STORIES WE TELL, STORIES WE EAT:

MEXICAN FOODWAYS, CULTURAL IDENTITY, AND IDEOLOGICAL STRUGGLE IN NETFLIX'S *TACO CHRONICLES*

by

BELA SÁNCHEZ

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Student: Bela Sánchez

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Stephen Wooten	Chair
Sarah Wald	Member
Sharon Luk	Member

and

Krista Chronister	Vice Provost for Graduate Studies

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THESIS ABSTRACT

Bela Sánchez

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Food is a biological necessity imbued with numerous social, cultural, and economic implications for identity production and everyday meaning-making. Food television is a unique medium for the meanings of food and foodways to be illustrated and communicated. This research analyzes the food docuseries *Taco Chronicles* as a popular media text that reflects cultural and national identities and ideological struggle in Mexico. Specific themes which emerged include the interplay of indigeneity, Europeanness, and mestizaje as racialized identities; food as a way to uphold or challenge heteronormative gender roles and expectations; and shared cultural identity and the everyday practices of the nation as conveyed through food. This thesis interrogates the multiple sociocultural hierarchies at stake in *Taco Chronicles* and argues that the show (re)creates the boundaries of shared identity through its visual and discursive elements.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In this paper, I will report on an analysis of the television show *Taco Chronicles* as a popular media text that reflects cultural identity, everyday practice, and ideological struggle in Mexico. *Taco Chronicles* is a Mexican documentary streaming series distributed by Netflix. The show premiered its first season on July 12, 2019, and its second season released on September 15, 2020. The show was created by Pablo Cruz, a film and television producer from Mexico City, and is produced by Gloria Content, Cruz's own production company based out of Los Angeles, California ("Gloria"). Gloria Content is also co-owned by Diego Luna, a Mexican actor who entered the Hollywood mainstream from a successful career in telenovelas. These affiliations are notable because they indicate that the brains behind *Taco Chronicles* have some amount of power within the deeply entrenched TV and film hierarchies.

Unlike traditional television, streaming services do not provide ratings data, so it is difficult to know where and how many people have watched *Taco Chronicles.* However, given that the show is produced by a Mexican team and distributed by a US American company, and that the show is entirely in Spanish, the target audience is likely US Americans with an interest in traveling to Mexico, and middle to upper class Mexicans with the means to access streaming services. Although these two audiences differ in their positionality in many ways, they are united by a particular sensibility about leisure capitalism and the value of tourism. The show also pays attention to the particular segment of the population in the United States, especially those people living in California and Texas, who possess an affinity for or even sense of ownership over Mexican food regardless of their ethnic, racial, or national heritage. *Taco Chronicles* is selling viewers on the value of traveling to eat foods in the places where the foods originate, in the

places where they are *best*, which demands a level of expendable income and time that are not available to the average resident of either Mexico or the United States. It is reinforcing the particular values of a certain kind of viewer, and implicitly excluding the interests or preoccupations of others.

Taco Chronicles has a total of 13 episodes, each focused on a different type of taco: from Mexico City's emblematic al pastor, to the cabrito of the northeastern grazing lands, to the pit-roasted cochinita of the Yucatán peninsula, and more (a full list of episodes can be found in the Appendix). The show is rife with stunning visuals: macro views of taco fillings, sweeping shots of urban and rural sceneries, all drawing the viewer in and getting their stomach grumbling. Each episode provides a brief history of the food, highlights particular purveyors or regions where it can be found, and illustrates the social lives that spring up around that taco. As a series, *Taco Chronicles* is straightforwardly a food show with travel components, highlighting key regions, restaurants of interest, and experts on different aspects of Mexican food. It is inherently designed to communicate a singular storyline, one that is unified around shared ideals and identities. However, given the enormous variety of foods and people highlighted throughout the show, any singular straightforward narrative is threatened by people and quotes that offer alternative conceptions of mexicanidad. Through each episode, tensions over racial and ethnic heritage, gender norms and expectations, and the validity of a shared national identity, color the exploration of various taco preparations.

The central question guiding this research is: How do Mexican food and foodways in popular, particularly in the context of Netflix's *Taco Chronicles,* operate as a site of ideological struggle over national identity? In asking this question, I aim to consider the validity of shared identity and the underlying sociocultural hierarchies that impact Mexican identity. Thus, my

research focuses on two primary subquestions. First, in what ways are hegemonic ideas about indigeneity, Europeanness, and mestizaje communicated through foods in popular media? And second, how do representations of Mexican food and foodways challenge or reinforce heteronormative gender and sexuality?

I will argue that, by telling stories about food and foodways, *Taco Chronicles* operates as a site for key sociopolitical and cultural tensions to play out in the public sphere. *Taco Chronicles* engages a public discourse about what it means to be Mexican, what foods are considered Mexican, and what it means to share food within the bounds of these definitions. I will assert that popular media about food can (re)establish shared cultural and national identities by reinforcing hegemonic ideals about racial identity, gender roles, and the boundaries of the nation. This research fits into a broader literature about food, foodways, and identity production, including work by Arjun Appadurai on the creation of national cuisines in India and by Atsuko Ichijo and Ronald Ranta on the many linkages between food and nationalism. In the scholarly literature on Mexican foodways specifically, this research could not exist without the expansive historical work done by Jeffrey M. Pilcher on shifting foodways and shared cuisines both within Mexico's borders and beyond. My work also fits alongside Steffan Ayora-Diaz's exploration of regional foodways in the Yucatán peninsula and Sarah Bak-Geller Corona's many articles exploring the origins of Mexican national cuisine, especially in early cookbooks. Finally, in terms of its theoretical genealogy, this research draws on Stuart Hall's explorations of cultural identity, Jon Fox and Cynthia Miller-Idris's idea of everyday nationhood, and Tim Edensor's description of national identity as a cultural matrix with infinite points of connectivity.

In the first section, I will outline my methodology and explore the theoretical underpinnings for this research. I will frame my research through work from television studies,

cultural studies, and food studies, treating the television show as a cultural text that can be read for sociocultural and political tensions and themes. In the second section, I will provide a brief history of food and foodways in Mexico, focusing on three major historical moments to guide my work: indigenous foodways before European colonization, cultural mixing after the Conquest, and changes to food and the production of mass media about food after the Revolution of 1910-1920. I will highlight the three aforementioned moments as key turning points for the development of modern Mexican national and regional cuisines. I include this historical grounding to emphasize the continuity of particular foods, ideas, and cultural tensions, and to highlight that modern day foodways can only exist through the ongoing negotiation of historical legacies. Although history is vital to understand the present and the future, the history I provide is just one version of a story that could be told in innumerable ways. I rely heavily on academic texts and forms of knowledge (see Jeffrey Pilcher's *¡Que Vivan Los Tamales!* and *Planet Taco* for two academic histories of Mexican food and foodways), which implicitly devalue the lived experiences of diverse populations, especially marginalized communities. The purpose of this research is to examine the positionality and mediated nature of a particular popular cultural artifact, but any history is always equally mediated, no matter how objective its goals. Thus, I provide the historical framing not with the goal of objectivity, but to further explicate the explicit linkages that *Taco Chronicles* makes to the past in each episode.

In the third section, I will conduct an analysis of the discursive and visual elements of *Taco Chronicles*, with three subsections focused on specific themes which emerged. The first subsection will address the interplay of indigeneity, Europeanness, and mestizaje as racialized identities and as ideological frameworks for talking about food. I find that allusions to indigenous heritage are used to deeply root the modern nation in an ancient lineage, but that

Taco Chronicles ultimately reinscribes Europeanization as a form of moral uplift and social progress. The second subsection will concentrate on food as a way to uphold heteronormative gender roles, but also as a way to challenge those expectations and queer cultural identity. Here, I note how the kitchen is simultaneously a tool for women's subjugation and a site for feminist struggle, so that women's cooking knowledge and men's dominance in the commercial kitchen ultimately reinforce the same norms. I also highlight the presence of an LGBTQ+ taquera as a case of queering the nation. The third subsection will focus on shared cultural identity and the everyday practices of the nation as conveyed through food and rhetoric about food. I find that the elements of national cuisine work to reinforce the boundaries of shared national identity, and that the show necessarily creates and recreates the nation as such.

In the fourth and final section, I will conclude by addressing the limitations of this research and possibilities for future research.

CHAPTER II

METHODS AND THEORY

Television, food, and close reading of both

This research will examine the discursive and visual elements of the Netflix docuseries *Taco Chronicles* (Spanish: *Las Crónicas del Taco*) as a popular media text that reflects everyday practice and meaning making. Because television is everywhere, even more so in 2022 than it was when broadcast television began, it is a "principal mechanism" by which a culture can "communicate with its collective self" (Fiske & Hartley xvi). Television is a gigantic "archive of human sense-making," and its ever-widening availability means it is being actively viewed and constituted twenty-four/seven (ibid. xviii). However, the era of streaming services also means that no one show can claim that the whole world is watching, as our niche tastes become "reified as separate and distinct communities" where favored television shows reinforce particular "political beliefs, supposed facts, and truths about the world, and hence radically different senses of the world we're living in" (Gray & Lotz 129-130). Television in the modern era, then, has a much less defensible claim to hegemony, but it still participates in the communication of hegemonic ideals and key ideological struggles as they are playing out simultaneously in other arenas. A singular television show may only represent a fraction of the viewing public, but it has an inescapable relationship to the larger social, political, and cultural forces of its time.

The documentary film (or series) is a unique cultural text because of its ontological status as closer to reality or more intimately connected to the real world (Grant et al. xxiv). Although the documentary has largely been associated with film and film studies, even as Netflix has become a "powerhouse of documentary production and distribution," the serialized documentary (docuseries) shares much in common with fictional television (Gray & Lotz 131-132). The

docuseries makes a claim to truth that is perceived as legitimate based on its association with reality, but it necessarily remains a singular act of interpretation on the part of a discrete set of actors. The work is a representation of one version of real life, where the creator is a participant and "active fabricator of meaning," rather than a neutral or omniscient reporter on the facts (Nichols 18). Like any other televisual or media format, then, the documentary series can be read as a text with "historically-situated cultural and political tensions" that shape individual and collective human experience (Moya 9).

Food television specifically incorporates "the vicarious pleasures of watching someone else cook and eat," "the emulsion of entertainment and cooking," and "the jumbling of traditional gender roles" (Adema 113). Food television can provoke a sort of "nationalist nostalgia" by typifying particular cultures and ways of eating and providing consumers with a template for authenticity (Bordi 97). In the face of globalizing and modernizing impulses, food television can quell the increasing anxieties of demands on time and labor, complex social networks, and a heightening need for comfort and security that is not being met by home-cooking (Adema 113). Thus, food television is an arena for ideological struggle over national identity, over what foods are traditional or authentic, what foods are mainstream or fringe, which foods—and by extension, which people—belong or do not. In Mexico, where tacos remain the quintessential street food around which cultural identity is articulated, a food television show that centers tacos draws on a lineage of ideas about national cuisine to reify shared identities.

I will employ close reading as a method for textual analysis, understanding close reading as the formal analysis of discursive and visual elements in order to interpret a text. Close reading allows for the thematic and structural elements of the text to reveal both the meanings of the text itself and the "broader flows and operations of the culture in which the text exists" (Lewis 32).

Of particular interest are those elements that reify national identity through food culture, history, and everyday practice.

Everyday nationalism and cultural identity

Mexico is a nation-state, a cultural unit (the nation) with a congruent political unit (the state). The work of nationalism, then, is to maintain, reestablish, and reify the relationship between the two units, while simultaneously determining the boundaries of the shared cultural identity. The national culture is a discourse, a way of constructing meaning across "deep internal divisions and differences," so that the nation of many disparate groups becomes [tenuously] united by a shared narrative (Hall 297). Similarly, Tim Edensor considers national identity as the nexus of a cultural matrix "which provides innumerable points of connection, nodal points where authorities try to fix meaning, and constellations around which cultural elements cohere" (vii). Across this cultural matrix, national identity is enacted in a variety of ways, from the legislative decisions of governmental officials to the everyday practices of national citizens. Fox and Miller-Idris identify four ways that nationhood is reproduced in everyday life: talking the nation, choosing the nation, performing the nation, and consuming the nation (537-38). Popular culture, by commingling the intimate space of the home and the people with the public space of discourse and official cultural production, takes up each of these tasks to represent and reproduce notions of national belonging. *Taco Chronicles* talks the nation through its discursive elements, while encouraging its viewers to consume the nation through its focus on food. The show reifies national identity by way of familiar, everyday symbols and food culture.

Food, food culture, and national identity

Arjun Appadurai describes food as a "highly condensed social fact," with a "marvelously plastic kind of collective representation," that can "signal rank and rivalry, solidarity and

community, identity or exclusion, and intimacy or distance" (*Gastro-politics* 494). Food holds immense power in human sociocultural formations because it is both constantly necessary and always—to greater or lesser extents—perishable (ibid.). Given both its immediate biological importance and its myriad social and economic implications, it is no wonder that food is enlisted as a tool for the establishment and reinforcement of national identity. Food culture helps reproduce and sustain the nation through food-related practices, patterns, images, and boundaries (Ichijo & Ranta 7). Certain ethnic, local, or regional specialties may be taken up by the national food culture, while others may be obscured or exoticized, in order to frame a cohesive narrative of the nation.

Storytelling about food in official and popular contexts projects a particular understanding of what the nation eats (ibid. 9). Asserting and enacting national identity through food—performing the nation, as it were—means producing, consuming, and otherwise choosing foods that directly link to the nation's "perceived or imagined history, social traditions, culture, and geography" (ibid. 8). The national cuisine is the feast of the imagined community, demarcating food-related boundaries for a diverse populous and consolidating a messy history into a shared narrative. Popular culture like *Taco Chronicles* that focuses on national cuisine as a central component of cultural identity is actively co-creating the nation with the people producing the food, the people consuming both the media and the food, and the state agents under whose auspices all these cultural symbols are being created.

CHAPTER III

A BRIEF HISTORY OF MEXICO AND ITS FOODWAYS

Pre-Columbian foodways

Prior to the arrival of Spanish imperialists, there was another empire whose influence spread across central Mexico.[1] In the Valley of Mexico, on a marshy island in Lake Texcoco, the Mexica, now more commonly known as the Aztecs, established the settlement that would eventually become the great city of Tenochtitlan. The Mexicas' relentless engagement in warfare for territorial expansion and tributary relationships caused the empire to rise from a city-state to cover the entire central basin of Mexico. The empire was bounded on nearly all its sides—by the arid north from which they had once migrated, the Tarascan empire to the west, the Tlaxcalans to the east, the Maya lowlands to the south, whose weak market system made them poor candidates for tribute (Deeds et al. 51). The dominance of the Aztec Empire in terms of cultural production and hegemony cannot be overstated; even in the present day, representations and ideas about "ancient" indigenous Mexicans harken most often to the Aztec way of life. The most salient manifestation of the power of the empire could be seen in the trade, production, and consumption of food.

The great market of Tlatelolco, at the northern end of Tenochtitlan, was the hub for the sale of food produced within the valley and received by way of tribute (Pilcher, *¡Que Vivan Los Tamales!* 8). The vegetables were many and varied: dozens of varieties of maize, chilies ranging from deep green to fiery red, squashes in shades of yellow, plump tomatoes, bright orange sweet potatoes, jicama roots, cactus paddles, watercress and sorrel and epazote and hoja santa.

[1] This thesis will cover a period when this region was known by many different names, from the Nahuatl Anahuac to the Spanish Virreinato de Nueva España, to the modern Mexico, coupled with expanding and contracting borders, polities, and peoples. For the purposes of this writing, I will use the term "Mexico" to refer to the land within the boundaries of the modern nation-state, unless otherwise stated.

Alongside the vegetables were fruits like zapote, with its inky, chocolaty flesh, spiky green guanabana, avocados large and small, and a rainbow of cactus fruits. Butchers sold rabbits, gophers, possums, and dogs, plus the more highly prized venison, armadillo, iguana, and axolotl. Fishmongers brought an enormous range of delicacies to the market: dried shrimp, crabs, oysters, clams, snails, lobsters, turtles, frogs, octopi, fish roe, and countless species of freshwater fish from the nearby lakes and streams. The market was a feast for every sense, evidence of the strength and power of the Aztec Empire.

Within the Aztec Empire, cuisine was highly stratified based on class standing; while the royalty enjoyed a seemingly endless parade of foods and preparations from all over the empire[2], peasants and slaves primarily consumed the simple milpa diet of corn, beans, squash, and peppers. Tortillas, those perfect parcels of nixtamalized corn dough cooked hot and fast on a clay comal, were the primary source of complex carbohydrates and accounted for as much as eighty percent of calorie intake (Pilcher, *¡Que Vivan Los Tamales!* 12). Maize was first domesticated about 9000 years ago, and nixtamalized[3] corn was consumed as early as 1500-1200 BCE (Green 317). Three other foods made up the core components of the basic diet: beans, squash, and chiles (Pilcher, *¡Que Vivan Los Tamales!* 12). Although meat from a variety of species was available in pre-Columbian Mexico, the highly stratified social structure of the Aztec Empire made it largely unavailable for non-elites. Beans were the most important source of protein in the central valley, while fish was more significant in coastal regions and nuts and seeds were enjoyed in the more

[2] In his account of the colonization of New Spain, conquistador Bernal Diaz del Castillo recounted the customs of Moctezuma II, describing spreads of thirty or more stews with ingredients from all over the Empire (Díaz del Castillo Vol. 2, Ch. 91).

[3] Nixtamalization describes the process by which maize is soaked and simmered in an alkaline solution—usually made from mineral lime (calcium oxide) or wood ashes—before it is ground into masa. Nixtamalization helps to loosen the indigestible hulls of maize kernels, adds calcium, improves protein value, and converts free riboflavin and niacin into bioavailable nutrients (Green 317). The most important outcome of the nixtamalization process is the conversion of niacin, making it available for absorption in the body and thus preventing pellagra.

southerly tropical climes. Squash and chiles, along with numerous other vegetables and fruits, rounded out the nutritional needs of Mesoamerican peoples by providing vitamins and trace minerals, along with significant amounts of water—of utmost importance especially in the hot, semiarid climate around Tenochtitlán.

To speak of a unified cuisine in pre-Colombian Mesoamerica presents many of the same challenges as the notion of a national cuisine in modern Mexico. The diversity of ingredients at hand across the territory resulted in a range of culinary patterns based on geography and cultural identity. While the Aztec Empire was a dominant imperial force that used cuisine to assert ethnic identity and power over other cultures, it remains true that there was a significant variety of foodways in pre-Columbian Mexico. Due to the tropical climate of the Yucatán peninsula, Mayan peoples consumed significantly more tree crops in daily life, such as the aforementioned avocado and guanabana, as well as papayas, guavas, breadnuts, and chayas, among others (White 6). Moreover, the Maya likely consumed cassava, a starchy tuberous root, as a complementary source of carbohydrates to the more universally consumed maize (Cagnato & Ponce 284). The consumption of nixtamalized maize transcended regional and cultural boundaries, taking a huge range of forms from the most common tortilla and to highly decorated tamales, but the differences between different cultural foodways were just as important to articulating identity and establishing boundaries between peoples. This hugely varied foodscape[4] was the landing place for the Spanish conquistadores, and almost immediately began to see the consequences of European arrival.

[4] Here, I draw on Ayora-Diaz's concept of the foodscape as "the shifting, changing, and dynamic arena where cultural sources of food, ingredients, recipes, cookbooks, cookware, cooking technologies, ingredients, and prepared meals … become meaningful culinary markers for the consumers." (15)

Spanish conquest and cultural mixing

On the heels of the unification of Castilla and Aragón and the culmination of the Reconquista with the fall of Granada, the newly established Spanish Crown celebrated their victories by organizing a large-scale and far-reaching attack on the people they considered Other. Within the Spanish territory, the Tribunal of the Holy Office of the Inquisition, commonly known as the Spanish Inquisition, was founded to maintain Catholic orthodoxy in the kingdom and rid their soil of the Muslim and Jewish people who had lived on the Iberian Peninsula during the 800 years of Moorish rule. In the same era, Ferdinand and Isabella hired the now-infamous Christopher Columbus to find a western route to Asia. Instead, Columbus stumbled onto the Western continent and surrounding islands that would soon yield unimaginable capital gains for the Spanish Crown. Thus, the consolidation of the Crown, the reaffirmation of Catholic supremacy, and the conquest of the Americas proceeded in tandem, establishing Christendom on continents new and old.

But the unsung hero of Conquests both within Spain and outside was the Iberian pig. Because Jewish and Muslim peoples both avoid pork as part of their religious laws, the presence and consumption of pork was a simple way for the Inquisition to judge whether a household had wholeheartedly converted to Catholicism (Deeds et al. 150). On the other side of the world, Spanish conquistadores were arriving in the New World with livestock to sustain themselves, including the Iberian pig—first in present-day Cuba, then on from there to continental ports in New Spain (present-day Mexico) (Vann). Within a decade after conquest, pigs had become so numerous in New Spain that laws were being passed to clear them from the streets of Mexico City (Pilcher, *¡Que Vivan Los Tamales!* 30). Although meat was consumed in pre-Columbian Mexico, it was not readily available to non-elites, because there were no domesticated large

mammals in the region. The proliferation of swine represented a radical shift in the foodscape of Mesoamerica, as pigs not only required land and resources, but also demanded to be eaten by somebody. Thus, pork became equally important in the Americas to ensure that colonized peoples were adopting the cultural and religious norms of Spain. If the Spanish could introduce their livestock to the diets of indigenous peoples, it was a significant step in the process of "civilizing" the continent for further Europe domination.

Pork was just one in an innumerable list of Old-World imports that radically altered the Mesoamerican foodscape. Wheat, the grain of choice for colonizers, was planted everywhere, although it only truly flourished in the dry regions of northwestern New Spain. Onions and garlic, a parade of livestock and their associated dairy products, cooking oil, citrus fruits, and sugar cane, among many others, all expanded the pantheon of New World cuisine—but not without serious growing pains (Pilcher, *Coming Home* 188). Corn became a serious sticking point between colonizers and indigenous peoples, especially because Papal authority deemed only wheat appropriate for use as Catholic communion (Earle 699). The most significant sources of both calories and identity remained ethnically exclusive, with bread feeding Spaniards and their descendants and tortillas continuing to feed indigenous communities (Pilcher, *¡Que Vivan Los Tamales!* 27). Cultural mixing was piecemeal and violent; the success of Spanish wheat in the northern half of the colony was coupled with silver mines worked by indigenous slaves, while in the area south of Mexico City, native peoples maintained stronger political and cultural autonomy (ibid. 38). Food, then, was not a neutral source of calories or sustenance, but a politicized symbol of cultural identity, social rank and status, and investment in the Spanish colonial project. From the outset, food was used to establish in-groups and out, display social mores and beliefs, and identify oneself as belonging (or not) in the new world order.

Revolution and postrevolutionary appetites

400 years post-Conquest, as the Mexican Revolution drew to a tentative, unrevolutionary close, the idea of a shared Mexican identity was in upheaval. Post-Independence identity had relied on a complicated mixing of European ideals and aesthetics with a nostalgia for an invented indigenous past. During the Porfiriato, the 35-year period defined by the dictatorship of General Porfirio Díaz, mestizo identity began to shift to the core of Mexican nationalism. Mestizaje, literally translated in English as "miscegenation," refers to the idea of a mixed European and indigenous race in the Spanish Americas, and under Díaz, the idea of an ancient indigenous legacy was used to signal that Mexico was a strong, autonomous, deeply rooted nation (Bueno 219). A national mythology based on a common history was especially useful under a dictatorship because it created an official narrative of unity that meant dissent was not only anti-Diaz, but also anti-Mexico. When the revolution against the Díaz regime took hold in the early 1910s, the population split into a myriad of factions: Díaz supporters, agrarian reformers, liberals, anarchists, and more. Ten years later, some semblance of victory had been won, but the cracks between different classes and groups in Mexican society had been exposed. It was up to the revolutionary leadership to craft a new, stronger national mythology around which cultural identities could be rebuilt.

One component of the postrevolutionary effort was a concerted effort to redefine and reinscribe notions of mestizaje. José Vasconcelos, one of the most important intellectuals of the postrevolutionary period, penned the most significant work on this topic, *La Raza Cósmica*, in 1925. Vasconcelos advocated for a new racial hierarchy, one that positioned mestizos as the ultimate benefactors of racial mixing that would yield a more perfect race of humans (Stavans 59). Furthermore, he believed the work of the mestizo was to spread their superior being across

the world, repeating the same imperialist history as the Spanish 400 years before, but with a slightly different racial philosophy (Stavans 61). Ultimately, Vasconcelos' well-articulated and carefully argued message came to be the most important thesis on the racial and national formation in Mexico, continuing to be cited into the present day. However, the work of spreading Vasconcelos' philosophy was not solely the domain of intellectual treatises, which would not likely be read by the general public. His philosophy was most skillfully communicated through a cultural renaissance, guided by the central government, to reinvent Mexican identity and imagine a new version of the nation.

During the Porfiriato, several notable inventions had been designed and patented that promised to ease the burden of tortilla-making for Mexican, especially rural, women. In 1859, the first nixtamal mill was patented, which could replace the hand-powered metate in the production of masa (Pilcher, *¡Que Vivan Los Tamales!* 102). Next came the attempts at tortilla machines that could fully mechanize the tortilla process, removing manual (women's) labor from the equation entirely; in 1919, conveyor belts revolutionized the cooking process (ibid. 103, 104). Finally, the invention of masa harina meant that masa no longer needed to be made fresh from the corn kernels each morning, but could instead be rehydrated from flour, saving hours of work. The modernization of the tortilla-making process was very appealing to postrevolutionary nation builders. Tortillas had never wavered as the most important source of calories and nutrition in Mexico, but their association with the indigenous and poor relegated them to a position inferior to European products. After the Revolution, culinary tastes were shifting, as the peasant communities who still made up a majority of Mexico's population made sociopolitical gains as a result of Emiliano Zapata's and Pancho Villa's revolutionary fervor. Peasant foods like corn tortillas, guisados, and pulque were becoming more popular among the higher classes,

and food stalls run by peasant women were already extremely popular in Mexico City (Gaytán 27). Although many people recognized that the industrialization of tortilla-making changed the flavor and texture of tortillas in undesirable ways, that industrialization also allowed peasant foods to proliferate across the class hierarchy. Tortillas—and their many associated tacos—became a way to obscure difference by sharing food, facilitating the invention of a unified national cuisine.

The notion of a national cuisine

Despite the modern moniker of "Mexican food," like any other large nation-state, Mexico for most of history did not have a unified cuisine. Much as Appadurai has explored with cookbooks in India, the premodern culinary traditions in Mexico were highly regional and bounded by ethnicity (*How to…* 5). The Indian model he lays out is a useful tool for postrevolutionary Mexico, as here too complex regional cuisines and a new interest in nationhood were combined into a project of identity for the middle classes in particular (ibid.). Any attempt at a national cuisine necessarily requires the collapsing of complexity, especially the elimination of the most "exotic, peculiar, distinctive, or domestic nuances," in order to make foods available to the greatest common denominator (ibid. 17). However, the regionalized nature of food in Mexico was vital to the articulation of the national cuisine, as regional specialties and unique preparations could signal acceptable diversity in the pursuit of sameness.

Official memory and industrial impulses were not the only cultural factors altering the foodscape in postrevolutionary Mexico. Due to the highly differentiated foodscape in the country for most of history, and especially because the roots of food were found in peasant communities without a shared written language, a codification of Mexican cuisine had not been attempted until the late nineteenth century at the earliest. The cookbook industry really took shape after the

Revolution, as the official desire to unify the population spread to mass culture. For the first time, cookbooks containing dishes from across the regions and subcultures of Mexico were being published, establishing the pillars of a national cuisine that could be enjoyed within the home. In the introduction to her 1947 cookbook Mexican Cook Book Devoted to American Homes, Josefina Velázquez de León describes Mexican food as extremely diverse, responding to "the customs, the climates, and the spirit of the race" (11). Velázquez de León was one of the pioneers of culinary nationalism in the postrevolutionary period, publishing more than 150 cookbooks in her lifetime on topics ranging from the regional dishes of Mexico (Platillos regionales de la República mexicana) to modern appliances (Cómo cocinar en las apartos modernos) (Pilcher, "Josefina Velázquez" 200). The invention of a national cuisine required a substructure of keystone recipes that could be made across the country, potentially in a variety of ways, but with recognizable components that defined it as a particular dish. Tacos were already nearly universal, as indigenous peoples had been wrapping filling in tortillas for as long as maize had been domesticated; different fillings communicated information about the geography, culture, and sociopolitical dynamics of whatever region a person was eating in. Similarly, enchiladas and moles were endlessly translatable depending on the chiles and other ingredients most typical of a region. This is not to say, however, that there were not dishes that rose above the rest in the eyes of cookbook writers and national officials.

Mole de guajolote, turkey bathed in a reddish-brown sauce defined by flavors of chile and chocolate, became a "touchstone of Mexican food" (Aguilar-Rodríguez 600). Depending on the author, emphasis could be placed on different aspects of the mole's history to draw attention to its mestizo origins: its indigenous ingredients, its creole and European preparation, its progression into the repertoires and mouths of middle- and upper-class Mexicans. Prior to this

concerted effort at a national cuisine, mole was associated with low socioeconomic status and highly regionalized as a dish from Puebla, a state just southeast of Mexico City (Aguilar-Rodríguez 603). However, in the postrevolutionary period, cookbook writers like Velázquez de León and Ana María Hernández redefined mole as a universal dish that could bring together the wealthy and the poor, those of European descent and those of indigenous, constructing a shared national identity that centered food as the uniting element (ibid. 605). These cookbook writers emphasized women as the knowledge-bearers and cultural pillars of mexicanidad, as they were the ones in the kitchen materially feeding their families and existentially feeding the nation. Thus, mole was one in a pantheon of new old dishes that was redefined to serve the purposes of national myth-making and identity building.

As hegemonic cultural ideals and sociopolitical conditions changed, so too did the meanings and value systems associated with food. Tortillas, though ubiquitous and relatively unchanging, underwent a facelift at the hands of the postrevolutionary powers, transforming into a meal appropriate for the upper classes. Regional and peasant dishes that up to the twentieth century had not been shared across ethnic, class, or geographical boundaries were, for the first time, made available to broad swaths of the population, who took up these recipes as new components of their shared identity. Ultimately, the postrevolutionary period saw the first concerted efforts at ideological struggles over lo mexicano that would continue into the present day: the tension between Europeanization and indigenismo, the complicated location of women at the center of culinary life, and most significantly, the very impulse to generate a cohesive national identity in the first place. In the present day, many of these struggles over national identity persist, although the cultural backdrop and popular media in which they occur have shifted.

CHAPTER IV

ANALYSIS: POPULAR MEDIA AS A SITE OF IDEOLOGICAL STRUGGLE

In the intervening years between the Revolution and the present day, Mexico underwent a decidedly unrevolutionary political process. For seven decades, the same center-right party, the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), would hold uninterrupted power until the 2000 election of President Vicente Fox. On January 1, 1994, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which eliminated most trade barriers between the United States, Canada, and Mexico, went into effect. While the trade agreement was ostensibly designed to create parity between the nations of North America, the material effect it had in Mexico was one of continued subordination to the wealthier northern nations. Mexico became the site of industrial export agriculture, maquiladoras, and precarious livelihoods that were increasingly reliant on demand from the United States in particular. Furthermore, the proliferation of US agribusiness in the Mexican countryside represented one of the direst threats to indigenous foodways since the Spanish conquest, as the introduction of genetically-engineered and patented corn hybrids imposed new pressure on heritage maize landraces (Dalton 149). Material changes to agriculture and national economies have also resulted in existential worries about national and cultural identities. The precarity of global citizenship and perceived threats to shared identity can be soothed through popular media that highlight cultural ideals for citizen consumers.

Mestizaje, indigenismo, and Europeanness in stories about Mexican food

In 2020, 19.41% of Mexican census respondents self-identified as indigenous (INEGI). Furthermore, in Mexico today, as much as 93% of the population is mestizo, a broad range of identities summarized under that nebulous admixture of Spanish colonizers, indigenous peoples, and African-origin slaves (Martínez-Cortés et al. 568). Just these two statistics reveal the

complexity of hegemonic racial and ethnic categories, which do not play out neatly in people's lived experiences. Racial and ethnic identities are unstable, constantly renegotiated and reified by both top-down and bottom-up forces that benefit from social categorization. Modern Mexico still centers the idea of mestizaje as its primary racial logic, "'a site of elaboration of a range of cultural practices and identities, often unmarked and unnamed, or named as national or "normative" rather than specifically racial'" (Frankenberg qtd. in Moreno Figueroa 399). Mestizaje simultaneously democratizes the social structure by promising that anyone can eventually become mixed enough to achieve moral and social uplift, while remaining deeply discriminatory toward and dependent upon the inferiority of Black and indigenous peoples (Wade qtd. in Moreno Figueroa 390). In *Taco Chronicles,* the complexity and ambiguity of racial and ethnic identity are collapsed in favor of oversimplified histories and essentialized multiculturalism, dependent especially upon the ways that foods have moved and mixed alongside people over the course of the country's history.

Indigenous peoples have been absorbed into hegemonic national and cultural identity as an "essential and vital" population lending "sense and depth" to Mexican history (Moreno Figueroa 393). The core food that communicates the centrality of indigeneity is maize. One chef describes maize as the "backbone"— "without it, we wouldn't be able to walk, to be, to eat, we wouldn't be able to do anything without corn" ("Canasta" 13:40). Corn is more than a basic foodstuff or reliable sustenance; it is bound up with who this chef is, how he relates to his community, and how he draws on history to establish his identity. Corn establishes a lineage with millennia of indigenous peoples whose societies centered on the crop.

In an episode on cochinita pibil[5], the cutaway history lesson tells the Mayan creation story from the *Popol Vuh,* which states that after failing to build humans from wood or clay, "the gods used corn, and they were successful" ("Cochinita" 12:50). Maya culture remains particularly strong on the Yucatán Peninsula and in the southernmost states of Mexico, their original territory pre-Conquest, and the passing down of both creation myths and particular foodways can strengthen community ties to each other and to their ancestors. But *Taco Chronicles* reaches far beyond the local residents of the Maya territories, and it emphasizes the importance of preserving these traditions, "especially in today's globalized world" ("Cochinita" 29:00). Indigenous heritage not only deeply roots the nation, but it acts as a foil to the anxieties of modern life, and foodways in this lineage can be a particularly useful manifestation of this effort.

The indigenous legacies that *Taco Chronicles* draws on are just one side of the often-violent encounters between peoples and ethnic groups in Mexico across history. Drawing on Bernal Díaz de Castillo's story of Moctezuma's epic feasts, the narrator begins by emphasizing guisados' origins as the food of the Tlatoani, the great king ("Guisado" 14:45). Here again the importance of the food is tied to its role in the food traditions of pre-Columbian indigenous peoples, but it is elevated even further as the foodstuff of the leader of an empire. However, in a terrible turn of events, guisados were "forced to hide" by the Spanish Conquest, supposedly resulting in their near disappearance (ibid. 15:10). It is nearly impossible to imagine that guisados, which are less a particular preparation than a vast category of ingredients and spices and cooking methods, could ever have been at risk of disappearing, especially from the plates of peasant communities.

[5] The pib is a Mayan earthen oven, consisting of a hole dug into the ground, heated with firewood and stones. Cochinita pibil is a preparation of pork wherein a whole pig is roasted in a pib.

These simplified story beats are as convenient as they are powerful. Rather than complicating the story of conquest, a story in which indigenous peoples were violated *and* strong, oppressed *and* resilient, the show relies on a linear narrative with winners and losers, heroes and villains. But even the hero and the villain are unclear—yes, the Spanish forced traditional foodways into hiding, but they were ultimately victorious in shaping the hegemonic culture of Mexico in numerous ways. Carnitas are memorialized as a victorious meal to celebrate the occupation of Tlatelolco and the fall of the Aztec Empire ("Carnitas" 4:02). Barbacoa, an "ancient" cooking technique containing "the essence of years, of centuries of flavor," is "reinvented" by Spanish conquerors bringing goats and sheep ("Barbacoa" 24:35). Rather than navigating the complexity and violence of colonial encounters and changing foodways, *Taco Chronicles* is enticed by the specter of shared national identity, reinscribing the idea of colonization as a form of forward progress.

Much as the emphasis on maize is a reflection of both the ingredient's nutritional importance and its centrality to indigenous histories, other ingredients illustrate the material and ideological dominance of European foods. Although corn may be the backbone, the episodes of *Taco Chronicles* are divided based on the fillings cradled within those tortillas, almost all of which are meat products and preparations. The introduction of livestock to the Mesoamerican foodscape was an act of large-scale violence that worked in tandem with other colonial pressures to threaten the resilience and vitality of indigenous peoples. However, rather than reckoning with or even acknowledging that painful history, *Taco Chronicles* lauds connections from modern cooking methods to "shepherds in olden times" as evidence of a continuous historical legacy for these foods and cooking styles ("Pastor" 7:00). Over images of thick cuts of beef being sliced, slathered, and stacked on the grill, the narrator emphasizes how carne asada is "where family

begins," because "wherever there's a fire, our country's heart beats" (ibid. 25:15). Meat becomes the connective tissue between the individual, the family, the community, and the nation-at-large, gathered in community around the shared goal of eating steak. By tying these ideas and images together, *Taco Chronicles* implicitly values the Europeanization of the foodscape over the autonomy and cultural continuity of indigenous peoples. Because foods are central to the collective memory of national events and settings, playing out flattened histories through the performance of their consumption can reify the official memory established by elites and political structures. Hegemonic ideals about the superiority of European products and the resilience of indigenous foods, which can appear at odds, are solidified into a set of boundaries around membership in the nation, racial and ethnic hierarchy, and the ongoing preference for mestizo identity.

Gendered expectations and queer possibilities

In heteropatriarchal societies, cooking is often coded as women's work. While men operate in the public sphere, women are consigned to domesticity and household labor. The relegation of women to the kitchen has been a useful and ongoing tool in their subjugation, facilitating the limitation of economic opportunity and the dependence on male counterparts. However, the kitchen has also been a site of feminist struggle, where women are upheld as the producers of vital cultural knowledge. In food television, the negotiation of gender in cooking is at the forefront because food television centers both the home cook (typically female) and the professional chef (typically male). In *Taco Chronicles*, that double bind manifests in who gets highlighted as an expert on food, who is cited as carrying generational knowledge, and who gets to share the stories of Mexican food with the general audience.

Much as meat is imbued with colonial legacies, it is also tied to masculine gender norms. Hegemonic masculinity represents a narrow vision of the ideal man, one who possesses qualities of "authority, rationality, physical strength," and dominance over both femininity and other masculinities (Sumpter 105). It is well documented that an individual is more likely to be perceived as masculine when they consume more meat, and the distribution of meat within meat-consuming cultures has often reflected patterns of subjugation of women, children, and other oppressed groups (ibid. 104). Consider the phrase "looking at [someone] like a piece of meat," typically applied to women on the receiving end of the heterosexual male gaze, which carries the dual weight of sexualization and degradation. Meat, when handled by a (cisgender, heterosexual) man, symbolizes male power, sexuality, superiority, and within heteropatriarchal societies, these meanings can be reflected in food production as well. *Taco Chronicles* highlights the maleness of meat, which feeds into a larger vision of the food industry as a masculinized trade.

The archetypal taquero, or taco maker/seller, as described in *Taco Chronicles,* is a man with "big hands to serve a big handful of meat" ("Asada" 0:50). Although the taquero is, at core, a cook, the task is not seen as women's labor in this more public, commercial context. The role is masculinized by its supposed physical demands, and cooking becomes disconnected from its domestic contexts. The emphasis on size in this quote reinforces gender expectations, that men be physically domineering as a show of strength. The taquero's large hands also manipulate the tools of his trade, the cleavers and butcher knives they sharpen repeatedly before finely chopping asada or shaving off the outer layers of an al pastor trompo[6]. One taquero says that he was born with "a knife in [his] hand, then a machete, and now a sword" ("Suadero" 11:55). This taquero is claiming butchery as his birthright, and in so doing, he highlights the imposition of violence as a

[6] The trompo is the vertical rotisserie on which marinated pork called al pastor is rotated and cooked with a charcoal or gas flame.

tool for masculinity. He is a good taquero because he has lived his life with a weapon in his hands, a weapon used against animals that could just as easily be turned against people if necessary. Pedro Reyes, a food writer and talking-head expert for the show, states that because suadero[7] tacos are a nighttime meal found in "unsafe" areas with street activities that are "culturally speaking, [not] proper for women," they are usually made and served by men. Male strength allows men increased freedom and access to public space, while women are implicitly restricted by potential violence. Food preparation here has less to do with skill or knowledge, and more to do with cultural norms about where certain genders are allowed. Through food production and consumption, maleness is reproduced as a power structure. By documenting that in film, *Taco Chronicles* centers heteronormative gender roles as a key component of Mexican identity.

In contrast to the image of the masculine taquero, women are rarely shown handling large quantities of meat or skillfully wielding hefty knives. Instead, women are valued for their "wise, magical knowledge" of cooking techniques, knowledge that they have carried through generations ("Guisado" 25:40). The description of cooking knowledge as something otherworldly, almost implying that it is impossible to attain by normal means of learning, simultaneously makes women an indispensable source of knowledge and absolves men of the responsibility of sharing in the lineage of that knowledge. To an extent, that generational knowledge empowers women to build community among themselves and maintain a sort of power. One rural woman, making tortillas with three other generations of her family, describes traditional women cooks as "guardians and warriors who defend this country's land" ("Canasta" 16:20). The domesticity of household cooking is contrasted with the violent imagery of war and

[7] Suadero is a thin cut of meat between the belly and the leg of a cow, equivalent to the brisket in American butchery.

defense, emphasizing the perceived threats to national unity that have arisen in the age of globalization. Women reproduce the boundaries of national groups by "the rich heritage of ethnic symbols, traditions and values," especially to the next generation (Özkirimli 193). When they are tasked with maintaining culinary knowledge, women take on the role of "border guard" for the imagined community and its specific collectivity (Yuval-Davis 23). Another expert describes women as happy and hardworking, "messengers of the knowledge of this land's cuisine" ("Cochinita" 11:40). Women are described as willing participants in the nation and its norms, and the preservation of culinary tradition is inextricably tied to the maintenance of national identity. Thus, while men perform culinary identity in the public arena, women remain responsible for the substructure upon which public representations are built.

Despite the dichotomous roles that are presented repeatedly in the show, there are moments of opportunity for women to expand the purview of their expertise and their participation in the food production system. One taquero describes his daughter coming to him and saying, "I'm going to learn from you, you'll teach me" ("Carnitas" 14:00). The taquero states that this request was difficult for him, as the dominant culture expects a "strong, qualified male" to do the job (ibid.). Although this taquero was ultimately willing to teach his daughter his trade, he did not do so of his own volition. It was the responsibility of the woman to advocate for herself, to convince her father (and society at large) that she deserved to participate in the taco industry. The father's beliefs about gendered labor aligned more closely with hegemonic gender norms, and he only made an exception once his daughter "proved [him] wrong" (ibid.). María Morales Sánchez, a master taquera in Tlaxcala, says her husband's family scolded her because they were against her going out to sell tacos ("Canasta" 9:20). She and her husband now run the business together, but she still describes her start as a "bad habit of putting [herself] to work"

(ibid.). In each of these cases, women's ability to attain success or simply a presence in public food culture is not the result of a systemic change but requires individual effort to buck the norms within one's own family. Certainly, advocacy and change at the scale of the family can be a part of community-level efforts to alter gender expectations and prejudices. However, *Taco Chronicles* tells these stories as one-off victories for extraordinary women, rather than using them to question the system at large. As such, national identity is actually strengthened by these stories of resistance, as they illustrate the strength of the hegemonic food culture and gender roles.

Moments of resistance to gender conformity also manage to spring up in *Taco Chronicles,* offering the possibility of reimagined identities and relationships. A blue bicycle laden with the iconic blue-plastic-lined basket and a jug of salsa, strips of bright pink fabric hanging down over the pedals. The viewer catches the sequined front of the dress, two thick braids woven through with ribbons, a pink and blue crown of fabric atop this unknown vendor's head. Finally, she slows her bike, and the camera shows the full shot, a costumed woman arriving at a worksite with her typical shout: "Tacos! Tacos de canasta! Tacooos!" ("Canasta" 17:15). This is Lady Tacos de Canasta, a muxe[8] who got her start selling tacos de canasta at Mexico City Pride. Lady Tacos de Canasta is the only LGBTQ+ person in all thirteen episodes, and she represents a rejection of the normative gender expectations in modern Mexican society. Her dress and braids are reminiscent of the traditional dress of Zapotec women, but laden with modern features like glitter and sequins. Furthermore, muxe is not a transgender identity that fits within the framework of the dominant gender binary but is a rejection of the binary altogether in favor of indigenous ways of knowing and being. By highlighting Lady Tacos de Canasta, *Taco*

[8] Among the Zapotec peoples of Oaxaca, muxe is a recognized third gender, with a defined social, economic, and cultural role since before colonization (Plata).

Chronicles offers the possibility of more imaginative futurities that contest the hegemonic heteronormative *and* colonialist ideals. Lady Tacos de Canasta queers the nation by adopting some of the recognizable components of national food culture—the taco-laden bicycle, the loud hawker's yell, the quick moving hands—and reshaping them to expand the definition of who belongs in the food space.

"Mexicanness" as shared cultural identity

In their infinite variety, tacos are ultimately just a flatbread and a filling, wrapped together for the consumption and enjoyment of millions. But for the people who enjoy them, they have come to mean much more than sustenance. The ideological struggles, historical narratives, and differential experiences addressed in the previous sections are still ultimately taking place within a normative understanding of national and cultural identity. *Taco Chronicles* is not calling into question the existence of Mexico, Mexicanness, or Mexican food. Instead, the show depends upon an implicit understanding of and belief in the narrative of the nation, and it actively cocreates that narrative by describing and illustrating ideas about origins, continuity, tradition, and belonging. "Modern nations are all cultural hybrids" defined by patterns of unequal cultural exchange and conflict over the authority to define the shared identity, so the most salient work of the popular media within that context is as a discursive device that crosscuts difference with the promise of unity (Hall 297).

Historical touchstones like the Conquest and the Mexican Revolution provide a backdrop for the larger narratives about Mexicanness and cultural belonging that are ultimately at the center of *Taco Chronicles.* The significance of the Revolution to the hegemonic mestizo identity remains strong even one hundred years after the conflict ended. The burrito supposedly experienced its "golden age" during the Mexican Revolution ("Burritos" 3:45). Tacos guisados

were saved from the shadows and became "everyone's passion" through the stomachs of those "courageous" men fighting for some form of freedom ("Guisado" 15:35). The story of burritos is accompanied by a stylized image of a Pancho Villa-esque vendor, with a big handlebar mustache, straw sombrero, and patterned poncho, and two donkeys wearing sunglasses in front of a town church or center, a playful mixture of historical figure and modern imagery. There is likely some truth to these stories, as burritos and guisados were nutritionally dense and easily transportable meals for large numbers of troops. But the story doesn't need to be true for it to be meaningful. The Revolution was not only a sociopolitical fight, but a battleground for the foods that make Mexicans who they are. The food is imbued with a sense of mysticism and power, as it nourished men who came to symbolize a belief in independence and change. Revolutionaries become the pillars of modern culture, the upholders of mestizo identity, and the reason that Mexico as such can share the food that it does. Food is more than food, and the Revolution is more than a revolution. Both are useful mediums to which numerous meanings and ideals can be applied.

Each season of *Taco Chronicles* ends with a series of grand statements about the meaning of the taco and its role in both the speaker's life as an individual and in the collective lives of those people deemed Mexican. At the individual level, one speaker states that tacos "keep me close to my roots. It reminds me who I am and how I grew up" ("Guisado" 22:40). Tacos are a part of their personal food story, something that ties them to their family and community. However, the idea of "roots" indicates that even at the personal level, these connections are embedded within larger ideas about shared identity and the continuity of tradition across generations and centuries. As another person puts it, "Our genetics scream 'taco.'... So if you're Mexican and you don't like tacos, I'd wonder where your parents are from, honestly" ("Pescado

26:55). Here, the idea of a deeply rooted identity is taken one step further. On the one hand, the person's preference for tacos is no longer about individual taste or connection to family, but an unavoidable biological imperative. And the existence of that imagined biological imperative is also a metric by which to measure group membership; to dislike tacos is to openly state that one does not belong. Thus, tacos and Mexicanness become unavoidably bound up with each other, and eating tacos is a way for the in-group (those who identify themselves as Mexican) to perform the nation.

One expert considers tacos "as important as the national soccer team or the Virgen de Guadalupe" ("Guisado" 28:55). Sports are an important venue for nationalism in many modern nation-states, Mexico being no exception; "national identity is the most marketable product in sport" and the successes and failures of the national soccer team become closely linked with personal and communal worth (Allison 346). Our Lady of Guadalupe is the patron saint of Mexico and has been used as a symbol of national pride by Catholic Spanish descendants since the early years of colonization (Britannica). Invoking these two national symbols alongside tacos emphasizes the importance of cuisine to the formulation and reification of national identity.

National identities are always threatened from both the outside and the in, and the internal threat most significantly appears through regionality and localization. National identity is indeed a cultural matrix of infinite connections, but the innumerability of its contents is also the source of its instability (Edensor vii). If nationalism is invoked only to establish firm boundaries for the exclusion of outsiders, it may collapse from within as members of the imagined community affiliate more strongly with communities that are more apparent in their everyday life. In Mexico, where national cuisine is still largely constituted by the aggregation upward of regional and even familial cooking patterns, the taco as form offers an opening for

myriad peoples to adopt group membership in the imagined community while retaining individual idiosyncrasies that reflect lived experience. As one speaker describes it, “in one single taco, different cultures, different social classes, different economic backgrounds, even, come together. Everything revolves around a single dish: tacos” (“Guisado” 28:25). Because the single dish is not constricted by a single preparation or set of ingredients, it can shapeshift continually and remain malleable to the community preferences and regional norms of myriad groups. Many disparate peoples can consume the nation without necessarily consuming the same food, and in so doing, they can adopt the national identity as their own. As one chef explains, the taco ultimately serves two purposes: “to make a connection with people’s souls” and “if they are not Mexican, they can become Mexican through tacos” (“Pastor” 26:45). Cuisine generates a shared space for the imagined community, even those who have not yet fully subsumed the culture, to adopt the everyday practices of the nation.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

In the twenty-first century, globalization and modernization are not simple, homogenizing phenomena, but things that "entice" and "entrench" nationalism among otherwise disparate groups within a shared territory (Ichijo 217). Neoliberal governance, rapidly shifting media landscapes, and a glut of information due to increasing access to the internet have altered the ways in which national identity is disseminated from both the top down and the bottom up. Food and cooking shows can strike a balance between these two directions of influence. By considering everyday practice and consumption, the shows implicitly value the masses as a source of cultural knowledge, but their place in the broader media landscape means these shows often continue to uphold elite or hegemonic ideals. Given the centrality of popular and social media to the way modern people receive information, studying food and cooking shows as a source of individual, community, and national identity is a relevant contribution to the fields of food studies and cultural studies.

In this thesis, I have explored the television show *Taco Chronicles* as a microcosm of ideological struggles over national identity in Mexico that occur in a variety of public and private arenas, especially popular and social medias. As the show explores different taco preparations, geographies, and histories, it renders visible certain narratives while obscuring others. In the present day, mestizaje is still the most salient feature of Mexican racial and ethnic hierarchies, and its existence relies on a careful crafting of history to reflect the interplay of European and indigenous cultural influences. Food in Mexico represents the enormous diversity of ingredients and preparations introduced by both groups, and popular media is used to sanitize the violent histories that resulted in their admixture in order to produce a singular, streamlined narrative

about how national cuisine came to be. Thus, hegemonic ideas about mestizaje, Europeanness, and indigeneity are told especially through food histories and the ways that individual members of the food system self-identify within the nation and their communities. Within the show, struggle over traditional gender norms and expectations within the context of foodways is more apparent. *Taco Chronicles* illustrates the double bind of men as the public face of food preparation while women continue to be the primary cultural knowledge holders. These normative gender roles turn both men and women into border guards for national identity, as it ties their individual identity into the reinforcement of shared cultural identity. However, the show more openly challenges these enforced gender expectations by offering the possibility of queering the food space and by extension, queering the nation. Ultimately, both struggles over racial and ethnic identity and over gender are subsumed under a larger narrative about Mexicanness as a stable, shared identity that is made most salient through foodways. As one taquero put it, "we wouldn't be Mexican if we didn't have tacos" ("Guisado" 29:35).

This research was limited by both time and resources and leaves much open for future research and consideration. These same research questions could be more comprehensively addressed by considering a broader range of food and cooking shows in Mexico, available both via streaming and via traditional television. By broadening the scope of the archive, research could consider how different segments of the population are appealed to by different shows, and what messages about cultural identity and ideological struggle are most dominant for these groups. Given that this research focuses on a show that is available to both Mexican and US American audiences, another potential consideration would be a comparative analysis of shows produced for Mexican audiences, US American audiences, and both, considering how ideas about national identity are made salient to those within the group versus those outside of it.

Finally, this particular set of research questions could be expanded to address ideological struggle in popular food media outside of the television context, especially cookbooks, which could again reveal differences and similarities between the rhetorical and visual devices that are used to communicate hegemonic ideals to different audiences.

Although this research is rooted in a question about national identity, it has not addressed the validity of national identity as such or the existence of the nation. Therefore, the greatest possibility for this research would be to use food and foodways as a lens through which to deconstruct the idea of the nation-state and to emphasize the ways nations are being continually reimagined and created by a diversity of peoples and populations. The very idea of "Mexico" is not a stable signifier, but a precarious invention that is principally experienced through everyday practice and meaning making. New research could take a mixed methods approach to explore this idea by combining close reading with interviews, surveys, or food-centered life histories. By incorporating firsthand accounts, especially from marginalized populations within the dominant culture, a more comprehensive understanding of questions of ideological struggle could be attained. Indigenous groups have worked for increased autonomy, regionalization, and diversification of foodways, and should be given more space to speak firsthand about their relationship to hegemonic Mexican national cuisine. Furthermore, new research could and should afford more space to considerations of racial and ethnic identities beyond the normative structure that emphasizes only indigenous peoples and European heritage, especially paying attention to Black and Asian presence and histories within Mexico. Finally, more attention should be given to the diversity of gender identities in Mexico, and how those identities may be obscured or empowered through food and foodways.

APPENDIX

TACO CHRONICLES EPISODE LIST

Volume 1 (released July 12, 2019)

Directed by: Carlos Perez Osorio

Episode	Title	Run time	Description
1	“Pastor”	28 minutes	Savory, pork-based al pastor tacos are a street-food staple of Mexico City. But they actually have origins that stem back to ancient Asia Minor.
2	“Carnitas”	28 minutes	If you like tacos, you likely know carnitas. But did you know its roots go back to the Aztecs? Take a trip to Michoacán, the world’s carnitas capital.
3	“Canasta”	25 minutes	No matter the filling, canasta tacos are truly beloved. Get to know this street-food favorite and one of its most dynamic purveyors: Lady Tacos de Canasta.
4	“Asada”	26 minutes	From Tijuana to Hermosillo to Sonora to Downtown LA, carne asada reigns supreme. But the most flavorful meat is nothing without the perfect tortilla.
5	“Barbacoa”	30 minutes	Every time barbacoa is prepared, it starts in the same place: a big hole in the ground. It doesn’t get much more humble—or delicious—than that.
6	“Guisado”	31 minutes	With guisados tacos, it’s not just the meat—it’s the stew. We visit with some of the most notable "stew taco" cooks in both Mexico and Los Angeles.

Volume 2 (released September 15, 2020)

Directed by: Santiago Fabregas

Episode	Title	Run time	Description
1	“Suadero”	33 minutes	Urban and nocturnal, the suadero taco is the perfect hangover cure. It's the Mexican cousin to American beef brisket, but with more spice and bite.
2	“Cochinita”	33 minutes	The cochinita pibil is a Mayan pit-roasted pork delicacy, passed down over the centuries and preserved, even after colonization, like a sacred ritual.
3	“Cabrito”	29 minutes	The cabrito, or kid taco, springs from a goat herding tradition that can be traced to Iran and Lebanon. It's now become emblematic of northern Mexico.

4	“American Taco”	32 minutes	The American taco is, of course, an import—but much changed after assimilation! Distinguished by its hard or puffy shell, it's still delicious.
5	“Burrito”	28 minutes	The convenience of the burrito—a good-sized flour tortilla tucked in at both ends so nothing wrapped inside spills—is from Mexico's northern states.
6	“Birria”	24 minutes	To dunk or not to dunk? To spoon or not to spoon? The crucial aspect of the birria taco is its broth, a sumptuous blend of goat meat juices and spices.
7	“Pescado”	29 minutes	The best fish tacos come from the Mexican Pacific coast, with a nod to Japan for the crispy, tempura-like breading and emphasis on freshness.

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