

## ***Mexicanas' Public Food Sharing in Colorado's San Luis Valley\****

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**Resumo:** O trabalho feminino em torno da alimentação envolve produção e reprodução e ultrapassa as fronteiras entre a esfera doméstica do lar e a esfera pública da comunidade. O trabalho de campo etnográfico, realizado durante dez verões no município de Antonito — predominantemente hispânico, localizado na área rural de Conejos County, Colorado, EUA —, revelou que, ao estenderem suas responsabilidades de dar de comer para além da família, abarcando a comunidade mais ampla, as mulheres são essenciais para garantir a segurança alimentar nesta região rural empobrecida. Em cinqüenta e seis horas de gravações, em que foram registradas histórias de vida centradas na comida, as dezenove mulheres que entrevistei falei sobre suas crenças e comportamentos em torno da produção, distribuição e consumo de alimentos. Elas descreveram como o seu trabalho de alimentar possibilitou que elas minimizassem a fome, agissem politicamente, construíssem valores públicos baseados na partilha e dessempenhassem a representatividade.

**Palavras-chave:** Histórias de Vida Centradas na Comida. Mexicanas. Representatividade. Fome. Segurança Alimentar.

**Abstract:** Women's food work involves both production and reproduction and traverses boundaries between the domestic sphere of the home and the public sphere of community. Ten summers of ethnographic fieldwork in the

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predominantly Hispanic town of Antonito in rural Conejos County, Colorado, USA, has revealed that women are instrumental in ensuring food security in this poor rural region by extending their responsibilities for feeding beyond the family to include the broader community. In fifty-six hours of tape-recorded food centered life histories I conducted with nineteen women, they talked about their beliefs and behaviors surrounding food production, distribution, and consumption. They described how their feeding work enabled them to minimize hunger, act politically, construct public values based on sharing, and enact agency.

**Keywords:** Food Centered Life Histories. Mexicanas. Agency. Hunger. Food Security.

### Introduction

This paper examines how women cross over and dissolve the boundaries between public and private spheres in their roles in combating hunger. The case study focuses on *Mexicanas* in the predominantly Hispanic town of Antonito (population 873) in Conejos County in southern Colorado, USA.<sup>1</sup> I hope to show that in extending their responsibilities for feeding beyond the family to include the broader community, women act politically, construct public values based on sharing, and enact agency. I define agency as “purposive action expressing freedom” (Counihan 2009) and suggest that foodways are an important arena for women’s agency.

I conducted ethnographic fieldwork in Antonito during summers from 1996-2006 with my husband, anthropologist Jim Taggart (Taylor and Taggart 2003). Antonito is just six miles north of the New Mexico border on the northern frontier of what anthropologists have called Greater Mexico—that area of the US that has longstanding Mexican influence.<sup>2</sup> Antonito is in an area that was part of Mexico from 1821-1846—the

<sup>1</sup> People of Hispanic background in the Antonito area refer to themselves by many terms depending on their age, generation, and preference. They use the Spanish terms *Mexicanas/os*, *Españoles*, and *Hispanos* and the English terms Hispanic, Spanish, Spanish-American and Chicanas/os. They rarely use the terms Mexican American and Latinas/os.

<sup>2</sup> Paredes (1976, xiv) defined Greater Mexico as “all the areas inhabited by people of a Mexican culture” in the US as well as in Mexico. See also Limón 1998.

rural San Luis Valley, an 8000-square-mile cold desert valley lying at 7500-8000 feet above sea level between the San Juan and *Sangre de Cristo* mountain ranges.<sup>3</sup> *Mexicano* settlers came to north from Rio Arriba and Taos counties in New Mexico in the mid 1850s and founded the agricultural hamlets of Conejos, Guadalupe, Mogote, Las Mesitas, San Rafael, San Antonio, Ortiz, La Florida, and Lobatos. Antonito came later, in 1881, when the Denver and Rio Grande Railroad built a station there and laid out a town site running six blocks from east to west and twelve blocks from south to north along highway 285. The town grew steadily due to its commercial importance, saw mills, perlite mines, ranching, and agriculture through and after World War II, with its population peaking at 1255 in 1950 and then dropping steadily to 873 in 2000. In that year's census, ninety per cent of residents defined themselves "Hispanic".

Antonito has a pharmacy, locally owned supermarket, three restaurants, two gas stations, a video store, a hair salon, a barbershop, and several gift and used-goods stores. There are around 450 students in the elementary, junior high, and high schools, which draw not only from the town of Antonito but also from the neighboring hamlets. Many people struggle to find jobs and go in and out of the workforce. The few important employers are the town, the county, the schools, the hospitals in La Jara and Alamosa, and the service economy in Alamosa, population 9000, thirty miles north. Many people get by on odd jobs, babysitting, trading in used goods, public assistance jobs, and welfare. In the summer and fall there is some tourism due to hunting, fishing, and vacationing in the nearby San Juan Mountains and the popular narrow gauge Cumbres & Toltec Scenic Railroad that travels from Antonito over the spectacular San Juan Mountains to Chama, New Mexico.

<sup>3</sup> The southern San Luis Valley was long the territory of the Ute Indians (Marsh 1991, Osburn 1998, Simmons 2001, Young 1997) and was settled in the mid-nineteenth century by Spaniards and Mexicans from Old and New Mexico (Deutsch 1987). Anglos arrived in ever greater numbers in the late nineteenth century with the U.S. military (sent to vanquish the Utes), the Church of the Latter Day Saints, homesteading claims, and the railroad. On the history, culture, and land use of the San Luis Valley, see Bean 1975, Deutsch 1987, García 1998, Gutierrez and Eckert 1991, Martínez 1987, Peña 1998, Simmons 1979, Taggart 2002, 2003, Taylor and Taggart 2003, Tushar 1992, and Weber 1991.



Figure 1. Main Street, Antonito, Colorado, USA /  
Rua principal, Antonito, Colorado, EUA

### Food Centered Life Histories and *Testimonios*

For ten summers, I lived and conducted ethnographic research in Antonito, using a food centered life history methodology. Food-centered life histories are tape-recorded semi-structured interviews with willing participants on their beliefs and behaviors surrounding food production, preparation, distribution, and consumption. I have tape-recorded and transcribed 55 interviews with nineteen women and amassed 80 hours of tape-recordings and approximately 2000 pages of transcriptions. Interviews focused on women's experiences and memories of farming, gardening, canning, cooking, diet, recipes, everyday and ritual meals, foods for healing, eating in pregnancy, breast-feeding, eating out, and many other topics.

For many women food was a powerful voice of self-expression as well as a channel through which they related to nature, the family, and the local and global community. In the meals they cooked, the rituals they observed, and the memories they preserved, women communicated powerful messages and emotions.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, Hispanic culture in the San Luis Valley revolved around subsistence food production

<sup>4</sup> On food as women's voice see Brumberg 1988, Counihan 1999, 2004, DeVault 1991, Hauck-Lawson 1998, and Thompson 1994.



Figure 2. Janice DeHerrera doing a food-centered life history interview / Janice DeHerrera concedendo uma entrevista (história de vida centrada na comida)

until after World War II when the local ranching and farming economy began to decline (Deutsch 1987). Like Mexican and Mexican-American women cooks and writers from other regions, the women of Antonito used food in rich ways to express themselves and strive for agency.<sup>5</sup>

Food-centered life histories have suited my feminist anthropological perspective, which defines gender as a crucial category in social life and social analysis, emphasizes women's diversity, and challenges gender oppression (Behar and Gordon 1995, Moore 1988, Wolf 1992). The experiences and voices of women—particularly those of economically and politically marginalized ethnic groups—have too long been absent from the historical record. Recuperating them enriches our understanding of American culture and is a central goal in feminist ethnography and oral history.<sup>6</sup>

Food-centered life histories emulate the *testimonio* genre, a form of writing that emerged out of Latin American liberation movements.<sup>7</sup> *Testimonios* are ordinary people's narratives about events they have witnessed that center on a compelling "story that needs to be told—involving a problem of repression, poverty,

<sup>5</sup> Cabeza de Baca Gilbert (1942, 1949, 1954) wrote about the recipes, cooking, and culture of Hispanic Las Vegas, New Mexico. Cleofas Jaramillo (1939, 1955) had long descriptions of foodways in her memoir of growing up in northern New Mexico and she too produced a cookbook. Many of the Mexican American women interviewed by Elsasser et al. (1980) in northern New Mexico and Patricia Preciado Martin (1992, 2004) in southern Arizona described foodways and dishes similar to those of Antonito. Abarca (2001, 2004, 2006) made "culinary chats" the center of her study of Mexican and Mexican American working class women, and Pérez (2004) has used "kitchen-table ethnography" to compare the lives of *Mexicanas* in Las Cruces, NM and Casas Grandes, Chihuahua. On Chicanas and food, see also Blend 2001a, 2001b, Counihan 2002, 2005, Goldman 1992, Montaña 1992, Rebolledo 1995, and Swadesh 1974.

<sup>6</sup> See Behar and Gordon 1995, Gluck and Patai 1991, Wolf 1992.

<sup>7</sup> *Testimonios* emerged as a literary genre out of liberation struggles of indigenous people, workers and *campesinos* in Latin America in the 1960s and 1970s and are widely known through the book *I, Rigoberta Menchú* (Menchú and Burgos-Debray 1987). Beverly (1993, 70-71) defines *testimonios* as "told in the first person by a narrator who is also the real protagonist or witness of the events she or he recounts... The production of a testimonio often involves the tape recording and then the trans-

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cription and editing of an oral account by an interlocutor who is an intellectual, journalist, or writer." The Latina Feminist Group (2001, 2) defines *testimonios* as "a crucial means of bearing witness and inscribing into history those lived realities that would otherwise succumb to the alchemy of erasure."

<sup>8</sup> Deutsch (1987, 11) writes, "Written history of female minorities or 'ethnics' is rare, that of Chicanas or Hispanic women rarer though increasing, and of Chicanas or Hispanic women in Colorado virtually non-existent."

subalternity, exploitation, or simply survival" (Beverly 1993, 73). Like ethnography, *testimonios* are based on collaboration between the narrator/witness and the compiler/ethnographer. The goal of *testimonios* is "to rewrite and to retell... history and reality from the people's perspective" as diverse and complex as that may be (Gugelberger and Kearney 1991, 11). Food centered life histories are like the *testimonios* utilized by the Latina Feminist Group (2001)—personal stories from marginalized women that reveal subjectivity and diversity while calling attention to broad political and economic forces. They give voice to the relatively powerless rural Hispanic women in the remote southern San Luis Valley about whom little is known, contributing to their empowerment and to the process of "documenting silenced histories" (Latina Feminist Group 2001, 3).<sup>8</sup>

My forthcoming book, tentatively titled "*A Tortilla is Like Life*": *Mexicanas' Stories of Food, Identity and Land in Colorado's San Luis Valley* (Counihan 2009) shows how Antonito women described land and water, defined food and meals, and enacted family, gender, and community relations. Interviews showed women playing important roles in the production, distribution, and consumption of food both inside and outside the home. Women gave high value to being able to provide for their families. Older women remembered having gardens and gathering wild food, and demonstrated deep ties to the land. All women valued earning money to be able to buy food and other things for their families. Their food centered life histories revealed complex relationships to cooking and feeding, which were widely seen as women's duties and which connoted both drudgery and creativity, burden and pleasure, and subordination and power. Many of the women I interviewed extended their responsibility for cooking and feeding into the public sphere and were important contributors to community dinners which sprang up for church events, funerals, weddings,

anniversaries, fund raisers, sports team banquets, and other public occasions. Women also played an ongoing role in many activities designed to combat public food insecurity.

### Poverty and Food Insecurity

Poverty was a problem in Antonito, Conejos County, and the predominantly Hispanic rural region of Northern New Mexico and Southern Colorado that Martínez (1998, 70) calls the *siete condados del Norte*.<sup>9</sup> Jobs were few, employment was precarious, some people suffered from physical and mental impairments, and a few people in town were struggling to get enough good food to eat. Conejos County was one of the poorest in the nation. In 2004, the percent of people below poverty in Conejos County was a staggering 19.1% vs. 10.2% in Colorado and 12.7% in the U.S. In 2005 the annual median personal income per capita for Conejos County was \$18,875, barely over half of the Colorado figure of \$37,510, and the U.S. figure of \$34,471.<sup>10</sup> In Conejos County the average monthly Food Stamp caseload was over 7% of the population—614 out of approximately 8500 inhabitants (Colorado Fiscal Policy Institute, n.d.).<sup>11</sup>

Poverty jeopardized food security and threatened community ideals of equality and collective responsibility. But the women I interviewed felt that the poor were able to stave off hunger for three reasons: there was a caring community; there was assistance—both governmental and private; and the traditional diet was cheap, available, and nutritious. Women played key roles in assuring adequate food through all three of these channels. Even people who did not have much money and did not tackle the twenty-one page application for Food Stamps could survive by eating culturally appropriate and adequate though perhaps monotonous foods, while benefiting from informal and formal food sharing. There were several safeguards

<sup>9</sup> Martínez (1998, 70) describes the *siete condados del norte* as “the seven contiguous rural counties in northern New Mexico and southern Colorado that have Chicano/o demographic majorities.” They are Costilla and Conejos Counties in Colorado, and Taos, Río Arriba, San Miguel, Mora, and Guadalupe in New Mexico.

<sup>10</sup> These figures come from the website <http://www.fedstats.gov/qf/states/08/08021.html> consulted 12/20/07.

<sup>11</sup> The Colorado Fiscal Policy Institute (n.d.) reported that between March 2006 and February 2007, approximately 220,000 Coloradons were food insecure and 251,000 (5.3%) were on food stamps, an increase of over 61% since 2000. Nord, Andrews and Carlson (2006) reported that 12% of Colorado households were food insecure. The average price of Food Stamp meal was \$1.19 in 2007 and this amount has declined since the “welfare reform” of 1996 when the standard deduction for applicants was frozen at \$134 ignoring the rising cost of living (Colorado Fiscal Policy Institute 2007).

against hunger: the school breakfast and lunch programs, the Food Bank in the basement of the St. Augustine Church, the Senior Citizens Center lunches, and Meals on Wheels for elderly shut-ins. Women were instrumental in all of these organizations and in propagating a theory and practice of community responsibility. Janice DeHerrera expressed community sentiment when she said, "*Nobody that has food will deny somebody that's hungry that asks for food*".

Fifty-two year old Bernadette Vigil remembered growing up in Antonito in the 1950s and painted an idyllic picture of her people taking care of each other:

It was wonderful, being brought up in Antonito was, oh, it was wonderful. We didn't know what prejudice was, we didn't know what hunger was—no matter how poor everybody was, you didn't know what hunger was. You knew who your neighbor was, and who helped who, and everybody got along with everybody, everybody, all the kids... We were poor, but hey, we didn't lack anything. And if we were missing anything, I sure didn't know about it. None of us did...

Vigil gave an example of how the community rallied to combat the rare cases of extreme poverty:

There was this woman, and she was real, real poor... Her husband went completely insane one day. Completely insane. She was left with fifteen kids... They would kill birds. What were they doing with birds? Why would they want to kill birds? Well we didn't know, but they were eating them. They would kill them, pluck them and eat them. We had no idea. Little birds. So then we told my daddy. And my daddy says, "I don't believe this." So he went and he told Mr. Daniels who owned the grocery store. Mr. Daniels wanted to go see, so they went to go see, and sure enough they were so poor. There was no welfare at that time. There was no social services, there was no nothing. So from that day Mr.



Daniels would let her come in [to the store] and get whatever she needed.

Community beneficence helped people survive poverty before there were formal institutions to help them such as Food Stamps and welfare. Forty-five year old Janice DeHerrera also remembered experiences of helping needy people in the past in Albuquerque, NM. Her value system around food mirrored that of Antonito and showed how embedded food sharing was in *Mexicano* culture. She told a story her father had told her about his youth, and then went on to talk about how as a young adult she used to feed the homeless when she was learning to cook:

In Albuquerque there was this blind man, he was my dad's neighbor. They didn't have welfare or food stamps in those days, before the war. My dad was a little kid and his mother had a deep conscience and she told him to take the man to go beg for food. My dad would take him once a month to go begging for his food. They would get a little wagon that they used to bring wood in and he would pull the wagon door to door and he'd ask people and they'd give him a couple pounds of beans, of rice and somebody else would give him flour. That was their welfare system...

[When I was learning to cook] I started feeding the homeless because they'd smell me cooking all day, and they would come to the house and ask for food. I wouldn't let them in because I was always kind of afraid. But I would tell them to go around to the other side and I would make them a plate and told them that they could eat in privacy, in like a little patio yard that was fenced off... I'd get a lot of homeless people knocking on the door. It was real strange. But I always think those were God breezes or God sends. A lot of people got to eat my first foods.

### Traditional Foodways, Sharing and Making Do

As Janice DeHerrera's stories revealed, an ethos of sharing food had deep roots in the *Mexicano* culture and was a barrier against hunger. Sixty-six year old Teddy Madrid confirmed, "*Oh there was a lot of sharing.*" But she observed that families with alcoholism, neglect, or death of the breadwinner were in danger of hunger:

I was aware that there were some men that did not provide for their families simply because of alcohol. I detest that because I saw it from childhood. I also saw it when I was teaching as a nineteen-year-old [in 1953]... I had one child in my class that... she was so thin and so skinny and dark circles under her eyes. I would tell her, "Did you bring a lunch?"... She did not bring a lunch, and she did not go home... I would bring things for her, but she wouldn't eat. I think her stomach had shrunk...

Teddy Madrid pointed out that there was hunger but with hard work and resourcefulness, ranching and farming families could get enough to eat from cultivated and wild foods:

It depended on how astute the mothers were... They learned to use a lot of, for example, the wild spinach [lamb's quarters]... They would either dry it or can it... They would have the *champes* [rose hips] for jelly... They would also pick the *verdolagas* [purslane], the little round greens... They would have their own onions. So, in a sense, many of them were vegetarians, but there were also the rabbits. At that time, it wasn't hard to kill rabbits. And there was fish, if the kids would go fish...

The natural environment did provide diverse foods, so that with hard work people could still eat even if they lacked jobs and money. Janice DeHerrera said that even in recent times not only was the traditional diet inexpensive to purchase, but potatoes could be

had for free if a person wanted to go out gleaning—hard but remunerative work:

People around here don't need much... A lot of them aren't starving here, because of the traditional food of beans, tortillas, and potatoes. Potatoes are a hundred pounds for eight dollars, or ten dollars. There's a lot of meals with a hundred pounds of potatoes. A hundred pounds of beans, ten dollars, you can't eat a hundred pounds of beans in one year. We tried... We ate eighty pounds, and... that was a lean year, when we didn't have much money... If you eat beans and chili every day there is no stigma to that... There is no stigma to eat burritos, one of the cheapest foods you can make... If you have a little bit of money you can get by, because there is food around... If the field is empty according to the potato grower and then you just go in and dig, kick around the dirt a little bit, you'll find potatoes hidden in there. You just take what's left over... It's hard work... The one time I went, I didn't like it. Then after that [my husband] Ted just took the kids. They had all kinds of energy... Then there is people that go and [glean potatoes] and... try to sell them, to the people... There's a lot of food if you are starving. It isn't necessarily yummy food, but you won't starve.

### **Hunger in School**

Even though food was available in the environment and the traditional diet was inexpensive to purchase, there was still hunger. Through her job at the elementary school, Janice DeHerrera saw evidence of hungry children, just as Teddy Madrid had fifty years earlier, which DeHerrera attributed to parental neglect. But there was a safety net of free school breakfasts and highly subsidized lunches Monday through Thursday when school was in session (there was no school on Fridays), and there was an ethos of community care:

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In the school that I work in, there are a couple kids who are not getting enough nutrition... I think that it is laziness of the parents. The mothers are lazy, and they have boyfriends and they drink and they go out... I know the children have malnutrition because they're skinny little things. But when they come to school they ask for seconds for breakfast and they go three times for lunch. On Mondays, they go hurry to get in that line like they haven't had enough food during the weekend...



Figure 3. Antonito High School / Escola de Antonito

But on poverty I think that there are people in here that could be in that position but our community does not allow it. First of all we are losing money in our cafeteria and the school takes the loss, a big loss, I mean major big, big monies to keep the food program the way it is and they keep it low... For our children it's only 50 cents, and everybody gets to eat breakfast. Nobody has to come to school hungry or be in school hungry because they have a free breakfast, no matter their income. So we know that the kids at least four days a week are getting good nutrition... And then they

never deny kids seconds or thirds unless they are not eating their plate and only coming for cake. But if they are eating their food and they go and take their tray and show that they've eaten all their food or most of it, they'll give them more food. So nobody is denied seconds or thirds...

I don't think that anybody's hungry. I don't know, for some reason people will tell you if they are hungry. They'll come to the principal and tell them... This one little girl, the lady didn't have very much money and they moved in and the mother said that they had to spend all the money on the deposit to get the apartment and that she couldn't afford any crayons and stuff the kid needed for school. I told her that's OK. I'll get her some. I went to the secretary and asked, told her the situation and she gave me what she had and whatever she didn't have I went and bought for the kid... We went around asking people for stuff...

DeHerrera and Madrid described several formal and informal ways that people overcame the threat of hunger—often through the intervention of women—through gleaning, gathering, wild foods, school feeding programs, and private charity.

### **Antonito Food Bank**

In addition to help from community members, government assistance was available to the poor and hungry in the form of Food Stamps, the WIC program, the Commodity Food Program, and The Emergency Food Assistance Program, but not everyone in need was eligible or willing to apply for these forms of assistance.<sup>12</sup> For local people, the food bank at the Catholic Church was an important barrier against hunger. In 2004 I interviewed Tina Casias, then the Church administrator, about the food bank. She said it had about thirty clients, who could come six times per year. Casias encouraged them to come every other

<sup>12</sup> Nord, Andrews and Carlson (2006) report that Food Stamps, National School Lunch Program and WIC are the three largest food assistance programs. In 2005 FS provided benefits to 25.7 million people, costing over \$28 billion, with an average benefit per person of \$93/month. National School Lunch Program in 2005 operated in around 100,000 schools, served an average of over 29 million meals/day, over 60% of which were free or reduced price. In 2005, WIC served an average of 8 million people per month with an average monthly benefit of \$38 per person. Nord, Andrews and Carlson (2006) report that in 2005 TEFAP (The Emergency Food Assistance Program) of the USDA supplied 476 million pounds of commodity food to soup kitchens and food pantries. "Some 4 million households (3.5% of all households) obtained emergency food from food pantries one or more times during the 12 month period ending in December 2005." (Nord, Andrews and Carlson 2006, 32).

month to spread the food out over the year, but she said sometimes they came six months in a row.

Casias said that the policy was to allow clients to pick a specified number of items depending on the size of the family, as follows:

1 person	15 items
2	25
3	35
4	45
5 and up	55

Casias made the point that they let clients choose items, whereas many food banks gave out pre-packed bags with no choice. But because people had different tastes and some had health issues too—high blood pressure, diabetes, or allergies—the Antonito Food Bank policy was to let clients select what they wanted and needed. Casias said the Food Bank had “*everything*”, and she took me down to the Church basement to see it. We walked through a church hall floored in red linoleum, and at one end were two freezers. The freezers were old and not very big, around 4' x 3' x 2'. She opened the first and inside were a few packages of hot-dogs, eight or ten packs of hamburgers, and sliced turkey breast. Casias limited people to two packages of meat per visit to make sure there was enough for everyone. In the second freezer was bread of various types: sandwich bread, packs of rolls, hamburger and hot dog buns, and processed bread items.

Next Casias took me over to a padlocked door in the wall, which had a sign on it that said: PLEASE DO NOT STACK ANYTHING AT THIS DOOR. IT IS THE FOOD BANK. Casias unlocked the door and we went in. The Food Bank was a bright, clean, well-organized room with shelves containing a bounty of different food items, welcoming clients to choose items to feed themselves. There were many staples, including flour, sugar, dried milk, rice, dried pinto beans, yellow

masa, and oats. There were several kinds of canned vegetables and fruits including pumpkins, green beans, peas, corn, cranberries, pears, and peaches. There were some processed items like macaroni and cheese, salad dressing, mayonnaise, Hamburger Helper, Stove-Top dressing, and several canned soups. The nearby Alamosa food coop bought items in bulk and bagged them, and when Casias got cash donations, she gave the money to Alamosa and they returned the equivalent in bulk goods.

Casias said the Food Bank got donations from all over. The Alamosa and Denver food banks sent regular shipments. A local arts group, Arco Iris, donated a lot of non-food items like paper towels, napkins, toothbrushes, toothpaste, and toilet paper, so clients could choose these too. The St. Augustine Catholic Church



Figure 4. Antonito Food Bank shelves / Prateleiras do Banco de Comida de Antonito

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and the Presbyterian congregation had regular food drives organized and supported by women parishioners in both the Catholic and Presbyterian communities.

Teddy Madrid, a Presbyterian, told how the members of her church supported the food bank:

The first week of the month everyone brings their food, or money, whichever they prefer. My sister is in charge of it and she brings it down to the [Catholic] Church... The Presbyterian Church in Pueblo grants our church a hunger fund. I think they'll give us somewhere to 300-500 dollars a year... Two or three ladies will go to the grocery store—we patronize our local grocery store, and we buy the groceries there... On Superbowl Sunday, we have a Superbowl food bank day, and this year all the people who came to church brought cans. Some bring soup, others bring salmon, other cans, whatever it is, and some give money... Food is something that families need, that children need. Without food, they will not thrive... They need it.



Figure 5. Antonito Presbyterian Church / Igreja Presbiteriana de Antonito



Teddy Madrid articulated the important cultural value on sharing food, which was a religious value as well. “*It gives us satisfaction, spiritual satisfaction, that we can help someone else*”, she said. Concordant with the attitude that food was a basic need and right, access to the food bank was straightforward and immediate. In contrast to the complicated bureaucratic procedures necessary for getting government food stamps, all food bank clients had to do was be residents of southern Conejos County and fill out an application, which included name, address, phone, social security number, family members, and income. Verification of income was not required. The Food Bank administrator Tina Casias said, “*The needy are honest.*” She added, “*If they’re coming here, they need it*”. As soon as people filled out an application they could go with Casias right away to the basement and choose their food. All kinds of people used the food bank: a family with two disabled parents and several children, a single mother with six children, some elderly people, and some alcoholics.

Janice DeHerrera described the food bank ethos:

The church has a food bank... People in the community [contribute]... The church has drives for food all the time. They ask people to bring in canned food or pasta or anything people have... In the past we had this priest that came in and he says, “The only people that are going to get free food from the food bank, ... are people that have food stamps...” He put a requirement and that got everybody mad, a lot of people mad. It got me mad because some people won’t go for food stamps because they don’t want the government to know anything about them... Sometimes somebody’s husband... used the food budget for the liquor and they’re still within the income where they wouldn’t qualify for food stamps. So they would be denied—they’re not going to eat for a week until they get another paycheck, or two weeks... There’s people that are barely making it and something else came up. They’ve got to go to

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the doctor or something and then they don't have money now for food. So I don't believe they should have restrictions... Our conscience is stronger than the law.



Figure 6. Antonito Catholic Church / Igreja Católica de Antonito

### Conclusion

Janice DeHerrera's words struck a powerful chord. She showed how women's propagation of community ethics of sharing overcame the hierarchical policy promoted by the priest. She affirmed how her community took seriously the task of making sure everyone had enough to eat and offered a hopeful vision of community responsibility. *Mexicanas* in the Antonito area have always been instrumental in food distribution, which has given them a public role and status.<sup>13</sup> They are like the Chicana community organizers in Eastside Los Angeles who "link family concerns to

<sup>13</sup> See Deutsch 1987, 53. My forthcoming book (Counihan 2009) has a chapter on women's roles in commensal rituals surrounding death.

a wider network of resources” and “bridge the social distance that separates residents” (Pardo 2000, 108).<sup>14</sup> In East LA, some women spent countless hours cooking Mexican food for political and parish events and turned normally defined “private” labor into public work that built community. Like the East LA Chicanas, the women of Antonito were political actors in sharing food and combating hunger.

With high unemployment in Conejos County and few job opportunities nearby, community support was essential to aiding needy people to survive. Particularly at risk were the elderly and the children, for whom hunger had devastating health consequences (Marshall et al. 1999), and for whom women were the primary caretakers. Women were also instrumental in both informal practices of food sharing and in formal institutions like the school breakfast and lunch programs, the Food Bank, the Senior Citizens Feeding Program, Meals on Wheels, and the Catholic Church’s Share Program, which provided Thanksgiving and Christmas food boxes to families in need. These were important means of staving off hunger and maintaining values of mutual responsibility, particularly the community value on food security for all.

Through the methodology of gathering women’s food-centered life histories, this paper has promoted several feminist goals. It has given voice to long-ignored rural Hispanic women and thus has enriched the historical record. It has shown that women’s feeding roles have significance beyond the walls of the home and can play an important political function in promoting food security in the community. It has thus challenged the false but lingering stereotype that women’s work matters in the private domestic sphere, but has little impact on the public world. It opens the way for future studies of how command of food brings women agency and power in public, and suggests their huge potential contribution to social justice movements centered on food access and sustainability.

<sup>14</sup> On Chicanas’ activism linking the personal and the political, see also Davis 1998.

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