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From Tortillas to Low-carb Wraps: Capitalism and Mexican Food in Los Angeles since the 1920s

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Abstract: Tortillas and products made from maize provided subsistence to early Mesoamerican civilizations, and are central to Mexican national identity, Latino/a communities, and the globalization of Mexican foods. In the U.S., tortillas represent one of the fastest growing sectors of the food industry. This study shows how the adaptive nature of capitalism leads to a refining of colonial praxis, using the tools of industrialization, nutrition science, and marketing as new methods for colonizing maize and delinking it from Mexican culture and history.

Key Terms: Americanization; coloniality; de-Mexicanizing diets; maize; tortilla industry; GRUMA; Los Angeles; Guerrero, Mexico; Mission Foods; race, class, and gender hierarchies

Tortillas are an iconic Mexican food that have nourished the peoples of the Americas for millennia. An integral component of Mesoamerica's indigenous cultures, their production and consumption are essential for understanding the formation of Mexican national identity, Mexican migrations and communities, and the globalization of Mexican foods. In the United States, tortillas are the fastest growing sector of the baking industry, with sales reaching \$6.1 billion in 2004 and more than \$8 billion in 2009 (Sylvester, 2003; Kabbani, 2010). In 2009, tortillas outsold white sandwich bread for the first time in history (Kabbani, 2010). Many applaud this growth as a symbol of U.S. multiculturalism, with tortillas as an ambassador of Mexican culture, fully embraced by the U.S. heartland.¹

The popularity and growth of tortillas in U.S. culture, however, has occurred at a time of intense xenophobia and anti-Mexican sentiments. Capitalist restructuring, U.S. foreign and economic policy, the dislocation of *campesino* maize producers, and political and economic crisis have spurred human migration from maize producing regions in Mexico and Central America to various parts of the U.S. (Ochoa and Ochoa, 2005). Upon arrival in the U.S., immigrants have been met with a wave of policies in the 1990s aimed at reducing migration, reversing such federal programs as bilingual education, affirmative action and other civil rights gains. After 9/11, the anti-immigrant policies reached new heights through the creation of federal government policies that linked undocumented

immigration to terrorism. During both the Bush and Obama administrations, such policies have led to major raids of businesses in various parts of the nation, instilling terror in communities and separating families (Ochoa, 2005; Chávez, 2008).

This contradictory scenario of maize and tortillas as cultural ambassadors while Mexicanas/os in the U.S. and campesino producers of maize are vilified, is part of the long history of capitalism and colonialism in Mexico and the U.S. Since the onset of the conquest of Mexico in 1519, a concentrated effort has transformed the economy and culture of indigenous Mexico and Central America, supplanting it with European-oriented culture. Popular resistance struggles against efforts of cultural erasure, however, have resulted in the persistence of maize as an identity marker and in the Mexican culinary repertoire, even in the face of capitalist onslaught. The adaptive nature of capitalism means a refining of colonial praxis through the tools of industrialization, nutrition science, and marketing, delinking it from Mexican culture and history.

HOLISTIC APPROACHES TO MEXICANA/O FOOD STUDIES

The recent boom in food scholarship has helped to underscore the historic importance of food and its connection to culture, identity, and unequal social structures. Since the 1960s and 1970s, there have been tremendous strides in interdisciplinary approaches to

Mexican food that have moved from structural analysis of grain production, to the impact of systems of production on workers, to poststructural discussions of consumption and of traditional producers' knowledge systems. More recently, scholars have built on earlier works and employed the insights of cultural studies to construct more holistic and nuanced approaches to food systems that emphasize power, inequality, knowledge, and resistance (Ochoa, 2011).

Since the mid-twentieth century, a burgeoning literature has helped us to understand the political and structural factors of Mexican food history. The initial studies focused on colonial institutional and economic histories of grain production and government regulation (Lee, 1947). By the 1960s and 1970s, studies influenced by dependency and Marxist debates about the role of agriculture in society explored food production within a framework of the development of capitalism and its impact on working Mexicans (Florescano, 1969; Feder, 1977; Esteva, 1983). By the 1980s and 1990s, scholars increasingly studied food distribution and consumption, with many linking these to the creation of a national cuisine or to national economic development strategies (Barkin and Suárez, 1985; Pilcher, 1998; Ochoa, 2000). At the same time, the essential role of women in food production began to be considered (Keremitsis, 1984; Bauer, 1990; Barndt, 1999).

More recently, scholars have noted the transnational dimensions of food and agricultural policies. Most of these studies have centered on the countryside, agriculture labor, and food production, significantly complicating our understanding of commodity chains and the social, political, and gendered impacts of food production and processing (Barndt, 2002). They have demonstrated the power of capital to take advantage of national, racial, and gendered divisions of the workforce to expand markets (Bank Muñoz, 2008). Others have demonstrated how the kitchen and the community garden represent epistemic sites and sites of resistance, opening up many new avenues for understanding the complexities of food in Mexicano/a society (Abarca, 2006; Mares and Peña, 2010).

The importance of connecting Mexicana/o foods to larger macro-structural factors from a critical perspective can be seen in recent works by journalist, Gustavo Arrellano, and historian, Jeffrey Pilcher. These are landmark studies that address important issues about the globalization of Mexican food in the public sphere of the U.S., and in Pilcher's case, throughout the world. Both authors

paint complicated pictures about Mexican food and they problematize notions of authentic Mexican food. Whereas Pilcher centers power relations and examines how (and which) Mexican foods are represented in the public sphere, Arrellano tends to slight historical processes of colonialism and capitalism that shape how Mexican food emerges in the U.S.

This article seeks to challenge notions that Mexican food has assimilated in the U.S. Instead, it underscores how the growth and commercialization of Mexican food occurs, and what groups benefit and which are left robbed of traditions and cultures. In particular, I draw on the insights of critical scholars of coloniality of power who argue that the,

colonization of America comprised the systematic repression of indigenous ways of knowing and even after the elimination of political colonialism the relationship between European cultures and the others is still one of colonial domination. (Quijano in Janer, 2007)

Walter Mignolo develops Quijano's notion to talk about a colonial matrix of power that connects economic and political power to knowledge and subjectivity, and creates physical and epistemological hierarchies about race, gender, and sexuality (Mignolo, 2011: 9). Drawing on Quijano and Mignolo, Zilkia Janer and Vanessa Fonseca have independently applied these concepts to food in the Americas. Janer focuses on the colonial processes of "... degradation of indigenous culinary knowledge as a response to the challenge that American nature and indigenous culinary practices posed to Europe" (Janer, 2007). In her analysis of the advertising and marketing of Mexican foods in Texas, Vanessa Fonseca (2003) demonstrates that "coloniality of power will evidence how in late capitalism, the commodification of culture and the colonization of lifeworlds results from the implementation of marketing practices as neocolonial forces leading to the reconfiguration and transformation of subjectivities, both Hispanic and non-Hispanic, through consumption" (Fonseca, 2003: vii). Through these more holistic critical approaches, food is transformed from that which sustains life to just another commodity that has no roots, history, or cultural context.

This essay explores how modern companies, owned by Mexican capitalists, innovate colonial practices and reinforce racial, ethnic, class, and gender hierarchies to expand the market. At the same time, these companies work to disassociate tortillas from Mexico for non-Latino/a consumers and play on the nostalgia of Mexicana/o, and Chicana/o, and immigrant consumers. Nevertheless, the deep-rooted history of maize and tortillas and their symbolic meanings has led to its persistence among working-class Mexicanas/os. The contradictions that emerge in this process are numerous. This article first examines the historic place of maize and tortillas in Mesoamerican history and culture, and how successive regimes have sought to transform Mexican diets. Following the great Mexican migration to the U.S. in the early 20th century, we then examine the context in which the tortilla industry emerged, by focusing on Americanization programs and the devaluation of Mexican foods, at the same time that Mexican food is becoming popular among

world has lasted so long. Variants of Mexica lore explain that maize was introduced by the god Quetzalcoatl and served as the basic building block of Mexican civilization (Warman, 2003: 35). Other creation myths center women as corn mothers, responsible for giving life and the origins of maize. Women have been central to the process of maize cultivation and its daily transformation into *nixtamal* and then tortillas or tamales. Hence, maize is historically central to the culture and identity of Mesoamericans and especially of Mesoamerican women.

Beginning with the Spanish conquest, Europeans aggressively sought to eliminate maize from popular consumption. During the colonial period, the Spanish preferred a wheat-based diet and wheat production displaced maize production in many areas, leading to severe price increases, famine, and social unrest (Florescano, 1969; Florescano, 1976; Super, 1988). Indigenous populations and humble mestizos continued to eat a maize-based diet, but in the colonial hierarchy it was seen as inferior.

Beginning with the Spanish conquest, Europeans aggressively sought to eliminate maize from popular consumption.

the Los Angeles' Anglo elite. The essay then explores the rapid development of the tortilla industry in the city, as a means of resisting the dominant discourse and practice. Lastly, the essay concludes with an analysis of the Mexican tortilla giant, GRUMA (Grupo MASECA), which entered the Los Angeles market in the late 1970s. By focusing on the marketing strategy of Mexico's tortilla giant, we can see how it has come to dominate the industry by using strategies that reinforce and deepen the racialized hierarchies of the early 20th century.

COLONIALISM AND MAÍZ

Consumed for thousands of years in Mexico, tortillas are much more than just a food product. First cultivated around eight thousand years ago in Mesoamerica, maize is an integral part of Mesoamerican life and culture. According to the Mayan Book of Life, after searching for a good material to make humans, the gods decided on *masa*: "From yellow corn and white corn his flesh was made; from corn dough the arms and legs ..." (Warman, 2003: 35). According to *Mexica* creation myths, humans were created five different times. On the fifth attempt, humans were nourished with maize which helps explain why the

However, it was not until the advent of pseudo-scientific approaches to the study of nutrition and culture in the late nineteenth century that racialized arguments were developed that blamed Mexico's poverty on its maize-based diet. For example, Porfirian senator and intellectual luminary, Francisco Bulnes, authored an 1899 study based on modern nutritional science that concluded "maize has been the eternal pacifier of America's indigenous races and the foundation of their refusal to become civilized" (Pilcher, 1998: 77). Such studies formed the basis of subsequent policies designed to transform Mexican diets away from that created by indigenous women over the centuries. Nevertheless, tortillas remained an important part of the Mexican diet and culture consumed by Mexicans of all walks of life (Pilcher, 1998).

During the early 20th century, maize was begrudgingly accepted by Mexican elites as campesinos and rural Mexicanas/os formed the social base of the Mexican Revolution. During the 1930s, under the presidency of Lázaro Cárdenas, maize began to regain its historic prominence as a number of agrarian reform policies were implemented in the regime's efforts to buy social peace. Subsequent presidents worked with the Rockefeller

Foundation to increase maize production, while eliminating small *maiceros* and encouraging mass production (Ochoa, 2000; Cotter, 2003). Tortillas, made from corn ground for thousands of years by women at the *metate*, were transformed by the first half of the 20th century to a product produced in automated tortilla factories. As Mexicanas/os migrated to the United States, they brought with them tortilla-making knowledge and production, and consumption greatly transformed wherever Mexicanas/os were (Valle and Valle, 1995).

MEXICAN DIETS IN THE U.S.

The growth of Mexican immigration to the Los Angeles region following the outbreak of the Mexican Revolution in 1910 instilled concern among the city's Anglo elite. Fears of radical Mexicans influenced by the Revolution merged with eugenic beliefs of the need to improve the "Mexican Race" so as to create a productive workforce that would live harmoniously in the emerging metropolis. While elites in Mexico were engaged in tortilla discourses that debated the relative merit of traditional diets, U.S. reformers had already concluded that Mexican diets were inherently backward and needed to be transformed.

U.S. social reformers concentrated their efforts on assimilating the Mexican population. Scholars have shown how Americanization programs tended to emphasize the public schooling of Mexican children aimed at creating a disciplined student with a "proper" work ethic through a curriculum that focused on industrial education (González, 1990). Americanization officials quickly realized, however, that an important avenue for transforming Mexican values was to "go after the women" (Sánchez, 1994). For example, in her study of the public health system in early 20th-century Los Angeles, Natalia Molina (2001: 10) found that "health officials considered Mexican women more malleable and influential as the carriers of culture within their families."

Similar efforts were made with regard to nutrition and the food customs of Mexicanas/os influenced by the development of modern nutrition science and home economics. Reformers sought to transform working-class habits to increase the productive and intellectual capacity of Mexicans and to assimilate them as effective workers. Americanization teachers and progressive era scholars assiduously studied Mexican dietary patterns, which they found to be lacking in nutritional value. For

one Americanization teacher, "Mexican families are malnourished, not so much from a lack of food as from not having the right varieties of foods, containing constituents favorable to growth and development" (Ellis, 1929: 19). In the process, they created a binary notion of Mexican food and American food, not recognizing the great diversity of both diets and the ways they influenced each other.

Americanization teachers sought to change these dietary patterns. Evangeline Hymer (1923: 16), who surveyed Mexican families in Los Angeles and in Fullerton, California, concluded that the "... Mexican still clings to his native diet, while modifying it gradually to include American foods." Over a decade later, another teacher argued that, "Mexican style food is eaten in most of the homes because it is cheaper and because the Mexican mother is ignorant of nutrition and health rules" (Bishop, 1937: 79). Pearl Ellis, an Americanization teacher in the Covina Public Schools sounded the alarm about what the tortilla-based diet could mean for the Mexican child and for society at large.

The noon lunch of the Mexican child quite often consists of a folded tortilla with no filling. There is no milk or fruit to whet the appetite. Such a lunch is not conducive to learning. The child becomes lazy. His hunger unappeased, he watches for an opportunity to take food from the lunch boxes of more fortunate children. Thus the initial step in a life of thieving is taken. (1929: 26-27)

To remedy these perceived poor diets, Americanization teachers provided a number of recipes for Mexican mothers to use to help de-Mexicanize their diets. These recipes included simple and inexpensive foods that included milk, bread, butter, eggs, and fruits and vegetables. Among the more nutritious and economical lunches that Pearl Ellis recommended were sandwiches made of either cheese and catsup, lettuce and mayonnaise, crumbled egg and lettuce, minced meats, and jelly. Americanization teachers argued that if Mexican women were taught how to manage the family budget and learned the basics of nutrition, they could be instrumental at raising children who would successfully contribute to American society,

and their husbands would become a productive worker who “is more dependable and less revolutionary in his tendencies” (Ellis, 1929: 31).

These Americanization policies were part of a much larger process of the “culture of empire” (González, 2004). As historian Gilbert González has argued, U.S. imperial dominance in Mexico in the late 19th century and early 20th century was accompanied by pseudo-scientific cultural arguments that spoke of Mexican inferiority. One

off the massive deportation and repatriation campaign in 1931, just yards away from La Golindrina restaurant, a favorite of Anglo tourists (Valle and Torres, 2000: 83).

Efforts to de-Mexicanize the food customs of Mexicanas/os, as with most Americanization programs, however, were not successful. Mexicans in the region had a deep understanding of basic nutrition and their diets were often far more elaborate than Americanization teachers indicated. Scores of Mexicans interviewed during

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of the most prominent contemporary U.S. authorities on Mexico, Wallace Thompson (1921), writes of the need to understand this “grievously sick nation.” In a chapter on Mexican foods, he describes at length the basis of the diet which he argues is considered nutritious by all dietary measures, but demonstrates profound cultural chauvinism as he discusses how other cultures find Mexican foods “rather strange and unpalatable” and argues that spicy chiles lead to digestive problems that contribute to malnourishment (Thompson, 1921: 283-284). Thompson’s works served as the basis for U.S. educators and Americanization teachers, and was often cited in their theses and books (González, 2004).

These policies of cultural transformation were occurring in a context of growing repression against the Mexican community. During the 1920s and 1930s, government policies sought to control Mexican workers through residential and school segregation, union-busting and red-baiting tactics, and the mass deportation of approximately one million Mexicans and Mexican Americans during the 1930s (Gómez-Quiñónez, 1994; Balderrama and Rodríguez, 1995; Ruíz, 2008). At the same time, city boosters fostered the development of Los Angeles’ identity based on a Spanish fantasy past that glorified the Spanish *rancheros* and the Mission period, decoupling this period from Mexico and Mexicans (McWilliams, 1946; Kropp, 2001; Deverell, 2004). “Spanish” food became popular among the city’s elite and they purchased new cookbooks and frequented newly opened restaurants (Haffa-Ginger, 1914; Valle and Torres, 2000; Shindler, 1998). The brutal irony of these policies was apparent as a raid on the Plaza Olvera kicked

the 1920s by the Mexican anthropologist, Manuel Gamio, and his team illustrate that they knew what they liked and they knew how to balance their meals, provided they had sufficient means. Even if they were struggling economically, many families supplemented their meals with homegrown vegetables from their family gardens. Most people interviewed discussed the importance of maintaining their Mexican diets for reasons of taste as well as health, and they tended to characterize U.S. foods as bland. Señora María Rocha commented, “as for food we don’t suffer because there is everything that you need to make Mexican style dishes ... What we like most are the greens, salads especially.” Her husband, José Rocha, added that since they are from Guanajuato they “have green bellies since we eat a lot of salad and it is plentiful here” (Gamio, 2002). Ignacio Sandoval and his wife planted the front lot of their Belvedere home with vegetables every spring. Because reformers assumed they knew what the Mexican was like, the complexity of Mexican meals and nutrition, even in the midst of economic hardship, often escaped them.

Despite efforts to transform Mexican diets, the growth of the Mexican population provided a market for Mexican food products in general, and tortillas in particular. The growing population countered anti-Mexican food rhetoric and served as a market for a burgeoning tortilla industry that would largely cater to the Mexicana/o population.

THE TORTILLA INDUSTRY IN LOS ANGELES

Despite centuries of colonial efforts to eliminate maize and tortilla consumption, the tortilla industry rapidly developed in Los Angeles during the 20th century.

Spurred by Mexican migration in the first several decades of the 20th century and by key industrial innovations, Mexican American-owned tortillerías sprouted in the growing Mexican American communities of greater Los Angeles. While Mexican women continued to produce tortillas in the household, in the 1920s tortillerías began to appear in Los Angeles. In the 1930s, the first fully automatic tortilla making machines were designed and patented (Valle and Valle, 1995). Mechanization and market-oriented tortilla production spurred the gradual deskilling of the tortilla-making process, with Mexican women becoming increasingly alienated from the process that their ancestors had pioneered centuries ago. At the same time, industrialized tortillas fostered a burgeoning industry that throughout the 20th century transformed from a number of small Mexican American family-based operations to an industry dominated by a vertically integrated Mexican transnational corporation.

Throughout Los Angeles during the first four decades of the twentieth century, tortillerías were concentrated in and around the major centers of the Mexican population—downtown near the plaza and east of the river, as well as in a few working-class suburbs and portions of south Los Angeles. These shops were generally owned and operated by Mexican immigrant and Mexican American families, employed family labor and a small number of employees (5-10), and catered to a local Mexican market (Los Angeles City Business Directories, 1930s and 1940s). For example, El Sol del Mayo, owned by María Quevedo, was located on North Spring Street in the 1920s and 1930s, and operated with about 7 women workers in a semi-mechanized process (Los Angeles Public Library Photo Database; Valle and Valle, 1995).

Between the 1940s and 1960s, tortillerías began to expand rapidly throughout the Los Angeles area. In 1947, thirty tortillerías were listed in the phone directory. Humberto González, the owner of one tortillería employing new technology, produced an average of 125 dozen per hour per machine, and delivered about 2,000 dozens a day in two trucks (“Pat-a-cake Tortillas Bow to Machine Age,” 1947). So rapid was the growth, that in 1965, the *Los Angeles Times* stated that “Tortillas [were] Selling like Hotcakes in U.S. Market” (Nevarez, 1965). Los Angeles was being referred to as the tortilla capital of the U.S. since it was estimated that between one and two million tortillas were consumed daily. Tortilla consumption moved beyond the Mexican American

community as supermarket chains throughout the city sold tortillas. For example, Vons markets had nearly 100 stores and sold more than 500,000 dozen tortillas in 1964. The development of the frozen food industry and the beginning of the fast food industry created other markets for tortilla products beyond the Mexican population (Pilcher, 2012).

In this process, however, men increasingly became centered in the industry as the innovators and entrepreneurs. In numerous newspaper accounts, the growth of the tortilla industry was linked to mechanization and men were frequently profiled as the innovators. For example, a 1947 *Los Angeles Times* article profiled Humberto González as the spokesman for the “new turbo type tortilla technique” as “Pat-a-cake tortillas bow to machine age” (“Pat-a-cake Tortillas Bow to Machine Age,” 1947). González argues for increased efficiency. His wife, Helen Gutiérrez, is pictured “stacking tortillas as they come off the machine owned by her husband, Humberto ...” Nevertheless, a few notable shops were run by women, such as Rebecca Webb Carranza who was president of El Zarape tortilla factory that was among the first to employ an automated production process, and has been credited with being one of the creators of the tortilla chip (Nelson, 2006; Arellano, 2012: 202-204).

Between the 1960s and the 1980s, the industry began to consolidate into a few large companies that dominated the market and pushed out smaller and less efficient tortillerías. The five big tortilla producers in Los Angeles during this period were Cisco’s, La Colonial, La Gloria, La Vencedora, and Ramona’s, each with machines capable of producing 2,000 dozen tortillas an hour. These tortillerías were able to expand since they had access to capital, a strong distribution chain, and were able to get contracts with the budding supermarkets such as Vons and Safeway. For example, La Reyna owner, Mauro Robles, started as a distributor of Mexican food products in East Los Angeles and the San Gabriel Valley. He saved up enough money to buy the latest tortilla-making machine, bought a small tortillería on Brooklyn Avenue and opened up shop, supplying the businesses that he had already cultivated as a distributor. As his business prospered, Robles was to buy a piece of land on Ford Blvd. and build a modern factory with the latest equipment (Robles, 2005). The expansion of these factories led to the employment of thousands of workers in the area. Several factories had well over 100 employees.

The expansion of the tortilla industry was spurred by demands in the Mexican American community. During the industrialization process, women were increasingly

plummeted and were eliminated by the end of decade (Ochoa, 2000). Before they were eliminated, however, President Salinas began diverting state corn stocks away

President Salinas began diverting state corn stocks away from 45,000 subsidized *nixtamal* tortilla factories and to the ready-mix tortilla industry. GRUMA benefited from this process.

relegated to the margins of the industry, so that in most cases women's public presence in the tortilla-making process had been transformed from artisan and chef to a brand name in a male dominated industry.

TRANSNATIONAL TORTILLAS

A major shift in the industry began in the 1970s with the entrance of the Mexican tortilla giant, Grupo MASECA (GRUMA), into the U.S. market. GRUMA came to dominate the Los Angeles market by the 1980s, through its political and economic connections, but also by a shrewd marketing policy that played on coloniality and reinforced class, racial, ethnic, and gender divisions. In the process, this Mexican transnational company made millions of dollars while helping to transform the character and history of the tortilla.

GRUMA came to dominate the tortilla industry in Mexico during the 1980s and 1990s, benefiting from its close relationship with the administration of President Carlos Salinas de Gortari (1988-1994), as the government restructured its economy to fit the strictures of neoliberalism. Started in 1949 in Nuevo León as Molinos Aztecas, the company modernized the process of making corn flour, storing it, and then essentially just adding water and a few chemicals to make tortillas, transforming what had been a laborious process into a relatively easy one. GRUMA grew steadily in Mexico throughout the 1960s and 1970s, but was held in check by a state-owned marketing agency.

By the early 1980s, GRUMA's ready-mix tortillas grew rapidly as a result of Mexico's IMF-imposed neoliberal response to the economic crisis. These policies entailed slashing social welfare programs, liberalizing markets, reducing tariff barriers, privatizing state-owned industries, seeking foreign investment, and culminating with the implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement in 1994. Consequently, throughout the 1980s and 1990s, subsidies to corn and tortillas

from 45,000 subsidized *nixtamal* tortilla factories and to the ready-mix tortilla industry. GRUMA benefited from this process. Its CEO, Roberto González Barrera, was closely associated with Salinas' brother, Raul, a high ranking official in the state food agency, later jailed for his role in the death of a presidential candidate, and with Salinas' Secretary of Agriculture, Carlos Hank González—Hank's son is married to González Barrera's daughter and their mutual grandson was closely mentored by both magnates (Senzek, 1998; Galarza, 2009). The press reported numerous questionable payments by the Mexican government to GRUMA during the early years of the Salinas administration that smacked of favoritism and cronyism (Carson and Brooks, 1996; De Palma, 1996; Newman, 1996).

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, thanks to government subsidies, GRUMA came to dominate the tortilla industry in Mexico, coming to account for some 65 percent of the ready-mix industry, which in turn accounted for nearly half of the tortilla industry. With the tortilla subsidy eliminated, the large industrial process of GRUMA has been able to displace large numbers of *nixtamal* factories.

GRUMA's rise and dominance of the Mexican market stimulated their expansion internationally. Beginning in the 1970s, GRUMA expanded its operations to Central America, and by 2003 controlled approximately 71% of the corn flour market in El Salvador and approximately 65% of the Central American market (Ortega, 2003). In 1999, GRUMA purchased controlling interest in a Venezuelan firm making it the number two producer of wheat and corn flour in the South American country (McCosh, 2001). In the following decade, GRUMA expanded into the European and Asian markets (López, 2004; González Amador, 2004).

Beginning in the late 1970s, GRUMA entered the U.S. market by purchasing several *tortillerías*, including Guerrero and Mission in Los Angeles. Guerrero was purchased from Verónico and Marina Trujillo who

started their factory in Los Angeles in 1973. The Trujillos expanded their business by adding flour tortillas to the corn tortillas that they started with, and by 1986, they had four factories and began to advertise on television. In 1989, they sold their business to GRUMA (Guerrero Tortillas website). With Mission and Guerrero as their

Bank calculated that the average production worker (all of whom are Latino) in the Los Angeles factories of a major transnational tortilla firm earned \$8.79 an hour, while white workers in the bakery industry earn an average of \$14.46, and Hispanic workers \$10.34. Bank argues that this is owing to a “racialized despotism” where managers

GRUMA uses the “Mission” label to appeal to a non-Latina/o market by disassociating tortillas from Mexicans or Mexican immigrants.

key brands, GRUMA aggressively expanded in the 1980s and 1990s, accounting for over 50% of U.S. supermarket tortilla sales in 2002, and controlling about 70% of the market in Southern California. They currently operate 13 industrial plants in the U.S., including the largest tortilla factory in the world, just in Rancho Cucamonga, and employ over 5,000 people (Dickerson, 2003). This growth has occurred with the help of a strategic alliance with Archer Daniel’s Midland, one of the leading agribusinesses in the world and a key recipient of U.S. corn subsidies.

GRUMA AND TORTILLAS IN LOS ANGELES

The expansion of GRUMA has greatly impacted Los Angeles’ tortillerías. While there are still about 90 tortillerías in California, they have had to scramble to find new niches to survive. For example, La Reina, once the largest producer of flour tortillas in the nation, has shifted its operations to make up for market share loss by expanding its participation in the Mexican food business by adding frozen foods, packaged chips, moving into organic tortilla production, and adding other specialty items to its product line. Nevertheless, La Reina’s revenue in the early 2000s was nearly 20% less than it was in 1983 (Robles, 2005; Dickerson, 2003). This mirrors the experience of other tortilla producers that have been able to stay in business: either diversify their production or shut down. Tumaró’s Gourmet Tortillas, based in Santa Monica, developed their product, low in fat and using organic products, to appeal to health conscious consumers. They have also worked to create various flavors to sell the tortillas as “wraps,” for tortillas are consumed in many guises on a global basis (Semuels, 2006).

Despite the significance of the tortilla industry in Los Angeles, most workers are not unionized. Consequently, in Los Angeles plants, production workers earn significantly below workers in the rest of the bakery industry. Carolina

take advantage of immigration status, appeal to Mexican nationalism, and an elaborate surveillance system to keep workers in fear of losing their jobs and the union out (Bank, 2004).

There have been various attempts to unionize the industry over the past few decades, but they have largely been unsuccessful. During the 1980s, unsuccessful attempts to organize the industry did lead at least one employer to implement a pension and a profit sharing plan (Robles, 2005). The major success of union organizing attempts came in the 1990s with the organization of truck drivers who distribute GRUMA products. In 1990, the Teamsters won the right to represent drivers. After a bitter six-week strike in August and September of 1996, drivers received a boost in pay and commissions (Ballesteros, 1996; Rivera Brooks, 1996; Bacon, 1996). Nevertheless, the remainder of the industry remains unorganized and underpaid by bakery industry standards (Bank Muñoz, 2008).

GRUMA has been successful at expanding into the U.S. market by using the knowledge it developed in Mexico, the capital it earned through close relationships with government officials in Mexico, through its alliance with ADM in the U.S., and through its grand strategy of creating national brands in the U.S. GRUMA’s success can also be attributed to its shrewd marketing strategies that have taken advantage of the growth of the Latina/o population and of the Hispanic marketing craze of the 1980s and 1990s (Dávila, 2001; Fonseca, 2003). This strategy has several dimensions, including marketing to both a Latina/o market and a non-Latina/o market, appealing to nostalgia for the Mexican homeland or a Spanish fantasy past, catering to the whims of American dietary fads, and forging ties with top retailers of the booming fast food industry. In doing so, it has helped bolster traditional notions and stereotypes of Latinas/os

and Mexican foods, and has further separated the consumer from the producer of corn and the tortilla factory worker.

In the U.S. GRUMA has successfully appealed to both a Latina/o market and a non-Latina/o market. Guerrero and Mission are marketed separately and an average consumer would be hard-pressed to find a link between the two companies. When GRUMA purchased Guerrero in the late 1970s, the tortilla market aimed at Latinas/os was well established. With Guerrero, they continued this process, working to appeal to Mexican and Latina/o consumers in particular through the use of the name “Guerrero,” the surname of both a famous Mexican independence leader (Vicente Guerrero) and a Mexican state. The clear packaging is adorned with red and green lettering in Spanish with drawings of ears of corn. Underneath the brand name is the brand’s trademarked slogan “un pedacito de Mexico” (a little piece of Mexico), an appeal to the consumer’s nostalgic remembrances and to Mexican nationalism (Fig. 1). The tortilla is reminiscent of the look and feel of tortillas prepared in the traditional fashion.



Figure 1. GRUMA’s Guerrero Tortillas, 2004. Photo by Enrique C. Ochoa.

With Mission Foods, GRUMA made a direct effort to cultivate a non-Latina/o market, attempting to situate itself within the context and history of the U.S. Southwest. The brand name is a direct reference to the Spanish Mission period, and evokes nostalgia for what scholars have termed the “Spanish Fantasy Past” where Spain is glorified and the brutality against indigenous people is erased. GRUMA uses the “Mission” label to appeal to a non-Latina/o market by disassociating tortillas from



Figure 2. GRUMA’s Mission Tortillas, 2004. Photo by Enrique C. Ochoa.

Mexicans or Mexican immigrants. Mission tortillas, in contrast to Guerrero, are packaged in clear bags with brightly colored lettering in English. The Mission brand is on the front of the packaging with a mission bell adorning the middle of the package, and above the logo the package brags that Mission is the “World’s Best Selling Tortillas.” On the bottom of the package, it proclaims “No Lard-No Cholesterol” (Fig. 2). Mission distributes both corn and flour tortillas. The corn tortillas, however, do not look exactly like the Guerrero tortillas. Instead, they are smoother and lighter, and look much like flour tortillas. In addition, beginning in 2004, Mission began to produce “wraps” to cater to their popularity and has developed low-carb tortillas to appeal with health-conscious consumers (“Mission Food Revolutionizes,” 2004). Beginning in late 2008, Mission unveiled its Life Balance Tortillas, fortified with calcium and 23 vitamins and minerals, including omega-3 fatty acid, DHA (Schroeder, 2009). By doing so, Mission has help make the tortilla industry the fastest growing sector of the U.S. baking industry, and in the process has contributed to the de-Mexicanization of the tortilla.

DISNEY TORTILLAS

Mission Tortillas’ efforts to insert itself into California culture and history can also be seen in its connection with Disneyland. The building of Disney’s second theme park in Anaheim, “California Adventure,” in 2001, was aimed at representing California’s history and cultural diversity.

The theme park has different rides and sections to reflect Disney's notions of California's past and present. The theme park was one of the few places in California that provided a representation of California's history and regions, and therefore is a combination theme park and museum. As part of constructing this past, Mission

know-how to greatly improve the process, practically erasing the participation of the indigenous and working-class Mexican women. In the last section of the exhibit, guests see the shiny modern factory making the tortillas with several Latina/o employees dressed in white baker outfits, ensuring the moving of the efficient modern

In the process of the tour, Mission is able to recast the history of the tortilla, making itself central to a thousand-year tortilla history, and effectively de-Mexicanizing the process.

Foods built and operated a mini-tortilla factory that doubled as a museum in an industrial-looking building that had both the feel of an adobe Mission-style building and a modern factory (Yester California Adventures at Yesterland). Between 2001 and the time of its closure (May 31, 2011), Mission produced tortillas using its ready-mix dehydrated meal, which through sophisticated machinery rehydrated the flour, made little balls of masa, pressed and cut the masa into perfectly shaped tortillas, and cooked them (Luna, 2011). Some of the tortillas were then given to viewers of the process, while the majority of the tortillas were used to supply the Mexican restaurants in the Disneyland complex.

Equally important, California Adventure guests were able to experience Mission's version of the origin and history of tortillas, and how they fit into California history. As guests walked through the adobe building, they saw murals and installations that explained the origins of their tortillas. While fields of maize are shown in one mural and one room shows the connection of maize to Mexico's Mayan and Aztec past, visibly absent is the role of indigenous peoples in the cultivation, innovations, and consumption of maize and tortillas since the conquest. The crucial role of women in transforming maize into tortillas and the scientific process that it requires is almost nowhere to be found. Instead, the exhibit jumps to the Mission period and shows a series of dioramas of tortillas being produced by hand by women. This is merely a backdrop to the exhibit's climax which is the way GRUMA developed the corn flour process that has industrialized and simplified the tortilla-making process. There is no discussion of what this deskilling process has meant to family production and community-based tortillerías. Instead, the exhibit turns to showing how men take over the process using Western

machinery, and with gloved hands passing out pieces of the freshly-made tortillas (Yester California Adventures at Yesterland). In the process of the tour, Mission is able to recast the history of the tortilla, making itself central to a thousand-year tortilla history, and effectively de-Mexicanizing the process.

Mission has worked in a number of other ways to connect to U.S. popular culture icons. To commemorate Disneyland's 50th anniversary, Mission announced that for a limited time it would make kid-sized tortillas with edible Disney tortilla decals that stick right to your tortilla (Fig. 3) ("Mission Spices Kid Tortillas with Edible Decals," Promo 2005). GRUMA has also been successful in deepening its market share through connecting with other U.S. popular culture icons. Mission has deep ties with the American fast food industry, such as supplying



Figure 3. GRUMA's Mission Tortillas Commemorating Disneyland's 50th Anniversary, 2005. Photo by Enrique C. Ochoa.

Taco Bell and Pollo Loco with the majority of the tortillas that they use in the Southwest. Over the past several years, Mission has benefited from the expansion of the fast food industry's use of tortillas in wraps and in breakfast burritos and sandwiches, with data from April 2014 showing a 12% increase in sales over the previous year (Schroeder, 2014).

GRUMA, through Guerrero and Mission, dominates tortilla sales in supermarkets. Many of their critics charge that GRUMA has forged deals that give their products superior placement in supermarkets. Many markets have specific sections located in the middle of the stores on the end of the aisle where tortillas are located. However, only Mission/Guerrero products are placed there, while other tortillas, if they are sold in the store, are placed in an ethnic foods section. Smaller tortilla makers have unsuccessfully sued the tortilla giant, arguing that they have made illegal deals with supermarkets and these deals in effect restrain trade by granting Guerrero and Mission preferential treatment (Rivera, 2001; Dickerson, 2003; Dickerson, 2004; Ramírez, 2004).

CONCLUSIONS: THE DEVALUING AND REBRANDING OF MEXICAN FOODS

With the growth and dominance of the industry by a transnational corporate giant, the Los Angeles tortilla industry has been radically transformed in just a few decades. GRUMA came to dominate the industry through its pioneering efforts in the industry and through its close relationship with the Mexican government at a critical juncture. It has benefited significantly from government subsidies in both Mexico and the United States, to the detriment of community-based family tortillerías. GRUMA's shrewd marketing appeals to both a Mexican sense of national identity (in the Guerrero brand), and a greatly expanded de-Mexicanized (Mission) brand, to hearken to a Spanish Fantasy past that has achieved lead focus in large grocery chains, and included the faux tortilla "wraps." The growth of GRUMA's operations has meant jobs for workers, but jobs with little protection and wages below U.S. bakery industry standards, further underscoring that the development of the tortilla industry in Los Angeles has reproduced unequal power dynamics, and racial/ethnic and gender hierarchies.

It is in this context of global capitalism and neocolonial practices that we can discern patterns of oppression and domination, over the years, that have continually sought to erase indigenous identities, histories, and

knowledge production. Such practices have reinforced racial, ethnic, class, and gender hierarchies in the expansion of markets, while at the same time, disassociating tortillas from Mesoamerican history and culture. The role of the modern nation-state in Mexico and the U.S. has greatly facilitated this cooptation and erasure through homogenizing nation-state building processes that seek to eradicate (assimilate) people and cultures that do not fit the dominating paradigm. It is in this way that we arrive at the seemingly paradoxical situation of "Mexican food conquering America" (Arellano, 2012), while U.S. policies foster the exploitation of workers, and diminish the cultures they bring with them, criminalize Mexicanas/os, and create a massive bureaucracy that incarcerates and deports thousands of immigrants yearly.

ENDNOTE

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