Commodifying Food and Maintaining Culture Along the Border in Ana Castillo's *The Guardians*

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Abstract:

The land between Mexico and the United States has a long, historical pattern of racial, economic, and cultural tension provoked by conquests since the sixteenth century. The most recent tension, however, centers on the border between both countries, which, in turn, challenges the notion of nationality and identity. Ana Castillo tackles the tensions north of the border in her fictional work, *The Guardians*, by chronicling the lives of a broken family, barely surviving the harsh lands of la frontera. Regina, presented as the main character, and her nephew, Gabo, live near the border and mourn the disappearance of her brother, Rafa, who was last seen traveling from Mexico to the United States. While the key concern pertains to the loss inflicted by missing and dead relatives, the characters' mourning is the direct effect of living within the harsh environment of the border. Though upfront examples exist throughout the novel, solely examining food speaks heavily on the subtle changes and tensions these characters face, as well as their determination to preserve their families' traditions. Food, though not uncommon in literature, provides a haven for immigrants and minorities who are oppressed by dominant cultures. They use food to preserve and embrace their traditional recipes when living in unfamiliar lands. Castillo acknowledges the grim productions of food in the novel by invoking empathy through these characters' lives. In *The Guardians*, food is therefore used to exploit precarious lives, provide a means of commodity, and preserve culture among Chicana/os living near the border.

Keywords: Borderlands, Castillo, food studies, Chicana/o identity, trauma

Introduction

The land between Mexico and the United States offers a hybridity of Mexican and American culture, though often times experiences binary clashes between the two. While the borderlands of southern Texas were once governed by Mexico, the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo stripped Mexico of a majority of the land. The shift in governance placed natives in a difficult position both financially and culturally, for the U.S. enforced American law and culture onto those who remained on the land. In *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Gloria Anzaldúa exposes the U.S.' heinous conquest for territory and attributes much of the tensions among the border as the U.S.'s

determination to "distinguish *us* from *them*" (25). The issue primarily gravitates towards Americans who culturally ostracize Mexican Americans (or Chicana/os) who maintain Mexican traditions and culture. While those who remained on the land after the war continued to live in a similar fashion, the growing cultural tensions at the border exemplify Anzaldúa's observations on othering Chicana/os. Ana Castillo further interrogates the disruption of Chicana/o identity in *Massacre of the Dreamers* by calling such displacement a "sociological dilemma or a schizophrenic self-perception" (1995, 8). Chicana/os, Castillo notes, live within a disrupted space of opposing cultures and beliefs, dominated by the U.S. In turn, the literature these Chicana/o writers compose push against "the whites in power [who] want us people of color to barricade ourselves behind our separate tribal walls so they can pick us off one at a time with their hidden weapons; so they can whitewash and distort history" (Anzaldúa 1987, 108).

Castillo tackles the Chicana/o tensions of Mexican and American identity in her fictional work, *The Guardians*, by chronicling the lives of a broken family, barely surviving the harsh lands of la frontera. Regina, presented as the main character, and her nephew, Gabo, live near the border and mourn the disappearance of Gabo's father, Rafa, who went missing while attempting to cross the border. Gabo, who mourns his absent father and deceased mother, absorbs religion as a way of coping with his loss. The novel also features Abuelo Milton and Miguel, who face similar injustices throughout their lives. Subsequently, "*The Guardians* is concerned to replace the mechanistic with the humanistic in its characters' and readers' perceptions of themselves and their environment" (López 2011, 166). While the key concern pertains to the loss inflicted by missing and dead relatives, the characters' mourning is the direct effect of living within the harsh environment of the border. The novel can therefore be read as a "sociological dilemma" for both Regina and Gabo because of the cultural tensions they face as Chicana/os in the U.S.

Exemplifying such an argument may unfold through cultural differences between both Mexican and American cultures, especially through food. Examining food not only speaks heavily on the subtle changes and worries these characters face, but also on their determination to preserve their families' traditions. Food, though not an uncommon element employed in literature, provides a haven for immigrants and minorities who are oppressed by dominant cultures. They use food to preserve and embrace their traditional recipes when living in culturally unfamiliar lands. Moreover:

> Ethnic Americans have been heavily involved in food production and services. From African American slave laborers on southern plantations, to Filipino and Hispanic migrant farmers, to Chinese and Japanese workers in the salmon industry in Alaska, to ethnic restaurants all over the country, ethnic Americans have fed and built this nation. (Gardaphé and Xu 2007, 8)

As Gardaphé and Xu note, ethnic Americans, including Mexican Americans, are exploited for labor in multiple forms. Between viewing ethic Americans as exploited labor and individuals capable of sharing their culture through cooking, the U.S. depends on diverse individuals to maintain the production of food. Castillo acknowledges the grim production of food as well as

the benefits of diverse food by invoking empathy through these characters' lives. In *The Guardians*, food is therefore used to exploit precarious lives, provide a means of commodity, and preserve culture for Chicana/os living near the border. This essay first examines food production, such as gardening and farming, as well as the variety of foods characters like Regina cooks and sells for profit. Food within these two sections thus gravitates towards food as a commodity for survival. This essay then considers the cultural assumptions of Mexican and American food, for both types of cuisine are perceived in contrasting ways throughout the novel. The borderlands, primarily in Texas, maintains over a century of Mexican and American cultures that clash and, in contrast, infuse together. Focusing such a displaced identity formation on food speaks heavily on the ways the characters in Castillo's novel negotiate their identities among la frontera.

The Cultural Significance of Growing Food

Castillo incorporates an abundance of food references within the novel to emphasize the importance food attributes to these individuals' lives. Gardening and farming, for one, offers the characters the opportunity to avoid costly expenses at the grocery store and job opportunities.

Regina, for example, saves money by maintaining a garden with produce suitable for the environment. "She has one of those green thumbs," Gabo admits. "We get all kinds of chiles, tomatoes, yellow, red, and green for salsa, three varieties of squash, a patch of watermelon, and corn" (Castillo 2007, 18-19). While the fruits and vegetables cannot fully support Regina and Gabo, the grown food nonetheless reduces Regina's grocery expenses. Gardening, however, demands much work, for preparing and maintaining the land must be completed at specific times of the year. When Regina begins gardening for the new year, her duties involve preparing the soil and fixing the fence to prevent animals from destroying the garden. Regina narrates, "Gabo was fixing the gate to our garden just like his father would have done. Just before spring we mend it and every following winter the winds yank it every which way. We needed to reinforce the fence with new chicken wire, too, to keep the cottontails out" (Castillo 2007, 47). Not only does Regina's narration reveal the laborious tasks required to secure the garden, but also the displacement of family traditions. Food, as previously noted, serves as an important aspect to these characters' lives, especially as comfort mechanisms during strenuous times. Gardening, in this instance, deters from the typical comfort they feel when performing these yearly tasks, for Regina and Gabo are reminded of Rafa's absence. Though Gabo does not mind the work, their tradition reinforces the fact that Gabo's missing father can no longer perform the task normally assigned to him. Without fully acknowledging Rafa's disappearance, Regina continues narrating her preparations for the garden, revealing, "I use compost from food scraps, coffee grounds, eggshells, and bring over cow or horse manure from nearby ranchos and mix it all up as top dressing. We loaded wheelbarrows and dumped it in the garden to fertilize the sand" (Castillo 2007, 47). Regina's preparation reveals the ways in which she gardens without excessive spending at the store. Rather than buy fertile soil, Regina composts her own as a cost-effective alternative to store bought soil.

Regina further acknowledges her dislike of the government spraying toxic pesticides that may be dangerous for consumption. In turn, Regina plants vegetables and fruits in containers, for, as she argues, "container gardens seemed like a good idea if you were in doubt as to whether your soil was safe" (Castillo 2007, 52). Containers help her keep plants safe from chemicals, which suggests Regina's distrust of the government and her ability to find ways to protect herself and her family even within her limited economic means. She also volunteers to teach children how to garden for these reasons. To her dismay, the children lose interest almost immediately and leave Regina to finish the work on her own. Regina's skepticism pertaining to pesticides, however, remains warranted. It was common—especially during the late twentieth century—for the U.S. government to spray toxic chemicals to prevent crops destruction from unwanted pests. Many poor residents near the border are also "exposed to water that is, like the water in border towns more generally, polluted by untreated sewage, agricultural chemicals, and pesticide runoff, as well as by extensive dumping of industrial byproducts like heavy metals and toxic chemicals" (Sadowski-Smith 2008, 37). Thus, Regina's skepticism not only reveals her desire to eat healthy foods, but also her awareness of the issues surrounding her community related to pollution and its effects on health and food contamination.

While these tasks are arduous and arguably not worth the hassle for inexperienced gardeners, Regina continues gardening out of passion and the opportunity to take care of herself on land that barely supports Regina's ambitious gardening plans. Gabriel Valle argues, "Food, place, and culture are embodied knowledges that offer marginalized communities the opportunity to produce and reproduce the means of their own existence" (2015, 74). The produce grown then symbolizes not just fuel for the body, but also an opportunity to restore traditions. The work required to maintain gardens subsequently becomes especially meaningful. As Regina advises, preparing her garden a month before spring assures the garden will thrive. Doing it earlier might expose the saplings to frost, which "will kill everything you just put into the ground with such loving care" (Castillo 2007, 48). Regina knows gardening and has a passion for it. Malgorzata Poks argues differently, believing:

> If [Regina] grows most of her food in her garden, it is because she is poor and not because she has gone green. It is for the same reason that she uses organic pesticides and fertilizers or that she recycles food. To survive, she must not only grow food and cook meals at home, but also try to sell the surplus at a small profit and economize on necessities. (2017, 129)

Because Regina grows "with such loving care," attributing her gardening to economic intent merely undermines her passion for gardening and further dismisses her determination to produce quality produce exempt from harsh chemicals. When reflecting on her garden, Regina admits, "loving care is what I try to bring to whatever I do—otherwise why bother" (Castillo 2007, 48). Regina's fascination with gardening and sharing her knowledge with others centers on her childhood memories. During her adolescence, Regina admits to not liking her mother, for her mother was always strict and made her complete many tasks. In this particular instance, however, Regina

attributes her vast knowledge to her mother, claiming, "That's who I learned to cook from and to know all about plants and everything about vegetables, my mother" (Castillo 2007, 28). Regina's growth as a gardener and cook was not an isolated learning experience, but rather a tradition inherited from her mother. Because Regina does not have any children of her own, she therefore reaches out to Gabo and the community children to provide the knowledge obtained from her mother, who, in turn, learned it from Regina's grandfather.

While learning how to grow fruits and vegetables provides many Chicana/os job opportunities, the arduous work makes farming difficult to maintain. As farming dwindled in Mexico, Regina's family had to cross "over to the States to work the harvests" (Castillo 2007, 28). She worked the fields and cared for the animals on the farms. However, as Malgorzata Poks notes:

> The free flow of goods across the border—mostly from south to north— under the North American Free Trade Agreement was accompanied by a boost in the illegal flow of disenfranchised bodies in the opposite direction, bodies desperate enough to accept conditions of virtual slavery for the privilege of harvesting pecans, chili, and other local crops for ten long hours a day. (2017, 129)

Regina and her family worked in the fields under desperate conditions, so she knows laborious work. She still remembers her mother "used to suffer from fainting spells. When we worked in los files, she fainted every day out in the middle of the field, picking pecans, chiles, tomatoes, apples, whatever" (Castillo 2007, 118). Abuelo Milton shares a similar narrative about migration, claiming, "Many of them knew how to farm because they came from ranchitos in Mexico" (Castillo 2007, 72). And while Regina's narrative focuses more on the present day—years after escaping farming—Abuelo Milton's narrative acknowledges the continued hardships suffered by people working the fields. As he recalls, "Los obreros signed away all their rights. They didn't even know what they were signing since everything was in English" (Castillo 2007, 72). As a result, Chicana/o immigrants are forced to find new work once the fields they harvest are completed for the season, for the language barrier prohibits them from acknowledging the exploitative measures invoked by the contracts they willingly sign without reading.

The unfair treatment of ethnic immigrants attributes more than just an inability to understand English. Claudia Sadowski-Smith notes, "binational agreements that culminated in NAFTA have enabled corporations to systematically take advantage of lower labor and operating costs, tariff and value added tax differentials, and the limited enforcement of weak environmental and labor regulations in Mexico" (2008, 37). Abuelo Milton confesses, "they did not get nothing, just a big kick in the tresero back to Mexico when they weren't needed no more" (Castillo 2007, 73). Regina retorts that the current situation will not change because of the broken system, despite Chicana/os being overworked and undervalued. She argues, "The truth is, a lot of employers don't want immigration laws to change. If the country made it easier for professional immigrants to come in, the competition would possibly drive professional salaries *down*" (Castillo 2007, 125). Not only does Regina acknowledge the flawed system, but she does so with defeat, knowing the U.S. government

will not improve the lives of ethnic immigrants. The hardships surrounding Chicana/os crossing the border premises the novel's central focus and causes Rafa's disappearance preceding the novel's narration: he migrates to the U.S. to harvest pecans and, as Regina speculates, returns to Mexico to tend to his new family. Because of the flawed system, he must travel back to the U.S. with the guidance of a coyote—many of whom are corrupt and unsympathetic to those migrating for better opportunities. Should an improved system exist for these precarious lives, Gabo's mourning would consist of one less person. Given the political nature of the situation, however, the characters in the novel face a constant state of mourning.

Though immigrating to the U.S. legally with proper documentation serves as the logical option, obtaining these documents is an even more arduous task than migrating illegally. Regina admits, "That's all every immigrant in the world wants, to get her papers in order. To officially become a person" (Castillo 2007, 116). Becoming a person therefore centers on documentation, resulting with job security and benefits. Though, as Regina and Abuelo Miguel argue, the current system in place will not change, given that farmers and the government are benefiting from cheap, exploitative labor. Becoming "a person" is therefore important when desiring professions beyond working in fields. Regina speculates, "One day a machine will be invented to replace all the farm workers" (Castillo 2007, 116). Should machines decrease the need for physical labor, then the future for undocumented immigrants may worsen. For Regina, obtaining her papers was not an option until marrying a U.S. citizen. As a result, she could "stay and not hide in the shadows no more. This meant no more picking, no more peeling chiles, and no more canning" (Castillo 2007, 5). With official documents, Regina's validation as "a person" allows her to move beyond working in the fields.

The food the characters grow throughout the novel not only serves as the opportunity to share agricultural techniques from generation to generation, but also as a rooted history of exploited labor. For immigrants, food detracts from a sense of alienation, for one can recreate most foods, given the vast amounts of products at grocery stores. But for Regina and her family, the thought of food provokes a paradoxical feeling of defeat, knowing the food that they purchase may have been picked and manufactured by the oppressed and exploited.

The Essential Methods to Commodify Food

The exploitation of ethnic immigrants for laborious jobs provides merely one of the many ways businesses profit from food. From Abuelo Milton running errands in exchange for food (Castillo 2007, 71) to Regina giving Gabo's friend, Jesse, fruits and vegetables for helping her in the garden (Castillo 2007, 50), Castillo exemplifies the notion that food does not simply result in only memories of challenging work, but rather a commodity to exchange for service and/or money. Regina's attachment to food for profit persists throughout the novel, despite escaping work in the fields. Though she works at a school helping teachers, the money schemes she pursues alongside her teacher's aide position tend to center on food. In the beginning of *The Guardians*, Regina notes a time when she sold eggs for income. The only problem was that "no one really wanted to pay for

them. Then I started feeling for the poor families I worked with at the school and I gave them free eggs. The coyote ate three of my hens before I caught up with it" (Castillo 2007, 7), thus ending Regina's scheme to sell eggs. Regina's pizza selling business ends similarly. Though she began the business making money, it did not last long, for "a guy started doing it, right next to me, out of his car. He gave free Cokes, so he ran me out of business" (Castillo 2007, 11). Not much later, she concocts the idea of selling pies, despite not even getting an "honorable mention" when entering her pies into a pie-baking competition (Castillo 2007, 25). This scheme, like many of her other ones, was concocted when she was complemented on her cooking skills. In this instance, Regina bakes a pie for Miguel after he helps her look for Rafa. All the other teachers were impressed by her work, which then began her "pie-baking business" (Castillo 2007, 26). Because she makes her pies from scratch, she then advertises her pies as "one hundred percent homemade good" (Castillo 2007, 26). Regina, like many businesses who market food, advertises her pies as homemade and therefore unique. Through her marketing techniques, she acknowledges that "modern food is less and less identifiable by its consistency, flavor, smell and texture. It is processed, packaged, 'presented,' as it were dematerialized, stripped of its sensory characters, reduced to appearances and signs" (Fischler 1988, 280). By understanding how to commodify food, Regina sells not only the product but also the product's creation. Though the teachers can buy pies from the grocery store, they cannot buy them homemade, suggesting that whatever they buy elsewhere will not consist of the same quality and care.

Food is moreover exemplified throughout the novel as a product with varying qualities, depending on its creation. Miguel, for example, observes the type of food offered at the church carnival and goes out of his way to address generic beverages. While playing a game of ring toss, he claims, "the price was the bottle you snagged—grape, orange, strawberry, root beer, cream soda, or cola—all generic brands" (Castillo 2007, 34). He then digresses from his observation, but leaves the impression that generic brands were bought to make a larger profit for the church. Should the church have concern for quality, they would have provided the customers with name brand drinks. Because the church was raising money, they instead sold the cheaper drinks to increase profit. Miguel wins ten bottles without much interest in his prize. Though he would probably feel just as indifferent about the bottles if they were brand names, his situation nonetheless exemplifies a similar marketing strategy imposed by Regina's pie-baking business: to highlight the product's details, rather than taste. Abuelo Milton even notes that his wife's favorite drink is Fanta, claiming, "Orange Fanta was her favorite" (Castillo 2007, 92). Similar to Miguel's experience, Abuelo Milton acknowledges the obsession individuals have with specific name brand products. Though orange beverages are produced by many companies, they do not compare to the specific taste Fanta produces. Castillo therefore suggests a preferred dichotomy of store bought/homemade and name brand/generic. Perhaps if Regina's pizza competitor sold generic beverages, she would still be in the pizza making business.

Homemade foods, however, are not always preferred to store bought foods. When Gabo eats Abuelo Milton's food, he claims, "The toast was burned y los eggs dry. He served us both café from

a little pot on the stove that looked like it came from the cowboy campfire days" (Castillo 2007, 102). Gabo's statement puts into question the dichotomy of homemade versus store bought by criticizing Abuelo Milton's food. The concept of food quality may perhaps explain Regina's lost interest in selling pies. Without a doubt, many enjoy eating Regina's food. She even attests to being "good in the kitchen" (Castillo 2007, 155). The question therefore centers on whether the quality of the pies surpasses store bought pies. When Gabo asks about the business, Regina vaguely responds that "baking pies is risky business" (Castillo 2007, 50). Though selling pies on the premise that they are homemade provides Regina with momentary success, the pies' value may have plummeted after everyone actually bought and tasted the pies. The concept of quality, however, should remain the central focus. In Gabo's case, Abuelo Milton's food, though homemade, looks undesirable and tastes awful. Due to the small number of characters in the novel, Castillo may be making an argument for gender and how it plays into the quality of homemade food. While many regard Regina as a great cook, Gabo considers Abuelo Milton a bad cook. Elizabeth Lee Steere addresses a similar argument in an analysis of Castillo's *So Far From God*, claiming, "while the food preparation of meat is masculine, the preparation of corn is considered feminine" (2013, 87). Men preparing meat in *The Guardians* only occurs when Miguel barbeques meat. The gender gap Steere addresses nonetheless applies to *The Guardians*, for Regina flawlessly cooks dishes in the kitchen, whereas Abuelo Milton cooks unappetizing dishes. Miguel also grills the meat at Gabo's birthday party, while Regina prepares the side dishes. Though gender should not always apply to the expertise of cooks, Castillo nonetheless suggests through both novels a gender and essentialist concept of food quality within Chicana/o culture. Thus, the quality of homemade food depends on the gender of the cook and the food they prepare.

Making, selling, and harvesting food provides merely a few of the many ways in which these characters profit from food. For Gabo, profiting from food entails working at a grocery store, where he "pack[s] groceries and keep[s] the shelves stocked with inventory" (Castillo 2007, 18). The intriguing aspect of Gabo's job centers on his love for the profession. Though he ultimately wants to become a priest, working at the grocery store provides Gabo the time to reflect on his religious ideologies. "As I unpack cans of string beans y garbanzos to line the shelves," Gabo reveals, "it is a meditation of our Lord. Sweeping is my favorite quehacer, Santito, because then I am free to contemplate God's eternal love" (Castillo 2007, 18). Working with food inside therefore provides Gabo the opportunity to relax while pondering his religious beliefs. Regina further finds solace working with food, claiming, "Cooking relaxes me. Chopping, cutting, adding a little epazote or ajo, tasting—by the time the comida's done, I'm not even hungry no more. But I feel better" (Castillo 2007, 60). Perhaps, then, Regina's statement explains why she concocts money making schemes based on cooking and why Gabo works at the supermarket: to meditate while making money.

The ways in which one works with food exposes the gap in both class and privilege. With proper documentation, Regina has the opportunity to work with food in a calm, controlled environment while also helping Gabo obtain a job at the grocery store. For many Mexican

Americans living near la frontera, the connections and opportunities provided for Regina and Gabo are unobtainable. Working with food reveals the dynamic differences of class and privilege. The more challenging and overbearing work falls on exploited and oppressed individuals who are provided with minimal alternatives, while cooking and selling food falls on documented individuals who may work various professions.

The Perceptions and Cultural Importance of Food

The exploration on food has so far centered on the means of production and commodification. From grown foods (such as fruits and vegetables) to assembled foods (such as Mexican dishes), the characters—particularly Regina—proceed through their dismal living situations while indulging in a variety of foods. Avocados, for example, are a delicacy and are only eaten on rare occasions. Regina complains that "Avocados, the food of the gods, are the only things I can't grow on my land—too arid; avocado trees don't grow in sand" (Castillo 2007, 7). The limitation of the fruit prohibits Regina from fully indulging in them and she can only obtain avocados when she has enough money to purchase them. Though she believes the fruit holds weight as "the food of the gods," she nonetheless eats them in moderation because they are expensive. This not only speaks to Regina's sense of moderation but also her economic status. Should she have an abundance of money, purchasing avocados regularly should pose few problems for her. Avocados as a delicacy, however, primarily apply to Regina, for Gabo views the fruit differently. That is not to say he dislikes avocados, but instead considers the fruit a burden. He notes, "once you cut one open the leftover portion will turn black and go to waste" (Castillo 2007, 19). As Gabo believes, he cannot simply eat a portion of the fruit, but must instead eat the whole avocado, for it will wilt if left uneaten. He then reveals the many different techniques others assume will help preserve the fruit, such as putting it in "cellophane, aluminum foil, cutting the pit out, leaving it in, Tupperware" (Castillo 2007, 19). Due to his many previous attempts, his lost hope in preserving the remainder prohibits him from spontaneously eating them. Gabo's frustration does not deter from his appreciation for the fruit, for he claims that "avocados are just about the only thing my tía doesn't grow in the garden that we can't live without" (Castillo 2007, 18), but his frustration centers on time and planning. Gabo's opinion of avocados not only exposes his habits of preserving food, but also hints at his and Regina's economic status. In other words, the ways in which these characters reflect, purchase, and consume avocados expose the ways in which their class dictates their eating habits.

Food for immigrants provides a sense of comfort when living in unfamiliar lands, for most grocery stores stock the ingredients, such as avocados, that would allow individuals to replicate most recipes. Donn Gabaccia (1998, 6) explains, "Humans cannot easily lose their accents when they learn new languages after the age of about twelve; similarly, the food they ate as children forever defines familiarity and comfort". The Mexican food that many of these characters grow up eating provide opportunities to recreate their past. "For minority group members, identification with others who

share the same origins and traditions is critical in developing both a positive personal identity and feelings of self-esteem and efficacy, rather than self-blame and powerlessness" (Arce 1981, 182). Food therefore serves as a preservation for the culture and traditions of their past. And though the novel's location centers on the border, there still exists a displacement of Mexican culture inflicted by American culture. This then interferes with younger generations' roots to Mexico. Anzaldúa notes, "the infusion of the values of the white culture, coupled with the exploitation by that culture, is changing the Mexican way of life" (1987, 32). Anzaldúa's observations on culture are apparent in Castillo's novel, as many characters view the foods they eat with different connotations and interests.

Without a doubt, the recipes Regina follows primarily derive from her Mexican ancestors. From atole to menudo, readers may associate Regina as a character who remains indebted to her family's traditional recipes. Meredith Abarca (2013, 121) claims, "Every time a traditional recipe is prepared, not only are familial values reinforced, but also cultural and national ones". Thus, the foods that these characters eat not only reflect their family's traditions, but also the traditions shared among other Mexicans dating back many generations. Just like her skills gardening, Regina learns how to cook at an early age from her mother and notes a childhood memory in which her mother "was mad at me because the frijoles had burned" (Castillo 2007, 160). Because Gabo lives with Regina, he too eats Mexican food every day and does not seem to crave American food. When coming home from work one day, he narrates, "Inside, there were no potatoes and eggs on the stove kept warm for me" (Castillo 2007, 20). On a different day, he admits to eating beans every day (Castillo 2007, 18). The question then centers on Mexican food in comparison to American food and "the infusion of the values of the white culture" forewarned by Anzaldúa.

While Regina and Gabo eat Mexican food every day, they still eat American food, but mostly on special occasions. The day Gabo returns home and notices Regina did not cook exemplifies a special occasion. Instead of eating homemade Mexican food, Regina surprises Gabo with an unexpected plan to eat at Applebee's or Chili's for dinner (Castillo 2007, 20). Likewise, when Regina marries Junior, they celebrate by eating Kentucky Fried Chicken (Castillo 2007, 152). This then suggests that most days are dedicated to eating traditional Mexican food passed down by generations, and American food for special occasions. Eating American food further proposes the notion of always consuming American food away from home. Interestingly enough, Regina's business schemes involving food solely pertain to American foods. From pizza to pies (as well as candy apples and pecan bread), Regina enforces this observation by providing American food that others leave their homes to obtain. Abuelo Milton also provides a list of places to eat when he used to shop with his wife years ago. As he recalls, "Across the street [from the flea market] you got the Kentucky Fried Chicken—Taco Bell combo in one little building—men are waiting there. They're waiting in the McDonald's and Church's Chicken parking lots too" (Castillo 2007, 131). Abuelo Milton does not clarify whether he actually ate at these fast food chains. He instead only mentions the various fast food places and men who gravitate towards them. Whether or not he actually ate the food serves

little relevance, for "the infusion of white culture" nonetheless plays into the "Mexican way of life." As suggested by the novel, consuming American food only occurs outside the home environment.

That is not to say that all Mexican foods are entirely appreciated. There exists, throughout the novel, a separation between healthy and unhealthy foods. Though Regina and Gabo love to eat chorizo, they moderate their portions due to the expense (as with avocados) and health issues associated with eating too much chorizo. Regina hypothesizes, "spicy, greasy sausage is no good for your health, and what's bad for your arteries cannot be good for your mental well-being neither" (Castillo 2007, 8). Regina's highly unscientific statement exposes a division of foods one may indulge in and foods one should only eat in moderation. Gabo recognizes this in church, noting, "I looked around the church at all the roasted pecan faces. A lot of the women around here are gordas. Some are bien flaquitas. I think it has to do with very bad eating habits, too much drinking" (Castillo 2007, 64). Eating Mexican food and occasionally drinking alcohol does not solely result in obesity, but the thought of Mexican recipes deemed unhealthy and American recipes healthy exposes the cultural oppression derived from stigmatization. Regina admits, "I had decided recently I thought the food we grew up with could kill you" (Castillo 2007, 66), which associates the food they consume as unhealthy and may create health issues if overconsumption occurs. Miguel's Americanized children attest to this assumption and refuse to eat the Mexican food Miguel brings them. "Right away," Miguel narrates, "my son said the food was too spicy for him. He wouldn't even taste it. Xochitl announced she was on a diet" (Castillo 2007, 110). The Mexican food Miguel buys therefore goes uneaten by his children. His Americanized children not only detach from their heritage, but are alienated from the culture. The negative assumptions associated with foreign foods is not new, for "the unknown food [has always been] suspected of belonging to a category of substances defined as impure and taboo in the culture of the subject" (Fischler 1988, 282). Instead, Miguel makes grilled cheese sandwiches for them. Though grilled cheese sandwiches are often times just as unhealthy as gorditas, Miguel's Americanized children make assumptions about Mexican food that parallels with Regina's assumptions. As a result, the characters in the novel are made to assume the food they have been eating for generations does not provide suitable and healthy nourishment. The "values of white culture" therefore come into play, for traditional Mexican recipes are stigmatized and thought of as less desirable due to the fallacy of its nutritional value.

Conclusion

Ana Castillo's *The Guardians* chronicles the lives of an aunt and her nephew, torn by the clashing issues of culture and opportunities near the border. From loss to grievance, these characters experience emotions many Americans who live far from la frontera do not need to endure. Despite such traumatizing experiences, Castillo incorporates an abundance of food references to describe the lives of Chicana/os. Food not only provides work opportunities, but also the ability to connect with one's culture when settled away from home. Despite the resistance from Americanized individuals (such as Miguel's children) who neglect their traditions due to the assumed

unhealthiness, the food the main characters grow, sell, cook, and consume help them endure the alienation and trauma experienced in their lives. Gabriel Valle asserts, "Sharing food among members of a community counters orthodox notions of competition between individuals and accepted ideas of space" (2015, 78). When Regina admits Rafa's death, she offers to take Gabo out to eat. When Gabo dies, Regina feeds Gabriela strawberries. Eating therefore signifies closeness with loved ones. Aishih Wehbe-Herrera argues, "it is the nurturing network that constitutes the characters' actual homelands. It is the bridges they build among themselves that a place called home exists" (2013, 157). The constriction of the metaphorical bridge occurs in many ways, though mostly present through food. Gabo observes, "My tía loves to see people eat her food" (Castillo 2007, 64). Though apparently true throughout the novel, Gabo's observation applies to most characters. Regina's mother, Abuelo Milton, and Miguel are just a few that exemplify this observation. "Mealtimes are 'densely packed events' for creating, maintaining, and negotiating the national, cultural, and social structures that organize people's patterns of behavior" (Abarca 2013, 121). Given the difficulties living near the border, food undoubtedly encompasses many of these individuals' lives, not only for the purpose of maintaining traditions, but also for the financial opportunities it provides.

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