From Sombreros to *Sincronizadas*

Authenticity, Ethnicity, and the Mexican Restaurant Industry

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While scholars agree that performances of authenticity and ethnicity express social relations and reveal the socially constructed character of identity, we know little about how these interactions contribute to the politics of everyday life. By engaging in participant observation, drawing on open-ended interviews, and analyzing the content of available data regarding restaurant culture, the author argues that the accomplishment of Mexican authenticity is a social construction. However, despite its socially created qualities, the author contends that performances of authenticity and ethnicity affect not only how individuals understand each other, but illustrate the challenges faced by different groups of people in the commercial production and consumption of identity.

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Examining how individuals negotiate the social world and make sense of their experiences reveals not only how people understand each other, but illustrates how they view themselves in relation to those with whom they interact. Authenticity, as an index of these encounters, provides the opportunity to determine and communicate one's place as an individual in an increasingly global marketplace. While the search for authenticity highlights the desire for "genuine" forms of expression, it also calls attention to concerns regarding the interpretation and negotiation of contemporary

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consumer life. In a world where soft drinks are marketed as "the real thing" (Handler 1986, 6) and restaurants are named "The Authentic Café" (Halter 2000, 19), consumption serves as a means through which authenticity becomes a measure of the quality, efficacy, and legitimacy of one's experience in a particular setting.

Despite its fabricated character (Peterson 1997), 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 (Bell and Valentine 1997). 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). These traditions are often linked to the meanings that people attach to their own ethnic identities (Tuchman and Levine 1992; Waters 1990) and the ethnic identities of others (Gabaccia 1998; Nenga 2003). As a measure of symbolic ethnicity (Gans 1979), authenticity contributes to the process, performance, and preservation of culture.

While scholars agree that performances of authenticity and ethnicity express social relations and demonstrate the socially constructed character of identity, we know little about how these interactions shape the politics of everyday life. By engaging in participant observation in Mexican restaurants, drawing on open-ended interviews with owners, managers, customers, and reviewers of Mexican restaurants, and considering the content of a range of available literature (i.e., restaurant industry reports, articles, and books) related to restaurant culture, I argue that the accomplishment of Mexican authenticity, whether maintained by Mexican owners or performed by large restaurant chains, is a social construction. However, despite its socially created qualities, performances of authenticity and ethnicity affect not only how individuals understand each other, but illustrate the challenges faced by different groups of people in the commercial production and consumption of identity. Focusing on the consequences and contradictions that are generated through different claims to authenticity, I examine the salience of ethnicity in day-to-day situations and explore the dynamics of cultural production.

Consuming Authenticity and Ethnicity

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. Her insistence on authentic Mexican food and condemnation of inauthentic hybrid dishes was so influential 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 (Kennedy 1972, 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 on 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, identity, and culture.

Scholars maintain that authenticity is a uniquely contemporary characteristic that affects individual selfhood and social relationships (Boorstin 1961, Handler 1986, Trilling 1971). According to Trilling (1971), the concept of authenticity signals a shift in how individuals relate to one another. Authenticity, as he put it, " . . . [is] 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). Likewise, Boorstin (1961) in his work on the changing nature of the American news media, expressed concern over the presentation of authenticity and the significance of illusion or "the menace of unreality" (p. 240). Troubled by the growing trend to replace authentic events, scripts, and stories with inauthentic ones, occurrences of "pseudo-events" interfered with the ability to determine spontaneity; they obscured an underlying "reality," and promoted other pseudo-events. For example, the use of stereotypes, "stirred an irrational and undiscriminating hunger for fancier, more varied items" (pp. 38–39). As a form of pseudo-event, stereotypes "whetted the appetite"

for pre-determined images as opposed to spontaneous proceedings (p. 39). Therefore, the spread of inauthentic pseudo-events is not only dangerous to society at large, but is detrimental to individuals' abilities to understand their roles in these encounters. From this perspective, authenticity is a modern cultural construct that sustains the assumption of a "true" experience or occasion. In addition, this position holds that authenticity is a common means through which individuals interpret their roles and the roles of others in a variety of social contexts (Goffman 1959; Grazian 2003; MacCannell 1973; Peterson 1997).

Focusing on the culture of country music, Peterson (1997) described how audiences anticipated certain types of performances that exemplified the genre's values. To gain notoriety, musicians were implicitly required to abide by a set of specific pre-existing standards to fulfill the expectations of their fans. The extent to which performers had to live up to consumers' ideas about different encounters demonstrates the political relevance of representation in the production and reproduction of culture. Similarly, Grazian (2004) documented how consumer desire, as an influential set of social forces, operated in Chicago blues clubs. For example, he found that cultural myths pertaining to white audiences' longing for black musicians and employees was so powerful that many venues employed black men exclusively as a means to create the impression of an authentic ambience. In the space of the blues club, registers of race and ethnicity served as key signifiers in the presentation of authentic cultural displays.

Performances of "ethnic" authenticity are generally seen as highlighting "genuine" characteristics, customs, and traditions of specific groups of people (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). When probed about the personal meanings attached to their ethnic identities, Waters' (1990) informants agreed that "having" an ethnicity made them feel special and provided them the opportunity to take part in a host of traditions such as eating "ethnic" food. Some confusion was apparent, such as one woman who explained that she celebrated her Irish heritage by eating sauerkraut. Misappropriations aside, consuming particular food was tantamount to displaying cultural pride. The decision to eat certain types of "ethnic" cuisine symbolizes a form of self expression, but can also delineate a boundary between "the collective self and the other" (Ohnuki-Tierney 1993, 3). Consequently, dining preferences may represent a positive attachment to one's culture and denote discrimination against others.

Goldman (1992), in her research on cooking and colonialism, maintains that accounts of cultural authority in texts such as cookbooks, memoirs, and novels illustrate the conscious and unconscious presence of "the self." In

her estimation, the insistence on authentic cuisine not only implies the existence of inauthentic food, but reveals the ubiquity of self-assertions that affirm and appropriate the cultural expressions of people from different ethnic backgrounds. Hence, making claims to authenticity is capable of signaling an array of implicit and explicit power relations. Further developing the link between politics and authenticity, Abarca (2004) explains that the "gastronomical desire" for planned or genuine authenticity, while always rooted in cultural and socio-economic assumptions, "carries real colonizing attitudes and implications" that too easily essentialize certain ethnic groups (p. 18). As a result, assertions of authentic "ethnic" food espouse romantic ideas about the people who are typically associated with certain cuisines. Such processes stifle creative expression while at the same time reproduce the notion that some groups of people are more "exotic" and "ethnic" than others. Weary of the unquestioned ideals of cultural authenticity, Abarca contends that consumers should be more critical of the practices by which "our rather ordinary words and common phrases" influence how people from particular backgrounds are perceived (p. 19).

These findings point to the importance of authenticity and ethnicity not just as measures of the legitimacy of a specific cultural experience, but as concepts through which a variety of commonplace ideas are generated. What is more, performances of authenticity and ethnicity sustain commonly held beliefs about particular cultures, places, and people. Therefore, it is essential to examine, in greater detail, how notions of authenticity and ethnicity are negotiated by actors themselves in the very locations where such interactions take place. While research suggests that a diverse range of relations are expressed when individuals make claims about authenticity, few studies address how these interactions unfold and influence the production of culture. As a result, I pay close attention to the social conditions under which such assertions order the terms of representation and contribute to the politics 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 reproduction of symbolic meaning (Fine 1996; Finkelstein 1989; Spang 2000). As unique sites for observing "public ethnicity" (Lu and Fine 1995, 536), restaurants bring together social actors as participants and spectators in performances of culture. From September 2000 through June 2001, I became a participant observer in Mexican restaurants in Amherst, Northampton;

Springfield, Massachusetts; and Hartford, Connecticut.[1] Additionally, I conducted interviews with customers, reviewers, owners, and managers of these restaurants. To gather a wide range of materials concerning the social relations of Mexican restaurants, I collected copies of flyers, menus, web pages, restaurant industry reports, restaurant reviews, and take-out containers. Thus, this project draws on participant observation, open-ended interviews, and content analysis to examine the culture of Mexican restaurants.

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 a more ethnically diverse population.[2] These cities are located within a 25 and 45 minute drive from the Pioneer Valley. When this research was carried out, none of these locations had a large Mexican or Mexican-American population, and therefore restaurants catered to a non-Mexican clientele.[3] In each of these restaurants, I spent time observing the daily routines of management, employees, and customers. While some of the restaurants were open for breakfast, I generally conducted my fieldwork during the lunch and dinnertime hours. With my notebook in hand, I recorded the décor, layout, and atmosphere of each restaurant while sipping a coffee, enjoying a beer, or eating a meal—indeed, becoming a participant observer in Mexican restaurants was quite a savory experience.

With the help of my colleagues who were personally acquainted with several restaurant owners, I began compiling a list of potential informants. After conducting my first interview, I drew on the guidelines of snowball sampling by asking each restaurateur for the names and phone numbers of people they knew who owned or managed Mexican restaurants. I also searched the Internet and the Yellow Pages to locate restaurants outside of the Pioneer Valley. Aside from the management at Taco Bell who invoked "company policy" by not talking to anyone about their restaurants, arranging interviews with owners and managers of Mexican restaurants was fairly straightforward.

In total, I interviewed eight owners and managers of Mexican restaurants (two women and six men). These interviews were conducted face-to-face and included open-ended questions. They lasted from 1 to 2 hours, were tape recorded, and then transcribed. My conversations with customers of Mexican restaurants (12 women, 7 men) lasted from 15 minutes to an hour and were collected in restaurants and coffee shops in the towns of Amherst and Northampton. I approached people as they ordered, ate, and left the various establishments. Initially I was nervous about making contact with people in such an informal manner, but folks were quite eager to share their

ideas about Mexican restaurants. Equally enthusiastic to talk to me were restaurant reviewers. 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.

Unlike my experiences with customers and restaurant reviewers, establishing rapport with owners and managers of Mexican restaurants was more complicated than I expected. For instance, several were concerned about what my project was trying to "prove." Despite assuring them that my project was exploratory, and therefore not intent on confirming a particular thesis, on finishing interviews I was frequently re-questioned about what my "real" motives were for studying local Mexican restaurants. I suspect that some people thought that I was a restaurant reviewer determined to critique the authenticity of their cuisine. Others were eager to talk about their restaurants in relation to the local restaurant scene. Interestingly, in these cases conversations generally took place in both English and Spanish. To be sure, talking to me in Spanish served as a means to affirm their authenticity as Mexican owners and managers of Mexican restaurants, while it also operated as a way to test, or to authenticate, my intentions as a researcher.

Catering Mexican Authenticity

Sipping hot chocolate in the subterranean dining room of a local coffee shop, Adrian, a restaurant reviewer whose career in journalism spanned over 20 years, revealed "I like it authentic, real, from back home, the motherland." Although she had only recently acquired the position of senior food writer, Adrian was adamant about the importance of a reviewer's ability to accurately evaluate the authenticity of a restaurant's cuisine. When she was unable to gauge a restaurant's authenticity, Adrian brought along friends or colleagues to assist her. Such was the case when she reviewed an Argentinean restaurant. In her words, "I decided to take a friend from Chile with me to gauge how authentic it was. Everyone spoke Spanish, they were all from Argentina." Similarly, Catherine, a reviewer whom I talked to by telephone, explained how she intuitively knew when a restaurant was authentic by observing the rapport an owner established with customers. As she put it, "The owner is cooking, takes his time. The restaurant is full of warmth, of something that is common, that is family . . . If you and I are eating here, then we're family."

Adrian and Catherine's observations suggest that authenticity is an important measure in determining the quality of a dining experience. However, their responses also show that evaluating a restaurant's authenticity requires more than just an appraisal of a restaurant's menu, recipes, or ingredients. Specifically, a restaurant's atmosphere is vital to an assessment of authenticity. Like reviewers, customers described the ambiance of a restaurant in terms of people and not décor. Frequently commenting on the presence or absence of "Hispanic" or "Mexican" employees, the ability to interact with Spanish-speaking employees was a central means by which many assessed their experiences. One customer recognized that a particular Mexican restaurant was authentic because she could "order in Spanish and the order was given back in Spanish," while another stated that when "all the cooks [were] Hispanic," he could more readily determine if some restaurants were more authentic than others. Customers and reviewers also looked for other cues. As a customer put it, "When you see Mexicans eating there it gives you the feeling that it's authentic and not just yuppies eating burritos and sipping margaritas," while a reviewer noted that she knew a restaurant was authentic because labor activist César Chavez dined there when he used to visit the area.

Customers were more likely to describe a restaurant's atmosphere as "not quite Mexican" when college students worked in the dining room. For example, one remarked that because she could not speak Spanish to the person working at the register, this contributed to a "very Noho" (an abbreviated version of Northampton) atmosphere that affected her ability to "escape that we're in New England." Much like Grazian's (2004) observations in blues clubs, the presence of employees from different ethnic backgrounds allowed customers and reviewers to distinguish between experiences that were "authentically Mexican" and those that were not. Despite the fact that the vast majority of Spanish-speaking staff were from El Salvador, customers and reviewers did not question the possibility that their interactions were not with "authentic" Mexican employees.

Although customers and reviewers readily acknowledged the importance of authenticity, they were uncritical of the cuisine or atmosphere offered at the local Mexican restaurants that they considered "inauthentic." In one case, a reviewer observed, "They make no pretense of serving traditional Mexican fare . . . it's more whimsical and Americanized than loyal to any particular ethnic cuisine," while a customer remarked, "No, it's not authentic Mexican, but they don't claim to be." Even when a restaurant was unsuccessful at maintaining an authentic décor, reviewers still expressed

confidence in making determinations about its authenticity. Such was the case with Jennifer, who explained that despite a restaurant's Formica tables and plastic chairs, she could still recognize "something real about the cuisine." Taken together, customers and reviewers' comments imply that there is more than one way to achieve authenticity and to evaluate those accomplishments. In addition, their responses suggest that there is something about *how* particular claims of authenticity are expressed that contributes to their assessment of their experiences. Turning to presentations of authenticity and ethnicity in Mexican restaurants, I examine the production of identity and the conditions of representation.

Commemorative Authenticity: "It's Got a Mexican Soul . . . and That Says a Lot"

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.

Expressing his disappointment at the alterations restaurateurs commonly made to accommodate people's perceptions of Mexican food, Enrique detailed his refusal to compromise the traditional names of his menu items. In one 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-chro-neez-ahh-dah [in an American English 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 versions 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 review that praised the cuisine but commented extensively on its ambiance and "lack of Mexican charm." 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 that invoked authenticity as a significant and essential aspect of ethnic identity. Additionally, Enrique's comments suggest that even in commemorative versions of authenticity, consumers' preconceived ideas about

how specific people create "charm" produce conflict when challenges are presented that extend the possibilities of available ethnic representations.

Loyalty to tradition was also a theme that emerged when I spoke with 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 typical of 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 with 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 60 customers while the bar area seats 25 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 were. Ricardo reveals that Mexican food does not have to be authentic to *appear* authentic. Moreover, his comments suggest that performances of Mexican identity are inextricable from assumptions about class, gender, and family even in 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 "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 and 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 that 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 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 that are unavailable to non-Mexican restaurateurs—in this case, tradition, family, and ethnic heritage rooted in Mexican culture.

As a social construction, 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 and the cost 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 observance of authentic culinary styles and methods of preparation. According to this research, abiding by the guidelines of authenticity is an important and complicated endeavor that requires a combination of flexibility, foresight, and strategy. More importantly, however, these studies suggest that there are unique challenges for owners and chefs of "ethnic" restaurants whose performances of authenticity convey values that uphold the integrity of a particular culture.

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 their ambitions to broaden 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 consistent 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 a menu item that he did not interpret as authentically Mexican, 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 a dominant set of ideas that portray identity as fixed, stable, and recognizable. For example, when Enrique displays Chicano/Latino artwork throughout his restaurant, he sees this decision as a symbolic act that expands his customers' knowledge of Mexican art

and Chicano heritage. Despite Enrique's desire to influence his customers' ideas about the diversity of Mexican culture, his strategies were unable to communicate a "different way of looking at Mexican food" because of expectations that he explained were put forth by "the standards of *lo gringo*" (that of American or non-Hispanic origin).

These types of struggles, as Gray (2004, p. xv) points out, call attention to the relationship of representations to "actual structural positions, social practices, cultural meanings, and the complex constellation of power" in which performances of authenticity take place. For members of historically marginalized communities, consumption is a key site where they are able to construct an identity that manages, contests, and extends common cultural categorizations that reproduce both oppositional *and* conventional representations (Kates and Belk 2001). However, as these owners' responses suggest, despite attempts to affirmatively represent their traditions or present their own versions of authenticity, they are often unable to disrupt mainstream ideas of what is and what is not "authentic." When established sets of expectations are challenged (e.g., not offering tortilla chips), these efforts conflict with customer demand and desire—both shaped by long standing social forces that impose market-oriented notions of authenticity that cater to "unreal" events over "real" ones (Boorstin 1961).

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 more "traditional" burritos. 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.

Ironically, part of Doug's success in the Mexican restaurant industry is 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 to 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 music 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, Sara builds on similarities which accentuate the seasonings used in different cuisines. For instance, in many of her dishes she adds 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.

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:

> It feels hippie-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.
>
> 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's a gourmet burrito place; they've glamorized it into something not traditional.
>
> 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 show that customers and reviewers carefully evaluate the extent to which the cuisine they consume abides by a standard of authenticity that adheres to particular aesthetics, menu items, and ingredients.

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). As they put it, socially constructed cultural differences are " . . . 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 symbolize innovative cultural representations and reveal the potential for diverse meanings of "eating ethnic."

While Mexican culinary culture is central to Doug and Sara's advertising, décor, and menu, they do not make assertions of Mexican authenticity. In its place, they emphasize qualities such as "freshness" and "alternative" methods of food preparation. Through the use of hybrid inauthenticity, their restaurants highlight the vitality of different styles of cooking and observe the unique contributions (e.g., ingredients and seasonings) of a variety of cultures (e.g., El Salvadoran and Thai). More importantly, however, they respect the role and maintain the integrity of Mexican cultural forms. In other words, instead of appropriating small parts of Mexican culture in a piecemeal fashion, Doug and Sarah's restaurants honor Mexican ethnicity by drawing on it as the primary means to create something new (El Salvadoran burrito and Thai chicken burrito). Hence, implementing a hybrid inauthentic approach is a valuable method of honoring tradition even as it departs from tradition in its pristine form.

Americanized Authenticity: "Now You Can't Do Mexican"

James, the manager of a popular international Mexican restaurant chain, began his career at El Torito,[4] 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 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's 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" 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 . . . 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.

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 with Italian food, corresponds to those values put forth by large corporations, whereby Mexican food is marketed as "familiar" as opposed to distinct in and of itself.

Down the road from James's 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." 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 nontraditional 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 rustic lanterns, the dining area stood out from the cordoned-off bar area that was 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 titled "Riding the U.S. Ethnic Food Tide," consultants suggested that "A company must understand how cuisines will develop, identify the opportunities, and capture them before others do" (Promar International 1998, 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[5] 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 article "Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance," hooks (1992) explores 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 describes the unconscious as a site of contestation where capitalism, patriarchy, and colonialism continue to re-inscribe relational hierarchies (p. 21). As she sees it, this type of longing is deeply embedded in ideas of white superiority 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" situates ethnicity not as a central expression of heritage or culture, but instead as "a spice" that accommodates the "desires" of an Anglo customer base whose consumption practices are considered hierarchically distinct.

Adhering to the logic of an "American market" systematically fails to recognize non-Anglo individuals as consumers of "ethnic" cuisine. With structures of exclusion built into the commercial organization of ethnic restaurants, it is no surprise that attributes such as "comfort" and "accessibility" trump qualities of cultural uniqueness. In such circumstances, people who are not classified as "American" remain unrecognized for their participation in and contribution to social, economic, and cultural expressions of public consumption. If consumption is one "place" where scholars insist the terms of citizenship are put into practice (Dávila 2001; García-Canclini 2001; McRobbie 1999), then those consumers who are not "mainstream Northern and Western European" are excluded from particular privileges of citizenship. These processes illustrate not only the limited value of cultural agency in large-scale marketing practices, but also reveal the limitations that hierarchies of exclusion place on different groups of people. 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 conditions that commemorate similarity as opposed to difference (Halter 2000, 18).

Fast-and-Easy Inauthenticity: "*Yo Quiero Un Taco*"

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 outfits started in 1962, and serves 60 million people a week (Baldwin 1999). In his authorized biography, the founder of Taco Bell, Glen Bell, eager to capitalize on the fast food cultural transformation taking place throughout Southern California in the 1950s, described how ordering tacos at a full-service restaurant was a slow process, but that alterations to the method of preparation could speed-up production. After visiting several local Mexican restaurants, he experimented with wire baskets and stainless steel holders in an attempt to create an easily replicated 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).

Each new restaurant was commemorated with grand opening "fiestas," and some included "Hispanic men in gold-embroidered jackets [playing] guitars and violins . . . Women wearing embroidered blouses, full skirts, and colorful woven belts [who] raised their arms, clicked castanets, and

laughed as they danced" (p. 74). Bell and his business partners participated in numerous fiestas over the years. 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 multinational 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 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 trying 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 Montezuma'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 their 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), overall sales grew 28 percent, and operating profits rose 36 percent (Weinstein 1991). That same year, sales in the Mexican restaurant industry increased by 10 percent, as compared with the 2 percent growth in the restaurant industry as a whole (Dawson 1991). By pushing prices down and marketing their products as "value menu" items, Taco Bell, together with its 3,700 restaurants, was the industry forerunner in linking cheapness to Mexican-ness.

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 had foreseen 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 . . ." (Johnson 1999, 1). Prompting 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 Perón (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 population. 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). Gabriel Cazares, a former Clearwater, Florida, mayor, and president of the Tampa chapter of LULAC, called for a nationwide boycott of Taco Bell 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 communicated through the dominant metaphor "immigrants are animals" (p. 198).

Looking specifically at print media texts pertaining to the 1994 California referendum, Proposition 187,[6] Santa Ana shows how these ideas are reflected in the media. 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 potential effects and far-reaching social implications in the establishment of conventional frames of reference (p. 192).

In light of a series of political legislation targeting the Latino community,[7] commercials starring a Spanish-accented dog pitching Mexican food, for some, was 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).

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 sameness and safeness, and alignment with dominant dialogues of the time period. Through discourses of humor and harmlessness simultaneous messages are sent and received disguising "a more malevolent function" (Dubin 1987, 130). These transmissions draw on notions of familiarity that situate ethnicity through the lens of commonality, conformity, and comfort. 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 widely accepted belief. Within the culture of the Mexican restaurant industry, the accomplishment of authenticity and ethnicity is a social construction, one that is produced by Mexicans and Mexican-Americans as much as it is scripted by marketing experts of large restaurant chains. However, in spite of its socially constructed character, practices of authenticity have real-world implications that illustrate the limits and constraints that less powerful populations face in the marketplace—especially when it comes to accessing the conditions that enable the production and consumption of their identities.

Mexican restaurants are important sites where ideas about Mexican culture are generated and maintained. While the restaurants in this study primarily catered to an Anglo customer base, future research should consider how authenticity is negotiated in Mexican restaurants that have a more diverse clientele. For instance, how does authenticity operate in Mexican restaurants in places like Chicago, Los Angeles, or San Antonio? Such a focus would enable a more detailed discussion of the politics of consumption in relation to cultural performance. Additionally, research that examines how performances of authenticity and ethnicity differ across cultures would provide a rich context for theorizing how representation operates as a form of power. Although ethnicity is one form of representation accomplished through authenticity, research that explores other taken-for-granted claims as they are negotiated by individuals in the locations where they are practiced is vital for gaining a greater understanding of the dynamics that influence the production of culture. Analyzing these types of social relations reveals the embeddedness of meaning-making practices in local contexts and highlights the construction of cultural ideals that enforce essentialist ideas about ethnicity (Lamont 2000).

Narratives of authenticity and ethnicity, as central to the commercial character of the "ethnic" food industry, forge structural and relational hierarchies that reproduce knowledge about particular groups of people. Rooted in anxieties related to the expansion of modern industrial society (Trilling 1971), and entrenched in the ongoing efforts to achieve equality (Abarca 2004), struggles over representation reflect the enduring political salience of identity. 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). For Mexicans, Mexican-Americans, and Chicanos, whose access to the legal and symbolic benefits of citizenship is consistently challenged, matters of representation yield powerful political and material outcomes. The next step, then, is to critique the dimensions of other seemingly neutral forms of representation so as to open new possibilities, strategies, and spaces for questioning existing social divisions and confronting continuing inequalities.

Notes

1. All informant and restaurant names are pseudonyms. In some cases I withhold citations to maintain confidentiality.

2. For instance, in 2000, Springfield's population was 56 percent white, 27 percent Latino, 21 percent Black, 1.9 percent Asian, and Hartford's population was 27.7 percent white, 40.4 percent Latino, 38.1 percent Black, and 1.6 percent Asian. In comparison, Amherst's population was 79.3 percent white and Northampton's population was 90 percent white (www .census.gov).

3. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2000), individuals who identified as Mexican or Mexican-American comprised less than 1 percent of the inhabitants in each of these communities. The specific percentages of people who identified themselves as Mexican or Mexican-American include: Amherst, 0.5 percent; Northampton, 0.4 percent; Springfield, 0.4 percent; and Hartford, 0.8 percent (www.census.gov).

4. El Torito Inc. is an international Mexican restaurant chain that operates in the western and mid-western United States, Turkey, Japan, and the Middle East.

5. Decker characterizes the "American market" as consumers whose backgrounds are "mainstream Northern and Western European" (2003, 113).

6. Proposition 187 sought to restrict social services, health care, and education to undocumented immigrants.

7. In particular, California initiatives, Proposition 187 (1994), Proposition 209 (1995), and Proposition 227 (1999).

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