

Tortilleras in space and time: a Mesoamerican staple in colonial and contemporary art

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[Abstract] Per misurare la risonanza di un motivo culinario che è stato a lungo un simbolo di identità negli Stati Uniti sudoccidentali, Messico e America Centrale, questo studio comparativo copre una gamma temporale e spaziale che spinge categorie storico-artistiche come “precolombiana”, “coloniale” e “contemporanea” fuori dai loro confini disciplinari. In un paio di illustrazioni realizzate a quattro secoli e mezzo di distanza, una donna prepara l’alimento base del Messico, la *tortilla*. La scena precedente appartiene al *Codex Mendoza*, un manoscritto del XVI secolo dipinto da artisti scrivani messicani, e l’ultima immagine è un collage, *Citlali: Hechando Tortillas y Cortando Nopales en Outer Space*, di un’artista messicano-americana, Debora Kuetzpal Vasquez. Sebbene il *Codex* sia un documento complesso incorporato all’indomani dell’invasione spagnola di Tenochtitlan e mediato dalla politica dell’era coloniale, appartiene a un progetto in corso per difendere il futuro degli indigeni. Il *Codex* presenta la realizzazione delle *tortillas* come segno di ordine sociale in un’etnologia destinata a influenzare il dibattito sui diritti umani degli amerindi. Nella sua immagine degli astronauta messicano-americana che preparano lo stesso cibo, Vasquez cita selettivamente la tradizione messicana per trasmettere la sua prospettiva Xicanx e la preoccupazione per il patrimonio e la salute della sua comunità. In entrambe le immagini, l’associazione mesoamericana della tortilla indica una continuità culturale elisa dalla storia euro-americana.

Parole chiave: Codex Mendoza; Chicano; Xicanx; tortilla; arte decoloniale.

Para medir la resonancia de un motivo culinario que durante mucho tiempo ha sido un símbolo de identidad en el suroeste de los EEUU., México y América Central, este estudio comparativo cubre un rango temporal y espacial que empuja categorías en la historia del arte como “Precolombino”, “Colonial” y “Contemporáneo” fuera de sus límites disciplinarios. En un par de ilustraciones hechas con cuatro siglos y medio de diferencia, una mujer prepara el alimento básico de México, la tortilla. La escena anterior pertenece al *Códice Mendoza*, un manuscrito del siglo XVI pintado por escribas del artista mexicana, y la última imagen es un collage, *Citlali: Hechando Tortillas y Cortando Nopales en Outer Space*, de la artista mexicano-estadounidense, Debora Kuetzpal Vasquez. Si bien el código es un documento complejo incrustado en las secuelas de la invasión española de Tenochtitlán y mediado por la política de la era colonial, pertenece a un proyecto en curso de defensa del futuridad indígena. El código presenta la elaboración de tortillas como un signo de orden social en una etnología destinada a influir en el debate sobre los derechos humanos de los amerindios. En su imagen de astronautas latinas preparando la misma comida, Vásquez cita selectivamente la tradición mexicana para transmitir su perspectiva Xicanx y su preocupación por la herencia y la salud de su comunidad. En ambas imágenes, la asociación mesoamericana de la tortilla significa una continuidad cultural elidida por la historia euroamericana.

Palabras clave: Códice Mendoza; Chicano; Xicanx; tortilla; arte decolonial.

To measure the resonance of a culinary motif that has long been a symbol of identity in North America, this comparison study covers a temporal and spatial range that pushes such art-historical categories as “Pre-Columbian”, “Colonial,” and “Contemporary” out of their disciplinary confines. In a pair of illustrations made four and a half centuries apart, a woman prepares Mexico’s staple food, the tortilla. The earlier scene belongs to the *Codex Mendoza*, a sixteenth-century manuscript painted by Mexica artist scribes, and the latest image is a collage, *Citlali: Hechando Tortillas y Cortando Nopales en Outer Space*, by a Mexican-American artist, Debora Kuetzpal Vasquez. While the codex is a complex document embedded in the aftermath of Tenochtitlan’s Spanish invasion and mediated by colonial-era politics, it belongs to an ongoing project of defending Indigenous futurity. The codex presents tortilla-making as a sign of social order in an ethnology meant to sway the debate over Amerindians’ human rights. In her picture of Latina astronauts’ preparing the same food, Vasquez selectively cites Mexican tradition to convey her Xicanx perspective and a concern for her community’s heritage and health. In both images, the Mesoamerican association of the tortilla signifies a cultural continuity elided by Euro-American history.

Keywords: Codex Mendoza; Chicano; Xicanx; tortilla; decolonial art.

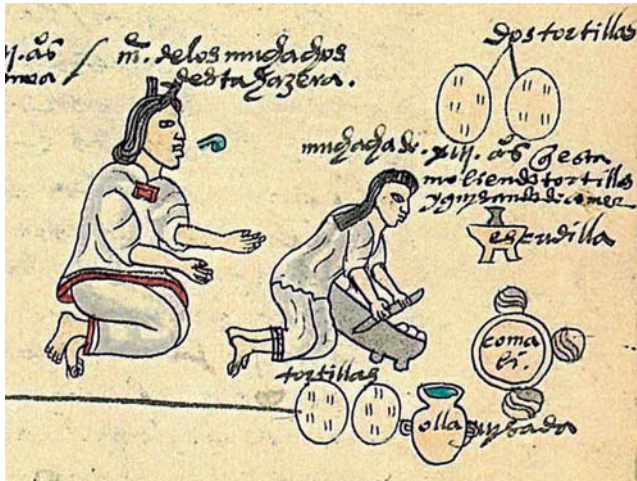


Fig. 1 - *Codex Mendoza*, folio 60, detail. ca. 1540. Oxford, England, Bodleian Library, Oxford University.

Introduction

Among modes of continuity, food is unique in its multisensory and emotionally layered appeal to memory. Culinary narratives promote historical consciousness of the individual or collective self, and tracing the roots of a cuisine can recover estranged chronologies. In this article, I compare two images that stand for a continuum of cultural identity, for which the maize tortilla acts as a vital sign. The first picture is a scene in the *Codex Mendoza* (Fig. 1), a sixteenth century painted manuscript about the Mexica¹. The second is a collage, *Citlali: Hechando Tortillas y Cortando Nopales en Outer Space* (Citlali: Making Tortillas and Cutting Nopales in Outer Space, 2005. Fig. 2), by Debora Kuetzpal Vasquez, a contemporary artist from Texas. Both illustrations visualize a narrative in which a woman prepares tortillas. I juxtapose these two pictures, distant in time and place, because their depictions of this staple food signify *Mesoamerica* to preempt the erasure of Indigenous culture by colonialism and its legacies.

When the *Codex Mendoza* was painted, the Mexica were negotiating new identities to counter a subhuman status used to justify the genocide, bondage, and disenfranchisement of “New World” inhabitants². Considering the circumstances of its production, I align the codex and its tortilla imagery with a chronology of Indigenous activism extending from the Conquest to the present. A native of San Antonio and a lifelong community activist, Vasquez emphasizes the Indigenous part of her Mexican heritage and has positioned herself as a decolonial artist long before the recent demands for anti-colonial justice. Her staging of Mesoamerican culinary practices in *Citlali: Hechando Tortillas*, a fantasy of extraterrestrial settlement by Latinas, insists on a form of futurity for the culture outlined in the codex. Both pictures activate selfhood in the everyday and engage homemaking to defend against extinction. However, Vasquez severs tortilla-making from the binary cosmivision and gender roles of the Mexica, and the food preparation in her collage proposes a nimble ethnonationalism, un-

¹ Since this Nahuatl-speaking group called themselves *Mexica*, I use this term instead of *Aztec* for the founders of Tenochtitlan in the Valley of Mexico.

² For a representative source on the sixteenth century debate over the human rights of Amerindians, see *Aquí se contiene una disputa o controversia* (1552), published by Bartolomé de las Casas.

Fig. 2 -
Vasquez, Debora Kuetzpal.
*Citlali: Hechando Tortillas
y Cortando Nopales
en Outer Space.* 2005.
Collage. Acrylic and clay.
San Antonio, TX.



bound to ancestral lands and able to adapt. In the *Codex Mendoza*, a young woman making tortillas is a sign of civilization meant to dispel the colonizers' image of the "barbarian" Mexico. In *Citlali: Hechando Tortillas*, the preparing of the same food by Latina astronauts reverses the obsolescence of Mesoamerica. These tortilla-making images are coeval with a centuries-old project that denies a historical dead-end in a narrative that kills off the Indian in the first act. Europeans invented the Americas and the Amerindian³, and thus, inadvertently, an origin point was plotted from which counter movements could draw oppositional timelines. I juxtapose these images not only because they use the same culinary practice to mark Indigenous identity; they unfold a temporal system other than a sequence of Euro-American ascendancy. To undo colonial and neocolonial structures is to unsettle their mastery of space and time: the first as center and periphery, the latter as a straight line of discrete segments and foregone conclusions.

Kency Cornejo states that «the colonial encounter is transhistorical», with a legacy «persisting across time and nations» (2014, p. 16). Decolonial art practices cover broad geopolitical formations and disinter obscured pasts, and so an effect of such practices is disorientation, because the artists attempt a recovery from cultural amnesia and, for the colonized, the trauma of an inner diaspora. Art history, for its own part, has committed "chronological anomalies," reports Robert Nelson, and its "disciplinary gaze" deems the West the oldest and most current civilization, while its blindness veils other timelines, for example, pre-Islamic art of the Middle East or post-Columbian American art history (1995, pp. 35, 37). Nelson argues that the outstanding task of his discipline is to reapproach the objects of its study according to «alternative plottings of space, time, and society» (1995, p. 40). Exploring the dimensions of colonialism demands a wide lens, and to reckon with Vasquez's expressions of her Mexican-American identity, my study needs to return to Mexico and the sources of its national pride: *Mexicanismo*.

³ See Edmundo O'Gorman, *The Invention of America: An Inquiry into the Historical Nature of the New World and the Meaning of its History* (Westport, CT, Greenwood Press, 1972).

Mesoamerica, a kernel of modern ethnonationalism

When Mexico gained independence in 1821, the new state conceived itself in the Mesoamerican past, particularly its final chapter: the Mexica. *Mexicanismo* asserts a current moment of political legitimacy and social cohesion anointed by the inheritance of Tenochtitlan's supremacy. After Mexico's revolution (1910-1920), *indigenismo* strengthened these symbolic ties to prehispanic history. Prompted by the conflict, a diaspora followed by a radiating outward of post-revolutionary ideology and aesthetic achievement exported Mexican national culture to the north, recharging the transamerican exchanges that had surged in the 1800s with the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (Pérez, 1999, p. xviii). In the mid-twentieth century, Mexican Americans began advocating for their civil rights and socioeconomic representation. To distinguish themselves from white, mainstream US society, Chicanos – the parent generation of Vasquez (b. 1960) – adopted Mexican ethnonationalism (Pérez, 1999, p. xix). The Chicano Movement also aligned itself with Mesoamerica and drew from pre-Columbian cultures like the Maya, but it located the Chicano homeland in Aztlán, an area in the Southwest US from where the Mexica migrated to the Valley of Mexico (Moraga, 1993, p. 151).

According to Sarah Bak-Geller Corona, consensus-building in Mexico has affirmed the tenacity of a national cuisine dating to the zenith of Tenochtitlan and later blending with Iberian cookery (2016, p. 228). Since Independence in the early nineteenth century to the present, chroniclers have insisted on the Mexica origins of gastronomical standards like maize tortillas. This “culinary nationalism” began as part of the broader project of *mestizaje*: a function of Mexican nationalism and solidarity, which subsumes the Indigenous into the *mestizo* category, defined as mixed European and Amerindian lineage (Bak-Geller Corona, 2016, p. 228). In expressions of *Mexicanismo* and *Chicanismo*, the maize staple is a symbol of continuity with Mesoamerica.

Cultivating sources of precolonial identity

The history of the tortilla is entwined with the cultivation of maize, which began around 9,000 years ago (Blake, 2015, p. 17)⁴. The rise of Mesoamerican civilizations is attributed to this crop and the process of nixtamalization which renders maize kernels more nutritious (Coe, 1994, p. 14). The Mexica believed that humans were made from tortilla dough, and the grain has an eminent status in their cosmology. In the mode of Western literacy, however, the tortilla's story begins with the codices that form the colonized knowledge base of Mesoamerica. These privileged manuscripts resemble a time-honored recipe insofar as they encourage variations in the field of discourse to which they gave rise. The sway of an authoritative source like the *Codex Mendoza* is that of Foucault's “initiators of discursive practice,” authors whose paradigmatic bibliographies accommodate «the possibility and the rules of formation of other texts» (1992, p. 310). Consecrated by endless citation, the codex is a source from which various historical underwritings of individual and joint identities have derived, including *Chicano* (more recently, *Chicano/a/x*). Framed as sourcebooks on ancient societies, colonial ethnographies have been used to construct the imaginaries of Mexican and Chicano ethnonationalism. For this reason, the depiction of a girl grinding maize for tortillas in the *Codex Mendoza* is iconic.

⁴ For a history of the tortilla, see Blake (2015); Pilcher (1998); and Paula E. Morton, *Tortillas: A Cultural History*. Albuquerque, University of New Mexico Press, 2014.

“ Making tortillas and cutting nopales
allow anyone anywhere at any time
to cohabit a world of memory and sensation
with immediate and ancestral communities. ”

A few decades after the Spanish invasion of 1521, a group of Mexica artist scribes, or *tlacuiloque*, and Spanish commentators in Mexico City produced the manuscript that later became known as the *Codex Mendoza*. Jorge Gómez-Tejada aligns this text with the fifty-year indigenist campaign begun by Bartolomé de las Casas with his accounts of the brutal treatment of Amerindians (2012, p. 27). Las Casas and other activists advocated for Indigenous rights, and their tactics included presenting to the Spanish court illustrated manuscripts imbuing New World societies with humanity, sovereignty, and «signs of civilization» (Gómez-Tejada, 2012, p. 33). By illustrating a girl learning to grind maize for tortillas, the *Codex Mendoza* projects what its authors believed and hoped was a “civilized” society according to the colonial powers weighing their future. The preparation of tortillas was not just a facet of domestic life; it was a religious, economic, and social pillar of Tenochtitlan. Although this drawing tempts a reading of a slice of pre-Conquest life, its meaning has many layers based on the purpose of the codex, its intended audience, the scenes accompanying it, and the cosmology that defined Mexica gender roles.

While the codex is a complex document embedded in the aftermath of the Conquest and mediated by colonial politics, its image of culinary training, I argue, shares some of the same impetus as *Citlali: Hechando Tortillas* made by Vasquez, the daughter and granddaughter of Chicanas. Both pictures curate Mesoamerican culture to project worlds in which a remodeled indigeneity prevails. A visual arts professor at Our Lady of the Lake University, Vasquez features Amerindian foods as motifs throughout her multimedia studio practice and considers pre-Columbian cuisine a critical part of her Xicanx identity. The term *Xicanx* distances *Chicanismo* from Catholic patriarchy, and *Xicanisma* asserts a more pronounced affiliation with Indigenous heritage and integrates feminism and queer politics (Castillo, 2014, pp. 2, 52). Whereas the codex depicts a gendered division of labor as proof of societal order, the kitchen practices in the collage do not perform binary identity. However, both pictures imagine a future contiguous with the domestic tradition of preparing foods from indigenous plants to share with family. To help undo the obsolescence of Indigenous cooking by industrial foods, Vasquez follows a diet like that outlined in *Decolonize Your Diet* (2015), a cookbook by the *Xicanistas* Luz Calvo and Catrióna Rueda Esquibel, who recreate Mesoamerican cuisine to yield a physical and psychic recuperation. *Citlali: Hechando Tortillas* adapts tortilla-making as part of the artist’s world-making, which resists neocolonial, capitalist modes of food production.

A reduced view of tortilla-making

The sixteenth century *Codex Mendoza* is divided into three parts: Section 1 depicts the founding of Tenochtitlan, Section 2 inventories its tribute system, and the last part, “The Daily Life Year to Year,” documents the life stages of Mexica subjects and articulates their familial and pro-

fessional orders. In Section 3, the repetition of a tortilla glyph helps present an orderly, productive society. Edward E. Calnek describes this section as a map or flow chart of various life paths (1992, p. 84). Different courses of action coexist in scenes in a framework tracing two paths to death: capital punishment for engaging in vice, or natural causes following an honorable life (Calnek, 1992). Section 3 presents the rearing of Mexica children, who either train to contribute to their families' sustenance, or submit to punishment for disobedience. Folios 58r-60r contain registers that each include two scenes (Fig. 3). In every scene, blue dots represent the children's age, and tortillas symbolize their daily rations – e.g., half of a tortilla for age 3, one and a half for age 6, etc. – though Mexica diets included other foods (Berdan and Anawalt, 1997, p. 153). Juxtaposed with the children's labors, the tortillas are transactional in a system of labor and output, nourishing Tenochtitlan.

The codex depicts tortilla-making on folio 60r. The scene suggests a kitchen through culinary action and cookware rather than a representation of space. A woman instructs a thirteen year old girl to grind maize for tortillas. The girl kneels over a *metate*, or grinding stone. Digging her toes into the blank paper, the girl grasps a *mano*, or stone roller, and grinds *nixtamal*, or softened maize. Once she has made *masa*, or dough, and patted it into flat discs, she will cook the tortillas on the clay griddle, or *comal*, surrounded by hearthstones. Below the girl, the finished product echoes the glyphs indicating her food allowance. Another item in the scene is a three-legged sauce bowl, or *molcajete*, labeled *escudilla* in the Spanish gloss (Coe, 1994, p. 109). A clay pot captioned as an *olla* also appears among the cookware (Berdan and Anawalt, 1997, p. 162).

The lesson on tortilla-making is adjacent to a scene of a father directing a boy to gather grasses into a canoe. In the *Codex Mendoza*, the role of one gender is defined against what was expected of another. All of the child-rearing scenes depict men and boys in the left columns and women and girls in the right. These subjects in training are inculcated with a system of labor based on a male-female binary that restricts feminine activity to the home. The first folio of Section 3 establishes this impression by depicting a ceremony in which a female newborn is presented with a broom, spindle, and workbasket, and the midwife buries the umbilical cord under the *metate* by the hearth (Berdan and Anawalt, 1997, p. 145). The sixteenth century *Florentine Codex*, a later project led by Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, explains that this custom «signified that the woman was to go nowhere. Her very task was the home life, life by the fire, by the grinding stone» (1950, pp. 171-173). Arnold J. Bauer attributes this division of tasks to the long process of preparing tortillas, which consigned women to “slavery to the *metate*” (2001, p. 28). Mexica women spent up to six hours each day preparing tortillas, and learning this skill will make the thirteen year old eligible for marriage (Berdan and Anawalt, 1997, p. 162). According to Jeffrey M. Pilcher, culinary ritual was synonymous with «the personal and family identity» of Mexican women, who were «inextricably linked with the food they cooked» (1998, pp. 106, 107).

Calnek maintains that the “extremely reduced” female roles in the *Codex Mendoza* – wife, mother, midwife, curer, perpetrator of bad behavior – indicate a narrow interest (1992, p. 87). While the manuscript assigns a wider array of jobs to boys and men, it prescribes how virtuous girls and women should act rather than present all their possible life paths (Calnek, 1992, p. 87). The *Florentine Codex* also casts Indigenous women and their labor in a moral light by equating their cooking with their character: «The good cook is honest, discreet», while the bad is «dishonest, detestable, nauseating, offensive» (Sahagún, 1950, pp. 52, 53). By these cri-

teria, brittle tortillas reflect poorly on their maker. Louise M. Burkhart explains that the codices on Mesoamerica reflect the concerns of Christian European men, who avoided the Indigenous, particularly women (1997, pp. 26, 27). Church representatives regarded the domestic sphere as the “final frontier” in stamping out native religion (Burkhart, 1997, pp. 41, 42). In these ethnologies, Burkhart perceives two kinds of women: idolatrous practitioners of blasphemous household rituals, or submissive housewives (1997, pp. 27, 28).

An expanded view of tortilla-making

The zeal of Catholic missionaries inflected their documentation of Indigenous culture. However, appraising the situation of Mexica women according to modern value judgments about domestic work, or dichotomies like public-private, masculine-feminine, or *cosmicprosaic*, can also misconstrue an image as seemingly patent as one of a cooking lesson. The gender norms permeating Mexica society conditioned thought and behavior with the belief that assuming given male and female identities and their respective duties had not only a domestic function, but also political, economic, and religious purposes. Burkhart argues that historians often presume that public and private life in ancient Mexico was divided, or domestic labor was relegated to a low status as it is under capitalism, or the public domain was more important than a “private” one (1997, p. 26). *Male*, *female*, and *married* are now categories of individual identity, but Mexica conceptions were more expansive. In the view of Caroline Dodds Pennock, it is more accurate to think of the Mexica gender binary as an exterior-interior division: masculinity was associated with the world beyond the city-state, and femininity with its internal affairs (2011, p. 530). Pennock characterizes the *altepetl*, or city-state, as “a model and mirror” of the married household (2011, p. 528). For example, wedlock was a governing model by which rulers personified both the male and female partner of heterosexual union (Pennock, 2011, p. 535).

Camilla Townsend identifies the locus of women’s labor, which was the household or *calli*, as “the essential building block” of the *altepetl* and, by extension, the cosmos (2009, s/p). *Casa* or *home* means a protective, personal space, but the Mexica thought of the *calli* not as «a tranquil refuge» from the «currents of cosmos and history», but where such «currents intersected forcibly» (Burkhart, 1997, p. 30). Townsend believes that Mexica women were conscious of their daily tasks as measures for maintaining universal order (2009, s/p). Sweeping, weaving, making offerings, and tending the hearth warded off chaos and appeased the gods (Brumfiel, 2011, s/p). The hearth, where food was prepared, was the center of the home and the cosmos, and working at the *metate* to make tortilla dough reenacted the genesis of humanity, when the goddess Cihuacoatl formed people from *masa* (Brumfiel, 2011, s/p). Cooking also served concrete and symbolic functions that extended beyond the *calli* (Burkhart, 1997, p. 29). Household members followed protocols for handling maize, tortillas, and cookery to assure success in business and battle abroad (Burkhart, 1997, pp. 42-45).

Mexica women did not have equal opportunities *per se* but did share a complementary relationship with men. Pennock replaces the idea of Tenochtitlan as a “pre-modern patriarchy” with a model of “complex equalities” (2011, pp. 529, 540). Women could own land and other property, inherit and accumulate wealth, and sell goods, and they worked as vendors, market administrators, midwives, healers, and priestesses (Brumfiel, 2011, s/p). Women made food

not only for their *calli*, but also for the marketplace, helping to fuel the development of Tenochtitlan and its imperial drive (Townsend 2009, s/p). Over time, Elizabeth M. Brumfiel proposes a state-sponsored program in which male warriors were glorified supplanted “gender complementarity” with gender hierarchy (2011, s/p). In Mexica mythology, art, and ritual, she finds portrayals of women as «agents of cosmic disorder», potential enemies in need of subdual (Brumfiel, 2011, s/p).

Chicanismo 2.0

The layout and rhythms of the *calli* were synchronized with Mexica concepts of space and time (Burkhart, 1997, p. 32). On the sacredness of domestic life in Tenochtitlan, Burkhart writes: «One could see the Mexica house as a model of the cosmos, writ small, but perhaps it would be better to see the Mexica cosmos as a house, writ large» (1997, pp. 30, 31).

Made about four and a half centuries after the last Spanish gloss was added to the *Codex Mendoza*, the collage *Citlali: Hechando Tortillas* recalls its tortilla-making scene, yet makes explicit the equivalence between the *calli* and the cosmos. Vasquez features her recurring character, “Citlali, La Chicana Super Hero,” and a same-sex partner making tortillas and cutting *nopales*, or cactus pads. Characteristic of the artist’s mixed-media practice, the collage combines painting in acrylic and sculpted details on a 20” × 30” surface. As if to reveal the kitchen as a point of cosmic orientation, Vasquez situates her *tortilleras*, or tortilla makers, in outer space. In the scene, a planet is girdled by a blue-black atmosphere studded with titanium-white stars. Chunks set in flashes of illumination suggest meteors whizzing past, and a green humanoid with black eyes pilots a flying saucer. Clay tortillas float into the planet’s orbit from a modern kitchen on its surface. Cut away to show its interior, the open room includes a stove and a table, which jut into the foreground. Cactus pads, jalapeños, a *molcajete*, and tortillas, all made from clay, sit on the table where Citlali cleans the *nopales*. Citlali wears her signature jeans and red bandanna, as well as a space helmet. Her partner, dressed in a more femme style, stands by the stove, waiting for a tortilla to cook.

Vasquez’s image renders the Mesoamerican cosmovision of the mundane commingling with the eternal. Part of a Citlali franchise that includes installations, comics, and short fiction, *Citlali: Hechando Tortillas* echoes a plot point in Vasquez’s story, *For Those Seeking Signs of Intelligent Life*, which relates her superhero’s origin tale. Citlali is the offspring of two women: one from Earth, the other from the Orion constellation. Before Citlali becomes a woman, her celestial mother takes her to another planet to visit with her grandmother in a «little open-air kitchen», where Citlali imagines her «mami Ixchel making tortillas [...] in space» (Vasquez, 2017, pp. 345, 346). In Vasquez’s textual and visual narrations of Citlali – which also include other kinds of mixed media, canvas paintings, prints, and digital art – the scenarios often center around childhood memories of sitting in the kitchen while a mother, grandmother, or aunt prepares a meal. Throughout her practice, Vasquez draws from her experiences of growing up in Texas, being raised by Chicana matriarchs who instilled an appreciation of Mexican heritage through cooking and other traditions (Cabrera, 2013).

Citlali: Hechando Tortillas situates domesticity amid the capricious universe that the Mexica believed could be tamed through routine. The astronauts contend with meteors, zero gravity, and UFOs, reminiscent of the chaos kept at bay by the daily protocols of ancient Mexico,

yet the Latinas manage to carve out a space for living. In a sense, they have transported the hearth of the *calli*: the domestic core to which Mexica girls were bound at birth. Emma Pérez describes a similar reliance on women to sustain an uprooted culture in an unfamiliar and unwelcoming space in the Mexican diaspora to the Southwest US. Pérez explains that *Mexicanas* helped maintain continuity for their new communities by preserving the language and traditions and forming clubs and organizations, which their Chicana daughters carried on (1998, p. 78). This role of creating social cohesion accords with the sketch in the *Codex Mendoza*, in which women, guided by social and sacred orders, follow a model of desired behavior and avoid the reputation of female “agents of cosmic disorder” promoted by a militarized Mexica state and later by the Catholic order.

Vasquez defines Citlali, her superhero character, as a «combination of indigenous women, their Chicana activist daughters, and the spirit of strong women» (quoted in Shoemaker, 2011, p. 6).

Her intentions for Citlali are to humanize workers, acknowledge Latina labor, and address «social and political issues pertaining to women and Raza» (Vasquez, 2019, s/p). A self-described “artist” (2019, p. 14), Vasquez has also featured Citlali on banners, protesting practices unfair to women workers such as the housekeeping staffs of San Antonio hotels (Mata, 2014, p. 127). Whereas the *Codex Mendoza* underwrites the economic institutions of Tenochtitlan, Vasquez’s use of Citlali demands protections for female and immigrant laborers. A focus on workers’ rights aligns Vasquez’s practice with the Chicano Movement, or more precisely, its restructuring by feminist and LGBTQ critique after its late-1960s’ mobilization for the economic, political, and social visibility of Mexican Americans. Since Citlali challenges worker exploitation, Irene Mata believes Vasquez’s project creates an alternative mythos, supported by the fact that her character is not a white, male superhero (2014, pp. 127, 128). Drawing from US pop culture and alternative comics, Vasquez repackages the self-recognition of *Chicanismo*. Opposed to assimilating into white society, Chicanos distinguished themselves by building consciousness of a shared Mexican-American identity that drew from Indigenous and Mexican sources (Pérez, 1998, p. 79). Documents like the *Codex Mendoza*, especially its frontispiece showing the founding of Tenochtitlan, validated a desire for reclamation and autonomy. Aztlán came to represent the nationalist aspirations and indigenist affiliations of Chicanos. A symbol of the Chicano nation, Aztlán was evoked in a manifesto drafted in 1969 at a conference to rally Mexican-American youth around the cause of liberation. *El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán* (The Spiritual Plan of Aztlán) underscores the wrongful loss of homeland initiated by colonialism and perpetuated by US imperialism and racism⁵.

Queering the *tortillera*

Citlali: Hechando Tortillas promotes *Xicanisma* by contesting the patriarchy, homophobia, and binary gender roles of the initial Chicano Movement. In her 1993 essay *Queer Aztlán*, Cherríe Moraga criticizes the lack of intersectional justice in the early movement, when lesbians and gays could not be «members of the “house”», referring to *El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán* which conjures the Mexica *calli* as community writ small (p. 159). Moraga explains that since non-heterosexuals were barred from the *calli*, they sought to «redefine familia, cultura, and comu-

⁵ A copy can be found online: <http://clubs.arizona.edu/~mecha/pages/PDFs/EIPlanDeAtzlan.pdf>

nidad» (1993, p. 165). Moraga claims that this openness is consistent with Amerindian culture, suggesting that the feminist and queer revision of *Chicanismo* was not an abandonment of *El Movimiento*, rather its revision through inclusion and recommitment to its *indigenismo*. However, such statements overlook the incommensurability of Xicana feminism with *decolonialism*⁶. As a settler narrative, *Citlali: Hechando Tortillas* envisions the under-explored intersection of Xicanx and Indigenous interests by echoing historical situations in which Mexicans have been, by force or choice, Brown settlers on Amerindian lands (Tuck and Yang, 2012, p. 10).

Vasquez's astronauts dwell far from their home planet of Earth, visible in a corner of the collage where it eclipses the sun. Mexica girls, on the other hand, remained in the *calli* training for their future by the hearth, while boys went afield. This division of labor helped define gender in ancient Mexico. Rosemary Joyce reveals that Mexica children were socialized to assume a gender, and she describes their childhood as a process of "boying" or "girling" (2000, pp. 474-476). Joyce deciphers in the codices a program of discipline imposed on children's bodies and behavior to replicate a precedent of adulthood. At thirteen, a Mexica girl was at the "peak of differentiated gender identity," so she was versed in finishing practices to mold her into a "normal" woman (Joyce, 2000, p. 474). Congruent with Judith Butler's idea of "the social production of embodied existence" by repeating traditional ways of being, gender was not a given in ancient Mexico but taught and acquired through "citational" acts (Joyce, 2000, p. 474). Rising before sunrise and spending all morning, every morning, at the grinding stone to feed tortillas to her family would have been the citational performance of a woman's life.

While *Citlali: Hechando Tortillas* expresses the artist's *Xicanisma*, it also cites established aspects of Mexican-American womanhood, but not in support of a differential construction of gender. The Latinas prepare Mesoamerican ingredients using Indigenous culinary techniques in a scene devoid of male presence, but they are not accompanied by a binary male scene. Citlali and her partner are somewhat assimilated into heteronormative structures of female domestic labor, yet Vasquez distinguishes *femme* from *feminine*. *Femme*-performing women, like Citlali's companion, are subversive by inhabiting the traditional female role in a non-heterosexual relationship, consciously performing femininity instead of relating to it as a natural given (Butler, 1993, p. 314). Though the duo makes a meal by hand, the women are not subordinate to a prescription of labor or personhood. Citlali does not conform to a conservative vision, she radiates individuality as an uber persona.

Decolonizing and worldmaking

With its display of culinary art, Vasquez's collage selectively cites a given female role, and her choice of materials shows a keen investment in this tradition. Instead of painting the tortillas, she threw them into physical relief, sculpting and manually performing the hands-on labor of patting out clay flatbreads. Vasquez also sculpted the other ingredients and handheld cookware like the *molcajete*, as though they were miniature proxies meant for a dollhouse. Placing these items in closer proximity to real life, the addition of a third dimension underscores the scene's culinary action. In addition, similar to the overhead view of the tortillas and their cook-

⁶ See Aimee Carrillo Rowe, "Settler Xicana: Postcolonial and Decolonial Reflections on Incommensurability." *Feminist Studies*, vol. 43, no. 3, 2017, pp. 525-536.

ing surface on the *comal* in the *Codex Mendoza*, a tipped perspective puts the tortillas and the pan on the stove in full view.

Why does a Xicanx feminist cite a task that for ages has confined women to the kitchen? Vasquez sustains tortilla-making to mend historical discontinuity, illustrated by the fate of the tortilla in Mexico. Twentieth century modernization introduced the radical innovation of *molino de nixtamal*, maize ground by a mill instead of by hand (Bauer, 2001, p. 190). On the heels of industrializing the tortilla came its commodification by *masa de harina*, or dried *masa* (Pilcher, 1998, p. 105). Widely available by the 1970s, this product requires only water and a machine to transform into stacks of tortillas ready for purchase (Pilcher, 1998, p. 105). While these innovations greatly reduce the time needed to produce tortillas, its impact on Mexico, a culture where making tortillas from scratch has organized family life since ancient times, is daunting to calculate. Exacerbating this “desecration of tortilla life” are the effects wrought by NAFTA, the treaty that opened Mexico in 1994 to cheap US corn, rupturing homegrown economies and unraveling community and family ties (Lind and Barham, 2004, p. 56).

A proponent of a decolonial diet, Vasquez involves food in a reparative mission that, in the words of José Esteban Muñoz, overcomes the “logic of a broken-down present” (2009, p. 12). In the case of the tortilla, the logic of industrial food production sacrifices social bonding and threatens public health. In *Decolonize Your Diet*, Calvo and Esquibel intersperse recipes with a manifesto citing the benefits of a precolonial diet and touting the revolutionary act of eating like a Mesoamerican: «Indigenous heritage diets [...] have historically protected us against and prevented the very diseases [...] that now threaten our communities’ health» (2016, s/p).

Citlali: Hechando Tortillas falls within a mode of artistic production defined by Muñoz, who theorized a queer aesthetics that casts “a backward glance” to imagine a more pleasurable and, in this instance, a more nourishing future (2009, p. 4). Vasquez’s worldmaking eschews a utopia based on too many essentialisms and, like the *Codex Mendoza* as a projection of a post-Cortés society, her collage anticipates the need to adapt to new developments. Ancient, current, and speculative mingle in this vision of indigeneity lasting beyond the here and now. The open-air kitchen, for example, recalls the outdoor Mexican *cocina*, but it has a suburban design with modern appliances and perches on another planet. Vasquez’s use of clay, a material of the Earth and of earthenware like the *olla*, signals material affinity with the land, an emphasis of Chicano ethnonationalism, but her orbiting tortillas resist a nostalgic vision of a mythic homeland. According to Vasquez, making and sharing Indigenous foods is a scenario accommodating Xicanx identity. Making tortillas and cutting *nopales* allow anyone anywhere at any time to cohabit a world of memory and sensation with immediate and ancestral communities.

Conclusion

As responses to the emerging or ongoing forces of colonialism, the *Codex Mendoza* and *Citlali: Hechando Tortillas* envision the continuity of the artists’ cultures through culinary tradition. Prompted by a power imbalance, each narrative features a daily practice in which women are either tasked with or choose to restore the symbolic load of social exchanges that help define Indigenous culture. The *tlacuiloque* demonstrated their humanity by featuring a handmaiden of their domestic, civic, and cosmic order. According to their intent, the female gender role of making tortillas qualifies Mexica society as a compatible graft onto the new Hispanic regime.

Vasquez factors her Mesoamerican background into a techno-organic heterogeneity by projecting a scenario in which the consumption of tortillas and *nopales* persists along with the daily rhythms and social bonding that their preparation engenders. Vasquez follows the call issued by the writer Ana Castillo to *Xicanistas*: «be archaeologists and visionaries of our culture» (2014, p. 226). Vasquez's worldmaking navigates the essentialisms that were once the basis for excluding individuals from the house of Aztlán. Her collage cites a normative way of female being to connect her community including its queer members with their ancestry and a healthy, sustainable heritage. As a staple food, the tortilla and the performance of its production consecrate space as "home" for the Mexica in the codex and the Latinas in *Citlali: Hechando Tortillas*. ■

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