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Deconstructing Cultural Food Borders: The Creation of New Latinidades in Latina Literature through Consumption

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"This is the only spoon I use". He pointed to a stack of tortillas on the table. "That's the spoon my people have used since the beginning of time" (A Spoon for Every Bite).

Time - the very word connotes the expectation of change, of movement forward and yet, time does not seem to be factored in when speaking of the potential for transformation of cultural food habits. The Indigenous man in Joe Hayes' children's book *A Spoon for Every Bite* notes that an essential part of his culture is eating tortillas; their use is vital to the survival of his culture's consumption habits. His statement also suggests that no member of his pueblo in the past or the present would deviate from the use of tortillas as an eating utensil or they would risk no longer being considered a part of "my people"; an overarching statement which creates an

expectation of static cultural behavior that is uncontested and unchanged by time. The construction of cultural consumption habits and food traditions as static segments of cultural ritual through discourse such as this creates cultural food borders that are fixed to a particular idea of cultural authenticity and allegiance. Richard Handler emphasizes that “an authentic culture is one original to its possessors, one which exists only with them: in other words, an independently existent entity, asserting itself against all other cultures” (4). Authenticity’s exclusionary practices create exclusionary judgements on which ingredients and dishes fit into the (hi)story of a culture. These cultural food borders then are constructed as a basis for *authentic* Latinx culture, thereby creating a multitude of borders and expectations of cultural consumption embodied by food; excluding certain dishes and food stuffs from ever crossing the borders of the cultural body. Illusions of freedom and choice in what to eat are disrupted by a judgmental discourse in what is said about food, how it is said, and what expected behaviors of consumption are tied to collective Latinx cultural identity, known previously as *Latinismo*¹ and subsequently as *Latinidad*.²

Since this branch of food discourse demands specific forms of ingestion to maintain identity, a type of force-feeding occurs on both sides of the discourse. Intercultural members from previous generations on one side of the discourse attempt to preserve their ideas of *authentic* culture and tradition; desiring proof of cultural allegiance through the exclusive consumption of approved foods. Cross-cultural affiliates push at existing Latinx cultural food borders demanding assimilation to U.S. American food standards. This discourse builds cultural borders between and around recipes and their necessary ingredients. These recipes thus become the recipes (or rules) for living acceptable cultural lives in either sphere. We (and by we, I mean Latinxs who struggle with identity politics that are built around food) can contest these rules by substituting ingredients, making notes in the margins of the cookbook, or changing recipes to meet our palate’s needs. In doing so, Latinxs can deconstruct the constrictive borders of cultural authenticity and identity. Massimo Montanari’s text on food culture exemplifies the power of food and consumption in deconstructing cultural food borders as “food can serve as a mediator between different cultures” (134). The power of food is as much more than a mediator though; using the pathways built through mediation to cross cultural food borders so too can we cross into new communities and create new identities. By addressing the food prejudices and food rules within the cultural and regional groups presented in Esmeralda Santiago’s *When I Was Puerto Rican*, I will interrogate how food’s material and symbolic discourses become the foundation of Latinx cultural authenticity and tradition which create images of static food-based identity that can be transformed through an embrace of cultural border-crossings facilitated by multicultural exchange of foodstuffs.

The form of culturally symbolic communication pertinent to this investigation hinges on discourse. Specifically, intercultural and cross-cultural discourses about food, and the conflict that emerges from the forcing of eating behaviors through discourse. In this context, intercultural discourse is that which is said about food by members of the same familial, cultural, or regional group as the narrator, whether it is about their own group’s food stuffs or that of other cultural groups. Cross-cultural discourses refer to the commentaries on food stuffs by

¹ See Padilla, Felix M, 1985.

² See Caminero-Santangelo, Marta, 2007.

those whose own cultural affiliation is outside of the same groups as the narrator. It may include what cross-cultural speakers communicate about their own cultural food in comparison to the narrator's, as well as what they have to say about the narrator's cultural food stuffs. Roland Barthes argues that food is a system of communication which emits a "coherent set of food traits and habits [that] can constitute a complex but homogenous dominant feature useful for defining a general system of tastes and habits" (23). This general system of tastes and habits Barthes speaks of reflects cultural beliefs. Thus, by consuming dishes which are given significance in our individual cultures, we symbolically confirm and communicate to others our place as a member of our cultures and our allegiance to cultural homogeneity. We define allegiance and betrayal by what we ingest and that which we choose to forgo, creating a fantasy of a static culture and sets of tradition. The presence of food within literature can be examined to reveal the interworking of the larger ideologies of cultural identity, allegiance, and betrayal of this fantasy.

In the last year, the scholarly titles published that discussed food in literature ranged from discussions of the historical presence of food in British literature³ to food's creation of heritage stories in African narratives.⁴ As demonstrated by these texts, as well as their predecessors, food can be used to symbolize identity. Charlotte Boyce and Joan Fitzpatrick suggest that "depictions of food in literary works can help to explain the complex relationship between the body, subjectivity, and social structures" (i). The interactions of the body and food are normally taken to create the most substantial effects for a person but as Boyce and Fitzpatrick note, a person's approach to life and sense of belonging within their society is enveloped within the realm of food. They confirm the age old saying: you are what you eat. The symbolism carried by this phrase has impacted the study of identity formation and wedded it to food. The original context of Brillat-Savarin's proverb, "Tell me what you eat, and I will tell you what kind of man you are", has transformed and bestows a dominance of the communication of cultural symbolism onto food itself (25). This relationship between culture and what Elspeth Probyn calls "alimentary identity" not only offers the potential to bridge cultures but highlights oppressive eating structures. This relationship is the foundation for this article's investigation of the tension between this consumption-based identity and cultural loyalty, or the potential for betrayal of cultural tradition and authenticity through consumption. The replication of this tension within literature deserves further examination because these narratives demonstrate the potential for fracture of cultural identity when culinary tendencies, or the foods chosen to be consumed, are in opposition with what is assumed to be a symbol of cultural loyalty. Probyn also suggests that while the idea of food-based identity, or "alimentary identity", has been seen as static, they contain the potential for "ways of reworking the categories that once defined us" (33). This fracture and potential together allow for an emergence of transnational food fusions of tradition and adaptation, leading to a lineage of diasporic Latinx food cultures which allow for the development of identity outside of the expected norms.

Esmeralda Santiago's memoir *When I Was Puerto Rican* (1993) offers points of reference for discourses in which a Latina is force-fed opposing identities through constructed notions of tradition and authenticity which revolve around consumption. This is not just about eating though; it is a finely tuned method which merges ingestion and allegiance with traditions of

³ See Boyce, Charlotte, and Joan Fitzpatrick, 2017.

⁴ See Bishop, Jonathan Highfield, 2017.

consumption and the production of food. This method is communicated by Latinx cultural keepers of previous generations to younger members, defining the limits of loyalty through eating as well as the potential for betrayal. Santiago's memoir directly demonstrates that the contesting of static notions of tradition and cultural authenticity occurs through alteration of recipes and cultural border-crossing consumption, which forces the creation of new Latinidades.

Previous investigations of Santiago's text paid much attention to the direct association between the consumption of food and the eventual affirmation of Negi's chosen identity. Santiago's Negi is Puerto Rican and is forced from a young age to deal with cultural pressures that are encompassed by food discourses. Those scholars, like Marshall, who have written about Santiago's three memoirs, the first of which is *When I Was Puerto Rican*, have noted the effect of colonialism on Negi's relationship to food and consider how she must escape her shame by reclaiming her Puerto Rican identity. While it is generally a given that food in ethnic American literature works to communicate identity, I look to examine this concept further and consider the way the societies presented within these narratives speak about food in reference to cultural loyalty, tradition, and authenticity and the impact such discourse has on identity. I first turn to the process of force-feeding identity which incites the redefinition of "alimentary identities" and examine methods of control that provoked a need to revolt or adapt through multicultural consumption.

Santiago's memoir marks a geographical journey by Negi, whose cultural and ethnic identity is questioned based on her affinity or ability to eat foods established as her cultural foodstuffs. The purpose of discussing this memoir is not an attempt to compare and contrast thematic appearances of food, but to trace the transformation of Latinidad over a range of locations within the crossing of constructed cultural borders through the act of eating. Santiago's Negi grows up within a household which experiences tensions created by intercultural and cross-cultural food conflict. The rules established for her on what she is allowed to eat, or supposed to eat, demarcates who she is expected to be within her society. Negi's reactions and choices in response to this disrupt her anticipated identity.

Nationalism and the Puerto Rican Mouth

Essentialized ideas of cultural identity and expectations of conforming to tradition are instilled within children from the authority figures they are most likely to readily accept information from. In the early stages of development, we can assume the first authority figure a child meets are their parent. The relationship of parent and child is bound by both discourse and food as it is the parent who teaches a child what is allowed to go in their mouth as food and how to produce sounds which are understandable and acceptable within greater society. The subject of parent-child relationships within literature is one which perpetuates the creation of such static ideas.

The parent-child relationship in Esmeralda Santiago's memoir *When I Was Puerto Rican* demonstrates the impact intercultural discourse has on the development of a child's cultural identity. The section of the book set in Puerto Rico from Santiago's youth provides the first set of allegiance-based discourse grounded in consumption. The relevance of the United States' use of Puerto Rico as what Laura Briggs dubs a "laboratory in which development...was being tested as global policy" to Santiago's work is worth taking time to explore (110).

Prior to United States' intervention in one of its "unincorporated territories" from the 1930's through the 1960's, Puerto Rico was marked as being on the brink of widespread starvation (Berman Santana, 113). The United States implemented nutritional programs for families in various areas of Puerto Rico which consisted of education on the four food groups, cleanliness, and health care; one such program can be viewed in the descriptions of Santiago's memoir. All of the knowledge and *proper* habits that were instructed upon were based solely on U.S. American standards and produced tense, binary cross-cultural discourses of clean versus dirty and right versus wrong in which the United States and its food stood on the clean and correct side and Puerto Rico on the other. United States government medical historians regard this era as the reformation of Puerto Rico from an impoverished nation into the ideal "showcase of development", inclusive of Puerto Rican endorsed clean living conditions and higher standards of eating (Gonzalez, ii). This justification of the colonialism enacted on Puerto Rico asserts an image of economic prosperity expedited by the United States through an investment in food sources and the Puerto Rican people, but does not recognize that the programs increased what Déborah Berman Santana calls "the gap between the affluent and the impoverished" (124). The creation of programs which were internationally outsourced with supplies from the United States did not work to create strength from within the country itself, but to institute dependence on the United States as a source of livelihood. These politics, Santana suggests, worked to "speed up the westernization of those societies, and ensure that a powerful elite will always benefit from its alliance with the metropolis...It will not solve the problems of poverty, unemployment, or injustice for the most rapidly growing sector of the world's population: the poor" (113). This historical legacy, and current relationship, of United States control and influence in Puerto Rico within a colonial context can be observed first-hand through discourses of food superiority in Santiago's memoir.

The historical influx of cross-cultural discourse about acceptable and hygienic food sources that came with the programs instituted in Puerto Rico by the United States drove tensions within Puerto Rican communities higher as they attempted to keep a firm grasp on their cultural foodstuffs. Within this battle questions of cultural allegiance through food emerge and become centered around conflicting cultural discourses; one which is produced by the United States program personnel and the other by Puerto Rican parents. Kyla Wazana Tompkins provides important insight into the battle over influence on a child's mouth. She suggests that the cook's (or provider of food's) ability to speak comes from the escape of the physical boundaries of their designated space through the food that they cook. Tompkins attests that kitchens hold a form of political power for cooks because it is not merely a workspace, but the one place that the cook "threatens to speak" (Tompkins 17). Through this food,

"not only does the kitchen come to be associated with the mouth, more specifically, with the mouth that will not close (and thus the mouth that laughs, eats, speaks, and screams); it becomes the central space where the threatening porosity between bodies— most specifically between ruling-class and subaltern bodies— is most apparent" (17).

As both parent and provider of food as cook, the parent has ultimate control over a child's mouth and thereby ultimate control of their cultural food borders. The reinforcement of the parent-child food discourse dynamic is manifold as the only way to assert cultural identity and Puerto Rican nationalism is to close the child's mouth to *gringo* food (Santiago, 51). This

discourse becomes so embodied by the child that if the mouth is unable to close then the body will close the borders to its stomach and purge the invading sources.

In true representation of the historical markers of the time period the memoir details, Santiago, who goes by her childhood nickname Negi in *When I Was Puerto Rican*, is told her diet of regional food stuffs, such as “pigeon peas, pasteles wrapped in banana leaves, crispy fried green plantains, and boiled yucca”, is unhealthy and unsafe to eat by United States nutritionists during a community meeting (40). The meeting consists of groups of parents, mostly mothers, who inquire on the sustainability of this diet when they notice that “none of the fruits or vegetables on [the] chart grow in Puerto Rico” (67). In response to these comments the families are instructed to substitute familiar produce for those they have never seen before in the U.S. American food groups chart. Following a brief back-and-forth about which foods can be easily exchanged for one another, the nutritionist is stumped on the topic of breadfruit and concludes that “it is best not to make substitutions for the recommended foods. That would throw the whole thing off” (67). The battle for the child’s cultural identity begins at this point, as both intercultural and cross-cultural affiliates compete for the right to control what enters a child’s mouth, a physical cultural border.

The crossing of physical borders is demonstrated by the forcing of cross-cultural foodstuffs across the borders of the Puerto Rican body and in through the mouth which results in an increase of intercultural discourse forcing expectations of blind allegiance. Negi expresses concern about the “gringos” and wonders if consuming their food will make the Puerto Ricans “Americanos” (Santiago 51, 73). In response to Negi’s questions her father makes it clear to her that you risk becoming American “only if you like it better than our Puerto Rican food”, cementing Negi’s cultural and regional identity within her allegiance to consumption of Puerto Rican food (74). Negi’s reaction to the discourse is to develop a physical repulsion to the food provided in the United States cafeteria known as the *centro communal*.

Negi’s first experiences with the food provided in the United States run facility are preemptively corrupted since she has decided that the food is “disgusting” before tasting it because her father has told her that the only way to retain her cultural identity is to refrain from enjoyment of the “gringo imperialist food” (75, 82). When fed a concoction of peanut butter and milk, Negi immediately vomits after taking a sip of the beverage which she claims tastes sour (82). She is scolded for her purging by a Mrs. Garcia and informed that it is powdered milk and cannot get sour. Here we see a conflicting intersection of discourses. It could be assumed that the milk does not actually taste strange and Negi is imposing her beliefs onto it, but it is also plausible that the nutritionists have indoctrinated servers like Mrs. Garcia to believe that the food they have provided is without fault. Whatever the source of the discourse and the actual taste of the milk, the psychological effect of Negi’s father’s discourse can be marked in her resistance to ingesting the food, her bodily reaction of vomiting, and subsequent illness when she does consume it: “for days I lay sick in bed, throwing up, racked by chills and sweats that left the bedcovers soaked” (84). As Meredith Abarca suggests, “when food anchors identity politics, the focus shifts from abstract discourses to concrete realities” (251). As such, the discourse has transformed, and Negi is left momentarily ill even though none of the milk actually made its way into her stomach. She is not made ill by the drink but in the development of a concrete bodily reaction to conflicting cultural discourses.

Only one of Negi's school mates in the text recognizes the problem with U.S. American food-policy implementation, informing Negi that his father told him the food was being provided "all because of politics", but the other children like Negi's friend Juanita form no repellant reaction to the food from the *centro communal* and actually enjoy it (Santiago, 70, 76, 82). So, we can assume that those parents like Juanita's have not been exposing their children to this intercultural discourse about the dangers of foods outside of the Puerto Rican sphere. But, Negi begins to embody the intercultural discourse produced by her parents so much so that she incites severe punishment for her actions in the *centro communal* by taking on her mother's voice and discourse, saying "I remembered a word Mami used for food that made her gag. 'It's ... repugnante!'" (82). Mami's words begin to flow out of the open mouth of Negi, as it is Mami's kitchen Negi is used to eating from and therefore it is through this porosity of body and mouth that the intercultural discourse is transferred from parent to child (Tompkins, 17). The cross-cultural discourse yielded by the ruling-class United States personnel is reappropriated as they entered Puerto Rico telling the citizens that their food and hygiene were disgusting and now Negi uses her voice, and her mother's words, to proclaim her allegiance and preservation of cultural identity.

Both instances of intercultural food discourse by Negi's mother and father endorse the food stuffs of their own society and keep those of other societies on the outskirts. Though her father directly invokes nationalism by means of tying identity to assumed differences in American and Puerto Rican food, her mother is Negi's cultural authority on food, "because Mami never lied about food", which makes any food her mother commands to be safe for Negi to physically and mentally grasp (47). Lin T. Humphrey notes that "In memory culture, where we find traditional recipes and food stories, 'traditional foods' may refer to either the kind of heritage or history that we actually had or the one we only wish we had. When we label food traditional, it is usually a mark of approval." (Humphrey, 163). Negi learns about making blood sausage from her mother, a traditional dish which uses the entire pig, and the description of the process that is used to make them forces unconditional approval of authentic foods on Negi (Santiago 42-3). Her mother frames the legacy of their village's insistence on the use of an animal from snout to tail as a tradition that is stomached and not questioned, just like Negi's food-based identity must not be questioned or she will jeopardize her allegiance and claim to authenticity. Through the kitchen the matriarch of the family becomes the leader and the decision maker. These roles combined with the traditional role of the woman as the cook create the paradox in which those who eat from the matriarch's kitchen are force-fed their cultural identity. Closed mouths to what the matriarch chooses to provide, or has the ability to provide, equates to defiance which is met with beratement and exclusion (Tompkins, 91). This shaming creates a compounded image of forced identity and authenticity as there is no other option to belonging than agreeing to proclaim allegiance by filling your mouth, not with Mami's words this time, but with the foods marked as traditional. As Negi's life continues in the book, her regional movement eventually facilitates an adaptation and change of her food-based cultural identity.

The development of the rift in Negi's expected cultural identity comes when she is fourteen and moves to New York City with her mother and younger brother. Her first interest is in the markets that her mother takes her to. They are not Puerto Rican shops and house no *authentically* Puerto Rican ingredients. Yet, separated from the direct sources of regional ingredients, it seems that a change in food source and location of eating makes no difference to Negi as she explains, "Chico makes good asopao...It was delicious, thick with rice and chunks of chicken,

cubed potatoes, green olives, and capers...just the way I liked it” (Santiago 219). Negi does not develop a sense of repulsion for the dishes, like she did to food from the United States as a child, even though it could technically be considered outside of Puerto Rican food customs because it is made in the United States. Now that Negi and her family have relocated to America their access to “genuine” ingredients from Puerto Rico to make their food is limited and could potentially limit their claim of cultural allegiance. Negi’s tension with what is considered authentically Puerto Rican transforms as her cultural identity transforms. Stuart Hall invites the idea that “cultural identity is a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as ‘being’. It belongs to the future as much as to the past” (225). Though this concept addresses the ever-changing nature of cultural identity, if it is assumed that food defines cultural identity then food traditions must too be consistently changing. As the source of ingredients for Puerto Rican food, as well as the substitution of ingredients not found in the United States occurs, Negi crosses boundaries into a new form of Latinidad.

Negi’s adaptation and adjustment of cultural identity through the crossing of national borders with the move to New York puts her in contact with those portions of United States food culture she once despised saying, “I felt disloyal for wanting to learn English, for liking pizza” (229). All of these instances work in an attempt to reformulate her idea of what it means to be a Latinx woman through food. As Santiago notes in her prologue about the difference between the guavas of her youth in Puerto Rico and those of her adulthood in New York, they “smell faintly of late summer afternoons and hopscotch under the mango tree. But this is autumn in New York, and I’m no longer a child” (Santiago 3). Guavas are no longer something that she can grab directly off of the bush but located in the “exotic fruit display” and a reminder of how her identity has changed over time with entrance into adulthood, which is also an entrance through multicultural food borders (3). Returning to Hall, it can be seen that the “becoming” of Negi’s cultural identity as an adult recognizes her connection to the Puerto Rican diaspora through the guavas but resolves the cultural tension she once experienced by placing it in the past of tradition as a stepping stone to moving forward in the development of her present identity. The title of Santiago’s text works to communicate the departure from the identity that was forced on her as a child since it says she *was* Puerto Rican rather than still considering herself to be the concept of Puerto Rican that was presented through the discourses she experienced as a child. Since food identity is the basis for all identity.

Recognizing New Latinidades

Differing responses to intercultural and cross-cultural discourses which demand confirmation of cultural and ethnic identity demonstrate the creation of manifold voices which reformulate notions of food-based Latinidades. The genre of literature explored here offers valuable forms of vocalization of such manipulated forms of Latina food-based identities. As our food continues to change over time in source, meaning, and method for consumption, so too does it create new Latinidades.

Resolving the tension exemplified in *When I Was Puerto Rican*, which is caused by intercultural and cross-cultural ideas of authenticity and tradition requires fluidity of borders. Negi eventually transforms imposed ideas of food based cultural identity and begins to redefine what authenticity and allegiance mean by negotiating her identity through multicultural consumption. It is through this multicultural consumption that new Latinidades are formed. These differences manifest themselves in the changing of recipes which were thought the

hallmark of familial cultural identity. The tension produced by these recipe alterations are the creators of new Latinidades.

As we continue to consume, we are reminded by Stuart Hall that the discourse we employ in reference to our own and other's cultural foods in order to give meaning must acknowledge that "meaning is never finished or completed, but keeps moving on to encompass other, additional or supplementary meanings" (229). Moving on means the crossing of borders, physical borders of both nations and bodies, and invisible cultural and ethnic borders. These borders and the identities they define are blurred by the crossing of food. We need to recognize new forms of Latinidad so that different voices can find their own spaces, whether they are Puertorriquenos in New York or Tejanas in El Paso like myself. Food in these narratives teaches us is that there is a commonality in which the desire and demand of naming a people under one ethnic group is what creates the tension within and without.

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Elizabeth Vigil is an alumna of The University of Texas at El Paso where she earned a B.A. in English and American Literature with a concentration in Chicano/a Studies and in Anthropology with a sociocultural specialization and a concentration in Religious Studies. Her research interests are grounded in contemporary ethnic American literature and use of all forms of traditional and non-traditional literature to investigate the representations of the mouth as the pathway to transnational connection of peoples. Elizabeth studies the relationship between the mouth as a transfer of cultural tradition, the use of food as a form of social control through food-shaming discourse, the transformation of tradition by younger generations who adjust cuisine and religion to fit their lifestyle, and the use of religion as a form of segregation which predates race.