

I N T R O D U C T I O N

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What's for Breakfast?
Los chilaquiles de mi 'amá,
of course!

We have all heard from nutritionists that breakfast is the most important meal of the day. While I have ignored it on many occasions, this time I will follow the experts' advice and begin with the breakfast that gives this book its basic yet essential nourishment: *los chilaquiles de mi 'amá*. This dish flavors the premise of *Voices in the Kitchen*, that everyday cooking is a language. Literally, *chilaquiles* are a breakfast I grew up eating: fried corn tortillas with tomato-chile sauce. Symbolically, they are the culinary metaphor for how working-class women speak with the seasoning of their food. *Los chilaquiles* also blur the distinction between theory and action, between the field of knowledge in the library or laboratory and the field of knowledge in an ordinary home kitchen.

This book is a research project where the personal *is* political on at least two counts: the reason for embarking on it and the core of women whose culinary philosophies give substance to it. When I graduated from college in the early 1990s, I knew I needed to get away from the academic institution. I needed to leave that world, at least for a while, before going to graduate school since I was becoming rather cynical and skeptical about most of the textual knowledge I encountered. I am particularly referring to feminist theories of female subjectivity and agency. All these theories were meant to raise my consciousness and help me liberate myself from the patriarchal, socially constructed, restricted, and oppressive

places assigned to women due to gender, class, and ethnicity. The source of my cynicism and skepticism was a vivid understanding that textual knowledge is not accessible to a large group of women, like the ones in my family—working-class women. Most women I know are not part of an academic world; they belong, as part of me will always belong, to a nonacademic world where textual knowledge does not directly influence their everyday life. I am not saying that working-class women are devoid of knowledge, subjectivity, and acts of agency. What I am saying is that these women rarely read feminists' books or express themselves in a written textual form. Sometimes their claims of self-agency are not even verbal.

My frustrations, therefore, were a product of my personal life. A strong, smart, and independent woman, who did not passively accept her role within the domestic sphere, raised me. My mother, Liduvina Vélez, clearly understands the double-gender implications and limitations embedded in the patriarchal, capitalist, and Catholic world in which she had been raised. Yet she has not accepted at face value the rules of her social milieu. When she felt suffocated by societal demands, she became an active agent in changing her life and creating new paths. Why, then, I wondered, did I not see my mother's story or stories like it in the feminist works I was reading in college?

Kitchens and cooking, a place and activity that most women engage in regardless of educational level, ethnicity, or class status, form the praxis to bridge the gap between academic theoretical discourses about female subjectivity and quotidian working-class practices of female agency. A study of the social and philosophical dimensions of cooking illustrates how female subjectivity and acts of agency take place in both the academic and nonacademic world. Everyday cooking, food as voice, reveals the existence of a different field of epistemology. Food as voice comes "forth as a powerful, highly charged, and personalized voice." For Annie Hauck-Lawson, professor of health and nutrition, food voice "emerges as a term that crystallizes the dynamic, creative, symbolic, and highly individualized ways that food serves as a channel of communication."¹

In my desire to understand the discourses of quotidian cooking and how a woman seasons her sense of self through such practice, the theoretical foundation for this research is a series of *charlas culinarias* (culinary chats) I have had with Mexican and Chicana

working-class women. With the *charlas culinarias*, the personal becomes political. This book began to take root in graduate school with a feminist course on the importance of creative expression for women. While I agreed with every theoretical argument we read, my frustrations with academia remained. Only three artistic expressions were presented in this course: painting, writing, and composing. If creative expression forms a vital part of what makes us human, what then happens to women whose life circumstances do not permit them the time, space, and money for these three creative outlets? During the semester, images of my mother and her kitchen often emerged. Thus, I began to explore the kitchen site as a form of studio and cooking as an artistic expression. I also began this academic exploration with my mother, Liduvina Vélez. I had firsthand knowledge of her culinary creative expression, and she is a Mexican working-class woman. As the project developed, my mother has been the tie that holds together all the *charlas culinarias*. Guided by her request to have *charlas culinarias* with women who, according to her, “han pasado por etapas muy difíciles en la vida y tienen una historia que contar” (have experienced difficult phases in their lives and have a story to tell), she often set up the logistics of the *charlas*. In the words of cultural anthropologists, Liduvina Vélez has defined what they call the “notion of field” of the ethnographic and theoretical aspect of this book, hereafter referred to as *Voices*.



Recipe: Methodology from the Ground Up

Significance

Methodology from the ground up gives a unique flavor to domestic space, particularly the kitchen as a site of knowledge and empowerment. It provides a general set of instructions for preparing decolonizing methodologies, which Linda Tuhiwai Smith defines as approaching “cultural protocols, values, and behaviors as . . . integral ‘factors’ to be built in to research explicitly, to be thought about reflectively, to be declared openly as part of the research design.”² The kitchen and cooking as decolonizing methodologies create a type of thirdspace feminism where the activity of cooking yields forms of epistemologies that go beyond just knowing how to cook. “The maneuvering of paradigms,” as Emma Pérez defines thirdspace

feminism, is in the hands of those actually doing the cooking. These women mark their subjectivity oftentimes “neglected and ignored” by those of us outside the kitchen.³ Domestic space as a field of epistemology validates the social, cultural, and economic significance of women’s household work. With different fields of knowledge, we academics can see how the subjects of our research are active agents in the making of their own *historias*, their own life stories.

Necessary Equipment

Three absolutely essential cooking utensils are a large cooking receptacle, a sharp knife for peeling, and a good set of tongs for separating. The receptacle needs to be large enough for feminisms rather than a singular feminism to fit in it. The cooking container needs to have room to accommodate the fact that there are different “cultural-based subjectivit[ies],” and as Aihwa Ong says, not all women conduct their lives according to one “particular” feminist “vision of the future.”⁴ To this I add that we should recognize a woman’s unique and specific life situation whenever possible. Women, even as members of a single family, do not carry out their daily lives in homogeneous ways. Therefore, a container large enough for cooking multiple possibilities of social change rather than a grand single theory is key equipment for preparing this recipe. Chicanas theorizing about feminisms take this approach by developing strategies that “are context-dependent and largely the result of lessons learned from their daily lives and the daily lives of women around them.”⁵ Theories, like philosophies, come out of culturally specific realities; they come out from people’s way of knowing the world.⁶ The second necessary tool is one that helps us peel off the thick skin that keeps theory-making within the realm of academia so that we can find theories in nontraditional places. Sonia Saldívar-Hall lists some of these places as “the prefaces to anthologies, in the interstices of autobiographies, in our cultural artifacts, our *cuentos*.”⁷ To this I add our cooking practices. The third cooking gadget crucial for the creation of this recipe is a set of tongs to enhance our efforts in removing the layers of oppression and victimization in women’s lives so that we can present women’s moments of agency. These three tools are necessary to begin preparing a methodology from the ground up where working-class women’s culinary epistemologies, along with their poignant practical and emotional articulations, express themselves as subjects, as agents of their own lives.

The Basic Ingredients: Dedication, Recognition, Humility, and Collaboration

For my version of this recipe, I first used a genuine and generous portion of dedication that took me from wanting to conduct and control culinary interviews to sharing and learning by engaging in *charlas culinarias* (culinary chats). The change took place during the first interview in 1996. Only ten minutes sufficed to discover the contradictions embedded in the methodology I was using to hear how women use the kitchen and cooking to express themselves. In my effort to conduct objective empirical research true to its disciplinary field led me, then a Ph.D. student in comparative literature, to solicit the guidance of an anthropology professor to structure a questionnaire appropriate for ethnographic research. Armed with it, I set out to interview my mother, Liduvina Vélez, to find out what she had to say about her relationship to *foodways*. Yes, I used the proper academic discourse such as foodways, and I even defined it by quoting Lucy M. Long: “a network of activities and systems—physical, social (communicative), cultural, economic, spiritual, and aesthetic.”⁸ I went on to say that foodways are deeply embedded in the formation of personhood and nationhood. Needless to say, the very structure of the questionnaire limited what my mother could and would share. She would answer my questions with a simple “yo no sé hablar” (I don’t know how to say it). She also avoided the topic I hoped to discuss by singing a song: “Allá en el rancho grande, allá donde vivía, tenía una rancherita que alegre me decía, ‘te voy hacer unos calzones, te los comienzo de lana y te los termino de cuero.’” The very structure of the interview led her to avoid answering my questions, which asked for specific events, dates, people’s names, and culinary methodological procedures using a discourse that she did not recognize. During this first interview, I even referred to her with the Spanish formal pronoun of *usted*. Yet my siblings and I simply call her *’amá*.

Ingredients in a recipe must complement one another. This often happens by accident, as it was with the case of my recipe. A good dose of self-recognition allowed me to taste the flavorless meal that my own overzealous academic ambition was beginning to create. Fortunately, still in the early stages, I realized that for kitchen talk to function as a vehicle by which women share forms of their subjectivity, their “flesh and blood experiences” expressed in their *sazón*,

the second ingredient has been for me to undergo a process of *conscientización*.⁹ In this process I learned to speak *with* my mother and not *to* her. I learned to listen to what she wanted to say and not worry about following a preconceived methodological research agenda. In the process of *conscientización*, I recognized the irony embedded in the initial phase of my research. My academic, intellectual interest focuses on finding out how working-class women subvert the preconceived ideological gender implications that define a kitchen as a woman's *place* by converting the kitchen into a woman's *space*. Yet the questionnaire I presented to my mother also had a preconceived assumption on my part: a subtle academic bias that often believes that only when a person is well-read and well-educated in a formal institution of higher learning are articulation and knowledge her domain. Fortunately, my mother also subverted these erroneous notions by shifting the structure of my questions. The concept of *charlas culinarias*, rather than a formal, structure questionnaire, is the result of my process of *conscientización*. A successful interview became a *charla*. The informality of the *charlas* rather than a formal interview creates a level of comfort and *confianza* (trust) among the participants, myself included.

This book is as much my mother's project as it is mine. The theoretical inquiries explored in each chapter are those suggested from the original *charla* with her. She has gone from "yo no sé hablar" to actively engaging in a number of subsequent *charlas*, telling her friends about the project, and asking them to participate. In this process, I have often become a note taker. I used to say that it was no small feat for a woman with only two years of formal schooling to become the assistant in her daughter's journey of conducting academic research. But now I say that for a Ph.D. to be an assistant to a woman with limited formal studies is, as Smith tells her students and researchers, "a humble and humbling activity."¹⁰

Humility in the context of conducting academic research manifests itself as an awareness that allows us, the researchers, not to assume "that we are the experts" and to recognize that "we have a great deal to learn from others."¹¹ To see others as active agents of knowledge places us in a situation of sharing knowledge as well as in a position of apprenticeship. As academic cooks, due to our well-educated cosmopolitan exposure to international cuisines, we might often think of spices such as galangal, ajowan, saffron, annatto, asafetida as rather significant. But humility in a metaphorical

culinary context within this study represents those food items so ordinary, like salt and pepper, that help bring out the rest of the flavors in our food. Because of their common presence in every kitchen (or most), they are easily taken for granted.

I learned my first lesson in humility during the first *charla* my mother set up with two of her oldest friends, María Luisa Villicaña and Irma Vásquez. During this *charla*, I realized how at the inceptive stages of my project, my desire to hear working-class women's voices had clouded my own knowledge of traditional ways of common courtesy. Academia trained me well in the process of conducting ethnographic research, so I thought. Before the visit, I made sure that the tape recorder worked; I made sure I had enough tapes and batteries, paper and pencil. I also took some books because I wanted to share a few images about food's sensual and sexual implications in case such subjects did not simply enter into the *charla*. My mother also took something that never crossed my mind. She brought two plants and offered one to María Luisa and another to Irma as a gesture of gratitude for *their* generosity in giving us some of their time. And then there was the surprising supper María Luisa had waiting for us, since the *charla* took place in her house. In the academy of life, my mother has learned things that I, in my zeal for obtaining objective knowledge, was beginning to forget in the academy of higher learning.

As I learned to listen to women's voices in the kitchen—90 percent of all these conversations took place sitting in the kitchen sharing a meal—I recognized how these working-class women are grassroots theorists and their *charlas* reflect social and philosophical theories from the ground up. The methodology of the *charlas*, free-flowing conversations, creates a dialogue where unconventional fields of study, of knowledge, come together. As a methodology, it demonstrates how there is not just one history but many stories, how there is not just one intellectual form of knowledge but many ways of knowing and being intellectual. *Charlas* are about vertical thinking, not horizontal, meaning that researcher and women in the field are intellectually on the same plane. The praxis of this methodological paradigm, the analysis, focuses on thought-provoking moments that illustrate the gaps within master narratives of patriarchal and capitalist ideologies, where these women *do* speak and theorize about their lives. The *charlas* alter Gayatti Spivak's question "Can the Subaltern Speak?" to the statement "How the

Subaltern Speaks.” Within Spivak’s theoretical paradigm, subalterns, colonized women, cannot speak because they hold no political or economic power. This book, however, shows that working-class women have been speaking all along, but perhaps not in political or economic conventional discourses. Their theories from the ground up open the door to ask different analytical and philosophical feminist questions about women’s subjectivity and acts of agency.

Women participating in the *charlas* do not speak of “differential consciousness” as does Chela Sandoval, or “decolonial imaginary” as does Emma Pérez, or “interstitial” gaps where moments of power and knowledge are found, as Michel Foucault argues. Oftentimes, however, they speak of concepts not too different from those developed by academic theorists. Their discourse about social, political, economic, and gender issues, however, differs drastically. The preparation and descriptions of everyday meals do have political and economic ramifications. In the *charlas*, we can hear the life stories of women’s social consciousness and quest for change; the conversations provide a way to hear the voices of those who lack not only a room of their own but paper of their own as well.

Humility blends into collaboration. The theoretical concepts of women from the *charlas* interconnect with those of academic scholars, at times to elaborate on a similar issue by speaking of it with a different language and set of examples, at others to add a more in-depth complexity to social relations. The collaboration in this book blends academic scholarship from the areas of anthropology, philosophy, geography, architecture, literature, cultural studies, and folklore with the everyday life scholarship of Mexican working-class women. For example, the *charlas* have led me to formulate the following questions in response to feminist geographer Linda McDowell’s observations that “it is often women who have the most spatially restricted lives.”¹² While most of us would agree with this observation, I ask whether the kitchen is always a site of entrapment, or whether it is also a space, particularly for women with restricted economic resources, of survival as well as an identity-affirming process. For many of the women in the *charlas*, the latter is the case.

Voices in the Kitchen juxtaposes the *charlas* and literary texts, primarily but not exclusively by Chicana and Mexican women writers, to argue for the interpretation and analysis of the *charlas* as a literary genre. After the transcription of each *charla*, I proceeded to read it as if reading a short story, giving close attention to the

nuances of language, the metaphors, and the symbols women use while engaging in a culinary dialogue. The *charlas* represent personal narratives, testimonial autobiography, and a form of culinary memoir. Texts are not just verbal expressions inscribed in written form; they are actions, practices, and even silences. Texts are embodied as well as inscribed. In this book, while women speak of specific life *herstories* through the seasoning of their cooking, what gets expressed goes beyond the kitchen and cooking per se. Memory, emotions, and history are all evoked and shared within the discourse of the *sazón*, the sensory-logic of cooking, which is highly personalized but socially charged. The fact that the same recipe prepared by two people yields different results further shows the personalization of the *sazón*, or what I call in this study, women's own *chiste* (twist), which reveals particularities of her life. Ketu H. Katrak analyzes a person's *chiste* as she writes, "I tasted anxiety in the onions fried a bit too brown and tension in the too many dark burned spots on the roasted *papads*."¹³ For Gloria Gonzales, "papas fritas" as a form of sharing *chistes* can cure any depth of loneliness or sadness.¹⁴ In this book, the *chistes* we will hear the most relate to Liduvina Vélez's life; we will see them by reading direct transcriptions of our *charlas* or as the source of the theoretical inquiries explored in each chapter.

The theoretical anchors supplied during the transcription of the first *charla* with Liduvina Vélez structure the organization of the book. With the original questionnaire aside, my mother and I began to remember aunts, sisters, and grandmothers. Once she and I were chatting, she shared her own notions of subjectivity as she explained the value in the ownership of the *space* that made up her first *cocina propia* (her own kitchen). The kitchen as a woman's *space* rather than a woman's *place* is the topic of discussion in the first chapter, "A Place of Their Own: Appropriating the Kitchen Space." My mother then took me into a sensual field of knowledge based on the *sazón*, the sensory-logic that prevails in the practices of cooking and in the language of the kitchen. She took me there by describing recipes created by feeling measurements in her hand, by touching food's texture, by looking at the food's color as it cooks, by tasting it and smelling it. The focus in chapter 2 is the *sazón* as the epistemology of the senses. The joy she expressed at remembering her beautiful hand-made tortillas when she was sixteen led to an exploration of aesthetics in *el arte culinario casero* (home culinary art). Chapter 3, "El arte culinario casero: Cooks-as-Artists," engages in the politics of cooking as art. The description of her recipes and invaluable

anecdotes connected to them show a critical understanding of her social and cultural milieu as she writes parts of her life embedded in her cooking practices. Again, due to her stories full of personal and cultural histories, folklore, wisdom, and courage, the theme of chapter 4, “Kitchen Talk: Cooks-as-Writers,” is the life stories surrounding a recipe. The kitchen as a woman’s *space*, *sazón* as an embodied knowledge, and stories in recipes give the theoretical frame for the literary analysis in the last chapter, “The Literary Kitchen: Writers-as-Cooks.”

As a whole, the book creates a space for bringing together the grassroots theorists, the women in the *charlas*, and academic feminists on issues of subjectivity and acts of agency. The bridge it builds represents my attempt to put the theory of decolonial methodologies into practice by the very structure of the book. One of these efforts is not to think of women in the *charlas* as “informants” for my research agenda, but as critical thinkers in their own right who use the language of food to formulate their theories. As a gesture of professional courtesy and respect, when referring to the ideas others have published, even when they happened to be our friends, we refer to them by their last name. The convention of using the last name represents a formal public symbolic act of respect and acknowledgement to someone whose ideas influence our thinking. With this same intention, I refer to all the women, including my mother, by their last name, except in the transcriptions of the *charlas* that form part of this book. In the shift between these two writing techniques, I hope to capture the different discourse of two fields of knowledge. In consideration of non-Spanish speakers, this book offers within the text English translations of the *charlas*, which took place in Spanish. Yet to keep some flavor of these women’s voices, short quotes consisting of a few words or a sentence are in Spanish, followed by an English translation. This editorial format also applies to literary text originally written in Spanish. All the translations are mine unless indicated differently.



Women in the *charlas*

All the *charlas* began with my mother, Liduvina Vélez, in 1996 and continued through 2004. The first conversation took place in Vélez’s house in Menlo Park, California, when she was—well—I do not

believe I can reveal her age. Her response to her age is always the same, “*esas cosas nó se preguntan*” (you do not ask those things). Vélez was born in Michoacán, Mexico, lived there until she had five children, then lived in Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas, Mexico, for a number of years where she gave birth to two more children. Now California is home. She has been divorced twice. When she immigrated to the United States, she took five of her seven children, the oldest being fifteen and the youngest two. The other two children joined her three months later. No one spoke English. Her occupations have ranged from selling food, to making curtains, to washing dishes, to cleaning houses. Since Vélez is known by her friends and family as Duvi, within the transcriptions I will refer to her as Duvi.

Alma Contreras is my oldest sister. The *charlas* with her were always a three-way conversation with our mother. All of them took place at our mother's kitchen table with the special sound and aromatic effects of something cooking on the stove. Contreras has been married twenty-four years, and has four children ranging from twenty-three to nine. While still living in Nuevo Laredo, she attended an academy where she received a Bilingual Secretary Certificate, yet she spoke no English. Even with her nonexistent English, within a year of moving to California she was working at Bank of America. Now, she works as a housekeeper. She explains that this work allows her to have flexibility of time. She is her own boss, a sentiment shared by Vélez. Most of her adult life, she has lived in the same house where the small, no-counter-space, blue-and-white kitchen is located at the back of the house.

Esperanza Vélez and Guadalupe Flores are Liduvina Vélez's two sisters. In order to avoid confusion with the same last names, when the reference is to Esperanza Vélez I will use her full name. Esperanza Vélez loves to cook, and she is known in our family for her *buen sazón*. When she had her house constructed, she told the architect, “*la cocina la quiero grande porque es donde más me agrada estar*” (I want a spacious kitchen because it is where I most enjoy being). The first of our four *charlas* took place over the telephone. The subsequent conversations were held in her house in Puebla, Mexico, usually in the kitchen while cooking together. Her kitchen is roomy with space for a breakfast table. Esperanza Vélez has been married for over forty years and has three children. When her children were small, she began selling clothes by going to people's houses; now she has her own boutique, which is located in the first floor of her house.

For many years, Esperanza Vélez has hired someone to help her with the household duties, except for the cooking. This remains her domain.

Guadalupe Flores, unlike her sister, does not like to cook. But when she cooks, she does it with love for her family. Again the first kitchen talk with her took place over the telephone; the second *charla* was held in her house in Laredo, Texas. The kitchen in her house does not have a definable space of its own; it simply forms part of the dining room. The third conversation took place in a restaurant in Nuevo Laredo, Mexico. In the transcriptions I refer to her as Lupita. Flores has been married for over thirty years, and she too has three children. For many years, Flores was a housewife who dedicated herself to raising her children, but there came a point in her life that she defines as *su depresión* (depression), which she overcame by carving out a career for herself as a Mary Kay consultant, later becoming a director. Now, she travels to places she never imagined she would ever go. Proudly, she shares with me that she has had four company cars.

Irma Vásquez and María Luisa Villicaña are the first two kindred spirits Liduvina Vélez met soon after her arrival in California. Both Vásquez and Villicaña come from the same town as Vélez, such a small town that Vásquez and Vélez are distant relatives. Their friendship goes back over twenty years when they first met working in a sweatshop making curtains. Of the three women, only Villicaña remains in the curtain business, but now she is a designer. Both Vásquez and Villicaña are married; Vásquez has three children and Villicaña none.

Imelda Silva and Guadalupe Flores's friendship goes back over forty years. Vélez suggested that speaking to Silva would widen my understanding of daily life activities in Aguililla and Apatzingán, Michoacán, their native birthplaces. During this *charla*, Silva, her mother, and I made *tamales amarillos* at Silva's house. With Silva, I learned much about Redwood City's Mexicanization over the past thirty years. Silva is married and has three children, two living on their own and one still at home. She works cleaning rooms in a hospital.

The conversation with Alicia Villanueva, Licha, took place at Vélez's dining table. Villanueva is in her mid-fifties, the mother of five children whose ages range from twenty-one to thirty. She is mother and father to her children; she got divorced when her

younger son was about five. Villanueva's ex-husband is Contreras's brother-in-law, thus her connection to women in my family. When Villanueva moved to the United States also from Aguililla, Michoacán, she did not speak English. In order to support her children and herself, she has worked in a laundry, cleaned houses, and now babysits her grandchildren.

I met Hilaria Córtes, or Yaya, while living in Los Angeles, California, from 1991 to 1994. Back then we were neighbors, so I knew that she sold food on the weekend to supplement her income. Years later when I asked her if she would like to be part of this study, she responded, "pues sí, a mi me encanta platicar" (of course, I love to talk). The *charlas* with Córtes took place in the house of mutual friends in South Pasadena, California. Córtes was born in Jalisco, Mexico, where she finished only a few years of elementary school. In her words, "sí fuí a la escuela pero no aprendí. Fuí re burra" (yes I went to school but did not learn. I was a donkey). She moved to the United States in her early twenties, shortly after she married and had four children. For all intent and purposes, she has raised her children on her own. In addition to selling food, occasionally she irons other people's clothes to make some extra money. For fifteen years she rented a house, but with her hard work and efforts she now owns her home.

Erika Morales became part of the *charlas* on the recommendation of a friend in graduate school. During the time of the conversation, Morales was living in Sacramento, California, and she was working as a cook for my friend. She shared many of her family culinary stories and recipes typical of Veracruz cuisine, her native state. Her *compañero*, Cesar, also participated in this conversation. They had been together for just a few years and had a six-month-old baby. They were both in their early twenties. Since then, Morales has moved back to Veracruz and is now the mother of two. During the season of harvesting, primarily tomatoes, Cesar returns to California to work for a few months.

Alma Welty's culinary talk took me to an extensive history of Puebla's culinary arts. She has been a housewife all her adult life. The limitations of her economic circumstances were such that the kitchen where the *charla* took place did not have a sink, and she cooked on an electric one-burner stove. One of her children, years back, had an accident that left him in a wheelchair for the rest of his life. Welty carries the responsibility of taking care of him. I met

Welty thanks to Ángeles Herrera, my sister-in-law's mother. When I went to Puebla in 1999 to have a *charla* with Esperanza Vélez, I also spoke with Herrera, who suggested that Welty was “una excelente cocinera y ha tenido una vida muy dura” (an excellent cook who has had a hard life).

During this stay in Puebla, I also met Susana García viuda de Melo thanks to my aunt Esperanza Vélez's recommendation, who felt her *comadre* García viuda de Melo would be an excellent person to talk with since she makes a living selling food. García viuda de Melo runs a *mini-cocina* from her house, where she serves *comidas corridas* and *a la carta*. In a front corner section of her house, she has her mini-kitchen, which is big enough to hold three tables, each with four chairs. Her private kitchen, the one inside her home, is larger. At this kitchen's breakfast table, our visit took place. Chapter 1 discusses much of García viuda de Melo's life.

Verónica Abarca, my sister-in-law, became part of the *charlas* when Vélez suggested that as our family increases I should continue to gather its history. We spoke while sitting in Vélez's dining table. Back then she had been married for less than a year, left her family in Puebla and moved with my brother, Juan Abarca, to California immediately after the wedding. Now she is a stay-at-home mother of two living in Sacramento, California. We spoke when she was twenty-three.

Norma Salazar's inclusion in these *charlas* deviates from working-class women who are in one way or another connected with my family. I met Chef Salazar, head instructor of the California Culinary Art Academy, in South Pasadena, when one day in June 2003, I walked into the academy and asked if I could speak to someone about the influence Latino food has had on California cuisine. A few days later, Chef Salazar shared with me not only California's history of Latinized fusion cuisine, but also the history of her life in the kitchen, which began when as a little girl she made cookies with her mother. Chef Salazar began working in professional kitchens when she was eighteen.

What brings Lucy Fischer-West into this book are the ongoing *charlas culinarias* we have had since we met in 2001. Since we both love to cook and garden, people who knew us separately would tell us that we needed to “hook up.” Married for over thirty years, she has one son, with whom she enjoys kitchen time. Every meal Lucy offers to her friends and family represents a celebration of life.

Those fortunate enough to eat at her table receive spiritual nourishment from her meals, from her hospitality, and from her storytelling. In *Child of Many Rivers: Journeys to and from the Rio Grande* (2005), Fischer-West offers a literary repast honoring life's experiences.

Voices in the Kitchen offers feminists within academia new areas (yet old practices) for developing theories about women's lives, experiences, and knowledge. What this research offers the women from the *charlas* is public recognition, acknowledgment, admiration, and respect for their lives, their struggles, their knowledge, and, above all, their *coraje* (courage) grounded in the mundane activities of everyday cooking. I would like to close by saying that *los chilaquiles de mi 'amá*, as a metaphor, is the gift that I present not only to all the women who have participated in the *charlas* but also to all those women who do narrate their lives in the daily preparation of each meal, formulating theories from the ground up as they assert their subjectivity and acts of agency. To them I say, *a sus órdenes*.