Rethinking Chicana/o Literature Through Food: Postnational Appetites

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Academic writing in English dealing with the connections between food studies and Latina/o literature is a relatively new area of study. In Spanish and Latin American literature, however, there is a long tradition of literary works that address food, beginning perhaps with Miguel Cervantes and the writers of the Siglo de Oro (Golden Age), and in the present day with studies on the culinary themes in the works of Laura Esquivel and Isabel Allende.1 Literary critics have focused on culinary topics in certain novels,2 and the very popular book Kafka’s Soup (2006)3 includes references in the context of food from works by Jorge Luis Borges and Gabriel García Márquez.

The book reviewed here was prepared by editors Nieves Pascual Soler and Meredith E. Abarca, who have each published much on food and its social significance. Soler is Associate Professor of American Literature at the University of Jaén in Spain; her publications include, Hungering as Symbolic Language, and A Critical Study of Female Culinary Detective Stories: Murder by Cookbook. Abarca is Associate Professor of Chicana/o Literature and Mexican-American Folklore at the University of Texas at El Paso. She has published several articles on food-related issues, including “Los chilaquiles de mi ‘amá: The Language of Everyday Cooking,” “California Cuisine,” and “Never is a Tortilla, Just a Tortilla: Culinary Metaphors in Latina/o Literature.”4

According to food historian C.M. Ortíz Cuadra, research on food history since the 1960s can be grouped into three areas: (1) studies that focus on regional cuisine and geographic contexts, including the material and biological aspects of food; (2) studies on the history of food through a consideration of mental attitudes and feelings, especially through the disciplines of sociology and anthropology; and (3) studies on creative literature that join elements of critical and literary theory (10-11). This collection of essays clearly falls into the latter category.

The book offers readers much food for thought, from the extensive Introduction to eleven provocative essays on “food consciousness” in Chicana/o literary discourse. Central to this discussion are critical insights from Gloria Anzaldúa, and issues on gender, mestizaje and “post-nationalism” (4-6), and “post humanism” (35-36). The concept of “post-nationalism” refers to the ways in which nation-states lose their identities as global entities. “Post-humanism,” on the other hand, according to Cary Wolf, is the critique of humanism, setting forth a set of questions where we “can no longer rely on the human, autonomous, rational beings which provide us with knowledge about the world” (235). In the first chapter, Suzanne Bost, referring to Cary Wolf, states that post-humanism “fundamentally unsettles and reconfigures the question of the knowing subject and the disciplinary paradigms and procedures that take for granted its form and reproduce it” (35). Concepts in this book are examined in the light of “food consciousness” and cooking as a form of rebellion by Chicanas/os against their exclusion from nationhood, and their situation in terms of “postnation” (1). The book also addresses ways in which foodways “redefine subjectivities in post-national cultures” (3).

The collection was pursued under two basic questions: What is food? and Why food?, on the premise that food is not just something edible and sustaining, but also a “cultural object” (1). To look at food beyond its tangibility is to recognize that it also carries a cultural significance. As such, food also plays a role in the formation of cultural identities, not only symbolizing culture, but by shaping it as well.

The contributors demonstrate how aspects of culture and society, such as gender, sexuality, race, and class, set in motion by the Chicano Civil Rights Movement, correlate to food. The book is structured into four parts: “Translatable Foods,” “The Taste of Authenticity,” “The Voice of Hunger,” and “Machos or Cooks.” Chicana writers discussed include: Sandra Cisneros, Ana Castillo, Denise Chávez, the “Taco Shop Poets,” and others. Bost’s chapter, “Diabetes, Culture, and Food: Posthumanist Identity in the Gloria Anzaldúa Archive,” and the final chapter, “Reading the Taco Shop Poets in the Crossroads of Chicano Postnationalism,” by Paul Allatson, are especially rich in their mapping of theoretical approaches with respect to post-humanism and post-nationalism.
Laura P. Alonso Gallo's analysis of food and feminism in Denise Chávez’s *Loving Pedro Infante* sees both a reflection of ethnic identity, and the pursuit of love and sexual desire through religious parody. Noting that she was named after the Catholic saint, Teresa of Ávila, the character Teresa says she also has a hunger that is not being satisfied, in her case “for love” (108). Gallo equates her need to that for “impure food” (108) that has infiltrated Mexican-American culture. Teresa’s consciousness is what helps her break away from a male dominated society, and the state of victim personification.

Mimi Reisel Gladstein’s chapter, “Mexican Meat Matzah Balls,” reflects on food and eating in the works of Chicano artist, poet, and writer, José Antonio (Tony) Burciaga. She affirms that Burciaga was an early Latino foodie for whom “food was omnipresent in his conscious and unconscious perspective” (193). Having grown up in a Jewish synagogue, Burciaga cleverly intermixed cultures through food, “At another time he would wear [a tortilla] on his head ‘like a yarmulke,’ the skullcap worn in the synagogue. Who but Tony Burciaga would think to make a yarmulke out of a tortilla?” (194) Burciaga, Gladstein affirms, had a “food voice that spoke to multiple communities and in multiple languages” (205).

This informative book is one of the first extensive literary studies to pursue critical approaches to the study of food. The editors and authors offer both scholars and students new ways of reading kitchens, cooks, and culinary arts through Chicana/o literature. It would make an excellent companion text for courses on Food, Culture, Film, and Fiction.

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ENDNOTES
2 For example, Brazilian Jorge Amado’s novels, *Doña Flor and Her Two Husbands: A Moral and Amorous Tale* (New York: Knopf, 1969) and *Gabriela, clavo y canela: crónica de una ciudad del interior* (New York: Vintage Español, 2008); as well as Mónica Lavín’s *Sor Juana en la cocina* (México: Clio, 2000).
5 The “Taco Shop Poets” is the name of a poetry and collective group which was formed in 1994 at San Diego’s Centro Cultural de la Raza, headed by Adolfo Guzmán López.
6 José Antonio Burciaga (1940-1996) was one of the founding members of Culture Clash. He was a writer, activist, and artist as well as a long time Resident Fellow at Casa Zapata at Stanford University.

WORKS CITED