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Culinary *Mestizaje*: An Afro-Latino Collective Sensory Memory

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Abstract: On the premise that culinary *mestizajes* express the complexity and often contradictory histories reflected in cultural values, this study examines historical, cultural, and symbolic stories that inform the foundation of a variety of Latino cuisines, with particular emphasis on African culinary influences on Latino food preparations. The purpose of the study is not to trace the history of any single food, but to consider the mnemonics of collective palate memories embedded in lived histories, and articulations of Claude Fischler's idea of a "principle of tastes."

Key Terms: Mestizaje; Afro-Latino; collective memory; sensory memory; embodied histories; Latino foodways

If it is true, as French politician turned epicurean Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin claimed in the late 1880s, that we are what we eat, it is equally true what Italian food historian Massimo Montanari asserted in 1994, that we eat what we are. Montanari explains how the inhabitants of any given society essentially eat their own history: "Man eats what he is: his own values, choices, and culture" (24-25). Food and ways of cooking communicate something of who we are. What and how we share our food with others reflect acts of self-representation, and what we accept from others and make part of our own food practices indicates how different cultures inform our sense of self. The foods we eat (or refuse to eat) and the ones we have access to (or are denied from us) tell stories of our personal, cultural, and historical subjectivities.¹

When we eat, we do not simply consume a combination of ingredients prepared through a given set of culinary techniques. In the act of eating, we take into our bodies, and store through our senses the histories already embedded within the ingredients and techniques of preparing a dish. Because the histories of foods are *in* our bodies, they become part of our subjectivity, regardless of whether we are cognizant of the active process food forms in our expressions of who we are. Just by virtue of eating, we express something about the cultures, histories, and places that have made a claim on who we are in relation to our past. For example, through her love for *morcillas* (blood sausages), Esmeralda Santiago, in her memoir *When I was Puerto Rican*, explains how she learns not only about the Spanish and African

imprint in Puerto Rican culinary fare, but also about spiritual beliefs of honoring the life of animals killed for human consumption. When she asked her mother why a pig's blood and guts are used to make *morcillas*, she is told: "Because once you kill the animal, it is a sin to waste anything that can be eaten" (1993: 43). Throughout her memoir, it is through food that Santiago marks key moments in her life.

In addition to the food itself, culinary material culture, such as cooking utensils, also carries the histories of places and the stories of people who have used them. When others use such items, a link between past and present is drawn. In her study of the global history of Caribbean food, historian/archeologist Candice Goucher points out how for Afro-Caribbeans cooking and consuming certain foods offers the "opportunity to remember home. To have forgotten would have implied discontinuity and neglect of ancestors and spirits." To aid this culinary memory, certain food containers like a gourd were used, for they "held the magic of physical and spiritual survival" (2014: 83).² Haitian novelist Edwidge Danticat describes in *Breath, Eyes, Memory* how, after a drastic emotional rift between a mother and daughter, the daughter finds an emotional connection to her mother through a culinary material object. Sophie Caco, the daughter, states: "I was feeling alone and lost, like there was no longer any reason for me to live. I went down to the kitchen and searched my mother's cabinet for the mortar and pestle we used to crush spices. I took the pestle to bed with me and held it against my chest" (87).

Material objects used to prepare, store, grow, and raise food, as well as food itself, reflect a people's lived history. Such history, as I aim to show, is archived in culinary *mestizajes*³ retrievable through the palate's memories.

What I mainly explore here is the historical, cultural, and symbolic process that produces Afro-Latino culinary *mestizajes*. These forms of gastronomic mixtures or *mestizajes* result from the intersection of African and Amerindian food knowledge, which becomes a foundation for much of Latina/o cuisine. If I speak of African-ness more than I do of Amerindian-ness in this paper, it is simply due to the fact that the influences of American indigenous foodways is already accepted as essential ingredients and methods of Latina/o cooking practices: *tortillas* and *tamales* are from corn, *moles* are made with chocolate and chilies, *quesadillas de flor de calabaza* (squash flower quesadillas) are impossible without the squash blooms, and *chilaquiles* become only tortillas in chile sauce without *epazote*.⁴ Therefore, I stress the African-ness within the cultural mixture of Latina/o culinary *mestizajes*, as it is an aspect not always acknowledged, recognized, or understood.⁵

My interest in the possible stories embedded with the African influence into Latina/o cuisines stems from my previous work. I've explored the connections between Mexican tamales and a West African dish called *akaça*—a tamale-like food made with a black-eyed pea paste that is steamed and wrapped in banana leaves. What led to such exploration is the popularity of hot tamales throughout the Mississippi Delta, particularly within the African-American community. In "An Afro-Mestizo Tamal: Remembering a Sensory and Sacred Encounter," I offer the theory of a "shared collective memory" for why tamales have become a roadside signature dish for many African-Americans within the Mississippi Delta (2013). My argument shows the ways in which people of African origins and Amerindians share a land-based spirituality and use food in similar symbolic ritual manners: both tamales and *akaça*, or *acaçá* as it is spelled in Afro-Brazilian communities, have a history as ceremonial foods. In this current essay, I expand on this theory by continuing to explore the roots of the historical collective memories that continue to be remembered in the foods first prepared by people of African origins—particularly as they combined their food knowledge with that of Amerindian cultures.

CULINARY MESTIZAJES

What I'm calling an Afro-Latino culinary *mestizaje* is created out of the nodes of food practices—from producing, distributing/gathering, and consuming. When people of different ethnic/racial groups live in close proximity to one another, the eatable histories of each group interconnect, giving new meaning to such stories; thus, creating culinary *mestizajes* that express collective subjectivities. Sidney Mintz aptly describes cuisine as the process of how "people ... [use] ingredients, methods, and recipes on a regular basis to produce their everyday and festive foods, eating the same diet more or less consistently, and sharing what they cook with each other ... [It is the] active produc[tion] of food and ... [having an] opinion about food, around which and through which people communicate daily to each other who they are" (97-98). This definition of "cuisine" suggests agency on the part of a person defining who she/he is historically and culturally through her/his culinary practices. This form of agency is born out of the availability of food items in a given environment, creativity, and previous culinary knowledge that eventually becomes cultural culinary traditions.

In "Ending Poem," Aurora Levins Morales and Rosario Morales allude to an Afro-Latino food-based *mestizaje* that reflects a person's subjectivity negotiated at cultural and social intersections brought forth by the colonization of the Americas.

I am what I am.

...

*A child of many diasporas, born into
this continent at crossroads.*

...

I come from the dirt where the cane
was grown.

...

*Spanish is in my flesh, ripples from my
tongue, lodges in my hips,
the language of garlic and mangoes.*

...

I am of latinoamérica, rooted in the
history of my continent.

...

I am not African.

*Africa waters the roots of my tree, but
I cannot return.*

I am not Taína.
I am a late leaf on that ancient tree,
and my roots reach into the soil of
two Americas.
Taíno is in me but there is no way back.

I am not European, though I have
dreamt of those cities.

...

We are new.

...

And we are whole.

(in Kanellos, 2002: 270)

The culinary mestizaje captured in this poem shows the (hi)stories that intertwine to shape a person's subjectivity, sense of self, as a wholesome cultural identity. Without a physical return to Africa, Europe, or to the Taíno people of the Caribbean, the roots of the Afro-Latino culinary mestizaje expressed in this poem are watered and nourished with the lives of those who first worked the soil for sugar cane, mangos, and garlic; the use of such foods in recipes, over time, come to represent what Claude Fischler calls a "principle of tastes" for a group's cuisine.

Culinary mestizajes are made up of a network of exchanges—methods of growing, preparing, storing, sharing, and consuming food—that transcend the boundaries of geo-cultural and geo-national politics of mestizaje. The rhetoric of mestizaje, not just within the Mexican and Mexican-American context, but also throughout most of Latin America and parts of the Caribbean, has historically rendered Black communities invisible. Therefore, a national ideology of mestizaje fails to recognize Black communities' contributions to the cultural, social, economic, and political fabric of a nation (Jerry; Vaughn). For instance, after the wars of independence this effort was accomplished politically by replacing the racial caste system of colonial times with a social class system, making mestizaje a process and discourse of whitening (Vincent). Even Vasconcelos' trope of *la raza cósmica* (the cosmic race) appears to endorse the process of whitening through the blending of races, which over time would exterminate the "negative qualities" of the "inferior races," i.e. Amerindians and Blacks (Safa).

The discourse of mestizaje has been used to reflect a variety of ideological positions. First was the attempt to eliminate the colonial caste system upon independence

and nation building in the early nineteenth century, seeking class homogeneity; then a new ideology developed out of the 1910 Revolution that Mexican heritage was dual Indian-Spanish, or *mestizo*, as noted previously. I would like to discuss the second discourse of mestizaje that promotes heterogeneity through the recognition of a plurality of cultural identities. In her study, *Mulattas and Mestizas: Representing Mixed Identities in the Americas, 1850-2000*, Suzanne Bost stresses the rhetoric of resistance integral to this second discourse of racial mixture. For Bost:

Mestizaje rests on a 'foundation' of multiple, shifting components yet remains attached to history, cultural specificity, and powerful politics of resistance, [...] *Mestizaje* often transcends its potentially tragic origins (conquest, rape, 'the death of the subject') and enables resistance to hegemony, a critique of imperialism, and powerful reinterpretations of self and culture. (257-262)

How food practices can function as a cultural hegemonic resistance is one that Bost's literary study does not consider.

The pepper pot is a "one-dish tradition shared by peoples of Native America, Africa, and Europe," Candice Goucher tells us in *Congotay! Congotay!: A Global History of Caribbean Food* (25). She explains that within the context of the Caribbean there are two versions of pepper pot: *cassareep*, a syrupy stew derived from bitter cassava (a yuca root) and *callaloo*, a soup flavored by greens and vegetables. The etymology of callaloo (*calulu*) originates from a word describing a dish prepared in Angola, São Tome, and Congo, thus, in certain places of the Caribbean it is "known as Congo soup" (26). Goucher concludes her discussion of the African tradition of pepper pot by stating:

Since no recipe was written down until later in the eighteenth century, it is likely that the actual cook, who successfully mingled the flavors of tripe, scraps of meat, and peppers, was African-American and perhaps even

West Indian. By the time of Richard Brigg's American cookbook, published in 1792, the peppery soup had become 'West Indian' to [an] American Audience. (26-27)

For those familiar with Mexican cuisine, this description sounds similar to *menudo* and *pozole*—minus its leafy greens and with the addition of *maíz* (or hominy grains).⁶ The cooking method of the pepper pot, where all the ingredients are placed in one pot, shared by different ethnic groups living in the same geographical space, suggests the feasibility of an inter-ethnic web-like network embedded in the development of culinary *mestizajes*. As a matter of fact, cassava, a native plant of the Americas, is the principal flavor in *cassareep*.⁷ Cassava was "the principal food in the diet of the [original] native population" of the Caribbean and other parts of Latin America, "and, in the aftermath of the Conquest, it also became part of the diet of the emergent *mestizo* society" (Ortíz Cuadra, 125). The culinary *mestizaje* that includes items such as cassava reflects the blending of Amerindian, African, and European histories.

Unless the subject matter of a study is specifically on food, as in the case of Goucher's book quoted previously, and Cruz Miguel Ortíz Cuadra's *Eating Puerto Rico: A History of Food, Culture, and Identity* (2013), many new studies that have emerged in recent decades on Afro-Latinidad do not focus on food. This is the case even when a book's title uses culinary metaphors, as is the case with Laura A. Lewis' *Chocolate and Corn Flour: History, Race, and Place in the Making of "Black" Mexico* (2012). The book focuses on issues of culture and identity in an area of Afro-Mexicanos. While the topic of food as a marker of identity is not central to this book, the use of "chocolate" and "corn" in the title does allude to the significance that food plays in the construction of people's cultural identity. This absence of food as a signifier of people's identity is also evident in the groundbreaking anthology, *The Afro-Latin@ Reader: History and Culture in the United States*, edited by Miriam Jiménez Román and Juan Flores (2010); not one of its 70 entries focuses on food. And yet a brief reference is made on food's power to convey people's interconnecting (hi)stories in one chapter that merits mentioning: Arturo Alfonso Schomburg once contemplated researching and writing a cookbook to address:

the social history of Negro cooking. Judging from his highly personal descriptions of 'the hearty egg breads and sugar baked apples of Virginia to brains in brown butter and batter cakes with borders of crisp black embroidery in the Blue Grass, on down to rice calas [New Orleans *beignets*] and the ineffable steeped coffee, cinnamon flavored chocolate and hot toddies,' ... he must have dedicated hours ... to the study of Negro culinary achievements. (Hoffnung-Garskof, 77)

This commentary is worth pointing out because of who made it: A native Puerto Rican, Schomburg moved to the mainland at age seventeen and found an intellectual and cultural home among African-Americans. He developed a deep interest in the African diaspora to the point of gathering an extensive collection of sources documenting the experiences of African-Americans and other African diasporic peoples. His collection is archived at the Schomburg Center for Black Studies in New York City. Considering that Schomburg is recognized as a forerunner of Black Studies in which Black Latinos, thus Puerto Ricans, are an integral part, and that he saw the value food plays in the formation of an Afro-Latino identity, it is surprising that this foundational book on Afro-Latino Studies does not address culinary *mestizajes*.

In his search for "blackness" in Latin America, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. gives little to no attention to how an African heritage continues to survive through some of the foods people eat. Gates Jr. overlooks food as the place to find "blackness" even when in Mexico it is literally offered to him in the form of *fufu*, and in Cuba as *ajiaco*. *Fufu* is a ubiquitous food in West and Central Africa (Goucher). In Yoruban cooking, it is kneaded into a consistency of stiff dough until it resembles a loaf of bread (Bascom). Throughout the Caribbean, *fufu* is a porridge made of mashed yams. In contemporary Puerto Rico, *fufu* gave creation to the *mofongo*, made mainly with plantains and yucca, instead of yams (Ortíz Cuadra). *Ajiaco* is a stew made of meat and different roots/tubers known as *viandas* throughout the Caribbean, including parts of Mexico, Central and South America. Since the 1940s, social scientist Fernando Ortíz has cited this dish to encourage Cubans to embrace their African-ness as a proud part of

their *Cubanidad*. The word *ajiaco* refers to a mixture of Native American, Spanish, African, and Chinese ingredients. In *Lexicografía Antillana*, Alfredo Zayas y Alfonso claims that “aji” is a Taíno word for hot pepper.⁸

The way Cuban-American Cristina García uses *ajiaco* in her novel, *Monkey Hunting* (2003), gives culinary mestizajes a philosophical reflection. This is best explained through Lucrecia, a mulatta ex-slave. She defines herself not by the origins of her birth, but by who she has become. For her, it is best to approach life in the same manner—not searching for a single historical point of origin, but by accepting the multiple origins that have come together to mark new beginnings.

In her opinion it was better to mix a little of this and that, like when she prepared an *ajiaco* stew. She lit a candle here, made an offering there, said prayers to the gods of heaven and the ones here on earth. She didn't believe in just one thing. Why would she eat only ham croquettes? Or enjoy the scent of roses alone? Lucrecia liked to go to church on Easter to admire the *flores de pascua*, but did she need to go every Sunday? (129)

If Lucrecia ever questioned her origin of being born in the state of a mulatta slave, she “didn't question who she'd become. Her name was Lucrecia Chen. She was thirty-six years old and the wife of Chen Pan, mother of his children. She was Chinese in her liver, Chinese in her heart” (138).

Lucrecia's culinary mestizaje is represented by her *ajiaco* stew, which unquestionably makes her Cuban: a quick Google search of *ajiaco* most commonly defines it as a Cuban national dish. Her subjectivity, which makes her “Chinese in her liver and heart,” is one not susceptible to the culinary-based identity implied in the metaphor of the “melting pot,” in which the distinctive flavors of particular ingredients (or peoples) get lost. Lucrecia's culinary mestizaje reflects a combination of ingredients, cooking methods, and dishes that express the story of a people who can trace their historical origins to China, Africa, Spain, and the original natives of the island, who over time became Cubans. The production of sugar as a cash crop—the industry responsible for the massive introduction of African, and to a lesser extent Chinese,

slave labor into the island—has led Lucrecia to the practice of adding sugar to almost every stew. She celebrates her freedom as a slave and marriage to Chen Pan, a Chinese immigrant to Cuba, by planting a garden that includes “Yuca. Taro root. Black-eyed peas”—reflecting an African agricultural-based knowledge (73). Tamales are filled with smoked duck to accommodate Chen's Chinese palate. Lucrecia's favorite “Cuban” dessert is *chino con piojos* (Chinese man with fleas): “a pound cake with so many sesame seeds”—a condiment originally native to Asia (137). Lucrecia also learns to cook chicken with lots of ginger.

Culinary mestizajes reflect acts of collective agency. For Goucher, this form of embodied agency has endured over time and space, “perhaps ... because cooking food [is] so embedded in aspects ... such as ritual, belief, and gendered relations” (xix). Another aspect of the historical endurance of shared foodways between these two groups is their dependence to a great extent on a subsistence diet by which literal and cultural hunger was overcome.⁹ In *In the Shadow of Slavery: Africa's Botanical Legacy in the Atlantic World* (2009), Judith A. Carney and Richard Nicholas Rosomoff define the diet of African slaves as a subsistence diet governed by three main principles: the food available in a given environment that feed a people; the relationships that connect food to cultural belief systems; and how such cultural values are connected to a peoples' identity. For them, such a diet “connects the ways that enslaved Africans used for the production of food to resist imposed diets and to exercise choice over what served as their daily sustenance.” Through the subsistence diet, they argue, enslaved Africans were able “to win back a modicum of control over their own bodies.” Furthermore, this form of diet also illuminates the symbolic value of specific food practices as well as power relationships (967-77). The subsistence diet shared by people of African origins and Amerindian heritage, whose lives are historically intersected, have strengthened their cultural agency through acts of culinary mestizajes which over time have produced regional and national iconic and symbolic dishes: *ajiaco* in Cuba, *bacalao* in Mexico, *causa rellena* in Peru¹⁰, *mofongo*¹¹ in Puerto Rico.

An Afro-Latino culinary mestizaje clearly does not exclude an African heritage. But more importantly, this form of culinary mestizaje is not erased, but constantly remembered through a variety of foods. Culinary mestizaje is lived and expressed viscerally as the values, histories, and symbolic meanings of people's cuisines which have

not always been passed on in written format. People's subjectivities negotiated through their culinary mestizajes are recognized through the palate's memories.

COLLECTIVE PALATE MEMORIES

Why do dishes that developed out of basic subsistence diets and created by those most often living on the socio-economic and cultural margins of a society eventually transfigure into nationalist symbolic dishes? Perhaps the answer is in the mnemonic process of embodied memories. In *The Spirit of Mourning: History, Memory and the Body* (2011), Paul Connerton, after establishing how all historical communities are born in an original context of violence, makes the case for how wounds of such violence are stored in the archives of cultural memory: "[C]ultural memory occurs as much, if not more, by bodily practices [...] as by documents and texts. This memory takes place on the body's surface and in its tissues, and in accordance with levels of meaning that reflect human sensory capacities more than cognitive categories" (60-64). Furthermore, bodily, or embodied, memories of which food forms part of, function through a "semiosis that occurs at the bodily level [which] has its own articulateness, history, and purposes" (50-55). This bodily mechanism of cultural memory explains why in George Lamming's novel, *In the Castle of My Skin* (1991), a mother prepares a farewell dinner of okra and flying fish on the eve of her son's impending migration. By consuming this dish, the son will store the history, culture, and symbolism of okra and flying fish, as well as his mother's *sazón* (her culinary knowledge and emotions transmitted in the preparation and offering of the food) in his palate's memories.¹²

Ortiz Cuadra defines the palate's memories as "the foundation of a kind of intimate bond with food and diet molded by material circumstances: a mother's cooking, the frequent repeating of various dishes and meals," going on to state that, "this bond speaks to and evokes memories and emotions (good and bad), fixations on flavors, and taste, and—at times—sensations of estrangement" (2). The palate's memories have a strong link to peoples' collective culinary subjectivities because the process of remembering takes on multiple forms of recognition. It is through the senses—smell, taste, touch, sight, and hearing—that the reproduction of (unwritten) recipes takes place (Howes; Kormeyer). Through habitual bodily movements the performance of cooking is displayed—watching, dicing,

kneading, baking, serving, offering, sharing. In these performances, bodily movements express a totality that words cannot do alone (Connerton). The names of dishes signal historical and social memories—ajiacó, bacalao, barbecue, mofongo, tamales, *sofrito*, to mention just a few.¹³ In rituals and ceremonies, cultural and spiritual values and beliefs are manifested, thus recognized: *pan de muerto*, *capitotada*, calabash, and the Feast of New Yam (Sutton).¹⁴

Fischler's notion of a "principle of tastes" represents those flavors, textures, and aromas that carry historical, cultural, and symbolic meaning. In the context of Amerindians, these would be things like corn, chilies, chocolate, quinoa, potatoes, certain kinds of beans, and squashes like cassava. Here we can also think of the Three Sisters—corn, beans, and squash—referred to as such by Mesoamerican peoples as well as the Haudenosaunee (the Iroquois) who lived in what is now New York State; we can also think of the "Siete guerreros" of the Aztec diet: corn, beans, squash, chiles, amaranth (*huauhtli*), nopales, and maguey (Coe). For people of African origin living in the Americas, we can think of yams, black-eyed peas, rice, okra, plantains, and collard greens.

Elizabeth Rozin and Paul Rozin draw links between a "principle of tastes" and a people's collective historical memories. For them, these links are based on the simple fact that "[m]ost of the world's people seem to belong to well-marked cuisine groups that create culinary products with distinctive and describable gustatory themes" (35). In Mexican cuisine, we have examples of the "principle of tastes" that derived from an African origin, such as plantains, tamales wrapped in banana leaves, rice pudding, and barbecue, just to mention a few (Aparicio Prudente). What creates the categories of gustatory themes is the use of specific spices, ingredients, and culinary techniques, which carry the meaning of culinary traditional flavors across time and space. According to the Rozins, "traditional flavors may serve the same function as traditional costume or traditional religious practice. They are means of defining a culture group, of identifying an individual within it, and for separating that group from others" (37).

In *High on the Hog: A Culinary Journey from Africa to America* (2011), Jessica Harris sums up the critical component of collective sensory memory in the process of carrying traditional flavors over space and time. She writes:

Recipes, religious celebrations, meals, menus, and more from the African continent were a part of the cultural baggage that was brought across the Atlantic by those enslaved. No matter where the individual's origins, direct ties to the mother continent were ruptured and scattered in the upheaval of the Transatlantic Slave Trade. The general notions of ceremony and the tastes of the food of ritual and daily life, however, remind in memory, activism that influenced the taste, cooking techniques, marketing styles, ritual behaviors, and hospitality [practices]. (15-16)

All of these elements form part of shared experiences and values that reside in the collective palate's memories.

From Maurice Halbwachs' perspective, collective memory refers to "a current of continuous thoughts whose continuity is not at all artificial, for it retains from the past only what still lives or is capable of living in the consciousness of the groups keeping the memory alive" (140). Halbwachs goes on to state that collective memories are depositories of traditions. For Connerton, traditions do not simply live in our minds but in our bodies. "Tradition [...] is more a matter of bodily re-enactment than it is a matter of conducting a conversation with text of the past" (3386-3391). In the realm of food, collective memory manifests a tradition's significance of either everyday or ceremonial foodways because it re-enacts in the present the past. As Connerton explains, "a tradition can act upon people only because they still carry history as a living thing in themselves" (3365-3371).

For example, as I argued elsewhere (2012), traditions associated with tamales and acaçá, the Afro-Brazilian tamal-like food mentioned previously, have been part of a collective memory that extends over thousands of years. In the Americas, tamales have been offered as ritual foods in Mayan, Aztec, and other Native American ceremonies, like the Sun Dance; they are also often part of the Christmas dinner of many people of Latin America. The spirits of those who have passed away are often remembered and honored with the offering of tamales on the Day of the Dead. Perhaps the oldest tradition associated with acaçá for the Yoruba people is

also its role as a ritual food, a tradition that is carried on by Afro-Brazilians who practice *Candomblé*.¹⁵ Generally speaking, throughout the African continent, according to Harris, ritual foods are divided into two categories: first "those that offer thanksgiving and sacrifice to the ancestors and the gods," and second, "those that celebrate the new harvest" (14). Acaçá seems to connect elements of these two categories. When Latinas/os of African and Amerindian origins eat any traditionally-based foods, these foods express a living history.

Pierre Nora underscores the mechanism by which traditions are instrumental to the continuity of people's collective memory. In *Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire* (1989), he affirms that collective memory:

[...] remains in permanent evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, unconscious of its successive deformations, vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation, susceptible to being long dormant and periodically revived. [...] It nourishes recollections that may be out of focus or telescopic, global or detached, particular or symbolic ... [It] installs remembrance within the sacred ... [It] is by nature multiple and yet specific; collective, plural, and yet individual. ... [It] takes root in the concrete, in spaces, gestures, images, and objects. (146)

Drawing on Nora's concept of collective memory, the change within recipes for particular items, for example *pasteles* (a Puerto Rican tamale-like food), mofongo or acaça, reflect "permanent evolution" open to many modifications and cultural significations. What remains constant within a seemingly never ending change of a given recipe is the "principle of tastes."

For example, in the case of *pastel de plátano*, Ortíz Cuadra explains how such "principle of tastes" come from basic African cooking elements: "the mashing of *plátanos* [or plantains into a] ... dough to give it a certain texture and its being wrapped in [banana] leaves and cooked by boiling" (152). In his description of Puerto Rican *pasteles*, for which no formal written recipe existed

prior to 1930, Ortíz Cuadra illustrates how the collective memory for making them is in fact one of bodily and sensory knowledge.

Whoever has made pastel, in one form or another, is well aware that the task is complicated and requires considerable focus, organization, and judgment, along with something that cannot be planned—an intuitive sense of how the dish will best come together. There is no single accepted way of making pasteles. [...] For example, the first step in the process—softening the banana leaves prior to enfolded the dough in them (or, *amortiguárlas*)—has always been the subject of differing interpretations. [...] The same lack of uniformity characterizes the preparation of the dough [...] The filling, too, varies from kitchen to kitchen, its content often determined by what food happens to be on hand at the appointed time, as well as by the likes and dislikes of household members. (150-151)

Despite so many changes, pasteles are a traditional Puerto Rican food. Pasteles are typically made only on special occasions, such as Christmas and the Three Kings festivities.

Nora's views on collective memory as "remembrance within the sacred," play a central role for the spiritual significance given to many foods. In the case of Puerto Rican pasteles, "the custom also exists of making pastel to present it as a gift, much like the traditional acceptance and presentation of *tamal de maíz* in different parts of Mexico and Colombia and of *huallaca* in Venezuela" (Ortíz Cuadra, 152).¹⁶ Tamales, in Mexico, as well as *acaçá* in Brazil, and pasteles in Puerto Rico, are vested with symbolic meanings integral to a land-based spirituality shared and practiced by some Latinas/os whose ancestry include people of African and/or Amerindian origins. As a matter of fact, the strongest cultural similarity imprinted in the preparation of tamales and *acaçá*, brought to life through a collective palate's memories, is the sacredness that these foods entail. Nora also emphasizes how gestures allow collective memory to take root, and when *acaçá* is

used as ritual food, it becomes part of ceremonies that incorporate dance and music—particularly drums.¹⁷

The palate's memories, while clearly connected to histories, cultures, values, and belief systems, are usually not the focus of studies about memory. This omission of food is a peculiar one since Western philosophers engaged in the phenomenology of memory agree that the senses are vital to the process of recollecting. "The things best pictured by our minds," says Cicero, "are those that have been conveyed and imprinted [...] by one of the senses" (40). Memories are preserved by the senses. For Halbwachs, it is the sensory aspect of memory that keeps traditions alive. Food, therefore, epitomizes the ultimate forms of pictures or images in our minds because food involves all the senses—including those of emotions. This is the case even if the memory connected with such images often lives dormant in our body's tissue or in what Connerton calls in *How Society Remembers* (1989), the sediment of the body.¹⁸ The palate's memories can always be revived through familiar smells, textures and/or flavors. The senses, particularly taste and smell, have two other important functions in the process of collective memories: they "have a greater association with episodic than semantic memory, with the symbolic rather than the linguistic, and with recognition rather than recall" of past significant social and cultural events (Sutton, 101-102). Culinary *mestizajes* are about the episodic, the symbolic and the recognition that who we are is a blend of what those who came before us ate. It is perhaps due to this episodic, symbolic, and recognition that the dishes created by a subsistence diet to diminish literal and cultural hunger that over time certain foods become emblems of national cultural identity.

A STORY OF A PALATE'S MEMORY

Playwright Eduardo Machado discovers the collective (hi)stories inscribed in the palate's memories after just taking a bite of a Cuban tamal. In his memoir, *Tastes Like Cuba: An Exile's Hunger for Home* (2007), Machado describes Cuban tamales as "made by grating fresh corn, and only fresh corn. They're filled with sautéed sofrito (onion, pepper, garlic, and tomato) and chunks of shredded pork and fatback, and it is rare to find one that isn't bright yellow and supremely moist" (125). Just like Mexican tamales, they are steamed and wrapped in dry cornhusks. It is through a bite of a Cuban tamal that Machado discovers the power food has to convey a

story. After a bite of a tamal, offered to him by Gladys, a Black Cuban, who unlike him and his family, never left the island, as a gift to honor his love for Cuba, he states: “I ate her tamales like I had eaten others tamales, but the experience was different. [...] They] told a story, my story, the story of those that came before me, and the story I was trying to tell through my play” (366). Gladys’ food in general, but her tamales in particular, gives Machado the foundation upon which he builds one of his plays, *The Cook*. In it, using food as a trope, Machado conveys “something people might not understand initially, but that they would come to know deeply” (364). After the first production of *The Cook* in 2001 in New York City, Machado stated: “Maybe we come from different places. Maybe we looked different. But in the theater Gladys was the mother to us all. Her home, her kitchen, her Cuba, was a place we all belonged” (369).

It is no surprise that Machado discovers the power of food from Gladys who makes a living by running a *paladar*—an informal eating establishment operated from within a private house. Of all the foods that she could have offered Machado as an acknowledgement of his love for Cuba, she gives the gift of tamales. According to her, tamales explain why and how we sometimes come to know the story embedded deeply in food. She affirms that for her, tamales “[...] are the only food we have left from the indigenous people that once lived here [in Cuba]. Their souls comfort us when we eat tamales” (366). For Gladys, food has the capacity to single out a (hi) story of those who came before us. This (hi)story lives in our palate’s collective memories, and while we might not always be cognizant of such (hi)story, the consumption of foods from our historical past relives such (hi)stories in a visceral manner. This explains the difference between not fully understanding, yet deeply knowing the power of food.

In the context of Machado’s work, the (hi)story of the people that came before him, a White Cuban, and Gladys, a Black Cuban, is that of the original natives of Cuba: the Taíno-Arawak people. However, over time, the nature of “natives” to the island expanded to include people from Africa and Spain (and Chinese, as mentioned above)—reflecting the ethnic historical background of both Gladys and Machado. Cuban tamales, therefore, as presented in Machado’s memoir, express a culinary mestizaje that intertwines and connects different ethnic roots to specific historical moments where people’s distinct origins mark new interethnic beginnings.

CONCLUSIONS

The goal of this paper has been to illustrate through various examples the historical, cultural, and symbolic process that produce Afro-Latino culinary mestizajes. Why embark on such analysis? The value in exploring Afro-Latino culinary mestizajes is that it can help us fully acknowledge, understand, and embrace the complexity and often contradictory (hi)stories and cultural values that are at the root of Afro-Latino subjectivities. Culinary mestizajes provide both a discourse and a practice by which to negotiate personal and collective subjectivities that go beyond the cultural limits of a nation-state.

Unlike other theoretical frames where discourse is used to explain practices, culinary mestizajes work in the opposite direction. The “palate’s memories” give meaning to the “principle of tastes” of any given dish: Cuban tamales for Eduardo Machado, *ajiacó* for Lucrecia Chen (in García’s novel, *Monkey Hunting*), *morcillas* for Esmeralda Santiago. The durability of a culinary sensory memory, for it transcends the life of any single individual, is that it is enacted every time a dish is prepared, shared, and consumed. A people’s historical experiences, knowledge, and cultural values are archive in the “palate’s memories.”

But why make the case for culinary mestizajes where the focus has mainly been to address the “African-ness” of this mestizaje as it relates Latino foodways? In part, because the African culinary influence in Latina/o food practices is often not acknowledged. But at a deeper level, because we not only are what we eat, but also eat what we are, this lack of culinary recognition translates to a lack of historical recognition of who we are. The power of food, as Machado, Chen, and Santiago experienced, is that it is not based on historical, textual records but on collective “palate’s memories.” Culinary mestizajes give way to speak about who we are based on the (hi) stories and values embedded in what we have eaten and in what and how we currently eat.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ My use of subjectivity is to indicate the active process by which people work at creating, maintaining, and constantly renegotiating their own sense of cultural, social, and national identity. Subjectivity, as a philosophical concept, presupposes that all people are inherently subjects rather than objects. Subjects have the quality of possessing perspectives, experiences,

feelings, beliefs, and desires that shape and are shaped by the culture and society they live. Subjectivity, however, does not mean free will, for it is as much a process of defining our individual self as well as defining the process of socialization. Since no individual lives in complete social, cultural, and environment isolation, our actions (physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual) of self-definition are in constant negotiation (often resulting in contradictory attitudes) with those of others who might hold more economic, political, or religious social power. The thing to remember is that our subjectivity (that informs how we define ourselves) is never static but constantly undergoing change as we navigate our relation within our society, which in turn alters in response to economic and environmental global changes.

- 2 A central goal in Paul Connerton's *The Spirit of Mourning: History, Memory and the Body*, is to present a case, which I find quite convincing, especially as I connect his arguments to food culture, that memory is not exclusive to the mind. It is also in things and places. If the memory of materials, or the consciousness carried in material things, is one that might not be readily accepted, Connerton traces such hesitation to our post-Cartesian mentality: "It is only in the Western post-Cartesian world that we frequently speak of the life of matter as the life of what is 'merely' matter; it is as if consciousness, and therefore memory, were about minds rather than about material things, as if the real can reside only in the purity of ideas rather than in the impurity of what is material" (448-51).
- 3 By culinary *mestizajes* I mean more than just the "fusion" of different cultural cuisines. The term *mestizaje* carries with it a history, ideology, and consciousness that comes out of the intersections of different ethnic /racial groups—within the context of Mexico and most of Latin America, these mixtures are mainly of indigenous peoples of Americans and Europeans. Within the context of my study on Afro-Latino foodways, which extend beyond this article, I make the argument that such a mixture contains a significant African component that is evident in a number of Latin American and Latina/o food practices. Culinary *mestizajes*, therefore, is used here to speak about peoples' cultural subjectivities as they are informed via food histories and practices.
- 4 *Chilaquiles* is a typical Mexican breakfast made of small, bite-sized fried tortillas, which are simmered in

a tomato-chile sauce, and a few *epazote* leaves. *Epazote* is an herb native to Central and South America, and Mexico. Its Spanish name comes from the Nahuatl spelling, *epazōtl*. In English, it is known as wormseed or Mexican tea.

- 5 In the larger context of this project, I am looking specifically at the intersection of food practices between people of African and Amerindian heritage, and primarily within the geographical areas of Mexico and the South and Southwest of the United States. However, in this larger project, I also examine the African influence in Peruvian and Colombian foodways as these areas are places with a substantial number of people of African ancestry.
- 6 *Menudo* is a Mexican soup prepared from a broth of beef (or pork) stomach (tripe), simmered with red chili peppers. *Pozole* (spelled *pozolli* in Nahuatl) means hominy. Similar to menudo, it is prepared with pork meat and hominy. In pre-Hispanic civilization, *pozolli* (corn) had a ritual significance. While I recognize that the argument can be made that a "single pot" meal is quite universal and thus diminishes the ethnic and cultural connection I make here, it is because of this universality that I draw from the example of the ingredients or food of two different ethnic groups coming together for a recipe.
- 7 Cassava (*M. esculenta*) is also known as manioc or yuca (not yucca, which comes from a different botanical family). It's a root similar in shape as yams and sweet potatoes, and the third largest source of carbohydrates after rice and maize (corn). As dried powder extract, it is called tapioca. For the significant and symbolic role cassava has played on the diet of Afro-Latinos in the Caribbean, see Ryan N. Schacht's "Cassava and the Makushi: A Shared History of Resiliency and Transformation."
- 8 In Latin American cuisine, *ají amarillo* (*Capsicum baccatum*) is most commonly associated with Peruvian cuisine.
- 9 Hunger is not understood as a mental idea; hunger is experienced in the body. This bodily awareness encodes the historical and cultural as well as symbolic meanings a subsistence diet entails for those who cultivated it and created their meals based on it. This awareness is passed on through generations as cultural memories stored in our senses and our palate. See Connerton's *The Spirit of Mourning and How Societies Remember*.

- ¹⁰ *Causa rellena* is a hybrid dish made with three Peruvian natives—yellow potatoes, avocado, and *ajf amarillo*—and three European imports: lime, garlic, and chicken. The name *causa* comes from the Inca Quechuan word *kausaq*, which means “that which gives life.” *Causa rellena* is a type of mashed potato dish arranged similar to a lasagna: a layer of potato, followed by avocado, followed by more potato, then chicken, then more potato.
- ¹¹ *Mofongo* is an Afro-Puerto Rican dish typically made with fried green plantains mashed together with broth, garlic, olive oil, and pork cracklings, using a mortar and pestle. Its roots can be traced to the West African dish *fufu* which is made of starchy root vegetables and plantains which are first boiled then mashed into a dough-like consistency. A similar dish in the Dominican Republic is known as *mangú* and in Cuba as *fufu de plátano*.
- ¹² *Sazón* is a word that does not have a literal translation in English. It refers to having the ability to cook guided only by your senses. In *Voices in the Kitchen*, I define *sazón* as the epistemology of the senses to make the case that cooking requires not only “cognitive” knowledge, but one that is known and expressed through the senses.
- ¹³ See Ortíz Cuadra for the historical and cultural significance of *bacalao* (cod fish), as well as *sofrito*, a process of sautéing herbs, chili peppers and other condiments, for a seasoning to add to meats and vegetables.
- ¹⁴ *Pan de muerto* (Bread of the Dead) is a type of sweet roll made with anise seeds and orange flower water. It is traditionally baked in Mexico during the weeks leading to the *Día de los Muertos* (an Aztec custom merged with Catholic All Saints Day), celebrated on November 1 and 2. *Capirotada* is a Mexican bread pudding usually eaten during the Lenten period.
- ¹⁵ *Candomblé* is a Portuguese word that means “dance in honor of the gods.” It refers to an Afro-Brazilian religion, practiced mainly in Brazil. It derives elements from belief systems that come from the Yoruba, Fon, and Bantu people, all from different parts in Africa. In addition to these African belief systems, *Candomblé* also incorporates aspects of Catholicism.
- ¹⁶ While all tamales are made from corn-based *masa* (dough), a *tamal de maíz* refers to one lacking other ingredients, making the corn flavor primary.
- ¹⁷ See Spivey (1999); Fernández Olmos, Murphy and Paravisini-Gebert (2011), and Houk (1995).
- ¹⁸ For an excellent overview of the interconnection between the senses, memory, and food see Carolyn Korsmeyer (2005).

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