CATERING AUTHENTICITY: ETHNICITY AND REPRESENTATION IN MEXICAN RESTAURANTS

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“We are haunted, not by reality, but by those images we have put in place of reality.”


“...As a free and salsafied people, you have the full power to come together, to eat, to drink, to laugh, to be loud, to relax, to goof off, to pause. On support of this declaration, we pledge to you these articles of salsafication for as long as the sun does rise. For life always needs a little salsa.”

--Chi-Chi’s, Declaration of Salsafication

“I like it authentic, real, from back home, the motherland” explained Adrian, a restaurant reviewer for a major East-coast newspaper. Working as a journalist for the last twenty years, she recently secured a position as a senior food writer. In our conversation about the process of writing a restaurant review, Adrian emphasized the importance of a critic’s ability to evaluate the authenticity of a restaurant’s cuisine. Similarly, Jennifer, a novice restaurant reviewer from a small-town newspaper revealed, “Inherently, I want it to be authentic. For me, I want a peek into another society and another culture.” She described how despite the presence of Formica tables and plastic chairs, she could gauge by the cuisine alone whether or not a restaurant was authentic. In her opinion, assessing a restaurant’s authenticity was not only vital in the formulation of an overall critique, but was an expectation that she brought with her to the restaurants she evaluated.

For these critics, and many others like them, authenticity is a significant measure in determining the quality of one’s experience in a particular cultural setting. In spite of its fabricated (Peterson, 1997) character, performances of authenticity influence how people identify with and become involved in real world social, political, and cultural arrangements (Bauman and Briggs, 1990). Central to these arrangements is the ability to enact distinction (Bourdieu, 1984)
and recognize difference. MacCannell (1973), for instance, noted that tourists consistently sought to enter the back regions of their destinations in an attempt to encounter how people different from themselves authentically lived. Like tourists, customers of “ethnic” restaurants also desire backstage (Goffman, 1959) experiences and the “illusion of authenticity” when participating in different culinary traditions (Lu and Fine, 1995: 541). Moreover, these cultural traditions are linked to the meanings that people attach to their own ethnic identities and the ethnic identities of others (Gabaccia, 1998). Thus, the consumption of authenticity is one measure of symbolic ethnicity (Gans, 1979) that contributes to the exercise, maintenance, and reproduction of culture.

While scholars acknowledge that authenticity and ethnicity are important elements in the production of culture (Dávila, 2001; Gilroy, 1993; Kelley, 1992), less is known about how these terms “make sense” in everyday presentations of identity. Therefore, I examine how ethnicity is negotiated as a register of authenticity within the context of Mexican restaurants—a site where claims about authenticity and performances of ethnicity are showcased accomplishments. Such a focus enables a closer examination of the salience of ethnicity in day-to-day situations, and how the circumstances through which it is accomplished provide insight to the dynamics of cultural production. Because arrangements of authenticity can either affirm or challenge the knowledge people bring to and take from their encounters with particular cultures, it is important to take seriously the interactions that affect these social relations. Breaking away from the “positive” versus “negative” binary of representation, I explore the complications and contradictions that are generated through authenticity. Additionally, I suggest that performances of authenticity are fundamentally political because of their ability to contribute to and align with broader socio-political representations.
In this paper, I argue that authenticity is bound to the notion of ethnicity within the cultural arrangement of the restaurant, and indexed by the consumption and production of "ethnic" cuisine. The loosely configured typologies I illustrate characterize a continuum of representations, and are not intended to signify mutually exclusive categorizations; instead, like culture itself, they are porous and overlapping—meant only to contextualize how different versions of ethnicity are made possible through diverse presentations of authenticity. Moreover, they highlight the continuity and disruption of meanings that emerge in spite and because of the commodification of cultural forms. Thus, it is my aim to emphasize the processes, qualities, and discursive features that position authenticity and ethnicity as constitutive of each other; invoked as a means by which people make sense and lay claim to their everyday experiences.

**Authenticity, Ethnicity, and Representation**

One of the first public nationwide debates over authenticity and Mexican food began in 1972, when Diana Kennedy, a British national, published *The Cuisines of Mexico*. Kennedy distinguished what she labeled authentic “interior Mexican food” from the “mixed plates” found at Mexican restaurants in the United States (Walsh, 2004:121). Referring to Americanized versions of food as “Tex-Mex,” a name previously used to describe food that was a combination of Texan and Mexican cuisine, Kennedy called for greater awareness of authentic Mexican cooking. So influential was her insistence on authentic Mexican food and condemnation of inauthentic hybrid dishes that restaurants began to describe their food as “interior Mexican” in an attempt to follow the purist trend toward the authentic Mexican recipes included in her collection (p.121). She has even earned respect in Mexico where she was awarded the Order of the Aztec Eagle, the Mexican government’s highest honor bestowed on foreigners, for her international promotion of Mexican food.
As the accolades and esteem conferred upon Diana Kennedy illustrate, matters of authenticity are not limited to the maintenance of a particular culinary tradition, but imply an attempt at the preservation of a greater cultural phenomenon—one that extends beyond the parameters of cuisine, and directs attention to representation. Trilling (1971), for example, observed that "authenticity is implicitly a polemical concept" which reflects the transition to modernity and the evolution of interpersonal interaction (p.94). Examining notions of "sincerity" and "authenticity," he argued that sincerity had little value in contemporary society because it privileged social relationships over individual selfhood. In its place, authenticity emerged as a less public form of selfhood—one that emphasized the importance of people’s roles in demonstrating their "true" selves. Authenticity, he lamented, "...has become part of the moral slang of our day [that] points to the peculiar nature of our fallen condition, our anxiety over the credibility of existence and of individual existences” (p.93).

In another famous formulation, Boorstin (1961) expressed concern about the presentation of authenticity in his influential work on the changing nature of the American news media. As he saw it, the growing demand for fictitious instances of human interaction symbolized a "revolutionary change in our attitude toward what happens in the world" (p.9). The increasingly significant role of illusion or "the menace of unreality" in contemporary American society insidiously replaced the authentic with the inauthentic (p.240). In his estimation, occurrences of "pseudo-events" interfered with people’s ability to determine spontaneity; they obscured an underlying "reality," and promoted the promulgation of other pseudo-events. For example, the use of stereotypes, "stirred an irrational and undiscriminating hunger for fancier, more varied items" (pp.38-39). Stereotypes, as a form of pseudo-event, "whetted the appetite" for predetermined images, as opposed to spontaneous proceedings (p.39). From this perspective, the
spread of inauthentic pseudo-events is not only dangerous to society at large, but is also
detrimental to individuals’ abilities to understand their roles in these encounters.

Authenticity is a common means through which individuals interpret their roles and the
roles of others in a variety of social contexts. For instance, Peterson (1997) described how
audiences anticipated certain types of performances that exemplified the cultural values of
country music. In order to attain success, musicians were in essence required to abide by a set of
specific pre-existing standards to fulfill the expectations of their fans. The tailoring of stage
presence, lyrics, and clothing are just a few examples of the processes that are “fabricated” in the
social construction of an authentic country western performance.

The extent to which performers in distinct cultural locations attempt to abide by
consumers’ imaginings of different encounters reveals the salience of representation as a socially
illustrated the scope of social forces that operated within the context of Chicago blues clubs. In
particular, he found that cultural myths pertaining to white audiences’ longing for black
musicians and employees was so powerful, that most venues employed black men exclusively so
as to create the impression of an authentic ambience. In the space of the blues club, registers of
race served as key signifiers in the presentation of authentic cultural displays.

While variations between race and ethnicity are rooted in socio-historical experiences
(Takaki, 1982) and legal statuses (Haney-López, 1996) of people of color, these terms are
frequently used as a means of classification, especially in the context of performances of
authenticity. For example, Wilkins’ (2004) research on Puerto Rican “wannabes,” showed that
when white high-school girls were perceived as “acting Black” or “acting Puerto Rican” they
were deemed racially and ethnically “inauthentic” by their fellow classmates (p.112). Seen as
“trying too hard” (p.117), they failed to achieve an authentic presentation of ethnicities other than their own. Unable to establish membership in different ethnic groups, the Puerto Rican wannabes, as well as the reactions to them, illustrate the performative nature of authenticity and the contested implications of its manipulation when interpreted as a marker of ethnicity.

Performances of ethnic authenticity are presented as a means to highlight “genuine” characteristics, customs, and traditions of specific groups of people (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983). Participating in familial customs represents one means through which individuals are able perform their own identities. When probed about the personal meanings attached to their ethnic identities, Waters’ (1990) respondents agreed that “having” an ethnicity made them feel special and provided them the opportunity to take part in a host of cultural traditions such as eating “ethnic” food. Hence, the decision to consume a particular type of food symbolizes a form of self expression. This measure of self expression resonates across a variety of historical and cultural contexts. For instance, in 1825, Brillat-Savarin famously observed, “Tell me what you eat, and I will tell you what you are,” while Parry (1985) noted that in Hindu culture, “A man [sic] is what he eats. Not only is his bodily substance created out of food, but so is his moral disposition” (p.613).

According to Ohnuki-Tierney (1993), the consumption of a particular cuisine or food, delineates “the boundary between the collective self and the other,” and can also serve as “a basis of discrimination against other people” (p3). However, the contours of discrimination are oftentimes not so clear-cut. Fantasia (1995) outlined how fast food became a widely accepted part of French culture contrary to widespread negative attitudes toward the “Americanization” of cuisine. Examining both cultural and structural forces, he showed how the new “rhetoric of technocracy” that associated work with internationalism enabled a shift from a traditional “old
bourgeois” sentiment to a contemporary “new bourgeois” attitude (p.214). This reframing provided social legitimacy to “modern” forms of eating practices that were once discouraged but now seen as acceptable.

The consumption of “foreign” or “ethnic” cuisine thus poses a distinctive set of social circumstances for examining issues of authenticity, ethnicity, and representation as interactions that are culturally, politically, and socially embedded in processes of everyday life.

**Exploring the Culture of Mexican Restaurants**

Restaurants provide an empirically rich point of entry for observing interpersonal exchanges as part and parcel of the creation, enactment, and reflection of symbolic meaning (Fine, 1996; Spang, 2000; Trubek, 2000). As unique sites for observing “public ethnicity” (Lu and Fine, 1995:536), Mexican restaurants bring together a variety of social actors as spectators and participants in performances of culture. In order to examine the interpretive dynamics of these venues, over a nine-month period, from September 2000, through June, 2001, I collected interviews with customers, reviewers, owners, and managers of Mexican restaurants in Amherst, Northampton, and Springfield Massachusetts, and Hartford, Connecticut.

The towns of Amherst and Northampton are located approximately 90 miles west of Boston in the Pioneer Valley, and are small communities with a primarily Anglo-American population. In contrast, Springfield, Massachusetts, and Hartford, Connecticut are larger urban centers with more ethnically diverse populations. These cities are located within a twenty-five and forty-five minute drive from the Pioneer Valley. While markedly different with regard to levels of ethnic diversity, it is important to note that when this research was carried out, none of these locations had a large Mexican or Mexican-American population and therefore catered to a primarily non-Mexican clientele. For instance, according to the U.S. Census Bureau (2000),
individuals who identified their ethnic background as "Mexican," comprised less than 1 percent of the inhabitants in each of these communities\(^1\) (www.census.gov).

I began by identifying the owners of local Mexican restaurants with the help of my colleagues and friends who knew several restaurant owners and provided me with their email addresses. After conducting my first interview, I drew on the guidelines of snowball sampling (Biernacki and Waldorf, 1981) by asking each informant for the names and phone numbers of people they knew who owned or managed Mexican restaurants. Through this information, I began to build a list of potential interviewees. To add to this list, I located the names of owners and managers outside of Amherst and Northampton by searching online and looking through the Yellow Pages. Aside from the management at Taco Bell who invoked "company policy" by not speaking to anyone about their restaurants, arranging interviews with owners and managers of Mexican restaurants was fairly straightforward.

In total, I conducted eight with owners and managers of Mexican restaurants (two women and six men). These interviews were conducted face-to-face, included open-ended questions, and took place in either Spanish or English. In addition, they lasted between one and two hours, were tape recorded, and later transcribed. Because I wanted to develop my analysis inductively, I did not have specifically tailored questions for each interviewee, but instead inquired about their initial decision to enter the restaurant industry, and asked them to describe the process of developing the arrangement, menu, and design of their restaurants.

The nineteen interviews with customers of Mexican restaurants (twelve women, seven men) lasted between fifteen minutes to an hour, and took place in restaurants and coffee shops in the towns of Amherst and Northampton. I approached people as they ordered, ate, and left the

\(^1\) The specific percentages of individuals who identified their ethnic background as "Mexican" are: Amherst, 0.5 percent; Northampton, 0.4 percent; Springfield, 0.4 percent; and Hartford, 0.8 percent (www.census.gov).
various establishments. Most were very willing and enthusiastic to comment about their experiences at Mexican restaurants. However, occasionally, people declined my request for an interview—this was the case when I approached customers in fast food restaurants. The interviews were guided with specific, open-ended questions. In particular, I inquired about how frequently they dined at Mexican restaurants, how they rated each restaurant, and how, or if, they judged a restaurant as authentic.

My three interviews with restaurant reviewers (three women) took place after I contacted area newspapers that published restaurant reviews. In one case, a newspaper editor would not reveal the “true” name of its reviewer because he wanted to protect the reviewer’s anonymity. Of the three interviews, one was conducted face-to-face, and two were carried out over the telephone. Again, because the focus of my project was exploratory, I relied on open-ended questions pertaining to the process of evaluating restaurants. The interview that took place face-to-face was recorded and later transcribed, while the interviews that took place over the telephone were recorded in my journal.

To complement my interview data, I became a participant observer at Mexican restaurants. I took notes on the décor, layout, and atmosphere of each restaurant. I also considered the arrangement of their kitchens, dining rooms, and menus. Moreover, I observed the interactions of customers, as well as exchanges between employees and management. In order to gather a wide range of empirical data concerning the social relations of Mexican restaurants, I collected copies of flyers, menus, web pages, restaurant industry reports, restaurant reviews, and take-out containers. All informant names are pseudonyms. In some cases I withhold citations in order to maintain the confidentiality of those who agreed to participate in
this project. I incorporate open-ended interviews, participant observation, and available literature as a basis for exploring both the local and broader public representations of Mexican restaurants.

**Commemorative Authenticity: “It’s got a Mexican Soul...and that says a lot”**

Scholars have noted that the consumption of food is able to express a sense of ancestral continuity (Belasco, 1987) and convey an image of public identity (Fine, 1996). Maintaining loyalty to tradition was central to how Enrique organized the overall layout of his restaurant. For instance, he labeled menu entrées “comida de la gente” (food of the people), and adorned the windows of his restaurant with decals that read “hecho en Mexico” (made in Mexico) and “viva la raza!” (a rallying cry made famous during the Chicano Rights Movement of the 1960s).

Describing what he called an “essence,” Enrique elaborated,

> For me, when I think about Mexican food I think about what kind of food you find at Mexican kitchens at home, not so much at a restaurant. It’s more like what I would find at a quinceañera, (cotillion) what I would find at a boda, (wedding).

According to Enrique, the “essence” of authentic Mexican food is linked to cultural celebrations such as quinceañeras and weddings. While unable to fully replicate these environments within the context of his restaurant, he is able to offer his customers Mexican “home-style” cooking that celebrates Mexican identity by both challenging and reinforcing people’s perceptions of what and when “real” Mexican food is consumed.

Differentiating himself from his competition, he described how his restaurant, Los Cabos, stood out from the other local offerings:

> If you go to that restaurant, what it does is takes a variety of ethnic foods, wraps them into a large flour tortilla and calls it a burrito. So what you have is a stir-fried chicken burrito with roasted bell peppers, mushrooms, and yogurt, you know? [That] has nothing to do with what my Tía (aunt) Ana serves.
As he saw it, the use of unconventional burrito ingredients symbolized a departure from traditional food preparation.

Describing the alterations restaurateurs commonly made to accommodate popular perceptions of Mexican dishes, Enrique explained his refusal to compromise the traditional names of his menu items. In one specific case he challenged people’s ideas about quesadillas:

It would be easy for me to sell the quesadilla with your choice of flour or corn tortillas. Instead, what I say is, let’s call the flour tortillas with cheese inside for what they are, **sincronizadas**. Sin-choo-nee zhah dahl [in an American accent], well, that’s made with flour tortillas. That’s the difference so one day when they [his primarily Anglo clientele] go to Mexico, they’re not shocked that their quesadilla isn’t made with a flour tortilla, and they’ll know what a sincronizada is.

Enrique’s resistance against mainstream ideas about Mexican cuisine in general, and the local articulations of Mexican food in particular, manifested not only in his menu, but also in the advertising and décor of his restaurant. When Los Cabos first opened, a college newspaper published a lukewarm restaurant review that although praised the cuisine, commented extensively on the overall “lack of Mexican charm” of its ambience. In recounting the incident, Enrique, clearly bothered by the remark explained:

There’s no sombreros, zarapes, or piñatas…. it has a Mexican soul and you know that says a lot. It’s not salt it isn’t pepper, it’s not nice tile or a beautiful chair. There’s a spirit about it only those who are very proud of what Mexican is or how it should be represented can get it.

Symbols such as sombreros, zarapes, and piñatas, as Enrique put it, presented a limited version of Mexican identity, one that neglected to consider the “huge history of great art” produced and appreciated by Mexicans on both sides of the U.S.-Mexican border. In his estimation, stereotypical imagery could not contend with the “soul” and “spirit” fostered by presenting a commemorative approach to Mexican culture. With ads stating “Evite el estereotipo!” (avoid the
stereotype), “Mexican food that Mexicans would want to eat,” and “Mexican food like you’ve never had it in New England,” Enrique actively engaged his customers in a political and cultural relationship pertaining to meanings of authenticity as a central, and albeit, essential aspect of ethnic identity. Additionally, Enrique’s comments suggest that even in commemorative versions of authenticity, consumer’s preconceived ideas about how specific people produce “charm” result in conflict when challenges are presented that extend the possibilities of available ethnic representations.

Critics of local Mexican restaurants consistently identified Enrique’s restaurant as “the most authentic in the area.” One described it as a “popular source of budget nourishment” that serves “big portions of truly authentic Mexican food—a rarity on this coast.” Another commented that when labor activist César Chavez visited the area, he was frequently spotted dining there. Customers also had ideas about how they “knew” that Enrique’s restaurant served authentic Mexican food. One customer explained “It’s louder than other restaurants…like if you go to a Puerto Rican restaurant,” while another commented, “When you see Mexicans eating there it gives you the feeling that it’s authentic and not just yuppies eating burritos and sipping margaritas.” Still, others mentioned the restaurant’s “Hispanic” staff, and “perplexing” menu items as indicators of authenticity. Enrique’s presentation of commemorative authenticity clearly resonated with critics and customers alike.

Loyalty to tradition is also a theme that emerged when I spoke to Ricardo, a restaurateur who recently moved to New England. Working collaboratively with his seven brothers, their first restaurant, Las Rosas, was named after their mother, and subsequent restaurants were named after other family members. This kind of environment, Ricardo explained, “emphasizes that we are family and that people can tell we are family and that people will feel like part of our
family.” Serving food from their home state of Jalisco, Mexico, they are accustomed to altering preparation styles and levels of spiciness to suit local palates. Even with such changes, Ricardo maintained:

Our food is yes, really Mexican...It’s authentic in the way that if you go to Mexico, to our hometown...well, it’s a little different there, more spicy. Yes, it is authentic, but with a style from this side of the border.

According to this statement, while Ricardo asserts that his restaurant is “really Mexican,” it is only authentic in comparison to Mexican food served within the United States. Claiming that although his restaurant is “the most Mexican in the area,” Ricardo states that in order for it to be “truly” authentic, it would also need:

...four or five small tables. Why? Because the woman of the house, the mother, the grandmother are really the ones who are going to cook. But if you go to a big restaurant like in Mexico City, there isn’t anything that Mexican, it’s more commercial. So, of all the restaurants here, I believe this is the most authentic.

Just above, Ricardo implies that authentic Mexican food is unavailable at “big” restaurants in large cities; instead, it comes from a kitchen where food is prepared by “the woman of the house.” Ricardo’s description of a mother or grandmother preparing food in a kitchen as a measure of an authentic dining experience is ironic, especially when considering that no women were employed in his restaurant. Moreover, his restaurant’s dining area accommodates sixty customers while the bar area seats twenty-five customers—a far greater number than the “four or five small tables” he identifies. However, this does not stop Ricardo from promoting an authentic “family-style” experience so “that people will feel like part of our family.” While he concedes that the food he serves is not entirely authentic, he presents it as if it was authentic. Ricardo reveals that Mexican food does not have to be authentic to appear
authentic. Moreover, his comments suggest that ethnicity, in combination with assumptions about class and gender, also contribute to commemorative representations of ethnicity.

David, originally from New Mexico, opened his restaurant because “the area needed an authentic, traditional-type Mexican restaurant.” Emphasizing the importance of preserving his family’s recipes, David was interested in reaching-out to the community in order “to hand-down a tradition or share a tradition to the people of New England from the Southwest.” Seeing his restaurant as representing Mexican culture, David explained the differences between his menu in comparison to that of a large Mexican chain restaurant located nearby:

... a taco is a taco [but] it’s what you put inside your taco [that] makes it different. Burritos are an American invention, there’s no such thing as burritos in Mexico and the only reason that I serve them is because people love them.

Other alterations David made to his menu included the addition of quesadillas and taquitos because “people kept requesting them.” Décor was less relevant in David’s opinion, especially when it came to displaying his heritage, “It’s not important in a sense because really and truly I’m a Mexican-American, and the food I serve is traditional Mexican and New Mexican home-style cooking.” In David’s estimation, his Mexican-American background alone qualified him to represent authentic Mexican and New Mexican food. David’s performance of authenticity, like that of Enrique and Ricardo’s, is informed by claims unavailable to Non-Mexican restaurateurs—in this case, tradition, family, and ethnic heritage rooted in Mexican culture.

As a socially constructed production, authenticity generates a unique set of contradictions for those owners and managers who situate themselves as representatives of a specific collective identity. While they are able to display personal values associated with their presentation of ethnic heritage, they must also make concessions to fulfill certain customer expectations. In their research on the presentation of “ethnic” authenticity, Lu and Fine (1995) observed that the
owners of Chinese restaurants often made changes to their cuisine to suite the “standards of the American palate” (p.540). These alterations were based on aesthetic values linked to cultural discourses as well as costs of particular food ingredients. Customers desired the “illusion of authenticity” regardless of modifications pertaining to the use of spices, methods of preparation, and styles of service (p.541). Invoking innovative and adaptive measures, owners and chefs of Chinese restaurants cooked according to tradition even when adhering to customer preferences. Similarly, Ferraro (2002) found that the owners of Mexican restaurants in Los Angeles, California used various names to describe menu items as a way to display their adherence to authentic culinary styles and methods of preparation. According to this research, abiding by the logic of authenticity is an important and complicated measure that requires a combination of flexibility, foresight, and strategy.

In spite of the use of strategic measures in the presentation of authenticity, many restaurateurs were hesitant when it came to making menu alterations, and continued to challenge customer’s ideas about Mexican food and Mexican culture. This is fittingly exemplified in Enrique’s discussion about serving tortilla chips:

That’s why for the longest time we never served chips in our restaurant. The essence of the fact of that’s not how we start our food, it’s not with a basket of chips. The only reason we serve a basket of chips in our restaurant is to break that in-between time when the food is waiting, but it is not something special.

Enrique intentionally excluded tortilla chips from his menu, but later compromised and offered them because of increased customer demand. On his menu, tortilla chips were listed as “totopos” —a name that he insisted more accurately reflected the custom of consuming fried tortillas, and not as “something special” to “home-made” Mexican cuisine. Still not entirely
comfortable with his addition of something he did not interpret as authentically Mexican on his menu, Enrique added:

Americans can’t take it as an essence like if they go over to my house, they’ll get a basket of chips. That’s not what my sister Veronica does when she first gets home, fries the tortillas for the chips, you know?

In commemorative presentations of authenticity, ethnicity is depicted as both challenging and conforming to dominant essential ideas that portray identity as fixed, stable, and recognizable. For example, on the one hand, when Enrique displays Chicano/Latino artwork throughout his restaurant, he sees this decision as a symbolic gesture that expands his customer’s ideas regarding Mexican art and heritage. On the other hand, Enrique’s desire to expand his customer’s ideas about the diversity of Mexican culture is undermined when it comes to their apparent inability to recognize a “Mexican soul”—a quality that his restaurant and cuisine “has.” These types of struggles, as Gray (2004) points out, call attention to “the relationships of discursive claims and representations to actual structural positions, social practices, cultural meanings, and the complex constellation of power” in which competing presentations of authenticity are formulated (p.xv). These interactions also suggest that the accomplishment of culture is not as straightforward as it seems, even in the backstage of authentic performances (Goffman, 1959).

Hybrid Inauthenticity: “The Superbowl and Salsa are Synonymous”

Doug, an Anglo restaurateur, had the “burrito concept” in mind for several years before opening his restaurant. Living in a college town, he explained that a “burrito joint” was an appropriate addition to the area’s other “ethnic” restaurants. He described his restaurant’s food as follows:

It’s Mexican-American, well, more American than anything
else, what we do as I see it. Sort of like pizza. We produce the Americanized version of something that’s supposedly Mexican, and, in a way, authentic, but for the most part, it’s an Americanized version of some foreign food like Chinese food that ends up appealing to the palate of people in this country, like fried rice, ‘cause it’s more American than anything else.

Remarking that the burrito is both “Mexican-American” and “more American than anything else,” Doug is able to distinguish his restaurant’s burritos from burritos associated with traditional Mexican ingredients. His observations are based on a distinction between different types of ingredients:

Most of what’s out there for a Mexican burrito has got a lot of fatty stuff in it. Like a lot of people perceive refried beans as made with lard, and they are, for the most part. We don’t use refried beans, in fact, we don’t use pinto beans. Predominantly we use black beans because they are more appealing to a broader market than pinto beans.

Doug’s success in the Mexican restaurant industry, ironically, is in part a result of the perception that Mexican food is unhealthy. Capitalizing on what he calls the “burrito trend,” he explains, “as an Americanized version of food, it [the burrito] fits into a nice classification system that’s somehow there for whatever reason.” Indeed, this “classification system” works in his benefit, even when it comes to the preparation of his restaurant’s tacos:

Our taco is really no more than a burrito than anything else. We call it a taco because it’s smaller than the burrito and that was an arbitrary decision that seemed to make intuitive sense to our customers, and so that’s what we called it.

Relying on an “arbitrary” decision to create tacos as similar, yet smaller versions of their burritos, reveals an approach to authenticity that adjusts to customer demand through a hybrid preparation and production of Mexican cuisine, one that in this case, presents tacos as a different version of burritos. As he sees it, his customers are aware that they are not eating “truly
authentic” Mexican food, but are instead consuming “healthy” and “funky” Mexican food. Even when it comes to the salsa, for Doug, “it’s an illustration of something Americanized, and now, salsa’s our thing. The Super Bowl and salsa are synonymous.”

During our interview, I inquired about an El Salvadoran flag propped in a corner of the large indoor menu situated above the open kitchen. Explaining that the majority of his employees were El Salvadoran immigrants, he described how their input with regard to the inclusion of music, food ingredients, and recipes was reflected throughout his restaurant. For example, one employee suggested the creation of an El Salvadoran burrito made with ingredients she cooked with in her own kitchen. Doug remarked, “I tried it, and liked it. It’s a simple recipe and we adopted it and it was a sorta ethnic thing to have as an option…we’ve never really taken it off of the menu.” As a “sorta ethnic” option, the inclusion of an El Salvadoran burrito reflects the hybrid inauthenticity through which Doug presents and markets his restaurant.

Sara, originally from California, described her style of cooking as “yuppified,” and distinct from the food prepared by her Mexican mother. When referring to her menu, she stated, “I stay away from traditional Mexican food that I love because I’ve created this type of very quick, fresh food.” Emphasizing that her menu does not reflect a traditional or authentic Mexican fare, she explained her interest in flavors and spices that parallel those found in Mexico:

I’ve found this similarity with Asian food and Mexican food. There’s a very big similarity with the freshness and the produce such as: tomatoes, squashes, all the salsas. The cooking techniques are also very similar to say, Southeast Asian food, which I love, and it’s very accessible to the common palate.

Discovering a link between cross-ethnic cooking styles and flavors, Sara builds on similarities which accentuate the seasonings utilized in different cuisines. For instance, she includes ingredients such as peanut sauce for a “Thai flavor” and Feta cheese for a “Mediterranean
flavor.” When describing the combination of ingredients, she elaborates on a hybrid culinary approach, “When I first opened, people weren’t used to experiencing a Thai chicken burrito with a rice and bean burrito. I’ve been able to slowly bring in different things and mix them all up.” Like Doug, Sara refrains from making any claims to traditional Mexican cooking.

Sara explained that it was not imperative that her restaurant “look or feel authentic;” instead she emphasized the importance of “using the right ingredients.” However, when describing the décor of her restaurant, a different story emerged:

The concrete counter and wood stumps [the scats] are very Oaxaca. You go to Oaxaca, and well, the colors are very bright and you get that feel like when you’re in Mexico in certain small towns, they have these bright, beautiful colors that are very simple and festive. But, I gave it a little New York or San Francisco feel by making it modern. The artist is a woman who’s my color consultant… her art works well with the space.

Although Sara dismissed the importance of décor in favor of “the right ingredients,” she integrated motifs similar to those found in Oaxaca, Mexico. Combining a “New York or San Francisco feel,” Sara’s stylistic choices emphasize the fusion of different aesthetic designs.

Doug and Sara’s customers, while identifying their restaurants as serving Mexican cuisine, take notice of their hybrid inauthentic approach. Able to distinguish the differences from more traditional fares, customers and reviewers shared a range of comments about their restaurants specifically:

Yeah, they have pickled cabbage in one of their burritos. They’ve got the salsas going on. It’s multi-ethnic, packed into a Mexican style.

It feels hippy-like. You sit on tree stumps and the menu isn’t wildly Mexican. Chicken-cilantro salad doesn’t strike me as Mexican, or their Cajun-fish taco.

It’s a gourmet burrito place, they’ve glamorized it into something not traditional.
It's Latin food with a twist. There is some Asian influence in a few dishes, but that's what makes the place so truly unique.

If you're looking for authentic Mexican food, don't come here. However, if you want Americanized Mexican food that's much better/cheaper than Taco Bell, this place is great.

I'm from California, so I know what authentic Mexican food is like...and it's not anything like La Fiesta restaurant.

These remarks reveal that customers and reviewers carefully evaluate the extent to which the cuisine they consume abides to a standard of authenticity that adheres to particular aesthetics, menu items, and ingredients. They also illustrate how, through the logic of authenticity, customers and reviewers are able to critique and distinguish Doug and Sara's hybrid inauthentic approach as it pertains to the maintenance of or departure from Mexican "tradition" or "style."

According to Tuchman and Levine (1992), the inevitable "naturalness" of products related to specific ethnic traditions is often associated with the created character of ethnicity. Examining the internal logic of "ethnic" cultural invention, they show how "eating Chinese" became a New York Jewish custom that reflected articulations of self-identity. In some cases, Chinese food provided a "biographical continuity" for different generations of New York Jews through the linking of cultural themes and fond memories when dining in Chinese restaurants (p.401). Drawing on the work of Giddens (1984), they call attention to the recursively and historically shaped qualities of activities, meanings, and forms in the creation of new cultural symbols. As they put it, "Constructed cultural differences remain Durkheimian social facts, enduring and real in their consequences, yet malleable to reinterpretation by future generations" (p.401). In the context of performances of authenticity, these social facts represent innovative
cultural symbols and reveal the contemporary possibilities for diverse meanings of “eating ethnic.”

Customers and reviewers’ interpretations of Doug and Sara’s cuisine as a hybrid form of inauthenticity reflects their ability to enact distinctions of symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1984), and to differentiate between restaurants that offer a more traditional fare (as in the case of Enrique, Ricardo, and David) in comparison to a “hippy-like” or “funky” fare (as in the case of Doug and Sara). Social capital, according to Bourdieu, signifies “a reputation for competence and an image of respectability and honorability” granted by the participation in specific cultural practices or the consumption of cultural goods (Bourdieu, 1984: 291). Having carved a distinct niche in the Mexican restaurant industry, Doug and Sara manage a hybrid form of inauthenticity that affords them the opportunity to create a new cultural space where they do not have to make any claims about authenticity. Thus, they capitalize on the public’s perceptions of Mexican culinary styles in ways that do not debase ethnicity, but instead focus on “freshness” and “alternative” methods of food preparation.

**Americanized Authenticity: “Now You Can’t [Just] Do Mexican”**

James, the manager of a popular international Mexican restaurant chain, began his career at El Torito\(^2\), a California-based corporation. When I asked James why there were no El Torito restaurants in New England, he explained that New Englanders were not “ready for that type of Mexican food.” Conversely, the chain he currently managed would not be well received in California, “because it’s too Americanized, we haven’t been brought up on Mexican food like people in California, not to mention produce availability year round; that kind of drives the menu.” From James’s perspective, because of their different degrees of exposure to Mexican

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\(^2\) El Torito Inc. is an international Mexican restaurant chain that operates in the West, and Mid-Western United States, Turkey, Japan, and the Middle East.
food, customers in California and New England diverged in their Mexican food preferences. His restaurant is “too Americanized” for Californian palates, but sufficiently “Americanized” for New England palates. Comparing the restaurant chain he manages now to his experiences at El Torito, he explained:

In recent years we’ve gotten a little more traditional than we used to be. Well, El Torito, it’s more authentic. We took on some of El Torito’s ways. Like we have a certain salsa, have gone to thicker corn tortillas, which are way better than our old ones used to be, way more authentic, you know.

In moving toward the “more authentic” ways of El Torito, James’ menu offered foods such as “traditional nachos,” “fajita pizza,” and a “Buffalo chicken sandwich” served on a “Mexican-style bun.”

James remarked that it was important for his restaurant to “try to become everything” in order to reach a wider customer base. As a result, the menu evolved to satisfy consumer trends:

We have ribs, grilled burritos, so a bit of the Tex-Mex has melded into our menu as a necessity to compete with Chili’s. Basically now you go to Applebee’s, Friday’s, or Chili’s, you go anywhere and you’re going to get fajitas. Now you can’t do Mexican. I think you have to offer other food to capture that one of four people that doesn’t eat Mexican food.

Competition played a pivotal role in shaping the menu at James’s restaurant. Again and again, James emphasized the need to “capture” potential customers who do not normally eat Mexican food. To accomplish this, the restaurant must adhere to an “Americanized” menu. As he sees it, people who do not normally eat Mexican food “think it’s hot, spicy, they think that’s the only way you can get Mexican food. I compare it to Italian food, it’s very flavorful, but not everything’s hot.” James’ description of people’s perceptions of Mexican food as spicy or hot, in combination with his comparison to Italian food, corresponds to portrayals advanced by
corporate strategy, whereby Mexican food is marketed as “familiar” as opposed to distinct in and of itself.

Down the road from James’ restaurant, Daniella, a manager of another chain restaurant, told me the story of the Mexican vaquero:

The name [of the restaurant] is based on the Mexican vaquero, who is the Mexican cowboy. If you look at the front of the menu it gives you the story of the Mexican vaquero—so our mood is based on food that you cook on the range, the Mexican range.

The restaurant’s mood, as she explained, was vital to its theme. With its Mexican vaquero logo, Daniella’s restaurant is able to offer a wide range of both “Mexican cowboyish stuff,” and “authentic cowboy stuff.” For example, menu items include “campfire queso,” “portabello fajitas,” and a “border T-bone steak.” In order to maintain an “authentic atmosphere,” Daniella’s restaurant must “readapt those philosophies [pertaining to traditional Mexican cuisine] to go along with the guests, the customers. It has been changed to where you can’t go on without your theme, it [the restaurant] just won’t survive.”

The image of the Mexican cowboy worked well with the restaurant’s theme. For instance, offering selections such as “smoked barbeque ribs” and “mesquite-grilled salmon,” the restaurant’s menu contributed to ideas about “traditional Mexican favorites” through the inclusion of untraditional Mexican entrees. According to Daniella, creating a comfortable atmosphere is also a big part of the restaurant’s success:

Atmosphere has a lot to do with people’s perceptions. They walk in here and they already have a preconceived notion [of how the food will taste] by how clean our restaurant is, by what they are looking at. If they walked in here [and saw] four walls painted white, with no Mexican music on, with 1970s music, or whatever the case may be, they aren’t going to feel that homey comfort. I’m sitting by the campfire range eating Mexican food, it’s huge.
Apparently Daniella’s "guests" appreciate the atmosphere of the restaurant, "We get it on comment cards all the time; the atmosphere is awesome, it’s warm, it’s cozy, you feel like you’re sitting in Mexico, you know, it’s authentic."

Elaborately decorated with giant saddles, colorful blankets, and antique lanterns, the dining area stood out from the sectioned-off space of the bar area, adorned with neon-lights, large screen televisions, and life-size beer advertisements. Daniella explained:

Well, we try to keep it all the same flare, you know. We don’t have that Mexican bar-type atmosphere because you can’t generate business out of that. It has to be functional as well, so it’s not as authentic in the bar area as it is out here.

According to Daniella, although customers enjoy eating in a Mexican atmosphere, they do not enjoy drinking in one. The "authentic" dining area and the "not as authentic" bar area fittingly capture a corporate approach to "ethnic" dining: ethnic, but not too ethnic, authentic but not too authentic.

Like James, Daniella expressed concern about those people who do not normally eat Mexican food:

Down South, they don’t need to have a Porterhouse steak [on the menu]. People in the Northeast don’t know Mexican food, so there are many people who are like, ‘I don’t know Mexican food, I will not go there.’ But now we have a lot to offer people, food that isn’t Mexican.

In a large-scale industry study entitled "Riding the US Ethnic Food Tide" (1998), consultants suggested that "A company must understand how cuisines will develop, identify the opportunities, and capture them before others do" (Promar International, p.2). However, before they do so, companies ought to consider the implications of authenticity. As a different industry publication advised:
...presenting a mass American market\textsuperscript{3} with rigorously authentic products is not only impossible, but inadvisable. Unless you're talking specifically to the heart of an ethnic community, you don't want to offer truly authentic ethnic... it's just too unfamiliar to the wider group (Decker, 2003: 113).

From this perspective, the maintenance of familiarity, such as the atmosphere, cuisine, and mood of a restaurant should suitably follow tastes of the "American market." Moreover, "successful" authentic "ethnic" products:

will respect that spectrum's boundaries, sticking close to traditional cuisines that reflect American tastes. Once a product goes past the line of comfort and accessibility... it will not be seen as a real choice. It will be seen as something that is not convenient and not comfortable. And then it becomes foreign again (pp.113-114).

In her work on "eating the Other," hooks (1982) examines the commodification of racial "Otherness." Looking specifically at desire through the lens of race, she shows how discourses and practices successfully promote the enjoyment of racial difference as a "new delight, more intense, more satisfying than normal ways of doing and feeling" (p.21). Concerned with cultural arrangements that celebrate ethnicity as "a spice, [a] seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture," hooks explores the unconscious as a site of contestation where capitalism, patriarchy, and colonialism continue to reinscribe relational hierarchies (p.21). As she sees it, this type of longing is deeply embedded in the structure of white supremacy, and the West's crisis with its own identity—both rooted in the learned libidinal aspiration to dominate.

Shaping a large-scale restaurant chain according to the desires of an "American market" organizes ethnicity not as an expression of heritage or culture, but instead as "a spice" that accommodates the "desires" of an Anglo customer base whose consumption practices are

\textsuperscript{3} Decker characterizes the "American market" as consumers whose backgrounds are "mainstream Northern and Western European" (p.113).
considered hierarchically distinct. Through the reproduction of a single-subject identity, the construction of an “American market” effectively effaces all other ethnic backgrounds from restaurant “market” formulations. Rosaldo (1997) addresses how assumptions based on the idea of sameness in relation to culture and language enforce the marginalization of cultural plurality. The disenfranchisement of multiple identities in the structuring of expressive outlets, such as the case with the restaurant industry, reproduces the notion of a uniform citizenry. In this context, all other ethnicities remain unrecognized for their participation in social, economic, and cultural arrangements that contribute to the public sphere. If consumption is one “place” where scholars insist public forms of citizenship are exercised (García-Canclini, 2001; McRobbie, 1999) then those consumers who are not “mainstream Northern and Western European” are excluded from particular privileges of citizenship (Dávila, 2001).

Through the promotion of an Americanized authenticity, the vibrancy of cultural forms that celebrate identity and heritage are collapsed into narratives that emphasize similarity by staying “close to traditional cuisines that reflect American tastes” (Decker, 2003: 114). In such arrangements “authenticity itself becomes a hot commodity,” fostering expressions that commemorate similarity as opposed to difference (Halter, 2000: 18).

Fast-and-Easy Inauthenticity: “Yo quiero un taco”

Nowhere is the manipulation of ethnicity more polarized than in the fast food industry. Making no serious claims to authenticity, fast food chains are some of the most prolific distributors of Mexican images of in the United States. What the standardization of a formal Mexican cuisine did for the growth of the Mexican restaurant industry, mechanization did for the spread of the Mexican fast food market. Taco Bell, the most famous and successful of these chains started in 1962, and serves 60 million people a week (Baldwin, 1999).
In his authorized biography, *Taco Titan: The Glen Bell Story* (1999), the founder of Taco Bell, Glen Bell, described his admiration of Dick and Mac McDonald’s fast food assembly line production, and spent a great deal of time surveying their set up. Eager to capitalize on the fast food cultural transformation taking place throughout Southern California in the 1950s, Bell observed that ordering tacos at a full-service restaurant took a long time, but that alterations to the method of preparation could speed up the process. After visiting several local Mexican restaurants, he experimented with wire baskets and stainless steel holders in an attempt to create a mass-produced taco shell. Together with a “taco slide” and “taco rail,” Bell developed a taco production line, and introduced the first manufactured taco shell (Baldwin, 1999: 64). As he put it, “With tacos, every order is the same. It’s quick and easy. You can assemble tacos and hand them out as fast as people order them” (p. 65).

Bell celebrated the grand opening of his restaurants with “fiestas,” complete with live mariachis, Mexican dancers, and beauty queens. As Bell’s biography recalled, the events included:

Hispanic men in gold-embroidered jackets strummed guitars and violins, and sang ‘ai-yai-yai-yai, canta no llorar.’ Women wearing embroidered blouses, full skirts, and colorful woven belts raised their arms, clicked castanets, and laughed as they danced. But no smile was broader than Glen’s beneath his fringed sombrero as he sold nineteen-cent tacos as fast as he and his employees could assemble them (pp. 74-75).

Bell and his business partners participated in numerous fiestas over the years. Some of his associates and former employees went on to open their own successful operations, capitalizing on the growing popularity of Mexican fast food. In keeping with the Mexican theme, Bell “felt a Taco Bell should look like a building that sold tacos, he asked Robert [his architect] to give the new restaurant a south-of-the-border look” (p. 100). Together with the original “Taco Bell boy,”
described as "a smiling Hispanic wearing a serape and sombrero," Bell had a product, a theme, and a mascot (p. 146).

In 1978, Taco Bell was purchased by PepsiCo, and expanded its locations worldwide. As it took on other multi-national fast food competitors, Taco Bell's publicity and marketing strategy became increasingly more important. During the 1970s, the restaurant offered only four products, but in 1984 they unveiled a new marketing approach by expanding their menu, and "convincing mainstream America that its Mexican fare is nourishing, fresh, All-American fast food, rather than some exotic, gastrointestinal question mark" (Paskowski, 1984: 66). Lawrence Higby, then senior vice-president of marketing stated, "We're try to bring together tastes and concepts that people who are not as familiar—or trustful—of Mexican can recognize as beef, cheese, and corn" (p.66). In an attempt to accommodate shifting trends, Higby explained, "Sales of hamburgers are flat, and that whole category is mature. Mexican is the standout—and we're changing dramatically to capitalize on that" (p. 67). As a result, Taco Bell's advertising focused on presenting their products as "...comfortable, familiar food that can be shared, that this is food to be consumed just like you would a hamburger..." (p.67). The goal of the new approach, according to Higby, was to help people "get over their uneasiness with Mexican food" (p.67). One restaurant analyst explained the changes by describing the need to accommodate customers who "historically [have] been intimidated by Mexican food, linking it with Montezeuma's revenge" (p.68).

Taco Bell's campaign was successful, and the company continued to expand. In the early 1990s, they cut costs by preparing food outside of its restaurants, and unveiled a 59, 79, and 99-cent menu. During the first three quarters, the number of customer transactions increased 35 percent (Lev, 1990: 1), overall sales grew 28 percent, and operating profits rose 36 percent.
(Weinstein, 1991: 13). That same year, sales in the Mexican restaurant industry increased by 10 percent, as compared to the 2 percent growth in the restaurant industry as a whole (Dawson, 1991: 111). By pushing prices down and marketing their products as “value menu” items, Taco Bell, together with its 3700 restaurants, was the industry forerunner in linking cheapness to Mexicanness.

Toward the end of the 1990s, sales started to dip and the company sought a fresh campaign to curb the decline in earnings. Taco Bell hired a new advertising agency, and in 1998, Dinky the Chihuahua (a.k.a Gidget) first barked “Yo Quiero Taco Bell” on nationally distributed television commercials. Not even the advertising executives foresaw how popular the ads would become. By the end of 1998, sales were up 9 percent, and the chain expected to sell 20 million plush-toy versions of the Chihuahua (Johnson, 1999). As Taco Bell vice president, Peter Stack remarked:

We’re enjoying the highest awareness levels our advertising has ever generated...The key responsibility of the Chihuahua is to connect with our customers, to make them crave the food and come into the restaurants...That’s the No.1 job. Everything else has to be supportive of that goal (Johnson, 1999:1).

Generating more sales than campaigns featuring human celebrities such as basketball superstar Shaquille O’Neal, Dinky the Chihuahua, as Taco Bell president Peter Waller put it, was “critical” to their success, stating, “It happens maybe once in a lifetime that you get a nation talking about you” (Horovitz, 1998: 1).

Taco Bell did indeed experience high awareness levels; however not all of them were positive. Many national Latino groups expressed concern over a Spanish-speaking dog invoking the imagery of a variety of Latino icons such as Che Guevara (the Argentinean Marxist revolutionary) and Evita Péron (the celebrated former first lady of Argentina). Still others, like
members of National Council of La Raza and the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) were angered by the use of anthropomorphism—when human characteristics are assigned to animals. The employment of anthropomorphic advertising in reference to a specific ethnic group is often considered a base for the subsequent dehumanization of that ethnic group. Welquis Lopez, the vice chairman of the National Hispanic Republican Assembly stated, "Why can’t they use something else? Don’t use an animal, because then you’re treating us like we are part of an animal" (Estrada, 1998: 38). In an interview with Latino USA, Gabriel Cazares, a former Clearwater, Florida mayor, and president of the Tampa chapter of LULAC, called for a nationwide boycott of Taco Bell by explaining:

I think it was an unfortunate commercial. I think that the use of a dog to depict Mexicans was very demeaning. If Taco Bell wanted to depict someone that would reflect Mexican culture, we have many live, two-legged artists, singers, dancers, musicians—some great people in America that could have been selected to give a testimonial for Taco Bell [and] say, 'yo quiero un taco,' and that wouldn’t have been offensive (http://www.latinousa.org/learning/tacobell.html).

Santa Ana (1999) argues that the contemporary framing of American discourse on undocumented Latino immigrants is commonly articulated through the dominant metaphor "immigrants are animals" (p.198). Looking specifically at print media texts pertaining to the 1994 California referendum, Proposition 187*, Santa Ana shows how public discourses reflected in the media dehumanize immigrant workers. As animals “to be lured, pitted, or baited,” both pro-immigration and anti-immigration supporters described immigrants in this fashion (p.200). In his estimation, “The conceptual correspondence ‘immigrants are animals’ is racist. It belittles immigrants as it separates non-citizens and citizens, since it assigns them a less-than-human standing” (p.216). When considering that everyday metaphors symbolize the “common-sense world-view of [their] target domain,” the significance of such characterizations highlights the

* Proposition 187 sought to restrict social services, health care, and education to undocumented immigrants.
potential effects and far-reaching social implications in the establishment of conventional frames of reference (p.192). As Cicero put it two thousand years ago, metaphors come about “when a word applying to one thing is transferred to another, because the similarity seems to justify the transference” (Purcell, 1990: 39; in Santa Ana, 1999: 194).

In light of a series of political legislation specifically targeting the Latino community, commercials starring a Spanish-accented dog pitching Mexican food, for some, seemed an unlikely coincidence. As Cazares remarked, “It comes at a time when Hispanics, especially Mexicans, suffer terribly from immigrant bashing. It just makes me feel like that this is another putdown to Mexicans” (Sullivan, 1998: 5). However, not all Latinos or Latino groups responded as fervently as Lopez or Cazares. In fact, Belen Robles, the national president of LULAC, issued a press release denying reports that they had asked Taco Bell to stop running the commercials and stated that, as they saw it, the Chihuahua was not offensive to Latinos. In her words, “This is a non-issue for LULAC…We have many more substantive things to worry about…I seriously doubt they would intentionally air something that is offensive to the Hispanic community” (Reddick, 1998: 1).

O’Barr (1994), in his research on otherness and advertising, examines particular social ideologies that demonstrate who is powerful, who is weak, and how society should function. Disrupting a monolithic approach to how meaning is produced in advertisements, he suggests that interpretations do not follow a uniform pattern. Instead, the production of meaning is a collaborative venture that includes the participation of the audience and the intention of writer. From this perspective, the meanings generated from advertisements are never simple elucidations, but complex and uneven exchanges between producers and consumers. Thus, such struggles reveal the constitutive aspect of representation, meaning, and ethnic identity in popular

\footnote{In particular, California initiatives, Proposition 187 (1994), Proposition 209 (1995), and Proposition 227 (1999).}
practice and the cultural imagination. More importantly, however, they highlight the critical tensions around everyday processes of consumption and reflect the collective strategies through which political narratives are challenged.

From the Taco Bell boy to Dinky the Chihuahua, Taco Bell’s representation of fast-and-easy inauthenticity organizes ethnicity through the cultivation of contested meanings, adherence to commonality and safeness, and contribution to dominant discourses of the time period. Dubin (1987) contends that social control and the structure of society is extended, maintained, and reproduced through the consumption of material goods. Specifically, he addresses the taken-for-grantedness that occurs in the relationship between producers and consumers in the process of recognition that portrays people of color in a subservient manner. Through discourses of humor and harmlessness simultaneous messages are sent and received disguising a more malevolent function. The messages sent and received in arrangements of fast-and-easy inauthenticity draw on notions of familiarity that situate ethnicity through the lens of commonality, comfort, and conformity. Consequently, through the implementation of characters and characteristics that are easy to control, social statuses of inequality are replicated, unintended or otherwise, in the display of caricature and humor.

Conclusion

The contention that authenticity is a highly negotiated interaction that represents a romanticized representation of reality is by now a scholarly norm. Similarly, the notion that ethnicity is a socially constructed category that reflects a group’s common origin and sense of unique collective solidarity, is also a staple of constructionist work. This study expands these theories by empirically exploring how authenticity and ethnicity “make sense” as a register of representation within the context of Mexican restaurants.
Questioning the taken-for-grantedness of authenticity reveals how “everyday” knowledge of ethnicity is organized and reproduced. Within restaurant culture, the accomplishment of ethnicity is best characterized as a continuum of constructed meanings achieved through different versions of authenticity. In these arrangements, authenticity and ethnicity are constitutive of each other; intimately entangled as components of the reproduction of cultural images, icons, and cuisines. Staged by producers and judged by consumers, authenticity is a culturally fictitious and commercially viable marketing device. Therefore, authenticity is not a characteristic of food itself, but is a categorization that emerges in presenting, marketing, and performing culinary culture. As a continuum of articulations, claims pertaining to authenticity reveal the constraints, possibilities, and unevenness of both the production and consumption of culture.

In the context of the oft-cited cliché, “you are what you eat,” the consumption of different identities presents itself as a social and political practice of representation. Practices of representation, as Lipsitz (1994) reminds us, do not necessarily suggest relations of equal standing or mutual reciprocity, especially when participants in these dialogues “speak from positions of highly unequal access to power, opportunity, and life chances” (p.4). Under these circumstances, representations are capable of yielding uneven social and material outcomes and reinforcing ethnic divisions (Gray, 1995; Rose, 1994). Matters of representation are theoretical and political “component[s] in any strategy that seeks to redress issues of cultural and material inequality” (Valdivia, 2000:90). Furthermore, they extend beyond the surface of commercial expression, and thus warrant a critical awareness of the imagery used to depict different groups of people.
Through narratives of authenticity, ethnicity, as central to the commercial character of the “ethnic” food industry, is invoked, forging structural and relational hierarchies that reproduce knowledge about particular groups of people. Rooted in anxieties related to the symptoms of modern industrial society, and entrenched in the ongoing efforts to attain equality, struggles over representation reflect the enduring political salience of identity. While ethnicity is one form of representation accomplished through authenticity, research that probes the socially constructed nature of seemingly neutral concepts in a variety of circumstances will invariably call attention to other determinative features of the production of culture. Analyzing these types of social relations reveals the embeddedness of meaning-making practices in everyday contexts and highlights the construction of cultural ideals that enforce essentialist ideas about ethnicity (Lamont, 2000). Moreover, interrogating how social structures are extended and reproduced is central to “digging through the multiple thematic layers to determine what they reveal about social time and place” (Dubin, 1987: 122). The next challenge, then, is to critique the dimensions of other dynamic forms of representation so as to open new possibilities, strategies, and spaces for questioning existing social divisions and confronting continuing inequalities.

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