

Review of:

A Tortilla is Like Life: Food and Culture in the San Luis Valley of Colorado.

Carole Counihan. Carole. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009. Pp. ix-253.

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Community, food and women's ethnic identity is the focus of anthropologist Carole Counihan's ethnographical book; *A Tortilla is Like Life*. Counihan interviews nineteen women over an eight year period about their personal experiences of growing up in a predominantly Hispanic community. Counihan's food centered life histories reflect the diversity and commonality of the women within the community. She asserts that, "food is a powerful voice and sparks meaningful memories in many people" (7). This is embodied in the women of Antonito in the Southern San Luis Valley of Colorado; their close association to the land, farming, and historical substance living patterns is expressed and defined through food, ethnicity, place and gender.

Determining whether a group has full citizenship and sense of "cultural belonging" within a larger dominant Anglo culture can be both treacherous and rewarding for an outsider. In her book, Counihan approaches her fieldwork with the knowledge that racism and conflict have colored the landscape of the people she is working with. Therefore, she makes a concerted effort to show respect for the individual and the group as a whole, with particular attention to individual confidentiality and cultural diversity. Her intention is to offer a forum to the women of Antonito that allows them to articulate in their own voices the rich cultural tapestry that is Mexicano life in the San Luis Valley.

Early on in the book, Counihan focuses on the concepts of personal Hispanic identity in the wider definition of what is Hispanic culture. She notes the wide and variable definitions of ethnic heritage through the diversity of terms that the women use to define themselves. Terms such as Mexicana and Spanish, or Mexican- American and Chicano, offer a glimpse into the diversity of individual cultural expression within the premise that common identification is essential to cultural citizenship (43). Her interviews with four of her primary informants reflect the cohesiveness inside the [almost] monoculture of Antonito in contrast to the wider conflicts with the outside world, where the women experience both prejudice and discrimination. Counihan explores the natural environment, with a particular focus on water, and how it affects individual and community. Historically water is considered to be a contentious issue among farmers and families, and is acknowledged historically as the basis for survival for Mexicano culture in the Southwest. Water and land is intricately woven into food production and tradition for her informants; this is particularly true for the older women who remember gardens that sustained their families' through difficult periods. Historically, Hispanic families chose areas for their farms and homesteads that were in proximity of rivers which allowed for

irrigation of the land. These landed settlements became the source of family histories. Land ownership represents a source of pride and cultural tradition for many Mexicano families, and this is reflected in the attitudes of the women and their connection of land, family and food.

Counihan presents the women's views on traditional diet, and its association with the land and environment. She focuses on the older women in the study who still remember subsistence living conditions where much of their time was taken up with food preparation for the family. The informants focus on the foods that offered the most sustenance, such as meat, beans, potatoes, breads, and foods that were gathered from the wild.

Family gardens provided a diversity of fruits and vegetables, and according to one informant, "Whatever came out of that garden is what you ate the next winter" (83). Women's gardens could be a source of pride as well as sustenance for the family. Cultivated grains provided the breads that were the backbone of the diet. Two other foods central to the diet, that added both flavor and color were the green and red chili. Counihan feels there is a need to focus more on woman's botanical knowledge. This knowledge, "contributed to biological and cultural diversity" (89). Unfortunately, this knowledge has diminished with subsequent generations, leaving a chasm between past and present traditional food ways, as well as local Hispanic culture.

Counihan focuses her interviews on gender, food and work. As times have changed, generations of Antonito women have seen their roles change from caretakers to providers. Due to low populations and "frontier conditions," gender roles have fluctuated and diversified to allowed women a broader role in sustaining the family. Domestic chores moved back and forth between the public and the private domain. Some women chose to work outside the home in typically "female" centered professions such as housekeepers, cooks and teachers. This created conflicts between gendered centered expectations for women as mothers and wives, and the sense of individual independence that these jobs provided for the women. One informant, Helen Ruybal, discussed how she resisted the gendered stereotype of marriage and family, putting a career as a teacher ahead of traditional expectations. Such choices allowed the women a certain autonomy and status that early Hispanic women had never achieved; however, it also could also set them apart from their communities as non-conformists which created a tension among the generations.

Many of the women interviewed embraced the idea of physical "man's work" and reveled in the ability to provide for the family as well as a man. One of the primary ways women established their dominant position in the family was through food work. Physical labor was always an intensive part of food preparation. Canning, drying, gathering and storing food was a never-ending task for early Antonito women. Historically preservation was vitally important, and women would spend intensive physical effort on maintaining their stores through the long Colorado winters. Food preparation could also bring families extra needed money through the sale of tamales or tortillas.

Counihan further examines women's agency, action, and women's ability to express themselves through creative cooking. According to Counihan; "Agency is critical to the concept of cultural

citizenship” (114). This agency is reflected in the when, where and how of cooking, which speaks of both diversity and flexibility in domestic roles. Relationships are built on, or negotiated through food within Antonito society, and this concept is reflected in all aspects of Counihan’s research.

Relationships varied depending on the individual; however, food was and is a central theme in the development and sustainability of connections within the family and the community.

Within the Antonito community, household meals foster attachment, family values and traditions, thus preparing future generations for socialization in the community, and their extended environment. Communication is part of this socialization and family meals lend themselves to the continuance of tradition and stories. As one informant, Martha Montdragon reveals, “I could always remember we could share our stories while we were eating” (140). This time of sharing maintained a feeling of family that extended into the larger network of social relationships. The women’s stories create a rich portrait of closely familial ties and social contexts that Hispanic women express both creatively and individually. Mealtime is presented as multi-layered and dense with meaning and connection.

Counihan investigates the notions of sharing and generosity within Antonito society. Complex relationships outside of the family often centered on food, fellowship and reciprocity. In the early years, work exchange and food sharing were encouraged by the community, and to a large extent, were essential for the continuation of the local culture due to physical and financial hardships. This give and take allowed for a larger communal bonding within Antonito society. Hospitality also required that households offer food and drink to a visitor. Counihan states, “Offering something was a way to bridge social separation and to emphasize equality” (155). Caring for each other was essential to familial and social survival.

Food, death and poverty are the topics of her final chapters. These subjects are intricately tied with nurturing, loss and collective responsibility. Times of crisis are seen by the Antonito community as a period for collective compassion and sharing. Death in many cultures is often associated with the life affirming sustenance of food, equally for the dead and the living. It was both comfort and transition for the bereaved, and allowed the community to share in the grieving processes. Red Chili seems to hold a special place of honor among the Mexicano community, and can frequently be found at funerals and weddings. Gifts of prepared food were brought to the grieving families, and shared communally between the days of death and burial. Another type of food preparation associated with death is the farewell dinner. This allowed the public and the family to say good-bye to the deceased through traditionally prepared feasts. Counihan refers to Van Gennep’s theory of the Rites of Passage (1960) in reflecting that post-funeral meals are, “...among the most important rites of his third stage of passage—incorporation” (177). These meals allow the surviving members to re-establish relationships, and show continuing solidarity as a group.

Finally, the topic of poverty is discussed by Counihan’s informants. Southern Colorado, and particularly Conejos County where the town of Antonito is located, has experienced crippling poverty and unemployment over the years. Food sharing allowed for those unable to fend for themselves to eat. Cheap traditional foods such as beans, potatoes, vegetables and tortillas were made available to

families in need, as were school lunch programs and food banks. Most farming families did well, but those who had lost the main bread winner or suffered from a partner being sick or addicted to alcohol, experienced deprivation. According to one informant, Teddy Madrid, it was not uncommon to take in a desperate relative, or to give them flour and beans to make their situation easier (185). Giving was a traditional natural form of food distribution, and represented a form of status for the giver within Antonito society. Children and the elderly suffered the most during these times and to give was to ensure the continuity of Mexicano culture.

Counihan's book is well written and will appeal to a wide spectrum of readers. The voice of the women she interviewed comes through in a very thoughtful way. Her interpretation and commentary is insightful, allowing the reader a view of an underrepresented ethnic group. Personally, I enjoyed the way that Counihan approaches her subject both with depth and sensitivity. Counihan adopts a fairly hands off attitude with respect to theory and interpretation, thus giving the book a less formal tone. She displays a conscious understanding of her topic by allowing both subject and history to speak for itself. I would have enjoyed a more in-depth commentary on the folklore of foodways; however, this is my own bias, and the lack thereof does not detract from the overall study. I would recommend this book to those whose interests lie in foodways, gender studies, ethnography and folklore. *A Tortilla is Like Life* would be a good addition to any reading list, and a beneficial resource for those who desire to understand the complex associations of gender, food, culture and ethnicity.