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## Visualizing *mole poblano* as heritage process in Mexico City's Café de Tacuba

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### ABSTRACT

This paper provides the first study of an untitled, large-scale painting, which the author refers to as *The Creation of Mole* (1946), by Mexican artist Carlos González. Commissioned for Café de Tacuba, one of Mexico City's oldest and most well-known restaurants, this painting was part of an aggressive rebranding campaign for the café, which sought to legitimize claims of Mexican culinary authenticity through evocations of Pueblan colonial heritage, including the fictive legend of the invention of Mexico's national dish, *mole poblano*. The paper demonstrates how and to what ends *The Creation of Mole*, which has been precluded from scholarly inquiry due to its commercial status, engages in meaning making at the nexus of national identity and aspirational modernity. It is argued that the labor rendered invisible in *The Creation of Mole* nonetheless amplifies an important kind of civic "making" present in, and perpetuated by, the painting. The confluence of *mole poblano*'s popularized mythic invention coupled with the colonial historicity of Café de Tacuba encodes *mole poblano*, and Café de Tacuba's menu writ large, as foodstuffs of a collective Mexican *mestizaje*—an invisible but powerful phenomenon that could be consumed, absorbed, and digested.

### KEYWORDS

Mexico; modernity; *mole poblano*; consumption; painting; art history; *mestizaje*; café

In the grand foyer of Mexico City's Café de Tacuba hangs a large-scale oil painting on canvas produced in 1946 by Mexican painter and cinematographer Carlos E. González (b. Mexico City 1893, d. Mexico City 1961; [Figure 1](#)).<sup>1</sup> The untitled painting, which I will refer to as *The Creation of Mole*, depicts the mytho-historic invention of Mexico's national dish, *mole poblano*—a decadent stew comprising turkey drowned in a thick sauce of ground chilies and, sometimes, chocolate—in the seventeenth-century Convent of Santa Rosa, a Dominican cloister located in the colonial center of Puebla, about two hours southeast of Mexico City.<sup>2</sup> Commissioned specifically for the café, *The Creation of Mole* has never known any home other than this commercial site. Today, Café de Tacuba claims this painting as the "icon" of the establishment (Mollinedo and Rafael 2012, 18). In spite of this painting's prominence in one of the oldest, and most well-known cafés in the city, the work's commercial origins have precluded it from studies of Mexico City's postrevolutionary visual milieu.

In their pivotal scholarship on Mexican foodways, Jeffrey Pilcher (1998), José Luis Curiel Monteagudo (2004), and José Luis López and Luis (2013), among others, have



**Figure 1.** Carlos E. González, *Untitled [the creation of mole]*, c.1946, oil on canvas, Café de Tacuba, Mexico City, Mexico.

Source: Café de Tacuba, Mexico City, Mexico.

established *mole poblano* as an intersectional foodstuff through which Mexican history and politics unfold. Building upon this formative scholarship, I consider how images and representations of *mole poblano* intervene into this historical discourse, not merely reflecting, but rather negotiating, shaping, and perpetuating attitudes and ideas about consumption, identity, and citizenry. The mid-twentieth century marked a particularly robust period in the visibility of Mexican foodways, including *mole poblano*, thanks in large part to elite artistic efforts to commemorate indigenous culture as well as increased circulation of illustrated cookbooks. As innovations in domestic technologies expedited Mexican cookery in ways never before possible, visual representations of cookery and foodways became a surrogate for the cookery that was no longer taking place. How and to what end this culinary and commercial visual landscape intervened in the lived experiences and aspirations of *chilangos* and tourists remains understudied in the scholarship.<sup>3</sup>

In this context, I argue that *The Creation of Mole* engages Mexican nationalist identity construction through the metabolic process of visually and gustationally ingesting the ultimate syncretic cultural product, *mole poblano*.<sup>4</sup> Though the café for which it was commissioned is a site of “making,” *The Creation of Mole* suppresses notions of cookery and labor, instead elevating the café into a locus for the production of good citizenry through the painting’s myriad iconographic and performative invocations of *mestizaje*—a modern brand of cultural miscegenation that pervaded Mexican consumer ideology in the postrevolutionary era.

This argument hinges upon the recognition that Mexican identity is not merely a product of cultural mixing but rather an interminable process of self-fashioned *becoming* in the image of an ideal Mexican self. I suggest that this perpetual

transformation aligns with Laurajane Smith's definition of heritage as "a cultural process that engages with acts of remembering that work to create ways to understand and engage with the present, and the sites themselves are cultural tools that can facilitate ... this process" (2006, 44). As Smith explains, heritage resides within the inherently unstable practice of memory, whereby individuals negotiate—consciously and unconsciously—between remembrance and ignorance in the service of constructing meaningful identities in the present. Monuments such as *The Creation of Mole* produce and perpetuate these processes of identity construction, particularly in the context of Café de Tacuba's agenda of modern consumerism. While immersion in Mexican lived experience can render these processes unconscious, I demonstrate that *The Creation of Mole* facilitates a culturally crafted understanding of *mestizaje* that is rooted in the fictive memory of *mole poblano*'s colonial production and consumption. This social construct, which can be re-inscribed with each taste of the dish and each visit to the café, heightens the performative negotiation of colonial remembrance for the modern consumer.

As Pilcher has suggested, the narratives surrounding *mole*'s colonial invention communicated not seventeenth-century attitudes but rather "the nationalist ideology of modern Mexico" (1998, 42–3). I suggest that *The Creation of Mole* likewise utilizes fictive colonial mythology to encode modern Mexican ideology. In other words, this commercial painting is neither anachronistic nor kitsch; rather, it negotiates attitudes toward indigeneity, gender, and modernization that render it—and the café for which it was produced—a critical site for the construction and enactment of national consciousness. Although I explore the ways in which the painting allegorizes contemporary attitudes toward heritage, labor, and leisure, I do so while emphasizing that the conceptual value of the painting comes from its intersection with the lived experience of the café, in which the idea of *mole poblano* transforms into material consumption.<sup>5</sup> In this way, *The Creation of Mole* serves as a prime example of the negotiation of Mexican citizenship enacted at the nexus of representation and foodways.

To demonstrate the agents of heritage at work in *The Creation of Mole*, I first establish the circumstances surrounding the painting's commission, which includes a rebranding of Café de Tacuba and claims to authentic Mexican cuisine rooted in colonial Puebla. Next, I discuss how González situates his work among a niche group of popular images that indulge the mythic colonial ties between the dish and the Convent of Santa Rosa—a myth emergent from commercial interests in the modern era, which became seamlessly integrated into Mexican history and heritage. I then provide a close iconographic and formal analysis of the painting, arguing that the work's emphasis on consumption and consumers firmly situates this fictive colonial scene among efforts to promote the modernization of Mexican cookery. Ultimately, I show the ways in which González inscribes modern anxieties about indigenous cookery in his painting, thereby underscoring the racial and social dialectics encoding metaphorical and material conceptions of *mole poblano* in 1940s Mexico City.

### **Amplifying the colonial**

On December 13, 1912, as Mexico descended into a decade-long era of bloody revolution, Dionisio Mollinedo opened Café de Tacuba in the modest storefront of a colonial-

era building. Named for the street on which it is located, Café de Tacuba resides to this day at the heart of Mexico City's Centro Histórico, directly between the ruins of the Aztec Templo Mayor—dismantled by the Spanish in 1521—and the Palacio de Bellas Artes, a flagship cultural site of modern Mexican arts. This politically charged location, at the nexus of colonial destruction and modern Mexican grandeur, allowed Mollinedo to position Café de Tacuba as a *mise en scène* of “authentic” Mexican heritage, rooted in both the site's colonial pedigree and a modern consumer sensibility.

Café de Tacuba saw great success in its first three decades, as Mexican dignitaries and intellectual clientele brought attention and sophistication to the café. By the late 1930s, with the café's popularity firmly established, and in an effort to amplify the café's claims of historic authenticity, Mollinedo commissioned an extensive remodel of the café's main salon from a generic dining room to one of “Colonial Mexican” style (Mollinedo and Rafael 2012, 17; Figure 2). This rebranding was largely rooted in an investment in the colonial historicity of the café's location and marks a critical shift in the café's identity from a cozy fine-dining establishment to a self-conscious site of Mexican heritage. The café's advertisements, which previously boasted of a “one of a kind” café (see *El Universal Ilustrado*, July 5, 1928 issue), declared themselves, after the remodel, a site of “authentic Mexican food” (Toor 1946, 279).

This rebranding and artistic commission came at the start of a new economic era for urban Mexico. The 1940s saw a fantastic boom in Mexico City's population, which, by the end of the decade, had nearly doubled in size to three million (Aguilar-Rodríguez 2013, 44). Many of these migrants came from rural areas throughout Mexico, seeking work in the city's newfound industrial economy. Manuel Ávila Camacho's presidency (1940–6) had ushered in, almost unintentionally, a new, if problematic, capitalist era (see Niblo 1999). This administration, impacted by war demands overseas, saw growth



**Figure 2.** View of Café de Tacuba's main salon, c.1940–70, polychrome postcard (recto), 3¼ x 5½ inches. Alducin Offset, Mexico City, Mexico.

Source: Collection of author.

in tourism, investment, and construction, though working classes, whose wages became stifled under the corrupt administration, saw fewer benefits than the urban elite (199, 123). By 1946, the year González produced *The Creation of Mole*, Mexico's political agenda had shifted away from the revolutionary educational, agrarian, and cultural reforms of the past two decades and instead looked toward global interests and aggressive free-market industry (Sherman 2000, 575–6). Consumer and tourist economies, fervently pursued under the administration of Miguel Alemán (1946–52), became the state's hope for national growth.

To that end, the 1940s marked a critical era of modernization for Mexico City's culinary landscape. During this postrevolutionary era, consumers largely prescribed to a discourse of antipathy, fear, and anxiety toward modes of indigenous cookery that today have become a privileged aspect of Mexican cuisine. Regulations increasingly consigned itinerant street vendors to “hygienic” and permanent operations in covered markets where their commerce could be contained and monitored (Niblo 1999, 14). The inter- and post-world war influx of foreign tourists and immigrants, however, marked a gradual shift in gastronomic conventions, as newcomers both inscribed their culinary practices onto the city and demonstrated curiosity, albeit limited, toward foodways local to Mexico. Tourists were cautioned to ease into those “richer and heavier” foods of Mexico by first seeking out Mexico City's Western culinary offerings, which were plentiful by the 1940s (Toor 1946, 14, 57; Novo 1976, 337–43; Niblo 1999, 28). Only after exhausting the city's offerings of American, Italian, French, Spanish, and German cuisine should foreigners carefully dabble in the exotic foods and beverages of colonial and indigenous Mexican origins. Thus a measured embrace of distinctly Mexican, and regional, cuisine, like that espoused by Café de Tacuba, slowly began to capture the intellectual curiosity of urban and foreign consumers (Pilcher 2012, 155).

In this climate of increasing demand for a modern, yet mildly daring, presentation of Mexican cookery, Mollinedo hired González—at that time a mid-career Mexican artist involved in the city's plastic and theater arts—and together they embarked on an excursion to the colonial city of Puebla in the early 1940s.<sup>6</sup> Like *bon vivant* nineteenth-century travelers, Mollinedo and González combed Puebla for material and cultural riches. They collected original colonial artwork as well as reproductions, ceramic tiles, and decorative motifs, all of which they would ultimately bring back to Mexico City to inlay in Café de Tacuba's newly remodeled main salon (Mollinedo and Rafael 2012, 18). Puebla was hardly an arbitrary destination for the artistic and entrepreneurial team. Mollinedo had taken González to the very site where *mole poblano*, the national dish of Mexico, allegedly originated. Mollinedo had a particular affinity for this dish, whose Nahuatl derivative, *molli*, meaning sauce or stew, was also Mollinedo's nickname among family, friends, and customers (2012, 3). Whether the nickname or the painting came first, Mollinedo clearly sought to foreground *mole poblano* as a culturally potent dish and as the central vehicle for his café's brand.

Upon their return from Puebla, González, under Mollinedo's direction, transformed the café's nondescript dining room into a colorful and textured *mélange* of colonial Pueblan aesthetics. González embedded ceramic tiled wainscoting into the salon walls, rendered brightly colored and highly stylized floral and avian elements into archways, and produced two large-scale paintings that hung on the café walls above seated patrons—one a triptych about the history of chocolate, and the other *The Creation of Mole*. Prior to the remodel,

remnants of the frescoes that dated from the site's previous iteration as a convent and women's hospital remained on the walls as a subtle reminder of the building's historicity. González's artistic intervention plastered over original decorative elements of the site in favor of new invocations of the café's colonial heritage, which became amplified visual and material referents of the café's claims to *Mexicanidad* (Mexican-ness).

Little is known about the life and work of Carlos E. González, but *The Creation of Mole* arguably stands as the most prominent work of his painting career. In the absence of extant documentation on González's commission for the café, one can only conjecture as to how and why Mollinedo first approached González specifically for this work. Mollinedo likely came to know and hire González through their mutual friend, Ernesto García Cabral, a revered Mexican illustrator and satirist who frequented Café de Tacuba (Mollinedo and Rafael 2012, 8). García Cabral's friendship with González has been well documented through illustrations, photographs, and text in the magazine *Fantoche*, including the January 18, 1929 issue in which García Cabral published a caricature of González, a "member of *Fantoche*," with an overly accentuated mouth and a corresponding limerick mocking his sizeable lips. *Fantoche* frequently advertised Café de Tacuba in its pages, thus suggesting that García Cabral and his satirical publication likely helped forge an initial connection between González and Mollinedo at least a full decade prior to the café commission. González rendered García Cabral's visage on the triptych in Café de Tacuba's Salon del Chocolate as an astute colonial friar consuming chocolate, perhaps as a nod to the friend who brought González the commission (ibid.).

González typically worked in theater and film, where he designed stage sets, props, and costumes and acted in occasional productions. Together with José Manuel Ramos and Fernando Sáyago, González founded the Compañía Productora de Películas Colonial (Colonial Film Production Company), a production company focused on bringing colonial-era narratives to the big screen (Reyes 1981, 26). Café de Tacuba's colonial pedigree thus seems to have its beginnings in the convergence of González's theatrical proclivities with Café de Tacuba's seventeenth-century architectural origins. González thus refashioned Café de Tacuba's religious framework into a secular sanctuary where patrons engage in the pious, and modern, act of conspicuous consumption while the café décor tethers consumers to the Mexican past.

## Inventing *mole* in the Mexican imagination

*The Creation of Mole* stands as the crowning achievement of Café de Tacuba's remodel. The centrality of this painting comes from its monumental scale, which evokes the modern murals inscribed on edifices throughout Mexico City, as well as its monumental topic. For centuries, *mole poblano* has served a critical, if malleable, role in the Mexican imagination. Curiel Monteagudo has claimed that "hablar del mole es hablar de historia, de tradiciones y de recuerdos" (To speak of *mole* is to speak of history, traditions, and memories) (Curiel Monteagudo 2004, 31). Described in Mexican guidebooks as a "festive" food for special occasions, such as birthdays or national holidays, *mole* was perceived as a dish for all Mexicans in the 1940s, regardless of race or class (Toor 1946, 14; Brenner 1947, 280).

In the postrevolutionary era, Mexican consumerism prescribed to a nationally specific mode of self-fashioning known as *mestizaje*, which signified the utopic (and racially fraught) miscegenation of Spanish and indigenous blood and culture. This

mixing could manifest through bloodlines or in more ephemeral and material modes, such as fashion or foodways (Vasconcelos 1979; Rankin 2010). Mexican heritage was thus an invisible, but real, element that could be consumed, absorbed, and digested. As a foodstuff whose ground and stewed ingredients embody the syncretic cultural mixing of modern Mexican society, *mole poblano* signifies the fluid and unfixed identities that underscore *mestizaje* (Pilcher 1998, 26; Coe and Coe 1996, 213).<sup>7</sup> Foods like *mole poblano* thus became vehicles of cultural symbiosis, literally and conceptually entangling with the consumer's physical and social body (see Bennett 2010, 44; Perullo 2016).

This fluidity, which Fernando Ortiz famously ascribed to Cuban *ajiaco* (stew) as a metaphor for transcultural processes (1947), has made *mole poblano* a resonant and prominent visual signifier in modern Mexico. The universality of *mole poblano* made it a particularly potent foodstuff in the imaginations of visual artists of the twentieth century, who mobilized its likeness as a symbol of Mexican equality. In 1902, José Guadalupe Posada produced "Mole de Calaveras" (Skeleton Stew), a broadside that metaphorically aligned collective Mexican suffering with *mole*. The image was then re-circulated in the 1920s by photographers Edward Weston and Tina Modotti, who appropriated Posada's broadside as an evocation of the proletariat in the contentious years just after the Mexican Revolution (Brenner and Glusker 2010, 141).<sup>8</sup> The avant-garde *Estridentista* group likewise drew upon *mole poblano* as a signifier of the Mexican masses. Their 1923 manifesto affirmed Mexican autonomy by proclaiming, "¡Viva el Mole de Guajolote!" (Long live the turkey stew!). And the November 29, 1929 cover of the satirical magazine *Fantoché* featured an illustration by García Cabral of a *china poblana*—an early-national Mexican female trope—serving up a bowl of *mole poblano* to the reader, the dress and the dish caricatured as quintessential, if overly wrought, signifiers of Mexican identity.

Though González at times fraternized in the same artistic circles as avant-garde artists such as Modotti and García Cabral—having worked on the journal *Mexican Folkways* with Modotti and *Fantoché* with García Cabral—he chose not to draw upon their modernist renderings of the dish for *The Creation of Mole*. Rather, González looked to evocations of *mole poblano* that firmly visualized its mythology within the historical setting of the Convent of Santa Rosa—recognizable for its tile work, vaulted ceilings, and Dominican nuns—as a means of substantiating this fictive origin story within the particularities of Pueblan heritage and "place" (Low 2009).

On December 12, 1926, Carlos de Gante's article "Santa Rosa de Lima y el Mole de Guajolote" appeared as a full-page story in the Sunday edition of *Excelsior*. This article marks the first time that *mole poblano*'s alleged colonial origins appeared in the public sphere in text as well as in image; alongside the article, a black-and-white illustration portrays a dulcet nun delicately tending to a clay pot of *mole poblano* in the kitchen of the Convent of Santa Rosa, whose vaulted ceilings and tile work establish key characteristics of the site discussed in the article's text. This image reappears in slightly modified form in 1945 as an illustration for Melitón Salazar Monroy's *La típica cocina poblana y los guisos de sus religiosas*, a booklet about the colonial culinary heritage of Puebla, whose first chapter is devoted entirely to the monastic origins of *mole poblano* and which was published less than a year prior to the completion of González's painting. This book, which combined monastic recipes with ethnographic examinations of Pueblan pottery, architecture, and folklore, appears to have been a vital influence for



**Figure 3.** Salvador Ortega, cover illustration in M. Salazar Monroy, *La típica cocina poblana y los guisos de sus religiosas*, polychrome lithograph, 1945. Puebla: Impresos López.

Source: Sala de Archivos y Colecciones Especiales, Universidad de las Américas Puebla.

González. The cover illustration as well as images throughout Salazar Monroy's book echo the composition, perspective, and iconography of *The Creation of Mole* (Figure 3).

Consequently, both de Gante's and Salazar Monroy's espousal of the origin of *mole poblano* derives not from a desire to promote this dish per se, but rather as a tactic to salvage the newly abandoned Convent of Santa Rosa from ruin by boosting tourism to the region.<sup>9</sup> By the time Salazar Monroy published his book, it was no secret that "sabrosos moles" (delicious mixtures) of fact and fiction comprised the legend of *mole poblano*'s invention (Heliodoro Valle 1989, 428). Nonetheless, by 1945, this mythology became sanctioned as a vital origin point in Mexican history (Curiel Monteagudo 2004; 40; Juárez López 2013, 108, 150). In an era of increased tourism, advertising, and conspicuous consumption, Salazar Monroy unwittingly, or perhaps deliberately, built upon a concise vision for national patrimony, begun in the 1920s with de Gante's *Excelsior* article and inclusive of Pueblan material and culinary culture. Mollinedo and González remodeled Café de Tacuba in the image of Salazar Monroy's book—including polychrome tiles, large clay pots, iron work, and majestic vaulted ceilings, all of which

they imported into the café—as a tactic to draw attention to a colonial historicity that was ultimately rooted in modern Pueblan legend.

### Labor's invisible presence

The vaulted ceilings and Pueblan tile work of the café's main salon resonate visually with the vaulted ceilings and tile work rendered in the background of *The Creation of Mole*, conflating painted image with material reality. The painting stays true to the real Convent of Santa Rosa kitchen, which today remains intact as a museum of popular culture. As in the café itself, cookery and feasting enliven this colonial scene. *The Creation of Mole* portrays a moment of partaking and pleasure, forging a seductive connection between the consumption of café patrons and the consumption of the colonial nuns in the painting. Invisible, but implicit, in this moment is the demanding cookery that led to this painted feast, which echoes the invisible cookery that propels the café's business.<sup>10</sup>

In the painting, the stern but eager Dominican nuns horizontally bisect the canvas as they pour drinks, converse, and clamor for the foods upon the table. At the foreground of the picture plane, the hungry sisters practically materialize out from the painting to join café patrons as the plates, cooking pots, and bowls in the image tilt forward, forcing perspective in order to display the objects of the feast to the viewer. At center, one nun stands apart from her cohort, her face in profile, eyes nearly closed, as she leans in to her fork to taste the *mole poblano* upon her plate.

The anticipation of eating seems to be both an intimate moment for the central nun and an act that she wishes to share with café diners. She holds her plate out, away from her body, inviting the viewer to share in her indulgence. At the painting's lower left corner, a kneeling indigenous woman forms a *tortilla* with her hands, patting the *masa* (corn dough) into its discus form. At lower right, an elaborately framed and inscribed cartouche interrupts the scene, though its evocation of colonial-era forms and script also amplifies the colonial moment portrayed. The cartouche echoes the elaborate labels of Spanish American portraiture, such as Miguel Cabrera's portrait of the Count of Santiago de Calimaya (c.1752), whose text both conveys and substantiates the noble lineage of the sitter. The small and arcane writing of the cartouche in González's painting likewise lends legitimacy to the work by creating the appearance of colonial antiquity while substantiating the inscribed narrative with an air of history and monumentality. Based on the account published by writer and historian Artemio de Valle-Arizpe (1932), the text conveys the tale of Sor Andrea de la Asunción, the Dominican nun pictured at center, who has miraculously invented *mole poblano* from within the confines of the convent's kitchen. As the text recounts, the impetus for Sor Andrea's invention of *mole poblano* emerged out of her desire to produce a dish that would fully express the "espíritu de México" ("spirit of Mexico").<sup>11</sup> This "spirit" manifested in a dish of complex mixtures of local and global ingredients ground and stewed until they become a singular, emulsified product—*mestizaje* on a plate. In a literal sense, then, *The Creation of Mole* imagines Sor Andrea enjoying the fruits of her labor with her fellow nuns. On a more profound level, the painting visualizes the colonial underpinnings of Mexico's national dish and, by extension, modern Mexican consumption.

The notion of consumption indeed becomes the point of departure for González to both distinguish his work from contemporaneous artistic portrayals of *mole poblano* and to craft Café de Tacuba into a site that actively engages nationalist attitudes toward bodies, labor, and leisure. González visually suppresses the challenging production of *mole poblano*, opting instead to reference the dish's cookery textually, solely in the painting's cartouche. In this written tale adapted from Valle-Arizpe, Sor Andrea emerges as the critical vehicle for this inspired dish; nonetheless, a divinity transcendent of earthly labor supplants the arduousness of *mole poblano*'s cookery with sensuality. Although she deftly grinds the chilies, tomatoes, onion, and garlic, Sor Andrea manipulates the ingredients in an intuitive and erotic, rather than laborious, manner, her "torso rising and falling gently and rhythmically over the *metate* [grindstone], the thick stone *mano* steadying her delicate and white hands."<sup>12</sup> In González's telling, *mole poblano* came to be produced *through*, not by, Sor Andrea.

The absence of visual representations of nuns cooking in González's composition only heightens the work's abstraction of labor. For Dominican nuns at this time, the body functioned as a vehicle for negotiations of devoutness and loyalty (Graziano 2004, 156). González alludes to this dynamic while also quietly challenging it by portraying the nuns in anticipation of feasting. They do not actually indulge in the fruits of their labor—this action is merely implied—but rather stand on the cusp of giving into temptation. The scene, therefore, playfully engages a vision of piety (or perhaps loyalty) devoid of strenuous production. While Sor Andrea takes on the role of maker—her hands, after all, are said to create *mole poblano*—the text presents her not as a laborer, but rather as a deific vehicle, birthing the culinary manifestation of the "spirit of Mexico." By rendering her work as sensual rather than arduous, González portrays the story of Sor Andrea's invention as divine conjuring rather than an act of mortal toil.

González undeniably foregrounds Sor Andrea as a consumer, not a producer. In the painting, the nuns are suspended in a state of anticipation, as they plate their meals and pour their beverages. At center, Sor Andrea stands in the moment of expectation just prior to indulging in the dish she has so cleverly fabricated. This playful eagerness is echoed in the sensuality of the text at bottom right. Her fellow nuns cheer her on, yelling, "*¡Muele! ¡Muele!*" (Grind! Grind!), yet, according to legend, Sor Andrea's body appears unaffected by this grueling, messy process. Upon successfully grinding the paste, Sor Andrea's hands appeared "polished," a virtual impossibility for anyone making *mole* in this manner (Valle-Arizpe 1932, 360). Together, Sor Andrea's purity and sensuality portray an effortless woman whose invention at once embodies the very essence of *Mexicanidad* and yet remains removed from production by a Mexican body.

### War on the *metate*

Amid this scene of jovial nuns, a lone figure resides at the margins of the composition, marking the singular instance of "work" visually rendered in the painting. Kneeling below the feasting nuns, a dark-skinned woman, wearing peasant clothing rather than a Dominican habit, pats *tortillas* with her hands, the dough for which she has taken from the *metate* on the countertop. This woman's presence here seems puzzling—Café de Tacuba legend asserts that the woman is a portrait of González's wife, whom he wished to immortalize in this work, yet no proof of this claim exists. Regardless of the veracity

of such an interpretation, the fundamental fact that this figure's presence in the painting demands explanation or prompts local lore supports the notion that she seems out of place in this work. I suggest that this discomfort arises from the figure's dark skin, peasant appearance, and placement in the composition, all of which speak to hierarchical attitudes toward the "ethnicization" of labor and foodways in 1940s Mexico City.<sup>13</sup>

At the time of this painting's production, portrayals of "work" and cookery in Mexican art and popular culture were largely relegated to Mexico's pre-Columbian past or, alternately, as it pertained to technological advances in the present that would effectively ease middle-class domestic labor. The schism between the indigenous past and the industrial present has deep roots in colonial socioracial hierarchies, but become further heightened in the twentieth century as concerns over Mexico's socioeconomic viability intersect with the elite agenda to "Mexicanize the Indian," or to incorporate the Indian into Mexico's increasingly industrial economy (Doremus 2001, 377). In the 1920s, José Vasconcelos led the charge to educate and professionalize Mexico's indigenous and peasant populations, claiming, "The Indian has no other door to the future but the door of modern culture, nor any other road but the road already cleared by Latin civilization" (Vasconcelos 1979, 16). Indigenous Mexicans were thus perceived as existing inherently outside of, or behind, modernity—a realm of whiteness and Eurocentricity, which was given primacy in the "blend" that comprised *mestizaje*. In short, Indians "are a symbolic referent to the past, but they are usually rejected as an active presence" (Bartra 2002; 7; also see Bonfil Batalla 1996). Visual representation of the Mexican Indian thus either pertained to the nation's ancient past, or relegated the Indian to the narrative "backdrop" (Thomson 2011, 25).

The compositionally and figuratively fraught relationship between the kneeling woman and the central figure of Sor Andrea in *The Creation of Mole* signifies the complex negotiation of racial identities relative to laboring bodies. Sor Andrea stands in the foreground, her face fixed downward in the direction of both her plate of *mole* and the kneeling worker, whose back is turned on the festivities at hand; the kneeling woman sits wholly apart from the activity in the room, her work framed as something contained and restricted from the world of the nuns. Historically, the Convent of Santa Rosa did not employ indigenous servant labor. Only nuns would have been present in the convent's kitchen (Loreto López 1997, 488).

Further, although the painting's text references the *metate* as the implement used by Sor Andrea to produce the *mole poblano*, it has been transferred, visually, onto the kneeling woman, who uses the tool not for *mole poblano* but for *masa*, a foodstuff explicitly tied to, and symbolic of, pre-Columbian foodways and indigenous, laboring bodies (Pilcher 1998, 2012). In an editorial of the bilingual ethnographic journal *Mexican Folkways*, to which González contributed, Frances Toor proclaims that *mole poblano* "really is a national dish, and stands at the opposite extreme of *tortillas*, the daily bread of the people" (Toor 1927, 239). Perhaps nowhere is the rarified cultural capital of *mole poblano* so clearly measured against the working-class *tortilla* than in González's painting, where a complete dissonance persists between the kneeling woman's production and Sor Andrea's consumption. The hand-formed *tortillas* lack purpose or presence in the feast, thus giving way to *mole poblano*'s superiority. Traditionally, *tortillas* function as the vessel for consuming *mole poblano*, sopping up the stew on the plate; however, the *tortillas* are nowhere to be found on the nuns' tablescape. Sor Andrea seductively anticipates a taste of the *mole poblano* not with a *tortilla*, but with a fork—

a marker of Western social distinction, which renders the indigenous woman's labor futile and her presence an allegorical foil to Sor Andrea's refined consumption.

This visual dialectic appears time and again in the history of institutional and popular Mexican arts, implying—if not outright equating—the role of whiteness in Mexican heritage with civility. Conversely, then, such works anachronistically inscribe indigeneity with primitive qualities. Juan Cordero's *Christopher Columbus in the Court of the Catholic Monarchs* (c.1850), for instance, provides a notable precedent for the representation of racial and social binaries that, I suggest, González likewise employs. In Cordero's academic painting, indigenous figures, at left, bow to the reigning monarchs, at right, to whom they have been brought as evidence of Columbus's encounter with the New World. At center, Columbus stands as the mediator between these two worlds. The indigenous figures stand in the shadows, their scant clothing revealing their dark skin and long hair. Conversely, a light illuminates the monarchs, their ornate and lush textiles contrasting the nakedness of the noble Indians, whom they literally (and figuratively) look down upon.

*The Discovery of Pulque*, by José María Obregón (c.1869), espouses a similar, if not more explicit, relationship between race and social distinction. This academic painting harkens back to the pre-Columbian presentation of *pulque* (an indigenous beverage fermented from the sap of the agave) to the King of Tula. At center, Xochitl, a light-skinned and fully clothed young woman, holds a bowl of the newly refined and nourishing beverage. Standing in the spotlight, she starkly contrasts the dark-skinned, bare-chested woman at left, who holds a maguey, the plant from which the *pulque* was rendered. A binary thus emerges between the raw maguey and the refined *pulque*. By equating the relationship between raw and refined with the relationship between dark and light skin, this painting, like Cordero's painting—and *The Creation of Mole*—illustrates the Western narrative of the triumph of civility over savagery, *mestiza* over the Indian (Widdifield 1996, 94–5). In this manner, the visual representation of indigenous bodies comes to represent the crude and unsophisticated past, while white bodies represent the modern present.

González likewise references racial dialectics in the mundane Pueblan kitchen by invoking José Agustín Arrieta's *Cocina poblana* (1865). González has clearly composed his image, with the stove and *metate* at left, table at right, pots and pans along the walls, and door at back, with Arrieta's *costumbrista* painting in mind. Arrieta's scene is rife with elements of Pueblan heritage, including allusions to *mole poblano*. A *guajolote*, or turkey, stands proudly upon a table at right, while a woman in the foreground kneels over her *metate* to grind chilies or cacao into a paste destined for the *olla* (ceramic vessel) upon the stove at left. Arrieta's visual contrast between the dark-skinned woman laboring over the *metate* at left with the upright, light-skinned, blond-haired woman at right parallels *The Creation of Mole*, where the kneeling woman and her indigenous accouterment (*masa* and *metate*) metaphorically and formally oppose the white nuns standing above her, who dine on *mole poblano* from their porcelain china.<sup>14</sup> This opposition of race, cultural capital, and labor underscores the particularly fraught sociopolitical attitudes toward cookery and technology in the 1940s.

Like the indigenous body, the *metate*, an ancient tool for grinding raw ingredients into pastes or dough upon a rough stone surface, both served as an admired symbol of pre-Columbian Mexican grandeur and a real and imminent threat to the modern, and

increasingly industrialized, Mexican nation. At the moment of González's commission for Café de Tacuba, state-sponsored images of celebrated ancient Mexican heritage contrasted with popular images espousing the merits of modernization. As González embarked upon his commission for Café de Tacuba, Diego Rivera worked just five blocks away painting a series of frescoes for the third-story corridor of the Mexican National Palace. Rivera's murals portray epic scenes of pre-Columbian Mexican production, such as pigment mixing, mat weaving, ceramics, agriculture, and cooking. In one panel devoted to pre-Columbian cultivation of maize, a bare-chested Huasteca woman in the foreground kneels over a *metate* to grind the kernels into dough. An homage to an ancient past, this visual portrayal of the *metate* neither threatened nor interfered with conspicuous consumption in the present and therefore served as a celebrated gesture of Mexico's unique heritage.

The *metate* as a contemporary culinary tool, however, carried with it the perceived potential for socioeconomic regression. In an era of increasing accessibility to electrical appliances and other products that expedited cookery, the *metate* stood in opposition to national aspirations of modernization: "Electrical appliances not only facilitated daily chores, but also worked as symbols of social improvement" (Aguilar-Rodríguez 2013, 43). This modernist posturing and domestic professionalization meant a repudiation of pre-Columbian culinary technologies in favor of expediency and mass-production (2013, 45). Cookbook authors encouraged Mexican peasants to declare, "*¡Guerra al metate!*" (War on the grindstone!)—a cultural "war" entangled with problematic attitudes toward race and class—in favor of mass-produced products and domestic expediency (Hernández 1937, 51). This attitude pervaded all levels of Mexican society, to the degree that "neither metates nor comals were welcomed" in state-funded public dining halls of the 1940s (Aguilar-Rodríguez 2007, 192–3). In this context, the contradiction of self-fashioned *mestizaje* reveals itself at the intersection of imagination and reality. The Mexican state at once commissioned Rivera's frescoes imagining pre-Columbian modes of production, while the body politic simultaneously decried such modes of production in modern Mexican kitchens.

Although the newfound fervor for electric appliances and industrial products soured Mexicans on the use of traditional technologies, it did not prompt cooks to turn away from traditional dishes. Appliances were seen as important tools to accelerate, and even professionalize, cookery of the foods made by their grandmothers (Aguilar-Rodríguez 2013, 49). A desired efficiency in the kitchen thus lent itself to the aspirational quality of the completed dish, rather than the process of its cookery. In fact, by the mid-1900s, *mole poblano's* availability as a prepared paste meant that cookbook maven Josefina Velázquez de León could promote *mole poblano*, a dish that previously took upwards of three days to prepare, as part of an "Emergency Menu" in the 1949 book *Cocina instantanea* (Instant Cooking). Pre-packaged products negated *mole poblano's* demanding grinding and stewing, thus rendering the spectacle of its cookery imagined and abstract. Even scratch cooking of *mole poblano* became faster and less arduous through the introduction of electric blenders in the mid-twentieth century (Pilcher 1998, 26).

The cover illustration of *Cocina instantanea*, for instance, foregrounds brightly colored boxes of pre-packaged foods (including "Rico's *mole poblano*"), while a plated dish sits upon a pristine tabletop in the background. Nowhere on the cover of this cookbook—nor anywhere else in the book—is cookery depicted, save for a single



**Figure 4.** Detail of page illustration, J. Velázquez de León, *Cocina instantanea*, lithograph, 1949. México, D.F.: Ediciones J. Velázquez de León.

Source: Mexican Cookbook Collection, Special Collections, The University of Texas at San Antonio, photograph by author.

illustration of a woman standing over her *metate* in tears with the bolded caption, “EVITE LAS MOLESTIAS ANTIGUAS” (avoid old inconveniences), proclaiming the source of her frustration (Velázquez de León 1949, 8; Figure 4). The book endorses an efficient progression from package to plate, thus decreasing the home cook’s time and energy in the service of preparing impressive meals. Indeed, the recipes in this book are brief and wholly reliant upon brand name pre-packaged foods that eliminate most cookery save for heating or mixing. In other words, the modernization of the Mexican kitchen led to the waning importance, and subtle veiling, of labored cooking in favor of an emphasis on, and aspiration toward, consuming.

In this light, the kneeling indigenous woman of *The Creation of Mole* becomes not an extant laborer in the convent’s kitchen, but rather a symbol of labor, broadly speaking, and its ancillary importance to leisure and consumption in 1940s Mexican foodways. Her association with ancient modes of production, both through her own indigenous body and through her antiquated tools, such as the *metate*, frame her as a signifier of Mexican heritage, not as a contemporaneous presence in the scene. This woman functions as a nod to the innovations of indigenous culture that preceded the Mexican nation, not as a figure historically equivalent to the nuns in González’s painting.

The kneeling woman, therefore, becomes a vehicle to reconcile elements of discord in *The Creation of Mole*. Her presence as a concept of labor navigates, and moralizes, the painting’s murky dissonance between the narrative of *mole poblano*’s “making” against the painted scene of feasting and consumption. Likewise, the woman’s presence signifies *mestizaje*, a critical element of Mexican national identity that would be wholly incomplete were the Dominican nuns the only figures present. The indigenous woman thus becomes a vital aspect of this painting’s ability to signify the Mexican identity that *mole poblano* and its consumption reify for the viewer. Most importantly, the imaginary

nature of this indigenous woman, whose presence signifies timeless, immobile tradition, rather than the temporality and singularity of the scene at hand, allows the painting to reinforce the importance of the colonial as a vital bridge between the antiquated indigenous past and the burgeoning industrial and commercial present. Much like the mythology that perpetuates the celebration of Thanksgiving in the United States, the alleged origins of *mole poblano* promote feasting as a way to veil the aggressive appropriation of land, food, and culture by one group over another in the service of a fictive “civility” imposed upon “primitive” lands and people.

## Conclusion

Ultimately, I suggest that González privileges consumption over cookery in *The Creation of Mole* in order to render labor imaginary and, therefore, modern in the commercial space of the café. The colonial bodies of the Dominican nuns of the Convent of Santa Rosa, coupled with the “untainted” colonial setting of Puebla—a setting that evades any claim to pre-Columbian roots—firmly couches the legend of *mole poblano*’s creation, as well as González’s painting, among a pedigree of modern, and civil, Mexican bodies. As Juárez López suggests, “La propuesta del mole inventado en un convento quitó la sombra azteca de los sacrificios y la idolatría, y en su lugar se puso a unas monjas cercanas a Dios” (The story of *mole*’s invention in a convent removes the shadow of Aztec sacrifice and idolatry, and replaces it with nuns close to God) (López and Luis 2013, 109). By empowering patrons to align Mexican heritage with *mole poblano*’s consumption rather than its production, *The Creation of Mole* divorces the dish from its laboriousness and, by proxy, its ties to indigenous and rural technologies. The painting thus acknowledges and critiques the deep Mexican past in order to reify the café’s transcendence of antiquated practices.

In sum, labor rendered invisible in *The Creation of Mole* nonetheless amplifies an important kind of civic “making” present in, and perpetuated by, the painting. The confluence of *mole poblano*’s popularized mythic invention coupled with the colonial historicity of Café de Tacuba encodes *mole poblano*, and Café de Tacuba’s menu writ large, as foodstuffs of a collective Mexican memory. The feasting nuns and the feasting café diners together engage in meaning making at the nexus of national history and aspirational modernity. Sor Andrea’s anticipation of her newly created dish thus promises the viewer a passive agency rooted in civilized consumption rather than brute production—a production rooted in consumption. In so doing, *The Creation of Mole* emboldens viewers to embrace this brand of visual and gustatory heritage, no matter how fictive or ephemeral, as a potent and modern mode of civic participation.

*The Creation of Mole* thus mediates a culinary commitment to the Mexican and modern self, which Mollinedo and González explicitly sought after and fabricated in the 1940s for locals and tourists alike. Every bite of *mole poblano* simultaneously resonates with the colonial, Pueblan materiality of the café and the conspicuous habits of the modern citizen. The perceived *Mexicanidad* of the dish, the café, and the consumer thus amplify through the self-conscious process of ingesting colonial memory. *The Creation of Mole* thus reconstitutes the body politic in the image of the colonizer, perpetually reaffirming the imagined, colonial invention of the “spirit of Mexico.”

## Notes

1. The painting originally hung in the Café's Salon del Chocolate alongside a second work by González, but was moved to the foyer after a massive fire destroyed the front half of the café in 1999 and had to be reconstructed.
2. The name, *The Creation of Mole*, comes from the phrasing used by Café de Tacuba staff to reference the work.
3. *Chilango* is slang term for a person from Mexico City.
4. I invoke "nationalism" in this paper as a framework that simultaneously draws upon top-down and bottom-up ideologies and economic realities. In short, nationalism marks the intersection and negotiation of official attitudes with vernacular experiences (Bartra 2002).
5. Gender is also an important aspect of this painting, as the work solely comprises females who are presented in a commercial space intended to engage the public, and largely male, gaze. Many of González's contemporaries gendered images of the nation as female, effectively standardizing femininity as the symbol onto which Mexican nationalism was projected (see Herschfield 2008; Mraz 2009; Zavala 2010; Sluis 2016). This aspect of the painting, regrettably, goes beyond the scope of this paper where I instead aim to demonstrate how, even within a gendered painting, race and class dialectics become the most amplified and distinctive aspects of heritage negotiation.
6. As a crossroads of global trade, Puebla de los Angeles, founded in 1531, boasts a syncretic blend of materials and heritage: Its cultural landscape embodies the *mestizo* spirit of expansion, globalization, and domination of the early modern era (Curiel Monteagudo 2004, 35).
7. *Mole poblano*'s alleged colonial origins tap into Spanish-American attitudes toward self-fashioning, in which identity was unfixed, fluid, and dependent upon one's environmental circumstances. This fluidity particularly applied to one's gustatory habits: "Race," in colonial Mexico, "was in part a question of digestion" (Earle 2012, 47).
8. The large limerick of the broadside reads "Aquí está el sabroso Mole/ El Mole más bien guisado/ Métanle recio toditos/ Que solo vale un centavo" (Here is the delicious *Mole*/ The best cooked *Mole*/ All make it strong / That is only worth a penny).
9. This undertaking may be viewed as successful—the Convent was converted to a ceramics museum in the mid-twentieth century and in 1973 became the official site of the Pueblan Popular Art Museum, where visitors may still today visit the famed colonial kitchen.
10. *Mole poblano* contains dozens of ingredients and takes upward of three days to cook, from the painstaking task of grinding the spices and chilies into a fine paste to the stewing of tomatoes and fats until it forms a thick and luscious base. *Mole poblano* arguably stands in such high regard in Mexican cuisine for this very reason: it is an index of a labor of love.
11. The "spirit" of Mexico alludes to the idealistic goals of postrevolutionary consciousness. In 1921, José Vasconcelos, then Secretary of Education as well as architect of modern *mestizaje* and primary patron of Mexican muralism, coined the saying, "Por mi raza hablará el espíritu" (Through my race the spirit will speak) and inscribed it on the National Autonomous University of Mexico's shield as the school motto. This phrase references the utopic "cosmic race" Vasconcelos (1979) espoused as the patriotic aspiration of Mexican modernity.
12. The Convent of Santa Rosa's namesake, Saint Rose of Lima, was the first canonized saint of the Americas. Though she was actually *criolla*, Saint Rose came to be venerated for her alleged *mestiza* heritage in the 1940s. Colonial heritage, proto-nationalism, and even corporeality and consumption (Saint Rose was notorious for her particularly extreme and punishing relationship to food) are thus bound up in the Convent of Santa Rosa (Hansen 1665; Loreto López 1997; Graziano 2004; Lavrín 2008; Espín 2011). The relationship between Sor Andrea's hands and the "thick stone *mano*" not only plays on the idea of a tool as an appendage (*mano* being Spanish for "hand"), but it also calls to mind a miraculous vision of Saint Rose of Lima's, in which she perceived young Christ brides softening stone, akin to the "softening" or mixing upon the *metate*, with their tears (Graziano 2004, 156).

13. I use the term “ethnicization” as a nationalizing process informed by racial performativity, as described by Rick A. López (2010, 9; also see Zavala 2010).
14. The women in Arrieta’s painting wear the *china poblana* costume of a white blouse, shawl, and colorfully embroidered skirt, which signifies morality, modernity, and patriotism in nineteenth-century art and literature (Thomson 2011, 13, 16). Like Arrieta, González foregrounds morality, modernity, and patriotism in *The Creation of Mole*, but does so by turning away from nationalist tropes such as the *china poblana* that were, by the 1940s, overly satirized (see the November 29, 1929 cover of *Fantoche*) and institutionalized.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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