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CULINARY WORLDS AND INTER-AMERICAN ENCOUNTERS: MAPPING ALIMENTARY PATHWAYS IN LAURA TILLMAN'S *THE MIGRANT CHEF*

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Abstract

Foodways, in the domain of inter-American scholarship, provide a critical lens for apprehending the histories of colonial exploitation, asymmetrical power relations, complexities of migration, and cross-cultural exchanges characterising the encounters between Latin American nations and the United States. This article examines *The Migrant Chef* (2023), the life narrative of Mexican chef Eduardo "Lalo" García Guzmán, mediated through Laura Tillman's biographical narration, to explore how the varied dimensions of food cultivation, preparation, and consumption structure and contest Mexico's position in a neoliberal, globalised world. Employing the critical paradigm of "gastrocriticism", this study analyses the way in which the experiences of Lalo, his family, and his predecessors portray the coloniality of power integrated into the U.S. agribusiness, disrupt racialised hierarchies in U.S. culinary spaces, and reassert the cultural sovereignty of Mexico by revitalising its gastronomy on a transnational scale.

Keywords: foodscapes, life writing, gastrocriticism, inter-American encounters, culinary nationalism.

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1. Introduction

Historically, U.S.-Latin American relations have been structured and influenced by agricultural systems, culinary exchanges and food regimes, which have persistently operated as mediums through which hemispheric power is consolidated, negotiated and contested. These dynamics have seamlessly extended to the contemporary, neoliberal era wherein everyday consumption and cuisine are continuously caught up in "conversation with state powers that both facilitate and limit access" (Sammells 2024, 1016). So, it is fairly common for life narratives shaped by displacement, cross-border mobility, and economic insecurity to encompass the varied dimensions of food cultivation, preparation, and consumption and, through them, reveal the hierarchies inherent in the dynamics between the United States and Latin American nations. Amidst the various recognisable forms of life writing, biography bears substantial significance in literary and cultural studies. The aim of a biography is to "record what a man did…portray the manner of man he was…discuss the effect of environment and circumstances upon the subject and analyse the impact of the individual upon his acquaintances and his times" (Purcell 1959, 314). Based on her assumption that the subject of a biography reveals "more than the personal," American historian Alice Kessler-Harris (2009) states that it possesses the capacity to "teach us something about the political and social conflicts that shaped the American past" (630). Therefore, in the domain of Inter-American studies, which intends to "revolutionise how we think about the Americas…their relationships with Europe and Africa and pre-Columbian worlds," (Fitz 2014, 13), biographies that chart migration, displacement, urbanisation, and continual negotiations of race, labour, and citizenship serve as a reference point for a gaining a coherent understanding and awareness of the hemispheric or transnational narrative encounters. *The Migrant Chef: The Life and Times of Lalo García* (2023), which chronicles the experiences of the acclaimed Mexican chef Eduardo "Lalo" García Guzmán, contributes to the ongoing discourse on the U.S-Latin American narrative encounters by tracing the harsh realities of migrant farm labour in the United States, shifting terrains of Mexican politics, structural inequities permeating the contemporary restaurant industry and the rich culinary heritage of Mexico through Lalo and his family's lived experiences. Mediated through Laura Tillman's biographical narration, this 2024 James Beard Foundation Award-winning life narrative records an immersive account of Lalo's quest; it begins with delineating his formative years labouring in the agricultural fields of the United States harvesting fruits and vegetables along the migrant route, follows his progression into the demanding world of professional kitchens where he honed his craft as a culinary apprentice and then documents his ascent into the ranks of contemporary gastronomy as one of the most influential representatives of Mexican cuisine.

Critical food studies posit that the notion of food "illuminate[s] and… obfuscate[s] histories of colonialism and communalism, labor…ethical

consideration and environmental degradation" (Tigner and Carruth 2017, 1). Hence, Latin American scholarship engages with "food industry, consumption policies, indigenous and mestizo foodways…and national cuisines" (Aguila and Miseres 2021, 9) to comprehensively map the socio-cultural histories and the impact of globalised forces on Mexico and other Latin American nations. Likewise, within migrant-receiving regions of the United States, food "links the production of signifiers, consumption and socialisation practices" (Zúñiga 2025, 26), enabling immigrant and diasporic communities to construct a collective historical consciousness and sustain transnational belonging. Therefore, within the inter-American context, the theoretical approach of gastrocriticism, which "links gastronomy and literary criticism" by incorporating critical concepts from "disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, history, medicine, semiotics, psychoanalysis and philosophy" (Klitzing 2019, 16), proves to be particularly valuable for analysing biographical works associated with the U.S. and Latin American countries. Tracing and interpreting the foodways embedded in life narratives, this interdisciplinary, critical framework analyses the cultural, political, and economic facets that engender and reorient transnational exchanges across the Americas. In this context, this paper undertakes a close analysis of *The Migrant Chef* to situate it as an inter-American narrative, which unfolds and reconfigures the deep-seated systemic asymmetries associated with Mexico and the United States. Employing the theoretical paradigm of gastrocriticism and foregrounding the foodways and culinary acts that structure Lalo's journey from Mexico to the U.S. and back, this study examines how his personal and familial experiences portray the coloniality of power embedded in U.S. agribusiness, disrupt the racialised hierarchy in American culinary spaces, and reassert cultural sovereignty by revitalising Mexican gastronomy on a global scale.

1.1 Tracing the tradition of Mexican American life writing

Life narratives featuring Mexican immigrants and Mexican Americans are predominantly shaped by "a heterogeneous set of political, economic, and social changes" (Brasil and Cabecinhas 2018, 541) wherein the central subject frequently appears as an embodied archive of precarity, cultural negotiation and political witnessing. Given the complex racial and national histories surrounding Latino/a/e identities, "to identify oneself as a Latino/a is a conscious choice" (Oboler 1992, 32) that presupposes an engagement with one's traditions, cultural milieu and the conditions of volatility and vulnerability. Since the phenomenon of "human mobility" in the Americas, characterised by intense patterns of "migratory flows…throughout the continent" (Hernández 2018, 201), specifically to the United States, constitutes a recurring concern in Mexican immigrant and Mexican American life writings, these narratives situate the migrant or diasporic individual as a "counterpoint to the official discourse of power, identity, history and authoritarian structures" (Ganguly 2005, 116) by chronicling the resistant capacities through which these individuals contested the forces that constrained

them. Hence, such accounts often become inter-American stories that depict U.S. interventionism, labour extraction, and the consequent resistance, as well as decolonial approaches to rewrite the dominant narratives.

Mexican American life writing constitutes a diverse archive of self-representational practices that comprises memoirs, autobiographies, biographies, journals, diaries, letters, and testimonios. Gaining critical visibility from the 1980s onward, this literary tradition emerges from the entanglements between Mexico and the United States, articulating the complexities of origin, citizenship and the politics of belonging across contested borderlands. These narratives frequently centre on the Mexican American "who starts his life in Mexico but continues it in the U.S." or "who straddles the border or lives simultaneously in both cultures" (Woods 1994, 755) and transform the personal experiences into a broader reflection on socio-political and cultural processes that shape Mexican existence in the United States. They encompass "infinite stories…of unknown, inarticulate, unlettered men, women, and children" to advance the discussions on "categories of class, gender, and ethnicity as they interact at the level of the individual" (Nasaw 2009, 576). Gloria Anzaldúa, in her ground-breaking semi-autobiographical work *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987), foregrounds the new *mestiza* consciousness born from the "interplay of oppression and resistance" (Lugones 1992, 31), conceptualising the borderlands as a psychological and epistemological space beyond physical boundaries where multiple identities and histories intersect. Herein, she also presents the significance of *autohistoria-teoría*, which refers to critical reflections on one's personal and collective history, in asserting the embodied experiences, ways of knowing and meaning-making silenced by dominant narratives. Similarly, Genaro M. Padilla's *My History, Not Yours: The Formation of Mexican American Autobiography* (1993) establishes Mexican American life narratives as a cultural discourse and attempts to reclaim the ignored and forgotten autobiographical voices of the colonised people who "began the Mexican American cultural tradition in the United States" (Rockwell 1994, 63). The hybrid genre of fictional autobioethnography developed by Norma Elia Cantú in her *Canícula: Snapshots of a Girlhood en la Frontera* (1995), based on her experiences of the Mexico-Texas border, recovers women's voices from oppressive frameworks and resonates with centuries of racial discrimination and labour appropriation. While earlier life-writing traditions focus on experiences of displacement and the formation of Mexican-origin communities in the United States, later narratives, such as the autobiography *Hunger of Memory* (1982) by Richard Rodriguez, engage with questions of language, education, and assimilation faced by children of Mexican immigrants. This practice of employing life-writing has continued to define Mexican-American literary traditions in contemporary times as well. Personal essays like Sandra Cisneros's *A House of My Own: Stories from My Life* (2015) and Ana Castillo's *Mamá, Mi'jo, and Me* (2016) and memoirs such as Reyna Grande's *The Distance Between Us* (2012), Domingo Martinez's *The Boy Kings of Texas* (2012), Jean Guerrero's *Crux: A Cross-Border Memoir* (2018) and Erika L. Sánchez's *Crying in the Bathroom* (2022) extend the tradition

of narration of lived realities to explore issues of border crossings, fragmented identities, cultural memory and community belonging.

Conceptualising the corpus of Mexican American life writings as documents of negotiation with the United States also necessitates attention to life narratives emerging from the culinary or gastronomic sphere, where foodways serve as the predominant medium for articulating migration, memory, labour, and ethnic identity. A significant number of life narratives by culinary professionals or home cooks take the form of culinary autobiographies and memoirs, such as Zarela Martinez's *Food from My Heart* (1992), Diana M. Silva's *Molé Mama: A Memoir of Love, Cooking, and Loss* (2017), Aarón Sánchez's *Where I Come From: Life Lessons from a Latino Chef* (2022) and *Chronicles of a Mexican Chef* by Silvana Salcido Esparza (2025). These personal narratives illustrate how Mexican American culinary practitioners challenge the status quo of the American food industry while battling racism and xenophobia through their culinary artistry and gastronomic heritage. Food also bears a natural affinity with *testimonio*, as both are fundamentally rooted in the "shared, communal nature and the necessity of survival" (McMenamin 2018, 450) central to the testimonial tradition. So, the testimonial text often locates resistance in everyday culinary practices, where indigenous ingredients become a symbolic metaphor of cultural sovereignty. *The Migrant Chef*, the biography of the Mexican chef Eduardo "Lalo" García Guzmán and the subject of this study, participates in the tradition of inter-American culinary life writing by introducing a distinct narrative arrangement that foregrounds a dialogic relationship between lived experiences and textual mediation. In the biography, Lalo's embodied experiences of migration, agricultural labour and professional culinary spaces, along with his knowledge of Mexican culture and foodways, function as the central narrative force while Laura Tillman's biographical narration acts as a mediating framework through which the lived realities of Lalo and his family are situated within broader contexts of inter-American histories of labour, Mexico – U.S. migrations and transnational gastronomy.

1.2 Lalo's journey as the 'migrant chef' and Tillman's biographical project

The life of Eduardo "Lalo" García Guzmán constitutes the narrative axis of *The Migrant Chef,* where the epithet 'migrant chef' encapsulates Lalo's existence in an in-between space where migration becomes an organising principle of his identity. His culinary practice, professional trajectory and personal affiliations are continually shaped by the oscillation between departure and return, belonging and exclusion, rendering him an individual negotiating a liminal positionality between Mexico and the United States. Lalo's early life unfolded against the backdrop of Mexican migration and U.S. agrarian capitalism, wherein mobility across the border was a matter of economic necessity. As the son of a migrant farmworker, he entered the agricultural labour circuit at the age of ten to join his

family in harvesting farm produce across the United States. Consequently, his formative years were shaped by poverty and displacement rather than educational continuity, for he "didn't speak the language, and he never stayed anywhere long enough" (Tillman 26). Lalo then moved on from the fields to professional kitchens in the restaurants across Georgia, marking a transition from one regime of labour to another. Beginning in modest small-town restaurants, he gradually refined his craft under celebrated chefs while navigating the precarious legal status that defined his existence as an undocumented immigrant. Repeated deportations, prolonged separation from his family and eventual return to Mexico marked a decisive reorientation of Lalo's personal identity and culinary vision, prompting a renewed engagement with Mexico's indigenous food traditions. Subsequently, he established Maximo Bistrot Local, emerging as a "representative of a burgeoning culinary movement" (Tillman 102) committed to solidifying Mexican cuisine within contemporary fine-dining culture. His kitchens became spaces where other immigrant and deportees recounted "their own border crossings, their time working alongside famed chefs in kitchens across the U.S., [and] their homecomings to Mexico" (Tillman 121). As the political instrumentalisation of Mexican immigrants gained urgency in the United States, Lalo became increasingly determined to share his story to a greater extent in hopes of illuminating the lived realities of undocumented immigrants and deportees and offering a sense of recognition to others like him. He believed that "sharing his story could save someone [like him], too" (Tillman 122). It is at this juncture that Laura Tillman's biographical project assumes significance.

Laura Tillman, in the author's note, lays out the detailed framework of her ambitious project of documenting Lalo García's life through sustained journalistic enquiry and historical contextualisation. She had visited "the environments significant to Lalo's story" (Tillman 6) to interview his family, friends, colleagues, employers, customers, and experts he interned under to gather testimonies, photographs, immigration records, and archival evidence to construct a mediated narrative produced through continued dialogue and historical research. Tillman declares that:

> "[T]he details included in the text are the result of extensive conversations with him about his emotional life, his reaction to events, and follow-up conversations about what he was thinking and feeling during specific moments…Lalo's willingness to be candid and patient was critical to this process" (6-7).

This collaborative endeavour precludes *The Migrant Chef* from being a straightforward transcription of lived experience. Instead, the voices of Lalo and those connected with his personal and professional life converge to provide a layered account of migration, labour and transnational belonging and develop "humanity, empathy, and understanding to the issue of the U.S.-Mexico border and the people and ideas traversing it" (Beato 2023, 8). This work expands the possibilities of conventional biographies by combining literary journalism with

the narrative art of life writing. The hybrid nature of this text allows readers and critics to relate to the personal retrospective interpretations that a memoir or autobiography can offer, while corroborating, contextualising, and historicising those experiences alongside a plethora of other subjective voices. Thus, *The Migrant Chef* demonstrates the critical potential of culinary biography by employing a chef's biographical arc as a narrative lens for apprehending broader hemispheric configurations across the Americas, dismantling the reductive tourist imaginary of Mexican food and valorising Mexican gastronomy as a socially embedded, historically situated, and labour-intensive cultural practice.

1.3 Research Methodology

This study undertakes a qualitative analysis of *The Migrant Chef* to examine the various aspects of the processes of cultivation, preparation, and consumption depicted in the text. To achieve this, the study employs Ronald W. Tobin's theoretical paradigm of "gastrocriticism" (2002, 625). Tobin conceptualises gastrocriticism as a mode of critical enquiry that analyses food's pervasive presence in literary texts and uncovers its importance as a polyvalent signifying system. Hence, it advocates the study of "multiple connotations of food and drink in relation to social, racial, geographical, identitarian, historical, sexual, anthropological, religious, philosophical, medical, cultural, psychological, ideological-political, gender, and linguistic issues" (De Maeseneer 2014, 29-30) by appealing to various disciplines like "history…sociology…semiotics, psychoanalysis and philosophy, gender studies and…anthropology" (30). As an interdisciplinary framework, Tobin's notion of gastrocriticism enables the integration of multiple critical perspectives according to the particular social, cultural and political functions foodways perform within a given text. The present study, thus, draws upon three distinct critical conceptions to illuminate the diverse dimensions of food in the biography. Accordingly, the paper first employs Aníbal Quijano's concept of the "coloniality of power" (2000) to interpret García's childhood labour and the effects of NAFTA on Mexican agriculture, to show how exploitation and systemic asymmetry underpin the U.S food systems. Subsequently, the analysis draws on Krishnendu Ray's distinction between the "ethnic cook" and the "professional chef" (2016) to analyse Lalo's apprenticeship in U.S. fine-dining spaces, exposing the racialised culinary hierarchies within the American gastronomic field. Finally, the study employs Priscilla Ferguson's theory of "culinary nationalism" (2010) to examine the role of Lalo and his predecessors in the revitalisation of Mexican national cuisine, demonstrating how food serves as a vehicle for reclaiming cultural agency and reshaping Mexico's global image. Altogether, these theoretical assertions facilitate a gastrocritical reading of *The Migrant Chef*, interpreting food as a predominant medium through which issues of coloniality, labour, migration, and national identity are articulated.

2. The politics of agro-capitalism in *The Migrant Chef*

The emergence of America as a global power was marked by the development of a new social, political, and economic system of control that inherently carried on Eurocentric notions of domination and commodification. The renowned sociologist and scholar of decoloniality, Anibal Quijano, discussing the implications of the "coloniality of power" (2000, 533) upon Latin America in his celebrated essay "Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America", writes, "This new structure was an articulation of all historically known previous structures of control of labor, slavery, serfdom, small independent commodity production" (534) that formed the basis of the world market. He states that the coloniality of power continues to operate in conflict with democracy, citizenship, and the modern nation-state in several Latin American nations. The life narrative of Lalo highlights a similar subjugation and exploitation of the Mexicans by the neocolonial framework of the U.S, wherein "race and racial identity were established as instruments of basic social classification" (Quijano 534) and the power structure "continues to be on and around the colonial axis" (Quijano 568). In *The Migrant Chef*, the lived experiences of García and his family provide an extended look at "how migrant workers form the backbone of American food systems" (Vasquez 2023, 2) through the dehumanising conditions and relentless oppression that marked the precarious lives of Mexico's rural working-class families who were compelled to cross an increasingly policed border to toil in the agricultural fields of the United States. The biography, thus, engages with a critique of the neoliberal systems that built and sustained agriculture and, by extension, the food economy while disarticulating the agrarian life of Mexico.

Quijano elucidates that in America, notions of race granted legitimacy to the dominant relations imposed by the colonisers. As the "conquered and dominated peoples were situated in a natural position of inferiority" (Quijano 535), the attitude of the U.S. towards the Mexicans maintained the established hierarchies. Lalo's life narrative contextualises the naturalised colonial nature of American agro-systems by noting that "racism and farmwork were…intertwined before the nation's founding, when the labor of enslaved Africans artificially drove down the price of food and cash crops" (Tillman 27). Lalo's family was forced to navigate a similar exploitative system that asserted the racial hierarchy which got assimilated into the U.S. agro-capitalist systems in contemporary times:

> "Lalo and Jaime would be the third generation of their family to join the millions of Mexican migrants who traveled north to plow fields and pick produce in the United States, a country that had hungered for cheap labor since before its founding, but was ambivalent about the people who performed it" (Tillman 19).

The early chapters narrate the excruciating lives of the García family during the 1960s, long before Lalo himself entered the agricultural circuits of the United States, which reveals a continuum of exploitation that spans generations and

demonstrates how U.S. agriculture has long depended on the coerced labour of undocumented Mexicans. The account of José García Agueta, Lalo's maternal grandfather, reconstructs the lived realities of the Bracero Program, a wartime agreement that brought hundreds of thousands of Mexican men into the U.S. to offset labour shortages during World War II. While ostensibly a temporary labour solution, the program functioned as a mechanism of racialised control: rural Mexicans travelled vast distances to recruitment centres only to endure weeks of degrading examinations, procedures in which they were sprayed with DDT. Once in the United States, Braceros were worked to the point of collapse without adequate wages or basic protections, and disciplined through the constant threat of deportation. The biography also cites Edward Murrow's statement in the 1960s exposé on the recruitment of workers in Florida: "[T]his is the way the humans who harvest the food for the best-fed people in the world get hired" (28) to situate the wider history of migrant labour. The narrative further documents that decades later, when Lalo himself laboured in American fields harvesting fruit, the conditions remained eerily unchanged. Every time the Garcia family arrived at work, they were sprayed with insecticides to cleanse them before they touched the produce. As a result, young Lalo learnt the ultimate truth at a very tender age: "Citrus and tomatoes were king…[and] the health of the oranges was more important than his own" (Tillman 20-21). This foregrounds the structural devaluation of agricultural labour within the U.S. food economy, wherein the crop is prioritised over the well-being of the worker, indicating a labour regime in which human needs are subordinated to market productivity. At ten years old, Lalo spent his days gathering oranges, which his father boxed and sold for a meagre two dollars a bundle. Operating with almost mechanical synchrony, the García family filled hundreds of boxes daily as they moved along the migrant route from Florida to Michigan orchards, from Ohio to Georgia. As Tillman notes, efficiency governed survival: "Not all crops were equal… you could shake oranges from the tree. Strawberries were slow" (25). Even the small gesture of placing the "pretty" fruit on top of the box, she writes, was performed "right in the field" (25) to satisfy supermarket aesthetics. While federal laws imposed restrictions on employment, agriculture remained an exception, allowing employers to overlook the presence of children who contributed to increased family output in piece-rate systems. The personal experiences of Lalo and the Garcia family substantiate that in the agricultural sector, which in turn powers the food systems, encounters between the United States and Latin American nations, such as Mexico, are characterised by Eurocentric capitalist domination.

Anibal Quijano, while elucidating the capitalist nature of America's global model of control, states that each domain of social existence is governed by an institution shaped through the very process that builds and sustains the dominant power. Thus, it is the "capitalist enterprise" (545) that controls the organisation, its resources, and its outputs of labour. In *The Migrant Chef*, Lalo's personal and familial history is placed with the larger transformations initiated by the United States with policies like the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA)

that "eliminated tariffs and barriers to trade between Mexico, the United States and Canada…facilitating direct investment and flow of goods across borders" (Gálvez 2018, 3) to flood Mexico with its own mediocre produce and extract the nation's gastronomic wealth comprising of corn, maguey and other indigenous ingredients to further its own capitalist interests. The repercussions were brutal as small-scale agriculture suffered, and even large-scale farms were unable to "compete in the production of corn, which can be grown more cheaply and efficiently in the United States" (Staudt 2018, 46) as a result of government subsidies. Quijano elucidates that the 1930s initiated a period of "Latin American dependent industrialization" (567), and the subsequent subordination of Latin American markets came as a consequence of this dependence. The biography records such a scenario where due to the imposition of NAFTA, Mexican farmers were incentivised to abandon the traditional *milpa* system and to switch to other crops that were essential for the globalised American consumer system rather than cultivating the landrace corn which was "the critical ingredient in Mexican cuisine" (Tillman 109) and had "adapted over thousands of years to specific microclimates, yielding varieties…and flavors" (110). The irony of the situation is evident in how the U.S. seized this opportunity to boost its business, quadrupling corn exports following the implementation of the agreement. To situate this contemporary phenomenon in a broader postcolonial context, the biography recounts the history of Mexico under the domination of the *conquistadors*. The historical anecdotes demonstrate how the Spanish colonisers viewed corn as nutritionally and culturally inferior, as it was consumed by the indigenous communities and made them cultivate wheat in larger proportions in the lands forcibly snatched from them, which ultimately rendered the terrain unsuitable for growing the "necessary components for the healthy diet that had historically sustained them" (Tillman 110-111). Similarly, the consequences of NAFTA have led to traditional Mexican diets becoming increasingly scarce. Tillman notes that, as a result of overflowing U.S. food products and the monopoly that the American food corporations have established over key ingredients of Mexican gastroculture, like corn flour and maguey, which go into the making of the infamous tortillas and mezcal, "processed food has become a cheap, compulsively available part of the Mexican diet" whereas "nutritious drinks like atole have become less common" (110). Even in rural areas, gathering fresh produce became a challenge, but "a Coke and a bag of chips, with their long shelf life…are ubiquitous" (109). Regarding mezcal, which is deeply ingrained in the culture and identity of the Mexican state of Oaxaca, the narrative documents that: "The Oaxacan people were the first to stop drinking mezcal" (110). Quijano writes: "For the controllers of power, the control of capital and the market were and are what decides the ends, the means, and the limits of the process" (548). It can be theorised that this idea led to the inception of policies like NAFTA, which proved to be a terrible curse for the Mexican agricultural sector, food industry, and culinary culture. Thus, the crises brought upon by the imposition of NAFTA had "significantly altered the pattern of U.S.-Mexican relations" and initiated the weakening of "U.S. cultural

hegemony in Mexico" (Morris and Passé-Smith 2001, 124). Therefore, Lalo's biographical narrative operates as a mediated space wherein personal memory intersects with broader structures of power to situate the lives of the García family within overlapping histories of agricultural dependency and transnational food politics.

3. Cooking against hierarchy, ethnicity and Lalo's recognition in U.S. fine dining

The biography's shift from the agricultural fields to the American kitchen marks a transition from one domain of structural inequality to another. As García's life trajectory moves into the rigid world of U.S. fine dining, the narrative exposes an alternate configuration of power in which culinary skill and cultural value are organised through racialised hierarchies. The eminent sociologist and scholar of food studies, Krishnendu Ray, in his critical work *The Ethnic Restaurateur* (2016) presents the generalised dichotomy between the ethnic cook and the professional chef: "The professional chef is the mirror-image of the foreign-born, untrained, ethnic cook" wherein the "former occupies the heights of the culinary field in the USA" while the "latter inhabits the bottom rungs of the hierarchy" (216). Through its portrayal of the initial phases of Lalo's culinary journey, the biography documents how Lalo efficiently moves beyond this distinction.

The conception of high-end cuisines as complex and original attributes the professional chef with a "higher degree of competence and creativity," in contrast to the "self-trained ethnic chef" (Lane and Opazo 2025, 134). This leads to Ray's conception that to be an ideal professional chef, one must undergo an extensive transformation, which involves reorienting one's habits, palate, haptics, and hands to be able to "fit middle-class aspiration and upper-class consumption" and can be "promoted in the class hierarchy" (*The Ethnic Restaurateur* 216). Lalo's growth as a culinary professional aligns with some of the characteristics Ray mentions, but it also opposes a few others. The contrast that the narrativisation of the culinary skills possessed by Lalo and his colleague, Scott Adair, illustrates the above-mentioned notion. Adair had received formal training from a culinary school and dreamed of becoming a celebrated chef in the United States, who would be featured in posh magazines that, during the 1990s, were exclusively focused on white male chefs. In absolute contrast, Lalo never imagined that he would be a chef someday, and whatever he knew about cooking and flavours was from watching his mother "cook carnitas, chilaquiles, and tamales in their improvised kitchens" (Tillman 41). But soon, Lalo could successfully recreate the techniques by watching Adair perform: "Lalo studied Adair as he executed techniques he'd paid tens of thousands of dollars to learn in culinary school. Within days, Lalo would be performing them better and faster" (Tillman 43). In the case of Lalo, his skills and expertise were enhanced by his internal disposition, which allowed him to cope with the lack of institutionalised learning and rise above his peers. Ray's observation that the "foreign-born depends on experience, in terms of both

taste and skill" (*The Ethnic Restaurateur* 216), becomes evident through Lalo's knowledge of cooking which was derived from his mother Natalia regarding whom the biography records: "what she lacked in formal training, she more than made up for with her palate, her impeccable sense of balance" (Tillman 37-38). In the domain of culinary arts, not unlike any other form of art, inborn faculties often surpass years of training. Lalo's embodied competence becomes apparent through the realisation that Adair had after assessing his proficiency and mastery of the hand: "Those hands told Adair he would never supersede this cocky kid, no matter how long or hard he worked" (Tillman 43). Ray had observed that a professional chef's "hands have to be remade" (*The Ethnic Restaurateur* 216) to advance his upward mobility, but Lalo's culinary journey demonstrates that his inherent expertise was already capable of placing him at par with any qualified professional chef of the United States.

Describing the aims of premium culinary schools like the Culinary Institute of America (CIA), Krishnendu Ray writes: "American cooks become chefs by acquiring new tastes, obtaining fresh words to articulate them, gaining novel cooking skills…that marks them as radically different subjects from…ethnic cooks" (*The Ethnic Restaurateur* 172). Lalo disproves this distinction as Adair admits that he "found himself learning from Lalo, who was executing advanced techniques without knowing their proper names" (Tillman 43). In fact, one of the crucial interactions between the two, which serves as a significant moment within the narrative, occurred when Adair compares Lalo with Auguste Escoffier, the globally renowned French chef who was the foremost pioneer of fine dining and modernisation of the culinary arts. Within the biography, this comparison serves a dual purpose; on the one hand, it points towards the hegemony of French cuisine in the culinary profession in spite of the "celebration of multiculturalism" (Janer, *The Geopolitics,* 2018, 5), and on the other hand, it solidifies Lalo's naturalised capabilities as a fertile ground for developing the domain of Mexican haute cuisine. Lalo's fundamental transformation in the fine dining sphere began when he joined *Brasserie Le Coze*. This restaurant belonged to Eric Ripert, who had already become a prominent figure in the French culinary scene within the United States. Participating in one of Ripert's kitchens enabled Lalo to hone his skills and remodel them into those of a professional chef. Tillman narrates: "When Lalo started at Brasserie Le Coze, he had a new language to learn…French terms that form the basis of communication in the world of fine dining…he had to perfect the techniques they signified" (45). For Lalo, assimilating and embodying the techniques of French cooking opened up new avenues, significantly contributing to his culinary prowess. Ray asserted that the new American chef is generally "born in spaces between three positions: the (female) domestic cook, the (colored male) ethnic cook, and the (white or Asian male) professional chef" (*The Ethnic Restaurateur* 171). So, by imbibing this newfound culinary knowledge, Lalo, the ethnic cook, was gradually conforming to the idea of the new American chef.

Ray discusses the hierarchy of taste in the American gustatory imagination and establishes that, according to Americans, their contemporary culinary

culture is impacted by two distinct components: the high-status, foreign cuisines and the low-class, ethnic fare of immigrants. He writes that the "appropriation of the first sort is understood primarily in aesthetic terms of taste and notions of skill", whereas "the latter is understood as a matter of necessity…undifferentiated toil" (*The Ethnic Restaurateur* 103). Lalo's lived experiences depict that people like him often serve as a bridge between the two by attempting to elevate ethnic foods to the status of a dignified and relished foreign cuisine, similar to Italian or Japanese cuisine. This task almost always proved to be a Herculean one, as most of the immigrants attempting to make their food culture respectable in American society either belonged to the working class or indigenous communities, and it was well recognised that "proximity to poor ethnics undermines the prestige of a cuisine" (Ray, *The Ethnic Restaurateur* 129). The opportunity to become the head chef of a Mexican restaurant in Alpharetta gave Lalo the space to explore, reinvent, and establish his cuisine in the American dining scene. In an essay, Ray (2014) writes that the ethnic entrepreneur "conceives and offers the flavor of her peoples' experience by designing a small, semi-public space and a menu" (*The Immigrant Restaurateur* 393). Lalo does a similar thing as he designs the restaurant by drawing upon the traditional and indigenous food practices, he had accumulated as a Mexican, as well as his professional culinary training, to develop his own distinct culinary style. Tillman writes: "PURE Taqueria… marked the first time in Lalo's professional life that he was primarily cooking Mexican food…rice and beans, salsa and carnitas could find their way directly to the diners he served" (67). Ray opines that: "Immigrant restaurateurs have been crucial to the changing transaction in taste in American cities…American tastes have been opening up, and that has led to important changes in haute cuisine" (164). The biography records Lalo's triumph: "PURE was a hit; over time, it would grow to seven locations, a success built in part on Lalo's foundational work in creating the first menu" (Tillman 72). Lalo's foundational work, which included crafting the first menu and shaping the restaurant's identity, demonstrates the formative influence that immigrant cooks often exert on emerging food cultures in the United States. Even after his deportation, the restaurant's continued success reflects how immigrant labour and creativity become embedded in American taste, even when the individuals themselves may remain excluded.

4. Mexico's culinary nationalism and reclamation of cultural sovereignty

Lalo García's deportation to Mexico shifts the narrative from U.S. culinary hierarchies to the evolving landscape of contemporary Mexican gastronomy. In *The Migrant Chef*, Lalo's work participates in a national project of cultural renewal, one that aligns closely with Priscilla P. Ferguson's theorisation of "culinary nationalism" (2010, 102). Culinary nationalism may be defined as a "dynamic process of creation and contestation" as opposed to national cuisine, which is a "static product" (King 2019, 3). Laying out the principles of culinary

nationalism, Ferguson writes: "Culinary countries must balance innovation and tradition, individual creativity and time-honored conventions, the singular and the collective" (106). Through the life's work of Lalo and his predecessors, the biography reveals how Mexican chefs imbibe these principles to mobilise food for reclaiming agency and challenging long-standing global perceptions shaped by American and European dominance.

García's culinary journey is situated within a broader genealogy of Mexican gastronomy shaped by the pioneering work of chefs who preceded him and helped redefine the nation's identity. The narrative draws on Ferguson's argument that the "culinary supremacy of France is one of those ideological constructs that have become so much a part of our lives" (104) and demonstrates how Mexico in the 1990s looked to France as a model for elevating national cuisine to the status of haute cuisine. Within this moment of gastronomic reorientation, figures such as Mónica Patiño, Carmen Ortuño, and Alicia Gironella emerged as central architects, characterised by their "seamless combination of experimentation and the celebration of cultural heritage" (Tillman 77). This new generation of chefs challenged the Eurocentric and Americanised standards of refinement and legitimacy in the gastronomic world, framing cuisine as a "flag of identity" (Palmer 1998, 186). Their work destabilised denigrating assumptions about Mexico, exposed the colonial hierarchies that had persisted in gastronomy as "a defined set of norms that indicated who should cook what, what should be consumed where and with whom" (78), and thereby bridged the gap "between the theory and practice of nationalism" (Avieli 2005, 169). Ferguson's discussion of Marthe Allard Daudet's seminal cookbook, *Les Bons Plats de France* (1913), in her essay illustrates Daudet's modest claim, "I don't claim to have invented anything" (102), highlighting her commitment to safeguarding France's gastronomic heritage. Chef Ortuño's declaration, as recorded in the biography, invokes a similar ethos: "I don't consider mine a new cuisine, but a new way of seeing" (Tillman 79). It reveals that the contemporary Mexican chefs were not attempting to craft novel culinary styles as much as they were re-reading, reclaiming, and revitalising the historical epistemologies embedded in their own foodways. In a similar fashion, chef Patiño's metaphor that Mexican chefs are "artists who felt marooned abroad…imagining the masterpieces they might create back home in Mexico" (Tillman 82) encapsulates the recognition of the creative plenitude inherent in Mexican food cultures. These approaches align with the assertion of famed historian Jeffrey Pilcher (2012), who states that culinary professionals striving to assert cultural sovereignty in the face of competitors abroad "cultivated a new image of authentic Mexican as the food of the ancient Aztecs and Maya" (190). Also, Patiño's most striking intervention in Mexico's culinary landscape, her insistence on elevating mezcal, long associated with rural poverty, to "the same level as a whiskey or a cognac" (Tillman 84), further exhibited how cuisine can act as an "ideal example of a nation's soft power" (Chapple-Sokol 2013, 168) that can reshape global perceptions. Thus, the biography positions these chefs as the upholders of the nation's "culinary consciousness" or the "defenders of

tradition in a rapidly modernising world" (Ferguson 102) whose efforts restored dignity to Mexican cuisine and positioned it anew within the global gastronomic imagination.

Building on the discussion upon the chefs who first challenged Eurocentric fine-dining paradigms in Mexico, the narrative turns to the figure who crystallised this shift for a global audience, chef Enrique Olvera. Olvera's trajectory illustrates a direct confrontation of the reductive stereotypes through which Mexican cuisine was perceived: "cheap enchiladas topped with fluorescent cheese, bland jars of salsa, packaged flour tortillas with a suspiciously long shelf life" (76). Such caricatures revealed how deeply U.S. culinary culture had internalised colonial hierarchies of taste and "condescension toward the working classes" (Pilcher 2012, 11), relegating Mexican food to the realm of the inexpensive, the unsophisticated, and the ethnically minor. These stereotypes regarding cuisines signify a "representational harm" which extensively contributes to "racialised public discourse" and "perpetuate[s] prejudice towards ethnic groups" (Luo et. al 2023, 985). It is precisely against this backdrop that Olvera imagined a different future for Mexican cuisine inspired by Peruvian chef Gastón Acurio, whose work elevated Peru's gastronomic reputation on the world stage: "I want to do the same for Mexico, because if any country has gastronomic wealth, it's Mexico!" (Tillman 76). Recording Olvera's vision, Tillman observes that his restaurant, *Pujol*, firmly established that the purpose of Mexican restaurants was "greater than providing a tasty meal: it was a place to surprise, titillate, and finally change a diner's perspective" (77). As restaurants may be conceived as spaces that "create and strengthen communities…with the culinary traditions of Latin American countries…[and] help to negotiate the changes brought about in the United States" (Janer, *Cooking*, 2008, 51), the new form of the Mexican restaurant became a cultural intervention, re-teaching diners how to perceive Mexican cuisine.

Lalo extends this project of recalibrating Mexican gastronomy by retrieving regional traditions and resisting Eurocentric hierarchies through his hybrid culinary practice at his restaurant, *Máximo Bistrot Local*. The process of culinary innovation is based on the "chef's artistic aspiration, of learning and networking…dimensions of adoption and diffusion that are influenced by the tradition of the broader gastronomic world" (Stierand and Lynch 2008, 340). This illuminates how his training in French techniques in the United States, combined with his Mexican upbringing, transforms Lalo's culinary craft into a site where transnational influences, diasporic memory, and traditional culinary epistemologies converge. Tillman captures this duality when she describes the ambience of *Máximo*: "comfortable as a family home in Mexico, but with the subtle sophistication of a French bistro" (94). His restaurant becomes a spatial metaphor for his culinary identity, in which Mexican heritage and American professional training coexist without hierarchy. Initially cooking French and Italian dishes, García gradually began incorporating Mexican elements into his menu: "a chile, a sauce, a preparation that came from the country he had spent so many years… and had discovered anew with a chef's eye" (Tillman 100). This reintroduction of

Mexican flavours is a recuperative act, through which García reclaims Mexican foodways from their historical marginalisation and relocates them at the centre of a global culinary conversation. The biography conveys Lalo's culinary point of view through its description of his cuisine as "ingredient-centric food that confidently brought together Mexican and French concepts" (Tillman 102). His reinterpretations enact a subtle decolonial gesture, challenging the prestige accorded to Euro-American taste while refusing to romanticise tradition. Instead, he allows technique, migration, and affect to intersect in his hands to produce a cuisine that is modernised yet connected to its roots.

Ferguson observes that "conventional culinary discourse constructs a nation…rooted in *terroir* and tradition" (105). She adds that the value of a recipe lies in "the sense of place conveyed by the recipe, in an understanding of history… [and] absolute necessity of authenticity" (104). The culinary practices of Olvera and García embody this principle by actively resisting the "monolithic identity" (85) that had long dominated the global imagination of Mexican cuisine. Their efforts centre on reconnecting fine dining to the country's vast regional traditions by travelling through rural towns where "cooking techniques had evolved over millennia," and local dishes were shaped either by "a wealth of ingredients… or owed to conditions of scarcity" (Tillman 86). This process of translating hyperlocal practices into the realm of contemporary gastronomy makes the local national and, in this sense, "the part and the whole coincide" (Ferguson 104). Their extensive travels, both within Mexico and abroad, advocating for a culinary vision rooted in Indigenous epistemologies and regional specificity, led Mexico to become more than "a folkloric place for the world" and be valued as "much more sophisticated, without losing that sense of joy that people associate with [it]" (Tillman 87). Moreover, Ferguson's notion that terroir is central to any cuisine to "translate the nation to its consumer" (104) is further upheld by Lalo and his colleagues through their reliance on *chinampa*-grown produce cultivated through an agricultural system dating back to the Aztec era. Tillman writes that for Mexican chefs, the inclusion of chinampa produce was a "way to tell the story of Mexico" (108). These chefs worked actively toward the revival of local agricultural knowledge by promoting awareness of "traditional methods," embracing "'ugly' produce and cooking for free at fundraising events" (Tillman 109). Such practices form a powerful resistance to the agro-industrial transformations unleashed by NAFTA, which had threatened small-scale farming, destabilised local food ecologies, and deepened Mexico's dependence on the United States.

As chefs can contribute extensively to the national image-making, the biography further documents the expanding public significance of chefs within contemporary cultural politics: "Chefs are a natural fit: they move between the dining room, the kitchen, and the environs of purveyors…[they] explain the connections between a country's food, people, history, and environment" (112). These insights illuminate the chefs as "cultural ambassadors" (Janer *Cooking* 51) who translate regional foodways into national identity for global audiences. In this context, figures like Patino, Olvera, and Lalo operate as agents of culinary

diplomacy and nationalist representation. Ferguson further notes that in the era of globalisation, "geographic and political boundaries that sustained culinary singularity" have been abolished and "producers and consumers are enthused by the culinary cultures" (104) of all kinds. Against this backdrop of intensified global circulation, *The Migrant Chef* constructs a counter-narrative. The culinary trajectories of Eduardo "Lalo" García and the pioneering chefs who preceded him asserted Mexico's culinary sovereignty by challenging structural inequalities perpetuated by the United States by "developing their own gourmet infrastructure" (Pilcher 2012, 200). Lalo occupies a far distinct position for his knowledge of "not only how to prepare food, but how it is grown" (Tillman 113). His cuisine reclaims Mexican foodways from reductionist imaginings and proclaims a culinary nationalism grounded in lived experience, historical consciousness, and inter-American labour histories. In fact, the biography records the magnitude of the changes brought about by this recalibration of Mexican gastronomy by tracing the trajectories of young chefs trained under García. She writes of one such apprentice: "He didn't need to stage abroad, much less make risky border crossings to do so. He could grow and flourish at home" (131). This moment encapsulates the paradigm shift wherein Mexican chefs no longer needed foreign validation or migration to achieve professional excellence; the centres of gastronomic distinction were now within Mexico itself.

5. Conclusion

Food systems are a multilayered infrastructure of cultivation, circulation, commodification, and culinary transformation that governs not only what is eaten but also the geographical, economic, and ideological pathways through which food and its consumers are valued. When placed within an inter-American discourse, this complex web of "foodscapes" (MacKendrick 2014, 16) becomes a map of inter- and intra-hemispheric encounters on diverse socio-cultural planes. This paper demonstrates, through its gastrocritical analysis of *The Migrant Chef*, how the notion of food materialises the asymmetries and counternarratives prevailing between the Global North and South. Situating the life arc of Mexican chef Eduardo "Lalo" García Guzmán as a crucial locus wherein histories of extraction, racialization, and resistance are enacted and reimagined across the Americas, this study reveals that the various domains discussed throughout the analysis illuminate different dimensions of the U.S.-Mexico encounters. At the level of agricultural labour and the neoliberal food economy, the relationship between Mexico and the U.S. is structurally extractive and exploitative. Herein, the processes associated with cultivation become a vehicle of material domination and geopolitical subordination. When the narrative shifts to the American dining space, the U.S.–Mexico interaction is also reductive as it is characterised by the symbolic devaluation of the migrant ethnic cook. But, within the Mexican culinary sphere crafted by a new generation of chefs, including Lalo, the nature of the U.S.-Mexican association underwent a

notable reorientation. These chefs responded to decades of U.S.-mediated stigma surrounding Mexican food as cheap or unsophisticated by transforming regional traditions, terroir, and indigenous techniques into a source of national prestige, which garnered admiration, appropriation, and competitive emulation from the United States. Taken together, these shifting configurations reveal that U.S.–Mexican encounters are continually renegotiated through the material, cultural, and symbolic circuits of food.

The trajectory traced in this analysis unfolds several promising avenues for future research, inviting a broader interrogation of how culinary narratives operate as hemispheric archives of mobility and power. The most promising extension of this research lies in expanding the corpus to include the auto/biographies of other prominent Latino or Latin American chefs and conducting a comparative study to chart how different national cuisines and socio-economic contexts negotiate similar North-South dissonances in terms of culinary labour, capital and authorship. Another possible approach would be to address the life stories of working-class women and indigenous cooks, whose narratives are often relegated to the margins, to deepen understanding of kitchens and cooking as decolonising methodologies against patriarchal, oppressive structures and regimes. Such expansions would effectively consolidate culinary auto/biography and life narratives as a viable medium for apprehending the cultural and political textures of inter-American exchanges.

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