

FRIDAY NIGHT TACOS: Exploring Midwestern Borderlands Through Familial Women's Oral Histories

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Abstract: *Tracing the narratives of three Mexican American women's family oral histories, this article looks closely at Gloria Anzaldúa's conceptualization of borderlands as an in-between space of creative strategies for survival and affirmation in relation to Midwestern Mexican American women's experiences. Concurrently, this article recenters the Midwest as a vital project for Chicana Studies by applying a reading of Anzaldúa's borderlands to one Midwestern Mexican American family experience in rural Kansas. Drawing on life reflections of women growing up in the 1960s and 70s, this article exposes the constraints women navigated while also theorizing forms of resistance through food. These claims to home space, belonging, and community by Mexican American women in majority white spaces can serve to inform our broader understanding of Chicana feminist praxis within and beyond the Midwest.*

Key Words: *borderlands; Chicana feminism; mestiza consciousness; Midwest; oral history*

Drawing from a larger oral history project on Midwestern Chicana identity development,¹ this article focuses on the personal narratives of three women and their experiences growing up in Kansas in the 1960s and 70s. Through a Chicana feminist analysis of my family's oral history narratives, this article explores Anzaldúan conceptualizations of borderlands theory in Kansas. While the previous participants of the study included five women from Kansas (some related to me by blood and others through marriage) and three women living in various regions of Minnesota, I chose to focus on three blood-related family members' oral history narratives alongside my personal narrative/storytelling reflections to ground a more cohesive exploration of the relationships between place, belonging, and identity in Kansas. The women's stories highlighted here include my mother, Estella; her eldest sister, my tía

Gloria; and her next eldest sister, my tía y madrina, Lydia, who is known by her family nickname, Lilly. In particular, I apply Anzaldúa's concept of borderlands, mestiza consciousness, and la facultad to portions of their oral history recollections to theorize the lived experiences of Chicanas in the Midwest.

Because these women are related to me by blood, I draw upon Chicana feminist theory frameworks that illuminate the connection between family memory and storytelling about personal and social identity. With this in mind, I turn to Chicana feminist theorizing on family and identity in the personal narratives of Cherríe Moraga's (2000) *Loving in the War Years*, Norma Cantú's (1997) *Cancicula: Snapshots of a Girlhood*, Pat Mora's (1997) familial novel *House of Houses*, and Kathleen Alcalá's (2007) *The Desert Remembers My Name: On Family and Writing*. My work is in conversation with these texts, as they all frame familial stories as important to Chicana epistemology. Furthermore, I build on the legacies of these works to investigate how Chicana identity is influenced by Midwestern (Kansas) geography. As each of these works show, family is a site of knowledge production where women gain understandings of intricate, intimate notions of gendered and racialized selves. Feminist notions of sexuality, desire, and embodiment also emerge throughout Chicana feminist theory through the aforementioned texts. As Cantú notes in her introduction to *Cancicula*, with a quote by Pat Mora, "life en la frontera is raw truth, and stories of such life, fictitious as they may be are even truer than true" (1997, xi). Cantú weaves together family memory and fiction to create what she calls "fictional autoethnography," where "many of the events are completely fictional, although they may be true in a historical context" (1997, xi). I interpret this to signify that, through writing familial stories, truth, memory, reflection, life-long shifting relationships, and even notions of kinship change over time. In the case of my interpretations of my family's stories, for instance, my truth may be my mamá's fiction, but both stories lend opportunities to understand a localized

Midwestern Chicana experience by seeing them within a broader historical context. While I have tried to stay away from interpreting the women of my family's oral histories through fiction, my reading, analysis, and interpretation of their stories certainly engage a kind of retelling, a mediating of their stories as part of what I see as their Chicana feminist contributions to the Midwest, even as they may not characterize them in that way.

Additionally, Moraga's *Loving in the War Years* effectively provides permission to Chicana writers to use family knowledge as a cornerstone to shape one's own understandings of Chicanisma. As a Chicana lesbian, I particularly appreciate Moraga's depth in writing through her relationship to her mother and family as she constructs larger notions of passion and desire as integral to Chicana feminist praxis throughout *Loving* (2000). Alcalá's *The Desert Remembers My Name* deftly weaves stories, much like Cantú, that often have no end because, as Alcalá notes, "My stories don't end in the conventional mode because these stories have not yet ended" (2007, 56). My stories here also have not yet ended. For this reason, I invoke Alcalá's work in the attempt to find a moment in time to frame analysis, recognizing that this project is always incomplete because the story has not yet finished, and new layers of knowledge continue to be added even when I might think this story is behind me. The family is not a neutral or intrinsically positive space for Chicana feminist consciousness to emerge, but it is often one of the first sites of Chicana feminist consciousness. The long line of Chicana feminist scholarship that theorizes identity inspires this contribution on Mexican American familial women's oral histories in the Midwest.

As Tiffany Ana López notes, "Chicana/Latina epistemology, which is more simply defined as the ways we know the world, is born from the different tributaries of our life paths" (2010, 17). López's words specifically encourage Chicana scholars to recognize attempts to separate "personal experience and

critical production,” which “feeds disassociation and adds to the toxicity of violence and trauma” (2010, 17). By integrating personal and family reflections alongside the oral histories of three women of my family, I seek to expose and heal through Chicana feminist knowledge production that inevitably places my story as daughter, niece, and granddaughter alongside mother, aunt, and grandmotherly reflections. This work situates Chicana ways of knowing as reflexive theorizing (testimonio alongside interwoven Chicana feminist texts) and practice (the methods involved in collecting and writing about and creating cultural productions involving these oral histories).² As Mónica Russel y Rodríguez notes in her article on Chicana testimonio, “Writing one’s experiences as an urgent political practice of liberation has been central to the methodological foundations of Chicana/Latina feminisms” (2007, 86). Like Russel y Rodríguez, I, too, am interested in how personal narrative can connect us to deeper insights about social phenomena and challenge disciplinary boundaries while doing so. My investment in engaging the personal as a site of theory is in how it enables one to theorize the role of geography and place—public and private—in shaping Midwestern Chicana identity.³ Last, this study works to address an important scholarly gap in that Chicano Studies have yet to fully account for the impact of Midwestern Chicana lives, as the majority of Chicano Studies texts/study on the Midwest often leave out and render invisible Chicana contributions.⁴

To ground the analysis of these oral histories, I turn to the ways domestic practices within predominantly white communities craft Chicana claims of belonging in Midwestern geographies, particularly through food.⁵ I use Anzaldúan theories of borderlands, mestiza consciousness, and *la facultad* to better understand women’s experiences of isolation and the challenges of being Mexican women in the Midwest. I connect their recollections of food and their reflections on belonging to make sense of how creating home in

Kansas can be read as a Chicana resistive practice. Because food practices take place often within the space of the private sphere—the home—and women’s traditional realm of the kitchen in particular, reading Anzaldúan notions of home within the context of the borderlands becomes instructive. For instance, in *Borderlands/La frontera* Anzaldúa articulates the ways she brings her home with her everywhere she goes. She writes, “I am a turtle, wherever I go I carry ‘home’ on my back” (1999, 43).⁶ This line exemplifies the way that Anzaldúa conceptualizes home as a sense of belonging; home is not rooted in place, but rather rooted in herself, her practices, and, like so many other Mexican-origin people, her history of migratory travel. Like Anzaldúa, the women of my family have also carried their homes on their backs and witnessed their relatives doing the same. As one can see, analyzing Midwestern Chicanas’ oral histories through an Anzaldúan lens provides opportunities to frame a more geographically expansive Chicana feminism across many US borderlands.

Friday Night Tacos

As I grew up in New Mexico, my family would make the long journey from the Southwest to visit familia in the Midwest every summer. That ten-hour car ride across mountainous terrain that slowly turned to golden wheat fields was made better by knowing that when we got to the end of the journey in Kansas, we would be met by my abuelita’s cooking—tacos, enchiladas, gorditas, arroz, fideo, sopa; whatever my mother Estella wanted the most, my abuela (also named Estella) would be cooking. The kitchen was always the gathering spot where women would enter, sit, and chat while abuela finished up our meal and women helped gather plates, put out food, and coordinated the filing in and out of the tight space with overflowing plastic plates.

My abuela and tías are used to this type of labor, both within and beyond the scope of their homes. After every meal one can always find my mamá and

tías washing dishes and quickly cleaning up after the family eats, giving the precious commodity of time to young children to play and entitled men to relax. My mamá left Kansas in the early 1980s shortly after I was born, and as the youngest girl in her birth order, she often was encouraged to relax by her older sisters, knowing that she most wanted to enjoy abuela's cooking. In the oral histories of the women of my family, they also speak to how food brought in extra income for their mamá while their dad was busy drinking his meager salary away. Gloria, my eldest tía, who currently lives in Topeka remembers:

We used to make tacos, I think it was a Friday night, they called it "Taco Night" and we would make the tacos. And my mom would make them at home and then us daughters, the oldest ones would carry them to the restaurant at a certain time and we couldn't make enough tacos for the restaurant. Mama would make the salsa and I think it was called "Friday night tacos" or something like that. And everyone knew that my mom would make the tacos. Yeah, she would help Gloria Hilgen with taco night at a restaurant.⁷

Friday night tacos at Gloria Hilgen's Restaurant in Greenleaf was the place where my abuela and tías—members of the only family of color in this small town in Kansas—used food to connect with the larger white community. My tías recount those days as hard, making tons of pan-fried tacos for a town full of white folks. Her recollection makes me consider the value of home and my family's lives through food.⁸ And I am in awe thinking about how eager those white folks must have been to eat my abuela's, mi familia's, absolutely delicious, never-tasted-anything-like-them-before tacos. Beef and papa wrapped in a corn tortilla flash fried in Crisco, drained grease dripping into white paper towels. Yet, when the family first moved to town in the 1950s, a little old white lady tried to start a petition to expel the Falcón family from Greenleaf.⁹

Food has always been an important marker of my cultura, a way for me to connect to my Mexican identity long before fully recognizing the labor involved in preparing these tacos. Imagining the women of my family toiling over pans of crackling grease in the middle of a Kansas summer for the white townfolk to buy and enjoy my abuela's tacos gives me a sense of pride for her ingenuity. It allows me to reflect on the values of hard work and the ways that the women of my family have often made their own paths where none have gone before. Tacos in the summer heat of Kansas are the stories of a Midwestern manifestation of Gloria Anzaldúa's borderlands. My abuela's tacos served as the site for a cultural collision to occur in that small-town Kansas existence. Just as Anzaldúa notes in *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1999), borderlands are realized miles away from the US/Mexico border.

Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera* serves as an important bridge to read the narratives of the women of my family, including notions of Chicanidad in the Midwest. In her formative Chicana feminist text, Anzaldúa clearly lays out a deep understanding of the impact of the US/Mexico border on her life and on the lives of Mexican American people. In her construction of borderlands theory, she articulates the complexities of the effects of cultural collisions that occur both in terms of the physical landscapes of border zones and the metaphorical conditions of Chicana consciousness. Anzaldúa writes, "the Borderlands are physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy" (1999, 19). Here, her notion of borderlands is clearly disconnected from a specific physical location. While Anzaldúa frames her borderlands theorizing within the context of her Texas-based identity, she does not demand that this concept only apply to the specificities of the US/Mexico border landscape. Additionally, when Anzaldúa notes that borderlands also present

themselves at the erosion of boundaries between two people through intimacy, she also frames borderlands as processes that impact the development of Chicana consciousness—the erosion of our old self and previous ways of thinking in Chicana psyches. She names this process in the final chapter of *Borderlands/La Frontera*, “La conciencia de la mestiza: Toward a New Consciousness” (1999, 99). According to Anzaldúa, it is through recognizing the power of epistemic crossings that shape “a new *mestiza* consciousness, *una consciencia de mujer*. It is a consciousness of the Borderlands” (1999, 99). Applying an Anzaldúan lens to the experiences of women in this study amplifies the scholarship on the lived experiences of Chicanas in the Midwest. Specifically, in the case of my familial women’s oral histories, their experiences construct a deeper understanding of the manifestations of the borderlands in Kansas. I turn now to focus this analysis on how women navigate notions of belonging and resistance in Kansas through exploring the intimacies of home and food.

In Their Own Words:

Home and Belonging in the Midwestern Borderlands

The borderlands my mother’s family experienced spanned linguistic and geographic realities. Though her father’s parents were Mexican on both sides and both spoke Spanish as their primary language, a distinct language barrier existed in her childhood household between her Mexican American father and Mexican mother. Growing up in Fairbury, Nebraska, in the 1930s and 40s, father lost his fluency in the Spanish language. Her mother, on the other hand, spoke only Spanish at the time of her eventual move from Juárez to El Paso to the Midwest. Additionally, like many Chicanas, my mother’s family remains physically connected to the US/Mexico borderlands because of migratory experience from Mexico and Texas to the Midwest *and* simultaneously experience Midwestern borderlands where, “the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country—a border culture” (Anzaldúa

1999, 25) take shape. My reference to Midwestern borderlands is meant to convey both the friction caused by two or more cultures meeting one another *and* the creative resistive spirit borderlands manifest through the cultivation of *la mestiza* in Midwestern sites. Migration stories expose cultural clashes as Mexican people live in white-dominated spaces. My mother's paternal family hailed from Kansas City. Brought there by a job with the railroad, they settled in, what was at the time, one of the larger Mexicano/Chicano communities of the Midwest from the turn of the twentieth century through the 1930s.¹⁰ When my mother's family settled in Greenleaf, Kansas—population 500—this rural life was far away from her mom's support network, as it was the only Mexican/Chicano family in a field of whiteness.

As the story "Friday Night Tacos" demonstrates, while some members of the community of Greenleaf, Kansas, eventually accepted my mother's family, it was not always easy residing there. Anzaldúa reminds us that borderlands create a "vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary" (1999, 25). Additionally, Anzaldúa reminds us that the borderlands create opportunities for us to receive "multiple, often opposing messages. The coming together of two self-consistent but habitually incompatible frames of reference causes *un choque*, a cultural collision" (1999, 100). Anzaldúan borderlands manifest in Kansas for the women of my family through the form of "cultural collisions." Gloria, Estella's sister, the eldest child of the family who recounts the taco night remembers this vivid example of a cultural clash, the results of this "unnatural boundary" manifesting between her family and the community in which they lived:

The only thing I remember in Greenleaf was that lady behind us who put up the petition to, that she wanted us out of there, she didn't like us. And she put a petition to get our family out, and she went around town to see who was going to sign it and nobody signed it. I guess she

just didn't like Mexicans, that's what we thought because we were the only Hispanic family there, but that's where dad found his job at the coop, we weren't no hell-raisers or nothing like that, we were small, and going to school and whatever.¹¹

As Gloria relates, at least one member of the community was so disturbed by the new presence of Mexicans in her small Kansas town she was moved to take some kind of community action to attempt to encourage them to leave. This is one example of a "cultural collision" Anzaldúa references regarding how the borderlands manifest for Chicanas. I also see the legacies of white domination of land and space and their ideals of white supremacy. As Anzaldúa states, "The Gringo, locked into the fiction of white superiority, seized complete political power, stripping Indians and Mexicans of their land while their feet were still rooted in it" (1999, 29). Gloria's family's presence in this particular small-town Kansas environment plays out similarly to the historical narratives Anzaldúa shares in the long history of settler-colonialism in the US. Tía Lilly also frames her notions of belonging in Greenleaf through this lens of implicitly, noting white supremacy as reality when she reflects on growing up in rural Kansas:

Being the only Hispanic in town you know, people do treat you different, you feel like you're not, you're not trustworthy, until they [white people] finally get to know you and then they realize well, "they're not so bad," "they're not causing any trouble," you know? Until they get to know you and then, then they finally decide "ok, they're ok, they can stay."¹²

In the case of Gloria's recollection of a white woman's petition, her exclusionary actions are symbolic (through the failed project of circulating a petition) so, too, then, are Lilly's memories of her family's presence understood as possible troublemakers, reflections of this settler-colonialist history on Mexican-origin people. The collisions manifest in the ways Gloria

and Lilly felt inferior because of the actions and attitudes of white folks in contrast to the ways they saw themselves.

I turn to examine how these women made sense of difference highlighted by the bumping of Mexican identities against white, rural identities, to explore how their experiences being marked as different enabled them to develop lenses for understanding oppression as it operated in their communities. Acknowledging their racial and cultural difference develops alongside readings of their reflections on friendships and growing up as Mexicans in Greenleaf, Kansas. Tía Lilly shares,

Um, I really only had one truly good friend in Greenleaf and that was a white girl, her name was Jean Waltzy and we hung out a lot together. I never went to her house, but she came to our house several times. She was the closest friend I had and then other girls there in Greenleaf that I went to school with you know we wouldn't see each other outside of school but that's where [we] usually hung out. But usually [it was just me and] my sisters, [who] hung out. And mostly the guys that hung around our house were boys because we played a lot of softball in front of our house with the neighborhood kids.¹³

Throughout many of their stories, mamá and my tías discuss how their siblings served as their main companions when it came to socializing; however, when they entered the school system they often befriended at least one girl. For instance, Tía Gloria also recounts that she had one close white female friend but reflects that she was really closest to her sister Lilly, “Me and Lilly were always together . . . yep, I think Lilly was my best companion.”¹⁴ In Tía Lilly’s memories of childhood friendships she recalls a white friend whose house she was not allowed to visit, while her white friends were always welcome in her

family's home. This phrase, "I never went to her house" marks a moment of recognition of their racialized and cultural differences. Through it all, these women's reflections note how they relied on each other for companionship and their sisterly relationships and familial bonds helped to carve out a sense of belonging for them.

Growing up in a predominantly white small town, Lilly recognized that she was "different." These reflections on friendships not only mark moments of racial/cultural difference but, we can also interpret Lilly's stories as examples of Anzaldúa's notions of developing *la facultad*. Anzaldúa writes, "*la facultad* is the capacity to see in surface phenomena the meaning of deeper realities, to see the deep structure below the surface" (1999, 60). While an awareness of difference is not the only component necessary to developing *la facultad*, recognizing difference through the process of racialization is an important first step toward being able to see deeper structures below the surface. The following highlights her consciousness of this racialization process at work in the Midwestern borderlands.

Well, since we were mostly the only Mexican Americans in towns, they [white folks] just kind of looked at us a little bit different. I don't think they looked at us like we were equals at all. They were kind of skeptical at first, you know until they got to know you, especially the kids, sometimes I knew some of the kids especially the ones that had more income they just kind of looked at you a little bit down.¹⁵

Her recognition that she was "looked at . . . a little bit down" by people who "had more income," articulates how she felt her class and cultural identities intersect. Her Mexican-origin background was "different," and that difference was not always initially understood as positive. I read this understanding of difference as also representing a wound she carries with her, reminiscent of

how Anzaldúa writes of the US/Mexico Border as “una herida abierta” (1999, 25) or the “1,950 mile-long open wound” (1999, 24). It is not the isolation alone that causes pain for Lilly and her sisters, but rather the acknowledgment that this difference marks her as “less-than” by the community within which she lives. It is the way she knows she lives in the in-between space of borderlands that informs her understanding of identity in Midwestern geography. Tía Lilly reflects, “You know, especially with my work, I know that I’m Mexican or Hispanic like they are too [new immigrants], but I’m not. I’ve lived in a white world, not a Mexican world.”¹⁶ Neither from here (the US), nor from there (Mexico), represents a longing to belong, and yet also reveals what I see as the stirrings of the capacities to see beyond the surface as Anzaldúa reminds us, that which is “latent in all of us” (1999, 61) who may be persecuted because of our identities. When I ask my Tía Lilly to explain what she means on how people looked at her she shares,

I remember one girl, that she, her parents had, like a furniture store, a grocery store she made fun of my dark knees. She said, “why you got those black knees for?” and I guess it’s just the discoloration on our knees, I guess from when you, sometimes when you kneel down and stuff, I guess they get just a little bit of discoloration on ‘em and stuff. You know to me it wasn’t anything but I guess to her, she pointed it out, that’s for sure. You know, it was different, I never felt like I was their equal, I wasn’t their equal, they kind of looked down on us. And you know, growing up in Greenleaf, it was kind of about the same until they got to know you, they treated me a little bit more equal.¹⁷

Again, these reflections point to her awareness of racialized and cultural differences as a Mexican American woman. The last part of this statement—“they treated me a little bit more equal”—may be semantics, but it is telling

in that even within the context of belonging to a community she does not characterize this equality issue as resolved fully.

Anzaldúa's notion of *la facultad* describes a psychic and spiritual sense of reality as a survival mechanism (1999). As we know *la facultad*, like *mestiza* consciousness, usually comes from a jarring experience, turning to explore the ways women address discrimination or oppression helps to reveal how they engaged as individuals. Tía Lilly proudly asserts:

To me you know, it really didn't bother me. I just thought, "It's their loss." I wasn't going to let it affect me. I had my sisters, so you know if I couldn't be friends with the white girls, hey, I had my sisters...That's the way I dealt with it. And you know, it just makes you a stronger person because you just don't, I didn't let it affect me. I didn't let it stop me from doing what I wanted to do.¹⁸

While the members of this family do not share insights to this level of psychic knowing reflective of *la facultad*, they did develop survival techniques of ignoring the slights and relying on family as a means to overcome their perceived deficits.

Lilly's sister, my mother Estella, also recognizes this difference in her experiences coming of age in reflections on her family's treatment,

I knew we were different, but I don't think it affected me. I was probably a lot more shy though, I was pretty shy and quiet then. You know, not to bring attention. I recall being in one of the other towns having to cross the cafeteria and having people staring and looking at me. And you know, probably you know trying to figure out what I

was. I remember that kind of uncomfortable, that staring, knowing that I was different.¹⁹

While Anzaldúa reminds us that *la conciencia de la mestiza* copes with the realities of living in the borderlands by, “developing a tolerance for contractions, a tolerance for ambiguity,” both Lilly and Estella signify this tolerance of contradictions/ambiguity in their statements on difference (1999, 101). For Anzaldúa coping with the tensions of the borderlands means that, “Not only does she [la mestiza] sustain contradictions, she turns the ambivalence into something else” (1999, 101). Estella mentions in the quote above that she did not think the way whites treated her affected her much. However, in the next breath, she admits that it probably did affect her in terms of her being a lot more shy. *Shy* is not a term I would typically use to describe my mamá, so having to deal with what it felt like to be marked as different, or live with the realities of being the object of study by curious white community members, did actually impact her behavior even as she might not have originally thought it to be relevant to her experiences. While she feels the ambiguity and carries with her the sense that something is happening beyond the stares, I do not read her actions as turning ambivalence into something else, as Anzaldúa notes critical of leaning into one’s mestiza consciousness.

While Anzaldúa reveals *la facultad* and coming into one’s mestiza consciousness as a process, I do not wish to paint my family members as encompassing a fully realized “uprooting of dualistic thinking” (1999, 102). This challenge to the Western way of knowing that constructs and upholds binary oppositional categories/way of being is a journey I consciously seek to embody and practice and I simultaneously recognize this process is not something any of the three women chronicled here openly embrace in their oral histories. These women’s reflections have shaped my *facultad*; the

telling of their lives have helped me break into a “new mode of perception” (Anzaldúa, 1999, 61). Tía Lilly and the other women of my family might not say they have a mestiza consciousness, but I argue their experiences with racialization in a white-dominant, small, rural Kansas town developed their ability to recognize how difference played out and informed my ability to gain new perspectives on our family stories. The process of understanding these women and their cultural realities within and beyond their families is important, but so too is the way that we might read resistance in those practices. While exploring the space of the home and feelings of belonging is one way to read Kansas borderlands, the Falcón family’s use of food as a means to bridge cultures serves as a site of reclamation, of remaking the world around them to better reflect their culture in isolated space, a way to pass down generational wisdom, and the way I read ambivalence becoming transformed into something grounded by a sense of purpose and pride. I turn to this discussion next.

Planting Roots and Making Claims: Resistive Practices through Food

Mexican food is a site of rich exploration for Chicana feminist theory and practice. Denise Chávez’s *A Taco Testimony* uses tacos to craft a family narrative memoir. She writes, “Tacos are my life and my story. They are my hope. They are my salvation, and I don’t say that lightly. They are my history. My culture. They are who I am. They are my roots and my Becoming. My pride and my healing” (2006, 107).²⁰ She exposes beautiful connections to the role tacos have played in her life and in the context of her family living in New Mexico. I, too, understand the way I draw on the power of Mexican food to comfort me as I live in Minnesota. A pot of beans, roasting jalapeños on my comal, and making quesadillas become valuable acts of self-care amidst the realities of isolation from a larger Chicana/o community. I can only imagine how powerful that would be in small-town Kansas where my family

members lived, to taste chile on one's tongue to heal from a hard day's work away from one's community.

When I was young, my mamá used to make me hot dogs and wrap them in warm flour tortillas. Seeing and smelling the roasting hot dogs and sensing the warm rolled up treat that would soon be on our tongues, my brother and I would watch with fascination as she warmed the tortilla to just the right crispiness—not too crunchy so that it wouldn't wrap, but definitely blackened by the warmth of the stove. If my brother and I wanted a peanut butter and jelly sandwich it was rarely on bread but almost always rubbed onto one side of a flour tortilla, one side peanut butter, one side jelly. Growing up in Albuquerque in the nineties I knew many families—Mexican and Anglo alike—who used tortillas as bread long before wraps became the trendy (healthy) carb sandwich holder. Mamá did not learn these food practices from living in New Mexico; she brought them with her when she moved from Kansas to the Southwest where she grew up eating hamburgers, hotdogs and fried bologna on tortillas. I am reminded by Anzaldúa's brilliant poem

To live in the Borderlands means to
put *chile* in the borscht,
eat whole wheat *tortillas*, (1999, 216)

which gives tangible meaning to the mixing of cultures that represents living in the Midwestern borderlands. In Greenleaf, Kansas in the 1950s and 60s there were no Mexican mercados selling red chile powder. While the women of my family grew a garden for produce, potatoes, tomatoes, carrots, and corn, the ingredients for a spicy salsa were difficult to come by. My mamá told me that abuela used canned tomatoes and jalapeños to make her salsa for tacos. While perhaps not the best ingredient options, she made do with what she had within

her environment. I read the resistive food practices that my family engages within and beyond the confines of the home as underground feminist acts and as a lens through which we can see the creative resistance strategies women of my family employed in the Midwestern borderlands.

The label of *feminist* is a contentious one and not one that folks simply identify without conscious consideration. However, we can analyze identity and actions of others with a feminist framework. Chicana feminist scholar Aída Hurtado recognizes the power in identifying alternative frameworks by which we may be able to assign feminist understanding to women's actions and identities who might not actively claim feminism as the influencer. Through theorizing "underground feminisms" Hurtado acknowledges the label of feminism as often marginalizing to women beyond the academy but also a means to see feminism in previously unnamed ways. She writes, ". . . feminism might look different if we were to expand its definition beyond the feminisms developed and defined by the academy. If we were to take into account women's lives and actions rather than restricting ourselves to theoretical definitions, we might find an answer for the apparent lack of feminist identification among women today" (2003, 261). While feminist was not a signifier my mother Estella, Tía Lilly, or Tía Gloria used to describe their lives or the life of their mother, I read many of their acts of resistance as Mexican-origin women as engaging practices of feminism.

When Gloria recounts the use of her mom's ingenuity to make tacos for the small Kansas town in which they lived, I read this act as fulfilling an underground feminism (Hurtado, 2003). The story "Friday Night Tacos" exposes a snapshot in time of women using food to resist patriarchal domination through challenging domestic confinement. Estella shares a story that demonstrates how women claimed power beyond the space of the home to control their own destinies:

. . . dad was the boss. In fact, just a couple of weeks ago when I was seeing [mama] she said “dad was the boss” and whatever he brought home for groceries that’s what she had to try to figure out what to make. Because she had [recently] made a new dish that I had never ate with her before and I’m 51 years old and I said, “Well mamá, how come you never made this?” And that’s when she said that [dad] thought he was the boss and you know, he wouldn’t bring all of what she needed for the different recipes. So she just worked with what he brought home.²¹

I read this experience not solely in the sense of a cultural clash in the borderlands—as in the lack of ingredients for traditional Mexican cooking or the lack of access my undocumented grandmother had in terms of shopping for herself—but rather an investigation on how women use food as a means to navigate the complex tensions between public and private spheres. While my mamá, Estella, had not mentioned “Friday Night Tacos” in her oral history she had spoken of her mamá working at Faye Barker’s restaurant as one of her first memories of her mamá working outside the home.²²

Mama ended up working for Faye Barker . . . where she first started working and so then I guess she [Faye] would teach her [mamá] how to cook you know like, all the potatoes and roast and things like that to where, we were you know, my mom was from Mexico, we were just having like fried chicken like maybe every Sunday, dad would get some chicken, so we would have like chicken every Sunday, something like that. But most of the time we were having beans and tortillas, rice and every so often, and then you know, the tacos and the enchiladas and stuff. You know, that wasn’t like once a week, maybe once a month or so, on that. Dad, I know, would be at the grocery store, his regular staples would

be bologna deli, you know off the rings? And I remember him bringing that home and we'd have bologna sandwiches. And I still love bologna sandwiches, like now. But not like pastas, you know, like spaghetti, pastas, macaroni, we never had such things growing up like that.²³

My mamá reflects on her acculturation experiences in the Midwest and the ways her mamá learned new food practices that provided her with some autonomy and control over money:

Sometimes it was very special because sometimes when we'd be done with school then we'd come meet her and she would give us a little, um, little dishes of potatoes and gravy or something so we'd come sit and get us a little something after school. And then she would pay for it you know, out of her thing. We didn't eat free, but she took that into account and stuff. So she was cooking and taking orders probably, just the simple things. And so that meant she was starting to get her own money and stuff. So it was nice.²⁴

Estella's vignette about eating new foods her mamá prepared both at home and at Faye Barker's restaurant, combined with Gloria's story of Friday Night Tacos served at another restaurant in town, demonstrate their mamá's resistance to patriarchal control by earning her own money and determining how to feed her family of six children and the entire town. Her resistance is reflected in navigating creative ingredient choices, as well as finding ways around, or, making do with, what abuela was given to work with following abuelo's trip to the grocery store.

Years later, I would text mamá a follow-up question about Friday Night Tacos and abuela's experiences working in white women's restaurants. While I had

asked each of my oral history respondents about food, I had not though, at the time, to gather life stories through the lens of food, even though food is an important marker of my family's Mexican heritage and cultural connection. One of many perks of conducting research with family members is the ability to access the research subject often. "Mamá, what was the name of Faye Barker's restaurant?" I texted her looking for answers not revealed in previous oral history data. The day passed; my mamá texted back almost twelve hours later: "The White Way Café? Let me check with Gloria." The next day mamá confirms, "Yep, the White Way Café." In the digging up of this information, mamá also tells me that Friday Night Tacos happened at the American Legion (not at Faye Barker's Restaurant as Gloria had initially remembered when she first told me this story). The White Way Café no longer exists, like many small rural places. A quick Google search indicates there are no more restaurants in Greenleaf, one marker of the signs of a once vibrant community struggling in this decade. But, the American Legion, a veteran's organization, is still standing and bringing together community members who have served in the US military to promote patriotic nationalist advocacy efforts. To know this was the restaurant scene where my abuela was selling tacos is a stark demonstration of women who made their own way, against the odds.

Food as a Bridge and as Home

I read the potential political resistance that accompanies gendered actions—such as selling food in places not particularly likely to embrace those who produce the food—as underground feminist acts. The space of the home being where these women produce food is also meaningful in the ways that these women may not have always felt "at home" in their community, but they used the space of their home as a means to etch out a sense of belonging. In this sense, these women represent what it means to "survive the crossroads" (Anzaldúa 1999, 103). For Anzaldúa, food becomes a descriptive tool to

account for both the tensions of being “in-between” and of the (occasional) violence and (more frequent) trauma associated with developing one’s mestiza consciousness. Through analogy where food and food preparation practices represent women’s strength and resilience, Anzaldúa notes:

Somos lo molido en el metate

We are the *comal* sizzling hot ... (1999, 103).

Through contrasting the tools with which Chicanas prepare nourishing food with the violent practices in grinding corn or spices with these tools—the metate and the molcajete—Anzaldúa signifies the tension between victim and agent. Las mestizas are both the means of production (we have the tools to craft our own destinies and the consciousness to claim our autonomy) and the product (nourishment through the form of a cooked food) we offer up for consumption. In the case of my own family history, abuela and my tías cooking tacos for white townfolk in Kansas demonstrates Anzaldúa’s survival in the crossroads through food. These women were marked as outsiders, felt they were different because of their Mexican heritage (were mashed in the grinder of small town politics), yet also, in spite of working in a place named “The White Way Café,” also used a sizzling hot comal to engage food practices (Friday Night Tacos) to make money to help sustain the family *and* make their own place in an environment not particularly welcome to them.

Through the domestic practices of community building and cooking, I have highlighted the attempts of one Mexican American family to claim space in the Midwest. By using food as a means to bridge differences through Friday Night Tacos, these women in Kansas provide one example of Chicana resistance in small communities and thriving through isolation in a rural town. They are the new mestizas shaping claims to be at home in the Midwest. Despite the negative

aspects (geographic/cultural isolation) of living in the Midwest for these women, they actively assert it as their home by bringing their home practices (making tacos) into public space. Home is both a tangible (place) and intangible (feeling) Midwestern Mexican American women experience here. Within Midwestern spaces, Mexican American women may experience what Anzaldúa defines as crossroads, cultural collisions, and borderlands as a direct result of experiencing magnified cultural differences due to isolation and environments where there are fewer Mexican American people present. My family's story is not unique; in fact, food often becomes a bridge traversing the gaps between borders. When I think of the best Mexican food, I think of Kansas.

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Notes

¹ The larger study involved eight oral history interviews with women in Kansas and Minnesota, conducted between 2009–2010.

² For more on Chicana ways of knowing see Dolores Delgado Bernal, C. Alejandra Elenes, Francisca E. Godínez, and Sofia Villenas, eds., *Chicana/Latina Education in Everyday Life: Feminista Perspectives on Pedagogy and Epistemology*.

³ For more on reflections of historical groundings of the personal as theoretical and methodological

frameworks for the field of Chicana/o Studies see Chon Noriega and Wendy Belcher, eds., *I Am Aztlán: The Personal Essay in Chicano Studies* (Los Angeles: UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center Press, 2004). I also borrow from Mary Pat Brady's *Extinct Lands, Temporal Geographies: Chicana Literature and the Urgency of Space* (2002) in engaging the idea of Chicana geographies and her notion of exploring spatiality as a means to explore the relationship between identity and space.

⁴ In my larger book project, I take up this scholarly gap in the literature in attempts to reframe Midwestern Chicana erasure as a detrimental misremembering of Chicana/o history. For instance, we suffer a misremembering of our herstory when we forget Norma Alarcón founded the influential *Third Woman Journal* in Bloomington, Indiana. Additionally, while Gilbert Cardenas (1976) urged the field of Chicano Studies to account for Midwestern Chicano experience in the mid 1970s, he was not concerned with the project of including women's experiences in that project. In identifying this gap, I do not want to obscure the legacy of work completed on exploring Midwestern Chicana experience. While few in the numbers of studies, some scholarship stands out as work my writing engages to further the conversation. Karen Mary Davalos' (1996) work on quinceañeras in Chicago provides useful ethnographic and cultural studies frames for studying women in the Midwest. For work on contemporary experiences of Chicanas/Latinas in the Midwest, see Amelia María de la Luz Montes' (2003) article, "Tortilleras on the Prairie: Latina Lesbians Writing the Midwest," Jessica Lopez Lyman's (2016) article, "Revitalizing Poetics: Latin@s Reshape South Minneapolis, Minnesota" (2016) in *Chicana/Latina Studies: The Journal of Mujeres Activas en Letras y Cambio Social* 15 (2): 33-61, and to a lesser extent (because chapters do not explicitly focus on women's experiences or use gender analysis as frames) Ann V. Millard and Jorge Chapa's (2001) edited anthology, *Apple Pie & Enchiladas: Latino Newcomers in the Rural Midwest*. While we may have examples of Chicanas and Latinas who grew up in, live, and write of/from sites in the Midwest like Sandra Cisneros, Ana Castillo and Achy Obejas (Chicago), there remains much work to be done on the study of Chicana/Latina lives in the Midwest contemporarily, historically and geographically. I also recognize I am not the first scholar to point out these gaps. I draw inspiration from and carry on the work of Davalos, Avila, Pérez-Torres and Sandoval (2002) who advocate for the necessary inclusion of the Midwest and other neglected geographic sites for a strong, complex, dynamic Chicana/o Studies.

⁵ While I use Mexican-origin people or Mexican Americans interchangeably, I prefer to use the frame of Chicana to identify the subjects of this study as Norma E. Cantú and Olga Nájera-Ramírez do to signify, "women of Mexican descent who reside in the United States" (2002, 2) even if the subjects referred to in this study do not use that term to define themselves. Readers will also see Chicana in the text to refer to the frame of analysis, as in Chicana feminisms, as well as Chicana an identity category with which the author identifies. While I am aware of the complications of identity markers and the increasing use of Xicana in activist and scholarly circles, Chicana here signifies the connection to the field of Chicana Feminist Studies and the gendered identities of cis-gender women in this study. For more on the complications of linguistics and language and the use of 'x' see Catalina Onís (2017) recent work "What's in an 'X'?" For a historical look at the complications of identity signifiers, labels and terminology see Suzanne Oboler (1995).

⁶ While the original version of this text was published in 1987, I choose to reference the 1999 second edition volume for the purposes of this article.

⁷ Gloria Madrid, oral history interview by author, July 18, 2009.

⁸ I am not the first to question the relationship between food and identity as the burgeoning field of food studies indicates. I attempt to use food as a frame or a lens through which I access women's understandings of their identities and as a means to explore the larger context of the interactions between women, the food they eat/prepare, and the community around them. For more on the importance of situating food within the context of geography see Rachel Slocum and Arun Saldanha's edited anthology *Geographies of Race and Food* (2013). Additionally, Allison Hope Alkon and Julian Agyeman's *Cultivating Food Justice: Race, Class, and Sustainability* explore in their 2011 anthology the politicization of the food justice movement as largely a wealthy white project which often discounts the intersections of race and class when characterizing the goals of food justice movements. Like Alkon and Agyeman, I hope through focusing on food as a lens in understanding Midwestern Mexican-origin identities, I will contribute to the body of scholarship exploring how, "race and class play a central role in organizing the production, distribution, and consumption of food" (1).

⁹ I chose to use the anglicized pronunciation of our family's last name here because that is how the townsfolk referred to my family instead of Falcón. Additionally, as my family members largely use English as their primary language (as opposed to Spanish) I slip between the English and Spanish construction of *tía/aunt* or *mother/mamá* as both terms frame titles we use to address familia.

¹⁰ See Garza (2006) "The long history of Mexican immigration to the rural Midwest" for a more detailed history of the androcentric Mexican and Chicana/o migration story from Mexico/US Southwest. Additionally, Jeffrey Marcos Garcilago's (2012) monograph *Traqueros* details the largely male labor history of Mexican railroad laborers.

¹¹ Madrid, oral history interview.

¹² Lydia (Lilly) Marie Rider, oral history interview by author, July 18, 2009.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Madrid, oral history interview.

¹⁵ Rider, oral history interview.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Estella Creel, oral history interview by author, March 19, 2009.

²⁰ For more on how Chicanas theorize food see Meredith Abarca's "Los Chilaquiles de mi 'ama: The Language of Everyday Cooking" and her volume, *Voices in the Kitchen* where she highlights

connections between food, love, and the importance of passing on women's cooking traditions within the family as particularly related to women's roles within the kitchen to make sense of the deep connections to food. While not Chicana, Carole Coulihan (2008) highlights the process of food making labor, and how her respondents use food to control the means of production in resistance to economic oppression in her work on Mexicanas in Colorado.

²¹ Creel, oral history interview.

²² While I did not set out to collect what Carole Coulihan articulates as a "food narratives as life history" (2008) method in my oral history collection, food did become an important theme that ran throughout oral history collection with my family members. I also borrow from Ramona Lee Pérez's (2009) enthusiasm for exploring food as an epistemological source for investigation which accounts for the long description of food to follow.

²³ Creel, oral history interview.

²⁴ Creel, oral history interview.

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