“A DISH SO POTENT”

HERITAGE, IDENTITY, AND MATERIALITY

OF THE SAN ANTONIO CHILI QUEENS

1850-1930

by

Laura Fernanda Ochoa Rincon

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of the University of Delaware in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in American Material Culture

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ABSTRACT

From about 1850-1930, the so-called Chili Queens of San Antonio ruled the city's plazas at nighttime selling various forms of Mexican food. But what made them so desirable and memorable in the memory of Texans? This thesis explores the ways in which the Chili Queens of San Antonio took preexisting stereotypes about Mexican women and further amplified them in order to sell a certain vision of Mexican womanhood and used that to assert themselves as connoisseurs of their own culture to white patrons. The first section explores the background, identity, and food of the women who later became known as Chili Queens. By looking at their lives before they became a fixture of nighttime plazas, we can gauge a better idea as to how they had to skillfully understand and navigate certain stereotypes to enhance their success with white patrons. Once they leave the home, they enter the public arena and export their product to potential customers while selling a certain vision of identity.

Through their use of dress, decoration, and the food itself as material culture, the Chili Queens created a deliberate decorative program in a public space. We see an interesting shift of heritage presentation from the privacy of their own community to the public plazas, one which gave the Chili Queens more autonomy and political and social capital. Exploring the interesting relationship between white patrons who wrote about the Chili Queens and the Chili Queens themselves, my thesis shows how the Chili Queens' legacy would not have survived without this unlikely union that simultaneously exoticized the women and complimented their cooking and culture. Through their deliberate presentations, the Chili Queens were able to be successful not just in business but also in establishing their legacy.

Chapter 1

INTRODUCING THE CHILI QUEENS OF SAN ANTONIO

In 1977, the state legislature of Texas voted on a resolution to make Chili con Carne the official state dish of Texas. The resolution states, "One cannot be a true son or daughter of this state without having his taste buds tingle at the thought of the treat that is real, honest-to goodness, unadulterated Texas chili."[1] Even famed Texan and president, Lyndon B. Johnson, possessed a special affinity for the dish, which was often prepared for him by his longtime Black cook, Zephyr Wright.[2] So, what made this dish so emblematic of Texan identity? The answer to this question of gastronomic symbolism lies in chili's nineteenth-century origins. From around 1880-1930, the open-air plazas of San Antonio were filled with groups of Mexican and Mexican American women. These women would arrive in the plazas shortly after the sun went down and begin to set up shop. As twilight turned to evening, an influx of patrons

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[1] House Concurrent Resolution No. 18, 65th Legislature

[2] Wright even created her own version of Chili known as the Perdenales River Chili specifically for LBJ and his wife. For more information about Wright's positionality as head cook in the white house kitchen and how Tex Mex influenced her cooking, see: Adrian Miller, *The President's Kitchen Cabinet: The Story of the African Americans Who Have Fed Our First Families, from the Washingtons to the Obamas* (The University of North Carolina Press, 2017): 140-165.

came to the plazas expecting bowls of red-hot *chili con carne* made by these women, referred to as the "Chili Queens." In *San Antonio: A Historical and Pictorial Guide* (1959), Charles Ransdell recounts his own experience walking into Haymarket Plaza in San Antonio, Texas: "the one thing that comes from San Antonio, Texas—and from nowhere else—is chili con carne."[3]

Who exactly were the Chili Queens? Depending on who you ask, you might get different answers. Fundamentally, the Chili Queens were a group of women who decided to forge their own path by entering the marketplace to sell a specific food closely tied to their history and identity. While the image of traditionally dressed women selling a spicy and uniquely southwestern dish may be romantic, the Chili Queens of Texas were actively engaging in a market where their profits from day to day depended on embodying and projecting a certain vision of Mexican womanhood. Many of the Chili Queens worked during the day as domestic or factory workers, yet still found themselves short on money. Struggling to make ends meet, they decided to take matters into their own hands and use the open-air spaces of San Antonio plazas, as well as an understanding of the white idealized vision of the American southwest, to generate supplemental income. The Chili Queens set up a complex array of Chili stands and parlors where they could sell their food to patrons regardless of social status. Though they also sold other traditionally Mexican foods such as refried beans,

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[3] Charles Ramsdell, Carmen Perry, and Charles J. Long, San Antonio: A Historical and Pictorial Guide (University of Texas Press, 1985): 59-60.

enchiladas, tamales, and hot chocolate, it was their chili that made them so famous among the wanderers and citizens of the city.[4]

As the Chili Queens and their enticingly spicy wares grew in popularity within San Antonio, both the dish and the women began to gain notoriety beyond the borders of the Lone Star State. Chili stands were sent to represent the gastronomy of the state of Texas at the 1893Chicago World's Fair, celebrating the quadricentennial of Christopher Columbus's arrival in America, dressed in Mexican attire and using simple utilitarian objects such as makeshift stoves and basic checkered tablecloths, the Chili Queens served up piping hot bowls of chili and many visitors to the fair enjoyed their food for the first time. By looking at everyday objects, we can construct an image of the community the Chili Queens were creating and how they actively shaped their image as an integral part of Texan gastronomy. As is evident from their presence at the World's Fair, there was an interest in these women and the food that they cooked as an international symbol of Texas cuisine and culture.

This celebrated American dish was the product of women who themselves did not receive full recognition as "American." These women struggled as second-class citizens, occupying a world characterized by a centuries-long melding of people and

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[4] Margarita Calleja Pinedo, "La Interdependencia Económica y Cultural De Texas y México: El Caso Del Chili Con Carne," *Caravelle*, no. 96 (January 2011): pp. 217-234, https://doi.org/10.4000/caravelle.4820.

cultures. Many of the women claimed more than one identity, with Chili Queens identifying and being identified as Mexican, Indigenous, and Mexican American. Identity, at its core, is a messy topic, but most of the women in this discussion are Mexican American born (all living in San Antonio), most likely having at least some part of indigeneity. These women's indigenous heritage proved to be something they could turn to their advantage in selling a product made more enticing through the perception of native authenticity. Regardless of these cultural intersections and backgrounds, they came together, or were rather lumped, together under a cultural "Mexican" identity as the Chili Queens. I will be using the term "Indigenous" to refer to someone who mostly connects with their North American indigeneity (as opposed to central American indigeneity) and uses it in everyday life, including old customs and traditions. I will be using the term "Mexican" to mean someone who identifies themselves as a citizen of Mexico and shares cultural ties to both Indigenous and Spanish traditions. Finally, I will be using the term "Mexican American" as any Mexican born person who gained citizenship after Mexico surrendered the land of Texas.[5] Scholars such as Paul Ortiz discuss these intersecting identities at length and acknowledge their linkage and co-existence, influenced by the perpetual change of geographic borders that often cut through the boundaries of cultural and personal

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[5] For more on scholarship that explores alternate definitions for these identities and their complexities specifically during the time of the Chili Queens see: Ramon Guiterrez, and Tomas Almaguer. 2016. *The New Latino Studies Reader: A Twenty-first Century Perspective.*

identity.[6] Regardless of how they were perceived by the world, they sought to make a name for themselves in the plazas of San Antonio and in the world.

The Chili Queen's self-fashioning is key to understanding the prominence they achieved in Texas and beyond. The Chili Queens then used stereotypes rooted in a Spanish colonial past to serve their own needs.[7] They cleverly harnessed white ideas of "the Mexican woman," which included stereotypes emphasizing their docile nature, submissiveness, and ability to cook. They were able to market themselves as a different type of Mexican woman in Texas, one who wasn't afraid to do "unwomanly" things like gossip, smoke, and be out late at night oftentimes alone. This vivacious attitude only seemed to make them more popular because they strayed so far from what their customers expected. The expectation was that Mexican American women were not only docile and submissive, but also unintelligent and entirely dependent on a man. The Chili Queens quickly broke those stereotypes and established themselves as a new form of Mexican Woman.[8]

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[6] For more on these converging identities, see: Paul Ortiz, 2018. *An African American and Latinx History of the United States*. University of North Carolina Press: 23-59.

[7] Fredrick B Pike. *The United States and Latin America: Myths and Stereotypes of Civilization and Nature.* Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992; 120-150.

[8] Vick L Ruiz. "From out of the Shadows: Mexican Women in the United States." *OAH Magazine of History* 10, no.2 (1996): 15-18. http://www.jstor.org/stable/25163066

But the Chili Queens couldn't gain their reputation by themselves. The writing of white male patrons, who had long othered these women, promoted their image in various publications, introducing them to people across the state and the nation. The Chili Queens relied on the uneven power dynamic between themselves and white men to gain the popularity that they did, even though they had relatively little power over what was written about them. This thesis explores how the Chili Queens created a distinctly visible and consumable version of Mexican American heritage, modernized for public performance to enhance their own economic prospects. They mobilized their own material culture in dress, food, and design to create a public image that not only intrigued white patrons, but also engendered respect as reliable cooks and good stewards of Mexican American culture. This distinct image would be key to cementing the Chili Queens as icons of the state of Texas.

This thesis will explore the origins of "chili" and how the Chili Queens transformed the dish from a staple of southwestern home cooking to a highly marketable product. Following the Chili Queens as they entered the plaza space, this study seeks to analyze the materiality of their infamous stands and the Chili Queens themselves. Dress in particular was used to create a specific vision of these women to customers. Within the space of the plaza itself, the relationship the Chili Queens had to the white patrons who wrote about them was key to both the commercial successes and challenges of the Chili Queens. Ultimately, as discussed in the final portion of this thesis, inherently racist Progressive Era reforms were the primary factor in the downfall and final cessation of the Chili Con Carne stands. Even though the Chili

Queens disappeared from the plazas of San Antonio, they leave a vibrant legacy, captured in photographs and objects, that fundamentally shaped Mexican American identity.

Chapter 2

WHAT'S FOR DINNER? CREATING CHILI AND CUSTOMERS

While no direct recipes for the Chili Queen Chili exist now, some close approximations have been published. The following recipe, published by National Public Radio in partnership with the research library of the Institute of Texan Cultures, is likely very close to the recipes used by Chili Queens: "2 lbs beef shoulder, cut into ½-inch cubes, 1 lb pork shoulder, cut into ½-inch cubes, ¼ cup suet, ¼ cup pork fat, 3 medium-sized onions, chopped, 6 garlic cloves, minced, 1-quart water, 4 ancho chiles, 1 serrano chile, 6 dried red chiles, 1 Tablespoon comino seeds, freshly ground, 2 tablespoons Mexican oregano, Salt to taste."[9]

This recipe incorporates Mexican and Indigenous ingredients such as the chiles and comino and old-world foods: pork, beef, onions, and garlic. These ingredients were often found in the diets of white Americans and patrons had no problem recognizing them as familiar. With this synthesis of ingredients, the Chili Queens created a uniquely loved dish by drawing from their own traditions (chiles, oregano) and regional ingredients that were customary for white patrons (beef, cumin).[10] The

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[9] "#1 Original San Antonio Chili," NPR (NPR, October 15, 2004), https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4108397.

[10] Mary Beth Aue. "Texas Chili: A Spatial Analysis of Food Preference." Dissertation, University of Central Arkansas, 1983: 33-50.

ingredient that lent its name to the dish, chiles, was a common and central ingredient in the foodways of the Chili Queens themselves. They not only used chile peppers in cooking, but also in rituals and as medicine.[11] Given that the chile pepper held so much power as a highly popular and common ingredient for Indigenous and Mexican people, it was no wonder the Chili Queens decided to make it a main ingredient in their dish.

One of the ingredients most familiar to white patrons was ground cumin. According to Sarah Pruitt, "the heavy use of cumin (relative to traditional Mexican cooking) can apparently be traced back to the 1500s, when the Spanish brought workers of Moroccan descent from the Canary Islands to their settlements in the San Antonio region. As a result, Moroccan cooking, with its heavy use of cumin and garlic, became part of the complex and interesting history of Tex-Mex cuisine."[12] White patrons were used to the taste to cumin, having used it in cooking since the sixteenth century. It is also heavily featured in Anglophone cooking books of the time so there was a strong connection between white patrons and cumin. By using cumin, salt, and oregano, the Chili Queens seemed to be careful and deliberate with which

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[11] Arnulfo Luengas (2000). *La Cocina del Banco Nacional de Mexico [The Cuisine of the National Bank of Mexico]* (in Spanish). Mexico City: Formento Cultural Banamex. ISBN 968-7009-94-2.

[12] Sarah Pruitt, "Tracing the History of Tex-Mex," History.com (A&E Television Networks, June 16, 2015), https://www.history.com/news/tracing-the-history-of-tex-mex.

ingredients they wanted to include in their Chili. They were using parts of their heritage and culinary tradition to mold their new dish into something that could be eaten by most and not seen as gross or unappealing. By choosing and substituting the ingredients with the customer in mind, the Chili Queens were also asserting their entrepreneurial prowess.[13]

What did home cooking look like for the women before they became San Antonio Chili Queens in 1840s? Their home kitchens were equipped with only the basics, such as pots, pans, and perhaps a kerosene stove if they were lucky.[14] This brought forth a struggle: how could they create something worthy for sale on the plaza with only the barest of kitchens? The challenges of a low budget and low social status coupled with their already busy work and family responsibilities forced the Chili Queens to be creative and use what was available them to not only survive but thrive. They created a dish that was relatively fast and easy to make and store and would be presentable to the public as an authentic Mexican dish, even though it was a mix of American and Indigenous Central Americans influences. A further challenge arose in determining how they were going to market this dish, and themselves, to the public.

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[13] Pilcher, Jeffrey "Tex-Mex, Cal-Mex, New Mex, or Whose Mex? Notes on the Historical Geography of Southwestern Cuisine," *Journal of the Southwest* 43, no. 4 (2001): 21-30.

[14] Calleja Pinedo, Maria Margarita. "Las Barreras Culinarias Del Siglo XIX En La Formacion De La Comida Tex-Mex." *Region y Sociedad* 31 (2019): 11-23. https://doi.org/10.22198/rys2019/31/104

To deconstruct chili, it is critical to discuss each individual ingredient and its purpose. White American, Mexican, and Indigenous customers alike were all accustomed to eating beef and pork, which had been introduced to the new world by Spanish Conquistadores.[15] Suet, or beef fat, was a popular cooking fat during this period for both white and non-white residents of San Antonio, as well as lard (pork fat). Onions and garlic were also common and were used in a variety of recipes. While many species of chiles are used in Mexican and Indigenous cooking historically, the Chili Queens favored the *ancho* chile pepper. Originating in Puebla, Mexico, *ancho* chile peppers have been cultivated since long before colonists made their way onto Indigenous land. When used fresh, the pepper is known as the *poblano*, and has a less spicy and more verdant flavor. When dried, the *poblano* becomes an *ancho*, characterized by a deep red color and a smoky, slow-burning spiciness.[16]

The version of Chili the Chili Queens sold most likely came out of a preexisting stew recipe using goat, venison, or beef. By using these Indigenous ingredients, the Chili Queens were asserting their indigeneity and identity while at the same time trying to create an enjoyable dish. Initial white reaction was negative, and it was even referred to by a patron as "various savory compounds, swimming in fiery

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[15] Dave DeWitt."Chapter 2: Cuisines of Texas." Essay. In *The Southwest Table: Traditional Cuisine from Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona,* 23-51. Guilford, NM: Globe Pequot, 2011.

[16] Amy Bentley, "From Culinary Other to Mainstream America: Meanings and Uses of Southwestern Cuisine." *Southern Folklore* 55, no. 3 (1998): 220-238.

pepper which biteth like a serpent."[17] But even though the palate of white patrons was slow to develop, especially regarding the "bite" of *ancho* chiles, journalists note that there was a certain sense of enticement in the food and atmosphere that the Chili Queens were creating. The Chili Queens' challenge was to create a new recipe that the white patrons with colonial sensibilities wouldn't shy away from, while using the blend of old and new world ingredients they and their Indigenous ancestors used in home cooking.

It was key that their chili be seen as a product of Mexican culture and identity. Being seen as Indigenous meant being seen as primitive, while being seen as Mexican meant one had a closer relationship to the whiteness and thus had more political and social power. By using both old world and Indigenous new world ingredients, the Chili Queens were creating a dish that encapsulated traditions from Indigenous and colonial Mexico. With the introduction of beef as the primary meat for the Chili Stew, the Chili Queens asserted themselves as modern women and cooks who knew how to handle an ingredient such as beef that used to be only used by Spaniards. In addition to experimenting with these new forms of cooking, at home, the future Chili Queens were serving up traditional Mexican fare such as tacos, tortillas, and tamales. The foodways of the Mexican American southwest were the product of a centuries long

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[17] Jeffrey Pilcher "Tex-Mex, Cal-Mex, New Mex, or Whose Mex? Notes on the Historical Geography of Southwestern Cuisine," *Journal of the Southwest* 43, no. 4 (2001): 30-32.

culinary creolization, characterized by the presence of both old and new world flavors and ingredients. The home-cooking of the future Chili Queens was a close relative of "Tex Mex," and what many modern Americans recognize as "Mexican" food.[18]

The creole cuisine of the southwest is part of a larger American phenomenon. The history of food in the United States is characterized by a blend of ingredients and cultures and has been the subject of some notable recent scholarship. Chef and activist Michael Twitty's discussion of food, identity, gender, race, and memory in Black culinary history is especially notable. Latinx women and the food that they produce are ripe for a similar discussion.[19] As Twitty writes in his book *The Cooking Gene*, "A heritage that is only self-congratulating and masturbatory is not a heritage at all but rather insipid nostalgia. We cannot afford that; everything must be put on the table; our food is not just food for us, it is a way into an alternative history and a new vision of who we can become."[20] We must be careful in over-romanticizing food events and the way they depict heritage. In the case of the Chili Queens, it is important to

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[18] Jeffrey Pilcher, "Tex-Mex, Cal-Mex, New Mex, or Whose Mex? Notes on the Historical Geography of Southwestern Cuisine," *Journal of the Southwest* 43, no. 4 (2001): 32-45.

[19] Zilkia Janer, *Latino Food Culture* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2008): 12-22.

[20] Michael Twitty, *The Cooking Gene: A Journey through African American Culinary History in the Old South* (New York, NY: Amistad, an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers, 2018): 35-36.

adequately analyze the functions and forms of the food events and explore the ways in which they tie into heritage and performance.

While scholars like Jensen Wallach argue that there is no singular "taste" that Americans prefer, there are certain types of food that can be identified as inherently American. The Americanness of these dishes can be defined by who made it, the process by which it was made, or the ingredients used. There is a certain power in stating that something is American. Once declared, the true history of that thing might go hidden behind the broad, concealing category of "American" and its various subcategories. One of those such categories is Tex-Mex, which is defined as "having a blend of southern American features originally characteristic of the border regions of Texas and Mexico"[21] Malgorzata Martynuska writes that "transnational mobility has a large impact not only on the lives of migrants who travel to another culture but also on the host culture itself."[22] As a symbiosis of flavors happens, the two cultures are just as affected by each other. Each cultural component of a new cuisine complements and supplements the others, resulting in a true symbiosis. It is critical to note that this was no isolated incidents. Scholars such as Shannon Dawdy and Kay Moss all show that

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[21] Robb Walsh. *The Tex-Mex Cookbook* (XVI ed.), New York: Broadway Books: 12-15.

[22] Małgorzata Martynuska, "Cultural Hybridity in the USA Exemplified by Tex-Mex Cuisine," *International Review of Social Research* 7, no. 2 (2017): pp. 90-98, https://doi.org/10.1515/irsr-2017-0011.

throughout this period southern foodways were rapidly changing and evolving.[23] Vestiges of colonization were always apparent, but southern cooks of color were using a blend of familiar and new ingredients and techniques in order to assert their culinary heritage and vision.[24] This is exactly what happened when the Chili Queens were creating their dish. They used different cultural flavors to create something entirely new which had vestiges of both identities and cultures. Neither one was lost, but rather both amplified by this new creation.[25]

The Chili Queen's job was not to just serve food, but to also serve as a touristic consumption of Mexican culture. One could be Mexican but had to straddle the line so as to not become "too Mexican," scaring away potential patrons influenced by their preconceived images of Mexican people. Indigenous and Mestiza women already generally occupied the lowest level of society.[26] Through their mixed cooking style, these women were trying to appeal to white American patrons as more western and, by

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[23] Dawdy, Shannon Lee; "A Wild Taste": Food and Colonialism in Eighteenth Century Louisiana. *Ethnohistory* 1 July 2010; 57 (3): 389-414. Doi: https://doi.org/10.1215/00141801-2010-003.

[24] For more information about the evolvement of southern foodways see Kay Moss K. *Seeking the Historical Cook: Exploring Eighteenth-Century Southern Foodways.* Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2021.

[25] Egerton, John, "Southern Food: at home, on the road, in histor*y."* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005. 32-68.

[26] Dennis Ray, and Glenn R. Carroll. "Where Did 'Tex-Mex' Come from? The Divisive Emergence of a Social Category." *Research in Organizational Behavior* 37 (2017): 143-66. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.riob.2017.09.003.

extension, modern. By mixing these two aspects, the Chili Queens were able to assert themselves as modern cooks, not simple Indigenous women. While they were cooking, they were also grappling with the way they wanted to be perceived through their food, and what that food signified for the family they were feeding. By taking bits and pieces from each culinary tradition, the Queens invented a dish that could be palatable for most people using ingredients that were both familiar and unfamiliar. As the women were cooking away in their private kitchens creating something for public consumption, the city of San Antonio itself was going through a massive change that would eventually allow the Chili Queens to take to the Plazas of San Antonio and set up their chili stands at night.

Chapter 3

OFF THEY GO: CHILI QUEENS AND THEIR REPRESENTATION IN THE PUBLIC PLAZAS

During the period shortly preceding the reign of the Chili Queens, the passage of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848 meant that Mexicans who decided to stay around South Texas (including San Antonio) would become citizens of the United States. This put a large group of Mexicans in a very precarious situation. Now that they were no longer classified as Mexican citizens, what did that mean for them in terms of their own identity and the way they chose to express it? This radical shift in borders and cultural boundaries meant that women, including and especially the Chili Queens, had to rapidly adapt to a world full of new challenges. They didn't have public support for their business endeavors at the time not just because they were Mestiza and Indigenous women, but also because the plaza space at nighttime was seen as an unfit place for women to be at or to try to sell products. As newly minted American citizens they were American by name but not by culture. Instead of straying away from that Mexican culture they chose to embrace it, alter it, and even commodify it in these open-air plazas. As the space of the plaza developed between 1800 and 1840, Chili Queens had an opportunity to set up shop and capitalize on the influx of highly curious patrons coming to the Plazas at night. Venturing beyond the domestic labor of the home and low-wage factory jobs, they sought to forge their own path to financial security, on their own terms. By using the kitchen as a space to enact

cultural heritage, they were able to create a product that they hoped would play well with patrons. It is then, at that moment, that the Chili Queens shift from primarily cooking at home and enter the Plazas, ready to sell an idealized and fabricated version of not only their food, but themselves, to wider audiences of patrons. This chapter focuses on the materiality of the plazas, the Chili Queens' dress, and stand design in order to examine the overall experience and its shift into the public arena. The way the Chili Queens decided to set up their stands and the way they presented themselves reveals crucial information about their lives and how their viewed their growing business.

There are three different types of plazas in San Antonio: market plazas, organic plazas, and monumental plazas. The first of these is the oldest, with origins in eleventh century Spain. Market plazas were usually unplanned areas with simple stalls that stood just on the outskirts of towns. Organic plazas were planned spaces with direct relation to the city grid used by Spain to build colonial cities and were popular in northern Mexico. The final plaza type, the monumental plaza, gained popularity during the sixteenth century and was popular in Spain and its colonies due to its function of serving as a place for gatherings.[27] From the late seventeenth to the mid eighteenth century, there were three plazas in the city of San Antonio.

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[27] Daniel D. Arreola, "Plaza Towns of South Texas," *Geographical Review* 82, no. 1 (1992): p. 56, https://doi.org/10.2307/215405.

Initially established as a parade ground in 1722, the Military Plaza, by the mid nineteenth century, was rapidly changing into a space not just for military parades but also for commercial use.[28] After the end of the American Civil War in 1865, the city of San Antonio exploded in population, changing the urban topography and the significance of the city's center.[29] Residents created small markets within the space and though they were repeatedly forbidden from using the space as a commercial one, the vendors persisted and eventually the city council gave in to the vendors due to the popularity of the site as a commercial space. As vendors continued to stake their claim in these spaces during this period, the sentiment spread to other plazas within the city of San Antonio.

Negotiating space within the plaza was perhaps one of the most difficult things the Chili Queens had to do. It was important for them to make sure they had space to conduct their business and the best spots were hard to come by. During the beginning of the Chili Queens' reign, from about 1860-1900, the Chili Queens often changed the location of their stands. Primary documentation in the form of various newspaper articles shows that the Chili Queens originally set up their shops in the Old Military

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[28] Marvin Charles Bendele. "Food, Space, and Mobility: The Railroad, Chili Stands, and Chophouses in San Antonio and El Paso, 1870-1905." Dissertation, University of Texas, 2015: 94-98.

[29] Guerra Mary Ann Nooman. *The History of San Antonio's Market Square.* San Antonio, TX: Alamo Press, 1988: 23-55.

Plaza until City Hall and its plaza was built in 1893.[30] Later sites were Haymarket Square and Milam Square plazas, all popular nighttime locations in San Antonio. According to an interview given by Frances Veracruz, a resident of San Antonio who would often visit the chili stands in the 1920s, the plazas were generally open in the summer and fall, usually with three or four stands operating at once in various locations throughout the plaza.[31]

San Antonio was a rapidly industrializing city during this period. Prior to 1887, San Antonio was a relatively small town known for its cattle and vegetable industry. The city was highly segregated, with few new arrivals to the area. In 1887, the San Antonio railroad arrived at San Antonio. With the introduction of the railroad also came the introduction to previously unheard-of foodways, people, and ideas.[32] Not only was San Antonio quickly becoming a transportation hub, but also a culinary hub. Until the nineteenth century, most Americans were eating at home and tended to eat out only while traveling. As Jennifer Wallach describes, "food at these venues [prior to the Chili Queens] was an afterthought, which could be nicely or indifferently

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[30] Frank H. Bushick, *Glamorous Days in Old San Antonio* (San Antonio, TX: Naylor Co., 1934): 39-40.

[31] Frances Veracruz. Interview by J. Esperaza. Oral Interview. San Antonio, December 11, 1975.

[32] "The Railroad Era and Industrial Development," The City of San Antonio - Official City Website > Home, 2016, https://www.sanantonio.gov/Mission-Trails/Prehistory-History/History-of-San-Antonio/Railroad-Era-and-Industrial-Development/Railroad-Era-and-Industrial-Development-Narrative.

prepared depending upon the availability of ingredients and the skill and interest of the cook."[33] As San Antonio was growing, so too was the way in which restaurants functioned. San Antonio was quickly becoming a diverse city. With a population of 12,256 in 1870 growing to a population of 53,321 in 1900, the city experienced a titanic leap in population within just 30 years, becoming the second largest city in the state of Texas.[34] More people meant more mouths to feed and more diverse tastes in food to satisfy. Initially, white Americans saw the tastes of Indigenous and Mexican food as too abrasive, inherently inferior, and unhealthy.[35] The Chili Queens' influence would be the primary factor in changing that perception of Mexican and Indigenous cooking by using stereotypes about their food and both defying and exploiting them. They tackled the criticism of the food being too spicy by adjusting the amount of chile used and furthermore cemented the dish itself as undeniably Mexican, but over time that would change to become Mexican American or sometimes called Tex-Mex.[36]

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[33] Jennifer Jensen Wallach, *How America Eats: A Social History of U.S. Food and Culture* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014): 120-125.

[34] Texas Almanac: City Population History from 1850–2000. Texas Almanac. Retrieved March 2, 2022.

[35] Jeffrey Pilcher, "The Globalization of Mexican Cuisine," *History Compass* 6, no. 2 (2008): pp. 529-551, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1478-0542.2007.00509.x.

[36] Jeffrey M. Pilcher, "Who Chased out the 'Chili Queens'? Gender, Race, and Urban Reform in San Antonio, Texas, 1880–1943," *Food and Foodways* 16, no. 3 (August 2008): pp. 173-200, https://doi.org/10.1080/07409710802304168.

Aside from the materiality of the plaza space, it is critical to look at the materiality of the food itself and how the Chili Queens used their own unique creation to sell an image of authenticity that was anything but authentic. In a broad sense, they relied on white naivety to construct an image of a lively Mexican American woman who cheerfully and sassily delivers delicious and "authentic" food.[37] To answer these questions about authenticity and heritage creation, it is critical to turn to the study of foodways and how communities interact with the food they eat. According to scholar Charles Camp, food plays itself out in what he calls "food events," which are situations and events in which food plays a central role in social activities. To adequately discuss the intersection of food and culture there are five components that must be examined: "Production/gathering of foodstuffs, Distribution of foodstuffs, Cookery, Distribution of foods, Consumption of food."[38] This process of looking at foodways speculates that individual food events are created not as the expression of material needs, but by the symbiosis of social and biological impulses. All humans have a fundamental biological need to eat, but to have a "food event", there must be a deeper meaning to the food you are consuming.

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[37] Jeffrey M. Pilcher, "Who Chased out the 'Chili Queens'? Gender, Race, and Urban Reform in San Antonio, Texas, 1880–1943," *Food and Foodways* 16, no. 3 (August 2008): pp. 173-200, https://doi.org/10.1080/07409710802304168.

[38] Charles Camp, *American Foodways: What, When, Why, and How We Eat in America* (Little Rock, AR: August House, 1989): 13-16.

In the case of the Chili Queens, production/gathering of foodstuff is characterized by the overall production mechanism of food in the nation. This industrialization that grew San Antonio into a major regional hub is reflected in the food production system. *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* by William Cronon provides a useful discussion of the issues of ethics and morality that accompany an industrialized food system. Centering the human experience of the industrialized food system, Cronon explains how, as industrialization and demand exploded, exploitation of farm factory workers rose alongside with it.[39] Market forces, he states, heavily affected nature and the surrounding world. While these market forces can provide the general public with more consumer goods, the increase in volume proves harmful for those at the production level. While Cronon focuses on the Midwest and the city of Chicago, his analysis of the shifting landscape due to industrialization can inform an understanding of late nineteenth-century San Antonio as well.

With the heavy industrialization of foodstuff, the Chili Queens were able to not only access a greater volume of ingredients they might not have previously had access to, thus further expanding the food event they were creating. This rapid industrialization created just the right conditions for the Chili Queens to market their own brand. These industrial food systems were not isolated to Chicago and with the

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[39] William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton, 1997): 145-150.

introduction of the main railroad line in 1887, San Antonio was ripe for this new system to come into place. The distribution of foodstuffs can be examined using the same lens of quick industrialization. As industrialization was swiftly progressing, so too was the distribution of different foodstuff available in America. This increased access to otherwise unseen goods was critical for the Chili Queens. Since cattle was being moved in large numbers, the Chili Queens suddenly had easy access to one of the main ingredients of *chili con carne*: beef. In addition to taking advantage of these newly available ingredients, the Chili Queens instead decided to stick to more traditional ingredients. The Chili Queens acquired most, if not all, of their ingredients using the local markets, which had sourced their foodstuff in an economically pragmatic fashion, choosing to only include basic staples of the region like onion, garlic, ancho chiles, serrano chiles, red chiles, cumin, and oregano. A San Antonio visitor in 1888 described the process of watching the Chili Queens buy their ingredients and noted "when they have to pay for their meat in market a very little is made to suffice a family; it is generally cut into a kind of hash with nearly as many peppers as there were pieces of meat—this is all stewed together."[40] Keeping an eye on their bottom line, the Chili Queens were stretching the meat in order to make as much profit as they could. They were, at the end of the day, entrepreneurs who needed to ensure they made a profit.

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[40] Charles Ramsdell, Carmen Perry, and Charles J. Long, *San Antonio: A Historical and Pictorial Guide* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1985): 279.

In addition to their careful budgeting of ingredients, the Chili Queens were also careful with another valuable and limited resource for working-class nineteenth-century women: time. The cooking methods of the Chili Queens were also unique in the sense that when they set up their stands at night, they weren't necessarily cooking the Chili as much as they were heating it up once it had already been prepared.[41] Like many modern restaurants, the Chili Queens prepared their wares ahead of time. A Chili Queen would sauté the onions and garlic, cook the meat, add water and the other ingredients, and then let that cook for up to eight hours in order to ensure a tender meat in the stew. In addition to their businesses, these women had obligations within the home that kept them busy for most of the day until they opened their stalls. There was not necessarily a hard line between their public and private life, requiring innovation to run their businesses. Preparing the chili ahead of time allowed them to sell for the entirety of the time they were at the plaza, maximizing the opportunity for profit.

Speed and taste were of paramount importance to the Queens. So, too, was the way their food was displayed and served. In the photograph below (Figure 1), a Chili Queen is serving a patron a dish of Chili and four tortillas laid out on a platter. Behind

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[41] Jeffrey M. Pilcher, "Who Chased out the 'Chili Queens'? Gender, Race, and Urban Reform in San Antonio, Texas, 1880–1943," *Food and Foodways* 16, no. 3 (August 2008): pp. 173-200, https://doi.org/10.1080/07409710802304168.

what seems to be a carboard box, one can see the pots and pans she has in front of her and how many different items she is cooking at once. When this picture was taken in 1939, the Chili Queens were still located in their outdoor locations and plazas. You can see the simplicity of the set-up as well. All she has around her is a small awning, a stovetop to keep her food warm, and a carboard box, presumably there to hold inventory such as tortillas. Stalls in the plaza like the one depicted in this photo seem to have been typical in their simplicity. They were a quick location to get a delicious and cheap bite, all thanks to the reputation the Chili Queens spent decades building up. The process of building up their businesses was a rather complex one given how little status they had. But they did so anyways by word of mouth, constantly changing menus, and learning to adapt with the city mandates. This is all hard work which the Chili Queens made look easy.

To get more patrons, the Chili Queens had to walk a fine line. They had to create a dish which was inarguably Mexican and southwestern but at the same time palatable to the white consumer, the primary consumer of their wares.[42] In order to do this, they were careful with the ingredients they chose and endeavored to make a dish that was not too complicated or containing too many spices travelers and patrons were

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[42] For the purposes of this paper, southern cooking is defined as a diverse food tradition in the southern half of the United States which includes elements such as tomatoes, squash, and corn. For more information see: Atkins-Sayre, Wendy & Ashli Stokes (2014) *Crafting the Cornbread Nation: The Southern Foodways Alliance and Southern Identity, Southern Communication Journal*, 79:2: 77-93, DOI: 10.1080/1041794X.2013.861010

not used to. Newspaper articles from the time suggest that while the chili that they cooked was indeed flavorful, it was rarely too spicy for white American patrons.

Figure 1 San Antonio Light Photograph Collection, MS 359, University of Texas at San Antonio Libraries Special Collections

By toning down the ingredients to a more "palatable" version, the Chili Queens were inviting non-Mexicans into their spaces of cooking.[43] With this popular dish, the Chili Queens were able to play two roles at once. On one hand, they were siding with their patrons and creating dishes that could still be consumed by them. On the other hand, they were using ingredients that were indigenous to the area and created a dish similar to other Indigenous stews. They were, at the same time, showing off their culture while hiding parts of it that others may find unappealing. While the origins of the food itself are rooted in Mexican and Indigenous cooking, the toned-down chili allowed the Queens to show off their culture while at the same time attempting to assimilate culinarily in order to make sales. This furthermore proves the point that ethnicity and identity were paramount in the success of the Chili Queens because of how they marketed themselves as Mexican women who knew how to also cook like a Spaniard.

Aside from the Chili that gained them their notoriety from white patrons, the Chili Queens also sold a larger variety of Mexican food including tortillas, enchiladas, and tostadas. This was an additional way for them to draw on their own traditions to make money and support their families. Perhaps this expansion in offerings was something that was expected of them as visibly Mexican women. Surviving

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[43] Frank H. Bushick, *Glamorous Days in Old San Antonio* (San Antonio, TX: Naylor Co., 1934): 39-40.

photographs show that almost all the Chili Queens were brown women, who could not hide their identity because it was etched into their skin. They couldn't run away from looking Mexican, so they used that to their advantage to pass themselves off as doyennes of Mexican, and Tex-Mex, cooking.[44]

A first-hand account of the Chili Queens making other foods for patrons explains that "the cook gave a final pat to the tortilla, and with it resting lightly on her fingers, palm up and just above the griddle, she smoothly slid her hand out from underneath… a deft touch was also essential to avoid embarrassing creases and folds… although quite stiff when just off the griddle, they softened after a few minutes into a delicious flabby texture that kept for an hour or two, then grew stale and brittle."[45] This excerpt shows that not only were the Chili Queens cooking other foods, but they were doing it with just as much thought and finesse as their Chili. These women were, to an extent, a product of their society, but they also used their position to their advantage by perfecting cooking techniques for other foods. This not only gave them more clout but was also a wise and deliberate financial move. This way, even if a patron came by who did not like chili, they were always able to order a different meal. By expanding their menu, they were also expanding their customer

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[44] Jeffrey M. Pilcher, "Who Chased out the 'Chili Queens'? Gender, Race, and Urban Reform in San Antonio, Texas, 1880–1943," *Food and Foodways* 16, no. 3 (August 2008): pp. 173-200, https://doi.org/10.1080/07409710802304168.

[45] Jeffrey M. Pilcher, *¡Que Vivan Los Tamales!: Food and the Making of Mexican Identity* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 2008): 14-18.

base. The professionalism with which they cooked was also a bold and deliberate business decision. They were asserting themselves as the go-to providers in San Antonio for delicious Tex-Mex food.

Just as Charles Camp writes, the Chili Queens were able to construct a "food event" in the plazas they worked on by including not just the food, but also because of what the food allowed to happen, which was congregation and even oftentimes live music events displaying traditional Mexican music. While having to battle negative stereotypes surrounding lower class Mexican women such as them being lazy, dirty, unhygienic, and unintelligent, the Chili Queens asserted themselves as experts of cooking and that allowed them to be seen in a more positive light. The Chili Queens took advantage of a situation that allowed them to become their own bosses and earn extra income. They knew that the plaza spaces were lively areas of the city, especially at night so they likely chose those as locations for their businesses. Military Plaza was an ideal place to start business due to its popularity and relatively central location. During this time, most middle- and lower-class Mexican Americans lived in the working-class neighborhoods of Laredito and Chihuahua, located just west of downtown and west of the Military Plaza. The Chili Queens were able to shape the communal space of the plazas using their own external vision of their heritage. This vision included simplistic design and décor along with other entertainment such as live music, typically in Spanish to further assert their identity. The Chili Queens relied on different ways to exert and present their own culture to patrons in a way that felt more communal than anything else. With such an influx of travelers to the region, this was a

distinct opportunity for the Chili Queens to show off their culture in a curated way, only showing what they want to about their culture but still keeping things 'light' enough so as to not alienate or highly bother white American patrons. As people took notice of these vibrant spaces, stories about the Chili Queens appear in San Antonio local papers. Pictured below, Figure 2 shows a small newspaper segment about the Chili Queens published on January 25, 1925.[46]

This article talks about Chili Queen Juana M. Garza and the seemingly delicious food she made for her patrons. It also provides critical details regarding the set-up of her chili stall. As the article notes, her quarters were "unpretentious, primitive" and consisted of only three small rooms. Even a space of three rooms was massive considering that most Chili Queens simply had a small stand in the Plaza in which they sold their food out of. Only a space such as the plaza would have afforded the Chili Queens so much space, both physical and metaphorical, to grow and become staples of their community. This comes as no surprise for scholars of plaza spaces. In a study conducted by researchers about the visibility and access of plazas spaces, they found that "the presence of seats, food carts, or sculpture (triangulation) and the combination of seats and sculpture improved visibility. Perhaps, the effect of food carts differs in real plazas, where people line up by the cart which may also offer pleasant aromas of the food. Also, in real plazas, the desirable elements

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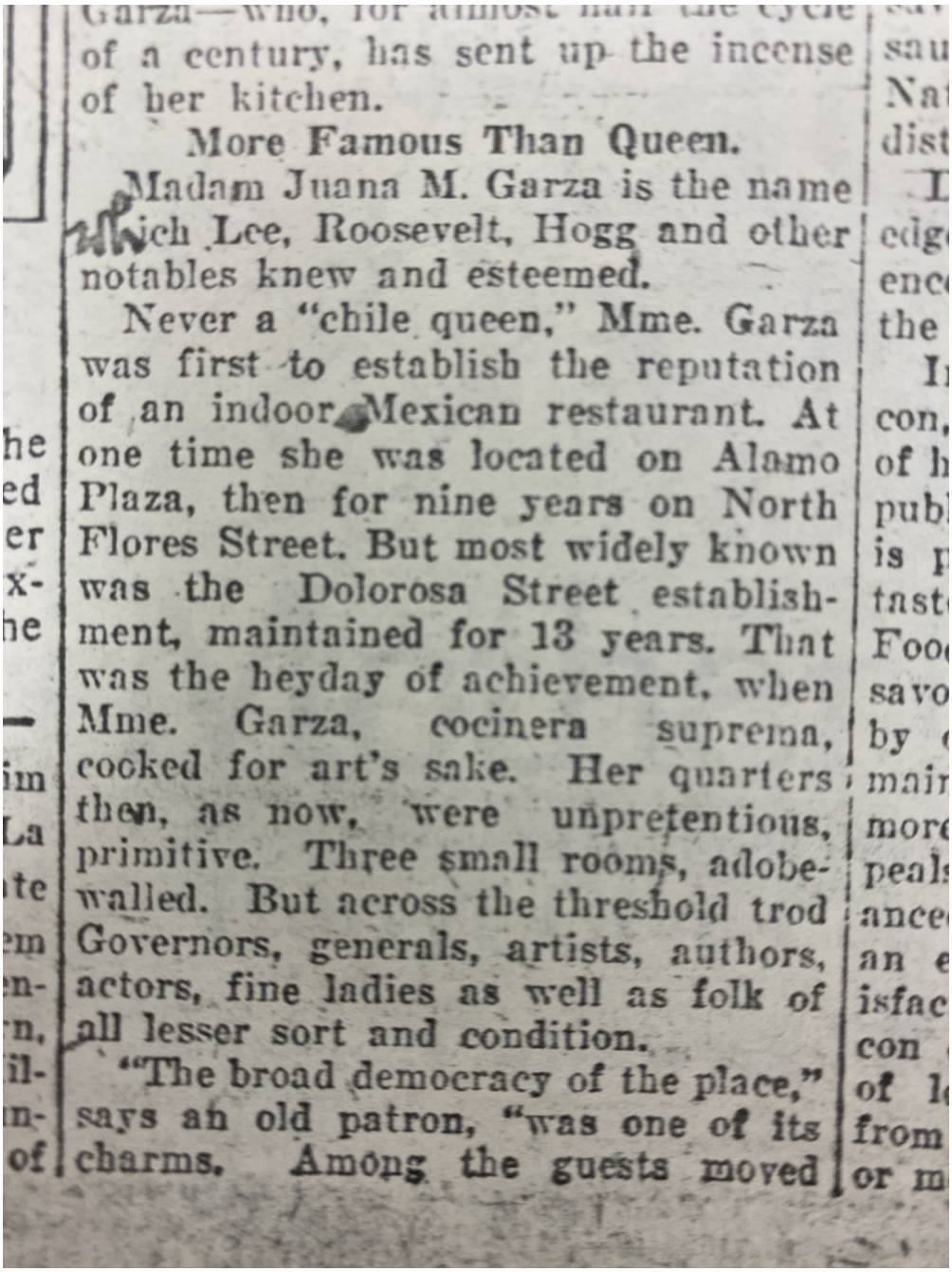
[46] "More Famous Than Queen" *San Antonio Light*, January 25, 1925.



of a century, has sent up the incense of her kitchen.

More Famous Than Queen.

Madam Juana M. Garza is the name which Lee, Roosevelt, Hogg and other notables knew and esteemed.

Never a "chile queen," Mme. Garza was first to establish the reputation of an indoor Mexican restaurant. At one time she was located on Alamo Plaza, then for nine years on North Flores Street. But most widely known was the Dolorosa Street establishment, maintained for 13 years. That was the heyday of achievement, when Mme. Garza, cocinera suprema, cooked for art's sake. Her quarters then, as now, were unpretentious, primitive. Three small rooms, adobe-walled. But across the threshold trod Governors, generals, artists, authors, actors, fine ladies as well as folk of all lesser sort and condition.

"The broad democracy of the place," says an old patron, "was one of its charms. Among the guests moved

Figure 2. "More Famous Than Queen" San Antonio Light, January 25, 1925

would attract people, which might attract other people."[47]

Food and ample seating seem to be the two most important features to have in a plaza to ensure people would visit. When looking back to the San Antonio Plazas from 1860s-1930s, one can evidently see the effect that food had on patrons and visitors. Because of all the makeshift tables put in the plaza, as can be seen from the two previous figures, patrons were able to sit down anywhere and spend more time in the plazas. Since they were already sitting down at the sites of vendors, they would feel even more compelled to engage in this makeshift economy by purchasing food from the local vendors, thus adding to both the visibility and visibility of the plaza space. This visibility only grew due to the fact the Chili Queens created a space in which many Mexican and Mexican American people could exert their heritage in front of white patrons who would come to the stands. They were increasing the visibility of their businesses by increasing their own visibility of their heritage.

The plazas served as a blank canvas on which the Chili Queens and their community could paint a vibrant picture of Mexican American life and culture. The vendors who worked in these spaces constructed material culture when they set up their stands at night. Everything used for the selling and consumption of chili was brought in, creating a tightly portable and carefully curated material world. The Chili

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[47] Dina Abdulkarim and Jack L. Nasar, "Do Seats, Food Vendors, and Sculptures Improve Plaza Visitability?," *Environment and Behavior* 46, no. 7 (2013): pp. 805-825, https://doi.org/10.1177/0013916512475299.

Queen stands was subsequently seen as a plain space, with simple chairs and tables, cooking equipment, cutlery, and other materials necessary for the operation of the Chili stand. But just because it was seemingly set up in a vernacular fashion does not mean that it was uncomplicated or unintentional.

An oral history recorded in 1975 shows us the intricate way the Chili Queens set up their stands with the very little they had. The interviewee, Frances Veracruz, informs the interviewer "[a] chili stand consisted of three tables in a U-shaped set up. The open end of the U was utilized for the coal heated brazier and a portable kerosene stove… the tables used were approximately eight to ten feet in length and the top was about two feet in width… paper flowers in a vase or just a plain glass vase served as a center piece. Each table had the same décor and kitchenware… the coffee pots were made of the enameled porcelain finish kind some blue and some white in color. A porcelain finish water pail and dipper were part of the kitchenware."[48] The simplicity of all the materials inside the plaza space just goes to show the significance of the food itself. The food, while being served inside a plaza space that was sparsely decorated with vestiges of Mexican identity, serves to exude a Mexican identity in America. The chili engaged multiple senses at once, creating a multisensory experience that the customer could link with the essence of Mexican American culture.

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[48] Veracruz, Frances. Interview by J. Esperaza. Oral Interview. San Antonio, December 11, 1975.

This does not mean, though, that the set up was insignificant. Of the plazas spaces at night, the *Christian Science Monitor* reported in 1935 that "the traditions, life, and color of Old Mexico are authentic and vitally alive here…from the primitive kilns of the natives come forth the decorative strings of brightly colored fruits and vegetables…they run through the Mexican section of the city in a sort of color motif that marks this part as still Mexico…perhaps at some future time the Chili Plaza will have vanished. Perhaps the guitars and the twanging voice will be heard no more…the Chili Queens will in years come to reign on the glazed tiles."[49] So while their decorations might have been minimal, they were able to sell a vision of Mexico on the other side of the border that patrons seemed to love and at the same time were intrigued by.

Pictured below is a photograph from 1933 taken in Haymarket Plaza in San Antonio (Figure 3). The first thing to note is on the right-hand side of the photograph, where a makeshift kerosene stove is planted. You can even see the smoke from the stove, showing that the Queens were actively cooking. But it is important to look at what they were cooking with also, which were very cheap metallic and ceramic dishes and pots, which all look heavily used. Another thing to note is the setup of the table itself. It is a basic U-shaped table made up of what seem to be planks of cheap wood.

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[49] "Night at Haymarket Plaza," *Christian Science Monitor*, April 13, 1935.

Over it, an oil cloth is positioned in order to not harm the sensitive wood below. Simple glass cups of various shapes and sizes can be found scattered along the tops of the U-shaped table, as if awaiting more patrons to join in. On the opposite end of the table, one can observe three patrons siting down waiting to be served while behind them three men with guitars are seemingly playing a song for the Chili Queens and the patrons. This type of set up with the accompaniment of live music was not at all uncommon for the Chili Queen stands. In fact, it was rather common for them to be photographed with some sort of musical act, as they were quite popular at nighttime. With such a broad and open space, the Chili Queens were able to take advantage of the situation not just for themselves, but also for local performers. They would join forces and create a distinct and undoubtedly Mexican decorative program for patrons. They were now setting the standard for white Anglo visitors for what was and wasn't Mexican.

In a sense, these plaza spaces became a great location to educate and entertain people with Mexican culture, though that wasn't necessarily the aim for the Chili Queens. In 1882, the published *Alamo City Guide* boasts of the Plaza spaces by writing that "The Plaza is a large open square surrounded by business houses and crossed by the street railway… Those who delight in the Mexican luxuries of tamales,

Figure 3 San Antonio Light Photograph Collection, MS 359, University of Texas at San Antonio Libraries Special Collections

chilli [sic] con carne, and enchiladas, can find them here cooked in the open air in the rear of the tables and served by lineal descendants of the ancient Aztecs."[50]

The appeal of a "genuine Mexican" food culture is evidently being sold to potential tourists. Though the author does not explicitly mention the Chili Queens, the mention of *chili con carne* in the rear area of the plaza indicates that he was almost certainly observing the Chili Queens at work.[51] By describing the women as "lineal descendants of the ancient Aztecs" the image of indigeneity carried by their food, dress, and bodies is shown as "wild" and "different." The white author approaches the bordered space of the plaza with a colonial gaze as a stranger in a foreign land. The Chili Queens probably knew this and didn't push back against such statements. Perhaps they were using white ignorance to further existing stereotypes and enlarged them in order to further underscore their own authenticity.

It wasn't just the Alamo City Guide that promised this type of experience, though. Several other touristic pamphlets and informational books show the Plazas as a space for gathering and eating. A small booklet called *Souvenir of San Antonio* made by Paul Wagner's Bazaar and published in 1885 shows one such scene with simplicity

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[50] Steven Gould, *The Alamo City Guide, San Antonio, Texas: Being a Historical Sketch of the Ancient City of the Alamo, and Business Review; with Notes of Present Advantages, Together with a Complete Guide to All the Prominent Points of Interest about the City, and a Compilation of Facts of Value to Visitors and Residents* (New York, NY: Macgowan & Slipper, Printers, 1882).

[51] Daniel D. Arreola, "The Mexican American Cultural Capital," *Geographical Review* 77, no.1 (1987): 17-43, https://doi.org/10.2307/214674.

(Figure 4).[52] The bottom of the print reads "Military Plaza, Mexican Supper" and that is exactly what is depicted. In the background, there are several buildings sitting next to each other serving as a kind of barrier or border to the plaza. In front of the buildings, the plaza is littered with carriages of people awaiting to eat. Shifting towards the foreground of the print, one can observe several long rectangular tables all stacked next to each other to accommodate all of the patrons. The print itself shows a lively scene of both Anglo and Mexican patrons, who can be distinguished by the clothes they appear to be wearing. For this print to be in a small pamphlet aimed to show all sides of San Antonio means that the popularity of these "Mexican suppers" and the Chili Queens was rapidly growing and was becoming an intrinsic part of the identity of the city, becoming almost inseparable from it.

The physical entrapments and materials used in the plaza space create a material culture program surrounding Mexican-ness. According to Miles Richardson "If material culture is the physical expression of the world in which we are, then defining the situation means how people incorporate material culture into the situation they are creating… People are no longer simply there physically; they are also in-the-world."[53] This type of experience is what the Chili Queens spent so much time

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[52] *Souvenir of San Antonio* (San Antonio, TX: Paul Wagner's Bazaar, 1885).

[53] Miles Richardson, "Being-in-the-Market versus Being-in-the-Plaza: Material Culture and the Construction of Social Reality in Spanish America," *American Ethnologist* 9, no. 2 (1982): pp. 421-436, https://doi.org/10.1525/ae.1982.9.2.02a00120.

Figure 4. Souvenir of San Antonio (San Antonio, TX: Paul Wagner's Bazaar, 1885), University of Texas at San Antonio Libraries Special Collections

cultivating. By incorporating patrons into their world of Mexican American material culture, the Chili Queens were solidifying their decorative program while at the same time transforming the minds and opinions of patrons. The built environment was central to sensorial experience of both Chili and the Chili Queens, and neither would have become emblematic of San Antonio without the other. Even though their dish was rapidly gaining traction, the Chili Queens would soon have to face some serious problems. As the stands were thriving, there was increasing scrutiny by emerging state authorities, such as the Health and Sanitation Department of San Antonio. Nevertheless, they persisted in their search for extra income by travelling to different plazas.

Later sites were Haymarket Square Plaza and Milam Square Plaza. The location where the Chili Queen were depended on the state of the plazas as well as where they were allowed. Figure 5, a picture, taken in 1933 in Haymarket Plaza, shows a typical gathering at the plaza with the Chili Queens. As is evident in the photograph below, there is a makeshift awning created in order to cover the tables and chairs. Mostly everything about the objects is ordinary. The U-shaped wooden table covered by a cheap decorative cloth cover shows the simplicity that the Queens worked under. To the left of the picture are the patrons very close, seemingly full of glee and a few are even holding guitars. It was not uncommon for there to be constant music streaming from the plaza spaces nightly. This music was one of the ways the Chili Queens fostered community, by inviting local, and sometimes non-local, artists to play in the stands at night.

Figure 5. San Antonio Light Photograph Collection, MS 359, University of Texas at San Antonio Libraries Special Collections

As shown in the picture, the crowds who came to eat at the plazas were quite diverse. Even though the crowd of the Chili Stands at night were diverse, the majority were white and the promoters of the food were generally white, such as the authors of the guidebooks and local journalists. We can see Black, brown, and white patrons being tended to by the Chili Queens pictured on the right. This is unique because the Chili Queens fostered and created a diverse food environment where they could

express their own culinary identity while at the same time asserting themselves as savvy businesswomen. The food they served was intentional and transformative. The space within the plaza, as has been discussed in this section, created a captive audience for which the Mexican American community fashioned themselves towards. The plazas were a diverse and multi-sensory experience, with the eating of chili comprising only one component of the experience.

Just as important as the food they served was the way in which the Chili Queens dressed themselves and what that can tell us about Mexican womanhood and identity. Chili and its experience are only one of the fundamentals needed to create a food event. One of the main ways the women who would come to be known as the Chili Queens fashioned their cultural identity in the was through dress. Clothing is central to the presentation and perception of identity, both in life and in visual representations of individuals. The Mexican *rebozo* was a key component of Mexican American, and by extension, Chili Queen dress.[54] Like the shawl, the *rebozo* was worn by Mexican women in their native land and wherever Mexican women lived from around the 1750s to the present day. Typically made from a straight and uncut piece of cloth, *the rebozo* served both a practical and aesthetic purpose as both

[54] For the purposes of this paper, Mexican American is defined as a person who has direct ties to Mexico while living in the United States. Since Mexico didn't achieve its independence until 1821, Mexican American in this context simply means a Mexican living in America.

accessory and to provide warmth to the wearer both out in public and at home.[55] The *rebozo* originated during the early colonial period, with initial mentions of the textile piece being referenced to in 1572.[56] During the same period, there were various Indigenous garments that were similar to the *rebozo* in both style and technique. These precursors were very simple cloths which would be wrapped around the wearer. Mexican makers drew upon Indigenous techniques such as Ikat dyeing and ideas such as a need to create a multipurpose shawl and modified them to create something new.[57]

Around the seventeenth century is considered the introduction period for the garment which, as Patricia Anawalt writes, as "the bringing of a foreign garment into a costume repertoire for the first time in order to fill a new need."[58] This new need was created by Indigenous women in the search for a more versatile shawl with multiple uses—they created the new shawl known as the *rebozo.* So, Mexican artists and makers adapted these Indigenous garments to better serve the needs of a rapidly

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[55] Alejandro Guzman, (September 2, 2000). "El rebozo una prenda 100% Mexicana" [The Rebozo, a 100% Mexican garment]. *Reforma* (in Spanish). Mexico City: 11-21.

[56] "Exhiben la magia del rebozo mexicano" [Exhibit of the magic of the Mexican rebozo]. *El Universal* (in Spanish). Mexico City. September 13, 2012

[57] Wilfrido Ávila García (June 1, 2008). "El Rebozo Mexicano" [The Mexican rebozo]. *El Sol de Cuernavaca* (in Spanish). Cuernavaca.

[58] Patricia Anawalt, "Textiles As History; Clothing Clues To 500 Years Of Mexican Acculturation," *Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings*, 1992: 21-33.

growing colonial society. In making the *rebozo*, Indigenous Mexican makers in the seventeenth century took embroidery and weaving techniques that had been used for centuries in Indigenous garments such as embroidered skirts and turned them into a *rebozo*, a completely modified garment with Indigenous Mexican origins.

When we start looking at the *rebozo* as both a local and global garment, we can start making larger connections about dress, appearance, and perception. The *rebozos* visible on the streets of colonial Mexico and San Antonio could simultaneously communicate identities and perceptions as diverse as the women wearing them. The *rebozo* could serve as a class signifier based on the specific materials, ornate embroidery, and particular motifs. On another woman, it could serve as a utilitarian garment that could be used for everything from carrying a child to ceremonial purposes. It could be wrapped around a woman and tied off to allow her to carry items or babies inside of it. Extending beyond that, the *rebozo* has even been used in traditional Mexican folk medicine as a tourniquet, and as a tool for birthing mothers by using it to apply pressure to the stomach in order to make childbirth easier.[59] The colonial *rebozo* embodies the multiplicities of colonial Mexican society, linked by its materials, wearers to both Spanish and Indigenous textile traditions. The *rebozo* was adapted to lives and needs of the wealthy Mexican woman just as acutely as it was to

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[59] Rebeca Pérez, (November 20, 2009). "Revalora el rebozo medicina tradicional" [Revaluing the rebozo in traditional medicine]. *Mural* (in Spanish). Guadalajara.: 8-10.

the poorest *rebozo* wearers, demonstrating the versatility of the garment and its permeation as an essential component of Mexican dress. The Chili Queens relied on this history of the rebozo in order to assert themselves as inherently Mexican.

The origins of the complicated perception of this garment is best explored visually through *casta* paintings from the eighteenth century. *Casta* paintings helped to visually define racial categories in Mexico in the eighteenth century.[60] They served as a visual aid to separate people into groups and those groups depended on factors such as skin color, which was often tied to race and ethnicity. In *De Castizo y India produce Coyote* by an anonymous artist, made in about 1760, we see a depiction of a *rebozo* and one of the many ways in which it was worn by Mexican women (Figure 6). By examining the different *rebozos* and their wearers depicted in *casta* paintings, a clear link between indigeneity and the *rebozo* emerges.

In this work, painted around 1760, we can see a woman, described as *india*, with her *castizo* (mixed Spanish and Indigenous) husband and their daughter. While the mother is depicted with a lighter brown skin tone, her classification as *india* clearly denotates her as Indigenous. While both the daughter and mother are depicted with only slightly darker skin than the *castizo* father, their indigeneity can be read by the viewer in their clothing, namely in the presence of the *rebozo.* Both the mother and daughter wear similar outfits, consisting of a European-style bodice and petticoat with

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[60] Sarah Cline, "Guadalupe and the Castas," *Mexican Studies/Estudios Mexicanos* 31, no. 2 (2015): pp. 218-247, https://doi.org/10.1525/mex.2015.31.2.218.

a white *camisa* with ruffles at the neck and cuffs. The mother's earrings are large, likely made from a hard paste, while the daughter's feature a red or pink stone, perhaps coral. Both mother and daughter are wearing a striped *rebozo* over their shoulders. The western components of their dress and the lightness of their skin place mother and daughter in visual proximity to the whiteness of the *castizo* husband. Without the addition of a *rebozo,* the women could be perfectly placed inside the crowds of any number of European cities in the mid-eighteenth century. As the *rebozo* eventually fell out of fashion with the colonial elite, the garment became more associated with lower class Mexican women, which could be at least partially attributed to the ways in which Casta paintings depict the *rebozos*.[61] With these Spanish influences in fabric and design, coupled with strong Indigenous influence in design, the *rebozo* gained

[61] Diana DiPaolo Loren,, "Corporeal Concerns: Eighteenth-Century Casta Paintings and Colonial Bodies in Spanish Texas," *Historical Archaeology* 41, no. 1 (2007): pp. 23-36, https://doi.org/10.1007/bf03376991.

Figure 6. Unknown, Casta Painting: De Castizo y India produce Coyote, about 1760. Denver Art Museum: Gift of the Collection of Frederick and Jan Mayer, 2013.306. Photography courtesy Denver Art Museum

popularity among the lower classes in Mexico and Texas towards the mid nineteenth century. As it gained such popularities, fancy *rebozos* such as the ones described previously, began to phase out. In particular, it was used as a signifier for Mestizo women, which I define as a person of mixed race having Spanish and Indigenous descent, who would wear the *rebozo* in the early colonial period to distinguish themselves from Indigenous women.[62]

By the time that the Chili Queens were active during the period between 1860 and 1930, there were two different types of *rebozos*. The first were the "traditional" *rebozos*, which consisted of a design made with a special dyeing technique known as ikat. This resulted in multiple patterns, typically depicting pastoral scenes or following a complex patterns such as traditional Mexican patterns but were often easily replicated and reproduced.[63] To make an Ikat *rebozo*, there are fourteen different steps required. What set them apart from previous works, was the way threads are soaked in starch to solidify them before they go on the loom. Before going on the loom, the cords are marked with ink and then hand tied before being dipped in the dye bath that would give it its color. The second type of *rebozo* made during this period were known as regional *rebozos*. While the general techniques of the creation process are

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[62] Marion Oettinger et al., *Folk Treasures of Mexico: The Nelson A. Rockefeller Collection* (Houston, TX: Arte público press, 2010).

[63] *Julia Marisol Hernandez (June 13, 2012) "Únete al Festival del Rebozo" [attends to Rebozo Festival]. El Occidental (in Spain). Guadalajara*

the same, regional *rebozos* are significantly more colorful and come from regions such as Oaxaca and Chiapas.

Following the 1870s, changes in the marketplace enabled most Mexican women to wear a *rebozo*. With *rebozos* more widely available, the soon to be Chili Queens would often wear them to signify their cultural heritage to their families and anyone they came into contact within the outside world while wearing the garment.[64] Made from various fibers such as cotton, wool, or silk, they could cost anywhere from a couple hundred pesos, which was about $10, to more than thousands based on the material used. Colors and patterns can differentiate where the *rebozo* was made but during this period most *rebozo* were made in Mexico and then exported to the United States.[65] Trends and feelings about Indigenous Mexican dress such as the *rebozo* expanded into Texas, including San Antonio, where the Chili Queens resided. This strong associations between indigeneity and Mexican can be observed further by looking at newspapers of the time. A Spanish newspaper in San Antonio in 1908 named El Democrata Fronterizo (The Democratic Frontier) describes the proudness for the town for a woman to be wearing a *rebozo*. They describe a woman with a

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[64] Marian L. Martinello, *The Search for a Chili Queen: On the Fringes of a Rebozo* (Fort Worth, TX: TCU Press, 2009): 23-41.

[65] "Julia Hernandez "Exhiben la Magia del Rebozo Mexicano" *[Exhibit the magic of the Mexican rebozo]. El Universal (in Spanish). Mexico City. September 13, 2012.*

rebozo as beautiful, healthy, and Mexican. The ad also shows the reader where one can purchase these rebozos in San Antonio.[66]

Rebozos quickly became a signature look worn by the women not only when preparing food at home but also in the marketplace. The adoption of a simplified "mash up" *rebozo* allowed the Chili Queens to pick a garment that had such direct ties to indigeneity, and by extension, Mexican-ness. The newer and cheaper *rebozos* allowed the women to assert their culture through a directly visual medium. The rebozo and dress was simply one of the many cultural markers that created the Chili Queens' identity toolkit. Like dress, food is a powerful form of culture. Though one can note that community gatherings and creation of public memory does not necessarily need to surround food, in the case of the Chili Queens, one cannot separate the food from the culture and, naturally, the women themselves.

As that association grew, one can begin to see pictures of Chili Queen wearing *rebozos* themselves, where those trends were following alongside the trends of Mexico. They used this garment to conjure up the image of the *china poblana*, a stereotypical depiction of a lively lower-class woman from Mexico who was known for her dress and jovial attitude. We can see this connection being made directly by looking at an oral interview that describes the Queens wearing "colorful long skirts

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[66] *El Democrata fronterizo. [volume]* (San Antonio, Tex.), 08 Feb. 1908. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers.* Lib. Of Congress.

and blouses. The traditional *china poblana* type costume."[67] Even though there was, to some extent, a derogatory nature to calling someone a *china poblana*, there was also a high sense of intrigue and excitement when people came across one.

Shortly after the eighteenth century, the depiction of the *China Poblana* became popularized. Kimberly Randall writes that "The *china poblana* with her costume of European petticoats and colorfully embroidered Spanish-style blouse figures predominantly, especially in the detailed descriptions provided by travel writers in the nineteenth century. For her inventive use of lace, sequins and embroidered embellishments, the *china poblana* was many times praised for her "taste" and "extraordinary beauty."[68] These *china poblanas*, much like the Chili Queens, were a group of highly independent mostly middle and lower-class women who would spend much of their days out and about, doing very little other than looking pretty. Occasionally she is mentioned as selling small items by the roadside or food, which led to many travelers writing about them and their lifestyles. As opposed to the highly elite women in Mexico who would very often never leave their homes, the *china poblana*s, were makers of their own destiny and were known as independent

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[67] Veracruz, Frances. Interview by J. Esperaza. Oral Interview. San Antonio, December 11, 1975

[68] Kimberly Randall, "The Traveler's Eye: Chinas Poblanas and European-Inspired Costume in Postcolonial Mexico," *The Latin American Fashion Reader*, 2005, https://doi.org/10.2752/9781847881052/lafr0009.

women who transgressed social boundaries. Contemporary writers described the *china poblana*s as mestizas and were highly intrigued by them:

> "The china does not allow her small foot to be encased in a satin shoe: she knows to wash the clothes with perfection, to stew a delicate mole, to season quesadillas most tastily, and to admirably make up the pulque with pineapple and almond or tuna [fruit of the prickly-pear cactus]: there is no street where she is not seen, graceful and attractive, with the twirl of a petticoat from one sidewalk to another; and in the jarabe, a dance as boisterous as it is national, captivating with her lascivious movements, the glance of her brown or dark eyes. Her black hair is gracefully waved, and from it, her name has come without a doubt."[69]

Multiple similarities emerge between the Chili Queens and the figure of the *china poblana.* Even though the *china poblana* was not known for her wealth, her cleanliness shows a desire to exemplify themselves as clean and presentable women. The second, and perhaps most important comparison, is the one the author draws between the *china poblana* and food. To mention her mole, quesadillas, and pulque, was an intentional act meant to create a connection between the *china poblana*, independence, and food. To accentuate the delicious food she cooked is to give her

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[69] Bobadilla Encinas, "Manual Del Viajero En México (1858), De Marcos Arróniz. Apuntes En Torno a Un Narrador Costumbrista (Traveler's Manual in Mexico (1858), by Marcos Arróniz. Notes about a Costumbrista Narrator)," *Noesis* 28, no. 55 (June 2019), https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.20983/noesis.20193.5.

some position in society, because she can at least leverage her culinary skills in the real world. It also places the act of food making with words such as graceful and attractive, thereby connecting the *china poblana*'s ability to make food to the gracefulness she exhibited.[70] Another point to note in this description is the mention of her dark eyes. This continuous exoticization can be observed in various first-hand accounts of *china poblana*s and Chili Queens. To mention the color of their eyes is to accentuate that they are mestiza women, therefore not a part of the upper rungs of the casta system.

Those living in Mexico who came from Europe or European parents favored imported fashions from Europe, while those who were Mestizos tended to blend European and Indigenous dress in an attempt to create something entirely new. The Chili Queens were lower class mestiza women who played this role well. They incorporated European dress while at the same time still wore Indigenous dress such as the *rebozo* to identify themselves as mestiza women. During the beginning of the reign of the Chili Queens, from about 1870 to 1900, we see significant photographic evidence that the Chili Queens, much like the *china poblana*s and contemporaries in Mexico, were using the physicality of the *rebozo* as an indicator of their respective identity.

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[70] Ibid., 12.

During a time of rapidly changing leaders and borders in both Mexico and Texas, the *rebozo* came to symbolize a culture that was unwilling to be forgotten. This culture was readily adopted by the Chili Queens. This was further amplified by the connection that the *china poblana* had to cooking knowledge. The garments they wore were emblematic of a newly forming identity, one that was neither completely Mexican, Indigenous, or American. Given the strong visual culture ties to *rebozos* and Mexican-ness, the Chili Queens were using this preconceived notion to their advantage. By asserting their "authentic femininity" they were embodying the clothes they were wearing, thus selling a certain vision to the patrons who would come over for a bowl of Chili wearing their *rebozos* mixed in with modern European dress.[71] On the other hand, by wearing the *rebozo*, the Chili Queens were asserting a counternarrative to the *china poblana.* Since the *china poblana* was not allowed to smoke, drive, drink, or work outside the home, they were going directly against this narrative. By setting themselves up as entrepreneurs, the clothes they wore, in particular the *rebozo*, showed that they would not be defined by any set up stereotype for how a woman ought to dress. By incorporating the *rebozo* along with various items of traditionally European dress, they were setting up a new category for Mexican and

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[71]Adriana Zavala. *Becoming Modern, Becoming Tradition: Women, Gender, and Representation in Mexican Art* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010): 15-17.

Indigenous women in San Antonio, one that didn't have to be so restrictive and delineated and one that allowed the Queens to assert some form of autonomy.

Since the *rebozo* had been so closely associated with Mexican womanhood, those sentiments began to change around the turn of the nineteenth century into the twentieth century. As the popularity of *rebozos* waned away from the upper class, the lower classes were still actively wearing *rebozos* and continued making them in large quantities.[72] We can see this change in status further emphasized by looking at more photographs taken of the Chili Queens. As can be seen in Figure 7 below, a photo taken in the 1880s depicts the lively Military Plaza market where the Chili Queens would set up shop at night and serve to their patrons. Amongst the sea of black coats and mostly western dress, we can see a Chili Queen toward the center of the photograph, her back turned to us. A skirted petticoat down to the floor is embellished with two deep ruffles at the bottom. This skirt is in line with American fashion of the period, indicating there was some desire to assimilate based off the clothes they wore. It was a typical middle- or lower-class garment based on its simplicity.

While her bottom half is undeniably western, what's most intriguing is her top half. While we can observe her talking to two patrons, looking down at one, we can see that around her shoulders and body is a, presumably black, *rebozo* with finger weaved fringe along the perimeter of the garment. As the garment hangs loosely over

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[72] Andrea Bastien, "La Prenda De Mexico; El Rebozo," cultura, 2010, https://culturacolectiva.com/historia/la-prenda-de-mexico-el-rebozo.

her shoulders, she is exemplifying her status as a Mexican woman. Not only that, but she is also attempting to exert her identity as an American woman, as is emblematic through her choice of skirt. To mix global western fashion with distinctively Mexican garments, the Chili Queen is turning herself into a bit of a paradox. By asserting her independence and working in the plaza, she is rejecting traditional notions of womanhood in both Mexican and European standards. While at the same time, she is attempting to market herself as two people in one. On one hand, by looking at her bottom half, one would assume this is a western woman wearing a basic western skirt. By looking at her top half, clues of her Mexican nature reveal themselves in the *rebozo* she is wearing.

We can see western influences on the clothes these women wore, we can also see significant signifiers that made them stand out, mainly the use of the *rebozo*. This established them as a group of women who were rapidly changing and evolving in their identity. This combination of dress inevitably led some to classify that style as inherently Mexican. The use of the *rebozo* further emphasized this identity and became a sort of tool for the Chili Queens to use. But it is also important to note that they were mixing styles of clothing together with the *rebozo*. Pictures from the period show Chili Queens both wearing *rebozos* with traditionally western clothing underneath or not wearing *rebozos* at all with only western wear. Visually, this leads

Figure 7. San Antonio Light Photograph Collection, MS 359, University of Texas at San Antonio Libraries Special Collections

to a mixture of identity that is both foreign and native. Much like the Chili they cooked, which was coming from a mix of traditions, the mixture of European and Mexican clothing on the Chili Queens show that they were trying to assert a certain vision of themselves through the way they presented themselves. *Rebozos* are also much more complex than just a piece of weaved fabric. To these women, and the women who made them they represented, as Gabriella Gutierrez writes, "womanhood served in a bowl of folklore and struggle, motherhood and fashion a myriad of activities and memories for Mexicana women to digest continuously."[73]

In a photograph taken in 1883 in San Antonio, one can observe a Chili Queen out in the open-air plaza with a *rebozo* loosely drawn around her body (Figure 8). Here we can observe the Chili Queen front and center. Beside her stands a Mexican man with a broad brimmed hat and a long white sleeve shirt with lateral stripes of an unknown color. Right in front of the Chili Queen is a stack of plates, presumably those would be used to serve food to patrons. She stands in the middle, eyeing the camera directly. We can see she is taking from western influences by observing her long skirt with lateral stripes, which she wears over a faded and torn apron. One can presume it is cold due to the fact that she also chose to wear an embroidered sweater. This sweater features fine detailing along the edges and is

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[73] Gabriella Gutierrez y Muhs, "Rebozos, Our Cultural Blankets," *Voces: A Journal of Chicana/Latina Studies* 3, no. 1/2 (2001), https://doi.org/http://www.jstor.org/stable/23013260.

Figure 8. San Antonio Light Photograph Collection, MS 359, University of Texas at San Antonio Libraries Special Collections

similar to other sweaters that Americans and Europeans would wear at the time. While the bottom of her outfit is the product of the white European and American fashion system, the *rebozo* is actively rejecting that notion.

Even though the Chili Queens' stands, by the early twentieth century, were highly popular, there was danger looming overhead for these women. As I will discuss in the following chapter, the fate and future of the Chili Queens was decided not by them, but rather by bureaucrats. Pictured below is a photograph taken in 1937 by *The San Antonio Light* (Figure 9). The newspaper article reads "Action of city health department ordered removal from Haymarket Plaza of chili Queens and their stands, brought an end to a two hundred year-old tradition... Made their first appearance after Spanish soldiers camped on Military Plaza."[74] At this point in time, the Chili Queens struggled with local officials, attempting to continue this almost century-long tradition. According to the health department, lack of running water and proper utilities to cook was too much of a health risk for the city to take. This was a pivotal time for Chili Queens. To be seen as legitimate, they had to abide by different rules they were not accustomed to and answer to the city. Due to these new rules and regulations, the Chili Queens seemed to also change the way the appeared. No longer would one see a Chili Queen wearing a *rebozo* most likely because now they wanted

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[74] "Chili Queens Make Last Stand," *San Antonio Light*, September 12, 1937.

to distance themselves as much as possible from their Mexican identity, which was inherently seen as unclean by local white city officials.[75]

In Figure 9, we can see two sisters and Chili Queens, Juanita and Esperanza Garcia, making tortillas. While the action itself of making tortillas is inherently Mexican, the dresses they wore tell another story. Pictured the left, we can see one sister in a floral-patterned modern dress with small ruffles on the shoulder. On the right, the other sister is pictured wearing a simply knit white dress with folded arm cuffs. Both dresses are fine examples of Eurocentric dress in San Antonio during this period. These sisters, and all Chili Queens past 1900, had to quickly evolve into a more Eurocentric dress style to continue progressing with their business. In addition to this, the older outfits were generally out of fashion by the 1930s and the Chili Queens chose to modernize their dress. By this point, hundreds of writers had written about the Chili Queens and their food, so they were established as being able to cook delicious food, perhaps no longer really needing the *rebozo* to sell their food and its authenticity.

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[75] Jeffrey M Pilcher. "Who Chased out the 'Chili Queens'? Gender, Race, and Urban Reform in San Antonio, Texas, 1880–1943." *Food and Foodways* 16, no. 3 (2008): 173–200. https://doi.org/10.1080/07409710802304168

Figure 9. San Antonio Light Photograph Collection, MS 359, University of Texas at San Antonio Libraries Special Collections.

After 1900 it is very difficult, if not impossible, to find a photograph of a Chili Queen wearing a *rebozo*, as Mexican women adapted to the new realities of the twentieth century. By disavowing Indigenous clothing, they were increasingly asserting themselves as American citizens, not to be confused with the lower-class Mexicans. As the health and sanitation rules introduced in the early 1900s expanded, the Chili Queens wanted to distance themselves from their Mexican identity and wanted instead to be perceived as American businessowners. Regardless, the *rebozo* did serve a significant function for these women and other mestiza women in the past. As a multifunctional shawl, it provided them with multiple uses but also as a way for them to identify themselves and show the people around them what their background was. By this point the Chili Queens had such notoriety due to patron buzz, the *rebozo* became optional as a way to exert heritage. The evidence of their heritage and cultural expertise were present in the food they served to customers.

Chapter 4

UNILIKELY ADVOCATES AND THE END OF THE CHILI QUEEN ERA

The Chili Queens relied on an unlikely ally in their quest for popularity: white men. It was through the words that white men wrote about the Chili Queens that they rose to popularity. While the Chili Queens were taking a risk by displaying an amplified version of their heritage in a public space, they also would not have been talked about if it were not for these white voices. How does that then change the way we ought to look at the legacy of the Chili Queens? For one, we know that the racialized lens in which they were being examined was coming from a Eurocentric point of view. Due to this specific point of view, they were even further exoticized. That exoticization, though demeaning, was a large contributor to their notoriety. But that relationship only further exacerbated the differences in cultures and made the Chili Queens more alluring. The context in which the Chili Queens existed then changes from one of liberation to one dependent on the approval of the white gaze. This is precisely why the Chili Queens made deliberate decisions in front of patrons to present a particular version of Mexican womanhood and changed their recipe to include less spicy peppers. While they were still publicly displaying their heritage, they presented a curated version of it to fit the needs of white visitors.

The white visitors, while coming in with preconceived notions, still wrote about the Chili Queens as if they were some exotic creature—almost outside of being human because all that could be seen of them was their heritage (or the ways they

decided to present it for patrons). While the Chili Queens seemed to have momentarily disappeared in the minds of Texans shortly after the last stand was shut down in the late 1930s, it was the written words of the patrons that kept their legacy alive.

Published in 1913, the author of the *Visitor's Guide and History of San Antonio, Texas* shows us just how popular the Chili Queen stands were by sharing from his own experience in which he writes "imagine a large square at that time badly lighted as to municipal illumination, but ablaze with small camp fires and flaming lamps swinging above rows of improvised and shaky tables…the more fastidious American might enjoy delicately fried eggs and chicken with a cup of fair coffee, followed, perchance, by a corn-shuck 'cigarro' rolled by the hand of the dark-eyed 'muchacha' in charge."[76] By describing the Chili Queens serving his food as "muchacha," which in Spanish roughly translates into little woman, Barnes is showing us how he views his positionality compared to the woman serving him. To him, the Chili Queen was simply a servant with dark eyes.

With this one simple sentence we understand the "muchacha" to be a part of a different world: one that caters to white patrons. It is also important to note the description of the plaza that Barnes draws out. These are makeshift structures littered with bad lighting and small fires everywhere. We know the fires exist for the Chili

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[76] Charles Barnes, *Visitor's Guide and History of San Antonio, Texas: From The Foundation (1689) to the Present Time, with the Story of the Alamo* (San Antonio, TX: Published by Nic Tengg, 1918).

Queens to cook their food, but the ambience that Barnes sets up leads the reader to believe that the place was at least a little shady and suspicious. Regardless of these conditions, though, writers and patrons like Barnes continued to flock the plazas at night hoping for a bowl of Chili and a cigar from the Chili Queens.

This attempt at forging a new identity seemed to work out well because by the 1880s, the Chili Queens' fame had spread to northern cities, where, according to an 1897 San Antonio Express report, newspapers and magazines idealized them as "stunning creatures, with the rich, brown skin of the tropics and the languorous grace and bewitching black eyes of Spanish donnas."[77] In this quote we can see two things occurring. The first is the obvious objectification of the Chili Queens. They are described as "stunning creatures" meaning they are not entirely human. By dehumanizing them through this description one can note that while there do seem to be shifting attitudes about the food that they cooked, the Chili Queens at the end of the day were still seen as exotic and unamerican. This is now the second time we have observed descriptions directed at the Chili Queens' eyes. It seemed to be, other than the skin color, the primary mode for othering the Chili Queens.

The lack of light-colored eyes tells the reader that this "muchacha" is not like other women. Regardless of the xenophobic remarks though, it is evident through this quote that the Chili Queens were quickly becoming known all over the state. Their

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[77] Gene Fowler and Tandem Web Co, "Hot Dish," *Texas Highways*, April 21, 2018, https://texashighways.com/culture/history/hot-dish-san-antonio-chili-queens/.

food, and the way in which they cooked it, allowed for their own commodification. The Chili Queens were also not unaware of the impact they and their food had. As food scholar Jared Pilcher writes "The young women appreciated recognition not only for their beauty—although surely that was part of it—but also for their cooking skills. Moreover, the crowds who clamored for chili validated the entire Mexican community, granting recognition of their foods as a worthy part of the national culture."[78] The beauty of the Chili Queens lay not only in their jovial attitudes but also in their self-fashioning as a romantic image of the Mexican woman. But it is still clear to see the effect the food they served had not just on patrons, but also on the way that they perceived Mexican culture.

But as they were growing to be more a part of the popular culture in San Antonio, their very existence within the plaza space was being continuously threatened. As Gabaccia and Pilcher write "Much of the allure of the vendors lay in their transgression of the boundaries of race and hygiene."[79] What did this mean exactly? Essentially, it translates into patrons acknowledging the food vendors as unhygienic to some degree while at the same time continuing to purchase their

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[78] Jeffrey M. Pilcher, "Who Chased out the 'Chili Queens'? Gender, Race, and Urban Reform in San Antonio, Texas, 1880–1943," *Food and Foodways* 16, no. 3 (August 2008): pp. 173-200, https://doi.org/10.1080/07409710802304168.

[79] D. R. Gabaccia and J. M. Pilcher, "'Chili Queens' and Checkered Tablecloths: Public Dining Cultures of Italians in New York City and Mexicans in San Antonio, Texas, 1870s-1940s," *Radical History Review* 2011, no. 110 (January 2011): pp. 109-126, https://doi.org/10.1215/01636545-2010-028.

products. There was a sort of allure to these Chili Queens because even though they were generally seen as making unhygienic food, they were also seen as vibrant and important pillars of the Mexican American community. An 1897 San Antonio Express article discusses the food made by the Chili Queens and concerns around food safety and sanitation. The article states that "since they can't be washed or disinfected it is well to take them as they are and thank heaven that they were ever made at all."[80] This shows that patrons knowingly ate the food even with warnings from local city officials that the food might not be safe to eat. Instead, it was described as heavenly.

The built environment depended on both the Chili Queens and the local city officials who were attempting to shut down the Chili Stands. What was once a source of pride for the city began to become, as some city council members saw it, a nuisance to "reputable" restaurants. As some scholars write, "[p]rogressives approached urban renewal from an environmentalist perspective and favored green spaces such as Frederick Law Olmsted's Central Park in New York, as a means of uplifting the masses and countering the dangers of modern industry... The Chili Queens thus helped create a stereotype of dusky, sharp-witted women, waiting to be tamed by Anglo

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[80] San Antonio Express, August 25, 1897, quoted in Donald E. Everett, San Antonio: The Flavor of Its Past, 1845 -1898 (San Antonio, TX: Trinity University Press, 1975), 33.

men."[81] With this resurgence of the need for more green space, the city threatened the Chili Queens' stands because they occupied valuable space that could potentially be transformed into parks or public gardens.

Leaders of the City of San Antonio began making radical changes to their plaza spaces by actions such as restricting vendors to only working at night and adding shrubbery and trees in the areas where the vendors would work, making it more difficult for them to find locations to set up their stands at night. In December of 1889, the order was given to evacuate all vendors in the area of the Alamo Plaza to make way for construction. Even though officials told the Chili Queens and other vendors that this change would be temporary, it eventually became permanent, and the Chili Queens had to move to other plazas such as Milam and Haymarket Plaza. This change radically effected the Chili Queens and their businesses and tourists at the time felt the same ambivalent way about it.

A record from 1895 written by Jon Bourke expresses that "[f]ew tourists can have forgotten the 'chile stands' of San Antonio, Texas, once a most interesting feature of the life of that charming city but abolished within the past two or three years

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[81] Jeffrey M. Pilcher, "Who Chased out the 'Chili Queens'? Gender, Race, and Urban Reform in San Antonio, Texas, 1880–1943," *Food and Foodways* 16, no. 3 (August 2008): pp. 173-200, https://doi.org/10.1080/07409710802304168.

in deference to the 'progressive' spirit of certain councilmen."[82] The progressivism referred to in this quote refers to the Progressive political movement in the United States. Progressive advocates fought for reforms in all areas of life but specifically politics, which they viewed as inherently corrupt.[83] In addition to political changes, there was an emphasis on cleanliness during the Progressive Era. For white supporters, this translated into equating whiteness with cleanliness.[84] With this perception of race in relation to hygiene, the Progressive era was an active hinderance to people of color. This type of reform, specifically having to do with food culture, was happening everywhere, not just San Antonio.[85] But even though it was happening everywhere, it happened in San Antonio through using the guise of sanitation to ensure a change in food culture in the area. This 'progressive' spirit continued to be a hinderance to

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[82] John G. Bourke, "The Folk-Foods of the Rio Grande Valley and of Northern Mexico," *The Journal of American Folklore* 8, no. 28 (1895): p. 41, https://doi.org/10.2307/533082.

[83] James Livingston, "The United States as a Developing Country: Studies in U.S. History in the Progressive Era and the 1920s," *Reviews in American History* 22, no.4 (1994). https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A16352361/AONE?=googlescholar&sid=bookmark-AONE&xid=321123b6.

[84] Graf Rudiger "Truth in the Jungle of Literature, Science, and Politics: Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* and Food Control Reforms during the Progressive Era," *Journal of American History,* Volume 106, Issue 4, March 2020: 901-922, https://doi.org/10.1093/jahist/jaz676

[85] Edward L Glaeser and Claudia Dale Goldin. 2008. *Corruption and reform: lessons from America's economic history.*

vendors of San Antonio Plazas. Despite having widespread support from locals and oftentimes directly defying city ordinances, the Chili Queens were rapidly declining in numbers by the 1920s. As the problems with the Health and Sanitation department grew, so too did the worries of the Chili Queens.

Mexican American leaders of the community attempted to put in health and safety measures that would appease the white politicians, including the proposition that hygiene classes be given in Spanish to support the local vendors. By 1937, the ever-increasing health and sanitation rules shut down the Chili Queen stands in Haymarket Plaza. Eventually, with the help of local Mexican leadership, the city agreed to allow the stands to run with some new rules according to which "The city regularized the new procedures by requiring each vendor to pass inspection and receive a license from the health department."[86] These rules included the need for running water, consistent health inspections of the site, and health cards which the Chili Queens were forced to fill out.

These new rules and regulations can be observed by examining the picture below (Figure 10). Taken in 1939, at the peak of the de-chilification of the plazas in San Antonio, shows a display of the health cards the Chili Queens had to keep up and

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[86] Jeffrey M. Pilcher, "Who Chased out the 'Chili Queens'? Gender, Race, and Urban Reform in San Antonio, Texas, 1880–1943," *Food and Foodways* 16, no. 3 (August 2008): pp. 173-200, https://doi.org/10.1080/07409710802304168.

fill out. As can be seen in the left-hand side of the photograph, there are approximately twenty-four different sanitation cards. Chili Queens were forced to fill out these cards in order to stay in business. Unfortunately, many of the Chili Queens were not able to do that by 1939, so this is one of the few pictures of a Chili Queen who is depicted following these new plaza rules. In the foreground, a Chili Queen is pictured making masa using a plain metallic bowl on top of a plain wooden table constructed from planks. She is wearing a mid-calf length dress with a simple overall that hangs tightly on her waist.

By 1940, the Plaza space was completely reimagined by the ever-increasing sanitation laws that applied to all food vendors in the plaza, especially the Chili Queens. These new laws ousted the woman who had made the previously sleepy plazas an attraction for both tourist and locals alike. Not only did they bring in food, but by also bringing in items such as tables and chairs, they were able to create a small community that surrounded visitors in Mexican culture. From their inception in the 1860s until the 1930s, the Chili Queens used the Plaza as a location for creation of a decorative program. They did this not for some altruistic reason, but rather for a more pragmatic one: to make extra money for themselves and their families. Regardless, the Plazas of San Antonio would have looked radically different without their presence and so too would the culinary landscape of Texas and the Southwest.

Pictured in Figure 11 is a Chili Queen identified as “Mrs. Victorio Senorio cooking on gas stove in kitchen” and is representative of the way they would heat up their Chili and other items they cooked. We can see Mrs. Senorio, with a plain

Figure 10 San Antonio Light Photograph Collection, MS 359, University of Texas at San Antonio Libraries Special Collection

Figure 11 San Antonio Light Photograph Collection, MS 359, University of Texas at San Antonio Libraries Special Collection

white apron covering her floral-patterned shirt as she raises a flat spatula turning over tortillas.

She is in a very confined space with a fan in front of her to keep her cool with all the heat being emitted from the gas stove. All around her are different foods being cooked as she stands and does her job. This photo, taken in 1948, marks a departure from the Chili Queens of the plaza, moving their work to indoor kitchens. During the period of the 1870s-1930s, the Chili Queens sold and marketed their food along the various open-air plazas in San Antonio. As the excerpt from the newspaper article that the picture accompanied reads, "Driven inside for good when army inspectors deemed their spicy wares unsanitary shortly after the outbreak of World War II, they now operate in a fully-screened building [200 block Produce Row] across the street from the [Haymarket] Plaza. They dish out chili, enchiladas, chalupas and the like."[87]

The Chili Queens seemed to always be on the run from one plaza location to the other. This was often due to xenophobic ideas about the food that they were cooking. Citing unsanitary conditions and a lack of washing areas, the local health department in 1936 brought an end to this outdoor tradition popular with residents and tourists alike.[88] But that was not the end for the Chili Queens as the picture above clearly shows. Instead of crumbling to bureaucratic pressure, they found ways to

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[87] "Chili Queens Back," *North San Antonio Times*, July 29, 1948.

[88] Vicki Ruíz, "Citizen Restaurant: American Imaginaries, American Communities," *American Quarterly* 60, no. 1 (2008): pp. 1-21, https://doi.org/10.1353/aq.2008.0013.

modify the way they were selling their food to patrons and continued to flourish. By using the voices of white writers to explain what a night in a San Antonio Chili stand would have looked like, they were engaging in a power dynamic that was unequal but at the same time allowed them to achieve their desired goal—attention. The importance of the plaza comes further into play when we examine cultural heritage scholarship. Roger Simon and Susan Ashley write that "heritage practices, particularly those animated through stories and storytelling, would be a form of communications par excellence for bringing particular narratives, symbols and performances into a sphere where they can be seen, heard and given recognition by the multicultural state and its citizenry."[89] The plaza itself was that place to be seen and heard in, and the Chili Queens took full advantage of that.

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[89] Roger I. Simon and Susan L.T. Ashley, "Heritage and Practices of Public Formation," *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 16, no. 4-5 (2010): pp. 247-254, https://doi.org/10.1080/13527251003775471.

Chapter 5

CHILI QUEEN HERITAGE AND CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The Chili Queens were iconic figures in San Antonio history for a multitude of different reasons. By deciding to step out of the traditional workforce at night and setting up open-air stands in the plazas of San Antonio, the Chili Queens were cementing themselves into the identity of the city. Anyone could come to the plaza at night, regardless of race or social status. This meant that the plaza could effectively be used as a space for gathering and community building outside the bounds of the highly segregated areas of the city. These makeshift awnings and stands were on the surface simplistic but were also a sure-fire way to ensure that they would be looked at. There was no need for fancy silverware or outlandish centerpieces because the Chili Queens themselves served as the centerpieces for touristic consumption of Mexican heritage.

Here, heritage was created in a modern and public way. The food and the heritage, even though many of its ideas were taken from the past, was actually very modern, and the food they adapted was modern as well. To be modern with the appearance of tradition was a conscious decisions made by the Chili Queens. The way in which they asserted their own identity and stereotypes and even amplified them for customers it goes to show what their intent was. In a study done by Marzia Varutti when looking at Indigenous groups in Taiwan making material culture in public spaces, she notes that "the idea of a 'contemporary Indigenous heritage' is constructed (notably by Indigenous artists and artisans) through the conflation of 'tradition,'

'value', 'authenticity' and 'indigeneity', as well as creativity and innovation."[90] This creativity and innovation can be directly seen in all of the actions of the Chili Queens. Varutti further explores how this public display of heritage not only makes the group more visible, but it also begins a process of cultural understanding. This process of cultural understanding can be directly seen in the ways in which white patrons wrote about their experiences with the Chili Queens.

But such a public display of heritage can also lead to issues, as was the case with the San Antonio Department of Sanitation. There was a sort of allure to these Chili Queens because even though they were generally seen as making unhygienic food, they were also seen as vibrant and important pillars of the Mexican American community. As so-called progressives became more emphatic about the Chili Queens closing their stands, they fought back and agreed to terms imposed on them by the city. That didn't stop their popularity, though, and instead aided them by giving them more of an allure.

The Plaza space was completely devoid of Chili Queens by 1940, despite the key role these women played in the development of the plaza spaces. It is important to note that they were the ones who contributed so greatly to the material culture of the

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[90] Marzia Varutti, "Crafting Heritage: Artisans and the Making of Indigenous Heritage in Contemporary Taiwan," *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 21, no. 10 (2015): pp. 1036-1049, https://doi.org/10.1080/13527258.2015.1050055. Though Taiwan and Texas are two radically different places, this study shows that the results could be replicated among other groups with the same results due to universal sentiments about public spaces and creation of heritage.

Plaza. Not only did they bring in food, but by also bringing in items such as tables and chairs, they were able to create a small community that surrounded itself in Mexican culture. By creating, as what Charles Camp calls, a "food event", the Chili Queens were engaging in the most radical act of public heritage display. Using their refined recipe, they were able to centralize their stands around the Chili they sold, and by extension, their culture as a whole. The food they served was intentional and transformative. Using Mexican and Indigenous ingredients, they Chili Queens created a stew that was both Mexican, Indigenous, and American while at the same time being none of those identities.

Being seen as the "other" was essential for the Chili Queens—they relied on that exoticism to further push the boundaries of that stereotype. The Chili Queens used the stereotype of the *China Poblana* in order to assert themselves as a particular type of jovial Mexican woman. But they furthered that stereotype by engaging in various actions with their patrons such as gossiping, socializing, and even smoking. This took them beyond the *china poblana* and into an entirely new realm of cultural presentation. It was not enough to simply been seen as the other, though. The Chili Queens had to find methods and ways to continue their representation of Mexican heritage, and one of the main ways they did that was through the food they cooked. But the food they cooked would have essentially been meaningless for the broader public were it not for the large number of white patrons who came to the chili stands at night and wrote about the Chili Queens in generally positive, but still racist, ways. This strange relationship that the Chili Queens held with their white patrons further

goes to show how much they needed to "other" themselves in order to be written about. The words of these white patrons quickly spread throughout the state and the nation. Ironically enough, it was the voice of white writers that gave power to a group of Mexican and Mexican American women. Without the legacy written by these writers, we may have never known who the Chili Queens were. This power imbalance further goes to show how the Chili Queens decided to view it as a marketing opportunity instead of being offended by the way in which they were written about. Through the help of white patrons who wrote about them, the Chili Queens were able to solidify their legacy in the state and in the nation.

The Chili Queens cleverly used the stereotypes levied against them by further amplifying their difference to white patrons and extrapolating on it and, in turn, were seen as a revolutionary group of women according to the men who wrote about them. The plaza functioned as a backdrop for this public display of heritage to occur. Without the plaza, the Chili Queens would have had no way of exerting their heritage. With the plaza as the backdrop, the food that they cooked and the clothes they wore served as an overt statement about their own identity. This identity was constantly in flux and changed depending on patron sentiments. As time progressed so too did the Chili Queens. We can observe change in their locality, dress, and even food. This was once again a deliberate choice by these women to have more autonomy. With this newfound autonomy, the Chili Queens were able to construct a deliberate decorative program within the plazas. This decorative program, while seemingly simplistic to some, was actually a radical way for the Chili Queens to assert themselves as experts

in their field. Regardless of the food, plaza, and dress, the Chili Queens were mostly doing one thing: creating a visual cultural heritage in a public space that allowed them to bend the rules of how a woman ought to behave and do. Without the deliberate creation of this visual cultural heritage, the dish of Chili might have never been created. As Chili enters its 45th year of being the state dish of Texas, one might want to give credit to the women who created and advocated for the dish.

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Hello Laura,

Thank you for your image request. Please find the image file attached.
Fees are waived for your academic thesis. If you will share the thesis or the pertinent research/information related to this object when complete, we would be appreciative.
here is the credit line:

Unknown, Casta Painting: De Castizo y India produce Coyote, about 1760. Denver Art Museum: Gift of the Collection of Frederick and Jan Mayer, 2013.306. Photography courtesy Denver Art Museum

Best of luck,

DENVER art MUSEUM

Meghan Shaw
Registrar Assistant

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