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KITCHENSPACE, FIESTAS, AND CULTURAL REPRODUCTION IN MEXICAN HOUSE–LOT GARDENS*

MARIA ELISA CHRISTIE

ABSTRACT. The house-lot garden in central Mexico is gendered space where changing cultural identities are negotiated, re-created, and celebrated as "tradition" is continually redefined. No clear boundary separates the kitchen from the house-lot garden or the private space of the household from the semipublic space of the community. During collective food preparation for religious fiestas, gendered reciprocity networks strengthen community relations and foster alliances between traditional neighborhoods and between communities in the region. At the intersection of everyday life and fiestas, food-preparation spaces, or kitchenspaces, in the house-lot garden are fertile areas in which to explore the cultural reproduction of nature-society relations. They are vital to understanding gender, place, and culture in this region and represent people's symbolic connection with the land in increasingly urban contexts. This article analyzes the sense of place that Mexican women derive from their house-lot gardens. *Keywords: fiesta, gendered space, house-lot garden, Mexico, rural-urban interface, sense of place.*

The house blessing and communal meal launches the final stages of preparation for the big celebration two weeks from now. Twenty years ago, Doña Silvia of Xochimilco and her husband, Don Miguel, a migrant from an indigenous community in the nearby state of México, signed up to be hosts this year of the most beloved baby Jesus figure of Xochimilco, the Niñopa.[1] *Throughout an entire year beginning on 2 February, the day celebrating the first formal presentation of the baby Jesus in the temple and the purification of the Blessed Virgin, the hosts are responsible for providing a home for the "Niño" and offering prayers every night (Orta Hernández 1991). With a name meaning "child of the place" in Nahuatl, this small, hand-carved wooden statue is said to represent the baby Jesus syncretized with the child version of the Aztec god Huitzilopochtli 500 years ago (Cordero López 2001). Harking back to pre-Hispanic religious beliefs, he is treated much like a live child. With a large inventory of clothing and toys, the Niñopa is known for his mischief, his miracles, and his love of the local canals and* chinampas, *or raised agricultural beds unique to Xochimilco, now a suburb of Mexico City. The Niñopa draws crowds every day of the year, but especially on the day on which new hosts receive him into their home for the year. Thousands flock to pay him homage, mostly from Xochimilco but including pilgrims from as far south as Oaxaca.*

The crowds are so large today, 2 February 2001, that—after Mass in the church courtyard, where people bring their children, baby Jesus figures, and corn kernels selected as seed for the coming planting for blessing—the hosts decide to serve the food in

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the street several blocks away rather than in the cramped house-lot garden between the three houses in the family plot, where only a few dozen especially honored guests are offered a table. This departure from tradition causes more than a bit of anger, frustration, and logistical difficulties, among them the transfer of a dozen huge clay pots full of rice to the impromptu location at the end of the narrow, winding alley [Figure 1]. *After the meal people are allowed to file into the house-lot garden and newly built house to visit the Niñopa. Many are moved to tears as they bow to kiss the hem of his gown.*

In preparation for 2 February, men clean and decorate the streets while women work in the house-lot garden to prepare chilies, rice, tamarind, and other ingredients for the big day. In addition to making bulk purchases at Mexico City's principal wholesale market, Doña Silvia has raised a sow and fourteen piglets in the house-lot garden, while Don Miguel raised a few cattle and a special crop of corn on the chinampas.[2] *The women, several dozen in all, also prepare today's meal—except the meat, which is traditionally men's work—for the hundred or so who will come for the house blessing. As the meal is served, a group of men gather in the back of the house-lot garden near the pig pens* [Figure 2]. *One of the "uncles" from the extended family, who had worked with his nephew until 3:00* A.M. *slaughtering the sow, had come in the morning to prepare the meat, soaking it in tequila, oranges, pineapple, milk, and herbs. The smell of pork frying in the large metal pot over the wood fire is tantalizing.*

Giving my fingers a break from deseeding chilies in the women's work circle, I join the men for conversation in the back—acceptable only because of my special status as a visitor and student of food traditions. Other women enter this male space only briefly, to collect heaping platters of cooked pork. The older men, Don Miguel and his friends—many of them also indigenous migrants and agricultural laborers—speak Otomí and drink pulque.[3] *Most of the younger men drink rum and Coca-Cola. As we toast*

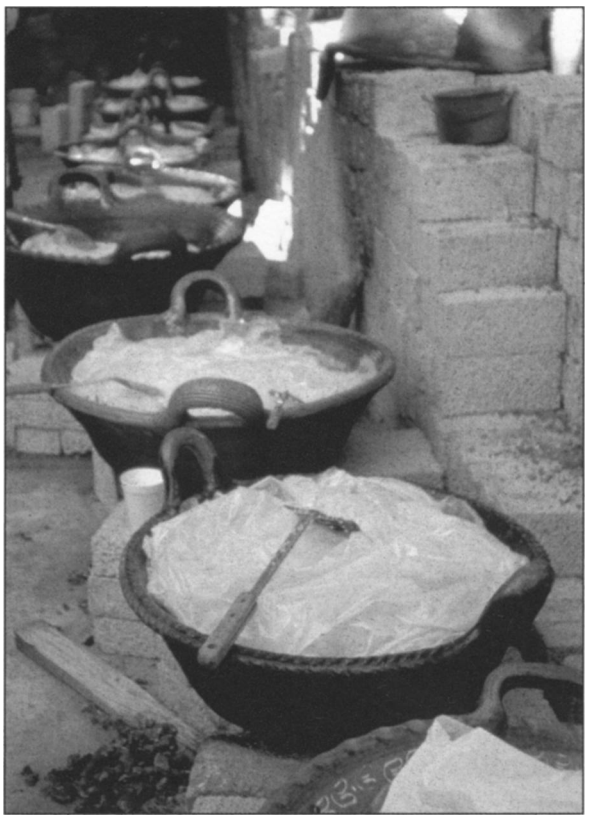

FIG. 1—A dozen large clay pots of rice, covered with plastic bags, ready to be served to pilgrims on the occasion of moving the Niñopa to a new house in Xochimilco, Mexico. (Photograph by the author, February 2001).

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FIG. 2—Dried tortillas and pigs in the back of Don Miguel and Doña Silvia's house-lot garden. Don Miguel collected the leftover tortillas from several kitchens in the neighborhood. (Photograph by the author, January 2001).

with plastic cups, Don Miguel asks proudly, "And you, fair-skinned one, what do you think of our traditions? Beautiful, aren't they?" I agree, and ask what will happen to them in the future. Another man interjects: "Our traditions will never die; they'll only keep getting better!" Everyone in the group agrees, with somebody claiming that the young will carry on traditions, changing them when necessary, as they always have.

Cultural Reproduction in House–Lot Garden Kitchenspaces

In Xochimilco and many other semiurban communities in central Mexico, the house-lot garden is a space where old and new elements are in constant engagement and where changing cultural identities are negotiated, re-created, and celebrated as "tradition" is continually redefined. No clear boundary separates the kitchen from the house-lot garden or the private space of the household from the semipublic space of the community. "Kitchenspace," as I came to call the combination of indoor and outdoor spaces where food is prepared, is a privileged site of cultural reproduction and plays a central role in family and community life. Gendered and embodied knowledge—including how to prepare traditional foods and when a particular dish is appropriate—is selectively transmitted from one generation to the next, and children are fed the tastes, traditions, and beliefs of older generations through quasi-sacramental food rites that make up the fabric of everyday life.

In this article I consider the function of kitchenspace in nature-society relations at the household and community level, its spillover into the house-lot garden, and

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women's participation in the community through the staging of fiestas that mark the annual cycle of culture and place. Based on a qualitative study of food-preparation spaces in three semiurban communities in central Mexico—Xochimilco, Ocotepec, and Tetecala—and working within geography's tradition of nature-society relations, I adapt a feminist political ecology framework to an exploration of gendered spaces, gendered knowledge, and narratives of cultural identity in the house-lot garden (Rocheleau, Thomas-Slayter, and Wangari 1996). In this region, centuries of careful observation of nature and the stages of the agricultural cycle are represented in a cultural complex with Nahuatl roots (Broda 1991). The annual fiestas of the religious calendar are a syncretic blend of the Catholic faith and a pre-Hispanic indigenous cosmovision (Broda and Báez-Jorge 2001). Ritual foods such as mole and tamales are offered to the spirits of the dead, the winds, the hills, and even the Popocatépetl volcano in an effort to appease the forces of nature (Good Eshelman 2001b).[4]

Traditional fiestas are as much a product of *mestizaje* (the mixture of Spanish and Indian elements) as is the rich mole sauce that many consider the quintessential Mexican dish. Many types of mole exist, but common ingredients include chilies, chocolate, and tomato of Mexican origin, almonds, raisins, and garlic brought by the Spaniards but of Arabic origin, and pepper, cinnamon, and cloves from the Orient (Benítez 2004, 85). Served with chicken or turkey, it is also the favored dish for weddings, birthdays, and community celebrations, although it is increasingly being replaced with fried pork, partly because of the rising cost of dried chili. Pigs, on the other hand, can be raised on kitchen scraps in house-lot gardens. Mole and other traditional foods reflect family heritage and regional cultural inheritances, as do rituals and beliefs surrounding their preparation. When I asked people to tell me about their community, they would inevitably begin by calling attention to their particularly tasty mole sauce. Although many cooks in Ocotepec use cacao rather than chocolate for a more bitter flavor, in Tetecala they add plantains and cookies for extra sweetness. Throughout the region the sight of a large clay pot signals similar traditions.

Building on previous relationships and fifteen years of experience in the region, I spent eleven months in 2000–2001 dividing my time between households and work parties in the study communities. I worked in half a dozen homes per site, visiting them periodically throughout the year, as often as weekly and even daily when they were involved in final fiesta preparations. Inspired by Miles Richardson's creative and multidisciplinary approach to place in his article "Being-in-the-Market versus Being-in-the-Plaza" (1982), I sought to understand the experience of "being in kitchenspace" using three qualitative methodologies: participant observation, ethnographic interviews, and participatory mapping (Spradley 1979; Richardson 1982, 1984; Rocheleau, Thomas-Slayter, and Edmunds 1995). I borrowed the dynamic and existential concept of "embodiment" from medical anthropology (Csordas 1994) to incorporate research subjects' multiple experiences of "dwelling" (Heidegger 1971) in particular environments into my inquiry—including their emotions, beliefs, and

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knowledge associated with kitchenspace. This helped me approximate a "sense of a place" rooted in the spaces of everyday living (Buttimer 1980) and cooking (de Certeau, Giard, and Mayol 1998). Despite the difficulty of gaining access to the private space of the home and the semipublic space of the house-lot garden—as well as of women's hectic schedules—informants were generally pleased to have someone lend a pair of hands to help with their work and listen to what they had to say.

The principal question guiding this inquiry was what role women play in nature-society relations through kitchenspace. After four months of participant observation, dozens of unstructured interviews in each site, and coming progressively closer to the spaces and issues that seemed to matter (Vayda 1983)—and with the help of local research assistants[5]—I developed and applied a series of structured interviews to address three areas: gendered spaces in the landscape and adaptation to change; women's knowledge about the natural environment in the context of gathering and preparing food; and food narratives reflecting culture and identity. Participatory mapping proved more effective than participant observation or interviews for understanding spaces from the perspective of women living in the study communities and brought attention to the modern-traditional duality of kitchenspaces in the house-lot gardens.

Kitchenspace is vital to understanding gender, place, and culture in this region. Although food is certainly a concrete manifestation of humans' link to the earth and food preparation reflects cultural traditions and beliefs, this study was also strategic: It was intended to incorporate women's work and spaces in a social context where these are too often left unrecognized. In a preliminary research project with Mexican immigrant women in Texas I found that, even when asking them about gardens they had planted and cared for, they consistently referred me to the man of the house; changing the focus to food and kitchens provided me direct access to women even in the most gender-segregated and conservative communities in Mexico. This study was informed by feminist critiques of Western science that question the exclusion of everyday life experience and contributions of ordinary people and by the social science literature on social reproduction that specifically validates their importance (Bordo 1986; Merchant 1990; Harding 1991). It responds to repeated calls within the discipline to pay more attention to the female "half of the human in human geography" (Monk and Hanson 1982; Seager 1992), something Latin Americanist geographers have been particularly slow to do (Schroeder 2002).

Three Increasingly Urban Communities

Xochimilco, Ocotepec, and Tetecala are located along the neovolcanic axis in the Mesa Central of the Mexican Plateau (Figure 3) and share many of the cultural traits characteristic of Mesoamerica. According to Robert West (1971, 371), this area "is the largest and culturally the most significant of the Middle American tropical highlands. From the archeological record it appears that since Preclassic, or Formative times (1500–200 B.C.) the high plateau has supported a large population. Here

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are found some of the largest of the ancient ceremonial and urban centers of Mesoamerica, particularly in the Valley of Mexico and environs on the eastern side of the plateau. Still today, the Mesa Central forms the core of Mexico's population and economy."

The three communities in this study are pre-Hispanic in origin. Xochimilco was settled in the twelfth century by one of the original Nahuatl groups, the Xochimilcas, who extended southward to parts of what is now the state of Morelos in the 1300s and also founded one of the original barrios of Ocotepec (Rosales Aguilar 1995; Maldonado Jiménez 2000). Tetecala was founded in 1680 by mestizo and mulatto immigrants from what is now the state of Guerrero, south of Morelos, after an earthquake destroyed the original settlement. These place-names are derived from Nahuatl: "Xochimilco" means "where flowers are sown"; "Ocotepec" refers to the "hill of the pine tree"; and "Tetecala" describes a "place with many houses with stone vaults."

FIG. 3—Two of the three study sites, Xochimilco and Ocotepec, are being increasingly urbanized due to their proximity to Mexico City and Cuernavaca, respectively. Tetecala, the third study site, though relatively isolated, is an important regional market and agricultural center. (Cartography by Beverly Garland, University of Texas)

Xochimilco and Ocotepec have experienced dramatic change and growth since the early 1970s as the nearby cities of Mexico City and Cuernavaca have expanded, transforming their communities into suburbs, bedroom communities, and periurban areas (Losada and others 1998; Torres Lima 2000). Between 1970 and 2000, Xochimilco's population (my work is focused on one of its seventeen traditional barrios) more than tripled, while Cuernavaca's population, which includes Ocotepec, more than doubled. In three decades these places each became an urban center of roughly one-third of a million citizens (Secretaría de Industria y Comercio 1971; INEGI 2000, 2001). In the same period, Tetecala, the study

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site farthest from Mexico City, grew by more than a third to nearly 7,000 inhabitants. Population increased in Tetecala with a steady trickle of migrants from the south; it remains a relatively isolated but significant regional market and agricultural center and the seat of the municipal government. The similarities between Xochimilco and Ocotepec, and the differences between them and Tetecala, are partly ethnic in origin. In Tetecala, residents refer to the neighboring indigenous community of Coatetelco, where fiesta and culinary traditions are more similar to the other sites, in disparaging tones. Xochimilco and Ocotepec still have Nahuatl speakers among its elders; all three sites have indigenous identity movements and groups offering Nahuatl or "Mexicano" language classes.

In Xochimilco, people have been producing food crops and flowers for more than 500 years, and the chinampas remain the basis for the region's intensive raised-bed agriculture (Rojas 1990; Crossley 1999) and cultural identity (Canabal Cristiani 1997). Morelos, on the other hand, has long been known for its plantations of rice and sugarcane and for a campesino tradition that gave rise to the agrarian hero of the Mexican Revolution, Emiliano Zapata (Warman 1988). In Ocotepec, most of the people who once worked the land have sold it or rent it out. For the most part, small-scale farming has ceased to be viable in Tetecala, and many lease their land to foreign investors who grow produce for export or plant cane for the sugar industry that once employed many townspeople.

Common features in the region include changes in land use from one generation to the next, so that it is increasingly rare to find people under the age of sixty who still farm the land. Although some occasionally obtain fresh produce from their own fields or from neighbors and family, women purchase most of their fresh fruit and vegetables daily at local open-air markets where the produce is as often resold by vendors purchasing from the national market in Mexico city as sold by local producers. Young women increasingly question traditional gender roles as they seek more opportunities outside the home. Food preferences and traditions nonetheless persist, even when women must spend hours cooking after having worked all day or take a "vacation" from their jobs in order to spend two weeks preparing food for the community. Corn and beans remain staples, and people still use firewood for cooking, if only for tortillas and fiestas. Some families plant subsistence corn, a few women grind it, and others boil it at home and take it to the mill to grind. Though few in number, young men are involved in commercial agriculture in Tetecala and, especially, Xochimilco.

Wave after wave of indigenous, rural migrants from poorer areas, an ongoing exodus from the pollution, crime, and poor quality of life in Mexico City, and out-migration to the United States constantly redefine boundaries in the three communities. The collective identity in each place is based in part on marking differences between longtime residents and relative newcomers and between each place and nearby cities and towns. Only people whose families have worked the land for generations consider themselves and are considered by others to be "from here." Locals deny that newcomers are "from here," particularly in decisions involving land,

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regardless of how many years they have lived in town. In Xochimilco and Ocotepec, localities with centuries of history between their traditional barrios as well as with other communities in the region, people identify and are associated with a particular barrio more than with the town itself.

I selected the three study sites, as well as the women in the study, in part for their diversity and also because of prior relationships that would facilitate access to what many called "the most intimate space in the home": the kitchen. Sometimes I chose informants because they were hosting a special meal. I sought out working people and ordinary places, like kitchens and house-lot gardens, that are often overlooked. Despite their importance to residents and increasingly for local tourism in both Xochimilco and Ocotepec, most people in Mexico City and Cuernavaca are oblivious to the fiestas' existence. Even within Tetecala, longtime residents from one neighborhood ignored the dimensions of the annual fiesta for the Virgin of Coatetelco on the other side of town; there, women worked collectively for several days in one house-lot garden to prepare food for hundreds of guests, most of them pilgrims in procession from the neighboring indigenous community of Coatetelco who returned the religious figure to its church on the same date as the Niñopa celebration in Xochimilco.

Study participants included women of different ages and educational levels. Younger women were invariably more educated, including some who had attended a university. Few informants over the age of fifty, though, had completed primary school. The women in this study were lower or lower-middle class, and some of them were struggling to make ends meet. None was short of ingenuity, character, or ability to stretch their resources, occasionally even scavenging for food in the countryside. All of them, regardless of age, had some business experience selling food, plants, or other products in the street or in the local market. Most consider themselves humble people. The only woman I would consider "poor" was one whose location on the outskirts of town reflected her social status and lack of belonging (Figure 4). Susana, a squatter recently displaced from her land in nearby Yautepec, lives in a shack on the outskirts of Tetecala with no electricity or running water. Her "house-lot garden" at the edge of a field has no formal boundaries but includes the usual chilies, herbs, and chickens. The large hearth made of scrap materials—including a tractor tire filled with cement—seems to anchor her family to the earth.

One elderly widow I interviewed said she was too poor to participate in fiestas, but she had dozens of coffee mugs hanging on her adobe wall (Figure 5). She needed these to send off her dead, she explained, with a collective mourning ritual requiring eight days of prayer, food, and drink. Several women complained not of their material poverty but of Protestant groups who wanted to "steal their dead" by bringing an end to these and other traditions, such as setting out food offerings for the dead in November. From a Nahuatl cultural perspective, this would jeopardize the very survival of the living, given the function of the dead, who work on their behalf to guarantee a plentiful harvest (Good Eshelman 2001a).

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FIG. 4—Susana's tractor-tire hearth outside her squatter's shack on the outskirts of Tetecala, Mexico. (Photograph by the author, November 2000)

Most of the women with whom I worked were from the three study communities; some who said they were not "from here" had married in from an adjacent barrio. Doña Eustoquia is an exception: A migrant from the state of Guerrero, she had come to Tetecala fifty years earlier, when her future husband "stole her" from her family—a relatively common occurrence for women at that time. She represents the community as much as does any other individual in my study and offers a partial perspective on the region.

Doña Eustoquia's house-lot garden is sparse, strikingly neat, and always well swept. She uses a broom she made from brush she collects in the nearby fields and keeps stacked beside her hearth. Once a week she cooks dried corn with lime for tortillas, grinding corn daily on a hand mill attached to a tree [Figure 6] *and sprinkling limewater on the ground to keep the dust down. Her house-lot garden includes two fruit trees—soursop and papaya—and several stoves, including a gas stove that sits under a roof on the porch and a smoke kitchen where she makes tortillas. She often uses a small, portable stove with charcoal in order to save gas, firing it up on most mornings to reheat her beans and make coffee. On her small covered porch she has a few plastic chairs for company next to a little flowerbed in which she grows chilies, flowers, and pápalo, an herb that is a local favorite. She has other decorative elements as well, including half a dozen rocks she brought back from walks in the countryside and a dried ear of corn. When I asked why the corn is there, Doña Eustoquia contemplated it for some time before responding, "It's pretty."*

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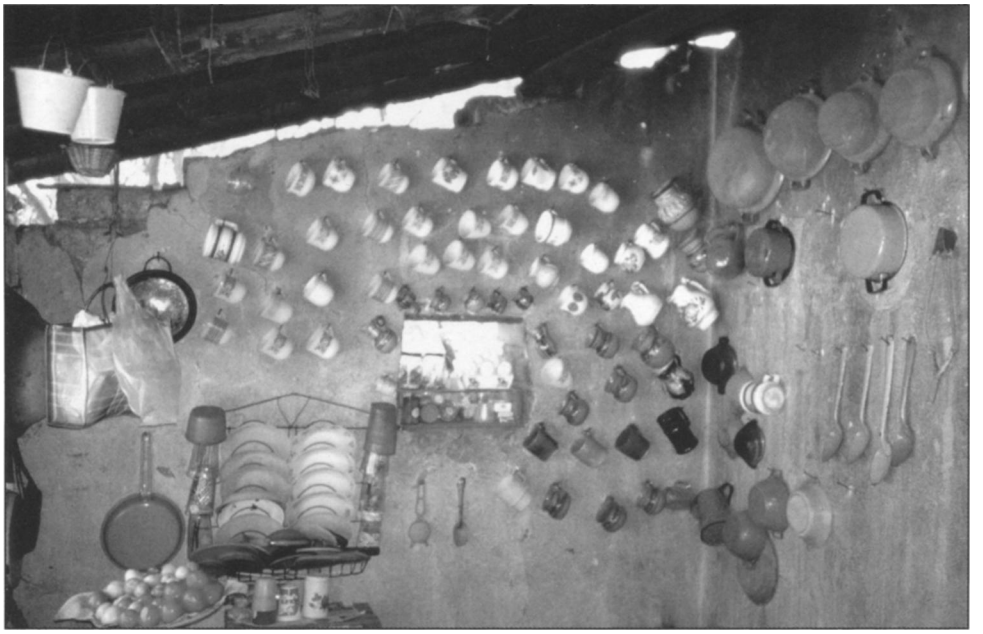

FIG. 5—Doña Irene, a poor widow in Tetecala, has more than two dozen coffee mugs hanging on the wall of her open-faced kitchen so that she can host mourners and send her dead off properly. Note other common kitchen items: clay pots of various sizes, enamel-covered pots and spoons, plastic buckets and dishes, a plastic woven market bag, strainers, and tomatoes. Less common, perhaps, a child's slingshot hangs on an extra nail at the far right. (Photograph by the author, May 2001)

KITCHENSPACE IN GEOGRAPHICAL GARDEN STUDIES

Since the mid–twentieth century cultural geographers have shown interest in gardens and yards, including their food-related aspects (Sauer 1952). Although a "masculinist bias" in geography (Sundberg 2003)—and a bias toward "field" research and toward agriculture over domestic spaces and gardens—may have discouraged consideration of spaces close to the home, geographers have increasingly remarked on their cultural and social significance. Clarissa Kimber was a pioneer in studying gardens, with her early research in the West Indies showing dooryard gardens to be "an intimate form of land use . . . particularly revealing of cultural habits and inheritances" (Kimber 1966, 116). Hinting at the emotional and social importance of gardens, Kimber pointed out that their general purpose "seems to be for consumption and exchange with neighbors and for the use and pleasure of the gardener," and she found it "a matter of status to be able to give presents from the garden" (pp. 106–107). She noted that the exchange of garden products supported reciprocity networks.

More recently, Antoinette WinklerPrins stressed the importance of garden products to critical social networks in the case of rural-to-urban migrants in Brazil (WinklerPrins 2002). In Mexico a different sort of "garden" product—food prepared in the house-lot garden—confers status (on the cook, the household, and the barrio that receives guests) and helps to sustain critical social networks. In this way,

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FIG. 6—Doña Eustoquia grinding corn in a mill mounted on a tree in her house-lot garden in Tetecala, Mexico. (Photograph by the author, December 2000)

house-lot gardens play an indirect role in subsistence when their function as an extension of the kitchen for household chores and for entertainment, recreation, and display—functions Richard Westmacott (1992) identified in his study of African American gardens and yards in the rural U.S. South—combine to strengthen social networks that provide a safety net and material support.

J. B. Jackson stated that a garden tradition "almost sacred in its general acceptance, was that the vernacular or working garden was the domain of the woman of the house" (1993, 12). In Mexico gardens are both the domain of individual women and, at times, community space. During fiestas, the house-lot garden becomes ritual space with clear gender lines, the women clustered near the corn and the rice and the men near the meat and the alcoholic beverages. But beyond gendered space, it is women's territory. Women use it for everyday chores and have a claim to it for small-scale economic opportunities such as egg production. Just as one woman rules the kitchen and house-lot garden in any given household, the woman who hosts a community meal is the unquestioned authority: Her female helpers look to her for guidance, and the men stay out of her way.

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In his feminist political ecology study of urban kitchen gardens in highland Guatemala, Eric Keys (1999) reported that Mayan women not only supplement household needs in the house-lot garden but have a primary role in educating children—transmitting knowledge and values—regarding the natural environment. Stressing that the garden is the location of "important non-material elements of Mayan lifeways," Keys emphasized that the educational role of women in this space "surpasses that of material production, gender empowerment, and horticulture architecture of the garden, those elements that have received the most attention from cultural and political ecology geographers" (p. 98). In her study of ethnicity and change among Yucatec immigrants in Quintana Roo, Laurie Greenberg (1996) linked the house-lot garden with the maintenance of cultural identity. She found that species native to the Yucatán or long used in typical Yucatec dishes were the most common plants in the house lots and concluded that "house lots are an important space for ethnic continuity because they offer families a site for ethnic and individual expression, autonomy in continued subsistence practices, and control over diet" (p. 355). Likewise, although the house-lot gardens in my study provide space for women to raise small animals on food scraps, their nonmaterial elements of culture are most significant.

Cultural inheritances in the house-lot garden go beyond the embodied knowledge or reciprocity networks required to prepare community feasts—and even beyond the recipes themselves. Women transform raw ingredients into calories sufficient to support human existence—quite a feat considering the precarious economic circumstances of many in the study region—and into culturally appropriate dishes that satisfy the palate and prejudices of those who eat them. Given the importance of food and fiestas in the house-lot garden to maintaining a sense of cultural continuity and critical social networks, changes in this intimate form of land use should become a greater priority for cultural and political ecologists, as well as for feminist and cultural geographers.

"The Everyday One or The Smoke Kitchen?"

Half-finished craft projects surround me in María Teresa's kitchen. I sit among carrots, ribbons, bits of yarn, and glue, trying to interview her while she makes supper for her family. She recycles kitchen containers: milk cartons for lanterns at Christmas, cutoff plastic soda bottles for wedding souvenirs. Nothing is wasted: Large cans are used for potted plants; food scraps and old tortillas are cooked into a soup for the dogs. When I ask María Teresa to sketch a map of her kitchen, she hesitates, and asks, "Which one? The everyday one or the smoke kitchen?" She draws both, beginning with the one in which we are sitting. Despite her initial reticence, she enjoys drawing the details—flowers on the table, ruffled curtains, pots and pans—and signs her masterpiece when it is complete [Figure 7]. *Halfway through, she draws two large clay pots with a pile of firewood alongside. "Every house in Ocotepec has a smoke kitchen," she insists. Knowing that the new houses on the outskirts of town do not, I wonder whether this is a clear*

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indicator of a local family versus one from Mexico City who recently built their weekend home in a former cornfield.

So integrated is the house-lot garden into everyday life and so subtle the progression from "indoors" to "outdoors" that it was practically invisible to me. Not until María Teresa mapped her modern and smoke kitchens on one page was I jarred into recognizing the vital but humble existence of this outdoor kitchenspace. The "everyday" and the "smoke" kitchens—or, as other women put it, the "modern" and "traditional" kitchens—often coexist and, despite some overlap, are associated with different social functions. One is family space, the other community space, although community is largely made up of kin, just as everyday life includes a never-ending cycle of fiestas. Everyday food preparation pushes the boundaries of kitchenspace into the house-lot garden, where the sink and the hearth are located, together with traditional grinding implements such as the three-legged metate that is still used to knead tortilla dough, if no longer to grind corn. On special occasions, members of the community cook, eat, and generally make themselves at home in what can no longer be considered a private house-lot garden. Both household and community kitchenspaces spill over into the house-lot garden.

The reciprocity networks that transform the house-lot garden during these preparations involve community members of all ages: They are a traditional system of mutual support throughout the region that links individuals together within communities, just as formal "visits" and processions at the time of annual celebrations connect one barrio or community with another. A visiting delegation from one place may provide the candles, flowers, music, fireworks, or other essential components for another town or barrio's fiesta. The visitors are received with a meal by specially designated hosts, many of whom commit to this role in writing one year in advance. The receiving community, in turn, sends delegations to towns with which it is in a reciprocal relationship to coincide with their fiestas; they too are inevitably received with a meal, and relations between the two communities (or two barrios in different communities) are renewed. The woman who hosts a special meal calls on women from her extended family network for help. "Family" extends beyond blood relatives to include "comothers" incorporated into the family or community based on their previous support with food for a particular celebration, their sponsorship of a child at baptism or of a girl celebrating her fifteenth birthday, always a formal and lavish affair that marks her transition into womanhood. This ever-expanding extended family provides an "insurance umbrella" of sorts (Stea 1995).

With the support of her extended network, María Teresa hosted the traditional "meal for all the neighborhoods" on 3 May, the Day of the Holy Cross, in the barrio by that name. Everyone from the three other barrios in Ocotepec was invited, and hundreds of guests sat and ate in what had been a small cornfield in the house-lot garden just days before. The next morning María Teresa served warmed-up leftovers to the neighborhood committee in a gathering that concluded with a discussion of community affairs and commitments for the following year's celebration. She wept with relief as the celebratory meal drew to an end. A returning migrant

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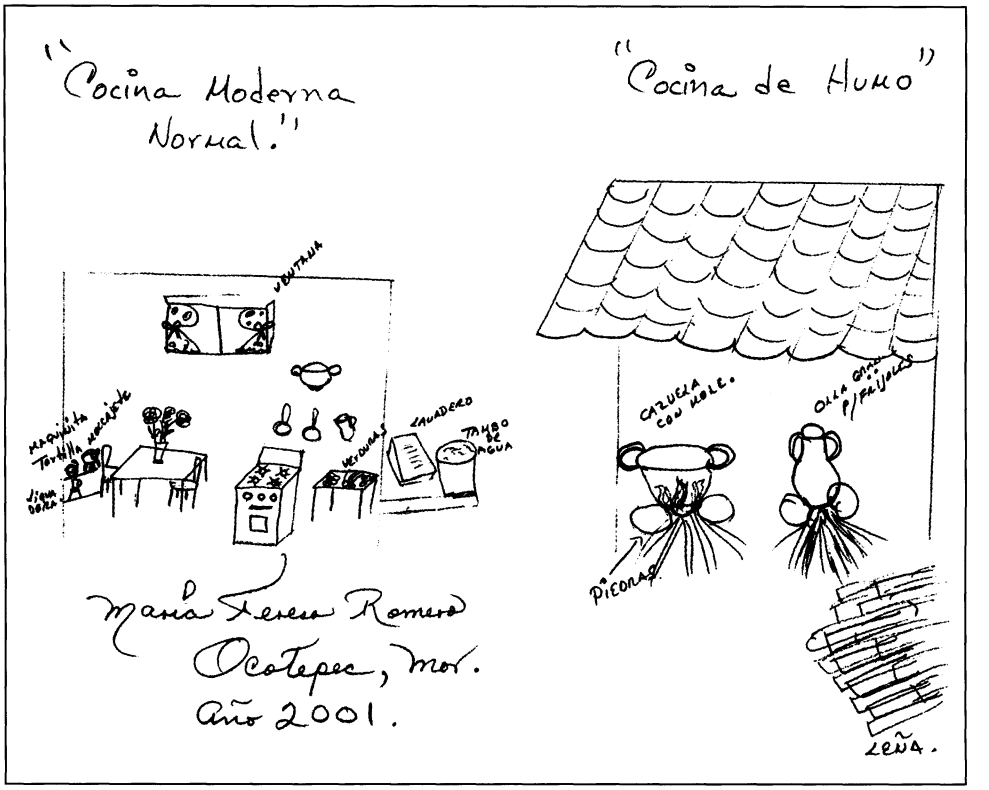

FIG. 7—María Teresa's sketch of her dual kitchenspaces in Ocotepec, Mexico. (Reproduced courtesy of the *Journal of Latin American Geography*).

with centuries-old roots in Ocotepec, María Teresa was anxious to prove herself a member of the community; she paid into the cash collection twice, in her husband's and her father's names, so both would be read aloud by the committee. "The family name must be kept very clean," she explained, so that one can count on community support in times of need, as when her mother passed away recently: The church bells immediately announced her death and launched eight days of mourning.

BEING IN KITCHENSPACE

Doña Margarita sits by the multiple hearths at the back of the house-lot garden in Xochimilco, getting up now and then to stir the mole and check on the rice and tamales. She explains various rituals to me, including the tying of corn-husk "ears" on the pot handles to ensure that no discord disturbs the tamales [Figure 8]. *Half-cooked tamales may be blamed on an angry cook or a crying child. Tamales are treated with extreme care and tenderness, almost like infants. Bean tamales are particularly sensitive, she assures me, and will not be settled once something goes wrong. "You can fix meat tamales," she says, "but not bean ones. The bean tamales, they really get mad if you disturb them!" As guests arrive, most of them walk back to the smoke kitchen to greet "Grandmother"—as most of them call her—with respect and affection, bowing and kissing her*

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FIG. 8—Mixiotes cooking in pots with corn-husk "ears" on their handles in Señora Rosa's traditional kitchen in Xochimilco, Mexico. (Photograph by the author, March 2001)

hand before sitting down at the tables in the yard. At eighty-one Doña Margarita, like many elderly women in the region, has a prestigious place in the community, based in part on her accumulated knowledge and continued performance in the house-lot garden. Sitting in the smoke of burning firewood, she squints at me suspiciously at first but relaxes when she recalls my three children growing up in the neighborhood. "They love me a lot here," she tells me proudly. "They call me to come make the rice."

The house-lot garden provides key cultural and social space for the performance of rituals that reaffirm participants' sense of belonging—the collective preparation and consumption of typical foods linked to fiestas—particularly those that mark the religious and agricultural calendar. It allows women to play a vital role in community affairs and to feed their family even in difficult circumstances. As in other parts of the globe, women in Mexico are rarely recognized for their work preparing daily household meals. During collective food preparation for religious fiestas, however, the reputation of the host family and barrio is literally in women's hands. For women like Doña Margarita, whose daughters and granddaughters allow her little responsibility for the household, it provides a welcome opportunity to contribute.

In this region the house-lot garden is a place many women enjoy visiting with guests, caring for their plants, or simply resting. Women reported experiencing joy and pleasure being in their gardens, enjoying nature in the form of potted plants, caged birds, and the fresh food they washed and cooked there. Every house-lot garden had the ubiquitous ornamentals selected and tended by women, potted in recycled kitchen containers in a curious integration of the kitchen and the garden.

The approach down a long hallway to Señora Rosa's kitchen in Xochimilco is lined with dozens of plants in cans and plastic containers on the wall leading to a small house-lot garden [Figure 9]. *This includes a sink used for washing food, dishes, and laundry alongside the canal and several animal pens that have been in use off and on for years. Behind the kitchen are a plum tree, a bench, a tree trunk for sitting, and a tiny*

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salon behind the kitchen where she cuts and styles hair. "Right now the only animals we have are cats," Señora Rosa says. "My sister sometimes has a pig or some chickens. My son raised a pig too, for his daughter's fifteenth birthday party. When we don't have animals we give the waste from the kitchen to people who are raising pigs. Look, here I'm saving things in this pot. I save the hard tortillas for Don Miguel, for his cows." Today she prepares mixiotes: *She slaughters her sister's roosters and smothers the pieces of meat in chili, adds potatoes, onions, and oregano, wraps them in corn husks, and then steams them over a fire, using old furniture for fuel, with strips of corn husk tied onto the pot's handles* [Figure 8].

The house-lot garden is a site of gendered knowledge and cultural transmission, maintained to a great extent through multigenerational households in which older women take care of young children and teach both boys and girls how to prepare food and acquire a taste for local dishes. Women are responsible for a variety of food-related activities here, from raising pigs to stirring pots and flipping tortillas, as well as tending plants and small children (Figure 10). Girls learn that their role is to nurture and serve others. Most women said they taught their sons to cook—eggs and beans at a minimum—in case their future wife was sick or the boy remained single; but in reality it is mothers, sisters, grandmothers, and even neighbors who fill in for an absent, sick, or "delinquent" wife. One persistent pattern is that an unmarried daughter is expected to cook for the family. Another is that the grandmother chooses one person to be the repository of her cooking knowledge and does not fully disclose her recipes until she is ready. Young women complain that their grandmothers hide kitchen secrets from them, just as men complain of not being allowed in the kitchen other than to eat. Clearly, women maintain a certain degree of control over household relations through kitchenspace.

In addition to cooking in the house-lot garden, women transmit everything from knowledge of plant names and how to raise animals for food to a love of living things. Several women told me that, along with recipes, they teach their children to respect the labor of the farmer and the bounty of nature. Joining the preparations and celebrations of a fiesta, young people learn social obligations and moral values, including service to community. Every person who comes to the table—or the house-lot garden—must be fed, if only a taco. At the same time, multitiered menus before and during fiestas reflect the social stratification that has characterized Mexico for centuries. The hostess prepares simple menus for the women who work with her, and for any children they bring along, while they prepare the main meal for

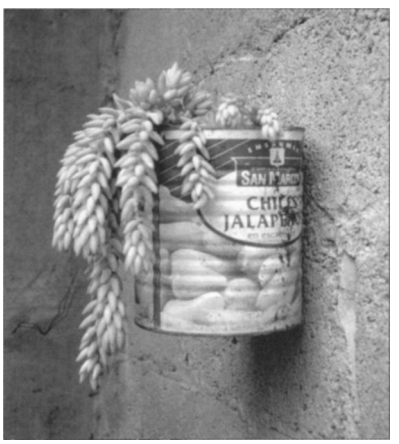

FIG. 9—A lovely *Sedum morganianum* (burro's tail) in a recycled chili can, one of many ornamentals in Señora Rosa's house-lot garden in Xochimilco, Mexico. (Photograph by the author, January 2001)

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FIG. 10—A grandmother makes tortillas for a fiesta in Ocotepec as a toddler looks on. Note the firewood stacked behind the woman and the bags of cement piled behind the boy. (Photograph by the author, March 2001)

the guests. A small number of honored guests may be distinguished with a different menu on the feast day or offered a basket of house mole and tamales to take home after the meal.

Most of my conversations with Esmeralda take place in her kitchenspace in Tetecala, under a roof, neither indoors nor out. Because of the heat, she and her mother moved the gas stove out of the closed room they still call "the kitchen" in order to catch what breeze they can. Despite the fact that her kitchenspace has only three walls, Esmeralda expresses her frustration about older people's expectation that young women like herself live within the confines of "these four walls." She would prefer a career as a lawyer to her responsibilities of grinding corn at her family's mill (located in the house-lot garden) and cooking food all day long for her family and once a week to sell at the market.[6] *Her house-lot garden includes seven hearths, a large sink, and several plastic containers for storing water; some items are devoted exclusively to storing or transforming corn, including a metate made of volcanic rock. She owns both a mortar and pestle and an electric blender for making salsa. Her fuel includes firewood, dried corn husks, charcoal, and several gas tanks; and she has a large variety of pots and pans made of clay, plastic, or enamel-covered aluminum. The crowded space contains more than sixty chickens, a number of pigs, and several fruit trees, dried foods and medicinal herbs, potted ornamentals, an aged parrot, and a plastic table and chairs at which to receive guests and serve meals.*

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House-lot gardens in the study communities are more important in terms of cultural values and sense of place than for their contribution to the physical sustenance of the family. Although the gardens provide the household with some fruit on a seasonal basis, growing vegetables there is rare, with the exception of an occasional volunteer chayote squash. One woman explained this phenomenon with the popular saying "paws or plants," a comment on the incompatibility of animals such as chickens with plants in the ground. Women grow herbs and chilies for cooking and medicinal use in this space, and they may raise small animals for a special meal or to stretch the family budget. Not every house-lot garden has food plants and live animals, but enough do that a sense of immediate connection with nature through the food cycle is part of the collective experience and sense of place. Significantly, women's response to my query about whether they lived in the country or the city was often justified in terms of their house-lot gardens. Women with working spaces and animals or plants in the house-lot garden pointed to these as evidence that they lived in the country, even as they pointed to city services and increased crime and pollution as evidence of urbanization.

"We Used to Have a Lot of Pigs"

Three different herbs grow in Soledad's house-lot garden: spearmint, epazote, and chamomile. In addition to pigs, the family once had many chickens, but a lone hen is all that remains. The family plot includes several adobe houses and a smoke kitchen that can be fully closed, which Soledad says is important. "The thing is that, if we make food for a fiesta in large quantities, we can close that and it can stay there. And the animals can't get in."

Soledad remarks on the intolerance for animal smells that has accompanied Ocotepec's urbanization. "Everything bothers us nowadays," she complains, lamenting the fact that "there are no more pigs," not only because they were good to eat but also because now she has to throw away food scraps. "We used to have lots of pigs. But the thing is that it bothers the neighbors and all that. Before, the smells did not bother them and everyone had pigs, but now everything bothers us. It is the same people, but now their children [have other ideas], and it's like they don't want animals anymore. And I say, well, a little animal, a pig, for example. I mean, we have their pen don't we? And it was a help because now the scraps that come from the kitchen, that we used to give the piggies that we then sold or ate, now they go to waste. And they're food scraps, aren't they? I mean, they're food scraps. Well, we always had pigs; always, always. Now, we sometimes give scraps to the dogs, but sometimes from getting too many, they just don't want them. And besides, there's some food dogs don't even like, and pigs eat everything. Everything."

The house-lot garden offers opportunities to study gendered strategies of adaptation to change on the urban/rural interface, including, given its semipublic nature at times of community celebrations, changes in population. It is a place for the very young and the very old, for longtime residents and newer immigrants, for work and play, for education and celebration. The house-lot garden provides a connection

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with the land—a space for the symbolic reenactment of such a connection—and the past in communities, such as Ocotepec and Xochimilco, that are increasingly engulfed by cities. As one informant in Ocotepec exclaimed sadly to me, "The city is swallowing us."

Household and community easily share space in the house-lot garden, but rural and urban elements have a more antagonistic relationship. Raising, slaughtering, cooking, and eating animals there allows people to remain conscious participants in the life cycle, with full awareness of how wastes literally feed into their consumption process. Reuse and recycling are part of the landscape, with tortillas laid out to dry and slop buckets collecting food wastes a common sight, even if destined for animals somewhere else in the barrio. Used containers and materials are utilized for storage and cooking: scrap metal for a griddle, plastic bags as lids on clay pots, cans for potting plants. Pigs, in particular, represent an economic and cultural strategy that supports both household and community needs and, like traditions regarding the dead—but regardless of religious practice—that people in this culture region find extremely disturbing to lose. Yet even in Tetecala, the most rural of the study sites despite its classification as a city, new neighbors from more urbanized areas complain about the smell of pigs. Esmeralda's family faced a legal battle with neighbors who attempted to introduce a city ordinance on this issue. The ordinance did not pass, but it illustrates the tension between urban and rural lifestyles that exists in all three communities. Curiously, the same people for whom animals in the house lots are intolerable swell the ranks of the community feasts.

House-lot gardens are losing ground to overcrowding, construction, and changing values and lifestyles, although, for the most part, outdoor kitchenspaces have retained their function and significance. Throughout Ocotepec, house-lot gardens showed signs of recent construction, either as people sold off parts of their land or as younger members of the family built homes on the family plot. Yet women resist losing their fiesta or smoke kitchen: Rosalinda, for example, moved her smoke kitchen to her rooftop when she built up the edges of her house-lot garden to rent out space for extra income, and she was proud to provide the women who helped her with the mole for Easter with the best view in town of the festivities below (Figure 11). One woman I interviewed as she was making tortillas in her house-lot garden expressed her sadness as we listened to the hammers pounding and watched young men pour cement just a few meters away from the hearth. With her view of the countryside blocked and no more cornfield to look at, she said, more to herself than to me, "How will I live?"

Fiestas play a role in integrating population sectors in the community and forging alliances with the outside, with migrants from rural areas providing much of the energy and faith that are critical to carrying on agricultural traditions—including the religious fiestas. Kitchenspaces in house-lot gardens offer migrants opportunities for meaningful and embodied participation in their host community. Migrants who have married into the community—as in Don Miguel's case—or locals who once farmed for a living, and even children of locals who return after a period out-

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side their hometown—as with María Teresa—may host a meal for a neighborhood fiesta to express religious devotion, build alliances, and increase their social status in the process. Those with money can give cash to help with the cost of the fiesta. Those with little money or political capital may still contribute to the preparations, which, for women, usually means working in the house-lot garden. One church

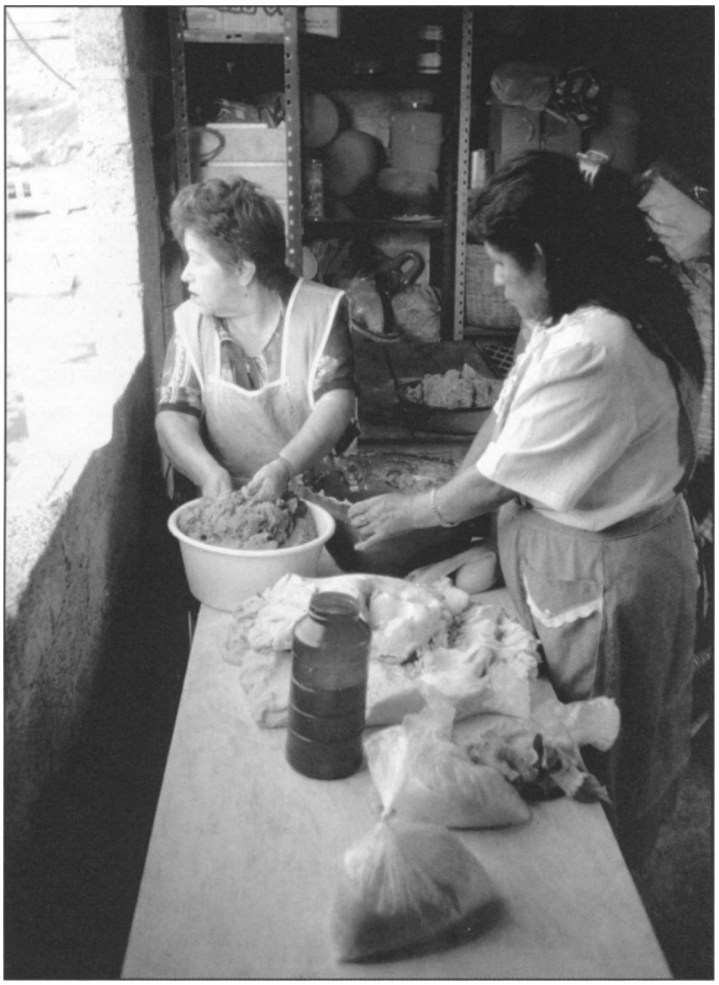

FIG. 11—Rosalinda's smoke kitchen on the roof of her house in Ocotepec, Mexico offers an excellent view of the fiesta below. (Photograph by the author, April 2001)

official in Xochimilco remarked that new arrivals from surrounding states are the most enthusiastic participants in local celebrations.

In central Mexico, who "we" are and what "here" represents have been changing to absorb new influences since long before the Spaniards arrived 500 years ago. People in the three study sites express suspicion of all newcomers, but they are particularly resentful of city folk and, in Xochimilco and Ocotepec, the urban sprawl

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that is changing their landscape and way of life. They are more sympathetic to rural migrants, some of whom sought work in the city and ended up as hired hands in local agriculture. Throughout the region people believe that their way of life is threatened by an erosion of values palpable, among other things, in the disregard for peasants and what they consider the "authentic" taste of the Mexican countryside. In this context, women in kitchenspaces walk a thin line between adaptation and resistance, adjusting food recipes to availability and to cost of ingredients and cookware as they seek to provide the tastes their families and communities expect despite changes in everything from environments to lifestyles (Christie 2002).

Food celebrations in the house-lot garden have grown even as the agricultural spaces in which they were rooted have shrunk (Christie 2003). As people in Xochimilco and Ocotepec have become less dependent on agriculture, the resource base that sustains the fiestas has changed from an uncertain harvest to the steady accumulation of capital from a salaried job or the informal sector. At the same time, locals increasingly invite outside guests as their alliances extend into the city. One seventy-year-old woman in Ocotepec told me that today's huge fiestas are not so traditional. In the old days, she explained, when people prayed for a harvest and had a couple of chickens at most, they could not count on having enough for a feast.

House-lot gardens reflect the changing cultural values and needs of the people who inhabit them and offer unique perspectives on the relationship between society and the natural environment. Increasingly urban communities adapt to change, and their mechanisms for community participation vary from one locality to the other, much like the mole recipe. In central Mexico, gendered spaces in the house-lot garden must be part of inquiries into nature-society relations. Women's ability to feed their family on an everyday basis and to supply their community with the special foods that are at the center of religious rituals and celebrations merits more attention, such as the role that transnational links and contributions from displaced community members play in celebrations of place and whether their importance is greater than that of relative newcomers who do not "belong." Gardens offer fertile ground for further research, particularly if preconceived notions about "field" and "garden" do not restrict our ability to understand change in different cultural contexts.

Notes

1. All names have been changed to protect the identity of the individuals involved in this research.

2. Raising animals on chinampas is not traditional, and the practice causes some friction in the community, partly because of resentment that meat is increasingly replacing the traditional vegetables, corn, and beans.

3. Pulque is the fermented juice of the agave heart, made by methods similar to those used by the ancient people of Mexico. In Xochimilco and Ocotepec (see Figure 3), older men can be found drinking pulque, whereas younger people generally choose more "modern" bottled drinks, which they associate with professionals and the corresponding rise in social status. In Tetecala (see Figure 3), although some older men still drink pulque, strong alcohol made from sugarcane is more common.

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4. Tamales, or *tamalli,* literally means "carefully wrapped" in Nahuatl and is the ritual food of choice for celebrations today, just as it was centuries ago. A tamal is basically something carefully wrapped in corn husks or banana or other leaves and then steamed (Pérez San Vicente 2000).

5. Three assistants in particular were invaluable to this research: Yazmín Flores Romero in Ocotepec; Martha Domínguez Nájera in Tetecala; and José Torres Medina in Xochimilco.

6. At the time this article was written, Esmeralda was studying law in Cuernavaca. Her niece has taken over the kitchen duties.

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