

CHAPTER FIVE

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FOOD AS MEDIATING VOICE AND OPPOSITIONAL CONSCIOUSNESS FOR CHICANAS IN COLORADO'S SAN LUIS VALLEY

I never cooked you know. I was always a bookworm. Ever since I was a growing up. When it was time for the dishes, they couldn't find me, so my poor sister had to do them by herself. . . We had an outhouse—a soldiers', a government toilet outside—and I'd take a book, you know, and I'd go there, and they'd say, "Where's Helen?" And somebody would pop up and say, "Oh she's in the toilet reading, she could be." And when I thought the dishes were half done or done I'd pop up. I never was responsible for them, they never depended on me, and my sister was such a good cook. She was a good cook and she griped about me not taking turns on the dishes but she didn't fight, she didn't mind. She was grown up on the job, you know, it was natural for her.¹

The words of Helen Ruybal, a ninety-nine year old former teacher and resident of the town of Antonito in rural Southern Colorado on the northern frontier of greater Mexico,² are part of a life history that shows how food can mediate Chicana voice and oppositional consciousness. I interviewed Ruybal as part of a long-term study I have been conducting since 1996 in this Chicano community with my husband, anthropologist Jim Taggart (see Taylor and Taggart 2003). Antonito is just six miles north of the New Mexico state line in the San Luis Valley, an eight thousand square-mile cold desert valley lying at approximately eight thousand feet above sea level between the San Juan and Sangre de Cristo mountains.³

I have tape-recorded and transcribed food-centered life histories with nineteen women and six men in Antonito. Interviews focus on experiences and memories about food production, preservation, preparation, consumption, and exchange. They cover descriptions of material culture as well as women's subjective remembrances and perceptions. They include past and present diets, recipes, everyday and ritual meals, foods for healing, eating in pregnancy,

breast-feeding, eating out, and many other topics, for food points in diverse directions. For many women and some men, food is a powerful voice of self-expression through which they mediate relations with nature, the family, and the local and global community. In the meals they cook, the rituals they observe, and the memories they preserve, women communicate powerful messages and emotions.⁴ Like Mexican and Mexican-American women cooks and writers from other regions, the women of Antonito use food in rich ways to struggle for agency, challenge subordination, and strive for power.⁵

Food-centered life histories have suited my feminist anthropological perspective, which places women at the center, defines gender as a crucial category in social life and social analysis, emphasizes women's diversity, and challenges gender oppression (Behar and Gordon 1995; Moore 1988; Wolf 1992). I suggest that food-centered life histories are like the *testimonios* utilized by the Latina Feminist Group (Acevedo 2001)—personal stories which reveal subjectivity and diversity while calling attention to broad political and economic forces. *Testimonios* are “a crucial means of bearing witness and inscribing into history those lived realities that would otherwise succumb to the alchemy of erasure” (Acevedo, 2). Erasure is a particular threat for relatively powerless people like the rural Hispanic women in the remote southern San Luis Valley about whom little is known.⁶ My ethnographic methodology aims to gather their stories and to share them with a broader audience, thus contributing to their empowerment and to the process of “documenting silenced histories” (Acevedo, 3).

My forthcoming book, tentatively titled *Mexicanas' Stories of Food, Identity and Land in the San Luis Valley of Colorado*,⁷ gives a full exposition of how my nineteen interviewees described land and water, defined food and meals, and enacted family, gender, and community relations. In this paper, I use excerpts from one woman's interviews to introduce two points. The first is that women's food-centered life histories illustrate what Chela Sandoval (1991) calls “differential consciousness,” a “form of consciousness in resistance” that is central to what she calls “U.S. Third World feminism.” Sandoval's key point is that for people belonging to traditionally subordinated groups, resistance to oppression needs to be subtle and flexible. “Differential consciousness” is the ability to think different things and use different strategies in different times and places in ways that resist domination.⁸ It is akin to Scott's idea that oppressed peoples develop “hidden transcripts” to undermine public discourses upholding power structures (1990). Ruybal and other women in her community took diverse stances towards food and were able, in Sandoval's words, to function “within yet beyond the demands of the dominant ideology” (1991:3).

My second point is that women can develop differential consciousness in their relationship to food, as Ruybal did, by challenging the dichotomy between

production and reproduction that has been so detrimental to women's social status.⁹ As Engels originally pointed out in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, and feminist anthropologists have elaborated upon,¹⁰ the splitting of production and reproduction led to the privatization and devaluation of women's labor both inside and outside the home, and, to quote Engels, the "world historical defeat of the female sex" (1972, 120). Interpreting Engels, Eleanor Leacock argues that a key factor in "the subjugation of the female sex" has been "the transformation of their socially necessary labor into a private service" (1972: 41). This process has characterized much of women's food work with the global decline of subsistence farming, but women in Antonito have resisted it in several ways.

Ruybal pursued three strategies throughout her life that displayed differential consciousness and enabled her to overcome the production-reproduction dichotomy surrounding food. First, she rejected cooking as pillar of her own identity yet respected women who did it—especially her sister Lila. Second, she involved her husband in cooking, and thus increased its value at the same time as she reduced her domestic workload. Third, she produced and sold *queso*—a fresh, white cow's milk cheese—and, thus, transformed kitchen work into paid, productive labor. In these ways, Ruybal minimized food's oppressive dimensions and enhanced its empowering ones. I focus on Ruybal's experience but place it into the broader cultural context by referring to other women I have interviewed in Antonito, some of whom shared Ruybal's strategies of publicly valuing women's domestic labor, enlisting men's help in the home, and making money from food. In contrast, other women in Antonito found cooking to be a symbol and channel of oppression (Counihan 2002; 2005). Food work offered diverse forms and conflicting avenues of self-realization for *Mexicanas* in Antonito as it has for women everywhere.

Antonito, Colorado

Antonito is a small town consisting of six blocks running from east to west and twelve blocks running south to north along U.S. Route 285 and State Highway 17 in southern Colorado. On Main Street are a pharmacy, locally owned supermarket, several restaurants, two gas stations, a video store, a hair salon, and several gift and used-goods stores. There are around five hundred students in the elementary, junior high, and high schools, which draw not only from the town of Antonito but also from the surrounding agricultural hamlets of Conejos, Guadalupe, Mogote, Las Mesitas, San Rafael, San Antonio, Ortiz, La Florida, and Lobatos. Antonito is far from water and is often dry and dusty, but these hamlets are all located near water—the Conejos, San Antonio, and Los

Pinos rivers—and are relatively lush and green in good years when average rainfall is eight inches.

Several Indian groups, especially the Ute, Navaho, and Apache, inhabited the region around Antonito in what is today Conejos County. This area was claimed by Spain until Mexican independence in 1821 and by Mexico until the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848, when it became part of the United States. In the mid-1850s, the earliest settlers came to Mogote and Guadalupe. When the Denver and Rio Grande Railroad tried to build a depot in 1881 in the county seat of Conejos, landowners refused to sell their property, so the railroad established its station and a new town in Antonito. In 1902 it built the Palace hotel for its workers and travelers, and Antonito grew steadily due to its commercial importance, saw mills, perlite mines, ranching, and agriculture through and after World War II, with its population peaking at twelve hundred and fifty-five in 1950 and then dropping to eight hundred and seventy-three in 2000. In that year's census, ninety percent of residents declared themselves "Hispanic."

Today, poverty is widespread in Antonito, Conejos County, and the predominantly Hispanic rural region of Northern New Mexico and Southern Colorado that Martínez calls the *siete condados del Norte* (1998, 70).¹¹ In the Antonito area, important employers are the town, the county, the perlite mine, the schools, the hospitals in La Jara and Alamosa, and the service economy in Alamosa (population of nine thousand; located thirty miles to the north of Antonito). Many people get by on odd jobs, baby-sitting, trading in used goods, public assistance jobs, and welfare. In the summer and fall there is small tourist economy due to hunting, fishing, and vacationing in the nearby San Juan Mountains and the popular Cumbres & Toltec Scenic Railroad.

Helen Gallegos Ruybal

Helen Gallegos Ruybal grew up with her parents, two brothers, and sister in the small farming and ranching hamlet of Lobatos, four miles east of Antonito. They owned a modest five acres of land that Helen's mother inherited from her parents. Helen's father used the land to raise some crops and farm animals to provide for their subsistence:

My father used to milk four or five cows, to get around, to get going. And we had two or three pigs and he took care of them and butchered them at the right time, and we had lots of pork.

Helen was not born into the local elite, called *ricos*, whom she defined as those having *money and ranches and animals and cows and water*, but she did

achieve membership in the Hispanic elite through education, work, and accumulation of wealth.

Ruybal's parents followed the traditional division of labor: *he provided and she raised the children*. When her father was young, Ruybal says, *He was a common laborer*. But later he opened a small store and also taught school for a while. She remarks:

My father opened up a little convenience store just in a room of the house because the school was there and the kids would go buy candy and go buy peanuts. And they had cigarettes and tobacco and all those things... And my mother just cooked and sewed and raised the kids and put up the garden food.

Ruybal's mother was like most women in the community, including her sister Lila, whose primary work was gardening, preserving food, cooking for the family, sewing, quilting, and knitting.¹²

Rejecting Cooking, Respecting Sister

Ruybal's food-centered life history demonstrates how she has formulated a differential consciousness by spending as little time as possible on domestic chores throughout her life and maximizing her productive paid work outside the home. She eschewed the housewife role; benefited from the help of her mother, sister, husband, and hired girls; and cooked as little as possible. This strategy has minimized the subordinating dimensions of reproductive labor. Even as a girl Ruybal had ambition: *I wanted to be different. I wanted to go my own way*, she says. She aspired to *education, earning money, and doing some good to people*. So she studied rather than helping at home, and she worked hard to become a teacher. Assistance from her sister and parents was critical to Ruybal's ability to study and work: *I had my likes and dislikes supported at home... My parents were interested in education for all of us. . . and my folks believed in going without so we could have supplies and go to school and we never missed it*. By running their store and raising their own meat and vegetables, Ruybal's parents were able to send her to Loretto Academy, a Catholic boarding school in Santa Fe, New Mexico, where she completed high school and teacher certification. She returned home and began teaching while she went part-time and summers to Adams State College in nearby Alamosa. She received a B.A. in 1954, which enhanced her credentials and earning power. She was employed steadily, first in several different hamlets around Antonito, and later in the better paying Chama public schools forty miles away over the San Juan Mountains in New Mexico.

Ruybal's employment gave her financial independence, which meant that she did not have to marry for economic reasons as many girls did. Helen's future husband, Carlos Ruybal, courted her for years and both families supported the match, but Helen initially resisted marriage:

I wanted to be free to do what I wanted. . . I didn't want to be tied down. . . I didn't want to get married, and I refused to all the time, for the sake of not having a family to keep. . . I wanted to work, and I felt like if I had children, I wasn't going to be able to work. I skipped marriage for a long time.

Not only did she avoid marriage, but Ruybal also rejected cooking and the prominent role it played in many women's identity: *I never cooked you know. I was always a bookworm. Ever since I was a growing up.* For Ruybal food production, preparation, and clean-up were marginal activities she avoided if she could: *I'm not really a kitchen guy, you know what I mean, a provider in the kitchen.* Nonetheless, she could not escape cooking entirely but made it clear that she was a haphazard and indifferent cook. For example, one day she came over to visit and brought a gift of bread she had just made, saying, *Is it good? I thought it was kind of good. Sometimes it doesn't come out right. . . . I'm not a good cook [laughs], I'm not a steady cook.* Another time Ruybal spoke about making home-made tortillas, which she and everyone else in town thought were superior to store-bought ones, but she acknowledged her own uncertain success: *Sometimes I make tortillas. And sometimes they come out good and sometimes they don't, not so good. And oh well.*

Ruybal eventually succumbed to cultural pressure to marry and she had to manage the household and the two children who came soon after her marriage. Crucially important was the support of her mother and sister:

My sister Lila was my right hand; she raised my kids. I'd come from my home, one mile, and I'd leave my kids there. What they didn't have, they had it there, and what they had, well they used it. She took care of them, fed them, and cleaned them up, and when I came in the evening I visited with her, and I picked them up, and I went home.

Although Ruybal described her sister as *just a housekeeper*, she respected her sister's domestic identity, proficiency in the home, and skilled cooking:

Lila had six children. . . . She used to sew and crochet and knit and make quilts, pretty ones. . . And she cooked and she baked. . . Her children still remember the

jelly rolls, and they came out perfect like the ones in the store. . . She used to make pies, a table full of pies, apple pies. . . And she had such a good heart, and she was a good cook, she was a good housekeeper.

Throughout her life Ruybal valued her sister and worked hard to stay on good terms with her:

We got along fine until she died. We were in favor of each other always, since we were growing up... And we never got mad at each other, and we never got into a fight. . . If it was for my side, she'd go out of her way to do it, and I'd go out of my way to appreciate it. I gave her a lot of things. . . If she needed twenty dollars, I gave it to her. . . I always would give her every gift like that, any amount. And she would accept it. . . I had a good job in the first place, and I had less children, and more money, more money coming in. I was working and I couldn't miss a day and she never earned money. She just cooked, and washed and ironed, and took care of her kids and my kids.

Ruybal was able to appreciate and benefit from her sister's assumption of traditional female duties while at the same time she rejected them for herself. But not all women in Antonito were able to forge mutual respect out of difference, and public criticism of other women's choices was not uncommon. But Ruybal and her sister displayed differential consciousness by valuing and benefiting from each other's different choices vis-à-vis domestic labor and public work.

Blending Gender Roles: Involving Husband in Cooking

Ruybal's food-centered life history reveals how she improved her status by involving her husband Carlos in cooking and other domestic chores and, as a result, challenged the splitting of reproduction and production.¹³ Ruybal did not marry until she was sure that Carlos would support her career as a teacher. She says,

He thought of me. If I was going to work, he didn't want to put any objections, just go ahead and work. And . . . the first thing, [my daughter] Carla came. And Carlos helped me a lot and I helped him a lot. . . And then, not even two years later, [my son] Benito came. I wondered how far I was going that way. And I didn't want a large family. . . So after that, well, we just didn't let our family grow bigger. . . We were both combined. We both wanted the same thing.

Ruybal's teaching career gave her leverage to enlist Carlos's help limiting the family size and raising the two children, which in turn was critical to her maintaining her career.

Ruybal was able to forge a relatively egalitarian marriage because of her economic power and commitment to equality. She says, *When I started, I earned more money than Carlos. . . I feel like a bank account should be . . . together and both hold each other's reins a little bit.* The principle of each holding the other's reins goes against the public value in Antonito of men controlling family and budget. One man told me that he knew several marriages that fell apart when the women bettered themselves through education, attained jobs outside the home, and gained financial independence. Husbands did not always define their wives' economic success as a boon, but Carlos respected Ruybal's brains and business acumen, and they worked together as successful business partners, with Helen bringing in a steady salary and Carlos managing the growing ranch. Their cooperation allowed them to maximize their economic position and accumulate land and cattle, attaining the status of *ricos*.

Ruybal's economic contributions to the marriage and busy work schedule enabled her not only to secure her husband's help at home and but also to send her children to boarding school, which enabled her to skirt some of the childcare that fell to most women. Ruybal remarked,

I never had to cook, . . . I had kids, but they went to boarding school. I had them in the summer and Carlos used to help me a lot. In fact, they'd be with him at the ranch. . . . He would [cook] when I wasn't home. On Fridays when I came from school he had supper ready. He did fried potatoes, he did fried beans, and he did everything fried quickly, because he didn't want to be at the stove watching it. . . And he cooked and he had a good meal and I helped him too, we both cooked.

Many men in Antonito learned how to cook in the all-male sheep and cattle camps and knew their way around the kitchen, but most rarely cooked at home unless their wives were absent.

Ruybal was able to enlist her husband's help in the kitchen because she worked outside the home and made a significant income. Her economic power outside the home raised her value in the home. Involving her husband in the family cooking and admiring him for it improved the status of food work, reduced her domestic workload, established reciprocity, and challenged the subordination implicit in the expectations that women feed and serve men (c.f. DeVault 1991). In contrast, another woman in Antonito, Bernadette Vigil, described how her Puerto Rican husband humiliated her by forcing her to cook

rice his way, and threw her creations against the wall until she “got it right” (Counihan 2002). Vigil’s was an extreme situation, and most women fell somewhere in between Ruybal and Vigil, cooking whether they felt like it or not, and spending much of their time on domestic chores, especially feeding men and children.

Making and Selling Cheese

Ruybal’s food-centered life history bridges the divide between women’s private reproductive work in the home and the public productive world of paid work, demonstrating Ruybals’ differential consciousness in the acts of making and selling cheese from the milk of the family cows. She says,

For ten years, at least ten years, maybe more, I made cheese, white cheese. My husband and my son used to milk at the ranch and bring it from there to town. . . Cheese was a luxury item, like ice cream on a cake. . . . Oh, that used to be my job, and I’d use that money for a lot of little things. Even big things, I’d just put it with the rest of the money. . . That was a job, but I liked the idea, I didn’t work hard. Even when I went to school, I’d leave the cheese hanging and I’d go away and come back and it was all ready to take it out and put it in the pan in the refrigerator. . . As long as I had the milk, instead of throwing it away, I made cheese. That’s what I did it for more than for an income. But I loved to get the money that I got from my work.

Converting reproductive labor to productive work gave Ruybal pride, money, and power—in her culture and in her marriage.

Many other women in Antonito used their food preparation skills to make money. For example, Ramona Valdez grew up on a ranch in Guadalupe with her parents and two siblings, and from the 1930s through the 1950s, she regularly made cheese and butter, which she sold for fifty cents a pound. Valdez also raised and sold turkeys which brought as much as seven dollars (USD) each. Through these activities, she was able to accumulate eight hundred dollars (USD), a lot of money in the 1950s. Pat Gallegos made and sold cheese in the 1990s. Flora Romero was renowned for planning and cooking the food for funeral dinners and weddings. Gloria Garcia and Dora Sandoval each owned and ran a local restaurant, and they catered weddings and parties as well. Several women made and sold *empanaditas* or tamales for Christmas, tortillas for any occasion, and burritos for breakfast or lunch for the workers at the county courthouse. Selling food in public also gave the foods they ate in the home a measurable value because of what they were worth in commerce. Many women

used their food work as a way of making money, as Ruybal did, and thus actively followed the philosophical prescriptions of Jaggar and McBride (1985) by transforming food work from private undervalued “reproductive” labor into public remunerated “production.”

Conclusion

Ruybal’s life history shows how she used food as a path to dignity and power, key issues in women’s mediation of gender roles. She was among a minority of women in her community who achieved a college degree, a steady career, and a reduced domestic workload; nonetheless she was not unique but rather fell on a continuum of acceptable roles for women. Indeed almost all of the nineteen women I interviewed worked for money for varying periods of time. As they went in and out of the work force, their domestic roles contracted and expanded. Their experiences showed the permeability of the boundaries between public and private, between production and reproduction, a permeability that some women, like Ruybal, were able to exploit to gain social prestige and economic power. Ruybal’s food-centered life history reveals her differential consciousness. Ruybal has been able to function “within yet beyond” dominant precepts about women’s food roles—*within* by valuing domestic activities and those who did them; *beyond* by minimizing cooking in her life and using food instrumentally to further her activity and identity as a worker.

Ruybal’s flexible attitudes and activities surrounding food enabled her to be economically empowered and socially valued. She, more than many women in her community, managed to shape “the relationship between women’s reproductive and productive labor” (Moore 1988, 53), an essential step toward gender equality (Jaggar 1985). By balancing the traditional female role as feeder and nurturer with her productive work skills, she attained the sense of belonging and respect that are hallmarks of what scholars have called cultural citizenship (Flores 1997; Rosaldo 1997).

I have used food-centered life histories as a vehicle for Ruybal’s voice to enter public discourse and counter the silencing that has always been a central weapon in women’s oppression (hooks 1989). I hope to have shown that Ruybal’s and others’ food stories constitute *testimonios* that counteract the “alchemy of erasure” and affirm the value of women’s labor, memory, and resourcefulness. I hope that they enlarge understanding of Chicanas’ diversity in the United States and challenge universalizing and demeaning portrayals (Zavella 1991).

Notes

1 Direct quotations from my interview material with the subject, Helen Ruybal, appear in italics throughout the paper.

2 Paredes (1976, xiv) defined Greater Mexico as “all the areas inhabited by people of a Mexican culture” in the U.S. as well as in Mexico. See also Limón (1998). The life story of Helen Ruybal, like the lives of other women living in rural areas of Greater Mexico, differs in many ways from those of the urban Mexican and Mexican American women of her generation explored by Ruiz (1993).

3 The southern San Luis Valley was long the territory of the Ute Indians (Marsh 1991; Osburn 1998; Simmons 2001; Young 1997) and was settled in the mid-nineteenth century by Spaniards and Mexicans from Old and New Mexico (Deutsch 1987). Anglos arrived in ever greater numbers in the late nineteenth century with the U.S. military (sent to vanquish the Utes), the Church of the Latter Day Saints, homesteading claims, and the railroad. On the history, culture, and land use of the San Luis Valley, see Bean (1975), Deutsch (1987), García (1998), Gutierrez and Eckert (1991), Martínez (1987), Peña (1998), Simmons (1979), Taggart (2002; 2003), Taylor and Taggart (2003), Tushar (1992), and Weber (1991).

4 On food as women’s voice see Brumberg (1988), Counihan (1999; 2004), DeVault (1991), Hauck-Lawson (1998), and Thompson (1994).

5 On Chicanas and food, see Abarca (2001; 2004; 2006), Blend (2001), Goldman (1992), Rebolledo (1995).

6 Deutsch writes, “Written history of female minorities or ‘ethnics’ is rare, that of Chicanas or Hispanic women rarer though increasing, and of Chicanas or Hispanic women in Colorado virtually non-existent” (1987, 11).

7 Currently under review at the University of Texas Press.

8 See Segura and Pesquera (1999) on diverse oppositional consciousness among Chicana clerical workers in California. Gloria Anzaldúa’s “*Oyé como ladra: el lenguaje de la frontera*” is a wonderful example of differential consciousness expressed through language use (1987, 55-6).

9 Two recent discussions of Latinas’ role in transnational food production that undermine the production/reproduction/male/female dichotomy are Barndt (2002) and Zavella (2002).

10 See Lamphere (2000), Leacock (1972), Moore (1988), Rosaldo (1974b), Sacks (1974), Sargent (1981).

11 Martínez describes the *siete condados del norte* as “the seven contiguous rural counties in northern New Mexico and southern Colorado that have Chicano/a demographic majorities” (1998, 70). They are Costilla and Conejos Counties in Colorado, and Taos, Río Arriba, San Miguel, Mora, and Guadalupe Counties in New Mexico.

12 Fabiola Cabeza de Baca Gilbert’s books describe the Spanish American women of Northern New Mexico (whose communities provided many of the migrants who settled Antonito) and their lifestyles—gardening, preserving food, drying herbs, healing with herbs, cooking, and feeding family and friends. See Cabeza de Baca (1982 [1949]; 1994 [1954]) and Gilbert (1970 [1942]). On Mexican-American foodways, see also Abarca (2001; 2004; 2006), Bentley (1998), Counihan (2002a; 2005), Montañó (1992), Taggart

(2002; 2003), and Taylor and Taggart (2003). Elsasser, et al. (1980) offer “conversations” that give voices to Hispanic women from Northern New Mexico.

13 See Ybarra (1982) and Pesquera (1993) on the relationship of Chicanas’ earning power and work demands to the sharing of household labor with their husbands.

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