

# Cooking as *Mestizaje* in Alicia Gaspar de Alba's "Making Tortillas": Reconciling Chicana Lesbian Identity through the Space of the Kitchen

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**Abstract:** Feminist and queer food studies scholars have read the kitchen simultaneously as a place of oppression and of liberation, where the regulations of the heteropatriarchy are enacted but also subverted. This space has been explored by Chicana lesbian poets such as Alicia Gaspar de Alba, who in "Making Tortillas" uses the images, sounds, smells, and flavors of Mexican cuisine as metaphors for sex and intimacy between women, reclaiming and, at the same time, queering her heritage. By drawing from Chicana and food studies scholarship, I argue that Gaspar de Alba uses cooking in her poem as a tool to reconcile her sexual and cultural identities, and that the kitchen is a particularly suited space for the work of *mestizaje*—the epistemology proposed by Monica Torres, based on Gloria Anzaldúa's theories, which moves away from dichotomies to give place for assumed contradictions to coexist and interact.

What's the connection? I asked, between a tortillera and a lesbian? Something to do with the sound, they said, the kneading of masa and palms rubbing together, the clapping of tongues, the intersection of good taste and the golden touch.

—Gaspar de Alba, "Descarada/No Shame" (89)

In her book *La Frontera/Borderlands: The New Mestiza*, Gloria Anzaldúa locates the Chicana lesbian at a crossing of many borders: between Anglo-American and Mexican culture, between indigeneity and colonial heritage, and at the margins of heteropatriarchal structures—the latter making her an outcast even among other Chicanx.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I use the gender-inclusive term Chicanx for referring to the community at large. Chicano still appears in quotations where authors use it in that general sense, otherwise I use it to refer specifically to Chicanx who identify as men. I use Chicana when referring to Chicanx who identify as women and when qualifying the theoretical framework used here, which draws specifically on

For poet Alicia Gaspar de Alba, these conflicted sites converge when she meets a group of self-named *tortilleras*—Chicana lesbians who had reappropriated the term, originally a slur in Hispanic communities. The double meaning of the word—as both a woman who makes tortillas and a lesbian—creates a semantic space in which the supposedly conflicting identities of the Chicana lesbian coalesce. Using the term and the sensuous memories elicited by it, Gaspar de Alba wrote a poem titled “Making Tortillas” (1993), in which the traditional process of preparing tortillas becomes a vehicle for evoking lesbian sexuality. Like other Chicana poets such as M. Álvarez, Angela Arellano, and E. D. Hernández (Ehrhardt 95), she uses the images, sounds, smells, and flavors of Mexican cuisine as metaphors for sex and intimacy between women, reclaiming and, at the same time, queering her heritage and culture. As Julia C. Ehrhardt writes, “[b]y 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” (94). She also points out how these poets put lesbian desire at the center of their depictions of the kitchen, challenging heteronormative expectations of the role of woman as cook and breaking the “cultural silence” around their sexuality (94). In the realm of the kitchen, they find a space to celebrate their Chicana and lesbian identities.

Considering that, for the Chicana lesbian, *tortillera* and its double meaning offers a space in which to overcome the identity conflicts recognized by Anzaldúa, I posit that the origin of the term in the act of cooking is an important aspect of its border-crossing nature. Building from feminist and queer perspectives on the kitchen as well as the writings from Chicana authors and scholars, I will analyze the poem “Making Tortillas” to argue that the kitchen and the act of cooking offer a fertile space for the work of *mestizaje*—an epistemology grounded in Anzaldúa’s theories. Through this work, the speaker of the poem (and by extension Gaspar de Alba) finds a space to reconcile her cultural and sexual identities. To lay the foundation for this argument, I will start by examining the position of the Chicana lesbian and the conflicts she faces at the intersection of her identities. I will then go on to explore the concept of *mestizaje* and how the kitchen as a queer feminist space can offer a particularly fertile ground for this work: It rejects in its very nature the binary oppositions and categorizations typical of Western epistemologies. With this theoretical framework delineated, I will analyze “Making Tortillas” and the ways in which Gaspar de Alba’s poem enacts these ideas by refusing to be read in dual terms. It instead creates a space in which more than one perspective can coexist, opening up to the full spectrum of its speaker’s identity.<sup>2</sup>

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the work of woman-identified Chicana scholars, which differentiates itself from other lines of Chicana scholarship.

2 I build towards the argument made here in “How (Not) to Eat a Taco: Queering Mexican Food Practices in *VIDA*” (Faller Moura), where I read food practices in the TV series *Vida* as a queering of Mexican culture and explore how the border-crossing nature of food makes it a vehicle for

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### THE CHICANA LESBIAN'S IDENTITY SPLIT

The Chicana lesbian's position embodies Anzaldúa's concept of the *mestiza*, a Spanish term that denotes a woman of mixed race. Anzaldúa draws from this mixed racial identity to consider the many references and experiences that come together for women who grow up in the US-Mexican borderland: Mexican and US American national mythologies; Spanish and English languages; indigenous, colonial Spanish, and Anglo cultures; as well as being a woman within patriarchal structures (100, 102). This amalgamated identity leads to a painful state of confusion, "an inner war," since the different communities to which the *mestiza* belongs offer conflicting narratives, often oppressing and/or rejecting one another (100). The Chicana lesbian experiences this identity split not only between the different cultures and languages, which shape the hybrid Chicana culture, but also between her cultural identity and her sexuality.

Chicana lesbians grow up in their communities with the messages that cause this inner conflict. Carla Trujillo points out that the ostracizing of lesbians within Mexican cultural communities is mostly due to their rejection of compulsory heterosexuality and their resistance to having their identities defined in relation to men, e.g., in the roles as girlfriends, wives, and mothers (ix). By circumventing participation in the heteropatriarchy through their sexual orientation—the "ultimate rebellion," in Anzaldúa's words (41)—lesbians evade the male power exerted through these sexual relationships. Rejection from their community is the punishment for upsetting these structures that control women's bodies and agency within the church and family—the same structures that render the kitchen a space of oppression for the woman/wife/mother/daughter. Even within the social movements for the emancipation of Chicana people, the Chicana lesbian (and even the heterosexual feminist) is "[v]iewed as an agent of the Anglos" and "accused of selling out to white women, of abandoning her race, of having absorbed the struggle of the middle class" (Sternbach 57, 56). In sum, lesbian identity is posed as antithetical both to Mexican culture, where a woman is expected to fulfill her role as caregiver and cook for a man and her children, and to the racial and cultural struggle of Chicana people. Here the Chicana lesbian is placed in a double bind, in which her own sexual identity is equated with the hegemonic Anglo culture that, in turn, is oppressive toward her Chicana cultural identity.

Falling into false oppositions, such as this equation of homosexuality and allegiance to Anglo culture, is the danger of reading Chicana lesbian experience through binary structures. The resolution of her identity conflict does not come about by rejecting either side—her culture or sexuality—but by "healing the split" (Anzaldúa 102) and finding the interstitial space where both can coexist, not always

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bridging the sexual and cultural identities of Chicana lesbians, such as one of the show's protagonists and poets like Gaspar de Alba.

peacefully but in one continuum. The power of Anzaldúa's *mestiza* is that through her struggle and confusion she acquires a strong tool for subverting dichotomies: She develops the ability to exist with ambiguity and contradictions, transcending duality—a liberating and creative way of thinking that Anzaldúa calls the *mestiza* consciousness (101-02). This is the base for the mode of knowing of *mestizaje*, which allows for a 'healing' of the Chicana lesbian's identity split.

#### THE WORK OF *MESTIZAJE*

*Mestizaje* is an epistemology that rejects the Western Enlightenment model of apprehending the world through naturalized—though actually artificial—dualistic oppositions such as mind/body, subject/object, and rational/emotional. Instead of relying on this “epistemology of disconnection” (Torres 200) that not only splits experience into binaries but also privileges one side over the other (198-200), *mestizaje* looks to Anzaldúa's theorizing of the *mestiza* consciousness as a methodology for producing knowledge. According to Anzaldúa,

[l]a *mestiza* constantly has to shift out of habitual formations; from convergent thinking, analytical reasoning that tends to use rationality to move towards a single goal (a Western mode), to divergent thinking, characterized by movement away from set patterns and goals and toward a more whole perspective, one that includes rather than excludes. (101)

This means that through her capacity for ambiguity, the *mestiza* is able to include competing perspectives, accepting them as simultaneously possible and looking for the ways in which they relate to one another. In doing so, she also refuses to choose a side, subverting the implicit hierarchy contained in each binary pairing.

Disrupting the strict separation between subject and object in traditional Western scholarship, *mestizaje* understands that the subject is in constant relationship with others and with the structures that surround them. That is why Monica Torres calls it an “epistemology of relationship” (203): It

asks that we recognize that epistemological, linguistic, and cultural structures have been constructed in ways that help some and hurt others; that we identify our own multiple locations in those complex networks; that we acknowledge our relationships with others, as conflicted as those will be. (203)

Nothing is naturalized in the work of *mestizaje* but rather looked at as part of complex systems of relationship.

But while the concept of *mestizaje* derives from Anzaldúa's theorization of the experience of borderland Chicanas, it is important to note that it is not an intrinsic

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or essential quality of Chicana subjects. Epistemologies of disconnection, which have historically and systematically contributed to the oppression of groups such as Mexican Americans, have deeply entrenched themselves in these very communities through colonial practices. This is evidenced in the dichotomy between Chicana identity and lesbian sexuality explored in the previous section. Those who do engage in the work of *mestizaje*, though, have in it an alternative to epistemologies of disconnection and a tool to counteract the harm caused by them.

Based on this theoretical framework, I argue that Gaspar de Alba's poem "Making Tortillas" is one example of the engagement with the concept of *mestizaje*. She does so by claiming the Mexican culture that rejects her rather than disavowing it and by showing how the different aspects of her identity relate to each other. The way she achieves this is by bringing her culture and sexuality into a space that also has the capacity of holding contradictions: the feminist kitchen.

### THE KITCHEN AS A SPACE FOR *MESTIZAJE*

Both in queer and in feminist food studies, the kitchen is simultaneously a place of oppression and of liberation; a space where the regulations of the heteropatriarchy are enacted but also subverted. Alice McLean writes that, within feminist food studies, the domestic has been understood as a conflicted space: It is a site of women's oppression, where women are constrained and contained to the roles assigned to them in the patriarchy, but at the same time it encompasses a private realm where they have much more power than in the male-dominated public sphere (250). As a space considered secondary within the patriarchy, the domestic is not deemed important enough to grant the attention of men, leaving women to regulate it with greater freedom. In this sense, Edna Acosta-Belén evokes Virginia Woolf's concept of 'a room of one's own' as a survival strategy for women "in response to the multifaceted social practices that contribute to their gender subordination," identifying the kitchen in particular as one of these "unique spaces" of female autonomy (i). Similarly to how the *mestiza* takes the pain and confusion caused by her oppression and turns it into the powerful tool of *mestiza* consciousness, women have taken the room relegated to them in the kitchen and made it into a space of feminist creation.

What makes the kitchen a liberating space is that, in the absence of men, the identities of women do not have to be defined by their relationship to male counterparts. In María Claudia André's words, "like a homeland without borders, the safe environment of a feminist kitchen provides a space where gender is no longer a given image defined by the masculine, but a means of exploration to a whole spectrum of sensual, sexual and textual possibilities" (17). In this way, she suggests that rather than inhabiting the binary and constricting definitions

delineated by the patriarchy, women can experience their gender identity beyond such arbitrary borders—a move into a relational, resistant form of being.

Compulsory heterosexuality is one such patriarchal construct that LGBTIQ+ scholars have proposed can be subverted in the kitchen (McLean 254). While the home often represents an unsafe space for queer subjects, as it is a central unit in the heteropatriarchal enforcement of normative gender and sexual roles, Anita Mannur argues that the preparation of food as a vehicle for expressing queer desire has the ability to challenge these notions (225, 237). She suggests that food, with its powerful affect, can offer a valuable perspective for the “critical analysis [of the negotiation of] gendered, sexualized, and classed bases of collective and individual identity” (237). Food, then, is an essential element of what makes the kitchen an apt space for the work of *mestizaje*.

Food defies binary categorization—Claude Lévi-Strauss, for example, examined its refusal to fall on either side of the binary of nature vs. culture, encompassing both (Batstone 53). The neglect of the culinary arts in academic circles, suggests Kathleen Batstone, is not only due to the devaluation of “forms of creative expression traditionally associated with women” but also due to this resistance to the disciplinary classifications of traditional scholarship (47). Cooking and food defy the Western epistemologies that organize experience into dichotomies and as such represent a threat to governing oppositional concepts such as “male/female, art/science, or time/space” (47-48).

Besides destabilizing binary pairings, food also subverts the hierarchies that maintain the hegemony of one side over the other. In her argumentation, Batstone illustrates this through the hierarchy of senses, traced back to the Greeks, which places the more abstract sight and hearing as superior to the more bodily touch, smell, and taste—deeming the three latter as “animal” senses, which Kant later characterized as being capable of only lesser (not high) aesthetic pleasures (50). However, food preparation and consumption do not operate within this sensorial hierarchy, as they engage the “lower” senses of smell and taste at the center, while also engaging all senses simultaneously (51).

Cooking and eating also involve multiple levels of transformation, from that of raw ingredients into finished dishes, to the transformation enacted upon the food by the body that consumes it and vice versa (Batstone 51-52). While the food permeates the body, it *becomes* the molecules and cells that compose the body, in this way functioning “as mediator, able to move across otherwise impermeable boundaries” (52). This border-crossing nature of food and cooking as a subject lends itself very effectively to the work of the mestiza consciousness, which inhabits the space between arbitrary borders that try to pull her identity apart. It is then no coincidence that many Chicana lesbian poets have used food as a connecting field between sexuality and heritage in their writing.

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### ANALYSIS OF "MAKING TORTILLAS"

As Arlene Avakian argues in the essay "Cooking Up Lives: Feminist Food Memoirs," food plays an integral part in the construction of one's cultural identity since infancy: involving everything from what is eaten and how the food is prepared and consumed, to the relationships between those who cook, feed, and are fed (280). Not only the experience of eating tortillas but the memories of its preparation by the hands of a woman fulfilling her gender role within the social structures of the home inform Gaspar de Alba's Mexican American identity. In the poem "Making Tortillas," the speaker embraces the role of the tortilla maker, thoughtfully and evocatively describing the sensuous aspects of the cooking process, marking her sexuality not by circumventing traditional Mexican cuisine but by embodying it:

My body remembers  
what it means to love slowly,  
what it means to start  
from scratch:  
to soak the maíz,  
scatter bonedust in the limewater,  
and let the seeds soften  
overnight. (lines 1-8)

Already in the first line of the poem, it is important that it is the "body" who "remembers," immediately evoking and breaking apart the classic binary opposition of body and mind. André writes that feminist writers have made the body "a space of erotic experimentation at a sexual, textual and political level," constructed by the internal voice of the author rather than externally by the patriarchal rule (22). With the first line, Gaspar de Alba marks this autonomy of the female body, which is able to experience everything about to come in the rest of the poem and to remember it in a sensory consciousness.

The following experience in lines 2-4 describes what the body remembers. The 'slow loving' evokes sex, but it also qualifies the food preparation as an act of love—which at the same time subverts and values the role of women as cooks in the home—and 'starting from scratch' can refer both to the act of love/sex and to the traditional preparation of tortillas from base ingredients. The poem, however, rejects a simplistic reading in which every line can be decoded as either meaning of a double entendre—with each description of cooking hiding within a corresponding sexual meaning, for example. Rather than two sides that can be easily separated, the sensuous process of preparing tortillas and the sexual and romantic lesbian experience become intertwined as the poem builds and releases tension with each stanza. After the setup of the first two lines, it would be easy to expect that "to start from scratch" would be described in a sexually laden way. What follows, nonetheless, is a reverent description of soaking the cornmeal, which evokes

sensation through word choice (“scatter bonedust” [6], “soften” [7]) and through the rhythm of the line breaks. Particularly in the last line of the stanza, where the suspense builds after the suggestive “seeds soften” (7) is followed by the unsensational “overnight” (8).

The second stanza goes a step further:

Sunrise is the best time  
for grinding masa,  
cornmeal rolling out  
on the metate like a flannel sheet.  
Smell of wet corn, lard, fresh  
morning love and the light  
sound of clapping. (9-15)

Once again, the first line sets up the possibility of talking about sex, followed by more descriptions of food preparation. The language starts to become more directly suggestive when the “grinding” (10) of the masa and the “flannel sheet” (12) are used as similes. The image of the kitchen and the bed start to merge at this point, now using the line break to subvert the expectation of “fresh” (13) referring to food and applying it to “morning love” (14). While this stanza can still be read as purely describing the cooking process, it opens the imagination to encompass what is happening in the kitchen and in the bedroom at the same time, with “the light / sound of clapping” (14-15) describing either or both.

The claps then enter the poem properly:

clap-clap                    Pressed between the palms,  
                                  thin yellow moons—  
clap-clap                    still moist, heavy still  
                                  from last night’s soaking  
clap-clap                    slowly start finding their shape  
clap-clap. (16-24)

With the onomatopoeic use of the word “clap,” the sensual effect gets amped up in this section, interrupting the speech and creating a rhythm of its own. To Viviana Rangil, the repetition of the clapping sound “defines a physical movement that points to the sensual aspect of preparing food but imbricates it with the Lesbian sexual relationship as the hands alternate in clapping. At the same time, they shape the tortilla/kitchen as a space; they redefine the shape of relationships” (III). This space is where the identities of maker of tortillas and lover of women collapse, reaching the climactic point of the poem where every word has been imbued with sensuality. The moisture of the soaked corn calls up the wetness of arousal and of oral sex as the lover is pleased again after the “soaking” (21) of the night before.

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The reading, though, is still not dualistic: it evokes more than it offers clear double interpretations. It is a *mestizaje* of the different aspects of identity enacted in the poem, including both instead of simply using one to mask the other.

Considering this point as the climax, what follows is the beginning of the resolution:

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. (25-33)

We see a return of the body remembering, only that the memories are no longer of the steps involved in preparing tortillas but of the build-up to orgasm, which is described using the language of food. It is in some ways an inversion: Earlier in the poem, the evocative image of the “flannel sheet” (12) was used as a simile for describing the tortilla; now, food becomes simile and metaphor for sexual climax. Whereas in the direction of the first example we might have had “an air bubble” (29) that “gather[s] like a cry” (28), here we have the opposite: The cry of pleasure is “like an air bubble in the belly / of the unleavened cake” (29-30). While the intensity of this description and the “beads of grease sizzling / under the skin” (27-28) evoke passion, they also connote an internal struggle and can bring forth a memory of a time when the speaker had to contain these feelings within her body while performing her traditional role as woman/cook in her culture. On both levels, of internal struggle or of uncontrollable pleasure, this stanza brings the Chicana lesbian experience to the forefront while at the same time addressing the constrictions faced within her culture and the ecstasy that can be found through it.

The “[s]mell / of baked tortillas all over the house” (30-31) brings an understanding of the two realities of the kitchen and the bedroom that were previously intertwined and merged to a resolution: They are both connected by the smell of corn and sex and the sound of clapping of hands and bodies, and we can understand them as separate entities at this point. That offers a resolution to the tension built throughout the poem, leaving space for the very different last stanza:

Tortilleras, we are called  
grinders of maize, makers, bakers,  
slow lovers of women.  
The secret is starting from scratch. (34-37)

No longer a singular narrator, the poem now takes on a collective voice, bringing in a political layer by claiming the term which, to many Chicanas, might have been first understood as an insult. “The secret” shared in the last line, bringing back the recipe-related phrase “starting from scratch” (37), can be taken as advice on being a good lover, but it also suggests that it might be necessary to go back to the beginning and redefine the borders that have been delineated by dichotomies and have splintered the identity of the speaker. According to Ehrhardt, “[t]his 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” (95). But it also signifies new understandings of what it means to be a Chicana lesbian, a *tortillera*: at the same time a “grinder of maize” (35) and “slow lover of women” (36).

## CONCLUSION

Chicana lesbian writers—whose self-understanding hinges between Mexican and Anglo cultures, between their lesbian sexuality and the traditions of their heritage—have often described their own identity as a conflicted site, torn apart by the binary Western epistemologies Anzaldúa and Torres write about. Finding spaces that suspend these artificial boundaries is paramount to placating these inner battles and, one of these spaces they have found in their writing has been the kitchen.

The perspectives offered in the field of feminist and queer food studies offer a lot of room for Chicana lesbian writers to play out their inner struggles and find a resolution that includes all of their facets rather than privileging one. With a subject so close to their cultural identity, as Avakian describes it, and so entangled with issues of gender, class, and race, as well as themes such as nourishing, care, survival, and pleasure, they can deeply explore the different aspects of their identity simultaneously, as Alicia Gaspar de Alba does in “Making Tortillas.”

The contributions of Chicana scholars have much to add to any feminist and queer field of study. Food studies are interdisciplinary and intersectional by nature, and the study of lesbian experience in relation to food would not be complete without perspectives that cut across race, ethnicity, and class. The main contribution traced here, through the analysis of Gaspar de Alba’s poem, occurs at the intersection of all disciplines discussed: the ability to challenge and disrupt exclusionary modes of knowledge production. The work of *mestizaje*—the epistemology of relationship proposed by Torres—is a tool for dismantling the unjust categorizations that perpetuate these exclusions as well as violence and discrimination. By recognizing the inherent ability that food as a subject has for destabilizing epistemologies that breed inequality and injustice, the call is issued to further explore this power.

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