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Food, Poetry, and Borderlands Materiality: Walter Benjamin at the *taquería*

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...we are the *comal* sizzling hot,
the hot *tortilla*, the hungry mouth...
the mixed potion, *somos el molcajete*.
We are the pestle, the *comino*, *ajo*, *pimiento*,
We are the *chile colorado*,
the green shoot that cracks the rock.

Gloria Anzaldúa (82)

Part I Material Epistemologies by Means of a Piñata¹

In a short story entitled "The Properties of Magic" by Tejano writer Ray Gonzalez (2001) a boy named Augustino wakes up in the middle of the night to find a headless man standing at the foot of his bed. Dressed in an old army uniform, the man reaches into the hole in his neck where once a head stood and to the bewilderment of the child pulls out a donkey piñata just like one the boy's parents had given him for his fifth birthday. Readers quickly learn that this eerie nocturnal vision (we can't be sure it is a dream) is not that unusual in the boy's life. Haunting epiphanies and omens manifested through the appearance of familiar objects out of place saturate Augustino's everyday experience: his play is interrupted by finding a broken rosary on the school playground; the flickering of lights at church startles him; a drawing he brought home from school seems to attract the attention of a bird that flies through the bedroom window; sitting on the porch of his house, he feels observed by blue

currents of light speeding behind a fence. While on the one hand readers of Gonzalez's story are offered interpretative clues by the use of the word "magic" in the title and by the publisher's comments on the back cover that the Texas-Mexican border space the child inhabits is a world reliably "haunted by ghosts of the oppressed and the forgotten," on the other hand the author makes it a point to hint repeatedly that something other than supernatural forces may also be at work in Augustino's discovery of "magic." Perhaps the strange coincidences the child experiences have something to do with the fact that the father has abandoned the family and that Augustino is sick with longing.

In the milieu of contemporary cultural and literary criticism, it is not uncommon to interpret stories such as this through the prism of "magical realism." To be sure, there are elements in Gonzalez's narrative that justify the application of this label. Insofar as the literary conventions of magical realism offer a narrative mode that privileges "alternative approaches" to the Western philosophical take on "reality," they suit the goal of many Latin American and US-Latino works of fiction to harmonize contradictions found in the everyday life of national and ethnic communities besieged by legacies of colonialism (Bowers 13). Notwithstanding this compatibility, the problem with many attributions of the "marvelous real" style to literatures concerned with marginalized positions—as well as applications of "*lo real maravilloso*" to cultural zones such as the US-Mexico border—is the tendency to steer interpretation in a direction that favors the colorful, quaint, and other-worldly imprint of ethnic storytelling, at the expense of more specific material and historical considerations. In other words, pace its subversive intentions to shock and de-familiarize everyday life

from its rationalization under capitalist discipline, hasty applications of magical realism can instead unwittingly restore an aura of mystery and reification to the dynamics of social relations and historical processes that shape "Otherness."

Ray Gonzalez's recounting of Augustino's story is worth noting precisely because of the discomfiting skepticism the author reveals about what may be *really going on* with the boy, and hence his resistance to a generic attribution of esoteric, abstracted, and de-historicized "marvelousness" to borderlands experiences. By setting up a dialectics in the text that checks the imaginary against experience (desire against structure), Gonzalez thus defies a romanticized reading of Chicano/a interiority. In the process, he affirms a different articulation of border subjectivities—one that highlights a complicated entanglement with the material world. In this essay, I wish to follow Gonzalez's lead in elucidating a dimension of Borderland Cultural Studies that treats seriously the possibility of understanding Chicano/a identity and the historical processes of its formation less as an ontology mediated by transcendental markers of tradition and consciousness (the folkloric traces of primordial ways of being) and favors instead a knowledge produced by specific conjunctural histories and uses of cultural goods (objects, commodities, and other tangible materials).

At a basic philosophical and epistemological level, I have in mind a proposal for a historical-materialist reading of Chicano/a life comparable to the cultural histories of objects that have figured prominently in anthropological studies of staples or ceremonial objects (cf. Mintz, Thomas, Weiner). Although in-depth studies that trace the origin, diffusion, and social impact of single commodities have become something of a

small cottage industry both in academic and popular literary circles, similar kinds of multi-layered research projects have been conspicuously lacking in Chicano/a historiography and ethnology (see for instance Bishop; Kurlansky; Eisenstein). At a deeper level, however, more than empirical social histories of foodstuff or accounts of materialized sign systems are at stake in this proposal. The ethnic-geographic intersections of Chicano/a life also focus our attention on struggles over signification and materiality as categories that speak the self in the first instance. As cultural critic Jennifer González has perceptively suggested, the deployment of objects in relationship to Chicano/a identities, and vice versa, can best be understood as a fraught enterprise of tactical considerations that “tethers” certain acts of “persuasion,” which are summoned and performed through very concrete material and artifactual arrangements, i.e. tangible representations such as the body, the house, the car, the hairdo, the bedroom altar, the kitchen, and the front yard (82). Availing themselves of the “props” of Chicano everyday material culture (i.e. hair gel, candles, *molcajetes*, shock absorbers, or baby blankets), these performances of the self alternatively offer or deny opportunities to enact identities and subjectivities in public settings and private spaces. This materialist approach to experience, akin to what Walter Benjamin called “anthropological materialism” (*Reflections* 192), is of course only a strand of a larger philosophical question concerning the value and capaciousness of the realm of routine and mundane experiences academics call “everyday life” as an arena of emancipatory potential, or its opposite, alienation. The polemics associated with this question, and the benefits that such a materialist/experiential inquiry may accrue to borderlands epistemologies more

broadly, will be some of the topics explored in detail in this essay.

The bizarre night vision experienced by the boy in Gonzalez’s story offers an opportune point of departure for an inquiry into how dynamics of identity and agency may be articulated through material culture. Two sequential symbolic events take place in the child’s dream. First, an authoritarian figure is decapitated; secondly, a folkloric figure is released. The piñata is a folk object, which, if it were cast in the appropriate role generally assigned to objects in Western consciousness, should only be relevant (if that is a word that can be used at all) as “background for living” and never as the thing that draws attention to itself (Miller 102). But in this instance, the chain of signification has been reversed: what normally appears as “socially peripheral” becomes in the vision “symbolically central,” thus causing the shimmering *papier-mâché* trinket to harness the force of a “creative negation” in the boy’s life (Babcock 32). The donkey piñata appears out of context to function as a link to a memory of happiness (when the father was still home). But the vision also implies that healing cannot simply be “wished for;” it has to be enacted as a willful act against that which prevents it. The desired unity for Augustino’s family, represented by the piñata, requires first a severance, the extrication of an obstacle that prevents true enjoyment. In this sense, the patriarchal order represented by the man in uniform can also be interpreted as an epistemological prejudice that blocks the release of ordinary happiness. In the border zones, presumably, we can imagine this sense of “happiness” emerging from the recognition of oneself in simple pleasures (i.e. gardening, car-tooling, barbecuing, applying make-up, cruising). To recognize the routine realm of everyday life as pleasurable, however,

requires a re-valorization of the fundamental categories of truth and human worth. It also requires a watchful eye against romantic tendencies, for in addition to pleasurable, these tasks of everyday life are also laboring. Working against this, as Foucault observed, are the judgments that disqualify certain forms of knowledge as “inadequate [...] or insufficiently elaborated [...] knowledges located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition” (82). Hence, the strongman’s interiority, his authority over Reason and the hegemonic hold he has over which kinds of things should signify Chicano/a life “properly,” must be emptied out before this border child can restore joy to his life. This “underneath” of Chicano life, Augustino discovers, is all around him: most expressly in the ephemeral and diminutive objects that give life in the borderlands its taste of “folk” community (piñatas and such). The “low-ranking” knowledge in the borderlands—as so much of the recent anti-immigrant rhetoric against scarce resources “taken up” by “them” coming “here” demonstrates—has always been the somatic kind, the one felt by real bodies, moving across real spaces, generating real products of labor and consumption. The questions that linger, however, are: why are the most visible things also the most “invisible” and what exactly is the nature of the operations that allow (empower) one person to accomplish the reversals necessary to vindicate different forms of knowing?

The rich record of Chicano/a narrative, historiography, and art represents a systematic historical effort to provide answers to these questions. In the Chicano/a social imaginary one can say that a certain productive/creative negation takes place: while on one level a historically imposed de-territorialization has deprived the self of the familiarity of objects and memories

once reliably in place (at a mythic time in Aztlan or before “the border crossed” the people), at the same time on another level, a re-territorialization of political consciousness (“*aquí estamos y no nos vamos*”) affirms a new symbolic and political possibility (cf. Hicks). But whereas in the realm of Augustino’s boyhood psyche it may be difficult to know with precision for whom or what the authority figure that regulates the boy’s desires ultimately stands, the mobilization of the Chicano/a social project has unequivocally pinpointed a silencing authority that it seeks to decapitate. The Chicano/a recognition of marginalization and the development of an oppositional consciousness against it identify a system of colonial social relations inscribed into “history” as its target (Pérez 6). Therefore, displayed onto the social field, the symbolic decapitation that has been performed in Augustino’s vision can be read as a corrective to historical amnesia.

One interpretation of the historical accomplishment of Chicanismo—a way of “talking back” to the powers that be—asserts that rather than inflicting a loss, the violent cut-off of prejudicial self-knowledge restores to border history a buried reality that has suppressed “the materiality of its signifiers” (J.D. Saldívar 175). This accomplishment has been in fact *the* fundamental historical task of Chicano/a literature, history, social science, and art since their inceptions as part of the “*movimiento*.” Yet, ironically, to the extent that “materiality” is invoked as a central element in the Chicano/a collective project (making visible the subjects heretofore effaced), it is also advisable to remember how vulnerable to *non-material* notions of historical emancipation (for instance, metaphysical heroism) social movements throughout the 20th century have proven to be. This is the point Walter Benjamin strived

to make both about Surrealism and various forms of Marxist orthodoxies, which, by virtue on insisting on the “recuperation” of something lost, sanitized collective memory and cultivated nostalgia. Arguing forcibly that a belief in “restoration” led to holding in place a bourgeois faith in progress, which of course always moved things “forward” for that class, Benjamin saw the role of historical-material criticism, instead, as one mainly concerned with “blasting open the continuum of history” (Wolin xxii).²

According to Benjamin, therefore, a focus on materiality should lead to an ethics of destruction (consumption, ingestion, ruination) of bourgeois aestheticism, a politics that views the “totality of inherited social forms nihilistically, with a view to their imminent destruction” (Wolin xxvii). For marginalized or subaltern subjects, however, the disavowal of memory may not be entirely possible, or desirable. Rather, as José Esteban Muñoz has suggested, memory for the ethnic/sexual subject is implicated in a “double gesture” that recognizes “the need to reclaim a past” (an affective lifeworld) as well as “resisting the temptation to succumb to a nostalgic and essentialized concept of the past” (102). This double gesture, Muñoz suggests, is an action that while refusing to “being lost to memory,” also works *against* memory, assisting in the “shoring up” of new modalities of anti-normative” affect. As I will demonstrate below, food may just be the perfect arena, both for Benjamin and for Chicano/a artists, to test the metaphor of destruction in terms of the politics of representation. In reference to the role of material culture in the Chicano/a liberation movement, we can speculate in Benjaminian fashion that the dialectics (and theatrics) of cycles of production and consumption, be it in terms of piñatas or books or chorizo or *corridos*, will have to be better understood

as part of a theory of activism in order for “materiality” to be truly an interpretative foothold of the movement. Short of a conjunctural and strategic materialism, Benjamin would argue, the collective political project is always in danger of falling prey to romantic essentialism. Again, as a manner of introduction, Gonzalez’s story is a useful corrective against this danger. It offers us a persuasive account of the strategic role that ordinary objects and practices can occupy in the production of the Chicano/a self-constituting narrative that stands at the core of this political project.

Necessarily bound to the material objects in his surroundings, Augustino’s psychic life introduces a *different* way of remembering and knowing oneself. His world—crowded by rosaries, colored pencils, piñatas, swings, adobe walls, fences, and screen doors—constitute what J. González calls a form of “material rhetoric” or “a physical map of ontological qualities” that *constructs* the self, so to speak, as a kind of artifact itself (82). As Tomas Ybarra-Frausto has similarly observed, in addition to metaphysical and psychological dimensions, subaltern subjectivities can *also* be regarded, in some respect, always as a material assemblage, a “composite organization” marked by “a sort of wild abandon” that joins ornamentation “to a delight for texture and sensuous surface” (157). The objects described in the story are thus not simply referenced as empirical evidence to authenticate class and ethnic location. They are also codes for the fear of invisibility and undervaluing that the child experiences psychologically, but, most importantly, that he has first learned to recognize *externally*—just as commonplace, banal curiosities and pedestrian border-things, and most especially working-class-things, tend to be regarded by the dominant hierarchies of taste.

Through a select and tactical use of the material culture of Chicano/a living, Ray Gonzalez thus confronts us intertextually in this story with a series of epistemological inquiries: what paths are available to marginalized subjects to access knowledge of the self and of one's social, familial, and political community? How is subjectivity materialized in the borderlands? We know that the "quotidian" (a Francophone term derived from the Latin *cotidianus* for "many days" and used frequently in English to denote "everyday life") has figured prominently, and sometimes exuberantly, in poststructuralist theory and postcolonial cultural studies (cf. Burkitt). But if for working class Chicano/as "everyday life" is precisely the realm where both oppression and pleasure *or* mystification and empowerment unfold, where, then, does the subaltern turn to, within that sphere of daily living that Carpentier called the "raw" state of the "commonplace," (102) to find the symbolic nourishment and wherewithal to "resist?" Gonzalez's text insinuates the possibility of understanding and theorizing the Chicano/a object world (commodified as it may be), in terms more complex than either the happy-go-lucky optimism that favors uncritically the "resistance value" of popular culture or the suspicion of commodities bred by orthodox historical materialism have thus far produced.

Despite an abundance of discreet analyses of folk objects, Chicano art, and other select aspects of material practices such as youth dress codes (Cummings), the aesthetics and performances of lowrider cars (Parsons; Bright), the recuperation of memory through homegrown gardens (Rubio-Goldsmith) or the spatial structuring of the barrios (Villa), a materialist philosophical treatment of Chicano/a everyday life has remained underdeveloped in border

cultural critique. Although it is obvious that the conceptual elements necessary to replenish cultural meaning, social memory, and collective empowerment in Chicano/a cultural practices take place in a materially coded universe of "things" that express and reproduce "Chicanoness" semiotically, the deliberate elaboration of a materialist pedagogy of border "everydayness" requires more than a simple enumeration of accoutrements, postures, or styles. Such a project would also have to involve a theorization of how the dyad interior/exterior can become a porous rationale for a more meaningful understanding of borderlands and/or Chicana/o subjectivity (cf. Olkowski and Morley). It must also encompass a consideration of how questions of affect, specifically the dynamics that form consensus in intellectual practices and lead cultural critics to regard some practices as profound and others as shallow, refract the pedagogies that enunciate Chicano/a subjects (cf. Sedgwick).

To confront this challenge, objects ranging from religious car ornaments to Selena CDs, Che Guevara t-shirts, Frida earrings, oil cloth *manteles*, sepia-tone photos of *abuelitos*, Fiesta ware dishes, *rebozos*, plaster-of-Paris garden statuary, and cowboy boots, among many other artifacts, would have to be confronted and dealt with analytically as more than simply backdrop to more interesting stories, or in the worst-case scenarios, as the rear-guard for borderland cultural studies. Furthermore, the constitution of this line of inquiry for Chicano/a Studies would have to grow from nuanced historical studies of the political-economy of the borderlands (which now encompass not only the region that straddles the borderline itself but also ethnic enclaves in places of the U.S. heartland such as Kansas, Iowa, Nebraska, and Idaho). In this light, border culture would have to be systematically apprehended at

its core, since the seventeenth century, as commodity culture in one way or another (cf. Bauer; Bunker). Assembled electronics and tourist curios would be two of the most obvious products to consider; but Buicks, beef, bell peppers, brothels, and Botox, not to mention a large inventory of smuggled goods from parrots to penicillin, would also have to be accounted for. Instead of figuring as icons of truncated modernities or indexes of the vulgarized hybridity typical of tourist districts in border towns—the anathema of authentic folk life as some theorists have argued (Ortiz-González)—the border artifacts that cram everyday life, the spatial practices of Chicano/a daily living, and the idiosyncratic geographies of Latino barrios could be positioned strategically to generate and theorize creativity and political action. In other words, border life *is* and *can* be narrated as a “marvelous real” event, but emphatically, it is *also* a materialist-mundane experience of frontier modernity prefigured in the built environment and object-soaked reality of border towns and Chicano/a-marked social spaces.

Part II

Material Transition to Food, namely Tacos

Ray Gonzalez’s incisive story and the theoretical questions it helps foreground offer a glimpse of the central argument that I want to elaborate in this essay, namely, that attention to material cultural practices in relationship to processes of subjection and subjectivity ought to play a larger role in the articulation of a Chicano borderland heuristic. In the rest of the essay my attention turns from narrative to a different type of Chicano/a artistic intervention: the poetry, performance, and politicized urban

aesthetics a group of young people, spoken word artists and musicians, teachers, and activists based in San Diego, California that have worked since 1994 under the name of Taco Shop Poets (TSP).

I will explore the group’s poetics and self-reflexive cultural production as an example of a mode of Chicano/a artistic intervention that seeks to resolve a tension of particular interest to cultural practitioners and analysts since the dawn of Modernity. That is, how to *ingest* the material world of everyday life as revolutionary fodder while simultaneously advancing a political critique of the material *gluttony* that accrues to “everydayness” in a capitalist society. Working under the semantically playful motto “Read Tacos/Eat Poetry,” TSP inverts through their words and publicly-staged performances the ontology of borderlands texts and beings and refocuses the Chicano/a artistic-political project on two fronts: a geographic realm in which *taquerías* function as “cultural centers” and a gastronomical level in which food functions as bridge to yet untapped communal and political resources.

To help locate TSP’s project within the broader context of critical theory, I draw in the last section of the essay upon a select group of concepts developed in the early part of the twentieth century by the German philosopher, literary critic, and socialist intellectual Walter Benjamin. Benjamin is by now an iconic figure among radical intellectuals, but not because of this star status are his arguments any less illuminating. Although there is a “veritable Benjamin industry in full swing” in cultural studies (Isenberg), I will depart slightly from the trend by focusing my attention on an almost trivial part of Benjamin’s intellectual corpus. I am referring to a set of texts about food that Benjamin developed unsystematically, mostly in the form of newsprint quips. More

prominently deployed in the essay as a shadowy interlocutor than as a central figure, Benjamin nonetheless captures something quite significant about the possible utility of food to anti-hegemonic projects. For him, food is an allegory of both nourishment and destruction.

A word of caution, however, concerning the nature of the materiality invoked by these Benjaminian arguments, is relevant at this juncture. Certainly, as Nigel Thrift has observed, one of the “striking developments” in cultural theory in the last few years “has been the series of struggles to make a new compact” with the concept of materiality (123). In a narrow sense, the blow Marx dealt to the material world of commodities largely deflated the utility of the concept of materialism for the last 150 years. In the latter part of the twentieth century, however, as Thrift also remarks, a new “aesthetically disposed” materialism took a jab at the “old” Marxist aversion to “things.” In the most basic version of this revival, mass products of consumption from blue jeans to home furnishings have been singled out for their potential to accumulate meaning across multiple social registers (Fiske). But nuanced and dialectical treatments of materiality and mass culture have also emerged from this renewed interest. Somewhat sarcastically, yet recognizing the appeal this kind of analysis grounded on “things” holds against the head-spinning disorientation characteristic of globalization, Professor Bill Brown has asked, why complicate “things with theory?” Aren’t things themselves, he pondered, “the warmth” in them precisely what relieves us from the “chill” of “unnecessary abstraction” (*Things* 1)? This “warmth” alluded to in Brown’s question, however, is not meant to be interpreted as a simpleton’s enchantment with popular goods. Behind his inquiry stands a critical move to disrobe

“things” of their all too frequent self-evident role and to “think about the ideas *in* things without getting caught up by the idea *of* them” (*Sense* 2). Whether this is possible or not depends to a large extent on the politics of cultural and social action that specific arguments bring *to the table*.

My use of Benjamin’s notion of “anthropological materialism” is embedded in the politics that generated the concept during Benjamin’s time and that I believe still hold value today. The phrase was used by Benjamin in his essay on Surrealism; the phrase was conjured up as a specific argument against abstraction—directed at the bourgeois position that reified cultural products and experiences as “art for art’s sake” and disintegrated (invalidated) real, gritty, working-class experiences. In the case of Surrealism, Benjamin argued, this was the effect that had come to contaminate the Surrealist’s original revolutionary project. Despite their initial success in overcoming “the separation between poetic and political action” through nonsensical acts of artistic production, the Surrealists’ promise of social change had proven, in the end, to be ineffective (Habermas 119). Rather than “organize pessimism” against the bourgeois notions of art and life, the Surrealists had surrendered their historically inspired task by falling into contemplation. This was as anti-revolutionary as Benjamin could fathom any action to be. He said:

if it is the double task of the revolutionary intelligentsia to overthrow the intellectual predominance of the bourgeoisie and to make contact with the proletarian masses, the intelligentsia has failed almost entirely...because [this task] cannot be performed contemplatively. (*Reflections* 191)

Anthropological materialism was then, to the point, both Benjamin's theory of knowledge and his activist politics. The notion of materialism as elaborated by Benjamin was *the* one element, as evidenced in the correspondence between Benjamin and Theodore Adorno, that distanced Benjamin from the approach of the Frankfurt School to critical theory (Wolin 163). Explicitly rejected by Adorno, in at least one letter the same words were used as a derogatory jab against Benjamin by his friend (Bolz and Van Reijen 55). Yet, the same element that repulsed Adorno was what made Benjamin's argument all the more critical: the measure of *bodily concretion* of the revolutionary project was, as Benjamin said, "to win the energies of intoxication for the revolution," or to enact a "poetic politics" (*Reflections* 190). But, a critical point must be noted: when Benjamin spoke of the concrete measure of the body, he did not have in mind only an ahistoric, individual body, but a bodily collective that that come to be so, not metaphysically, but historically. This latter point he firmly upheld from Marxism. The "collective," however, as Benjamin understood it, was a "body, too" (*Reflections* 192). It has a physicality that bourgeois pretensions never acknowledges; working class rituals, traditions, folklore, entertainment, and pleasures are important because this collective body could only be organized historically and it is within the space of historical images of itself that it comes to recognize itself as a collective in the first place (exactly what bourgeois *individualism* contrives to repress).

And so here we arrive, in the context of a long-held preoccupation in critical theory with the fetishistic nature of things we use, possess, and consume, to a consideration of self-styled poets who mix cilantro, jalapeños, and tender words with a defiant

stance against bourgeois culture. But before we dip our iPods in the guacamole bowl and start singing the International in Spanglish, this project must be submitted to interrogation. We must ask: can poetry function as a protest against practices and forms of knowledge that reify and folklorize the border and yet, at the same time, become decisively textured by the vernacular poetics of taco shops and second-hand stores' "folk culture?" In the pages that follow I will elaborate how the Taco Shop Poets attempt to answer that question by favoring a more democratic approach to art-making and stressing the value of gut-level responses to anti-oppression. My sense is that Chicano/a and critical cultural analysis in general retain enough sediments of faith in social change to understand *why* the TSP proposal may be desirable; the devil, however, is in the details of *how* such a concept can translate into praxis.

Part III Material Aztlan, First Act: Seeing

In San Diego, as in most towns and cities in the American Southwest, "taco shops are on every corner." Thus begins the segment devoted to the Taco Shop Poets in the benchmark documentary on Latino arts and culture, "*Visiones*," which aired on PBS stations nationwide in 2004. This condensed geographical note, on one level so obvious, becomes in the hands of TSP a launching pad for a decentering project of borderlands cultural production. It is true; taco shops are everywhere. But they are not seen or experienced in the same way by the various sectors that interact in the San Diego/Tijuana border region. The first order of the day, then, for a productive intervention on the border cultural landscape is to

upset the parameters of visibility/invisibility engrained in the aesthetic and geographic hierarchies of this peculiar cultural crossroads. In most urban areas today, despite the rhetorical contamination of multicultural bodies and cuisines, geography continues to serve mandates of human distancing and prejudicial homesteading practices. There are neighborhoods into which some folks won't wander into. For the privileged classes, this distance can be a matter of fear of the unknown Others; but for the same token, the fear can be used as a wedge to boost the bourgeois self—by overcoming it and wandering into the *barrio*, thus becoming ethnically contaminated and hence more cosmopolitan. Needless to say, the same act of reversal cannot be as easily or harmlessly performed from the bottom of the social ladder venturing upwards.

But the taco shop mediates these distances in unexpected ways. Describing the rationale for choosing taco shops as their stage, TSP Adolfo Guzmán López states:

Taco shops are the most democratic of institutions...whether you're rich or poor, black or white or brown—doesn't matter; *taqueros* (taco makers) treat everyone the same and serve everyone the same;...taco shops are the little embassies of our culture where...we can recharge our cultural, literary and culinary batteries. (Romero)

A section of TSP's mission statement affirms their desire to take poetry to an audience not usually exposed to the spoken word and, vice versa, to take "the usually jaded spoken word audience to a new environment for poetry" (Multiple). Their project holds out some hope for the bourgeoisie, but by no means does it become its main target.

This Chicano/a cultural and artistic tactic of going to where "the people are" (*dónde está la raza*) is not conceived in a celebratory vacuum that regards authenticity as an innate attribute of "the folk." Rather, it is a calculated challenge against the aura that envelopes poetry and youth culture in a marasmic bourgeois sensibility. Despite their "fair-trade" policies (and this critique is not meant to discount them), Starbucks-like coffee shops are regarded as a spiritual dead end for revolutionary praxis. Tomas Riley, another TSP founder, elaborates on this point:

[...] the coffee house bears on its surface the markings of trendy cappuccino culture—a world ruled by the middle class and dominated by mostly Anglo patrons. We'd go into those spaces recognizing that very few if any members of the audience were from our community. They couldn't appreciate our bilingual expression or the political concerns we brought with us in our work. We just got tired of hearing the 'I feel your pain, bro and you have so much anger' type responses from audiences who weren't getting our message.... We needed another space—an outlet for ourselves where our culture was a premium commodity. Then it hit us. The taquerias in and around San Diego were sites of cultural celebration, places where socioeconomic boundaries break down for a brief time, where people were fed (in various ways) by the cultural information of the Chicano/Mexicano experience. (Martinez)

The deliberate nature of this gesture and its symbolic value for Chicano/a borderlands emancipatory projects can only be appreciated in light of the trends it bucks.

In a classic essay on “*carne, carnales*, and the carnivalesque,” José E. Limón reflected on how food, but most importantly specific spatial dimensions of its cooking and sharing, become a way for working-class *Mexicano* men in South Texas to “distinguish themselves from the dominant others” (the powerful ones who use plates and forks to eat *carne asada*) and to create jovially, “if only for brief moments” an alternative to the “contexts of alienation” that lie beyond the *ranchos* where the men gather (137). But can the urban *taquería*—open for business to anyone—bracket ethnic sociality and solidarity in the same way those out-of-the-way rural *ranchos* in South Texas can? TSP certainly seems to answer in the affirmative, but the problems that Limón described as those of “hierarchy, inclusions, and exclusion” are never fully overcome (136).

If eating tacos can be a way to know our common humanity, finding our way to a *taquería*—with or without the benefit of car satellite systems—is a far more problematic endeavor. This “finding our way” entails a process of locating, first visually, and secondly spatially, the site of human exchange. One of the fundamental problems inherent to a deeper understanding of border cultural life has been and remains today the signifying shortcut that border visuality tends to promise and deliver to observers, both in close and distant proximity. Deciphering knowledge from visual clues has been a central proposition of the “us” studying “them” approach that conjoined colonialism and ethnographic inquiry in the latter part of the nineteenth century and for most of the twentieth (Herzfeld 35). It is not enough, therefore, to “see” the barrio and the taco shops. The problem of visuality with regards to border culture and its representations does not reside in the lack

of interest in visual systems. The problem is that much of this “taking in” of the material/visual border has simply been as James Elkins remarks about much contemporary visual analysis, simply “too easy” (63). In other words, it is essential to ask: for what purposes is visibility mobilized? Elkins advises that visual studies must be “more reflective about its own history, warier of existing visual theories...less predictable in its politics, and less routine in its choice of subjects” (65). George Lipsitz comments on this aspect of the border semiotic field in his introduction to the TSP poetry anthology “Chorizo Tonguefire.” “The white bread and peanut butter conspiracy is spreading,” he says, “but Taco Shop Poets answer back *con salsa, con sabor, y con fuerza*” (1). In the “avant noir free verse” form that has come to signify hip-hop influenced poetry since the 1990s (Vélez), TSP’s Guzmán López chants the fortunes of the barrio (and its envisioned Chicano/a renaissance) amidst conditions of gentrification and militarization (“...” marks indicate places where I have broken the text for brevity):

Land grants no more
 Boom town no more
 The war is no more
 San Diego, war city no more
 No need for the great wall of factories
 From Pacific Highway to Kearny
 [Mesa
 General Dynamics, Solar Turbines,
 [jet hangars
 Recruitment depots
 Will all become artists lofts
 Will all become free clinics...
 No navy-town grunge
 Oozes from sidewalk cracks
 Onto marbled floor lobbies
 Grabbing tourists by their ankles...
 War-town San Diego
 Now Cultural Mecca of Aztlan

Has become crossroads for taco shop
 [culture...
 Has become crossroads for chorizo
 [tonguefire.

(*Taco Shop Canto*)

As the words in this poem demonstrate, as physical sites of production of borderlands or subaltern cultures Mexicano, Mexican-American, Latino, and Chicano barrios and their communal and private spaces constitute a semiotic field ripe for visual and sensory appropriation by local dwellers and passerbyers alike. At a fundamental level, there's nothing wrong with that. These appropriations, as Walter Benjamin would say, are "the ritual[s] by which the house[s] of our [lives]" are erected" (*Reflections* 62). However, another insidious reality is also present. Assembled as a "battery of desires, repressions, investments, and projections," the barrio and its hang-out spaces constitute the vernacular U.S. equivalent of what Said described as "Orientalism," that "created consistency," which hammers away at the eye and the mind and leads casual observers to affirm the strange illusion that they know something about the Other just because the Other is "there" for the sensing and feeling of whoever dares cross the train tracks to come closer. Borderlands geography and visual culture, therefore, are both an "atmospheric" phenomenon that projects spatial ubiquitousness—hence visibility—and a "psychological" embankment that fixes but at the same time holds back recognition—hence invisibility (Fox 42).

Apprehended as a socially-constructed optical apparatus, the gaze upon "all things border" accommodates Chicano/a lives into a semiotic system that assigns differential value to the dispersal of cultural resources. As the tired adage about real estate reminds

us, "location, location" seems to be the first level of "evidence" (viewed facts) called upon when the leaders of hygiene and law and order decide into which parts of town to send more Border Patrol, or double police force during peaceful protests, or assign more or less garbage pick up trucks. The state and other power nuclei feed visual clues incessantly into the episteme that creates understandings about whose aesthetics are desirable and hence better suited to foster a "civic" community. One of the most common instances of the ideology of visual sanitation are the myriad of master planning schemes cities invent to fight "blight" in urban areas. But other less obvious forms are also co-existent with redevelopment efforts: for example, state-sponsored tattoo removal campaigns for reformed juveniles or people in recovery from substance abuse; or in border towns, the need to drive *across* "the line" to "the other side" to party and shop. All these are examples of folklife accretions that make up the political landscapes of border zones and which, paradoxically, are never just "left alone" by the powerful interests—but are instead repeatedly surveyed, studied, and "managed." Being too visible, then, is both the curse and the only hope of the barrio. Too much visibility can make the working-class Chicano/a a target of surveillance. As TSP member Adrian Arancibia quips in one of his poems:

...static—be on the look out for a
 [male Hispanic in a black shirt...
 To be innocent but proved guilty
 [again?

(*Heat*)

On the other hand, because the barrio holds "the people," it is often a desired site for mass mobilizations of various sorts. Political organizers and beer promoters alike—with

different goals in mind, to be sure, and tactics that differ substantially in ethics as well, nonetheless perceive in the demographic visibility of the barrio an asset to be mined. The dialectics of an appeal to mass-mobilization prompted Benjamin to ask in his time, “what, in the end, makes advertisements so superior to criticism?” (*Reflections* 86). His answer reminds us just how powerful, but at the same time evanescent, the assertion of experience can be for a political project. What makes advertisement superior, Benjamin answers, is not “*what* the moving neon sign says—but the fiery pool reflecting it in the asphalt.” What is needed, then, is a political means of harnessing sensation; but if it were that easy—and uncomplicated by the politics of gender, sexuality, class, and race—then, as a poultry worker in an Alabama chicken processing plant told anthropologist Steve Striffler, we would “all be Mexicans” now (74), which is of course, an ironic way of saying that everything militates today against being this particular kind of subject, one who allegedly breaks the law, has too many children, takes other people’s jobs, milks the social welfare system, and overburdens the state.

Given the geo-politics of the barrio, the *taquería*, then, needs to be re-thought as a tactical location in the war-of-position.³ Shortly after they began staging their first guerrilla poetry readings on unsuspecting “burrito munching” crowds in and around San Diego (as seen in *Visiones*), news reports declared that as word spread about the activities of TSP, attendance at these gatherings escalated from 25 and 45 people to filling up an entire parking lot (Houlihan). Like all hegemonic endeavors, then, visualism, too, carries the risk of its undoing right inside the very act that it promotes. The hypervisibility of Chicano/a “space” in the barrios can cut both ways. A reporter for the *San Antonio Current* asked:

what better place to raise consciousness than the taco shop, that proletariat power-to-the-people eating establishment competing for space with Taco Bell and yet untainted by cross-marketing gizmos? (Castillo)

Re-orienting poetry away from its predictable venues and urging “*la raza*” and people from all walks of life and ethnicities to convene in natural gathering places of Chicano/a daily sustenance (substitute here taco shops for *panaderías*, laundromats, or bus depots and we are likely to produce the same effect), TSP is also resignifying border materiality through a meticulous recording of the artifactual makeup of the Chicano/a homeland. In doing this, their practices and declarations can also be understood as efforts to reconstitute the grounds on which Chicano/a intellectuals theorize culture. Notice for instance how Tomas Riley links anthropological materialism of the Benjaminian kind with a critique of global economics to describe the value of taco shops as cultural centers:

What strikes me as very Chicano about the *taquería*—with its drive-thrus and grab and go burritos—is that their owners are struggling to reconcile their desire to provide quality Mexican food (i.e. culture) with the need to compete in a U.S. fast food market. This adjustment seems to me an ingenious negotiation of cultural forces, which is our daily endeavor as Chicanos. (Martinez)

Chicano/a aesthetic practices have always been predicated, since the movement’s eruption, on the connectivity between spiritual “inner” resources and pragmatic “external” sites of “the people,” or *comunidad*. But it is has been a long time since such a project was envisioned in such explicit theoretical

registers. When venerated poet Raul Salinas (aka "raulsalinas") and artist/cultural critic David Ávalos comment on TSP in the PBS documentary their language confirms this temporal adjustment in the Chicano movement. "Back then," Salinas says, "poets were doing the same thing." And Ávalos adds, "it is exciting to find a group of young people find what a generation earlier did...and say we want to continue it" (*Visiones*).

Yet, other threads weave this cloth as well. Attention to the minutia of Chicano/a living has primarily fallen to the women artists of the movement. The recuperation of vernacular practices such as altar-making and tending in the installations of Amalia Mesa-Bains, the panoramas of everyday rituals in Carmen Lomas Garzas paintings, or the enunciation of gastronomical border-thinking in the epitaph by Gloria Anzaldúa which opens this essay are only a few of the examples that quickly come to mind. Attention to the object-world that fastens identity and memory to social action is a fundamental and vital gesture (feminist, sensual, sexual?) that redirects energy to the intimacy found and engendered by a political community.

But because Chicana/o borderlands theory has been to a large extent fueled by a masculinist political mobilization in a specific historical moment that carried with it a subtextual anti-capitalist orientation (and a corollary antagonistic position towards feminine concerns with "personal" or "domestic" realms of revolutionary practice), this in turn has tended to posit an attitude of dismissal and suspicion towards objects, commodities, and material "things" in general. Yet, the historical border as well as the organization of memory in the Chicano/a landscape cannot divorce themselves from the socio-psychological milieu of "border things" represented everywhere as a "mir-

rored reflection" of our shared lives (J. González, *Art/Women* 222).

Miguel Ángel Soria, another TSP member, underscores how taking a second look around the urban spaces of Chicano life can resignify the feminine/trivial or un-noticeable. He picks up on the sensory clues that fill the environments of taco shops. These are spaces "already filled with literature" he says; "from the rhyming Mexican tunes in the jukebox to the local freebie Latino papers stacked on the floor," taco shops already archive the transformations of our sense of community. (Romero) Staging performances in taco shops, therefore, augments the holdings of this impromptu repository of social memory. They do this by altering the usual "uppercrust" character of poetry and throwing back into the mix a grassroots, participatory ethic long obscured in art practices. "Effective activists strategies," TSP Riley observes,

allow people to use their individual talents to contribute to the project in a way that allows those talents to shine...there [probably] isn't much need for a bunch of poets and musicians on the revolutionary front, but that's what we are. (Martínez)

Thus, the aesthetics pursued by TSP in their poetry attempt to reverse the flow of conventional artistic practices in at least two fundamental ways: one, they aspire to move "prose, syllable, and rhyme" from going exclusively from artists to people to a cacophony that moves from people to artists. In this conception, "community" is redefined to include a diversity of subjectivities and positions: "a nationalist space, a gender space, and a sexuality space," reads one TSP statement (Multiple). Secondly, there is an entrepreneurial aspect to the TSP proposal, a make-do attitude that says that having one's

own business—even if it is a taco stand at the flea market—is a way of resisting the effects of domination in a capitalist society that *only* recognizes capital as a trademark of human dignity. As one observer has noted, *taquerías* thus are “tiny community centers not supported by a national endowment,⁴ but by *la gente* directly” (Vélez).

As TSP Arancibia has said, the regard for “different kinds of spaces” to nurture potential audiences for poetry is also epistemologically linked to an interest in “different kinds of bodies” (*Visiones*). But I would argue that it is also a regard for different kinds of “objects” of study. The challenge for this kind of materialist anthropology of borderlands experience is that while objects carry in their physical “bodies” encrypted DNA evidence of their histories of production and circulation, at the same time it is easy to fathom how easily tequila bottles, painted burros, and plaster Sleeping Mexican figurines can “appear” empty before us—simply there as teasers or fillers for other kinds of performances. Thanks to Marx, the notion that “objects” are clues to social relations is of course not new. But what is always in need of renewal is perhaps an acknowledgment of the lessons that objects *can* teach. In the development of a Chicano pedagogy of community building, efforts to theorize the border have elided an obvious site of signification: the surface level. It is there, in the archaeology of objects once distasteful and later appropriated, where the seduction of all things *border* can be deconstructed as a fetishistic dreamworld that is simultaneously the source of a commodified consciousness, but maybe as well the reservoir from which ordinary folks gather the “collective energy” to overcome whatever it is that stands in the way of their full realization. In the poem “Swapmeet,” TSP Adrian Arancibia

begins the arduous process of codifying a methodology towards this end. He captures the curious “curio” landscape that makes up the frenzied materiality of Chicano/a barrios and finds the heart of something akin to a community in the ordinary exchanges between sellers and buyers:

Chicano essence
burned into black top-spaced lots
where paper cups fly and dance
plastic bags whisper and breathe
in clutched hands...
plastic toys blink and squint colors
as Korean merchants time chants of
BARATO, BARATO, BARATO!
ONE DOLLAH! ONE DOLL\$!
[ONE \$! 1\$!

Cada color
Cada chant
Even the greasy smells touch and call
[out

music meets tortilla air,
exhaust begins burning baby eyes...
swapmeet is Chicano essence
boiling from the masses,
rising like moist hot air on Saturdays
[and Sundays

when at 50c
the flood begins.
(*Swapmeet*)

As this poem makes evident, the critical task of formulating for border studies something similar to what Susan Buck-Morss called in reference to Benjamin “a phenomenological hermeneutics of the profane” (3) will require a renewed focus on a kind of “commodity palace” aesthetically different from those found in Paris and Berlin in the 1930s. It will require a drive to those parts of town where *la raza* shops, eats, and gathers. Defeating the categorical hegemonies that militate against this

geographical reorientation will require more than a desire for the “perfect carne asada burrito.” It will inevitably have to incorporate as well a thorough analysis of the competing versions of the material history of modernism in the US-Mexico border zones (cf. García-Canclini). A study of the political-economy that produces banality itself cannot be far behind. But none of these lines of inquiry can ever be fully opened until the project of intellectual and artistic representations of borderlands subjectivities disassociates itself from the tired and wooden paradigms that despise *a priori* the crude, the repellent, and the allegedly transparent “things” that are traded at the flea markets of the Chicano/a homeland—among these, the most humble of foods served in the most humble of manners: the hand-held taco.

Part IV

Material Aztlan, Second Act: Eating

My analysis of TSP as well as of the claims of their cultural project proceeds in two directions, one substantially easier to buy into than the other. In the section above I examined TSP’s use of *taquerias* and their attention to “stuff” in and around borderland barrios as a reconfiguration of social space and possessions. Though intrepid, this is not necessarily a far-fetched proposal. Plenty of artistic interventions and other cultural, social, and political ventures have tackled the need to forge “spaces...that do not yet exist” for the benefit of liberating projects (Smith 236). In this section, my focus of investigation shifts to a less palatable or plausible theoretical undertaking—the role TSP assigns to food itself, and to eating as a social ritual, as catalysts for oppositional consciousness. The arguments for this lat-

ter point are a more difficult proposition to articulate, precisely because it hinges on poetics and aspirations that depend on an ephemeral act. There is no concise revolutionary stratagem that makes clear what ideological fiction a plate of refried black beans is best suited to destroy. This is why in this section Walter Benjamin emerges as a timely ally, for even if he never closed the hermeneutic circles of ideas in the structurally elegant manner in which his friend Adorno did, he went further than anyone has done to this date in wrestling with the questions of human sensation in capitalism as one of the irresolvable problems of the politics of socialism.⁵

Benjamin’s own awakening to food is chronicled in splinters of information in his writing. In his childhood memoirs entitled “Berlin Chronicle” we learn how as an adolescent he writes his first essay on the marble-top of the modest Princess Café. “That was the time,” he says, “when the Berlin cafes played a part in our lives. I still remember the first that I took in consciously” (*Reflections* 20). As he came into adulthood, “the frequenting” of cafes became a daily necessity. Seduced by dimly lit coffeehouses and bars, like all bohemians in the historical record of modernity and its discontents, Benjamin would have understood TSP’s monumental attraction to working class gathering places as harbingers of revolution.

One of his most famous quotes in another classic text, “One-Way Street,” declares that “taking food alone tends to make one hard and coarse...for it is only in company that eating is done justice; food must be divided and distributed if it is to be well received” (*Reflections* 86). One report goes as far as speculating that it was a chance encounter in an Italian piazza with almonds

that “altered the course” of the writer’s life. Allegedly Benjamin approached the great love of his life, the Latvian actress Asja Lācis, while she purchased nuts on the island of Capri (Kornhaber). Food continued to play a role in her discovery of the clumsy genius that so badly wanted to seduce her. On the way home, Benjamin carried her groceries, but dropped them all halfway to her house.

The recollection of these loose experiences and thoughts on food as social glue and erotic enabler point immediately, however, to a frequent problematic in Benjamin’s work and its reception in the cultural studies community. Many critics detect a nagging political naiveté in Benjamin’s fascination with sensuous experiences as the domain from which potentially redemptory moments against oppression could emerge. Benjamin’s own dear friend, the clear-headed theorist of the Frankfurt School Theodor Adorno, confessed that “despite [their] most fundamental and concrete agreement on everything else,” the set of bodily functions and ruminations that Benjamin had joined together in his so-called “anthropological materialism,” were simply not believable (cited in Bolz and Van Reijen 55). The main objection, Adorno advised his colleague in a letter in 1936, was that Benjamin’s dialectics lacked “mediation” (Isenberg). In other words, his contradictions never shaped into systems that could rationalize a political program. This perceived fracture in Benjamin’s epistemological rigor has led, in the opinion of some critics, to “too many admirers” who simply “avoid dealing with the gaps” in Benjamin’s thoughts and simply “enjoy,” instead, his “diverse insights into the seemingly insignificant details of everyday existence,” without any further political intent (Bronner).

These criticisms become ever more relevant when dealing with the subject of food for it is in relation to this most basic form of “cultural inheritance” that the pedagogic point of historical materialism makes either more sense or adds to further levels of alienation (Buck Morss 288). If the whole point of a “materialist education,” as Benjamin envisioned it, was to generate the sort of knowledge that can in turn provide “access to praxis,” then with regards to food one would have to assume that something *other* than a pure “vulgar Marxist illusion” against its banality would have to be identified before we can take the argument seriously (Buck Morss 289). What kind of social upset, then, can tacos deliver that mass labor organizing or the redistribution of wealth cannot?

On the long view of human agency, that is a view not concerned exclusively with a one-directional understanding of power, this is, no doubt, a ridiculous question. It would be a mistake to assume that the whole point of Benjamin’s argument for the mundane and the trivial is to lodge in individual objects or single everyday practices a tactical revolutionary hidden potential. Rather, his goal is to demonstrate that “the collective body” (the Chicano/a imagined community for instance) “organizes itself historically” *always within* the spaces of historical images (and objects and pleasures). Thus, Benjamin scholars Bolz and Van Reijen remind us, “the only thing that ‘connects’ the bourgeois individual with the collective body is the bursting of the boundaries of his [her] individuation” (56). If we consider this linkage, then the idea of eating as a social ritual that bonds a dispersed community otherwise fractured by the forces of globalization in the barrios is not too difficult to understand. Food, as we know all too well and food historians

Farb and Armelagos succinctly observe, is “symbolically associated with the most deeply felt human experiences, and thus expresses things that are sometimes difficult to articulate in everyday language” (111).

The poem “Dos de Lengua para Llevar” [Two Tongue Tacos to Go] (translation mine) by TSP Adolfo Guzmán López goes a long way towards the development of a revolutionary re-imagining of what Aztlán could be in the face of neoliberal policies of food making and circulation:

I did not know whether to laugh or
 [cry when I heard
 that Taco Bell was opening a
 fran[chise in Mexico....
 This is, to be sure, an attack against
 [our gastronomical independence...
 How could this be?
 It is as impossible to fathom as a
 [squash blossom quesadilla served
 [with ketchup...
 Or a molcajete made out of Teflon...
 If our political representatives are any
 [good to us
 They should ask that UNESCO
 [consider declaring tacos
 A patrimony of humanity...
 But what if, after this declaration, a
 [taco crisis ensues and
 The military forces of the United
 [Nations are sent to defend Mexico’s
 [taquerias
 From the capitalist grab by Taco Bells
 [or McDonalds?
 I have a better idea...
 What we need are more taco shops
 [functioning as cultural centers...
 The people are already there...yes,
 [they are there to eat, but no matter,
 They are there!
 ...what a beautiful example of demo-
 [cracy,
 the taco maker plays with our senses;
 [he knows we are watching
 and that’s why he can transform the

 [making of a taco
 into a spectacle dramatic and transcen-
 [dental...
 facing up to the taco maker we are
 [all the same...
 please....two tacos of social justice
 [to go!

(*Dos de Lengua*)

But, again, political strategist would be inclined to ask, where is the kernel of emancipatory action located in Guzmán López’s vision? Is it on sociality, on the performative antics of the taco maker, or on the taco itself? Perhaps one simple answer is to state that “praxis” shifts along and across all these levels. But the taco properly (allegorized in the poem from a filling of “tongue” to one of “social justice”) has been singled out and assigned a peculiar role. The etymology of the word taco, as well as the social difference that eating food without utensils marked in the colonial context, holds some clues of interpretation worth considering. The Nahuatl word “Tacol” was translated by the Spanish as “shoulder,” but as the Mexican cultural critic Salvador Novo noted, shoulder or *hombro*, was a term inclusive of any circumferential piece that enveloped something softer inside, so it was in various usages: a) an upper shield for the human back; b) the ring of new earth formed around a transplanted tree; c) the male organ or penis (filled with the water of man, or man’s juice); d) any wedge to fill in a hole and make something wobbly more stable; and e) the noun taco as we know it in culinary parlance, a tortilla folded and stuffed with savory fillings (61). These usages, insofar as they associate the word “tacol” with a protective function, also reminiscent of the Spanish word *atacar* (to attack), which can mean to defend by armed struggle or simply to tackle something that needs attention, and into the Mexican colloquial expressions such

as *echar taco* (a sexual innuendo meaning to consume, to plug the hole of a certain kind of hunger). Novo also reflects on the implied excess associated with the words *taqueo* or *taquear* (to have lots of tacos in one sitting), which also can have a sexual referent similar to *echar tacos*—to feel one's pleasure to satiation (46).

It is clear that this particular etymology favors a masculinist signification of the act of consumption. Chicana lesbian writers have tried to counter such gendered and sexualized readings of food. They have used food in novels, poems, and essays as a metaphor to explore the politics of sexual desire, both sanctioned and dissident—that is, recognizing that women are both “cooks” of *cultura* broadly speaking and also queering the way in which concepts of hunger and satiation are expressed in Chicano life (Ehrhardt). But both masculinist and feminist Chicano/a appropriations of food metaphors coincide in one aspect: tacos defy bourgeois etiquette. Novo associates the habit of using a tortilla for spoon or the custom of cleaning the sauce or last pieces left on a plate with a tortilla to practices prevalent among indigenous groups before the conquest and therefore, pre-hispanic in the broad sense of the word, i.e. pre-dominance, pre-subjugation. As Mexico strived to “imagine” (image) itself a national community, the eating habits of indigenous people remained a bastion of resistance to Europeanization. The taco and the tortilla in its many tasty varieties (stuffed with meat or avocado, beans, or in the last instance, as Novo aptly notes, simply sprinkled with salt) penetrate zones of the culturally habitual to, pun intended, drive a wedge (insert a taco), into the hegemonic project of national formation. In this sense, we may regard the taco as a “weapon of the weak,” a cultural victory of Indigenous Mexico wholly appropriated

by powerful elites, but always “evidence” of what the conquest sought to vanquish and couldn't. Thus, the word taco in the name Taco Shop Poets, or in the geographic referent *taquería*, is already a word charged with a genealogy of resistance—the kind of resistance, precisely, that most interested Benjamin for its revolutionary potential, a resistance against the bourgeois containment expressed in napkins, silverware, and assigned seating.

Benjamin, too, considered single food samples as useful pedagogical tools. He encountered a magical revelation about the role specific foods can play in social consciousness when he found himself starving after a long day of inadvertent delays for lunch. He published a short meditation on the experience in a Frankfurt newspaper in 1930 under the title “Fresh Figs.” After buying figs from a street vendor and finding out that the woman had no bag to place them in, Benjamin decided to stuff his pockets with the ripe fruit. As he continued walking and feeling hungry, he began to eat the figs, but something about the urgency of his hunger awoke in him a philosophical insight. “I could not stop eating them,” he says, and then adds, “but that could not be described as eating... it was more like a bath, so powerful was the smell of resin that penetrated me, clung to my hands, and impregnated the air” (*Selected* 358).

In the process of hungering for the figs, Benjamin tested out his dialectics of materiality. For him, the measure of the concrete was the body—and he proposed to destroy mystification by ingesting what the world offered. To be a revolutionary intellectual was to voraciously take in the world and to expose the lie of bourgeois superficiality. This is how the working classes, one is led to speculate, take in the material world: sincerely, and truly hungry. This

must have been the same insight, Benjamin suspected, that caused Marx to articulate his ideas about commodity fetishism. But Marx did not let himself be hungry enough along with the masses he described. His intellectual posturing barred him from taking the analysis to the next level: intoxication. Arguably, excess brings chaos into the order of bourgeois reason and as such tacos and other things we would rather regard as kitsch or intellectually deadly can be useful for revolution. How might this happen? The same way, Benjamin figured that he felt a “hatred” welling up inside him towards those figs. “I was desperate to finish them,” he says; “to liberate myself, to rid myself of all this overripe, bursting fruit. I ate to destroy it.” Describing the scene at a taco shop in San Diego during one TSP performance, a reporter wrote that as the young men posed questions “with wide-eyed wonderment and scowling grimaces,” the words they uttered “[ate] at the very core of social norms” (Swanland).

In the Chicano imaginary food has functioned strategically as a sign of social struggle and as a mediator to engender a collective body (Rebolledo; Viramontes). It is no coincidence that the Chicano poet Juan Felipe Herrera has a habit of calling himself (and signing his electronic correspondence) as “cilantro man.” “The language of food serves different needs,” writes literary critic Meredith Abarca, but in the Chicano/a experience, especially experiences mediated by gender politics, the language of everyday cooking also expresses “artistic creation, manifestations of love, self-assurance, and economic survival” (121). Politics of difference have also marked the role of food in constituting historical subjects. In nineteenth century Europe, notions about food began to change from what they had been a century earlier. From the debauchery and

gluttony that had once marked the aristocracy, food shifted to an ideal of high culture “coupled with a simple abstemious diet; previous eating to excess as a sign of prosperity [was] renounced for moral and physically healthier plain fare” (Brosch 210). In the American Southwest, the tension between food as plain nourishment or exotic practice found expression among contesting social groups. Historian Jeffrey Pilcher notes that in the conquest of the northern (up from Mexico) and south western (down from Boston) borderlands “outsiders found some Mexican American dishes simply repulsive” (660). One of these dishes was *menudo* (beef tripe stew); thus, this dish became for early *fronterizos* a “powerful symbol of ethnic identity.” Similarly, conquest produced embedded sign systems of oppression in the sexualization and feminization of Chicano/a lives through references to border women as “hot tamales” and “chili queens.” Something about the excess of *Mexicano* eating disturbed the Anglo settler; one strategy to cope with the discomfort transformed the excess into exotic cuisine and thus gave birth to “Tex-Mex” and Southwest cooking in all its varieties. Another strategy collapsed the signifiers of difference into single, hardened codes, and thus was born the food-related stereotypes and injuring words that described Mexicans in the U.S. Southwest for most of the 20th century: greasers and beaners (cf. De León; Bender).

The chaos that Mexican/Chicano or border food brings into Anglo bourgeois reason is the reason why, in true Benjaminian fashion, intoxication with tacos can “be made to serve a revolutionary discipline as liberating energy” (Bolz and Van Reijen 58). But there is another dimension to eating that neither Benjamin nor TSP confront as forthrightly as one would expect given their insistence that the logistics of consumption

carry allegories of social change: eating is an ephemeral activity. One enters the space of hunger, finds the object of satiation, indulges the senses in taking in what is available, begins to experience the satisfaction of a need fulfilled, and just as it began, the moment comes to an end. At a *taquería*, barring the presence of some energetic young artists to make one wish to linger, the entire operation does not usually take more than 30 minutes. Standing at a roadside stand, the moment of food communion is even shorter.

Given this, it would be important then to consider eating within the broad spectrum of performance or “embodied practices” that are used in communities to “store and transmit knowledge” and which are substantially more important for what they allow people “to do” rather than for what kinds of acts they, in and of themselves, constitute (Taylor). The lesson to be derived from underscoring the performative in eating practices is an understanding of how cultural meanings exist only, or at least primarily, in action and interaction, and not as cultural signifiers free-floating in an existential soup of meaning where resistance and an “anything-goes” attitude amount to the same non-consequential politics. This is a revolutionary proposition insofar as it posits, as Laura Gutiérrez has observed in another context, that in the cultural sphere there is no “authentic” package of goods to be inherited, but rather, in the moment of exposure, a “cultural meaning in the making” (2003).

Ephemeral actions, however, no matter how disruptive, still require mediation; something has to connect the single creative act with the structural possibilities for social change. The Taco Shop Poets, like Benjamin, therefore elaborate on the power of the taco as something more than

a food item; they seek to exploit it as allegory. Hence, the *taquero* is not the only one at a taco-shop poetry event required to “throw down [his] stuff” (green onions and chiles grilled alongside thin layers of lean meat thrust with force amid the two warm walls of a tortilla). The poet, too, must learn how to perform a similar act of concoction, metaphorically speaking. One way to do this is to use words sharply: to say *chorizo* when one means heart, or *jalapeño* when one means grief, or taco when one means cultural survival. Critical literature has a clear mandate in this regard: the point is to use food to “unmask” the alleged transparency of everyday experiences, not to “aestheticize” them (Ganguly 256). Benjamin’s ideas about consumption, in foodways and other artifactual forms, followed a path that linked the idea of a liberated life to the necessary consciousness of liberation demonstrated by a “voracious” appetite for knowledge. In a short essay unpublished in his lifetime, Benjamin identified the world of literature as a gastronomical struggle. The critic’s role is to expose the “essence of things” and to do this he/she must “take on a book as lovingly as a cannibal prepares an infant to be cooked” (*Selected* 729). The writer, on his/her part, must work with the “primal materials” of life experiences to prepare and serve a “nourishing dish.”

But it is the reader—those anonymous bodies who receive poetry and prose “between the squirts of salsa and the slathering of refried beans” (Walker)—who has the most delicious moment awaiting for him/her. Reading is a nutritious meal that allows people to experience pain and wonder “in the flesh” but also at a sufficient distance, enough to make the pleas for an altered consciousness “tasty.” But as with those figs in Benjamin’s pockets, the pleasure is heightened by the “destruction that lies

ahead.” This destruction is an artistic dream realized: at last, one modality of expressive beauty (a poem, a painting, a recipe for *cochinilla pibil*) that can do away “with the contained world” and reified system of lies that prevents true pleasure and love and masks it instead with tolerance and under-the-skin contempt (Bolz and Van Reijen 66). This requires nothing less than the transformation of the poet him/herself. As one TSP manifesto declares:

...we are witness to the violent end
[of the twentieth century
we are witness to a blinding light
we are the canon, the kabal
the win the loss the draw—the com-
[patriot and outlaw
we are revolutionary street vendors...
that is all we are...we are *taquer-
ros*...
(Taco Shop 7)

Being able to find favorable circumstances for art-making, social change, and oppositional consciousness in the dialectics of revolutionary and intellectual praxis described by Benjamin requires both faith and courage. The TSP project embraces these challenges; the puncturing quality of TSP’s practice, however is best understood to the extent that they also, in doing what they do, voice a rather complicated theoretical undertaking that entails the crafting of a materialist anthropology of the borderlands vexed by unstable political utopias. Today, as Herzog has observed, the paradigms that explain barrio landscapes have to take into account new sets of global forces that both expand and restrict the political opportunities for reasserting control over space and its inscribed inequalities: transnational

manufacturing, immigration, cross-border trade, smuggling, violence, fear, and nativism are aggravated now to levels we had not imagined possible before (103).

What sets TSP apart as a radical Chicano/a project of art and social action is precisely the way in which its members acknowledge the spatial politics of alienation and decide to do something about it. In other words, *believing* that whatever it is that vernacular Chicano/a culture holds dear at its core (constructed and differential and unstable and contingent and folkloric or shortsighted as it may be), it can, or must, also have a humanistic force to tumble down *los muros* (the walls of misunderstanding and inequality). This is the energy that Chela Sandoval has called “prophetic love”—*amor en Aztlan* (146). Thus, in the critical pedagogy of TSP, the power of geography and nourishment merge as a double-edged sword that can be exploited politically—not because a naïve or inconspicuous value can be restored to gazing at the barrio’s *taquerías* or eating tacos—but because releasing the sensorial power inside these human exchanges can also function as a de-centering of an already compromised hegemony. *Taquerías*, the TSP amply demonstrates, can be sites where this conceptual stew is cooked.

But the story does not end here. If we wanted to re-tool an efficacious Chicano/a politics for the twentieth first century that was critical and yet hopeful, how would we identify where to begin the revolution? What spaces should theory invade? At this historical juncture, I have argued throughout this essay, border epistemologies require a grittier and more democratic heuristic. Instead of Tio Taco or Taco Deco or Taco Bell, TSP poets relocate the taco and its

associated actors and places as a semiotic ground zero from which we may voraciously consume border culture, for only by destroying the armature of borderlands fictions, may we hope to regain something of the spirit that animates this place, this imaginary playground of hybridity.

Notes

¹ I benefited from comments from and conversations with Laura G. Gutiérrez, Sandra K. Soto, and Patricia Espinosa-Artiles in the preparation of this essay. I am deeply grateful for their intelligent insights and support.

² I thank Sandra K. Soto for pointing out the “other” side of a politics of recuperation, especially the implications such a reading of history holds for the agency of racialized and sexualized subjects.

³ The term “war of position” was coined by Antonio Gramsci as part of his theoretical elaboration of the notion of “hegemony.” It refers to a long, protracted struggle primarily across and through institutions of civil society, which focuses the struggle for change not only on the economic and political spheres, but also, and especially, on the cultural and ideological realms. The concept stands in contrast to “war of maneuver” which refers to a frontal attack to gain quick access to the echelons of power in a society with a strong state and a weaker civil society.

⁴ The reference is to the National Endowment for the Arts, a federal agency of the U.S. government that makes grants to nonprofit art organizations, but which has become over the last decade, due to constant in-fighting in Congress over its value and its politics and also as a result of it being a somewhat mythical bureaucracy, an unreliable source of support for artistic creation.

⁵ A brilliant, down-to-earth meditation on this problematic, humorous and taking into account the gendered dimensions of pleasure as expressed in socialist discipline, can be found in Slavenka Drakulic’s *How We Survived Communism and Even Laughed*, New York: Harper-Perennial, 1993.

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