

Surveying the Borders

'Authenticity' in Mexican-American Food Packaging, Imagery and Architecture

NICOLAS P. MAFFEI

Studies of food as a global phenomenon have usually focused on two processes: the blanding of local food cultures, and resistance through reassertion of the local (Bell and Valentine 1997). Exploring the former, this chapter draws on a number of fields from across the humanities and social sciences, including Architectural History, Food History, Latin American Studies, Cultural Studies, and Sociology, to demonstrate that a blended methodology is necessary to understand transculturation in design and the ways in which it is socially embedded (Ortiz 1995 [1947]). The analyses reviewed include writing on tamale advertisements, tortilla chip packaging, the architecture and signage of global fast food chain Taco Bell, and the interiors of local ethnic restaurants, spanning the late nineteenth to the late twentieth centuries. All the studies explore the ideological implications of representation and most evidence a cultural imperialism where symbols of Mexican identity were appropriated and transformed for a North American Anglo consumer. While these studies predominantly employ a narrative of top-down, cultural dominance, this chapter concludes by considering a number of investigations of ethnic restaurants from the social sciences where the social construction of 'authenticity' has resulted from collaboration between consumers and entrepreneurs. Thus, 'authenticity' can be understood as a co-produced experience where the exotic is mitigated by the familiar (Fine and Lu 1995; Gaytán 2008). This definition of the 'authentic' diverges from a humanities perspective that considers the inner self as 'real' and the performed self as 'fake', as well as the view that commercial values compromise the supposedly true self (Banet-Weiser 2012: 10–11).

Of course there are a variety of Mexican–American cuisines. Perhaps the most well-known of these is Tex–Mex, a food which by its very existence is a hybrid, a borderland creation of Texan and Mexican cultures. ‘Tex–Mex’ is a term often used dismissively to ‘denote any form of inauthentic Mexican food’ but it ‘more properly describes a regional variant of Mexican culture from Texas, with Anglo Saxon and Central European influences’ (Pilcher 2012: 440). What is now Texas has been *mestizo* since the arrival of the Spaniards in 1519. This Tex–Mex mix has been further hybridized by waves of immigrants from as far away as Germany and the former Czechoslovakia. Hybridity can be perceived as a threat to an imagined state of authentic cultural purity. The use of the term can be seen as an ideological tool, where the ‘other’ is romanticized, essentialized and incorporated by the dominant cultures (Kraidy 2002; Banu 2009; Hebdige 1979: 100). This chapter contributes to *Designing World’s* mission to reassess the role of national frameworks in design historical narratives by viewing ‘authenticity’ as constructed not within a single nation, but in both physical and imagined borderlands, where imposed and personal national identities are produced through a process of confrontation and amalgamation.

What is Ethnic Design?

To understand the design that accompanies ethnic food (its packaging, advertising and architecture), one must first understand what ethnic food is. From a sociological perspective, Ian Cook, Philip Crang, and Mark Thorpe (1990) observe that for some market researchers ethnic food originates from outside one’s own nation. For others, it is simply food that is considered ethnic. In the USA and UK ‘ethnic food’ is an established food industry category and can encompass Chinese, Italian, and Mexican or Hispanic dishes. Yet, such terms obscure a range of rich cultures and flatten out vast differences. Kimberly J. Decker tackles the near impossibility of marketing to an imagined, monolithic US Hispanic consumer segment, a group which is made up of many nationalities and ethnicities, including Cubans, Puerto Ricans, South Americans and those who identify with African, European and indigenous cultural traditions (Decker 2004: unpaginated).

Perhaps one way to approach ethnic food or ethnic design as a subject of analysis is to consider not what is consumed, but what is produced by consumers when they interact with other food cultures, including accompanying imagery and artefacts. Consumers of ethnic food go beyond simply tasting and imbibing. For example, Cook, Crang and Thorpe show ‘how everyday practices of commodified food provision and consumption involve the production and consumption not only of foods but of social imaginaries, which position individual dietary practices within wider discursive framings’ (Cook et al. 1990: 223).

The social imaginary of Mexican-American food culture is ripe with symbols. Perhaps the most resonant are those of the borderlands of the South Western United States, many of which are strongly linked to the people and landscape. From sleepy *caballeros* to sensual *indigenas* (native women in regional dress), and from colonial missions to nopal cacti, a variety of stereotypical imagery has been employed to conjure up Mexicanness in Mexican food imagery and food outlet architecture. These visual and material expressions carry their own class and gendered meanings. Jeffery Pilcher, the prolific historian of Mexican cuisine, argues that certain ethnic images such as Aztec and Mayan goddesses, pyramids and hieroglyphics can denote 'authenticity' for a national cuisine, even when such a cuisine excludes the actual foods of native communities which might be perceived by elite Mexicans as tainted by extreme rural poverty (Pilcher 2012: 416). Additionally, Pilcher observes, pictures of exotic Mexican women might conjure up a strange and alluring sexuality for Anglos in the USA (Pilcher 2012: 416). These images are understood differently across different borders, carrying one set of meaning in Mexico and another in the USA.

Finding the Border

Globalization has deep roots, for example the colonizing activities of the Spanish who brought European food culture to the Aztecs (Pilcher 2012: 282). The border and its symbols are a constant trope in the design surrounding Mexican American food. These linguistic and visual references belie the harsh political realities associated with the US-Mexican border. The spread of Mexican American food symbolism, whether in advertising slogans such as Taco Bell's 'Make a Run for the Border' campaign (1988–1990) or the representations of cacti, deserts and eagles in food packaging, arguably exemplify the postmodern disregard of national borders and the homogenization of ethnic cultures. Yet, the scholar of Latin American popular culture, Ana M. López, questions the assertion that globalization equals free movement and points to the realities of citizens denied access to certain nations: 'national borders are real and crossing them a painful and risky enterprise' (López 1998: 97). A Professor of Ethnic Studies, José David Saldívar, writes of the role borders play in the perpetuation of 'cultures of U.S. empire' (Saldívar 1997: xiv). He notes the variety of ways borders can be understood as a 'paradigm of crossings, intercultural exchanges, circulations, resistances, and negotiations, as well as militarized "low-intensity" conflict' (Saldívar 1997: ix). Borders and the geography they define can reinforce poverty, perpetuate misery, and instil fear. López argues that 'we cannot afford to refigure hybridity and heterogeneity as simple international phenomena. The notion that borders are disappearing is reassuring only to the privileged few' (López 1998: 99). Of course, certain information and visual culture may move more freely across borders, such as the images of the mission bell on

the Taco Bell restaurant exterior or the cacti on a tortilla packet. But what happens to their meanings as they make their own border crossings? Design and culture associated with Mexican-American border imagery, including a seemingly frivolous phrase in a Taco Bell advertisement, must be understood in the context of such realities.

Packaging Stereotypes

A number of scholars of Mexican food culture have focused on its Anglicization as part of a wider colonizing process. These authors trace this process to the late nineteenth century and into the 1930s when the industrialization of Mexican-American food, including canning and factory production, combined with advertising to disseminate both imperialist messages and nationalist expressions. Sahar Monrreal, an anthropologist focusing on the construction of imaginative geographies and literary representations of Mexican identity, provides a study of the ‘symbolic transformation’ and ‘shifting meanings of the tamale’ in advertising in popular US magazines at the end of the nineteenth century. The author investigates this process in the context of the Spanish-American War, and US imperialism, while examining changing notions of race (Monrreal 2008: 449). Monrreal considers these ‘images of not only Mexicans and *mestizos* but also ethnic food’ as ‘important “firsts” in the *Ladies’ Home Journal*’ (Monrreal 2008: 467).

Investigating the US marketing of Hispanic food in the first decades of the twentieth century, Vanessa Fonseca applies critical theory, cultural anthropology and semiotics to reveal what she terms the ‘Latinization of the US market’, the ‘appropriation and resemantization of Latin American cultural practices and artifacts by the mainstream culture’. She analyses this phenomenon as a neo-colonial, market-driven and hegemonic process resulting in cultural hybridization where ‘food artifacts’, including design elements used to promote cuisines, and practices of non-hegemonic groups, entered the mainstream and were stripped of their prior cultural meanings (Fonseca 2003: 3).

Discussing early twentieth-century Texas-based food manufactures, Gebhardt Chili Powder Co. and Walker’s Austex Chile Co., Fonseca shows how the promotional material for tamales, mass produced canned ‘Mexican’ beans and chili con carne aimed at Anglos, emphasized ‘authenticity’ and were associated with an imagined Hispanic and Mexican culture. This was achieved through the use of visual tropes including Sevillanas (women sporting mantillas and decorative combs from Seville) and phrases such as ‘genuine Mexican’. Such advertising resulted in a hybrid image that was simultaneously Mexican and Spanish. Fonseca’s analysis of a Gebhardt Mexican cookbook of 1932, which included photos of spotless food production facilities, shows how industrialized ethnic food was offered as ‘authentic’ and ‘exotic’, but also ‘sanitized’ (Fonseca 2003: 38),

perhaps appealing to a desire for something unique and romantic, while avoiding supposed Mexican dirtiness. Within the book images of 'presumed Mexican culture', 'peasants with oxcarts or animals, cacti, bullfighters, Indians carrying pottery', present an uncertain Mexican culture, confusingly mixing colonial, rural, Spanish and Native American characteristics while offering a hybrid image of ethnicity for the Anglo consumer (Fonseca 2003: 38).

The earliest tortilla chip packages provide a useful site for understanding the processes of representation in Mexican American food artefacts. Arguably the first mass-produced, packaged tortilla chips were manufactured by Azteca Mills of San Antonio and South Texas (later known as B. Martinez Sons Co.). Their initial logo employed symbols strongly associated with Mexican history and national identity, including a pyramid and green and red lettering. This was later changed to an eagle in flight holding an ear of corn (Fonseca 2003: 43). The coloured lettering and the imagery referenced Mexico's coat of arms, which depicts a Mexican Golden eagle on a prickly pear cactus with a snake in its beak. The combination of the name Azteca Mills and the imagery of the pyramid and eagle suggest a symbolic reference to the ancient Aztec story of the origin of Tenochtitlán (present day Mexico city) and the return to Aztlán (the mythic home of the Aztec people). Thus the corn chip was strongly identified with indigenous Mexican traditions, symbols and national mythology, whereas in the early 1930s the Frito Company of San Antonio would appropriate the corn chip concept, present it as their invention, and market it primarily to non-Hispanics (Fonseca 2003: 45). While not a Mexican tradition per se, in North America the tortilla chip and salsa starter became a mainstay of the Mexican restaurant experience, which established it as an essential component of Mexican-American cuisine.

The Mexican Restaurant

While manufacturers repackaged Mexican food as unthreatening and alluring, roadside restaurateurs in the United States conjured another type of exotic experience. Arriving in the USA with an influx of Mexican immigrants in the 1950s, Mexican cuisine followed Italian as the next ethnic American roadside food. Early roadside Mexican restaurants were simple in design and aimed primarily at recent Mexican immigrants. Later, however, they were designed to appeal to an Anglo clientele. In the 1960s such restaurants sported stereotypical Spanish colonial architectural details, including red-tiled roofs, wrought iron furnishings, arched entryways, and stuccoed walls. Taco Bell became the most prominent of these roadside venues.

Food historian Warren Belasco pinpoints the global rise of fast food in the 1970s, with Europe and developing countries 'discovering' McDonalds and Kentucky Fried Chicken. By the late 1970s fast food entrepreneurs in the USA



Figure 12.1 Taco Bell, Evergreen Park, Illinois, Fourth of July Parade, 1977. Photo courtesy of Bruce Cassi.

were positioned to take advantage of an ‘ethnic boom’. Food trade journals wrote of an increased appeal for foods ranging from pita bread sandwiches to tortellini, as well as burritos, fajitas and taco salads. Belasco asks whether this was a step towards achieving the democratic ideal of pluralism and equality or ‘depressing evidence of corporate conglomeration and cultural homogenization’ (Belasco 1987: 1). Ethnic fast food multinationals were in fact simply cashing in on a wider cultural phenomenon, a ‘grassroots ethnic revival’, while, according to Belasco, engaging in a hegemonic process where ‘dominant forces . . . incorporate insurgent strivings’ (Belasco 1987: 3). Because the members of the grassroots ethnic revival in the USA were mostly affluent and educated, this provided a great opportunity for food marketers. Rejecting past strategies that targeted an undifferentiated consumer mass, the food industry divided the ‘ethnic revivalists’ of the 1970s and 1980s into segments from first-generation consumers who desired simple, fundamental ingredients for use in traditional recipes to those who wanted an ‘Old World aura’ through the use of ‘processed convenience foods’, some spices and a ‘picturesque package’ (Belasco 1987: 8). Laying the foundations for the ethnic revivalists were fast food restaurants like Taco Bell.

Founded in 1962, Taco Bell, the largest of the Mexican fast food restaurant chains, offered its own fantasy of Mexico. In their study of roadside restaurants and the automobile in the USA, John A. Jakle and Keith A. Sculle claimed that ‘Taco Bell was more responsible for the transformation of Mexican food into popular roadside fare than any other chain’ (Jakle and Sculle 1999: 257). Taco Bell took advantage of increased automobility and the convenience food restaurant boom of the early 1960s. The business was aimed at mobile

food consumers including college students, military personnel and travelling salesmen. The authors note that '[t]acos spoke of an American region – the Southwest – but in ways inherently safe while seeming exotic' (Jakle and Sculle 1999: 258). Taco Bell's founder, Glenn Bell, needed a distinctive architectural type to materialize this ethnic fantasy. Employing the design language of Spanish Colonial missions and Mexican architecture, he developed a building with a low profile, red tile roof and brick walls. Within the front façade hung a bell, 'a symbol of the company's name yet a reinforcement to the [Spanish] mission image' (Jakle and Sculle 1999: 258). Bell's fast food restaurant expanded hugely through franchising and by 1975 Taco Bell had 673 units.

By 1982, when Taco Bell had 1,400 outlets in the USA and only five in the rest of the world, a redesign initiated by its new owner PepsiCo aimed at expanding the franchise into parts of the USA as yet unfamiliar with Mexican food. PepsiCo engaged S&O Consultants of San Francisco to investigate consumer perceptions of Taco Bell's image and design. Over five hundred fast-food consumers were asked how they felt about Mexican food and Taco Bell. Participants were shown images of Taco Bell restaurants and signage and asked to consider whether they were 'clean or dirty, family-oriented or adult, [or] expensive' (Langdon 1986: 176). Participants were also invited to judge the exterior architectural elements of the restaurant: the signage, bell tower, arched windows, red tiled roof and the logo. In a logo comparison test with McDonalds and Kentucky Fried Chicken Taco Bell fared poorly. The study concluded that the company was in danger of being dismissed as too Mexican for Anglo consumers, particularly where Mexican food was not established. A similar threat had led to the redesign of Pizza Hut when in the mid-1970s the New York design consultancy Lippincott & Margulies recommended that Pizza Hut employ a design strategy to avoid seeming too Italian (Langdon 1986: 178). Likewise, S&O's study evidenced consumer anxiety regarding the cleanliness of Mexican restaurants. Anxiety around supposed Mexican dirtiness is consistent with the hygienic imagery used in Gebhardt's cookbook earlier in the twentieth century and has been a significant trope in Anglo worries regarding immigration (Hoy 1995: 92).

S&O's research suggested a preference for the red tiled roof and the arched window, but not the sign: a sleeping Mexican slouched beneath a giant sombrero sitting on top of a tilted mission bell. Rather than being recognized as a demeaning stereotype, it was criticized by respondents as unrecognizable and confusing. Keen to position the restaurant in the North American mainstream, Taco Bell kept its name and menu, but deemphasized its borderland imagery. Thus, in the restaurant retrofitting the focal point of the façade – the brick bell tower and bell – was replaced by a plastic bell logo. Also removed were the large protruding wooden beams typical of Spanish colonial architecture that projected from the exterior walls. The outside walls, which in S&O's report were called 'dirty brown,' were lightened, thus removing any taint associated

with supposedly unclean Mexican culture. Arched windows were replaced with rectangular ones. A tiled roof was used prominently in the redesign but designed to not appear too Mexican. The red tiles were employed on a basic mansard roof, or ‘Mainstream Mansard’ as S&O referred to it, echoing existing fast food architecture. Langdon concludes, ‘Taco Bell, like untold numbers of second generation ethnic Americans, saw foreignness as a troublesome label and grasped at established symbols of American retailing – plastic and mansards’ (Langdon 1986: 179). Taco Bell became ‘ethnic in name only’. By 1996, it was the leading Mexican fast restaurant food in the USA, boasting 6,867 units worldwide and sales of \$4,416,000,000 (Jakle and Sculle 1999: 260).

In an effort to further popularize the brand, in 1997 Taco Bell launched an attention-grabbing advertising campaign featuring a talking Chihuahua, which whined, ‘yo quiero Taco Bell!’ (‘I want Taco Bell!’). Seen as reinforcing a demeaning ethnic stereotype – the other as desirous animal – the campaign attracted a vociferous and negative response from the Hispanic community. The author of ‘Taco Hell’, an article in the *Hispanic Times* magazine, wrote ‘move over Frito Bandito, there is a new top dog in the world of offensive advertising’, referring to the image of Hispanics as criminals employed in a Frito Company’s tortilla chip ad campaign. The spokesperson for Taco Bell expressed surprise at the response and defended the ads as a ‘cool and hip’ portrayal of ‘a sort of quasi-Mexican heritage’. Observing that Hispanic leaders had called for a boycott, the author pointedly noted that such action would make no impact ‘since Hispanics don’t eat there anyway’ (Anon. 1998). According to the magazine the campaign was pulled in late 2000 due to falling sales, at least according to Taco Bell (Anon. 2000). Pilcher notes that corporate advertising tends to promote ethnic food to mainstream audiences through the employment of ‘exotic and demeaning images’ including the Frito Bandito and the Taco Bell dog, ‘conveying images of Mexicans as outlaws and animals’, adding that even when corporate imagery is more respectful it can still detrimentally ‘crowd out ethnic entrepreneurs’ (Pilcher 2012: 412).

From a Feminist and Cultural Studies perspective, Suzanne Bost considers the colonial meanings that permeate Taco Bell’s visual and material metaphors, focusing on the meanings of its Alamo-style architecture, the sexual symbolism of the taco, and the company’s broadcasts of the desirous Chihuahua. Bost argues that while many other Spanish missions exist across the Southwestern United States, the Alamo is the most recognizable as a national symbol. Thus, the Alamo is ‘evoked in the minds of many Americans viewing Taco Bell advertisements’ (Bost 2003: n1, 516). Following a narrative of cultural dominance, Bost writes, ‘This setting – like other Taco Bell ad campaigns highlighting border crossing, patriotism, and revolution – associates U.S. consumption of Mexican food with the historical framework of colonialism, but coding (inter)national relations in terms of fast food, flirtation and adorable Chihuahuas trivializes the political reality’ (Bost 2003: 493).



Figure 12.2 Postcard, Alamo, San Antonio, Texas, front, 1901–1907. Special Collections, University of Houston Libraries, University of Houston Digital Library.

Through an investigation of numerous ‘Mexican’ tourist sites, including Epcot Center’s ‘Mexico’ in Florida and the Spanish Colonial missions of San Antonio, Texas, Bost considers the design and promotion of such environments as part of a wider set of images and experiences – related primarily to the consumption of spicy food and pleasure – which are intended to be consumed as depoliticized narratives, as an ‘American Mexicanism’, a mythology of what Mexico represents to Anglo Americans in the USA. Furthermore, she argues that US tourist consumption of chilies and margaritas is ‘supported by a history of war, Mexican poverty, and borderland violence’ (Bost 2003: 494). Bost suggests that everyone engages in a kind of ‘consumer colonialism’ when taking in exotic cultural products, including food and places, without a substantial personal change. The colonizer’s empire expands while the threatening strangeness of the other is neutralized (Bost 2003: 495). Bost observes that the hype around the Alamo as a tourist site and its fictionalized presentation as a place of Texan victory presents a compensation for the ‘initial failure to “consume” Mexico at the battle there’ (Bost 2003: 495), a battle lost by the mostly Anglo–Texan battalion. Thus it presents a touristic ‘continuation of U.S. war with Mexico’ (Bost 2003: 495). Following bell hooks’s ‘Eating the Other’ (1992), Bost recognizes this battle continuing in the context of Mexican–American fast food: when ‘Taco Bell pose[s] their products as other, it must only be a pose, a touristic construct that affirms gringo nationality’ (Bost 2003: 510). She further argues that by ‘transplanting the border symbolically inside the United States – Taco Bells in every town, Coca Cola saturating Mexican markets – corporate culture disavows Mexican challenges to U.S. profits and

national boundaries. The United States can then eat the other and keep its border, too' (Bost 2003: 512).

Perhaps this perception is shared more widely by Hispanic consumers. Taco Bell's attempt to attract Hispanic customers has failed, contributing just 0.5 percent to its sales gains in 2005. Carl Kravetz, Chairman of Hispanic marketing firm Cruz/Kravetz: Ideas, Los Angeles, does not consider negative stereotyping or cultural colonization but 'authenticity' as the key issue in attracting Hispanic consumers. 'The main problem for Hispanics is the perception of Taco Bell's food as too Anglo-American. Their issue is authenticity, and they have a lot of years of not being perceived as authentic to break through' (MacArthur and Wentz 2006).

According to an ethnographic study by Marie Sarita Gaytán, tempering exotic with familiar symbols in order to create broad appeal is seen as key to the 'corporate' approach of Mexican restaurant design, where supposedly authentic and inauthentic design elements are employed to create an imaginary space that is 'ethnic, but not *too* ethnic, authentic, but not *too* authentic' (Gaytán 2008: 332). The corporate literature of the ethnic food sector cautions against being too real or risk losing customers: familiarity is sought, not 'authenticity' (Gaytán 2008: 333). One food industry insider has stated that successful ethnic food 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' (Decker 2003: 113–114). Gaytán notes that this corporate approach to the production and promotion of ethnic cuisine rejects diversity of identity and cultural vibrancy, replacing it instead with celebrations of similarity rather than difference (2008: 334).

Authenticity: Balancing the Familiar and the Unknown

One of the earliest prominent debates regarding authenticity in Mexican food began in 1972. In her book, *The Cuisines of Mexico*, Diana Kennedy differentiated between 'interior Mexican food' and the 'mixed plates' of US Mexican restaurants (Walsh 2004: 121). Kennedy referred to Americanized Mexican food as 'Tex-Mex' and made a plea for better understanding of 'authentic' Mexican cuisine. Kennedy is considered extremely influential in initiating and disseminating the distinction between 'authentic' and 'inauthentic' hybrid Mexican dishes. Appreciated in Mexico for her global promotional efforts of the country's cuisine, she was awarded the Aztec Eagle, the government's greatest honour given to foreigners (Gaytán 2008: 316). This evidences the role of culinary 'authenticity' in national identity and suggests that Tex-Mex, the hybrid and inauthentic cuisine disregarded by Kennedy, had no place in the Mexican

government's representations of its national identity and culture. Pilcher, on the other hand, argues that there is no such thing as authentic Mexican food. It is diverse in its origins and is under constant change (Pilcher 2012: 400). He recognizes that many other immigrants, including Africans, Asians, Central Europeans and Italians, contributed to Mexico's cultural hybridity rather than just the romanticized myth of Spanish–Aztec / Mayan mix (Pilcher 2012: 484). The same argument could be applied to the designs associated with cuisines of Mexico.

In the social sciences, authenticity has been understood as a collaboration between consumers and marketers where the exotic is tempered by the familiar (Fine and Lu 1995; Gaytán 2008). In ethnic restaurant experiences 'authenticity' includes the use of traditional ethnic ingredients in combination with familiar North American forms. In the design of Mexican–American fast food architecture such mixing includes the combination of traditional symbolism with modern architectural elements, for example a mission bell incorporated into the exterior of a prefabricated building. 'Authenticity' for customers is not presented as a pure untainted experience or the consumption of non-hybrid cuisines, as in Diane Kennedy's notion of virgin interior Mexican food, but rather it is seen as highly individual and the result of a self-imposed illusion.

In their sociological study of Chinese restaurants, Fine and Lu note that 'ethnic entrepreneurs' in the US developed commercial enterprises for Americans who valued tolerance and longed for cross-cultural experiences through the production of ethnic culture that was 'unique, yet comfortable': "'authentic" and within the bounds of cultural expectations ("Americanized")' (Fine and Lu 1995: 535). Recognizing that this process includes the 'illusion of authenticity' and the 'illusion of continuity', the authors present authenticity as a social construction (Fine and Lu 1995: 541). Whereas many of the other studies referred to in this chapter dwell on homogenization, Fine and Lu focus on cultural harmonization occurring through cross-cultural interaction. This process is not presented as a hegemonic, top-down domination, but as cultural production between different social groups where a desire for familiarity and the reduction of discomfort are balanced with a longing for the unknown. The same formula can be applied to Mexican–American food culture and its accompanying designs. A sense of authenticity may be generated within the bounds of a consumer's cultural expectations of Mexican–American food imagery and design, resulting in the production of illusions of both authenticity and continuity in order to create a kind of theatre of expected Mexicanness, whether in restaurant design, packaging or advertising. In this way one visitor's encounter with the stuccoed walls of a Taco Bell can be as authentic as another's appreciation of Diane Kennedy's interior cuisine.

Fine and Lu conclude that the 'social construction of authentic ethnic food is bounded by social, cultural, and economic constraints' (Fine and Lu 1995: 547). It is these constraints and the negotiation of 'authenticity' that allows



Figure 12.3 Las Cazuela Mexican Restaurant, Austin, Texas, 2014. Photo courtesy of Ron Rodgers.

the cuisine to survive in the USA. If it were too authentic (for example, pig's trotters), it would be rejected. If it were too American, it would no longer be attractive, as it would not provide the 'self-validating "ethnic experience", a mark of . . . tolerance and sophistication . . . as dining out is identity work' (Fine and Lu 1995: 547). The authors see the negotiation of authenticity on an individual level as contributing to the shaping of ethnic culture on a societal scale. 'Through our purchases and presence, we validate the legitimacy of the group and of the American polity, all the while altering the ethnic culture to make it congruent with mainstream values and tastes' (Fine and Lu 1995: 549). Many successful designs associated with Mexican food also operate within these constraints, neither shocking nor challenging widely held beliefs, but appealing to a circumscribed Anglo adventurousness.

Employing participant observation, Gaytán's ethnographic study of Mexican restaurants recognizes an asymmetry of power in the social construction of authenticity, noting that 'making claims to authenticity is capable of signalling an array of implicit and explicit power' (Gaytán 1995: 318). The desire for authenticity can be seen as a type of colonizing attitude that essentializes ethnic groups (Abarca 2004: 18). Thus, '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' (Gaytán 2008: 318). This viewpoint echoes those of

Fonseca and Monrreal, discussed above, where imagined but unthreatening images and designs of Mexicanness are constructed by food entrepreneurs for a mostly Anglo audience.

Gaytán's study reveals how design has been employed in restaurants to denote or deny 'authenticity'. When a restaurant presented a seemingly inauthentic interior (e.g. Formica tables and plastic chairs) respondents felt they could still judge its genuineness based on the cuisine (Gaytán 2008: 322). In another restaurant an ideological authenticity was presented through prominent window decals exclaiming, 'hecho en Mexico' (made in Mexico) and 'viva la raza!' (a famous Chicano Rights cry from the 1960s) (Gaytán 2008: 322). The owner of this particular venue explicitly refused to include stereotypical imagery of sombreros, sarapes, and piñatas, explaining that this presented a narrow notion of Mexican identity and culture. Advertisements for the venue exclaimed, 'Evite el estereotipo!' (avoid the stereotype). Thus, the owner offered an ethnic 'authenticity' that was culturally and politically engaged (Gaytán 2008: 323).

Gaytán observes that in the décor, advertising and menu, one of the restaurants she studied made no claim to Mexican authenticity, but emphasized instead 'freshness' and 'alternative' food preparation (Gaytán 2008: 330). Thus stereotypical symbols of Mexicanness were avoided in order to focus on the excellence and individuality of the food and its ingredients. 'Authenticity' was not derived from images of ethnicity and nation but from the food itself. While this could be seen as an erasure of Mexican national identity and the victory of the colonial impulse over an ethnic other, it can also be viewed as an escape from the narrative of cultural dominance, leaving only the look of the food as an authentic element of communication.

In a 2004 discussion of food design – the use of ingredients to produce appealing colours, textures and forms in packaged cuisines – Kimberly J. Decker focused on the growing Hispanic market. She noted that recent food design research was focused on the vibrant and fun aspects of Hispanic culture. The author explained how food designers employed a pseudo-ethnographic technique of 'cultural mining' or 'trend treks' where they immersed themselves in the sights, sounds and smells of an ethnic neighborhood in order to translate those sensory experiences into food design. Reflecting an industry focus on the growing Hispanic market, Sylvia Meléndez-Klinger, a Chicago-based consultant to the food industry, and an experienced trend trekker, explained how this approach could be used to appeal to Hispanics:

Think of the colors of a piñata, the simplicity of it – it's paper and cardboard. It doesn't need to be very fancy. But it's vibrant, it's in a shape the community recognizes, and it's got the candy inside that they know. This is something that brings back memories. So you've got the colors and you've got the fun. You've got to transfer that fun to the food. It's got to be colorful. It's got to be something that makes them [Hispanic consumers] think of home and the flavors of home. (Decker 2004, unpaginated)

Arguably this approach continues the Latinization that Fonseca describes, but for a Hispanic rather than an Anglo audience. It reduces complex cultural meanings, which may carry symbols of national identity or of resistance, and reduces them to a range of party colours. While the terms ‘cultural mining’ and ‘trend trekking’ are used, such cultural excavation and ethnic travel can be seen as surface engagement and pseudo-ethnography. It is not aimed at the deep understanding of a culture, but rather a partial attempt to sense the tonal palette of a place in order to inspire the design of a non-threatening and marketable food. The emphasis here is on fun colours and nostalgic imagery. It is telling that there are no images of pyramids and snakes (Azteca Mills) or sombreros and mission bells (Taco Bell). It suggests that Hispanic food marketers and food designers are turning their backs on stereotypical imagery and employing a more abstract and open-ended symbolism (bright colours) to create a sense of playfulness and nostalgia. While this is not an example of hybrid inauthenticity, it could be termed non-Mexican Mexican food, or inauthentically authentic, as it strips away any explicit symbolic association with Mexican cuisine, but seeks unoffending images and design that expresses nostalgia, freshness and sociability.

Conclusion

This chapter has surveyed academic writing, from food history and Latin American and cultural studies to sociology and ethnography, in order to aid our understanding of the meanings produced and consumed in packaging, advertising and architecture associated with Mexican–American food. Ranging from homogenization, harmonization to inauthentic ‘authenticity’, a tendency to view food and design as a cultural battleground where an asymmetrical power relationship advantages Anglo producers is apparent across most of these studies. The first approach focuses on power relations; the second emphasizes the production of culture and personal meaning; while the latter has de-emphasized overt cultural symbols and concentrated on sales. Each approach provides a lens for understanding representations in Mexican–American food packaging, imagery and architecture and ways to investigate the ultimate product – the social construction of authenticity – while exploring an imagined borderland of national and ethnic symbols.

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Nicolas P. Maffei is Senior Lecturer in the Faculty of Design, Norwich University of the Arts, UK. His research has focused on modernism in American design. He has published articles in *Design Issues*, *Journal of Design History* and *Design and Culture* and contributed chapters to *Iconic Design* (Bloomsbury 2014), *Art Deco* (V&A Publications 2003) and *Norman Bel Geddes Designs America* (Abrams 2012). Dr Maffei's most recent research on the impact of digital technology on traditional forms of graphic design will appear in *Reading Graphic Design in Cultural Context: An Introduction* (Bloomsbury 2016).