that she both opens and closes *The Latin Deli* with poetry. Perhaps Ortiz Cofer is suggesting that it is the extraordinary capaciousness of poetry, as this poem “The Latin Deli” demonstrates, that has the timeless ability to integrate and engage with otherness, and to unify a people, much as poetry has done since the time of ancient Greece.

“The Latin Deli” examines the phenomena of exile and community, and the ways in which they have a profound impact on even the most mundane experience, such as food shopping in the destination country. The poem provides valuable insight into the complex ways that ethno-national identities are negotiated and dimensions of communities are established in the pan-Latina/o Diaspora, the dispersal of many different, specific Latina/o ethnicities that nonetheless share important commonalities—namely food preferences, a common language, colonization by Spain, to name a few significant facets. In the deli, with patrons from a variety of ethnic categories, Corazón’s customers discover a refuge that ameliorates the trauma of living in an alien terrain where they encounter struggles and
hostilities. The female deli owner becomes their new secular Madonna, finding something sacred in the ordinary communion of people.

Again, the title of this introductory poem is “The Latin Deli: An Ars Poetica,” which both signals its engagement with the classical writer Horace and Ortiz Cofer’s serious literary ambition. With this allusion, Ortiz Cofer deliberately and self-consciously situates herself in the context of the western literary tradition. In the original Ars Poetica Horace admonishes “You who write, choose a subject that’s matched by/ Your powers, consider deeply what your shoulders/ Can and cannot bear “(AP 38-40) in The Writer’s Aims. Ortiz Cofer’s invocation of Horace suggests that she believes that she can bear the weight and responsibility of the poet’s craft. Indeed, she uses Horace, an instantiating, classical Roman figure in western literary criticism, to claim space for a marginal voice, the voice of an ethnic minority, the voice of a woman of color. Co-opting the authority of this classical model, Ortiz Cofer claims poetic authority and license for herself as a writer, the freedom to use her vatic prowess to articulate a distinctly Latina perspective in order to expand the western literary canon.

Reading the food in this poem necessitates engaging with ideas about desire, loss, exile and especially ethnic community. The setting of the poem is a NY/NJ style bodega, where in effect, the market becomes a site of pan-Latina/o community and offers a respite from the pressures of not fitting in. To begin, the speaker of the poem observes a plastic statue of the Madonna and Christ placed above a cash register on the “formica counter.” This juxtaposition of religious iconography with the cheap formica, a kind of laminate material, and the cash register, an instrument of capitalism, serves to establish an image of cultural
hybridity. The statue points toward Latina/o’s long Catholic history, the “ancient register” and traditional reverence of the Madonna, while the laminate and cash register gesture to contemporary, secular and capitalist U.S. American culture. Next, the speaker describes the aromatic smells arising from containers full of “dried codfish, the green plantains/ hanging in stalk like votive offerings” as Ortiz Cofer links the olfactory sense to memory. In addition, the “Patroness of Exiles” and seller of “canned memories” now presides over a U.S. version of pan-Latinidad, an example of the mutually constitutive nature of the local and the global. This configuration occurs in the little deli as she listens to “the Puerto Ricans complain/ that it would be cheaper to fly to San Juan/ than to buy a pound of Bustelo coffee here.” The Cubans anticipate their great “glorious” return to Havana, and the Mexicans dream of the “dolares” to be earned in El Norte.” One common denominator is that they all desire the “comfort of spoken Spanish” and the recognizable “family portrait” of her face, a visage with phenotypically Latina features, a familiar portrait that serves to establish pan-Latina/o community.

Juan Flores interrogates the meaning of the word community, a word that is so often bandied about without much reflection:

“Comunidad," "común"" unidad": the Spanish word, even more clearly than the English, calls to mind two of the key terms in the conceptualization of this notoriously elusive idea. What do we have in "common," and what "unites" us, what are our commonalities and what makes for our unity? It is important to note that though the two terms point in the same direction they are not
synonymous, and their apparent coupling in the same word, "comunidad," is not a redundancy. For while "común" refers to sharing those aspects in the cultures of the various constitutive groups that overlap, the sense of "unidad" is that which binds the groups above and beyond the diverse particular commonalities. (Flores, *Tropicalizations* 184)

The Corazón figure is the recipient of talk about “their dreams and their disillusions” as the customers find in her, in her “ample bosom and maternal interest,” their new Madonna. Through the proffering of such food stuffs and the speaking of Spanish, their commonalities and “comunidad,” the woman shopkeeper becomes for these lost souls a talisman to their past, to their homelands. She is not objectified or sexualized, but rather she becomes the alma mater, the nourishing mother. Ortiz Cofer’s maternal representation of Corazón in the poem might be read as problematic in some ways, as unduly essentializing. Yet, I would argue that the inter-textuality between the poem and the short story establishes an important distinction from the trap of essentialism, one that invokes the concept of self-determination. In the fictional version, the female protagonist Corazón chooses to remain in the United States after the death of her husband Manuel, just as she opts to keep her enterprise, the bodega, open for business. Indeed, she preserves economic independence as she is the now the sole proprietor of the Latin deli.

In addition, perhaps it is also a matter of choice that she decides to nurture, and that her care of the Latina/o community may be a substitute of her own choosing for the maternal care she would have provided for her miscarried child. Perhaps it is not improperly feminist
to assume that Corazón is fulfilling a real desire of her own to nurture the community, not an onerous obligation imposed upon her by a husband or by societal expectation. And though I am loathe to make any observation that might be used injuriously to reify the historically fixed association between feminine roles and biological reproduction, perhaps it is as essentializing to assume that no women wish to nurture, as it is that all women must or should demonstrate motherly behaviors. In the end, Corazón’s future is aligned with the destiny of *pan-Latindad* diasporic community as she creates those threads of “unidad” that connect Latina/os however tenuously. She serves her customers “*jamon y queso,*” wraps it in wax paper, and ties it with string like a gift. These sandwiches would cost less at the A & P the speaker informs the reader. However, those A & P sandwiches “would not satisfy/ the hunger of the fragile old man lost in the folds/ of his winter coat, who brings her lists of items that he reads to her like poetry, or the others/ whose needs she must divine, conjuring up products/ from places that now exist only in their hearts” (4).

Horace also contends that “Poets wish to benefit or to please, or to speak/What is both enjoyable and helpful to living” (*AP* 333-334) to combine instruction with pleasure. Ortiz Cofer offers reading pleasure, as well as guideposts for other immigrants. But her instruction seems especially apropos for women readers, and indeed women writers. She provides a model for writers who are not well-represented in either the American literary canon, or more broadly in the western tradition of letters. She employs vivid food tropes in ways that serve to challenge the objectification of women and tropes that invite the reader to recognize the pain of a migrants’ dislocation and to encourage a *pan-Latindad* diasporic community in the commingled histories of the immigrants to the Paterson, New Jersey area. Ortiz Cofer may
provide useful advice that is indeed “helpful to living” by offering the Latina reader a version of life, in which she might find for herself a perspective that may assuage some of the suffering of an immigrant’s encounter with U.S. culture in terms of both gender and ethnicity, and an “angle of vision,” to use Lorraine Lopez’s phrase, in which she creates a space for agency in her own destiny. Such an angle of vision might entail new ways of thinking about Latinas’ sexuality, about Latinas’ relationship to the kitchen, and about new possibilities for Latinas’ autonomy and the fulfillment of their own desires.

**Food and Female Puerto Rican Community**

One final text that I would like to examine from *The Latin Deli* is a short story entitled “The Witch’s Husband” in which gender, ethnic and transnational concerns intersect. It is also a tale in which a remarkably pronounced matrilineal, thus gendered, trajectory incorporates various discourses and rituals about food and is integral to the maintenance of a transnational feminism. Puerto Rico is an island abounding with all types of supernatural and mysteriously inexplicable events. In fact, Ortiz Cofer’s hometown Hormigueros is famous for a mystical account of an apparition of Our Lady of Monserrate, in which a local famer, Giraldo González, happened upon an angry bull. Stunned, Giraldo let his machete fall to the ground and as he stood perilously close to the edge of a steep cliff with nowhere to run, he beseeched the Virgin for mercy, who then appeared with the Christ child in her arms. Miraculously, the bull knelt down before them and Giraldo was spared immolation (*Stories from Puerto Rico*, Muckley and Martínez-Santiago, 22). In an interview with Ralph Ocasio Ortiz Cofer explains: “One of the first images I have is of being taken to La Iglesia de la Monserrate. I was baptized there. My father was baptized there. His father was baptized
there. The legend permeated my whole childhood” (46). In fact, believers make pilgrimages to the shrine to this day. Other secular magical island tales recount stories of sorcerers and witches.

In “The Witch’s Husband,” Ortiz Cofer narrates a transnational, potentially conflictual encounter, through a first-person narrative in which a granddaughter, an English teacher in an American university, is charged with the task of returning home to Puerto Rico in order to persuade her stubborn abuela to surrender the care of her husband who has severe dementia. Since the grandmother herself suffers from heart disease, the family is concerned that the arduous responsibility of caring for the ailing grandfather will kill her too. As the granddaughter is about to embark on her rational lecture to the abuela, Abuela inquires “Mi amor, would you like to hear a story?” (45). The narrator recalls that this question “stopped her in her tracks” (45) as a child. Abuela then recounts a folkloric tale of a husband who becomes curious regarding his wife’s whereabouts each night, so he stays up until midnight only to find her painting her naked body, uttering a brief spell about not believing in God or the Virgin, and then flying out the window. The foolish husband mimics his wife’s ritual the next night and then, in hot pursuit, flies out after her. He discovers that the townswomen, “the witches,” were all gathered in the cellar of a wealthy man where they raucously indulge:

With much merriment, they took the meats and cheeses that hung from the bodega’s rafters and laid a table for a feast. They drank the fine wines right from the bottle, like men in a cantina, and danced wildly to eerie music from invisible instruments. They spoke to each other in a language he did not
understand, words that sounded like a cat whose tail had been stepped on. Still, horrible as their speech was, the food they prepared smelled delicious. Cautiously placing himself in the shadows near one of the witches, he extended his hand for a plate. He was given a steaming dish of stewed tongue. Hungry, he took a bite: it was tasteless. The other witches had apparently noticed the same thing, because they sent one of the younger ones to find some salt. But when the young witch came back into the room with saltshaker in her hand, the man forgot himself and exclaimed: “Thank God the salt is here.” (45)

Instantaneously, all of the witches fly back up the chimney, stranding the unfortunate husband. In a rather predictable irony, the husband now cannot replicate their spell and is stranded in the cellar. The next morning, the servants of the master of the house discover the husband who is blamed for the damage to the cellar. They beat him severely, then throw him naked onto the street where passersby view the sleeping wretch. When he awakens later that night, he vows never to follow his wife again on her mysterious, excursions. Significantly, the title focuses not on the woman, or witch, but rather on her foolish husband, as this is indeed a cautionary tale for men. Ortiz Cofer highlights the dangers of attempting to constrain a variety of female appetites and the multiplicity of women’s desires.

In the realistic framing narrative, the abuela reminds the granddaughter that years ago she had gone to live in New York City for one year, supposedly to be treated for a heart condition, as the family lore would have it. But the abuela also confesses that she had
previously run away from her husband and children, and that as a result, the husband became aware of his young wife’s profound unhappiness. Thus in a transnational switch, her year in New York was a gift from her husband who worked two jobs so that she could enjoy freedom in the big city for an entire year, a metropolitan locus for the fulfillment of her desires, and he also paid her sister to come to Puerto Rico and help care for the children. The grandmother explains that she was, indeed, sick at heart, burdened with a husband and four demanding children and tired of the life she was living. She wanted more while she was still young and pretty, “full of energy and dreams” (47). She hints to the granddaughter that during that year abroad she “lived” (48) with no further explanation necessary. Stunned by this revelation, the granddaughter then inquires why abuela returned to Puerto Rico at all, and the grandmother simply replies that she loved her husband and missed her children. He never asked questions about her year abroad and she vowed never to leave again unless the grandfather asked her to, and he never did. Thus, the grandmother’s word is her bond and she will not renege on the promise she made to him so many years ago. The narrator is awash with conflicting emotions after hearing this unexpected confession from the grandmother, a person who she believed suffered from the female Puerto Rican martyr complex, the idea that a woman’s worth is measured by how much suffering, giving and feeding she can perform in a lifetime. Yet, the grandmother is also a woman who apparently claimed a right to her own happiness, sexuality and survival so many years ago. Then, she turns to look at her failing grandfather who is helplessly scratching at the front door for admittance. The granddaughter has a new understanding of the possibilities for greater compassion and freedom for women in marital relations as Ortiz Cofer again, as with her description of Manuel in “Corazón’s
Café,” offers a characterization of the grandfather that counteracts conventional, oppressive notions of Puerto Rican masculine possessive behaviors and attitudes. The narrator explains: “My eyes fill with tears as I look at the lined face of this beautiful and gentle old man. I am in awe at the generosity of spirit that allowed him to give a year of freedom to the woman he loved, not knowing if she would ever return to him” (49). The two narratives converge as the abuela comforts her granddaughter and whispers, “and in time, the husband either began forgetting that he had seen her turn into a witch or believed that he had just dreamed it (49). She gently takes her granddaughter’s face into her hands and emphatically states “I am going to take care of your grandfather until one of us dies” (49). The narrator laments that she will have to explain to her own mother that she was unsuccessful in her assignment and then the abuela blesses her and ends the tale with the traditional closing “colorín, colorado.”

The embedded folkloric narrative uses food as a trope for the sexual desires of women. The consumption of the meats, the highly ethnic, Puerto Rican dish of “stewed tongue,” the cheeses and fine wines that the witches so hardily ingest, are a vehicle to explore the notion of female freedom and female appetites, themes which correlate well with the realistic, transnational, New York adventure and the sexual appetites of the grandmother in her youth. Furthermore, the folkloric tale about the witches articulates a feminist discourse and demonstrates a particular kind of ethnic community, a female Puerto Rican community. The witches’ banquet, a celebratory form of a politics of resistance, provides a counter measure to some of the highly constraining aspects of Puerto Rican womanhood, for example, the self-sacrificial martyr complex that Ortiz Cofer describes. Indeed, the grandmother she knows took in countless needy children and was always ready to nurture
and care for the townsfolk. Ironically, in the folk tale, it is the “master’s cellar” which becomes a subversive space for female Puerto Rican community as the women gather, to speak in a language that the husband does not comprehend, to dance with abandon and to set a feast for themselves as they satisfy their own particular appetites and desires. Thus, even if many of the women on the island, and elsewhere, cannot effect an actual escape to New York as the grandmother was able to, or perform a transformative spell that enables them to fly, Ortiz Cofer proposes the idea that through rituals of female community, women may better serve their own gustatory and sexual desires, and preserve their own autonomy in the face of patriarchal limitations.

Philippa Kafka in Saddling La Gringa: Gatekeeping in Literature by Contemporary Latina Writers argues that the grandmother character in a number of Latina tales circumscribes younger women through the prescriptive, prohibitive and ‘saddling’ narratives they pass on. While acknowledging that Ortiz Cofer transforms these tales in her own writing, thus making them less damaging for women, she claims that the kind of stories told by these ethnic, cultural “gatekeepers,” like the grandmother, actually serve to constrain women and perpetuate the disabling aspects of patriarchy. An example of such gatekeeping, such cautionary fables for young women by elder female figures, is the tale of Maria La Loca, the woman who was stranded at the altar and consequently loses her mind as depicted in Ortiz Cofer’s Silent Dancing. Kafka convicts the grandmother as guilty of injurious forms of enculturation and rails against lessons such as marriage is the “reward” for some women, “the glorious spoils of war for a ‘smart’ woman who does not give away her body ‘for free’” (Kafka 11). Kafka explains that, “Cofer uses her delineation of gatekeepers as a double-
edged sword for feminist purposes: to destabilize Puerto Rican cultural models about women by exposing these models as unfair and cruel through exposure of the discourse and conduct of the gatekeepers” (Kafka 10). Though no one can deny that many women are complicit in the perpetuation of patriarchy, and Kafka is surely correct to highlight how this dynamic frequently operates, I do not believe that Kafka takes full enough account of the role of the grandmother, in Ortiz Cofer’s life or in the story of “The Witch’s Husband.” Kafka does not even take Ortiz Cofer at her own word. Ortiz Cofer offers this observation: “My grandmother was a homemaker and a feminist in a time when those terms did not co-exist. She was the mother of eight children and my model for strength and determination” (Ocasio interview 44). Furthermore, in an interview with fellow Hormigueroan scholar Edna Acosta-Belén, Ortiz Cofer explains,

I learned from these women’s very strong sense of imagination. For them, storytelling played a purpose. When my abuela sat us down to tell a story, we learned something from it, even though we always laughed. That was her way of teaching. So early on, I instinctively knew that storytelling was a form of empowerment, that the women in my family were passing on power from one generation to another through fables and stories. They were teaching each other how to cope with life in a world where women led restricted lives.

(Acosta- Belén 86)
Ortiz Cofer understands that her grandmother was offering a feminist discourse and skills for survival in a challenging, Puerto Rican, male-dominated world. Through the process of this matrilineal storytelling, the abuela also constructs a resistant, feminist community in the context of her own family as the narrator of “The Witch’s Husband” recounts how even her “porcelain, pink, baby” daughter (43) has been rocked upon the lap of her great grandmother, thereby intimating the perpetuation of this knowledge and of this female Puerto Rican community.

Kafka also comments that, “Interestingly, Cofer never depicts men as sexually defeated or women as sexually victorious, despite the fact that she battles this paradigm in her writing (Kafka 6). However, she does not address the victory in “The Witch’s Husband,” a narrative in which, I would argue, the woman is, in fact, “sexually victorious,” most explicitly in her year abroad during which she “lived.” Even the witches’ feast, a lush banquet they spread for their own consumption and enjoyment, is a symbolic victory for Puerto Rican women. Kafka’s assessment is incorrect when she insists that in Ortiz Cofer’s work “the results of female disobedience are always tragic” (Kafka 17).

In “The Witch’s Husband,” Ortiz Cofer recounts a story that has been transmitted through a matrilineal trajectory in which gender and cultural knowledge are strongly connected to female autonomy and self-identity; the grandmother knows who she is and where her power lies, a power that resides in both her control over language and food, as she provides a model of power for her granddaughter. The abuela casts a spell on her granddaughter with her enchanted tale and thus demonstrates the power of storytelling as it is Abuela’s narrative that thwarts the granddaughter’s mission to persuade the grandmother to
relinquish the responsibilities and care of the grandfather. Furthermore, the abuela like a “brown, earth mother” associated with nature and mysteries, like a witch, has knowledge of occult things such as of the fragrant herb garden and healing plants in her backyard plot, the “patch of weedy-looking plants [from which] came all the remedies of my childhood” (43) as the narrator explains, thus providing a link among food, magic and power, just as in the folkloric, magical realist version in which the witches also have access to food, magic and power in their rituals and feasting. “The Witch’s Husband” is transcultural in that Ortiz Cofer allows her meaning to emerge from the fruitful tension between the two oppositional viewpoints, and two cultural and generational perspectives. Though the stories differ regarding subject matter and locale, they are thematically related in terms of enacting female desire. Furthermore, the transnational dynamic with the Puerto Rican, insular grandmother and the Anglicized narrator, also highlights the difference in terms of epistemological paradigms. Ortiz Cofer explores the implications of the underlying influences and attitudes of both U.S. Anglo-American culture and island epistemology, as she pits U.S. rationalism and its logical limitations of knowledge, against the magical realist story of the grandmother. “The Witch’s Husband” articulates some very conventional island notions of femininity, the martyr complex, at the same time that it presents a strong Puerto Rican stubbornness and female will, one that even includes the freedom to determine for herself how the grandmother will spend her remaining time. Furthermore, the abuela’s insular wisdom as expressed through both her masterful storytelling and her control and knowledge of the island flora is yet another example of tropicalization as the narrator will surely carry that island knowledge back to the U.S. with her in yet another transnational move.
In a reverse movement in which culture flows the opposite way, Ortiz Cofer presents the potential injection of U.S. values into Puerto Rico with the perspective of the granddaughter whose ideas are supposedly more “enlightened” and more “progressive,” ideas that support the U.S. penchant for warehousing the elderly with the placement of the grandfather in a nursing home (44), a kind of “cultural remittance,” to use Juan Flores’s term. Flores explains in *The Diaspora Strikes Back* that most investigations of the topic of remittances, what gains get sent back to the country of origin, has focused almost exclusively on financial and cash transfers, and that “the humanistic sense of culture having to do with creative expression [and values] has no role in the analysis” (9). This transmission of culture Flores describes as an “ensemble of ideas, values, and expressive forms introduced into societies of origin by remigrants and their families as they return ‘home,’ sometimes for the first time, for temporary visits or permanent resettlement” (4). Interestingly, many of the expressive forms of culture such as hip-hop, have indeed, left their mark on island culture. Yet, in Ortiz Cofer’s short story, the values that the “Americanized” granddaughter espouses regarding the care of the ailing grandfather, the cultural remittance so to speak, are rejected as U.S. values become thoroughly undermined. The grandmother demonstrates her insular wisdom and unwaveringly asserts her autonomy, once again, through the tale she recounts so determinedly as she leaves the granddaughter with no doubt that she is in control of her own future, she will care for her husband and she will “die in her own bed” (42).

“The Witch’s Husband” is a subversive female story with Abuela in control of both her destiny, and her husband’s. Ortiz Cofer employs the narrative strategy of framing, as one realistic tale enfold an embedded folkloric narrative, a technique that allows the reader to
consider the story from multiple perspectives, namely the narrator’s, the grandmother’s and the reader’s. Ortiz Cofer adapts the style of island traditions and the qualities of oral narrative that we see in the aforementioned tales of the Virgin and of the witches, but transforms them in a process of juxtaposition with the realist narrative, which results in a kind of tension that articulates new possibilities for Puerto Rican women, even old women, and also produces an authoritative feminist discourse of self-determination.

This feminist discourse, however, may be transnational in other ways than simply in the narrative’s relationship between the U.S. and Puerto Rico. The folk narrative of the witches powerfully dramatizes the theme of freedom largely through the use of food tropes, but also quite significantly through the metaphor of flight, a metaphor which may reveal a notable indebtedness to the writing of French feminist Hélène Cixous in her famous essay “The Laugh of the Medusa,” thereby establishing a more extensive, transatlantic, feminist community, particularly through the themes of flight, and the related theme of stealing. To be sure, the witches perform the action of flying at will and with great facility, a potent image of the resultant freedom that occurs when the women let loose, a feat which the husband is able to pull off only once and then is unable to duplicate, and that in the realist narrative the grandmother is also able to effectuate in her own “flight” to New York. This capability correlates with Cixous’ insight that “[f]lying is woman’s gesture” (344). She continues, “We have all learned the art of flying and its numerous techniques; for centuries we’ve been able to possess anything only by flying” (344). In Ortiz Cofer’s story, the seizure of the edible, and drinkable, contents of the master’s cellar, this theft for the witches’ very own pleasure, also confirms this intertextuality as Cixous inquires “what woman hasn’t flown/stolen?”;
“we’ve lived in flight, stealing away, finding, when desired, narrow passageways, hidden crossovers. It’s no accident that voler has a double meaning” (343-4). In may be no coincidence that women and witches converge “in narrow passageways” and in “cellars” in dark, secret spaces to form their “crossover” communities.

Cixous also insists on the association between flying and writing as “flying in language and making it fly” (343) as both activities require a daring release, a risky letting go, a flouting of the expectations of customary female activities. She implores women, “Write! and your self-seeking text will know itself better than flesh and blood, rising, insurrectionary dough kneading itself with sonorous, perfumed ingredients, a lively combination of flying colors, leaves, and rivers plunging into the sea we feed” (345). Cixous links these potentially synaesthetic, bodily experiences as she connects the food metaphor of “dough kneading” and of writing the body. In addition, the “insurrectionary dough kneading” also indicates the ways in which women’s writing can be revolutionary, an uprising, like the rising of dough from kneading and yeast, women’s labour and alchemical reaction. She draws a parallel with the theological notion of resurrection too as she encourages women to enact their own transubstantiation as they transmute body into bread, and mysteriously effect their own resurrection of a sort, through words, through female-centered writing.

Furthermore, Cixous presents women’s writing as continuity between body, “flesh and blood”; nature, the “leaves...rivers...sea”; and art, the “text,” perhaps suggesting that women’s resurrection may best be found in this productive continuity, a continuity that patriarchal culture obstructs at the site of the conflation where the female body becomes imprisoned in nature. Cixous, and Ortiz Cofer, writes against such a culture that produces
and perpetuates obstructions to women’s imaginative endeavours, a world that does not acknowledge, appreciate, or support that last movement to woman-produced text, culture, and art.

In one of the final entries of *The Latin Deli* called “5:00 A.M.: Writing as Ritual,” Ortiz Cofer underscores this association of flying/stealing with writing as she *rises* to “steal” time, to perform the rite, the act of “insurrectionary dough kneading,” as she describes her ritual (and invokes yet another transatlantic, feminist foremother) as “[a]n act of will that changed my life from that of a frustrated artist, waiting to have a room of my own and an independent income before getting down to business, that of a working writer: I decided to get up two hours before my usual time, to set my alarm for 5:00 A.M. When people ask me how I started writing, I find myself describing the urgent need to work with language as a search” (166). She wraps up, “And the initial sense of urgency to create can easily be dissipated because it entails making the one choice many people, especially women, in our society with its emphasis on ‘acceptable’ priorities, feel selfish about making: taking the time to create, to *steal* it from yourself if it’s the only way” (168) italics mine.

Ortiz Cofer is a skilful and eloquent detractor of patriarchal, masculine ideals and calls attention to the fact that much about Latina/o culture has been deadening to the advancement and creativity of its women through its gendered and ethnic discourses of social inferiority. Ortiz Cofer proffers a liberatory remedy through her own “self-seeking” texts, a literary contestation of the pervasive ways in which Latinas have been historically marginalized and subjugated. In significant measure through the use of food tropes in both short stories “Corazón’s Café” and “The Witch’s Husband,” Ortiz Cofer subverts and
challenges traditional gender roles. Corazón and Abuela both wield the power, not their husbands, and both women acknowledge and act upon their own desires. Even in the poem “The Latin Deli: An Ars Poetica,” it is a female figure who is “presiding” over the ethnic, pan-Latindad community that “her store” fosters in the bodega where she ascribes much dignity, beauty and humanity to various aspects of Latina/o culture and community. Above all, Ortiz Cofer has offered an ambitious effort to promote new notions about gender and ethnicity, the self and community, in a transnational context. Indeed, I would argue that Ortiz Cofer creates female characters who are capable of influencing their own gendered and ethnic political positions not merely as a way of countering male or Anglo oppressions, but rather as a means of suggesting their own authorial power. Ortiz Cofer embraces the ongoing project of reshaping culture and reinventing gendered and ethnic identities by flying, by deconstructing convention and reconstructing new models for Puerto Rican, transnational womanhood.
CHAPTER FIVE

FOOD, POWER AND VIOLENCE IN GEOGRAPHIES OF HOME

Born in the Dominican Republic in 1963, Loida Maritza Pérez emigrated to the United States with her family when she was very young. In an attempt to evade the dire economic conditions on the island, the family relocated to New York City. Pérez went on to become a 1987 graduate of Cornell University. Geographies of Home (1999) is Pérez’s first, and only, novel at this point in time although a second novel set in the Dominican Republic is supposed to be in progress.

Paralleling Pérez’s biography, Geographies of Home recounts a transnational tale of immigration from the Dominican Republic to New York City. Although several of the episodes in the novel take place in the Dominican Republic, the setting for most of the narrative is a rundown house in Brooklyn, a house that was purchased by the parents of a large Dominican family, Papito and Aurelia, as a safe haven and place of security for themselves and all of their fourteen children. Bachelard in The Poetics of Space describes the notion of home as a “felicitous space” and notes that the home possesses “protective value” (xxxv). Indeed, most often, people conceive of the home as pleasant, and as a shelter from external forces. Bachelard continues, “[F]or our house is our corner of the world” (6)

Unfortunately, life in Brooklyn, including the struggle with poverty, racism, and social alienation, proves to be harsh and, little, if any, better than the family’s bleak circumstances on the island. Indeed, their hope for prosperity and entrance into mainstream “American” society is repeatedly thwarted. One of the important protagonists in the novel, the daughter
Iliana, has just returned from college at an elite institution in upstate New York, ostensibly modeled on Cornell. Lured back to the nest by a mysterious voice which sounds uncannily like her mother’s, Iliana wishes to help her family through their recent tribulations as intimated by the supernatural, disembodied voice. Upon her return home, family life becomes exceedingly challenging as the highly dysfunctional familial dynamics take their toll on her psyche and on her body. Even at the conclusion of the novel, Iliana is still in search of belonging and her “corner of the world.”

One of the predominant themes at work in the narrative is violence. According to Bachelard “‘we read a house’ or ‘read a room,’ since both room and house are psychological diagrams that guide writers and poets in their analysis of intimacy” (38). For this immigrant family, genuine intimacy is rare, but violence is an inexorable part of family and social life. For instance, Iliana’s sister, Marina, is raped during a session with an African fortune teller. This sexual violation exacerbates, if not instantiates, her madness and, ultimately, Marina attempts suicide, a kind of ultimate violence against herself. Other acts of sexual violation and aggression permeate this narrative, violence that seeps into various relationships making intimacy dangerous and the home unsafe.

Food references permeate this novel as things fall apart. In Killing Spanish, Lyn Di Iorio Sandin points out that “the psychic crumbling” (67), of the daughters is frequently associated with the smell of rotting vegetables such as when Marina believes she is being accosted by her rapist she perceives the “odor of rotting greens” (16). Another of the many unsettling scenes of violation in the novel occurs between the sisters. Bachelard warns that “[A]s for the cellar...it is first and foremost the dark entity of the house, the one that partakes
of subterranean forces.” (18). After being raped herself, Marina perpetrates her own terrible abuse upon her sister Iliana in the basement of their house where they share a room. In a horrific scene of woman on woman violence, the obese Marina hoists herself atop her own sister and “rapes” her, twice, via brutal, manual penetration.

It would be impossible to perform a useful reading of Geographies of Home without a consideration of the ways in which gender intersects with race. It is especially in connection with Pérez’s use of the language of food, examples such as sugar, live chickens and starvation, that these intersections become evident. From the outset of the novel Iliana is racialized in graphic ways. The discrimination Iliana experiences commands the reader’s attention from the first line of chapter one. Pérez writes, ”The ghostly trace of ‘NIGGER’ on a message board hanging from Iliana’s door failed to assault her as it had the first time she returned to her dorm room to find it (1). Thus, the reception, and her continued treatment, at the elitist college was not what Iliana had hoped for. Indeed, she had become inured to the racial abuse and stigmatization. With Marina especially, race intersects with her ethnicity and gender as she internalizes the contempt she receives from the dominant white society. In Charcoal and Cinnamon: The Politics of Color in Spanish Caribbean Literature, Claudette Williams, a Caribbean scholar, describes a “paradoxical expression of antiblack prejudice by blacks and mulattos, who have absorbed the white supremacist ideology (3), an articulation that Marina certainly engages in.

Marina, unable to accept her own Afro-Dominican heritage, dark skin and “kinky” hair, experiences a series of harsh rejections from the white, Anglo-culture that surrounds her. Desperately needing validation, she is readily dismissed by the eligible white men at the
law office where she briefly worked as a receptionist. This racial pain and divisiveness also manifests in the sisters’ relationships with each other as the perniciousness of racial distinctions and the skin color hierarchy operate in the family dynamics. Upon contemplating a family photograph, Iliana muses about Beatriz the most fair and “beautiful “daughter who has left the family without notice of her whereabouts in what amounts to a wholesale rejection of her history, culture, family, and presumably, her blackness. One can speculate that this dissociation is an attempt to “pass,” to succeed and climb the U.S. social ladder without the “impediment” of the darker members of her family. Certainly, Pérez’s novel registers much of the intra-familial anxiety surrounding darkness and skin color in the Latina/o community in the Unites States. Commenting on the color racial hierarchy, Williams observes that assigning a positive value to fair skinned women and a negative one to dark skinned women “capture[s] the skin shade discrimination that is the essence of the racial dynamic of Caribbean societies...A deeply entrenched antiblack racism...was one of the insidious consequences of Caribbean slavery” (16). Certainly, these attitudes become transnational as values travel with immigrants to the communities in the United States. More specifically, these examples also serve as an extended comment on the troubled state of blackness in Dominican history, the most egregious instance of antiblack racism and violence being Trujillo’s 1937 massacre of 20,000 Haitians on the Haitian-Dominican border.

I must take a moment here to expand upon the feminist theorizing that I offered in the introduction to this study. I reiterate that although I am hesitant to abandon “woman” as a

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17 For a fictional, Puerto Rican account of an intra-familial, racial dynamic between brothers see Piri Thomas’s Down these Mean Streets.
category of analysis and do not wish to focus primarily on the ruptures and dissonances in feminism, nevertheless, I acknowledge that these differences exist among various groups of women and must be both recognized and explored. In an effort to establish an inclusive feminism, I now refer again to Williams in order to be conscious of those ruptures in feminist theory and female experience. In her important observation on feminism, Williams asserts that “it is necessary, nonetheless, to question the appropriateness of totalizing feminist theories for contexts such as the Caribbean” (7), and I will extrapolate here to include U.S. Caribbean communities. Williams explains:

Most Caribbean feminists would feel discomfort with the tendency of some Euro-centered feminists to ignore or de-emphasize race in their gender analyses. What is needed, therefore, is not an approach that entails either wholesale adoption or dogmatic rejection of the dominant forms of feminism (i.e. its Anglo-American and European forms), but a disposition to consider the implications of these theories for the Caribbean experience and to modify them, where necessary, to suit the local reality. (Williams 7)

Thus, to perform a gender analysis without close attention to race would not effect a productive reading of a novel such as Geographies of Home. As I will demonstrate below both gender and race inform Pérez’s deployment of food tropes in the novel.

Unlike Marina, Iliana accepts her own dark skin and denies legitimacy to Marina’s racist insistence on the superiority of white men, but Marina bitterly rejects and resents
Iliana’s stance. In fact, part of Marina’s hatred of her sister stems from her own self-loathing and from Iliana’s greater composure and self-acceptance. In *Killing Spanish: Literary Essays on Ambivalent U.S. Latino/Identity* Lyn Di Iorio Sandín analyses the connection between the rapist and Marina’s negative thoughts about her own racial identity as she reads the rapist as a kind of double, a representation of Marina’s own self-loathing in regard to her blackness and Afro-Dominican heritage:

This ‘flat-nosed, wide-lipped nigger’ clearly represents Marina’s own black self, which she refuses to consciously acknowledge. While penetrating her body, the man shouts at her, ‘Look at me!’ as if her split off black self is begging for recognition. This libidinal aspect of herself, from which she successfully disassociates while working at the law firm, or in conversation with Iliana, overpowers her in the darkness of the house’s basement, symbolizing an aspect of both her own unconscious and that of her extended family who suffer from the same complexes but to a milder extent. (73)

Though I will focus more closely on Iliana, Aurelia and Rebecca in my analysis, there are several uses of ingestibles as metaphor regarding Marina’s racial identity as well. In one instance, while dining out with Iliana and her friend Ed, Marina orders a glass of wine much to Iliana’s chagrin. Surprisingly, Marina requests this wine with a British accent (274) in an effort to appear “sophisticated and sane,” and I would posit more white. Marina’s posturing suggests that she is aware of, even enamored with, such sociocultural hierarchical
distinctions. Marina resists her Dominican identity and desires to take on Eurocentric values, even rather elitist values, as wine can certainly be construed as a status drink. In another instance, in an effort to ingest “Americanness,” Marina is depicted as greedily consuming milk, hence whiteness, and Captain Crunch cereal (101), a highly processed, sugary, corn cereal that many children in the United States eat for breakfast.

Other instances of violence occur with another sibling, Iliana’s oldest sister Rebecca, whose husband Pasion sadistically violates his wife in numerous ways. The junk-filled apartment in which he keeps her and their three children like animals is no better than a filthy chicken coop. He habitually abuses her physically, in one scene methodically breaking several of Rebecca’s fingers. Another perverse moment of psychological abuse entails Pasion’s having sexual intercourse with another, younger woman as Rebecca is tied up in a chair and forced to witness the sordid encounter. Both of these scenes could be classified as “torture” and echo the abuses suffered by Dominicans and Haitians at the hands of the Trujillo government on account of a troubled ethno-racial national and transnational history. Even Aurelia, the matriarch of the family, in an effort to protect her daughter and grandchildren, is guilty of violence. Indeed, violence pervades the novel on many levels. Papito is also abusive and his acts of aggression evoke the novel’s most scathing critique, that of patriarchy and its concomitant array of related abuses of power. What I discern to be a central metaphor in *Geographies of Home* is the comparison between food and food-related motifs and masculine desires, violence and various manifestations of power. I will show through the exploration of three crucial aspects of the novel; first, a family scene in which Papito tempts his family with sugar; second, an instance of Aurelia’s wielding her power
through ritual, animal sacrifice; and third, the starvation of Rebecca’s three children. In the novel, Pérez deploys food symbolism in a variety of ways in order to critique authoritarian, patriarchal, ethno-racial, colonial, and dictatorial oppressions.

**Sugar and Patriarchy**

“A single source of satisfaction—sucrose extracted from sugar cane—for what appears to be a widespread, perhaps even universal, human liking for sweetness became established in European taste preferences at a time when European power, military might, and economic initiative were transforming the world” (Mintz xxv).

Mintz’s quote underscores the ways in which sugar has been implicated in desires, colonial histories, and the manifestations of power. The axis of my inquiry in this section will examine the ways in which Pérez deploys the language and symbology of food, sugar in particular, to convey the rapaciousness of some desires and the consequent displays of aggression and power as this language engages with both gender and race. Pérez’s use of sugar, a food so highly charged with notions of desire and so deeply implicated in Caribbean histories of colonialism and slavery, allows her to condense layers of oppressions in this deft metaphor with one fell swoop. I will map out distinct, but related, scenes in the novel.

Numerous scholars theorize about sugar. Michael Pollan in “The Botany of Desire” explains his title in that, the book “is as much about human desires that connect us to these
plants as it is about the plants themselves” (xvii). And although his representative example of is the apple, (at a time in U.S. history when sweetness was scarce, nearly impossible to experience), some of his insights apply readily to sugar. For instance, Pollan traces the etymology of the word sweetness. “Lent by the tongue to all other sense organs, ‘sweet,’ in the somewhat archaic definition of The Oxford English Dictionary, is that which ‘affords enjoyment or gratifies desires.’ Like a shimmering equal sign, the word sweetness denoted a reality commensurate with human desire; it stood for fulfillment” (Pollan17).

I will now map out a scene in which sugar is indeed a figure for human desire. The first scene occurs as Aurelia tries to watch some television, a rather secular show featuring Johnnie Ventura, (also known as Juan de Dios Ventura Soriano, a popular Dominican musician and band leader), and several scantily clad female dancers. Marina, the mad daughter, annoyingly quotes scripture, as she is one of the siblings who embraces her father’s Seventh Day Adventism, and tries to distract and infuriate her mother. As a confrontation almost erupts over Marina and her prophesying versus Aurelia’s wish for entertainment, Papito, the father, enters the room.

“Guess what I have in my hands?” her husband boomed, his voice throbbing with excitement as he barged into the room.”

18 Pollan’s book is an insightful examination of the history of four plants, from the plants’ perspective, and their intersection with human desires. Pollan suggests that the plants actually have a particular kind of evolutionary agency of their own as he challenges the subject-object dichotomy between human beings and nature.
Relieved, Aurelia transferred her attention to Papito. “Aren’t you going to
greet your daughter?” she asked, gesturing toward their youngest.

Pleasure shot through Papito’s eyes as Iliana rose to kiss him.

“This is better than I expected.” He hugged her briefly before drawing away to
hold up a bulging paper bag. “You’re educated. Try guessing first.”

Remembering the cinnamon-scented soap, Iliana sat herself back
down. “I don’t know Papi. You tell us.” (47)

The language of this passage deserves closer inspection as I purport that this scene is, indeed,
“throbbing” with meaning. The verbs Pérez uses to describe Papito’s actions suggest
masculine power as his voice “booms” and he “barges” into the room.

Furthermore, desire circulates in this family romance as Papito becomes the center of
attention and Iliana rises to kiss her father. What he has in his hands remains a mystery, but
the phrase “throbbing with excitement” implies sexual, even the intimation of penile, arousal.
Indeed, the whole scene is disturbingly incestuous. Sandín states, “Incest is the supreme
signifier of patriarchal violence in the book, of its complexity and its long-lasting influence”
(65) Sandín’s analysis focuses more closely on the scene of Papito’s first love interest in the
Dominican Republic, a girl named Annabelle, an allusion to the ill-fated young woman in
Poe’s famous poem. In the novel the young Papito tries to woo her, only to discover that her
rejection of him is due to the fact that she is pregnant. During a raging storm, he discovers
that she has been impregnated by her own father, and mysteriously dies in Papito’s arms. My
analysis differs from Sandín’s in that I focus on the way a food metaphor, specifically sugar in this scene, is used to reveal these incestuous patriarchal dynamics and desires.

Marina then tosses the Bible to the floor and desperately tries to grab the mystery bag from her father’s hands. Papito laughs as he taunts his daughter by raising the package above her head. In addition to the suggestion of the erectile arousal, there is the vertical movement of Iliana’s “rising” to kiss him as well as Papito’s “raising” the bag above Marina’s head. Papito warns, “No peeking” and then, teases that “[E]veryone has to guess” (48). Aurelia, his wife, tires of his game and tells him to get out of the way as she was trying to watch TV. As Papito glances at the TV and steps forward to turn it off, he admonishes, “This is a Christian home. Such shows aren’t welcome here.” Ironically, Aurelia notices that Papito was “struck dumb by the dancers’ jiggling breasts” (48) and, quite hypocritically, cannot control his own desires and voyeuristic impulses, in spite of his rigid Seventh Day Adventism. He slips off his coat, does not release the precious bag, and offers the clue that this special present has just arrived from Santa Domingo. Marina guesses it might be dulce de leche. Papito then “squeezes” the bag so that its malleable contents shift. “It’s solid, but it moves like liquid,” Papito observes. Marina again attempts to snatch the bag out of his hand while Iliana winces. Concerned, she assumed Papito would slap Marina. “Instead, his excitement increased in proportion to Marina’s” (48). We have here a reiteration of “excitement increased” further emphasizing the theme of desire, and particularly the familial desires of fathers and daughters.

With Iliana’s concern for her sister’s potentially being struck and the recollection of the “cinnamon-scented soap,” violence is introduced onto the stage of this incestuous family.
“love fest,” an encounter that pits the women of the family against each other. In fact, pain and food in this text are often linked. On one other occasion, her sister Nereida thanks Iliana for her previous help with watching Nereida’s children. Reflecting on Nereida’s character and strength Iliana recalls, “One of her [Iliana’s] earliest memories was of Nereida standing with her hands outstretched as Papito poured a bowl of steaming oatmeal onto her palms for having fed a spoonful of her oatmeal to Marina” (120). In the current scene, Iliana “winces” at the uncertainty of how Papito will react. This visceral response is almost like that of an abused animal’s response to a brutal master, one who has hit her in the past, and indeed he has.

I would like to call attention to Iliana’s memory of the soap incident. In another incidence of patriarchal violence, Papito brings home scented soap as a gift for his wife Aurelia, and offers it to his daughter Iliana for her appraisal. Iliana innocently suggests the soap smells like cinnamon. Emphatically, the father indicates the picture of strawberries on the packaging and insists the soap smells like strawberries. Iliana again sniffs the soap, and is adamant that the fragrance is definitely cinnamon. Suddenly, Papito yanks her head closer to the gift and proclaims “Muchacha de la porra! Admit it! It smells like strawberries!” Unfazed, Iliana smells once again and refuses to concede. “It smells like cinnamon!” she persists, “why ask if you don’t want to know?” (8). Then “before she knew what was happening, her father’s calloused hand had slapped her face (7). Even after he unhooks his belt and beats her with it, she stubbornly maintains, “Cinnamon” (8).

This scenario explicitly demonstrates the abuse of patriarchal power as Papito strikes and then whips his daughter with a belt for not agreeing with him about so trivial a matter. In
this scene, patriarchal ideology becomes explicit as its misogyny is exposed by Papito’s comment, “Muchacha de la porra!” as he accuses his daughter of being part of the “girls’ club,” as if the relation between women and men is solely based upon an agonistic, and agonizing, tension. The Spanish word “porra” has several significations, among them “vanity,” in addition to group or club. It usually connotes disgust with someone and in Spain an angry person might tell someone to “go to la porra” or !vete a la porra! which basically means “go to hell!” Thus, Papito’s anger, abuse and cursing at his daughter is thoroughly out of proportion to the situation at hand. Clearly, the punishment does not fit the crime. Indeed, her difference in perception is no crime at all. This patriarchal misogyny is further revealed as Papito demands that Iliana deny her reality, her own knowledge of the world, the experience of her own senses-not her way of seeing, but rather her way of smelling. As the patriarch of the family, he ruthlessly imposes his will and reality on the female members of his unfortunate family. Indeed, this passage resonates with Dorothy E. Smith, whom I discussed in the introduction, and her observations about a “peculiar eclipsing” and the “obliteration" of women’s knowledge. Papito denies his daughter her own subjectivity as he violently attempts to impose his epistemological perception on her. Furthermore, in this complex textual moment, Papito demonstrates an ironic engagement with the dominant hegemonic cultural. He is complicit with colonial and patriarchal forces in his gross abuse of his own masculine, physical and patriarchal power, yet, in other places in the narrative, in different contexts, such as his underemployment as a factory worker in what the reader may surmise is a kind of sweatshop (235), he too is subordinated by the effects of colonial power
through his ethnoracial position which brings him poverty, unfulfilling employment and general humiliation.

Exposing another type of oppression, this soap scenario establishes an intersection between gender and race in his aggressive effort to subdue his daughter. What Papito acts out with his belt is a performance akin to a slave whipping, the master teaching the slave a lesson for misbehavior, or in this peculiar case, misperception. Papito requires an act of submission from his daughter demanded by the patriarchal order. The whipping scene calls to mind the slave trade with its concomitant brutality as it also invokes the history of Spanish Caribbean colonialism, and, in fact, European colonialism more generally, as all of the European powers who went to the Caribbean, assaulted the land, the indigenous peoples, the women, and the slaves whom they imported from Africa. In *Foundations of Despotism: Peasants, the Trujillo Regime, and Modernity in Dominican History* Richard Lee Turits analyzes the complex relations of power that enabled the Trujillo regime to sustain itself for three decades.19

In a section entitled “from slaves to peasants,” Turits explains:

19 Turits’s argument differs from the more conventional analyses of the Trujillo dictatorship in that although Turits records and does not dispute the brutality and atrocities of the Trujillo epoch in Dominican history, Turits complicates the historical narrative by posing the question about how it was possible to maintain such absolute “sultanic” control without the complicity of much of the Dominican populace. He argues that it was Trujillo’s complex relationship with the peasantry that, in part, allowed him to rule for as long as he did and with such an iron fist.
The origins of Santo Domingo’s independent peasantry dates back to the precipitous rise and equally sudden fall of the colony’s putative golden age in the sixteenth century. An initial gold-mining bonanza was quickly exhausted between 1510 and 1520, precipitated by the destruction of the large indigenous population upon whose exploitation this industry had depended. The sugar plantation economy that developed in its wake expanded quickly and dramatically. Spanish records indicate that in the 1530s, there were between thirty and forty sugar mills in operation in any given year. By 1544, according to one plantation owner, the colony exported 1,375 tons of sugar. And annual sugar production reached several thousand tons during the mid-sixteenth century (28).

Turits goes on to note that the neglect and indifference of The Spanish Crown to its Caribbean colonies ultimately left the islands unproductive and with little governmental structure. Unlike the sugar boom which continued in other Caribbean islands, Jamaica, for example, sugar production in the Dominican Republic diminished. As a result, many slaves were freed and quite literally headed for the hills where they formed autonomous

communities. According to Turits argument, this independent peasantry was whom Trujillo had to win over in order to sustain his rule.

Regarding the insatiability of desire, in *Sweetness and Power*, Sidney Mintz writes, “sugar seemed to satisfy a particular desire (it also seems, in doing so, to awaken that desire yet anew)” (xxv). This brief history of the sugar plantation economy indicates the rapaciousness of imperial greed. After the native population was demolished by abuse of their labor in search of gold and their numbers were drastically diminished by disease, sugar fueled the plantation economy through the exploitation of slave labor. Thus, sugar replaces gold. The association between gold—a metal, a mineral, an inorganic compound—and sugar—a plant-based organic substance—is compelling. Both are two of the most densely symbolic substances that represent human desires and human greed, and history shows us that violent atrocities have been committed in the acquisition of both. When Pérez deploys this apt trope of sugar in her narrative to figure patriarchal desire, she invokes this colonial history as well.

Returning to the soap scene, the types of scents Papito and Iliana perceive are subtly indicative of the different orientation of each character. Papito’s insistence on the fragrance of strawberries reveals an Anglo and Euro-centric orientation, an affinity with empire and with colonizers, as “the garden strawberry was first bred in Brittany, France, in the 1750s via a cross of *Fragaria virginia* from eastern North America and *Fragaria chiloensis*, which was
brought from Chile by Amédée-François Frézier in 1714” (wikipedia.com). In contrast, Iliana’s contention that the scent is cinnamon reflects her own affinity, not Euro-centric, as cinnamon has been known “since remote antiquity” and “was imported to Egypt as early as 2000 BC” probably from Sri Lanka (wikipedia.com). In terms of the racialization at work in this strawberry versus cinnamon conflict, Papito aligns himself with lightness, with pinkness, much like Marina’s fondness for milk and Captain Crunch. In describing complexions, there is even the common descriptor in the U.S. of strawberry blonde hair. Papito is invested, perhaps unconsciously, in perpetuating a fear of blackness in a dynamic akin to what Torres-Saillant, describes as “negrophobia,” in “The Tribulations of Blackness,” a dread of the spreading of blackness and black culture (1088). At the same time, Papito is also invested in an “enwhitening” project so representative of the Trujillo regime. Conversely, in this racial discourse, with the descriptor “cinnamon,” (as in Claudette Williams’ book title), Iliana aligns herself with brownness, an identification that she adopts, rather than attempts to erase.

Critical scrutiny uncovers an intriguing and skilful conflation of social forces as this violence is evoked and recalled through the sugar scene. Papito attempts a kind of fabrication of mystery with his admonition ‘no peeking’ and his invitation to “guess,” so that the daughters do not even know or understand what they are desiring. This dynamic, in conjunction with the malleability of the contents of the bag, suggests phallic power, a power

21 Papito’s orientation is also evident in his choice of furniture when they move into the house and discard sturdy wood pieces brought from the island in favor of more ornate furnishings and plastic-covered sofas.
whose effects are all too real and pervasive; yet, with all of the mystification, it is sometimes difficult to precisely discern from whence it derives and how exactly it operates. Indeed, Sandín observes that the three moments of Marina’s uncontrollable madness occur in various patriarchal spaces, the house, the church, and law firm when Marina briefly worked (68), thereby intimating just how intolerable life under such powerful forces can be. In addition, Papito, like a man grabbing his “package,” is none too quick to let it go, his power or his package. This malleability of his power, “It’s solid, but it moves like liquid,” as it is also demonstrated in the variety of social structures in which men in the novel rule. Clearly, Papito sees himself as the master of the house as he attempts to regulate the behaviors, even the perceptions of his family.

In addition, as Sandín notes, the church is another patriarchal space in which Papito, and his ragingly sexist pastor, adheres to a strict and dogmatic form of Christianity, Seventh Day Adventism, a form of religion that Papito believes, provides clear guidelines for living. Papito traces the trajectory of his spiritual life as he thinks about

his conversion from the Catholicism of his youth. What had appealed to him about Adventist doctrine was its specificity in distinguishing right from wrong. In a country where both had shifted according to a tyrants’ whims and little had offered relief or hope, religion had granted him salvation, unmediated access to the divine, and steadfast rules by which to live. These he had offered to his children against poverty and pain. (149)
Neither his former Catholicism nor his Adventism confers much compassion on Papito’s sensibilities. Ironically, Papito does not perceive the pain and suffering he causes his family, (and the members of his family with whom he deals most closely are women), with his own oppressive, restrictive and even violent behaviors. Pastor Rivera, the leader of his church, reinforces Papito’s misogyny, as he offers sermon’s on the vanity of Eve, lectures in which men are “tricked by women” and how men need to beware their false beauty (105-6).

In the various social territories covered in the novel, Papito’s instinct to protect his family and provide safety from a hostile is world is admirable, yet in his misguided patriarchal ideas about religion, women and family, he becomes the perpetrator of great suffering.

In *Millennial Dreams* Michael Pearson explains that Adventism defines itself essentially on its relation to time and to the second coming of Christ “which emphasizes the transitory nature of our present existence (17). These tenets set up an oppositional dynamic with Aurelia who seems very engaged in earthly matters and concerns of this world. Rather than worrying about the eschatological state of affairs regarding her children, she is trying to protect them, in the present, from the actual harms of this world. In addition, Adventists believe that since Christ did not come again on the foretold date in 1844, “The Great Disappointment,” Christ actually relocated to a different section of heaven in order to perform “investigative judgment” before he actually does return. Some of Papito’s behavior seems informed by this notion, especially in one of the final scenes in the novel, when Iliana returns to the house after visiting her gay friend Ed for comfort after the rape by her sister, and Papito investigates, interrogating her, making judgments and then violently assaults her yet again. Here Papito’s reference to the tyrant, Trujillo, is ironic too, in that Papito is also a
tyrant of a sort, in the space of his own home. With the allusion to the tyrant, Pérez establishes another layer of meaning as the physical home becomes like the Dominican Republic and Papito and his relation to power resonate with the dictator Trujillo as both “patriarchs” bequeath a legacy of repression and violence.

When Marina feigns indifference to Papito’s package, he coos, “Come here. I’ll prove to you how much I love you. Here. Take it. It’s all yours, “ as he clutches it away again. He smacked his lips exaggeratedly. “I’ll just have to keep it for myself. You kids wouldn’t know the difference between real sugar and the white dust you swallow in this country.” (49).

Iliana is disappointed that all the fuss was over sugar but then smells it: “Papito opened the bag and held it to her nose. A succulent aroma coaxed saliva from her tongue” (49) as if she too is not immune to the seductions of sweetness as she then exclaims that it smells like sugarcane. Through Pérez’s comparison of representations of gustatory and sexual appetites, she melds notions about patriarchy, power and desire.

In the closing of this sugar scene, as I have called it, “Papito grabbed a fistful of the sugar, dark as fertile earth, and let it trickle from his fingers into the bag. “The scent of my childhood! God, does it bring back memories!” (49). Papito then recounts a narrative about how when he was six years old and his mother died, he would accompany his father to work as he labored in the cane fields. As he begins to weep, Papito says “I remember watching him every night, then falling asleep while sucking sugar from a ripped sack like from a mother’s tit.” (49). Aurelia calls him a “filthy old man,” reminds him that his mother passed when he was ten, and orders him to stop telling lies (50).
By calling him a “filthy old man” Aurelia underscores the lasciviousness of his desires, and gestures again toward the notion of incest. In a similar vein, scholars and writers have noted that Trujillo also had intense sexual appetites, especially a penchant for young women, even many of the daughters of some of his associates. In a novel “The Feast of the Goat” (2000) by Peruvian writer Mario Vargas Llosa, winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2010, Trujillo is variously nicknamed as “The Chief, Generalissimo, the Benefactor, the Father of the New Nation, [italics mine]” (6). Also, the title of the novel indicates that Trujillo, with this depraved sexuality, as the “Father of the New Nation” “feasted,” (a choice verb that resonates with my consumption theme), on young Dominican girls with the ravenous appetite of a goat. Thus, Pérez’s erotically charged sugar scene exposes these various operations of patriarchal and even dictatorial power.

**Starvation of the Children**

At one point in the novel, as Iliana thinks back to her childhood, she remembers “praying for a bigger house...and more food so as to not to wake hungry in the night...she prayed for her mother to stop complaining about the price of milk and bread” (127). The theme of hunger of is prevalent in the novel most poignantly in relation to a mother’s desires to feed her children. Food scholar Carole Counihan writes, “The predominant role of women in feeding is a cultural universal, a major component of female identity, and an important source of female connection to and influence over others. Hence, although there are other components of female identity and sources of their authority, the power of women is to a great extent the power of food” (52). Although this statement gestures towards essentialism, Counihan does qualify her observation by admitting there are “other components,” though it
is certainly true that most, though not all, mothers are indeed responsible for feeding. In the novel, quite desperately, Aurelia attempts to provide enough food for her family, performing tricks by whipping air into eggs to expand an omelet and by being extremely resourceful with the meager provisions the earnings of Papito allowed. Aurelia does not ignore her children’s physical hunger.

On the other hand, Rebecca is rendered so powerless in her marriage to Pasión that although she makes modest attempts to feed them, she becomes almost numb to the suffering and literal starvation of her three children. On one occasion, Esperanza, the oldest child, enters the room with some white bread, a nearly empty jar of peanut butter and jelly mixture, and a knife. Rebecca swipes the knife out of her hand, removes some of the peanut butter already on Esperanza’s bread, and shares it with the other two children. She spreads it so thin, the bread tears, and then, “despondent, she watched them shove the bread into their mouths and pass the carton from one mouth to another” (58). Furthermore, she receives notes from school about the children’s filth and hygiene (53). The ostensibly unsympathetic, presumably Anglo-American teacher has no understanding of the kind of tortured life Rebecca and her child endure.

In her marriage to Pasión, Rebecca exhibits classic behaviors of women in situations of domestic violence. For example, within these abusive relations of power, she continually returns to Pasión after the beatings, sometimes even to have sexual relations with him. Unlike Aurelia, who at least tries to protect her children, Rebecca is so psychologically and physically crushed, she lacks agency and simply cannot stand up to his fury and demand better for her kids. The inequitable gendered relation between her and her husband Pasión is
remarkable and extreme. But, Rebecca’s hope springs eternal as she waits patiently and passively for Pasión to change. Perez writes:

During Trujillo’s reign of terror, Rebecca had learned of the disappearances of neighbors only to witness-months later and sometimes years-the return to life of several people given up for dead. She had seen others transformed into heroes in the face of danger, and, of late, had worked magic herself by scaring up out of nothing meals to satisfy or at least quell her children’s hunger. Compared to these marvels, Pasión’s transforming into a better husband, father an provider seemed an easy thing. (57)

Now in exile, these recollections mark Rebecca as psychologically scarred. She marvels at the return of the disappeared, yet she omits a consideration of what these disappearances signified for the abducted. The reader may surmise what kinds of tortures these abductees suffered at the hands of the Trujillo political machine and yet Rebecca likens their reappearance to “scaring up a meal,” which, admittedly, for her is no small feat. The fact of her living in two such oppressive patriarchal milieus, the Dominican Republic under Trujillo, Father of the New Nation, and Pasión’s apartment, renders Rebecca’s judgments about life, and about Pasión, warped. Her omission of the suffering of the abducted and her unwillingness to fully consider the plight of her own children suggest that denial and the suppression of these harsh realities are her own desperate attempts to survive and have
accordingly engendered a deep lack of empathy. More so than Papito, Pasión’s extreme physical and emotional cruelty mirrors the dictatorial tortures of Trujillo.

Rebecca is obsessively subordinated to Pasión, his desires and his whims. Pasión’s hobby of raising chickens impedes the life and well-being of his family. Typically, one keeps chickens for eating, either their flesh or their eggs, but Pasión keeps them for his own pleasure. One night early in their marriage, quite expectedly it would seem, Rebecca plucked and cooked one of the birds for dinner. Pasión’s response was utterly perverse as he “took one look at the stuffed bird and punched her in the face. It wasn’t even that he planned to sell the chickens. He just liked having them around” (52). If a chicken died, Pasión replaced it. The stench of living with chickens and their excrement was constant and intense; and yet Rebecca was forced to feed and provide fresh water for them, or else bear the brunt of Pasión’s wrath.

In a rather bizarre diasporic subject position, Pasión’s “embrace of a farmer’s life style idealized in stories told by a father who himself abandoned it upon arriving in the United States” (53) signals an impossible spatial dislocation. In a transnational move, Pasión attempts to transport and recreate the rural Dominican Republic in a highly urban setting, a Brooklyn apartment building, thereby transporting an idealized geography of home to a space not conducive to his agrarian dream, and not commensurate to his sense of himself. Indeed, his dream, desire or passion, and he is aptly designated Pasión, becomes Rebecca and their children’s worst nightmare. In addition to the chickens, Rebecca and the children dwell in a heap of rubble and refuse he also collected (“mismatched drawers, torn screen doors, wheels of all sizes, engines, broken machines, other unidentifiable objects...[old] magazines and
newspapers”) (53). Aurelia, fed up with Rebecca’s neglect of her children, accuses her of allowing the children to live in a pigsty (62), yet it is more of a chicken coop/junk yard.

Unfortunately, Rebecca seems unable to extract her family from Pasión’s patriarchal power and the sexual politics of her marriage to him. She has bought the lie that somehow such power is legitimate, much as Marina buys the lie of white superiority, perhaps even that such powerlessness and inferiority are desirable. Her personal memory reveals what is certainly a contributing factor to the formation of such a radically subordinate identity. When she was young, “she had felt honored to eat the last spoonful from her father’s plate” (79), an obsequious gesture that confirms her inferior, gendered status in the patriarchal order, and yet, quite disturbingly, she enjoys it.

**Chicken Scene**

“Hunger is clearest sign of powerlessness, for hunger means one lacks the control to satisfy one’s most basic subsistence need.” Francis Moore Lappé and Joseph Collins, authors of *World Hunger: Twelve Myths* (quoted in Counihan and Kaplan 2).

The quote by Lappé and Collins establishes a profound connection between food and power. “Control of alimentation is a source of power because food is a “very special substance” (Counihan 53). Pérez writes a scenario in which she uses food, this “very special substance”—in this instance several chickens—to offer a maternal response to the egregious violations of women and abuses of patriarchal power expressed in the novel. In various ways, Papito and Pasión intersect with history as Pérez draws parallels with both fathers and
Trujillo, the violent origin of much of the suffering in this text. Papito and Pasión perpetrate their violence primarily on the women in their families although Pasión’s abject neglect of his children might readily be construed as a form of violence too. Through the dictatorial politics of his regime, Trujillo on a massive scale, enacted violence on countless women, numerous men and two nations. Thus, Pérez’s novel both maps out and interrogates the connections among these various permutations of male power.

In this section of the study, I will elaborate an argument that proposes Aurelia’s power derives from her Afro-Dominican background, and this power is explicitly related to food. Aurelia is Pérez’s answer to the patriarchal, rapacious passions of most of the male characters in this novel. Channeling her own special powers, through food, she provides a deadly response to Pasión’s repeated violence against her daughter and the starvation of her grandchildren. In *Famine: Social Crisis and Historical Change* by David Arnold, he claims that “food was, and continues to be, power in a most basic, tangible and inescapable form” (quoted in Counihan and Kaplan 3). In terms of earthly power, Aurelia, will, in fact, feed her children and her grandchildren. Indeed, Aurelia prepares some food for Iliana at the time of her homecoming: “Iliana glanced down at her plate. It was true. Her mother had anticipated the dishes she most craved: fried, sweet plantains and a stew of cow’s feet, honeycomb tripe, garbanzos and carrots served over yucca and rice. She had even made sure to scoop some out of the pot in such a way that no bones landed on Iliana’s plate. (33). Although Iliana is too upset by Marina’s lifting her skirt and exposing herself, her mother’s intention, nonetheless, was to nurture. The novel also explicitly links the power of food with supernatural power. Hence, Aurelia’s comment about being a “witch” at the close of the sugar scene hints at this
capacity. Whereas Rebecca is incapable of effecting her own escape, Aurelia cannot remain passive in the face of her daughter’s continued victimization.

In the prologue of the novel, Pérez gives the reader scenes of both birth and death. As the protagonist Iliana’s grandmother lies dying, her own mother Aurelia, much to the dismay of the dying Bienvenida, is elsewhere giving birth. As Bienvenida passes, Aurelia bolts up in bed and sees a black cat cross her room. She frantically searches the house to no avail.

“When she returned to her room a bitter scent of freshly cut grass enveloped her. She tasted it on her lips and tongue, familiar as the dirt she had craved since the onset of her pregnancy. With it came an image of her mother turning the soil of the garden behind her childhood home” (ix). Then a powerful contraction washes over Aurelia as she delivers her child.

Just as Aurelia communicated with Iliana while she was away at the university, her mother Bienvenida, too, telepathically projects herself in the form of a “black cat” at the moment of her death. Thus, Aurelia’s preternatural powers derive from an Afro-Dominican, matrilineal heritage. Indeed, after her daughter’s attempted suicide, Aurelia turns to persistent memories of her mother for strength (131). The yearning for a taste of the presumably dark, brown, “dirt” and the sense of the “grass” on her tongue signal a strong desire for a return to her island, and to her Afro-Dominican spirituality which will prove to be the source of her power. In _Killing Spanish_, Sandín notes that “Pérez’s text renders few descriptive details that would enable us to identify the cult or deities Bienvenida serves” (66). Although the reader may not be able to discern for certain, it is clear that Pérez is writing against restrictive, Western, male-centered spiritualities. Sandín considers that it may be a Dominican variant of Voudoun or Santería, both syncretic Afro-Caribbean practices that combine elements of
African practices such as Yoruban, with Catholic elements, or if Aurelia partakes in a version of Spiritism which is often practiced alongside Catholicism. (66).

The reader discovers that Aurelia’s mother, Bienvenida, “commanded more respect than the emigrant priest who visited once a month. She was the one, who as a midwife, presided over births and deaths. On most days her house creaked with the traffic of those seeking her advice. At night, it heaved with the forlorn sighs of spirits” (132). Pérez sets up a gendered contrast between island spiritual practices and more patriarchal dogmatic Christianity, presumably Catholicism, as she mentions the priest. Aurelia contemplates the various spiritual tokens from her mother that she had rejected out of fear while on the island and she regretted “having discarded her mother’s gifts (135). This fear is what incited her turn to Papito and his rigid belief system as a measure to protect her from her own formidable powers. It would seem her participation in the Seventh Day Adventist Church was an extended experiment with an alternate spirituality, one that ultimately does not sustain her as she cannot her ignore he proclivity and affinity for island rituals, culture and spirituality. Indeed, wielding such power can be frightful as Iliana and Tico seem to possess the gift and are uncertain how to respond to it; Marina may indeed have access to it and this may, in part, be why she is mad; and it was rumored that Aurelia’s brother Virgilio committed suicide as a result of his ability. Yet, Aurelia muses about the loss of this spiritual connection: “As she delved in to the past she was conscious of something missing in the present-something her mother had possessed and passed along to her but which she had misplaced and failed to pass on to her own children. She could not identify what it was, but its absence was felt as acutely as hunger pangs” (23).
This acceptance of her power, however, does not come easily. Initially, upon arriving in the United States, Aurelia felt alienated, and her assessment of life in New York was bleak: “[e]verything had seemed grim and violent…. ” (23). She became severely melancholic and almost died. Separated from her homeland, she nearly lost the will to live. Experiencing a major depression, “she had deteriorated to a skeletal eighty-one pounds,” and “although she had recovered, she had emerged from a nine-month hospital stay profoundly changed “(24)—almost as if she her old self has died and she has been reborn as an “American.”

After the fire Marina sets in the kitchen, Aurelia is more frightened by what it means in terms of the labor and time it took to make a new home in the United States.

She had recalled the dust thick in the air when they’d first moved in; the impenetrable darkness caused by boarded windows and relieved only by flickering candles; the distinct unforgettable sound of rats scurrying inches from where she’d slept. It was these memories, more than the possibility of being burned alive, that which had sparked her terror. Five years of arduous work had transformed the house into a home, and she was incapable of the strength necessary to begin again or to dream of possibilities after she and Papito had invested all they had in the house which was to be the comfort of their old age and the anchor in their children’s lives. (22)
In her despair after Marina’s attempted suicide, Aurelia turns again to her roots, to her mother’s wisdom and to island spiritual practice. Aurelia resolves that “From that day on she would hold only herself accountable. She would no longer depend on anyone else to do for her or her children what she should have taken it upon herself to do” (137). In *Food and Gender* Counihan suggests, that in

patriarchal cultures, men claim exclusive mediating powers with the supernatural.; in more egalitarian cultures, women’s control over food carries over into an essential mediating role in rituals and supplicating gods and spirits. In Catholic ritual, for example, only male priests can perform the ritual of transubstantiation, where the bread and wine are converted into the body and blood of Christ....Because women prepare and control food, they are agents for ritual and religious knowledge and food offerings (5).

Aurelia’s close connection as giver of food throughout the novel establishes a feminine “mediating role” between herself and the divine and provides an oppositional potential to the patriarchal forces that have damaged her family.

Thinking about island practices as she prepares hot chocolate, Aurelia muses about the past,

She missed the ritual of making coffee. Before her conversion to Seventh-Day Adventist and while she still lived with her mother, she and Bienvenida had built a fire behind the house. While darkness lingered and roosters
crowed, Bienvenida had roasted coffee beans which Aurelia ground in to a fine powder with a mortar and pestle held snugly between her knees. Then, as the embers faded, they had sat drinking coffee whose scent had mingled with the green, wet smell of dawn” (23).

This beautiful maternal scene of “ritual” and of female bonding opposes the constraints of a religion in which even coffee drinking is prohibited. The encounter also points towards spiritual roots, a spirituality also encoded as Afro-Dominican as they sit in “darkness” wielding the power of fire. Like an island alchemist, Aurelia sits “with mortar and pestle held snugly between her knees” in a gesture to her own access to power, not through patriarchal means, but via her maternal capacity to transform material substances in the world. The epistemological and spiritual legacies she inherits from the island, in contrast to the dogmatic misogynist discourse of Papito’s religion, offer Aurelia liberation and the potential to act.

Besides the disembodied voice in the opening of the narrative, there are two poignant scenes in which magic disrupts the realism of the novel. The first dramatic scene occurs as Aurelia comes to remove the children from Pasión’s apartment and shape shifts on the sidewalk as the family watches:

Aurelia’s eyes had narrowed to mere slits and darkened to an impenetrable black that hypnotized its prey. She swooped toward her eldest daughter, her legs appearing to glide rather than to walk, stretching forward from shoulders broad with strength. Conflicting emotions tugged at her sharpening features,
lending them a hawkish edge. The scratches clawed into her face faded even as her lips—thinned by years of biting down on them to force their silence—appeared to beak, then exhaled steam that evaporated in cold air suddenly smelling of rain-washed grass although there was not a speck of green anywhere in sight. (197)

Bird imagery pervades this scene, and indeed, much of the novel. Like a fierce mother bird protecting her young, she rescues her grandchildren from the hell that has been their lives. After the children come to live with her, they are so accustomed to being hungry that although there is plenty of food, they have taken to hiding it all over the house, under the couch, behind the radiators. The evidence of their prior starvation is everywhere as Rueben licks his lips as he watches a TV commercial advertising food, or Aurelia discovers that the children literally lick their plates clean (208). The effects of their food deprivation are profound as Aurelia comforts the children and tries to empower them by asking them to inform her if the pantry is running low on a food they like and by showing them the food supplies to assuage their fears of starvation.

A climactic moment in the novel focuses on Aurelia’s use of power and how it connects to food, an event that occurs after Rebecca has warned her mother not to meddle further in her affairs and expressed to Aurelia her intention to return to Pasión. During one final confrontation with Rebecca, Aurelia offers an opportunity for Rebecca to relinquish ties with Pasión for her own safety, but even more so, for the well-being of the children. Rebecca is adamant to the end and does not have the wherewithal or fortitude to contemplate
a life without a man, any man, and so after she threatens her mother with her imminent return to Pasión, Aurelia takes matters into her own hands. Sandín observes that, “if dead or dying women are metonyms of the dangerous, violent origins in Geographies of Home we also see that female bodies aggressively engage violence as well as submit to it (Sandín 63). As we shall observe, Aurelia intends to enact her own kind of maternal violence.

Aurelia visits the local market and requests three live chickens, unplucked. Curious, the butcher inquires, “You planning on working hoodoo with these birds?” (254). After getting the chickens home and immersing them into boiling water to loosen the feathers, she sets about her business. At first, “her hands eased into a rhythm. This done, she focused all her thoughts on Pasión. Vaguely at first, then clearer as the seconds passes, she was able to make out the details of his face. She withdrew far enough to see the entirety of the giant’s height and smiled with grim satisfaction when she recognized his surrounding as the third-floor coop of the house” (255). As the rest of the family is preoccupied with mundane activities, Aurelia is performing magic, and murder.

Just as she prepared the coffee back on the island, or as a mother ritually prepares a chicken for an ordinary dinner, especially on the island where plucking the feathers one’s self would have been commonplace, in a scene that blurs the distinction between cooking and magic, Aurelia focuses on the task at hand. As her mother had telepathically projected herself to Aurelia while she was giving birth, so too does Aurelia bilocate as she makes herself visible to Pasión at his death. She does not wish him to believe that what was happening to him occurred by “mere chance” (255). Perez writes, “the strength of her desires jerked his head up as if it were attached to her hand by strings (255), a textual moment that provides a
parallel to Papito’s jerking Iliana’s head closer to the cinnamon-scented soap. Next, she begins to pluck handfuls of feathers out of the chickens. In a rather nightmarish scene, “the chickens that had languished half dead throughout the coop simultaneously leapt up...their squawks shattered the silence. The dust disturbed by their wings swirled up in blinding clouds” (255). Because Pasión suffers from asthma, the frenzy of the fowls causes an attack, and as he reaches for his inhaler, Aurelia swings a bird and knocks the lifesaving medication from his hands. Pérez continues, “When Pasión lunged for it, Aurelia slammed the platter of freshly plucked birds onto her kitchen table (255). Choking, he drops to the floor and with each action in Aurelia’s kitchen a corresponding event befalls Pasión. As she rubs salt on the birds, they begin to peck at his skin. Finally, Pasión expires only to be found days later at the mercy of his beloved chickens. The poetic justice of his horrific end is treated somewhat ambivalently by Pérez: Aurelia does not gloat and take pleasure in her actions. She explains that “Having conjured death, Aurelia stood respectfully in its presence” (256), and then she cleans up her own mess.

The reader might question how in a text that so pervasively critiques forms of power, why might the author have the maternal figure enact such a murder? The novel seems to suggest there is little other recourse to the strength and ubiquity of patriarchal power. The fact that Pasión receives his just desserts at the site of the kitchen and, ironically, from his own chickens, revises the relations of power that he had established in his own house. Aurelia offers a forceful, deadly, and maternal response to his violence when reasoning with Rebecca does not prevail. Furthermore, Aurelia’s access to power that derives from the Dominican Republic mirrors Pasión’s recreating the island in his apartment. With Aurelia’s
magic, as with Pasión’s poultry, the Dominican Republic is brought to New York. A notable
distinction, however, is that Aurelia evokes her island power and experience to protect
innocents, not to satisfy her own perverse whims and pleasures. In the familial legacy of
violence, Aurelia position remains ambivalent. Perhaps her intuitive awareness of the effects
of power prompted her initial reluctance in embracing this Afro-Dominican form of
knowledge and power. She does, indeed, become complicit in the matrix of familial violence,
yet with a qualification. After the rape of Iliana, Aurelia considers her moral position: “Faced
with the aftermath of Marina’s violence, Aurelia was confronted with her own and hounded
by the notion that the previous night’s events had been fate’s perverse retribution for her
crime. Plain and simply, she had committed murder” (293-4). Unlike, Papito, Pasión and
presumably Trujillo, Aurelia actually reflects on her actions and complicity in violence.

Using the language of food, Pérez offers an incisive account of the seductions and
consequences of desire by examining recurring structural features of power and oppression.
In the space of a transnational imaginary between the Dominican Republic and Brooklyn,
Pérez disrupts dominant gendered and ethnoracial discourses by challenging them through
the deft use of food tropes. At the conclusion of the novel, Iliana is wounded by the various
transgressions of her family. She must forge her own path, reexamine her own life. The
reader has the sense that she will certainly not crumble as her sister Rebecca did.
Nevertheless, Iliana must sacrifice the consolations of certainty as she leaves at the end of the
novel to save herself and to find a new, safer, and more productive space and that elusive
sense of home. Her search for self-identity continues as she emerges from the home and these
instances of scarring trauma. For Iliana, the site of the patriarchal home is ultimately
uninhabitable. The displacements of immigration and the abuses of patriarchal power have thwarted her development, but the text’s conclusion gestures towards personal validation that will occur not through her family but rather through her departure as Iliana embarks upon the search for her own trajectory, her own corner of the world.
CHAPTER SIX
READING A PUERTO RICAN FOOD EVENT

Ana Castillo, a well-known Chicana writer, once remarked that “we all have our abuelita poems.” Undeniably, the figure of the abuela looms decidedly large in Latina/o culture(s). Consider the powerful storytelling of the grandmother in Judith Ortiz Cofer’s tale “The Witch’s Husband,” or the dying grandmother in the first chapter of Geographies of Home who telepathically projects herself to her absent daughter. Even a recent Broadway musical In the Heights, written by a Puerto Rican—Lin-Manuel Miranda—features a grandmother. The young Puerto Rican protagonist, Nina, sets off for college and brings along her abuela’s recipes to ameliorate her homesickness. At the conclusion of the musical, after the beloved abuela dies, a large mural of her saintly and benevolent face graces a bodega storefront almost like a religious icon and brings both comfort and unity to the struggling Washington Heights Latina/o community. I would like to close this analysis with an autoethnography that reveals my personal investment in this study. Allow me to begin this chapter where I opened this project, with my abuela, a bit of culinary memoir and an interpretation of a holiday Puerto Rican food event.

As far back as I can remember my family has visited my abuela’s house each Christmas Eve. As kids, my brother, sister and I would pile into the back of my father’s beat up yellow taxi to make the trip from the Bronx, north to Yonkers, New York. Thrilled, we would gaze at the bright Christmas lights and colorful decorations that ornamented the street lamps and storefronts all along South Broadway. When we arrived at 102 Morris Street, the
first sign of celebration that demanded our attention was an amazing aroma that pervaded the entire apartment. It was the smell of my abuela’s pasteles, a Puerto Rican food so difficult to make, so labor-intensive, that in my family, we usually eat them but once a year. The wonderfully distinctive smell of pasteles and the joy of Christmas are inextricably and indelibly linked in my memory. The entire extended family would spend the evening eating, talking, laughing, dancing salsa, and eating some more. As a child, with my siblings and cousins, I eagerly anticipated the exchange of gifts after the meal. The wait seemed an eternity, as to most children, but much to our infinite delight and satisfaction we always got around to the beautifully wrapped presents under the tree, a rather conspicuous display due to the large size of my family. These were our rituals every Christmas Eve. It was always my favorite night of the year.

This Christmas Eve celebration is an experience that I cherish, one in which I have a high emotional stake, and one that powerfully informed my childhood imagination. Thus, I admit that I am no objective observer of this account although as a scholar, I would like to interrogate the semantics of our family food event, more specifically what it means in terms of ethnic and gender identity, perhaps even to do a bit of “anthropology of the present” to use Sidney Mintz’s phrase (xxvii), and to think about how this event came to its present shape and what it might signify. Indeed, recent scholarly work on food invites such an investigation. For instance, Brown and Mussell observe that “in order to make explicit the concealed meanings of a cultural system, structuralists attempt to interpret food events as languages and to analyze them by methods derived from linguistics” (12). Thus, the “language” of food practices, the semiotics of a food event, and reading the various facets of
the occasion as signs, can uncover much about ethnic and gender identities, as well as about the social relations and values of its participants. However, I will qualify this focus on “discourse” with an additional consideration and complication—that of eating as an embodied experience. Thus, this complication forces us to engage with both the material and the symbolic aspects of foodways.

This chapter will investigate the uses and meanings of food, both as a discursive facet of identity construction, reading the food like a language with a particular eye to how experiences of food function in a celebratory context, and as a practice that foregrounds this commensality as a highly pleasurable, embodied experience. I argue that food, its preparation and consumption on special occasions, is deeply implicated in ethnic and gender identity both in literary texts, as we have noted in the previous chapters, and in life, and that this important facet of ethnic identity formation arises to a significant extent from cooking and food rituals as they are predominantly forms of female cultural production, cultural production that operates at the national, familial and individual level. Until recently, cooking and foodways were largely overlooked by academics. Regrettably, home cooking of any kind has never been afforded much cultural significance, and even women who cook professionally have been disregarded. Unlike haute cuisines, of which the producers are largely male, everyday cooking and, for my purposes here, holiday preparations, have traditionally held little attraction for most men. Jean Francois Revel, a French philosopher and member of L’Académie française, makes an important distinction between “two sources of gastronomic art” (151). He posits that there is “a popular one,” “the peasant mother” (148) of cuisine, and the “erudite” source, that of “the galloping father” prepared by “professionals
that only chefs fanatically devoted to their art have the time and the knowledge to practice” (149). Revel asserts that traditional foods, which he calls ‘popular,’ are linked to the soil, are regional and seasonal. Thus, this feminine, peasant mode of food production is closely allied with nature. Revel believes that chefs must transcend everyday methods to realize great art and to create culture, and that grand cuisine is restricted to male professionals.

Notably, the gendered distinction Revel mentions suggests a hierarchy between low and high cuisines. Traditionally, men have not devoted their time and energy to “low” forms of culinary production. Charlotte Druckman confirms this hierarchy in an essay published in *Gastronomica*, where she muses, “Why Are There No Great Women Chefs?” a question she derives from Linda Nochlin’s title “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” (24). Druckman uncovers the constraining contemporary attitudes toward female chefs, and Nochlin exposes the impoverished historical conditions for women that have made, and continue to make, the fulfillment of grand creative aspirations nearly impossible. Druckman elucidates why even though women have made great strides in the food industry, (consider Julia Child or more recently Alice Waters), this oversight continues to prevail and that even at the prestigious 2009 James Beard Awards gala which assigned a theme of “Women in Food” to that year’s event, ironically, only one out of nineteen winners was female. She laments, “It seemed like a cruel joke” (24). In an effort to scrutinize the source of such disparity, she “went to both *Food & Wine* and *Gourmet* magazines to see if they could address this elephant in the kitchen—the great male/female culinary divide” (24).

Druckman ascertains that much of the problem, as Nochlin had established earlier, “lies in how we, as a culture, define terms like ‘great’ and ‘great artist,’ and also how those
of us who examine these terms—academics, journalists, critics, and theorists—shape or champion their definitions by accepting them as the norm” (24), and the norm most surely affords male cooks such distinguished labels as “chef” or “artist.” In order to determine to what extent judges might be able to discern whether a male or a female prepared a particular meal, an event was designed whereby the judges had no knowledge of the gender of the chef. Not surprisingly, the quality and style of the meals did little to reveal the gender of the food preparers. In the end, the results proved that the professional tasters failed to uncover the gender as many times as not. Druckman writes:

The evening’s message was that men and women don’t really cook differently; we just judge their food in different ways. This prejudice operates on two levels. Edible flowers on a plate can be said to signify ‘female,’ while precisely stacked layers and drizzled sauces can be deemed ‘male.’ But, when a chef’s gender is known, we can also describe his or her seemingly neutral dish with different vocabularies. Panelist Gwen Hyman, who writes about gender politics and food, reminded the audience of the old cultural trope ‘Women cook with the heart, men cook with the head—because women have hearts and men have brains.’ So, if a male chef serves a plate of Spaghetti Bolognese, it is lauded for its ‘in-your-face,’ ‘rich,’ ‘intense,’ ‘bold’ flavors, while a woman’s plateful of the same indicates “homey,” “comforting” fare, “prepared with love.” The former becomes an aggressive statement, a declaration of ego, while the latter is a testament to home cooking. (25-26)
What concerns me about the dichotomy Revel and Druckman describe in the gender politics of cooking is precisely how this hierarchy dramatically diminishes the valuation of women’s contributions to culture. Female chefs receive little recognition because their culinary creations are relegated to the domestic as “home cooking” which precludes their entrée into \textit{haute cuisine}, the kind of cuisine that is culturally significant, the kind of cultural production that counts. According to this logic, if the works of great female professionals can be ignored and devalued to such an egregious extent, then the cooking of Latinas in home kitchens will be even more miserably undervalued. This culinary divide dramatically reduces the importance of the food preparation of ordinary women when, ironically, “home cooking” is perhaps one the most profound vehicles through which many human beings nourish and understand themselves.

Although all cultures have culinary practices that define and mediate their experience—certainly everyone eats, I argue that food in Latina/o cultures works in especially poignant ways because of the intensely gendered practices surrounding food and its production in those households and communities. The unfortunate, and still pervasive, prevalence of the ideology of machismo has created an even more pronounced and rigid hierarchy than the ones described by Revel and Druckman above. Certainly, Latina food production lacks a high status evaluation as art, if it is deemed culturally significant at all. Even more problematic, this assessment has often relegated Latinas to a place of servitude in the kitchen. It’s just what Latinas do, what they are “supposed” to do. They cook. Unfortunate ethnic and gendered social expectations create a pernicious context for this
highly exploited Latina labor. On the contrary, most Latinos do not cook in the home (although many certainly do in underpaid restaurant jobs). By and large, Latinos conceive of themselves quite differently. Historically, the expression of Latino masculinity does not occur at the site of the kitchen, but rather, in the bedroom, hence the stereotypical, but partly accurate, notion of “the Latin Lover.” According to Raphael Ramírez, in Puerto Rico, (and I believe one could correctly extrapolate to various other Latino cultures), “the masculine ideology stresses sexuality. The male is an essentially sexual being, or at least he should look and act like one. He should enjoy his sexuality, declare it, boast about it, and above all, show it” (295). Hence, one of the primary identifying factors for Latinos depends upon his sexual, and not his culinary, prowess. The rationale for this male aversion to the kitchen and this rigid domestic economy of labor may be that men traditionally have not performed unpaid work, or that patriarchal notions of the family structure discourage men from positions of servility in the home. Such justifications, perhaps, preclude most Latinos from domestic, but even more specifically, culinary, labors.

Thinking about food and identity may demonstrate some of the ways food practices can code and demarcate cultural boundaries and the dynamics of social relations: the kitchen is certainly a neglected area for the study of human experience, an area consigned to insignificance by a particular and masculine bias. Taking as a starting point the now-famous feminist mantra that the personal is political, Meredith E. Abarca, the author of *Voices in the Kitchen: Views of Food and the World from Working-Class Mexican and Mexican-American Women*, insists on the importance of thinking about food and food practices as meaningful activities worthy of both analysis and philosophical contemplation. Her project consists of
numerous interviews which she calls *charlas culinarias*, kitchen chats, in which she interrogates the significance of food, and the way food has provided agency, a means of establishing and maintaining familial bonds, and a mode of creative expression, in the lives of female family members and friends. She considers these women in relation to their understandings of themselves and the world as “grassroots theorists” (9) and argues that theory can be discovered in non-academic places. This perspective endows the work, knowledge and cultural production of women with a high value, a value that has heretofore been if not ignored at least underappreciated in traditional academic discourses. “Kitchens and cooking, a place and activity that women engage in regardless of educational level, ethnicity, or class status,” Abarca observes, “form the praxis to bridge the gap between academic theoretical discourse about female subjectivity and quotidian working-class practices of female agency. A study of the social and philosophical dimensions of cooking illustrates how female subjectivity and acts of agency take place in both academic and non-academic spaces” (4).

Abarca reflects on the differences between “place” and “space” as she considers some of the challenges the kitchen has posed for women, as it is often in many ways the location of the most arduous domestic labor. However, this negative assessment limits the possibilities for food to be emancipating and expressive for women, and relegates female food preparation solely to “peasant” or servile labor. She notes in Foucault’s examination of power an oversight as he considers “other places” from whence a subject might subvert institutional control. Remarkably, Foucault excludes the house. According to Abarca, Foucault views home as “a place of rest,” and not a place of sociopolitical struggle, but Abarca astutely
challenges “rest for whom?” (210). Rather, she interprets the kitchen as just such a space for the potential subversion of patriarchal power.

She expounds on the politics of the kitchen:

As a women’s place the kitchen can imply a site of mandatory wifely labor and motherly duty to her family, culture, and even nation, a servitude that makes her financially dependent upon her husband, for her life revolves around mainly performing unpaid domestic labor. In this context, many feminists argue, the kitchen represents the locus of women’s emotional, physical, spiritual and economic vulnerability. These concerns address the ideological meanings that produce the notion of place. In the fields of architecture and geography, traditionally, to a great extent a patriarchal and capitalist agenda defines the social meaning of place as usually representing the physical and stable boundaries of a location….The kitchen as women’s space, though, can represent a site of multiple changing levels and degrees of freedom, self-awareness, subjectivity and agency. (19)

Thus, the kitchen as “space” can serve to destabilize patriarchal authority, function as a site of resistance, and provide a means of creative expression and female autonomy. So what kind of knowledge, agency and cultural significations are embedded in my family’s Puerto Rican Christmas celebration? What do the language and practices of our Puerto Rican food event
reveal? How might that event articulate positive notions of female autonomy rather than restrictive, patriarchal aspects of a woman’s place and provide a counter to the patriarchal operations of identity, family and nation?

Lin and Theodore Humphrey in *We Gather Together*, an exploration of foodways, suggest that food is not merely sustenance for the body and, that “the sociological and semiotic aspects of food are especially significant in festive contexts” (2). Although daily food practices serve to illuminate aspects of a cultural sensibility, feasts are especially instructive and heavily laden with signification. The practices surrounding holiday events are usually traditional, highly ritualized and profoundly symbolic. Therefore, in analyzing a particular celebration, one must examine not only what is eaten, but also the context of the event, the labor and methods of production, who attends the event, how the food is presented and, ultimately, what it means to the group collectively, as well as to the various participants.

A participant of our festival who is of primary importance was my grandmother, Ana Maria Cruz, or as we called her, Wela, our term of affection, a softening of *abuela*.

Wela was born at the turn of the century in Aibonito, Puerto Rico, a small mountain town. Her biography sounds a bit like a fairytale. When Wela was very young, she lost her natural mother, so young, in fact, that she had no memory of her at all. Her father remarried a woman who was somewhat of a wicked stepmother as forced Wela to do the household chores, including most of the cooking. Fortunately, she was not left to sleep in ashes by the hearth. Wela’s earliest recollection of making *pasteles*, the food of our Christmas Eve feast, was when she was seventeen and cooked them for her father and stepmother. Indeed, she learned in a traditional manner, a form of observational learning, by watching her
stepmother. Several years later, Wela told her parents that she wished to marry, and supposedly, they locked her in a room for three long days. When her parents finally realized that she would not submit to their will, reluctantly, they released her, and defiantly, she married my grandfather, Otillio Cruz. She and Otillio, with their first born child, migrated to New York City in 1926, nine years after the passage of The Jones Act granted United States citizenship to all Puerto Ricans. They relocated to an entirely different terrain, a geographic, cultural and psychic migration to be sure. In a way, Wela’s cultural and psychic dislocation began before she even left the island.

**On Puerto Rican History**

During the Spanish-American War, in 1898 on July 25th, the year Wela was born, the United States military invaded Puerto Rico. Two years later, The Organic Act, (or Foraker Act of 1900), established a civil government. In *Puerto Rico: Culture, Identity, and Politics*, Nancy Morris writes that the period that followed entailed an intense effort to “Americanize” the island (28). The government installed under this Act was ultimately controlled by the U.S. Congress who reserved the power to annul any laws passed by the newly formed Puerto Rican government, but gave some minor governing and legislative duties to Puerto Ricans. For example, the Lower House of the Legislative Assembly called the House of Delegates consisted of 35 officials elected by Puerto Ricans. Arturo Morales Carrión, a Puerto Rican historian, critically characterizes this arrangement as “paternalistic” with only “a smattering of Puerto Rican participation’ (quoted. in Morris 26-27). When the first elected body formally convened, the U.S. military band played American patriotic music. The response to these U.S. colonial impositions by many Puerto Ricans at the time was ambivalent.
Ostensibly, the material support and resources provided by the U.S. were welcomed by many Puerto Ricans after the long years of indifferent and irresponsible rule by the Spaniards, however, many islanders fervently wished to maintain their Puerto Rican identity and customs, and were skeptical of what life might entail under another imperial power. One political leader of the time, Luis Muñoz Rivera, expressed this sentiment: “We continue in the fight for our rights, for full American nationality and for a full Puerto Rican personality” (Negrón de Montilla 26). This statement reveals much ambivalence in its willingness to entertain the notion of “American nationality,” even while it exposes a strong reluctance to relinquish aspects of Puerto Rican culture that were rooted in tradition, qualities that comprised the Puerto Rican personality.

Another major element in the U.S. imperialist project, in this process of Americanization, was to reform the educational system using the US education system as its template. English teachers were imported from the mainland (Negrón de Montilla 51) and schools named after US heroes were erected across the island. Negrón de Montilla also recounts that schoolchildren were taught to sing “America” in English and that American flags became fairly ubiquitous. In addition, she explains that United States “[n]ational holidays were ‘patriotically’ observed and ‘patriotic exercises’ were carried out in every school” (240). In 1907, even Three Kings Day, a beloved holiday in many Latino/a cultures and a day on which gifts were exchanged, was removed from the list of holidays (Negrón de Montilla quoted. in Morris 28). Thus, the obligation to celebrate US holidays coincided with the eradication of significant Puerto Rican events.
Regarding language, Morris observes “The school system was the key in the campaign for the universalization of the English language” and there were high expectations for the broad implementation of English (28). Negrón de Montilla notes that in a teachers’ magazine, *La Educación Moderna*, some educators resisted such expectations and critiqued “the spirit of absorption and supremacy with which the English language is being imposed” (Negrón de Montilla quoted in Morris 28). Resisting the powerful forces of the colonizing US culture, many Puerto Ricans viewed themselves as guardians of tradition and attempted to preserve their Spanish language.

This bit of history may serve to explain several aspects of my grandmother’s experience and her response to such sociocultural aggression. First of all, after witnessing the US efforts to obliterate much of Puerto Rican culture on the island, after migrating to the mainland, she decided, quite deliberately, not to forfeit Spanish. She spoke in both Spanish and English to her husband and to all of her children who grew up bilingual. Curiously, she never celebrated Three Kings Day in the United States and I speculate that it may have been because the family was somewhat more secular than some Puerto Rican families, or because while raising her five children, there were economic constraints that discouraged a second day of offering presents. However, she tenaciously held on to Puerto Rican foodways, a way to reenact and remember her island which was part of her strategy of self-preservation. She refused to allow the forces of assimilation to completely erode traditional customs, especially the deeply symbolic Christmas *pasteles*, which were typically eaten on Christmas Eve.
Identity and Reading Food as Text

So what precisely is a pastel? A pastel is a Puerto Rican meat and vegetable pie which, customarily, is wrapped in platano leaves. The base of the patty consists of grated platano, a green banana, and yautia, a root vegetable, to which is added shredded pork, seasoned with green olives, chick peas and sofrito, a uniquely Puerto Rican blend of garlic, onions, peppers and tomato. Both platano and yautia are plentiful on the island. Hence, an intimate connection exists between the fruits of the land and the body of the consumer, a material link between the land and the physical body. This embodied aspect of consumption relates to important ideas about ontology and bodily pleasure that I will discuss below. In the diaspora though, the eating of pasteles takes on even more pronounced symbolic associations since the consumer has been estranged from the homeland.

To read the pastel as text, much as Roland Barthes reads French ingestibles such as wine and meat in Mythologies, invites a useful analogy, one that links consumption to identity. Furthermore, Barthes also gestures to the embodied facet of ingestion and he emphasizes the ways in which wine is central to French culture and national sensibilities. He declares that, “Wine is felt by the French to be a possession which is its very own” (58). He promotes wine as “a totem-drink” (58), one that signifies a “varied mythology” (58) and does not trouble itself about its contradictions. To drink wine is the “spinning out of a pleasure,” the materialization of enjoyment. On the universality of wine consumption in France, Barthes proclaims:
All this is well-known and has been said a thousand times in folklore, proverbs, conversations and Literature. But this very universality implies a kind of conformism: to believe in wine is a coercive collective act. A Frenchman who kept this myth at arm’s length would expose himself to minor but definite problems of integration….Conversely, an award of good integration is given to whoever is a practicing wine-drinker: knowing how to drink is a national technique which serves to qualify the Frenchman, to demonstrate at once his performance, his control and his sociability. (59)

He wraps up, “It is wine which is part of nation” (61). Barthes proposes two useful ideas here that I may productively apply to pasteles. The first illustrates the importance of the performative aspect of consumption. It reads consumption of wine as a universal and collective act, one that is frequently enacted in groups, and social settings, and in public.

Barthes also cites the concept of nation, and the ways in which wine circulates in a semiotic way to articulate nationhood. Barthes’s assessment of the relation among wine, culture and nation relates to Benedict Anderson's concept of ‘imagined communities’ as a narration of the nation-state, which for Anderson occurred largely through print and capitalism, where men are the protagonists of grand narratives of national identity. And although Anderson admits that “[i]ndeed, nation-ness is the most universally legitimate value in the political life of our time” (3), the complexity of national identity and its construction, however, demands other modes of self-identification to be taken into account, and perhaps, consumption is as compelling a way of understanding one’s nationality as is print culture. As with print culture
and capitalism, I must point out the masculinist bent in the production, and more broadly, the culture of wine in France (and elsewhere). Not surprisingly, the wine industry, in France, was historically dominated by men for centuries (with the exception perhaps of the *les veuves* Cliquot and Pommery in the 19th century). Furthermore, this male hegemony is not limited solely to production. It is also prevalent in other facets of the business and culture of wine, particularly in the number of professionals in the industry who are female, such as recipients of the prestigious Masters of Wine title, or even restaurant sommeliers. The number of wine professionals who are female is slowly increasing, yet still abysmal to this day. Wine production and consumption underscore the ways in which cultural production, and especially cultural production that expresses nationalism is highly gendered, and it is almost exclusively, male.

Another scholar also confirms this connection between wine and national identity. As Kolleen M. Guy writes in “Wine, Champagne and the Making of French Identity in the Belle Epoque, “wine in particular, as a product associated with France, took on an authority and legitimacy not afforded most commodities” (165). Guy confirms Barthes’s assessment on the ability of wine to “qualify” and “to integrate” the Frenchman. Guy continues:

The case of French wine legislation illustrates the extent to which protectionist legislation was part of a larger discussion about the cultural identity of ‘an essentialist, a true France’ [to use Lebovics terms]. This essential France, as the debate over the protection of wines illustrates, was highly contested. Historians have noted that by 1900 there was a new
emphasis on culture as a central component of French identity and new state-centred policies directed at integrating ‘the disparate regions of provincial France into a common political culture’ (165).

In a similar way, I argue that Puerto Ricans and some Puerto Rican writers view the pastel as closely linked with a nearly “essential” Puerto Rican identity. Like the various regions of France searching for a common culture, the Puerto Ricans on the island and those throughout the diaspora find a common national culture in the eating of pasteles. To use Barthes’s verb, Puerto Ricans “believe” in the pastel, hence the almost obsessive marking of Puerto Rican literary texts with this quintessentially Puerto Rican food. It may be noted here that for Puerto Ricans so much of their national identity is caught up in their sense of ethnicity in that Puerto Rico is not unified entirely by either language or geography, but rather by a complex set of experiences and cultural factors including their existence as a colonized and diasporic people. Thus, perhaps a more accurate description for the Puerto Rican experience of itself as nation might be characterized as “cultural nationalism.” Jorge Duany, in The Puerto Rican Nation on the Move: Identities on the Island and in the United States, insists on the significance of cultural nationalism as “a serious (though perhaps limited) attempt to assert Puerto Rico’s distinctive collective identity, within the context of continued political and economic dependence on the United States” (17). In his analysis, he maintains that cultural nationalism “has a strong potential to subvert ideologically the colonial regime in Puerto Rico” (17).
To use Duany’s phrase, Puerto Rico is “a nation on the move” in many ways. First, the original coloniás in New York, of which my grandmother was a part, established enclaves in Manhattan, (largely in Spanish Harlem and the Lower East Side), but with strong ties to the Island thus situating “the nation” in two distinct locales. Next, the Great Migration of the 1940s and 50s was the largest, airborne migration in human history, literally relocating nearly half the Puerto Rican population to the New York metropolitan area. Finally, the incessant migrations of Puerto Ricans back and forth from the island to the mainland, *el vaivén*, which continues to this day, destabilize conventional notions of national identity.

Duany explains how “popular images of Puerto Rican identity have been thoroughly deterritorialized and transnationalized over the over the past few decades” (8) and I would argue that perhaps these processes began far earlier as those first members of the New York coloniás, such as Bernardo Vega, Jesus Colon and my grandparents, held fast to their Puerto Rican heritage and icons. In addition, Duany alludes to Anthony D. Smith who argues that ethnicity and its concomitant “myths, memories, symbols and values” (9) provide important fodder for the creation of national identities. A strong linkage between ethnicity and nationalism may be even more pronounced since Puerto Rico is a indeed “a nation on the move,” one no longer bounded by a common language, because many people who identify as Puerto Rican do not speak Spanish, nor by a well-defined territory. In fact, Puerto Ricans are no longer solely situated in the two distinct locations of island colony and New York metropolis since Puerto Ricans have established communities that span across many cities in the U.S. Furthermore, they are not necessarily connected to the idea of a sovereign nation state.
Duany’s insistence that theories of Puerto Rican nationalism must engage with both island and diasporic concerns foregrounds the complexity of Puerto Rican identity. Significantly for my argument, Duany also confesses that “[s]ince its inception, Puerto Rican nationalism has been very masculine in orientation” (24). Admittedly, Duany’s analysis of Puerto Rican cultural nationalism is an excellent study, one that examines the ways in which in the 1950s intellectual elites on the island began a program to construct the Puerto Rican nation in opposition to U.S. hegemonic forces. He includes evidence of the ways Puerto Ricans as newly acquired colonial subjects were represented at two World’s Fairs, of the ways Puerto Ricans appear through the gaze of American anthropologists and even the ways the Smithsonian’s Vidal Collection of Puerto Rican artifacts articulates the Puerto Rican nation. To his credit, he mentions the fact that “[f]ood preferences were another popular expression of Puerto Rican culture in everyday life” (198) as he displays a reproduction of a menu from a New York eatery, Versailles Restaurant, a rather curiously French name for a Puerto Rican place, from 1927 that featured many Puerto Rican dishes. In addition, he reveals that by 1927 there were over two hundred bodegas, small Puerto Rican grocery stores, in New York City. However, Duany’s blind spot is that his own analysis is rather masculinist since in a study of over three hundred pages, only two pages are dedicated to the ways in which food is implicated in the construction and perpetuation of national identity, an indication that food practices are widely undertheorized in the experiences and construction of ethnicity and nationhood.
Tracing Ingredients

*Pasteles*, however, function as an important form of female cultural production, a Puerto Rican expression of ethnic identity at the level of the individual, the family and the nation, and I would argue that in my family this is not in coercive, patriarchal servitude to family or nation, but rather a joyful expression of both. So how might we read *pasteles* as cultural artifact in relation to Puerto Rican ethnic identity? We might begin with the concept of *mestizaje*, defined here as a mixture of various racial and cultural elements, namely European, African and indigenous. The mixture of ingredients in *pasteles*, and also in the dish typically served with them, *arroz con gandules*, suggests a kind of radically hybridized food combination, in that the points of origins of the different ingredients vary widely. For example, pigeon peas, *Cajanus cajan*, also known as Congo peas, gunga peas, or *gandules*, as they are known in the Caribbean, are born of intense tropical climates. Albala speculates that pigeon peas may have originated in India, but others argue in East Africa from which point they arrived in the Caribbean with the slave trade (86). The conflict has been fairly resolved: “All the evidence gathered to date points to peninsular India as the source as the place where the pigeonpea originates (Nene and Sheila 2). Another scholar confirms this assessment, “Despite a lack of very ancient remains, some contrasting opinions about its origins exist. It may be satisfactorily concluded that the pigeonpea originated in India and spread quite early. A secondary centre of diversity of the species is found in East Africa. Ancient Sanskrit sources may still clarify the early travels of the pigeonpea” (van der Maesen 15). Next, the saffron, *crocus sativus*, (though many U.S. Latinas rely on Goya’s *Sazon*) used to flavor and color the rice is frequently used in Middle Eastern cooking. *Pasteles* also
consist of the root vegetable *yuca*, an indigenous ingredient also known as cassava, “which is the primary staple for more than 800 million people in the world, mostly in the poorest tropical countries. The term cassava is most likely derived from the Arawak word for bread, *casavi* or *cazabi*” (Lebot 26). Lebot explains that the precise origin of cassava is unknown, but that it originates from either Central or South America. *Yautia*, also called *Xanthosoma*, which is a form of aroid, was also transferred to the West Indies with the slave trade (Lebot 281), like the pigeon pea. According to Peter Chapman, the *platanos*, or *musa paradisiaca*, most likely “originated in the rainforests of Malaysia in the Stone Age, discovered by cavemen some ten thousand years ago. The name ‘banana’ comes from Africa…From West Africa the banana found its way to the Canaries, and thence onward with the Spanish conquest to the Americas” (20). In addition, olives are from the Middle East. In the book *Olives*, Therios explains that the olive tree was native in the Mediterranean basin and that the Phoenicians brought the olive to the Mediterranean shores of Southern Europe and Africa, and that olives have been found in Egyptian tombs dating from 2000 BC (1). Thereafter, olive tree cultivation extended to Southern Italy, Sicily, Corsica and Sardinia, and also Spain which became one of the major suppliers of olive oil to the Roman Empire. Another ingredient, garbanzo beans are also from an area near the Fertile Crescent (Albala 81). And finally, the pork provides an element from Spain; ironically, the imperialist ingredient takes the form of the lowly pig. Pork, the most widely eaten meat in the world. Domesticated since the Stone Age, wild pigs have been found throughout the world. All North American domesticated pigs are descended from a herd brought to the New World by Hernando Cortez in 1539 (The Meaning of Food, PBS website ,
http://www.pbs.org/opb/meaningoffood/food_and_life/food_for_thought/p1/). In Spain pork figures importantly in the cuisine. There was even a special day at the end of November, the *matanza*, marked for the killing of the pigs (Sarasúa 161).

Thus, on the one hand, although *pasteles* function as a profoundly significant and nearly universal, “essential” marker of Puerto Rican ethnic and national identity, any attempt to construct an absolutely essential notion of Puerto Rican identity is thwarted by the sheer geographical scope of the origins of these ingredients. Tracing the history of ingredients in such ethnically marked recipes may serve to highlight the porousness, the radical heterogeneity and the interconnectedness of many “nationalities,” and can serve to debunk any cultural fantasies of racial, ethnic or cultural purity. Nonetheless, hybridity does not necessarily undermine the epistemic and political usefulness of identity, but rather it highlights the possibilities inherent in such identifications which seem to have their very “essence” rooted in plurality and difference.

The mixture of the *pasteles* is analogous to the commingled nature of *mestizaje*; hence, the form of *pasteles* alludes to a type of ontologic mixture, a concept which resonates nicely with the suggestive and hybrid notion of *mestizaje* almost like identity materialized. A *pastel* exists only as a mixture of disparate cultural food elements. In addition, *mestizaje* acknowledges African elements, such as the pigeon peas, precisely what historically has been erased, or perhaps abjected, from much of the Puerto Rican discourses on race, and admits the heterogeneity of Latina/o subjectivity and history. The *pastel* may even have derived from slave creativity and frugality in that nothing went unused and that the bits of meat which were left over were folded into the *masa*. In a sense, the *pastel* comprises a cultural
hybridity in the formal construction of the food item itself as it provides a language for the cultural anthropologist to read. Levi-Strauss explains, “We can hope to discover for each specific case how the cooking of a society is a language in which it unconsciously translates its structure--or else resigns itself, still unconsciously, to revealing its contradictions” (12). Perhaps the *pastel* translates both its hybrid structure and its contradictions. Like *mestizaje*, the textures of the two basic components of a *pastel*, namely the *masa* and the *sofrito*, constitute a kind of admixture. The *masa* has a very messy texture, the constituent ingredients of which are not readily ascertained; it is a food with the consistency of mush. On the other hand, the olives, chunks of pork and garbanzo beans do remain as discrete elements within the mush, almost like little treasures to be searched for amidst the *masa*. The *pastel* is, therefore a mixture, too, in terms of its blending of textures with these distinct ingredients incorporated into the *masa*. The *pastel* functions symbolically as both a factor in Boriqua individual subjectivity, but also as a marker of collective, Puerto Rican familial and national identity.

But eating *pasteles* may also support a non-discursive form of identification as well. Since meals are cultural productions that are actually ingested, a literal incorporation occurs. Claude Fischler, a French sociologist, suggests that food is “central to individual identity, in that any given human individual is constructed, biologically, psychologically and socially by the food he/she chooses to incorporate” (275). Thus, the kind of intimate experience with food situates it as a powerful embodied encounter. We quite literally, to reiterate Brillant-Savant’s famous saying, we are what we eat.
However, in spite of the inclusive nature of this representative food as it certainly embodies the various racial and ethnic aspects of Puerto Rican history, not all representations of Puerto Rican foodstuffs are such. *Pasteles* are typically served with another quintessentially Puerto Rican dish *arroz con gandules*. Duany notes that much cultural and nationalist production has, not surprisingly, excluded the Other. For example, the well-known, romanticized image of the Puerto Rican *jibaro*, a white, or light-skinned, male peasant farmer from the inner highlands, represented “the essence of Puerto Rican nationhood,” (24) a representation that, Duany observes, appears in various poems and narratives. In terms of food, the iconic image of the *jibaro*, a figure deeply implicated in the master narratives of Puerto Rican identity, is also depicted on a can of beans. It is called, not surprisingly, *El Jibaro* and features a picture of a man wearing a *pava*, the famous Puerto Rican straw hat. This example supports the insight that, until recently, the Puerto Rican discourse on race has indeed attempted to efface the presence of African influence, in that, although the can boasts the romantic, light-skinned and idyllic figure of the *jibaro*, ironically, the beans are *gandules*, also known as pigeon peas or Congo peas, which traveled to the Caribbean through Africa. Hence, even the representation on a commonly used can of beans articulates a masculinist, racially homogeneous, Hispanophile nationalism— a white, patriarchal national culture, one that appropriates a product used, I would surmise, by countless Puerto Rican female cooks, not *jibaros*, and one that co-opts an African food.

In *Ethnic and Regional Foodways in the United States*, the authors Goode, Theophano and Curtis question to what extent a particular household food event is significant within a wider social context. They posit that certain food events are perceived as ethnic by
the natal family simply because the event has been occurring since childhood, yet in reality, the event may be particular to that natal family alone. My grandmother confirmed that most families on the island eat pasteles on Christmas Eve and that this practice is generally regarded as a Puerto Rican tradition, one that does not appear widely in most other cultures of Spanish descent. Although a mention of pasteles does occur in the Dominican writer Loida Maritza Perez’s debut novel Geographies of Home in which the mother Aurelia is preparing pasteles as part of a feast for a Christmas party (247), further research is required to determine whether the tradition of pasteles derives from island experience in the Dominican Republic and the cultural traffic with Puerto Rico in the Caribbean, or if this custom had been adopted through the proximity of the Puerto Rican and Dominican communities in New York City since that is where the writer lives and the narrative takes place, or lastly, it may be that such a large influx of Dominicans have immigrated to Puerto Rico in recent decades, an intra-Latin American diaspora of sorts. Some casual research on the internet suggests that the pastel is more treasured in Puerto Rican culture. In fact, Dominicans even have a different name, pasteles en hojas, and a somewhat different recipe for them. Regarding South America culture, I inquired of two Spanish language educators, one Columbian and the other Venezuelan, and neither recognized the pastel as part of their national cuisine. In fact, the teachers recounted that a pastel in their respective countries was more of a sweet pastry rather than a savory dish. A teaching experience of mine may help to establish the traditional, and ubiquitous, consumption of pasteles and of this particular food event on Christmas Eve in Puerto Rican communities.
While I was a teacher in the Bronx, my class and I were discussing issues of ethnicity. A student inquired about my own ethnic background and I disclosed that I was half Puerto Rican and half Irish. Puerto Ricans constituted a significant percentage of the student body and, thus, a number of the students questioned my claim. They asked if I spoke Spanish. Not really. Then I was not Puerto Rican. Then, I informed the class that I call my grandmother “Wela” and that she was born on the island. Well, maybe I was Puerto Rican they conceded. But you don’t look like Puerto Rican, they observed. I can’t help how I look, I apologized. And what does a Puerto Rican look like, I questioned. They weren’t certain, but they were sure I didn’t have the right look. Finally, I told them that my family eats pasteles every Christmas Eve. All of the Puerto Rican students informed me that they eat them on Christmas Eve, too. This confirmed for them that I was, in fact, a relatively authentic, though somewhat suspect, Puerto Rican. Thus, from a sociological perspective, even away from the homeland in diasporic settings, the eating of pasteles seems to occur in a wide social context. Eating pasteles was interpreted as a fairly definitive marker of ethnicity well-recognized by these student insiders. Even in spite of my language deficiency in Spanish, pasteles function as a carrier of authenticity, perhaps because of the symbolic, communal nature of the Christmas event, perhaps because of the incorporation, literally, of the food into the body. Foods stand in a special and intimate relationship to the self in that we are what we eat in a very literal, bodily way, and perhaps the students intuitively recognized this. For me, this notion of incorporation problematizes a purely discursive approach to identity, an approach that I believe does not adequately engage with embodied realities. At any rate, my participation in this food practice allowed my Puerto Rican students to conceive of me as an insider.
I was somewhat surprised by the fact that the ingestion of *pasteles* seemed to resonate more powerfully with my students than the reality of my grandparents’ being born on the Island. Fischler suggests because we are omnivores and thus our process of food selection is highly varied and complex, that the process of incorporation signifies quite potently (277).

One must consider how the signification relates to bodily experience. He inquires “How do socially constructed norms and representations become internalized—inscribed, so to speak, in taste buds and metabolisms? Do not these norms and representations also have a biological side?” (276). Thus, in a material sense, the consumed food actually physiologically becomes part of the body in a very real, substantive way as it transforms into skin, flesh and bones, which in turn has an influence on what the food means to the eater and the community.

Fischler advocates for “an integrative” approach, one that accommodates both the social and biological aspects of human consumption. Incorporation is also the basis of collective identity and, by the same token, of otherness. Food and cuisine are central components of the sense of collective belonging to a social body. “Thus, not only does the eater incorporate the properties of food, but, symmetrically, it can be said that the absorption of a food incorporates the eater into a culinary system and therefore into the group that practices it, unless it irremediably excludes him” (280-281). This culinary system is part of a larger “world view” (281). Considering the case of my students, I was inculcated into their own Puerto Ricanness. Fischler reasons that what is a stake for an eater is nothing short of “his place in the universe, his essence, his nature, in short his identity” (281).

Other ethnicities also have foods which function as markers in a similar way. One can make a useful comparison between *pasteles* and the *tamales* of Mexican women. In
Foodways, Brett Williams discusses Tejano migrant workers and the transportability of culture. As Tejano migrant workers move from place to place, the food the women prepare, specifically tamales, provides the workers and their families with a strong affective connection to their homeland as taste and smell are intense triggers of memory. The tamales provide a constant, a soothing and reassuring factor, in a continually shifting world.

Similarly, the transportability of culture correlates with my grandmother’s experience. In 1926, Wela, Otillio and their first child, Iris, migrated to New York City. My grandmother reported that they left Puerto Rico because, “there was nothing to do there. No work.” In the following years in New York, Wela gave birth to my father, Raphael, and three other children Louie, Elsie and Marie. In New York, Wela continued to prepare Puerto Rican foods, including pasteles, for her husband and children. “Traditional foods and ways of eating form a link with the past and help ease the shock of entering a new culture,” suggests Susan Kalcik (37). Although some adaptations were made, for instance, Wela used special paper at first, instead of platano leaves, with which to wrap the pasteles, the recipe remained the same. When asked why she chose to maintain the tradition of cooking pasteles on Christmas Eve, she replied, “Because it wouldn’t be Christmas without them.” Cooking and eating pasteles was a method of reconstructing a Puerto Rican identity in the diaspora. Even after residing in the United States for decades, with all of the concomitant forces to assimilate, Wela continued her Puerto Rican traditions, customs that continued to inform celebrations and her daily life. Nancy Morris writes that “Puerto Rico is a rich setting to study the perceived effects of various pressures on identity. As much as any society, Puerto Rico has been exposed to forces of globalization, through deliberate coercion, through
integration into U.S. market culture, and through continuous exposure to imported media products (11). Jorge Duany confirms Morris’s assessment as he observes that in spite of the enormous and sustained influence of the U.S. on Puerto Rico, many still retain a distinctly Puerto Rican cultural consciousness. Duany writes, “As an overseas possession of the United States, the Island has been exposed to an intense penetration of American capital, commodities, laws and customs unequaled in other Latin American countries. Yet, today Puerto Ricans display a stronger cultural identity than do most Caribbean people, even those who enjoy political independence (1). Yet in spite of the formidable forces to assimilate both on the Island and in United States, Puerto Ricans do not forfeit their Puerto Rican foodways.

As with the Tejano women and their tamales, the making and eating of pasteles, of this traditional food, were very important to Wela’s sense of herself, perhaps even more acutely after she came to the United States. The food provided a material and affective link to the island she left behind in that food ties people to place. Using Levi-Strauss’s concept of food systems as a language, Wela was, in effect, rewriting, or “textualizing” in a non-verbal way through food, a conception of “home,” articulating her experience of displacement. In a way, the pastel may also textualize a sense of abjection. Puerto Ricans were not enthusiastically welcomed on the mainland. My family was caught in between the native Puerto Rican culture of my grandmother and the dominant culture of Anglo-American society.

It is not news that many immigrants’ experience was marred by various forms of prejudice upon arrival in the U.S. Newly arrived immigrants can be stunned by experiencing the scathing discourses and attitudes which construct minority communities as social
problems. When seeking adequate housing for the family, after many rejections, my relatives had to lie and tell prospective landlords that they were Italian, a “necessary fiction” of sorts to borrow a phrase from a multimedia exhibit on the Latina/o population in the US Southeast (curated by Mario Marzan and John Ribó at Golden Belt Studios, Durham, NC, 2010). Few property owners would rent to Puerto Ricans, but toward that end, for some, their olive skin tone allowed them to “pass” as Italian. The response to such racism and discrimination was painful and complex. Assimilation to the dominant culture which rejected the family was problematic, yet it was impossible to maintain all of the traditional Puerto Rican cultural practices. My family, as with many immigrant families, embodied a kind of cultural ambiguity and hybridity as they attempted to strike a requisite balance between two cultures. Indeed, they made friends with, and some even married Anglo-Americans, yet they retained their Spanish language and many of their food practices. In some respects, they were both rejected and accepted by mainstream Anglo-American society. This sometimes painful tension creates an ambivalence that perhaps is characterized by the abject, creating a sense of continually living on a border, continually crossing unofficial boundaries. Mexican-born, U.S.-based Chicano writer Guillermo Gómez-Peña muses on this confusing, but potentially productive, experience of hybridity in the “the border is.” Gómez-Peña freestyles:

Border culture means boycott, complot, ilegalidad, clandestinidad, contrabando, transgrecion, desobediencia, binacional/….But it also means transcultural friendship and collaboration among races, sexes, and generations. / But it also means to practice creative appropriation, expropriation and subversion of dominant cultural forms (1).
Gomez-Pena’s musings reveal the complexity of negotiations of life on the border between the U.S. and Mexico, but they are also applicable to the experiences of Latina/o immigrants more broadly. Gomez-Pena calls attention to the fact that such negotiations and dynamics of culture are often simultaneously subversive and collaborative, as in misrepresenting one’s self to landlord, or creating social bonds with Anglo-Americans. On the other hand, even though social forces do influence and transform ethnic identities, nevertheless, some aspects of Puerto Rican identity persist. Thus, acculturation is highly complex and often not linear. Nancy Morris observes that “[t]hrough a century of substantive and symbolic conflicts over issues such as language, education and political structure, Puerto Rican identity has remained distinct, while adapting to the pressures placed upon it. Such resilience and conservation demonstrate that identity, while malleable, is also durable” (7). This state of being in flux and experiencing such social pressures, however, makes the meaning of traditional foods even more pronounced and the singularity of Puerto Rican culture more desirable. In effect, food practices provide continuity and a component of ethnic identity and heritage that most Puerto Ricans are unwilling, and rightly so, to surrender.

As my grandmother’s children matured, my Aunt Iris, the eldest, became the next tradition-bearer of our cultural foodways. As Wela aged, Iris assumed the bulk of the responsibility in the preparation of pasteles, and was the lead orchestrator of the cooking process. Wela would still boil the pork early in the morning, and she assisted with peeling vegetables for some time. But at age 75 she retired, leaving the strenuous work to others. As the authors of Foodways observe, “ethnic food systems are not simply conservative and
tenacious, nor are they disappearing over time (69). The pattern in my family supports this assessment in two ways; First of all, practice of making of pastel has not vanished over time. Secondly, though conservationist in the impulse to accommodate traditional foodways, adaptations, in fact, were made. One such variation occurred when my aunt Iris worked outside the home in a sewing factory and thus, had contact with other Puerto Rican women who cooked pastel. A female coworker suggested to Iris that she substitute yucca, another root vegetable widely used in Puerto Rican cuisine, as a base for the pastel, instead of the combination of platano and yautia. This extrafamilial influence led to a culinary innovation, a second type of pastel that has now been prepared in my family for decades. For some family members, the yucca pastel is now a favorite. Interestingly, though the content of the masa changed, the form of the pastel remained the same, a masa mixed with a sofrito, wrapped and tied up with string.

Thus, the form of the pastel remains a cultural constant. Though the substances in the mixture may change, engendering a new type of cultural expression, the form itself functions as an ideological practice, a practice of mestizaje that physically and symbolically wraps culturally diverse ingredients neatly up in package form, perhaps like the Boriqueña body itself. Thus, the pastel serves as a metaphor for the self, linking the form of the pastel to the corporeality of the preparer. As a consumer, she absorbs the food’s properties in to herself. Thus, the both the symbolic and the corporeal are linked to the concept of identity. “The congruence of dietary patterns and their societies reveals the way cultural forms are maintained by the ongoing activity of those who ‘carry’ such forms, whose behaviors actualize and incarnate them” (Mintz 13). Indeed, the pastel is a culinary articulation of
Puerto Rican identity at the level of the individual, the family and the nation and these identifications seem to have sharper meaning off the Island in a diasporic context.

As the family continued to cook pasteles, they continued to straddle two worlds. In Sandra Marie Esteves’s poem “Not Neither”: she writes: “Being Puertorriquena/ Americana/ Born in the Bronx, not really jibara/ Not really hablando bien/ But yet, not gringa either” (Tropical Rains 26). Like Esteves and Ortiz Cofer, my aunts had the sense that they belonged absolutely to neither culture.

Iris, born on the island, was the orchestrator of the pastel-making process for many years. When she passed away in 1973, my aunt Marie, her younger sister, was inaugurated and assumed responsibility. Marie was born in the United States and so it was she who most poignantly experienced the powerful forces of assimilation to U.S. Anglo-American culture, while at the same time trying to preserve a vibrant aspect of her Puerto Rican culture.

Making Pasteles

In many ways, the making of the pasteles is as interesting a process as the celebratory event itself. Twenty years ago, when my aunts Iris and Marie, as well as their daughters and my grandmother, all lived together (my grandfather had passed away and my aunts were either divorced or separated due to severe domestic violence, hence establishing a very matriarchal family dynamic), the procedure was entirely an in-house production at Wela’s home. Today, many family members participate in making the pasteles in various houses.

The raw materials for the pasteles are purchased a day or two in advance of the preparation. Years ago, Marie had to travel from Yonkers to Manhattan to buy the various
vegetables at a specialty store. Today, the local Korean fruit stand carries all the necessary ingredients, thereby making the acquisition of materials more convenient. Interestingly, when Wela was a girl, her father went to market for the foodstuffs. After Wela and Otillio immigrated to the U.S., Otillio continued the tradition of shopping for the ingredients in New York. Shopping, however, is the only capacity in which the men in the family have participated in the process, until rather recently that is. Traditionally, making pastele is a very gendered activity. However, for the first time a few years ago, a man actually sat at the preparation table with the women as my cousin Christopher learned to grate, though quite interestingly, he has not returned to the table since.

This culinary work as exclusively female is not entirely ubiquitous, however, and I would surmise that for Puerto Rican families that continue the tradition, it is increasingly more common for men to participate in the preparation process since more women work and because gender roles have become somewhat less rigid. Many years ago and simply out of curiosity, when I first started thinking about pastele and what they meant to Puerto Ricans, I asked Roberto Márquez, a Puerto Rican scholar who taught for many years at Mount Holyoke, was born on the island and raised in Spanish Harlem, about his family practices and experience of pastele. He replied as follows:

As to whether we still regularly eat pastele at our house around the Christmas season, the answer is yes. In fact, my wife and several of her friends generally get together some days before to have what I suppose can only be called a
"pasteles klatch," during which, having set aside SEVERAL hours for the purpose, they prepare industrial quantities of them (which they then divide up), as they chat and gossip and just plain have fun; my job -- and that of the other husbands and "significant others" -- is to cut the banana leaves to measure, put the mixture of meat and "masa" on them, wrap the whole thing in the appropriate paper, tie it up, and stack them, in preparation for cooking. Though it all does make you appreciate certain "modern conveniences" and "labor saving devices," it makes for a great afternoon and evening spent among family and friends. (email December 4, 2001)

Cooking day, the day on which nature’s raw materials are transformed into cultural artifact, is also a “pasteles klatch,” and begins with my Aunt Marie’s rising early. When I asked my aunt how she knew what to do she replied, “I was always involved in making them. By the time I took over, I had enough practice that I knew what to do.” From observing her mother and older sister, Marie internalized the process in the manner of a folk-learning model. At first, her apprenticeship consisted of cutting the paper and strings to wrap the meat pie. Next, she learned to peel and grate, by far the most arduous tasks, tasks that are dependent on precise, repetitive motions that require great dexterity to perform quickly, and that can cause great muscle strain. Finally, she acquired the skill to season the meat using a sofrito, (the use of which is perhaps the single, most defining aspect of Puerto Rican cooking) and to achieve the proper consistency for the masa, not an easy undertaking. Cooking as such is a thoughtful, skillful and deliberative practice.
Since Marie has always worked full-time, she requires the assistance of her daughters and nieces. It takes six or seven women from early morning until dusk to prepare approximately 100 pasteles. Were it not for the support she receives, a working woman would be hard pressed to continue such an onerous tradition. I asked Marie about the mood and conversation on this day and she explained that, “It’s a happy time...You’re together in the kitchen. There’s a festive feeling. It helps if you have a Kahlua toward the end of the day and have the music on.” Narratives and jokes develop in the context of this communal effort. In addition, it is important to note the receptivity to other ethnic food types and drinks with Marie’s choice of Kahlua, a Mexican drink which has a delicious coffee flavor and adds to the festivity of the day. Like Roberto Márquez’s event, my family too, enjoys great sociability and communion on preparation day in this act of loving generosity.

In what ways are diasporic foods essentialized and does the necessity of maintaining "exotic" or “authentic” foodscapes produce a distinct diasporic burden, acting to fix migrant culinary cultures - with what outcomes and effects for foods and the creativity of their makers? Clearly, this cooking process is an operation which entails an enormous amount of culinary labor, yet, in a spirit of cooperation the female members of my family enjoy each other in spite of the work. As Asian-American critic Wenying Xu asserts, “Every manipulation of the edible is a civilizing act that shows who we are, what values we uphold, how we interact with one another, and why we do food differently than others “ (3). The preparation of the meal even has great affective value and is a fine example of female cooperation. As in Abarca’s Voices, the kitchen does not only function as a site of subordination and constraint. It can also be a space of female agency and a space to
experience the decolonizing of the kitchen. Making pasteles fosters and maintains strong interpersonal bonds among the women in the family and these bonds have sustained them through many personal trials. In addition, this production event evokes a kind of feminist, and working-class, ethics of collaboration based on an equitable division of labor. This division makes the event possible without unduly burdening any one woman. Also, a feminist sensibility is even manifest in the decision of the women to perform the work at all. Marie and company carry out the undertaking because they choose to, not because of male coercion or expectation, not because of the tyranny of some man’s stomach. Initially, Puerto Rican women may have perceived the preparation of pasteles as an activity that marked them as subjugated and as sufferers, as I surmise my grandmother’s early experience may have been, with a clear and oppressive gendered, and perhaps, generational, division of labor. My aunt and cousins, however, have transformed the culinary practice into a celebration of survivors, a vindication of female agency, just like the women in Voices. Now, the entire day of preparation of pasteles occurs approximately two weeks before Christmas. Marie discovered that the pasteles freeze very well and, thus, some holiday pressure is alleviated by having them ready in advance. In Puerto Rico, in my grandmother’s time, they would have been prepared Christmas Eve morning.

Another significant aspect of this day of cooking relates to the deep feelings and memories evoked by the preparation rituals. Susan Kalcik ascribes such strength to “the unifying ability of shared food and foodways [such] that it can operate not only between members of the group that are separated geographically but even between those separated by death” (48). Although Kalcik suggests this in the context of food offered for the deceased
and other similar rites such as preparing food offerings for the ancestors, rites that occur on holidays such as the Mexican *Día de los Muertos*, it seems equally apropos to apply this concept to our own ritual preparations and this connectedness between the living and the dead. My cousin Linda, one of the cooks, and her sentiments about her deceased mother Iris, confirm this association. In an interview for this project, Linda commented that not only does the preparation bring her mother to mind but, that “when we’re doing this, she’s with us” (phone interview). Thus, my family is not so much cooking *for* the ancestors, but rather *with* the ancestors. So, in a way, this commemorative tradition even transcends death. Like the late Chicana scholar and theorist Gloria Anzalduá, we Puerto Ricans also have our ghosts.

Another notable aspect of the Christmas festival is that not everyone in the family partakes of *pasteles*. Food preferences are intimately linked with self-definition and a number of the children do not eat them. Note Roberto Márquez’s sons’ response to the *pasteles*, a food in which the contents of the package are not entirely predictable or identifiable. As Márquez remarks, “... and, then too, not every Puerto Rican regards them as a thoroughly compelling delicacy... our sons, for example, who also eat them, were originally less than taken with *pasteles*, because of their less than appetizing look.... and, as they alleged, their resemblance to... oh, never mind...” (email December 4, 2001). Márquez was disinclined to admit or articulate that his sons thought that the *pasteles* look like excrement.

This observation leads to an intriguing aspect of Kristeva’s analysis of the abject in *Powers of Horror* when she explains a child’s rejection of a parental offering of food: “I” want none of that element, sign of their desire; “I” do not want to listen, “I” do not assimilate it, “I” expel it. But since the food is not an “other” for “me,” who am only in their desire, I
expel myself, I spit myself out, I abject myself within the same motion through which I claim to establish myself” (3). So the logic of abjection is such that I define myself against you, by refusing the food you proffer and hence, I reject you; thus, I become myself. There are inherent contradictions in this dynamic that are played out further in adolescence when many Puerto Ricans, Márquez’s sons and my own family members included, embrace the marker of their abjection, this exceptional meal that indeed looks somewhat like excrement, and transmute it into a symbol of cultural pride and ethnic identity, a coming of age as a Puerto Rican.

At our festival, along with the pasteles, a huge pot of arroz con gandules is served, as well as a pernil (roast pork) and a salad. In years past, Iris made rice pudding with coconut. Today, Stephanie makes flan. As with Márquez’s boys, many of the kids prefer the “safer” dishes, the rice and beans and desserts. Kalcik explains, “Children adopt adult foods to signal their leaving childhood behind” (50). In my family, the decision to eat pasteles, after years of watching the adults eat them, is a rite of passage of sorts. It is a decision to partake in our cultural heritage. My father and his siblings began eating pasteles earlier than the grandchildren. Marie and her siblings witnessed the making of this food for years and perhaps this familiarity eliminated any reluctance to eating them since pasteles are not very visually pleasing to some.

This rather distinctive presentation, as noted by Roberto Márquez, has been offensive to a number of outsiders over the years. My Irish-American mother took several years to try pasteles, but then ultimately loved them. On one occasion, my mother offered a pastel to an Italian-American neighbor, Mrs. Abenante, explaining that it was a very special Puerto Rican
food, a delicious, savory pie of pork and vegetables. She took one look at it, refused to taste it, and remarked that the pastel looked like “shit.” Apparently, her set of expectations regarding what is palatable and what foods are fit for consumption was not met by the pastel. According to Curtin, “The classification of something as food means it is understood as something made to become part of who we are” (9). To Mrs. Abenante, the pastel was too repugnant for ingestion, embodying the horror of the indiscrete, the indiscernible, that which breaks form. Fischler describes “the omnivore’s anxiety” as “focused in the act of incorporation, the action in which we sent food across the frontier between the world and the self” and that “to incorporate a food is, in both real and imaginary terms, is to incorporate all or some of its properties (279).

Thus, although food offerings can maintain and foster connection, at times they, unfortunately, can construct boundaries through this cultural variability. Mrs. Abenante’s revulsion maintained an ethnic division through her scatological comment about this food, interestingly, a division erected over the site of trauma, (though not my mother’s); just consider the famous West Side Story, a filmic representation of a painful social reality for Puerto Ricans in their relation to Italians. In Tarrying with the Negative, Žižek muses on the potential causes of such ethnic (dis)ease:

We always impute to the “other” an excessive enjoyment: he wants to steal our enjoyment by ruining “our way of life” and/or he has access to some secret, perverse enjoyment. In short, what really bothers us about the “other”
is the peculiar way he organizes his enjoyment, precisely the surplus, the “excess” that pertains to his way of life; the smell of “their” food, “their” noisy songs” and dances, “their” strange manners, and “their” attitude toward work... The basic paradox is that our Thing [way of life] is conceived as something inaccessible to the other and at the same time threatened by IT? According to Freud, the same paradox defines the experience of castration, which, within the subject’s psychic economy, appears as something that “cannot really happen,” but we are nonetheless horrified by the prospect. The ground of incompatibility between different ethnic subject positions is thus not exclusively the different structure of their symbolic identifications. What categorically resists universalization is rather the particular structure of their relationship to enjoyment. (203)

Perhaps the neighbor was threatened by this particular form of enjoyment, this excess, this coprophagia, this “shit” eating as she would have it? And “horrified by the prospect” of what might it mean for her identity and her “way of life” that she now inhabits an apartment building with people who engage in such utterly perverse enjoyment?

Nevertheless, there is considerable irony in the neighbor’s overt rejection of pasteles and her supposed culinary, and implicitly, social, superiority. Initially, many Italian foods were considered repulsive by Anglo-American standards, specifically such aspects of their cooking as the frequent and abundant use garlic, and the consumption of organ meat such as tripe. Furthermore, Italians themselves experienced rejection by the dominant Anglo culture
which labeled them as greasy “wops.” Richard Raspa writes about a group of Calabrian immigrants, who emigrated from Southern Italy to Iowa, and he recounts the negative reception offered this group. For example, he tells of how a particular food, frazzini, a pretzel like bread prepared with anise seeds, was rejected by the Mormons. The Mormon women explained the anise seeds reminded them of rat droppings (188). Hence, food can most certainly function as a medium of division. A similar negative response to pasteles occurred when my cousin Diane was married. Her husband, a Polish man, also blatantly refused to eat them, and still does not partake. Apparently, this particular food strongly defines ethnic boundaries, but not all outsiders have an adverse first reaction.

On Christmas Eve after the meal, we engage in the ritual of gift giving. This exchange is performed the same way every year with one person calling the names of recipients and another frantically collecting the discarded wrapping paper. The community and the ritual feasting are most satisfying for the adults. The opening of presents is the kids’ favorite part. Ultimately, this festival engenders a distinctive sense of our Puerto Ricanness and family unity for all.

The meaning for the participants in this family food event varies. Fischler explains:

A given human group generally shares these classifications and associated practices and representations. Basic taxonomies incorporate the individual into the group, situate the whole the group in relation to the universe and in turn incorporate it into the universe. They thus have a fundamentally religious dimension, in the strict etymological sense of re-ligere, to bind together. (281)
Since Marie is now the main tradition bearer, I asked her what this event means to her: “It’s part of our tradition and our culture, and I’m trying to keep that alive, that little bit of culture that we still have. The food is one of the ways of bringing that to the forefront We’re all Puerto Rican. You’re part Puerto Rican, your brother, your sister, my children and grandchildren” (phone interview).

Certainly, for Marie, and by extension most of the family, this meal retains a high cultural value, and the symbolism and purpose of this food event go far beyond ingesting a meal for sustenance, though it is achieves that purpose too. It is a social process that celebrates our familial cohesion, a process of nostalgic enactment, a symbolic assertion of our collective identity. Nonetheless, the meal is more than solely symbolic and although I have read the “language” of the meal as discourse, there is a highly embodied aspect to this encounter with food, and more precisely, to the practice of eating communally; the experience is material as well. It would seem that the essence of “the thing” can only be accessed through the actual experience of physically eating together. Žižek observes in *Tarrying* that, “the element which holds together a given community cannot be reduced to the point of symbolic identification: the bond linking together its members always implies a shared relationship toward a Thing, toward enjoyment incarnated” (201). Žižek’s insight demands an account of the physicality of this event, eating as an embodied physical pleasure. He continues:
If we are asked how we can recognize the presence of the Thing, the only consistent answer is that the Thing is present in that elusive entity called “our way of life” (201). This paradoxical existence of an entity which “is” only insofar as subjects believe (in the other’s belief) in its existence is the mode of being proper to ideological causes: the “normal” order of causality is here inverted, since it is the Cause itself which is produced by its effects (the ideological practices it animates). Significantly, it is precisely at this point that the difference between Alcan and “discursive idealism” emerges most forcefully: Alcan does not reduce the (national etc.) Cause to a performative effect of the discursive practices that refer to it. The pure discursive effect does not have enough “substance” to compel the attraction to a Cause—and the Lacanian term for the strange “substance” which must be added so that a Cause obtains its positive ontological consistency, the only substance acknowledged by psychoanalysts, is of course, enjoyment, as Alcan states explicitly in Encore. A nation exists only as long as its specific enjoyment continues to be materialized in a set of social practices and transmitted through national myths that structure these practices. To emphasize in a “deconstructionist” mode that Nation is not a biological or transhistorical fact but a contingent discursive construction, an overdetermined result of textual practices, is thus misleading; such an emphasis overlooks the remainder of some real nondiscursive kernel of enjoyment which must be present for the
Nation qua discursive entity-effect to achieve its ontological consistency.

(202)

When Marie insists that we are all Puerto Rican, even in part, it may be somewhat in response to my mother’s repeated urge (which Marie was well aware of) for a strategic disavowal of our Puerto Rican heritage; mother advised us as children, myself and my siblings, “to tell everyone you’re Spanish.” Mother’s imperative registers her anxiety about the perception of others, and the stigma of being Puerto Rican in the U.S. in the mid-20th century. Rather, she preferred for us to focus on the European aspect of Puerto Rican identity to the exclusion of the African and Native components. Of course, as a rebellious teenager, I began to claim, and proclaim, my Puerto Rican heritage to the world, and to my mother’s great consternation. Marie’s insistence on the recognition of our uniquely Puerto Rican identity must also be in response to the various forms of prejudice and discrimination Puerto Ricans have suffered, and continue to suffer to this day. Thus, Marie urges a familial solidarity that serves as a positive counter measure to the negative, Anglo, U.S. attitudes towards Puerto Ricans.

Nancy Morris notes that “Implicit in the recognition of uniqueness is the importance of preserving it. In Puerto Rico, the near-universal pride in Puerto Rican uniqueness was accompanied by a desire to protect and preserve Puerto Rican culture” (157). Our family food event serves to ensure the continued vitality of this distinctly Puerto Rican cultural and culinary institution.

The preparation and the actual feast are both performances of our individual and
collective identities as Puerto Ricans, a reflection of how we conceptualize ourselves. When we sit down to share this meal on Christmas Eve, this privileged food so intimately linked with our identity, we are preserving a ritual that is synchronous with the enactment, and enjoyment, of Puerto Ricans everywhere, in New York City, New Jersey, Chicago, North Carolina, Georgia, the West Coast, on the island or anywhere else Puerto Ricans may have settled in the diaspora. This concurrent transnational feasting is a fine example of Benedict Anderson’s now famous phrase on “imagined community,” a sense of national and cultural solidarity that transcends time and place. Anderson’s analysis focuses heavily on language, specifically on print culture, to achieve this sense of synchronicity and solidarity. In my analysis, such effects are achieved through foodways, especially in the social context of consumption.

When I asked Marie, a working woman, why she takes the time and intense effort for this event, she replied:

Because it brings us all together as a family. The food is a draw. It draws you to me. It’s the experience of everyone eating together. I get enjoyment out of seeing everyone eat this dish that is so traditional. We’re still doing it year after year. It’s almost 100 years. I hope to continue doing it just as long as I can. And when I can’t, I hope that someone else picks up the ball.
As a child, I had no conception of the amount of labor and time involved in this feast. The other members of my family owe an enormous debt of gratitude to Wela, Iris, Marie, and others, who have made our celebration possible. They have enabled us to maintain a tradition that is an affirmation of the dignity and beauty of our Puerto Rican heritage and collective self-esteem, an articulation of self, and an important form of female cultural production. I cannot help but notice the similarity between the pasteles wrapped up and tied with string, and the myriad of Christmas presents under the tree. Pasteles are a gift of labor and love, as well as a marker of our identity. Perhaps, most significantly, they have provided us with a “draw,” to use my aunt’s language, something that has continued to bind us together throughout the decades, an encounter that symbolically confirms that, indeed, we are Puerto Rican and we are a family. According to Jean Baudrillard, much can be understood about the “uniqueness of the gift.” Baudrillard explains: “It is this object and no other. It has symbolic exchange value. The ambivalence of all exchange material (looks, objects, dreams, excrement) derives from this: the gift is a medium of relation and distance; it is always love and aggression” (59). In a way, aggression may be too negative, too strong a word for what my aunt attempts in her gift of pasteles. Nonetheless, she does anticipate a return on her effort, the fulfillment of her expectation that we all continue this tradition which is a kind of bond, an obligation. Furthermore, the exchange of food is a most profound way of making social connection. Mauss has shown “the pervasive cultural power of the gift which keeps individuals constantly indebted to each other and continuously engaged in positive interaction through giving. Food is an extremely important component of reciprocal cultural exchanges, more so than any other object or substance” (3).
**Pasteles in North Carolina**

This essay thus far has neglected to theorize about the specific implications for myself in this Puerto Rican food tradition. I live in Raleigh, North Carolina and so, unfortunately, I am not present for the preparation of the *pasteles*, but I have ventured to cook small batches on my own. Thus, I am a cultural worker in the process of analyzing culture. In partaking in this continuity of ethnicity, I, too, like my Aunt Marie and cousins, am perpetuating the persistence of this enduring tradition. And what does this say about my own subjectivity and self-understanding, my relationship between self and the world? Is this preparation of *pasteles* a metaphor of self for me as well? Where am I situated in terms of this tradition of feminist identity politics and food? Several years ago, when my seventeen-year old son volunteered my services to cook *pasteles* for his class, I shuddered. My initial reaction was that I could not possibly accommodate his request. Primarily, the amount of labor seemed daunting to me. Furthermore, *pasteles* have been so mythologized in our familial culture I could not fathom that I would have the skill required to make them, even though I have considerable culinary ability. I wondered if by making them myself, I would be potentially disenchanted with them, if the *pasteles* would be demythologized in some way.

My first production of *pasteles* for Mike’s class was an adventure. After numerous phone calls and trips to specialty markets, I concluded that, apparently, there are no *pastel* papers in the state of North Carolina; so, I was forced to import them from New York, though this has changed in recent years. Next, getting the *platanos* and *yucca* was simple enough, however, finding a *yautia* proved nearly impossible. The produce manager at Harris Teeter and I nearly came to blows. He offered a *yautia* but gave me a ginger root. He
promised a *yautia* but handed me a *yucca*. Finally, he gave me a *yautia* but called it a *malanga*. Frustrated, I took it and later discovered that both names are often used for the same root vegetable.

The initial production of *pasteles* was successful. Mike’s Spanish teacher, a Puerto Rican man, loved them and warned some of the students not to dare take the two larger *pasteles* I had prepared especially for him since “they were gold.” Perchance, the teacher’s comment invites us to consider what Levi-Strauss calls “a contradiction,” how the same food might be regarded as excrement, and gift, and gold. Is it possible that the unconscious logic of the language of Puerto Rican *pasteles* forcibly argues for a transmutation of excrement into gold? a transfiguration in value of how an oppressed, colonized people is labeled by outsiders as inferior, a kind of social waste, into an ambivalent expression (of *jouissance*?) of their own self worth, a way in which the feelings of abjection are conquered and transformed, even celebrated perhaps? And perhaps what is worst lies in Puerto Ricans own internalization of themselves as inferior, possessing *la mancha del plátano*, the stain of the plantain, on obedient colonial subjects. Juan Flores points out that as early as 1934, in Antonio S. Pedreira’s defining study of Puerto Rican culture, *Insularismo: Ensayos de interpretación puertoriqueña*, Pedreira labels Puerto Ricans as isolated and docile. This assessment harkens back to a comment made by a Spanish Bishop López de Haro in the 17th century that Puerto Ricans were fearful of fishing in their own waters due to the peril posed by the threat of Dutch pirates (Flores 16-17). This comment seemed to cast a lingering pall over Puerto Rican self-identity, a pall that is dispelled, at least in part, by the communal eating of our celebratory *pasteles*, truly a hallmark in our culture.
The second occasion on which I cooked *pasteles* was for a graduate course in Latina/o studies with Dr. María DeGuzmán. I thought that I could not fully relate what they are without having my classmates actually see and taste them. In analyzing my motives, I have concluded that several issues were at stake. First, it was a performance of my identity and competence as a Latina, a Puerto Rican specifically, and a declaration of my affiliation with the Puerto Rican community. Secondly, the performance helped to resolve some issues of authenticity for me. Even though I cannot speak Spanish (yet), if I can cook like my *abuela* then perhaps I am truly Puerto Rican. Both cooking and eating have a profound impact on our subject formation so although I cannot claim Puerto Rico via language, I have accomplished a culinary feat instead. Thirdly, perhaps making *pasteles* is a mechanism of dealing with my own unacknowledged feelings of abjection, (consider my mother’s comments) and by embracing them, I overcome them. Finally, I feel proud and compelled to continue a practice that some Puerto Ricans deem too difficult and time consuming. As Roberto Márquez admits, “It is though, because of the labor-intensive nature of the art, something of a fading tradition” (email December 4, 2001). Ultimately, my family’s event and my own attempts at making *pasteles* are cultural performances. For my family, making and eating *pasteles* are collective, profoundly symbolic events of commensality around a Christmas meal. For me, it was also a personal endeavor to prove my culinary competence and my very own Puerto Ricanness.
AFTERWORD

After reading this project, one might believe I have a strong dislike of men, and indeed I do, of some men. But overall, that is not the case. I hope it is entirely clear that what I have critiqued in this study are the social structures that support the subordination of people as categories, subordinations that encourage prejudging individuals, not on their character, their intellect, work ethic or other merits, but on gender, race, sexuality, and/or ethnicity.

In spite of my harsh criticism of patriarchy, I was privileged to have a father who was the one of the kindest people I have ever known. Indeed, he was everything, according to most messages about masculinity in U.S. and Puerto Rican culture, that a man should not be. To my mother, who was, in fact, a very good, but very difficult woman, he was never aggressive, nor to me and my siblings. He was a good provider and a former Marine, clearly in touch with his “manly” side, but he also had a gentle and generous soul. In fact, several of my mother’s relatives, who were also quite difficult, lived with us for years at a stretch when they fell on hard times, in our small, two bedroom, Bronx apartment.

When my first husband, Michael, died in 1985 of aplastic anemia when he was only twenty-nine, and our children, Mike and Jessica, were but one and three years old, my father stood by us in every way possible. From giving us rides all over town in his yellow taxi, to doling out some dollars at the end of the month when my meager allotment from Social Security ran dry, to babysitting for my two kids when I decided to go back to college as a young widow and take a full fifteen, and sometimes eighteen, credit course load, my kind and
gentle father supported me. More recently, when my five-year old daughter, Angela, died of a brain tumor, my dad was also there for me, sharing my grief beyond words.

Shortly after Angela’s passing, my father came down with Alzheimer’s Disease. His case was somewhat atypical, and many cases are, in that rather than lose his recognition of people, he very early on lost his words. This disease was devastating to him and to my siblings and me. We watched Alzheimer’s rob him of just about every ability one can imagine. For most of the year, my father was under the care of my sister and brother as they lived nearby him in New York and I live in North Carolina. But for four weeks of the summer for the last several years of his life, I would take my dad home with me, so as to give my siblings some desperately needed relief from caregiving and I got to spend some precious time with him. Caring for the dying can be very instructive as we discover what is essential in life.

After my dad could no longer talk, I still sought ways of connecting with him. I found that music was one effective method. I purchased a cd of some well-known Puerto Rican ballads and would play them for him each afternoon as he sat on my front porch. He would tap his fingers and smile with recognition and I knew he was still in there, and enjoying himself. Food was another medium through which I communicated with my father in those last years. I knew that he especially enjoyed the Puerto Rican foods of his youth, dishes that my mother rarely prepared, although, thankfully, she did finally learn how to cook a good pernil. During those summer weeks, I would grate yucca and make him empanaditas de yuca, or slice avocados, perfectly ripe, drizzle them with extra-virgin olive oil and finish with just a pinch of salt. I served him arroz con gandules, platanos maduros and then piña
colada ice cream or flan for dessert. He would take a bite, raise a knowing eyebrow and then hum with deep satisfaction.

I flew into Laguardia Airport during a storm, but made it to the hospital when my father was about to die. I had been there two weeks earlier, and again, we were waiting, uncertain how long it would be until he passed. The nurse suggested we should go home and that she would call if anything changed. My sister and brother, who had been at his side for days, weeks even, decided to go home. I thought I should stay, just in case. During those last hours, I prayed by my father’s side and thanked him profoundly for everything he had done for me and my children. I even sang to him one of our favorite songs, in Spanish, Sabor a Mi, a love song. Several hours later, at six in the morning, holding my hand, my father died. I hope I will always hold on to the flavor, the taste, the trace of his love and kindness in my life.
WORKS CITED


