CONSUMING STORIES:

FOOD, MIGRATION, AND IDENTITY IN LATINX LITERATURE

By

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ABSTRACT

The food we consume says a great deal about who we are. Our culture, beliefs, values, and family history join us every night around the dinner table, guiding our culinary choices. However, food also carries stories that are often overlooked, stories of oppression and marginalization that dictate access to certain foods as well as their means of production. Mexican food in the United States rises as a prime example of these contradictory stories with dishes like tacos and burritos enjoyed ubiquitously around the country while Mexican migrants perform dangerous, low-paid, and under-valued work across the food production system. Reading food in Latinx literature reveals the complex intersection of food, migration, and identity, helping us to understand the totality of the stories contained in our food.

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INTRODUCTION:

Mexican Food, Labor, and the Politics of Taste

Upon her arrival in the United States, the protagonist of Yuri Herrera's *Signs Preceding the End of the World* observes kitchens overflowing with Mexican employees and jokes, "*Toda la cocina es cocina mexicana*" (40). *All cooking is Mexican cooking*. This remark, however, is perhaps more perceptive than she realizes as fields, kitchens, and other low-wage food production jobs across the United States are filled with employees from Mexico and other Latin American countries. In a domain rife with contradictions, food production and consumption in the United States frequently reveals the disparity between the country's often tepid (at best) acceptance of immigrants and the enthusiasm with which we consume ethnic food. Mexican food, in particular, rises as a prime example of this paradox as marginalized Mexican laborers work in fields and factories around the county while wealthy eaters across the United States celebrate "[t]he taco truck as the new gourmet temple" (Rosenbaum, 2014).

As writer Gustavo Arellano describes in *Taco USA: How Mexican Food Conquered America*: "Mexican food has entranced Americans even while Mexicans have perplexed Americans" (7). In fact, food is often at the center of the complex and contradictory relationship between the two countries. Tacos and burritos may be enjoyed ubiquitously in the United States, but Mexican immigrants are often the repeated targets of racism and xenophobia. Furthermore, these beloved foods remain almost exclusively relegated to cheap take-out options, thereby enforcing a colonial hierarchy of eats that reserves cuisines such as French or Italian food for expensive nights out. Food historian Jeffery Pilcher notes that "customers have simply refused to

consider [Mexican and French] cuisines as equals within international hierarchies of taste" even "when using the same fresh ingredients and, in many cases, the same Mexican workers" (457). As a country that boasts a vibrant and nuanced culinary history, this pigeon-holing of Mexican food points to a continued devaluation of Mexican people and their culture. It is an attitude made all the more unsavory by the prevalence of Mexican employees in virtually every sector of US food production.

In this context, the interdependent relationship between US agriculture and Mexican laborers acts as one of the driving forces of migration between the two countries, as well as the beginning of the story of inequality that underpins the US food system. For more than 100 years, US food production has depended on cheap migrant laborers, mainly from Mexico, to keep production costs down and ensure consumers' year-round access to fresh fruits and vegetables. The plight of these migrant farmworkers is a prevalent theme in the work of many Chicanx writers, including Helena María Viramontes and Diana García. These two authors focus explicitly on the role of Mexican laborers in US food production as they work to combat the structural violence that renders the migrant body invisible to consumers and enables the continued exploitation of these workers. Even writers hailing from other Latin American cultures, such as Cristina Henríquez and Julia Alvarez, illustrate the importance Mexican migration plays in the US food system with novels that center on Mexican immigrants working in agriculture.

Fred L. Gardaphé and Wenying Xu describe "food in literature as a significant site where subject formation, social critique, identity negotiation, and community building take place" (9-10). By all accounts, food is deeply connected to our culture, identity, and sense of self.

What we eat plays an essential role in making and maintaining our connections and relationships with others, and it helps to establish a sense of collective national identity. The four Latinx writers mentioned above highlight the role of food in creating a sense of home for the immigrant subject, but also examine how the immigrant laborer, by cooking, picking, and growing food, is facilitating these connections for the United States at large. Sharing a meal is more often than not what brings friends and family together, yet the inherently intimate and caring gesture of preparing food is often overlooked. As Jeffrey Pilcher writes, studying food "[provides] a view from below of how women and the lower classes have influenced national ideology" (3). Migrant workers shape the food people eat in the United States because their labor dictates what foods are available, easily accessible, and affordable. By creating meals, as well as picking and producing food for American consumers, immigrant laborers are facilitating these familial bonds, often at the expense of the wellbeing of their own families.

Through the examination of food in literature, we can also understand "much about the way cultural superiority and inferiority have been measured by native and ethnic groups" (Gardaphé & Xu, 6) as well as the conditions for the "naturalization" (Pilcher, 457) of foods and people into US society. Our dietary choices are suffused with notions of status, prestige, and other subtle social connotations, and much of culture and identity is anchored in culinary practices. These practices are often challenged as families migrate and collective identities shift accordingly. Authors like Luis Alberto Urrea and Erika L. Sánchez examine the generational and cultural divides that families face as culinary traditions and their associated values change. This is especially true as Mexican food is weighted with the slew of political, social, and cultural ramifications briefly discussed above, and the culinary choices these Mexican

American families make again reveal underlying ideas about what foods are valued in US society.

Reading food in literature allows us to explore "the cultural meaning embodied in cooking, and the connections between eating and the self which develop in the process" (Soler & Abarca, 19). As a vital placeholder for cultural and family history, food becomes a space for exploring the complexities of identity as well as the winding pathways of politics, migration, and culture. Particularly in the United States, food and those who prepare it are vastly undervalued. Often it is what is fastest, easiest, or cheapest that ends up in our stomach. To this end, the majority of our food is grown, picked, and cooked by some of the most marginalized of immigrants; those willing to perform this backbreaking work for the little Americans are willing to pay for their food. Given the particularly complex relationship between food and Mexican immigration in the United States, the study of food in literature can expose these underlying tensions between the two countries and help us better understand the politics of taste and the construction of food value in US culture.

CHAPTER ONE:

"…in this land that used his bones for kindling:" The (In)Visibility of Migrant Farm Labor in Helena María Viramontes's *Under the Feet of Jesus* and Diana García's *When Living Was a Labor Camp*

Since its inception, industrial agriculture in the United States has been built on a system of structural violence that assigns value to labor along the lines of race, class, and citizenship. The most marginalized sectors of US society have historically been relegated to the fields. Today's agricultural workforce of mostly undocumented Latinx farmworkers serves as the most recent incarnation of racially motivated labor exploitation on US farms, a history that renders the laboring migrant body largely invisible to most US consumers. Even as modern-day 'foodie' culture advocates for greater transparency and sustainability in food production, discussions of workers' rights remain conspicuously absent. This is not an accident. The labor of the more than three million migrants who work in US fields is often actively hidden by the agricultural industry in order to keep production costs low by ensuring constant access to an exploitable workforce. Writers like Helena María Viramontes and Diana García challenge this invisibility by bringing these laborers to the center of their texts. In doing so, both authors reveal the inequalities central to the United States' food production system while also highlighting the exchange of labor that is essential for understanding the transnational relationship between the United States and Mexico.

In his essay, "Simply White: Race Politics, and Invisibility in Advertising Depictions of Farm Labor," Evan Stewart argues that "[t]roubles with race in the world of contemporary labor are intimately linked to troubles with visibility" (130). Structures that assign value to labor based on a worker's race, ethnicity, or citizenship are made admissible in part by the invisibility of

certain demographics. According to Stewart, it is an issue that is "especially prevalent" in US agriculture, "an occupation in which dangerous and exploitative working conditions fall disproportionately along lines of race and citizenship" (130). This has been true of US agriculture for so long that it is difficult for both growers and consumers to imagine an alternate system. Since the dawn of the 20th century, agriculture in the United States has depended on a migrant workforce, primarily from Mexico, to keep production costs down, thereby ensuring lower prices for consumers and higher profits for executives. Over the intervening hundred years, little has changed; current estimates suggest that most migrant farmworkers, more than 70%, are foreign-born, mostly from Mexico, and more than 50% are thought to be undocumented (National Center for Farmworker Health, 2018).

Historically, the agricultural industry has intentionally selected an impoverished and ethnically distinct workforce, allowing them to exploit these laborers in a way that raises little objection from either the migrant workers themselves or US consumers. Neighboring Mexico, with its "huge pool of cheap, accessible, and, when necessary, disposable labor" (Gonzalez, loc. 103), has long filled this need, often due to "deliberate US policy" (Henderson, 72). In his book, *Beyond Borders: A History of Mexican Migration to the United States*, historian Timothy J. Henderson argues that much of both legal and illegal migration to the United States from Mexico is "a creature of American capitalism" (4). This is due to both the draw of better playing jobs north of the border, but also to US economic expansion into Mexico resulting in "a mass uprooting of peasants" and the subsequent exploitive temporary labor contracts which Gilbert G. Gonzalez compares to systems of colonial rule and indentured servitude seen in British-controlled India and French-controlled Algeria (Gonzalez, loc. 129). In his book, *Guest Workers*

or Colonized Labor?, Gonzalez argues that an "imperial mindset regarding Mexico" paired with "an ongoing economic expansionism…amounted to a neocolonial strategy [on behalf of the United States] to systematically exploit Mexico's resources and labor" (loc. 586).

As a result, growers in the United States came to see access to Mexican labor as "an absolute right," actively recruiting both legal and undocumented workers and "willfully violat[ing] laws that impinged" upon their ability to do so (Henderson, 65). In his memoir, *Homelands*, Mexican-American journalist and son of migrant farmworkers Alfredo Corchado recalls farmers visiting his family's trailer after work "subtly urging [his parents] to spread the word back in Durango. [The growers] needed more workers, *como sea*, and everyone knew that meant illegal" (17). Henderson likewise refers to the popularity of undocumented laborers, but questions if growers "admired their gumption or their limitless exploitability" (81). For some time, however, this exchange of work and labor between the United States and Mexico proceeded in a way that Corchado refers to as "mutually beneficial" (82). Before the advent of stricter immigration policies, migration between the two countries "took into consideration our binationalism, and the economic workflow ebbed to the tune of supply and demand" (Corchado, 82).

Mexican migrants, while still being the lowest paid of any other immigrant group, could make nearly six times their salary in Mexico and easily return home to their families at the end of the growing season (Corchado, 82). As policy shifted and security tightened along the border, this ability to move with relative freedom began to vanish. However, the demand for labor from US farmers remained strong as ever, as did poverty and the need for work among Mexican peasants. As a result, the migrant worker did not stop migrating but instead was forced to make

his or her stay in the United States longer, often not returning home for years at a time. Combined with the lack of a comprehensive temporary visa program for agricultural workers or sufficient regulation of employers, many are forced to enter and remain in the United States without proper authorization, thereby increasing both their invisibility and their vulnerability. This "taint of illegality" (Henderson, 6) that surrounds Mexican immigrants in the collective US imagination, regardless of their actual immigration status, has the added effect of creating a population that is "permanently stuck at the entry level, unable to work their way up through the preverbal ranks" (Henderson, 6), which in turn ensures their continued employment in farm labor.

In *Under the Feet of Jesus* and *When Living Was a Labor Camp*, Chicana authors Helena María Viramontes and Diana García draw on their own experiences growing up in the fields of California to humanize these migrant workers, to shine a light other than that of relentlessly beating sun on those who have the all-important job of feeding the country. *Under the Feet of Jesus*, the coming-of-age-story of thirteen-year-old Estrella, follows a Mexican American family of seven as they migrate across California, working in the fields as *piscadores*. When the novel was published in 1995, Viramontes describes herself as "astounded" when an interviewer asked her to "make an argument for why people should care" that she had written a novel about "farmworkers" and "the poor" (Viramontes, 2017). While the answer to this question should seem obvious even for purely selfish reasons (you should care because you need food to eat), Viramontes describes realizing that "not everyone's going to understand that" (2017). Not everyone understands the crucial contribution of these marginalized individuals, precisely because they are working within a system that encourages consumers to disregard their labor.

García likewise describes her poetry collection as "[written] out of a deep commitment to the generations of farmworkers whose sacrifices weren't represented adequately in… poetry" (García, 2001). She tackles this issue of representation with a collection of poems that offer a sensory experience of the San Joaquín Valley and an intimate look at its inhabitants. In the introduction to the book, titled "Camp Observations," García says simply, "I write what I hear and see" and "what I eat and smell" (xii). This uncomplicated act of observation naturally endows the migrant life not only with greater visibility but with value, a subtle validation that these people and their labor is worthy of our time and attention. Centering her collection on this idea of observation, García offers a celebration of humanity through the depiction of everyday life. By presenting the lives of migrant laborers in their texts, both authors work to increase farmworker visibility while also revealing the structures that erase migrant labor in the first place.

There is nothing new about the exploitation of and disregard for agricultural labor. Even before the recruitment of Mexican migrant labor, it is an industry with a long history of racialized structural violence and strict social hierarchies that deem certain bodies more valuable than others. Both *Under the Feet of Jesus* and *When Living Was a Labor Camp* draw on this history by beginning with references to cotton, a crop that is immediately emblematic of the deep roots of oppression and exploitation in the US agricultural industry. In his book, *Cotton and Race in the Making of America: The Human Costs of Economic Power*, Gene Dattel describes cotton as "uniquely tainted in American history" due to its undeniable affiliation with race (1). For more than 100 years, cotton was the United States' most important export, making up as much as 60 percent of all exported goods (Dattel, 1). It was a crop responsible for bringing "wealth, power,

and prosperity to both America and Europe" (Dattel, 2) with the "social by-product" of prolonging slavery and "shap[ing] the plight of African Americans throughout US history" (Dattel, 1). Cotton, Dattel argues, is an example of "America's overwhelming attachment to material progress at whatever the human cost" (1), a philosophy that we might compare to today's treatment of Mexican migrant labor as exploitable and expendable.

While cotton is commonly associated with chattel slavery and the plantations of the southern United States, cotton production continued long after emancipation under the continued labor of African American sharecroppers in the southern states and later of Mexican migrant workers in the southwest. Between 1942 and 1964, during the so-called bracero program, as much as 90 percent of cotton pickers working in New Mexico were temporary Mexican laborers (Gonzalez, 34). By invoking the image of cotton, Viramontes and García acknowledge Mexican migrant labor as a continuation of the exploitation that has long been present in US agriculture as well as highlight the importance of this history in understanding the current structure of farming across the country. In the first pages of *Under the Feet of Jesus,* the clouds that hang above thirteen-year-old Estrella's family as they arrive at the site of their new job appear "ready to burst like cotton plants" (3). Denis Lopez, who argues that cotton "functions allegorically" in the novel, writes that "the reference…cannot help but to evoke metonymically the legacies of racialized slavery and debt peonage in the cotton-producing South" (316).

It is a symbol that suggests the history of radicalized labor exploitation literally hanging over the family. The looming cotton-like clouds also highlight the precariousness of the family's social and economic position. Cotton plants that are "ready to burst" are ripe for harvesting, yet to say the same about clouds imply a heavy rain, something that can impede any harvest. Thus,

in just a few words, Viramontes illustrates two issues in an array of often contradicting factors that govern the family's lives. Estrella muses, "It was always a question of work, and work depended on the harvest, the car running, their health, the conditions of the road, how long the money held out, and the weather, which meant they could depend on nothing" (4). The family is at the mercy of these cotton-like clouds, the harvest, the weather, and the capitalist tendency to sacrifice human labor for economic gain.

The first poem of Diana García's collection, entitled "Cotton Rows, Cotton Blankets," also draws on cotton as the loaded symbol of US agriculture, describing pickers who are "at the mercy of the labor contractors" (García, 5:50). The crew travels to the fields at dawn, their "minds parceling rows / of cotton to be chopped by noon," where they are beholden to a contractor who "worked [them] through lunch without water" (3). The pickers are objectified in both the structure of the sentence and in the eyes of the contractor. It is a dehumanizing effect that is enhanced by the accompanying description of "a pregnant mare draped in sheets" and "cotton blankets" (3). The horse, a creature also valued for farm work, is wrapped in the product of the *piscadores*' labor, even while they continue to toil.

García's image of the pregnant mare shrouded in cotton blankets is particularly poignant when compared to Viramontes' next depiction of cotton in *Under the Feet of Jesus*. Thirteen-year-old Estrella remembers "being lulled to sleep by the softness of the cotton" (52) when she joined her mother in the fields as a younger child. Her mother, who "showed pregnant and wore large man's pants with the zipper down and a shirt to cover her drumtight belly" (51), dragged "pounds and pounds of cotton,…the swelling child within her" (51) and her four-year-old daughter, asleep on the top of her cotton sack, though the field as she picked. In contrast to the

pregnant mare of García's "Cotton Rows, Cotton Blankets," the mother in *Under the Feet of Jesus* is granted no respite from her labor. There are no cotton sheets to shield her from the summer sun, and she has no choice but to continue working. Like the image of cotton, this juxtaposition of man and beast brings to mind the long history of dehumanization and racially motivated oppression at the heart of the US agricultural industry.

Cotton also provides insight into another important component in the erasure of agricultural labor, namely the separation of the product from its origin and the labor that produced it. In García's poem, this separation is illustrated by her description of harvesting the cotton contrasted against the cotton in its consumable form. The title itself, "Cotton Rows, Cotton Blankets," draws immediate attention to cotton's two, often desperate forms. It is a crop that is particularly prone to revealing the disparity between product and raw material because, as a product, cotton can become completely unrecognizable from its natural state. Furthermore, those laboring to produce the cotton have always been the most invisible and exploited in American society, creating an industry that has existed for hundreds of years with little thought to its producers. In his article, "Ghosts in the Barn: Dead Labor and Capital Accumulation in Helena María Viramontes's *Under the Feet of Jesus,*" Dennis López discusses the repeated appearance of the "spectral" (309) in Viramontes' novel, a tactic he suggests speaks to the erasure of labor in capitalist societies. In quoting Theodor Adorno, López argues that products have the illusion of coming into being as if by magic, without regard to the labor involved or the process of creation (309). This effect is achieved, López argues, "by the systematic erasure of the social and material requirements of its production —or, more precisely, the relentless effacement of the laboring body" (310). By presenting the realities of labor alongside descriptions of

consumer-ready products, both Viramontes and García work to combat this effacement and reacquaint their reader with the means of agricultural production.

This reclamation of labor can be seen clearly towards the end of *Under the Feet of Jesus*. Estrella and her family take responsibility for Alejo, a teenage boy and Estrella's first love who has been severely poisoned by pesticides sprayed on the fields. The clinic's sterile environment, one of the few settings in the novel outside of the fields and labor camps, contrasts sharply with the migrant family. The nurse, in her "white uniform and red lipstick" makes Estrella "self-conscious" with her own "[d]irty face, fingernails lined with mud, her tennis shoes soiled, brown smears like coffee stains on her dress where she had cleaned her hands" (137). But it is the jars of cotton swabs and balls that call the attention of the mother, Petra; they are almost unrecognizable to her. She thinks they "looked too white, like imitation cotton" (136). In the sanitized context of the clinic, there is no indication of the naturalness of cotton or the labor behind it, yet Petra's musings seek to reconceptualize it.

She recalls her own days picking cotton, pregnant, dragging a much younger Estrella along on her bag, and she remembers "how she'd wet the cotton or hid handsized rocks in the middle of her sack so that the scale tipped in her favor when the cotton was weighed" (136). In an industry where workers are paid by the pounds harvested, and failure to pick the minimum weight can result in non-payment for the entire day, strategies like Petra's become necessarily commonplace, even as she feels "resentful" that "she had to cheat for food" (136). The nurse, who "seemed too clean, too white, just like the imitation cotton" (141), plainly has no understanding of the connection between the cotton on her desk and the people standing in front of her; she appears "surprised and distraught" (136) to find them in her clinic. To Petra, however,

the evidence of their labor is plain, and Alejo appears to her as the human manifestation of her weighted cotton sack. Although teenage Alejo may not have picked cotton himself, this history of exploitative labor weighs his young body down with sickness and exhaustion. He looks as if there are "rocks in the cotton sacks of his bones, his eyes and stomach, his pockets" (139). By placing cotton in these two different contexts, the field and the clinic, Viramontes reveals the gap between production and consumption as well as the ensuing erasure of labor.

In fact, cotton is such an excellent example of this invisible labor that Arlie Hochschild uses it to begin her forward to *Invisible Labor: Hidden Work in the Contemporary World*. She describes a dress that begins its life as a cotton plant in India, "harvested by underpaid laborers who are exposed to pesticides" (xi), whose labor is then "hidden behind the labels of garments… and the models we see wearing these garments in women's magazines or on company Web sites" (xii). This systematic erasure that Hochschild details ensures that the consumer has somewhere else to place their attention. The brand or the model becomes the face of the product and thereby assumes responsibility for its production in the eyes of the consumer in a way that might be considered more palatable or socially acceptable. The consumer of the cotton dress can conveniently forget the laboring bodies that García describes working "backs to the sun, bandanas tied / to shade our brows, hands laced with tiny cuts" (3). However, alongside this erasure of labor is the implicit suggestion that revealing the means of production will lower the value of a product, an idea that is sure evidence of the belief that the bodies and labors of some have greater value than others.

This concept of obscuring labor to impart value is very much alive and well in food marketing. Just as Hochschild describes the hidden workers behind clothing production, Evan

Stewart's essay "Simply White: Race, Politics, and Invisibility in Advertising Depictions of Farm Labor" conducts a study of orange juice commercials, concluding that these advertisements "share structured practices of whitewashing either by coding that labor as a 'white' activity or by obliterating any kind of embodied labor in the presentation of the product" (133). The advertisements are designed to train the public's gaze away from the laboring migrant body by featuring, for example, the oranges themselves as the "workers" and the sun as "upper management" (136). Advertisements that do feature "growers" generally appear as "light-skinned men" (140). Stewart argues that these advertisements are beholden to "cultural norms that cannot speak of certain kinds of labor done by certain kinds of people lest the product loose a sense of quality or legitimacy" (145). By hiding "the messy realities of racialized farm labor and production" these advertisements create "an environment of privilege" (139) where consumers can enjoy their products without guilt or responsibility.

Just as Petra struggles to relate the perfect white cotton balls that she sees in the clinic to the crop she labored to harvest, her daughter, Estrella, contemplates the contradictions she sees in the grape harvest. As she works under the blistering sun harvesting grapes for raisins, thirteen-year-old Estrella reflects:

> Carrying the full basket to the paper was not like the picture on the red raisin boxes Estrella saw in the markets, not like the woman wearing a fluffy bonnet, holding out the grapes with her smiling, ruby lips, the sun a flat orange behind her. The sun was white and it made Estrella's eyes sting like an onion, and the baskets of grapes resisted her muscles, pulling their magnetic weight back to the earth. The woman with the red bonnet did not know this. (49-50)

In this passage, Viramontes alludes to the logo of popular Sun-Maid raisins, an interesting play on words that references the sun's role in 'making' the raisins, but also the 'maid' who harvests the grapes and is featured on the boxes that Estrella describes. Every detail of the raisin box is imagined, from the color of the sun to the woman's "useless" bonnet (50). The smiling (white) woman knows nothing of the grape harvest, Estrella muses, where children become lost in the "monotonous" rows of grapes that proceed "without beginning, without ending" (50). It is a description that is remarkably similar to García's account of the vineyards in her poem, "Turning Trays." She writes, "and you, / as far from the beginning as the end, / cannot walk away. / You cannot escape turning trays. / One row ends; another begins. / You must finish this row / and the next / and the next." (46). The monotony and physical strain of the work is palpable in both texts; "Morning, noon, or night, four or fourteen or forty it was all the same," Estrella thinks (53). There is no trace of a smile as she tells herself, "Don't cry," while "[t]he muscles of her back coiled like barbed wire and clawed against whatever movement she made" (53). This is the reality that the "pastoral image of the farm girl captured on the Sun Maid raisin box obfuscates" (574) according to Sarah D. Wald's essay "Visible Farmers/Invisible Workers."

Current advertisements for Sun-Maid raisins only enhance this disparity. A commercial published on the company's YouTube channel in January of 2021 shows a young girl who is transported to a magical land of raisin production after tasting a Sun-Maid raisin. The entire romanticized landscape of snowcapped mountains surrounding a valley filled will gently rolling fields of grapevines is completely devoid of humans. Self-driving trains huddle along tracks, delivering raisins to enchanted assembly lines while the little girl giggles with delight as flying contraptions shower her with delicious snacks ("Imagine That!," 2021). The erasure of labor at

work in this advertisement could hardly be more apparent; the company has literally created a fictional world where food is made by magic to obscure the production of their raisins.

Furthermore, advertisements like this actively erase the labor and experience of children like Estrella by assuming a particular kind of childhood and a particular relationship with that childhood. According to a 2014 Childhood Agricultural Injury Survey, approximately 524,000 minors work in US agriculture, meaning childhoods like Estrella's are far from uncommon (Coates & Fernández, 2019). Farm labor, which is largely recognized as one of the most dangerous and least regulated industries in the United States, is the only industry that can legally employ children as young as 14 (US Department of Labor, 2021). A 16-year-old employee can perform any job on a farm, including those deemed "hazardous" by the US Department of Labor, and children of virtually any age can work in agriculture with their parent's permission (US Department of Labor, 2021). In this "legal loophole [that] places the United States in violation of its international legal obligations," Zama Neff, writing for Human Rights Watch, describes how, according to "US federal law, children can toil in the fields at far younger ages, for far longer hours, and under far more hazardous conditions than children working any other type of employment in the United States" (Neff, 2011).

Child labor in agriculture and the conspicuous lack of public outcry it generates illustrates just how well-hidden migrant farm labor is. Margaret Wurth, who studies countries such as Brazil, Indonesia, and Zimbabwe in her work as a senior researcher in the Children's Rights Division of Human Rights Watch, calls US child labor laws in agriculture "kind of unbelievable" (Wurth, qtd. in Coates & Fernández, 2019). She says, "What distinguishes the US from all of these countries is just how weak the law is…None of these other countries allow

children legally at the age of 12 to work as hired workers on farms" (Wurth, qtd. in Coates & Fernández, 2019). Over the past few decades, 'foodie' culture has exploded in the United States with an emphasis on organic food and (expensive) farm-to-table dining. Many food advocates argue for more awareness of how our food is produced and processed in the name of personal health, environmental health, and the health of animals raised for consumption. However, the rights and health of farmworkers, including the hundreds of thousands of children at work in the fields, have hardly been mentioned.

In her essay "Visible Farmers/Invisible Workers," Sarah D. Wald argues that the continued invisibility of farmworkers is due to this focus on "a politics of consumption" rather than "a politics of production" (568). In her essay, Wald offers a reading of Michael Pollan's best-selling exposé on the United States' food industry, *The Omnivore's Dilemma,* compared with Viramontes's *Under the Feet of Jesus*. Although Pollan's book functions as a "narrative of witness" (Wald, 572), farmworkers hardly make an appearance. Wald argues that "Pollan writes them [the farmworkers] out of the moral equation for the US food system. They do not contribute, in Pollan's calculation, to the karmic price of the American meal" (572). By ignoring the labor of these workers, mainstream food texts often focus on a "consumer citizenship" (Wald, 568), advocating "consumer purchasing as the solution to unjust working conditions" (Wald, 575). This system, however, "is undemocratic in the very unevenness of consumer buying power and consumers' access to certain products" (Wald, 575). Texts such as *Under the Feet of Jesus*, Wald argues, "[encourage] a shift from a politics of consumption and legal citizenship to a politics of production and denizenship, a category of political belonging emerging from one's place of residency and labor rather than legal citizenship or national identity" (569). Because

those in the position of production are often excluded from consumption, they continue to retain little power over their own labor. By shifting the focus of value and ownership to production, we might create a more equitable food system.

However, Gilbert G. Gonzalez argues that "low-wage work tends to retain workers within its grasp, and farm work is low-wage work" (loc. 442). Poverty, of course, is an important component to keeping a workforce both invisible and disempowered. *Under the Feet of Jesus* and *When Living Was a Labor Camp* are both populated with characters who are clearly excluded from American consumer culture, a contributing factor to their invisibility. In *Under the Feet of Jesus*, Viramontes emphasizes the divide between consumer and producer with repeated appearance of common US brands or products, out of context and distorted. The family's precarious position as consumers is established early on in the novel. Estrella "remembered every job was not enough wage, every uncertainty rested on one certainty: food" (14). At one point, the family's cupboards are empty, filled only with "the thick smell of Raid and dead roaches" (16) and one empty container of Quaker Oats. The Quaker man, with his "chubby pink cheeks" and "wavy long hair the color of creamy hot oats" (16), is the picture of robust health, yet to stop the hungry tears of Estrella's younger siblings, the only good it serves is as a distraction. Estrella dances for the children, "trying to feed the [them] with noise, pounding her feet drumming her hand and dancing loca to no music at all, dancing loca with the full of empty Quaker man" (20). Viramontes contrasts these two popular US brands, Raid and Quaker Oats, yet Estrella's home smells of Raid, of pesticides and toxicity instead of the comforting, homey smell of cooking oatmeal.

When Petra goes on a shopping trip with her children, the full lack of her purchasing power is revealed. Even the produce that the family labors over in the fields is unavailable to them as consumers. In the store, "only the relics remained," a sad shadow of "[t]he fruits and vegetables that were firm and solid out in the hot fields" (109). While many of the other products available in "the rickety store" (103) are universally recognizable processed food, they also require careful consideration before purchasing. Viramontes writes:

> Petra picked up a can of El Pato Tomato sauce, checked the price, then checked a can of Carnation Milk, a jar of Tang, then returned each to the shelf. She decided on four cans of Spam and stacked them into Estrella's basket at $1.80 each for a seven-ounce can and made a mental calculation of $7.20, then returned the two cans and adjusted the amount, then realized the ESPECIAL that read three cans for $5.00 which meant to buy six cans was cheaper in the long run and placed four more cans in the basket. (109)

This space, where Petra "appears as both producer and consumer" (Wald, 575), illustrates the incompatibility of these two identities. Her status as a producer and the poverty that comes with farm work negate her ability to participate in a consumer-based society. Thus, lacking the capacity to "vote with her dollars" (Wald, 575), Petra loses the power to advocate for herself as a producer.

This inability to participate in a consumer-based society also implies a kind of invisibility and anonymity that Diana García addresses in her poem "Occupant: Blue Roof Apartments." "*Here we are*," García writes, "*the anonymous poor*" (52). She describes these people "stored in the city's largest housing complex" (52), as one might consider storing food in a pantry or tools in a shed, ready to be taken out and used when the need arises. The poem begins by detailing

"[t]he mail addressed to Occupant" (52), advertisements that arrive with no mention of the recipient's name or any awareness of what products might be helpful in her life. Nearby, García describes apartments with a "security guard and pool" as the place "were we'll move / when we get the next job, / the next raise, / the next big promotion, / that next step up, / that guarantees us mail / addressed to us by name" (52). Wealth, García suggests, is associated not only with heightened security and comfort but with the simple idea of recognition, a stability of identity that implies a sense of belonging and self-value.

In *Under the Feet of Jesus*, this concept of anonymity shows itself in an ambiguity of names and identity. The two adult figures in Estrella's life are her mother and her mother's boyfriend, both of whose names and identities shift and change throughout the novel. Estrella's mother, Petra, is often referred to as simply "the mother," a title that implies a sense of archetypal universality while at the same time obscuring the individuality and identity of the woman Petra. Likewise, the proper name of Petra's boyfriend is never revealed. He is simply "the man they called Perfecto" (3), a man whose identity has become inseparable from his work. The narrator describes, "No one remembered knowing him before his arrival, but everyone used his name to describe a job well done" (25). Perfecto's 'perfect' work defines him; in place of a name, it grounds him and grants substance to his existence.

Despite Perfecto's work ethic and the implied quality of his work, he receives little appreciation for his labor, a realization that transpires with a simple 'thank you' from Estrella. The narrator describes:

> [Perfecto] had given this country his all, and in this land that used his bones for kindling, in this land that never once in the thirty years he lived and worked, never once said thank

you, this young woman who could be his granddaughter had said the words with such honest gratitude, he was struck by how deeply these words touched him. (155)

Estrella's gratitude, and the weight it carries for Perfecto, helps to restore value to labor by revealing just how lacking this sense of gratitude is in the agricultural industry. Likewise, Estrella comes to realize the value of her work and, in doing so, finds her own sense of self-worth and empowerment. Standing in the clinic with sickened Alejo and the unhelpful nurse, Estrella "remembered…[h]ow bones made oil and oil made gasoline. The oil was made from their bones, and it was their bones that kept the nurse's car from not halting on some highway" (148). In a very literal sense, the work that Estrella and her family perform keeps the country running, and Estrella suddenly understands her importance. Viramontes writes, "Estrella had figured it out: the nurse owed *them* as much as they owed her" (148). This is a revelation for the girl, allowing her to take charge of the situation and stand up to the nurse who once seemed so superior to her and her family.

In the end, we are left with what Evan Stewart calls the "fundamental paradox" of industrial agriculture: "how do companies relying on migrant farm labor demonstrate the work and value that went into the cultivation of their products without revealing the underlying racial power structure that keeps their workers in a profitable, but highly precarious, state?" (130). How do we, as consumers, reconcile our adoration of food with a complete disregard for labor and means of production? Few would argue that food is unimportant, yet due to its long residence in the domestic sphere, it lends itself particularly well to the erasure of labor and the ensuing mistreatment of workers. The value we place on food has long been distorted from the value we place on those who grow, harvest, or prepare the food, creating the complex network of

structural violence that marginalizes farmworkers and other food industry employees on the basis of race, gender, ethnicity, class, and citizenship. Importantly, this erasure of labor also conceals the caring, sustaining impulse that often grounds food production and preparation. By giving migrant farmworkers the respect and attention they deserve, works like *Under the Feet of Jesus* and *When Living Was a Labor Camp* help us to recognize the complex social forces at work in all levels of our food system, working to restructure our understanding of food and the value of labor.

CHAPTER TWO:

"…friendship is a country that includes everybody:" The Caring Labor of Food in Julia Alvarez's *Return to Sender* and Christina Henríquez's *The Book of Unknown Americans*

The invisibility that shrouds food production in the United States is also palpable in Julia Alvarez's *Return to Sender* and Christina Henríquez's *The Book of Unknown Americans.* Moving from California to the eastern United States, both novels continue the conversation about the invisibility of Mexican agricultural workers. However, instead of taking place in the fields, these novels center on the home. Where authors like Helena María Viramontes and Diana García foreground the laboring body, Alvarez and Henríquez delve into the relationships between families and communities, exploring the role of food in forging and maintaining these connections. *Return to Sender*, a young adult novel by Julia Alvarez, challenges the romantic ideal of the family farm and draws parallels between the plight of small farmers in both the United States and Mexico. In *The Book of Unknown Americans*, Christina Henríquez also tells the story of a Mexican family's migration to the United States, exploring the role of food in both maintaining and dismantling family structures and relationships. By bringing the focus of these texts to families and relationships, our conversation surrounding food shifts into a more domestic space, taking a closer look at the connections that food and farming facilitate both within immigrant communities and in the broader social fabric of the United States.

As explored in Chapter One, the stories of both immigration and food production in the United States cannot be told outside the context of Mexican migration. Movement across the southern border long predates the existence of said border, and much of this migration has been

driven by the need for labor, particularly within the agricultural sector. In his book, *Guest Workers or Colonized Labor?,* Gilbert G. Gonzalez argues against the commonly held belief "that a hundred years of Mexican migration comprise one more migrant stream coming to America to struggle for and experience the mythological 'American Dream'" (1). Instead, due to "the central role of the United States in creating a century of Mexican migration" (loc. 113) through labor demand and foreign investment, migration from Mexico is distinct, especially in agriculture and food production. It also has a distinct place in the US imagination due to the "taint of illegality" (Henderson, 6) mentioned previously, in the construction of the numerous negative stereotypes that Mexican migrants face.

Highlighting the unique nature of Mexican migration are Julia Alvarez's *Return to Sender* and Christina Henríquez's *The Book of Unknown Americans.* Both Alvarez and Henríquez are Latina writers hailing from different Latin American cultures who have chosen to foreground Mexican characters in their texts, texts that deal with issues of invisibility, (il)legality, migration, and food production and consumption. While these issues affect immigrants in the United States from many counties and different walks of life, the use of Mexican characters in *Return to Sender* and *The Book of Unknown Americans* speaks to the importance of Mexico and Mexican labor in the long and invisible history of US food production. Both novels acknowledge the influence of Mexican migration in the US food industry as they turn the focus towards the relationships that food facilitates both at the familial and community levels. In place of the physical labor that dominates works like *Under the Feet of Jesus* and *When Living Was a Labor Camp*, these two novels explore the specific role that immigrant labor plays in building the community of the United States through food.

In her essay, “Visible Farmers/Invisible Workers,” Sarah D. Wald discusses what she refers to as the “Jeffersonian narratives” that dominate modern-day food movements and the perception of farm work in the United States. These narratives, Wald argues, romanticize the small family farm, billing it “as an innocent return to core American values and Jeffersonian Democracy” (Wald, 572). However, these “celebrations of local and organic produce” work to obscure and demonize the migrant laborer by “continu[ing] to privilege a relationship between land ownership and white citizenship” (Wald, 572) and presenting Latinx farmworkers as “merely a byproduct of an industrial system of agriculture” (Wald, 570). Migrant laborers are seen as part of a problem that could be solved with a return to the “agrarian fantasy” (Wald, 580) of the past, an idea that overlooks the labor needs of both large and small farming operations and the long history of racialized labor oppression on US farms. It is an attitude that both further obscures the laboring migrant body and offers unrealistic ideas about small farmers and rural life in the United States.

According to Teresa M. Mares, Vermont is a state particularly emblematic of this “imagined agrarian utopia” (Mares, 3). In her book, *Life on the Other Border,* Mares echoes Wald’s concerns that the immigrant laborer is erased by modern food movements which idealize the small family farm. This erasure is particularly apparent in “socially responsible” (Mares, 3) Vermont, the state of socially progressive politicians like Bernie Sanders, and the serine, pastoral landscape that is so emblematic of the rural United States. However, a full 70 percent of Vermont’s agricultural revenue comes solely from milk sales (Mares, 12), making it particularly vulnerable to market forces that have driven up the cost of farming without a corresponding increase in the price of the product. Since the late 1990s, Vermont, a so-called “‘nontraditional’

destination" (Mares, 6) for Latinx migrant laborers, has experienced an influx of migrants who now "labor and live in the state's shadow economy" (Mares, 3), supporting the legacy of the state's famous dairy farms. While the pastoral image of Vermont erases the labor of migrant bodies, the "lily-white" (Alvarez, 333) state also renders the Latinx migrant "hypervisible in public settings" (Mares, 6). These contrasting states of visibility, combined with a strong presence of Immigration and Customs Enforcement officers due to Vermont's proximity to the United States' northern border, results in a population "at risk for compounding experiences of structural vulnerability and inadequate and irregular access to many basic needs and social connection" (Mares, 8).

This is the context for Julia Alvarez's young adult novel *Return to Sender*, the story of eleven-year-old Tyler who befriends the daughter of his parents' undocumented Mexican employees on their Vermont dairy farm. In the novel, Alvarez challenges the ideal of the small family farm and the idea of its incompatibility with Latinx migrant labor by showing the reality of a struggling US dairy farm. She also reveals the true structural nature of the violence that migrant farmworkers face by illustrating the pressure that US farmers experience as they work within a profit-centered capitalist system. The constraints growers face are articulated clearly by anthropologist and medical doctor Seth M. Holmes in his book *Fresh Fruit, Broken Bodies*. Describing berry farmers in Washington state, he writes:

> The corporatization of US agriculture and the growth of international free markets squeeze growers such that they cannot easily imagine increasing the pay of the pickers or improving the labor camps without bankrupting the farm. In other words, many of the most powerful inputs to the suffering of farmworkers are structural, not willed by

> individual agents…structural violence is enacted by market rule and later channeled by international and domestic racism, classicism, sexism, and anti-immigrant prejudice. (52)

While Holmes' research is focused on berry farms in the Pacific Northwest, market forces and industrial agriculture have affected all facets of the agricultural industry, including "small-scale dairy farmers on both sides of the border" (Mares, 11), simultaneously forcing Mexican farmers off their land while US farmers must pay employees less to remain competitive in an international market.

In *Return to Sender,* the Paquettes are billed as a typical all-American farming family, full of the "Yankee values of hard work, modesty, and wholesomeness" that Mares touts as key to the "discursive production of Vermont" (13). Tyler's father grew up on the Vermont dairy farm, like Tyler himself and near-countless generations of Paquette men before him. Proud Americans, they name their cows after states, or at least, Tyler amends, "we used to" (61). Many things have changed on the farm, however, and the Paquettes find their lifestyle harder and harder to maintain. Labor is hard to come by; Tyler's mother explains that even "if you did find someone…he only wanted to work eight hours a day, five days a week" (7). Yet the actual labor requirements of even a small-scale dairy farm require schedules that often far surpass fifty hours per week (Mares, 17), and working as much as seventy to eighty hours per week is not uncommon (Mares, 88, 135). Furthermore, since the 1970s, milk prices have stayed relatively stagnate, while production costs have tripled or even quadrupled (Heintz, 2018); dairy farmers like the Paquettes find themselves just a few strokes of bad luck away from losing their livelihoods and family homes.

After Tyler's grandfather, Gramps, passes away from a heart attack and his father suffers a near-fatal tractor accident, young Tyler finds himself on the verge of losing his family farm. No matter how many times his parents "do the math" (5), keeping the farm seems impossible. The family cannot afford to hire the help they need to replace Tyler's injured father and older brother, who shows little interest in farming and will leave for college at the end of the year. Tyler, however, still feels a deep connection to the farm and is so distressed by the prospect of selling it and the trauma of witnessing his father's accident that he suffers recurring nightmares, prompting his parents to send him off to visit his aunt and uncle. Luckily, upon his return, Tyler learns that his parents have found a way to keep the farm by hiring "the best helpers a man can ask for" (13): three undocumented Mexican men who Tyler's mother refers to as their "angles" (14). Upon first hearing the news, Tyler is ecstatic, declaring it "a miracle" (12). However, he quickly becomes skeptical of their new employees when he learns that they are undocumented. Tyler is "shocked" (55) to learn that his father, "the most patriotic American Tyler has ever known" (187), is "breaking the law" (55) by hiring these men, yet he clearly has no choice. His father's voice is "bitter" when he asks Tyler, "How badly do you want to stay on the farm, son?" (56).

At first, Tyler shuns eleven-year-old Mari, the oldest of the three Cruz sisters, who move to the dairy farm with their father and two uncles. Drawing on his binary notions of right and wrong and legal and illegal, he tells her, "I'd rather lose the farm than not be loyal to my country" (70). However, throughout the novel, his feelings soften. Tyler comes to understand his father's assessment that the "law…needs changing" (77) and, instead of the hostility he exhibits at the beginning, he decides that he "wants the law to be changed so they [the Cruzes] can stay,

helping his family as well as themselves" (113). Tyler's mother echoes this sentiment, telling Tyler's aunt that "having these Mexicans has put a whole new spin on [their] lives" (114). The relationships the two families build become more important than the farm itself, especially for Tyler's grandmother, who refers to the Cruzes as "her Mexican family" (253).

Seen from the perspective of Tyler and Mari, the dynamics of politics and labor that have driven the Cruz family to the Paquette's farm are simplified and seen through the lens of friendship. For a Valentine's day school assignment about different kinds of love, Mari chooses to write about the relationships that have developed between her family and the Paquettes. She says, "I decided to write about how we had come to Vermont to help the Paquette family, and what good friends they had been to us" (202). In Mari's eyes, the decision to come to Vermont is a caring act, a way for her family to help these people who have become her friends. After an argument with Tyler, she echoes this sentiment, saying that Tyler "didn't really appreciate how [her] father and uncles had helped save his family's farm. It was like [they] had only done it for the money" (205). Of course, her father and uncles *have* worked on the dairy farm just for the money, but Mari understands that the Paquettes have also received something more valuable than labor from their new employees. They have found a way to save their beloved family farm, enabling them to preserve their family history and way of life.

Food, family, and farming are intrinsically linked in a relationship that Robert Wuthnow describes in his book *In the Blood: Understanding America's Farm Families*. He describes farming as "inherently about families" (9), writing, "The fact that many if not most farmers were raised in farm families is one of the most distinctive factors of farm life. It is hard to imagine any other occupation in which this kind of generational continuity is as important" (14). In *Return to*

Sender, Tyler illustrates this concept perfectly, explaining that "[h]e had grown up on this farm, as had his dad before him, and Gramps and his father and grandfather before that" (6). The "generational continuity" of farming in the Paquette family inspires a strong sense of identity. There is a feeling of belonging that grounds the family so that Tyler cannot imagine another way of life; he is sure that selling the farm will "kill" (6) both himself and his father. He compares losing the family farm to the Trail of Tears which he recently learned about in school (6), perhaps not exactly an apt comparison, but certainly one that demonstrates the deep connection that Tyler feels to his family's farm.

As Wuthnow argues, "Farm families…cannot be understood in terms of relationships only among the living" (14). One of the things that distress Tyler the most when he thinks of selling the farm is leaving his grandfather, whose "ashes were scattered up in the garden by the old house" (8). However, Tyler also takes Wuthnow's concept of "generational continuity" one step further, musing that "the farm was not just Dad's, it was the whole family's, going all the way back before Gramps, as well as forward, his and Sara's and Ben's, even if they didn't want it" (9). His whole family is present on the farm, not only those who have passed away but also future generations. It anchors the family in time as well as space and offers a promise of continuity, almost a feeling of immortality. It is evidence of the family's past, which is, in turn, evidence of a future still to come. Tyler's mother, by comparison, "a city girl" from Boston who has no ancestral connection to the land, "didn't understand the way that Tyler did, the way Gramps and Dad did, what it meant to be a farm family" (8). She leads the conversations around selling the farm while Tyler's father hardly contributes, merely "[hanging] his head like he knew she was right" before "giving up" (6).

Due to this sense of family legacy, farms take on a high level of significance in farming families by functioning as the holder of family history and traditions. While serving many purposes, one important function of family tradition is "as the mechanisms through which family members identify and affirm their membership" (Wuthnow, 15). Like other cultural practices, traditions are activities we undertake to assert our membership to particular social groups and maintain all-important social ties. After countless generations, the farm has become integral to the family's sense of communal identity. Tyler explains how "[m]any of the things that his family does were decided long before he had a vote" (44). His parents tell him simply, "That's the way it's always been done" (44) if he questions them. With losing the farm, the Paquettes are not only threatened with losing their livelihood but also this stronghold of identity and their ancestral way of life, as far back as anyone in the family can remember. Thus, when Tyler learns his family will be able to keep the farm, after all, he "felt like his whole life had just been given back to him, wrapped up like a present with a big bow on top" (12). There are, however, other characters in *Return to Sender* who have faced these same struggles and not fared as well as the Paquettes.

In a note to readers at the end of the novel, Alvarez refers to global changes that have made farming an unsustainable way of life for many in both the United States and rural Mexico, forcing Mexican farmers north to look for work. She writes:

> Caught in a similar struggle in this country are the children of American farmers who are finding it increasingly difficult to continue farming. They cannot find affordable help and [must] resort to hiring farmers displaced from other lands. The children of both are seeing the end of a way of life and the loss of their ancestral homes. (322)

The industrial agriculture and free trade policies that have decimated rural Mexico have also left small farmers in the United States struggling. Following the passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994, prices for corn, Mexico's most emblematic crop, fell 48 percent in just over two years as the market was saturated with cheap, subsidized US corn (Gálvez, 50). This quickly destroyed the livelihoods of some two million small Mexican farmers, forcing their migration into cities across Mexico or north, across the border (Mares, 11). With corn featuring predominantly in the Mexican diet since pre-Columbian times, it is not difficult to imagine that the ancestral connection many of these farmers had to their land far exceeded that of the Paquettes'.

Throughout *Return to Sender*, however, Alvarez highlights the commonalities between the Cruzes and the Paquettes. Tyler's mother explains that "[l]ots of them [people from Mexico] are coming up here because they can't earn enough back home to live on. Many of them used to farm" (14). Tyler once again thinks of the Trail of Tears, as he did when considering the plight of his own family, immediately creating a connection for the reader, if not yet for himself, between his own situation and that of their new employees, the Cruzes. Like many of the migrants arriving from across Latin America, the Cruzes have come from an agrarian background. When they first reach the Paquettes' dairy farm, Mari is glad, saying, "Papá will be so much happier working on a farm!" (19). She goes on to describe a farm family like Tyler's, remembering her father's stories of helping his own father as a child, "before the family had to give up farming because there was no money in it" (19). Mari describes her grandfather as "a farmer, working from sunrise to sunset," an occupation that turned him into "an old man" even before he reached

the requisite age (61), much like Tyler's own father who at times seemed "as old as Gramps" (57).

Through their labor, the Cruzes and other Latinx migrants like them give up their own traditional way of life to support and preserve the lifestyle of US farmers like the Paquettes. In her book, *The Unending Hunger: Tracing Women and Food Insecurity Across Borders,* Megan A. Carney situates food in the "realm of socially reproductive labor" (74), that is, labor that serves to produce and sustain relationships and cultural ties. Traditionally this labor is undertaken by women who bear the "responsibility for overseeing social reproduction" (Carney, 74) by feeding and caring for their families. This "caring labor" (Carney, 74) is also present in *Return to Sender* as the Cruzes help the Paquettes maintain their traditional way of life, strengthen their own family bonds, and build new relationships. The caring labor associated with food and the community it creates does not begin in the kitchen or at the table but much earlier. Migrant Latinx laborers undertake this caring labor by helping to sustain struggling US farm families, and while doing so, sustaining the image of the "cultural legacy of farming" (Wuthnow, 3) that is central to US identity. They are, according to young Mari, "people who come to this country because of necessity…not just helping their families back home, but helping build this great country" (205).

However, the Cruzes are helping to preserve the Paquettes' ancestral way of life at the cost of their own. Mari describes the "division right down the center of [their] family" (59); her two younger sisters are American citizens and "belong" in the United States in a way they don't to Mexico. Furthermore, the Cruz family has been ruptured by the disappearance of the girls' mother in an attempted border crossing. Given the importance of women and mothering in the

socially reproductive labor associated with food, the absence of the Cruz sisters' mother is particularly conspicuous. Their own family bonds suffer considerably as the Cruzes work to help the Paquettes, illustrating what Alvarez refers to as the more "dire" (336) situation of Mexican farmers.

Christina Henríquez's *The Book of Unknown Americans* illustrates a similar set of sacrifices as the novel tells another story of a Mexican family working in the US agricultural industry. In *Return to Sender*, the role of food in maintaining familial and cultural ties is almost completely absent from the Cruzes' lives. This is perhaps partly due to the absence of the family's mother; however, the loss of traditional foodways is also a common struggle for many migrants, and this sacrifice is central to *The Book of Unknown Americans*. Ironically, those employed in different facets of the food system often experience food insecurity at disproportionately high rates compared to the general population. Furthermore, many migrant farmworkers and other immigrants employed in food production experience a lack of access to what Teresa M. Mares refers to as "culturally meaningful" foods (58). Because food serves not only for physical sustenance but also as important markers of identity, culture, and tradition, Mares argues that food security data alone is inadequate for describing "the embodied and emotional consequences of going without meaningful food" (59).

The Riveras of Christina Henríquez's *The Book of Unknown Americans* struggle to deal with these consequences after their move to the United States. Faced with relocating so that their daughter can attend a special school after suffering a traumatic brain injury, the family experiences several great changes, many of which is represented through the food they eat. The mother, Alma, struggles to sustain her family without access to the foods she was accustomed to

in Mexico. While the father, Arturo, works in agriculture, providing the food that helps to build community and social networks across the United States, the Riveras' own family structure and relationships slowly deteriorate. Like *Return to Sender,* the Riveras' role in the industrial food chain requires them to sacrifice their traditional way of life, including the food they eat and the communal and cultural identity associate with those foods.

Beginning her story, Alma describes her family's desires as for "the simplest things: to eat good food, to sleep at night, to smile, to laugh, to be well" (3). They are "blinded by the swell of hope and the promise of possibility" (3), yet their desire to eat good food is the first inclination that life in the United States might not live up to their expectations. The family settles in Delaware, like Vermont, an untraditional destination for Latinx migrants, but a state that has become "popular with the Latinos" (145) due to its proximity to Pennsylvanian mushroom farms. Insisting on "[doing] it the right way" (181), the family has secured visas through one of these farms, where Arturo works in the dark, literally hidden away in a windowless warehouse without time to eat or drink all day. Coming home from work, "[h]e had dirt under his fingernails and smelled like rotten vegetables" (24). He tells Alma that "no one eats" during their shift as he "greedily" takes the water she offers him (25). Alma is "appalled" (25) by the conditions her husband faces, insisting that he could be a manager at the mushroom farm since he owned his own construction company in Mexico. However, Arturo is much more aware of the precariousness of his situation; he fears losing his job and tells Alma that he is not there to "make waves" (25).

As "some sort of consolation" (27), Alma offers to prepare food for Arturo following this exhausting first day of work, yet the hot dog she cooks cannot compare to the elaborate and

carefully prepared meals she offered him in Mexico. Accordingly, she "felt acutely the meagerness of it [the hot dog], the insufficiency" (27). While it is perhaps calorically sufficient, food provides much more than physical sustenance and, here, the hot dog falls short. In *The Unending Hunger: Tracing Women and Food Insecurity Across Borders,* Megan A. Carney describes food "[a]s something that is ingested into the body and animates us as beings,…a basic substance of life, but its exchange and communion are also embedded in relations of social reproduction" (Carney, 74). Eating is not simply an act of nourishment. For thousands of years, food has quite literally shaped civilizations, yet the social ties it creates can also be minute and specific, building family and individual identity.

In *We Are What We Eat*, Donna R. Gabaccia describes food as one of the first cultural markers that children acquire. Comparing food to language, she writes, "Humans cannot easily lose their accents when they learn new languages after the age of about twelve; similarly, the food they ate as children forever defines familiarity and comfort" (6). Thus, food serves as one of the most important custodians of family memory and history. Jonathan Safran Foer likewise describes this social aspect as "the stories that are served with food" (11). He argues that eating is never simply a matter of taste and preference; rather, the foods we enjoy are a product of the stories that are associated with those foods. These stories are important because they "bind our family together, and bind our family to others. Stories about food are stories about us — our history and our values" (Safran Foer, 11). Because "food is bound to both taste buds and taste, to individual biographies and social histories" (32), it functions as a way for eaters to define their identity and establish membership in various social groups.

Much like the Paquettes' farm in *Return to Sender*, there is a sense of "generational continuity" (Wuthnow, 14) that makes food essential to a family's sense of identity. Recipes are passed down for generations, certain foods are made for specific celebrations, and thus foods acquire the kinds of stories that Safran Foer discusses. With staples of the Mexican diet stretching back thousands of years, the foods Alma prepared before her arrival in the United States provided her with an attachment to a long history. When cooking for her family in a traditional way, Alma was part of something that has existed for thousands of years, a tradition grounding and legitimizing her daily practices in a sense of communal and generational authority. However, as Tyler points out in *Return to Sender,* the concept of family history and tradition not only connects an individual to the past but also to the future.

Recalling a time in Mexico before her daughter's injury, Alma remembers preparing the dinner for her family's Christmas Eve celebration. Fourteen-year-old Maribel, who is determined to "prove her independence and her capabilities" (124), insists on taking responsibility for some of the evening's dishes. Alma worries that the entrees of tamales and revoltijo de romeritos were "too complicated" (124) for her daughter but allows her to tackle the dessert, fried buñuelos. Upon successfully completing the dessert, Maribel's face is "ripe with pride" (126) as she serves her creation to her parents and grandparents. Looking at her daughter, Alma sees her becoming an adult in front of her eyes, saying, "I saw the family she would have one day and the food she would make for them. I saw her entire life in front of her, waiting" (126). Just as Tyler sees his whole family present on his family dairy farm, not only those who have passed away but the generations yet to come, Alma sees and understands the generational connection of food. The

idea that her daughter will one day reproduce the dishes of her childhood in her own kitchen connects Alma to the future as much as it connects Maribel to the past.

Following her daughter's accident, however, that future disappears and, in losing access to traditional foodways, Alma also loses this grounding sense of identity. The foods she now prepares are meaningless and cannot function in the ways she is accustomed to. With the hot dog Alma prepares after Arturo's first day of work, she hopes to not only fill her husband's stomach but also offer this "consolation" (27), attempting to expunge the "guilt" (26) she feels for bringing him to the United States. The meal, however, does not have the social or emotional backing to provide the comfort she is trying to impart. Alma thinks longingly of the food she used to prepare for her husband in Mexico when he would come home every day to share lunch with her, and they would enjoy:

> Soft tortillas that I had ground from nixtamal, wrapped in a dish towel to keep them warm, a plate of shredded chicken or pork, bowls of cubed papaya and mango topped with coconut juice or cotija cheese. On Fridays, we would eat vanilla ice cream that I spooned into dishes the size of small, cupped hands or pan dulce that I baked. (26)

The pride that Alma takes in feeding her family is palpable, and the food she prepares serves not only to nourish their bodies. The imagery of the ice cream served in dishes reminiscent of cupped hands suggests the presentation of a gift, an offering to her family to maintain their physical, social, and emotional wellbeing. These elaborate lunches that she "spent much of the morning preparing" (26) illustrate her commitment to her family, to the value of creating a beautiful meal to encourage the important ritual of sharing a daily lunch.

Just this simple act of sharing a daily meal is a rarity in the United States, where food is commonly eaten alone, in a car, or out of a fast-food bag, resulting in "negative effects both physically and psychologically" (Delistraty, 2014). This is because food consumed away from the family dinner table tends to be less healthy, but also because "eating alone can be alienating" (Delistraty, 2014); it is a missed opportunity to build community and strengthen family bonds. With Arturo's job requiring him to take three separate busses to and from work, these lunches shared between husband and wife are a thing of the past. Furthermore, the kinds of food Alma used to serve are no longer available to the family. The Riveras wake on their first morning in the United States, "bewildered and disoriented" (6), and realize they must journey out to buy food for breakfast. Unsure of where to go, they end up at a gas station where they "scanned the metal shelves for anything that they recognized" (8). Alma "laughed" when Arturo offers her a jar of what he calls "American salsa" (8), asking, "Do they think this what we eat?" (8). Leaving the gas station, the family has "American salsa, eggs, a box of instant rice, a loaf of sliced bread, two cans of kidney beans, a carton of juice, and a package of hot dogs" (8-9). Except for the eggs, the food is all prepackaged and highly processed, a far cry from the fresh foods that Alma carefully prepared for her family in Mexico.

On occasion, Alma visits the nearby Hispanic market, a place filled with "the scents of home" (53), yet the food there is too expensive for her to buy. Instead, she sees it as "taunting" her, fruits and vegetables that "drove [her] crazy" (93-94) with her the inability to purchase them. Arturo's salary from the mushroom farm is "just enough to cover rent and bus fare and food" (93), but the only food within the Riveras' budget comes from the Dollar Tree. In one of the great paradoxes of industrial agriculture, fresh foods like the mushrooms Arturo harvests are

far out of reach for the family who buy instead "[f]ood in cans, food in boxes" which require only "[adding] water and heat" (94). Without access to traditional ingredients and foodways, Alma lacks the most critical means she has to care for her family physically, socially, and emotionally. Instead, Alma's priorities surrounding food begin to change. She purchases oatmeal in bulk at the Dollar Tree when another Mexican woman tells her, "One can will feed you for a week" (94). After preparing the "pot of pale gray mush" (94) for her "skeptical" (95) family, Alma remarks that "[i]t wasn't good" (94), but the oatmeal is cheap, and the small portion of dried oats has transformed into a quantity sufficient for their supper.

As cooking becomes more utilitarian, however, more is lost than simple enjoyment. In her essay "Los Chilaquiles de mi 'ama," Meredith E. Abarca argues that, for many women, "[c]ooking becomes a language of self-representation" (120). Through interviews with her female family members, Abarca explores the "*chiste*" or "twist" (119) in cooking, personal touches, or small changes that personalize a dish. Through this *chiste*, a woman "at certain moments sees cooking as more than a wife's duty and obligation" (129). She can make decisions in the kitchen that "[validate] knowledge based on her specific lived experiences" and allow the cook a "claim of agency [that] comes from her creative interventions" (129). Cooking, then, becomes an important way for some women to assert their independence through "a celebration of [their] own affectionate and creative expression" (127). When she first prepares oatmeal for her family, Alma immediately begins to wonder how she can improve the food. "Maybe," she considers, "I could sprinkle some cocoa powder on it, or stir in some honey, just to liven the flavor" (94-94). Generally, however, the complete loss of familiar ingredients is too great a challenge for Alma's creative impulse.

Instead, she finds herself overcome with homesickness, a feeling that is often expressed through her longing for foods. With both Maribel and Arturo out of the house during the day, Alma struggles with loneliness and isolation. The time she would have spent visiting with her mother or preparing meals for her family is now idle. Alone in the apartment, Alma takes out the comal she has brought from Mexico and considers making "[s]omething to remind [her] of home" (33). Yet without any of the correct ingredients, she is left powerless, "staring at the flat cast-iron pan, feeling homesickness charge at [her] like a roaring wave" (33). The food itself even seems to intensify the Rivieras' homesickness; they feel that "eating foods from home in a place that wasn't [their] home only made things worse" (93). This, combined with the price of essential ingredients like chiles, quickly reduces their diet to the likes of oatmeal.

When Arturo is fired without warning from the mushroom farm, the Riveras' situation becomes desperate. The family's meager savings rapidly dwindle until even Alma and Arturo's evening cup of tea is reduced simply to boiled water. Alma makes "rice and beans and rice and beans and more rice and beans" (183), yet the repetition wears on her family, and, without access to her traditional foodways and culturally meaningful foods, Alma cannot sustain her family as she did in Mexico. Furthermore, Alma feels her daughter's accident was "[her] fault" (102), adding to her conscience the family's subsequent move to the United States where their life has become so much more difficult. Trying to make up for her perceived shortcomings, Alma attempts to protect her family in another way. She confronts a teenaged boy who harasses Maribel one day in their apartment's parking lot, yet she insists on keeping it from Arturo, saying, "I didn't want him to know that I had failed Maribel again" (122). However, keeping the secret tragically results in Arturo's murder and the now broken family's return to Mexico.

In her discussion of migrant workers on Vermont dairy farms, Teresa Mares describes "the lives of workers whose labor is devoted to feeding others rather than attending to their own physical, spiritual, and cultural hungers" (109). The same can be said for employees across the industrial food system. Fields, factories, and kitchens across the United States are filled with workers who have been forced out of their own self-sufficiency and food sovereignty and lured across the border to sustain US farms. The fear, anxiety, and fractured families that populate both *Return to Sender* and *The Book of Unknown Americans* clearly illustrate the sacrifices that immigrant workers make as they facilitate community across the United States through food production. Ironically, these sacrifices are often made along the lines of food, as many who work in the food industry lack access to traditional foodways, which compromises the sense of identity and culture that is strongly linked to food. Both novels show that food and farming supply much more than physical nourishment for eaters or a livelihood for farmers; it provides important markers of culture, comfort, identity, and group belonging. Therefore, we can understand immigrant workers as not only feeding consumers across the United States, but also participating in an important aspect of nation-building.

CHAPTER THREE:

"…pancakes were the first American food he ever ate. Those and chop suey:" Food as Border-crossing and Transnational Nation-building in Luis Alberto Urrea's *The House of Broken Angels* and Erika Sánchez's *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter*

Because of its essential role in constructing individual identity, food has long been equally important in forming national identities. The food we eat acts as a kind of border, an invisible line separating the familiar from the unfamiliar, working behind the scenes (in the kitchen, if you will) to unify nations. However, in the United States, a national cuisine has been notoriously difficult to define. We continue to fortify our physical borders, yet modern-day eating habits encourage more culinary border-crossing than ever before, not to mention the global nature of food supply and labor recruitment. *The House of Broken Angels*, by Luis Alberto Urrea, and *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter,* by Erika Sánchez, clearly illustrate the transnational nature of the American diet while showing the evolution of food and culture in Mexican American families living in the United States. The novels examine the borders that food creates within families, including how diet works to divide members along cultural and generational lines with culinary choices that speak to family history or new social aspirations. Because of the everyday border-crossing that takes place as we fill our plates, the eating habits of transnational families such as the Reyes and the de La Cruzes become a way to assert their new American identity while contributing to the national identity of the United States by encouraging the continuation of the multi-ethnic US diet.

The editors of *Food Across Borders* describe eating as "a border crossing" (loc. 83). They write: "The act of choosing what to put into our mouths is a kind of 'boundary-work' in which

we sort out the line between what is us and what is other. Similarly, eating is a transgression in which we violate the wholeness that is our bodily selves and bring the outside in" (loc. 86). Because of its early associations with family, comfort, and familiarity, eating habits create a firm boundary that defines what is safe by separating the familiar from the unfamiliar. As a border, food works to determine individual and group identity, yet, like any border, the delineations are not always clear. Many of the foods most emblematic of specific cuisines have a global history; they have crossed numerous borders and are often "historical artifacts…of surprisingly recent vintage" (2), according to food historian Jeffrey M. Pilcher, who points out that "no Irishman ate a potato, of South American provenance, before Columbus's voyage" (2). While globalization often seems like a modern-day phenomenon, Pilcher points out that by the beginning of the 20th century, "[c]uisines were already thoroughly globalized" (87). Domesticated crops and livestock had been "introduced…to virtually all regions where they could be raised efficiently," and access to new ingredients had "reshaped taste preferences around the world" (Pilcher, 87).

This global history leads the editors of *Food Across Borders* to describe "local food" as "an oxymoron" (loc. 492). Within our food system, "[borders] function like membranes: allowing some things to pass, transforming others, and keeping yet others out altogether" (García, Matt, et al., loc. 514). Cuisines are shaped as foods move across national borders, cultural borders, and even the borders that encircle the eating habits of individual families. Virtually everything we put into our mouths has crossed a border at some point in its history, and it has been changed, reshaped, or reimagined with that crossing. Even if we insist on eating native varieties of vegetables at our local farm-to-table restaurant, there is a good chance that those who harvested, processed, or prepared our food have crossed a border to do so. This

has been true for hundreds of years, dating back to the importation of enslaved Africans who supplied much of the agricultural labor across the Americas. As the editors of *Food Across Borders* write, "Borders are…internalized in the foods we eat, part and parcel of their very conditions of possibility" (loc. 497). Due to this fundamental relationship between food and borders, what we eat can be viewed as a global, transnational, and ever-changing borderland that we interact with daily; it is a place that can promote "creative intermixing or create zones of intensive policing and constriction" (García, Matt, et al., loc. 514). This is particularly true in the United States, where our diet, according to Donna Gabaccia, is primarily defined by our taste for "a diverse variety of multi-ethnic specialties" (226).

As discussed in Chapter Two, eating is an important way to define identity and foster a sense of cultural and familial belonging. It is clear then that the way countries eat collectively is also essential for determining national identity. Food historian Jeffery M. Pilcher argues that "patriotism ultimately derives as much from the devotion to one's own community as the distrust of outsiders. And the love of childhood food provides one of the means of acquiring this nationalist affiliation" (Pilcher, 66). As something that perpetually works to bring people together, food is the cornerstone of communities worldwide, endeavoring to define identity by both creating a culinary border that separates one group from another and fostering an internal sense of shared community. The United States, however, has long struggled to join in a national cuisine; the country's diet has instead varied by region, influenced primarily by the proliferation of different ethnic "enclave communities" (Gabaccia, 65), resulting in a country of multi-ethnic eaters.

In *We Are What We Eat*, Donna Gabaccia describes "[t]he American penchant to experiment with food, to combine and mix the foods of many different cultural traditions" as "a recurring theme in our history as eaters" (3). In contrast to other food cultures, for example, Mexican eaters who are repeatedly categorized as "people of corn" (Pilcher, 7; Gálvez, 27), American eaters are defined by "how we eat, not what we eat" (Gabaccia, 225-6). Culinary borders crisscross the United States, separating the population along the lines of class, race, and ethnicity, yet the way we eat encourages an unprecedented amount of border crossing, a practice that has "generated new identities—for foods and eaters alike" (Gabaccia, 5). In the introduction to the collection of essays *Pilaf, Pozole, and Pad Thai*, editor Sherrie A. Inness describes her childhood visits to the German deli, her family's favorite Chinese restaurant, and the baba ghanoosh her mother prepared at home. It is a diet she calls "hardly unique" as "eating ethnic food is commonplace in American culture" (3).

As explored in Christina Henríquez's *The Book of Unknown Americans*, culturally meaningful foods provide more than just physical nourishment, and the loss of these foods can be detrimental for individuals and families alike. However, migration also provides an opportunity to recreate meaningful foods and give meaning to new foods by reconstructing family identity. *The House of Broken Angels*, by Luis Alberto Urrea, and *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter,* by Erika Sánchez, clearly illustrate the role of food and the crossing of culinary borders in defining and redefining identities. Both novels tell the stories of multi-generational Mexican American families as they adapt to life in the United States and negotiate their developing family dynamics. Food often works as a border in these families, separating different generations or branches of the family tree and representing the gap that develops as

values and traditions change. However, the way these families traverse and accommodate these borders becomes key to building the families' new, collective identities. Furthermore, the culinary border crossing they engage in follows the long tradition of multi-ethnic eating in the United States; the resulting eclectic, cross-cultural eating habits become a defining factor of the families' new American identity.

Luis Alberto Urrea's *The House of Broken Angels* follows the Mexican American de La Cruz family as they come together to simultaneously celebrate the final birthday of Big Angel, the family's terminally ill patriarch, and the funeral of Mamá América, Big Angel's mother. A true family of the borderlands, the story of the de La Cruzes has crisscrossed the US-Mexico border for generations beginning when Big Angel's grandfather came to California following the Mexican Revolution. The family "became Mexican again" (9) in the 1930s when the Great Depression struck, and the Repatriation Act resulted in waves of deportations. Don Antonio, Big Angel's father, then returned to the United States as an adult to live with "the gringa hussy" (28), who purportedly stole him away from his wife and children in Mexico. All this, however, is ancient family history, and the de La Cruzes have resided for nearly fifty years in San Diego. Big Angel's grandchildren can "only say 'taco' and 'tortilla' in Spanish" (67), and the family's eating habits have likewise transformed. New foods have become meaningful for the de La Cruzes, foods that are more indicative of American ways of eating.

Although Don Antonio passed away long before the novel's start, his presence is still palpable in the de La Cruz family. There are several foods associated with the legendary man, all of which are classic examples of the transnational nature of the US diet, and all of which hold special significance for Don Antonio's descendants. Upon arriving in the United States, de La

Cruz family "legend" claims that "pancakes were the first American food he [Don Antonio] ever ate. Those and chop suey" (12). The man is also known for cooking "spaghetti with hard-boiled eggs" (189) and "heart-attack chili" (287), all foods that are perfect examples of what Jeffery Pilcher refers to as "migrant cuisines" (79), cuisines that "emerged from the new soil as barely recognizable versions of foods from the homelands" as immigrants settled in the United States (80). In an article for Smithsonian Magazine, Kat Eschner refers to chop suey specifically as "an American classic" (Eschner, 2017). Even though these foods are still often associated with different ethnic communities, they are actually some of the most quintessential American dishes, foods created in the United States by migrants working to recreate home while creating dishes that others would also enjoy in their new country.

Don Antonio builds on this longstanding tradition of immigrants who have used food to adapt and adjust by adding his own twist to these meals. He adds hard-boiled eggs to his spaghetti in place of meatballs, and his chili was a concoction of onions, peppers, tomatoes, rice, refried beans, five "diced and fried…pork chops," and "a pound of Monterey Jack cheese," which turned into a mixture like "cement" (288) that he ate cold on toast or in tortillas. Pancakes, though, "los pan-kekis" (12), are an especially important food for the de La Cruzes. Based on their legendary association with Don Antonio, Big Angel recalls how "his family…developed an addiction to pancakes" (12), an enduring addiction that endows the food with new meaning specific to the family's developing sense of identity. These newly meaningful foods slowly begin to fill in the gaps that result from the loss of traditional foodways, such as in *The Book of Unknown Americans* by Christina Henríquez.

Return to Sender, by Julia Alvarez, and *The Book of Unknown Americans,* by Christina Henríquez, both show the critical function of food and farming in forming collective family identity due to the longevity of these practices. As conventions that have existed for generations, these traditions help to ground identity by contextualizing it in important cultural or historical practices, allowing for cohesion and feelings of group belonging. Immigration, however, can disrupt these longstanding traditions, and it can take many years for families to develop a new, collective sense of identity, such as in *The House of Broken Angels*. Meanwhile, immigrant families often become divided along generational lines in what Dina Birman refers to as "acculturation gaps" (2011). Some family members, generally of younger generations, adjust to a new culture more quickly than other, usually older, members. Acculturation, which Birman describes as "changes in language, behavior, attitudes and values" (2011), occurs at different rates between generations because children frequently have more exposure to the host culture from an early age while parents are more likely to retain beliefs and practices from the home culture. The result is that "immigrant parents and children increasingly live in different cultural worlds," which can "make family communication and mutual understanding difficult" (Birman, 2011). Food, as well as cultural expectations surrounding gender norms and domestic work associated with it, can play an important role in perpetuating these acculturation gaps, as is the case in Erika Sánchez's *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter.*

In the novel, fifteen-year-old Julia Reyes struggles to connect with her parents, Amá and Apá, after their "favorite" (21) daughter, Julia's older sister Olga, is killed in a tragic traffic accident. As bookish, American-born Julia tries to relate to her parents' more traditional views and aspirations for their daughter, food repeatedly becomes the borderland where the family's

cultural division and attempts at reconciliation play out. Julia's late sister, Olga, embodied her mother's expectations of what a good daughter should be. According to Julia, Olga was terribly "boring" (23); she "cooked, cleaned, and never stayed out late" (20). She "loved to be close to her family" (289) and was content to stay at home, attending the local community college, and working in a nearby office. Julia, on the other hand, constantly perplexes her parents with her dreams of moving to New York City after high school and her belief that it is better to "live in the streets than be a submissive Mexican wife who spends all day cooking and cleaning" (12).

While Julia loves to eat, these gender norms that she associates with cooking quell any desire to be in the kitchen. Food and cooking represent fundamentally different things to her and her mother, indicative of the generational divide between them. Julia, who once "ruined Thanksgiving" with "a rant about the women having to cook all day while the men just sat around, scratching their butts" (21), cannot understand why preparing food and caring for her family is so important to her mother. She believes Amá's role in the kitchen is "sexist" (21) and seeing her mother washing dishes in her own kitchen after working all day cleaning houses makes her feel "guilty for existing, guilty that she has to work like that for [them]" (122). Growing up in a fundamentally different time and place than her mother, Julia sees tasks like cooking tortillas as redundant and time-wasting. She says, "I don't see the point of going through all this trouble [making tortillas] when we can buy them at the store" (33). For Amá, however, these domestic tasks are "common sense" (32), as well as practices that represent her connection to her home culture and tradition.

Because of the different values that food and related domestic tasks represent, the kitchen becomes the place where Julia and her mother experience the most conflict and the most

misunderstanding. While cooking together, Amá insists that Julia's tortillas "have to be perfect" (32), as her daughter struggles to achieve the requisite round shape. Julia becomes frustrated with her mother because they are "just going to eat them" (32) and storms out of the kitchen as Amá shouts after her, "What kind of woman are you going to be if you can't even make a tortilla?" (33). In accordance with Amá's belief that "women were supposed to stay at home and take care of their families" (289), cooking, for her, is an important sign of independence and maturity, of being able to care for oneself and one's family. Later in the novel, as Julia fights for more autonomy from her parents, Amá again uses her inability to make a proper tortilla to illustrate her immaturity. Amá tells her, "You think you're all grown-up. You're only fifteen. You don't even know how to make a tortilla" (89). Julia is angry yet also confused; she can't understand the importance her mother places on this simple ability, saying, "I don't know what tortillas have to do with anything" (89).

As the incredibly labor-intensive cornerstone of the Mexican diet for thousands of years, Alyshia Gálvez describes tortilla-making as "the archetypal role of Mexican housewives" (152). In her book, *Eating NAFTA*, Gálvez writes, "making tortillas is historically so crucial to everyday life and the basic diet of households that it is imbued with tremendous symbolic value and esteem" (153). For Mexican women, the daily preparation of tortillas "constituted an art unto itself" (Pilcher, 21), allowing them to practice the "*mantenimiento*" of their families, which Gálvez describes as "the value of sustaining the physical organism of family members and… bonding family members to one another within cultural norms, values, and practices" (153). To Amá, the act of preparing food for her family is not only about physical sustenance but also the social, cultural, and spiritual health of her family. Much like Alma in *The Book of Unknown*

Americans, Amá's ability to care for her family is an integral part of her identity and a source of pride and independence. For Julia, however, cooking suggests much the opposite. Independence, to her, is implied by liberation from these domestic tasks traditionally performed only by women.

Julia's frustrations with her mother also extend out of the kitchen, to the restrictions that Amá places on her diet in general. While Julia reports "daydreaming about dancing hamburgers" and feeling like she could "weep with happiness" if she ate a slice of pizza (13), Amá insists on feeding her family a consistent diet of home-cooked Mexican staples. Julia is annoyed when her mother "[has] to be all Mexican about it and pack [her] cold cheese-and-bean burritos" (127) for a school outing and complains that Amá has "never taken [them] to McDonald's, not even once" (57). According to Julia's mother, "there's no need for burgers and fries when [they] have a pot of beans and packets of tortillas at home" (57). Julia's requests for take-out are likewise met with her mother's insistence that Julia is "spoiled" and that she should "make [her]self a quesadilla" (57) instead. As a result, food becomes a way for Julia to rebel against her mother and attempt to compensate for all the ways she feels her life is lacking. "Sometimes," she says, "it's like I'm eating to drown something yowling inside me, even when I'm not really hungry" (78).

Junk food is "forbidden in [her] house" (57), but Julia circumvents her mother's rules as often as she can. By buying and eating processed foods, Julia establishes her identity as different from that of her parents. She describes buying cheeseburgers in secret on her way home from school and "[eating] it in three bites" (57) so that her mother won't know. One night, she and her father order "gloriously greasy" (70) Chinese food when Amá is at her church's prayer night.

Afterward, Julia says, “We had to throw the boxes away in the alley so Amá wouldn’t find out. We lied and told her we had eaten eggs for dinner” (70). Julia’s shifting tastes and cravings again indicate the cultural and generational divide between herself and her parents, yet they also represent the family’s changing identity. The difference between the foods that Julia and her mother consume or even desire to consume illustrates the borders of culture, domestic values, and generational gaps within their family.

As a “post-immigration family” (104), the de La Cruzes of Luis Alberto Urrea’s *The House of Broken Angels* don’t experience the drastic acculturation gap that Julia and her mother struggle to overcome, yet food still divides their family in important ways, particularly Big Angel and his half-brother, Little Angel. As Don Antonio’s youngest child, half-American Little Angel is known within the de La Cruz family as “The American” or “The Assimilator” (35). Now an English professor “[l]iving with hippie gringos far away” (51) in Seattle, he returns home for the first time in years for his elder brother’s final birthday, where the half-brothers work to resolve the decades-old conflicts between them. Big Angel and Little Angel are both connected and divided by their shared father, Don Antonio, however, the conversations about their childhoods often revolve around the food or lack of food that they associate with the man. The brothers’ differing childhood foods, as well as access to those foods, continue to feature prominently in the dynamic of their adult relationship and constitute an important part of their “‘I’m more Mexican than you are’ games” (104).

According to Big Angel, Don Antonio “abandoned them [his wife and children] to starve in La Paz” (66), leaving his eldest son to take up the role of patriarch. From then on, Big Angel says, “his siblings had looked to him as their father figure” (66), and he took responsibility for

the family's wellbeing. Even so, Big Angel, his mother, and siblings continually teetered on the verge of starvation, forced to eat their pets, "the doves in the patio cages" (149), and forage for dandelions which they boiled or fried before consuming (190). Food scarcity continued to plague Big Angel into adulthood. In a particularly difficult time, he and his wife, Perla, began to call one another "Flaca" and "Flaco" because they become so thin. Perla refers to her husband as "her hero" (40), recalling "how Big Angel chose to go hungry so everyone could have a tiny bit of food, even if it was only a mouthful" (39). When it becomes clear to Big Angel that there is "only hunger and dirt" (40) for his family in Tijuana, he moves them, definitively this time, to the United States.

North of the border, however, the de La Cruzes continue to struggle with hunger and food insecurity. Instead of "a better life," Perla "found loneliness and worse hunger than in Mexico" (159). Furthermore, her attempts to "find new ways to stretch a thin chicken and a handful of rice" (159) for her family of five were made worse by the show of opulence around her. She describes being surrounded by "people…rolling like pigs in huge piles of food and clothes and liquor and nice underwear and cigarettes and money and chocolate and fruit" (159). Her children, on the other hand, "thought donuts made them rich" (162) when Big Angel brought home the stale leftovers from his work at a bakery. Certain kinds of food, as well as access to food in general, are associated by the de La Cruzes with being rich, American, and well-fed, ideas that have been solidified by the family's own experiences with food insecurity.

As one of his "million jobs" (161), Big Angel once headed the computing division for San Diego's gas and electric company. Here, he says, "I saw everybody's secrets" (11), and what interested him the most was the division between the usage of gas and electricity in the different

neighborhoods. Based only on the gas and electric statistics, Big Angel draws conclusions about the demographics of certain neighborhoods based solely on what he assumes to be their eating habits; “Real people cooked” (11), he determines. The fact that the “rich bastards” on one side of town used significantly less gas than “the rabble in the southside” meant “rich people must be ordering deliveries or eating cold food or going to fancy restaurants that cost as much as a sofa” (12). Those who used more gas, like “his Perla [,] cooked about twelve hours out of every day” (11) because “Mexicans liked food hot, home cooked, and lots of it” (12). For Big Angel, home-cooked food is a clear indication of working-class existence, the thing that separates the “real people” (11), like himself, from the presumably unreal.

While Big Angel’s childhood and young adult life was marked by lack, he assumes that his half-brother, Little Angel, “the American” (31), lived very well. As Don Antonio’s first family “filled [their] pockets and shirts with dandelions” (190) for supper, Little Angel’s “American mom” cooked “chicken potpies” (29) when Big Angel came to visit. He imagines that her son was spoiled, spending his Saturdays enjoying “some fat boy lunch of cold spaghetti or frijoles sandwiches on white bread, and chocolate milk and comic books” (29). Big Angel sees food as circumscribing the borders of class and social standing, and his younger brother’s diet suggests to him that Little Angel “had everything” (263), despite Little Angel’s own assertions that his family life was far from perfect. These divisions established in childhood continue to exist between the brothers into their adult life, and Little Angel remains the outcast of the family; he is “[t]he great lost soul. English teacher who had gone off to Seattle and lived in the rain” (57). His family believes that his life is easier than theirs; he is “[a] culture thief. A fake

Mexican. More gringo than anything" (167) as he totes his "cardboard briefcase" (202) of Starbucks coffee around the party.

However, after being settled in the United States for nearly fifty years, Little Angel argues that all de La Cruzes are "pretty much Americans" (104). While Big Angel takes offense to this statement, the food which appears on the day of Big Angel's birthday party hints at the truth of his half-brother's remark. Little Angel, who imagines a spread of "chicken mole and pots of simmering frijoles and chiles rellenos…displayed in pornographic lushness" (205), is dismayed by "the reality of the day" (205). The potluck-style table is laden "with pizzas, Chinese food, hot dogs, potato salad and a huge industrial party pan of spaghetti" (205). To make matters worse, "[s]omebody was allegedly on the way with a hundred pieces of KFC" (205). Little Angel observes the unexpected display, wondering, "Where's the Mexican food?" (206), as one of the cousins walks by "swill[ing] his mead" (206). "[I]t was all turning into an end-of-semester project for his multicultural studies course" (206), the perplexed Little Angel muses.

In her book, *We Are What We Eat*, Dona Gabaccia describes two specific components that set the US diet apart from others: "our taste for standardized, mass-produced processed dishes and for a diverse variety of multi-ethnic specialties" (226). In this respect, the diets of both Julia from *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter* and the de La Cruzes are very similar and very indicative of American ways of eating. Like the de La Cruzes, the foods Julia frequently craves are multi-ethnic "American" staples like pizza and Chinese food, alongside the consumption of various junk and fast foods. To Julia, this way of eating represents a different lifestyle from that of her mother's, one in which she can imagine herself to be something other than a woman who spends her life caring for her family. In fact, relinquishing the need to cook is an important status

symbol is for many. In her essay "Los Chilaquiles de mi 'ama," Meredith E. Abarca describes the different motivations for cooking from scratch. Her mother, she writes, did so as "an act of necessity and not of keeping a 'heritage'" (133). She writes, "For working-class people, doing things from scratch does not always represent an ideological, political and cultural statement about heritage. Doing things from scratch is a process of gathering and reusing what they have access to" (133-134). Those who cook from scratch out of necessity often aspire to eat more processed and prepared foods because they are seen as more modern and cosmopolitan.

The spread at Big Angel's birthday party clearly illustrates this shift in eating habits. As the family has become more comfortable and financially well-off, their cooking routine has dwindled, and their reliance on prepared food has increased. At the party, Perla describes herself as "a refugee from the apron" (206). For fifty years, she "was a cook for everybody" because she "had to" (206). Now, however, she tells Little Angel, "I eat hamburrgurrs…Subway! Cheerios!" (206). For Perla, her escape from the kitchen is not just a daily chore that she no longer has to perform; it is evidence of her improved economic and social position. She and her family have become like those "rich bastards" (11) whose low rates of gas and electricity usage Big Angel used to monitor.

According to Alyshia Gálvez, "[s]tatus and prestige [is] always implicated in dietary differences" (102); the foods that appeal to us and that we chose to consume (when we have the choice) often reflect more than just personal preference, they are choices that indicate the social image we are trying to foster. In her book, *Eating NAFTA*, Gálvez discusses the effects of free trade on diet and health in Mexico, including a national shift towards the consumption of more processed and preprepared foods. She explains how "[p]eople are encouraged by advertising to

imagine themselves to be modern and cosmopolitan through the consumption of certain kinds of products" (94), namely, by buying and consuming the processed and prepackaged foods that are associated with this "cosmopolitan modernity" (102). Most of the de La Cruz family, for example, nurses an obsession for instant coffee, believing that it was "some kind of miracle" (172). Urrea writes, "Mexicans of that generation liked to stir a spoonful of coffee powder into a cup of hot water and tinkle it around with a spoon. As if something highly sophisticated and magical were happening" (173). Nescafé, with a splash of canned Carnation milk, made them think they were "living ahead of the cultural curve" (173). However, the beliefs of "that generation" (173), at least regarding food and modernity, have changed, and some of the younger de La Cruzes rely on other foods to convey an air of cultured sophistication.

In *Eating NAFTA*, Gálvez goes on to explain the change in perception of processed foods with the progression of globalization that has made these products readily available to a much wider market. She writes, "Now that people around the world have access to the same varieties of soda, chips, and fast foods, consumption of them…has become associated with the lower social status" while "minimally processed, locally produced foods…are coveted by wealthy elites" (102). Even as both Julia and the de La Cruzes consume the "sodas, chips, and fast foods" (102) that Gálvez describes as previously indicative of culture and modernity, a new generation of perceived high-status foods emerge. Minnie, Little Angel's niece, excitedly tells her uncle about the new "big yuppie Target" that has a bakery and "sushi, even" (181). He returns from the Target with Big Angel's birthday cakes, an extra briefcase of Starbucks coffee ("Just in case" (202)), and a California roll for Minnie, which she gobbles down with her fingers while her cousin laughs at her for "eating cat food" (204). Minnie, however, is not swayed; eating the sushi

makes her feel superior to her cousin, more cultured and worldly. She tells him that he is "not sophisticated" and "inform[s] him" (204) that the food is, in fact, called sushi.

In *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter,* Julia begins dating a "total suburban white boy' (196), and her own assumptions surrounding food and social status become clear. On their first date, Connor takes her to "a coffee shop bustling with hipsters" (173), the kind of place she's "never been in" before (176) and which immediately makes her feel out of place. She says, "I imagine a giant spotlight on me as I enter" (173), and it is the first of several locations and food-related encounters that illustrate the distance she feels from Connor. When he takes her to "one of those fancy [grocery stores] where a bag of organic apples costs more than [her family's] rent" (191), she jokes with him, demanding "some fair-trade, sustainable, locally-grown-by-a-community-of-gnomes" (192) bar of chocolate, yet the discomfort she feels is palpable. She avoids bringing him to her own neighborhood, saying, "How do you explain to someone that you're poor?" (188).

The irony, however, is that the way the poor have historically eaten has become incredibly popular in recent years. In *Food in World History*, Jeffrey Pilcher points out "[t]he modern paradox that only the rich can afford to eat like peasants" (121) and, in *Eating NAFTA*, Alyshia Gálvez makes a similar argument specific to Mexican food. She writes:

> [A] convergence of economic trends and policy decisions…have taken ancestral ways of eating out of the reach of the average Mexican citizen, while making traditional foods available as a high-value, high-status commodity to be 'elevated' and reinterpreted by global elite chefs. (4)

In recent years, food trends have shifted to glorify a way of eating that features locally produced whole foods, ideally grown organically by small farmers, essentially the way poorer populations have eaten for thousands of years. Mexican food, Gálvez argues, is a particularly good example of this phenomenon. People in Mexico, as well as Mexican Americans like Julia and the de La Cruzes have embraced "an 'American' way of eating" (Gálvez, 10), heavy in processed foods, due in large part to the "cultivation of aspiration" that drives corporate marketing campaigns (Gálvez, 191). Meanwhile, Mexican food has surged in popularity among the very hipster-coffee-shop-dwelling, fancy-grocery-store-shopping consumers that Julia feels so out of place around. However, a visit back to Mexico lets Julia reconnect with her ancestral foodways by separating cooking from the overbearing presence of her mother, allowing her a greater sense of culinary agency as she rediscovers a sense of pride in traditional foods and the Mexican part of her identity.

Following a suicide attempt, Julia's parents send her to Mexico, insisting that it will make her "feel better" (228). Although she is skeptical of her mother's assertion that her "grandmother will teach [her] things" (228) that do not revolve around cooking, Julia finds herself in her parents' small village of Los Ojos, staying with her grandmother and extended family. In fact, her grandmother does teach her how to cook, yet Julia's musings are filled with none of the frustration and feelings of inadequacy that plagued her in her mother's Chicago kitchen. Determined to not be seen as "a spoiled American princess" (260) by her family, Julia throws herself into all the food she encounters, even when she watches a pig slaughtered for the evening's party and later when she notices "a few thick hairs jutting from the skin" of the pork in

her taco (260). A sense of genuine interest seems to motivate Julia's eating and cooking, marking a palpable change from the reluctance with which she entered her mother's kitchen.

A full two pages describe the detailed process of preparing Mamá Jacinta's famous menudo recipe, beginning with a trip to the butcher to "pick up the buckets of dirty cow stomach" (246). Julia goes on to describe the process by which the tripe is washed, softened with calcium oxide, and then "cut into slivers, and…into squares" (246). She explains the different parts of the stomach, detailing how they look and what they are called in Spanish. In the final product, Julia explains that "the texture…can be shocking to the average American tongue," however, she concludes with a sense of pride, "I like it" (247). Experiencing the elaborate process of preparing the menudo seems to help Julia connect to her food in a new way; she can claim ownership over these foods and modes of preparation that are not only meaningful to her family but that Gálvez denotes as now being "high-value, high-status commodit[ies]" (4).

Julia returns from Mexico ready to give her mother a second chance, and after picking Julia up at the airport, Amá crosses a culinary border of her own; Julia can "hardly believe it" when her mother takes her to a Chinese restaurant. Julia says, "I honestly don't remember the last time we ate at a restaurant together" (282). There, over "sweet and sour chicken" and "a plate of steamed vegetables" (284), mother and daughter both end up in tears as they apologize to one another and have their first meaningful conversation of the entire novel. Even though the women see food as representative of fundamentally different things, it is also the place where they can reconcile and recognizes one another's differences in a collaborative way. In taking her daughter to a restaurant, Amá acknowledges Julia's desire to be out of the house, to have a different life than that of her mother, just as Julia has returned with a new appreciation for Amá

and the work she does. Furthermore, their compromise takes place over a meal of American Chinese food, one of the cuisines most indicative of the cultural negotiation fundamental to American eating and American identity.

In his review of *The House of Broken Angels* for the New York Times, novelist Viet Thanh Nguyen describes the de La Cruzes as a "Mexican-American family that is also an American family" and the novel itself as "Mexican-American novel that is also an American novel" (Nguyen, 2018). When closely examining the subtitles of identity and belonging, borders are never obvious, and the study of food in the United States makes this particularly clear. As a subject that is inherently about mixing, combining, and creating, cuisine becomes the site when multiple identities become unified. After all, isn't chop suey a Chinese American food that is also an American food? Pepperoni pizza is an Italian American food that is also an American food, and a Korean BBQ taco is a Korean-Mexican-American food that is also an American food. Never has the pluralism of American identity been more evident than in the construction of our national diet. If what and how we eat continues to unite us, it seems indisputable that de La Cruzes and the Reyes are also American families.

IN CONCULSION:

The Value in Sacrifice

Food undoubtedly brings people together, and the culinary border crossing characteristic of the US diet creates a common ground that unifies American identity. However, this impression requires viewing diet mainly in isolation; it becomes difficult to see food as a place of unity and cooperation when we consider the entirety of the US food system. In *We Are What We Eat*, Diana Gabaccia questions if "the mixing and matching of cuisines and ingredients signify a spirit of toleration that is the greatest source of American unity and strength, or…just the opposite—a lack of respect for the ethnic and regional traditions that preserve the many differing histories of our people" (224). When we look at the structure of food production and consumption, including who produces the majority of our food and how they are treated as well as what foods are considered most valuable in US society, it becomes clear that what and how we eat still divides the United States in critical and often overlooked ways. Our culinary choices continue to play a significant role in making separations along the lines of class, gender, race, and ethnicity, serving to uplift certain groups while contributing to the oppression of others.

In their book, *Day of Destruction Days of Revolt*, journalist Chris Hedges and cartoonist Joe Sacco detail a series of "sacrifice zones" in the United States, which they describe as "those areas in the country that have been offered up for exploitation in the name of profit, progress, and technological advancement" (xi). These are places, Hedges writes, where "the marketplace rules without constraints, where human beings and the natural world are used and discarded to maximize profit" (xi). One such sacrifice zone, they argue, is the treatment of migrant workers in industrial agriculture, an assertion supported by the works of Helena María Viramontes and

Diana García. *Under the Feet of Jesus,* by Helena María Viramontes, and *When Living Was a Labor Camp,* by Diana García, both place the Latinx migrant within the context of the racialized history of US farm work, a system that has long assigned value to labor along the lines on class, race, and citizenship. US growers and consumers have always been willing to exploit marginalized populations in the name of lower prices and higher profits, creating an invisible workforce to be taken advantage of at the whim of the marketplace. In foregrounding the laboring migrant body, Viramontes and García draw attention to the physical, mental, and emotional sacrifices that Latinx migrants make every day as they harvest fruits and vegetables across the United States. The authors also draw attention to the inferred structural violence in the agricultural industry that keeps the migrant worker hidden from consumers, implying that a product loses value if the true means of production are revealed, and therefore implying that the migrant body has less worth in US society.

Also sacrificed in the US industrial food system are small farmers on both sides of the border like the Paquettes and Cruzes in Julia Alvarez's *Return to Sender*. The struggles of both families illustrate the personal loss that occurs when farmers are forced to give up their ancestral livelihood, including the destabilization of identity that results from the loss of longstanding family traditions. By comparing the plight of small farmers in Mexico to those in the United States, Alvarez disrupts the ideal of the small family farm that drives many modern-day food movements. Latinx migrant labor, along with the exploitation of this labor, is not restricted to industrial agriculture, and those occupied on many levels of the food system struggle to make ends meet including growers and other farmers. Chapter Two also reveals the food-based sacrifices that many migrants make with the loss of traditional foodways as in Christina Henriquez's *The Book of Unknown Americans*. On the salary Arturo receives harvesting

mushrooms, the Riveras can no longer afford to eat as they were accustomed to in Mexico, and the food insecurity they experience is damaging socially and emotionally.

The loss of traditional foodways is the final way that food manifests as a capitalist sacrifice zone. According to Alyshia Gálvez, traditional foodways in Mexico are "arguably under greater assault today than during the conquest" (37), as free trade agreements like NAFTA have resulted in a proliferation of packaged and processed foods, dramatically altering patterns of consumption among Mexican eaters. The editors of *Food Across Borders* likewise describe how "the Standard American Diet is invading stomachs at the global level" (loc. 214), destroying traditional foodways and introducing new diet-related diseases around the world. As highly processed foods fall out of favor with health-conscious consumers in wealthier countries, corporations such as McDonald's and Coca-Cola take advantage of what Gálvez refers to as "surplus bodies" (Gálvez, 192), consumers in developing countries that absorb highly processed foods which are promoted using "marketing…focused on a culture of aspiration" (Gálvez, 191), or the association of products with a particular modern lifestyle. *The House of Broken Angels*, by Luis Alberto Urrea, and *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter*, by Erika Sanchez, illustrate clearly the role of food in striving for a more modern lifestyle. Both Julia, from *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter,* and the de La Cruz women, from *The House of Broken Angels,* associate the consumption of more processed and prepared foods with greater freedom and social prestige through liberating themselves from traditional domestic tasks.

However, as processed foods have become cheaper and more accessible around the world, and as the health risks associated with a highly-processed diet have become more widely know, these foods are now more closely associated with lower classes, and minimally processed, whole foods traditionally eaten by peasant populations now demand top dollar. The resulting

"massive proliferation of diet-related illness" among the poor who can no longer afford to eat a traditional diet is "a kind of structural violence—a result of policy decisions and priorities" (Gálvez, 6). This creates another food-based sacrifice zone as the bodies of these consumers, as well as their traditional diets, are lost the name of profit. Furthermore, the loss of these foodways "has made [these cuisines] newly available for 'elevation' and 'redemption'" by chefs who often charge "stratospheric prices" (Gálvez, 193) as they fuel foodies' hunt for the next, most 'authentic' food craze.

In the context of these food-based sacrifices, the hyper-visibility of certain cuisines and the vigor with which Americans consume ethnic food, in general, becomes almost ironic. It is in direct contradiction to the blatant devaluing of the immigrant labor central to US food production and the destruction of traditional foodways around the world. Despite a "public enthusiasm" for a variety of different cuisines there is, according to Roberto A. Ferdman, a "private, and yet pronounced, form of bias, a subtle hypocrisy that suggests we think these foods are inferior" (2016). In an interview with Ferdman, author of *The Ethnic Restauranteur* Krishnendu Ray defines "internal hierarchies of tastes" where certain cuisines are seen as inherently more valuable as evidenced by their price. Ray says, "Despite all this talk about how we eat everything and like everything, we are not willing to pay for everything at the same rate, and that tells you something" (2016).

Just as the structure of food production implies that the labor of some bodies is more valuable than the labor of others, the pricing structure of restaurants across the country also speaks to implicit ideas of value assigned to race, class, and ethnicity. According to Ray, some cuisines, for example, Chinese or Indian food, are "just not good enough, in the minds of Americans anyway, to pay $30, $40 or $50 for these foods" (2016). While Mexican food is

slowly beginning to demand a higher price point from consumers, this is happening only as it has become distanced from Mexican people. As Gálvez argues, "Mexican food may in part be so popular at the moment precisely because it is falling out of reach for so many Mexican people" (22). If anything, the recent popularity and 'elevation' of Mexican food only confirms the devaluation of certain people and cultures in US society.

Jonathan Safran Foer writes, "We are made of stories" (14), and the food we eat is a product of those stories. We consume food because it means something; it holds the stories of our family, our culture, our beliefs, our social aspirations. Our culinary choices express who we are, who we were, or who we want to become. Some, like the de La Cruzes in Luis Alberto Urrea's *The House of Broken Angels*, make culinary choices based on the foods they perceive as more modern and cosmopolitan. Others, such as the Riveras in Christina Henriquez's *The Book of Unknown Americans*, instead crave the comfort foods of home. These different representations of diet speak to different values, different goals, and the prioritization of different stories. As one of the most personal and intimate parts of daily life, what we choose to consume is a clear indicator of our principles and priorities.

However, the stories contained in food are not only personal but collective. Food also tells the story of countries, of transnational relationships, of migration patterns and trade agreements. While the multi-ethnic US diet alludes to a cooperative sharing of culture and history, the food we consume also tells of oppression and racialized systems of exploitative agricultural labor. Mexican food, in particular, exposes the inequality implicit in the US food system and the conflicting displays of value that arise in a country where the tacos we consume with gusto are prepared with vegetables harvested by invisible and marginalized Mexican migrants. The study of food in multicultural literature reveals the diversity of the stories

surrounding what we eat, as well as their far-reaching consequences. If, as Safran Foer argues, "eating and storytelling are inseparable" (11), paying attention to how food appears in stories helps us to recognize the meaning that our culinary choices hold. We can begin to untangle the complex role of food and domestic culture in the construction identity, learning better who and what we value, both individually and collectively, as we gain a deeper understanding of the stories we consume around the dinner table.

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