Mexican Food and Lore Beyond the Fictions We've Been Fed

by

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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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Title: Mexican Food and Lore Beyond the Fictions We've Been Fed

This research highlights a two-fold reality: commercial and political interests often obscure the socio-political experiences of the people who create and consume the foods we label as "Mexican," presenting simplified or commodified narratives. At the same time, while Mexican cuisine reflects a rich blend of Indigenous, African, and European influences, dominant narratives frequently erase Indigenous and Afro-Mexican contributions, as well as the histories of resilience and survival embedded in these foods. By examining how corporate and state forces in both Mexico and the United States have shaped cultural understandings of Mexican food, this work examines how divergent notions of what constitutes Mexican food in the U.S. and Mexico—as presented in cookbooks, restaurant menus, advertisements, and food labels from the early twentieth century to the present—mirror ongoing struggles over what it means to belong within each nation at various points in our intertwined national histories.

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DEDICATION

To my childhood self.

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I. INTRODUCTION: TRANSBORDER MEXICAN FOOD MATTER

Beans Beans Beans, The Magical Fruit

I was six years old when I first learned that, in the United States, beans were considered a "disgusting" food. In Lincoln Park Elementary school in Sparks, Nevada, in 2002, My first-grade teacher, gathered my classmates and I to ask us one of the most important questions a child of that age could be asked: "What's your favorite food?" When I was asked this question, I was a newly arrived Mexican immigrant with little to no English-speaking abilities. I knew, however, that every morning before sending my siblings and me to school, my mother served us a generous bowl of *frijoles de la olla*. Whenever one of us protested the dish or the quantity of beans awaiting us each morning, my mother would remind us that this food saves lives. Indeed, beans were one of the only sources of protein she consumed growing up in rural Guanajuato, Mexico, in extreme poverty. The *milpa*, as she would explain to us, was the heart of the Mexican people. The corn, squash, peppers, and beans it yielded had sustained our family through hard agricultural labor both in the US and Mexico, migration, and, as we would come to understand with time, the American public school system.

That day in school, I knew I had the best answer. I proudly used the little English I knew to proclaim, "My favorite food is beans." My classmates' laughter and teasing that followed, however, quickly taught me that in announcing my love for this food, I had behaved wrongly. In wanting to find an explanation for this misbehavior I turned to my Mexican classmates, hoping to find an answer to what I had done wrong. Through them, I learned that "beans" was an incorrect answer to the initial question and that my mother's *frijoles* were a gross, flatulent-inducing punchline. One that was even more worthy of mockery when spoken by a brown immigrant Mexican like me. After that experience I understood that the beans I knew were not the representation of my mother's love and history, but an embarrassment I should only consume

in the safety of my own home. Though I never shared this experience with my mother, from then on our childhood breakfasts were tinged with pain. This pain grew from the shame that took hold of me at school that day, at times destabilizing my efforts to protect her from a world unwelcoming to her frijoles de olla and, if she embraces them, to her eldest daughter as well.

The “disgusting” quality of beans that I first encountered in my first-grade classroom is more complicated than it seems. I knew many of my American classmates enjoyed a bean burrito with a packet of “taco sauce” from the school cafeteria. I also knew that Taco Bell’s “Baja Blast” and “Gordita Crunch” were popularly consumed—a truth made even more complex when my third-grade teacher reprimanded me for bringing a book to school in Spanish, reminding me that we were in America and here we “speak English.” Meanwhile, Taco Bell Chihuahua and its catchphrase “Yo quiero Taco Bell” were beloved icons in commercials. As though the only acceptable version of Mexican I could be reduced to mass-produced, flavorless beans and comic relief.

This moment revealed how a seemingly innocent question about taste can expose deeper cultural hierarchies and assumptions about belonging. How did a group of six-year-olds come to understand beans as a food non grata, something not to be consumed or celebrated in public? And what effect did this moment — and others like it — have on me and on others within the Mexican diaspora? *Mexican Food and Lore Beyond the Fiction We've Been Fed* explores why my mother's beans were disparaged, while these other presentations of beans and lo Mexicano were acceptable and even celebrated. When I use the word disgusting, I mean it in a more complex sense than a simple expression of distaste.



Figure 1. My mother and me shortly after immigrating to the United States, sitting in on her English classes, 2000. Photo by author.

Disgust, in this context, operates not merely as a physical reaction to flavor or texture, but as a deeply social and symbolic judgment. In both Mexican and American imaginaries, beans occupy a space marked by class struggle and otherness. As Chin Jou explains, as class and labor tensions intensified in the late nineteenth century, the legume acquired a stigma as a "poor people's food."[1] But the beans I knew were different — their "disgusting" quality tied to what Jane Levi describes as "undisguised," beans in their purest form, unfamiliar to my classmates.[2] They also fit what Mario Montaño identifies as foods that fall outside the boundaries separating "acceptable" foods from those seen as disreputable or threatening.[3] Unlike processed, frozen burritos, the *frijoles de la olla* my mother cooked each morning carried a different kind of stigma, one rooted in poverty, migration, and racialized labor.

Contextualizing this stigma within Anglo-American settler colonialism following the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo reveals how anti-Mexican and anti-Indigenous sentiment continues to shape contemporary attitudes toward Mexican and Mexican-coded foods. Foods such as beans become denigrated as a way to symbolically denigrate Mexican people themselves. This operates on multiple levels: socially, through shaming in public schools; culturally, as reflected in children's rhymes like "Beans, Beans, the Musical Fruit"; and linguistically, through pejorative terms such as "beaner," "frijolero," or "chilichoker." What remains is a racialized discourse embedded in food, where nicknames and teasing function as proxies for exclusionary sentiments—what Molotov captures in the lyrics of their song "Frijolero": "stay on your side of the goddamn river."[1]

The stigma that labels beans as "gross" functions as a boundary-making emotion—one that encodes class hierarchies, racial anxieties, and national myths about progress and modernity. It is precisely this layered nature of disgust that makes it so powerful: it disguises social exclusion as personal preference, turning structural inequality into a matter of taste. The field of foodways helps us grapple with such questions. More than just the study of what people eat, foodways considers the cultural, historical, and political meanings embedded in culinary practices. Rooted in folklore, food studies allow us to trace how Indigenous and Afrodescendant peoples have used food to resist White settler colonial efforts to dispossess them of land, culture, and identity. At the same time, it reveals how White elites have sought to commodify and control those very identities and practices. Resistance, then, lives in the preservation and celebration of foods like beans—foods that carry memory, survival, and love.

[1] Molotov, "Frijolero," track 2 on *Dance and Dense Denso*, Universal Music Mexico, 2003

Culinary Practices in Greater México Profundo

This project draws on Michel Foucault's concept of discourse and power/knowledge to examine how narratives about Mexican food are produced, circulated, and legitimized. As Foucault asserts, discourse is "a fragment of history, a unity and discontinuity in history itself," emphasizing that discourse is not static but constantly shifting across time and contexts.[2] His framework allows for an analysis of how authority over culinary knowledge is constructed—determining who is authorized to define "authentic" Mexican food and whose voices are marginalized or erased.

Building on this, I center Guillermo Bonfil Batalla's influential concept of Mexico's duality—*México imaginario* and *México profundo*—as a critical lens through which to understand not only national identity but also diasporic food practices. Bonfil Batalla argues that Mexico is shaped by an enduring tension between two civilizational projects: a dominant, Western-oriented México imaginario, constructed and upheld by state and elite interests, and a *México profundo*, rooted in Indigenous lifeways that persist despite centuries of colonial and postcolonial marginalization. As he explains, this opposition is not between abstract cultural elements but between the social groups who embody them:

> Tal enfrentamiento no se da entre elementos culturales, sino entre los grupos sociales que portan, usan y desarrollan esos elementos. Son esos grupos que participan de dos civilizaciones distintas, los que a lo largo de medio milenio han mantenido una oposición constante, porque el origen colonial de la sociedad mexicana ha provocado que los grupos y clases dominantes del país sean, simultáneamente, los partícipes e impulsores del proyecto occidental, los creadores del México imaginario, en tanto que en la base de la pirámide social resisten los pueblos que encarnan la civilización mesoamericana, sustento del México profundo.[3]

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[2] Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge ; and, the Discourse on Language*, 1st American edition, with Alan Sheridan, World of Man (Pantheon Books, 1972). 117.

[3] Guillermo Bonfil Batalla, *México profundo: una civilización negada*, (Grijalbo, 1990). 9.

Amelia Mesa-Bains expands Bonfil Batalla's framework to directly include "the people of the other México, whether referred to as Mexicans, Mexican-Americans or Chicanos," arguing they are "linked inextricably to the Motherland from which their ancestry springs" while having "created its own cultural reality, a reality of profound meaning within the United States." By examining how food discourse operates within broader regimes of power, this project extends that framework further, demonstrating that narratives of Mexican cuisine are inseparable from the histories, identities, and struggles of the people who create them. I argue that discourses surrounding mexicanidad in the United States are deeply reflected in, and reproduced through, discourses surrounding Mexican food — that the divergent representations of Mexican cuisine circulating through cookbooks, restaurant menus, advertisements, and food packaging from the early twentieth century to the present mirror broader struggles over belonging, authenticity, and national identity across intertwined U.S.–México histories

The Porfiriato and the Food Politics of Erasure

Mexican Food and Lore Beyond the Fictions We've Been Fed is a story about how members of the Mexican diaspora — like me — come to understand the indigenous labor and knowledge behind some of the most popular Mexican dishes, and how the narratives surrounding those foods often obscure histories of exploitation and appropriation. To tell this story, I begin on September 23, 1910, at a grand banquet hosted by Mexican President Porfirio Díaz in celebration of the Centenario — Mexico's centennial commemoration of its fight for independence from Spain. Foreign dignitaries and ambassadors from around the world were invited to witness the spectacle of Mexico's modernization project: tours of the expanding railroad system and irrigation canals, parades, and battle reenactments of natives and Spaniards staged throughout Mexico City's streets. That afternoon, guests commemorated the Mexican nation by feasting on dishes such as *consommé riche, petits pâtés à la Russe, foie gras de Strasbourg en croûte, filets*

de dinde en chaud-froid, and paupiettes de veau à l'ambassadrice — paired with a Chablis Montrachet and Mouton Rothschild 1889.[4]

The *Porfiriato* refers to General Porfirio Díaz's nearly 30-year dictatorship, spanning 1877 to 1911. His regime was defined by centralized control of government, a network of cronies managing all aspects of civic society, aggressive pursuit of foreign investment, and deep land inequality. Culturally, it was marked by a modernization project that actively imported European models of art and culture. By 1910, social tensions had reached a breaking point and Revolution was impending. Díaz marked the end of his rule with a symbolic statement of his administration's ideological standing or what Jeffrey Piltcher refers to as the tortilla discourse: Mexican modernity would need to leave behind indigenous influence and embrace the European.[5]

The French menu used to celebrate Mexican independence at that dining table may appear very different from the tamales, tacos, chiles en nogada, and mole seen today on Independence Day, or the guacamole, tacos, and beer common to Cinco de Mayo celebrations in the US — yet there is a persistent absence at the center of all of them. The dishes change, but the Indigenous autonomy that launched the Revolution is absent from the tale. This absence is not

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[4] Carlos Roberto Martínez Assad, "Los banquetes de las elites," *Relatos e Historias en México* 63 (2013): 73.

[5] Jeffrey M. Pilcher, "The Tortilla Discourse: Nutrition and Nation Building," in *¡Que vivan los tamales! Food and the Making of Mexican Identity* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1998), 77–78. Pilcher defines the tortilla discourse as a racial and class discourse centered on the perceived inferiority of corn-based diets that serves as a subterfuge to divert attention from the nation's social inequalities.

accidental, and it did not begin or end with Diaz's exile to Paris in 1911. The *Porfiriato* offers us an example of a longer pattern: indigenous foodways and labor are absorbed into narratives of national or commercial celebration while the people and knowledge systems behind them remain unacknowledged. Cinco de Mayo in United States is perhaps the sharpest contemporary example: a minor regional Mexican holiday transformed into a mass-market occasion, shaped in large part by beer and spirits companies who found in it a profitable vehicle to market to Latino consumers as "drinko de Mayo."[6] What gets celebrated is then, an aesthetic of Mexican culture that obscures the Mexican immigrant communities and their lived realities. What connects Díaz's banquet table to a Cinco de Mayo promotion is a persistent structure: indigenous Mexicans and their knowledge are either erased entirely, or they are allowed in as flavor — as symbol or commodity — stripped of history and authorship.

Tracing these shifts historically, this project follows how discourse surrounding Mexican food from the late Porfirian era (circa 1900) to the present has authorized different figures as culinary authorities. These include Porfirian-era científicos such as Francisco Bulnes, mid-twentieth-century culinary figures like Josefina Velázquez de León, and contemporary celebrity chefs such as Rick Bayless. Each, in different ways, has shaped which foods are made visible, accessible, and celebrated, often reinforcing a *México imaginario* aligned with state and corporate interests. In contrast, working-class Mexicans and Mexican Americans, such as the everyday culinary practitioners within families, including my own mother, continue to sustain complex systems of knowledge and practice that embody and reproduce a *México profundo*.

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[6] José M Alamillo, "Cinco de Mayo, Inc.: Reinterpreting Latino Culture into a Commercial Holiday." In *Studies in Symbolic Interaction*, vol. 33, edited by Norman K. Denzin. Emerald Group Publishing Limited, 2009. https://doi.org/10.1108/S0163-2396(2009)0000033015.

Mexican Food Matters

In the last fifty years, significant progress has been made in sociohistorical analyses of popular Mexican dishes, led by scholars like Jeffrey Pilcher and Sandra Aguilar, who analyze how racial and nutritional discourses surrounding Mexican food in the twentieth century function within broader political conflicts in the United States and Mexico. At the same time, Mexican cultural studies centered on diaspora practices in the United States—led by Chicana folklorists such as Mintzi Auanda Martínez-Rivera and Rachel V. González-Martin—examine how contemporary cultural expressions like quinceañeras, weddings, and linguistic practices operate as communal, decolonial forms of meaning-making. However, within the field of food studies, there remains a lack of literature that intertwines these approaches through a contemporary lens rooted in folkloristics. This project contributes to that need by bridging sociohistorical analyses of Mexican food with folkloristic understandings of lived cultural practice, positioning Mexican foodways as dynamic sites where racial discourse, cultural identity, and community-based resistance intersect.

Studies on the diffusion and cultural presence of Mexican foods, reveal a complex system of U.S. and Mexican apparatuses at work, where it is not only Mexican people and practitioners, but also political systems and corporations that shape what foods are acceptable and celebrated. A study of their history and appropriation reveals xenophobic and racist sentiments, as well as the exploitation of Indigenous labor and knowledge toward Mexican people. These dynamics help explain how certain dishes are popularized in the U.S. and globally, particularly during times of political and social precarity—from the forced mass deportations of Mexican and Mexican American agricultural workers during the Great Depression, to their replication after World War II during Operation Wetback, to the current targeting of the Mexican working class.

At its core *Mexican Food and Lore Beyond the Fictions we've been Fed* argues that the most pervasive fiction it confronts is the fiction of shame itself. By undoing, one by one, the myths that surround Mexican foods through their origins, meanings, and value, it participates in a broader process of undoing food shame. This work resonates with Psyche Williams-Forson's assertion that food-based oppression is tied to racialized systems of power, and that liberation begins with rejecting the narratives that render certain communities and their practices unworthy.[7] The stakes are high: the ongoing erasure of indigenous culinary origins continues to shape cultural and historical understandings of Mexican identity, while also enabling more subtle forms of othering lo Mexicano. These narratives do not simply distort history; they actively produce hierarchies of value that mark Mexican food—and by extension Mexican people—as excessive, inferior, or consumable only under certain conditions.

There is a tension between what is mocked or shamed in Mexican food traditions and what becomes acceptable once it is appropriated. At a time when Mexican food is more visible than ever, Mexicanidad and Latinidad are also increasingly targeted — it is important to remember the histories of erasure and appropriation that coexist alongside state-sponsored violence and disappearances. This is precisely the moment that calls for a literature of re-membering, one that speaks directly to a community need: to name what is being lost, to document what is being attacked, and to insist on the humanity of the people who carry these traditions forward.

[7] Psyche A. Williams-Forson, *Eating While Black: Food Shaming and Race in America* (The University of North Carolina Press, 2022).

Within the Mexican and Mexican diaspora communities, there is a need to frame our foodways as sites of resistance, love, and healing. This project is situated within a broader landscape of immigration politics and heightened anti-immigrant rhetoric in the United States, where food—and what is recognized as "food"—functions as a powerful social litmus test for belonging. In September 2024, Donald Trump claimed that Haitian immigrants were eating the "dogs" and "cats" of residents in an Ohio town. This statement did more than circulate misinformation; it activated deeply embedded cultural anxieties around food practices to mark certain communities as fundamentally outside the bounds of acceptable social life. By framing Haitians as consumers of what dominant U.S. culture defines as "non-food," the claim positioned them not only as culturally incompatible but as morally suspect and socially illegible. Similarly, the ICE raids in the summer of 2025 targeting predominantly Latino working-class neighborhoods in Los Angeles constituted an attack on Mexican entrepreneurial and food landscapes. Yet even amid unrest, street food vendors persisted. This resilience underscores how Mexican diasporic foodways operate within broader systems of care and repair, sustaining communities in the face of structural violence.

Krista Maxwell defines the concept of re-membering as "the resurrection of suppressed Indigenous knowledge and practice" that "enables social repair, reconstituting collective social bodies — families, communities, nations — by restoring connections among their members." [8] It is a political and embodied practice of repair: the deliberate process of restoring the fractured social and cultural ties severed by colonialism, systemic racism, and other forms of oppression. Through food scholarship, re-membering invites us to center ancestral foodways — and the indigenous epistemes that create them — as living archives of knowledge, memory, and

[8] Krista Maxwell, *Indigenous Healing as Paradox* (University of Alberta Press, 2025). 3.

resistance. Recipes, agricultural techniques, cooking methods, and shared meals become more than cultural artifacts; they are dynamic practices through which historical wounds are addressed and communal bonds are restored.

These practices are sustained by systems of care and repair, upheld by the labor and knowledge of people like Ambrocio "Enrique" Lozano, who in June 2025 in Culver City, California, was detained by masked men while pushing his paleta cart, and documented by artists like Lalo Alcaraz (see figure 2). What is at stake is the erosion of these systems — the immigrant entrepreneurial landscape that sustains this culture and that is being targeted and attacked. This project emerges from that urgency. It is a response to a community that is being dis-membered in real time and that needs frameworks, stories, and scholarship that affirm the depth and continuity of what it carries.



Figure 2: “Summer of ICE” Lalo Alcaraz 2025. 9x12 acrylic on canvas.

Embodied Knowledge and Culinary Production

As a scholar of folkloristics and as an immigrant myself, my scholarly privilege allows me to identify and articulate the elements that make a community resilient. It is these spaces and their people — the snack shop, the taco truck, the hot dog vendor, the paletero, the elotero, la señora de los tamales — that El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán (1969), a manifesto toward a Chicano liberation rooted in justice and social autonomy, identifies as the frontline in a struggle for our humanity: "the barrios, the campos, the pueblos, and the ranchitos."[9]

[9] Rodolfo Gonzales and Alberto Urista [Alurista, pseud.], "El plan espiritual de Aztlán," *El grito del Norte* (Albuquerque, New Mexico) II, no. 9 (July 6, 1969): 5.

This dynamic is personal. I often share my own experiences with food shaming to illustrate the urgency of this work, though I sometimes understate how profoundly those moments shaped my intellectual and emotional development. Without fully realizing it, I began to center whiteness — not only in food but in language and self-perception — as the standard of legitimacy. I stopped speaking Spanish and came to view aspects of my Mexican identity as markers of inferiority, stripped of complexity or intellectual depth. Food shame became a foundational reference point, reinforcing an internalized devaluation that took years to recognize and unlearn. It is precisely this lived experience that sharpens my capacity as a scholar to name what others might dismiss or overlook — the weight of a sideways glance at a lunch box, the subtle condescension embedded in a compliment, the difference between mockery that wounds and appropriation that erases. These are not abstract distinctions. They are felt before they are theorized, and my positionality gives me both the sensitivity to recognize them and the scholarly language to articulate what is at stake. Undoing the myths surrounding Mexican food is also an act of reclaiming self-worth. This project emerges from that process: a deliberate effort to celebrate and revalue the very foods that were once sources of shame, transforming them into sites of knowledge, resistance, and cultural affirmation.

Methodologically, this research adopts an interdisciplinary approach grounded in cultural studies and folklore. I broadly engage in textual analysis across a range of genres — cookbooks, recipes, literature, advertisements, and internet lore — treating these materials as both textual and visual archives that document how everyday culinary practices either sustain or erase Indigenous and Afro-Mexican traditions. these sources reveal how state and corporate power shape public understandings of *lo mexicano*, often privileging commodified and simplified narratives that obscure the lived experiences of the communities who produce and consume these

foods. Chapter 1, “Josefina Velázquez de León and Mole Origin Myths” examines how the post-revolutionary Mexican government appropriated the indigenous dish mole as part of a broader nationalist project that sought to mask the shortcomings of the revolution. Mole, one of the most recognizable Mexican dishes and one of the highest regarded as cuisine emblematic of the country, is also at the center of one of the most fictionalized and strategic origin myths. The myth that the dish was invented by a 19th century nun in Puebla. This chapter examines the perpetuation and framing of this mole myth in culinary literature, cookbooks, and by influential figures such as cookbook writers like Vicenta Torres de Rubio and Josefina Velazquez de Léon, the state helped construct a narrative that framed the dish as a symbol of mestizaje, suggesting that Mexico’s indigenous past had seamlessly merged into a unified national identity. This narrative perpetuated the fiction that Mexico was no longer distinctly indigenous, but rather a mestizo nation, thereby advancing a political agenda centered on unity through cultural blending. By tracing the emergence of this myth in historical and culinary texts from the post-revolutionary period through the 1950s, the chapter reveals how such representations legitimized and sustained this ideology over time.

Chapter 2, "!Yo quiero Mexican(esque) Food!: Taco Bell’s strategic appropriation of *lo Mexicano*," explores the appropriation of Mexican food within the U.S. fast food industry using Taco Bell as a central case study. As a pioneer in the Mexican fast-food industry and one of the oldest and most successful cases of appropriation of Mexican food, Taco Bell offers a critical lens through which to examine how corporations such as PepsiCo and later Yum! Brands capitalized on this appropriation to create a "Mexicanesque" dining experience, transforming Mexican cuisine into a commodified and accessible product for mass consumption. Through analysis of advertising imagery as well as customer-generated responses — ranging from toilet

humor to nostalgia — the chapter shows how these representations operate on a popular cultural level to shape perceptions of Mexican food. It argues that such portrayals reinforce a stigma in which Mexican-coded foods, labor, and even bodies are framed as excessive yet cheap, ultimately serving economic and cultural hierarchies. Focusing on the U.S. West from the 1960s to the present, the chapter highlights the enduring fiction that Mexican food exists primarily for Anglo consumption, obscuring its cultural origins and lived significance.

Finally, Chapter 3, "The Rascuache Performance of *Locura* foods" examines how the Mexican street food practice of what I call *Locura* food — a genre of snacks, assembled and sold by street vendors in Mexican and Mexican American communities — operates as a form of counter-hegemonic cultural expression within contemporary Mexican American communities. Where Chapters 1 and 2 trace the appropriation and erasure of Mexican food at the level of corporate and institutional power, this chapter turns to the vernacular practices or the everyday, community-generated food cultures that persist on their own terms. I analyze how this genre of food reveals vernacular practices occurring in the midst of the appropriation outlined in the previous chapters, asserting a cultural logic that operates outside and against dominant narratives. Drawing on Tomás Ybarra-Frausto's concept of *rascuachismo* as well as Gloria Anzaldúa's notion of *nepantla*, the space of in-betweenness where identities are negotiated and transformed, the chapter explores how youth creatively negotiate and inhabit the in-between space of Mexican and U.S. identities. Through the making and consumption of *Locura* they curate a gastronomic form that brings into dialogue the effects of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) with traditional Mexican working-class snacks rooted in systems of care, repair, and resourcefulness upheld by immigrant communities. By embracing the excessive, layered, and improvisational qualities of the snack, this practice celebrates *rascuache* aesthetics

as a mode of resistance. Ultimately, the chapter argues that this genre of snack creations challenges dominant narratives circulating in both the United States and Mexico, asserting an alternative cultural logic grounded in lived experience and creative adaptation.

II. JOSEFINA VELÁZQUEZ DE LEÓN AND MOLE ORIGIN MYTH

Mole, invented by a Spanish Nun?

It is said that in the Dominican convent Santa Rosa in Puebla, in the 16th century, a Spanish nun, some know as Sister Andrea de la Asunción, performed what some could describe as a culinary miracle. For one day, a bishop, or perhaps it was an archbishop, was coming for a visit. The nuns, who prided themselves in the vows of poverty, were panicked, for this convent lack the supplies necessary to make a banquet worthy of such an important man. Sister Andrea, guided by the holy spirit, bravely entered the convent's kitchen and began assembling a dish with the few ingredients at hand. With tomatoes, chiles, and spices, she made a thick paste that she placed over a cooked turkey, the only poultry the frugal nuns had at hand. The result, which she called mole from the Spanish *moler*, was adored and praised by the nun. And so, mole was created from the fusion of Spanish ingenuity and Mexican foods. Or was it?

Mole, from the Nahuatl *molli,* meaning broth or sauce.[10] It exists in many variations across Mexico and Central America. It is a thick ground sauce of chili peppers, chocolate, spices such as clove, sesame seeds, and cumin. The dish predates Spanish arrival in Mesoamerica, with variations of the dish documented in the Florentine Codex.[11] Its cultural importance as both a

[10] Stephanie Wood, ed., "molli," *Online Nahuatl Dictionary* (Eugene, Ore.: Wired Humanities Projects, College of Education, University of Oregon, ©2000–present), , https://nahuatl.wired-humanities.org/content.

[11] Sahagún, Bernardino de, Antonio Valeriano, Alonso Vegerano, Martín Jacobita, Pedro de San Buenaventura, Diego de Grado, Bonifacio Maximiliano, Mateo Severino, et al. Historia general de las cosas de Nueva España (Florentine Codex), Ms. Mediceo Palatino 218–20, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Florence, MiBACT, 1577. Available at Digital Florentine Codex/Códice Florentino Digital, edited by Kim N. Richter, Alicia Maria Houtrouw, Kevin Terraciano, Jeanette

ceremonial and celebratory dish is evident in the dish's preparation and consumption today. With its presence noted in the Panquetzaliztli Festival to honor the God Huitzilopochtli.[12] As well as traditional Oaxacan wedding ceremonies, practiced both in Mexico and by the diaspora.

While many modern moles in Mexico and abroad have adapted the recipes to the availability of post-conquest foods such as bread, pork lard, rice, and chicken, the dish, in its many variations, is centered on the ancestral knowledge of indigenous communities, especially women, who, as the knowledge keepers and practitioners, have protected the recipes and ushered them into modernity. Yet, how did the mentioned origin myth of mole brand mole poblano, in particular, at best as a mestizo creation, born out of New World scarcity and Spanish ingenuity?[13] Furthermore, why is this fiction still being perpetuated, as it can be found explicitly in travel advertisements, as well as implicitly as we see in the colonial specter behind the name of Doña Maria,[14] as well as popular idiom (*en mi mero mole*) the cultural presence of mole, specifically

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Peterson, Diana Magaloni, and Lisa Sousa, bk. 10, fol. 51v. Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2023. https://florentinecodex.getty.edu/en/book/10/folio/51v .

[12] Ibid, bk. 2, fol. 82v. Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2023. https://florentinecodex.getty.edu/en/book/2/folio/82v

[13] Jeffrey M. Pilcher, *¡Que vivan los tamales! Food and the Making of Mexican Identity* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1998), 130: "This dialogues reflected the indigenista program for redeeming Mexico's Indians, represented by the 'dirty, stinky' turkey, cleansed by indoctrination in the ways of Old World civilization, the spices, to create the Mexican mestizo nation, mole poblano."

[14] Maricruz Payán Díaz and Jorge Alan Flores Flores, "No Me Llamo María: El Género y El Racismo En La Mujer Mazahua," *QVADRATA. Estudios Sobre Educación, Artes y Humanidades* 7, no. 14 (2025): 61–73, https://doi.org/10.54167/qvadrata.v7i14.1948.Doña María mole is a ready to eat canned mole product sold by MegaMex Foods. A María, is pejorative name to refer to an Indigenous woman.

red mole Poblano, that has become ubiquitous in US restaurants is undeniable. This chapter explores how mole and indigenous cuisine was appropriated by the Mexican post-revolutionary government as a part of an effort to unite under a nationalism constructed to disguise the failings of the revolution. Furthermore, it interrogates 20th-century chef and entrepreneur Josefina Velázquez de Leon's role as a pioneer of Mexican cuisine under the party dictatorship and the consequences that come the erasure of Indigenous and Black influences on Mexican cuisine.

This chapter undertakes a literary and textual analysis of the myth of mole as it appears across newspaper articles and cookbooks from the early to mid-twentieth century. Drawing on critical race theory, I examine how racial ideologies are constructed and naturalized through both language and image — attending to the ways that written descriptions, recipes, and visual representations work together to produce and circulate narratives about Mexican indigeneity and culinary legitimacy. Throughout, this analysis is grounded in the political history of the period, situating these cultural productions within the broader struggles over national identity, modernization, and the selective incorporation or erasure of Indigenous heritage that defined Mexican public life from the Porfiriato through the post-revolutionary decades.

The Mexican State and the Mythification of the Mexican Revolution

To understand how the myth of mole made its way into contemporary depictions and framings of the dish, we must discuss the myths of the Mexican Revolution and its political outcomes. Alan Knight provides a critical analysis of how the Mexican state constructed a "mythic" narrative of the 1910 Revolution to legitimize its long-standing rule. Knight argues that while this myth became a powerful tool for national unity, its influence was often less extensive

and successful than historians have traditionally assumed.[15] Maccario Schettino's poetic declaration of the revolution as "a concept, not a fact" refers to the 1938 nationalization of Mexico's oil and consolidation of the Revolutionary Institutional Party (PRI) under president Lazaro Cárdenas: "The Revolution which marks the [twentieth] century . . . never happened [nunca existió] . The Mexican Revolution, on which was founded the political regime that ruled from 1938 and for fifty years, is a cultural construction."[16]

The fractured political groups that emerged from the waves of violence following the ousting of Porfirio Díaz in 1911 reveal how unstable Mexico's revolutionary aftermath truly was. What began as a movement against dictatorship quickly devolved into competing regional factions, military strongmen, and shifting alliances. From 1911 through the 1920s, political authority rested less on institutions and more on caudillos—figures whose power was personal, militarized, and often temporary. The founding of the Partido Nacional Revolucionario (PNR) in 1929 by Plutarco Elías Calles and other revolutionary leaders marked a turning point: it signaled the formal transition from individualized caudillo rule to party-centered governance.

However, this institutional shift did not necessarily translate into democratic legitimacy. Although as Jorge Alocer well explains, the party had no constitutional right to declare itself the State's party, rather this hegemonic-pragmatic party, that although allowed other parties to exist and function alongside, it's dominance lied not in building power but conserving it. This

[15] Alan Knight, "The Myth of the Mexican Revolution," *Past & Present* (Oxford) 209, no. 1 (2010): 223–73, https://doi.org/10.1093/pastj/gtq010.

[16] Macario Schettino, Cien años de confusión: México en el siglo XX (Mexico City, 2007), 13.

consolidation deepened under the presidency of Lázaro Cárdenas. In 1938, Cárdenas reorganized the PNR into the Partido de la Revolución Mexicana (PRM), restructuring it along corporatist lines that incorporated labor unions, peasant leagues, and other mass sectors directly into the party apparatus. While this reorganization expanded land redistribution and advanced key revolutionary reforms, it also further centralized political authority within the party itself. Access to reform became mediated through party channels, binding social groups to the regime in exchange for benefits.

Thus, the post-revolutionary Mexican government faced the dual challenge of stabilizing a country devastated by conflict and legitimizing itself as the inheritor of revolutionary ideals, particularly land reform and the reduction of inequality. The creation and consolidation of the ruling party provided stability and curtailed, to some extent, the violence of the caudillo era. Yet the very mechanism that institutionalized the Revolution also entrenched a single party's dominance without clear constitutional grounding. The later renaming of the PRM into the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) in 1946 formalized this structure. In this sense, the PRI's hegemonic rule can be seen as structurally illegitimate: precisely because it lacked clear constitutional grounding and relied on monopolizing revolutionary authority, the regime's urgent need to legitimize itself would increasingly be channeled into state-led nationalism-building projects designed to manufacture unity and popular identification.

The post-revolutionary state, and eventually the PRI, secured and maintained their legitimacy in part through the institutionalization of nutrition as a site of political intervention. By embedding themselves in the everyday lives of Indigenous communities through agencies such as the Instituto Nacional Indigenista (INI), founded in 1948, the PRI transformed diet, health, and agriculture into instruments of state power. Through these institutions, the state

sought to integrate Indigenous populations into a modernizing national project — channeling education, civic participation, and nutritional policy through centralized bodies that effectively redefined what it meant to eat, live, and belong as a Mexican citizen. [17].

INI's foundation was built upon prior institutionalization through programs Departamento de Salubridad that housed programs such as Higiene de la Alimentación in 1936 and Instituto Nacional de Nutriología (INN) in 1943 that sought to research and modernize the dietary habits of indigenous populations in Mexico, not in an objective manner but in a manner reminiscent of eurocentrism ideals, as Pablo Yankelevich explains: "Hacia principios del siglo XX, Francia era el punto de referencia y validación por excelencia para casi todos los

[17]"61¿Qué establecía la Ley de Creación del Instituto Nacional Indigenista?" *Los pueblos indígenas de México: 100 preguntas,* accessed April 7, 2026, https://www.nacionmulticultural.unam.mx/100preguntas/
.In 1948, the Mexican government passed the legislation that created Instituto Nacional Indigenista, article 7 specifically outlines the institutional organization of the INI:"El Consejo será presidido por el Director y estará integrado por representantes de
las Secretarías de Educación Pública
(Dirección de Asuntos Indígenas), Salubridad, Gobernación, Agricultura, Recursos Hidráulicos, Comunicaciones y Obras Públicas y
Departamento Agrario y por representantes designados por el Banco de Crédito Ejidal, Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, la Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México
y el Instituto Politécnico
Nacional, por un representante designado por las sociedades científicas que se dediquen preferen temente a estudios antropológicos y por representantes de los núcleos indígenas más importantes que serán designados y participarán en la forma y términos que señale el Reglamento de
la presente Ley."

comportamientos y saberes de las élites mexicanas. Si esto fue así para la política, la banca o la ciencia, mucho más para la cocina."[18]

The creations of these programs, therefore, must be read within the contexts of what Angélica Bautista López refers to as a discourse of cultural homoginzation that built from the Intellectuals of the early 20th century, such as Andrés Molina Enríquez and José Vasconcelos, placed the mestizo at the center of national identity. Bautista López argues that the policies of these social programs both sought to "mestisize" or "whiten" the indigenous population, encouraging them to abandon their specific cultural practices into a modern, Westernized ideal.[19] Simultaneously, the state sought to dissolve ethnic differences that were seen as an obstacle to national progress by centering a mestizo state.[20] Sara Aguilar Rodríguez well relates this discourse to the PRI's funding of nutrition research as an attempt to turn the Indigenous Mexican into the ideal Mestizo laborer:

> La alimentación, la nutrición y la higiene se presentaron como elementos esenciales para mejorar la salud y la productividad del mexicano, pero también en una forma de transformar las prácticas culturales que se consideraban como inferiores. Dicho proceso

[18] Pablo Yankelevich, "Alimentación e identidad nacional," *Desacatos*, no. 34 (December 2010),184.

[19] Angélica Bautista López, "El discurso identitario del México posrevolucionario como política cultural homogeneizadora," *Polis* 17, no. 1 (2021): 75–106, https://doi.org/10.24275/uam/izt/dcsh/polis/2021v17n1/bautista.

[20] Guillermo de la Peña, "La antropología, el indigenismo y la diversificación del patrimonio cultural mexicano," in *La antropología y el patrimonio cultural de México*, 1a ed., El Patrimonio Histórico y Cultural de México 1810–2010, vol. 3 (México: Dirección General de Publicaciones, Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes, 2011), 57–106.

> de occidentalización no permitía concesiones. Los indígenas debían dejar de ser lo que eran ya que su cultura y prácticas culinarias carecían de valor.[21]

Since the chaos of the revolution had disrupted the Porfiriato legacy of rapid economic development through foreign investments, especially in mining, it is obvious why Indigenous Mexicans, who were long since seen as impediments to modernity, found themselves at the crux of an ideological debate. A debate that given the country's majority population in rural and indigenous communities, with a State that needed the labor of indigenous bodies but did not want to support Indigenous autonomy.

The post-revolutionary State's attempts to modify the Indigenous Mexican diet in order to create a robust workforce are best illustrated through one of the INN's initial campaigns to promote and increase the consumption of dairy and beef. Building on the pre-revolutionary discourse, led by *científicos* like Francisco Bulnes (see introduction), that centered diet to reach European modernity. Also, in the Porfirian tradition, scientific studies were conducted to create a rhetoric that positioned the Indigenous populations as scapegoats. For example, in 1946, INN director Francisco de Paula Miranda led a nutrition survey of an Otomi community in Valle del Mezquita, Hidalgo, finding that although their mostly milpa-based diet was sufficient, their scarce consumption of dairy, meat and varied vegetables became the object of concern:

> Comen muy pocos de los alimentos que son considerados comúnmente como importantes, dentro de un buen régimen alimenticio. El consumo que hacen de carnes, leche y lacticinios, frutas y vegetales es muy escaso. Sin embargo, por medio del

[21] Sandra Aguilar-Rodríguez, "Cooking Modernity: Nutrition Policies, Class, and Gender in 1940s and 1950s Mexico City," *The Americas* 64, no. 2 (2007). 134.

> consumo de tortillas, pulque y algunas plantas y raíces, obtienen una alimentación regularmente Buena"[22]

Despite Miranda's own admission in the report that altering the diet of the community would be an "error,"[23] His description of sickly and emaciated subjects suffering from the detrimental effects of malnutrition became the sensationalist message of his 1947 report:

> El sujeto mal alimentado es perezoso, flojo, incapaz de trabajo intenso y sostenido, apático, sin ambiciones, indiferente a lo que le rodea, lleno de limitaciones físicas y mentales, con un horizonte estrecho, fácilmente sugestionable, y es víctima en las luchas por la existencia, en la paz y en la guerra. Es además un ser débil, fácilmente presa de los efectos del mal.[24]

While Miranda's writing is careful not to directly center the indigenous Mexican as the pitfall of the nation, unlike his Porfirian era intellectual ancestors. The descriptions of frail, lazy, and susceptible to vague evils are linked to a long-standing stereotyping imagery of indigenous peoples that is simultaneously developing in the United States.[25]

I highlight language use because the PRI's influence on Mexicans' food practices from 1940 to 1950 operates on multiple, often contradictory levels. As seen with Miranda and the INN, scientific findings that supported the nutritional value of a milpa-based diet clashed with the State's welfare policies, which effectively forced low-income households to consume milk. Through investor-friendly partnerships with Nestlé (which established its first factory in Mexico

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[22] Anderson, Richmond K., José Calvo de la Torre, Gloria Serrano y Goerge C. Payne. "Nutrición y alimentación de los indios otomíes del Valle del Mezquital." Salubridad y Asistencia: órgano de la Secretaría de Salubridad y Asistencia, 11(IV), 1945. 20-21

[23] "Intentos para cambiárselos serían una equivocación, mientras su condición económica y social no mejore y algo realmente bueno pueda sustituirlos." Ibid 46.

[24] Francisco de P. Miranda, *La alimentación en México* (México: Publicaciones del Instituto Nacional de Nutriología, 1947). 30.

[25] See chapter 2

in 1945) and, one year later, a tax-exempt policy with Lechería Nacional S.A., which agreed to supply the government with milk at a fixed low price, the State institutionalized this contradiction.[26] Given the country's economic crisis in the 1940s that saw poor corn harvests and rising cost of living, and wartime shortages, which pushed rural and Indigenous populations to migrate toward metropolises like Mexico City, for the average Indigenous laborer in 1940s–1950s Mexico City, maintaining a traditional milpa diet was a challenge, if not an impossibility.

At the popular level, these challenges play out in the discourse of milk, as Aguilar explains: "Cow's milk turned into a symbol of modernity and health while its consumption as a fluid increased in the Western world, particularly in the United States. According to Melanie DuPuis, in this country, milk came to be considered a 'perfect food' with universal nutritional value and a central role in Western civilization."[27] This discourse is echoed in Lechería advertisements depicting an idyllic, European-looking family enjoying Sello Azul powdered milk—a powerful visual and economic contrast that posed a threat to the longstanding foodways of Indigenous Mexicans, a shift facilitated by both the INN and the PRI state. The discourse of milk matters because embedded within it is a project of dietary racial homogenization. Despite the social infrastructure created to aid Indigenous rural Mexicans, policies that pushed milk consumption failed to consider the lived realities of the very people they claimed to serve. This failure is evident not only in the higher prevalence of lactose intolerance among Indigenous

[26] Sandra Aguilar Rodríguez, "Raza y alimentación en el México del siglo XX," *Inter disciplina* 7, no. 19 (2019): 119–38, https://doi.org/10.22201/ceiich.24485705e.2019.19.70290.

[27] E. Melanie Dupuis, *Nature's Perfect Food: How Milk Became America's Drink* (NYU Press, 2002).

populations but, more importantly, in the Revolution's inability to secure land and, by extension, the livelihoods of these same communities. And would ripple effects throughout Mexican history

It is worth noting that the State's efforts to homogenizing indigenous cultural practices in the name of national unity were seen across cultural efforts including funding museums to showcase and preserve a curated version of pre-conquest indigeneity "valued the glorious past of the Aztecs and Mayas while ignoring the contributions of contemporary indigenous peoples.[28] As well as in music through the promotion and funding of a "national musical identity" and national dance organizing.[29] Porfirian era cultural projects that were completed or expanded at this time including the Palacio of Bellas Artes, Teatro Juarez, and El Museo de Museo Nacional de Antropología, the Secretariat of Public Education (SEP) under Cardenas' presidency exploded in funding for the arts making dance and music required subjects in schools as well as funding for folklorists to the rural villages all in an effort to document and diffuse "lo Mexicano"[30] . Further intergotatting this curation of lo Mexicano, we find that the arts become a means through with State's influence on popular culture and trends that supported their goal of a capitalistic mestizo

[28] Sandra Aguilar-Rodríguez, "Mole and Mestizaje: Race and National Identity in Twentieth-Century Mexico," *Food, Culture, & Society* (London) 21, no. 5 (2018). 603.

[29] Cristina Cruz Carvajal, "La búsqueda de la identidad musical en el México posrevolucionario de los ritmos regionales a los nacionales," *Diálogos Revista Electrónica de Historia* 20, no. 1 (2019): 78–93, https://doi.org/10.15517/dre.v20i1.33024; Sandra Torales Hueto, "Jarocha's Costume and the Search for a Mexican Identity between the Porfiriato and the Post-Revolution," SCT Proceedings in Interdisciplinary Insights and Innovations, *SCT Proceedings in Interdisciplinary Insights and Innovations* 2, no. 0 (2024): 152.

[30] Ricardo Pérez Montfort, "Historia, literatura y folklore 1920-1940. El nacionalismo cultural de Rubén M. Campos, Fernando Ramírez de Aguilar e Higinio Vázquez Santa Ana," *Cuicuilco Revista de Ciencias Antropológicas* 1, no. 2 (1994). 86.

state, an influence that permeated into many aspects of civil society including, like a culturally aesthetic smokescreen, in erasing or obfuscating the complexity and diversity of indigeneity in Mexico, the PRI then had a backdrop to devalue efforts to address inequity, therefore disguising the obvious failures of the revolution, under a curated façade of unity

The Social Importance of Mole

It is also worth asking how mole has come to exist in its current political and social context. Why has a dish with such clear and undeniable Indigenous origins—both in its ingredients and preparation techniques, and one that exists in countless regional variations demonstrating the depth and complexity of Indigenous presence in Mexico—become so widely reinterpreted? How did it come to be served as the central dish at the "wedding of the century" of María Félix and Jorge Negrete, described by American chef Rick Bayless as the "holy grail of Mexican cooking," and celebrated in mole festivals as the ultimate expression of Spanish and Mexican syncretism?[31] How did it move from being embedded in Indigenous culinary traditions and rhetoric to becoming emblematic of Mexico's identity on the global stage? To begin answering these questions, it is necessary to retrace mole's appearance in early culinary literature. The anonymous *Recetario Novohispano* of 1791, for instance, includes several recipes

[31] Rick Bayless, *"Rick Bayless Oaxacan Black Mole,"* YouTube video, posted March 22, 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zwgsbzcl5j8; Nicole Trejo, "Así Fue La 'Boda Del Siglo' Entre María Félix y Jorge Negrete," *El Universal*, October 18, 2022, https://www.eluniversal.com.mx/espectaculos/asi-fue-la-boda-del-siglo-entre-maria-felix-y-jorge-negrete/; Raquel Piñeiro, "El odio a primera vista del que surgió el amor: la boda de María Félix y Jorge Negrete," Vanity Fair, November 28, 2020, https://www.revistavanityfair.es/sociedad/articulos/boda-maria-felix-jorge-negrete/47809.

for clemole (colloquially referred to as mole de olla), composed of rehydrated chili peppers and tomatoes, and seasoned with sesame seeds, cloves, cinnamon, and garlic.

Mariano Arévalo and Mariano Galván Rivera's *El Cocinero Mexicano* (1831) includes multiple recipes for green, red and black mole, mole de guajolote, and various versions of pipian.[32] By Alejandro Valdés's *Arte novísimo de Cocina* (1872), recipe versions began to increase the specificity of recipes such as "Pollos rellenos de mole."[33] Also in this decade, mole poblano recipes started to center turkey meat, which became more common, and recipes began to include cacao, a change in culinary trends that is seen in *La Cocinera Poblana y el Libro de las Familias (*1877) that contains 7 different versions of mole de guajolote.[34] Through these examples, we see that early literature documented a wide range of clemole, chimole, pipian, and mole recipes using a variety of ingredients and cooking techniques, an indication of the dish's

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[32] Mariano Arévalo and Mariano Galván Rivera, *El Cocinero Mexicano*, vol. 2 (1831), University of Texas at San Antonio Digital Collections, https://utsa.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/01UTXSANT_INST/ken82l/alma992265726390 4621

[33] Alejandro Valdés, *Novisimo arte de cocina, ó, Escelente colección de las mejores recetas : para que al menor costo posible, y con la mayor comodidad, pueda guisarse á la española, francesa, italiana e inglesa : sin omitirse cosa alguna de lo hasta aquí publicado, para sazonar al estilo de nuestro país : lleva añadido lo mas selecto que se encuentra acerca de la repostería : el arte de trinchar &c., con dos graciosísimas estampas que aclaren mejor este último tratadito*, with U.S. National Library of Medicine (México : Impreso en la oficina del C. Alejandro Valdés, 1831), http://archive.org/details/14011110R.nlm.nih.gov.

[34] *La Cocinera Poblana y el Libro de las Familias* (1877), University of Texas at San Antonio Digital Collections, https://utsa.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/01UTXSANT_INST/ken82l/alma993849448400 4621

not just complexity but also the growing interest in this category of recipes. Yet these early examples, due to the styling of these dense, anonymous manuals, offer little context for their recipes and their respective social environments. For that, we must look toward the publications of the late 19th and early 20th centuries

Vicenta Torres de Rubio's *1896 Cocina Michoacana* was revolutionary not only because it is the first cookbook published by a named woman, but also because, unlike the encyclopedic-like works of her predecessors that read like manuals, Torres de Rubio's work took a communal and friendly approach.[35] By soliciting recipes from Michoacanas who mailed in their contributions, the book marked a shift in culinary literature. It not only collected recipes but also offered social commentary on the practice of cooking. In this manner, *Cocina Michoacana* becomes a conversation between Rubio and her contributors, one that also contains commentary embedded with racial ideology. In her introduction, she contextualizes her inclusion of certain recipes within larger anti-Indigenous discourses:

> Antes de terminar estas esplicaciones, debo decir: que voy a cuidar de incluir diversas fórmulas de origen primitivo en el país; es decir de aquellas que la clase indígenas posee como secretos que le pertenecen tradicionalmente; que no pueden menos de inspirar interés en cualquiera reunión, y que producen platillos apetitosos y sabrosos por más que nunca hayan figurado en obras impresas. Se ha visto con desdén, lo que en toda mesa pudiera lucir: Tamales o corundas de Zacapu. Potzole Quiroga –Tapacua indígena –Gorditas cordiales de la Sierra –Carnero al pastor –Nacatamales primitivos –Toqueros de regalo –Charapes de Bajío. Menudillos surianos –Totopos, carne y masa –La manera de distinguirlas, será la de poner entre paréntesis la palabra (indígena) [36]

[35] Vicenta Torres de Rubio, *Cocina Michoacana* (1896), University of Texas at San Antonio Digital Collections, https://utsa.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/01UTXSANT_INST/1a5vfa7/alma9928030353904621

[36] Ibid, 5.

What we see here is a brief but complex articulation of how Indigenous culinary knowledge was being appropriated in this political era. The claim that these dishes are of primitive originreflects a broader understanding of indigeneity as archaic or belonging to the past. At the same time, Torres de Rubio insists that despite this perception, her readership (whom we can assume to possess literacy and a degree of economic capital) may still find these dishes useful, tasty, and welcoming to their tables, even if they are commonly viewed with "scorn."

Furthermore, her choice in wording—describing Indigenous cooking practices as both traditional and secretive raises questions of intellectual ownership. Criollo elites like Torres de Rubio insert themselves into the role of curators and stylists of culinary practices that they simultaneously characterize as inferior. Her stylistic suggestion that certain dishes could be labeled with the parenthetical "indígena" (a choice she ultimately does not consistently apply in *Cocina Michoacana*) further intervenes in this issue. It functions as a compromise: an acknowledgment of what she frames as the dishes' primitive origins and the social stigma attached to them, while also marking their adoption and even admiration. In this manner, Torres de Rubio offers a snapshot of how appropriation, in the eyes of the early 20th-century Mexican elite class, is justified. An appropriation that ultimately reveals the racial ideology underlying the incorporation of Indigenous culinary knowledge into elite culinary culture.

It is in this appropriation of Indigenous culinary knowledge into elite culture that anti-Indigenous sentiment is revealed. Let us further examine the only other passage in *Cocina Michoacana* in which Torres de Rubio addresses the topic of Indigenous communities, found in a preface to her escabeche section:

> ...la naturaleza ha llegado a aquellos lagos un rico contingente con los peces blancos, de un hermoso plateado en artísticas franjas, y sobre todo, de carnes las mas sabrosas y suaves, que se prestan, perfectamente, para la conservación en piezas que miden desde un

> tamaño inferior hasta unos quince o veinte centímetros.
> La exportación seria un hecho seguro, y para conseguirla habría que vencer un inconveniente; el de embalar, que nos parece muy secundario para una empresa, pues que empresa le hemos de llamar considerándola de claro porvenir para la clase indígena que nos llama a su regeneración, mejor dicho, que necesita ser obligada hasta que adquiera conocimientos útiles, hasta hacerla útil en esta sociedad nuestra que languidece.[37]

She positions the Indigenous class as diminishing (note her choice of *regeneración*), a class portrayed as socially inept and lacking the knowledge necessary to integrate into society. Taking into consideration her previous statement, where it is traditional culinary knowledge that is of value so long as it is useful to elites, we see a similar logic at work here. Torres de Rubio makes an argument for capitalism in which the Indigenous Mexican requires the forceful intervention of the elite to become productive within what she calls a languishing society. Her initial admiration for the country's natural resources mirrors her earlier praise for Indigenous foods: both are admirable, yet both are framed as resources awaiting proper exploitation and organization by elite actors.

Writing in 1897, Torres de Rubio is therefore articulating a logic that anticipates a broader nation-building discourse that would be institutionalized decades later. Her framing of Indigenous communities as needing *regeneración*, discipline, and integration into productive economic life closely resembles the ideological framework that would later guide twentieth-century Mexican state projects of modernization and assimilation. In this sense, her writing foreshadows the cultural politics that would eventually be formalized under the rule of the PRI and would be further replicated in the applied to mole

Mentions and appearances of mole prior to the Mexican Revolution can be found across Mexican territory, frequently appearing in menus, recipes, and culinary columns, as well as in

[37] Ibid, 379.

both Mexican and United States newspapers.[38] These sources document multiple variations of the dish—such as mole poblano, Oaxacan mole, and mole de guajolote—demonstrating its regional diversity. Newspapers of the era often highlight mole as a central feature of community life, particularly in wedding celebrations, where it is served as a signature dish, and in the form of *antojitos* sold at festivals and prepared for patriotic festivities.[39] These references suggest that mole was not understood as a singular, unified national dish, but rather functioned as both an

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[38] *Mexican Herald* (Mexico City, Mexico) IX, no. 135, January 12, 1900: 8. *Readex: Latin American Newspapers*. https://infoweb-newsbank-com.uoregon.idm.oclc.org/apps/readex/doc?p=WHNPLAN1&docref=image/v2%3A1246B4296D2EBE54%40WHNPLAN1-1272503E020FF440%402415032-1272503E52FB2950%407-1272503E52FB2950%40; *Diario* (Mexico City, Mexico) VI, no. 1159, January 1, 1910: 5. *Readex: Latin American Newspapers*. https://infoweb-newsbank-com.uoregon.idm.oclc.org/apps/readex/doc?p=WHNPLAN1&docref=image/v2%3A12854C329FFA324A%40WHNPLAN1-1296D017F5F44568%402418673-1296D0183B622DD0%404-1296D0183B622DD0%40; *Excelsior* (Mexico City, Mexico) IV, no. 1175, June 5, 1920: 5. *Readex: Latin American Newspapers*. https://infoweb-newsbank-com.uoregon.idm.oclc.org/apps/readex/doc?p=WHNPLAN1&docref=image/v2%3A126508E729B456E4%40WHNPLAN1-12B3E10D62613560%402422481-12B3E10DEEBC91B0%404-12B3E10DEEBC91B0%40.

[39] *Siglo Diez y Nueve* (Mexico City, Mexico), January 5, 1849: 3. *Readex: Latin American Newspapers*. https://infoweb-newsbank-com.uoregon.idm.oclc.org/apps/readex/doc?p=WHNPLAN1&docref=image/v2%3A13316854647F044D%40WHNPLAN1-13384C8E2305E1A0%402396398-13374DC2B6F07FB8%402-13374DC2B6F07FB8%40; *Nueva Era* (Mexico City, Mexico) II, no. 404, September 15, 1912: 6. *Readex: Latin American Newspapers*. https://infoweb-newsbank-com.uoregon.idm.oclc.org/apps/readex/doc?p=WHNPLAN1&docref=image/v2%3A128A3981779955FD%40WHNPLAN1-1297310F2A380390%402419661-1297310FAFA98DA8%405-1297310FAFA98DA8%40

economic enterprise and a communal, celebratory food across Mexican communities and their diasporas.[40] The dish's prominence within Indigenous communities can be placed in conversation with a broader racialized discourse about food that, as Jeffrey Pilcher argues, crystallized in what he calls the "tortilla discourse."[41] This framework cast Indigenous foodways—especially those rooted in the milpa—as impediments to national progress, associating them with backwardness, excess, and a lack of discipline. Within this context, foods were not merely sustenance; they became symbols through which elites articulated anxieties about race, labor, and modernity. An 1897 article from journal *El Imparcial* offers an example of this logic:

> Un bautizo, una confirmación, una fiesta onomástica, un matrimonio, una extremaunción, un velorio, han de ir acompañados para merecer tal nombre, por el platillo nacional, sea verde como la esperanza, sea amarillo como el rencor, sea negro como los celos o rojo como el homicidio, pero en abundancia, en ancha cazuela, espeso, oleoso, con reflejos metálicos, salpicado de ajonjolí, mágica superficie donde se asomen gorditos los huesos y deleznables las pechugas del pavo... Doctos higienistas aconsejan un uso parsimonioso.... de ese otro enemigo del alma, que unido al licor nacional y a la tortilla sirve de combustible a la incansable máquina de los proletarios [y quizá habría que añadirle "de los indios.[42]

The dish itself is framed as a vice, its richness and sensory appeal coded as moral and physical excess. Yet the critique does not stop at the level of food. By linking the dish to tortillas and liquor (presumably pulque), staples associated with Indigenous and working-class diets, the article extends its judgment to the people who consume it. These foods are said to "fuel the tireless machine of the proletarians," with the telling aside that one might add "of the Indians."

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[40], Sara V. Komarnisky "Suitcases full of mole: Traveling food and the connections between Mexico and Alaska." *Alaska Journal of Anthropology* 7, no. 1 (2009): 41-56.

[41] See introduction for more thorough discussion of the Tortilla discourse

[42] *El Imparcial*, August 28, 1897, quoted in Ricardo Pérez Monfort, "El mole como símbolo de la mexicanidad," in *Cuadernos de Patrimonio Cultural y Turismo* no. 12 (2004),82.

culinary practice, then can be read as a proxy for racialized social critique. What emerges is a discourse in which Indigenous people and their foods are mutually constituted as threats. The dish's perceived excess including its heavy richness, its intensity of flavor, its abundance of ingredients, mirrors elite anxieties about Indigenous bodies and communities: undisciplined, driven by base appetites, and in need of regulation. Similar to what Torres de Rubio called for in *Cocina Michoacana,* the call for "parsimonious" consumption thus operates on two levels. On the surface, it is dietary advice; more deeply, it echoes a broader argument that Indigenous populations themselves must be controlled, moderated, and guided into productive citizenship.

Interrogating the Mole Myth

The question, then, is how *mole*—a dish that was once rooted in indigenous and intimate community practice—became absorbed into the project of mestizo nation-building. A key figure in this transformation is Carlos de Gante, whose 1926 *Excélsior* article, "Santa Rosa de Lima y el mole de guajolote," constitutes the first written record of the mole origin myth. In this piece, de Gante embellishes the narrative, asserting that a 17th-century nun from the Convent of Santa Rosa prepared the dish for Bishop Manuel Fernández de Santa Cruz[43]. By centering Bishop Santa Cruz—a real and prominent Spanish-born cleric, most recognized for publishing Sor Juana de la Cruz's *Carta atenagórica*—as the central figure, de Gante establishes a direct symbolic link between the dish and central Mexican nationalism. His later fictionalized account of the origins of *chiles en nogada* follows a similar pattern, attributing the dish to unnamed "damas" of Puebla

[43] Carlos de Gante, "Santa Rosa de Lima y el mole de guajolote," *Excélsior* (Mexico City), December 12, 1926, 4–5.

in 1822 who supposedly created it to celebrate the triumphs of Agustín de Iturbide, the military leader of Mexico's independence movement.[44]

Just one year later, in 1927, another author, Artemio de Valle Arizpe, published a nearly identical origin story for mole in *El Universal*. In his version, the bishop is replaced by the Viceroy Antonio de la Cerda y Aragón, and the nun is identified as Sor Andrea de la Encarnación, Mother Abbess of the Convent of Santa Rosa[45]. Despite their popularity, these accounts—and their many variations—are easily disproven. As José Curiel Monteagudo notes, the convent in which both de Gante and de Valle Arizpe situate their stories was not completed until more than a century after the events they describe[46]. As Pilcher argues, however, the significance of these narratives lies not in their historical accuracy, but in what they reveal about racial and nationalist ideology: "Like most legends, this one contained an element of truth, for colonial cooks did indeed invent new cuisines borrowing from both Mesoamerican and European traditions. Nevertheless, the glorification of food as 'mestizo' reflected not the hierarchical mentality of New Spain but rather the nationalist ideology of modern Mexico."[47] Significantly, these myths originated in newspapers and were crafted not by culinary practitioners but by

[44] Carlos de Gante, *Por Tierras Nacionales* (Puebla: Gante, 1929), 193–96.

[45] Artemio de Valle-Arizpe, "El mole de guajolote," in Programa Gastronómico del Octavo Festival Centro Histórico (Mexico City, 1992).

[46] J. L. Monteagudo, *Construcción y Evolución del Mole Virreinal*, 6° Congreso sobre el Patrimonio Gastronómico y Turismo Cultural: *El Mole en la Ruta de los Dioses* (Puebla: CONACULTA, 2014), 40.

[47] Jeffrey M. Pilcher, "Tamales or Timbales: Cuisine and the Formation of Mexican National Identity, 1821–1911," *The Americas (Washington. 1944)* (Cambridge, UK) fifty-three, no. 2 (1996): 194.

intellectuals, only later being incorporated into cookbooks. This trajectory suggests that it was not the Mexican populace itself that elevated mole to the status of national dish, but rather indigenist political institutions that exerted influence over the presses disseminating these narratives.

It is also worth asking why state institutions and cultural figures did not instead promote a foreign cuisine—French, for example—as a national symbol. To understand how mole was sanitized for the celebration and consumption of early 20th century Mexican elites, we must understand the post-revolutionary government's need for myths linked to culinary traditions. As Alan Knight describes the 'project' of the Revolution constituted of land and labor reform, indigenismo education and economic nationalism, he argues however that the "images, icons, heroes, stories, slogans, songs and anniversaries" that carry the project of the Revolution are "memes" that require carriers such as "effective media, deployed by suitable organizations, for their diffusion: books, newspapers, film, radio, murals, monuments, public buildings, schools, parties, trade unions andejidos (agrarian reform communities)."[48] I argue that food myths, such as that of mole also function as a carrier. The answer lies in the political instability of the post-revolutionary period. Although some *caudillos* had been assassinated and their armies dispersed, the revolution had not fully concluded. The post-revolutionary state continued to clash with the populace, as evidenced by conflicts such as the Guerra de Cristeros.[49] In this context, invoking

[48] Knight, "The Myth of the Mexican Revolution." 228

[49] Jean A. Meyer, *The Cristero Rebellion: The Mexican people between church and state, 1926-1929*, with Richard Southern, Cambridge Latin American studies 24 (Cambridge University Press, 1976).

foreign cultural models risked recalling the Porfiriato, thereby underscoring the revolution's incomplete break with the past—an undesirable strategy for maintaining PRI dominance.

Moreover, the mythology surrounding *mole* functioned as an effective ideological tool within a broader nation-building project. It did more than simply narrate the origins of a dish: it helped construct a usable past. By situating *mole* within a colonial setting, these stories evoked historical continuity, while simultaneously projecting a mestizo future—one that symbolically incorporated Indigenous contributions but rendered the living Indigenous subject largely absent. In this sense, *mole* was not merely nationalized; it was instrumentalized as part of a cultural framework designed to define and stabilize Mexican identity. The centrality of Puebla to these narratives is not incidental. The region also produced other key symbolic figures, such as La China Poblana, an exoticized representation of an Afro-descendant and Indigenous woman, typically depicted in colorful, richly embroidered skirts and blouses. Over time, her image was appropriated by *criollo* elites, particularly during independence celebrations, and transformed into a stylized emblem of national identity.[50] Like *mole*, this figure condensed complex histories of race, class, and regional culture into a simplified, consumable symbol.

As Pérez Montfort explains, it was in the post-revolutionary period that such symbols were deliberately curated to articulate a coherent vision of the nation: "El resultado fue un impulso un tanto excesivo a ciertos estereotipos nacionales como el charro, la china poblana, el indito o el pelado, con el fin de reducir a una dimensión más o menos gobernable, o si se quiere entendible, a esa multiplicidad que saltaba a la vista al momento de enunciar cualquier asunto

[50] Vanessa Álvarez Guzmán, "La china poblana: entre la santidad y la sensualidad," *La Palabra y el Hombre. Revista de la Universidad Veracruzana*, no. 69 (2024): 31–34, https://doi.org/10.25009/lpyh.vi69.3826.

relacionado con ese indefinible 'pueblo mexicano.'"[51] Within this broader process, *mole* can be understood as one element in a larger repertoire of national symbols, mythologized and circulated to render the diversity of Mexico legible, governable, and ideologically cohesive.

In the post-revolutionary decades of the 1930s and 1940s, Mexico's kitchens underwent rapid and transformative change, driven by expanding industrial production both domestically and abroad. Technologies such as the corn mill, which had been in sparing use since the late 19th century, became increasingly refined and accessible, leading innovation of new appliances like the blender. Advertisements of the decade reflect a innovative attitude, drawing on the country's indigenous presence, via *metate* and *molcajete* as hindrances to progress, where as the mill and the blender "liberating" women from the arduous hours of grinding corn.[52] At the same time, a growing middle class and intensified migration to urban centers, particularly Mexico City, reshaped domestic life, as expanding road infrastructure connected regions more than ever before. As María Stoopen observes,

> By the end of the 1940s, all Mexican kitchens, large and small, had been affected to 1° or another by the spread of technological progress. Housewives were delighted at the speed with which meals could be prepared in pressure cooker, which did not explode as often as they feared. They marveled at how eggs could be whipped up at the last minute for the children's breakfast, before they rushed to beat the school bell with seconds to spare; they loved the smoothness of blended vegetable purees to thicken soup. Of course, the ingredients for spicy sauces were still chopped by hand, and beans were still mashed on the stone molcajete, for that was the only way to get them just right.[53]

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[51] Pérez Monfort, "El mole como símbolo de la mexicanidad," 77.

[52] Arnold J. Bauer. "Millers and Grinders: Technology and Household Economy in Meso-America." *Agricultural History* 64, no. 1 (1990): 17.

[53] Margarita de Orellana et al., "Spaces in Mexican Cuisine," *Artes de México*, no. 36 (1997). 86.

This post-revolutionary PRI kitchen—where modern appliances coexisted with traditional techniques—created both opportunity and uncertainty for Mexico's urban middle and upper classes. In this context, there emerged a growing need for cultural intermediaries who could guide consumers in navigating new technologies while also interpreting and standardizing regional cuisines. Figures such as Josefina Velázquez de León stepped into this role, positioning themselves as both entrepreneurs and cultural authorities who helped shape how modern Mexican households would cook, consume, and understand "national" cuisine.

Josefina Velázquez de León was a chef, entrepreneur, and influential culinary figure born in Aguascalientes in 1899. Raised in a privileged and educated environment, she moved to Mexico City in 1905. She married Joaquín González but was widowed less than a year into the marriage, remaining a widow in her twenties and never remarrying. Her career spanned from the 1930s until her death in 1968, during which she built a prolific and wide-ranging presence in Mexico's culinary world. Based primarily in Mexico City although informed by the ethnographic work she carried out across the country, she published numerous cookbooks through her own imprint, covering everything from instructional manuals on incorporating new technologies to specialized and event-specific dishes. Her cooking school, *Academia de Cocina Velázquez de León*, and expanded her influence into media with a radio program, *La flojera en la cocina*, followed by her 1950s television show, *El menú de la semana*. Although she was not the only figure working in these fields, her productivity, independence as a publisher, and broad scope of work allowed her to dominate the culinary publishing landscape of her time.

Josefina Velázquez de León is a complex and consequential figure in Mexican culinary history, but contemporary portrayals of her as a pioneering, standalone innovator are incomplete without situating her within the broader political and media structures that shaped and facilitated

her career. Rather than operating independently, her print and media work was embedded within the broader nationalist project of the Mexican state between the 1930s and 1960s. Firstly, the post-revolutionary party system dominated by the PRI exerted significant influence over publishing, radio, and television. As Paul Gillingham explains, this system functioned through a combination of incentive and control, shaping media production in ways that aligned with state interests:

> The Mexican rulers of the dictablanda —a state that combined authoritarian and democratic elements and that exerted tenuous control over markedly autonomous local societies— smoothly and comprehensively censored the twentieth-century media: happily handing out carrots to an oft-complicit press, prepared when needed to pick up the stick. 4 In short, the arch-Machiavellian Cortés might well be painted as a worthy predecessor of the arch-Machiavellian Institutional Revolutionary Party (Partido Revolucionario Institucional, PRI).[54]

Within this context of media regulation and collaboration, Velázquez de León's career must be understood as part of a broader state-aligned communication network rather than as an isolated entrepreneurial endeavor. Because her career unfolded entirely within the confines of a *dictablanda,* her works cannot be read as neutral or purely commercial productions. The cookbooks, radio programs, and television appearances she left behind are not simply culinary artifacts; they are cultural texts produced within a specific political atmosphere that shaped what could be said, celebrated, and circulated about Mexican identity. To analyze her remaining body of work is, therefore, to analyze documents that bear the imprint of that system — texts in which the elevation of certain dishes, traditions, and origin myths over others reflects the broader ideological priorities of a State invested in constructing a unified and manageable national culture.

[54] Paul Gillingham et al., *Journalism, Satire, and Censorship in Mexico* (University of New Mexico Press, 2018) 1-2.

Her other entrepreneurial endeavor, 1946 radio program *La Flojera en la Cocina*, broadcast on XEW Radio, directly situates her work within this nationalist media infrastructure.[55] XEW radio, known for its slogan "La Voz de la América Latina desde México," was one of the country's most prominent and accessible radio stations. It played a key role in supporting the political consolidation of the PRM and its transition into the PRI, while also shaping cultural production in line with nation-building goals. The station was especially influential in promoting musical acts aligned with nationalist identity, including figures such as Agustín Lara. More broadly, radio functioned as a central tool in disseminating state-approved culture and ideology. As Julián Castro describes, the medium was actively structured to reinforce nationalism and ensure alignment with government messaging:

> To make sure that government messaging was reaching public audiences, pnr legislators produced laws that forced commercial stations to air pro-government propaganda, and that restricted messages contrary to the desires of the state. Government officials and the owners of prominent stations also collaborated on the airing of music that was"Mexican" in an attempt to build a stronger national culture, one that was more loyal to the revolutionary state and to Mexican commercial products. This partnership, and more importantly, the technology of radio broadcasting, allowed for this expansion of populist politics and nationalist sentiment, both of which Cárdenas built upon as he brought the political use of radio to new heights during the expulsion of Calles from Mexico in 1936 and the oil expropriation of 1938. Broadcasting had become a permanent part of government and modern Mexican culture.[56]

When socio-politically contextualized, these dynamics demonstrate that Velázquez de León's media presence was part of a larger state-supported cultural project. Her culinary programming, disseminated through highly regulated and politically aligned media channels, contributed to the

[55] Unfortunately, no recordings exist.

[56] Joseph Justin Castro, *Radio in Revolution: Wireless Technology and State Power in Mexico, 1897-1938* (University of Nebraska Press, 2016), 194-195.

construction and circulation of a cohesive Mexican national identity, aligning domestic practices such as cooking with the ideological goals of the post-revolutionary state.



Figure 3:Josefina Velázquez de León, *La cocina en el aire: selección de recetas exquisitas, útiles y prácticas ofrecidas en los diversos programas de radio en que tomó participación la autora en las estaciones XEQ, XEK, XEJP Y XEW de la ciudad de México* (México: Academia de Cocina Velázquez de León, 1947)

Velázquez de León's culinary legacy included an extensive documentation of regional cuisines, creating a legacy that would later inspire culinary figures such as Diana Kennedy and Rick Bayless, who helped shape global understandings of Mexican food as cuisine. At the same time, Velázquez de León's career intersected with the PRI's broader nation-building and cultural consolidation efforts, in which regional diversity was curated into a unified national identity. Despite this, relatively little scholarship examines her in this political context. Modern

recognition, such as the exhibition by *La Plaza*, a Los Angeles-based Latinx cultural center that described her as "the woman responsible for giving a national face to regional Mexican cuisine."[57] This title highlights her influence but does not take into account how her role as a cultural mediator to middle- and upper-class audiences also facilitated the incorporation and appropriation of Indigenous and regional dishes into a nationalist culinary framework.

In the cover art of Velázquez de León's regional cookbook series, the appropriation of indigenous culinary traditions is visually reinforced through the consistent centering of white women as the literal face of Mexico's regional cuisines. The artistic style of these covers reflects the broader conventions of mid-century print media, featuring illustrated figures, carefully rendered fashion, and an emphasis on domestic or cultural scenes. This aesthetic is reminiscent of Norman Rockwell's American realism, which similarly portrayed idealized and often sanitized visions of everyday life. Comparable visual styles can also be found in postcards, magazines, and posters of the era, situating these cookbooks within a wider transnational visual culture.

A closer examination of the illustrated covers reveals a striking absence of indigenous figures, alongside a selective appropriation of indigenous fashion and cultural practices. *Cocina regional jaliscense* (1952), for example, depicts a white couple dancing the regional jarabe Tapatío, embodying a stylized version of local tradition. Similarly, *Cocina Campeche* (1953) features a recurring figure—a fair-skinned, copper-haired woman—gazing out over Campeche's bay. This same woman reappears across multiple volumes, including *Cocina Yucateca* (1955),

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[57] @laplazala, *Celebrate Women's History Month and Josefina Velázquez de León, a pioneer of Mexican gastronomy who, between the 1930s and 1960s, published over 140 cookbooks, ran a cooking academy, and hosted TV and radio shows* (Instagram post), March 7, 2023, https://www.instagram.com/p/CpgEYTqrMGc/.

where she overlooks a pot of cochinita pibil, as well as in *Cocina regional de Michoacan* (1953) and *Cocina Veracruzana* (1955). Her repetition across regions suggests a homogenized and racialized representation of Mexican identity that erases local specificity.

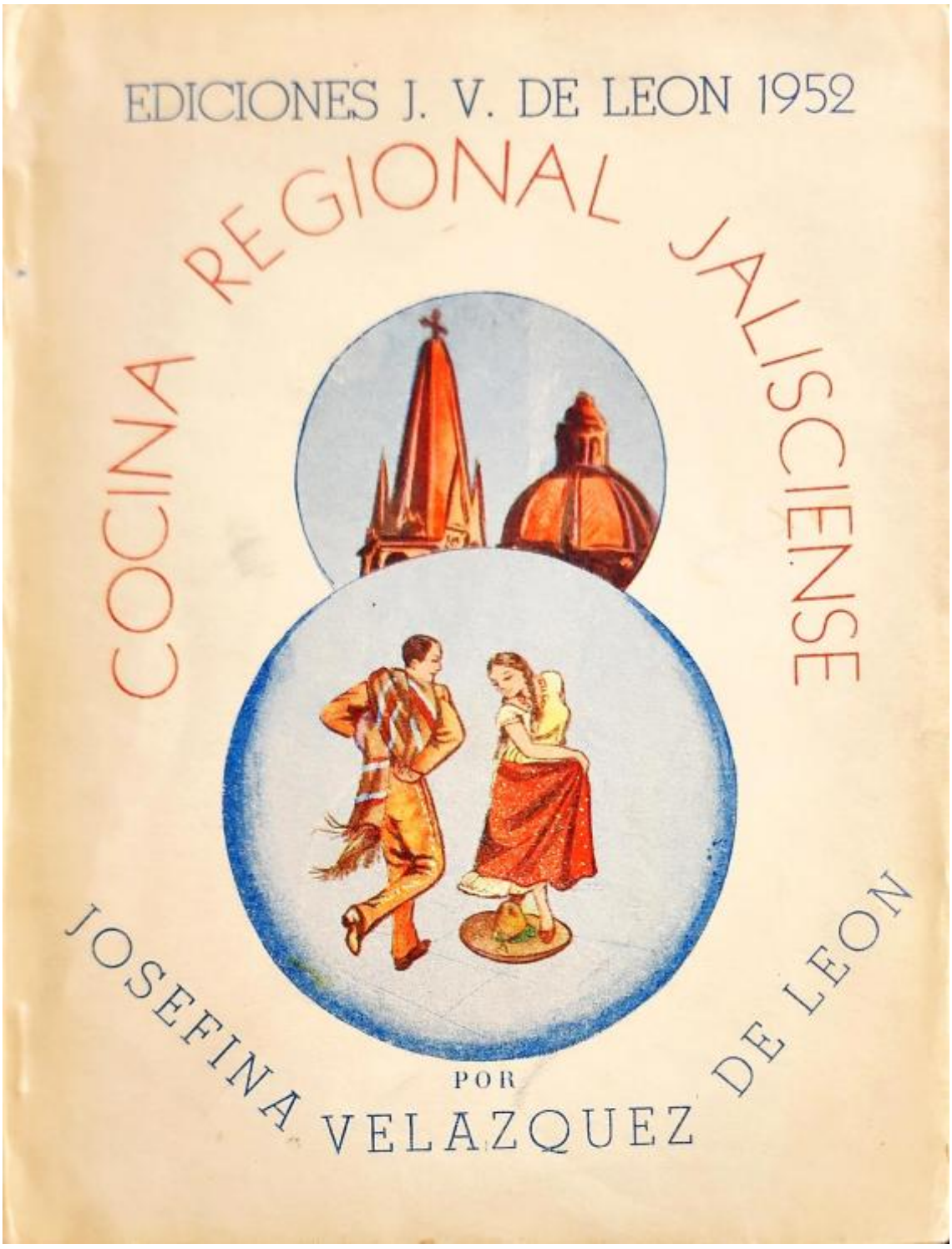

Figure 4:Josefina Velázquez de León, *Cocina regional Jalisciense* (Mexico, D.F.: Academia Velázquez de León, 1952). University of Texas at San Antonio Libraries Special Collections.



Figure 5: Josefina Velázquez de León, *Cocina Campeche* (Mexico, D.F.: Academia Velázquez de León, 1953). University of Texas at San Antonio Libraries Special Collections.



Figure 6: Josefina Velázquez de León, *Cocina Yucateca* (Mexico, D.F.: Academia Velázquez de León, 1955). University of Texas at San Antonio Libraries Special Collections.



Figure 7: Josefina Velázquez de León, *Cocina regional de Michoacana* (Mexico, D.F.: Academia Velázquez de León, 1952). University of Texas at San Antonio Libraries Special Collections.



Figure 8: Josefina Velázquez de León, *Cocina Veracruzana* (Mexico, D.F.: Academia Velázquez de León, 1955). University of Texas at San Antonio Libraries Special Collections.

The absence of indigenous feminine knowledge and labor becomes particularly evident in *Cocina Oaxaqueña* (1950). In this cover, four white women dressed in intricately embroidered

huipiles are shown dancing, while the only indigenous figure is relegated to the background and rendered with minimal detail. This compositional choice underscores the marginalization of indigenous presence even within representations of regions deeply rooted in indigenous culture. Although little information is readily available about the artists responsible for these illustrations, a recent eBay posting attributes the artwork to Mexican artist Eduardo Cataño [58]. These visual examples of appropriation ultimately speak to a broader nationalist project that reinterprets indigenous practices through a lens of consumable whiteness.

[58] 1950's Beautiful Senoritas Oaxaca Eduardo Catano Amazing Art Mexican Poster," eBay, listing no.293421462968,posted August22,2024,sold by user toysmexico, https://www.ebay.com/itm/293421462968.
The listing features a poster of the cover image of *Cocina Oaxaqueña*, including Cataño's signature. His most recognizable work, *Flor del Bajío* similarly appropriates Indigenous fashion, depicting a white woman (allegedly inspired by actress Ava Gardner), demonstrating a recurring motif in Cataño's artistic style.

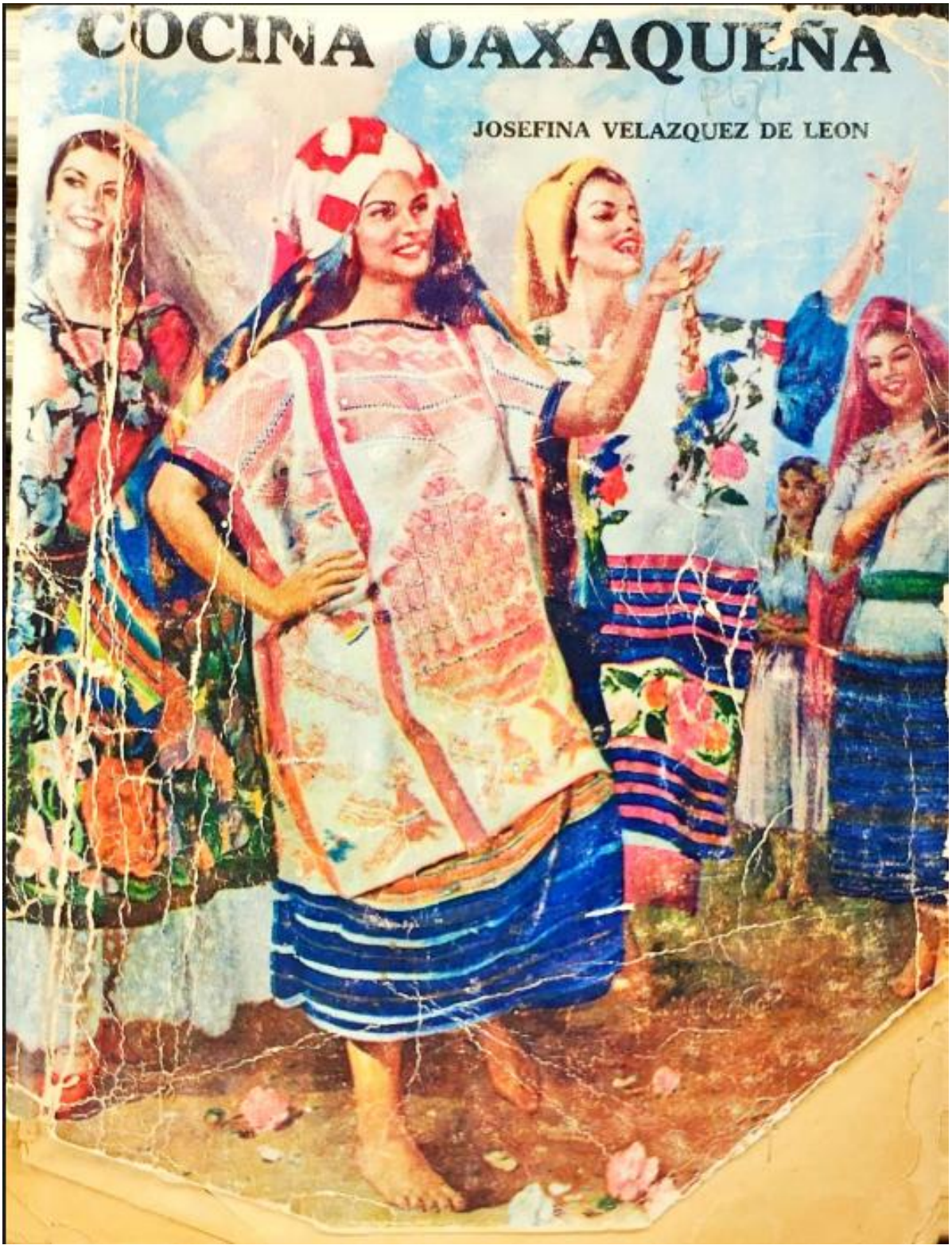

Figure 9: Josefina Velázquez de León, *Cocina Oaxaqueña* (Mexico, D.F.: Academia Velázquez de León, 1950). University of Texas at San Antonio Libraries Special Collections.

Cocina Poblana (1952) offers a particularly clear example of how the myth of mole was rendered accessible and consumable for a broad audience. The cover itself visually reinforces this narrative, depicting a nun serving a cazo of mole to a viceroy. This framing continues in the opening pages of the cookbook, where Josefina Velázquez de León presents a version of the myth that closely mirrors that of Valle Arizpe. She writes: "Tanto él como el Obispo y todos los comensales, quedaron encantados de tan regio platillo y desde esa fecha hasta nuestros días el MOLE POBLANO se toma en casas de ricos y pobres, siendo el platillo predilecto, no sólo en Puebla, sino en toda la República Mexicana."[59] By reproducing this narrative almost verbatim, she positions the story not as folklore or legend, but as an authoritative origin of the dish. She repeats this pattern with chiles en nogada, similarly introducing the recipe through Valle Arizpe's origin story.

[59] Josefina Velázquez de León, *Cocina Poblana* (México: Academia de cocina y repostería Velázquez de León, 1952), University of Texas at San Antonio Digital Collections, https://utsa.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/01UTXSANT_INST/ken82l/alma9924873513904621. 7.

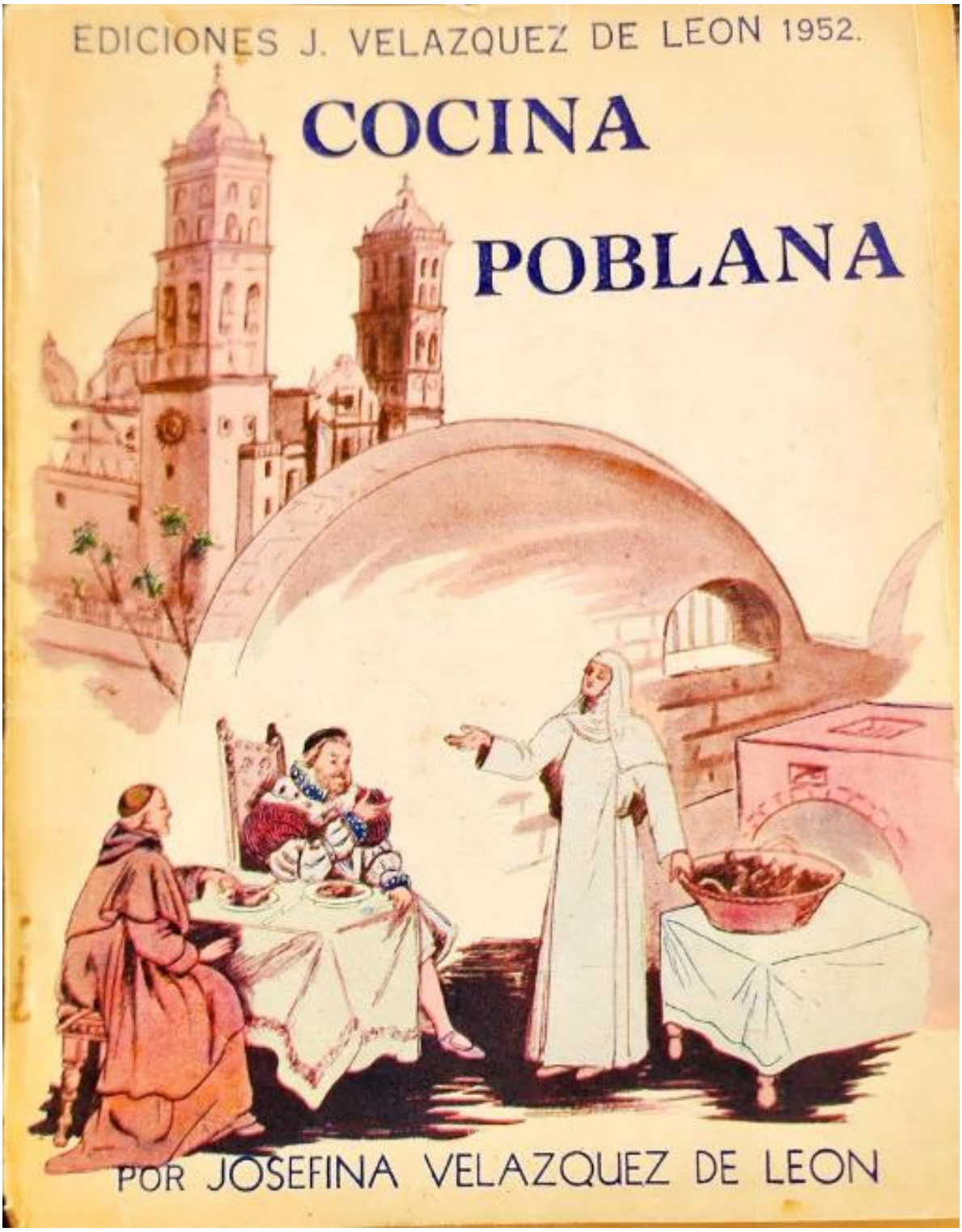

Figure 10: Josefina Velázquez de León, *Cocina Poblana* (Mexico, D.F.: Academia Velázquez de León, 1952). University of Texas at San Antonio Libraries Special Collections.

The significance of this choice lies not in the inclusion of the myth itself but in Velázquez de León's decision to center it as foundational knowledge within the cookbook. In doing so, she effectively legitimizes the narrative, presenting it as a historical fact rather than a constructed or contested account. Given her prominence and authority within Mexican culinary culture, this framing carries considerable weight, shaping how readers understand the origins of these emblematic dishes. As Luis Ozmar Pedroza Ortega explains, Velázquez de León's influence extended beyond print into mass media, amplifying her role in standardizing and disseminating culinary knowledge:

> La unión de la televisión y la cocina proyectó cómo México se modernizaba y se unificaba como una nación que compartía prácticas culturales. La cocina de Josefina Velázquez de León transmitida en la televisión es el ejemplo claro de la materialización de la formación de un mercado nacional porque, por primera vez, una receta podía ser transmitida de manera simultánea y preparada en todo México; es decir, el mole poblano podía ser elaborado tanto en el centro como en el norte del país, ya que se tenía la fórmula estandarizada y difundida en medios de comunicación y podían conseguirse los ingredientes debido al intercambio comercial establecido entre las regiones. Era la cristalización de la unificación nacional.[60]

In this context, her repetition and elevation of the mole origin myth function not only as storytelling, but as a mechanism of diffusion that operated within the PRI's nationalist agenda — one made all the more effective by the legitimacy her nearly forty-year career afforded her across media, from print to radio to television. Her ubiquity in Mexican public life gave her work a cultural authority that moved fluidly between the domestic and the national, subtly reinforcing the mole myth and broader narratives around Indigenous dishes and presenting them as natural and representative expressions of twentieth-century Mexican identity.

[60] Luis Ozmar Pedroza Ortega, "La cocina se cuela en la radio y televisión mexicanas," *Revista BiCentenario. El ayer y hoy de México*, no. 58 (Instituto Mora, 2023), 55.

Conclusion

This chapter has traced how mole and Indigenous cuisine were appropriated by the Mexican post-revolutionary government as part of a broader nationalist project — one constructed, in no small part, to obscure the unfinished promises of the revolution. Through the institutionalization of nutrition as a site of political intervention, the PRI secured cultural legitimacy by repackaging Indigenous foodways for national consumption, transforming dishes like mole into symbols of a unified Mexican identity that quietly erased the very communities from which those traditions came. This process operated on multiple, often contradictory levels — a discourse of cultural homogenization that built upon the intellectual currents of the early twentieth century and found its way into cookbooks, newspapers, and media that reflected deep anti-Indigenous attitudes even as they celebrated Indigenous cuisine.

At the center of this chapter is Josefina Velázquez de León, whose pioneering role in Mexican culinary culture cannot be separated from the political atmosphere in which her career flourished. Her works, produced within the confines of a *dictablanda*, functioned as cultural texts aligned with the PRI's nationalist agenda — elevating the mole myth and reframing Indigenous and Afro-Mexican culinary traditions in ways that rendered their origins legible and palatable to a modernizing nation, while leaving the injustices visited upon Indigenous communities by the failures of the revolution largely unspoken. Though her name is not widely recognized today, her legacy did not disappear; it was inherited. It lives on in the work of figures like Rick Bayless and the late Diana Kennedy, white American faces who absorbed an already fraught culinary narrative and carried it into international prominence, compounding the erasure by adding another layer of displacement between Indigenous communities and the recognition of their own traditions. More than fifty years after Velázquez de León, the myths she helped circulate remain

embedded in how Mexican cuisine is understood, marketed, and consumed — which is precisely why they must be interrogated, named, and refused.

III. TACO BELL'S STRATEGIC APPROPRIATION OF LO MEXICANO

Café Mitla in the Shadow of Taco Bell

In downtown San Bernardino, California, just off historic Route 66 on Mount Vernon Avenue, you'll find Mitla Café, a small family-owned restaurant serving dishes you might expect to see listed see listed on Mexican restaurant menus throughout the United States: tostadas, enchiladas, tamales, burritos, tacos, and chiles rellenos alongside a few "American flavor" offerings like burgers, French fries, and club sandwiches.. Mitla Café is owned and run by third-generation descendants of Lucia Rodriguez, who opened the restaurant in 1937 after immigrating from Tepatitlán, Jalisco and ran it until her death in 1981. Under Ms. Rodríguez's ownership, Mitla Café, was at once a popular dining spot and a site for community organizing. As an active member of the local C*ámara de Comercio Mexicana,* working to ban racial segregation and advance Mexican entrepreneurial endeavors in the region, she often hosted meetings there.[61] The community organizing that Ms. Rodriguez established at Mitla Café helped make it a vital hub of connection for the Mexican community of San Bernardino and environs, a family legacy that continues today.

[61] Rebecca Ortenberg, "The Mitla Cafe: Serving the San Bernardino Community for Generations," December 7, 2023, https://savingplaces.org/stories/the-mitla-cafe; Mark Ocegueda, "Sol y Sombra: San Bernardino's Mexican Community, 1880–1960" (University of California, Irvine, 2017), https://escholarship.org/uc/item/39x753fm; The San Bernardino Cámara de Comercio Mexicana was created in the 1940s to give Mexican business leaders—who were prohibited from joining the racially segregated Chamber of Commerce—"a stronger voice within the city" and to work toward "unity and cohesion" (160–161).

Among Café Mitla's many regulars was Glen Bell, a World War II veteran and San Bernardino local who served hotdogs and hamburgers across the street at *Bell's Drive-In*, which he opened in 1948. Members of the Rodriguez family remember Mr. Bell as a frequent patron with a particular fondness for their tacos dorados and a propensity to "ask lots of questions about how we made tacos and then leave."[62] In 1954, Glen Bell began putting the knowledge he had gained at Café Milta to his own use, opening Taco Tia first in San Bernardino, then in Redlands and a third in Riverside. After selling the Taco Tia franchise to his business partner in 1955, his new taco franchise El Taco in Long Beach, which he eventually sold to his shares in. With another name change, he opened his last and most successful solo restaurant Taco Bell in 1962 and three years later it was franchised. In 1967, the company celebrated it 100th locale in Anaheim. In 1970, Taco Bell went public with 325 restaurants across the country, in 1978, Bell 868 locations, 1.43 shares of PepsiCo common stock for each of the 3.5 million outstanding shares of Taco. In Bell's authorized 1999 biography by Debra Lee Baldwin, *Taco Titan: The Glen Bell Story*, Bell never mentioned the Rodriguez family, nor did he ever credit them or Mitla Café.

[62] David Farley, "How Taco Bell 'Stole' the Taco," *BBC*, July 1, 2021, https://www.bbc.com/travel/article/20210630-how-taco-bell-stole-the-taco.



Figure 12: Exterior of Mitla Cafe. Rebecca Ortenberg, "The Mitla Cafe: Serving the San Bernardino Community for Generations," National Trust for Historic Preservation,

This chapter examines the way the cultural histories of these two seemingly unrelated businesses encapsulate Mitla—and, more importantly, its legacy as a community gathering spot for the Mexican community and standard-bearer of a West Coast Mexican-owned restaurant in San Bernardino—a legacy that is often obfuscated by the fictitious narratives we have been fed for generations by Taco Bell's marketing. Two stories emerge here: the first is Bell's story of the hardworking American entrepreneur who rose from the working class to millionaire status—a narrative built upon the uncredited cultural traditions and labor of Mexican immigrants whose knowledge and ways of life are quietly derived from and repurposed to sustain it. The second is the larger story of Taco Bell's marketing itself, which "trolls" or mocks the very Mexican communities from whom its products are ostensibly derived, profiting off the marginalization of the same peoples and traditions it appropriates.

Taco Bell and other corporate Mexican fast-food chains that followed its model such as Del Taco and Taco Time operate as culturally and popularly separate from Mexican people and

their lived realities. While. Taco Bell is the transnational corporate giant among them, owned today by Yum Brand Foods. Each of these Mexican-coded but not Mexican-owned fast-food businesses depends for its food stylization, packaging, and marketing strategies on the social construction of an *imaginary Mexico* within the wider Anglo-American society around which it has grown. These strategies center on offering discreetly transgressive yet homogenized, de-exoticized, and portable versions of Mexican food, which serve as portals through which non-Mexican consumers may make safe, ephemeral contact with all that they secretly find alluring about Mexican culture and identity. Within this imaginary, such fast-food corporations position their "Mexican" food products as safe, flavorful pathways through which U.S. consumers can access what they perceive to be the *essence* of Mexico, without ever confronting the social, political, or economic realities of Mexican life on either side of the Mexico-U.S. border. In this framework, the tastes and desires of the American consumer take center stage, while the complexities of Mexican people and culture are relegated to the margins.



Figure 13: Cámara de Comercio Mexicana meeting at Mitla Cafe in the late 1940s. Mark Ocegueda, *Sol y Sombra: San Bernardino's Mexican Community*, 1880–1960 (UC Irvine, 2017), 61, https://escholarship.org/uc/item/39x753fm.

The Commoditization of the Mexicanesque

Insofar as corporations such as Taco Bell project an image of their commodities as existing within a remotely Mexican universe, they participate in the settler colonial logic of subordinating the lived realities of Mexican people to the context of Anglo-American border imperialism—reducing them to an *imaginary Mexico* whose make-believe, cartoonish inhabitants exist only to satisfy the bodily desires of non-Mexican consumers, and to magically absorb the abject aspects of those desires onto themselves. While Taco Bell entices consumers with this fantasy-version of Mexico, or the *Mexicanesque,* its corporate history and ubiquitous

presence in the realm of U.S. and international highly processed food consumption speaks more to what the late Rodolfo Acuña famously calls "Occupied America"—the U.S. side of the Mexico-U.S. borderlands in which real Mexicans remain unseen, unheard, and uncredited.[63]

By *Mexicanesque*, I refer to the appropriation of Mexican stories and cultural practices for white American consumption, as described by William Anthony Nericcio. Michael Dowdy captures this dynamic succinctly. “Taco Bell is quintessentially ‘Mexicanesque’ in that it contorts, caricatures, and essentializes ‘Mexican’ identity for quick and cheap consumption by white Americans.”[64] Taco Bell, then, functions as a cultural apparatus that packages an imaginary Mexico for mass consumption. It transforms a complex and living culture into an aesthetic of familiarity—one that allows Americans to indulge their senses in an exhilarating illusion of momentary unity of the self with the Mexican other while remaining blissfully detached from the people and histories that make that otherness real.

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[63] Rodolfo Acuña, *Occupied America: The Chicano’s Struggle toward Liberation* (San Francisco: Canfield Press, 1972).

[64] Michael Dowdy, “‘Mexican or Something’: Reading the Novels of Mexicanesque Appalachia,” *Contemporary Literature* 64, no. 4 (2023): 444.



Figure 14: First Taco Bell in Downey, California promoted the Mexicanesque through Mission-style fake adobe. (1962). "Meet the Man Behind the Bell," Taco Bell, March 13, 2019, accessed, https://www.tacobell.com/stories/glen-bell.

My analysis of Taco Bell operates along two main axes. The first concerns the foundations upon which Taco Bell grew from one knock-off taco joint to a multinational corporation leading the growth of a 43 billion dollar company[65] —its appropriation and reinforcement of already prevalent racist beliefs, as well as a corporate design that positioned the company as readily accessible to low-income Americans and their demand for cheap, fast food. The second axis focuses on Taco Bell's cultural output—its imagery, branding, and stylistic decisions. The company relied on the "othering" of Mexican people to craft a version of Mexican-inspired food that was close enough to evoke familiarity but distant enough to erase the

[65] Katherine Hamilton, "Yum! Brands Sales Rise on Taco Bell, KFC Growth," *Wall Street Journal*, April 29, 2026, https://www.wsj.com/business/earnings/yum-brands-sales-rise-on-taco-bell-kfc-growth-bfe20dfb?eafs_enabled=false

complexity, authenticity, and humanity of actual Mexican cuisine and culture. In doing so, Taco Bell occupied a cultural space where criticism could easily be dismissed as trivial.



Figure 14: Glen and Martha Bell posing for an early Taco Bell advertisement. "Glen and Martha Bell Preparing Mexican Food at Their Home," *Bakersfield Californian*, October 16, 1968, 49.

In other words, modern Taco Bell has branded itself in a way that distances its products from contemporary discourses on immigration and Mexican identity, effectively masking how its portrayal and packaging of "Mexican" food extend post–World War II U.S. anti-Mexican sentiment. It is important to examine Taco Bell's branding of *Mexicanidad* because, while the corporation was not the first to repackage Mexican foods for an American audience, it was the first to corporatize these dishes on such a massive scale. Taco Bell established the template for modern Mexican fast-food chains, setting both a standard to emulate and a model to compete against. As Latino scholars, we must pay attention to trends in the fast-food industry because institutions like Taco Bell—and its parent company, Yum! Brands—function as powerful cultural

referents. They shape mainstream understandings of *Mexicanness* and, by extension, contribute to implicit judgments about who does and does not belong within the imagined community of the United States.

For this chapter, I employ a textual analysis of Taco Bell's discourse, drawing in part on Taco Titan: The Glen Bell Story by Debra Lee Baldwin, a collaborative biography of Glen Bell. This analysis is supplemented by a range of cultural materials, including television commercials, menu imagery, and urban legends, as well as user-generated content from online forums such as Reddit. By examining both corporate-produced narratives and their circulation within popular culture, this study traces how meaning is constructed, reproduced, and contested across different media. While critical race theory provides tools to interrogate the racialized assumptions and power dynamics underlying Taco Bell's branding, folkloristics allows examination of how narratives, jokes, and legends—such as urban myths and internet discourse—circulate, evolve, and encode cultural anxieties. Together, these frameworks enable us to situate Taco Bell's discourse within a broader system of storytelling that both reflects and reproduces attitudes toward Mexican-coded food and identity.

Food Contamination Myths and Anti-Mexican Racism

With the expansion of the U.S. highway system and the rise of suburban living after World War II came the need to feed a new commuting population. As Gary Alan Fine describes: "Probably no change in American society has been as dramatic as the change in American residential patterns from small towns and rural areas to urban and suburban living. In 1790 only five percent of the population resided in towns or cities with more than 2,500 residents; by 1970

two-thirds of the American population lived in these 'urban' areas."[66] This shift represented a significant disruption to the social fabric of American families. Prior generations—particularly the World War II and boomer generations—had understood the family unit as the backbone of American society.[67] Yet suburban living placed families in closer proximity to the state and to corporate institutions.

This social changed meant that suburbs produced commuters; commuters required highways; and highways required large-scale government investment funded by taxes. This new reliance on government infrastructure coincided with the rise of corporations that stepped in to meet the specific needs of suburban life—car manufacturers, fossil fuel companies, and, central to this chapter, fast-food restaurants designed to keep pace with the lifestyle of the American commuter. At the same time, this increasing dependence on both state and corporate systems generated a parallel sense of distrust and suspicion toward the very infrastructures enabling such change. Earlier generations had greater access to self-sustaining lifestyles, whereas food—once a local and personal endeavor—was becoming fast, convenient, and tied to large institutional providers. As Fine analyzes: "Concurrent with the growth of government as a provider, there has

[66] Gary Alan Fine, "The Kentucky Fried Rat: Legends and Modern Society," *Journal of the Folklore Institute* 17, no. 2/3 (1980): 226.

[67] Wade Clark Roof and Lyn Gesch, "Boomers and the Culture of Choice: Changing Patterns of Work, Family, and Religion," in *Work, Family and Religion in Contemporary Society* (London: Routledge, 1995).

been an increase in the role of profit enterprises. Once food was almost exclusively prepared and consumed in private residences. Now, more than one meal in three is served outside the home."[68]

This shift laid the groundwork for the rise of fast-food restaurants, and with them emerged a distinctive body of lore. Fast-food lore can be traced to the uncertainties and anxieties produced by rapid societal change. Part of this anxiety came from the destruction of small communities caused by highway expansion. The term *urban legend* itself points to the deep connection between storytelling and attitudes toward urbanization. Why does fast-food lore matter? Because it provides insight into the fears and tensions accompanying social transformation. Legends that endure over time function as a kind of cultural archive—a snapshot of their moment. When a particular legend resurfaces, it often signals that its underlying themes have regained relevance.

Following the explosive growth of McDonald's and the cultural prominence of fast food in the 1960s and 1970s, urban legends increasingly centered on the trustworthiness of fast-food establishments. One of the most notable is the legend of the "Kentucky Fried Rat." In this tale, an unsuspecting customer purchases a bucket of fried chicken, only to discover that one of the pieces is, in fact, a fried rat. While versions vary in descriptive detail and outcome, the core structure remains consistent: a bucket of chicken, an initial act of consumption, and the shocking revelation of a rodent. The longer version collected by Gary Alan Fine heightens the consequences of this food deception, culminating in death:

> Before going to the movies, a young man and his date stopped at a fast-food chain fried chicken stand, purchasing a bucket of fried chicken to eat at the show. The girl complained that one of her pieces of chicken was rather rough and "rubbery." Toward the

[68] Gary Alan Fine, "The Kentucky Fried Rat: Legends and Modern Society," *Journal of the Folklore Institute* 17, no. 2/3 (1980): 225

> end of the film, she became violently ill. The boyfriend was so concerned at her sudden and intense condition that he drove her to the nearest emergency hospital. The examining physician said that she appeared to have been poisoned, and he asked the young man if he knew of any possible cause. The boy raced out to the car and began burrowing through the half-consumed bucket of chicken and discovered an odd-shaped piece, half eaten. He broke off the batter and realized it was the remains of a rat, poisoned and fried along with the chicken. The girl, receiving a fatal amount of strychnine from the rat's body, died.[69]

The fact-checking website snopes.com—one of the internet's earliest digital archives of online rumor—notes that variations of this same story have persisted for decades. It resurfaced in a 2003 report from Baltimore, Maryland, in which a pastor claimed to have eaten a mouse from a local Popeyes, and again in 2015, when a Facebook post by Devorise Dixon of Watts, California circulated a photo of what appeared to be a battered and fried rodent accompanied by a stern warning not to eat KFC.[70]

The suspicions animating these legends center on food deception. Here, the perceived agent of harm is the faceless corporation. The mechanization and corporatization of something as intimate as eating becomes a cultural terrain upon which social anxieties manifest. This is particularly acute in the context of highly processed, mass-produced fast food, where the distance between the raw ingredient and the finished product is vast, deliberately obscured, and largely inaccessible to the consumer. The corporation, in this sense, becomes a kind of folk villain because the structure itself is experienced as indifferent, extractive, and unaccountable. When these food fears intersect with racial tensions, the figure of the ethnic other becomes the

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[69]Ibid, 230–31. Fine notes that the original account was quoted from the UCLA Folklore Archives, collected by Robert J. Williamson from a male, age twenty-five, Santa Monica, California, January 1973, 229–30.

[70] David Mikkelson, "Kentucky Fried Rat," *Snopes*, February 5, 2001, https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/critter-fritter/.

face of corporate suspicion and the embodiment of cultural threat. The anxieties that might otherwise be directed at the faceless corporation are displaced onto a racialized body, collapsing the distinction between industrial distrust and ethnic prejudice into a single, more insidious narrative.

Narrowing in on this theme of food deception, consuming ethnic food with an underlying fear that you are consuming something else—we need to discuss the racial undertones embedded in food-contamination myths revolving around ethnic cuisine. As Julien Giry explains, "...food legends transcend this mere moral dimension to become a more elaborated narration with a political dimension. Here, the often accidental, isolated, one-time, or sole story gives way to political conspiracy theories that incriminate an almighty secret enemy who rules every aspect of our lives."[71] These narratives do not emerge in a vacuum; rather, they draw from deep historical roots.

Their origins trace back to the antisemitic myths of the Middle Ages. Felsenstein mentions the persistent accusation that Jews deliberately set about to poison well water as a means of damaging Christendom.[72] Rockaway and Gutfeld explain that the blood libel charge—the false accusation that Jews murder Christians to use their blood in religious rites—persisted, as noted in a nineteenth-century American riot that occurred in Brooklyn in 1850, which was

[71] Julien Giry, "Panic(s) in Our Plates: Contemporary Legends and Conspiracy Theories on Food," *Contemporary Legend* 1 (December 2023): 11.

[72] Frank Felsenstein, "Jews and Devils: Antisemitic Stereotypes of Late Medieval and Renaissance England," *Literature and Theology* 4, no. 1 (1990): 15–28.

fueled by the rumor that Jewish families had murdered a Christian girl for the holy day feast. [73] These myths framed minority communities as existential threats through imagined contamination, foreshadowing later racialized food panics.

Similarly, anti-Asian sentiment often conflates Chinese people and Chinese food with contamination and hazard, serving as a resurgence of the "Yellow Peril" panic Choe writes that this rhetoric "stigmatized Chinese food and Chinese people—and all 'interchangeable Asians' who could be, for any reason, imagined as Chinese—as potential sources of contact with an exotic lethal disease able to infect other races.4 In the rhetoric of Yellow Peril, the dichotomy between White European victimhood and Yellow Chinese threat bound together all Asians collectively as a racialized entity in which Chinese became a representative synonym of Asian, which is color-coded as yellow."[74]This association with contagion is not new; Chinese communities also became scapegoats during the bubonic plague outbreaks in the early twentieth century, when Asian food was at the "epicenter of concern" as a "carrier of disease."[75] The COVID-19 pandemic simply revived this long-standing narrative.

Jia Jen-fu further traces this discourse to nineteenth-century Western depictions of Chinese dietary practices. According to Jen-fu, a prominent Christian missionary, Walter Medhurst, played a major role in shaping Western views of Chinese customs. Medhurst claimed

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[73] Robert Rockaway and Arnon Gutfeld, "Demonic Images of the Jew in the Nineteenth Century United States," *American Jewish History* 89, no. 4 (2001): 355–81.

[74] Soojung Choe, "Food, Contamination, and Race-Thinking: Culinary Encounters in Late Medieval Missionary Accounts of Asia," *Speculum* 99, no. 2 (2024): 459.

[75] Ibid, 460.

that the Chinese had "the most unscrupulous stomachs imaginable," eating everything of an animal "from hide to entrails."[76] Their consumption of meats unfamiliar or repulsive to Westerners became, in these accounts, an index of moral character—evidence of "unscrupulousness" and a failure to "follow the right kinds of rules." As Jen-fu concludes, "this idea of the 'unscrupulous stomach' has never gone away... interest in what Chinese people ate became more than simply a discussion of their eating habits: it was rather an index of their moral character… And I think we see that again today."[77]

Such stereotypes persisted across centuries. Blaine was one of many white observers who commented negatively on the Chinese diet and the vital role of rice. A popular stereotype held that the Chinese could survive on a diet of "rice and rats."[78] These depictions helped give rise to an offshoot of Yellow Peril ideology—one centered specifically on malicious food contamination, in which ethnic foods were imagined as dangerous, deceptive, or intentionally harmful.

An offshoot of Yellow Peril ideology can be seen in myths of food contamination in Chinese restaurants across the United States. Even prior to the Chinese Exclusion Acts of 1882, the racist stereotype that Chinese restaurants used dogs cats or rodents as the meat in the dishes

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[76] Michelle T. King, Jia-Chen Fu, Miranda Brown, and Donny Santacaterina, "Rumor, Chinese Diets, and COVID-19: Questions and Answers about Chinese Food and Eating Habits," *Gastronomica* 21, no. 1 (2021): 81. The quoted passages are drawn from Walter Medhurst, *China: Its State and Prospects* (1838), as cited in King et al.

[77] Ibid, 81

[78] Sherrie A. Inness, *Secret Ingredients: Race, Gender, and Class at the Dinner Table*, 1st ed. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 43.

persisted. Allegations that Chinese restaurants use these "mystery meats," and maintain "dirty kitchens," have circulated in the United States for over a century, mutating with each era's fears. These myths draw on the colonial trope that non-Western peoples possess inherently lax hygiene, irrational cooking practices, or dangerous relationships with animals. In 1853, the Daily Alta California announced:

> If there is one class of nasty foreigners. . . more ill-favored, unfortunate, and forlorn among us, than another, it certainly must be the Chinese…Rats, lizards, mud-terrapins, rank and indigestible shellfish, and such small deer, have been and continue to be, the food of the "no ways partickler" Celestial, where flour, beef, and bacon, and other fare suitable to the stomachs of "white folk" abound. It is not to be wondered at, therefore, that the habits of the Chinese in California should excite ineffable disgust, and turn the stomachs of the stoutest Anglo-Saxon.[79]

This positioning of Chinese cuisine as not merely foreign but as a direct threat to the health of Anglo Americans forms the nucleus of longstanding food-contamination myths. The issue has never truly been the food itself—after all, ingredients like lobster, once considered the "trash food" of the poor, are now celebrated as luxury items. Rather, the perceived danger lies in the *people* associated with the cuisine. Food becomes a proxy through which racial anxieties are expressed and legitimized. To leave an ethnic cuisine unquestioned, uninspected, or unpoliced would open the possibility of social acceptance; thus, the rejection of the racialized "other" begins in the stomach. To consume another group's cuisine is symbolically to let that group in—to accept, to enjoy, to be changed. Myths of contamination work precisely to stop that process.

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[79] Quoted in Haiming Liu, *From Canton Restaurant to Panda Express: A History of Chinese Food in the United States*, Asian American Studies Today (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2015), 29.

They erect an invisible boundary around the dominant group's palate, thus marking certain flavors as dangerous.

It is within this longer history of food contamination as a vehicle for racial anxiety that the rumors surrounding Taco Bell must be understood. The chain has been plagued by such rumors since the 1960s, when stories of rat, dog, or kangaroo meat being quietly substituted for beef first began to circulate. These whispers carried enough cultural weight to eventually find their way into a courtroom: a 2011 lawsuit alleged that Taco Bell, owned by Yum! Brands, had falsely advertised as "beef" a taco filling that in fact contained "extenders" and other non-meat substances, citing a U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) definition of beef as the legal standard. The rumors did not stop there. In 2013, a Taco Bell location in the United Kingdom was found to contain traces of horse meat—a discovery that briefly reignited the same anxieties on an international stage. Taco Bell is not alone in this regard; McDonald's has faced persistent rumors about the composition of its beef, and Subway has weathered ongoing speculation about its tuna. Yet what distinguishes the Taco Bell rumors from these other cases is precisely the racial and cultural freight they carry. When placed within the historic pattern of ethnic food contamination myths, the stories of fake or adulterated meat at Taco Bell do not simply reflect generalized consumer distrust of the fast food industry—they plug into a far older and more insidious system of othering, one in which the specter of contamination has long served as a means of policing the boundaries between the dominant culture and the racialized communities whose cuisines it simultaneously craves and fears.

The Mexican Threat

The rise of Taco Bell as a corporate giant did not occur in a political vacuum. It unfolded against a backdrop of escalating tension surrounding Mexican immigration, border policy, and

the place of Mexican people within the American national imaginary—a tension that found expression not only in legislation and political rhetoric, but in the cultural narratives, folk legends, and popular anxieties that shaped how ordinary Americans understood their relationship to Mexico and its people. To grasp the full significance of those cultural expressions, we must first understand the political and economic conditions that produced them.

Just as the United States was experiencing massive industrialization in the 1970s, so too was Mexico, with its expanding network of maquiladora factories spurring rapid growth in northern border cities such as Tijuana, Mexicali, Ciudad Juárez, Nuevo Laredo, and Monterrey. This parallel industrialization was was structural. The maquiladora model was itself a product of U.S. economic policy, designed to capitalize on cheap Mexican labor while keeping the benefits firmly on the American side of the border. The result was a profound and contradictory interdependence: Mexico's northern corridor was being reshaped by American capital and demand, even as American political culture increasingly cast Mexican migrants—many of them displaced by the very economic forces the U.S. had set in motion—as an invading threat. This economic growth was mutually fed as the post world war two model of industrial growth, that centralized manufacturing jobs with US cities, was abandoned in favor of a pre-NAFTA model, as Durand et al. describe.

> In developed nations, production grew more capital intensive and markets fragmented as mass production methods gave way to just-in-time delivery, flexible accumulation, out-sourcing, and continuous flow manufacturing, all carried out on a global scale. In developing nations, state bureaucracies were slashed, government- owned firms were privatized, and tariff barriers were dismantled to expose formerly protected, insular economies to the full force of global competition[80].

[80] Jorge Durand et al., "The New Era of Mexican Migration to the United States," *The Journal of American History* 86, no. 2 (1999): 519, https://doi.org/10.2307/2567043.

Paired with an increase in both documented and undocumented Mexican immigration to the United States, rhetoric surrounding immigration from the southern border began to shift.[81] In the 1970s, Ronald Reagan initially approached the issue with a degree of nuance. By the 1980s, however, his rhetoric had hardened into one of wariness, warning that an "invasion" of illegal aliens signaled that the country had "lost control of [its] borders" and would, without detention, "crumble under the burden of overwhelming numbers."[82]

This shift in rhetoric helped pave the way for the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) of 1986, which sought to curb undocumented immigration by criminally punishing American employers who hired undocumented workers. Rather than focusing solely on migrants themselves, the act attempted to reduce the demand for undocumented labor by requiring employers to verify employees' work authorization through the I-9 system. At the same time, IRCA established provisions that allowed certain undocumented migrants to apply for permanent residency.[83]

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[81] David G. Gutiérrez, "'Sin Fronteras?': Chicanos, Mexican Americans, and the Emergence of the Contemporary Mexican Immigration Debate, 1968-1978," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 10, no. 4 (1991): 5–37.

[82] United States, *Administration's Proposals on Immigration and Refugee Policy: Joint Hearing before the Subcommittee on Immigration, Refugees, and International Law of the House Committee on the Judiciary, and Subcommittee on Immigration and Refugee Policy of the Senate Committee on the Judiciary, Ninety-Seventh Congress, First Session, on Administration's Proposals on Immigration and Refugee Policy, July 30, 1981.* (U.S. G.P.O. : For sale by the Supt. of Docs., U.S. G.P.O., Congressional Sales Office, 1982), https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/011341647.

[83] Durand et al., "The New Era of Mexican Migration to the United States."

These policies marked a significant change in the national narrative surrounding Mexican immigrants, particularly in rapidly growing urban and agricultural regions such as California. There, agricultural growers successfully lobbied for the expansion of the H-2A temporary worker program in order to increase the flow of temporary agricultural laborers. As a result, border enforcement—once a largely bureaucratic concern—became embedded in the daily lives of working Americans. Moreover, IRCA formally entrenched the distinction between "legal" and "illegal" immigrants, further perpetuating suspicion toward immigrant communities.

It is precisely this contradiction—between economic reliance and cultural hostility—that gives the urban legends and food contamination myths of this period their particular charge. As they reflected popular prejudice, they also gave narrative form to a deeper anxiety, one that was at its root political and economic: an anxiety about proximity, porousness, and the impossibility of keeping separate two societies that were, in every material sense, already deeply entangled. It is no surprise, then, that popular suspicions directed toward the growing Latino immigrant community found one of their most persistent outlets in urban legend. These orally transmitted narratives, typically set against an urban backdrop, function both as static snapshots of societal reactions to historical change and as dynamic litmus tests, since their circulation and variation tend to reemerge at specific political moments.

Their ease of transmission and malleability, moreover, position urban legend as vessels through which communities process, negotiate, and reinforce their fears. As Linda Dégh argues, legends "manifest in discussions, contradictions, additions, implementations, corrections, approvals, and disapprovals during some or all phases of their transmission, from their inception

through various courses of elaboration, variation, decline, and revitalization." [84]T hey are, in other words, never static; they breathe and mutate in response to the political atmosphere that sustains them. or this reason, I propose analyzing Taco Bell's rise as a pioneering force in American Mexican fast food through the lens of three urban legends circulating at the time: "The Mexican Pet," "Lights Out!," and "The Choking Doberman." By examining how these stories engage with themes of Latinidad and Mexicanidad, we can better understand the sociopolitical anxieties that both shaped the company's ascent and influenced perceptions of its customer base.

The "lights out" myth, which began circulating in the 1980s, refers to an urban legend in which a car driving without headlights serves as bait for a gang initiation ritual. In the story, an unsuspecting driver who signals the unlit car becomes the target of violence. A version collected by *Snopes* in 2005 recounts the legend as follows:

> A police officer working with the DARE program has issued this warning: If you are driving after dark and see an on-coming car with no headlights on, DO NOT FLASH YOUR LIGHTS AT THEM! This is a common gang member "initiation game" that goes like this:The new gang member under initiation drives along with no headlights, and the first car to flash their headlights at him is now his "target". He is now required to turn around and chase that car, and shoot at or into the car in order to complete his initiation requirements. Make sure you share this information with all the drivers in your family![85]

While the tale's "gang member" remains unspecified and male, I argue that its cautionary tone and PSA-style delivery—where the Other is presented as a patient predator, an outsider infiltrating the suburbs in order to murder unsuspecting yet benevolent American drivers—points

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[84] Linda Dégh, *Legend and Belief: Dialectics of a Folklore Genre* (Indiana University Press, 2001). 2.

[85] Barbara Mikkelson, "Flashing Headlights Gang Initiation," *Snopes*, November 30, 1998, https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/lights-out/.

to a shift in popular narratives surrounding increased immigration and the urbanization of America. Although the "Lights Out!" tale never explicitly identifies who this dangerous gangster is, we can infer, given the racial anxiety that fueled the rise in white families moving to the suburbs, that the Other is racialized. As Friedrich M. Wirt explains in his discussion of 1970s "white flight," the exodus of white American families from cities to suburbs following desegregation: "Thus the fear of blacks, one of the forces in the suburban 'white flight,' matched by the fear of increased taxes, are currently working toward basic alteration of state-local relations in education, and, if extended, to other services."[86] Similarly, "The Choking Doberman", which began circulating in the lates 70s reflects this juxtaposition of a safe suburban home, being invaded by an unknown threat:

> It happened in Las Vegas. A woman returned from work and found her large dog, a Doberman, lying on the floor gasping for air. Concerned over the animal's welfare, she immediately loaded the pet into her car and drove him to a veterinarian. The vet examined the dog but finding no reason for his breathing difficulties, announced that he'd have to perform a tracheotomy and insert tubes down the animal's throat so he could breathe. He explained that it wasn't anything she'd want to watch and urged the woman to go home and leave the Doberman there overnight. When the woman returned home, the phone was ringing off the hook. She answered it, and was surprised to discover it was the vet. Even more surprising was his message — "Get out of the house immediately! Go to the neighbor's and call the police! "It seems that when the vet performed the operation, he found a very grisly reason for the dog's breathing difficulty — three human fingers were lodged in its throat. Concerned that the person belonging to the dismembered fingers might still be in the house, he phoned to warn the woman. According to the story, police arrived at her house and found an unconscious intruder, sans fingers, lying in a closet.[87]

The symbolism of the white, presumably American home can be interpreted as a metaphor for white suburbia under threat of invasion by racialized "others." Much like in "Light's Out!", the identity of the intruder is left deliberately ambiguous, allowing the fear to operate on a more

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[86] Frederick M. Wirt, "Suburbs and Politics in America," *Publius* 5, no. 1 (1975: 132.

[87] Barbara Mikkelson, "The Choking Doberman," *Snopes*, December 16, 2000, https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/the-choking-doberman/. (snopes.com)

abstract level. However, in some variations of the legend, the intruder is explicitly racialized through details such as “black fingers” or “Mexican fingers,” which serve as supposed proof of their identity. These additions reveal how underlying anxieties about race and demographic change can shape the narrative, transforming a general fear of intrusion into a more specific fear of racialized outsiders entering and disrupting the perceived safety and homogeneity of white suburban space.”[88]

Unlike the previous two examples, which more indirectly associate Mexico and Mexicans with danger, “The Mexican Pet” legend explicitly positions the country itself as the source of threat to the American suburban population. While multiple versions of the story exist, the central premise remains consistent: an American tourist visits Mexico, rescues what appears to be a stray dog, and brings it back across the border, only to later witness its grotesque transformation and realize that it is not a dog at all but a rat. This narrative crystallizes anxieties about contamination, deception, and cross-border movement, and a 1986 version collected by Brunvand most succinctly captures the suspicion toward Mexico encoded in the myth:

> A woman from La Mesa, California, went to Tijuana, Mexico, to do some shopping. As any visitor to this border town knows, the streets near the shopping areas are populated with stray dogs. The woman took pity on one little stray and offered it a few bites of her lunch, after which it followed her around for the rest of the afternoon. When it came time to return home, the woman had become so attached to her little friend that she couldn't bear to leave him behind. Knowing that it was illegal to bring a dog across the international border, she hid him among some packages on the seat of her car and managed to pass through the border checkpoint without incident. After arriving home, she gave the dog a bath, brushed his fur, then retired for the night with her newfound pet curled up at the foot of her bed, When she awoke the next morning, the woman noticed that there was an oozing mucus around the dog's eyes and a slight foaming at the mouth. Afraid that the dog might be sick, she rushed him to a nearby veterinarian and returned home to await word on her pet's condition. The call soon came. "I have just one

[88] Jan Harold Brunvand, *Encyclopedia of Urban Legends*, with Internet Archive (Santa Barbara, Calif. : ABC-CLIO, 2001), http://archive.org/details/encyclopediaofur0000brun. 71.

> question," said the vet. "Where did you get this dog?" The woman didn't want to get into trouble, so she told the vet that she had found the dog running loose in the street near her home in La Mesa. But the vet didn't buy it. "You did not find this dog in La Mesa. Where did you get the dog?" The woman nervously admitted having brought the dog across the border from Tijuana. "But tell me, doctor," she said. "What is wrong with my dog? "His reply was brief and to the point. "First of all, it's not a dog — it's a Mexican sewer rat. And second, it's dying.[89]

Brunvand traces the origin of the tale to an early twentieth-century precursor known as the "Turkish Pet," in which European tourists are similarly deceived into adopting an animal they believe to be a dog while traveling abroad.[90] Later variants that circulated throughout the 1990s and 2000s sometimes relocate the animal's origin to places such as California or Thailand, demonstrating the story's adaptability across cultural contexts. Despite these shifts in setting, the underlying narrative structure remains consistent: a seemingly benevolent act of rescue by a Western traveler is undermined by the revelation that the object of their compassion is not what it appears to be.

In the "Mexican Pet" version in particular, this structure reflects a distinctly American dynamic, where the act of bringing the animal across the border echoes a form of white saviorism—an assumption that the American subject can intervene, rescue, and ultimately "improve" something perceived as neglected or inferior. Yet the story subverts this posture by transforming the rescued animal into a source of horror, reinforcing a suspicion that the foreign "other" is inherently deceptive and dangerous. Crucially, the narrative resolves this tension by

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[89] Barbara Mikkelson, "The Mexican Pet: Cute Little Doggie Brought Home by a Tourist Turns Out to Be a Mexican Sewer Rat," *Snopes*, November 16, 1998, https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/the-mexican-pet/

[90] Jan Harold Brunvand, *The Mexican Pet: More "New" Urban Legends and Some Old Favorites* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1986).

validating that suspicion: the fear is not only justified but proven correct. As a result, the legend operates as both a critique and a reinforcement of these attitudes, exposing the fragility of the savior figure while simultaneously legitimizing anxieties about contamination, misrecognition, and the risks of crossing cultural and national boundaries.

Just as these legends rely on recognizable tropes of misrecognition, contamination, and the racialized "other," similar narrative patterns can be found in the origin stories and marketing mythology surrounding Glen Bell and Taco Bell. Bell popularized the idea that the crunchy taco, while inspired by Mexican cuisine, was effectively his own innovation—reframing a culturally rooted food as something discovered, refined, and ultimately legitimized by a white American entrepreneur for mass consumption. This mirrors the logic of white saviorism seen in the "Mexican Pet" legend: what originates in a racialized "other" space is only made safe, edible, or valuable once mediated by an American figure. At the same time, this narrative coexists with a persistent undercurrent of suspicion. The very cuisine that is appropriated and celebrated is also framed as potentially dangerous or contaminating, a contradiction that becomes especially visible in the long-standing association of Taco Bell with toilet humor. Jokes about digestive distress position Mexican-coded food as bodily disruptive and untrustworthy, reinforcing anxieties similar to those embedded in the legends. Together, these narratives reproduce a cultural logic in which the "foreign" is simultaneously consumed and feared—domesticated through appropriation, yet never fully stripped of its association with risk and contamination.

Taco Bell's Toilet Humor

These ideas of contamination tied to Mexican-coded food are further illustrated in the persistent toilet humor surrounding Taco Bell. The long-running joke that consuming Taco Bell inevitably results in digestive distress has been widely circulated and reinforced through internet

lore and meme culture. These narratives range from portraying Taco Bell as a near-guaranteed source of food poisoning to suggesting that diarrhea is simply the expected cost of cheap, late-night indulgence. Such humor is not unique either. Other fast-food chains are also subject to jokes about bodily consequences—the case of Taco Bell stands out for the consistency, specificity, and cultural staying power of these claims. Unlike more generalized fast-food humor, these jokes frequently carry an implicit association between Mexican-coded cuisine and bodily disruption, reinforcing a sense of the food as inherently unstable or contaminating. To better understand the racial undertones embedded in this humor, it is useful to turn to Alan Dundes' framework of latrinalia, which examines how jokes about bodily functions often encode deeper cultural anxieties and social tensions.

Latrinalia, a term introduced and theorized in folklore studies by Alan Dundes, originally refers to the drawings, graffiti, inscriptions, and markings found in public bathrooms. Dundes treated latrinalia as a meaningful vernacular practice that uses humor, obscenity, and bodily imagery to express social anxieties, power relations, and taboo subjects in semi-private public spaces[91]. Building from this framework, this project uses *toilet humor* as a broader, branched category of latrinalia: not limited to bathroom graffiti, but encompassing jokes, narratives, and cultural tropes centered on bodily functions such as flatulence, defecation, and diarrhea.

Far from being trivial, this expanded form of latrinalia operates as a cultural discourse that marks some bodies, foods, and peoples as excessive, unclean, or socially deviant. Early twentieth-century anti-Mexican sentiment at the border frequently centered on hygiene as a

[91] Alan Dundes, *Here I Sit: A Study of American Latrinalia* (1965), http://archive.org/details/1965-here-i-sit-a-study-of-american-latrinalia-alan-dundes.

justification for exclusion and surveillance. Public health fears shaped immigration policy, most notably in Chinese exclusion acts or practices such as the chemical disinfection baths that Mexican migrants were forced to endure in the mid-century, reinforcing the association between Mexican bodies and uncleanliness. Within popular culture, similar ideas surface through colloquial humor and children's rhymes, such as the well-known song "Beans, beans, the magical fruit," which frames beans—often racialized as Mexican food as a disruptive and foreign food the body. Related narratives include "Moctezuma's Revenge," the trope of food poisoning allegedly afflicting American travelers in Mexico.

Together, these examples illustrate how toilet humor functions as a mechanism of mockery and exclusion. By equating Mexican food and Mexicanness with digestive failure and bodily disorder, such humor mirrors the same xenophobic logic found in urban legends.. This section examines how toilet humor, particularly as it appears in relation to Taco Bell and the greater expansion of Mexican fast-food, reveals the ways Mexicanness is trivialized, racialized, and rendered consumable, in part, through collective ridicule.

The question, then, is why this lore has remained so enduring in Taco Bell's cultural existence, and what it reveals about how U.S. audiences have historically understood Mexican food within the broader culinary landscape. Unlike food safety scandals at other chains, such as Chipotle's widely publicized salmonella outbreak, Taco Bell's association with digestive failure is rarely framed as a serious concern about public health or corporate responsibility. This is notable given that Taco Bell itself experienced a major E. coli outbreak in 2006 and a salmonella

outbreak in 2010.[92] Instead, the jokes persist in a folkloric, almost inevitable register—positioning Taco Bell as a space where digestive distress is expected, normalized, and even humorous.

I argue that Taco Bell's status as inexpensive, mass-produced "Mexican" fast food allows these narratives to circulate without scrutiny, shielding them from the kinds of critical interrogation applied to other food chains. This normalization discourages audiences from questioning why Mexican-coded food, rather than fast food broadly, becomes the focal point of toilet humor. When situated within a longer history of xenophobic folklore and racialized hygiene discourse, Taco Bell jokes reveal not merely isolated internet humor, but a cultural logic in which Mexicanness is persistently associated with bodily excess, contamination, and loss of control.

To illustrate this point, I propose an analytical breakdown of the most common Taco Bell toilet joke. A survey of the subreddit r/TacoBell, created and active since 2011, reveals numerous posts discussing the long-running joke about Taco Bell–induced digestive problems.[93] Variations

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[92] Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Multistate Outbreak of *E. coli* O157 Infections Linked to Taco Bell, November–December 2006," May 13, 2024, https://archive.cdc.gov/www_cdc_gov/ecoli/2006/taco-bell-12-2006.html.

[93] Same-Paper-4542, "The Toilet at My Local Taco Bell," Reddit, r/tacobell, May 3, 2025, https://www.reddit.com/r/tacobell/comments/1kdq4c0/the_toilet_at_my_local_taco_bell/;axthousandxhours, "Taco Bell Truth," Reddit, r/tacobell, April 13, 2026, https://www.reddit.com/r/tacobell/comments/1skmra5/taco_bell_truth/;Designer_Distance_31, "Has Anyone Actually Gotten the Shits from Taco Bell?," Reddit, r/tacobell, February 15, 2025, accessed [your access date], https://www.reddit.com/r/tacobell/comments/1iqbnzl/has_anyone_actually_gotten_the_shits_fro

of the joke often center on specific menu items as the likely culprits; however, the core premise consistently parallels the Taco Bell experience with a trip to the toilet. The joke circulates through narratives that frame eating at Taco Bell as an unconventional remedy for constipation and through visual formats, most notably memes. At first glance, these jokes may appear benign or trivial references to a familiar trope. However, as Blank's study of fartlore narratives explains, this category of humor is "a subversive and compensatory genre that is a reflexive manifestation of unspoken societal attitudes and anxieties."[94] Ellis further characterizes bodily jokes as "an expressive genre through which one is encouraged to defuse, by means of laughter or groans, anxieties about and consequent hostility."[95] the task, then, is to identify the specific anxieties and societal attitudes to which this joke is responding.

The central premise of Taco Bell toilet humor rests on an understanding of the brand's food and marketing strategy as deceptive—where an advertisement for a burrito conceals a gastrointestinal threat that only reveals itself through the intimate act of eating. In his study of latrinalia, Dundes analyzes bathrooms as spaces of lower social status in which the taboo of bodily humor is permitted. A similar dynamic operates in relation to Taco Bell: its restaurants,

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m_taco/;The following posts represent three of the most popular and recent discussions on r/tacobell, a subreddit dedicated to Taco Bell consumers, in which users explicitly discuss gastrointestinal distress attributed to eating Taco Bell. These posts were selected as evidence of an active, ongoing folkloric discourse surrounding the brand's association with food-induced illness, demonstrating is ongoing and circulates organically among contemporary consumers.

[94] Trevor J. Blank, "Cheeky Behavior: The Meaning and Function of 'Fartlore' in Childhood and Adolescence," *Children's Folklore Review* 32 (January 2010): 61.

[95] Bill Ellis, "A Model for Collecting and Interpreting World Trade Center Disaster Jokes," *New Directions in Folklore* 5 (2001): 8.

physical spaces, food, and overall culinary presence occupy a marginal position within the American cultural milieu. This is reflected in its pricing strategy, as Taco Bell maintains some of the lowest prices in the fast-food industry and has implemented fewer price increases than its competitors.[96] The subreddit r/TacoBell also jokes about the brand's low social and culinary status; memes frequently juxtapose the devotion of Taco Bell fans with the franchise's reputation for cheap, processed food that caters to society's least educated and least privileged consumers. Toilet jokes and toilet memes that hinge on deception thus transform the space from mundane to the exotic, where food and excrement exist on equal footing (see figure 15).

[96] Paige Bruton, "How Taco Bell Keeps Its Prices Down," *Business Insider*, August 14, 2024, https://www.businessinsider.com/how-taco-bell-keeps-its-prices-down-fast-food-value-2024-8.



Figure 15: An example of a common Taco Bell meme. Steven Acree, "Taco Bell Finally Has the Right Seating!," Facebook, Crazy Memers, [July 6, 2024] https://www.facebook.com/groups/505860937029647/posts/1530531301229267/.

Depictions and descriptions of Mexican and Latino bodies as socially repugnant have a long and complicated history, shaped by anti-Catholic and anti-Indigenous sentiments during westward expansion in the mid-nineteenth century, as well as by anti-Mexican and anti-Asian policies in the early twentieth century. For the purposes of this project, however, I focus on how derogatory terms such as *greaser*, *beaner*, and *chilichoker* have circulated in U.S. narratives and how they are implicitly adopted and reproduced within culinary culture. The origins of the term *greaser* are debated, but it can be traced to the U.S. Southwest during the Mexican American

War, where it may have referred to workers who greased wagon axles or functioned more broadly as a stereotype casting Mexicans as unclean.[97]

What is not debated is the term's rapid entry into common usage: California's 1855 Vagrancy Act was popularly known as the "Greaser Act," an anti-idling law that targeted the "idle Mexican," or "all persons who are commonly known as 'Greasers' or the issue of Spanish and Indian blood… and who go armed and are not peaceable and quiet persons."[98] Furthermore, the slur's association with sexual deviance and social disorder is frequently conflated with the exoticization of Mexican food. As Jeffrey Pilcher notes in his historical analysis of San Antonio's Chili Queens—*chile con carne* street vendors, primarily women, in the late nineteenth century—these spaces "presented an exotic experience for tourists to test their manhood by flirting with 'Spanish' women and risking the strong flavors of chile peppers, garlic, and oil." The slurs of beaner and chilichoker, the most immediately identifiable as referencing an understanding of *lo mexicano* through food. In is study of Texan slurs, Americo Paredes that "the Mexican diet has been a much richer source of derogatory names, among them 'pepper belly,' 'taco choker,' 'frijole guzzler,' 'chili picker,' and (of a woman) 'hot tamale.' Aside from diet, no other aspect of Mexican culture seems to have caught the fancy of the Anglo coiner of derogatory terms for Mexicans."[99] I suggest that part of this fascination relates to Pilcher's illustration of some

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[97] Steven W. Bender, *Greasers and Gringos: Latinos, Law, and the American Imagination* (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 14.

[98] "Mexican Criminalization Before Silicon Valley · SJSU Digital Exhibits on Omeka S," accessed February 4, 2026, https://exhibits.sjsu.edu/s/b4sv/item/3254.

[99] Américo Paredes, *Folklore and Culture on the Texas-Mexican Border*, 1st ed., with Richard Bauman, A CMAS Book (Austin: Center for Mexican American Studies, University of Texas at Austin, 1993), 8.

Mexican food as a safe, but borderline devious landscape to enter.[100] A dynamic we see repeated in Tacobell's exotification of *mexicanesque* food and its lore.

Anglo Culinary Fantasies and of the Mexicanesque

The exotification of Taco Bell is a phenomenon shaped both by the franchise's strategic styling and by the modern symbiotic relationship it maintains with its consumers, one built on constructed nostalgia. By strategic styling, I refer to Taco Bell's creation of a *Mexicanesque* experience through its use of space and food—an aesthetic rooted in Mexican stereotypes, allusions to a Spanish heritage, and a version of Mexicanness that refuses to engage with the culinary realities of both Mexicans and Mexican Americans. The most glaring example is the brand name itself: "Bell" refers to the founder while simultaneously invoking the image of a Spanish mission bell, a logo that has existed in some form since 1985, although architectural references to the California missions have been part of the franchise since its early inception.[101] On their own, these allusions to Spanish heritage communicate little about the *Mexicanesque*; however, but when contextualized within a broader consumer cultural experience, these stylistic choices serve a clear agenda. By consumer cultural experience, I mean the way the average Taco Bell customer is positioned as a culinary tourist within a corporatized Mexican fantasy—one that reinforces and reproduces cultural stereotypes.

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[100] Jeffrey M. Pilcher, "Was the Taco Invented in Southern California?," *Gastronomica* 8, no. 1 (2008): 26–38, https://doi.org/10.1525/gfc.2008.8.1.26.

[101] Ronald D. White, "Robert McKay, Who Designed the First Taco Bell and Turned It into a Fast-Food Empire, Dies at 86," *Los Angeles Times*, https://www.latimes.com/business/la-me-robert-mckay-20171006-story.html.

Culinary tourism is a broad term that refers to the intersection of tourism and food, with an emphasis on how food shapes the ways tourists interact with a culture, a country, and its people. The concept also expands traditional definitions of tourism, as a culinary tourist does not need to travel physically; instead, the experience can be mediated through media, festivals, community events, and corporate restaurants. At the same time, the term centers conversations about how "foreign" foods are interpreted and presented to tourists. As Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett explains, "Culinary tourism creates opportunities to find, test, and push thresholds of the unfamiliar."[102] For middle-class American consumers in the 1960s, Taco Bell functioned as a mediator to what was framed as the unfamiliar cuisine of Mexican fast food. As Pilcher illustrates:

> The story of the modernization of Mexican food is as much about the movement of people as about technological change. This is not to deny the importance of McDonaldization, the logic of industrial efficiency, in shaping the corporate taco. An anonymous employee recently explained: 'My job is I, like, basically make the tacos! The meat comes in boxes that have bags inside, and those bags you boil to heat up the meat. That's how you make tacos.' Nevertheless, as this essay has shown, ethnic cooks created virtually all aspects of the Mexican American taco except the central commissary. Corporate hagiography notwithstanding, Glen Bell did not make a better or faster taco; he just packaged it for a nonethnic clientele.[103]

To claim that Taco Bell popularized Mexican food in the United States would be an overstatement that ignores the longstanding presence of the Mexican diaspora and regional Mexican restaurants, such as El Popular in Indiana, which opened in 1925 and was founded by Vicente Flores Garza, an immigrant from Nuevo León. Additionally, upper-class Americans who

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[102] Quoted in Lucy M. Long, *Culinary Tourism*, Material Worlds (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2004), xii.

[103] Pilcher, "Was the Taco Invented in Southern California?" 36.

could afford to travel to and live in Mexico published numerous accounts of their encounters with Mexican food. However, the McDonaldization of Mexican food, spearheaded by Glen Bell, did introduce a new genre of *Mexicanesque* fast food—one that translated the taco for white, nonethnic audiences.

Another aspect of culinary tourism that Long points out is how tourism involves a negotiation and negation: "The maneuvering between the realms of the exotic and the edible is a dynamic, creative process that is perhaps best thought of as a negotiation of the realms with the needs, interests, and aesthetics of all the actors involved."[104] Taco Bell menu items demonstrate how a negotiation of otherness plays out when it comes to the Mexicanesque, how it marks Mexican food as other and frames a consumption experience by negotiating it's perceived exoticism with American expectations. To illustrate this point we must look at the item names as originally, the menu consisted of tacos, tostadas, burritos, chiliburger and *frijoles*; the choice to keep the names non-descript and in the original Spanish, an unframed exoticism that linguistically did not reinterpret the dishes for an American audience. With the introduction of the *enchirito* in the 70s, a ground beef filled flour tortilla covered in red sauce and topped with cheese and olives, we saw how the strategy has moved away from Bell's original approach of simplifying the menu as not to alienate customers from foreign cuisine, and asserts itself as a innovator of food, thus taco bell was not just a mediator of Mexican foods but a producer.

[104] Lucy M. Long, *Culinary Tourism.* 37



Figure 16: Advertisement for the enchirito (1970). ProvokeCouture, "Taco Bell's Enchirito Enjoyed Its Day in the Sun," Reddit, r/vintageads, April 10, 2025, https://www.reddit.com/r/vintageads/comments/1jvl9ys/taco_bells_enchirito_enjoyed_its_day_in_the_sun/.

Taco Bell's original mascot, the Taco Bell Boy is one of the most obvious illustrations of how the franchise's use of Mexican stereotypical imagery intersects with food. The Taco Bell Boy, whose existence as mascot in the 1970s, has gone unacknowledged by Taco Bell, but can be found on vintage menus, memorabilia and most notably in old photographs we see him poised outside of Taco Bells in the form of life-sized sculptures, that now roam niche corners of the internet (see figure 17). The Boy is a smiling, dark-haired child, barefoot, and donning a sarape and a comically large sombrero. The image is reminiscent of other Mexican popular characters

like the Frito Bandito or Speedy Gonzalez who's imagery as *Revolucionistas* harks back to xenophobic attitudes toward Mexicans during the Mexican Revolution. When it comes to The Boy, his indigeneity is front and center, as well as is his subservient position as one of his arms is usually depicted holding a tray of taco. Similarly, southern Mexican fast-food chain El Chico (who's locations skyrocketed in competition to Taco Bell in the 1960s), till this day fashions a similar Mexican campesino in the logo. In the 1980s, Chi-Chi's also promoted similarly imagery with images of cheerful Indigenous Mexicans.



Figure 17: Taco Bell boy statue outside of a locale in Georgia, circa 1970s.BigPhili, "The Taco Bell Boy Use to Get Chicks," Reddit, r/tacobell, December 11, 2021, https://www.reddit.com/r/tacobell/comments/re1so7/the_taco_bell_boy_use_to_get_chicks/.



Figure 18: The Taco Bell Boy Statue rediscovered through online collectors. Joel Baker (americangiants), "Ever Since @vintageroadside Introduced Me to Taco Bell Boys I've Been Hooked," Instagram, November 22, 2023, accessed [your access date], https://www.instagram.com/p/Cz9ZNmiulys/.

This positioning of Mexican bodies as emasculated, cheery caricatures perpetually positioned (both literally and figurately) to serve, intertwines with anti-Indigenous narratives rooted in American settler colonialism that a similarly inscribed in "Indian" mascots across high schools, universities and sports teams:

> The narratives inscribed by these mascot exhibitions are punctuated by an ambivalence that includes contact, friendship, and subsequent submission. It is a sensual narrative that turns on wildness, sexuality, and savagery, and it is a nostalgic narrative mourning the loss of these once-great warriors and their glorious society. To be sure, the performance

> seeks on some level to “honor” the Indian, but it does so through unconscious forms, by allowing white America to simultaneously enact its grief for and consecrate the memory of the Indian. It is a celebration of the Indian sacrifice in the name of imperial progress according to the divine plan of Manifest Destiny.”[105]

This dynamic is further illustrated in Taco Bell's use of Gidget, the Chihuahua mascot who ran from 1997 to 2000, voiced by Carlos Alazraqui, whose instantly recognizable catchphrase "Yo Quiero Taco Bell" made her one of the most ubiquitous advertising figures of the late 1990s and early 2000s. In the advertisements, Gidget functions as a figure of legitimacy—a stand-in for the Mexican people, symbolically lending their approval to the brand. The variations on her appearances are telling. In one, she navigates neighborhoods and homes to a salsa soundtrack, finally delivering her catchphrase to some unsuspecting Taco Bell consumer. In another, she is recast as a romantic figure, scaling dangerous heights and leaping into moving vehicles, all in desperate pursuit of Taco Bell. Perhaps most revealing is the variation in which she appears in Zapatista-like attire, transformed into a revolutionary figure whose cause has been reduced to a hymn about gorditas. Together, these commercials sell *mexicanesque* food through cartoonish, defanged depiction of Mexican identity, one that is malleable enough to be heroic, romantic, or

[105] C. Richard King and Charles Fruehling Springwood, *Team Spirits: The Native American Mascots Controversy* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2001), 9–10, https://doi.org/10.5250/9781496245250.

revolutionary, so long as its desires ultimately lead back to the corporation.



Figure 19: A Taco Bell Advertisement and Menu from the Late 1960s with Taco Bell the original five menu items. Reddit, r/tacobell, August 21, 2024,https://www.reddit.com/r/tacobell/comments/1exby46/a_taco_bell_advertisement_and_menu_from_the_late/.

To grasp the full weight of these mascots, it is necessary to situate them within the broader political climate shaping U.S. attitudes toward Mexico and Latin America. The Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986, advanced under Ronald Reagan, embodied a contradictory stance: it penalized employers for hiring undocumented workers while simultaneously offering amnesty to certain immigrants. This dual approach reflected a deeper national ambivalence—one that depended on Mexican labor while politically and culturally marginalizing Mexican people. Such tensions were not confined to legislation; they also

permeated popular culture, where representations of Mexicans were often flattened into simplified, consumable images.

Within this context, the mascots and branding strategies of Taco Bell take on a more consequential role. By giving "Mexicans" a face through exaggerated, cartoonish figures, these campaigns did not offer meaningful representation but instead reproduced caricature and dehumanization. These mascots function as stand-ins for the absent labor, knowledge, and cultural expertise that underpin the very food being sold—labor embodied by real individuals, such as the family of restaurateurs like the late Lucia Rodriguez, whose contributions remain largely unrecognized in mainstream narratives. In replacing lived experience with caricature, Taco Bell's imagery renders Mexican identity both visible and disposable: present as an aesthetic yet detached from real people.

Conclusion

This case study reveals how mockery and appropriation are not confined to overtly political spaces but operate just as forcefully in the most mundane corners of American consumer culture—in a fast-food drive-through, a television commercial, a bathroom joke. Two stories converge here: the first is Bell's personal mythology of the self-made American entrepreneur, a narrative built upon the uncredited cultural traditions and labor of Mexican immigrants whose knowledge and ways of life are quietly derived from and repurposed to sustain it; the second is Taco Bell's marketing apparatus itself, which trolls and mocks the very Mexican communities from whom its products are ostensibly drawn, profiting off the marginalization of the same peoples it appropriates. These dynamics did not emerge in a vacuum. They unfolded against a backdrop of escalating tensions surrounding Mexican immigration, border policy, and the place of Mexican people within the American national imaginary—anxieties that found expression not

only in legislation and rhetoric, but in the folk legends, contamination myths, and xenophobic undertones that shaped how ordinary Americans understood their relationship to Mexico and its people. Taco Bell both reflects and reproduces this cultural logic: enticing consumers with a fantasy-version of Mexico deliberately constructed to operate as separate from Mexican people and their lived realities, while toilet humor and food-deception narratives recast the cuisine as a gastrointestinal threat, marking Mexican bodies, foods, and traditions as excessive, unclean, or deviant. What folkloric humor, latrinalia, and urban legend reveal, then, is that the work of racialization does not always announce itself loudly—it hides, just as often, inside a punchline.

IV. THE RASCUACHE PERFORMANCE OF LOCURA FOODS

"Vamonos pa la Wells"

In my hometown of Reno, Nevada, there is a neighborhood known as the Wells Avenue District that has long served as a vital hub for the Latino diasporic community. For Mexican immigrants like myself growing up in the early 2000s, Wells Avenue was the closest thing we had to a cultural center. It was home to the city's first large-scale Latino grocery store and provided essential services, including a free clinic where uninsured and undocumented residents could access healthcare, as well as a Catholic church that frequently hosted the Mexican consulate. The neighborhood also fostered immigrant entrepreneurship: beauty salons, clothing shops, esthetician studios, and tattoo parlors lined the streets, all owned and operated by local community members. Wells Avenue marked important life moments as well—for example, the city's oldest party dress store, where generations of Mexican girls purchased their quinceañera dresses before heading to nearby ballrooms to celebrate.

However, this cultural landscape is increasingly under threat. Wells Avenue borders Reno's rapidly developing "Midtown" district, where processes of gentrification are reshaping the neighborhood. Sleek boutiques, crystal shops, and minimalist cafés selling açaí bowls are beginning to displace long-standing businesses. In particular, the antojitos vendors—known for selling elotes, aguas frescas, and dorilocos—are being pushed out, signaling not only economic change but also the erosion of cultural practices embedded in the neighborhood's everyday life.

For many members of the Latino diaspora in northern Nevada, Wells Avenue functions much like a *tianguis*, a marketplace with Mesoamerican origins that carries both economic and cultural significance. Beyond commerce, *tianguis* are spaces of social connection and cultural continuity, where immigrants can reconnect with their homelands and with one another. It is not

uncommon to encounter relatives one has not seen in years, or to gather over shared foods that evoke transborder memory. As scholars such as Silvia Mete et al. argue, the *tianguis* responds to the needs of the community in ways that resist the homogenizing forces of globalization and can be understood as a form of "insurgent practice"—a localized, everyday mode of resistance embedded in social and economic life.[106]

Within this context, one particularly vibrant genre of food production emerges—what I call *locura* foods. These are inventive, excessive, and playful snack creations, often built from familiar ingredients but reimagined in unexpected combinations. I argue that *locura* foods are a creative form of culinary expression developed by Mexican diasporic communities in response to the economic and cultural disruptions of NAFTA and globalization. Through their *rascuache* qualities: resourcefulness, improvisation, and a grounding in working-class aesthetics, these foods assert cultural presence, transform constraint into innovation, and create moments of joy and identity within environments shaped by displacement and change.

My study of this genre of food production is centered on auto-ethnographic observations and digital folkloristic analysis, drawing on content gathered from TikTok under the hashtags #antojitos and #michoacana. As a researcher with personal and cultural ties to this culinary tradition, auto-ethnography allowed me to situate my own embodied knowledge and memories of these foods within a broader analytical framework, reflecting on how my positionality shapes the way I interpret and engage with these representations. Alongside this, systematic observation of TikTok content provided a window into how communities of practice — both in Mexico and

[106] Silvia Mete, Luca Tomaino, and Giovanni Vecchio, "Tianguis Shaping Ciudad: Informal Street Vending as a Decisive Element for Economy, Society and Culture in Mexico," *Planum: The Journal of Urbanism* 1, no. 26 (2013): 3.

in the diaspora — are actively producing, circulating, and negotiating the meanings of antojitos and Michoacán food culture in digital spaces.

The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) on a plate

The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) has fundamentally reshaped the food practices of Mexican Americans on both sides of the border by limiting access to traditional foodways and enabling the dominance of large food corporations since its 1994 signing. My hometown, Dolores, Guanajuato, was completely transformed by the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994. Drawn by low production costs, Chinese and Korean companies set up factories just outside of town, attracting a wave of young labor. By the late 90s, this influx of industry reshaped our culture and the landscape. Young girls who once learned to make tortillas at the age of six were now funneled into factory work. As women filled these new roles on the assembly lines, fewer men stayed to work the milpas. The factories consumed much of the area's groundwater, causing wells to dry up. Without water, the milpas died out, and so did the nopales that once grew wild in the hills. The women who used to pick and sell nopales fresh from the land slowly disappeared, too. Many, like my own family, chose instead to migrate to the United States in search of better opportunities.

NAFTA's environmental effects on my hometown also transformed food practices. Because Dolores sits at the crossroads between Guadalajara and Mexico City, the increased influx of traffic—hundreds of semi-trucks passing through daily—began tearing up the old dirt road until the municipality paved and expanded it. In turn, the cacti, fruit trees, edible succulents, and small games that were once easily accessible were destroyed. Similarly, local cow and sheep herders, who once relied on this vegetation for their flocks to graze, have either switched to a corn-based feed or given up herding altogether. As a result, the traditional cheesemaker who

relied on local milk no longer exists. What was once a self-sustaining food system tied to the land was disrupted by the infrastructural and environmental changes brought about by NAFTA-era integration. Today, the town feels like a dusty ghost town, only coming back to life during the holidays. That's when the immigrants like me—those fortunate enough to return—come home and share stories with their American-born family members. A common scene during the holiday season is a family sharing a bag of *dorilocos* or *chicharrones* while telling stories about the green hills and vibrant milpas that once existed, highlighting how even memory is now shaped by the inescapable presence of NAFTA.

Enrique C. Ochoa traces this transformation of Mexico's countryside to the country's broader economic restructuring beginning in the 1980s. Neoliberal policies aimed to reduce social spending, privatize state industries, and liberalize trade to attract foreign investment. A crucial turning point came with the 1992 reform of Article 27 of the Mexican Constitution, which ended the Lázaro Cárdenas era's land redistribution policies and allowed privatization of ejido (communal) lands. This shift dismantled institutional support systems for small-scale farmers, prioritizing instead "efficient," export-oriented agribusiness. Traditional subsistence farming declined as large-scale producers expanded, focusing on global export crops like tomatoes and avocados. These structural changes facilitated the emergence of what Ochoa calls "global food oligopolies"—powerful corporations including Grupo Bimbo, Gruma (producer of Maseca and other corn brands like Mission and Guerrero), Grupo Lala (dairy products), and FEMSA (Coca-Cola bottler and OXXO operator). As Ochoa argues, this consolidation has eroded traditional

foodways and narrowed access to culturally rooted diets, making traditional foods increasingly difficult and expensive to obtain.[107]

Gruma exemplifies how NAFTA-era policies enabled corporate dominance over traditional food production. Founded in 1949 by Roberto González Barrera as a small-scale producer of dehydrated masa (Maseca), the company benefited significantly from government support. During the 1950s-60s, the PRI Party subsidized corn production and provided loans and permits for expansion. Gruma entered the U.S. market in 1975 and consolidated its position through political connections, particularly González Barrera's friendship with President Carlos Salinas de Gortari.[108]By 1994, government subsidies totaled $300 million—43% of Gruma's net revenues.[109] Combined with Salinas-era policies forcing local tortillerías to use dehydrated masa instead of fresh nixtamal, this created an effective monopoly. As food critic Gustavo Arellano observes, "Gruma is the Thanos of the tortilla world—literally snaps its fingers and just destroys

[107] Enrique Ochoa, “Corporate power and the neoliberal assault on Mexico's food system,” in *México between Feast and Famine: Food, Corporate Power, and Inequality* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2025).

[108] Anthony Depalma, “How a Tortilla Empire Was Built on Favoritism,” World, *The New York Times*, February 15, 1996, https://www.nytimes.com/1996/02/15/world/how-a-tortilla-empire-was-built-on-favoritism.html.

[109] Rosalía del Carmen Ríos Arreguín et al., “The Globalization of Mexican Tortillas: GRUMA and the Mass Production of Corn Flour,” *The Global History of Capitalism Project*, April 2020, https://globalcapitalism.history.ox.ac.uk/globalization-mexican-tortillas-gruma-and-mass-production-corn-flour.

independent tortillerías."[110] NAFTA's impact extends beyond market consolidation to the fundamental industrialization of Mexican diets

Another aspect of North American Free Trade Agreement's effect on Mexican food practices—and behind the creation of *Locura* Foods—is the industrialization of the diet. The growth of these corporations illustrates how ultra-processed foods have become inescapable for Mexicans. We can see this clearly through the presence of Bimbo bread products in my own Northern Nevada community. Grupo Bimbo, founded in 1945 as Panificación Bimbo by Lorenzo Servitje, Jaime Jorba, Jaime Sendra, José T. Mata, Alfonso Velasco, and Roberto Servitje in Mexico City, began with cellophane-wrapped bread loaves. In the following decades, the company expanded its product range to include the snacks and confectionery it is most recognized for today. By the 1980s, the company had expanded into the rest of Latin America and began to export into the United States after the acquisition of Sara Lee in 1993.[111] . Grupo Bimbo illustrates how ultra-processed foods have become inescapable. Founded in 1945 in Mexico City, the company expanded throughout Latin America and entered the U.S. market after acquiring Sara Lee in 1993. With $22.2 billion in revenue by 2025, Bimbo's extensive

[110] Evan Kleiman, "GRUMA: 'The Thanos of Corn' Says Gustavo Arellano," KCRW, December 23, 2022, https://www.kcrw.com/shows/good-food/stories/gruma-nafta-mexican-politics-business-2.

[111]Enrique Ochoa, "The gran familia Bimbo: Catholic patriarchy, industrial bread, and whiteness ," in *México between Feast and Famine: Food, Corporate Power, and Inequality* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2025).

distribution network ensures its products reach even remote locations, making ultra-processed foods difficult to avoid for working-class Mexicans.[112]

The same economic model that made Grupo Bimbo and Gruma juggernauts of the Mexican food supply was replicated with American companies, revealing how the North American Free Trade Agreement functioned as the underlying mechanism reshaping the food system. Attracted by low tariffs, companies such as Nestlé, PepsiCo, Kellogg's, and Walmart began to invest in Mexican distribution, allowing for the influx of ready-to-eat, ultra-processed foods often priced lower than local products.[113] PepsiCo was one of the first to heavily invest in the Mexican market, announcing a $780 million expansion plan in 1993.[114] Having previously acquired Frito-Lay in 1965, PepsiCo was already positioned to dominate the snack sector, and with NAFTA, products like Doritos began to appear widely in Mexican grocery stores. Through the subsidization of American corn, Mexican markets also saw the increased inclusion of high-fructose corn syrup—the all-important ingredient in chamoy.

This transformation affects even sacred cultural spaces. In my Northern Nevada community's Guadalupana celebration on December 12th, traditional foods have been

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[112] "Grupo Bimbo (BIMBOA.MX) - Revenue," accessed April 25, 2026, https://companiesmarketcap.com/grupo-bimbo/revenue/; Enríquez García and Hugo César, "Corporate Social Responsibility and Shared Value Creation in Bimbo Mexico," *Trascender, Contabilidad y Gestión* 9, no. 25 (2024): 2–17, https://doi.org/10.36791/tcg.v9i25.245.

[113] Enrique Ochoa, "Paradise of Junk Food: Popular Struggles, Corporate Power, and the Social Costs of the Neoliberal Food System," in *México between Feast and Famine: Food, Corporate Power, and Inequality* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2025).

[114] Michael Jonofsky, *Pepsi Plans $750 Million For Mexican Expansion - The New York Times*, March 5, 1993.

increasingly replaced by mass-produced alternatives. In the early 2000s, community women prepared *buñuelos de rodilla*—large, hand-rolled fried wheat sheets with sugar and cinnamon—alongside *tamales, atoles*, and artisanal candy. Recently, however, Bimbuñuelos (Bimbo's mass-produced version) have largely replaced homemade buñuelos, while traditional food vendors have dwindled. This shift demonstrates how NAFTA-enabled corporations have penetrated cultural and religious spaces that once sustained traditional foodways, fundamentally altering the relationship between Mexican Americans and their culinary heritage.

These policies fundamentally reorganized the conditions of survival for small-scale food vendors and are the mechanics behind *Locura* foods. The structures that made ultra-processed ingredients ubiquitous, affordable, and unavoidable simultaneously displaced traditional food economies. In this context, street vendors and small entrepreneurs were forced to adapt, finding new ways to generate revenue using the cheapest and most accessible inputs available: the very snacks produced by these conglomerates. At the same time, they had to differentiate themselves within an oversaturated market, leading to increasingly creative, hybridized forms of food-making. *Locura* foods emerge from this contradiction. They are not simply fickle trends, but a physical, gastronomic, and artistic response to NAFTA-era restructuring. While rooted in the constraints imposed by corporate dominance, they are also deeply personal—shaped by memory, migration, and local taste. In this way, *Locura* transforms mass-produced, ultra-processed foods into something expressive and situated, reflecting both the pressures of neoliberal restructuring and the agency of the communities navigating it.

The Genre of *Locura*

Before describing these foods, a brief overview of the folkloristic framework of genre is warranted to establish how the genre I name Locura functions through presentation and

consumption. Alan Dundes argues that genre distinctions in folklore are important because they signal communicative purpose.[115] For instance, a joke may communicate something different than a fable. Building on this positioning of folkloristic genre, Dan Ben-Amos argues that genre in folkloristics operates through three interpretive modes—holistic, archetypal, and functional—all of which shape how we understand communicative acts. The holistic approach focuses on the internal structure of folklore genres, such as tales, riddles, and jokes, treating them as coherent forms in and of themselves. The archetypal approach emphasizes recurring structural patterns, thematic content, and cross-cultural social uses of genres, such as creation myths that appear across cultures under a unified category. The functional approach, by contrast, examines the relationship between the practice and its social and cultural context, categorizing genre according to how it operates within lived communities.[116]

My study of this *Locura* is centered on Richard Bauman's concept of genre as a framework through which we analyze discursive practices: "This resolution requires a shift from the conception of genre as a framework for the classification of finished textual products with immanent formal properties to an understanding of genre as a framework for the comprehension of discursive practice."[117] From this perspective, I classify Locura foods, as well as their

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[115] Alan Dundes, *The Study of Folklore*, with Internet Archive (Englewood Cliffs, N.J. : Prentice-Hall, 1965), http://archive.org/details/studyoffolklore00dund.

[116] Dan Ben-Amos, "Analytical Categories and Ethnic Genres," in *Folklore Genres*, ed. Dan Ben-Amos (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1976), 217–44.

[117] Richard Bauman, "The Ethnography of Genre in a Mexican Market: Form, Function, Variation," in *Style and Sociolinguistic Variation, Eckert, Penelope, & Rickford, John R. [Eds], UK: Cambridge U Press, Pp 57-77* (Cambridge University Press, 2002), https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511613258.004.

individual ingredients as "texts" within a broader discourse of Mexican and Latino identity in the United States. These foods are not merely objects of consumption, but readable cultural forms whose meanings emerge through performance, circulation, and context. As Bauman further explains:

> Emergent elements of contextualization inevitably enter into the process, forging links to the surrounding discourse, the ongoing social interaction. Broader social relations, instrumental or strategic agendas, and other factors. In a word, other pragmatic and meta-pragmatic frameworks in addition to genre must be brought into play in shaping production and reception.[118]

Locura foods operate as genre-based texts embedded within racialized discourse: they are produced, circulated, and interpreted within larger systems that shape Mexican and Latino identity in the United States. As cultural food practices, they function as communicative forms through which race, belonging, and cultural meaning are continuously negotiated and made visible.

Locura foods are a genre of transborder culinary creations that merge traditional milpa-based ingredients of Mesoamerican origin with processed and ultra-processed foods shaped by neoliberal, globalized food systems. I use the term *locura* is used here as an etic category for scholarly discussion; in everyday contexts, these foods may instead be understood as *antojitos* or *botanas*, commonly found in Mexican snack shops, from street vendors, or in communal celebratory settings. These creations are typically based on the transformation of a "whole" base food—by which I mean an item that can stand alone as a complete product. This base may include processed snacks such as chips, pastries, or boxed juices, as well as non-food vessels that structure the presentation, such as a kittichela (a michelada served in a Hello Kitty plastic cup) or

[118] Ibid, 59.

a rotochela (a michelada served in a Rotoplas-shaped cup). The base can also consist of fresh fruits or vegetables, such as jícama, cucumber, pineapple, or coconut. On their own, however, these base elements do not constitute *locura*. Rather, locura emerges through a process of gastronomic transformation, in which the base is combined with ingredients that are aesthetically and gastronomically contrasting. This interplay—across color, texture, flavor, and temperature—is what ultimately defines the genre.



Figure 20: The Kittychela. “La Kitty chela de Tepito.” Nico Basualdo (@nicobasualdo19), " TikTok video, July 16, 2023, https://www.tiktok.com/@nicobasualdo19/video/7256588042247408901.



Figure 21: The rotochela. “Me sentia mal y me fui por una rotochela," Chuy.Salharo (@chuy_salharo), " TikTok video, July 29, 2023, https://www.tiktok.com/@chuy_salharo/video/7261422842770771205.

This transformation is sometimes reflected linguistically through the suffix *-loco/a(s)* or through forms of Spanglish: *Doritos* become *dorilocos*, and a *piña* becomes a *piñaloca*. However, this naming convention is not required for a food to be considered part of the genre. In

many cases, the names themselves signal transformation more indirectly. For example, a *jícama* drizzled with chamoy and coated in Cheeto dust may be called a *jicapaleta*, while a *concha* sliced in half and filled with ice cream becomes a *concha nieve*. This kind of linguistic stylization is common, but it is not a defining feature. While a name may signal *locura*, the classification ultimately depends on the degree of transformation in the food itself. Some creations may be deeply transformed yet carry more descriptive or conventional names, such as *Flamin' Hot carne seca* (dried beef seasoned with crushed Hot Cheetos), demonstrating that the practice of *locura* extends beyond any single naming pattern.

There is also an ongoing negotiation of *locura*: its intensity varies depending on the youth communities that produce and consume these foods, as well as on their broader social acceptability. Some foods represent milder forms of *locura*, such as popcorn with hot sauce—an example that may be more readily accepted by older generations. In fact, products from brands like Tabasco and McCormick actively promote similar flavor combinations.[119] By contrast, a *greñuda* (an instant cup noodle topped with Doritos, candy, sauces, and chopped cucumber) embodies a more intense expression of *locura*. At the same time, *locura* circulates and evolves through social media, particularly on platforms like TikTok and Instagram. There, young Latino content creators engage in a kind of digital culinary tourism, showcasing and amplifying the

[119] "Spicy Popcorn," TABASCO, ://www.tabasco.com/recipe/spicy-popcorn/; "Spicy Popcorn Recipe | Buffalo Popcorn," Frank's RedHot, https://www.franksredhot.com/en-gb/recipes/buffalo-caramel-corn.

latest iterations of *locura* while shaping its visibility and ongoing transformation.



Figure 22: The eloteloco. "Elote loco," sebastian'ssnackshac (@sebastianssnacks), TikTok video, May 15, 2022, https://www.tiktok.com/@sebastianssnacks/video/7098207755252649258.



Figure 23: The greñuda. "Alguien sabe donde las venden? Sopa instantanea," @sale_zahory. TikTok video, June 12, 2025, https://www.tiktok.com/@sale_zahory_/video/7515290029615320327.

Importantly, *locura* operates within a specifically Latino, and more precisely Mexican, cultural context. It is recognized as *locura* when it is produced and interpreted within Mexican or diasporic communities. When similar creations are taken out of this context, they must be understood differently. For example, the appearance of *dorilocos* in a American “hangover food” cookbook, or the Midwest’s “walking taco” (Fritos topped with ground beef, lettuce, and shredded cheese), may resemble *locura* in their use of similar base ingredients. However, they do not carry the same cultural meaning or sensibility. *Locura* is not defined solely by its components, but by the class and racial consciousness embedded in its creation, along with a

sense of humor and play that transforms *what* could be considered trash into something of economic and cultural value. In this sense, *locura* can be understood as a form of gastronomic *rascuachismo*: a creative practice that reworks everyday, often low-cost materials into expressive and meaningful cultural forms.

Rascuache Culinario

The sociopolitical dimensions of *locura* are best understood through the lens of *rascuachismo*. To see how *locura* operates as an aesthetic of resistance—one that challenges dominant expectations of what Mexican food and Mexican people "should" be—we must first consider the concept of *rascuachismo*. *Rascuache* (or *rasquache*) is a Mexican term used to describe something of low value, vulgarity, or poor taste. *Rascuachismo*, a concept coined by Tomás Ybarra-Frausto in his "Rasquachismo: A Chicano Sensibility" (1989), reframes this notion as a mode of creativity grounded in resourcefulness and self-awareness. As he explains:"Very generally, rasquachismo is an underdog perspective — a view from *los de abajo*. An attitude rooted in resourcefulness and adaptability yet mindful of stance and style."[120] Frausto emphasizes that *rascuachismo* permeates everyday life and popular culture. A common example is the juxtaposition of sacred or religious iconography with mass-produced, low-quality materials—for instance, an effigy of the Virgin Mary set against an old bathtub repurposed as a

[120] Tomás Ybarra-Frausto, "Rasquachismo: A Chicano Sensibility," in *Chicano Aesthetics: Rasquachismo*, exhibition catalog (Phoenix, AZ: MARS, Movimiento Artístico del Rio Salado, 1989) 5.

stand-in for the sky.[121] Similarly, José Guadalupe Posada's *Catrina* illustrations depict death adorned in European high-class dress, using satire to comment on Mexico's class disparities.

[121] Maria Anderson, *A Lesson in "Rasquachismo" Art | Smithsonian Institution*, January 31, 2017, https://www.si.edu/stories/lesson-rasquachismo-art.



Figure 24: Hector Sanchez and Roger Garcia, *Altar for La Virgen de Guadalupe,* 1997, Marfa, Texas, in Maria Anderson, "A Lesson in 'Rasquachismo' Art: Chicano Aesthetics and the 'Sensibilities of the Barrio,'" Smithsonian, January 31, 2017.

Rascuachismo is not a monolithic concept, as artist and scholar Amalia Mesa-Bains demonstrates through her articulation of Chicana working-class *rascuachismo*. She writes:

> "Chicana rasquache (*domesticana*), like its male counterpart, has grown not only out of both resistance to majority culture and affirmation of cultural values, but from women's restrictions within the culture. A defiance of an imposed Anglo-American cultural identity, and the defiance of restrictive gender identity within Chicano culture, has inspired a female rasquachismo.[122]

Mesa-Bains' artistic altars exemplify this approach through their use of hyperfeminine symbols and domestic materials, transforming everyday objects into sites of cultural reinterpretation. For example, in her piece *An Ofrenda for Dolores Del Rio,* her use of hyperfeminine imagery and materials transform Del Rio, a Hollywood actress popularly recognized as the overly-sexualized *mexicana* stereotype, into a holy icon revered and respected.[123]

[122] Amalia Mesa-Bains, "Domesticana: The Sensibility of Chicana Rasquache," *Aztlán: A Journal of Chicano Studies* 24, no. 2 (Fall 1999): 161.

[123] Amelia Mesa-Bains, *An Ofrenda for Dolores Del Rio | Smithsonian Institution*, 1991, mixed media installation including plywood, mirrors, fabric, framed photographs, found objects, dried flowers and glitter, accessed April 25, 2026, https://www.si.edu/object/ofrenda-dolores-del-rio%3Asaam_1998.161.



Figure 25: Amalia Mesa-Bains, *An Ofrenda for Dolores del Rio*, 1984, revised 1991, mixed media installation including plywood, mirrors, fabric, framed photographs, found objects, dried flowers and glitter, 96 x 72 x 48 in., Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C.

Rascuachismo is important because it functions as a stylization and sensibility through which Chicanos navigate and resist Anglo-American cultural hegemony. It provides a framework for understanding how everyday practices, those that are rooted in working-class experience, become forms of cultural assertion and resistance. Mesa-Bains illustrates how forms of *rascuache* bodily stylizations, such as fashion, tattoos, and hair styles, operate as expressions of cultural continuity within the community. As she explains:

> The individual reflects the stance taken in defiance against poverty, violence, police harassment, hopelessness, and exploitation. Within the barrio, individuals create a world where their pose and presentation constitutes an imaginative resistance. Within this self-representation the stoicism of an indigenous past remains evident.[124]

This individual, embodied, and personal mode of resistance—facilitated through *rascuachismo*—subverts the model minority myth. Rather than promoting a subdued or assimilated cultural identity, it embraces excess, visibility, and bold expression. As Ybarra Frausto articulates, "In the realm of taste, to be rasquache is to be unfettered and unrestrained, to favor the elaborate over the simple, the flamboyant over the severe."[125] At the same time, *rascuachismo* reveals that resistance is multifaceted. It is not only oppositional in an overt or confrontational sense, but can also be jovial, ludic, and deeply personal. Through humor, play, and self-stylization, individuals enact forms of resistance that are lived in the body and expressed in everyday life, expanding what resistance can look and feel like.

Rascuachismo permeates both the creation and consumption of *locura* foods such as *dorilocos*. It rejects fixed notions of "intended use" by transforming foods gastronomically and linguistically, making it the conceptual lens through which *locura* becomes legible. Despite its name, *locura* is not randomness but a patterned, culturally grounded practice of reinvention.

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[124] Amalia Mesa-Bains, "Art of the Other México: Sources and Meanings/Arte del Otro México: Fuentes y Significados," in *Art of the Other México: Sources and Meanings*, ed. Amalia Mesa-Bains, René H. Arceo-Frutos, and Juana Guzmán, exhibition catalog (Chicago: Mexican Fine Arts Center Museum, 1993), 38.

[125] Tomás Ybarra-Frausto, "Rasquachismo: A Chicano Sensibility," in *Chicano Aesthetics: Rasquachismo*,) 8.

These foods resist Anglo-American expectations of assimilation precisely through their constant transformation. For communities routinely subjected to exploitation and state violence, stability and social safety are not guaranteed; as a result, *rascuachismo*—and by extension *locura*—develops as a practice that must remain adaptive and mobile. As Tomás Ybarra-Frausto notes, this produces an inherently ephemeral quality: "Pulling through and making do are not guarantors of security, so things that are rasquache possess an ephemeral quality, a sense of temporality and impermanence — here today and gone tomorrow. While things might be created *al troche y moche* (slapdash) using whatever is at hand, attention is always given to nuances and details." [126] In the case of *locura* foods, this ephemerality functions as a resistant strategy. Their rapid evolution—circulating through trends, street practices, and social media—makes them difficult to fix, standardize, or appropriate. What emerges is a form that is always in flux, rooted in specific communities and conditions, yet never fully capturable by mainstream commodification.

One of the most recognizable examples of *locura* is *dorilocos*: a bag of nacho cheese Doritos sliced open horizontally and layered with *cacahuates japoneses* (peanuts coated in a sweet wheat shell), *cueritos* (pickled pork rinds) cut into bite-sized pieces, and chunks of sugary tamarind candy. This mixture is then topped with ingredients such as shredded jícama, cabbage, lettuce, or corn, balancing sweetness with freshness and crunch. Finally, chamoy—a sweet, sour, and spicy sauce—gives *dorilocos* their characteristic red color and viscous texture. The precedent for *dorilocos* can be traced to nachos, first created in 1943 by Ignacio "Nacho" Anaya in Piedras Negras, Mexico, and later popularized in Texas through the combination of totopos

[126] Ibid, 6.

and processed cheese products during World War II rationing.[127] This earlier form already reflects a kind of proto-*locura*: an improvised, hybrid creation shaped by material constraints and globalization. However, as nachos became mainstream, ubiquitously appearing in movie theaters and baseball stadiums, they were increasingly decontextualized and "de-Mexicanized." *Dorilocos*, by contrast, represents a reinvention of this form. Using Doritos (a Frito-Lay industrial corn product) they reassert a connection to corn as a milpa-based staple while transforming it through the flavors, aesthetics, and sensibilities of Mexican working-class culture.

[127] Pati Jinich, "The Original Nachos Were Crunchy, Cheesy and Truly Mexican," *New York Times*, October 29, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/29/dining/nachos-recipes.html.



Figure 26: The dorilocos. "Make some Dorilocos with me! I bet you'll want some after watching this," Catalina's Michoacana (@catalinas_michoacana), TikTok video, March 26, 2024, https://www.tiktok.com/@catalinas_michoacana/video/7350791246488636715.

For *locura* foods, ultra-processed foods (UPFs) are central to the genre's *rascuache* counter-hegemonic logic. Their ubiquity reflects the dominance of global food conglomerates and the saturation of everyday life with mass-produced products that are often disconnected from the nutritional needs of the communities they target. At the same time, this very prevalence makes UPFs available as raw material for reinterpretation. In this sense, *locura* emerges through

the transformation of what was designed to endure—standardized, industrial food—into something expressive, localized, and culturally meaningful.

UPFs, commonly referred to in Mexico as *comida chatarra* ("junk food"), carry both material and symbolic weight. As Mesa-Bains notes, "chatarra" is a recurring motif in *rascuache* art, capturing the tension between disposability and creative reuse. Within *locura*, this "trash" is not simply consumed but reworked, highlighting the contradictions of a food system shaped by policies such as NAFTA, which have made ultra-processed foods nearly inescapable even as they contribute to ongoing health concerns.[128] High levels of UPF consumption in Mexico further underscore this tension[129], situating *locura* within a broader landscape of structural inequality and dietary risk.

Yet *locura* does not merely critique these conditions—it actively transforms them. Through practices of recombination, stylization, and sale, UPFs are turned into objects of aesthetic and economic value. What begins as hegemonic material is re-signified through everyday creativity. As Mexico City *doriloco* vendor Evelia Alcalá explains, this transformation can also have tangible economic impact: "My son hurt his knee and needed surgery last year… I

[128] Leonie Elizabeth et al., "Ultra-Processed Foods and Health Outcomes: A Narrative Review," *Nutrients* 12, no. 7 (2020): 1955, https://doi.org/10.3390/nu12071955.

[129] Joaquín A. Marrón-Ponce et al., "Associations Between Consumption of Ultra-Processed Foods and Intake of Nutrients Related to Chronic Non-Communicable Diseases in Mexico," *Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics* 119, no. 11 (November 2019): 1852–65.; "Mexican Food Consumption Shifts Toward Ultra-Processed Products," Mexico Business, November 11, 2024, https://mexicobusiness.news/agribusiness/news/mexican-food-consumption-shifts-toward-ultra-processed-products.

was able to pay for it with my Dorilocos."[130] In this way, *locura* exemplifies how communities navigate and repurpose the constraints of globalized food systems, turning *chatarra* into both sustenance and livelihood.

Guillermo Gómez-Peña and the Mastering of Rascuachismo Performance

Few artists embody *rascuachismo* as vividly as Guillermo Gómez-Peña, a point acknowledged by both Ybarra-Frausto and Mesa-Bains. His work offers a hyper-focused example of how *locura* functions within transborder communities: as a practice grounded in improvisation, contradiction, and the transformation of imposed limits into sites of creative expression. Like *locura* foods, Gómez-Peña's performances reject prescribed "uses" of space, language, and identity, instead reworking them into something excessive, playful, and politically charged.

[130] Nick Miroff, *The New Snack Craze on Mexico's Streets Starts with Doritos, and Goes from There*, October 20, 2014, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/the_americas/the-new-snack-craze-on-mexicos-streets-starts-with-doritos-and-goes-from-there/2014/10/19/b57289aa-91cd-4cbb-99ba-d75ffe704efe_story.html.

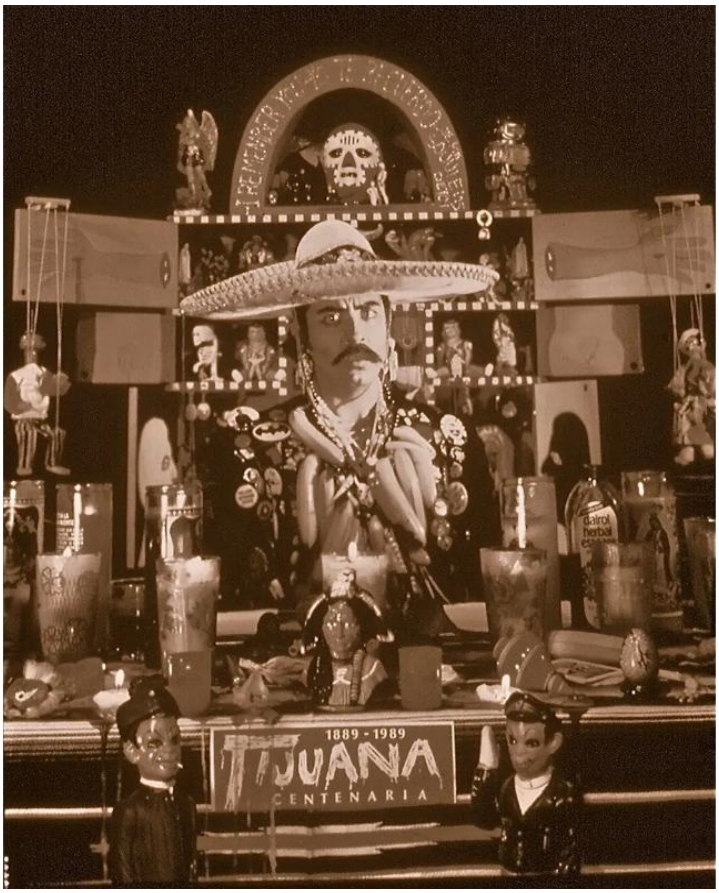

Figure 27: Guillermo Gómez-Peña, posing as a “border brujo” adorned by rascuache objects. Still from Border Brujo, directed by Isaac Artenstein and Guillermo Gómez-Peña, 1990. Photo by Max Aguilera Hellweg. In Guillermo Gómez-Peña, "Border Brujo: A Performance Poem (From the Series 'Documented/Undocumented')," TDR 35, no. 3 (1991): 49.

This is especially evident in his 1988 performance of *Border Wedding*, in which Gómez-Peña and fellow artist Emily Hicks were married on the beach in Tijuana, precisely where the metal border wall extends into the ocean. Surrounded by musicians, family, and friends positioned on both the Mexican and U.S. sides, the ceremony became a symbolic act that blurred the boundaries between performance, politics, and everyday life.[131] Much like *locura*, the

[131] Stacy Finz, “Arts Pair Makes Border Their Crossing to Bear,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 11, 1988, https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1988-03-11-ca-1145-story.html; Kathryn

performance stages an unlikely combination of elements: a traditional Mexican wedding, complete with a white gown reminiscent of 1980s styles, mariachi music, and festive spectators, set against the stark, militarized infrastructure of the border. The result feels simultaneously absurd yet familiar, humorous yet unsettling, as if something ominous lingers just beyond the frame. This juxtaposition is made even more evident when taking into account the couples' social status. With Gómez-Peña just having won the prestigious MacArthur Foundation award and Hicks, an English professor at San Diego State University, the couple represented the embodiment of the American Dream. Yet, their performative wedding mocks American Dream as a façade, by exposing the violent and dehumanizing American reality that is the border.

In this context, the performance exposes the dehumanizing logic of the border by exaggerating humanity itself. The U.S.-Mexico border, formalized in 1848 and continually reinforced through regimes of surveillance and control, operates as a space that categorizes, disciplines, and restricts movement. For those who navigate it regularly, it often demands conformity, silence, and self-policing to avoid scrutiny. Gómez-Peña's decision to stage a wedding, a ritual long centered on community, directly within this space disrupts those expectations. By amplifying love, *Border Wedding* reveals the absence of these qualities in the border's everyday operations.

The performance also mobilizes humor and theatrical excess as tools of critique. Gómez-Peña recounts crossing into the space without identification by pretending to be blind, while Hicks evaded border patrol by wearing a luchador mask and claiming a wrestler's secret identity.

Vomero Santos, "'Th'oppressor's Wrong,' or, What's Hamlet to the Borderlands?," *Latino Studies* 22, no. 2 (September 2024): 353–75, https://doi.org/10.1057/s41276-024-00462-6

These ludic interventions mirror the logic of *locura*: unexpected, exaggerated, and deliberately out of place. They destabilize the perceived rigidity of the border, exposing it instead as a site of contradiction where absurdity can unravel authority. At the same time, these acts carried real consequences. Gómez-Peña notes that the performance ultimately led to legal trouble and cost him "half of my MacArthur prize" underscoring the potential risks embedded in such forms of resistance.[132]



Figure 28: Emily Hicks and Guillermo Gómez-Peña, Border Field State Park Beach/Playas de Tijuana, 1988. In Guillermo Gómez-Peña, "The Border Wedding," Guillermo Gómez-Peña. https://www.guillermogomezpena.com/works/#the-border-wedding.

[132] "Essential Works Guillermo Gómez-Peña," https://www.guillermogomezpena.com/works/#the-border-wedding.

In his later reflections, Gómez-Peña describes himself as a transborder artist situated within a community that is "fragmented, ever changing and temporary," embracing the role of an "uncompromising dandy… an insider outsider, a performing contradiction."[133] This articulation resonates strongly with *rascuachismo* and, by extension, *locura*: both operate through contradiction, improvisation, and the refusal of fixed identities. While *Border Wedding* might initially appear as a staged, even fantastical utopia, it can be understood as an extension of everyday practices of resistance. Like *locura* foods, it emerges from the quotidian realities of transborder life, transforming constraints into creativity.

Performing and Consuming Locura

I base my framing of performance on Richard Bauman's conceptualization of performance as both a communicative behavior and a communicative event. He explains that performance is an act of communication—a dialogue between performer and audience—created through a marked event and expressed through behavior: "In contrast to notions of performance as any doing of an act of communication are conceptions of performance as a specially marked mode of action, one that sets up or represents a special interpretive frame within which the act of communication is to be understood."[134] Through this lens, public eating—particularly within *Locura* food culture—can be understood as a communicative act. *Locura* foods are generally prepared, presented, and consumed in community; by this, I mean their appearance is most common in public Latino spaces, particularly Mexican and Latino neighborhoods. Their

[133] TEDx Talks. *Radical Art, Radical Communities, and Radical Dreams: Guillermo Gómez-Peña at TEDxCalArts*. 2014. 26:25. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x1KkjVpc5Go.
[134] Richard Bauman, *Folklore, Cultural Performances, and Popular Entertainments: A Communications-Centered Handbook* (Oxford University Press, 1992). 44.

circulation on platforms like TikTok and Instagram, where they are categorized under hashtags like #antojitos or #dorilocos, further reinforces their public visibility and audience-oriented nature.

According to Bauman, two important characteristics of performance are setting and time. Locura foods make these dimensions especially visible. Their settings are communal—snack shops, fairs, festivals, and outdoor markets—spaces where audiences are built into the environment. They are also tied to specific temporalities of leisure: weekends, off-hours, and moments of social gathering. The where and when of Locura food consumption help mark it as performance, reinforcing that public eating in these contexts are staged, shared, and communicative.

Even the aesthetic presentation of Locura foods—bright, loud colors, contrasting textures, and sculptural creations—marks them as performance. These foods are not only consumed, but they simultaneously put on display, anticipating observation, evaluation, and participation. In this sense, the intimate act of eating, when done in public, becomes a communicative event, where the consumer is also a performer, and the food itself mediates a shared social exchange.

Richard Bauman further argues that performance is an act of vulnerability that exposes the performer to public scrutiny:

> In this sense of performance, the act of communication is put on display, objectified, lifted out to a degree from its contextual surroundings, and opened up to scrutiny by an audience. Performance thus calls forth special attention to and heightened awareness of the act of communication and gives license to the audience to regard it and the performer with special intensity. Performance makes one communicatively accountable; it assigns

> to an audience the responsibility of evaluating the relative skill and effectiveness of the performer's accomplishment.[135]

Bauman's model helps illuminate the performative aspects of public eating, especially when it is contextualized through race and power. For racialized bodies, public behavior such as eating is never neutral; it must be analyzed within the dynamics of visibility, surveillance, and judgment. As Psyche Williams-Forson explains in *Eating While Black*, Black American food cultures have historically been shamed, surveilled, and controlled through systems of structural racism, exploitation, and violence.[136]

Rebecca de Souza illustrates how these dynamics play out in the space of food pantries through what she calls neoliberal stigma, or a binary logic that separates the "worthy" moral citizens from the bodies marked as "unworthy" and "irresponsible.[137]" This logic is performed through the archetype of the Welfare Queen and is directed particularly toward Black women in food pantries or other social welfare settings: "Quite ironically, the burden of stigma is most deeply experienced in her attempts to alleviate food insecurity. It is not the lack of food but the interactions she engages in to procure food that are stigmatizing. Suspicion surrounds her."[138] For racialized bodies, this illustrates that behavior surrounding food, whether procurement, preparation, or consumption, exists within structures of power that regulate and surveil everyday life. These interactions are not neutral; they are shaped by systems that assign moral value to

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[135] Ibid.

[136] Psyche A. Williams-Forson, *Eating While Black: Food Shaming and Race in America* (The University of North Carolina Press, 2022).

[137] Rebecca De Souza, *Feeding the Other: Whiteness, Privilege, and Neoliberal Stigma in Food Pantries*, Food, Health, and the Environment (MIT Press, 2019). 16-17.

[138] Ibid.

how and what one eats and can be read through racialized and classed expectations, where individuals must constantly negotiate visibility.

Susan Kalčik directly situates this negotiation of visibility within the communicative messaging behind the performance of ethnic identities in the United States:

> First, immigrants may wish to express the adoption of 'Americanism' and the partial or total rejection of the ethnic immigrant identity. Second, immigrants or ethnics may wish to communicate maintenance or the adoption of ethnicity. Third, immigrants, ethnics, or non-ethnics may wish to communicate acceptance of the pluralistic aspect of American identity and underline intergroup harmony in the United States. Each of these types of ethnic statements may be made with varying degrees of self-consciousness. Each may be made in the private or public domain, as a communication to the self or in-group, or as communication to the out-group.[139]

If, as Kalčik claims, ethnic identity in the United States can signal in-group or out-group status, then the question relevant to this study becomes: what does the public consumption of *Locura* foods communicate to Mexican and Latino communities? More specifically, how do these acts of eating operate within this spectrum of ethnic signaling? Do they assert the maintenance of cultural identity, communicate belonging within a shared in-group, or risk marking the consumer as others within a dominant public? And to what extent are these performances self-conscious—strategic acts of visibility—or simply lived, embodied practices shaped by structural conditions?

Expanding on Williams-Forson's call toward forms of food liberation that reject "white racial narratives predicated on power and privilege."[140] I argue that for Latinos in the United States, buying and consuming *Locura* foods becomes a performance shaped by conditions of

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[139] Susan Kalčik, "Ethnic Foodways in America: Symbol and the Performance of Identity," in *Ethnic and Regional Foodways in the United States: The Performance of Group Identity*, ed. Linda Keller Brown and Kay Mussell (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1984). 56-57.

[140] [140] Psyche A. Williams-Forson, *Eating While Black: Food Shaming and Race in America*

scrutiny and constraint. For racialized bodies, public eating is an act of exposure—it is to place oneself under observation, where consumption is read, judged, and made meaningful through racialized frameworks. In this context, *Locura* foods, can be consumed through performance. They function as a performance of transborder identity, where the act of eating publicly communicates belonging, memory, and cultural negotiation across national and gastronomic boundaries.

What Ramona Lee Pérez and Meredith E. Abarca call "the condition of perpetual in-betweenness develops what we call the *sabor y sazón* (flavor and seasoning) of a border consciousness" is enacted through these moments of consumption.[141] For me, buying and eating a bag of *dorilocos* in both spaces becomes a dialogue with my own history of class, race, and displacement. The rancho festivities where the snack is popularly consumed recall Mexico's disenfranchisement of rural regions, where Indigenous and Afro-Indigenous communities continue to protect and defend their language, music, dance, and food practices against a state that has historically enforced conformity and assimilation. Similarly, in Reno, the encroaching gentrification that threatens antojitos in the United States is tied to Anglo settler colonialism that displaced the Paiute peoples who originally lived in the region.

For transborder Latinos who oscillate between these spaces, consuming *Locura* foods becomes a public act of marking oneself or an exposure to being read as other. In this way, *Locura* foods express transborder identity, marking the brown body as deviant within dominant cultural frameworks, turning public eating into a performance of both belonging and otherness.

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[141] Ramona Lee Pérez and Meredith E. Abarca, "Cocinas Públicas: Food and Border Consciousness in Greater Mexico," *Food & Foodways* 15, nos. 3–4 (2007):140.

These markings of otherness are as physical as they are psychological. To consume *locura*, one's body must contort and shape itself to the demands of the food: a bag of dorilocos, a mangoneada, a jicapaleta, a tray of salchipulpos lack the structural integrity for mindless eating. Instead Locura demands mindfulness and full body commitment: one's hand delicately balances the food in one hand, especially when ambulant, and one's mouth must strategically navigate toward the food, lest risk food droppings. At the same time, for maximum gastronomic experience, locura must be consumed as soon as it is prepared for the ephemeral quality of the food prohibits long-term storage.

The physical, performative aspects of *Locura* foods can be further analyzed through their response to food respectability politics, or what Gillian Crowther refers to as gastro-politics—the unspoken rules of commensality.[142] The gastro-politics of public eating in the United States have long been shaped by racialized ideas about proper behavior. From stereotypes that mark South Asian bodies as unclean for eating with their hands or as "smelly" because of the use of spices, to the pervasive "sambo" figures that associate Black bodies as disturbingly cheerful figures with watermelons, the racialized body—under the gaze of white supremacy—is scrutinized even in the most quotidian food contexts.[143] As Black comedian Wanda Sykes recounts, this scrutiny produces a constant awareness of white approval: "White people are looking at you! I would go

[142] Gillian Crowther, *Eating Culture: An Anthropological Guide to Food* (University of Toronto Press, 2013).

[143] Anita Mannur, "Culinary Fictions: Immigrant Foodways and Race in Indian American Literature," in *Asian American Studies After Critical Mass*, ed. Kent A. Ono (2005), 56–70; David Pilgrim, *Watermelons, Nooses, and Straight Razors: Stories from the Jim Crow Museum* (PM Press, 2017).

in the grocery store and look at the whole watermelons… I'll take my dignified ass to the salad bar… let me camouflage this shit with some cantaloupe, good day sir."[144]

The performance of consuming *Locura* foods, aesthetically loud, can function as a mockery of notions food respectability politics, as they reject nearly all notions of "proper" American behavior surrounding food. As Margaret Visser illustrates, modern table manners have always existed within the context of power as they harken back to Medieval European notions of etiquette created with the purpose of distinguishing between social classes, and protecting the elite from intrusion of potential foes. [145]For instance the common unspoken rule in the West that bites of food must be inconspicuous and small, is not a realistic expectation for *Locura* foods as their creations are large, bulky, awkwardly shaped. The visual performance of this trait is most evident through social media, where mukbang-style content highlights the performance consumption of *Locura* foods.[146]

The choreography required to eat a bag of *dorilocos* can be likened to the "mode of communicative action" aspect of performance in the sense that the material demands of the food shape the body and its reception.[147] This choreography is intensely physical: the eater must learn to balance the overstuffed bag, tilt and strain the neck and jaw to bring the unruly contents to the mouth, and negotiate the sticky, juicy mess of *chamoy, cueritos*, and lime. The body becomes

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[144] *Wanda Sykes: I'ma Be Me*, directed by Beth McCarthy-Miller (HBO, 2009).

[145] Margaret Visser. *The Rituals of Dinner: The Origins, Evolution, Eccentricities, and Meaning of Table Manners*. First American ed. Grove Weidenfeld, 1991.

[146] Mukbang, are Korean food videos centered on the act of eating. The term has been widely adopted to describe internet content that showcase eating for the camera.

[147] Richard Bauman, *Story, Performance, and Event: Contextual Studies of Oral Narrative*, Cambridge Studies in Oral and Literate Culture 10 (Cambridge University Press, 1986).

visibly marked by bright Red 40 stains—on the fingertips, around the lips, sometimes splattered onto clothing. With *dorilocos,* hiding becomes impossible; one's Mexican American identity is performed through an unapologetically messy, colorful, and excessive act of eating. Yet it is precisely this visibility that produces a surprising sense of freedom. When I am enjoying *dorilocos*, my body is "marked" by *locura*, and I am temporarily released from the work of maintaining white sensibilities of proper behavior. The red-stained mouth echoes what Anzaldúa describes as the necessity of letting the "wild tongue" speak—a refusal of decorum, assimilation, or containment. Under an Anzaldúan lens, *dorilocos* function as transborder foods whose consumption becomes a performance of shamelessness, a small yet potent everyday insurgency in which eating asserts pleasure, belonging, and identity beyond the policing forces of whiteness.

This sense of release takes on deeper urgency when placed within a broader genealogy of food shame. Returning to Wanda Sykes's anecdote regarding the pressure to conform to white standards of acceptability by avoiding the whole watermelons at the grocery store, she further illustrates what food liberation felt like post Barack Obama's election: "I've got a black president… I'm walking out the grocery store with a watermelon on my shoulder…I hope he gets a second term, then I'm going to Popeyes!"[148] It is this constant negotiation of what constitutes acceptable and unacceptable forms of existing where shame is produced.

Gloria Anzaldúa interrogates shame as a product of the devaluation of Chicana and Indigenous heritage—a devaluation magnified through anti-Mexican sentiment in the United States. Few writers capture the affective weight of shame as sharply as Anzaldúa, who writes: "Yes, all you people wound us when you reject us. Rejection strips us of self-worth; our

[148] *Wanda Sykes: I'ma Be Me*

vulnerability exposes us to shame. It is our innate identity you find wanting. We are ashamed that we need your good opinion, that we need your acceptance."[149]

What makes food shame especially insidious is that it often appears neutral, disguised as mere preference. Remarks such as "That smells weird" or "I could never eat that" rarely register as political, yet they reproduce racialized and classed boundaries through the language of aesthetic judgment. This everyday dismissal of culturally significant foods reinforces exclusion and cultivates a profound sense of isolation for those on the receiving end. Krista Maxwell reminds us that internalized disciplinary control often takes root through shame, writing that colonial power instills "normalizing judgements" that lead individuals to "develop practices of self-surveillance."[150] In Mexican and Mexican American contexts, such self-surveillance appears in the seemingly trivial discourse around corn versus flour tortillas. Many of us Mexican diasporic youth learn early on that corn tortillas indexed authenticity while flour tortillas signaled distance from one's heritage, even "white-washed" tendencies—a subtle but potent mechanism of cultural policing.

Seen against this backdrop, the genre of *locura* foods—*dorilocos, tostilocos, hot Cheetos preparados*, and other hybrid snack creations—emerges as a culinary formation that disrupts the politics of respectability embedded in food shame. *Locura* foods blend processed snacks with ingredients carrying long artisanal histories, producing colorful, excessive, and often structurally impractical creations. Their aesthetic prioritizes visual spectacle, texture, and playful excess over neatness or restraint. They are prepared in community spaces—street corners, snack shops, park

[149] Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands = La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, Fifth edition. (Aunt Lute Books, 2021). 88.

[150] Krista Maxwell, *Indigenous Healing as Paradox* (University of Alberta Press, 2025). 15.

vendors—on the urban periphery where cultural improvisation thrives. Importantly, *locura* foods are rarely meant to be eaten alone; even individually portioned versions are designed for social settings where the act of eating becomes communal performance. In this sense, *locura* constitutes a quasi-cuisine, though one that resists the fixity of that label. It is a constantly shifting, ephemeral practice rooted in shared pleasure, humor, and unapologetic abundance. When eaten without shame, *locura* foods offer an embodied critique of colonial taste hierarchies, asserting that pleasure, messiness, and excess can themselves be forms of resistance.

Another function of *locura* embedded within communicative performance is joy. This reflects a transborder Latino understanding of joy that emerges through both the creation and consumption of this snack. *Locura* also operates as a language through which Latino identity—particularly youth cultural identity—is expressed and asserted. As Stuart Hall explains, cultural identities are not fixed but dynamic, shaped by and embedded within shifting social conditions; they are subject to the continuous "play" of history, culture, and power.[151]

For Generation Z Latinos in the United States, this dynamic takes on particular urgency. They face unprecedented challenges, including environmental destruction, the rise of authoritarianism, and increasing rates of mental illness. As a result, Gen Z Latinos are compelled to resist more intensely in their everyday lives than previous generations. Within this context, *locura* foods create spaces and moments of joy that can be understood as what Audre Lorde

[151] Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" (1990), in *Selected Writings on Race and Difference*, ed. Paul Gilroy and Ruth Wilson Gilmore (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021)

describes as "acts of self-revelation"—practices that provide the affective tools necessary to endure and resist oppression.

A future framework for developing a theoretical approach to Latino joy can draw from analyses of Black joy—particularly the work of Lindsey Stewart—which offers the framework for understanding how cultural practices emerging from marginalized communities function as forms of aesthetic resistance. Stewart's work on the Black South demonstrates how joy can function as a political orientation She writes:

> Politically, the politics of joy includes a shift toward self-determination and a shift away from the pursuit of white political recognition; a refusal of assumptions of Black southern tragedy and inferiority; and a keen awareness of racial dynamics that remain intransigent, even while Black representation in the public sphere increases. Analytically, the politics of joy offers a change in focus and perspective, from the relations between oppressed and oppressor to the intragroup relations among the oppressed. Doing so positions us to analyze how we relate to each other, not just how we relate to our oppressors. Moreover, the politics of joy encourages us to engage with the cultural practices that make self-definition possible in our analyses of agency under oppression. [152]

This repositioning of joy as a method of resistance helps reframe the sensory and communal excess of *Locura* as more than as a refusal of normative food aesthetics that often-center whiteness, health moralism, or culinary "refinement." Like Stewart suggests, joy here turns inward; it centers the tastes, aesthetics, and desires of the oppressed themselves, the same ones used by white supremacy to sow narratives of shame. The textures, colors, and flavor combinations of *Locura* foods do not seek external validation—they are grounded in community-defined pleasure, a kind of *el gusto* that challenges what dominant cultures think food should

[152] Lindsey Stewart, *The Politics of Black Joy: Zora Neale Hurston and Neo-Abolitionism* (Northwestern University Press, 2021). 14.

look, taste, or even sound like. In this way, joy becomes an anchor—rooting us not in tragedy or lack, but in the abundance of shared cultural meaning and sensory expression.

Conclusion

This chapter analyzed understudied dimension of NAFTA's impact on Mexican foodways: the creative emergence of an entirely new culinary genre. In addition to examining economic displacement or nutritional consequence alone, this analysis has centered the generative cultural response of Mexican youth, whose improvisational and joyful food practices demand greater scholarly attention. As Stewart's analysis, drawing on Zora Neale Hurston's racial politics, reminds us, a liberation politics shaped only in opposition to whiteness or state violence is necessarily incomplete. The politics of joy asks us instead to notice how people live, love, create, and nourish one another — especially amid systemic oppression. It is precisely this principle that illuminates why *locura* foods represent not merely a culinary trend, but a creative, embodied, and joyful resistance that refuses legibility on dominant culinary or political terms. Dorilocos, in this sense, are not simply a snack consumed to perform identity; they are part of a larger cultural and political performance of joy — loud, excessive, and wholly unconcerned with being digestible to mainstream norms. They demonstrate that pleasure, when defined by those on the margins, is a radical act. *Locura* foods insist on joy not as escapism, but as a deeply rooted, collective form of self-determination — one in which flavor and community become tools of resistance. The food genre trends emerging from Mexican youth culture are, therefore, a site of urgent scholarly inquiry, one that this chapter has only begun to map.

CONCLUSION: TOWARD A RE-MEMBERING

In my 2023 graduate Food and Folklore seminar with Dr. Riki Saltzman, I was asked to reflect on comfort food: what it was, and more importantly, how a particular dish created comfort. I chose to write about my mother's *enfrijoladas* — rolled tortillas smothered in refried beans and topped with crumbling cheese. It was the first time I had ever been invited to reflect on my relationship with beans since that formative first-grade experience, and the assignment opened something in me I had not known was closed. Yet it was not until I entered a Ph.D. program that I found an academic space that welcomed this kind of reflection — one that gave me the language to articulate my experience with food shame and to write about my own healing practice of re-membering through food: the deliberate act of piecing myself back together through the dishes that had once made me feel small.

Mexican Food and Lore Beyond the Fictions We've Been Fed emerges from this recognition. Its purpose is to offer Latino students the history, methods, and critical languages needed to articulate their own processes of re-membering. In this context, re-membering is not simply an act of recollection; it is a political and embodied practice of repair — the deliberate restoration of fractured social and cultural ties severed by colonialism, systemic racism, and other forms of structural oppression. Through food scholarship, re-membering invites us to center ancestral foodways as living archives of knowledge, memory, and resistance. Recipes, agricultural techniques, cooking methods, and shared meals are not merely cultural artifacts; they are dynamic practices through which historical wounds are acknowledged and communal bonds restored. These embodied traditions offer pathways for reclaiming histories that have been fragmented by colonization, displacement, and racial violence, and they affirm that the knowledge Latino students carry into the classroom is not incidental to their education — it is foundational to it.

Paige Gutierrez's analysis of the Cajun crawfish boil in Louisiana illustrates this process vividly. She explains how Cajun communities have transformed the crawfish boil into an "ethnic emblem" that both celebrates and performs their difference, turning what might otherwise mark them as marginal into a site of cultural affirmation and pride.[153] In Gutierrez's reading, the feast becomes a form of *re-membering*—a collective act through which community members publicly assert belonging and identity, transforming otherness into festivity and resistance.

Similarly, Josephine Beoku-Betts demonstrates how food preservation practices among Gullah communities in the coastal regions of Georgia and South Carolina function as repositories of ancestral knowledge. She argues that the intimate relationship between natural environment, staple foods such as rice, and the rituals of preparation reflects "a cultural identity grounded in the communal memory of enslavement and African knowledge systems."[154] For Beoku-Betts, these practices do not simply preserve the past—they enact it. In the process, they sustain forms of cultural continuity that defy erasure and affirm the ongoing vitality of Black and diasporic epistemologies.

Re-membering cannot be understood without first grappling with *dismemberment*, what the colonial legacy of trauma inflicted upon communities of color. Dismemberment refers to the processes, both physical and epistemic, through which colonialism, white supremacy, and patriarchy have severed individuals and communities from their land, languages, spiritual practices, and one another. It includes the violence of forced assimilation, the erasure of

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[153] C. Paige Gutierrez,. *Cajun Foodways*. University Press of Mississippi, 1992.

[154] Beoku Betts, Josephine. "We Got Our Way of Cooking Things: Women, Food, and Preservation of Cultural Identity among the Gullah." *Gender & Society*, 9, no. 5 (1995):553.

Indigenous knowledge systems, and the imposition of heteronormative, patriarchal structures. Anticolonial scholars, notably Fanon, uses the description of dismemberment and mutilation to describe Europe's colonial imprint and inspire the creation of new decolonized world—not in the vision of Europe:

> The Third World must start over a new history of man which takes account of not only the occasional prodigious theses maintained by Europe but also its crimes, the most heinous of which have been committed at the very heart of man, the pathological dismembering of his functions and the erosion of his unity, and in the context of the community, the fracture, the stratification and the bloody tensions fed by class, and finally, on the immense scale of humanity, the racial hatred, slavery, exploitation and, above all, the bloodless genocide whereby one and a half billion men have been written off.[155]

Largely inspired by the field of psychoanalysis, Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* makes explicit the more personal, complex form of colonial violence that emerges from a space "where one's body is home to both oppressor and oppressed selves."[156] I would like to dwell a bit on this topic as relates back to being *ni de aqui, ni de alla; pocho,no sabo, agringeada*. Perhaps the most poignant observation is that to be Mexican is trapped as both gringo and raza, a double consciousness where two forces police each other often clashing, when one is too apparent the other punishes. In this dynamic, the self that holds both identities is exhausted to the point of fracture. Such dynamic is further illustrated by Gloria Anzaldúa's use of the Coyolxauhqui myth

[155] Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*. With Richard Philcox, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Homi K. Bhabha. Grove Press, 2004. 315

[156] Mohammad H Tamdgidi. "Intersecting Autobiography, History, and Theory: The Subtler Global Violences of Colonialism and Racism in Fanon, Said, and Anzaldua." *Human Architecture* (Belmont) 5, no. Special Issue (2007): 119.

in Chicana feminism, where we can see how communities have historically resisted dismemberment.[157]

Dismemberment is not merely a physical or psychological act; it is the perpetuation of institutions and cultural narratives that systematically marginalize and devalue Indigenous and Afro-descendant epistemologies. It is, at its core, a declaration — spoken through policy, rhetoric, and popular culture alike — that Mexicans and the Mexican diaspora do not belong.

Mexican Food and Lore Beyond the Fictions We've Been Fed intervenes in this tradition of erasure. My hope is that this work contributes to a growing body of scholarship that asks Mexican and Mexican American students what knowledge they already carry — knowledge passed down through kitchens, markets, and family tables — and that it celebrates rather than marginalizes their ancestral systems of knowing. Too often, Latino students are asked to leave that knowledge at the classroom door. This work insists they bring it inside.

In the five years since beginning my doctoral program and conceiving this project, I have witnessed how anti-immigrant rhetoric in the United States has recycled and repackaged the same anti-Mexican sentiment rooted in anti-indigeneity and Black erasure that this project examines. These are not new fictions — they are old ones told t us in new language. The claim

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[157] Gloria Anzaldúa. *Light in the Dark = Luz En Lo Oscuro: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality*. With AnaLouise Keating. Latin America Otherwise: Languages, Empires, Nations. Duke University Press, 2015. https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822375036.
According to myth, Coyolxauhqui, daughter of Coatlicue and the goddess of the earth and fertility, conspired with her brothers to murder her mother. Her brother, the newly born Huitzilopochtli and the god of war, burst out of his mother womb to slay his brothers and decapitate Coyolxauhqui. Her beheaded body was tossed off a mountain and became the moon.

that Mexican immigrants must assimilate to American customs and English-only culture reiterates the same anti-Indigenous logic that once belittled corn-based diets in favor of wheat, framing Native foodways as markers of backwardness and inferiority. The claim that Mexican "invaders" threaten American jobs and resources recycles the early nineteenth-century border logic that constructed the Mexican body as unhygienic and dangerous — a fiction used to justify dehumanizing practices such as the pesticide baths imposed on border crossers.

These declarations of non-belonging do not remain in the political sphere; they seep into the stories we tell about food. From the appropriation and rebranding of mole as a symbol of a sanitized Mexican mestizaje, to the fiction that tacos required Glen Bell's intervention to become fit for mass consumption, we are surrounded by narratives that diminish Mexican culinary traditions while profiting from them. Each of these stories carries the same underlying message: that Mexicans — their bodies, their knowledge, their food — are raw material to be improved upon, consumed, or expelled, never fully recognized as belonging. It is precisely these fictions that this project seeks to name, examine, and dismantle.

Given this context, we must ask: how do we re-member? Gloria Anzaldúa offers one framework. In her work, she reclaims myth as a living, breathing force — one sustained through the stories, rituals, and embodied practices of the community — as a means of healing the wounds inflicted by sexism, homophobia, and colonial erasure. Her framework invites us to turn inward, toward the practices we have inherited, and to recognize them as sites of both critical reckoning and cultural restoration.

For me, part of that reckoning necessitated confronting the anti-Black erasure perpetuated within my own community. For example, tamarindo, hibiscus, and horchata — the foods most closely associated with communal joy emerging from conditions of profound suffering is not a

contradiction to be minimized. it is a historical complexity that demands acknowledgment and interrogation. To ask where our food comes from is, in this sense, to begin the work of decolonization. Yet this interrogation need not end in despair. Our ancestral food practices contain within them the very stories of resilience that sustain communities through ongoing conditions of dispossession and exclusion. Practices rooted in *locura* and *rasquachismo* — the improvisational and irreverent aesthetics born from the margins — are not merely cultural expressions; they are epistemological frameworks through which communities have historically negotiated survival, innovation, and belonging. It is precisely this capacity for adaptation and meaning-making under conditions of constraint that this project seeks to foreground, offering Latino students not only a critical lens through which to examine their inherited foodways, but a foundation from which to begin, deliberately and collectively, the embodied work of re-membering.

The future development of *Mexican Food and Lore Beyond the Fictions We've Been Fed* envisions the expansion of its critical framework beyond foodways alone, toward a more expansive theory of *amor propio* as a site of collective self-fashioning and cultural affirmation. *Amor propio*, understood here not merely as individual self-esteem but as a culturally grounded practice of collective self-love rooted in joy and pride in one's whole self, offers a generative framework for examining the full range of expressive traditions through which Mexican and Mexican American communities have asserted dignity and belonging. As Sergio Loza explains, it is "a culturally specific notion that is hard to explain to others but that makes sense to those who have experiences like us," a term that, in his account, “emerged from our conversations and by

pulling from our personal journeys and histories, calling upon our different disciplines, and arriving at a term that just meant so much to us on a personal level."[158]

This framework, precisely because it is rooted in lived experience and collective meaning-making, has the capacity to extend well beyond the kitchen. Foodways, fashion, music, and linguistic variation — including the code-switching, slang, and hybrid tongues that have long been pathologized as deficiency — can each be understood as expressive registers through which communities practice *amor propio*: asserting the value of their whole selves in the face of institutions and narratives that have historically demanded their erasure or assimilation. To wear, speak, eat, and move in ways that affirm rather than apologize for one's cultural inheritance is, in this sense, a political and healing act. Future iterations of this project seek to trace these threads across multiple expressive domains, centering *amor propio* as the connective tissue that binds them into a unified, embodied theory of decolonial self-affirmation.

[158] Devin Grammon, Adam Schwartz, Dalia Magana, and Sergio Loza, "Contributor Conversation: Embodied Knowledge/Institutional Knowledge," in *Aquí se habla: Centering the Local and Personal in Spanish Language Education* (Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton, 2025), 81.

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