“Yo Quiero Taco Bell”: Consuming Mexican Identity in U.S. Spaces

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In an apt characterization by Guillermo Gómez-Peña, “The current media war against the Latino cultural other is intercut with eulogies to our products. Blood and salsa, that’s the nature of this relationship” (28). I suggest that “war” between the United States and Mexico has long been cast in U.S. media as a desire to consume the “other” within the Anglo-American body and nation. From the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo to NAFTA and the current U.S. obsession with “Latin” food, music, and dance, the United States has been attempting to incorporate and to commodify Mexican identity. Actual violence circulates with salsa and mezcal throughout this history of love and hate. Of course the U.S. desire to consume Mexico has always been contested by racist estadounidenses – attempting to limit “American” identity and nationality – as well as resistant Latina/os. In this paper I will focus, in particular, on one site where this battle is re-enacted, representations of the Alamo. In competing images that seek to control the symbolic meaning of this Texas mission – including its corporate simulacrum, Taco Bell – Mexican identity is often coded, and assimilated, as the product of a simultaneously heterosexual and alimentary U.S. appetite. The “quiero” in “Yo quiero Taco Bell” reflects this convergence of food, sex, and national domination. Why is it that gringo Americans are so anxious to “Make a run for the border”?1

1 Amy Bentley offers an answer to this question in a Southern Folklore article, “From Culinary Other to Mainstream American: Meanings and Uses of Southwestern Cuisine”: “While no doubt playing on the notion of the borderland as a ‘dangerous haven’ harboring outlaws (such as the Frito Bandito), Taco Bell advertising executives surely did not intend to evoke any reference to the prevalent ‘running to the border’ debates (of Mexican nationals ‘running’ south to north)”
On a recent visit to Oaxaca, where *mole poblano*-eating tourists filled the zócalo along with a dark-skinned amputee and a broken-looking elderly woman silently begging for money, I overheard one U.S. tourist loudly proclaiming how attractive and fun-loving Mexicans are: “They just party all night!” I do not make this up. Did he not see the hunched back of the elderly woman? Did he not see the relationship between his enjoyment of his *comida* and the others walking around his table? In *The Body in Pain*, Elaine Scarry asks: “How is it that one person can be in the presence of another person in pain and not know it – not know it to the point where he himself inflicts it and goes on inflicting it?” (Scarry 12). Anglo-Americans consume Mexican culture as a desirable commodity – Cinco de Mayo parties, chili, mariachi music – while this consumption exploits, dehumanizes, obscures, and impoverishes real Mexicans and Mexican-Americans.² I begin to wonder if it is not these very aspects of neo-colonial domination that make Mexican culture so “fun” for gringos. In a continuation of an American (Bentley 245). This asymmetrical U.S. corporate thinking is particularly important when one considers this 1997 slogan alongside the history of NAFTA.

² Throughout this paper I refer to “tourists” and “*estadounidenses*” in the abstract, as a sort of negative ideal. Regard them as types, clichés, extremes, not individuals. Certainly not all tourists or U.S. citizens exhibit these treats. I, for one, am both, but I do not like being taken for a “tourist,” especially in Mexico. I abhor the principles that underlie tourist industry. I hide my camera in a big purse with my dictionary and my water bottle. At the same time, I love taking photographs of Mexico: pyramids, markets, churches. I hang them on my wall, along with my collection of Mexican masks and candleholders. My experience in Oaxaca was an uncannily timed example of my recent thinking about U.S.-Mexico cultural relations and my own status as a white American researcher in this area. My own relationship to Mexico originated in my junior high school years in New Mexico, studying New Mexico history and the Spanish language. Although my continued focus on Mexican and Mexican-American culture is based on political commitment, and although I insist to my students in Chicana/o Literature classes that actual engagement with the material requires a rejection of tourist sensibility, my own academic, racial, and national privileges – even as a self-reflexive, well-read, politically liberal bilingual – are still consistent with tourist power dynamics. Can a gringa ever be anything but a tourist, a consumer, in her engagements with Mexico? In “Chapulines, Mole, and Pozole: Mexican Cuisines and the Gringa Imagination,” Doris Friedensohn seems to suggest that the answer is
sadism begun in the nineteenth century, the pain of Mexico forms the center of U.S. “fiesta.” Yet by attending to these signs of pain in Mexico, I risk reinforcing the quasi-romantic stereotype of Mexico as a site of poverty, drugs, revolution – as a repository for all of the images of “unhealth” that the U.S attempts to purge from its own self-image and to fence off in its vision of “South of the Border.” Estadounidenses are told not to drink the water there. The other side of this image is the mezcal, the party-all-night stereotype, which is also coded as unsafe for gringo tourists but packaged in an enticing manner. (According to bell hooks, in advertising, “the lure of ‘the Other’ is the combination of pleasure and danger” (hooks 186).)

The United States has a long history of turning to Mexico in general, and to the Alamo, in particular, for producing and for pondering experiences of pleasure and pain.

For example, the Alamo is used as a model for suffering, sacrifice, and death in Augusta Evans Wilson’s relatively obscure, xenophobic 1855 novel, Inez: A Tale of the Alamo – a melodramatic romance that appears notably not to be about the Alamo or the minor character, Inez. Evans chooses the Alamo as a site for exorcising Anglo-American demons (in particular, anti-Catholicism and disdain for supposedly slothful and superstitious Mexicans), and her celebration of Protestant femininity is encoded through her representation of the Anglo-Texans’ sacrifice at the Alamo. Most of the narrative follows the cross-country travels and the drawn-out illness of the emphatically pale, quiet, angelic, and cold-handed Protestant character, Mary. In a subtle alignment of representations, Mary and the Alamo are imbued with the same qualities. One of the few scenes actually set at the Alamo occurs in a narrative break of just nine pages, which intrudes upon Mary’s deathbed scene in Washington, D.C. We leave Mary fading on the pillows, switch perspectives to the battle at the Alamo, and return immediately to Mary’s “no.” Yet how does one communicate awareness of this problematic without bolstering one’s
peaceful death in the nation’s capital. This juxtaposition highlights the injustice of Mary’s untimely death but projects these worldly anxieties away from Mary, Washington, and, by extension, “America,” and onto the Alamo. Evans writes, “Oh! San Antonio, thou art too beautiful for strife and discord to mar they quiet loveliness. Yet the fiery breath of desolating war swept rudely o’er thee, and, alas! Thou wast sorely scathed” (Evans 241). In this complaint, San Antonio bears the tragedy that Evans will not attribute to Mary’s mild passage to heaven. Rapacious destruction of a lovely body is here attached to Santa Anna’s victory at the Alamo, after which

The sun went down as it were in a sea of blood, its lurid light, gleaming ominously on the pale, damp brows of the doomed garrison. Black clouds rolled up and vailed the heavens in gloom. Night closed prematurely in with fitful gusts, mingling the moans and strife of nature with the roar of artillery…. “God help us!” (242, emphasis added)

This melodramatic personification of the Alamo recalls descriptions of Mary’s damp brow – “large drops stood on her pure, beautiful brow” (237) – which also is frequently veiled by her dark hair, covers, and hats. Her beloved Dr. Bryant, who later returns to Texas to die at Goliad, cries out for Mary as the narrator cries out for the Alamo: “O God! Spare me my gentle angel Mary” (239), but ultimately “the shadow cast by [Death’s] black pinions” covers her face just as night falls “prematurely” on the Alamo (251). Both are represented as great losses for America.

The Mexican Catholic character, Inez, highlights Mary’s qualities by embodying their opposites: her hands are “hot – burning,” her “masses” of raven-colored hair fall to her waist, and she is described as “fearless,” “feverish,” “restless and piercing,” “haughty,”

own power through tourist pride or displays of self-flagellation?
“contemptuous,” and “cursed” (35, 59, 263, 268, 278). In opposition to the virtuous and virginal Anglo-Texans, Inez comes to represent a too-sexual, too-forward Mexico that perversely brings destruction upon itself: after rejecting her betrothed and losing her father, she cross-dresses (stereotypically, with a sombrero and a Mexican blanket) to escape imprisonment by the evil San Antonio priest, forwardly declares her love to Mary’s Dr. Bryant – an “avowal [that] gives [him] inexpressible pain” – and ultimately dies alone, “raving,” damned to purgatory by the priest, “denied” both a “peaceful end” and a consecrated burial (248, 277, 287-91). Inez’s solitary, miserable death renders Mary’s more blissful by comparison, as all pain is projected away from the Anglos and onto the Mexicans. Yet the Anglos’ future is inextricably, and unwillingly, intertwined with Mexicans’ pain and with Mexico as a nation. Inez begs to be allowed to follow the Anglo-Texan soldiers and to worship Bryant, but he rejects her love and wishes never to see her again (277). After Bryant is killed at Goliad, however, she steals his body in the night, buries it in secret, and ultimately has her own buried next to him. This fictionalization of U.S.-Mexican relations, written less than ten years after the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo, could be designed to justify U.S. domination by reiterating tropes supposed to reflect Anglo-Saxon superiority and Manifest Destiny. According to this narrative, Anglos tried to reject Mexico’s sexual advances but were too virtuous to repel the aggressively seductive Inez or the treacherous armies of Santa Anna. This reversal of history shifts blame onto the shoulders of Mexico, savoring the pain of the vanquished, and rewrites war as romance. The U.S. incorporation of Mexican lands then appears as the outcome of unwanted Mexican seduction: a self-destructive señorita who threw herself at the Anglos’ feet and trapped the United States alongside Mexico for eternity.

It was not until the end of the nineteenth century that the Alamo was first historically recognized as a memorial, after over fifty years of “disrepair and physical neglect” (Flores 440).
At this historical juncture, the tradition that initiated San Antonio’s first annual “Fiesta” was born. *Americana* magazine reports:

In 1891, following a fashion then popular on the French Riviera, the patriotic ladies of San Antonio assembled a retinue of carriages, proceeded in style to the city’s most famous landmark, and then cheerfully pelted each other with flowers in a mock skirmish…. staged in front of the Alamo to commemorate Texans’ bravery there and their subsequent decisive victory over Mexico at San Jacinto…. (Kiene 41)

The creation of Alamo mythology layered sexist and anti-Mexican stereotypes. According to Holly Beachley Brear’s anthropological study of Alamo commemorations, the Battle of Flowers Parade, and the entire carnival, itself, was organized through the 1950s by the wives of wealthy Anglo businessmen, attempting to bring tourist money to San Antonio (Brear 19). The *haute couture* performance – in which white carnival queens throwing flowers stood in for the men who died there shooting guns and canons – invoked nineteenth century images of white middle-

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3 There was little active participation of Latinos in the Fiesta until the League of United Latin American Citizens created the Rey Feo position in 1947, a “personality based on the medieval Ugly King crowned by peasants of southern Europe to mock their established royalty” (Brear 21-22). In opposition to the Carnival Queen, who is selected by the prestigious “Order of the Alamo,” the Rey Feo won the crown by raising money for the LULAC scholarship fund (22). According to Brear, today Fiesta attempts to efface the history of Anglo domination that marks San Antonio, the Alamo, and Fiesta commemoration by displaying “an image of unity, denying publicly any discord between Anglos and Hispanics” (22). In response to charges of ethnocentrism in their management and commemoration of the Alamo, the Daughters of the Republic of Texas have recently attempted to conceal their anti-Mexicanism with an appeal to liberal sympathies. According to Roberts and Olson, “taking a cue from feminists,” the DRT accused their critics of being “macho”: “‘Some of these men who are attacking us just resent what has been a successful female venture since 1905’” (Roberts and Olson 308). This response shifts the terms of a debate about national/racial/cultural representation to a sex/gender axis in order to reverse the historical power dynamics. The white DRT pose themselves as a defensive “subaltern” resisting male domination, which is metonymically attached – by racist stereotype – to Mexicans.
class femininity to draw tourists to an otherwise unappealing history. Making the battle
women’s business obscured the brutal violence at the Alamo and trivialized Mexican opposition
to U.S. conquest. In the nineteenth century, activities considered to be within the purview of
women were limited to moral, domestic, private, aesthetic, or corporeal concerns – not issues of
national security. The “feminization” of Alamo enshrinement thus displaced the painful
national history attached to the site – the defeat of Anglo-American men and U.S. political
principles – with parades and fiestas, symbolic gestures of domestic joy.

In addition to the carnival queens, late nineteenth-century San Antonio featured
supposedly “coquettish” Mexican “chili queens,” who, in Candace Kiene’s description,
encouraged Anglos’ “exuberant consumption of pungent Mexican chili… in nineteenth-century
open-air markets” (Kiene 42). In this juxtaposition, white queens veil physical violence with
surface display, while Mexican queens feed alimentary and sexual desires; the white women
reflect the mythical plane of history, while the Mexican women represent the physical body that
is the object of Alamo consumption. In both characterizations, San Antonio women satisfy the
desires of war-weary Anglo men and offer a fiesta in which Mexican culture forms the backdrop
for Anglo pleasure. The engendering of the Alamo as a masculine space is reversed, as is its

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4 Alamo commemoration has historically been a female occupation and is still overseen by the
Daughters of the Republic of Texas. According to the San Antonio Conservation Society, “from
the 1920’s through the 1940’s the organization was one of the few opportunities for women in
San Antonio to fight important battles” (Kiene 43). The conversion from actual battle to Battle
of Flowers shifts the meanings of “important,” “history,” and “conservation.” As a feminist, I
value the power women were given over the creation of Alamo history, but I suspect that women
were allowed uncharacteristic authority over this national site for anti-progressive reasons.

5 A recent e-mail from an Anglo-Texan friend captures this “festification” of the Battle at the
Alamo: “I have gone to lots of fiestas [sic] celebrations. San Antonio is so fun, but I always
thought the Alamo sucked. I don't know why exactly. I guess because it is a battle site. Ozzy
Ozborne [sic] pissed on the Alamo and is now banned from San Antonio. That makes the Alamo
historical association with Mexican domination, using women – chili queens and flower warriors – to reframe a painful and sometimes shameful history.

It is interesting to me that Alamo commemoration began at the same historical moment that San Antonio chili was gaining national attention. According to Donna Gabaccia’s study of U.S. “ethnic” food consumption, *We Are What We Eat*, the Mexican food that was previously considered to be inedible by Anglo visitors – for whom its “fiery” peppers were supposed to “biteth like a serpent” (Gabaccia 108) – was being more readily consumed in San Antonio by Anglo miners, traders, and soldiers who patronized the chili queens from the 1870s until they were outlawed by a sanitation-obsessed and xenophobic Health Department in 1936 (109, 133).

The 1893 World’s Fair in Chicago is credited with first introducing chili to the nation in a booth called “The San Antonio Chili Stand.” After 1893, chili stands and the Alamo both attracted an increasing numbers of tourists to San Antonio (109). I would argue that chili, Alamo commemoration, and the Battle of Flowers are parallel and contemporaneous signs of U.S. consumption of Mexican culture. Significantly, all three became markers of celebration in the United States after the Civil War, after Reconstruction, during a climax of immigration to the United States – a time when Americans were attempting to define and to consolidate a new, coherent nationality.

Mexico also figured prominently in post-World War II/Cold War symbolic gestures of American exceptionalism and solidarity – from presidential politics to television. In the 1950s...

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6 San Antonio is also reportedly the site where Elmer Doolin first discovered Mexican *friotes* in 1932 and purchased the recipe for what became fritos. “Typically, Frito-Lay claimed not to know the name of the Mexican from whom Doolin bought the fritos recipe” (Gabaccia 165), effacing the Mexican origins of the food later marketed by the “Frito Bandito.”
and 1960s, both the Alamo and Mexican food enjoyed increased visibility within American commodity culture. According to Randy Roberts and James Olson’s recent study, *A Line in the Sand: The Alamo in Blood and Memory* (2001), “The nationalization of the Alamo by Walt Disney’s famous 1954-1955 [*Davy Crockett*] broadcasts – the event that transformed it from a Texas shrine to an American one – was spurred by the Cold War and by Disney’s sense that America needed heroes who represented liberty and the rights of man” (Roberts and Olson 230). John Wayne’s 1960 film, *The Alamo*, follows this logic. In Wayne’s depiction, Davy Crockett and his Tennessee Volunteers use Texas/Mexico as a space for making themselves heroes in battle, adventure, and fiesta. While watching his fellow men drinking and dancing in a cantina full of Mexican women (presumably prostitutes), Crockett comments: “They think we came South to hunt and get drunk.” After Travis responds that “they seem to have accomplished that,” the camera cuts to the legs and feet of a full-bodied Mexican woman doing a can-can on a table. One of the Volunteers later thanks Davy for showing them the world. Jim Bowie, too, proclaims his love for Mexico based on its “big valleys, between high mountains… just everything a man could want in the way of country, for looking at or for growing on.” It’s the people whom he loves most and, in particular, “the women folk, well pshf!” After this exchange, and after the coquettish Mexican “Flaca” proclaims her love for Davy Crockett, Davy also claims to have found what he “lacks” in Texas: “When I come down here to Texas I was looking for something and I didn’t know what…. It’s like I was empty; well I’m not empty anymore.” What fills these men’s lacks seems primarily, according to the film, to be Mexican women. And these women

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7 According to Richard Pillsbury: “Anglos from the Southwest have always eaten a bit of Mexican food, but not until the late 1950s and 1960s did Mexican foods begin finding their way onto the plates of visitors to the region and residents of nearby states” (Pillsbury 160).
are directly associated with the danger and adventure waiting for white men in Texas. As with Roberts and Olson’s interpretation of Disney’s representation of the Alamo,

To viewers of the 1950s, Davy’s world was not much different from their own. It was a place where liberty was under siege, where freedom-loving citizens, who knew they were right, were battling against incalculable odds. It was Greece and Turkey in 1947, Berlin in 1948, Korea in 1950, or any one of the other flash points of the Cold War. (Roberts and Olson 242)

Similarly, John Wayne’s 1960 Alamo celebrated U.S. soldiers’ contributions to conflicts in other nations as expressions of U.S. liberty. The ending of the film – with the golden-haired Susanna Dickinson passing through the lines of Santa Anna’s men, who remove their hats in reverence, as she is escorted out of the Alamo with her daughter – also celebrates the white American housewife, nobly standing by her man as he dies conquering the world in the name of democracy and U.S. prosperity. The white woman represents what the men were fighting for, while the forward and flirtatious Flaca is sent away in the first half of the movie to remove Davy’s distraction. Although this film depicts intercultural and international romance, as many U.S. servicemen experienced, these are gestures meant to reinforce Anglo-American pride and U.S. power.

This is the same era in which Taco Bell was born. At the end of World War II, when Glen Bell left the Marine Corps, he started a drive-in hot dog business in San Bernardino, CA. In 1952, he “became increasingly interested in the idea of alternative menu items”: as an “avid Mexican food take-out customer,” his idea was to provide tacos without a wait (Taco Bell History). (He was also probably trying to carve out his own niche, in opposition to McDonalds, which was also getting its start in the early 1950s.) According to TacoBell.com’s “Taco Bell
History” page, “‘My plan for experimenting with tacos,’ [Bell] says, ‘was to obtain a location in a Mexican neighborhood. That way, if tacos were successful, potential competitors would write it off to the location and assume that the idea wouldn’t sell anywhere else.’” In this way, Bell took over a Mexican space with his own imitation of Mexican food in order to profit from the American desire to eat tacos. The first of the “Taco Bell” franchise was built in 1962. Richard Pillsbury writes in his history, *No Foreign Food: The American Diet in Time and Place:*

Glenn [sic] Bell’s development of a chain of taco stands designed to be competitive with other fast food outlets in the early 1960s did much to spread familiarity with the foods. His reddish-ten pseudomission concrete-block structures complete with plastic saguaro cactus garbage cans, the signature bell in the peak of the false front, and a gas campfire were unforgettable. Taco Bell has become a part of the Pepsi generation and gone national, competing toe-to-toe with the hamburger chains with varying success. (Pillsbury 160)\(^8\)

The mission-style architecture associated Taco Bell with the Alamo – a familiar sign of U.S. republicanism in the 1960s imagination – and the pseudo-campfires gave visitors the sense that, like Davy Crockett and his men, they were “roughing it” south of the border. Furthermore, Taco Bell’s recent link to Pepsi (rather than Coke) and its opposition to hamburger chains associate it with rebellion against outmoded traditions, something “other” than the dominant classics. The incorporation of Mexico within the emerging U.S. fast food culture has thus simulated the formation of a fun, updated, braver, republican, and perhaps even “multicultural” America.

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\(^8\) In 1975, Bell sold Taco Bell (then 868 units) to PepsiCo. The “mission-style” architecture was modified in 1984 with the installation of drive-thru windows (*Taco Bell History*).
The 1890s and the 1950s were both periods of intense reflection about the status and the makeup of U.S. nationality. This process of nation-building is assisted by incorporating marginal territories and assimilating them into the dominant body, a process that can be modeled symbolically through sex or eating. It is no accident that San Antonio commemorations use women’s bodies to sell access to the pleasure and pain associated with Mexican culture. By watching their wives re-enact the battle of the Alamo or by consuming the chili of the chili queens (and metonymically, the bodies of the sellers, themselves), Anglo businessmen symbolically conquered the other and literally assimilated it within their own frameworks. In “Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance,” bell hooks argues that: “When race and ethnicity become commodified as resources for pleasure the culture of specific groups, as well as the bodies of individuals, can be seen as constituting an alternative playground where members of dominating races, genders, sexual practices affirm their power-over in intimate relation with the Other” (hooks 183). Eating the other overpowers the other. In a 1972 essay, “Eroticism and Gastroscopy,” Octavio Paz follows this line of thinking: “Eroticism, precisely because it is an urge to go beyond, is also a search. For what or for whom? For the other…. The other extreme of eroticism, the opposite of transgression: the acceptance of the other” (Paz 83). For consuming the other to be pleasurable, it must remain other, unaccepted. Since the satisfaction of consuming the other is produced in the conquest of external or marginal territory, the demarcation between self and other must remain. One must therefore install signs of the other’s difference, its spiciness, its risk to one’s health, even as one incorporates it. Highlighting the potential for pain thus brings more pleasure. hooks suggests that the other is then supplanted by the dominant’s image of it:
Currently, the commodification of difference promotes paradigms of consumption wherein whatever difference the Other inhabits is eradicated, via exchange, by a consumer cannibalism that not only displaces the Other but denies the significance of that Other’s history through a process of decontextualization. (hooks 191) 

After all, the so-called “Mexican” food that estadounidenses preferably consume is not menudo, not chapulines; it is no longer truly Mexican food but rather an Anglo-American image of Mexican food, complemented by décor and bebidas complementary to Anglo-American stereotypes of Mexico. Although Mexican restaurants in the United States pose their food as “other,” exotic and spicy, it must only be a pose, a construct that affirms gringo nationality.

hooks also writes that “within commodity culture, ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture” (191). This relatively common sentiment is particularly apt when considering estadounidenses’ relationship to Mexican food. “American” food, like white American identity, is rendered bland by its domineering assumption of being colorless, the norm from which all else departs. There also must be some “blandness” attendant with the image of unshakable power and cultural centrality. In a recent article on the

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9 Similarly, Amy Bentley argues: “Because food is an extraordinarily powerful way to transmit ideas, power, and social status, the popularity of Southwestern cuisine can be convincingly interpreted as an act of cultural hegemony, an appropriation of borderlands foods in the hopes of neutralizing the power and voice of people, particularly Latinos, in the region” (Bentley 243).

10 In “Eroticism and Gastroscopy” (1972), Octavio Paz promotes the theory that “a Yankee meal is saturated with Puritanism, is made up of exclusions” – a “maniacal preoccupation with the origin and purity of food [that] is the counterpart of racism and discrimination” – while Mexican cooking features a “cult for the passionate and murky ragouts,” whose promiscuous blends and spices “constitute a major scandal” in the United States (Paz 74). Paz links the mixtures and contrasts of Mexican cooking to desire and pleasure, attributing Anglos’ interest in Mexican cuisine to a shift in values: “The erosion of traditional morals and the decadence of Christian rituals (…) have made acute the need for communion and collective rituals. Our time suffers
marketing of food in New Orleans, Heather Schell examines tourists’ desire to consume the hottest chili peppers in economic and social terms. For Schell, it is important that these hot peppers are associated with the cooking of economically impoverished nations (Mexico, South Asia, the Caribbean). She notes that “most of the people I saw sampling the [hot] sauces wanted to suffer and were evaluating the sauces using pain as the main criterion” (Schell 214).

The tourist with the burning mouth is not suffering meaningless pain; instead, he is getting firsthand knowledge of the pain of the peppers [depicted in flames on the jars’ labels]. This pain has a cultural history, attributed symbolically to the peppers on behalf of the peoples associated with chili peppers. The tourist’s throbbing lips are evidence that he is enjoying an authoritative cultural experience…. Having suffered for them [the peppers and the people they represent] through an authentic dining experience and politely contributed to the coffers of the New Orleans tourist industry, we need do no more. We can play around with feeling like someone on the bottom rung of the social ladder, but it is safe because we won’t be staying. (214-215)

This interpretation imagines the relationship between the consumer and the food as one of direct identification. Tourists want to play at being “third world” subjects, want to show that they are brave enough to do it, but as a tourist act, the culinary experience of “third world” “suffering” is always vicarious, terminable at the visitors’ command. The money they exchange for this experience highlights their power over the object of consumption. They emerge safe from the burning of the peppers, their identities bolstered by the new claims they can make about having from hunger and thirst – for fiestas and rites” (75, 79-81). “Now is the time of pleasure,” according to Paz, signaled by the “erotic rebellion” of the late 1960s and early 1970s (80).
been strong enough to endure the painful poverty of the other. In this way, “third world” pain brings tourists pleasure.

In “From Culinary Other to Mainstream American: Meanings and Uses of Southwestern Cuisine,” Amy Bentley offers a gendered interpretation, attributing the popularity of chile in the U.S., in part, to its “constructed masculine identity,” the appeal of the machismo and the dangerousness (à la Frito Bandito) associated with it (Bentley 241). Rather than seeing the chile, itself, as masculine or imagining any identification between consumer and food, I would focus instead on the heterosexualizing binary opposition imagined in the process of consuming chile. In my interpretation, the chile is dangerous, feminine, and other, posing a challenge to the bland U.S. self (engendered “neutrally” as masculine). Symbolically representing Mexico as both chile and sexualized woman enables fantasies of taming and containing the other. As in Augusta Evans’ representation of Inez, depictions of San Antonio’s mythically coquettish chile queens, or the cantina women who entertain Davy Crockett’s volunteers, the chile is seen as a temptation to gringos to prove their mettle by holding its fiery heat in their mouths: a masochistic pain whose dangerousness brings more pleasure. James Oles also finds this “gendering of Mexico in feminine terms” in his study of U.S. representations “South of the Border” in the visual arts, and he, similarly, argues that, “As female, Mexico could be easily dominated by the artistic or economic forces of the North” (Oles 49). Yet Oles does not address the ways in which these images fuse women and food as objects for the conqueror in their depictions of an inviting Mexico. For instance, Jorge González Camarena’s 1943 travel poster proclaiming “Visit Mexico!” sells the country with a long-braided, huipil-wearing woman whose body is intertwined, in this flat image, with the fertile jungle of the background and a large bowl brimming with fruits that blocks the lower half of her body (51). The peculiar added detail of
erect nipples pushing against her huipil over the proffered bowl of fruit reinforces the sense that this woman Mexico is aggressively sumptuous, asking to be tasted. As a result of this invitation, the conqueror may feel his guilt to be somewhat mitigated. As the aggressor, only she is responsible for her pain.

Given the actual hostilities that haunt the U.S./Mexico border, Bentley attributes the “mainstreaming and elevation of Southwestern cuisine” to “cultural amnesia” (Bentley 244). I would argue, however, that it is just the opposite: cultural memory demands the consumption of Mexican food. The fiery chile represents a history that the United States remembers all too well, both the guilt of conquest and the border-crossings that estadounidenses have been told are a threat to economic health and national security. Incorporating Mexican border-crossing makes it “American,” recasts it in the terms of the consuming culture. Xenophobic estadounidenses want the goods crossing borders with NAFTA, want to be tourists in/of Mexico, but they don’t want actual Mexicans crossing the border into “American” identity. In the 1890s as well as today, most estadounidenses consume only a limited fantasy of Mexico – their mythic margaritas, challenging chiles, and vixen Inezes – because these images make light of Mexican presence in the United States. This imaginary Mexico is restricted to realms of pleasure where it poses no serious threat to U.S. integrity. Gringo tourists (both north-to-south border-crossers and internal tourists who have been consuming Mexican in the Midwest, the Southeast, and New England since the 1890s) displace the south-to-north immigration of Mexicans with their own revisions of what Mexico means, their own fleeting runs to the border (which can be as easy as driving to the Taco Bell on the corner). Eating Mexican within the United States averts the gaze from the “real” Mexico on the other side of the border and any “real” pain it might cause.
In the summer of 2001, Taco Bell is featuring *Tomb Raider* cups and an “Archaeological Exploration” treasure hunt on its website. What is the logic behind this “new” adventure with ancient cultures? These games could be seen as a literalization of the plunder that accompanies the international expansion of U.S. industries. Does this trend reflect a postnational, postmodern, multicultural celebration of border-crossing? Are *estadounidenses* running for the border today because they have at last found *jouissance* (or at least increased revenue) in boundarylessness?

Elaine Scarry writes that, “When there is within a society a crisis of belief,” a challenge to central ideologies or cultural constructs, the “material factualness of the human body will be borrowed to lend that cultural construct the aura of ‘realness’ and ‘certainty’” (Scarry 14). I believe we are in the midst of another “crisis” in national belief. Following Scarry’s conclusions, obsessive attention to borders lends them that “aura of ‘realness’ and ‘certainty,’” at a time when *estadounidenses* are questioning the success of border patrols as well as the justice or profitability of those borders themselves. If we extend this anxiety about national boundaries to anxiety about corporeal boundaries, Mexican food presents a source of symbolic concern as it enters the U.S. body/nation. It would seem that highlighting border-crossing food would not be a marketable strategy in times of national vulnerability, as it threatens both levels of boundaries. Anthropologist Mary Douglas says of societies’ eating rituals and social structures: “The threatened boundaries of their body politic would be well mirrored in their care for the integrity, unity and purity of the physical body” (Douglas 125). “If we treat ritual protection of bodily orifices as a symbol of social preoccupations about exits and entrances, the purity of cooked food becomes important” (127). Yet the hunger that U.S. visions of Mexico feed is for impure foods and difference within the body/nation. I would argue that “unity and purity” are not, however, out of fashion. On the contrary, celebrations of hybridity, border transgressions, and difference
make those threatened national myths more visible, keeping “unity and purity” on the map like a fortress under siege.¹¹ A crisis in the current meaning and status of U.S. nationality might be driving Anglo-Americans to reingest the margins of the nation, to remember the Alamo in order to defend it continually. hooks: “One desires contact with the Other even as one wishes boundaries to remain intact” (hooks 189). Perhaps “globalized” business has ironically produced another urge to reconsolidate borders and to seal up the nation, as in the 1890s and the 1950s and 60s. Perhaps “foreign food” is so marketable today because estadounidenses want to eat the “other” before they, themselves, are consumed by new world markets or the so-called “Latin Invasion” of music, the restaurant industry, and immigration. If U.S. capitalists did not feel that their boundaries were being threatened by an emerging “new world order,” why would they be obsessively pointing them out? By moving these boundaries symbolically inside the United States – Mexican restaurants in every town or Coca Cola saturating Mexican markets – corporate culture disavows Mexican difference and nullifies challenges to U.S. profits and national boundaries. The United States can then have the other within it without opening its borders.

Most importantly, these gestures of (neo)colonial incorporation have always been resisted by Chicana/os and Mexicana/os whose identities, self-representations, and practices are incommensurable with xenophobic U.S. illusions of Alamo glory, Latin babes, and hot sauce. Laura Elisa Pérez discusses how Chicana/o aesthetics act as “agents of ideological disorder,” “the disordering embodiment of the radically abject” when they are taken into the dominant national discourse:

¹¹ According to bell hooks, “Within current debates about race and difference, mass culture is the contemporary location that both publicly declares and perpetuates the idea that there is pleasure to be found in the acknowledgement and enjoyment of racial difference” (hooks 181). This pop culture enjoyment, however, does not correspond with actual acceptance of difference. See my
The cultural practices of Chicana/o discourse may indeed ‘pass’ – into the ever refurbished dominant discourse, but they are not fully translatable: they are not fully digestible, and it is precisely their ideological unpalatability that is again recycled, again injected, like endless fishbones, slowly, steadily wounding the consuming body. (Laura Elisa Pérez 20)

Pérez’s rhetoric of abjection and indigestibility provides an appropriate model for resisting U.S. representations of Mexico as an object of alimentary and sexual desire: this desire wounds the dominating body/nation from within. Here again pleasure and pain converge, but this pain is less pleasurable because the consuming body loses control and the object consumed becomes the agent. Once eaten, the chile causes indigestion, fights back, transgresses the boundaries of the dominant like diarrhea (an emblematic process of abjection as well as an emblematic disorder of the gringo tourist).\(^\text{12}\) There is nothing brave or sexy about diarrhea. In much the same way, the Alamo acts as a sort of fishbone in Texas’ stomach, a wound Texans are admonished not to forget. Although, as I have discussed, most dominant culture Alamo celebrations reflect on Anglo sacrifice for the glory of freedom and Manifest Destiny, the Alamo is also a marker of Anglo loss. A foreign body within, the Alamo is a challenge to national boundaries, a site of Mexican victory stuck inside the U.S. stomach, a weakness in the mythic view of history, and a fracture in the foundation of U.S. rights to Mexican land. Remembering the Alamo must carry with it a trace of shame, adding urgency to the mythification of history.

\(^\text{12}\) See Julia Kristeva’s “Approaching Abjection.”
Tejana/o writers often create their own images of the Alamo, counter to the John Wayne vision, transgressing the official story of the Daughters of the Republic of Texas. Since the Alamo is one of the United States’ “privileged settings that play key roles in the emergence and transformation of a national imaginary,” as Mary Pat Brady argues, it can be “fiercely contested… when counterpublics create counterspaces or counternarratives of public monuments” (Brady 124). The meaning ascribed to the Alamo by the dominant culture relies upon reenacting the dominant narrative and public acceptance of that narrative. Yet “the public” has always created its own personal narratives attached to the Alamo and some publics have always resisted the dominant myth. I will end with one good example of a Chicana refusal to “Remember the Alamo” as a chapter heading in the narrative of Anglo-Saxon Manifest Destiny. Sandra Cisneros’ story “Remember the Alamo,” from Woman Hollering Creek (1991), was published exactly one hundred years after the first Battle of Flowers parade. Cisneros’ tribute to the Alamo contains overlapping revisions of history, both public and personal. The narrator, 

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13 I keep coming back to the concluding moments of John Sayles’ film, Lone Star, when Pilar tells her white half-brother/lover to “forget the Alamo.” In her conclusion to The Decolonial Imaginary, Emma Pérez suggests that it is empowering to hear these words from the mouth of a Chicana: “to hear the words ‘Forget the Alamo’ from a Chicana is, for me, a freeing, a freedom from a history that nags me for re-vision” since Pérez, too, “a tejana by cultural construction, [has] been trying all [her] life to forget the Alamo” (Emma Pérez 127). I would argue that, for Anglos, always remembering the Alamo should serve as a sort of penance, reliving loss, recalling ambivalent national histories.

14 Even the Daughters of the Republic of Texas were initially at odds regarding the narrative that should be attached to the Alamo. Tejana Adina de Zavala “wanted to remember the Alamo as a mission church, thereby recalling its role during the Spanish colonial period and signaling Mexican American history in Texas,” but the wealthy Anglo Clara Driscoll won the power to define Alamo symbolism in honoring the site with a narrative featuring the battle for Texas independence (Brady 130).

15 Sonia Saldívar-Hull, too, finds the stories in this collection to be disruptive of Anglo-American geographies: “Cisneros’ articulation of this brand of ‘border feminism’ is a practice of feminism that moves beyond abstractions to practices, that engages Chicana feminist theories with social and cultural productions in multiple Chicana and Mexicana locations and that also breaks with Euro-American feminisms’ geopolitical racist and elitist mappings” (Saldívar-Hull 252).
Rudy, displaces his given identity with a glamorous stage persona, Tristán: “But I’m not Rudy when I perform. I mean, I’m not Rudy Cantú from Fallfurrias anymore. I’m Tristán” (Cisneros 63). The personal history that Tristán eclipses is a violent one:

Tristán’s got nothing to do with the ugly, the ordinary. With screen doors with broken screens or peeling paint or raw hallways. The dirty backyards, the muddy spittle in the toilet you don’t want to remember. Sweating, pressing himself against you, pink pink peepee blind and seamless as an eye, pink as a baby rat, your hand small and rubbing it, yes, like this, like so, and your skull being crushed by that sour smell and the taste like tears inside your sore mouth. (67)

Cisneros is known for using children’s points of view to render scenes like this one more horrific, juxtaposing the child narrator’s incomplete understanding with the literary “truth” that readers see between the lines. She thus reveals two different ways of knowing the violence. This dual-edged description simultaneously invokes and denies sexual abuse (presumably by a white man, because his “peepee” is pink). It cites the violation of Rudy’s physical boundaries (both body and house) as it solidifies cognitive boundaries by patching up broken screens of memory and sealing the paint of history’s crumbling buildings. Throughout the story, Tristán/Rudy uses his imagination to revise, repair, and gloss over his perceptions. “When I was a kid and my ma added the rice to the hot oil, you know how it sizzles and spits, it sounds kind of like applause, right? Well, I’d always bow and say Gracias, mi querido público, thank you, and blow kisses to an imaginary crowd” (63). Like the carnival queens’ erasure of Anglo-American loss, the stage identity Tristán constructs counters reality with a glamorous façade, overtly performed, and gender-crossing; “his sisters jealous because he’s the pretty one. But they adore him, and he gives them tips on their makeup” (65). Beyond repeating the stereotypical equation
of transgender or homosexual identification with childhood abuse, Tristán’s story emphatically rejects conventional masculinity and casts identity and memory as personal creations.

This revisionist perspective merges Texas history with Rudy’s personal experiences of abuse. As in Inez, references to the Alamo are few, but Cisneros chooses the Alamo as the site for Rudy/Tristán’s anti-macho performance and ironically borrows the Anglo-Texans’ rallying cry, “Remember the Alamo,” as her title. Tristán performs at a club called “the Travisty,” which is located behind the Alamo, and his instructions to readers signal the different layers to this joke: “Every Thursday night at the Travisty. Behind the Alamo, you can’t miss it. One-man show, girl. Flamenco, salsa, tango, fandango, merengue, cumbia, cha-cha-chá. Don’t forget. The Travisty. Remember the Alamo” (63). On the level of the literary narrative, the “travesty” is Tristán’s imitation as a transgender performer, mocking masculinity with his “one-man show, girl,” and “Remember the Alamo” provides the reader with directions for finding the club. On the historical level, remembering that Alamo puts readers in mind of violent machismo (of which Tristán’s performance is a travesty), the massacre of white men (which could avenge Rudy’s personal history), and the travesty of justice associated with both the slaughter of Anglo-Texans and the ultimate incorporation of Texas/Mexico as part of the United States. According to Mary Pat Brady’s reading of this story,

The club’s location “behind” the Alamo positions it in the heart of a tourist zone but outside of tourism’s purview. “Remember the Alamo” both quotes the battle cry and ironically twists its significance, reducing it to a directional signal while suggesting that the Alamo itself has more than one meaning. (Brady 131)

The literal meaning of the Alamo in Cisneros’ story is the directional one, one that privileges a personal and Tejano relationship to the site, “behind” the commodified tourist front. Just as
Cisneros’ story reveals the pain of Rudy beneath the glamorous artifice of Tristán. Tristán’s narrative reveals the personal Chicano history beneath the commodified “front” of the Alamo. The heroes of this Alamo story are not Bowie, Crockett, Travis and Houston, or even Santa Anna, but “Gustavo Galindo, Ernie Sepúlveda, Jessie Robles, Jr.,…,” an enigmatic list of not famous Chicano names, men who are outside the dominant narrative associated with the Alamo (Cisneros 63).

The final words of Cisneros’ “Remember the Alamo” are a two-word paragraph: “This body” (67). This conclusion focuses on the site where abuse is enacted, sexuality performed, race and sex identity inscribed. This body, alone in its own paragraph, is free from historical, sexual, or racial specifications, ready to be modified with one’s own constructs. It is not a general “the body,” though. There are no universal bodies. “This body” makes it personal, near rather than far, endorsing personal experiences of history, such as Tristán’s. We know this body to be the site of sexual violation. We also know this body to be the source of graceful flamencos. The self-authored mobility of the latter defies the overpowering gesture of the former. In the same way, personal histories associated with the Alamo defy the commemorated “official” History. This Alamo, versus that one. Both are unmoored from history and subject to re-scripting. Throughout this battle of representations, the engendering of the Alamo and the cultural significance attached to it have been fluid. “Remember the Alamo” has come to signify a dis-remembering of history. Dominant culture “staging” of the Alamo has consistently denied Mexican authority and converted the site into a marker of Anglo-American glory. In the process, it has displaced the violent emasculation of the white men who died at the Alamo with symbols of white masculine heroism and sexual domination. Like Tristán, this Alamo façade seals up the paint, patches the screens, and has come to signify an assertion of U.S. pride, national
exceptionalism, and Manifest Destiny. It is therefore invoked at moments of national vulnerability – the 1890s, the 1950s and 60s, and today – used symbolically to seal up the nation.

The parallel I have found between Alamo commemoration and the emergence of Mexican food inside Anglo-American culture suggests a correlation between eating, sex, and (neo)colonial domination. It is therefore important to study the dominant culture’s pleasures and patterns of consumption. U.S. media reiterate a racist, sexist, and tourist fantasy about Mexico as a source of pleasure and pain, and the key to pleasure in these fantasies seems to be U.S. control. Mexico is only “fun” for tourists when pain, suffering, and death are safely contained in restricted areas. Probing the rationale behind tourist illusions and searching behind the façade reveals national anxieties and weaknesses. Resistors can find the vulnerable places where the dominant is subject to the other and throw their fishbones there.
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