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Towards Queering Food Studies: Foodways, Heteronormativity, and Hungry Women in Chicana Lesbian Writing

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As the nascent field of food studies takes shape, insights from queer studies have the potential to enrich our understandings of the interrelationships among food, gender, and sexuality. The project of queering food studies invites us to consider how food practices and beliefs reinforce and resist heterosexual gender ideologies. In this article, I analyze foodways in recent Chicana lesbian literature, examining writings that illustrate the cultural endurance of heteronormative constructions of gender even as they demonstrate how these beliefs are disrupted, destabilized, and transformed in queer literary kitchens. Poetry and essays by Chicana lesbians challenge dominant models of Chicana culinary roles by emphasizing women’s efforts to satisfy their physical and sexual appetites. In particular, Carla Trujillo’s 2003 novel, What Night Brings, highlights the figure of the hungry lesbian as a provocative counterpoint to the literary image of the Chicana as cook. Literature by Chicana lesbians not only invites scholars to question heteronormative assumptions about food, gender, and identity, but also demonstrates the potential of queer studies to enrich a variety of topics in food scholarship.

I had known for years that I was a lesbian, had felt it in my bones, had ached with the knowledge, gone crazed with the knowledge, wallowed in the silence of it. Silence is like starvation. Don’t be fooled. It’s nothing short of that, and felt most sharply when one has had a full belly most of her life.

In this passage from her volume of essays and poetry entitled Loving in the War Years, Chicana lesbian writer Cherríe Moraga uses the metaphor of starvation to describe her life as a closeted lesbian struggling to keep her sexual identity a secret (44). Though Moraga did not write these words for a food studies audience, her provocative linkage of lesbianism, hunger, and silence invites a consideration of how queer people, bodies, and appetites...
figure in the discipline of food studies. Anthropologist Carole M. Counihan has contended that the study of foodways—the social beliefs and behaviors associated with the production, distribution, and consumption of food—provides powerful evidence about cultural conceptions of sex and gender (6). As she states, “In many cultures, eating is a sexual and gendered experience throughout life” (9). Writing in the introduction to the essays collected in *Cooking Lessons: The Politics of Gender and Food*, Sherrie A. Inness concurs, maintaining, “Every aspect of food is intermingled with issues of gender.” Inness then goes on to explain that an analysis of the gendered messages in food can teach us much about societal gender differences and inequities (xv).

The study of gender has indeed emerged as one of the most exciting topics in food studies. However, when investigating what foodways can tell us about “the relations between the sexes, their gender definitions, and their sexuality” (Counihan 1999: 9), we tend not to specify that we are usually investigating heterosexual gender relations between women and men. In the words of queer theorist Michael Warner, this discursive phenomenon reflects a heteronormative analytic framework: one in which heterosexuality is presumed to be the “elemental form of human association . . . [and] the very model of intergender relations” (xxi). The new discipline of queer studies invites scholars to consider that “heteronormativity (or heterosexuality as an institution) is never absolutely coherent and stable” (Sullivan 132), and to examine the ways in which its power is both reinforced and resisted. As the nascent field of food studies takes shape, insights from queer studies have the potential to enrich our understandings of the interrelationships among food, gender and sexuality by encouraging us to rethink and refine our conceptions of these connections. For example, how food and foodways shape the gender and sexual identities of people who are not heterosexual in addition to those who are has not been extensively investigated by food studies scholars working on gender. Nor has there been a great deal of discussion about how our analyses of foodways and gender may unintentionally reflect heteronormative biases.

As Ruth Goldman explains, to “queer” an academic discipline means to alter its “discourses about sexuality and gender” in order “to problematize identity and challenge the normative.” Goldman further stresses that “queer theory is theoretically structured
around the concept of intersecting identities” (173), such as race, class, and ethnicity in addition to sexual orientation and gender identity. In this essay, I make a foray into queering food studies by analyzing contemporary Chicana lesbian writings about food, examining texts that illustrate the cultural endurance of heteronormative gender and sexual culinary ideologies even as they demonstrate how queer Chicanas in literary kitchens disrupt, destabilize, and transform these beliefs. After summarizing the culinary models that have structured recent interpretations of Chicana literary foodways, I analyze several lesbian texts that challenge these dominant interpretive paradigms, focusing specifically on writings that employ the figure of the hungry lesbian to question heteronormative cultural assumptions about food, sex, and identity. I highlight Carla Trujillo’s *What Night Brings*, a novel that documents the struggles of a young Chicana lesbian to assert her queer appetites in the midst of an oppressive culinary culture that seeks to subdue them. I conclude by suggesting the ways in which the insightful perspectives that Chicana lesbian writers bring to gender, sexuality, and food might be applied to the endeavor of queering food studies more generally.

In her groundbreaking 1995 study of Chicana literature, Tey Diana Rebolledo devotes a chapter to a mode of authorship she terms “the writer as cook.” She explains, “Women are imagined as nourishers both physically and symbolically; therefore, it is only natural that Chicana writers have seized that nourishing space and have linked writing and cooking” (Rebolledo 1995: 130). Noting the ubiquitous presence of women preparing food in Chicana texts, Rebolledo summarizes that female authors use cooking metaphors to depict “work, sexuality, and women’s spiritual and cultural hunger” (Rebolledo 1995: 133). Benay Blend extends Rebolledo’s argument, stating that the kitchen serves as a “safe refuge” for Chicana writers oppressed by a racist, imperialist, and sexist culture (Blend 2001: 58). By writing about food and cooking, Blend declares, these authors imaginatively create “a world where there are no politics of oppression” (Blend 2001: 57). Ellen M. Gil-Gomez finds weaknesses in Rebolledo’s claims, suggesting the metaphor of the writer as cook may “actually reinscribe women’s subordination rather than articulating women’s agency, freedom, or power” (Gil-Gomez 2001: 70). Debra Castillo concurs, proposing that while the figure of the female cook may
symbolize “female creative power,” in reality “her own work and her hunger, both physical and textual, go too often unrecognized” (xiv). Though compelling, the debate about the “writer as cook” does not address if or how the perspectives of nonheterosexual women might affect this gendered paradigm; even though Rebolledo and Blend do briefly mention works by lesbian writers, the critical discussion about the Chicana kitchen implicitly establishes it as a heterosexual female space.

The provocative food symbolism and metaphors in recent Chicana lesbian poetry challenge both the heteronormative construction of the Chicana kitchen and the limitations Castillo and Gomez see in the literary figure of the female cook. By celebrating the kitchen as a place where lesbians eagerly and lovingly prepare food for their female partners, these poets assert that queer as well as straight Chicanas regard cooking as a vital source of female identity and pride. Furthermore, by figuring lesbians not only as cooks but also as hungry women who deserve to have their physical and sexual appetites fulfilled, these poets break the cultural silence imposed on the expression of lesbian desire. In her poem, “Making Tortillas,” Alicia Gaspar de Alba erotically venerates lesbians as both cooks and lovers by punning on the word “tortillera” (“tortilla maker”), a derogatory term used to refer to queer Chicana women (de Alba 1993). As Catrióna Rueda Esquibel explains, the insult actually references the time-honored female tradition since the sound of tortilla making—slapping the hands together back and forth—can also be interpreted as a “representation of tribadism” (Esquibel 2003: 272). Lines from Gaspar de Alba’s poem erase the distinction between the heterosexual female cook who sustains her family with food and the lesbian who satisfies her sexual needs by making love with women. Blurring the culinary boundaries between straight and queer women, de Alba writes:

My body remembers
the feel of the griddle
beads of grease sizzling
under the skin, a cry gathering
like an air bubble in the belly
of the unleavened cake. Smell
of baked tortillas all over the house,
all over the hands still
hot from clapping, cooking.
Tortilleras, we are called,
grinders of maíz, makers, bakers,
slow lovers of women.
The secret is starting from scratch. (de Alba 1993: 355–356)

This poem insists that by “starting from scratch,” the tortillera initiates new understandings of Chicana culinary tradition by queering the meanings food and foodways usually signify in Chicano culture. Several poets anthologized in Chicana Lesbians: The Girls Our Mothers Warned Us About appropriate this power by employing traditional Chicano foods to depict lesbian sexual desire, to refer to female body parts, and to metaphorize lesbian sex. In E. D. Hernández’ poem, “You as a Public Turn On,” the speaker compares her lover’s taste to that of “salsita de chile en mi lengua” (a little chile sauce on my tongue) (56). In “untitled,” Angela Arellano queers the cultural significance of biscochitos, the Mexican anise-flavored cookies traditionally served at wedding receptions. Using a metaphor that legitimates her sexual hunger and validates the sanctity of her relationship, the speaker likens the passionate intensity of her lover’s kiss to the crumbling of “biscochitos dunked in hot creamy coffee” (Arellano 1991: 62). In addition to legitimating lesbian desire, the delectable image of the crumbling cookie ironically alludes to the fragility of the heterosexual bonds supposedly rendered unbreakable when couples speak their wedding vows. In the erotic fantasy poem “La enchilada,” M. Álvarez imagines her potential female lovers as chile peppers. Though the speaker craves the “green ones/vine ripened, ready for salsa,” the “tiny red ones” are undeniably her “favorite,” for these “little red bullets of fire” always bring her to the brink of orgasm:

They’re sooo good!
I can’t get enough
bite after bite
gasping for breath
“Yes, yes, more, more!”

Piquín/Jalapeño
Manzano/Serrano
What magnificent lovers you are! (Alvarez 1991: 71–72)
These writers turn the tables on heteronormative food practices not only by appropriating foods that represent the cornerstones of the Chicano diet and its most sacred heterosexual rituals to represent queer sexuality, but also by perverting the Chicana’s traditional culinary gender role. In contrast to heteronormative constructions of the Chicana cook, these poems configure the lesbian as food eater in addition to food preparer. They present the tortillera as a woman with appetites that deserve to be satisfied rather than as one who must deny her own hunger so that she may feed others first.

Cherríe Moraga identifies a literary ancestor for this queer female in the Aztec creation myth entitled “the Hungry Woman.” According to Moraga, the body of the eponymous character is covered with mouths: “She had mouths in her wrists, mouths in her elbows, and mouths in her ankles and knees.” The woman’s mouths cry incessantly for food; in an attempt to silence them, the spirits divide her body and use it to create the earth. But her voracious appetite cannot be satisfied. “Her mouths were everywhere, biting and moaning. . . . but they were never filled. Sometimes at night, when the wind blows, you can hear her crying for food” (Morega 2000: 146). Moraga embraces this hungry woman as the essence of Chicana lesbian narrative. “She is the story that has never been told truly, the story of that hungry Mexican woman who is called puta/bruja/jota/loca [“whore, witch, dyke, crazy”] because she refuses to forget that her half-life is not a natural-born fact” (Morega 2000: 147).

Carla Trujillo’s 2003 novel What Night Brings presents a contemporary retelling of the myth of the hungry woman. The plot depicts the struggles of eleven-year-old Marci Cruz, a hungry Chicana lesbian who must reconcile her queer sexual appetites, her desires to escape her abusive father, and her quest for social acceptance with the ideals of femininity that her heteronormative culture expects her to embrace. Trujillo’s text documents Marci’s efforts to resist through foodways the three most powerful social institutions that define and control her sexuality: her patriarchal family, in which heterosexual male and female gender roles are clearly demarcated and women’s subservience to men is mandated; the Catholic church, which enforces these heterosexual gender roles; and the homophobia of the Chicano community, which emerges from cultural gender and religious beliefs as well
as the racist, classist, and imperialist oppression Chicanos/as have historically experienced in America. Though the novel takes place in California in 1967, before either the Chicano or gay civil rights movements gain national prominence, Marci Cruz is already well aware that her nonnormative sexual identity will not be tolerated in any area of her life. But rather than succumbing to her culture’s dominant ideas about proper female gender identity, Marci bravely decides to confront them, using her relationships with food to assert her queer sexuality.

The Cruz family’s foodways exemplify Counihan’s observation that “power relations around food mirror the power of the sexes in general” (Counihan 1999: 11). Marci’s mother, Delia, does not work outside the home because her husband Eddie “won’t let her” (Trujillo 2003: 3), nor does she drive. Her primary responsibilities, according to Marci, include planning “every dime we spend on food” (10) and having dinner ready for Eddie when he gets home from the Chevy plant where he works. But though Delia purchases and prepares the family’s food, Eddie decides who eats what. As Marci ruefully relates, there is a double standard in the household when it comes to her father and food. Delia purchases Hostess cupcakes and deli ham for Eddie’s lunch that her daughters are forbidden to eat (185, 186); yet despite the energy Delia devotes to satisfying her husband’s hunger, he regularly indulges his insatiable sexual appetites by sleeping with other women. “My dad likes looking at girls—all kinds, all the time. If a girl he likes has big chiches [“breasts”], he smiles and looks at her like he’s about to eat pudding” (1). Unfortunately for Marci and her sister, Corin, Delia immerses herself in her culinary responsibilities so that she will not have to confront her husband’s alcoholism or his infidelities. Whenever Marci complains about her father’s behavior, Delia ignores her and “keeps cooking” (9).

Delia’s refusal to stand up to Eddie’s cruelty frustrates Marci, as does her mother’s silence when Eddie complains about the food she fixes. According to Counihan, men can wield domestic power over women by disparaging the food females prepare or by demanding certain dishes (11). When meals do not meet Eddie’s expectations, he regularly erupts into temper tantrums, throwing his food with a “‘this makes me sick’” scowl. Marci angrily relates, “I hated that look. I wanted to tell her to tell him to ‘eat shit’ or ‘get up and fix it yourself’” (11). But Delia never speaks up.
Rather, she meekly follows her husband's orders, preparing only the dishes Eddie likes. Marci despises the “frijoles guisados”—beans cooked with onions and oil thickened with flour—that Delia prepares almost every night at Eddie's insistence. But as Marci explains, “Mom fixes them this way because the king of the castle likes them like that. Since the king says, ‘I pay the bills,’ I have to eat them the way he likes them” (57).

As opposed to Chicana literary cooks who use “traditional Mexicano/Chicano/Indian foods” to symbolize their ethnic identity (Rebolledo 1995: 133), Trujillo uses Marci’s food preferences to reinforce her queer sexuality. Though Marci looks forward to the delicious fresh tortillas her mother makes on Saturday mornings, eating them hot off the comal like a “happy pig” (46), she refuses to eat the beans “guisados” that represent her father’s power over the family and her mother’s subservience to his culinary demands. By rejecting this particular dish, Marci symbolically refuses to ingest the subservient culinary role her culture expects her to embody. In addition to her mother’s tortillas, Marci favorite foods include candy, McDonald’s hamburgers, and ice cream—foods not traditionally associated with Chicano culture. As well, her mother does not have to cook these foods; Marci can procure them for herself when she has spending money.

The family’s precarious finances coupled with Eddie’s draconian control limit Marci’s access to the foods she enjoys, however, and consequently, she is always starving. There is never enough food in the Cruz kitchen to satisfy Marci’s rumbling stomach, nor can she resolve her growing sexual desire for girls with the heterosexual culture that surrounds her. “I don’t know when or how it happened. Maybe I was born this way, but the second I saw chiches, I wanted them. I couldn’t stop thinking of girls, during the day at school, at night in my dreams, and especially when I watched TV” (9). Because Delia forbids Marci from asking questions about sex, she turns to a higher authority for help. Every evening, in addition to asking God to make Eddie vanish (1), Marci also asks Him to turn her into a boy (9). As she reasons, if granted a sex change she could beat Eddie up when he hits her; as well, she knows that her culture only tolerates romantic relationships between men and women. “I know you can’t be with a girl if you are a girl. So that’s why I have to change into a boy” (9).
Marci comes to see a heavenly miracle as the only way her desires will be granted because violence almost always erupts when she attempts to satisfy her appetites on her own. One evening when the family is visiting relatives, Marci helps herself to leftovers from their supper table because she has not been able to stomach the beans her mother had prepared for dinner. When Eddie sees Marci take the food, he erupts into a rage, and his anger increases exponentially when his relatives remark that the stick-thin Marci “looks hungry” (58). Here, Marci’s appetite blatantly calls Eddie’s masculine authority into question: her action implies that her father cannot afford to feed his family, nor can her control her. As punishment for these offenses, he whips her with a belt.

This is the first of several chilling episodes in the novel when Eddie beats his daughters for breaking the food rules he forces the subjects of his familial empire to follow. Counihan has observed that husbands often justify abusing their wives because of meal failures (Counihan 1999: 11); using similar reasoning, on Easter morning Eddie claims the right to beat Marci and Corin due to their failure to eat properly. After the girls sit down to eat the hardboiled eggs they have colored, Corin eats the yolk of hers but gives the white part to Marci to finish. Furious, Eddie, starts screaming: “Mira, in this house nothing gets wasted. Everything costs me money and it’s money I have to bust my ass for. You peel an egg, you eat it. The whole thing, not just the parts you like” (84). Though Marci tries to explain that the sisters have worked out their own system of egg consumption—each eats only the parts she wants—Eddie brutally force-feeds Corin the egg while explaining: “When your daddy was little we never had enough to eat. We were starving, all of us, your grandma and my brothers. Sometimes all we had to eat were a few beans.... Now do you see why I get so upset when you waste food?” (87). Even though the girls have planned to eat all of the egg, in Eddie’s eyes they are guilty of assuming the power that rightfully belongs to him as the person with the “huevos” (balls) in the family. (Here Trujillo pointedly employs a culinary double-entendre, since “huevos” also means “eggs” in Spanish). Eddie’s words imply that because he is a man with the parts to prove it his daughters will never succeed in defying his rules.

Though Eddie presides over the Cruz kitchen with patriarchal authority, Marci finds a place to indulge her queer appetites
when she decides to grow food in the family’s backyard. As she confides to the reader, “I wanted corn. I liked the way it looked. Its smell. And how fast it grew” (40). As Jeffrey Pilcher documents, in Mexico this indigenous food has been associated with female sexuality since pre-Columbian times and has been used for centuries in art to symbolize male desire for nubile women (58 Pilcher 1998: 17). In this case, the corn Marci plants helps her to cultivate a relationship with Raquel, the beautiful sixteen-year-old girl next door who gives the young lesbian gardening tips. “I felt all melty and good when I looked at her, like I’d just eaten two packs of Reese’s Peanut Butter Cups” (26). By expressing her lesbian sexual longings though chocolate and corn, Marci queers the heterosexual meanings associated with both foods, challenging both the heteronormative and Chicano ideologies that “love and desire are constituted in relation to heterosexuality” (Esquibel 1998: 678). In addition to helping Marci to grow her own food, Raquel shares extra produce from her own garden with the younger girl. The beautiful teenager’s generosity supplements Marci’s meager diet and assuages the brutality that accompanies mealtimes in the Cruz household. “Each time she put something in my arms, I wanted to grab her and kiss her just like the people on TV. . . . I felt good because I got to be with her” (43).

Over the course of the novel, the Catholic church also emerges as a place where Marci can express her queer appetites. Initially, Marci finds this traditional cornerstone of Chicano heteronormativity alienating, since the catechism teacher dissuades her from asking questions and she finds the literal sustenance the Church offers unappetizing. In her opinion, communion wafers taste “exactly like store-bought tortillas” (66) and the flavorless bread discourages her from accepting the doctrine that “eating a body and drinking some blood was holy” (65). She instead prefers the message—and the refreshments—distributed at the Baptist church: a building painted “the same color as ‘bubblegum’” (50) where a youth minister bribes children with candy to listen to her message. But when Delia discovers that Marci has “accepted Jesus” at a prayer meeting in exchange for some stale red licorice (55), she insists that her daughter renounce her sin at the family’s own church.

Though Trujillo has maintained elsewhere that “lesbians and gay men are not given sanction by the largely Chicano Catholic
community” (Trujillo 1991: 190), Marci does receive a queer sort of sanctification for her sexuality when she makes her first confession. After she discloses her sins—wishing that Eddie would leave, liking girls, and “wanting to squeeze chiches [breasts]” (71)—to the priest, he surprises her by sympathizing with her: “Life isn’t easy, even if you don’t like your dad. . . . We must try to forgive those who hurt us. . . . And as for liking girls and squeezing chiches. I don’t see a problem with this, except it seems you’re still a little young to be squeezing chiches. I don’t think this is a sin either, unless the girl doesn’t want them squeezed” (71–72). After receiving absolution, Marci deduces that her confessor has mistaken her for a boy. But when she realizes that the priest is Father Chacón, she is not so sure, since her father derisively refers to him as a “jotito” (little queer) (75).

Marci does not know what the word “jotito” means, but she realizes that there is something different about Father Chacón when she attends the church “spaghetti feed” he has organized to benefit starving refugees in Biafra.2 Her curiosity as well as her appetite is whetted when she glimpses him in the hot church kitchen “with an apron on and his shirt sleeves rolled up” working with women to prepare the meal: “The pots of boiling water were so big they looked like bathtubs. The spaghetti sauce smelled good, and so did the garlic bread . . . Father Chacón was sweating so much his hair was wet” (76). This moment of culinary cross-dressing coupled with the enormous quantity of food makes Marci ravenous, and she returns to the kitchen for second and third helpings of spaghetti. Marci’s Uncle Tommy, a restaurant cook, then leaves the table. Ostensibly he has gone to help Father Chacón, but when she tries to find the men later they are not in the kitchen. While wandering through the church, she hears laughter; then she spies her uncle walking out of a confessional “tucking in his shirt” (78). Marci cannot believe her eyes when she sees Father Chacón emerge from the same door. Having watched the men come out of a closet together, Marci is certain that something besides a confession has occurred, but she cannot imagine what. Weeks pass, but Marci cannot stop thinking about the incident, especially when Eddie calls Tommy a “queer” during an argument. After hearing the insult, Tommy’s wife Arlene’s grimaces “like she was eating something awful” (131). Thus Marci decides not to ask her uncle about his dalliance with the priest.
“I didn’t know what queer meant, but I could tell it was bad” (131).

Just as she cannot comprehend why Eddie beats her for eating when she is hungry, Marci does not understand why her father and her aunt seem so perturbed by Uncle Tommy and Father Chacón, nor why people react in shock when Eddie refers to them with a word that, to her, merely means “being different” (133). Marci identifies with the men not only because one is a family member and the other a priest who assures her that she is “normal” (73), but because these jotitos are cooks. Because these men take pleasure in the quintessential women’s work—preparing food for others to eat—Marci reasons that she too can resist the dominant gender order. More important, Marci deduces that if Uncle Tommy and Father Chacón like each other, there may be nothing wrong with her desire for girls. After consulting the dictionary to learn what “queer” means, Marci deduces that the word “queer” indeed applies to her: “I’m a girl. I like Raquel. That makes me a girl liking a girl, which is a homosexual queer” (137). Notably, Marci’s newfound security with her sexuality is accompanied by significant improvements in the family’s food situation. When Eddie leaves his wife and daughters and moves in with his girlfriend, Delia finds work at Woolworth’s and befriends the lunch cook, who gives her leftovers to take home. As Marci reports, in addition to the hotdogs, macaroni and cheese, fried chicken, and fish sticks that diversify her diet, she and Corin also frequently eat “grilled-cheese sandwiches, spaghetti, cold cereal, or weenies wrapped in bacon. This made us happy because we didn’t have to eat beans so much anymore” (100).

In addition to giving Marci increased access to the kinds of food she prefers in amounts sufficient to satisfy her hunger, Eddie’s absence gives her more freedom to decide what she will eat. While Delia is working, Marci takes control of the kitchen on her own initiative and teaches herself to cook meatloaf, hamburgers, and spaghetti. As a result of these dietary and domestic changes, Marci gains a few pounds and remarks that she is “finally happy” at home (107). When Eddie surprises the family by returning to Delia, Marci does not surrender the power she has claimed for herself. She gleefully prepare foods her father hates the most and also deliberately ruins dinners by cooking “bad on purpose”: “I would always burn the meat, cook the green beans too long, or
put garlic in everything, which Eddie hated” (123–124). According to Counihan, women have long resisted gendered power relations in the kitchen by refusing to cook or by cooking foods men dislike (Counihan 1999: 11), but Marci also disrupts the normal order of dinner by refusing to remain silent when Eddie complains about the new supper routine. When he belligerently asks Marci, “Where the hell is your goddamn mother and why isn’t there any food on the table?” she retorts, “If you want food, why don’t you ask that girlfriend of yours to come over and cook it?” (107).

Marci’s queering of her household’s foodways and her refusal to adopt a proper Chicana culinary gender role emerge as even more poignant because her transgressions always result in brutal beatings. It is clear that when Eddie punishes Marci for cooking improperly he is also violently responding to his daughter’s gender queerness. (Though Eddie always complains about Delia’s cooking, he never raises a hand to his wife). One evening when Marci is preparing spaghetti, Eddie picks up the pot and throws it on the floor, spattering hot sauce on her arms and legs while he screams, “If you have to cook, you’d better cook me some goddamn beans and chile. And learn to make tortillas, too. I ain’t eating none of this shit you cook anymore. It’s about time you started learning things that’s gonna do you some good, and that’s learning how to cook food a man will eat... Don’t fix this crap again, Marci” (126). Eddie’s diatribe indicates that he perceives Marci’s queering of gastronomy and gender as an insult to his masculine authority and, worse, as behavior that jeopardizes her desirability as a potential wife. His insistence that Marci yield to the authority of Chicano foodways betrays the unspoken demand that she assume a heterosexual female identity.

However, even when Marci attempts to play the role of dutiful Chicana cook, she cannot satisfy Eddie’s expectations. The next time she prepares supper, Marci fixes beans and chile and tries to make tortillas. Blend maintains that the literary depiction of tortilla-making in Chicana literature “empowers women as the carriers of tradition” (Blend 2001: 44) but Marci has not inherited Delia’s skill with the comal. As opposed to her mother’s round, “thick and puffy” productions (46), Marci’s tortillas instead resemble “a map of California.” While Eddie concedes that her mistakes “taste pretty good” (143), he ultimately regards her culinary
shortcomings as indicative of her failure as a female. During a drunken rant, he insults her by calling her a “hombrecito” (little man): “Hell, that’s what you are. I’m not gonna lie to you... Your mother and I made a big mistake when we named you. We should have called you Mauricio... Pero, how did we know you’d be a boy when we saw your little bizcocho?” (144)

Though Eddie acknowledges Marci’s queerness here by suggesting that she is at once a boy with a “bizcocho,” he stops short of calling her a “tortillera” because the possibility that his daughter really is queer is too frightening for him to imagine. Marci herself remains silent about her sexual identity during the scene (insisting only that her father call her “Marci,” not the masculine “Mauricio” that Eddie decides is a more appropriate name for his daughter), but she scores a symbolic victory by implicitly daring him to use the word and then witnessing his cowardice. Unable to think of more insults, Eddie only repeats the tired refrain about his “huevos”: “I’ll tell you one thing... you ain’t never gonna be man enough to take on your father... Your daddy here’s the one with the balls” (144). Nevertheless, Marci is still wounded by the force of Eddie’s words. By referring to her as a boy, as opposed to a lesbian, Eddie implies that Marci is not only a failed tortillera literally, but queerly as well.

After this episode, Marci’s gnawing desire to confide her sexuality to anyone poignantly echoes the silent starvation Moraga describes. When Uncle Tommy volunteers to cook Thanksgiving dinner for his extended family, the invitation apparently promises Marci a perfect opportunity to break her silence about her lesbianism, especially when she sees Father Chacón helping her uncle in the kitchen. Free from her father’s scrutiny—Eddie has refused to spend the day at a “house that had ‘a bunch of queers in it’” (164)—Marci watches the couple as they cook together:

Both of them had on big, white aprons. Uncle Tommy was wearing a white shirt with rolled-up sleeves and as usual, looked really handsome. On top of the stove cooling off was a giant turkey that he’d cooked with some kind of stuffing in it. He made mashed potatoes—well, he cooked them and told Father Chacón to mash them. Father Chacón (‘Diego, Diego’ he kept telling me) was sweating a little. He took the electric beater and added butter, salt, and heated-up milk to the potatoes and whipped them till they were super creamy. Whenever one of them got in the way, they used their hands to steer around each other so they wouldn’t bump together...
I saw how they looked at one another when they talked, and I thought I could see something different than how regular men talk. I don’t know exactly what it was, but the closest thing I could think of was how I might have looked when I talked to Raquel (166–167).

The queer culinary bliss that Marci witnesses here initially promises to end her hunger for acceptance and understanding. Trujillo’s description of the gay men cooking for their lesbian guest provocatively perverts the heteronormative iconography of the Thanksgiving meal as immortalized in Norman Rockwell’s painting “Freedom from Want.”4 Father Chacón’s friendly overtures, the sensual mood in the kitchen, and the surfeit of food on the stove give Marci her first taste of what a loving homosexual relationship might be like. Seeing these queer cooks in action encourages her to consider the men as potential confidantes in her silent struggle, but when she attempts to come out to the couple by alluding to their queer behavior in the kitchen—“You don’t usually see men cooking” (167)—the men ignore her innuendo. Tommy tersely replies, “No you don’t . . . and for sure not in our family” (167), while, like Delia, Father Chacón turns from Marci’s eyes and concentrates on buttering the potatoes. The disappointed Marci leaves the kitchen still hungry; pointedly, Trujillo does not depict her heroine eating anything the men have prepared for the family feast.

After this rejection by the only queers she knows, Marci struggles to accept the possibility that her starvation will never end. Comparing her futile struggles to her father’s frequent food tantrums, she concedes, “Nothing else changes when you throw food against walls” (137). Despite her efforts to resist the heterosexual role her culture foists on her, signs abound that she will ultimately be forced to surrender to it. Her potential girlfriend, Raquel, elopes; Eddie continues to date his mistress, Wanda; and Uncle Tommy, sensing that Marci knows his secret, refuses to protect her and Corin from Eddie’s fists. As her twelfth birthday nears, Marci’s prayers for a sex change grow more desperate: “God, I hope you’re paying attention now because I’m not talking about little baby wishes like wanting candy or a new bike for Christmas. This is almost the same as people starving in Biafra . . . Start paying attention to me, will you?” (172).
By equating her own experience as a queer Chicana to that of Nigerian refugees physically perishing from famine, Marci, like Moraga, realizes that she is slowly starving to death, and makes one last-ditch culinary attempt to subdue Eddie. After consulting her great aunt, Marci obtains a polvo to sprinkle on Eddie’s beans, hoping that the mixture, as its label promises, will magically enable her to “dominate” her father (206). Here, Marci follows Mexican culinary folk wisdom; as Pilcher documents, in colonial Mexico it was commonly believed that a woman could bewitch an abusive husband by putting herbs in his food (Pilcher 1998: 59). But the eager Marci uses so much of the powder that Eddie complains about his beans “tasting funny” (212) and then insists that Delia change her work hours so that she can cook the family meals. Reading the figurative writing on the kitchen walls, Marci’s resolve to resist her cultural destiny begins to dissipate. “No matter how hard I pray, or how good I try to be, I’ll always be a girl… What do you do, God? What do you do with people like me?” (223).

Though the trajectory of Trujillo’s novel suggests otherwise, it does end happily for the queer heroine. Significantly, however, the only way the kitchen ultimately assists Marci on her quest to assert her queer identity is as a literal, not symbolic, escape route. During a family argument in the dining room, Corin grabs Eddie’s gun and shoots him. While the police and Delia tend to his wounds, Marci silently leads Corin out the kitchen’s back door to the bus station. After the girls arrive at Delia’s mother’s house in New Mexico, Marci befriends a girl named Robbie, whose mother owns a grocery store. As they fall in love, Marci’s references to hunger noticeably vanish from the novel, and on the last page of the book she revels in the joy of coming out of the closet and the taste of her first lesbian kiss. Marci’s repeated failure to find a place for her queer sexuality in the kitchens Trujillo describes, as well as her inability to nourish herself when she tries to adopt the heteronormative gender role her culture’s foodways force upon her, suggest that the culinary strategies available to straight female cooks who wish to “subvert feminine gender roles” (Blend 2001: 48) may not work for queer women. In this case, the only way the hungry lesbian avoids starving to death is by leaving the kitchen and the deference to heterosexual gender ideologies demanded of the cooks who enter it.
In their literary depictions of hungry women who queer gendered foodways (albeit with different measures of success), Chicana lesbian writers undertake the two most vital endeavors of queer studies: to challenge heteronormativity and to question the systems that sustain it (Goldman 1996: 174). As Chicana lesbian literature attests, foodways indubitably comprise one of the most powerful such systems. Though I have focused primarily on literary depictions of foodways in this essay, the project of queering food studies has the potential to enrich other arenas of food studies in myriad ways. The following lines from Cherríe Moraga’s poem “Open Invitation to a Meal” are instructive here:

I am
you tell me
_a piece of cake._

I wonder about your eating habits
which make me dessert
instead of staple
a delicacy, like some chocolate mousse
teasing your taste buds, melting
in your mouth—stopping there (16).

Moraga’s poem metaphorically warns that the endeavor of queering food studies should not be considered a proverbial piece of cake. Nor can it be accomplished merely through supplemental footnotes or superficial treatments; we must avoid the temptation of employing queer perspectives as decorative garnishes that hide entrenched epistemologies. How might our academic investigations of food and gender roles as they reflect power relationships in the kitchen and in the home, access to food and nutrition, and the very acts of cooking and consuming food benefit from a queer studies approach? How might an increased attentiveness to heteronormativity change scholarly assumptions about what practices constitute culturally representative or deviant foodways? How might perspectives from queer studies influence academic analyses of food and social justice, food and ethics, and food policy? These are just a few of the questions that arise when we queer food studies; undoubtedly many more will arise as the discipline grows. As the writings of Chicana lesbians assert, is time
to hear what queer voices can bring to the table of food studies, starting from scratch to develop new recipes for inquiry.

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Notes

1. A note on terminology: I use the term “Chicana” to refer to Mexican American women of mixed Spanish, Indian, and Anglo descent living in the United States.

2. The African state of Biafra was established by the Igbo people of Nigeria who seceded from that country on May 30, 1967. Nigeria refused to recognize the sovereignty of the state and a brutal civil war broke out in July of that year. As part of its military strategy, the Nigerian government set up blockades around Biafra, cutting off its food supplies. When news of the resultant famine spread worldwide, the plight of the starving Biafrans attracted the attention of international humanitarian and religious groups worldwide, who raised funds for relief. By the time Biafra surrendered to Nigeria in 1970, it is estimated that severe malnutrition had claimed the lives of 1 million people (Goetz 2001).

3. Literally translated, the word “biscocho” means “cookie” or “pound cake.” Here Eddie is using it as a crude reference to female genitalia.

4. Norman Rockwell’s painting “Freedom from Want” was part of a series of works intended to depict the ideas in Franklin D. Roosevelt’s “Four Freedoms” speech before Congress. It appeared in *The Saturday Evening Post* on March 6, 1943.

References


